

# WESTERN STORY

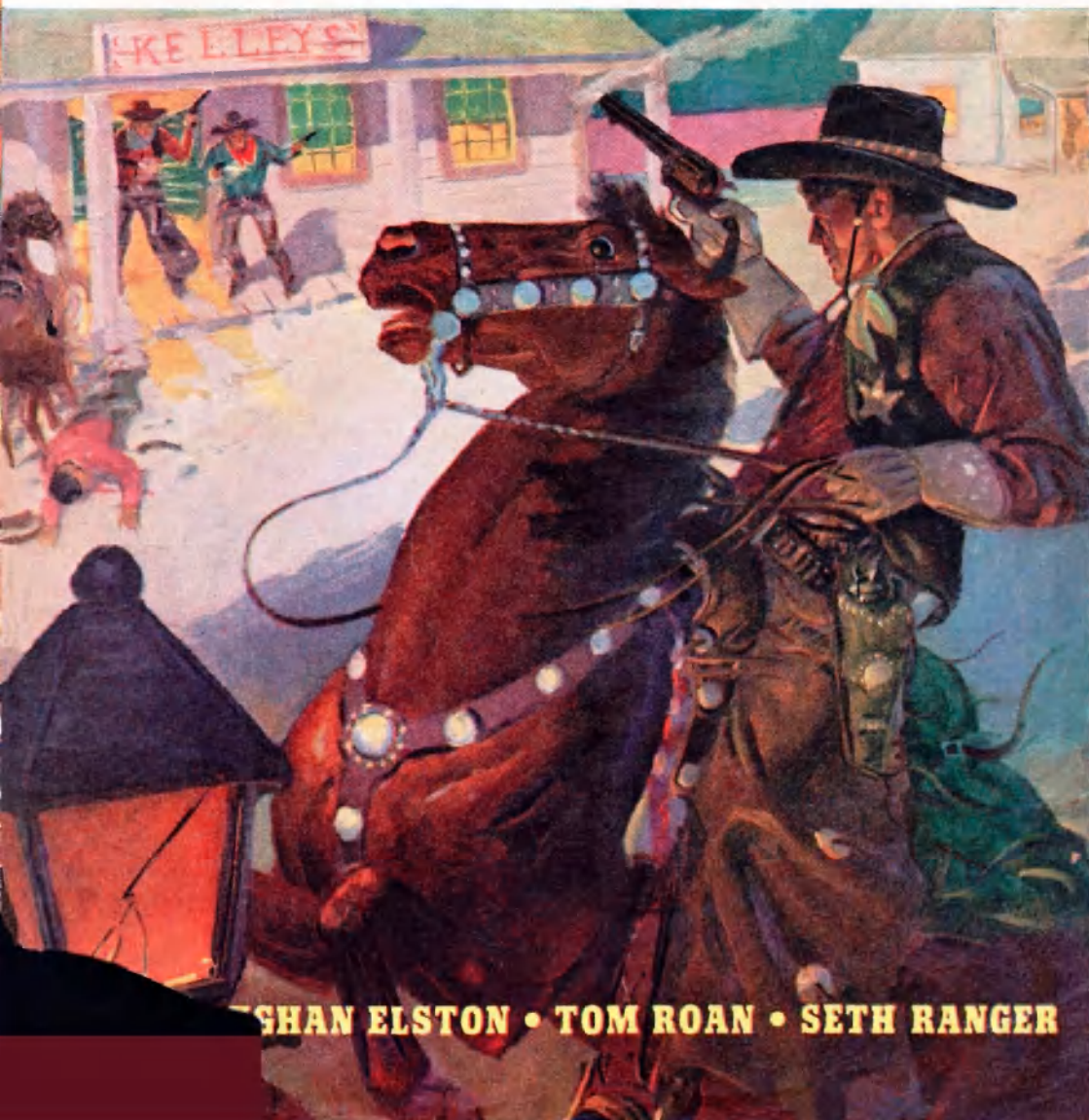
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VOL. 183 • No. 3

JUNE 22, 1940



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STREET & SMITH'S

# WESTERN STORY

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CONTENTS FOR JUNE 22, 1940

VOL. CLXXXIII NO. 3

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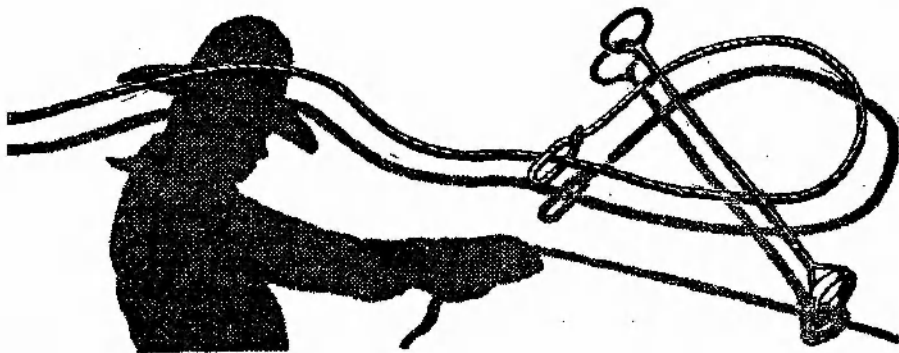
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# The Roundup

If a checkered career is a pattern of black and white squares, then a man who has mined copper in Chile, punched cattle in New Mexico, soldiered in France, hustled ads for newspapers, shipped out of lonely ports on tramp freighters, punched clocks at Hollywood studios, missed boats in the South Seas, been marooned snow blind in the Northwest wilderness, and otherwise, at the risk of life and liberty, pursued happiness, should at least know how to play checkers. "It always seems just as far to the king row, though," writes Allan Vaughan Elston, whose themes of fiction have been no less varied than his life.

Just now he's camping on a white square, turning out yarns of mystery and adventure. His camp is a California Monterey bungalow, fully and permanently equipped with the tools of his trade, as well as an assortment of memories and incentives in the form of a wife and three children. The only adventuring he gets these days is an annual excursion

for trout in the High Sierras; and if he wants to go hunting there is almost sure to be some pesky gopher rooting up the front lawn. "Not that it matters," he says. "The best yarns come out of a good log fire, anyway."

We're mighty proud to have this talented and versatile writer represented in Western Story Magazine. You'll find his latest tale, **MUTINY ON THE BOX CROSS**, featured on page 9 of this issue. Here's hoping you'll enjoy it as much as we did!

And here's a new slant on Death Valley, that desolate stretch of land which has been the scene of countless dramas famous in the annals of the West, which comes to us in an interesting letter from George Cory Franklin.

Of course, you're all familiar with Franklin's animal stories, particularly those ever-popular tales of Chief, Al Peak's wonder pony. Well, this week we give you **TRAIL BREAKER** (page 78), another adventure of Pete, the big dun steer we introduced to you all some weeks ago. Because of the flood of letters which came in from readers who found that Pete had what it takes, we've had G. C. F. trail him down and tell you more about him. And, although Pete's just a newcomer,

he's already made plenty of friends. (Sure hope there won't be any professional jealousy between him and Chief!)

Franklin is living at present in the desert country. We found his recent letter so interesting that we want to share it with you.

"Mrs. Franklin and I took the first day off from work since we came to the desert," writes G. C. F. "We drove out toward—in fact, through—Death Valley to the famous Twenty Mule Team Borax Mine. Perhaps you remember that I sent you a filler not so very long ago, descriptive of the old wagons used on this haul and which are now on exhibition in the Union Station at Barstow.

"It's a long cry from those days to the present-day highway. Mrs. Franklin drove the forty-five miles in an hour, a trip that formerly took the freighters four days. I was astonished to find a well-cultivated valley, about ten miles out from the main east-and-west highway. The farmers there have developed artesian water, and we saw one well flowing steadily through a full four-inch pipe. That ranch had some of the most beautiful alfalfa fields we have ever seen, and the fat cattle lazing under the cottonwoods surely looked good to us."

From which we conclude that a *pasear* into Death Valley still holds the glamour of a vivid and exciting experience.

We want to thank Celia Smith Spencer, of Santa Cruz, California, for her complimentary letter just received. "Congratulations," she writes, "for the nice smooth covers on your magazine. I have just finished reading *BLACK SOMBRERO*, Wil-

liam Colt MacDonald's serial, and found it very interesting. I liked *WHITEWATER PASSAGE*, by Frank Richardson Pierce, in the May 4th issue, too. A very fine story, bringing out character. I like Ranger stories very much. Best of luck to you."

### Coming next week—

**BLIZZARD BROTHERHOOD**, a full-length novel by Kenneth Gilbert. Weird and gripping, this strange story tells of a relentless fraternity of men who policed the vast reaches of the North, made their own laws and enforced them with grim, implacable justice. What happened when a renegade pack decided to challenge their dictates makes exciting, thrill-packed reading.

John G. Pearsol writes a thrilling short story of frontier days when two men who had sworn to uphold their country's flag almost forgot their solemn oaths in the face of Apache invasion. **RED TRAIL TO HONOR** is the title of this unusual yarn.

When it comes to writing animal stories, you'll certainly find Jim Kjelgaard crowding the front ranks. Particularly fine, we think, is the yarn which he contributes to next week's issue—**MONARCH OF THE CRAGS**—the story of a ram who matched his wits against a band of hunters.

Other noteworthy items in next week's big issue are stories and features by Harry F. Olmsted, Tom Curry, W. Ryerson Johnson and many others—plus, of course, a full string of interesting and helpful departments.

*No one ever noticed Bill... until .....*



# LET MUSIC MAKE YOU POPULAR

*it's easy to learn this "short cut" way*

ONLY a few short months ago Bill was a back number socially. Then suddenly, Bill amazed all his friends. Almost overnight it seemed, he became the most popular man in his crowd.

The big chance in Bill's life began at Dot Webster's party—and quite by accident, too.

As the party got under way, Dot's face flushed.

"I'm sorry, folks, but Dave Gordon, our pianist, couldn't come. Isn't there someone here who can play?"

For a moment no one answered. Then suddenly Bill rose and strode to the piano. "Do you mind if I fill in?" he said. Everyone burst out laughing. But Bill pretended not to hear. As he struck the first few chords, everyone leaned forward spellbound. For Bill was playing as Dave Gordon had never played, playing with the fire and soul of an inspired musician. In a moment Bill was the center of an admiring throng. In answer to their eager

questions, he told them how he had always wanted to play, but never had the time or the money to realize his ambition. And then one day he read about the wonderful U. S. School of Music course, and how almost anyone could learn, at home, without a teacher, and at a fraction of the cost of ordinary old-fashioned methods. "That day," said Bill, "was a lucky day for me. I sent for the course, and when it arrived, I was amazed! The course was as much fun as a game, and in a few short months I had mastered some of the most popular pieces. There's no mystery about it. Learning to play is actually as easy as A B C, this 'Short-Cut' way."

This story is typical of thousands who have found this easy way to popularity and you have always wanted to play but have the notion that learning requires years of practice, and expensive teachers, here is your opportunity.

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| Organ                               | Mandolin  |
| Cornet                              | Ukulele   |
| Trombone                            | Harp      |
| Piccolo                             | Clarinet  |
| Flute                               | Cello     |
| Hawaiian Steel                      | Trumpet   |
| Piano Accordion                     |           |
| Plain Accordion                     |           |
| Valze and Speech Culture            |           |
| Modern Elementary Harmony           |           |
| Drums and Taps                      |           |
| Banjo (Plectrum, 5-String or Tenor) |           |

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**WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE**

**79 SEVENTH AVENUE  
NEW YORK, N. Y.**

**COMPETITION CLOSING JULY 1, 1940**

# MUTINY on the Box Cow



BY ALLAN VAUGHAN ELSTON

## CHAPTER I

### SUNSET SHOWDOWN

THE town was tense, and Cimarron Steve Wilder sensed it even before he'd finished hitching his blue roan in front of the Soledad Saloon.

"She's tighter'n the A string on a

bull fiddle, Blueboy." Cimarron gave the roan an affectionate slap on the flank. "Wonder what's comin' up, an election or a funeral."

A voice drawled from the walk, "if yuh favor that bronc o' yourn any, stranger, better move it down to the next hitch rack."

Cimarron turned. "How come?" he protested mildly. "I don't see any loco weed growin' under this one."

A score of town loafers and cattle hands were lining the walk, most of them with their backs flattened against the store fronts. Their eyes were fixed expectantly on the door of a shack directly across from the Soledad.

The man nearest Cimarron said: "Suit yourself, stranger. Only maybe you'd orter know they's a coupla gents got a date to meet right out in the middle o' the street in a little while, and shoot it out with each other."

"Thanks for the tip," Cimarron grinned. "I sure wouldn't want my horse to get salivated." Unhitching Blueboy, he led the animal into a nearby vacant lot. There he tied the roan to a cottonwood stump.

Returning to his informant on the walk, Cimarron inquired, "Where are these gun-throwin' gents, mister?"

The man thumbed toward the shack across the street. "One of 'em's over there, oilin' his gun. T'other one's in the Soledad here, oilin' his gullet. The shootin's due to pop right after sundown."

It was nearly sundown now. Cimarron nodded. "I get it. One gent gives the other gent till sundown to get out o' town. And the other gent ain't gettin'."

"You named it, stranger."

Cimarron sauntered into the saloon.

Dominating a group at the bar stood a tall, rawboned man wearing crossed gun belts. He had mean eyes and a whiskey-hoarse voice which now bellowed. "So I told him to shag his carcass out o' town—or I'll bounce him out on a slug."

"You sure told him a few, Smiley," another voice wheezed.

And another, "If he knows what's good fer his guts, he'll git, Smiley."

Smiley was standing treat and they were yessing him, Cimarron saw at once. A tough, quick-triggered gunny, this Smiley. Clearly he was cock of the walk here in Smokey Buttes.

**T**AKING a position at the end of the bar, Cimarron himself attracted scant notice. The figure he presented was not particularly impressive. Having gone a month without shaving, and being covered with alkali dust from head to foot, Cimarron Steve Wilder at this moment more nearly resembled a vagabond prospector than a range man. His intention was to stop only long enough to quench his thirst, and then ride on home toward the Cimarron.

"A cold ginger ale," he murmured. The bartender served him with a look of contempt.

Then Smiley's voice rasped out: "Sure I told him a few. And he took it, didn't he? Proves he's a yeller-bellied coyote, just like I called him. If he ain't, why didn't he go fer his gun?"

"He ain't rid out o' town yet, though, Smiley," a man reminded. "And it's nearly sundown."

"Means I'll have to smoke him out," Smiley boomed. "Just wait till he sticks his nose out o' that Box Cross town shack over there."

"Maybe he won't come out, Smiley," a loafer chuckled. "Maybe he figgers to hole up there till some of the Box Crosses ride in to help him."

Guffaws of irony echoed this. And even Smiley's lip curled in derision. The man next to Cimarron explained in a whisper: "The Box

Cross waddies is all pals of Smiley's. They wouldn't help their foreman none. If they helped anybody, it'd be Smiley."

"How come?"

"'Cause Smiley was Box Cross foreman hisself, till last month. And when Smiley got fired in favor of a kid named Corbin, the outfit didn't like it. It'll suit 'em fine if Smiley shoots up Benny Corbin."

Cimarron's eyes narrowed. "Corbin, did you say? Where does he hail from?"

"From down on the Cimarron, I heard. And he's due to go back there feet first in a coffin, time Smiley gits through gunnin' him."

Benny Corbin! Although Cimarron was quickly alert, he managed not to show it. Six years ago, a Benny Corbin had been chore boy on Steve Wilder's own horse ranch at the headwaters of the Cimarron."

Tossing a coin on the bar, Cimarron Steve sauntered out. On the front walk his earlier informant grinned at him. "Ain't yuh stayin' fer the fireworks, mister?"

"Nope. Reckon it ain't none of my business." Cimarron went on to his blue roan, mounted and rode off down the street.

"But maybe it is, Blueboy," he muttered then. "Leastwise, we better find out if it's the same Benny Corbin."

After two blocks, Cimarron turned to the left. He doubled back on a side street and tethered his horse in an alley at the rear of the Box Cross town shack. The cabin, he presumed, was maintained by the Box Cross to provide an overnight bunk place for the owner or members of his crew while on errands in Smokey Buttes. Cimarron rapped on its back door.

"Come in," a voice called. It was Benny's voice, all right. Cimar-

ron had weathered too many blizzards with the cowboy not to know it. He stepped inside.

Benny was seated by a table with his right hand in a pan of water.

"Cimarron Steve!" he gasped. "What you doin' up this way, you old horse thief?"

**B**EING neither old nor a horse thief, Cimarron ignored the greeting in the friendly way it was meant. His eyes fixed on the pan of water and saw steam arising from it. They shifted then to a box whose label read: "Salt."

"Look here, Benny," Cimarron demanded. "What you soakin' your mitt in a pan o' hot, salt water for?"

Benny made a wry face. "To take the swellin' out," he explained. "Look, Cimarron." He held up a hand whose forefinger was badly swollen. "Ran a cactus spine into it this mornin', and it's so plagued stiff I can hardly bend it."

"Your trigger finger, huh? And you can't even bend it."

"That's it," Benny admitted. "And in just fifteen minutes I got to shoot it out with a jasper named Smiley."

Cimarron shook his head slowly. "You're in no shape for it, kid. In fifteen minutes you couldn't shoot it out even with a nearsighted sheepherder."

Benny restored his swollen hand to the hot salt water. "Can't be helped, Steve. I tried to steer clear of that gunny. I even backed off when he called me a yellow-bellied coyote, and worse, right to my face with the whole barroom lookin' on. Then he gave me till sundown to get out o' town. So what else can I do, Steve? 'Cept to come over here and soak my hand, and get in as good a shape as I can by sundown."

Cimarron rolled a cigarette. "It's sundown now," he murmured.

Benny's lean young face set in stubborn lines. "Time I'm takin' a walk, then."

"No, you don't. Listen, kid. This showdown'll keep for a day or two. You slip out the back way and fork my roan. Ride for the Box Cross. I'll stay here and make Smiley like it."

Benny Corbin shook his head. "Not on your life, Steve," he retorted. "I've got to live in this State, haven't I? And look folks in the eye! Not only that, I've got to meet the stage tomorrow mornin'."

"Who's on the stage?"

"The boss' niece from Indiana. He sent me with a buckboard to meet her." Benny gave a short laugh. "Imagine her steppin' off that stage and me not there! When she asked why, they'd say, 'He come in to meet you, lady, but Smiley run him out o' town.'"

"I see." Cimarron puffed thoughtfully. "All right, kid," he said finally. "Guess there's no help for it. There's still an hour of light, though. Let your hand soak another half-hour, then take a walk to meet Smiley."

"It's got to be that way, Steve. And, listen, if Smiley gets me, do you mind meetin' that stage for me? Buckboard's in the livery barn. You can just drive the lady out to the Box Cross and explain to the old man."

Under his breath Cimarron murmured, "Smiley's not gonna get you." Aloud he drawled, "Sure thing, kid. Trouble is, I look like a tramp. Been chasin' bronc thieves up around Stonewall this past month, and I ain't even shaved. Maybe I'd better be doin' that right now, just in case."

He moved over to a washstand

and found a razor. There was still hot water in a kettle from which Benny had filled his pan. Whipping up lather, Cimarron prompted, "While I'm shavin', slip me the low-down on this."

"Not much to tell, Steve," Benny declared. "'Cept that old man Cody's got a mighty sweet layout at the Box Cross. Two thousand head o' steer stuff and all the blue-stem vega they can eat. Plenty of tallow on those steers, Steve. All the same, the old man's been losin' money steady."

"Rustlers?" Cimarron inquired.

"No rustlers. The herd tallies out O. K. Still, the layout can't show a profit. Old man Cody finally figured it was Smiley's fault, so he fired Smiley and hired me. That made all the rest of the outfit sore. They've always been thick with Smiley."

"Any special grief since you took over?" Cimarron asked. He was shaving all this while, and thinking fast.

"Not a thing, Steve. Until today when I came to town and Smiley picks this gun fight with me."

CIMARRON finished shaving and mopped his face dry. His expression tightened as voices came from the street. A harsh laugh reached them from the walk in front of the Soledad.

"Looks like he's skeered to come out, Smiley," someone jeered.

Another voice echoed, "Maybe he's hightailed it out o' town."

Next came a bellow from Smiley himself: "He's still in there, all right. Hidin' like a rabbit. If he pokes his head out that door, I'll smoke it off with a slug."

Benny Corbin stood up with his face flaming. "I'm a rabbit, am I?" He wiped his swollen hand dry and

buckled on his gun belt.

He was advancing toward the door when Cimarron barred his way. "I hate to do this, kid," Cimarron drawled. Then his fist drove a paralyzing punch to Benny's chin.

Benny's mouth came open. He stared in a daze. "Hey, what the —" Before he could say more, Cimarron's left punched hard again on his jaw.

Benny's knees buckled. He sagged senseless to the floor. Cimarron carried him to a bunk. "Sorry, kid," he growled.

Then Cimarron stripped quickly to his undergarments. He tossed his own thorn-scarred corduroys to one side. Returning to the bunk, he pulled off Benny's white doeskin vest, his red-checkered shirt and wide, black, batwinged chaparajos and quickly donned them. He put on Benny's tall, cream-colored sombrero with the rattlesnake-skin band, and draped Benny's belt, with its pearl-handled six-gun, about his own waist. Benny had certainly garbed himself in his finest trappings to drive in to meet the boss' niece.

"I ain't been duded up like this in a coon's age, kid," Cimarron grinned. Benny Corbin, still out cold, did not hear him.

Cimarron peered from a window into the twilight. He waited about ten more minutes while the twilight faded. Then he pulled Benny's sombrero well down over his eyes.

Smiley's jeering came to him from the opposite walk: "Looks like I'm gonna have to pass out rain checks, gents. He's skeered to come out."

There was still enough light for shooting, Cimarron calculated, but not enough for features to be distinguished across the street. Fortunately he was of a height with Benny. Stepping out into dusk from

Benny's door, dressed in Benny's finery, he should instantly draw fire from Smiley.

So Cimarron opened the door and stepped suddenly out upon the walk. Across thirty yards of gloom he saw Smiley. The man stood leaning against the hitch rack, directly in front of the Soledad.

A score of loungers scattered briskly. One of them yelled: "Look out. There's that Corbin kid!"

Cimarron smiled. This was going the way he had hoped it would.

But Smiley did not immediately begin shooting. He hunched to a crouch, though, each hand a rigid claw as he stood staring.

Cimarron advanced to the curb. It was almost dark, and he made little more than a silhouette there. His eyes, from beneath the hat brim, challenged Smiley. He had emerged rolling a cigarette, and now he continued to roll the smoke with a tobacco sack draped by its string from his lips. With immense nonchalance, he was using both hands.

Then Smiley's voice lashed at him, "I told yuh to git outta town, Corbin!"

The tobacco sack draped from his mouth gave Cimarron an excuse for not answering. He stood at quiet ease on his own side of the street, watching Smiley.

Then Smiley went for his guns. They came up booming as Cimarron took one quick side-step and drew his own weapons. Flash for flash they shot it out, Cimarron Steve Wilder and Smiley.

Then Smiley crumpled to the dust, by the hitch rack.

All the town saw it; and all the town thought it was Benny Corbin who dropped the man who had tried to run him out of town.

Cimarron holstered his gun and walked back into the shack. He

locked the doors, pulled down the shades and lighted a lamp.

Benny was just coming to. His voice came groggily, "Did I hear someone shooting?"

"Sure, you did, kid," Cimarron grinned. "You just shot it out with Smiley."

## CHAPTER II

### CIMARRON SMELLS SMOKE

**C**IMARRON was removing the trappings which, in gloom, had made him pass to be Benny. Mechanically, the other man put them on.

"You got a rep now, kid," Cimarron said half jokingly.

"Don't want any rep I can't earn myself," Benny growled. "Hereafter, I'll do my own shootin'."

"Sure you will—when your hand heals. But this time, let the cards lie like they fell. It's good insurance. The whole town figgers you beat Smiley fair and handsome, so you won't be bothered none."

"How bad did you shoot Smiley up?"

"He's only winged," Cimarron guessed. "But maybe you better find out for sure."

"How?"

"Take a walk over to the Soledad. Buy yourself a cigar and let the customers admire you, kid. 'There's that fast-fingered foreman from the Box Cross,' they'll say, 'what just ventilated Smiley.' Fickle, these bar lizards are. They'll lick your boots. The king is dead, long live the king!"

Benny still looked resentful. "Grandstandin' is not my style, Steve."

"Course it ain't. You're just goin' over there to find out how bad Smiley's shot up."

The argument weighed with Benny finally. He went out, garbed in the same range foofaraw which

a few minutes ago had adorned Cimarron, and crossed the street. Cimarron watched from a window and saw him enter the Soledad Saloon.

Cimarron then went out the back door and to his roan in the alley. He led the animal to a hydrant in the yard, watered it, and then took it into a shed used to shelter Box Cross mounts when riders came in on overnight errands. A sack of grain was there and Cimarron put out a generous ration.

"I figger you an' me better keep out o' sight, Blueboy," he said, "seein' as everyone thinks we left town before sundown. We can bed down right here and leave at dawn for New Mexico."

Having fed the horse, he went back into the shack and waited.

In a little while Benny Corbin rejoined him. The young Box Cross foreman had two cigars and gave one of them to his friend.

"You said it, Steve," he announced. "Smiley's only winged. One slug tickled his ribs and the other smashed his right arm."

"Where'd they take him? To the hotel?"

"Nope. They carried him down the street to Pete Garcia's cantina. Smiley keeps himself a room there."

Benny's hand still pained him. He sat down to soak it again in hot salt water.

Lighting up the cigar, Cimarron stretched out on a bunk. "Tell me more about the Box Cross," he invited. "What about this niece comin' out from the East? Is she a good looker?"

"Never saw her, Steve. All I know is she's the old man's only kin and heir. When he cashes in, she'll be signin' the checks."

Steve glanced at him sharply.

"Ain't expectin' him to cash in, are you?"

"No reason why he should. He's short o' sixty and in good health. But he's been nervous lately. Nervous as a cat. Always keeps himself braced with a gun handy, like he's expectin' a blow-up any minute. Every now and then he comes cat-footin' down to the bunkshack, like he's hopin' to catch a load o' dirt bein' hatched there. And he doesn't trust a man on the outfit, 'cept Chang, the cook."

Cimarron blew smoke rings and mulled it over. "Well, I'd be suspicious, too," he admitted, "if I was losin' money on fat steers with nary a one of 'em ever bein' rustled. Is his layout mortgaged?"

"To the last cinch ring," Benny replied. "Every time an interest date rolls around, the old man has to ship a coupla cars of beef so's he can meet it."

"I reckon that explains it," Cimarron yawned. "Nothin' like interest to eat up profits on a ranch. What time's that stage due in the mornin'?"

"Eight o'clock."

"Well, good luck, kid; and I hope she's good-lookin'. Me, I won't be here when you wake up. I'm pullin' freight at daybreak for home," Cimarron kicked off his boots, turned his face to the wall and went to sleep.

IT was about five in the morning when Cimarron rose. He went out by the rear door without arousing Benny Corbin. Light was just breaking over the mesas to the east.

Saddling Blueboy, Cimarron rode south along the deserted main street. Smokey Buttes was like a tomb. Two blocks past the Soledad, and at the extreme edge of town, Cimarron came to a squalid run-down cantina with the name "Pedro Garcia"

over its door. That was where Benny told him they had taken Smiley, Cimarron remembered.

He was directly in front of the place when its front window was raised by someone inside. A brown face appeared there. Two hands, holding something fluffy and white, reached out. Then apparently the man inside became aware that a rider was passing. Quickly he drew his hands back in and closed the window.

Cimarron would have thought nothing of it—except that he had observed the nature of the white, fluffy handful exposed by the man at the window. Presumably the man was Pedro Garcia himself.

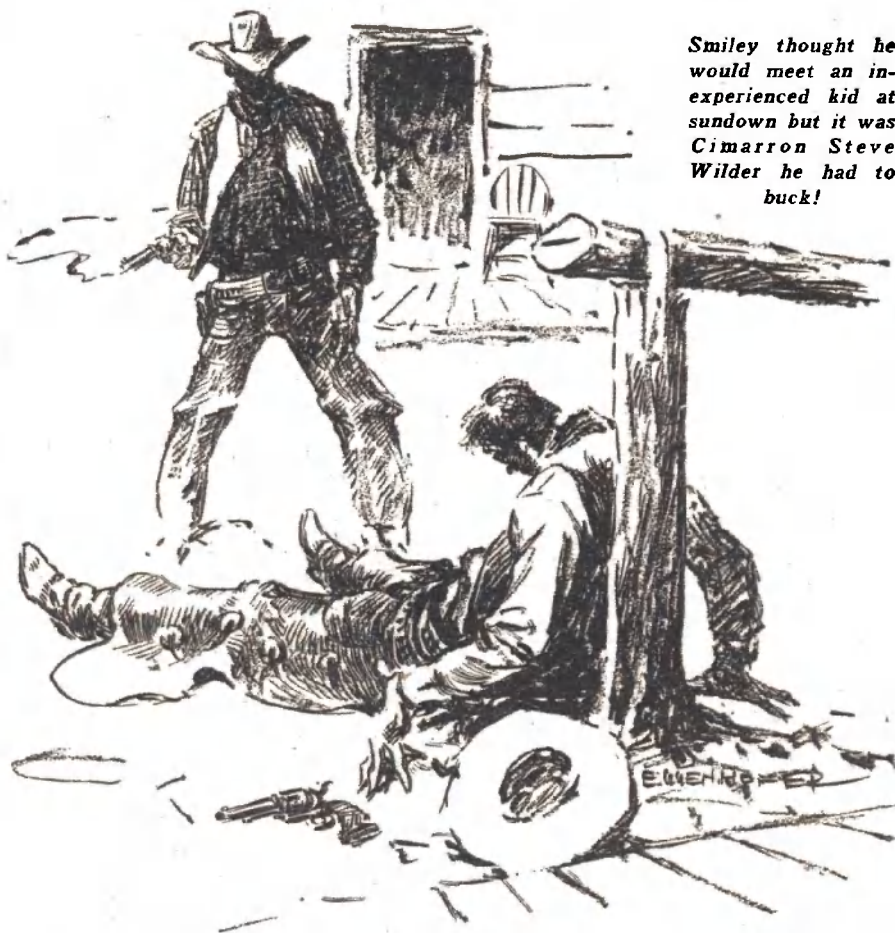
Cimarron continued onto the next corner. There he turned into a side-trail where he dismounted and tethered his horse. He was impressed by the significance of what he had seen at the window. "It happened just as we passed, Blueboy," he thought aloud, "because the Mex was waitin' fer daylight. He'd need to wait fer daylight. Pigeons don't fly at night."

Walking silently in his high-heeled boots, Cimarron returned to the front of the cantina. There he flattened himself to its wall only a step to one side of the window. Garcia, he reasoned, would give a passer-by time to be gone. Then he would again open the window.

In less than five minutes the window was re-opened. Two brown hands, holding a white, feathery burden, came out. A voice whispered, "*Vaya, paloma mia.*" Go, my pigeon!

The bird spread its wings for flight from the hand of Garcia. But the hand of Cimarron snatched it.

"*Caramba! Ladrón! Parase!*" the man inside the window yelled.



*Smiley thought he would meet an inexperienced kid at sundown but it was Cimarron Steve Wilder he had to buck!*

But Cimarron was already legging it for his horse.

What kind of a message was Smiley sending out, he wondered, and to whom?

Arriving at the roan, Cimarron disengaged a tiny roll of paper attached to the bird's leg. Only three words were written on it:

Smiley missed. *Cuidado.*

**C**IMARRON whistled softly. *Cuidado*, he knew, meant "be careful." Something else flashed to him with complete conviction. The

run-in with Benny yesterday had been planned. Its significance went deeper than Smiley's personal resentment at being displaced by Benny as foreman of the Box Cross. Benny Corbin had been marked for killing by some distant, controlling mind which had expected Smiley not to "miss."

"All of which smells like smoke, Blueboy," Cimarron muttered grimly. "Reckon we'd better hang around awhile." He mounted, still holding the pigeon. He rode the side trail half a block to the exit of

an alley. Then, turning north along this alley he made his way again to the rear of Benny's shack in midtown.

Cimarron put the roan in the shed there and went in to rejoin Benny. He found his friend in the shack's kitchen, cooking breakfast.

"Look what I ran into, Benny." Cimarron displayed the note and explained. Then he released the pigeon which fluttered to a bunkpost and perched there, quivering nervously.

"They had me measured for a pine box all right," Benny grimaced, having read the note.

"They?"

"The Box Cross outfit, I figured. Five of 'em out there, all of a feather with Smiley. Never could figure out why the old man doesn't fire 'em."

Coffee was boiling and Benny poured two cups. A platter of bacon was already on the table.

Cimarron sat down comfortably. "I'm sticking right by you, kid, till the last chip's played."

"No use of that, Steve," Benny protested. "I can manage."

"You can manage to get yourself dry-gulched. Nope, kid, that little horse ranch o' mine can take care of itself a spell longer. Besides, I'm curious. My victuals just won't set right till I find out where this pigeon flies."

"How can it fly anywhere with the door shut, Steve?"

"I can open the door, can't I?"

"But you can't see where it flies to. No bronc can keep up with a wingin' pigeon."

"That's right," Cimarron admitted. "So the deal is fer you to get there first. Meet the stage at eight o'clock. Then drive out to the ranch with the girl. How far is it, Benny?"

"About twenty-five miles."

"That's about three hours in a

buckboard. So I'll wait here until eleven. Then I turn the pigeon loose. At the ranch, keep your eyes peeled fer it. If it lights there and some crooked cowhand grabs it, you'll know he's in this play with Smiley."

Benny gulped his coffee and refilled the cups. "Sure thing, Steve. Then I can tip the old man and he'll fire the whole outfit."

"It still ain't double cinch tight, though," Cimarron frowned. "Maybe the bird'll fly somewhere else."

"Where, for instance?"

Cimarron gave it moody thought. Then his lean face brightened. Taking a small slip of paper, he wrote on it:

Smiley missed. *Cuidado.* Meet me at fork of Beaver Creek soon as you can.

GRINNING, Cimarron displayed the note to Benny. The Box Cross man saw the ruse and approved. "But why the fork of Beaver Creek?" he asked.

"Any other place'd do as well, just so it's brushy," Cimarron said. "Soon as I turn the pigeon loose, I'll high-tail there myself and bed down."

"I get it," Benny said excitedly. "Whoever receives the message'll show up at Beaver Creek. And you'll jump him."

"Anyway I'll know who he is." Cimarron looked at his watch. "Better start dollin' up, feller, if you aim to meet a lady at eight."

Benny Corbin proceeded to make himself handsome. This wasn't too difficult, nature having favored him with even features and yellowish curly hair, and with a build which would have caught the eye of any college coach. After the young man had dusted his boots and given a final, punctilious dent to his ten-gallon headpiece, Cimarron felt inspired to

remark: "You're just what the doctor ordered, kid, for unloadin' this shipment off the stage. She'll take one look at you and fall dead."

"I'm not interested, Steve."

"Better not talk too fast. Wait till you see her. Another thing. The whole town'll meet that stage and they'll be talkin' about how you shot it out with Smiley. She'll hear that and—"

"She won't hear anything if I can help it," Benny cut in, flushing. "And if she does, soon as we drive out o' town I'll tell her the truth."

He put on driving gauntlets and started out. "Comin, Steve?"

"Nope. I'm keepin' out o' sight all I can. Though I don't think Garcia got a good look at me when I grabbed that pigeon. The whole play's yourn, kid."

The flush on Benny's face softened. "It's darned white of you to sit in on this, Steve," he said sincerely.

"I'll be at Beaver Creek fork, if you need me," Cimarron told him.

Benny went out, turning toward the livery barn for the buckboard.

Cimarron remained in the shack and from its window he reconnoitered the street. A crowd was already forming in front of the post office. And fifteen minutes later Benny Corbin drew up there, driving a spanking team of grays.

Then the stage rolled in. The only passenger to alight was a young girl with much more baggage, Cimarron thought, than any one human could ever need. She was slight in figure and only a little of her face could be seen above a fur neckpiece. Of that little, though, Cimarron definitely approved.

He saw Benny Corbin step up and remove his sombrero. He saw the girl smile and extend a gloved hand. By the look on his face, Benny was

considerably impressed. Then the crowd engulfed her. Benny began loading bags and hat boxes on the buckboard.

"Don't blame yuh for not lettin' Smiley run yuh outta town, Benny," a loud voice called.

It made Benny hurry to get away. Cimarron saw him quickly embark his passenger and climb to a seat by her. Then the buckboard wheeled off in a cloud of dust toward the Box Cross.

In the shack, Cimarron recaptured the pigeon. A tiny cylinder for messages was affixed to the bird's leg. Cimarron inserted his own message in it. It was now eight fifteen. He sat down to while away three hours. At exactly eleven fifteen he would release the pigeon and then ride for Beaver Creek fork.

## CHAPTER III

### CREW MUTINY

**A**T nine o'clock Jeff Cody emerged from his ranchhouse on the Box Cross. His grizzled face wore a scowl. His niece, Merle Morley, was coming this morning and it worried him a little.

Jeff could feel trouble coming. It had hung heavy in the air for a month now, ever since he had discharged Smiley as foreman and given the berth to young Benny Corbin. Unquestionably the rest of the crew had resented that change. The remaining five hands, headed by Ike Salters, who by seniority should have succeeded Smiley, had been more than sullen about it. Jeff Cody was sorry now that he hadn't made a clean sweep.

He *would* make a clean sweep, Jeff resolved, just the minute haying was over. Competent cowhands who weren't too proud to irrigate, mow and stack hay didn't grow on trees,

Jeff knew. And his present outfit had been doing just that for years. He had to admit that they were good workers. The Box Cross put up four hundred tons of bluestem vega each summer season, for winter feed. It kept the steers in tallow.

Still, this past year the ranch had failed to show a profit. Why? Cody wished he knew. There had been no loss from blackleg or rustlers. Why should a ranch with a good ditch right, with plenty of lush meadows and the best grama-sod range in southern Colorado, consistently show losses on the books?

But at the moment what worried Jeff most was the coming of Merle Morley. "I'm sure your housekeeping needs checking up on, Uncle Jeff," she had written. "A Chinese cook, did you say? And not a woman within miles? I promised mother I'd look after you, so I'll be out in August."

On this cloudy August morning Jeff Cody looked off toward his near meadow and saw four of his men stacking vega there. A fifth, he knew, was packing salt out to a range waterhole. The four, who were haying, were belted with guns. It was incongruous, Jeff thought bitterly, for hay hands to weight themselves with an arsenal—unless they were looking for trouble.

Beyond doubt they *were* looking for trouble—with Benny Corbin. More than once Jeff had seen them baiting the new foreman for a showdown. There'd been veiled insults and back talk, in cold calculation of egging the new foreman into a go for his gun. Yesterday, in fact, the situation had become so tense that Jeff had been glad to get Benny out of the way by sending him in to meet the stage.

Today, haying would be over. And tonight he would fire the entire crew,

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with the exception of Benny. That was the only way to make sure that Merle wouldn't be exposed to the shock of a gun fight in the barnyard.

Jeff looked at his watch. Benny and Merle should be here in a couple of hours now. Chang Foy, the Chinese cook, came up from the barn with two pails of milk.

"Have you got the spare bedroom ready?" Jeff demanded.

"Oh, yes. All sweep out velly nice." Chang went on to the house.

**S**UDDENLY thunder rolled from mesas along the New Mexico line. In five minutes more it was raining—one of those sudden August showers which are likely to hit a Western ranch at exactly the wrong time, with a stack of hay not quite topped. Jeff's first thought was that his niece, on the way here in an open buckboard with Benny, would get drenched. Also, his outfit would have to quit haying and make tracks for the barn.

A few moments later Jeff saw his crew coming in, Ike Salters driving the hay wagon while his three companions loped alongside on saddle horses. In a few minutes they'd be unharnessing in the barn.

It occurred to Jeff Cody that here was a chance to find out what was on their minds. After unharnessing, they'd be sure to linger in the shelter of the barn vestibule—and perhaps gossip a bit about their feud with Benny Corbin. The key to a mystery might leak out. The mystery of why six, tough, gun-slung cowhands had been content to remain as combination hay jumpers and steer punchers on the Box Cross. Smiley, Salters and company had always seemed to Jeff a bit out of character here.

He could hear the wheels of the hay wagon crackling across a little

wooden bridge over the irrigation ditch, and turning into the barnyard. So Jeff Cody, although it went against his forthright nature to spy, decided that here was a case where an end justified the means. He stepped into a gloomy corner of the barn vestibule where steps ascended to a loft. Under the steps was a rick of adobe bricks, for use in the repair of outbuildings. Jeff brushed away cobwebs back of them and knelt there, well screened from the main vestibule area.

The hay wagon came to a stop outside. Its team was untraced and led into stalls. Then came the three saddle horses. Jeff heard the men putting feed into mangers.

He heard Ike Salters drawl: "I never did like to pitch hay, nohow. Let 'er rain."

"Where's the old man, Ike?"

"Up to the house, I reckon."

Silence for a few minutes. The four men came forward to the vestibule to relax over cigarettes.

Crouching under the loft steps, Jeff Cody felt a bit sheepish. His spying, it seemed, was all for nothing.

Then a hand named Gus Kelland snickered.

"What's so danged funny, Gus?" Ike asked.

"I was jest a-wonderin', Ike, how that gal from the East is gonna git out to the ranch. Chances are she can't drive no buckboard herself. And with Pretty Boy Benny in the morgue, how can she—"

"Shut up, Gus," Ike broke in harshly. "It ain't no skin off your back, anyway. Fact is, you don't know nothin' about it."

Back of the adobe bricks, Jeff stiffened. Why should they expect Benny to be in a morgue?

"Maybe the skin's off Smiley's back," a voice growled. "How do

we know he got away with it?"

"Don't worry about that none, Chick. He's chain lightnin', Smiley is."

Another minute passed with no sound except a patter of rain on the barn shingles. During it Jeff felt cold with worry and anger. It was clear now that Benny Corbin had been framed into some gunplay with Smiley. He peered out and saw a crafty leer on Chick Chaney's thin, bullet-chipped face. Chick was saying: "Reckon you're right, Ike. Corbin's playin' a harp by now."

"Button your lip, Chick," Salters warned. "How do we know Chang ain't out in the corral, milkin'? Better take a look."

Chick went to look into the corral. He came back and said: "Nope, he's done milked. He'll be up at the house now, with the old man."

Another voice came querulously: "See here, Ike, where does it get us? We get rid of Corbin all right. But how do we know the old man won't take on another one just like him?"

"Tail-'em-up says leave that end of it to him. And Tail-'em-up's got brains, ain't he?"

Jeff was puzzled. He didn't know anyone named Tail-'em-up.

"All I ask," Gus Kelland growled, "is fer to start in again right where we had to leave off when Smiley got fired. Sweet pickings, them were."

"There'll be plenty more, Gus. Best meal ticket on this here range, if we play it right." Ike gave a chuckle and tossed his cigarette out into the rain.

**T**O be found here, Jeff realized with sudden panic, would mean his own doom. These gunnies had as good as admitted a plot to murder Benny Corbin; had admitted, too, that they'd been consistently helping themselves to "sweet pick-

ings" from the Box Cross.

"The rain's slackin'," Ike said. "But we can't hay no more today, gents. Might as well go make ourselves pretty for that dude dame."

"She'll be comin' round the mountain!" Chick sang.

Stumpy laughed. "Maybe the old man'll send one of us in fer her, soon as he finds out Corbin got shot up."

"Hold on," Gus said. "Who's that foggin' this way on a bronc? Maybe it's the low-down from Smiley."

From his hiding place, Jeff, too, could hear an approaching horseman.

"It's only Dakota," he heard Ike say, "comin' back from saltin' that waterhole."

Dakota dismounted and entered the barn. Jeff could hear the rustle of his oilskin slicker. Then came his bantering voice: "What's the idea of you hay hands loafin' on the job. Ain't rainin' now?"

"Go jump in the horse trough, Dakota. Nobody ain't made you foreman yet."

"But if yuh had any brains, you'd be workin' a hayfork 'stead of your jaw," Dakota contended. "So the old man won't get the wind up, savvy?"

"Dakota's right," Ike agreed. "The sad news about Smiley gunnin' Corbin'll come any minute now. And if we're nice an' busy, we'll look a sight more innocent. What was your next chore, Dakota? We can't go hayin', so we might as well help yuh."

"Corbin told me to salt the waterholes," Dakota said, "and then he told me to patch the corral fence where it's fallin' down. Lend me a hand, you buzzards, and we'll be done by chow time."

"Aw right. You get a wheelbarrow, Chick. And Stumpy, you mix up some mud mortar."

Jeff Cody, crouching back of his screen, felt a sinking at the pit of his stomach. He heard Chick Chaney wheel a barrow up the barn aisle and park it directly on the other side of his own screen. Chick and Ike began tossing adobe bricks into the barrow. Back of the pile, Jeff crouched lower. He flattened himself on the floor. It was humiliating to hide like this from his own crew, but he knew his life was at stake now. He had heard too much of their plot. If they saw him, they'd never let him out of here alive.

"That's a load, Chick," Ike said.

Chick wheeled the barrow out to the corral and to a corner where the wall had half collapsed. In a few minutes he came back chuckling, for another load.

"Bet the old man's watchin' us from the house, Ike. 'Bees' he'll say, 'ain't got nothin' on them waddies o' mine, rain or shine.'"

**T**HE bricks kept thudding into the barrow. Each row of adobes removed left Jeff's screen six inches lower.

"Jeeper's!" Ike Salters yelled suddenly. "Look, Chick!"

Jeff knew he was exposed. He could tell it by the tension of silence. Silently he arose to his feet and came out from under the steps. His face was stern and bitter.

Five men, each with a twitching gun hand, faced him. Jeff himself was unarmed. In any case he could hardly hope to shoot it out with five of them.

All he could salvage was his dignity. He glared from man to man of them and lashed out: "You're fired, the pack of you! Roll your blankets and ride, you wormy coyotes!"

"What fer?" Stumpy challenged him. He was blocking the barn

door, a mortar trowel in his hand.

Jeff ignored him. "I'll go to the house and write your checks," he said. He turned his back on Ike and took a step toward the exit.

They couldn't let him go. Ike Salters knew it. They all knew it. They knew he had heard them acknowledge complicity with a man named Tail-'em-up and with Smiley, in some cold-blooded scheme not only to loot the Box Cross but to murder Benny Corbin.

The killing of Corbin by Smiley, in the minds of these men, was already an accomplished fact. So Jeff Cody was only permitted to take one step. Then, with callous unconcern, Ike Salters cracked down with his gun barrel on Jeff's head.

Jeff crumpled to the ground like a brained ox.

## CHAPTER IV

### DEATH ON PARADE

**F**IVE conspirators grouped about him with sweat-damp faces. "How we gonna explain this, Ike?" one of the men demanded.

"We gotta rig an alibi, and quick, Ike. The cook'll be showin' up down here any minute now, on one chore or another."

Ike kept his head. "Chang's next chore," he said, "will be to slop the pigs. He allers does that right after he skims the mornin' milk. Which same gives me an idear."

"If yuh got an idear," Gus said hoarsely, "yuh better throw a rope on it pronto, Ike."

"All right, Gus. You go out in the corral and throw a rope on that sorrel three-year-old. He's only half broke. Snake him around to the south side o' the barn. That can't be seen from the house."

They gaped at him. "Where'll that get us, Ike?"

"Do like I say and don't talk," Ike snapped. "Chick, you put a blind over the sorrel's eyes and toss a saddle on him. The bronc won't move as long as he's blinded. Stumpy, you and Dakota carry the old man out and set him astraddle. Then all of you but Chick go back to work, patchin' the corral fence. From there we can see Chick and the bronc, but the chink can't see 'em from the house 'count of the barn bein' in the way."

"It don't make sense, Ike," objected Chick who was nervous and confused.

"I'll do the thinkin'," Ike said. "Just hold that blinded bronc there, with the old man on him. And be sure you put one of Jeff's feet in a stirrup so it'll snag there. When I see the chink comin' out to slop the pigs, I'll wave my trowel. That'll be your signal to pull the blind off—and turn the bronc loose."

**F**IFTEEN minutes later Chang Foy emerged from the ranch-house with a bucket of skimmed milk. He was halfway to the barn when he saw a horse dash out from back of it. The horse was pitching wildly. Chang Foy, watching, saw its rider pitched off.

The horse kept bucking and ran on. It was dragging the rider, whose boot was caught in a stirrup. Chang Foy dropped his bucket and gave chase.

"Stop blonco!" he screamed shrilly. "Come click! Mistee Clody get pitchee off blonc!"

Four cowhands stopped work on the corral fence and came running. A fifth appeared from back of the barn. It was Ike Salters who caught the sorrel and jerked it to a halt.

Chang came running up and perceived immediately that Jeff Cody was dead. After being dragged

fifty yards, the rancher's head was hideously battered.

"You wall-eyed son of a buzzard!" Ike Salters cursed the sorrel for five raving minutes.

It completely deceived Chang Foy. The cook had seen his master take a ride and get pitched off. That was all there was to it.

"Whitest boss a guy ever had!" mourned Gus Kelland. The others echoed him. But the only genuine sorrow was Chang Foy's.

"Lookee!" the cook suddenly exclaimed. "There clome Mistee Corbin. He blingee lady, see? Oh, too bad, too bad!"

A buckboard wheeled in through the main gate. Back of the two grays sat Benny Corbin and a girl.

Ike Salters saw them and his jaw dropped an inch. Smiley, evidently, had missed. Corbin, according to schedule, should be in the morgue. Why wasn't he? Had he beat Smiley to the draw?

Quickly recovering his poise, Ike herded his crew to one side. "Let Chang do the talkin'," he whispered. "Chang's all the witness we need."

Stumpy gaped at Benny Corbin. "But I thought Smiley was gonna—"

"Shut up, you sap!" Ike whispered and turned soberly to greet Benny and the niece of Jeff Cody.

He saw horror tighten the girl's face. It was a small face, and the pinkness faded out of it. She stared at the battered body of her uncle, then swayed dizzily against Benny. The foreman's arm steadied her.

All the while Chang was explaining mournfully, Benny listened with his eyes hard on Ike Salters.

"He was pitched off a bronc? Is that right, Ike?" he said finally.

"It happened just like Chang says," Ike confirmed. "The boss come out and saddled the sorrel, and the critter begun sunfishin'. Bucked

him off and dragged him fifty yards afore we could ketch up."

"Is that right, Stumpy?" Benny turned to another man. Stumpy nodded dolefully.

Merle Morley's voice came faintly. "You mean poor Uncle Jeff is—"

"Yes'm. He's dead," Chick Chaney said. "We're plenty busted up over it, ma'am."

The girl stared for a moment longer. Then she hid her face in her arms and broke into sobs.

"Take him to the house, Ike," Benny directed.

**I**KE and Gus picked up the victim and carried him to the ranch-house. Benny followed in the buckboard, his arm still supporting Merle. His brain, all the while, was working furiously. Chang's testimony was clearly sincere. And yet there seemed something wrong here.

They took Jeff Cody to his room and laid him on the bed there.

Benny ushered Merle to the guest room. "Bring her baggage, Chang," he directed.

At her door the girl faced Benny with tears still blinding her. All Benny could say was, "It's a shame you had to bump into this, ma'am."

"It . . . it's ghastly!" The words choked her. Then her lips tightened. "But I'm not sorry I came. I know now that he needed me more than ever."

It struck Benny with force that she was Cody's only relative and heir; and that in effect she was now mistress of the Box Cross, with all the Box Cross treacheries dumped right into her lap.

It brought a fierceness to his eyes that she didn't miss. "Are you sure," she asked wretchedly, "that it was—an accident?"

"I'm not sure of anything," Benny admitted.

Merle's inquiry was natural, because on the drive from town Benny had told her about the gunplay with Smiley. She alone knew that it was a man named Steve Wilder from the Cimarron, and not Benny Corbin, who had traded bullets with Smiley. She knew all about Smiley's distemper at being discharged as foreman here, and about the intercepted warning to unknown confederates.

"I mean the only thing I'm sure

of," Benny amended grimly, "is that Ike Salters needs watching."

He left her and went to find the cook. "Chang," he directed, "I want you to sit on the front stoop and keep your eye peeled for a pigeon."

"Pligeon?" Chang puzzled.

"A white pigeon." If you see one

*It was because of Cimarron that Benny Corbin was able to meet the stage—and the whole town thought it was Benny who had gunned Smiley.*



fly to the ranch here, and light, let me know."

"I watchee," Chang promised.

Benny went into Cody's bedroom and found Ike sitting somberly by the corpse. After examining the victim's battered head, Benny could find no wound that could not be the result of the mishap described by Chang.

You've heard him say that yourself."

It was true. Jeff Cody, like most rangemen, had been prideful of his horsemanship.

"Anything us boys can do?" Ike asked.

Benny weighed his response carefully. His impulse was to send for the sheriff. But if he did, he would be admitting to Ike that he suspected murder. Yet there was no evidence of crime. Why should a sheriff be called when a rancher had merely been pitched



Benny's eyes met Ike's with a challenge. "Was Jeff in the habit of riding that sorrel?" he asked.

"Don't reckon anyone was," Ike admitted. "The critter was only half broke. But Jeff allers claimed he could fork anything on four legs..

off his horse and killed?"

"Send Gus to the county seat for Jess Millard," Benny ordered. Millard was the county's leading mortician and also a deputy coroner.

"All right," Ike agreed.

"And send Chick and Stumpy and Dakota down to the meadow. They can spread those wet shocks so

they'll dry in the sun. You, Ike, better hang around the bunkhouse in case I need you."

"Sure." Ike went out.

Benny remained there brooding. He considered riding to Beaver Creek fork for a consultation with Cimarron Steve. But that would mean leaving the girl alone here, so Benny discarded the idea. Treachery was afoot, although he had no faint idea of its motive. He was sure only that he must not leave Merle Morley with scheming gunmen.

Going out to the front stoop, Benny joined Chang. He saw Gus Kelland ride off toward the county seat. A little while later he saw three other hands ride with pitchforks to the hay meadow.

"I got all of 'em out of the way, Chang, 'cept Ike Salters. Which whittles 'em to just the right size for a showdown."

"I watchee for pligeon," Chang said. His slanting eyes explored the horizon toward Smokey Buttes.

"If it comes and Ike grabs it, it means he was in on that gunplay with Smiley." Benny looked at his right hand, whose swelling was now nearly gone. "I was in no shape for a showdown yesterday, Chang. But today, I am."

Benny had explained everything to Chang. The pigeon, he had told him, was being released about now at Smokey Buttes. It should take the bird about an hour to fly here to the Box Cross.

With Benny Corbin no less vigilant than Chang, the two watched all through the afternoon. A few fat, blue pigeons were in evidence all the while, fluttering about the barn cupola. But no white pigeon came with a message from Smokey Buttes.

## CHAPTER V

### A TRYST WITH TROUBLE

HAVING released the pigeon at Smokey Buttes, Cimarron rode his roan southeast toward a chain of mesas along the State line. Small streams tumbling from parallel canyons joined to form Beaver Creek. Arriving at that fork, Cimarron made camp in a cluster of alders to begin a vigil of his own.

A few Box Cross steers grazing in a swale caught Cimarron's eye. The grass was high, he noted, and the steers were fat. Cimarron stretched out with his head pillowed on his blanket roll. He lay there blowing smoke rings at the sun and wondering why the Box Cross should fail to show a profit. These interlocked mesas, he thought, would make convenient avenues for rustling. But according to Benny, there'd been no rustling. So the answer was something else.

What something? Cimarron wasn't keenly interested in the fortunes of the Box Cross. His interest was purely in Benny Corbin. Benny was up against treachery of some kind. The kid would be dry-gulched, likely, unless unseen forces were brought into the open.

The leader of those unseen forces, Cimarron felt sure, would be the recipient of a message now winging by carrier pigeon. "We'll be waitin' to get acquainted, Blueboy," Cimarron grinned, "when he shows up here." But the day waned and no one came.

Cimarron picketed the roan in cottonwoods well up the left fork. From his saddle roll he produced a can of beans, raisins, coffee. Making a fire, he heated the beans and supped sparingly.

When he rolled himself in his blankets for sleep, he knew that the roan

would whinny at any approaching horseman. But dawn and still no visitor. For breakfast Cimarron flushed a covey of grouse and brought one down with his .45. Vigilantly through another day he waited, and through another night.

"Grubstake's about gone, Blueboy," he told his horse. "If he don't show up by noon today, we'll have to amble."

It lacked an hour of noon on the third day when Cimarron heard hoofs crunching gravel. The sound came from up the right fork. A rider was trailing down from the mesa.

To make sure that Blueboy wouldn't whinny, Cimarron led the animal farther up the left fork. On foot he slipped through brush and took a position to command the junction of the streams.

A rider came into view—a lanky man with a bald, bullet head, and a long red neck that was mostly Adam's apple. Cimarron sensed something vaguely familiar about this fellow, but could not immediately place him.

**T**HE man dismounted at the fork and looked about. Cimarron watched him until he felt certain the man expected to keep a tryst there. Then he stepped out into plain sight. "Howdy, stranger," Cimarron drawled. "Who you reppin' for up this way?"

The man was startled. "Ain't repin' fer nobody," he mumbled. He was facing squarely toward Cimarron now—and Cimarron recognized him.

"Shoot me if it ain't old Tail-'em-up Taylor!" he exclaimed.

The lanky man only glared. His horse, Cimarron could see, had been ridden a long way.

"Too bad Smiley missed," Cimar-

ron baited. He half expected the man to go for his gun, and was ready for it.

"Don't know whatcher talkin' about," Taylor muttered.

"What dugout in a sandbank you brandin' in now, Tail-'em-up?" Cimarron inquired. "Last I heard they'd just finished runnin' you out o' Texas."

"I'm not takin' no lip from you, Wilder," Taylor snarled. He backed off a pace as he realized that he'd been trapped into this tryst.

Cimarron knew Tail-'em-up Taylor's background quite well. At one time the man had run a sizable herd of dogies in the Panhandle. "Cheap, scrawny little pot-bellied southerners, as I recall 'em," Cimarron reminisced aloud. "Mexico stuff, runnin' mostly to horns and ribs. Ever' time I saw one I allers thought it was a rail fence. Come a winter blizzard, all they ever got to eat was when you'd ride out and burn the spines offa cactus. Them dogies of yours usta eat that burnt cactus to keep from starvin'. Build a fire anywhere in the snow, and they'd come a-runnin'. Even then they got so weak you generally had to tail 'em up. That's how come folks usta call yuh Tail-'em-up Taylor."

"Mind yer own business," Tail-'em-up growled.

"My business," Cimarron argued, "is to find out why you're concerned about Smiley bein' missin'. Talk fast, Tail-'em-up."

"You been eatin' loco," Taylor sputtered. "I don't even know Smiley."

"Then how come you showed up here?"

"I was jest ridin' by. It's a free range, ain't it?"

Cimarron jerked a tobacco sack from his shirt pocket, spilled tobacco in a wheat-straw paper and began

rolling a cigarette. Rolling it, he used both hands but not his eyes. His eyes were on Tail-'em-up's gun hand.

"You an' Smiley gummed that play," Cimarron said, holding the tobacco sack by its string in his teeth. "You figgered to salivate Corbin, who was crabbin' some crooked deal o' yourn at the Box Cross. But it was Smiley got salivated, 'stead of Corbin. So he sends you the low-down by carrier pigeon an'—"

Tail-'em-up thought he saw a chance. He went for his gun. The iron was only half out when Cimarron fired from his hip. Taylor gave a yell. The bullet had grazed his knuckles and the gun was shocked from his hand.

"You ain't hurt any," Cimarron grinned. He picked up Taylor's gun.

"I'll see you jailed for this!" Taylor yelled.

Cimarron belted the man's gun. Then he pressed his own against Taylor's ribs and searched him. When he failed to find the pigeon-sent note, he was disappointed. "Just means you were smart enough to burn it, Tail-'em-up," he said.

Cimarron questioned the man for an hour but could get nothing out of him. Nor could he glean anything from Taylor's pockets except a New Mexico hunting license which gave the man's age and address. The address was Wolf Wells, which Cimarron knew to be on a wind-swept malpais range about fifty miles south of the Colorado line. But there was absolutely no proof of perfidy against the Box Cross.

"Means I got to let you go, Tail-'em-up. Here's your cannon." He tossed a .45 back to Taylor. "Now fork that crowbait o' yourn and fog on home."

TAYLOR mounted and went loping back upcreek. Cedars swallowed him in a few minutes, and Cimarron returned thoughtfully to his room.

He had no more than mounted when again he heard hoofs crunching gravel. This time a rider approached from the direction of the Box Cross. He proved to be a Chinese on a mule.

"Mistee Clorbin," Chang Foy announce breathlessly, "he say clome here find you." He gave Cimarron a note from Benny.

Cimarron read it, and whistled. Jeff Cody, the note said, was dead—bucked off and dragged by a half-broken horse. Nothing off color about it because Chang, entirely reliable, had witnessed the whole thing.

Cimarron questioned Chang at length. The Oriental insisted that no crime was involved.

According to the note, Benny and Jeff Cody's niece had now gone to the county seat to attend the burial. No pigeon had arrived at the ranch. "What about your end of it, Steve?" Benny's note asked. "Anybody show up on Beaver Creek? Here at the Box Cross, the cowhands have got me guessing. They stand without hitching, and sugar wouldn't melt in their mouths."

Reading between the lines, Cimarron could tell that Benny was more confused than ever. He was half sorry now that he'd turned Tail-'em-up loose. "I'm ridin' to the Box Cross with you, Chang," he announced.

## CHAPTER VI

### A GO FOR GUNS

CIMARRON and Chang Foy rode most of the twenty miles to the Box Cross together. When they were nearly there, Cimarron said,

"You ride on alone, Chang. I'll circle and show up from tother direction. Pretend like you never saw me before. I'm just a wanderin' cowhand lookin' fer a job. Savvy?"

Chang savvied. He winked a sloping eye and rode on.

Half an hour later Cimarron approached the Box Cross buildings from the opposite direction. He knew just what he would find: owner and foreman absent to a funeral and five punchers nursing guilty consciences in the bunkhouse.

Ike Salters scowled from the bunkhouse door as the newcomer dismounted.

"Howdy, neighbor," Cimarron grinned.

"Hi." Ike's tone was definitely uncordial.

"What's the chance of a job around here?"

"You headed in on the wrong sidin', mister," Ike said. "We're full up."

Cimarron grimaced. "Just my luck. Well, if you got an extra bunk I'll bed down overnight, anyhow."

No response from Ike. But Cimarron, as though taking for granted the traditional hospitality of ranches, led his roan to the corral and unsaddled.

He then went cheerfully to the bunkhouse where he made himself at home. "Nice layout you gents got here. Roll one?" Cimarron passed around the makings, then rolled one himself.

Ike, Gus, Chick, Stumpy and Dakota did not warm up to him. Clearly here was a nest they wanted all to themselves. To Cimarron's mild puzzlement, there was a fire in the bunk-room stove. It was a hot afternoon and the stove wasn't for cooking, but strictly for heating on cold winter days.

A faint smell of burning leather came to Cimarron. He sensed at once that a fire had been built in the stove for the purpose of burning something composed all or in most part of leather. Was it a clue bearing on the death of Jeff Cody? If so, it would certainly explain the crew's hostility at his intrusion.

"Boss around?" Cimarron queried.

"Nope. She went to a funeral with the foreman."

"A lady boss, huh?" Cimarron gave a laugh. "When'll she be back?"

"Coupla days, maybe."

"Foreman's a jigger named Smiley, ain't he? That's what they told me over at Raton, where I just rid from."

"Smiley usta be foreman," Ike growled. "He ain't no more."

Chang came in to put kerosene in the lamps. He paid no attention to Cimarron. After filling the lamps, the cook went to the cookshack to make supper.

Stumpy was eying the guest shrewdly. "Didn't I see you down on the Cimarron one time?" he demanded.

"Might be," Cimarron said lazily. "I been most everywhere."

By the time Chang called supper, Ike and his men had relaxed a little. Evidently this was only a harmless, out-of-work cowpoke who'd be moving on in the morning.

**W**HILE the crew was eating, Chang went up to take care of his duties at the main house. Later Cimarron saw him peering in at the bunkhouse window and caught a surreptitious signal.

"Reckon I'll go water my bronc," Cimarron said, and strolled out.

In the gloom he found Chang. "Clome click," the Chinese beckoned. He led Cimarron to the main ranch-

house and inside to a room which had been Jeff Cody's den and office.

"While I lide to Beaver Cleek, lobber clomes in here," Chang explained rapidly. "Velly bad lobber. He stealee lecord book. Velly bad, you savvy?"

"I savvy, Chang." Cimarron's eyes gleamed. "Cody kept an account book here. And it's missing."

"Keep lecord book light here." Chang indicated a vacant spot on a shelf.

"The book was a leather-bound ledger, I'll bet."

Chang nodded.

"So that's what they burned in the bunkhouse stove!" Cimarron exclaimed. "First chance I get, I'll rake through the ashes there. Keep a tight lip about this, Chang. Act like we don't suspect a thing."

When Cimarron returned to the bunkhouse, the five hands were playing poker. The guest sat in himself for an hour or so. To promote his popularity, he deliberately lost ten dollars.

Cimarron turned in while they were still playing. He awakened with dawn light streaming in. The others were up. He saw Chick Chaney pulling on gum boots and grouching about having to go change the irrigation flow in an upper meadow.

Chick went out. Cimarron dressed and ate breakfast with the four others.

"Reckon you'll be foggin' along now, huh?" Ike said. It was more of a command than a question.

"Yep," Cimarron smiled. "Thanks fer the bed down, gents."

He carried his blanket roll to the barn. There he saddled Blueboy and rode away. But he went only over the first rise of ground.

Dismounting and taking screen

behind greasewood, Cimarron looked back. He saw Ike, Gus, Dakota and Stumpy emerge from the Box Cross bunkhouse, wearing chaparrajos. The four rode away toward mesa foothills, obviously to work cattle there. To Cimarron it seemed reasonable that they'd be gone all day.

Chick, of course, might or might not be irrigating a vega meadow. Taking a chance on that, Cimarron loped back to the bunkhouse.

He went inside and spread a tarp on the floor by the stove. Then he used a small ash shovel to remove ashes from the firebox. Carefully he sifted these ashes on the tarp. If a leather-bound ledger had been burned, bits of the charred leather should still be here.

And Cimarron did find more than one scrap of charred binding. Clearly they were from the cover of a leather-bound ledger. Nothing remained of the inner paper. The pages had perhaps been torn out and burned separately.

The ranch records of Jeff Cody! A conviction gripped Cimarron that Cody had been murdered in cold blood. A clue to the motive, more than likely, had been written in the record book. In that case, why hadn't Jeff himself known of it? This confused Cimarron. Still, the evidence was piling up. After the murder of Cody, Ike and his crowd had seized the first chance to raid Cody's office. The chance came when Benny and the girl drove off to Jeff's funeral, and when Chang took a ride to Beaver Creek. Stealing the record book, Ike had promptly burned it in the bunkhouse stove.

Had he burned anything else, Cimarron wondered. He raked the fire box for the last crumb of ash.

Then: "Reach high, you snooper!"

THE voice was Chick Chaney's. Cimarron whirled with his hands high. He stood staring into the bore of Chick's .45.

"A peeper, huh?" Chick rasped. "Well, you've peeped your last peep." Cimarron heard the gun click to a cock.

The intent to kill gleamed coldly from Chick's eyes. In his rubber irrigating boots, he had entered soundlessly by the rear door.

"Good mornin', judge," Cimarron grinned. "What's the charge? You wouldn't cut down on me just fer cleanin' out the bunkshack stove, wouldja? I figgered I'd do a few chores around here, and earn my board."

It was a play for time—but it failed.

"Keep one hand up," Chick ordered. "Use the other to unbuckle your gun belt and drop it to the floor. Then you an' me are takin' a walk."

He'd be marched to the creek and murdered, Cimarron knew. So there was nothing to be lost by shooting it out now.

"I ain't arguin' with that hog-leg o' yours," Cimarron conceded. "You win, mister. I'm droppin' my belt to the floor."

It wasn't an even break, but Cimarron made the best of it. Keeping his left hand high, his right lowered to the buckle of his belt. Chick would much prefer to make the kill outside, he reasoned; preferably in brush along the creek, where evidence would never be found.

So Cimarron fumbled with his gun belt, his eyes on the cocked hammer of Chick's .45.

Then Cimarron took a nimble step to the left, crouching as his hand whipped to holster. Chick's gun roared and Cimarron took a smash-jolt on the shoulder. He fired,

went forward on knees and one hand still shooting. A blaze from Chick's gun licked out at him. Boomings from two guns rocked the bunk room and a second bullet nicked Cimarron. In a haze he saw Chick stagger and fall.

Then Cimarron himself fell face down, dead to the world.

## CHAPTER VII

### COUNTERPLOT

HOURS later Cimarron came to in Chang's lean-to off the ranchhouse kitchen. Groggy, and with pain racking his shoulder, he became aware that Chang was holding a hot drink to his lips. He tried to move an arm, but couldn't.

"More better lie eliet," Chang murmured.

He had bandaged Cimarron's head, where a slug from Chick Chaney's gun had left an ugly crease. Also a clean bullet hole through the shoulder, barely below the collar bone, had been swabbed out and was now bound with a healing poultice.

"Lie eliet," Chang insisted. "No likee more glun fight."

Slowly the cobwebs cleared. Cimarron realized that Chang had carried him here from the bunkhouse and had given efficient first aid.

"How bad am I shot up, Chang?" he asked weakly.

Chang held up two fingers. "No can lide long time," he said.

"How 'bout the other jasper?"

This time Chang held up one finger, indicating that only one of Cimarron's bullets had found flesh. "He are not velly bad hurt," Chang reported sadly. "He lide away."

"Chick rode away? Then why doesn't he bring Ike and the others here, to finish me off?"

"He lide that way." Chang

pointed north. Ike and his crew had ridden south. "I watchee by lindow," Chang grinned.

The facts came out, bit by bit. Cimarron learned that Chang had heard gunfire in the bunkhouse and had gone there to investigate. Peering in at a window, he had seen two combatants prone on the floor. Then one of them, Chick, had staggered to his feet.

"He figgered I was dead, mebbe," Cimarron suggested.

Chang nodded. "Then he are take money from mattress and lide away."

"Money? Whose money?"

Chang didn't know. But the mat-tress had been Ike's.

Cimarron made a quick guess. The Box Cross crew had been up to some crooked play here for a long time. Naturally they'd keep the profits in ready cash, for a prompt getaway if exposed.

"Looks like Chick hightailed with it, Chang. With me dead on the bunkshack floor, he figgered to let Ike and Stumpy and Gus and Dakota hold the bag."

One thing was certain. When that quartet of double-crossed cow-hands came in from work, they'd be fighting mad.

"Where's my roan, Chang?" Cimarron asked. The saddled roan, the cook informed him, was standing by the bunkhouse.

"It's a dead give-away that I'm here, Chang. So go unsaddle him. Hide the saddle and blanket roll under this bunk. Then slap Blueboy on the flank and start him runnin'."

Released, the roan would head for his old range. In time Cimarron could recover him there. In the meantime, Cimarron's presence here must be concealed from Ike's crew.

Chang went out on the errand. He returned with Cimarron's saddle

and duffel. The released roan, he reported, was now trotting south-east down the range. Also, Chang had cleaned up all evidence of a bunkhouse gun fight.

"You go sleepee now," Chang advised.

CIMARRON slept fitfully through the day. Toward sundown he was aroused by angry voices in the kitchen. Only an unlocked door separated Cimarron from them. Ike Salters and Stumpy were in there, barking questions at Chang.

"Not know anything," Chang insisted. "I see Mistee Chick lide away."

"The mangy skunk!" exploded Ike.

"Serves us right, Ike," Stumpy echoed. "We ortern't have left him alone here."

"Anybody else show up?" Ike demanded.

"Nobody come," said Chang. "Mebbe tomorrow lady boss and Mistee Clorbin come home."

"Ain't no use gripin' about it, Ike," Gus growled. "Chick ran out on us and we'll never see him again."

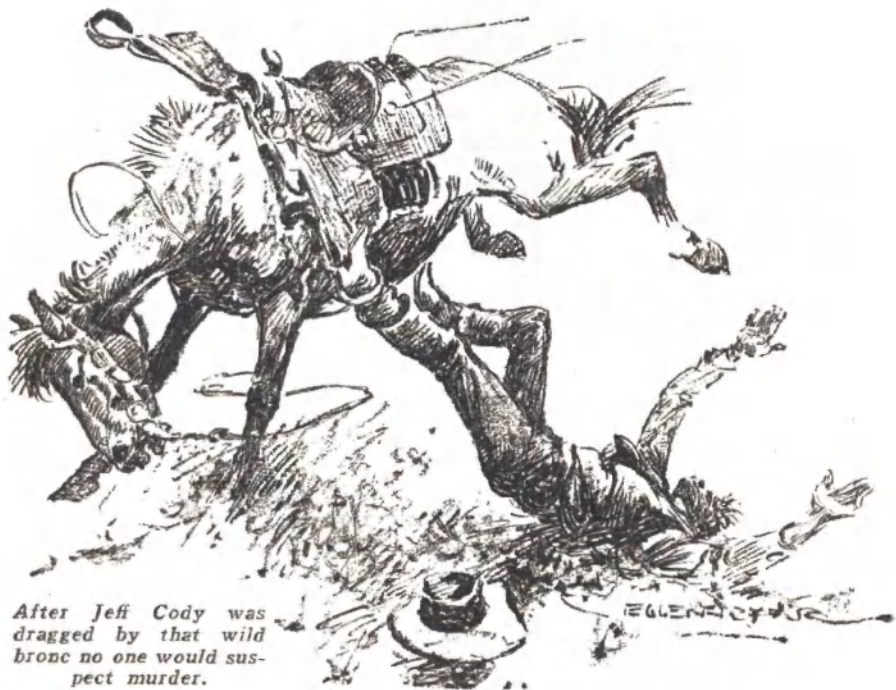
Cimarron fervently hoped so. For half an hour longer he listened to Ike pacing the kitchen in rage as he fired questions at Chang. It was clear that Ike had already noted the looted mattress.

To catch every word, Cimarron raised himself on his good elbow. Doing so, he dislodged a tray which Chang had left on the edge of the bunk. It clattered to the floor.

"What's that noise?" Stumpy's voice demanded.

"Lats," Chang squeaked. "Too many lats. Mebbe lady boss no likee."

Cimarron kept rigidly on his elbow, his brow beading with sweat.



One look in here by Ike or Stumpy and his life would be worth less than a breath.

Stumpy broke the tension by saying grouchily, "Better come down and dish up some grub at the cook-shack, Chang." He and Ike went out, followed by the cook.

Well after dark the cook returned to his patient. "Fcelec more better now, mebbe?" Chang asked solicitously.

"I ain't complainin'," Cimarron grinned. "Long time before I can fork a bronc, though."

"Tomorrow lady boss come home. Velly nice lady. Mistee Clorbin likee velly much."

Cimarron's grin broadened. "So the kid took a fall for her, did he?"

"Velly plitty lady," Chang nodded.

"Well, we don't want to crack

down on her with too many shocks, Chang. So when she comes home, don't tell her I'm in here. You can tell Benny, though. Him and me'll do all the worryin', while the lady boss tends to her knittin'."

AS a result of this instruction, Merle Morley was met by no bad news upon her return to the Box Cross. Ike, Gus, Stumpy, and Dakota greeted her with sober respect, then rode away to their several duties on the range.

Only after the girl had retired to her room did Chang call Benny aside and explain everything. Benny promptly went into the lean-to off Chang's kitchen.

"See here, you old porcupine," he complained to Cimarron, "where do I come in on this? First you gun it out with Smiley, then you take

on Chick. When does my turn come, anyway?"

"No use crowdin' your luck, kid," Cimarron grinned. Then his lips set soberly. "Listen, I got a coupla hunches I want to unload."

"Shoot, Steve."

"First, tip me to the set-up here. As I savvy it, Jeff Cody ran nothin' but he-stuff. Is that right?"

"Right, Steve. The Box Cross never was a breedin' ranch. Cody always bought steer calves at weanin', slapped his brand on 'em, and then kept 'em until they were two or three years old. Then he shipped 'em to market."

"What market?"

"Chicago."

"From what rail point?"

"He didn't ship any beef after I came," Benny said. "But I think he always had the boys drive 'em to Timpas, sixty miles north on the Santa Fe."

"That'd be a two-day drive," Cimarron murmured. He closed his eyes and thought it over. Then: "Listen, kid. Chang told you those two-timers at the bunkhouse burned the old man's ledger. But mebbe if you poke around in the office you'll find a few figgers here and there. Mebbe some old letter from the Chicago commission company that's been handlin' the old man's beef. See what you can find, Benny."

Benny went to the front of the house. He came back with a few odd papers and memos in hand. He had found them scattered amid the disarray on Jeff Cody's desk. One of them was a letter from the Griggs-Hammond Cattle Commission Co. of Chicago.

It read:

DEAR MR. CODY:

Your three cars containing ninety-one Box Cross steers arrived today and we

sold them for \$2562.80 net. As per your instructions, we are mailing check direct to your bank, to apply on your note there.

Sincerely yours,

GRIGGS-HAMMOND COMM. CO.

Cimarron read the letter twice.

"Nothing in it to work on, is there?" Benny asked.

CIMARRON looked up with a suspicious gleam. "There's plenty in it to work on, kid. Trouble is you missed it. And so did Jeff Cody."

Benny stared. "You're not hintin', are you, that Griggs-Hammond have been swindlin' the old man?"

"The old man lost money regular, didn't he," Cimarron countered, "ever' time he shipped cattle? But no, I'm not nominatin' Griggs-Hammond for the rustlers. These here rustlers ride broncs, same as you an' me."

"You're locoed, Steve. There hasn't been any rustling. Jeff Cody told me that himself."

Cimarron grinned. "I'm not blamin' you, kid, for not ketchin' on. Nor the old man either. Me, I've got the advantage of you. Because I happen to know somethin' about a gent named Tail-em-up Taylor."

He told Benny of his encounter with Tail-em-up at Beaver Creek fork. "For the brains of this racket," Cimarron finished, "I nominate Tail-em-up Taylor."

"You mean Shoot-'em-up Smiley, don't you?" Benny protested.

"Nope. I mean Tail-'em-up Taylor. He's slick as a mink, Tail-'em-up is."

More than that, Cimarron declined to say.

"Now you run along, kid, and see if you can cheer up the boss. I understand her and you been gettin' along fine."

Benny flushed. "She's a mighty sweet little girl, Steve," he said. "I'd sure like to get her out of this mess. I mean she's got this ranch on her hands and doesn't know what to do with it. It's been losin' money, and it's mortgaged to the horns. A note's comin' due next week, and she hasn't got a dime even to pay interest with. Looks like an auctioneer'll get the layout, hoof and saddle."

He went out brooding, and Cimarron called the cook into the lean-to.

"Saddle that mule o' yourn, Chang," he directed. "I'm writin' out a telegram to a man in Santa Fe, New Mex. Ride to the nearest telegraph office and file it. Then wait for an answer. When you get the answer, don't let anybody see it but me."

Chang saddled his mule and rode away with the telegram. Ten hours later he came back with an answer which was simply a name and an address: "Alvin Taylor, Wolf Wells."

## CHAPTER VIII

### BUNCOED BUNKHOUSE

**F**OR three more convalescing days Cimarron kept secret from Merle Morley his presence in the lean-to off Chang's kitchen.

Then Benny came in after a ride to Smokey Buttes for supplies and mail. "How you doin', Steve?" he asked.

"I'm mendin' fast, kid."

Benny grinned. "Same goes for Smiley. As I rode by Pete Garcia's cantina, I saw Smiley sittin' out in front. He's still got one arm in a sling. But he was usin' the other hand to oil a gun."

"Fine," Cimarron grunted. "Means him an' me'll be in shape fer shootin', 'bout the same time."

"Save him for me, Steve. He's —" A light step in the kitchen made Benny cut his speech short.

They heard Merle Morley speaking to Chang: "Didn't I hear voices, Chang?"

"Lats, lady," Chang assured her. "Too many lats."

"Nonsense, Chang. I'm sure I heard someone talking." Quite unafraid, the mistress of the house pushed open a door and found herself looking at two sheepish men. One was her foreman. The other was a man in bed with a bandaged head.

"We just didn't want you to worry, Miss Morley," Benny explained humbly. "This is Steve Wilder, and he's the best friend we've got. Shall I tell her, Steve?"

"No way out of it now," Cimarron said ruefully. "Pleased to meet you, ma'am."

As the girl stood wide-eyed in the doorway, Benny told her all that he knew and could guess.

The color faded from Merle's face. "Then you mean it wasn't an accident—about Uncle Jeff?"

"We figger it was murder, ma'am," Cimarron said. "Trouble is, we can't prove it. Callin' a sheriff wouldn't do any good. But if we stand pat and play like we don't suspect a thing, I think we can tree them fellers yet. Tree 'em higher'n a bobcat. Not only that, we can get some of the money back that they stole from Jeff Cody."

The fright and confusion left Merle's eyes, giving place to a determined gleam. "If they killed Uncle Jeff," she said bitterly, "I want to see them hanged for it."

"They'll either hang or swallow lead, ma'am," Cimarron promised.

"Steve's the man that doubled for me in that shooting match with Smiley," Benny put in.

Merle looked gratefully at Cimarron. Then reproachfully at Benny Corbin. "You should have told me he was here—so I could help Chang take care of him."

"I'm half mended now," Cimarron grinned. "And bubblin' over with advice. Want to hear some of it?"

**O**F course we want your advice, Steve," Merle said. Advancing to the bunkside, she sat down. Steve looked at her and saw plenty of courage in her eyes. They were big brown eyes that matched her smooth, shining hair. Chang, Steve felt, had been more than justified in calling her a "velly plitty lady."

"Here she goes, then," Steve turned briskly to Benny Corbin. "Kid, go down to the bunkhouse and drink a quart o' likker. When you get likkered up, come out in the open and make a pass at the boss. I mean get fresh with her right out by the well, where the whole bunkshack can see you."

Merle was startled, Benny indignant.

Before they could protest, Cimarron turned to Merle and continued: "And you, lady, ain't the kind that lets a cowhand get fresh with her. So you fire Benny on the spot. You tell him to saddle up and shag himself off the ranch, pronto. He argues about it, but you're mad and won't listen. So they's nothin' Benny can do but shag off."

Benny turned to stare at Merle; then they both laughed. "I think I understand," Merle said. "I discharged Mr. Corbin for the benefit of the bunkhouse, but I really don't mean it at all. But what for, Steve?"

Benny's only complaint was: "How come he's Steve and I'm Mr. Corbin?"

"And so, Benny," Steve resumed,

"rides out o' sight over the hill. Come dark, he slips back and Chang lets him in at the kitchen. He holes up here with me, under cover from the bunkhouse, and that'll ring down the curtain on Act I."

"And when," Merle asked, "will Act II begin?"

"Better get the first skit done with first," Cimarron said evasively. "Start gettin' likkered up, Benny. I'll be watchin' from the window when the boss slaps you. An' you smack him good, ma'am."

"But we mustn't overdo it," Merle smiled.

"That's right. Don't ham the scene. Make it natural."

They went out and Cimarron saw no more of them until midafternoon. It was Sunday and he knew all hands were in the bunkshack playing poker. Chang came in to report that Benny had joined the game there, and was imbibing from a bottle.

Cimarron made Chang help him to a chair by the window. From here he had a good view of the barnyard. For an hour he watched it, expecting Merle to appear there for a bucket of water and to be accosted by Benny.

**B**UT daylight faded without either Merle or her foreman appearing at the well. Cimarron returned to his bunk, disgruntled. Why hadn't those kids gone through with it?

They did not come in to explain and finally Cimarron fell asleep.

He awoke in the morning to find both Merle and Benny at his bunkside. "I'm fired," Benny grinned. "And it went over big with Ike Salters."

"I was afraid your sketch was too crude, Steve," Merle smiled. "So I tried to improve on it."

Cimarron looked hurt. And Benny explained with glee: "We worked it like this, Steve: I'm all likkered up in a poker game, when Merle knocks at the bunkhouse door. 'Come in,' Ike yells, and she comes in. 'Mr. Corbin,' she says severely, 'Chang tells me you shot a man in town. A man named Smiley. Is that true?' I admit it, and I give Smiley a good cussin'. 'Your language is offensive, Mr. Corbin,' Merle says, with a cold eye on my likker bottle. 'Moreover,' she says, 'I don't like to have my men brawling in town.' I get peeved and sass her back. One word leads to another, and finally I get my time."

"Much to the delight," Merle laughed, "of Ike and his bunkhouse chums."

"They saw me ride over the hill, duffel bag and all," Benny said.

"I still say my skit was the best," Cimarron insisted.

"What next, Steve?" asked Merle.

"Next, Benny an' me lay doggo here in the lean-to for three days. That's so they won't suspect any connection between Acts I and II. Also, it gives my shoulder time to finish mendin'."

"And in three days?" Merle prompted.

"In three days, ma'am, you go down to the bunkhouse with your pretty face all worried. In your hand is a notice from the bank about interest comin' due, plus an installment on a note. You show it to Ike an ask, 'What can I do about it, Mr. Salters?'"

"And must I take his advice?"

"Lock, stock and barrel," Cimarron told her. "Agree to anything he suggests, even if he nominates hisself fer foreman. Also, he'll tell you to do exactly what your Uncle Jeff allers did when a note came due.

He'll say ship a few cars o' beef to Chicago."

**T**HREE days went by during which Cimarron and Benny kept out of sight. Cimarron's shoulder improved rapidly.

During the same three days, Benny's growing devotion to Merle Morley was more and more evident.

"Better not start throwin' no love hitches, though," Cimarron advised, "till the shootin's over."

"If you weren't crippled up," Benny flared, "I'd—" He had to break off because Merle was coming in with a sponge cake she had made for them.

On the fourth day, Thursday, the girl went worriedly to the bunkhouse and consulted Ike Salters. She displayed a notice from the bank.

"That's easy fixed, ma'am," Ike said. "Just ship two hundred head o' three-year-olds to market. That'll be five cars. Write the Griggs-Hammond Commission Co. to expect 'em. Tell 'em to send the check to your bank."

"Will it cover what's due, Mr. Salters?"

"Sure it will. Me an' the boys'll go out and round up two hundred head right now."

"Thank you, Mr. Salters. It's all so confusing to me! Is there anything else I should do?"

"Yes'm. Write three letters in all. I'll have Gus ride in an' mail 'em."

"One letter is to the Chicago commission company, telling them to expect the shipment. To whom should I write the other two letters, Mr. Salters?"

"Send one to the division superintendent of the Santa Fe Railroad at Trinidad. Tell him you're shippin' five cars o' steers from Timpas, which is sixty mile north o' here.

Tell the railroad to have five empties spotted there by sundown Monday. Then write to the deputy State brand inspector at La Junta. Tell him to be at Timpas at sundown Monday, to check brands on five cars o' Box Cross three-year-old he-stuff being shipped east. The law requires that, ma'am."

The girl was forlornly grateful. "I never would have known what to do, Mr. Salters. Thank you so much. I'll go write the letters now."

She returned to the ranchhouse and wrote the letters. Ike rode off with Stumpy and Dakota to round up two hundred head of steers.

Gus Kelland came to the house and got the three letters. Steve and Benny, from a window, saw him ride toward Smokey Buttes with them.

"He won't mail 'em," Benny suggested. "He'll just chuck 'em down a prairie-dog hole and then they'll rustle this shipment of steers."

"Guess again," Cimarron grinned. "He'll mail the letters. The two hundred steers'll be shipped from Timpas and sold in Chicago, and the check'll be sent pronto to Merle's bank."

"Then what are we griping about?" Benny wondered. Merle was no less confused.

But it suited Cimarron to be mysterious. "We got two jobs, ma'am. First, we want to throw a hook in these jaspers. Second, we wanta get back part o' what they stole from your uncle."

Then Cimarron called Chang in. "Hop your mule, Chang," he ordered. "Ride to the county seat an' round up a deputy sheriff named Joe Doherty. He's an old bunkie o' mine. Tell Doherty to show up here at the Box Cross at 'zactly 11 a. m. Sunday."

Chang rode away on his mule.

## CHAPTER IX

### BEEF FOR BONES

SUNDAY dawned with a warm chinook blowing north from the mesas. Dust drifted from the hoofs of cattle and horses as four riders tallied two hundred fat steers out of the main corral at the Box Cross.

"Yipiyai!" Ike Salters yelled, and flicked his rope at the last steer. Dakota, Stumpy, and Gus echoed him. Gus twisted in his saddle to call back, "Look fer us home about sundown Tuesday, ma'am."

Merle Morley watched from the ranch porch as the herd trailed off to the north toward Timpas. Then she went inside to join Benny and Cimarron.

"We'll give 'em about a five-hour start," Cimarron said. He was dressed for the saddle now, with a .45 low on his right thigh.

"What about that deputy you sent for?" Benny questioned.

"Didn't want him to show up till the outfit was gone," Cimarron explained. "I knew Ike'd have to pull out early Sunday mornin' 'cause it's a two-day drive to Timpas."

Deputy Joe Doherty came riding up at eleven o'clock. Lean and sun-blistered, with big rope-hardened hands, he seemed more like a cowman than a law officer. Cimarron grinned a welcome as he introduced Merle and Benny.

"Oh, I hope there'll be no fighting," Merle said worriedly. Her eyes were on Benny Corbin, and Cimarron laughed.

"We won't let him get smoked up, ma'am," he promised. Benny flushed.

"What's the play?" Doherty wanted to know. "A beef steal?"

"I can show you easier'n I can tell you," Cimarron said. "Let's ride."

Chang brought two saddled horses from the barn. Doherty was already mounted, and the three men loped away on the trail of the beef herd. Merle and Chang waved from the ranch yard and Benny shouted back, "Take good care of her, Chang."

**T**OPPING a rise, the three trail-ers slowed down. "They won't get farther'n Plum Creek today," Cimarron calculated. "That'll be soon enough to ketch up with those jiggers."

The others could get nothing more out of him. All through the afternoon the trio continued on the trail of the beef drive. Twice Cimarron called a halt, when dust ahead warned him they were getting too close.

"Too bad about Jeff Cody gettin' pitched off a bronc!" Doherty remarked.

"Mebbe he was pitched off—and mebbe he wasn't," said Benny.

"But Chang said—"

"Mebbe they fooled Chang," Cimarron cut in. He loped on to a rise from which he could scout the herd ahead. When the others caught up, he said, "They just trailed down into Plum Valley, to bed for the night."

Doherty was getting impatient. "See here, Steve. Are you claimin' those fellers'll have the nerve to turn off somewhere and not ship to market as per orders?"

"Nope," Cimarron grinned. "They wouldn't have that much nerve. They'll ship as per orders. The steers'll be sold and Merle'll get a check for every peso they bring. Just the same—"

"Better look out. They might see us," Benny warned. They were approaching the rim of a bluff overlooking Plum Valley.

So the three men dismounted and moved on foot to the rim. Greasewood grew there and gave a screen from which they could oversee the creek bottom below.

"There they are, all right," Benny exclaimed. He pointed to a clump of cottonwoods by the creek where Ike Salters and his men were relaxing after the day's drive. The two hundred beefs had already watered. Some of them were now grazing; others were lying down along the creek bank.

"And here come visitors!" Cimarron announced. He pointed upvalley.

They all saw the four riders who approached downvalley to join Ike, Gus, Stumpy, and Dakota. Clearly these newcomers were expected. They dismounted and made themselves at home in Ike's camp. But Ike and his men mounted and rode upvalley.

Cimarron produced a pair of range glasses and held them to his eyes. "There they are," he grinned. "Two hundred canners from New Mex. Take a look."

He passed the glasses to Benny who looked through them in astonishment, then passed them on to Doherty.

"They're trading herds," Cimarron explained. "Just like they been doin' all along. Canners fer beef. No wonder old man Cody never could make any profit."

"I see a bunch of thin stock a mile or two upcrick," Doherty agreed. "They can swap herds all right. But what about brands?"

**E**ASY." Cimarron produced the telegram he had received in answer to one of his own from Santa Fe. "Years ago Jeff Cody registered his brand here in Colorado. But

that doesn't stop anybody from registering it in New Mexico. Or in Texas or Wyoming, or any other State. So I wired the New Mex State brand inspector to ask him who, if anyone, had filed Box Cross in New Mex. Here's his answer: 'Alvin Taylor, Wolf Wells.'"

"Wolf Wells bein' only about sixty miles below the line," Doherty put in, comprehension dawning on his face.

"No trouble fer a pigeon to fly that far," Cimarron explained. "Here's my slant—and I'll bet my blue roan agin' a cinch ring I'm

right. When Gus rode to Smokey Buttes the other day to mail three letters, he also slipped a note to Pete Garcia. The note was to Tail-'em-up Taylor, and named the date and number of beefs in the next Box Cross shipment. Pete sent it by pigeon. Whereupon Tail-'em-up rounds up the same number of his own three-year-old half-starved canners and starts for Plum Valley. Tonight he trades herds with Ike. Ike takes the canners on to Timpas and ships 'em to Chicago. Tail-'em-up takes the beefs back to New Mex and ships 'em, probably to K. C.

*The showdown came on the trail. Taylor knew the game was up and his hand lashed for his gun.*



on the Rock Island."

Benny jumped to his feet. His young face was red with anger. "Come on, you hombres. Let's go break it up right now."

Doherty was more than willing. But Cimarron said, "Keep your shirts on, you fellers. Thing to do is to let 'em get away with it."

"Not on your life!" Benny protested. "Think I'm gonna stand by and let 'em cheat Merle out of—"

"Don't blame you for gettin' het up, kid," Cimarron broke in. "But use your bean. If Ike ships the canners, the check'll go to Merle. It'll

mornin' an' grab them beefs away from him."

Benny saw it. "Sure, Steve," he said jubilantly. "That way Merle gets both herds." Then his face clouded. "But is it legal?" he asked the deputy.

"Don't see why not?" Doherty said. "It's a cinch you've got a right to the beef herd. As fer the canner herd, well, you didn't ask Tail-'em-up to ship it to market in Miss Morley's name. If he does it deliberate, the skin's off his own neck. And Steve's right. It only gets back part of what's already been stole."

The three rode back to a water-hole arroyo and made camp for the night. Over a night fire Benny asked, "Where'd you get this hunch, Steve?"

"First," Cimarron explained, "we seen that letter from Griggs-Hammond to Jeff Cody. It mentioned ninety-one head of three-year-old steers bringing two thousand five hundred sixty-two dollars and eighty cents net. That's only about twenty-eight dollars per head net. A fair price for canners, but a no-good price for beef."

"Then why didn't Jeff Cody get suspicious?"

"Reckon he did. We know he fired Smiley. Mebbe he figgered Smiley handled the beef too rough and fast, drivin' it to market. Likely he cussed out the railroad for jouncin' his beef around in cars, and for long delays on sidings that'd shrink plenty tallow off the beef."

"Another slant is that mebbe they only usta switch forty or fifty head on each shipment. They'd start out with a hundred, say, switch fifty of 'em here at Plum Creek for fifty canners, and so when the weights averaged up in Chicago it didn't



run around five thousand dollars—which means she'll get just that much back/of what's already been stole from her uncle. Meantime, we can take out after Tail-'em-up in the

look quite so raw. But this time they switched the whole drive, figgerin' a girl like Miss Morley wouldn't know anything about how much fat steers are supposed to weigh."

"Bout how much'd they make off each steer switched?"—Doherty wondered.

"A three-year-old skinny steer," Cimarron said, "won't weigh over seven hundred pounds. Bein' skin and bones, it only brings about a nickel a pound. But a fat three-year-old'll weigh a thousand pounds and bring a dime. Thirty-five dollars agin' one hundred dollars. Or about twenty-five agin' ninety, net, time they take off freight and commission charges."

"It's slick," admitted Benny. "They aren't really stealing cattle; they're only stealing fat."

"And fat," Cimarron said, "is the only profitable product of the range. Ship fat and you win; ship bones and you lose."

## CHAPTER X

### "IT'S SUNDOWN, SMILEY!"

**T**HE night was quiet. And even when morning came Cimarron was in no hurry to start anything. "Let's give Ike time to get out of sight with the cannery toward Timpas," he suggested.

Benny set coffee on the fire. "There'll be a brand inspector at Timpas," he chuckled. "He'll find everything O. K. Two hundred head of three-year-old steers branded Box Cross."

"You're dead right," Cimarron agreed. "It ain't his job to check fat; he's there only to check brands."

"The more I mull this racket over," Doherty said, "the slicker it looks. Usually a rustler gets trailed,

But these jiggers never get trailed, 'cause nobody ever misses any stock. The right number o' steers is always at the right place at the right time; nothin' gone but the tallow."

Benny went to scout from the bluff's rim. Returning, he reported: "Ike's makin' dust north with the cannery. Sorriest bunch o' critters you ever saw. You can count every rib."

Doherty brought up the horses and they rode away. Turning south up Plum Valley, they could see four men driving a herd ahead of them. Benny loosened his holster flap.

"All I want," he announced, "is for Smiley to be with 'em."

They spurred faster, gaining on the drive. "No luck, kid," Cimarron said. "It's just Tail-em-up and three Mexicans."

"Maybe," Benny said gloomily, "they won't even put up a fight."

"Don't let anybody get away," Cimarron warned. "If they do they'll tip Ike and he won't ship from Timpas."

"Those birds see us," Doherty said. Being a law officer, he forged to the lead. Cimarron and Benny kept close behind.

Tail-em-up had turned to face them. They heard him calling his three riders. The steers drifted sluggishly on.

"Where d'yuh aim to trail that steer stuff?" Doherty demanded. The morning sun flashed on his badge.

Tail-em-up fixed a wary eye on it. "It's my own cattle," he growled. "Why can't I drive it where I want?"

"Your own stuff, huh?" Doherty challenged. "Feel like arguin' about it?"

"Don't need to argue, mister. I

got my brand certificate right here." And Tail-'em-up pulled out a paper certifying his own registry of the Box Cross brand in New Mexico. "Take a look at these steers, sheriff. You'll find 'em all in my own iron," he said confidently.

Benny and Cimarron pushed forward. "You mean you just traded some dogies for 'em," Benny exploded.

"And the dogie trade's over," Cimarron said crisply. "Time fer bullet tradin' now."

Only one of the three Mexican drovers wore a gun. The other two were plainly frightened and began backing away.

Cimarron snatched a bridle rein. Doherty drew his gun and covered Taylor.

**I**NSTANTLY the armed Mexican threw up his hands. "Of this I know nothing, señor," he murmured. "I am only work by the day for these man."

"You snivelin' coyote!" Tail-'em-up cursed him bitterly. "I'd order have known better'n to bring along a pack o'—"

"Never mind," Benny cut in. "We're disappointed, too, same as you. We were itchin' for you to shoot it out." He loosened his lariat and tossed the loop neatly around the Wolf Wells man.

When the rope was pulled tight, Doherty disarmed both Taylor and the Mexican.

"Hogtie 'em to their brones, Steve. Then we'll wrangle 'em to the Box Cross."

Late that afternoon Merle Morley, sitting on the ranchhouse porch, saw a cloud of dust. Out of it emerged two hundred steers and seven men. She saw the cattle, her own, driven into a pasture. Then

the men came on to the bunkhouse. There she saw four of them jerked from their saddles.

Merle ran outside in time to hear Benny say: "You buzzards get a gallery seat for the big showdown." She saw them yank Tail-'em-up Taylor and his three vaqueros, all tied hand and foot, into the bunkshack and leave them there.

The girl had a hundred questions and tried to ask them all at once. "Why don't you take them to jail? Where's Ike Salters? Did anyone get hurt?"

"If I took 'em to jail, ma'am," Joe Doherty explained, "I wouldn't get back in time to pinch your cowhands when they blow in from Timpas."

"Watch out for a check from Chicago, Merle," Benny shouted. "Ike's shippin' five thousand dollars' worth of canners for you right now."

It took more explaining than that and most of it waited until after supper at the ranchhouse. After they finished eating they grouped in front of a pinon fire and Benny told Merle everything.

"You're taking too much risk for me," the girl protested.

The night wind rustled cottonwood leaves outside. From far away came the choppy yelp of a coyote.

"I can't see any risk," Benny argued.

"But those men were four to three against you. If they'd begun shooting—"

"They didn't, though," Benny said reasonably.

"And the odds will be the same when Ike and his men come home," Merle persisted. "I wish you wouldn't fight them, Benny."

"She's forgot you an' me is in the room," Cimarron whispered to Doherty. "What say we go down

and feed the broncs?"

The deputy sauntered out with Cimarron. "Sure thing," he grinned. "Let's give the kid a chance."

"Two's company and four's a roundup," Cimarron chuckled.

**A** NIGHT and a day dragged by. As Tuesday afternoon waned, Deputy Joe Doherty entrenched his forces to receive Ike, Gus, Stumpy, and Dakota.

First, he removed four prisoners from the bunkhouse and left them bound and gagged in a grain crib well apart from the main buildings. Then he posted Chang at the ranch-house door with a repeating rifle.

"Whatever happens, Chang," he told the cook, "keep in front of Miss Morley with that rifle. If any of those pot wallopers come at you, shoot the gizzards out o' them."

Then Doherty posted Benny Corbin in the barn loft, much to Benny's disgust. "What's the idea of me hidin' up here?" he grumbled. "I thought I was foreman o' this outfit!"

"It's a good place to throw lead from, ain't it?" Doherty argued. "When they ride up to the barn and dismount, Steve and I'll step out to make the pinch. So if they start shootin', you can blast 'em from the hay door of the loft."

Cimarron winked. To torment Benny he said: "The lady of the house made us promise to put you in a safe place, kid. She figgers to keep you for a pet."

Benny all but mutinied. Still, this was to be an official arrest and so the deputy sheriff held the right of command.

"I see dust comin'," Doherty said, pointing north. "Every man to his post."

He stepped into the barn vestibule

with Cimarron. In a few minutes the latter peered out.

"They's six jiggers comin' through the gate," he reported, "'stead of only four."

"Six? Who you reckon the other two are?"

"Smiley'd be one of 'em," Cimarron guessed. "He'll be mended by this time and aimin' to wrangle his old job back on the Box Cross."

"And Chick, maybe?"

"Not Chick. After hightailin' with that money from the bunkhouse, Chick'll never show his face in these parts again."

Cimarron peered again. "The extra hands," he reported this time, "are Smiley and Pete Garcia. Old Pigeon Pete."

That made the odds six to three, leaving Chang out of it.

"But with Benny throwin' lead from the hayloft door, I reckon we can handle 'em," Doherty muttered.

Cimarron was still peering out. "They're pullin' up in front of the bunkshack. But only Smiley's climbin' off his bronc. Smiley's goin' in the bunkshack. Rest of 'em are ridin' for the barn, leadin' Smiley's bronc."

It was at least a hundred yards from bunkhouse to barn. This, Cimarron calculated, was too far for effective pistol shooting. Which meant that Smiley would be out of the fight.

"That whittles the odds down, Joe," he declared. "Makes 'em only five to three."

The five riders arrived in front of the barn. Deputy Doherty waited until they were in the act of dismounting.

Then, with Cimarron at his elbow, he stepped out with a level gun. "You're pinched, the pack of

you!" he announced. "Hands high and don't get nervous."

**I**KE and his companions were taken completely by surprise. Midway in a swing from saddle to ground, Ike was in no position for a quick draw. It was the same with the others, Gus, Stumpy, Dakota, and Pete Garcia.

They stared. Then Ike demanded hoarsely, "What for?"

The response came from Benny Corbin. They looked up and saw Benny kneeling in the loft's hay door and aiming a gun at Gus Kelland. "For the murder of Jeff Cody," Benny yelled. "Not to mention shippin' bones for beef."

Pete Garcia and Gus Kelland began raising their hands. Ike, Stumpy, and Dakota stood in tension by their mounts, indecisive and only half cowed.

Then a shot came from the bunkhouse. Smiley had fired from a window there, bawling, "Smoke 'em up, Ike!"

At a hundred and twenty yards, Smiley missed. But the shot tripped hair-triggered nerves and Stumpy fired from his hip at Joe Doherty. The bullet jolted Doherty, spinning him half around. Off balance, he fired at Stumpy and hit only the flank of the man's horse. The animal squealed and began pitching, stampeding the other animals. Then Ike snatched for his gun.

"Blast 'em!" he yelled. Eight guns roared almost at once.

Cimarron first shot dropped Dakota. Then a slug from Ike smashed Cimarron's hip and he fell to all fours. He could hear Benny's .45 booming from the loft, and he saw Garcia make a jump for the nearest plunging horse. Abruptly Stumpy threw out his arms and

pitched forward. Doherty reeled against the barn wall and leaned there with his right hand spitting flame.

Then Cimarron got his own right hand off the ground and shot Garcia out of his saddle. Ike was still on his feet, shooting obliquely upward at the loft door. Cimarron, with pain crucifying him, made a final desperate effort and got to his knees. His hip burned and his trigger finger seemed paralyzed. And Ike was still trading blasts with the loft.

Then Cimarron managed to squeeze his trigger. His shot drilled Ike through the heart. Cimarron himself sagged flat on the ground, as weak as a whisper.

The cannonade was over as quickly as it had begun. A mockery of silence followed it. Then Cimarron became aware that Benny Corbin was bending over him.

"How bad are you hurt, Steve?" Benny asked anxiously. As gently as he could he rolled the wounded man to his back.

"Nothin' that a good doc can't patch up," Cimarron murmured.

He could see five men sprawled about, dead or dying. Deputy Joe Doherty was seated with his back to the barn wall, nursing a smashed leg. Of eight men, only Benny could stand on his feet. "I'm not even scratched," Benny said.

**A** SHOT from the bunkhouse reminded them of Smiley. It splintered the barn door. "He can't hit us at that range," Doherty muttered.

The sun was setting. When dark came, Cimarron was thinking, Smiley would get away.

"There wouldn't 've been no shootin'," Doherty growled, "if it hadn't been for Smiley. He started it, plague his hide."

"Want me to go get him?" Benny asked.

"Reckon you'll have to," Doherty grimaced. "I ain't fit fer it an' neither is Steve. I hereby deputize you, kid. Go arrest Smiley." Doherty took off his badge and tossed it. Benny caught it and pinned it on.

Then he reloaded his gun and started toward the bunkhouse. Merle Morley's hysterical voice cried from the main dwelling: "Don't go there, Benny. Stay back!"

Benny's only response was to change direction. He circled to approach the bunkhouse at its chimney end. The front had a door and two windows. Likewise the rear side had a door and two windows. The east end had one window. But the west wall was windowless, being a solid wall of adobe and stone chimney.

Approaching from the west, Benny was not exposed to fire from Smiley. All the while Merle kept calling frantically for him to stay back.

But Benny continued on and flattened himself against the blind wall. There he shouted, "Come on out, Smiley."

No answer.

Benny yelled again: "It's sundown, Smiley!"

This time the taunt drew response. Smiley was bound to remember his own ultimatum in Smokey Buttes, for Benny Corbin to get out, or shoot it out, by sundown.

"I ain't missin' this time!" Smiley yelled from within the bunkhouse.

His voice identified his position, which was all Benny wanted to know. Smiley was just inside the front door. But there was a rear or kitchen door. Keeping flat to the outer walls, Benny edged around toward it.

**F**ROM the main house, Merle Morley could see him. Terror paralyzed her. Chang stood stolidly by her side with a rifle and he, too, could see Benny at the bunkhouse. "He'll be killed!" Merle gasped.

They saw Benny Corbin arrive at the rear bunkhouse door and step quickly inside.

After that there was a dreadful silence. To Merle Morley, it lasted an eternity. Benny, she knew, had entered the kitchen. Smiley would be in the bunk room with a door intervening. When Benny opened that door, Smiley would start blazing death.

At the barn, two wounded men also watched and waited through that same heart-burning minute.

"The kid's got guts," Joe Doherty said.

"It's him or Smiley," Cimarron said grimly. He had rolled on his side and his eyes were fixed on the bunkhouse.

From within it, then, came two shots. They boomed almost as one. It seemed to Cimarron that he heard bodies fall.

Another silence. A torturing æon of it. Then they saw the bunkhouse door open. Out of it came Benny Corbin.

Cimarron saw him run to the ranchhouse. Merle Morley rushed out to meet him. They saw her stumble into his arms and stand sobbing with her cheek on his shoulder.

"Relax, Steve," Joe Doherty chuckled. "All we need now is about six doctors and one parson."

Faint though he was, Cimarron managed a grin. "You said it, Joe," he murmured. "Soon's we're patched up, them two kids can be happy ever after—and live off the fat o' the range."

# SNAKE BITE

**BY SETH HANGER**

OLD Jim Morgan dropped in one afternoon to see his friend Doc Haller. He settled himself comfortably in a chair by the medico's battered desk, stuffed and lit his pipe and chatted aimlessly for a few minutes. Then abruptly he brought the conversation around to what was on his mind.

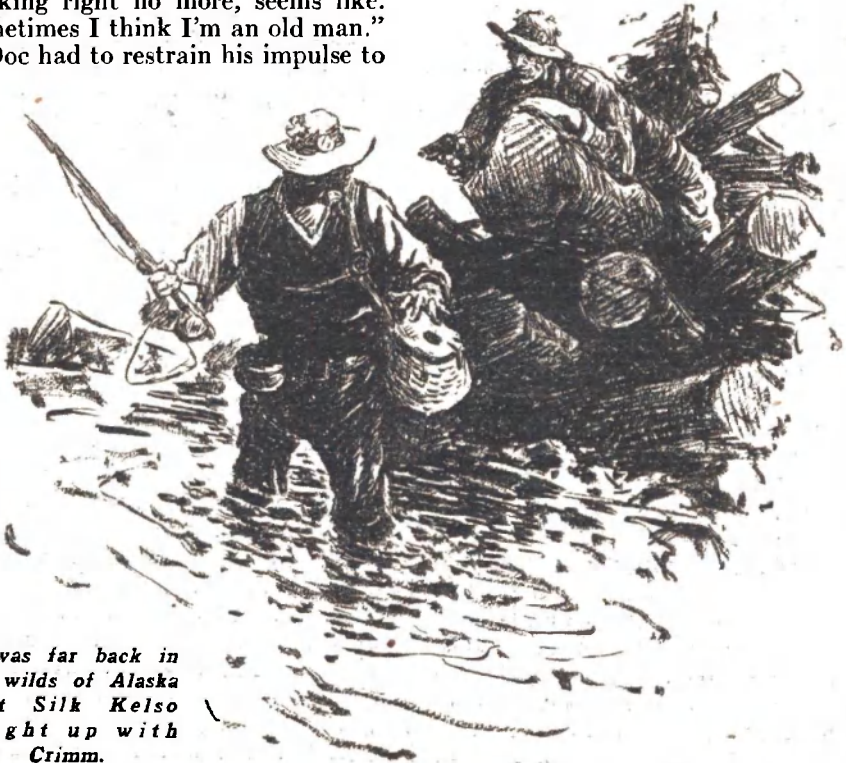
"You know, doc," he remarked, "I been feelin' kind o' run down lately. Used to be I couldn't stay in bed after sunup, but nowadays I have to make myself get up. Course after I get down three, four cups of coffee, I perk up some. But my joints ain't working right no more, seems like. Sometimes I think I'm an old man."

**Doc** had to restrain his impulse to

grin. "Let's see, Jim, how old are you anyway?"

"Only seventy-seven," Jim said defensively. "My granddad moved West and took up a claim when he was ninety-five, so I figger—"

"You figure you aren't the man you used to be," doc cut in. "And you're right. You've been a sheriff or deputy in a half dozen Western States. You've put in years chasing outlaws over deserts and mountains. Then you came North during the gold-rush days and you've been a



*It was far back in the wilds of Alaska that Silk Kelso caught up with Crimm.*

United States marshal ever since. You've waded icy streams, had a touch of frost bite more than once, camped out in the open in wet clothes and risked pneumonia time and time again. But why go on? You know what kind of a life you've led."

"And because I've done all those things I'm goin' to cash in my checks. Is that it, doc?" Jim Morgan's voice was worried.

"Not necessarily, Jim," doc assured him. "But you've got to move south where there's more sunshine and where it's warm and dry."

"How the devil can a marshal go chasin' the sun south?" Jim demanded scornfully.

"He can't—and be a marshal," doc replied. "You've got to select a man to take your place and train him. Then in a couple of years you can go south and leave him in charge."

"That doctor's orders?"

"I reckon so, Jim," Doc Haller said soberly.

**JIM MORGAN** left the doctor's office feeling that he was up against the toughest job of his life. His area covered both interior and coastal Alaska. He not only had to combat the crimes developing among interior whites and natives, but he must meet the peculiar brands and types of crime that spring from those who come from the sea and operate from steamers and sailing craft.

He drew plenty of water in high places. His reputation insured that. Politicians might shift others around or fire them and place a favorite in the vacant chair, but they left Jim Morgan alone. There was too much danger that an inexperienced man would make blunders and supply the opposing faction with a legitimate

grievance. But Jim knew that if he resigned, a politician would be appointed to the job. Such a man might be conscientious and impartial, but unless he was equipped to match wits with the local outlaws, plus the outlaws who came from the States either to hide out or operate, he would fail. And his failure was certain to work injustice on the old-timers and others in the country.

"Only thing to do," Jim reflected, "is to train a man for the job. But how in tarnation can I train anybody to take my place? Even makin' allowance for the fact that I'm kind o' dumb and learn slowly, it took me nearly sixty years to learn what I know. Another thing, where'll I find a likely man?"

To Jim Morgan's way of thinking, a man, to be a successful peace officer, required many qualities in his make-up. He must be big, rawboned and tough in order to hold his own in a rough-and-tumble fight. He must be good with a six-gun; he must have brains in order to match wits with the smart criminals. He must be able to drive a dog team in a blizzard, shoot roaring rapids in a canoe, launch a boat through the surf, and sail it later when the wind was unfavorable. The more he pondered on the subject, the more discouraged Jim Morgan became.

He was still struggling with the matter when he wrote a letter to his son in California explaining that he was planning to retire as soon as he had trained a man to take his place. There had been a time in his life when he had expected his son, George, to follow in his footsteps. But, as a law officer, George hadn't turned out very well. When he crouched in a thicket waiting for an outlaw to show up, he was sure to see some new plant that aroused his interest. He would become so ab-

sorbed in the plant that the outlaw often escaped. Eventually Jim had given his son a mighty boot in the rear and said, "Clear out and spend the rest of your life grubbin' for weeds. After you've starved awhile, you'll be glad to come home and learn the peace-officer business."

But George didn't come home. In time he developed into a famous botanist. He credited his father with his success, for he claimed that his love of plants had sprung from the long man-hunting trips he had undertaken as his father's deputy. But old Jim who had snorted—and was now secretly proud—was too honest to accept credit.

George wrote back to his father immediately, telling how pleased he was about his decision. But it was another letter in the same mail that informed the old marshal that his search for a successor might be over. It read:

DEAR GRANDFATHER:

Father showed me your letter. I guess chickens come home to roost, as they say. He's been trying to make a botanist out of me. He began when I was a little fellow by taking me out on his trips. But while he was crouched, looking for plants, I fought imaginary outlaws in the adjoining thicket. I still feel that way, and I'm twenty-five years old.

Unless you have someone in mind, I'd like to work under you, with a view to taking over when you resign. How about it? A letter will bring me a-running.

Your grandson,

JIM MORGAN.

"Jim Morgan," the marshal repeated, "the boy they named after me. By heck, he's twenty-five years old an' I ain't seen him since he was in short pants." The old man's eyes were dreamy with plans for the future. "He'll be big like all the Morgans, six feet tall, or better, and weighin' from a hundred and eighty to two hundred. He should have

brains, too. Us Morgans always married smart wimmin!"

THE old marshal wrote to his grandson that night. And a month later he was down at the wharf when the Seattle steamer landed. His eyes roved the passengers lining the rail, but he didn't see anyone who looked like his conception of young Jim Morgan.

"Prob'ly in his cabin, packin' his duds," the marshal reflected.

A brisk young fellow, who weighed a hundred and thirty pounds at most and stood five feet four inches, was shaking hands with everybody.

"That'll be the new superintendent of schools," the marshal mused.

The young fellow ducked into a cabin and emerged, dragging a man twice his size after him.

"Don't be so bashful," he said to the giant. "Come out here and kiss the girls farewell. You won't have time after you're ashore!"

The giant looked uncomfortable and old Jim Morgan chuckled. "He's a Morgan, all right—scared of the girls. By gosh, he's man-sized. I'm proud of him."

The slender young man didn't bother to kiss the girls himself, but grabbed two bags and hurried down the gangway. He hit the wharf and looked around. The big fellow was clear now and was following. The marshal met him at the foot of the gangplank.

"Hello, Jim, I'd know you anywhere," he said, holding out his hand. "I'm your grandfather."

"I'm afraid you're mistaken, Mr. Morgan," the big fellow explained. "Your grandson was the first man down the plank."

Inwardly the old marshal groaned, but nothing of what he felt showed in his face as he clapped a hand on

the other young man's shoulder. "How're you, Jim?" he said heartily.

"Fine," his grandson answered. There was a twinkle in his eyes. "I can see you're kind of disappointed. Compared to the rest of the tribe, I'm a runt, all right, but that's your fault, grandfather. You're the only one of the men who married a little woman."

The marshal chuckled. "If you take after her, Jim, you'll do. She was a buzzsaw when she got her fight up."

"I don't want to be tossed out because I'm off-sized," Jim said. "Didn't someone once say Colt made all men equal? History proves that some of the best bad men and peace officers were small men. How do you feel about it?"

"Just about the same as you do, Jim," his grandfather answered.

**I**N the year that followed, young Jim Morgan became the old marshal's shadow. There were times, though, when the shadow took the lead. If there was an icy stream to cross or a trail to break, Jim did it. He listened by the hour to stories of the old peace officer's exploits. Old Jim had never talked much of his achievements because he was naturally modest. But now he felt he should hold back nothing that contained a lesson.

Jim came in from a trip one day and found the marshal missing. "He heard Windy Johnson had drifted over from Yukon Territory, so he went out to pick him up," a miner explained. "Johnson's a bad one. I guess Jim didn't want to put a green hand up agin' him right offn the bat."

"He shouldn't have gone in this weather," Jim grumbled. He was dog tired, but he immediately took

the trail. He found his grandfather and Windy Johnson five miles from camp. Both of them were drenched to the skin.

"This cuss jumped into a glacial stream," the marshal explained. "Figgered I wouldn't go in after him. He got fooled." The old man's teeth were chattering and he was blue with the cold.

Jim hurried the marshal and his prisoner to camp. He put the latter in jail and got his grandfather into a tub of hot water. Later he tucked him into a warm bunk. The next day he decided to call in Doc Haller, who needed only a few minutes before he delivered his verdict, "Pneumonia."

Days later, doc called Jim into the room. "Your grandfather will live years yet," he said, "but only if he goes south and takes care of himself. If he tries to hang on up here he'll go out like a light. It's his idea he should stay and finish your training."

"That's the way I feel about it," old Jim whispered. "If a man leaves a good man in his place, he doesn't have to worry about cashin' in his checks. And give me another year and you'll be a good man, Jim."

"Thanks," Jim answered, "but the price is too high. If you don't head south on the first boat, old-timer, I'll go home and learn to be a botanist. And if you think I'm bluffing, just try calling me."

The old man sighed. "I guess you ain't bluffin'. I only hope the outlaws will realize it when you call a showdown with 'em. Tomorrow I'll send a cable to Tim Stratton in Washington. I'll ask him to get you appointed marshal for the good of the territory."

Three days later the blow young Jim was expecting fell. It was an

answer to old Jim's cable, and it read:

DEAR JIM:

Sorry to hear you must resign for your health. Sounded out important people on appointing your grandson in your place. Absolutely impossible even with your recommendation. Everyone feels he's too young and inexperienced and lacks reputation. Keep me advised of your plans.

TIM STRATTON.

Young Jim showed the cable to Doc Haller. "Had we better let him see it?" he asked.

"I guess we'll have to," doc said, "though I hate to. He was pretty low for days, and it was the thought of seeing another Morgan holding down the job that kept him fighting." He sighed. "Well, let's get it over." Young Jim followed the doctor into the marshal's room.

"You boys look like you was goin' to a funeral," old Jim said. "Why such long faces?" Then his own face grew depressed. "I know. Stratton answered my cablegram, eh?"

"That's it," Jim said. "I'll read it to you."

The marshal listened intently. "That settles it," he declared. "Tim would do anything for me, and I know he moved hell and high water to get you appointed. When he says it's impossible, it's only half the story. But we ain't licked. I'll ask for a leave of absence." He chuckled. "He'll get that through. Then I'll make you my chief deputy and you'll be in charge soon as I leave."

Old Jim dictated the cablegram requesting a leave of absence that night. He asked for a quick decision, saying he was anxious to catch the next ship south. He was pretty restless until Stratton's answer came. It read:

DEAR JIM:

Those who want to fill your shoes smell a rodent, but I happen to know the request will be granted. Good luck.

WS-4C

THE permission arrived a day before the steamer was due to sail. Old Jim sent for his grandson. "They're takin' me aboard on a stretcher," he said. "Doc figgers that's the best way. There're a million things I'd like to tell you about holdin' down the job, but no man could remember everything. You remember things from experience. Put it this way. I always made it a rule no criminal was safe in my district. That was my code, my watchword. They got to know it and stayed clear. Remember that. Another thing—half the fight's gettin' in the first lick. An' when you're up against a smart cuss, don't worry. Just keep your eyes open and cash in on your man's mistakes."

"If he makes 'em," young Jim suggested.

"He'll make 'em. They always do. The test of a good peace officer is his ability to spot mistakes, then turn 'em to his advantage," his grandfather explained. "They plan and they plan, then somewhere they make a mistake. That's when you pop it to 'em. Another thing, try to be one *think* ahead of 'em."

Jim and Doc Haller watched the steamer sail, then walked back to the camp.

"I suppose, young fellow, you'll settle down in the office until you get the feel of things?" doc suggested.

"No," Jim answered. "Just between us, I think I'll take a swing through the back country."

A month passed and the camp began to worry over young Jim Morgan's absence. There was a pay roll to look after, reports to sign and other routine work that needed attention.

"I guess we'd better organize a posse and see if we can find his body," Doc Haller said. "Like as

not he went out, bumped into a tough customer and was killed. Don't let no word of this get to the papers or old Jim will be hightailin' it north again."

The posse was almost organized when someone reported a band of men approaching camp. Doc recognized the man in the lead, Beaver Jackson, who trapped beaver out of season. He carried a fair-sized pack. The next in line was Squaw Olson, who sold whiskey to the natives. He was followed by two shifty-eyed individuals who poisoned animals for their fur. The remainder were tin-horn bad men. Young Jim brought up the rear. He had lost fifteen pounds, his face was covered with stubble, and his eyes were bloodshot from exhaustion and lack of sleep.



Jim herded his prisoners into the jail and ordered the jail deputy to lock them up. "I'll make out the charges later," he said. Then he joined Doc Haller. "Do you suppose you could take a couple of men, a dog team and mush out to Morris Goodenough's cabin? You'll find Hank Fremont there. I had to shoot him."

"What's Hank doing in this district?" doc asked. "And how come you beat him to the draw?"

"He figured I was a green hand, got careless and didn't draw fast

enough," Jim answered. "He heard old Jim had left the country and he thought it was a good time to move in."

"And these other fellows?" doc inquired. "Jim, you've made more arrests in one month than your grandfather did in the last year."

"He didn't have to make arrests. Criminals respected and feared him," Jim explained calmly. "You see, doc, if one big crime takes place in the district while I'm acting marshal, the politicians will use it as an excuse to remove old Jim and fire me."

"That's right," doc agreed. "But you must have had a lot of luck to find so many lawbreakers in so short a time."

"Credit my grandfather for that," Jim answered. "I remembered what he said about cashing in on their mistakes and being one step ahead of 'em." He sat down to keep from collapsing. "I reasoned they'd think it would be a fine time for a quick clean-up while I was getting my bearings. Instead of waiting to get them, I took a quick swing through the country and caught most of 'em dead to rights. As soon as I can catch my breath I'm going out again."

"No need of that," doc told him. "The word that you're on the job and are a fair copy of old Jim will spread by moccasin telegraph, and the boys will behave themselves."

Young Jim turned in an hour later, too exhausted to eat. He slept for twenty hours. Then he went down to the office to look over the mail. A Seattle paper carried a front-page story of his grandfather. The reporter had done a good job of it, pointing out that lawbreakers held Marshal Jim Morgan in such respect they shunned the district. Young Jim got a kick out of reading the story, but he didn't like the para-

graph about the old marshal's twenty-five-year-old grandson holding down the job during his leave of absence.

"Just an invitation," he told doc.

"But outlaws won't accept the invitation after your clean-up," doc argued.

"I'm thinking of outlaws on the Outside," Jim explained. "They won't hear about the small fry I picked up. And it wouldn't make any difference if they did."

"Well, young fellow," doc said, "a good marshal takes his job in stride. By the way, Hank Fremont is going to pull through. Your bullet hurt his pride more than it did his body. You were lucky you weren't killed."

"I know it," Jim said quietly. "But I couldn't back down when I walked into something tough."

JIM had called the turn when he predicted that outlaws from the Outside would hear of his grandfather's arrival in the States, but probably wouldn't know of the acting marshal's subsequent activity. But old Jim himself heard what was going on. His grandson made routine reports, but Doc Haller wrote pages of details for the old man to read.

Old Jim was reading doc's latest letter when his daughter-in-law came out and said, "A gentleman to see you, dad."

The man with her was slim, young and would have passed for a businessman except for an indefinable quality any veteran police officer would recognize instantly.

"I know all about you, Mr. Morgan," he said, holding out his hand. "Tim Stratton told me. I know you're hanging onto your job so your grandson can establish himself. I'm for you and for him. That's why I'm here. I'm Sam Davis."

"Are you a gov'nment man?" old Jim asked.

"Yes. We have our problems, too, you know, and our biggest one right now is the Silk Kelso gang. Silk, you know, boasts he never makes mistakes. I'm beginning to believe he's right. He pays his income tax to the last dollar so we can't get him on that, and he's careful in other respects. We know he's robbed, murdered and forced people to pay him money by various threats, but we can't prove it."

"You will in time," the old marshal predicted.

"We hope to. But the pressure is beginning to tell," Davis continued. "Silk isn't weakening, but his men are cracking under the strain. They are taking it on the lam. Silk is afraid they'll talk and he's wiping them out as they desert him. Al Crimm, one of his best men, has just disappeared."

"Has Silk killed him?"

"No. We're sure about that, because Silk is obviously worried," Davis explained. "We have a clue, though. Crimm likes to fish, and he undoubtedly heard about the fishing in Alaska. It isn't unlikely that he's gone to your old stamping grounds, reasoning that Alaska is as good a place as any to hide, particularly with a new and not too experienced man on the job."

"So that's what's on your mind," Morgan said thoughtfully.

"If Silk Kelso learns Crimm has gone to Alaska, he'll follow him there," Davis continued. "There will be a murder that'll make the headlines, and the newspapers will hold a field day at your expense, Mr. Morgan. It won't be just a killing with a machine gun or pistol. Silk doesn't work that way. That's why we can't pin a murder charge on him. Crimm's death will take some

curious form that Silk's ingenious mind will conceive."

"But he'll be just as dead, and the headlines just as big," the marshal said. He pondered a long time. "Maybe I'd better go back. I'd hate to have young Jim's reputation blasted right offn the bat. I'm old and can afford it."

"Why not just write him a letter putting him on guard?" Davis suggested. "I'll supply you with photographs of Crimm and Kelso. If they show up, he can notify you. No need of you leaving California unless Crimm shows up in Alaska. We have a man at Seattle checking on northbound passengers."

Davis supplied the photographs and description the following day and old Jim wrote a long letter to his grandson that night. "If either of these boys shows up," he concluded, "let me know. I'll come up and give you a hand. If we can convict Silk Kelso of some kind of a crime committed up there, we can have most anything we ask for. Kelso and his men may be able to scare some of these city juries, but he'll have a hell of a time throwing a scare into a jury of miners and trappers."

**A**L CRIMM had dodged government men so often he knew something of their methods. He had a hunch a man would be in Seattle checking on those who sailed to Alaska or the Orient. If not, some friend of Silk Kelso's might be on hand. Crimm, therefore, crossed the Canadian border in the Middle West and eventually bought a ticket for Prince Rupert, British Columbia. From that point he boarded a Canadian steamer for Wrangell, Alaska.

He made a trip up the Stikine River to throw off possible pursuers and when he returned to salt water

he bought a ticket for Cold Deck, Alaska. He watched the wharf through a porthole while the steamer was landing.

He remained in his cabin until a few minutes before the steamer was ready to continue her voyage, then he landed, almost unobserved. He had outfitted at Wrangell and there was no necessity of his buying supplies in Cold Deck. He hailed a native in a skiff and made arrangements to be taken to Tin Can Creek.

The native landed at the mouth of the creek, which was as large as some rivers in the States; then packed the outfit to a cabin a half mile distant.

"You're a good man," Crimm said when he paid him. "Keep your mouth shut about my being here. Come back in a couple of months, bring me newspapers, more grub. I'll pay you plenty."

"Sure," the native grunted.

The two months passed swiftly, for the trout fishing was even better than Crimm had expected. When the native made his next trip Crimm almost devoured the newspapers he brought. He was looking for headlines that would indicate Silk Kelso had been either killed or arrested, but all he saw were reports of the deaths of members of the gang.

"Shifty Lesser, while drunk, drove his car over a grade, eh?" Crimm mused cynically. "An' Tony Martinez was killed by a hit-and-run driver, too. That's a laugh. I know who hit him, then run."

A shudder passed over Al Crimm's frame. His nervous, ratty eyes shifted from the paper to the cabin and the thickets beyond. Then he shook off his fears. After all, Kelso would never guess he was here.

Four months passed. By now Crimm knew every pool in the area.

He no longer ate trout, but caught them, played them and tossed them into the brush. No sense in returning them to the pool. They only rushed around, frightened the other fish and spoiled the sport.

One morning he went to the big log jam. There was a falls above the jam which stopped the fish. As a result, many drifted back to the jam and rested. A thirty-inch rainbow had thus far refused to take the lure Crimm offered and had made his way over the jam to the big trout's favorite spot. Crimm could see him down there in the shadows. He put a gob of salmon eggs on a hook and let it drift down through the bubbles. The rainbow started to move forward, then changed his mind. Crimm, absorbed in the trout's movements, failed to notice a man crawling over the logs toward him. Then suddenly he felt needles driving into his leg. He yelled with pain and leaped, wondering what had pricked him.

"Easy, Al! Easy!" Silk Kelso's voice almost froze Crimm's blood.

Crimm whirled about and looked into the boss gangster's triumphant eyes, into the automatic pistol Silk held in his hand. "Silk!" he said hoarsely. "Don't shoot. You can't get away with murder up here."

"I ain't goin' to shoot," Silk assured him. "Not that that kid deputy marshal would do much about it. It just ain't my way. You're goin' to die without bein' shot. You'll die of snake bite, Al."

"What're you talkin' about?" Crimm demanded nervously.

"I figgered everything out," Silk explained. "Shootin' might be hard to explain up in Alaska. They might learn you belonged to my gang. So I said to myself, 'Silk, what can happen to a man when he's fishin'?' And the answer came like a flash.

'He can fall in the river and drown, tumble down a bank and break his neck, or he can get bit by a snake! So that's what happened to you.'

Crimm blanched. "That . . . that prick I felt in my leg?"

"Sure, Al. Sure," Silk answered. He held up a pair of needles fitted to a small syringe for Crimm's inspection. "I shot rattlesnake venom into your leg." Then he tossed the syringe into the pool. "Well, so long, Al," he said carelessly.

Crimm, almost insane with terror, began running, and as he ran the blood raced through his system, rushing the venom on its fatal way. Silk Kelso stood watching until his victim dropped, then he stepped into the water and waded downstream to the point where Crimm had fallen. He squatted down beside the man a moment, made sure he was dead, then recrossed the stream. As soon as he reached the opposite bank, he began running.

**A** MILE downstream, young Jim Morgan leaped from a thicket and covered Kelso with a six-gun. "What's the hurry?" he demanded.

"You the marshal?" Kelso asked excitedly. Jim nodded. "Then you're just the man I'm lookin' for. A little while ago I was fishin' on the creek and I saw a man runnin'. He fell. I waded the stream and went to him. He was almost off his head with fear. He said he'd been bit by a rattlesnake. A few seconds later he died. Come on, I'll take you there."

As Jim followed, he noticed that the tracks led to a point opposite Crimm's body. None were visible above. The stranger had told a convincing story as far as tracks were concerned.

"What's your name?" Jim asked. "Kelly—Ed Kelly," Kelso an-

swered. "I came up here to rest and do a little fishin'." He led the way across the stream and Jim examined the body.

"You stay here," he ordered when he finished. "I'll be up with a canoe soon."

"Sure," Silk agreed. "I don't feel like fishin' any more today."

"Shouldn't think you would," Jim agreed.

Silk Kelso sat down on the nearest rock to smoke and think. He was safe now, with a fool marshal to handle. Al Crimm, the man he had feared most, was dead.

An hour passed before Kelso saw the young marshal wading the icy stream, pulling a canoe behind him.

Kelso helped Jim get the body into the canoe, then he climbed into the bow. Jim handled the stern paddle and the light craft fairly flew over the fast water and into the river.

**I**T was dusk when they arrived at Cold Deck. Two men helped Silk and Jim carry the body to the morgue. Then Jim had Kelso come to his office to make his report.

Kelso had his story down pat. He knew exactly what he had to say and he recited it glibly in the presence of witnesses.

"That's fine," young Jim said blandly. "As far as it goes, only it doesn't go far enough. O. K., Silk Kelso, I'm holding you for Al Crimm's murder."

The charge caught Silk with his guard down. But it came up again instantly. Young Jim stood between him and the door, but Kelso didn't let that stop him. He outweighed the marshal thirty pounds, but he was slower. He smashed a blow into

Jim's stomach, but it bounced off the hard muscles as if they were rubber. Then Jim's left landed on Kelso's nose with a thud that sent stars weaving before the gangster's eyes. A fast right to the jaw dropped him and three seconds later Jim was putting on the handcuffs.

"Keep him under observation," Jim said when he turned his prisoner over to the jailer. "I'm going to Tin Can Creek the first thing in the morning and run gravel through a sluice box until I find the gadget Kelso used to play his snake-bite trick. I'll be back when you see me."

Cold Deck saw him a week later. He went directly to the cable office and filed a lengthy report to old Jim Morgan, his superior officer.

Old Jim was sitting in the sunshine when the cable arrived. "I suppose I'll have to hightail it north," he grumbled as he took the envelope from his son. But his weathered old face lighted up as he read:

DEAR OLD-TIMER:

I am holding Silk Kelso for Al Crimm's murder. Recognized Kelso from photographs. He had traced Crimm here. Was following Kelso when crime committed. Planned to make Crimm's death look like rattlesnake bite. Sluiced device out of creek to complete file of evidence. Conviction first-degree murder certain. Followed your advice, as usual, and remembered the best of them slip. Kelso wondered why I was so certain his story was false. He didn't know there are no snakes in Alaska.

JIM MORGAN, Acting Marshal.

Old Jim chuckled, relaxed and let the sun work on his stiff joints. He had a hunch he could get anything he asked for now. And he knew what he was going to ask for—a new marshal for Cold Deck!

THE END.

*Wearin' a collection of all the boys' Sunday togs, Windy Bill had to get in a fight!*



## BAR H GLORY

BY C. K. SHAW

I LOOKED at Bluey Beck, my eyes goin' coldly over his six feet of anatomy. Little Dick was fryin' bacon on the three-legged stove of the Thunder Hole line camp, and his under lip was quiverin'. Bluey set farther down on his spine and looked at the kid like he was a hunk of Satan cut loose on a peaceful range.

"You give me a pain!" I said for the sixth time. "All the kid's done

is enter your name in a six-gun contest so's you'll win yourself fame."

"You mean if I beat Two-spot Frank Wells of the SV."

I nodded for Dick, the kid we was bringin' up for a departed friend, to leave things to me. I'd sided that six foot of cussedness named Beck for ten years, and if anybody could make him prance out before a crowd and win that six-gun contest, it was

me, Windy Bill Wicks.

"I reckon you don't stand much of a chanct," I says. "I reckon Two-spot Frank Wells could beat you to the draw and take a chew on the way."

"Two-spot ain't so danged fast!" Bluey cracks back.

I shook my head. "You'd just be makin' a jackass outta yourself."

Bluey lifts offn his spine. Anybody that says blue is a weak color better look at that puncher's eyes when he's got his dander up. "I'm not afraid of Two-spot," he says slow so's I'll understand. "It's showin' off I don't like."

"It ain't showin' off; it's packin' the banner for the ol' Bar H. Don't you heart warm when you think how puffed up ol' Champ will be? He's been a danged good boss for ten years."

Bluey swung on the kid. "Why didn't you nominate Windy for the job?"

Dick Muller blinked. We'd been bringin' him up on close to a year and he had natural soaked up a lot of our smartness. "'Cause Windy ain't as fast with a six as you," he says. "And besides, I've nominated him for pop'larist man in Rimrock."

That last hit me in the stomach. "Pop'larist man!" I yelled. "Nobody but the ladies vote in that contest!"

The kid's face puckered. "Everybody likes you, Windy. I thought you'd be proud of the honor."

Bluey's lips moved back in the dumbest grin I ever saw on a human face. "Won't you be proud to pack the banner for the ol' Bar H?" he asks. He kept on grinnin' without any reason or judgment. "Pop'larist man! If you get one vote, Windy, I'll fall dead."

I felt vacant under my vest, but I wasn't lettin' on. "There's plenty of women that would consider it a

pleasure to vote for Windy Bill Wicks."

"Then you'll run!" shouts Dick.

"Sure!" I hollers good and loud.

"Then we'll get the grand prize!"

Dick yelps. "The SV won't be makin' no more cracks about the ol' Bar H bein' a lame-duck outfit."

"The SV is a nifty outfit," I answers slow. "And the Quakin' Asp spread and the John Day Valley bunch ain't got no flies on them neither. They'll all be after the grand prize at the Rimrock Roundup. To win it a ranch has to cop four outta seven events. If me and Bluey wins, we still won't have the grand prize."

"We got her sewed up!" the kid shouts. "Simp Wells is goin' to win the buckin' contest and Alf Newell the ropin'!"

"Simp and Alf is mighty tidy boys, but they don't go in for show, Dick."

"But when I told them you and Bluey was goin' to win two events, they said they'd go after the other two."

Bluey had stopped grinnin'; he begun to look plumb beat out. "If them two galoots," he says, meanin' Simp and Alf, "win their points and we don't, we'd just as well to hunt a new beddin' ground." He took down a box of shells from over the washstand and started for the door. "I'll start film' off the rough edges," he says, "and you better ride into Rimrock and tell Mrs. Hip-shot Bailey you're sorry you called her a battle-ax and blacked her husband's eye."

"I aint sorry for neither one!"

"Mrs. Hip-shot clerks in the Bailey Mercantile and swings a pile of votes—for or against," Bluey answers.

I thought of Mrs. Hip-shot after I was in bed that night. She sold

dress trimmin's and things and could do me a lot of dirt in a votin' contest.

The next mornin' me and Bluey and the kid left Thunder Hole and headed for the home ranch. All the way Bluey kept rememberin' some enemy of mine that wouldn't let his gal vote for me as pop'lar man.

Simp Wells yelled a greetin' as we rode up to the blacksmith shop. "What you goin' to do about that wart on your nose?" he asks. "That ain't goin' to be no help in a beauty contest."

Alf Newell lifted his six-feet-three of nothin' in width offn a bench. Whoever put Alf together forgot to tighten him up. The amazement is he don't lose a bolt off a arm when he starts to rope. "Windy," says he, "I was in Rimrock yesterday, and Mrs. Hip-shot Bailey is plumb mad over your runnin' for the office of pop'lar man. The ladies of Rimrock have put up Clyde Doolin."

I slid off my horse by instinct. "That wall-eyed magazine salesman!" I snapped. "He's sold the *Cozy Fireside* to every woman in the country to give as birthday and Christmas presents to their husbands and brothers and sweethearts. Poo Higgins said the sample copy had all about how to weed your turnips in it, plus a pattern fer a sunflower quilt block."

"That shows you," Alf said grimly, "what a pop'lar man can do with a bunch of women. Clyde Doolin has all the gals askin' him over for lemon pie and checkerboard cake."

I knew why Alf was so bitter. Kate Monroe, the widder of Hefty Monroe, was a neat hand at checkerboard cakes, and her and Alf had been keepin' steady company. I knew Alf wouldn't want no *Cozy*

*Fireside* paper for a Christmas present.

**W**HEN we come to dress the day of the big show, we was shocked to learn the Bar H spread didn't have more than one good dress outfit between the lot. Lefty Barns had a new black sateen shirt and I had a pair of tobacco-colored pants that was lookers. Alf Newell's satin tie was a daisy and Simp Wells sported a snakeskin belt with a silver buckle. Bluey had some long-shanked spurs that jingled like a set of sleigh bells if you knew how to shake your heels. Bluey could keep time to the fiddle when he was waltzin' with them.

"Boys," says Simp, "we got to fork over our fancy clothes to Windy, for he's the one that's got to spread the dog. Your time is already beat with Kate Monroe, Alf, so you won't need that fancy tie. Remember it's goin' to be a poisonous job for Windy to beat Clyde Doolin."

Alf handed the tie over uncommon meek for him—he didn't want Doolin to win that contest. But he did ask me to take the tie off when I et. Lefty Barns handed over the sateen shirt, tellin' me not to start none of my brawls with it on. Bluey give me the spurs without bein' asked. I owned a swell horsehair bridle made by one of my friends in the pen, so I made quite a splash that mornin'. Champ Garrison, boss and owner of the Bar H, rode to town with us, his boots fresh greased and his hat dusted. Little Dick pushed Snipnose 'longside of me, fair bustin' with pride for the outfit.

"We got that grand prize sewed up!" he shouts. Champ Garrison was the only man to agree with Dick. I kept rememberin' Mrs. Hip-shot.

In town, the stableman was as full

of news as a dog is of fleas. He said the SV was throwin' large brags. Champ Garrison brushed that talk aside. Him and Gumboil Georges of the SV had been friendly rivals for seventeen years, and Champ was out to skin him in the roundup. Champ took the lead as we left the stable, his head high and usin' good knee action. In front of the jail we run into a bunch of ladies with Clyde Doolin in the middle of 'em. Alf's widder was among the ladies.

We bunched for a powwow in front of the Buck Horn Saloon, and the outfit put its foot down on me havin' even so much as a dust cutter. They said for me to get started collectin' votes.

The first female I met was Cressy Bowers, Poo Higgins' gal. I swept off my hat, a new Stetson that'd never been shot through once, and pulled up beside Cressy. "You're purty as a speckled calf today," I says. "I'm surprised Poo Higgins is lettin' you graze free."

She tossed her head toward the Buck Horn Saloon. "I suppose he's in that den of iniquity!"

I was startin' to defend the ol' Buck Horn, when I remembered I was out to get votes. "Poo is sure a jug-head," I says instead. "Come down to the Mercantile and I'll buy you some candy."

"Poo is worse than a jug-head," she agrees pronto, but she smiles a little. "I noticed a fresh barrel of chocolates at the Mercantile."

When Mrs. Hip-shot Bailey saw who it was with Cressy, her lips got tight. She sacked up the candy without a word. I walked with Cressy to the door, then turned back to Mrs. Hip-shot.

"I plumb forgot to do my own shoppin'," I says.

She walked toward the tobacery. "Some Bull Durham and Star?"

"Right. Last month I bought two plugs in Spray and it was so dry I spit cotton while I was chewin' it. I buy here after this."

She didn't think she'd heard right.

"A nice day for the show," says I, "and you're lookin' as nice as the day."

She forgot the tobacery. "Windy Wicks, are you drunk?"

"No, ma'am. I've reformed along that line." Then I happened to think of somethin' else. "I'm goin' to use my influence to keep the whole Bar H outfit away from the evil of drink."

She was speechless.

"You've stopped ol' Hip-shot from drinkin', and that was some job."

"I've tried to reform him," she says dazed.

"You've done a perfect job," I answers honest, for now ol' Hip-shot neither smoked, drank or et hay. "I'm sorry I planked your husband in the eye. He's a man I'd be proud to have for a friend, don't drink or nothin'."

She got her breath back and started talkin'. She raked up everything, even to the time I rode my horse into the chink joint and ordered him a ham sandwich. Then she leaned over the counter and said real sociable, "Oregon Ed has been in several times lately talkin' about how well you're doin' with that poor little orphant you're raisin'. That shows you ain't all bad, Windy."

Oregon Ed was Ol' Ranny, oldest hand on the Bar H, and I caught right off that he'd been puttin' in some good licks for me the two days he'd been in town on a horse trade. "Yes'm," I says. "I do my best with that little orphant, though I know full well I can't do as good as a woman would do."

Soon we was chinnin' friendly, and danged if she didn't have some purty

good idees on raisin' kids. Mrs. Barney Hornsby come in with her kid and I bought him some chocolates. Mrs. Hornsby was pleased and I could hear Mrs. Hip-shot tellin' her what a kind-hearted feller I was under my crust.

I walked outta the Mercantile and planked square into Poo Higgins. I had a feelin' Poo had been waitin' for me.

"So I'm a jug-head, am I?" he asks dangerous. "Buyin' my girl candy, are you? Tryin' to beat my time, huh?"

"I'm runnin' for pop'larist man against Clyde Doolin," I says, eyin' Poo's fist so's he wouldn't slip over a haymaker. "I bought Cressy that candy so's she'd vote for me. Do you want Doolin to win that fifty-dollar prize money as well as all the money he's collected for magazines?"

Mentionin' Doolin made Poo blink his eyes, and I knew he was gettin' the *Cozy Fireside* for his birthday. "You've sure got on your gallin' togs," he says, still suspicious.

"Would I have a chanct against Doolin's tan shoes and sparklin' tie pin without my gallin' togs?"

That won him over, but I thought I'd clinch the deal. "If you don't want me to win, I'll quit. It ain't *me* gets a paper on turnip-growin' for my birthday 'stead of a tie."

"Windy, I'll do my best to see Cressy votes for you, but you see you don't go round callin' me no more jug-heads."

I walked on, realizin' I'd had a narrow squeak. Poo Higgins don't usual back down. I saw Marthy Lawrence across the street but I only lifted my hat. A hot-headed Kentuckian was beauin' Marthy around and I'd had a crawful of curryin' down jealous gents. I met Alf on the next corner lookin' blue as skimmed milk.

"Kate is over to the hotel talkin' to Doolin," he says. "You ain't got a chanct, Windy."

I stepped around him and started for the hotel before which I could see a bunch of women. As I got close I heard my name mentioned by Doolin.

"Windy Bill Wicks running against me, eh?" he snorts. "He's the gent that got intoxicated and slept under the hitching rack and when it started to rain he thought the roof was leaking."

"And Alf Newell was with him," chimed in Alf's widdler.

"Newell? Ain't that the gent that's supposed to rope today?"

He laughed a belittlin' laugh that lifted my hackles. As I split the crowd to face Doolin, Kate Monroe was talkin' again.

"Alf Newell is a handsome roper," she says tart. "I'm not goin' with him no more since he drove me to town and got into a poker game and forgot to take me home, but he's a handsome roper."

Doolin saw me and threw up his dukes, but he was too slow. I landed a blow that'd 'a' jarred the Rock of Gibraltar plumb into the crick, but the rat didn't go down. I plowed in fast with my left, for I knew the boys wouldn't want their Sunday togs mussed up in a long fight. My left went rammin' through blue sky and I was off balance as a fist took me, longside the head. I swang west from the impact, then back east as he took me on the other side. I was listin' heavy and knew I'd bit off a mouthful.

But I know a few tricks myself. I forgot Lefty's shirt and Alf's tie and settled to business. Soon I saw blood spurt and heard the ladies scream. Doolin grabbed me by the tie and swang me half around, tearin' open the neck of my shirt and that was a

favor, 'cause Lefty is smaller in the windpipe than me. We tripped and went down.

Neither of us looked like much when Sheriff Ham Nolan stopped the fight, but I could stand on my pins. The women knelt around Doolin, soppin' his face with lace handkerchiefs. The sheriff and I walked to meet a crowd of the boys comin' from the Buck Horn. What was left of Alf's tie was hangin' over my shoulder and Lefty's shirt was missin' all the buttons and half the collar.

"Sorry about the tie and shirt, boys," I says when we met.

"Hell," says Alf, glancin' back at Doolin, "I'll buy you a dozen ties."

I washed up at the waterin' trough. Word of the fight got around fast and the SV and Quakin' Asp boys complimented me real handsome. The sheriff said he'd had a notion to come over and stop the fight when I was underneath, then he recalled how tough I was and figured I'd lick Doolin if he give me time.

"He's a tough hombre," I says, willin' to give the devil his dues. "Never expected to find a magazine salesman with such a wallop."

The sheriff said he was surprised too.

**T**HE contest in the afternoon was so hot it'd burn the hair off your tongue. Bluey and Two-spot Frank Wells warmed up with baby stuff in the six-gun number, like shootin' the center outta the ace of hearts and puttin' a fringe around the deuce of diamonds. Two-spot soon got irked with the way Bluey matched him shot for shot. He'd not known Bluey was that good.

He cut loose to 'liminate Bluey and I got gooseflesh the way his gun streaked. He was plumb good. Then

Bluey whipped into his stuff and I never saw a hand dart faster. I didn't know whether I was watchin' six hands or just a blur. By the time I got my head turned to see where a bullet hit, I was three looks behind. Ol' Champ was leanin' heavy on my shoulder, tryin' to keep up with his lookin'. Alf Newell, not havin' a lot of chest space, was leanin' on the corral gate, clean winded. Bluey finished up by playin' "Home Sweet Home" on a dime the judge tossed in the air.

There wasn't no dispute about him bein' winner. The SV paid off side bets and slapped their man on the back. Bluey and Two-spot shook hands and Bluey told him if they was playin' it over he'd not be none sure of winnin'. Bluey's overmodest at times.

The buckin' contest come next and Simp Wells showed some nervous, bein' just a kid. "Get settled deep in the wood 'fore you give the signal for your horse to be turned loose, Simpson," I says calm. We don't usual take time for Simp's full name, but I wanted to show him there warn't no hurry. Bluey eared down Simp's bronc and the kid took a hitch at his belt and reached for the horn. As he raised to the saddle, I saw a familiar light weave into his eyes. He forgot the crowd and signaled Bluey, already feelin' the tremblin' of that bronc and figurin' which way his openin' jump would be.

He raked him from shoulder to flank and fanned constant. The kid could ride and he was up on a real buckner. None but a good peeler could 'a' stayed on top, let alone tickle his ribs and cool his ears. The crowd showed they knew a real ride was goin' on, and when the judge's gun cracked, I knew Simp had it. He'd not only rode purtier than the

SV man ahead of him, but had had a worse horse.

The SV'ers and Bar H'ers was now tied, two events each. The Quakin' Aspers and John Day'ers was fightin' for second place. The next event was goin' to decide things with us and the SV, for both of us had give over winnin' the pop'lar man contest. The SV had Bear-oil Billy Collins entered, but with Clyde Doolin now a martyr, me and Billy was hopeless beat.

Alf Newell had to win the ropin' for us to tie the SV, for there was no mistake about the SV havin' the bulldoggin' sewed up. Bluey nudged my elbow as Alf walked to his horse.

"Kate just now passed Alf up like he was poison in her coffee," he whispers. "Alf hasn't the heart for a winnin' fight."

I kicked myself for not displayin' my usual smartness earlier. I caught Alf by the arm just before he mounted. "Kate was braggin' to all the ladies and Clyde Doolin about what a swell roper you was, Alf," I says. "She stuck up for you noble when Doolin run you down."

"Honest, Windy?" says Alf.

"Sure, I reckon she'll be so proud if you win this match that she'll start bakin' you checkerboard cakes again."

Alf swung into the saddle like a new man. "I'll win it," he says with fire, and yells at Bloody Dennison, the SV roper. "Watch how I do this and maybe you can win second place."

You'd never 'a' thought Alf could 'a' moved so fast without comin' apart.

"What'd you say to him, Windy?" Bluey asks as Alf hung up a record.

After the events was over, Dick hunted me up with some arnicy that Mrs. Hip-shot had sent for my skinned places. He said Mrs. Hip-

shot was glad I'd whittled Clyde Doolin down 'cause he'd bought some shoe polish from her and not paid for it.

"She's goin' to vote for you," the kid says. "She thinks I'm lucky to have two fine fellers like you and Bluey lookin' after me."

"Dick," I said, thinkin' I'd better break the news to him, "it ain't in the cards for me to win that pop'lar man contest. Mrs. Hip-shot will be the only woman votin' for me."

The kid never batted an eye. "If the men could vote you'd win in a walk. We've got the SV tied even if we don't win the grand prize."

Durin' the contest the stage had come in and on it was a gent that just rubbed your fur the wrong way without even speakin'.

"He looks like a man trailer," Bluey says as us Bar H'ers was amblin' over to the restaurant for supper. "You didn't have no trouble that last shipment of beef you nursed into Portland, did you, Windy?"

"I did not," I returns snappy. Then decided it was no use gettin' starchy with Bluey if there was a man trailer in town. "That is, jest a fuss with a cop on Water Street."

"We'll keep our eyes on that bird," Champ Garrison says. "I don't want to lose no men with fall work comin'."

The dance got under way. The votin' for pop'lar man had been changed back to evenin' as Clyde Doolin hadn't been able to leave town at sundown as he'd planned. The votin' would take place at nine, but nobody doubted how it would go. The way the women made a fuss over Doolin's black eyes was disgustin'.

A bunch of us was settin' on a bench alongside the livery stable listenin' to Catgut Rollins scrape out "Over the Waves." Simp Wells was

with us 'cause his girl got mad when he took my side over the fight. Alf and Poo Higgins was likewise out in the cold. Dick was settin' close to me and every now and then he's say somethin' to show me he didn't mind about not winnin' the grand prize.

We saw the gent Bluey had called a man trailer come down the street and he had the sheriff with him. Champ Garrison began to rumble like when a storm was brewin'. The sheriff got closer and let out a yelp: "Where's Windy Wicks?"

"Duck!" Bluey says—but I already had.

"What do you want of Windy?" he asks, unsuspecting.

"This feller wants to give him fifty dollars," the sheriff says. "This is a detective from Chicago, and he's after Clyde Doolin. If Windy hadn't handicapped Doolin he'd 'a' been outta town 'fore he was caught. Windy is goin' to get fifty dollars side money for givin' Doolin that beatin'."

I hung my saddle back quick and stepped outta the stable.

**T**HE Bar H spread sure throwed on the dog for the rest of the evenin'. The sheriff got on a box in the middle of the dance floor and told the ladies of the country how they'd paid their money for a magazine that would never be sent 'cause Doolin didn't represent the company. He said the gents in the country would just have to get along without that paper on turnip growin'. But he said him and the detective had found a good-sized roll of money on Doolin, mostly dollar bills, and that they was handin' it out to the ladies as had signed for the paper.

"You got Windy Bill Wicks to thank for uncoverin' this snake in the grass," he finished strong.

"Windy knew he wasn't no common magazine salesman when he got into that fight with him, so he just fixed him up so's he couldn't get out of town. The votin' will now start for pop'larist man."

Even Bear-oil Billy Collins pounded me on the back, and he was the SV entry for pop'lar man. He said he didn't stand a chanct now with me and was withdrawin'. Which was handsome of Bear-oil, for he's quite some shakes with the ladies.

The votin' was rapid. The sheriff said there was no use to vote after Bear-oil withdrew, but the ladies wanted to vote and show me how they appreciated me gettin' their money back for them. I declined all offers to dance, the truth bein' I only knew the buck-and-wing and was sore in every joint, to boot. Doolin hadn't been no cinch.

Dick and me watched from the wall bench. Alf and his widder went prancin' by and Alf was smilin' like he figured to soon be eatin' checker-board cake again. Simp and his gal was all made up, and I saw Poo Higgins buyin' Cressy Bowers a glass of lemonade. He even took a glass himself to show he wasn't against weak drinks.

I felt somethin' heavy on my arm and looked down to see Dick's head wobblin' around. I give him a nudge and looked the other way. He set up straight as an Indian.

"What you say we hit the hay?" I suggests.

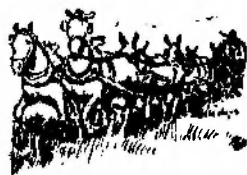
"Are you gettin' sleepy?" he asks, and begins lookin' for his hat. He got awake and tramped out of the hall with his head up. "The Bar H won the grand prize!" he says for the millionth time. "Won in a walk!"

I hobbled along, sore and stiff. "Easy as pie," I says.

# RANGE SAVVY

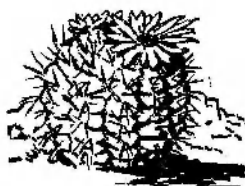
by H. FRERRIC YOUNG

Out of the West have come innumerable "inventions" to handle specific needs as the country sprang into life. Among them, probably the jerk line stands out as truly characteristic of this section. The jerk line is a single, continuous rein, though more often a rope, starting from its fastening at the top of the brake handle,



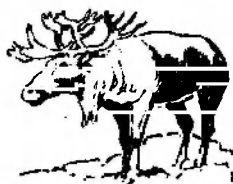
extending to and through the hand of the driver, who either is astride the wheel horse or is seated on the wagon's seat. The line continues thence along the file of horses' backs and to the left side of the lead animal's bit, without touching the bit of any intermediate animal. A single, steady pull guides the animal to the left, while two more short jerks turn it to the right. The jerk line is mainly used when from ten to twenty horses are strung out, single file.

Not to be outdone by the camel, the hedgedog cactus of the Mexican desert can go without water for five years, and grow, flourish, and bloom regardless. As to the water-storing system of this plant, first it is shaped like a round ball



with bellowlike seams running from top to bottom all the way around. Its wide-spreading roots take up all moisture within reach, which is drawn up into the large central mass of pith. The entire plant swells as the interior is filled with water. An average rainfall will supply it with enough water to last five years. As the water evaporates in a dry spell, the plant shrinks in size.

Strange as it may seem to some, the reindeer is not a native of Alaska. Forty years ago the government imported 1,080 head from within the Arctic Circle, and today over two million roam the wilds of Alaska. Antlers, which both male and female have, are shed yearly and from



them combs, buttons and knife handles are made. Reindeer hide makes the best kind of clothing for the Far North, and there is no better oil for leather dressing

and cosmetics than that obtained from this animal.

The reindeer and the caribou have been crossed by the Alaska College of Agriculture, and a larger, finer animal, called the carideer, has been produced. These animals live on moss, which they dig out from under the snow.

Arguments, pro and con, have waxed hot as to which draw is more conducive to speed, the natural right-handed draw of a pistol carried on the right thigh, handle to the rear, or the Texas cross draw. Both sides of the question seem to have affirmative answers, for some of



the West's most accurate gunmen used either method. Using the Texas cross draw, the gun is worn on the left side, butt forward. In practicing this draw, try half

sloping to one side, left side to target, and shooting under the crooked elbow of your left arm. It is, I think you will find, a most natural movement to use in galvanizing into action. This method is, however, strictly "instinct aiming" for close range at a large target.

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*Mr. Young will pay one dollar to anyone who sends him a usable item for RANGE SAVVY. Please send these items in care of Street & Smith, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Be sure to inclose a three-cent stamp for subjects which are not available.*

# GUNSMOKE GENTLEMEN

BY TOM ROAN



DANGER hung over the room in the alarming hush. It was a hush that was like a long, painful halt in one's breathing. For minutes it had been like that. Not one of the trio of men at the rough-planked table seemed able to speak. They were like mutes sitting there in the lonely, sod-roofed little log cabin so securely hidden in the deep, dark can-

yon that gashed its way down through the tall Wyoming hills. Each man sat with his elbows planted on the table, his chin in his cupped hands, and his long revolvers hanging motionless in the big holsters at his hips. The last hot outburst of words had robbed them of their voices, leaving them cold-faced and brooding with deadly thoughts.

Outside, the north wind blew, coming in howling and shrieking gales down the frozen river. Leafless old

cottonwoods bent their skeleton shapes to the icy blasts, their bare-bone limbs rattling and whistling in the waning light of a weak little half-moon hanging high in a blue-black sky shot with blinking stars. If that wind kept up, one of the wildest blizzards that ever blew would be raging before morning.

The men at the table were not even thinking about that. Hardships and bad weather were a part of them. Right now a crackling fire roared in the south end of the room and sent out its tiny bombshells of bursting sparks from the rough rock fireplace. A snug warmth filled the cabin, seeping to every corner and even into the cracks where the long-dead bark was falling away from the old logs. A whiskey jug sat on the table. Light cooking pans and a black coffeepot sat on the hearth. The odor of fried venison steaks still found its way around the room, and all else was snug and ready for any storm that blew, with blankets covering soft pine boughs on the three of the lean-to bunks against the wall; and three of the best and fastest saddle horses that ever stepped foot on Wyoming soil were warm in the old stables under an overhanging ledge at the north end of the cabin.

Cheered by copious rounds of the forty-rod whiskey from the two-gallon jug, and warmed by the tin mugs of hot, sweetened water in which they had downed it, the cabin had boomed with the wild songs of the outlaw trails until that quick hush had settled over it and sudden gloom had wiped away all the joy-making. Suddenly hands had flinched toward the butts of six-shooters. Weapons that had in the past gone through many battles together had been half drawn from their holsters. Some spark of sanity had halted it a split-

second before the blood would have been shed in the flickering firelight.

**A**N' that's what yuh call gratitude. Maybe we're supposed to laugh an' figure it a joke. Or maybe overlook it by pretendin' that the whiskey's gone to the Utah Kid's head."

Santa Fe Sam Albright was the first to break the silence. He looked like some old-time actor in his broad-lapeled, long-tailed coat, his fancy vest, white shirt, black string tie and striped gray trousers. He was more than sixty, a huge, raw-boned man with a long red beak for a nose and a mouth that seemed cut from ear to ear. A freckle-faced, black-hatted, pious-looking old renegade, he sat at the head of the table.

"After a mite more than three years in South America for . . . er . . . our health, he's sorry we returned!" Blackjack Jim Malone nodded, sitting there staring at his half-filled cup that had already grown cold. He was long and lean, and dressed like a gambler of the old school. As a matter of both personal adornment and concealment, he wore a monocle of frosted glass over the gaping and pulsating red pocket where his right eye should have been.

"I'd say," he finally yawned, "that there's a woman in this here thing somewheres, Santa Fe."

"A woman!" Albright's hard, amazingly blue eyes narrowed beneath his snow-white brows. "So that's it, Utah?"

The Utah Kid did not answer him. He was smaller than either of them, just past twenty-six, a gray-eyed, brown-haired, neat-looking man dressed in somber gray. His smooth, boyish face gave the lie to the reputation he had once cut for himself

with these saddle hawks until he had left them three years ago down on the Rio Grande.

"'Silence,' says somethin' I once read when drunk, 'gives consent.'" Albright spoke in his low, mockingly serious tone. "It's too bad to see a good man go to seed like this. Why, Utah, there never was a better hand than yuh, even young as yuh are, at doin' yore part when we rob a bank or pistol-flag a train. Tell me honest, boy, like a son to a father, is it a woman that makes yuh wanta shake the saddle dust from yore pants an' go 'er straight?"

"It's a woman," the Utah Kid said quietly, and it was the worst thing he could have told them.

"May the Lord have mercy on my pore old soul!" groaned Albright. "A woman!" He shook his head. "What's she like? Two purty eyes as bright as twinklin' stars, I suppose."

"An' two ruby lips rubbed on from a jar—" began Malone with a wicked little splatter of laughter.

"That'll do!"

Exploding gunpowder could not have thrown the Utah Kid to his feet any quicker. He was up from the end of the table, his bench kicked back and out of the way.

"Yes, it is a woman!" he cried. "As beautiful and loyal as any girl that ever walked the earth! Not only a woman, but a baby, too!"

"A baby?" intoned Santa Fe Sam Albright. "Jumpin' Jehoshaphat, Utah, yo'll be tellin' us yuh married her next!"

"I did marry her!" cried the younger man desperately. "I married her a year after you two went to South America. I was in the hospital for six months, as you know, but I didn't forget what you two had done for me. I didn't forget that you robbed a bank to pay my hospital

bills. I didn't forget, either, that you took a young fellow who looked like me to South America with you. You laid a broad trail so that the law couldn't help but know where you had gone. You took the law right off my trail. A man couldn't have better friends than you two."

**S**ILENCE held him for almost a minute after that. The men at the opposite end of the table did not move. They were sitting there waiting for the rest of it. In their eyes there was terrible disappointment. This scene was not real. It could not be. Each man was thinking that he was dreaming. This was a nightmare! The Utah Kid would never turn old friends down like this. Their thoughts had been of him every day since they had left him.

"You know why I came to Mother Lode!" The younger man was suddenly rushing on. "It's only twenty miles from this place. Up there in the hills!" He pointed northward. "It was a quiet, sleepy little town when I came. I thought I could stay there, and I did. Something about it got in my blood. I learned how it felt to walk down the street and look every man squarely in the eye. The sounds of hoofs at night ceased to be something to make me jump out of my blankets and dive for my guns. And then—then"—he looked around hopelessly—"I met Dell Miller. Nobody knew me as the Utah Kid. I took back the name my father and mother gave me. It was nice to have people call me Jimmy Wind again. And then gold was found in Mother Lode once more. The dumping grounds of hell moved in. Marshals were killed as fast as they were hired."

"Don't say it, Kid!" Santa Fe Sam Albright was suddenly on his feet. "Don't say it!"

"I *am* saying it!" The younger man slipped his hand to the left pocket of his shirt, and suddenly tossed a five-balled star on the table. "They needed a marshal, a man who could shoot and who would. I took the job. It's still too much for one man. I work night and day. I had hopes that maybe—now that you two have gone straight for three years—that you might like to keep on going straight. I could use two good men. I know you'd learn to like it. It's your one chance. The law will never bother you again. To the law all three of us are dead."

"Yuh mean to say, Kid"—Santa Fe Sam Albright eased back on his bench—"that yo've got the guts to ask us to wear one of those blasted things!" He pointed to the star with a finger that shook with contempt. "To pin things like that on our briskets? Kid, yuh ain't the boy I used to know."

"No," Blackjack Jim Malone said sadly, "we ain't talkin' to the Utah Kid. I reckon the Utah Kid is dead. It's just you an' me now, Santa Fe. When we come here we had some nice bright ideas about robbing a certain bank in Mother Lode. We figured the Kid would be there with a cigarette hangin' on one side of his mouth and that sort o' foolish little grin on his face. Santa Fe, the Kid ain't with us no more, but we've always played square with him. The Kid can't do nothin' but play square with us. Marshal"—he looked at the star with almost a sneer—"for old time's sake alone we'll tell you that we come here to meet you and to rob the bank in Mother Lode. Whether you like it or not, we're still goin' to rob that bank!"

"When you do"—a bitter little smile that was more a grimace of pain than anything else wormed its way across the younger man's face—

"there's just one thing to remember. You better not forget it. You'll rob the First National in Mother Lode only when you walk across the dead body of the Utah Kid!"

HE left them after hours of arguing, and rode alone to town when morning came. The wind howled around him. It was fiercely cold. A thermometer would have showed it forty degrees below. But Jimmy Wind did not mind the cold. He did not even feel it. His thoughts were in a whirl. The long-dreaded had come. The past was catching up with him.

"They're on the square in their own way." He told himself that several times through grim, cold lips. "An honest pair of fighting hawks! Either one would let his throat be cut before he'd tell a man a lie. But I'm through. They know it, but they think they can swing me by robbing a bank right under my nose. Well, we'll see!"

When he reached the foot of Mother Lode's Main Street he knew at once something was wrong. It was a typical Wyoming cow and mining town, surrounded by tall hills. Square-fronted stores and saloons stood at either hand. The one-story, red-brick bank was to his left, situated on a corner with the wind hurling clouds of snow around it. Mobs of people were everywhere even at the early hour. The majority of them should have been in working clothes and heading for the snow-mounded holes that marked the mines in the sides of the great bald mountains looming all around the town.

Crowds filled the doorways of saloons. For some reason the young marshal could sense unfriendly eyes boring at him right from the beginning. He saw men who had been

good friends to him suddenly turning in their tracks to move back inside the saloons. He could not understand it. Then he saw three snow-mounded shapes in front of the Polka Dot Bar that turned out to be dead horses. Afterward he was to learn they had been shot down by stray bullets.

There had been a fight. That much grew irkingly clear from the many bullet holes that showed even in the frost-caked windows. Gun fights were still a part of Mother Lode's wild night life. One man could not handle them all. One man could do only so much when bands of peaceful cowboys rode into town and the trouble-hungry element of the saloons, gambling dives and the mines took the notion to run them out. But the attitude of the crowds was alarming. Wind waved his hand at no less than a dozen men, and saw them simply shrug and turn their backs to him.

He swung back to the Polka Dot, dropped rein at the hitch rack above the dead horses, and moved on inside. The crowd at the bar turned like a well-drilled unit, and walked out the back door. Rube Smith, the bartender, gathered up his long white apron and followed the gang. Not a word was spoken. Wind simply found himself alone, standing there staring like a fool.

It was like that in other places—the Hoof and Horn, Denver Joe's, the Purple Rose, and the Montana. All Mother Lode was as mad as all get out about something! Silently insulted at every hand, humiliated at the worst possible way men could conceive it, Wind finally rode on up the street. Whatever was gnawing at Mother Lode's vitals would soon be coming to the surface. The town would not be able to hold it. It could not be kept hidden long!

Such sullen horseplay made a man as hard as nails, but he was determined to keep a stiff upper lip and not make a fool of himself by losing his temper. That determination was growing even when he reached the house. It was a neat little place near the head of the street, with stables, a haystack, and a small corral under a grove of leafless trees behind the house. His wife had already swept the snow from the porch, and from the chimney blue wood smoke streamed away in the wind. A nice little place for a man to call home!

Wind unsaddled and fed his horse in one of the warm stables, then rubbed the animal's back and legs dry, and slipped a blanket on him.

**W**HEN he entered the house he was smiling in spite of his worry. His wife, a slender girl of twenty-two, with golden-red hair, met him at the door of the kitchen. The warmth of the stove swirled around him as he took her in his arms. But even as he pressed her to him he could sense that something was wrong inside his own house.

"Oh, you're so cold!" she chided him. "Mercy, Jimmy, did you have to be out all night in weather like this?"

"Well, yes," he admitted. "I had a place to go, a job to attend to. Now it's over. How's Billy?"

"He's just had his breakfast," smiled his wife. "Now you come and have some coffee, and then I'm putting you to bed. You've got to get some sleep, Jimmy."

"No, not now," he evaded. "I've still got a little job down the street. How were things last night?"

"Well, I . . . I guess—"

"Go ahead, Dell!" His voice was suddenly gruff with her, and for the first time since they had known each

other. "Something happened. I know it. Don't hold back!"

"You left town yesterday at three o'clock, right after the bank closed," she answered calmly. "The Bellarkin gang rode in at four. You left Old Jake Goodwell and Shorty Drake to take care of the marshal's work while you were gone. They were the first to be killed."

"Killed!" His eyes widened. "Go on!"

"The Bellarkins shot up the town, as usual. Judge Porter and two miners were shot down right after Goodwell and Drake. They robbed the Hoof and Horn; they fired bullets into our house to show their contempt for you as they rode on up the street. One bullet came through the window and buried itself in Billy's cradle."

"Come on, Dell," Wind encouraged as he saw sudden tears fill his wife's eyes. "You haven't said all of it."

"There was mob talk after that, Jimmy. Yes," she nodded, the tears running down her cheeks now, "it was all against you. You know how the rough crowd feels about you, how they always have—and the better people say they always will. A man who called himself a prospector told everybody that he came into town and warned you at noon yesterday that the Bellarkin gang was coming. That gave your enemies something to talk about. They said you left town because you were afraid. And when they asked me where you were gone, Jimmy, I couldn't tell them, because I didn't know."

"It's a lie!" he cried. "It's all a lie! The whole thing's some kind of a plot cooked up by the tough hands of Mother Lode. I can see it all now. A man who looked like a prospector did talk to me yesterday at

noon. He deliberately made it a point to call me out of a crowd and off to one side, but he didn't mention anything about the Bellarkin gang. He told a tale of his camp robbed in the hills. He asked me to keep my eye out for a certain kind of a big gold watch with a peculiar fob and chain. He told me that someone might be seen wearing it around town. I don't want any coffee, Dell." He kissed her quickly. "There's a lot of things for me to do right now."

"Don't go out of the house, Jimmy!" Her eyes were suddenly filled with panic as she caught his arm. "You still have friends here, but they all want you to remain indoors for a little while. They know there's something wrong. They say it will clear itself."

"It won't have to clear itself as long as I'm able to walk!" Gently but firmly he pushed her away from him. Before she could halt him he was gone out the door.

He had changed completely as he was walking back down the street a minute later. A cigarette hung in the corner of his mouth. The half-foolish little grin Malone had mentioned in the outlaw cabin was now on his face. He swung in abruptly at the Montana on the west side of the street. When he saw the crowd at the bar turn on their heels as they had before and walk like wooden soldiers toward the rear door, he halted every man with a warning.

"I'll kill the first man who steps out that door!" His face was still twisted into a grin, but his glittering eyes gave the lie to that. "In my opinion you're all a gang of plain skunks to act like you're trying to act this morning. I had to go home and hear the whole tale from my wife. I had to learn how a gang of mongrels marched up to my house talking mob talk! You're a fine gang

of tinhorns to scare a woman and a baby. If there's a man among you, then step out of line and fill your hand!"

No man stepped out of line. They stood there staring at him like plotters caught in their own plot. A few grinned sheepishly, but Wind kept lashing it into them until he finally turned his back upon them contemptuously, to walk out of the saloon.

**JIMMY WIND** was like an eight-day clock when he struck the other places. There was no manner of stopping him with anything short of a gun fight, and too many men in Mother Lode had seen Marshal Jimmy Wind fight. They wanted no part of a fight with him! By nine o'clock he had bullied the town, and had knocked one burly miner's teeth out with his fists. He had visited Old Doc Laird's undertaking establishment behind the bank, and had seen the dead men lying there on the tables. Just as nine thirty came, he was back in the Hoof and Horn diagonally across the street from the bank when a roar of shots accompanied by a wild pounding of hoofs suddenly filled the town.

The fierce sounds of a burst of shooting came from inside the bank almost at the same instant, and Marshal Jimmy Wind knew what was happening. More than a dozen gunmen were galloping up the street in the whirling clouds of snow to make it a general street fight while other gunmen had quietly sneaked into the side door of the bank. To Wind it was all clear; he knew how such things were done. For an instant he visioned men studying their watches on the outskirts of the town, then separating with a few of their number to drift casually in up the side street.

Judged by one-time outlaw eyes, the First National was ideal for such an attack. It was there on the corner with even a hitch rack placed at the side door. The rest would be easy. All a couple of expert bank crackers would have to do would be to drift leisurely in at the side door. Taking the cash would be a quick and simple matter. Once the money was thrust into canvas bags, all the outlaws would have to do would be to back their way out after firing a few shots over the heads of the startled bank officials to keep them terrorized and lying flat on the floor. Once outside with all the noise and excitement going on in the street to keep the rest of the town interested, the bandits would flip into their saddles and be gone like bullets from guns.

And Mother Lode was in no condition to fight, Johnny Wind knew. With the town shot to pieces the day before, and five dead men lying in the undertaker's establishment, and with possibly a dozen others in the town bedridden, Mother Lode could not be anything other than an easy target for desperate men. The town was actually whipped and cowed before the fight started!

"The Bellarkins are back!" cried the bartender of the Hoof and Horn, letting bottles and glasses fly out of his hands and dropping to flatten himself on the floor behind the bar, while the rest of the crowd wheeled with startled yells to race like startled sheep for the rear door. "They'll kill anybody who even tries to fight back at 'em."

The identical thing must have been happening at the same time in all the rest of the places of business up and down the street where the morning crowds had gathered. Yells and cries of terror broke out everywhere. There were a few scattered shots fired back at the raiders, and

then every would-be defending gun of the town seemed to grow suddenly silent.

Jimmy Wind was already well into it. Snatching up a chair, he smashed out a window in the north wall of the Hoof and Horn, and hurled himself outside into a narrow alleyway choked with snow and rubbish. He turned and headed for the street. When he reached it he was in the open for the width of a long, narrow building that housed a saddle store. He passed it on the run, remembering an old rain barrel now filled with ice and snow that stood at the corner of it, and knowing it would offer some protection as a shield.

Shots tore at him as he made his short, furious race. It seemed that all the gunmen in the street were opening fire on him and concentrating every effort to bring him down so that the law of Mother Lode would be completely out of the way. A hot pain stabbed through his right leg just as he reached the corner of the building and swung around behind the old barrel. He went down on his hands and knees with clouds of snow blowing around him.

At a wild-bull bellowing of commands farther down the street, four reckless horsemen charged the marshal a moment later, and faster than they could have told their names, he sent two of them pitching out of their saddles and rolling on the icy ground, while a third man whirled his horse and snatched desperately for the lunging and rearing brute's mane to keep himself from falling.

**W**ITH his right leg running a steady dripping of blood and feeling as if a hundred red devils were prodding hot pitchforks into it, Jimmy Wind—once the Utah Kid of the outlaw trail—had the ad-

vantage for the next few minutes. He could see down the narrow, alley-like street alongside of the bank by looking over the top of the barrel, and he could see the front doors of the bank at the same time. With shots still tearing into the barrel, he was making good use of his position within a minute and a half after he had taken it.

He saw two men dart outside the side door of the bank. Each man was carrying a canvas sack. That meant the actual robbery had been completed. Now it was only the matter of a quick getaway. But the first man died just as he reached the hitch rack, a reeling figure wabbling from side to side, then suddenly dropping backward from the shock of a bullet that struck him in the side just below the point of the elbow to tear a yawning hole through him.

The second man stopped to pick up the first man's sack. He could not have found death any quicker or more sure in all Wyoming. A bullet slammed him to his knees, and another—coming before a man could wink an eye—pitched him forward on his face across the dead man.

The third and fourth men came out of the bank now. Neither of them carried a money sack. That pair knew their business! They were the hold-back men who could be trusted to remain inside under any strain of excitement and keep the bank officials terrorized while the men with the money made it to their horses and got a good start down the street to burn wind for some rendezvous. They skidded to a halt as they saw two men lying there over the money bags. Each man knew what to do, but one of them was braver than the other. He reached down to snatch up the money, and like the second of the

money carriers he went down, shot through the hips with a heavy slug of lead and paralyzed on the spot.

It must have been too much for the fourth man. He could not see that unerring gunman behind the old barrel, and with a yell he turned to run as if he did not want to be bothered with a horse. He managed to reach the corner of the bank, and there he went down on a broken leg with every bone shattered in the left knee as he flipped himself out of sight.

By this time, Jimmy Wind was finding the going hard. Four other horsemen in the main street had whipped down a side alley. Now they were coming up behind their man. They were evidently old heads in the game; they were men who knew how street fighting should be done, and were going at it the proper way. One of their number held the horses behind an old blacksmith's shop.

Snatching Winchester rifles from their saddles, and leaping to the ground, the other three came on, secure in the knowledge that there was a getaway waiting behind them.

Now Jimmy Wind was suddenly attacked on three sides. There was no protection from the three riflemen behind him. They were opening up like the blazing hellions they were, and Wind was firing back at them with a .45—a man doomed to almost certain death at any instant. Then out of the corners of his eyes he caught sight of two other figures with black handkerchiefs covering the lower sides of their faces—two figures just riding out of an alleyway beyond the men with the Winchesters. The one-time Utah Kid was thinking there was something mighty familiar about them even as a Winchester bullet tore through the right side of his chest to pitch him

forward like a dying man on the snow and ice.

**F**IGHTING instinct kept Jimmy Wind alive and carried him through. He was lying there on the ground, still blazing away with deadly gunfire. He never knew the exact moment that Santa Fe Sam Albright and Blackjack Jim Malone came into it. Both had most certainly come to town to rob the First National. The thing they did when they got there and found another gang ahead of them was not in the cards at all. There was a friend down in his own blood—a friend outnumbered and trying to fight it out alone. Something about it stung two fighting hawks to the bone.

"We can't let the boy down, Jim!" Santa Fe Sam's brassy old voice rolled out above the noise of the shots and seemed to blare like the bray of an ass all over the town. "Let the old tomcats tom!"

Through a film that came down over his eyes to half blind him, Wind saw them swinging forward with their heavy guns flinging out of their holsters and the reins of their high-strung horses held with a bulldog grip in their teeth. From that instant on, the saddle hawks of the old outlaw trails were flying, swooping and fighting.

It did not come to Wind for a long time that Santa Fe Sam and Jim had whipped down their masks and were riding bare-faced into the fight. He sensed rather than saw that the deadly Winchesters behind him were suddenly silenced with their owners pitching forward to the right and left. He never knew when the man who held the horses behind the blacksmith's shop gave up all hopes by suddenly turning to flee in terror.

Now Wind was plunging forward, up on his feet with pain seeming

actually to scream in his right leg. He rocked rather than walked, and at every step the blood squirted. For a few moments he was not the marshal of Mother Lode. In those moments he was the Utah Kid again.

Something had gone wrong in the plans. That thought rushed through his dazed brain, but he could not remember just what the plans were. The money was lying over there in front of the side door of the bank. Dead men were sprawled atop of it, but he could not remember just how or why that had happened. Then the thought was burning through him that he and his two companions were fighting a mounted posse in the street. He did not know where his own horse was. That was bad medicine, but he could not stop to find a horse now.

"*Fan it!*" He cried that out of the side of his mouth. It was the old give-up cry, a last call to his companions to go on and leave him while they could, a cry that should have told them he was through and going down, and there was no further use in their staying and trying to save his life.

But Santa Fe Sam and Jim Malone were not leaving him. He saw that, and cursed from the side of a mouth that dripped blood. Sam and Jim were a couple of fools! Didn't they know they could not shoot this out?

Yet Santa Fe Sam and Jim Malone were doing it! He himself was still pulling men off horses, rocking them out of their saddles. He went down again. He seemed a long time getting up; then he was staggering and weaving across the street. The man who had gone down around the corner of the bank with a broken leg now crawled back and suddenly began to open fire on him. He felt a bullet rip through the muscle of

his right arm, and steadied himself long enough to make another kill with one shot.

It was after that—how long after he didn't know—that he found himself hunched forward and trying to pick up the money bags. Right after that, Santa Fe Sam loomed above him, and it was the Utah Kid who looked up into the old man's grinning face. It was the Utah Kid who spoke in a voice that was hoarse and weak. Jimmy Wind had momentarily forgotten his marshal's job, his wife and baby boy.

"I'm through, Sam." Blackness was swirling around him as he managed that in a voice that came like choking sobs. "Don't be a fool. *Fan it!*"

And then he was down. Blackness was all around him, smothering him. He did not know that all the shooting had ceased. There was no memory at all of the street filled with dead men and horses behind him. It was just that awful blackness, crushing down and down—

**BAD!"** A doctor said that an eternity after the fight. "But he'll pull through. He's lost a lot of blood, but he's all good, solid meat and muscle. It'll take more lead than that to keep him down."

The odor of medicines came to Jimmy Wind. Someone pressed a soft, tear-wet cheek against his cheek. He felt warm lips press his temples. A baby cried somewhere. There was a long wait. He opened his eyes, and looked around the room. At first it was strange, and then he saw Dell standing there at the foot of the bed with Billy in her arms.

Jimmy Wind came back, but he hesitated. He looked to the left, and saw the benevolent face of old Santa Fe Sam Albright there beside

his bed. He looked to the right, and saw the grinning Blackjack Jim Malone. When he looked back at Albright the second time, he saw his own five-balled star pinned on the old man's brawny chest and gleaming there like a locomotive's headlight.

"Rest . . . er . . . Jimmy," whispered the old man as he bent his face close to Wind's ear. "Me an' Jim's talked it over. We couldn't sec 'em put yuh down. I'm glad we got here in time, though I'll admit we didn't come for no good an' honest purpose. From now on, son,

I reckon you'll have to sort o' lead the way."

"You mean—that, Sam?" Jimmy Wind—the Utah Kid—looked up, his voice a whisper.

"Ever' word of it!" A broad grin streaked Albright's face. "Rest. Don't worry. See this?" He touched the star on his chest. "I'm wearin' that for yuh now. Jim ain't got one yet, but yuh can have a couple made when yo're able to get up an' around. In the meantime, boy, you just take it easy. Me an' Jim will take care of the marshal's office."

THE END.

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## HORSE SENSE

MUCH discussion over the reasoning power of animals has been answered by the scientific discovery that certain emotions in the mind of an animal causes the body to throw off distinctive odors. Stockmen have noticed how quickly horses, dogs, and even cattle can detect fear on the part of human beings.

If a man who has no fear of animals enters a corral full of horses, little attention is paid to him. He can walk up to the one he wants, lay a hand on his neck and lead the horse out. But if immediately afterward a man under any form of excitement, fear, anxiety or worry goes into the corral, instantly the heads snap up. Some of the more nervous animals will snort and walk away; they may even attempt to break out of the corral—and all without a word having been spoken.

This reaction in horses and dogs is so marked that some men go so far as to determine whether or not a man is honest by the way his horse or his dog reacts to the strange presence. Animal trainers have long accepted this theory and are careful of their mental conditions. Any experienced cowboy knows that his horse works freer and shows better judgment when his rider is confident and happy.

Undoubtedly more than one stampede of cattle has been caused by the scent from the body of an anxious man riding around a herd, thinking that his physical presence there would quiet it, while in reality his body was sending off a scent that the cattle mistook for a warning of danger. Any man who has ever trailed wild cattle will tell of stampedes for which there was no explanation. The cattle seemed contented, well fed and quiet, there were no disturbing sounds—yet the cattle ran!



## SINGIN' COWBOY

BY CARTER CARR

On the edge of the millin' cattle, in the heart of a howlin' storm,  
In the midst of a river gone loco, or p'raps by a campfire warm,  
You'll catch his wild song risin', a song that I love to hear,  
For it always challenges danger, with never a thought of fear.

He can lose at poker grinnin', and he laughed when a bullet sped  
From out of a rustler's ambush and burned the side of his head.  
Laughed and charged through the thicket, with both guns flaming fast.  
Them hidden killers killed no more; that ambush was their last.

Some say he has no deep feelin' or he couldn't be singin' so free,  
But the heart of that Singin' Cowboy seems jest pure gold to me!  
For many a time men sinkin' in despair's dark, swallowin' mire,  
Taken courage because they heard him, taken hope and felt new fire.

When Death's cards fall agin' me, and to go seems hard and strange,  
I'll want that Cowboy singin' "All's well on the Final Range!  
All's well on that Range forever, and it's there that riders meet.  
It's there they gallop on stallions splendid, glossy and fleet.  
And there you will find no desert, no blizzard to blot the sun,  
And whatever you try to do there the Boss will say, 'Well done!'"

# TRAIL BREAKER

BY GEORGE CORY FRANKLIN

PETE, the big dun steer with the brindle head and long, sharp-pointed horns, was nervous. April was almost gone. The snow was off in the valleys. For two weeks flocks of ducks had been flying over the corral, where Pete had put in a lazy, luxurious winter; this was proof that the beaver ponds in the valley of the back range were free of ice. The grass along the water courses would be getting green, and soon there would be sprigs of watercress to be had for the taking.

For the past three nights a full moon had lighted up the valley. The herd of stock cattle out in the pastures had been making a lot of racket, showing that the cows wanted to get back on the summer range before the hundreds of little white-faced calves began to dot the landscape.

Pete paced back and forth the length of the corral, sharpened his horns on the logs, snorted and pawed the ground. This place hadn't seemed a prison to him until lately. In fact, he had rather liked the snug winter quarters that Dale Carter had put up for him when it became apparent that the steers in the feed lot would not get fat so long as Pete shared their corral.

A shed of logs had been built against the side of a hill. There was a stout corral in front of it, and in clear weather the sun shone through the open side and dried the straw of Pete's bed. The manager had been kept full of sweet-smelling timothy, and there was running water in the log trough. What more could a steer want?

In spite of all this coddling, Pete was wild and loved freedom. He had wolfed it all alone for two winters. He had avoided the cowboys at the time of the fall roundups, and he had intended to spend this winter down in the pinons with the deer and elk. But his plans had been changed when he killed Burly Martin, who was driving a small bunch of stolen beef cattle off the range. And when a little later Dale Carter had come along, following the stolen steers, Pete had helped him take them to the ranch, by breaking a trail through the drifts. That was how it happened that he had such comfortable quarters all to himself, instead of being sent to the slaughterhouse.

By peeking through a crack between the logs, Pete could see Carter standing in the back door of the house. The scent of the only man who had ever been kind to him thrilled the big steer. He gave forth a low, questioning bawl. Carter walked toward the corral, put his hand through between the logs and pulled Pete's ears.

"What's the trouble, old-timer?" he asked soothingly. "Are you getting spring fever?"

A low rumble in the mighty chest seemed to ask, "What are we hanging around here for? Let's go."

Carter laughed and rubbed the brindle jaws. "You may be right, at that." He turned and called to a tall, slim cowboy, who was standing by the blacksmith shop. "What do you say, Bart, shall we take a chance on an early drive?"

Bart came to stand beside his boss. "I've been ready for a week. The ponies are all shod and r'arin' to go. All we have to do is throw our soogans in the wagon and yell."

"All right, roll 'em out in the morning. We'll camp on Wolf Creek tomorrow night."

The two men turned and walked toward the house, talking. Their attitude and the note of freedom in their voice carried a meaning to Pete. He seemed to sense adventure.

**B**RAZOS MILLER, who rode the rough string for the Circle C, came swaggering from the round corral where the cowboys were still laughing at him having been forced to pull leather. Brazos had been a friend, and some said a partner of Burly Martin, the cattle thief whom Pete had killed the preceding fall. At any rate he had taken a strong dislike to Pete, and lost no opportunity of showing it. Just now Brazos was in a bad temper and looking for someone to take it out



*Pete got his chance for revenge when he cornered Brazos out on the range.*

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on. Pete didn't like the odor of the man's body. He went through the motions of pawing dirt over his back and shook his big horns threateningly.

"Oh, you would, would you?" snarled Brazos, grabbing up a pitchfork and shoving it through a crack. "Well, if you want to fight, take that and that and that."

The tines of the fork sank deep in Pete's neck, raked his shoulder and stung his ribs. He backed off and plunged forward, to be met with a vicious jab square in the face. The steer was furious. His eyes turned green and the dark hair on his neck stood up. He knew the uselessness of trying to break through the log fence, and since there was nothing else he could do, he opened his mouth and cursed Brazos in a series of short, coughing bawls that reached the ears of Carter, who was by this time in the living room.

"Old Pete is sure getting anxious to go, ain't he?" the cowman chuckled.

Bart nodded. "He'll make a great leader, one of the best we ever had."

"I'll tell the world," Carter agreed. "Last fall when I was bringing out that bunch of beef that Burly was rustling from us, he was worth more than two men would have been."

Pete knew nothing of this praise and wouldn't have been impressed by it. All he wanted was a chance to get at the scoundrel who was torturing him. Brazos dared not carry his abuse any farther; some of the cowboys were coming. He set the fork up beside the fence and went into the harness room.

Pete strutted about the corral for an hour. He was still sending forth short, bawling challenges when Bart came out to tell the men to get ready for the drive. As he walked past Pete's corral, the cowboy noticed the pitchfork and picked it up to carry it to the tool house.

"What the hell?" he demanded, as he saw the blood on the tines. He turned back to look at the steer, but at the moment, Pete's attention had been attracted to the other side of the corral and his back was toward the man.

Bart examined the fork carefully, and then instead of putting it on the rack with the others, he hid it under a loose board in the grain room, and went on about his errand, forgetting for the moment the evidence of cruelty he had found.

Next morning all was bustle about the ranch. Pete saw the chuck wagon and extra horses pull out before sunup. He sniffed the air impatiently as the herd began to move across the pasture toward the gate. Carter, himself, let Pete out. The steer trotted on into the open and to the point of the bawling, restless column. He dropped his head low, drinking in the sweet scent of warm moist earth, with great gulping sobs.

These were stock cattle, cows and yearlings, no bulls or old steers among them. Pete had everything his own way, except for two rangy cows that had ideas of leadership. One of these persisted in trying to pass him and take the lead. The other butted him from the rear whenever she got close enough. Pete turned on her and might have hurt her badly, had not Bart interfered by snapping his quirt in the steer's face.

"That'll do, Pathfinder," he warned Pete. "You just keep shoving one hoof ahead of the other and I'll see that these old bossies leave you alone."

Pete dropped into a shuffling trot that kept him well in advance of the herd. Bart turned to Brazos, who happened to be the next man behind him. "It looks like Carter's

judgment about cattle is still good," he remarked. "He thinks Pete is the best leader we ever had."

"That old mossyhorn is so spoiled he thinks he's boss of the ranch and everything on it," Brazos growled. "He made a pass at me yesterday like he wanted to tear the fence down when I walked by the corral."

Bart gave Brazos a long, level look and turned back to his work. Pete twisted his tail and lengthened his stride, making a good three miles per hour.

**A**BOUT ten o'clock they were passing through an aspen forest when Pete came to the first obstacle, a dead tree, eight inches in diameter, that had fallen partially across the trail, one end resting on some bushes that supported it, three feet above the ground. Pete could have jumped it easily, instead he stopped for a moment and glanced back over the long line winding behind him. Then he dropped his horns below the log, settled his great splayed hoofs solidly in the soft ground and lunged. The log broke with a report like a pistol shot. Pete tossed one of the ends aside and walked on. Bart grinned.

"There won't nothing stop that old dogie now," he decided.

A mile farther on, Pete stopped where a spring freshet had cut a deep arroyo across the trail. Apparently the drive would be blocked until the men could make a grade. Bart glanced toward the mountains and saw a place where it would be possible to cross. He turned Pete in that direction. The steer accepted Bart's judgment, and led the way up the edge of the ravine until he saw the way to cross. Twice after that, during the day, Bart was able to help Pete out in friendly fashion,

and without breaking down the animal's confidence in his own instinct to find a trail.

About three o'clock Bart rode up beside Pete and turned him off the trail into a meadow where the young grass was beginning to show. The herd had covered fifteen miles and was glad to call it a day. Not so Pete. He grazed a while, had a drink from a mountain stream, and crossed to the other side where he lay down and rested until after sundown.

The men were moving the cows back onto the bed ground when Pete got up, stretched his long legs, looked off toward the back range. After all, leading a trail herd was rather tame work for a steer who felt himself to be as much a monarch as any bull elk in the mountains. The trail lay clear before him. He was now well fed and rested; why not go?

He had taken only a few steps, however, when Brazos, who happened to be one of the two men on guard, saw him and rode across the creek. Pete eyed the man suspiciously, but if Brazos had merely rode around him, as Bart had done several times that day, the steer would have turned back. Brazos made the mistake of wrapping his shot-loaded quirt around Pete's nose. Instantly Pete was furious.

He charged, head down, and bawled like an enraged lion. The horse, a well-trained cow pony, made a quick jump to one side, barely avoiding the lancelike horns. Pete slid to a stop and whirled back, tossing his head threateningly. Brazos struck another blow, this time with the butt of his quirt. It caught Pete on a sensitive spot just above the ear.

Pete fell to his knees but got up and charged again. He had the

pony cornered now against the high bank of the stream. Brazos jerked out a gun and fired. A bullet imbedded itself in the fleshy part of Pete's neck. Pete had felt the sting of hot lead before and the pain failed to stop him now. Fortunately for the pony, Pete's head was so low that his horns passed beneath the animal's belly, but the horse received the full force of a blow that knocked him over the bank and down into the swiftly running water.

Pete stood on the bank above and watched the man and horse struggling in the water. The gun had been knocked from Brazos' hand or he would certainly have killed the steer now, for Pete was an unprotected target within easy range.

The horse was unhurt by the fall and was on the shore when Brazos waded out, cursing and stamping with rage. Pete watched the man get on the horse and ride off to the herd. Then the steer turned back toward the open range. He felt sick from the pain of his wound, but even more disgusted with men and their ways. So far as Pete was concerned, he was through with them for good.

All night Pete trudged on over ridges through the forest, until he reached the protected rincon where he had first braved the dangers of a mountain winter. Toward morning a shower came up, washing out all traces of the tracks he had made, so that next day, Bart and Carter were unable to find which way he had gone. Brazos, of course, denied any knowledge of the steer, but he secretly believed his shot had gone down through the shoulders to a fatal spot, and was relieved when Bart returned to the herd expressing the opinion that Pete had deserted his job of trail finding.

THE reality of his return to his range home was far different from the dreams Pete had enjoyed while shut up in the corral at the Circle C. It was a cold cloudy morning. He was tired from his twenty-four hours of travel, and his neck hurt. The heavy muscles on his neck had stopped the progress of the bullet, and the lead slug now irritated the sensitive nerves beneath the skin on his shoulder.

The rain, which had fallen heavily enough in the valley to wipe out Pete's tracks, had been only a mist on the higher slopes, so that blood from his wound still clung to the aspen leaves in the thickets through which Pete had plunged. Old Whisperfoot, the mountain lion, who was following the deer herds back to their summer range, caught the scent of fresh blood and stole cautiously behind a rock, twenty yards from where Pete lay resting. If the steer had been perfectly well, Whisperfoot would have taken one look at his size, noted the long, sharp horns and then turned back. Even a killer of Whisperfoot's skill and experience, would not have attacked a full-grown steer at this time of year.

Almost overcome with pain and weariness, Pete lay stretched on the ground. The smell of blood was strong here in the rincon where the air was protected from any breeze. It convinced the lion that he had stumbled onto a badly hurt animal that would be an easy prey. He crouched low and bellied forward stealthily to within distance for an easy spring.

Pete's eyes had been closed, but his ears kept turning like those of an elk. The slight rustling sound caused by the body of the lion dragging over the grass reached him. He opened his eyes drowsily and saw Whisperfoot setting himself for a

spring. Pete whirled over, his hind legs came under him, lifting the back quarters. The front part of his body was yet on the ground when the lion sprang.

Pete's horns deflected the rush of the snarling beast, but one claw raked down across the neck and shoulder of the steer, cutting a clean, knifelike gash. Whisperfoot missed the throat hold he had expected to get, but dodged Pete's first thrust.

Pete was on his feet now, blood streaming from the cut on his shoulder. The taste of it swept all caution from the cowardly lion. He screeched as he rushed forward, sprang high in the air, expecting to light on the back of his prey. Pete sprang back with the speed of a much lighter animal. The lion was unable to stop or change his course and he sailed through the air, directly above Pete's terrible horns.

A quick upward thrust sent the point of a horn into the vitals of the big cat, impaling him there, very much as a butcher bird sticks beetles on a thorn bush. Pete rushed to a nearby tree and crushed his enemy into a pulp before he tossed the lifeless hulk away.

Pete felt better now. He did not know that the gash Whisperfoot had cut in his shoulder had torn the bullet out and perhaps saved his life. He licked the spot until the pain eased somewhat, then went to a nearby spring for a drink.

The sun had scattered the clouds and the birds began to sing. This was more like the sort of a day Pete had expected. He found a patch of wild onions in the soft, black soil below the spring and feasted on them. Then he climbed up a slope and took a good long look at the hills above. The little rincon where he had taken refuge had been spoiled for him by the fight with the lion,

so he hunted up a small mountain park where the grass was good, and here he stayed until the fever was gone from his blood and his wounds healed.

Meanwhile the cows of the Circle C spread over the range. Pete could see them grazing in the valley or lying down in the shade of the trees. Calves played on the sunny slopes. Occasionally the steer saw men riding on the trails, but since the cattle were contented there was not much for the cowboys to do, and none of them took the trouble to follow Pete's big tracks, if they noticed them, which was doubtful.

**T**OWARD fall Pete began to put on weight, as he always did in preparation for the cold weather. His whole body was incased in a sheath of tallow that would enable him to go through the fifty below temperatures of the back range, for the steer had made up his mind to wolf it for the third time.

As the nights grew colder and there was a tang of frost in the air, Pete grew more restless. He ranged farther back from the valley. More riders appeared and cattle began to move down toward the foothills. Pete knew the meaning of this. The fall roundup was on, and unless he wanted to be caught in the drag he had better hide-out. He sought the highest slopes, feeding on the self-cured seed grasses that his system craved. One day he crossed the range and went over to the old cave where he had nearly starved to death one winter. He was surprised to find a large herd of yearlings grazing on the slope that he considered his own private range. Some of them he had seen around the watering troughs of the Circle C; in fact, they were all Circle C cattle.

Pete had no way of knowing that

he had stumbled onto a private cache that Brazos had spent more than three months in building up, whenever the other Circle C riders were away from the summer camp. The only thing that interested Pete was the fact that the grass he had expected to find was cropped short, and his plans for a wintering place ruined.

The yearlings were friendly. They crowded around Pete grunting their satisfaction at having found an older steer that might protect them and guide them to the ranch. Ten minutes after Pete walked down the slope below the cave he was the chosen leader of a hundred head of baby beef that would follow him exactly as a calf follows its mother.

Pete was disgusted. He disliked company and would gladly have given another the job of finding grass and water for his admirers. Yet he didn't want to go back and be rounded up with the herd, so he made the best of it and led the yearlings up the gulch to where the grass had been untouched.

The first snow was light and did little harm, although it forced Carter and his men to push the work of the roundup more rapidly. The day that the last of the cattle reached the ranch, Brazos called for his time. Carter felt relieved to see the man go. He had long suspected Brazos of unnecessary cruelty in breaking colts, and would have fired him if he had known of either of the clashes between the broncbuster and Pete.

Snow was falling when Brazos prepared to leave the Circle C. He had his bedding packed on a second horse. He made camp in the first timber above the ranch, intending to cross the range next day, drive the stolen yearlings south from where he had them cached, and clean

up at the first market he reached.

When the second snowstorm began, Pete decided to cross back to his home side of the range. He started late in the afternoon of the same day that Brazos left the Circle C. The yearlings thought this was fun at first. They romped along behind Pete, staged mock battles, pushed each other around in the snow, and acted very much like any bunch of husky youngsters. But it was no lark to Pete. He knew that the wind would increase as they neared the pass above timberline, and it would take something more than bluff and play to live through the torture of cold and wind-driven ice.

The steer moved slowly, conserving his strength and energy. At the first heavy drift he stopped and sized up the wind-swept ground on both sides of it. One of the yearlings, more venturesome than the others, made a bluff at taking the lead away, and Pete let him do it. The sturdy little whiteface plunged into the deepest part, fought his way a few yards and then bogged down, unable to go on or turn back. Two others that had started to follow him stopped and looked back at Pete, as if asking for advice.

Pete shook his long horns, blinked his eyes and felt his way carefully along a place where he could see the tops of the buck brush sticking through the snow. The yearlings followed, taking the matter more seriously now. The adventuresome one managed to roll over and buck downhill to the path the others had broken. The wind was biting into Pete's face. The intense cold stiffened his muscles, but he merely lowered his head closer to the ground and plodded on patiently. Not once did he look back at the long red and white line behind him.

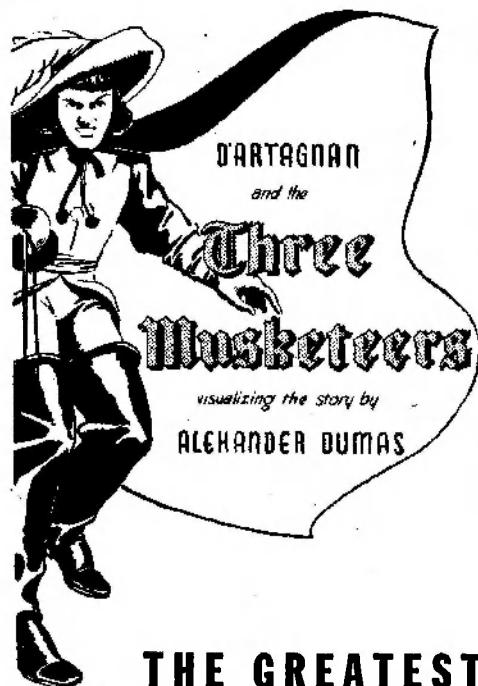
NIGHT had fallen when the herd came to the narrow pass on top of the Continental Divide. The yearlings complained with bawls and shrieks, to which Pete paid not the slightest attention. He simply kept doggedly on, as Bart had once advised him, "Shovin' one hoof in front of the other." He could not see a yard in front of him now, nor was his keen scent of any avail, since no stock had traveled this way for several weeks, and there was no trail to follow.

With only his homing instinct and the experience of past adventures to guide him, the big dun steer carried on a yard at a time. A short stop with his nose close to the frozen ground, while he drew in great gulps of chilled air, then a few steps and another enforced stop.

Behind him crowded the panic-stricken yearlings, too cold now to do anything but struggle to keep up. A terrific blast almost swept Pete off his feet. He dropped to his knees, then stubbornly braced his feet as he got his balance, and threw his weight against the storm. When the wind lulled momentarily, as if to get a fresh hold, Pete took advantage of the respite to gain a few precious yards. He could feel the ground dropping away in front of him now, and knew that he had crossed the highest part and was headed toward the protection of the timber below. The pressure of the wind lessened and the temperature became bearable.

For the first time Pete bawled. It was the long, high-pitched, exultation of a well-earned victory. It carried back along the line and gave courage to the tired yearlings, stirring them to greater effort.

Pete waited until he felt a snow-covered face behind him touch his legs, and then started on. He went



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faster now, encouraged by the lesser cold, which in such extremes seems almost like warmth. An hour later he led the little herd into the protection of a heavy spruce and let them rest in comparative comfort.

During the hour, Pete had fought the storm, Carter and Bart were checking over the tally books at the ranch. Before long they had discovered the shortage.

"I thought it was funny that Brazos should call for his time and pull out in the face of a storm," Bart remarked.

"If he's got a cache somewhere on the other side of the range he'll get away with it," declared Carter, "but we'll try and stop him. Pick three or four of the boys to go with us, and we'll leave at daylight. It will be hell crossing the range, but I can't afford to lose them yearlings."

Bart nodded. "There's something else I haven't told you. Last spring I found a pitchfork with blood on it, standing beside Pete's corral. I hid it and forgot all about it until tonight when I needed a board to fix a feed box. When I picked it up, there was the fork. It made me remember somethin' that happened the first day we were on the trail. I was braggin' on Pete as a trail leader, and Brazos told me about Pete having showed fight at him the day before. I've always been suspicious that Brazos knew more about what became of Pete than he let on. He may have killed him."

**S**HORTLY after daylight Pete moved out from under the trees. The wind had died down. It was much warmer, although snow still fell heavily. At first the yearlings hesitated to leave the shelter of the trees, but when they saw Pete going they were afraid to lose sight of him and followed at a trot.

An hour later Pete smelled the

smoke of a campfire. He stopped behind a tree and peered through the storm. He saw a man throwing a canvas cover on a pack. The scent was stronger now, and it brought back memories of the torture Pete had suffered in the corral, of the day he had been shot, and of his fight with Whisperfoot. Hot rage seethed up within him. He walked forward a step or two, shaking his horns. Then, with a deep rumbling bellow, he charged.

Brazos was caught flat-footed. His gun hung on the horn of his saddle, twenty feet away. He started toward it, saw it was too late, and, grabbing the branches of a tree, swung his body up as one of Pete's horns caught his overalls and ripped them from his body. Pete turned back, pawing the ground and bellow-

ing like an angry bull. The yearlings formed a ring about the camp, puzzled at the strange sights and smells. This was the scene as Dale Carter and his men saw it when they rode in.

Brazos was almost frozen with fear as well as cold. He admitted his guilt and told of his attempt to kill Pete. Carter dismounted and put one arm about the neck of his pet; who seemed glad to see him.

"If it was just stealing cattle," Carter said sternly, "I'd think that perhaps you'd suffered enough, seeing that I got all the calves back, but for sticking a pitchfork in this steer and shooting him, you'll get all the law will stand, which will be plenty. Come on, Pete, you've got a good feed comin' for this day's work."

THE END

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## RUSTLERS

CATTLE rustling goes on today more effectually, although in a less picturesque setting than it did in the '70s. Last fall the Cattlemen's Association meeting in a western city took measures to resort to the "old law" of the range, in order to protect their herds from the depredations of cattle thieves whose robberies amounted to nearly a million dollars within twelve months.

Brand blotting, changing earmarks or driving herds from one range to another, has given way to another kind of rustling carried on by small groups of men who know very little about the ancient methods. In fact, most of them would feel more at home in the hide-outs of a city gang than in a Western saddle. The modern rustlers locate a bunch of fat steers, usually on some isolated part of range or pasture. A movable corral is set up under cover of darkness, and the required number of cattle are driven into it. There is very little noise or disturbance. The cattle are accustomed to seeing men on foot, and can be handled easily. At a signal from the two men at the corral, the driver backs a truck up to the gate. A ramp on rubber rollers is silently run out and braced to the ground. Up this the cattle are driven until the specially constructed truck is loaded to its capacity; then the corral is taken down and placed in another truck, covered with canvas. The only evidence the owner finds next day is the marks of the wheels and the loss of several hundred dollars' worth of prime beef.



We get taken to task every so often by you older readers of the Hollow Tree because we seem to cater to the young folks and leave you out in the cold. We try to cover all age ranges in each department, and more often than not succeed. So to start the ball rolling this week we'll begin with a letter from Karl Ellington, an older member, who has this to say:

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have slipped into the old-age-pension years and have plenty of time for reading and writing. I would like to get letters from readers of the Hollow Tree who are interested in prospects in the State of Washington. I live all alone, so need some Pen Pals for company. If any of you younger Pals would like to know how to build a good home cheaply with rammed earth (not sod or adobe), I can tell you how it's done because I have lived in a house built that way. I like to hear from those who love nature and music. I play the violin, piano and pipe organ. I will answer all who write.—Karl J. Ellington, 3429 Fremont Avenue, Seattle, Washington

#### **Keep the cobwebs away from Pearl's mailbox—**

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am forty years old and would like some true-blue Pen Pals from everywhere. Writing letters is a hobby of mine, so come on, all, and drop me a line so my post-office box will not get cobwebs.—Pearl Fulcher, Box 285, Pomona, North Carolina

#### **Irene wants information on Irish folk lore—**

Dear Miss Rivers:

You got me some Pen Pals once before, and now I'm back again. This time I would like to have some who can tell me stories about Ireland and give me the words of Irish songs. I know only a few Irish songs and have read some stories about the fairies and elves of Ireland. Some of my ancestors were Scotch-Irish

and to this I attribute my enchantment with and love of Irish folk tales, stories and songs. Won't some one write and help me out?—Irene Fish, Box 40, Temple, New Hampshire

#### **Write to Floyd—**

Dear Miss Rivers:

I'm a lonely marine who craves Pen Pals, so help me out of this sea of loneliness by getting me a raft of letters. I'll answer all who write—whether they're nine or ninety!—Floyd A. Reid, Box 13, Station A, Toledo, Ohio

#### **Ethel likes the outdoors—**

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am seventeen years old and would like to correspond with Pen Pals of any age from all over the world. I like to dance, skate, ride horseback and enjoy all other outdoor sports. I have two hobbies, collecting match folders and small elephants. I'll answer all letters sent to me.—Ethel Sanetel, Rt. No. 3, Box 261, Oregon City, Oregon

#### **Lots of mail wanted here—**

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am twenty-one years old and I'd love to hear from all boys and girls around my age. I enjoy sending and receiving letters, so don't forget to send me plenty of mail. I would especially like to hear from those living in the United States, but all countries will be welcomed. I promise to exchange snapshots and answer all questions concerning the country in which I live. I enjoy dancing, hiking, swimming, music and movies.—Elmer Gallant, 469 Barrington Street, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.

#### **The Three Mesquiteers have a surprise for you—**

Dear Miss Rivers:

We want to make one more attempt to cut our initials in the old Hollow Tree. We are three lonely CCC boys, known as the "Three Mesquiteers" and we would like to have Pen

Pals between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three. We are twenty-one years of age and prefer to correspond with boys and girls from the Western States. We'll be glad to exchange snapshots with anyone who writes to us. Surprises will be awarded the first ten who write.—The Three Mesquiteers, Camp SCS-5-N, Espanola, New Mexico

### *Elinor is fun-loving—*

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a young girl sixteen years old and my hobby is collecting picture post cards and snapshots, which I'm willing to exchange with anyone. I like fun, so come on, everyone, and please write to me. I'll answer you all.—Elinor Thomas, Bowhay Hill, Stony Creek, Connecticut

### *Ivan will tell you about his travels—*

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am wondering whether or not it is possible for me to crash your column. I am thirty-two years old and have traveled a good deal through the United States and can tell lots of stories about my experiences. Sure hope I get some letters and I will exchange snapshots, so let's go, Pals!—Ivan Yowler, 30 Union Street, Uniontown, Pennsylvania

### *Learn all about South Africa from Sylvia—*

Dear Miss Rivers:

Here's greetings from a lonely girl in South Africa who's sending out a plea for Pen Pals from far and wide. I was born here in the land of sunshine and beauty and can tell you all about it, but I am also anxious to learn about other countries. Come on, Pals, and tell me about your home town and I will tell you about mine. Writing is my favorite pastime. Who'll be the first to write to me?—Sylvia Tozer, Municipal Abattoir, East London, South Africa

### *Interesting letters promised here—*

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a lonely soldier doing a two-year tour of duty here in the Philippines. I am twenty-two years old and would like to hear from Pals between twenty and twenty-five. My hobby is collecting snapshots, and I enjoy riding, swimming and ballroom dancing. I will gladly send snapshots of Manila to the first twelve who write to me, so come on, all you pen slingers who are interested in the Orient—I promise to be a very interesting Pen Pal.—Pfc. Raymond Radzinski, Military Police Det., Post of Manila, Manila, Philippine Islands

### *Bonnie wants Pals from everywhere—*

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have been reading the Hollow Tree for a long time and thought I'd enjoy writing to unknown friends. I promise to answer all who write and will exchange snapshots with all who want to. I want to hear from boys and girls from everywhere between the ages of sixteen to twenty-one. Come on, girls, and drop me a line.—Bonnie Haddock, R. F. D. No. 1, Box 77, Hilliard, Florida

### *Al is interested in music—*

Dear Miss Rivers:

I would like to hear from Pen Pals in the United States. I am twenty-five years old and

am interested in sports, dancing and music. I led the dance band when in college and traveled through many States during my summer vacations. I am now teaching music in a small Dakota town and get lonesome at times. Please fill my mailbox. I'll exchange photos.—Al Arends, Box 131, Bruce, South Dakota

### *This Pal collects interesting things—*

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am thirty-four years old and have been a widow for three years. I have a four-year-old daughter and, although I work and she is in a day nursery all day, we do have some time together. I am very interested in collections. I have started a doll, teaspoon and teacup collection for my little girl, and a stamp collection for myself. I am vitally interested in nature and enjoy watching things grow and observing animals. I enjoy reading and writing letters and hope to hear from many members of the Tree. Elizabeth Cromwell, 1454 Delta Street, Rosemead, California

### *From bonnie Scotland comes this plea—*

Dear Miss Rivers:

I would be very pleased if you could find me some Pen Pals in any part of the world. I am interested in all sports and my favorite indoor hobbies are collecting scenic photographs and foreign stamps. I promise to answer all letters.—John Hempink, 42 Henrietta Street, Kilmarnock, Ayrshire, Scotland

### *Shirley needs reassurance—*

Dear Miss Rivers:

Please publish my request for Pen Pals. Too many of the ones I have written to don't keep their promises. I have two Pals so far, but want more. I am sixteen years old, and my favorite hobby is collecting postmarks. I would especially like to hear from Pals in Arizona, Arkansas, Mississippi, New Mexico, Oregon, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, West Virginia and Wyoming, and all foreign countries. Everyone is welcome, even though you don't live in the States I've mentioned. Come on and make my mailman get to work. I promise to answer all letters and exchange snaps.—Shirley Wilson, Dunbarton, New Hampshire

### *Cowgirls and cowboys write to Austin—*

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am nineteen years old and have been a reader of Western Story for a long time. Now, I would like to join the Hollow Tree and make some Pen Pals from all over the world. I would especially like to hear from cowboys and cowgirls because I, too, am interested in cattle raising. So come on, young and old, I promise to answer all the letters I receive.—Austin Smith, Rt. No. 3, Meridian, Mississippi

### *Helen is happy-go-lucky—*

Dear Miss Rivers:

Can a happy red-headed girl of twenty-two years squeeze into your corner? I like dancing, horses and collecting stamps. I've loads of time to write to you all, so please answer this plea.—Helen Ebert, 107-16 122nd Street, Richmond Hill, Long Island, New York

### **Donald will tell you about life on a farm—**

Dear Miss Rivers:

I would like correspondents from all over the world to write to me. I live on a farm in central Iowa and I can tell anybody all about farm life. My main hobbies are collecting stamps and writing letters. I am sixteen years old and will answer all letters.—Donald West, Rt. No. 1, Box 130, Dunkerton, Iowa

### **Dorothea can tell you about Hollywood—**

Dear Miss Rivers:

Got room for one more Hollow Treelet? Do say yes! I'm huntin' for Pals twenty-five and up. Was born and raised in New York 'long the Great White Way—but my favorite stampin' ground now is Hollywood. As soon as those letters start breezin' in, I'll dust off my trusty portable and bang out replies pronto—that's a promise! Here's a gal who can give you some first-hand information on many a star, having had a fling at being a star's secretary. Travel has been my main dish, too, and I can spill many a yarn about some of my adventures, so c'mon and write! It only takes a piece of paper, an envelope, a stamp and some ink. Satisfaction guaranteed.—Dorothea M. Hulse, c/o Babineau, 3908 Budlong Avenue, Los Angeles, California

### **Cal sounds like a real man's man—**

Dear Miss Rivers:

I would like to hear from Pen Pals, especially those living in the West, but others far and near are also invited to write. I am interested in geology, and so collecting rocks is one of my hobbies. My other hobby is collecting coins. I like to hunt, fish and camp out in the woods where I can get away from the hum of civilization for a while. I am thirty-one years old and sometime in the near future I hope to have a log cabin by a lake or river in one of the Western States. Now, Pals, write to me before you put that Western Story of yours aside. You're all welcome, so let me hear from you.—Cal Baker, Rt. No. 2, Joy, Illinois

### **Margo will be an interesting Pal—**

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a twenty-year-old girl living with a Swedish family in England and I would like to have some Pen Pals in Mexico, Alaska and the United States. I am learning to talk Swedish and can also speak a little German. I am interested in stamp collecting and the geography and history of countries. I will try to answer all letters. About five years ago, with your help, I started corresponding with a girl and we have exchanged letters regularly since then.—Margo Hardie, Station Road, "Albert Villa," Broxbourne, Herts., England

### **A partner wanted here—**

Dear Miss Rivers:

It has been quite a number of years since I have written to the Hollow Tree, but here I am again. I have a two-hundred-acre woodland park located in an excellent industrial district approximately thirty-two miles from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I am looking for one or more partners to help develop this ground into an amusement park. This ground is traversed by improved highways, has electric power and natural gas lines. Partners must be congenial, self-reliant and have sufficient finances to help equip

and develop a year-round amusement park. They must have experience with handling large crowds and arranging year-round programs of amusement. All parties desiring to become partners write me.—D. B. Altman, R. F. D. No. 1, Box 9-B, Vandergrift, Pennsylvania

### **See that you don't overlook Eve—**

Dear Miss Rivers:

May I please join this band of happy Hollow Tree members? I am in my late thirties and collect matchbook covers, postmarks and home-town newspapers, and I will exchange them with anyone. I will answer all, if possible, and will send snapshots of myself to the first hundred who write.—Eve Sharkey, Rt. No. 1, Edmore, Michigan

### **This marine will tell you all about the Orient—**

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a member of the United States marine corps and have just returned from the Orient after two years' service there. I am twenty-two years old and am fond of all sports, especially tennis and jai-alai, a sport seldom played in this country. I would be delighted to explain this and many more unusual things about the Orient if all those interested will ask me about them. So come one, come all, and write to me. I'll be only too glad to exchange snaps and I'll answer all letters as soon as I receive them.—Pfc. Philip G. Freese, Marine Detach., Naval Amm. Depot, Mare Island, California

### **Kentucky is represented this week—**

Dear Miss Rivers:

Please print my letter in the Hollow Tree. I am nineteen years old and like all kinds of sports and music. Have lots of time to write, and would like to hear from boys and girls from all over the United States. So come on, all you Pen Pals, and fill my mailbox. I'll be waiting to hear from you all.—Mary Helen McGovern, 1319 Shingo Avenue, Louisville, Kentucky

### **Here's a Cuban Pal for you—**

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a Cuban, twenty-four years old, and am very anxious to make friends with some North Americans. I can answer letters in English and Spanish and will tell my friends anything about Cuba. I would like to exchange post cards, maps, and write about customs, dance music, games and anything else concerning my country. Hope I am lucky enough to get some Pen Pals.—Luis Moran, San Carlos No. 102, Santiago de Cuba, Cuba

### **Another partner wanted here—**

Dear Miss Rivers:

Calling all readers of Western Story. A man fifty years old wants a partner with a car for a prospecting trip in Arizona or California. Will try to kill two birds with one stone—find gold and aid my health. Like to start about July 1st. Was out West in the good old days and can tell plenty about my experiences out there and also down South. Will try to answer all cards or letters according to my budget.—Robert R. Glenn, 121½ West Main Street, St. Charles, Illinois



# Guns and Gunners

By PHIL SHARPE

YEARS ago when I was just a lad, I used to get into a great deal of trouble. People would tell me not to do something and that meant I ought to at least give it a trial.

I never got over that bad habit. Today when I'm told not to do something, I frequently try it. Most people are like that. I assume, therefore, that it disturbs many of our good friends greatly when they are advised not to shoot such and such a gun with such and such ammunition. However, this is not a "Don't Do It Department." I merely want to give you my personal reasons concerning the shooting of ammunition in certain kinds of guns.

I have seen a great deal of progress made in the firearms industry during the past twenty years, and particularly during the past ten years. There has been more practical mechanical, physical, and chem-

ical development in industry in these past ten years than in the previous twenty-five, particularly with regard to the firearms field.

What, you may wonder, does chemistry have to do with your gun?

Well, chemistry and metallurgy are very definite manufacturing problems. Chemistry and metallurgy are quite closely related. There are sometimes as many as fifteen different kinds of steel used in one gun. Each metal has entirely different properties and each serves its own particular purpose quite admirably. Thirty years ago guns were made of steel and that was that. Steel was steel. Today, there are thousands of different kinds of steel and steel alloys and each has its

The following list of literature is available to our readers: **STRAIGHT SHOOTING, SNAP SHOOTING, WINCHESTER AMMUNITION HANDBOOK, SAVAGE, STEVENS, FOX, COLT, SMITH & WESSON, HARRINGTON & RICHARDSON**, 3c each; **MOSSBERG, MARLIN**, 2c each; **WESTERN AMMUNITION HANDBOOK**, 5c; **REMINGTON ARMS AND AMMUNITION**, 6c; and a large three-pound bundle of assorted catalogs, 30c each and 38c west of Chicago. None can be sent to Canada. Postage stamps are accepted.

own peculiar properties.

Each gun manufacturer selects the type of steel he wants to use for barrels, another type for screws, bolts, and pins, still another type for trigger mechanisms, particularly the wearing points. Other types form springs; still another receivers, frames, and other materials form the small parts. Few gun makers manufacture their steel—as a matter of fact, none of them do—but they know exactly what they want and their chemists and metallurgists order by formula.

When the crude stock arrives at the factory, samples are sent in to their own private laboratories for tests to see if the material measures up to their standards. If not, the batch is rejected and sent back to the steel maker. Then comes the long tedious process of fabricating a gun. Machines in a factory turn out hundreds of small parts in an hour. Hundreds of different manufacturing operations are required to produce each gun.

In the chemical laboratory of the factories making ammunition, all brass, copper, nickel, and other metals are given careful examination. Throughout the manufacturing stages, samples of ammunition are withdrawn and sent into the laboratory. It's a complicated procedure, but American ammunition is the best in the world, and American methods are what made it so. It costs the factory more money to inspect ammunition than it does to actually manufacture it. To make

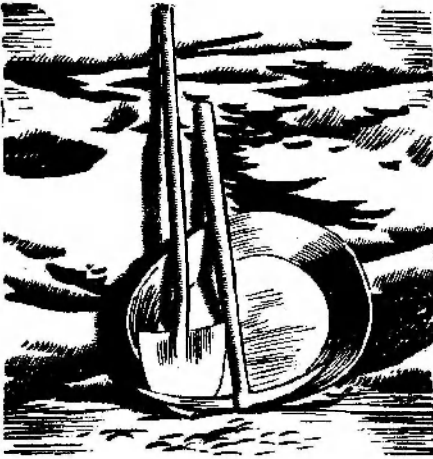
a centerfire cartridge there are over one hundred inspectors, both visual and laboratory. Samples are withdrawn continuously from the final loading machine and shot in velocity, pressure, and accuracy tests.

This has, of course, produced high-grade guns and more powerful ammunition. Ancient powders developing soft, easy pressure have given way to modern powders with a quick, sharp pressure which gives higher velocities, more power, and better final performance. It is unwise, therefore, to shoot this modern ammunition in ancient guns, if the ancient guns were not made to hold it.

Many of these old-time guns, particularly those designed for black powder are extremely unsafe for use with smokeless powders. The performance of the powder, the pressures, and everything else is entirely different. I wouldn't use it myself because I value my health. I've seen guns blow up. The risk just isn't worth it.

There's no objection to buying a used gun if that gun is in good condition and if the maker is still in existence. But before buying, it's best to check up on the matter. A gun which had no manufacturer's name or address stamped on it would indicate to me immediately that the gun was of inferior quality. Summed up, I wouldn't expect any gun manufacturer to supply me with suitable ammunition for a rifle or shotgun manufactured in 1875. It's just a bit unfair to him.

This department has been designed to be of practical service to those who are interested in guns. Mr. Sharpe will gladly answer any question you may have concerning firearms. Just address your inquiries to Phil Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Be sure you inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.



## Mines and Mining

By J. A. THOMPSON

A GREAT many readers have been asking lately about what they should take along on a prospecting trip in the Southwest; what else, that is, besides hope, courage, and determination to succeed in the free and independent outdoor life of the gold hunter.

To start with, the best we can do is tabulate the necessities. Anything more is apt to be a burden, even if you feel you have room for it in the car. As a matter of fact, as far as clothing is concerned no set rules can be laid down. The matter is one of personal preference, sometimes one of space available, and often one of economy.

There is one exception. Good boots are essential; either high-cut ones or simply stout, hob-nailed work shoes. And there should be an adequate supply of socks. Woolen socks help prevent blisters and make for additional foot comfort.

Aside from the boot question, we have seen prospectors in overalls, or cheap pants and undershirt getting along just as well and maybe better than some fellow all togged out in a store-bought outfit that somebody back East told him was what the well-dressed prospectors were wearing that year. Remember you are going out to hunt gold and dig it out of the ground when you find it, not to get in the movies.

Now coming to the matter of head gear. Pith or cork helmets such as are becoming popular with farmers, who operate tractors under the blazing sun of the Midwest, are gaining favor among many prospectors in the desert and semiarid mineralized regions of the Southwest. Others stick to a light hat with a broad enough brim to afford protection from the direct glare of the sun.

Also if you are going to be up in the higher mountain altitude, and the chances are that sooner or later you will, be sure and have along, besides a warm shirt for cold weather, a good sweater or leather jacket as comfort insurance against chill evenings and brisk early morning hours.

If you are placer prospecting along creeks and streams with water in them, rather than in dry arroyos, a pair of rubber boots is virtually essential. And don't forget a good first-aid kit complete with gauze, bandages and iodine or mercury.

For placer prospecting tools you will want a pick, a long-handled, round-pointed shovel, a gold pan per person and a good magnifying glass. Also, for breaking off likely looking chunks of rock ledge or vein matter and pan testing the same for free gold, a geologist's or prospector's hammer and a small iron mortar and pestle ought to be added. None of these items is individually expensive.

They probably cost roughly around one dollar and fifty cents each, and can be obtained locally in mining supply and hardware stores in towns in any gold-mining area. A steel tape measure and compass is helpful in staking claims and correctly designating corner posts.

In the general tool line a good chopping ax, hammer, saw and a few pounds of assorted nails, a good pocketknife, flashlight, and a spare set of batteries are all extremely useful. If you land at a spot where you can reach camp by car, a Dietz lantern and five-gallon can of kerosene will do for night lighting. Rope—about a fifty-foot coil of one-half-inch manila—is another mighty handy item. If you are prospecting where water is apt to be scarce, a two-quart canteen with shoulder strap for day trips away from camp ought to be included. For camp use, itself, in desert sectors where it is a haul to water, a ten-gallon water keg will save a lot of trips to the spring or nearest source of supply.

The camp outfit should consist of tent, insect and rodent-proof box for storing food, blanket roll, and canvas duffel bag (the handiest method of packing camp clothing, personal extras, et cetera). A folding cot is fine, if you are using an auto for transportation and have room to stow it. After all, a good night's sleep makes for better work in the daytime, and a happier, more contented outdoor life.

Plenty of good cooking for a two or three-man outfit can be accomplished with the following skeleton list of utensils: frying pan, coffeepot, two stew pans (one large, one smaller), and a Dutch oven. And don't forget a good can opener. Or a water pail, butcher knife, dish towel or two, and a knife, fork, spoon, plate, and a cup for each man. A few extra come in handy. Aluminum or enamelware utensils the most serviceable.

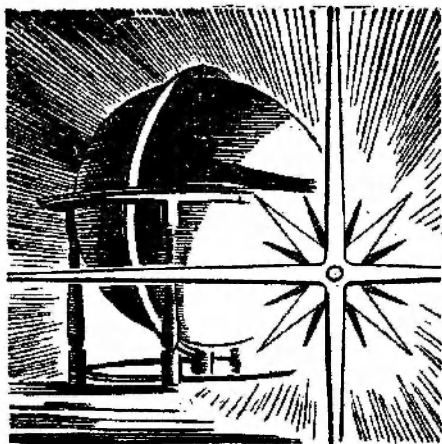
In arid, timber-scarce country take along your own tent pins of the steel variety. Then you have them with you at all times, and are not dependent on finding suitable wood out of which to make tent pegs, when perhaps such wood is not available. Last of all, don't forget an adequate supply of matches, soap, hand towels, and razor blades.

The above lists and suggestions are general only and cover roughly the most essential items for a camping-out, gold-placer prospecting trip in the Southwest. Local conditions, roads, distance from nearest town, length of time you intend to stay, grubstake available, and method of transportation, all are factors that will affect the need or lack of need for some of the items mentioned.

To Jeff K., Flint, Michigan: Any citizen of the United States, man or woman even a child (a legal minor) may make valid gold-placer claim location in Arizona.

• We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.



# Where to go and how to get there

By JOHN NORTH

INCLUDE a compass in your "must-have" list of things to take along on any extended outdoor trip, particularly into country with which you are not intimately familiar. A compass is one of the things that you *may* not need to use much. But when you do need it, you need it badly.

Granted that trails are usually blazed, and roads well marked, that the sun by day and stars by night are capable of giving a man who can read them his general bearings. But what about rainy days, or cloudy nights? What about those hundred and one times you find yourself attempting to cross unknown, heavily forested country that is fairly level and too dense to permit you to see very far ahead.

Now and then you may get a glimpse of sun filtering through the treetops, but more than

likely you will be in deep shade most of the time and unable to reach a spot where you can get a good view of any sizable segment of sky or of the general lay of the land through which you are traveling. A compass is mighty comforting, even to skilled woodsmen under such circumstances. Don't ever be afraid of being classed as an amateur and a novice because you had the sense to include one in your camp equipment.

As a matter of fact, the reverse is more apt to be true. It is the amateur who *thinks* he is smart enough to do without a compass.

This applies to travel in the desert country and arid mountains of the Southwest as well as to forested miles of "big timber." Narrow box canyons, deep arroyos, all looking very much alike, turning and twisting in various directions can prove almost as confusing after a day spent in them as a straight trek through dense woods.

That is why we don't find anything the least bit foolish in J. L.'s recent letter. From St. Louis, Missouri, he wrote: "Maybe this question will sound foolish to you, but should a fellow really take along a compass on a trip to the backwoods country of northern British Columbia? We plan to be gone a long time and to hunt and maybe trap a little while there. Can't a person rely on the sun and stars for finding his directions? Isn't that what the experienced woodsmen do?"

J. L., whether the trip is for pleasure, profit or both, take along a compass. Your last statement is only partly correct. It is true that those who know how to read them can rely on the sun and stars, but usually they only do so in a pinch. It is the sort of knowledge that comes in awfully handy in case a man gets lost and has to use it. But it is not

a substitute for the more sensible, more accurate and satisfactory foresight of having a compass to go by in the first place.

The usual camper's compass (get one with a closed, or hunting type case, not an open-faced one) is only about as large as a watch and not expensive. Here are a few hints about using it.

In the first place remember it is the blue, or blackened end of the needle that always points north. To make sure you don't forget it, a good idea is to scratch a BN onto the back of the case with your knife.

When you are using the compass always bear in mind the fact that the magnetized needle is highly sensitive. The local attraction of any, even small mass of iron or metal may throw the needle out of kilter. So if you are carrying a gun, an ax or such, put it down, and stand a few paces from it when you sight your compass. You can sight it either in your hand or on the ground—or both to check and make sure there is nothing in your pockets or about your person, a knife, for instance, that is deflecting the compass needle. In fact, even when the compass is not in use, it's best not to keep it near iron.

Here is something else about a compass that is quite obvious when pointed out, but surprisingly overlooked by a great many campers, both novices and those who should know better, and would if they stopped to think about it. *A compass can't tell you which way your*

*camp is if you are lost.* But it will do this for you.

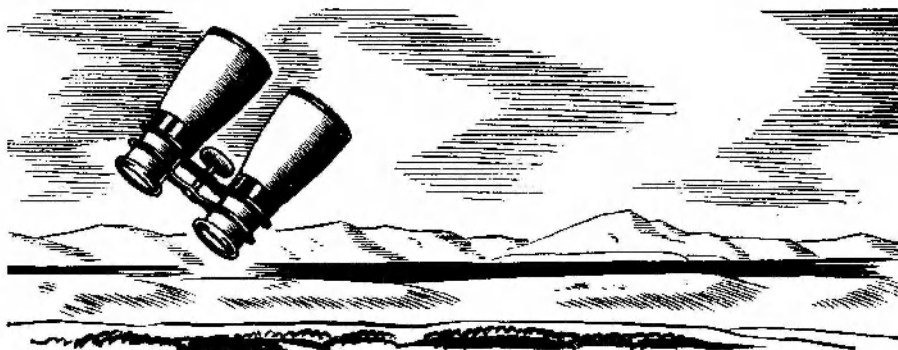
When you first set up camp use the compass to take the directional bearings from it to any prominent, visible or readily identifiable landmark—mountain peaks, stream confluences, lake promontories, and so forth. Then if you take a piece of paper and write down on it the general compass directions from these places back to camp, and keep that paper with you, you have some mighty handy and important information, if you should at any time get lost, or be far from camp when night falls. All you need to do is locate one of the prominent previously noted landmarks. From there on back to home base is a simple matter of following the compass direction written down. If you have drawn a rough map, so much the better.

Some people can remember such things as general compass bearings. But when a man is lost, or thinks he is, his mind will play strange tricks on him. Even the best of memories may become confused.

To K. M., of Duluth, Minnesota: Don't worry too much about tarantulas in the desert regions of the Southwest. They are ugly brutes, but big enough to be readily seen and avoided, and in spite of what you have heard, they are not so apt to bite as is usually believed. Even if they do, a tarantula bite is neither too painful nor is it very dangerous.

● We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.



## Missing Department

**MCCARTY, CECIL**—He is my son and has been missing since September, 1939. He is seventeen years old, five feet tall, and has black eyes and dark hair. "Cecil, if you see this, please let your mother know where you are." Or if anyone knows his whereabouts, please get in touch with me.—Mrs. Ossie Tindall, Rt. No. 1, Box 501, Dallas, Texas.

**DALE, JAMES**—He is my son and was last seen in Los Angeles in March, 1937. He was supposed to have gone to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the same year. He is twenty-seven years old, has red curly hair and brown eyes. He is about five feet eleven inches tall. Any news of him would relieve the terrible suspense I am under. If anyone knows his whereabouts, please get in touch with me.—Mrs. N. DeMarcus, Box 522, Cheyenne, Wyoming.

**NOTICE**—About fifty years ago my mother married Dr. Lewis Smith, a dentist with his practice in Flushing, New York. He had a brother by the name of William Dick Smith who lived in New York City. I have lost all trace of the family and their descendants. If anyone can give me any information about them, I would appreciate it.—Austin Buckley, R. D. No. 1, Pulkaski, Pennsylvania.

**MEIER, JAMES GILBERT**—He is my brother and has been missing for two years. He is sixty years old, has gray hair, blue eyes, dark complexion, and walks with a slight limp. He has always lived on a farm and might be doing farm work now. If anyone knows his whereabouts, please notify me.—Mrs. Frank Ray, 401½ West 7th, Sioux City, Iowa.

**CROW, WILLIAM ROBERT**—He is sixty years old and an electrical engineer by trade. When last heard from in 1919 he was living in Galveston, Texas, and had married a Mrs. Anna Franks. He had one stepson named Leroy Franks. Any information regarding his whereabouts would be greatly appreciated and would ease the heartache of his eighty-year-old mother.—Mrs. Victoria Barker, Rt. No. 2, Sheldon, Missouri.

**NOTICE**—About 1893 Daniel E. Johnson moved from Burlington, Iowa, to Kansas City, Missouri, and started a coal and wood yard on Fourteenth Street. He married again and had two daughters, my half-sisters. If still living, I wish to hear from them.—W. Clark Johnson, 1755 Ellis Street, San Francisco, California.

**LOUCKS, GLENN**—He is my brother and was last heard from in 1926. At that time he was in Syracuse, New York, learning to become a shoemaker. He is twenty-eight years old. Our mother and father are both dead. If anyone knows his whereabouts or has any information concerning relatives of my mother or father, I would appreciate hearing from them.—Mrs. B. R. Russell, Rt. No. 1, Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

- There is no charge for the insertion of requests for information concerning missing relatives or friends.

While it will be better to use your name in the notices, we will print your request "blind" if you prefer. In sending "blind" notices, you must, of course, give us your right name and address, so that we can forward promptly any letters that may come for you. We reserve the right to reject any notice that seems to us unsuitable. Because "copy" for a magazine must go to the printer long in advance of publication, don't expect to see your notice till a considerable time after you send it.

If it can be avoided, please do not send a "General Delivery" postoffice address, for experience has proved that those persons who are not specific as to address often have mail that we send them returned to us marked "not found." It would be well, also, to notify us of any change in your address.

**WARNING**—Do not forward money to anyone who sends you a letter or telegram, asking for money "to get home," et cetera, until you are absolutely certain that the author of such telegram or letter is the person you are seeking.

Address all your communications to Missing Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

# South to Gondra



**BY W. RYERSON  
JOHNSON**

**Part Three**

## *The Story So Far:*

Roy Lanterman and Red Haw, United States deputy marshals, receive a telegram from the attorney general's office informing them that they are to track down a border guerrilla bandit known as "El Lagarto"—the Lizard.

An unsuccessful attempt is made to kill the two deputies in an El Paso saloon. They track down the two would-be assassins and force them to disclose that the Lizard is holding a meeting that night in an abandoned warehouse.

The two deputies conceal themselves in

the warehouse and hear the Lizard talking over a deal with an American who is apparently acting for a group of men who are trying to promote a revolution in Mexico. There are stores of guns and ammunition in the warehouse which are to be smuggled across the border for the Lizard. The presence of Roy and Red is discovered and they are in a tight spot until they start a fire in the ammunition. Under cover of the fire, they escape.

Told to contact Gregor Duncan, a man from the attorney general's office, they take the stage to Albuquerque. On the stage they discover that Helen Blane, whose father owns a ranch near the border, is on the Lizard's death list. They also capture one of the Lizard's spies traveling on the stage.

After a short conversation with Gregor Duncan, Roy and Red realize that the man is an impostor. Roy reaches for his gun, but Duncan tells him it is unloaded.

## CHAPTER X

### HORSESHOES CALL THE TURN

If the man, who called himself Gregor Duncan, expected to see the two Federal agents lose their nerve, he was disappointed.

"No more bullets?" Roy repeated slowly. "This great trust which you say the government puts in me would be uncommon misplaced if I fell for one as old as that. You'd like me to flash a glance at my gun, wouldn't you? That would give you an outside chance to draw yours. No, thanks, Duncan. I'm playin' the cards without lookin'!"

"You've got good nerves," Gregor Duncan complimented. "You're going to need them." His head nodded to indicate Red Haw. "As your red-headed friend so graphically put it, you got as many guns hung on us as we have on you. It's a stand-off. But we can afford to wait. I have friends expected in almost any minute now."

"Any minute isn't soon enough," Roy said. "When Red stepped to the door a while ago what do you

think he was looking for? He gave the sign to our man downstairs who was waiting."

In the battle of nerves, it was Gregor Duncan who broke first. He nodded stiffly. "What you say is logical. It may be true. Acting on that supposition, I propose to back away, leaving this room by the door which gives on the back stairway. You"—he waved his hand at Roy—"can kill me, of course. But if you do, my friend will kill your friend. And quite possibly yourself. Don't be deceived by his appearance. He looks mild as a rabbit, but I doubt if there is a more deadly gunner in the West."

"Don't let him get away with it, Roy," Red clipped. "I'll take my chances."

"What chances?" Roy said harshly. "With Deep Lift behind you, and your gun in holster—what chances? When it comes to swappin' your life for Duncan's, I throw in my cards. Duncan can take his walk."

"And close followin', I take mine," the Deep Lift gunner reminded. His voice wasn't mild now. It was a malignant snarl. "And I take the redhead with me all the way to the bottom of the stairs. And if anybody tries to stop me, the redhead gets it—close off the muzzle!"

With Roy's gun still holding on him, Gregor Duncan started backing away. A sardonic light fired the gray of his eyes. "A good general," he said, "knows when to retreat. If you boys are as good as the government thinks you are, we'll all live to meet again."

Roy said nothing, merely held his aim and his eyes on Gregor Duncan. But the instant the man had disappeared through the door he shifted his glance to include Red and the Deep Lift gunner. Shifted his gun,

too. But he couldn't do any good with it. That was because Red, himself, had done some shifting.

What he had done was to swing suddenly on his heel, ramming his elbow back. His elbow slammed up against the gun that was so closely covering him from behind, deflecting the long barrel for a split second.

In that same split second, continuing the heel swing, he brought his other arm around in a short upward arc. He put his shoulder into the swing, and his fist landed with a sharp *thup* against the side of the Deep Lift man's face.

It wasn't a knock-out blow. Red hadn't had the opportunity to place it well enough for that. But it was powerful enough to rock the Deep Lift gunner back on his heels.

**B**Y that time Roy was closing in. He could have used his gun. But the man was too valuable for killing. From what they knew of Gregor Duncan, he was close to the top in this criminal ring which counted men's blood as nothing against trade concessions. Gregor Duncan was close to the top. And this rabbit-faced gunner was close to Duncan. He would know plenty and he could be made to talk. He was too valuable for killing.

After Red had taken the wild chance and made the opening, there was nothing to it at all. The two of them ganged on the gunner before he could throw anything but one wild shot. They knocked the gun from his hand, hurtled him with them to the floor. They had him secure and intact for questioning.

Then the second shot banged echoes around the room. The shot came from the door through which Gregor Duncan had vanished. It came from Gregor Duncan himself. Both Roy and Red saw the man

reappear in the doorway long enough to trigger the shot.

There was one more shot. Fired on the heels of the first and from the same gun. The bullet went through a man's heart.

The man was the Deep Lift windmill salesman who had turned out to be gunner for El Lagarto.

Roy and Red bumped shoulders as they pulled to their feet and slammed across the room, guns cleared for action. But Gregor Duncan was already out of sight around an el in the stairway. Roy and Red went down, three stairs at a time, rammed into a door halfway down around the turn. The door was solid. It opened outward and was barred from the other side. They tried their combined weight against it, but made no progress. They blazed lead into the heavy wood. The lead penetrated, but not with sufficient force to do more than splinter some wood.

They charged back up the stairs. Deputy Tarp Carron was entering the room from the other door.

"Hold down the room till we get back," Red slashed at him.

By the time he and Roy hit the street a curious crowd had gathered at the foot of the back stairway to gape at the lead-splintered door.

"You see a man come out of here?" Roy demanded. No one admitted that he had.

"Maybe you better get back upstairs," Red told his partner, "while I comb the town."

Roy nodded in agreement. "Anyhow," he said, "we fooled 'em about the sign you were supposed to have made when you first looked out in the hall to see if the way was clear for us. But you gun-crazy bucko, if you don't quit lookin' so hard for the other fella's bullet, you're gonna find it one of these days part-

in' your head deeper'n your pretty red hair."

Red grinned. "I'm still livin'."

"I'd like to see you keep that way," Roy said. "For anyhow long enough to visit me on my ranch in Arizona."

Red had already turned away. He flung back over his shoulder, "You havin' a spread out there, too? Been thinkin' serious of settlin' there myself."

Upstairs again, Roy found Deputy Tarp Carron holding back a crowd of curious onlookers at the door.

"Man shot dead, is all," Roy announced grimly. "That's not uncommon curious for Albuquerque, is it?" Under his hard stare the onlookers dispersed.

With the door closed, Roy faced Tarp Carron alone in the room.

"Who was it shot him?" Tarp wanted to know.

"Gregor Duncan."

"What?" The look of amazement on Tarp's face showed plainly that he didn't believe it.

"Why not?" Roy countered.

"But . . . but it ain't in reason. The . . . the attorney general of these here United States—" He stopped weakly. "It ain't in reason," he repeated.

"Talk sense. What ain't?"

"The attorney general ain't. He ain't gonna shoot no one, is he?"

"Let's get this straight," Roy said. "Who do you think Gregor Duncan is?"

"I don't think. Man, I know! I told you you were set for a surprise."

"Keep talkin'," Roy said. "Who's Gregor Duncan?"

"I jus' told you. He's the attorney general of all these here, now, United States and . . . and territories."

"You're crazy as a loon! What's that?"

From the inside room, where Gregor Duncan had pretended to lock his "prisoner," there had sounded a feeble muffled cry.

Roy pushed into the room, Tarp following. There was no one in sight. They listened. They heard the cry again. Slightly louder this time.

"From in that closet!" Roy said. "The door's locked. I tried it myself when I first came up here."

He tried it again. It was still locked. There was no key. He kicked, ramming in with the heel of his boot. When that didn't do it, he reared back and went in with his shoulder. This time he splintered a panel. He kept at it until he could walk through. The closet was long, and dark at the far end.

He lit a match. Its flaring, yellow glow revealed a man in the corner, trussed up feet and hands. There had been a gag in his mouth, but he had succeeded in working it loose.

"Who are you?" Roy demanded.

The answer came in a weak but defiant voice. "The attorney general of the United States."

IT was true. And after the attorney general had been hauled out, cut free, his legs and arms massaged vigorously to restore proper circulation, and a drink of whiskey placed in his hand, the truth of a few other things was made apparent.

Talking calmly, forcefully, the man told how he had waited here for Roy Lanterman and Red Haw, with Tarp Carron from the Federal marshal's office on watch downstairs. A stranger, a well-dressed man with gray eyes and graying hair, had forced his way into the room from the back stairway. The stranger

had slugged, bound, and gagged him. Locked him in the closet with the admonition to listen carefully to all that went on outside, and make up his mind whether he would call his dogs off the case completely, or die—as his two most trusted men, Lanterman and Haw, were to die.

"The rest of it you know," the attorney general said. "This impostor assumed the name, Gregor Duncan, which for purposes of anonymity I have used here. He received you, depending on his forged papers and his cold nerve to carry off the deception that he was a trusted representative of my office. Why, the rapsallion, if I could get my hands on him now—Where's the rest of that whiskey?"

Tarp Carron was the one who really looked haggard. He blamed himself for having allowed the stranger to get through to the most important man he had ever seen in his life.

"Wasn't your fault," the attorney general told him gruffly. "You couldn't have watched both doorways." He made a signal to Roy that he wanted to speak to him alone.

"Tarp, why don't you look up Red?" Roy suggested. "He's around town on the prowl for the man who's responsible for all this."

"Yes, sir, man!" said Tarp, who was glad to get away.

Alone with Roy, the attorney general motioned toward the dead man on the floor. "He shot his own man. Accident, I suppose?"

Roy frowned, shook his head. "He put in two shots. Both to the heart. They couldn't have both been accidents. When he realized we had him alive, he killed his own man to keep him from talking."

The attorney general paced restlessly. "There is no limit to the

depravity and viciousness of this crew! Or to this individual assassin's hypocrisy. I could hear most of what went on. Strangely, all that he told you about their nefarious plans was correct. It was in essence what I myself would have told you. He stopped just short of the full horror of it, however. He told you the government expected you and Mr. Haw to stop a revolution. It expects more than that. It expects you to stop an international war!"

"War!"

"Precisely! Disregarding for the moment the loss of life and money to Mexicans and Americans on both sides of the border during a revolution, El Lagarto would have the United States up to its neck in a war before the first year of his dictatorship was out."

"And you want us to stop it before it begins?" Roy asked with an undercurrent of irony in his voice.

"That's your little job—two men to keep a war from starting." With gruff affection the attorney general rested his hand on Roy Lanterman's shoulder. "You know, my boy, if there were ever two unsung heroes, they're you and Red Haw. The work you have been doing and will continue to do under the obscure title of United States deputy marshals is too important to be told. At the very least, you are entitled to the titles and salaries of Federal marshals. Unfortunately, it is only as deputies, free-lancing out of my office, that your work can be effectively carried on. But I have long wished that the government could find adequate means of expressing its gratitude. As deputy marshals, however, there is no provision for rewarding you beyond that station. Perhaps a special act of Congress—"

"Shucks," Roy said, embarrassed.

Then he grinned. "Maybe I'll settle some day for one of Uncle Sam's homesteads. In Arizona."

**T**HERE had been sounds of someone approaching through the outer hall. The door opened. It was Red. "I caught that last," he said. "My bid's in, too. And it's got to be Arizona."

"What do you know?" Roy fired at him.

"Plenty! But not about the man we knew as Gregor Duncan. He's disappeared, leavin' no trace. I've got the locals on a cordon around town for him."

The attorney general nodded. "He'll most likely go East. We have agents there covering the case. There are certain identity clues. Indications are that our man arrived here from El Paso in record time. So the search can be made for someone who's a good horseman. Someone who is also a deadly marksman with the revolver. Two accomplishments considerably more rare in the East than out here. An elderly man who—"

"No," Roy disagreed. "Young."

"But how do you make that out? I do recall he was active enough. But his hair was gray."

Roy called attention to the table at which Gregor Duncan had been sitting. "There's a dusting of powder on the table top." He pointed. "My guess is that he's grayed his hair with powder."

"A credible observation, my boy," the attorney general admitted. "Add to our list the certainty that he is a person of consequence. Or that some of his associates are. Many of our moves have been known as soon as we made them. We have been hamstrung from the first. As you know, they had intercepted your telegrams and were checking on you in El Paso even before you knew

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you were assigned to the case."

"Those are the kind of things that make it tough for us now," Red remarked, "but give us lots to go on when it comes to kickin' back at them. Even this mix-up here to-day hasn't been a dead loss. Prowlin' around, I looked in at the Dust and Cinders Saloon. There is a string of freighters wheelin' West from steel-end in the mornin'. It's a legitimate wagon train, from how I get it." Red shot a sidelong glance at Roy. "There's a girl, Helen Blane, joining the train with a couple wagon loads of supplies for her father's Cross Bar spread in Arizona. There are others just as legitimate. But there's shady business, too. Jerk-line drivers for fourteen wagons are bein' recruited by Hawk Lind at the Dust and Cinders. They don't talk much detail at the Dust and Cinders, but they're payin' double wages to carefully selected drivers. My idea's for us to go right ahead, like this fake Gregor Duncan arranged, and collect us some of that double money."

"But the personal danger, my boy!" the attorney general protested. "This 'arrangement,' as you recall, was to have resulted in your murder!"

"Knowin' what the risk is, it'll be easier to side-step it. We got nothin' on Hawk Lind—yet. But he's the one the fake Gregor Duncan told us to report to. We'll have plenty on him before we're through."

"But it's a certainty he'll be forewarned against you."

"Means we'll play 'em a little closer to our chests, that's all."

"I think Red's right," Roy said. "That girl's got to be protected, too. She's the one, sir, who was tagged with El Lagarto's death sign by the man lying dead here!"

"I was sure you'd think of that," Red said dryly.

"What I don't get the straight of," Roy handed back, "is why *you're* thinkin' of it. You never went for blondes before—"

"I go for this one."

"One of those things, is it?" The attorney general smiled tolerantly. "All right; one of you goes with the wagon train."

"One of us?"

"Yes. The object being to ferret out the concentration point for the war materials being assembled for running over the border. And to learn the identity of the man in charge of the operations, El Lagarto's outside man."

"And the other?"

"The other of you, carrying out our original plan, goes to Mexico on detached service to shadow El Lagarto on his home grounds. In effect, to learn whatever can be learned, and do whatever can be done."

"To stop a war before it starts, I think you said," Roy remarked.

"Correct. Work it out between you which goes where—and may God bless you both."

**T**HE moment he left the room, Roy and Red seemed to get the same idea at the same time. Each started fishing in his pocket for his half of the souvenir beer token. Red brought his out first. He spun it in the air, caught it, flattened it between tightly pressed fingers.

"Call what's up, pardner; the lucky horseshoe, or the writin'? Call it—and I go under the border."

Looming large in their thoughts, though unspoken, was the knowledge that whoever stayed on this side would be the one who'd be able to

continue his friendship with Helen Blane.

"Horseshoe's been lucky for me so far," Roy said. "I'm ridin' my luck. I say horseshoe again."

In the second that passed before Red took his hand away, the room was silent with an oddly oppressive hush. It was as though each of them realized that more than just a working arrangement was at stake. A wife for one, perhaps. And something else beyond that, something beyond life even for one of them. So closely attuned were they, that, catching each other's eye, they felt the same impulse. Denied almost before it was felt, it was an impulse to shudder. As though Death breathed close! Death for one. And they didn't know which one.

"So it's the horseshoe again, huh? All right, read it and sorrow." Red took his hand away. It stayed poised in the air, like a bird with wings beating, then lifted slowly. Buried to the second knuckle under his thick red hair, his fingers started scratching. It was one of Red's oldest, most venerable gestures. Roy had seen him do it a million times, and thought nothing of it. Now he didn't like it. It made him feel uneasy. He didn't know why and the feeling passed in a second. It was several weeks before he thought of it again. But then he knew why.

"I'm a ring-tailed hackamore!" Red growled. "Horseshoes! You hit it again." He pocketed the ax-chopped copper token. "And I go under the border." He stuck out his hand, and grinned. "Good luck, pardner. Be seein' you there or here."

"Right back at you," Roy said. "And don't take any plugged *centavos*."

"I'll watch it," promised Red. "Don't do nothin' I wouldn't do."

## CHAPTER XI

### GUNS GOING WEST

UNDER the fire of the morning sun, the wagon train crept into tawny distance. With Albuquerque only a whoop and a holler behind them, and already lost in the dust of straining wheels, men looked ahead, some with apprehension, but all with eagerness, to what the "untouched" West would bring.

Under the weight of tarpaulin-covered loads, the freighters creaked interminably. Their wagon wheels groaned—and they would groan more as days passed, and sun and dust diluted axle grease. Mule-skinners pitched rawhide and profanity, showing a degree of proficiency in the latter that made stage-driver swearing sound like Sunday-school talk. And the dust arose, chokingly, in every throat.

Not so much for protection now as in the earlier days, but for mutual assistance in emergencies dictated by trail and weather conditions, it was the usual thing for wagons wheeling West from steel-end to band themselves together in a caravan. In this train were freighters, ore wagons, and swaying Connestogas of perhaps a dozen different owners.

Here and there, on the westward trail, a homestead-bound family in a prairie schooner would leave the train, breaking a trail through the desert brush to suit their own fancy, lured by some distant vista of galleta grass which gave hope—more often than not, false—of water. In such a bold haphazard way were the homes of the West begun.

Here and there, too, the supply wagons would turn off, feeders for a ranch tucked away somewhere in the rocky hills, or for a mineral prospect, or frontier trade-goods

store. The largest single unit in the train remained intact. This was the fourteen freighters whose drivers had been recruited at the Dust and Cinders Saloon. Some of them were billed out with "mining equipment." Others had papers to show that they carried machinery and materials for railroad construction to be set down ahead of the rails which were being driven both ways across the continent.

Neither the hard-eyed, tight-lipped drivers, nor their "reserve drivers," who sat up front with long-barreled Winchesters at hand, questioned the truthfulness of the way bills. They didn't look under the battened canvas to check on the heavy cases underneath. And they were careful to see that no one else did.

Their contingent led the train. They set a fast pace. Because of their numbers they had much to do with selecting the wagon-train bosses. The bosses rode up and down along the line, leaning from saddle to admonish the drivers to, "Close in— Keep closed in!"

One of them loomed through the dust to bawl such an order to Helen Blane.

She shouted back in a way she thought he would understand. "My lead team's lickin' the tailboard of the wagon ahead already. What do you expect, miracles?"

The wagon boss moved in closer. "A girl, by heck! I couldn't see you for the dust. Drivin' alone?"

"No. The driver in the wagon just ahead's pitchin' rawhide for the Cross Bar, too."

"But you're drivin' this wagon alone?"

"Just me and my shadow, mister."

"I'm Hawk Lind," the wagon boss said, and grinned.

IT wasn't a pleasant grin. The man had a predatory hawklike look in the first place. And in the second place one eye was bruised black and his jaw was cut and swollen. He looked like something that had crawled out from under a herd of spooked steers—or from under a good man's fist. His grin, in fact, was more of a leer. And it would still have been a leer, she was sure, even if his jaw hadn't been swollen.

"I've got some time off pretty soon," the wagon boss told her. "You look mighty little and lonesome sittin' up there handlin' the lines on four mules. I'll come back and help you drive."

"Thank you, mister; but I'm not needin' any help."

"Listen, I'm a gent, see?" Hawk Lind said. "And a gent don't ask a lady does she need help. If he thinks she needs it, she gets it, see? You're gettin' it—pronto." He grinned in that thoroughly unpleasant way again, and, spurring his horse with brutal callousness, moved off through the dust.

Loneliness and an unknown fear touched Helen. Ever since the incident in the stagecoach when she had been marked with the sign of the Lizard, she had been under this strange pall of fear. She wondered now if this El Lagarto business could have had anything to do with her father's sudden determination to send her packing off to school in El Paso. There was no valid reason for thinking so. And yet—

Her vague fear crystallized into something close and positive as, behind her, she distinctly heard a stirring under the canvas-covered load that could almost certainly have been made only by a man or a large animal. Her slim shoulders drew together as she sat there, too frozen

for the moment to look around.

"Don't be frightened."

She recognized the kindly, cautioning voice instantly and turned with a glad little rush. "You!"

"That's right," Roy Lanterman told her. He was wedged there comfortably between the sacked and boxed supplies, with only his head showing above the canvas.

"How did you get here?" Helen gasped.

"It's *why* that's most important."

"Then why?"

"Long story. Hittin' the high spots, it was all set for me to mule-skin one of the Dust and Cinders freighters. But when I reported for the job, somebody had already got to the wagon boss with the information that I was hep to some dirty work he intended pulling. He tried

to have me buried on the spot, 'stead of waitin'. I resisted bein' buried somethin' terrific—"

"That's how you got that cut on your cheekbone," she broke in with impulsive sympathy.

"Yeah, but you ought to see the other fella."

"I . . . I think I have!"

He nodded. "Anyhow, the upshot was that I got away. But they were watching for me, so there was no chance to come along openly driving a wagon. I figured I'd stow away in yours."

"But why?" Helen asked. "I'm thoroughly mystified."

"I'm tryin' to stop trouble before it begins," Roy's answer was frankly evasive. "And keepin' an eye on you, young lady—in spite of I heard you tell one gent this mornin' you

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didn't need any help."

"Oh, did you hear that?" She laughed self-consciously and changed the subject. "Where's Mr. Haw?"

"He's stoppin' trouble, too. In a different direction."

"It's all very mysterious. Has it something to do with this El Lagarto business?"

"It has everything to do with it," Roy told her soberly. "I don't want to alarm you, but how well do you know the driver on your other wagon?"

"I've known him all my life. He's one of dad's riders. He came up here to steel-end to meet me and drive these supplies home."

"Good! Stick close to him. Just what the threat is to you I'm not sure yet. As possibly you've heard, the man who tagged you with the lizard sign was killed yesterday by one of his own men. That may push the danger away, temporarily, for you. But watch close, Helen—Miss Blane; and I'll watch, too."

**I** LIKE Helen best," she told him and then she stared. Roy was motioning her with fingers pressed to his lips. With a jerk he pulled the canvas over his head. She looked around just in time to see Hawk Lind ride close through the dust. He had that same unpleasant grin on his face.

"I told you I'd be back," he said. "Move over."

"I won't!" Helen said indignantly. "Don't you dare come on my wagon."

"Thanks for the invitation, sister. Hawk Lind always takes a dare." He was alongside now, leaning from saddle, with one hand on the wagon. "You better move over—unless'n you want me to board her slam in your lap."

She didn't move over, and Lind

said, "You asked for it." He put one foot on the wagon step and swung his other leg half free from the saddle.

She stamped hard on his toe with the small hard heel of her boot. He let out a blistering curse and raised his hand to strike her, but at that moment his horse pulled a little wide of the wagon. He gave it his momentary attention and consequently didn't see the fist which reached out from under the canvas and clipped him alongside the head.

But he felt it. It knocked him clear over his horse. He bellowed, with his shoulders rooting the dirt. His horse shied, ran away too fast for him to catch it.

On his feet again, the wagon boss ran alongside the wagon for a few steps, shaking his fist.

"One of them gals with a mule-hoof punch!" he shouted furiously. "But you really asked for somethin' now, sister. I'm kind o' glad it happened this way. Now I don't have to be careful about nothin'. You can look for me back, and that ain't a promise; it's a threat."

When he had gone, she said in a low voice, without looking around, "You pulled me out of that one, but what'll I do next time? I'm afraid, Roy."

It was the first time she had used his given name and it gave Roy a thrill of pleasure. "Don't you worry," he reassured her, "I'll visit that gent tonight."

"You'll be careful?" Her voice carried alarm.

"I'll be careful. And after this, so will Lind."

Roy wasn't making wide talk. When the wagons had pulled up for the night, and it was dark, he went on a prowl. Edging in close to the different campfires with the stealth of a Comanche scout, he listened to

the talk. The men, driving the Dust and Cinders wagons, formed a separate clique from the other drivers. They kept to themselves. Roy heard enough to convince him that they knew little beyond the fact that they had been paid double money to move and guard cargo, and keep their mouths closed to strangers.

One thing he did learn. This kind of sinister cargo had been billed out from the Dust and Cinders Saloon in a steady stream all season, and this was the last trainload. The drivers, as always, had been warned to be ready to unload at a minute's notice and drive the empty wagons back. But this time when they returned to rail head they were to be paid off for good.

Roy's eyes, as he gleaned this from the overheard talk, held a hard glint. It was information which, added to what he had already learned, told him that time was getting dangerously short. Somewhere in the desert vastness this side of the border was a cache, a veritable "mother lode" of contraband guns and war materials. And if this were to be the last trainload, it could indicate only that the Lizard and his backers considered they had transported enough war goods for their purpose.

**T**HE next phase of their operations undoubtedly was ready to be unfolded. Perhaps in a concerted raid of Mexican revolutionists on United States territory, the cached materials would be seized and run over the border. And then, for the glory of a blood-mad Mexican butcher and his money-mad American backers, homes would burn and blood would flow. And men would kill, in war fever, those whom at any other time they might have called friend and invited in their homes to eat and drink with them.

Until this late time the deadly ring had been able to operate without attracting attention. Since railroad construction work was let out to contractors who were continually freighting materials west from steel-end, it had been a matter of no great risk for the ring to transport some of its implements of murder under the label of railroad construction materials. Others went as mine equipment, which could be set down almost anywhere in the West, and no questions asked.

That was the way of it then. With most of their own drivers ignorant of the true nature of their cargoes, the wagons had gone out, sometimes in their own solid trainloads, and sometimes, to divert possible suspicion, joining up, as now, with the regular caravans.

But it wasn't yet too late to smash this monstrous thing. Roy began with Hawk Lind. He waited, hour after hour, into the night, and finally his chance came. The burly wagon boss stood up, stretched, told his assorted hardcases he was going to turn in. He stepped away from the fire. But he didn't go to his own blankets. He strode through the night toward the wagons of Helen Blane.

Roy followed him. He wore moccasins, and he closed distance like a lean and silent shadow. The first thing Hawk Lind knew about it was when an arm closed around his throat. Hawk Lind was a big man. He struggled and tried to cry out. But the crook of Roy's elbow was tight on his throat; he couldn't utter a sound. Struggling wasn't any good either, because Roy was a big man, too, and a hard one, and he was close in, with a hammer lock on one arm.

Roy simply held his grip, putting on more and more pressure

until he could tell by his victim's spasmodic jerking that he was on the edge of collapse. Then he said, "The girl's got friends. Leave her alone."

He relaxed his hold. Hawk Lind dropped, gasping, then got up and staggered away. Roy melted into the shadows toward the wagons. He would have liked to question the wagon boss about the shipment, but he didn't want to put him on guard. It wasn't merely this shipment that was important. It was all of them together. And it was imperative that this one go through on schedule if the destination of the rest was to be uncovered.

Several days passed. Beyond looking daggers at her every time he rode by, Hawk Lind didn't bother Helen Blane again. Roy held to his same course of action, scouting out the campfires at night, and riding under cover in the Blane wagon during the day. He had much time for deepening his acquaintanceship with Helen. They learned a lot about each other. She told him about her father, Buffalo Blane, who had come West in the early days when the Indians were contesting every step of the way. And she told him about her brother whom, quite obviously, she adored. It was just as obvious that she worried about him, too.

"He's so young," she explained. "So wild and reckless. If only he could get to know somebody like you—know him real well, I mean. You'd be such a steadying influence on him, Roy. Not that there's anything the matter with him. He's just young, that's all."

Roy hid a smile. "Didn't you tell me you were twins? Hector and Helen—"

"What's that got to do with it?" Helen flared. "Boys just don't grow

up as soon as girls. Is that why you've been treating me like a child—like your kid sister, in fact? "

Roy knew what she meant. He had talked to her about everything except the one thing that was uppermost in his thoughts: that she was the loveliest thing he had known, and he loved her so much he ached.

It wasn't the fact that he had nothing in the way of a secure life to offer her, that kept him from speaking now. It was his intense loyalty to Red Haw who had practically said he loved her, too. And with the grinning little dynamite stick so far away and unable to put in an oar for himself, it didn't seem right to Roy to build up his own case. It was taking unfair advantage, he felt; and he was positive Red would have felt the same way about it. He tried to give Helen some idea of this, but he didn't get very far.

"You certainly do think a lot of Red," was all she would say.

"I was hopin' you would, too," Roy told her once.

"Me? I like him fine. What's that got to do with us?"

**R**OY finally figured it out that maybe women just naturally didn't feel the same way about friends and love. Aside from waiting until Red Haw was on the scene to give him a chance for fair stand-up fighting for this girl, he didn't see what he could do about it.

It wasn't long before the rains came. Then everyone in the train wished they had the dust back. Cold, wind-driven rains, they were, turning to snow at times. Rain on the desert, until dry washes in every direction were running water.

Some of the wagons had already

turned off from the caravan. A long way west and a considerable distance south, and the time finally came for the two Blane wagons to turn off. Roy told Helen good-by, the night before. He warned her to be very careful until she reached home.

"Don't you worry," she said. "I'm on familiar territory from here on down. Dad will likely send some of the boys to meet me. And anyway it's not so far. And you'll come see us, won't you? My brother that I've told you so much about—you must meet him. Just remember the town of Flatpan. Our Cross Bar Ranch is not so far out from that, and smack on the border. You can find it all right—" She broke off suddenly, realizing that she'd been over all this a dozen times before.

The night sky was smudged faintly in the east with the gray of morning. Above, a scattering of stars shone through the clouds. Roy looked down and he could see Helen's white face staring up at him. There was hunger in Roy's eyes, and an ache in his heart. She was so lovely. It was all he could do to keep from taking her in his arms.

Perhaps she sensed his feelings. Or perhaps she merely let her own run away. At any rate, she swayed toward him. He caught his breath sharply, and his trembling fingers reached for her. He wanted to crush her in his arms. But he didn't.

He thought of Red Haw riding a lone trail somewhere south in Sonora. Red Haw loved her, too. A feeling of intense, almost fanatical loyalty to his friend swept over him.

"Not till Red's here to put in his own bid," was what he told himself. "It's only fair. He'd do as much for me."

So instead of kissing her, he took

one of her hands—cold, it was, in the morning's chill; he would never forget how cold. He held it in his own for a moment.

"Good-by," he said huskily. "We'll be seen' you, Red and me—soon. Good-by."

Helen bit her lip. She was glad it was still dark enough to hide how she felt, because even biting the lip wasn't quite enough to keep it from trembling, and blinking wasn't enough to keep the tears away.

"Yes, do come—you and Red," she said almost stiffly. She pulled her hand away from his, turned and walked slowly back to the wagon.

The morning was coming on rapidly now, with the sky a dirty gray all across the eastern horizon. And with the morning a few pelting drops of cold rain fell. Roy turned away, too. The camp was stirring, and he had to be out of sight before the light came.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE BIG SPLASH

ON the second day after the Blane wagons had left the train, Roy Lanterman crouched in a rocky covert and watched the fourteen Dust and Cinders freighters unload. On foot, utilizing the ample cover the rough country provided, he had tailed the wagons closely.

Soon after cutting south from the train, they had come to a rocky depression which was a dry wash for most of the year, but which was flowing swift white water now. They had followed the desert stream on farther south in country which grew progressively rougher and more difficult to traverse.

It was impossible eventually to go farther. Ahead for as far as the eye could see the land was scored and

guttled, the rock strata, souvenir of an ancient geological cataclysm, tilted on edge, and boulders heaped in a devil's jumble. El Cañon Diablo, in fact, was the name that Roy, in his scouting of their last night camp, had overheard a Mexican driver apply to the place.

It was impossible now to go ahead, even on foot, so what more natural than that the order should have been given to unload the wagons? On the other hand, as Roy observed, it was a dismal place to unload guns, in the middle of a desert waste, fifty miles or more up from the Mexican border, on the bank of a stream that wasn't navigable.

Immediately upon unloading, the wagons were headed back in the direction they had come from. Four men stayed behind to guard the canvas-covered cargo. Hawk Lind was one of them. He seemed to be in charge.

Roy Lanterman watched, puzzled. No one seemed to be doing anything. The day was overcast and chill with a persistent drizzle. The guards sat miserably hunched in the lee of the stacked cases, waiting, it seemed.

But when the last of the wagons was out of sight, and even the sodden rattle of the wheels bumping over uneven rock had been swallowed by the desert vastness, something happened. There was a hailing call from the direction of the swollen stream, and then from a place of concealment around a high-walled bend, a makeshift barge floated into view. Close behind it loomed another, and still others.

Each of the barges was manned by something like a dozen workmen, Mexicans for the most part, judging from their wide-brimmed hats of straw. The leading barge was poled close and made fast against a pea-gravel bar. Boards

were thrust out for gangplanks, and the bargemen swarmed ashore and commenced loading cargo.

Roy crept from his watching place and moved in closer. So this was the way of it! Taking advantage of the rare flood condition of the rocky draw, they had provided these barges on which they would float the guns downcurrent. Float them where? To wherever they had the rest of them cached, of course. But where was that?—Roy asked himself.

There was only one way to get at the answer. Since it was impossible, from the nature of the country, to follow afoot and keep the barges in sight in the tortuous channel, he would have to stow away and float along!

The chances certainly didn't look too good. But Roy held to the opinion that a man could do pretty much whatever had to be done. These were the last loads going down. It was his last chance to trace the guns to their concentration point. He *had* to get aboard one of the barges. So he did.

The whole thing went off smoothly. Creeping close behind rocky cover, he watched, and waited his chance. The cargo handlers were attacking the cases in a steady line, going and coming. Close in, Roy managed to drag one of the cases a little apart from the others. Eventually one of the handlers picked the case for his next load. In order to lift it he had to take a step or two which momentarily put him out of sight of the others.

**A** MOMENT was all Roy needed. He was ready. He chopped deftly, mercifully, to the point of the jaw. His man dropped, out before he knew what had struck him. Roy dragged him behind the near rocky ledge.

In a few scant moments Roy appeared again, wearing a soiled *charo* jacket, and grimy sash of red wool. His face was partly concealed by a broad-brimmed straw hat. He hoisted the heavy case to his shoulder, holding his arms in a way to shield his face even more. For the rest of it he depended on the murky drizzle—and luck.

The combination was enough. It got him on the barge. Taking his place in the loading line, he walked up the gangplank unchallenged. Once aboard, he walked around to the far side to spot his case on the stack. The stacks weren't any too neatly lined. Working swiftly, Roy shifted a few of the cases on top to form a niche large enough for his body. Then with no one looking, he lifted the canvas and snaked under.

He crouched and waited, hardly breathing. From time to time men passed within a few feet of him, and once, a man on top fastening down the canvas stepped into the hole Roy had made between those cases. The canvas sagged under the man's foot. He fell, cursed the loosely stacked cases, and, characteristically, did nothing about it. *Mañana* was soon enough.

Roy heard the men shouting in the excitement of casting off. He could feel the shudders that waved through the barge as it bumped against rock. For the first time he began to give some thought to the difficulties he might encounter in getting off when the barge had reached its secret destination. He needn't have worried. That part of it was arranged for him. Arranged in horrible detail.

The first inkling Roy had of trouble blowing up was when, only a few moments after the barge had cast loose, an excited bellowing set up apparently from ashore. Mexi-

can bellowing. Listening close, Roy was able to make out that somebody who had been left ashore had jumped in the water and struck out with the current to overtake the barge. Roy thought he knew who the man was, and it wasn't comforting knowledge.

He could hear the Mexican being helped over the side. He could hear his wet stamping, his excited sputtering talk as he told about somebody hitting him.

The possibility of something like this happening had entered Roy's calculations when he had delivered a "sleeping" blow instead of a killing one. It would have been safer to kill. That would have been El Lagarto's way. The way, too, of his American backers. But it wasn't Roy's way. He had preferred to jeopardize his own chances rather than snuff out the life of another man with a blow from behind. And if his humane action had got him into a jam now, well, he'd got out of others.

He smiled suddenly. Judging from what he was hearing, his immediate danger was already past.

"So what do you want us to do?" somebody was questioning the excitedly complaining Mexican. "Somebody has hit you; you have an enemy among the *lagartijos*. You have also a knife, no?"

Roy could almost see the shrug with which the man's complaint was dismissed. He breathed a little easier.

But the voluble Mexican would not be dismissed. He had, he insisted, no enemy among the *lagartijos*. They were his brothers. All of them. He loved them all and they loved him. Consequently they would not hit him. Consequently someone else had hit him. So the boat had better be searched.

"All right. All right." Again Roy could visualize the shrug of indifference. But this time it didn't make him breathe easier. For accompanying that almost certain shrug, he heard the words. "Search the boat if you like. Look everywhere. But calm yourself."

So they searched the boat. Some of the abused man's friends helped him. They pulled the canvas off the stacks and scrambled up on top. They discovered Roy almost immediately. Before he could try to shoot his way out, before he could even spring his jackknifed body clear of the cases which hemmed his arms, a rifle barrel cracked down against his head. It was all over then. They closed in on him.

The lagartijos stood their prisoner up on the scant after-deck space, and with a piece of stout rope, tied one of the ammunition cases to his foot.

**H**AWK LIND was the one who gave orders. He wasn't in charge here, but they let him have his way with the prisoner. "We've got plenty of bullets," he bragged. "And you, my gringo friend, will make history. Plenty men have walked the plank with cannon balls tied to their legs. But you'll be the first to go down with bullets, thousands of little bullets, draggin' you to the bottom. You won't talk; you got nothin' to say. But I'll talk; I'll sing you a funeral song."

Hawk Lind was stalking back and forth on the crowded deck, moving his arms in a wild swing. He was relishing all this; his cruel, loose-lipped mouth showed that.

"So we meet again," he taunted. "First in the Dust and Cinders. And I got a score to settle with you on that. Then we met a second time, didn't we? I'm only gettin' it now.

That night with the wagon train, remember? And now we meet again. But this time I'm makin' the gesture. And it's our last meetin'. Stand back, everybody, for the big splash."

They didn't stand back. With faces taut, eyes hot with morbid expectation, they edged closer, staring at this man who was about to die. Roy Lanterman, his own face impassive, searched them with his glance. He searched them with a seething inward eagerness. But in the whole pack there was not one sympathetic face. But there *was* a familiar one.

The face leaped out from the others in Roy's awareness, a heavily bearded countenance, satanic, with eyes burning at a whiter heat than the eyes of any of the others—and yet, oddly, holding that same touch of brooding sadness which Roy had noted before. It only went to prove, the thought struck, that no man, not even this one, could be wholly bad. Though where the good was in this one, Roy Lanterman could not imagine. For this one was the hatchet man!

Tending to the Lizard's business. Always on the job, it seemed, when executions were in order. In sinister aloofness, he stood back from the others, near a man wearing one of El Lagarto's new uniforms, a man high in the chief's favor if the amount of gold braid was an indication. The hatchet man spoke to him briefly, and having spoken, his mouth clamped shut in his humorless face, like a steel trap closing. The uniformed man nodded.

Roy Lanterman looked hopelessly away. Hawk Lind was talking again. "It galls me to realize it, my gringo friend, but I'm really doin' you a favor, pushin' you overboard. That jerkline kid you're so

sweet on, you'll be meetin' her sooner this way—that is, if you both go to the same place."

The wagon boss' reference to Helen Blane caught Roy off guard. He started. "You don't mean she's—" he began.

"Dead?" Hawk Lind said callously. "Not yet. But she's liable to be right sudden. She wasn't on my list, but the boys here that come up from the south been tellin' me—" Then at a frown and a warning word from the swarthy-faced man in gold braid, Hawk Lind quit talking.

An icy calm had settled over Roy Lanterman and he was thinking, "Well, here it is."

**B**UT it wasn't. Not quite. He had another reprieve as one of the straw-hatted lagartijos rushed up to him and thrust something in his hand.

"What's that?" Hawk Lind demanded suspiciously.

But then he saw that it was one of the small sun-dried lizards—El Lagarto's invitation to death. He looked back where the expedition chief and the hatchet man were standing and caught their approving glance.

"Yeah, I get it," he muttered. "Kind of late to be taggin' him with it, but you figure this makes it official, I reckon. Well, stand back, boys; here goes nothin'."

He bent, tipped up the heavy case of lead cartridges and pushed it overboard. Roy jumped at the same instant. He had to, or else have his leg crushed when the short rope payed out.

Down went the lead-weighted box into deep water, down and down. And down went Roy Lanterman at the other end of the rope.

On top there was taut nervous laughter as they saw him plummet

under the flood water.

"The crazy things a man'll do when he's dyin'!" Hawk Lind snickered. "All he could think about was savin' his leg. You see that froggy jump he give to keep the rope from bustin' his leg? What's a busted leg to a corpse?" Hawk Lind laughed again, and the others echoed his grim merriment.

Deep under the water, Roy Lanterman wasn't laughing. But he *was* exulting! Even the blinding suck of water past his ears before the iron-bound case of bullets anchored him to the bottom, wasn't enough to chill his surge of hope.

The reason was in his hand—the sun-dried lizard which he gripped with a grip of death. From the instant it had been thrust between his fingers he had known that there was something out of the ordinary about it. It was heavier, for one thing, heavier and with a different feel than the sun-dried ones which had been passed out before by El Lagarto's men.

The last thing on deck, feeling the lizard out with his fingers, he had made an amazing discovery. This wasn't a ticket of death. It was a last-minute invitation to life! *A thin-handled knife had been inserted within the lizard's skin!*

There wasn't a lot to it after that. Roy had emptied his lungs repeatedly there at the last and gulped a full breath of air to sustain him the necessary time on the bottom. Working fast, he sawed the rope through with the knife blade, then held on down there against the current for as long as his breath would last.

When he popped to the top, the barge, as he had hoped, was out of sight around a bend in the twisting canyon wall. He angled in to-

ward shore, pulled himself out on a shelf of rock.

He lay there for a while, breathing hard, telling himself that he was alive, *alive!* And his heart went out toward that unidentified member of El Lagarto's crew who had put the lizard in his hand. He hadn't much more than seen the man's face. He had never seen him before and probably never would see him again. His most vivid impression was of a straw hat bobbing close. And then, gripped tight in his hand—life. Why he had received this boon was a mystery. But a mystery which, alongside the fact of living, was not important. Not then.

### CHAPTER XIII

#### FLATPAN'S NEW DEPUTY

IT was night when Roy Lanterman reached the town of Flatpan, a dozen miles this side of the international line in Arizona Territory. It was late. The town was dark as a mine pit, no light showing anywhere and no one stirring.

He pushed on in the darkness in the manner of a man who knew where he was going. At the back door of a two-room adobe he knocked softly.

He waited, feet shuffling on the sandy ground. Soon he could hear someone fumbling around inside the house, and a pale string of light bloomed from under the door. When the latch moved and the door would have opened, Lanterman held it shut and talked with his lips to the door crack.

"What I got to say's for your ears and yours alone. Pull the blinds. Carry the light back in the other room. Then I'll come in. Hold a gun on me if you want."

What Roy saw when he ducked to clear the door casing was a little

man with a bald head and a cow-horn mustache. The man was standing in a rumpled nightshirt with his bare feet sticking out. In one hand he held a lamp and in the other a six-gun.

A ridiculous-appearing figure, but Town Marshal Ozzie Napgood didn't have to worry about appearances. Once he did. But that was long ago before his fast shooting—and square shooting—had noised his fame over a considerable part of the West. Now he let his reputation speak for him. As frontier peace officer for the last thirty-four years in a stretch of the West that was wilder than the Indians had left it, that reputation was considerable.

Roy Lanterman shut the door and came forward. The marshal watched him, saying nothing, but taking canny note of his rolling, confident stride, the worn place against his thigh where a holster was accustomed to rest, and the way his strong young body had jackknifed to clear the doorway when he came in. Taking note also that Roy's clothes were incredibly torn and muddled, the boots worn to a frazzle, and that in spite of apparent exhaustion, the eyes, bleak and packing plenty of drive, didn't match his fagged body.

"Heard about you, of course, all my life," Roy said. "But just lately I've heard your name talked up in praiseful detail—by Miss Blane—Miss Helen Blane."

"Miss Blane," Ozzie Napgood said, "is top-money reference fer anybody."

Roy couldn't help looking pleased. "I don't know if you ever heard of Roy Lanterman—"

"Who hasn't?" the old lawman interrupted.

"It may take me a while to prove same to you, but I'm Lanterman."

*Continued on page 118*

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*Continued from page 116*

"I thought mebbe."

"How come?" Roy asked, in genuine surprise.

"Miss Helen's been detailin' me a heap about you, too."

"You've been talkin' to her?" he asked eagerly. "She's back safer?"

"Was there any danger she wouldn't be?" Napgood asked sharply.

"Considerable! But now that she's back safe, our job's to keep her safe. I want you to get your pants on, marshal, go out and round up a couple good men, and send 'em out to the Cross Bar on night and day guard."

"Jephet's tomb! It's as bad as that?"

"It's worse. Didn't Helen tell you anything?"

"Some rigmarole about a dried lizard. Nothin' alarmin'."

"Nothin' alarmin'?" Roy smiled thinly. Standing there, he swayed with exhaustion. "It's on account of a lizard I come to you like this, dead on my feet. On account of a lizard there's been half a dozen men killed already that I know about. And that's only a starter."

"Jephet's tomb!"

"Everything's quiet on the Cross Bar? Mr. Blane—Helen's father—hasn't reported any trouble?"

"Nary a complaint." Napgood's face grew thoughtful. "Though that don't prove nothin'. You know how these old-timers are. Buffalo Blane's so all-fired independent he bends backward in a loop. If he was in a jam the law'd be the last thing he'd think to go to."

Roy nodded. Ozzie reached for his suspenders, and dragged his pants toward him from over the top of a chair. His eyes flicked over the young deputy. "Tough travelin'

around here this time of year," he remarked, inviting confidence.

ROY dropped down in the chair. "Hittin' just the high points," he said, "it's a job of gun runnin'. Gun runnin' on a scale like you never heard of before. We've got reason to believe they're cached somewhere this side the border, ready to be run across. I trailed 'em to forty-fifty miles north of here, and lost 'em on a barge floatin' down Diablo Canyon. You know how that country is. A bighorn couldn't navigate it. So I cut around on foot, hittin' for the nearest town, which is here."

"Hm-m-m," Ozzie Napgood said, then said it again, thereby putting himself on record as being in a state of intense inner excitement. "Diablo Canyon. It breaks up in every which direction. Be like lookin' for a needle in a haystack."

"I know. And there isn't time for that kind of search. That's one reason I came here. If I can't find the guns, maybe I can find the man who knows the most about them. I've got to find him." The cords stood out on his closing fist. "So much depends on it—you wouldn't believe me if I told you!"

"Here in Flatpan you're lookin' fer him? Jephet's tomb!"

"Figurin' the way the stuff was headed the last I saw it, and Flatpan layin' in against the border here, this would be the natural headquarters for El Lagarto's contact man in this territory—"

"El Lagarto?"

"You know of him?" Roy asked eagerly.

"Struttin' third-rater." The marshal's answer was given with a snort of contempt.

"Not any more. An American Santa Claus is buyin' him guns."

"Hm-m-m. And you figger the

dickerin' goes on through Flatpan?" "Everything points to it bein' a likely bet."

"I'll make some soundin's tomorrow. I got a good man, the *mestizo* Gonzales, they call him, with an ear close to the ground in the Mexican quarter here."

"There's Americans involved in this, too, don't forget."

Ozzie nodded. "Where are you fittin' in the picture?"

Roy leaned forward. "I'll be your deputy. That'll give me a motive for hangin' around town awhile and pryin' into things."

"Like that, huh? I donno how the boys'll take it, me hirin' a dep'ty from outside."

Lanterman shrugged weary young shoulders. "Think up a good story to account for me. Introduce me as Smith, Jones, Brown—anybody. Now where can I catch a little shut-eye? I'm dead on my feet."

Lanterman's quiet gathering to himself of authority didn't rile the old peace officer. He accepted it as a matter of course. "You can sleep with me, I reckon—if you can pry your long legs in my bed."

**ROY** got some new clothes the next day, and Marshal Ozzie Napgood stuck a badge on his calfskin vest and introduced him around. Pat-hand Evoy was the only one who called the marshal on his new appointment. Pat-hand ran the Razzle Dazzle Saloon and Gambling Hall, and sat in on all the heavy games. He was an impressive figure in his stand-up collar and black frock coat. A gold log chain sprawled across his vest of green and orange checks. A gold horse-shoe glittering with diamonds hung from the chain. His face was pudgy, but his eyes were fast and so were his fingers. He had the reputation

of being good-natured.

"If you want a deputy what the devil you have to go outside for?" he demanded of Ozzie, with a grin to take the sting out of the question.

Ozzie made up his story while he talked. "Roy here," he said, "done me a fast-lead service last sawshay I took over to El Paso. He's a good man and he'll make a good dep'ty."

No one put himself on record as taking Ozzie's word for it. Lanterman was an outsider and they treated him as one. It didn't worry him. It was just a question of time, he knew, till he secured their confidence. Like a new rooster in a barnyard, he had to prove up.

The proving came sooner than he had been looking for it.

Along about eleven o'clock that night in the Razzle Dazzle old Ozzie yawned. "Reckon I'll go home and pile in." He winked at Pat-hand Evoy, sitting in a game of showdown with a tow-headed, reckless-looking youngster who held his cards in one hand and a liquor bottle in the other. "After eleven o'clock," Ozzie concluded, "law officerin's a young man's game. That's another reason why I got me a dep'ty."

Pat-hand grunted. The gambler's eyes were slitted against the reek of the cigarette in his mouth. He smoked Mexican tobacco, the stronger and blacker, the better. The youngster in the game with him was original about his smoking, too. He carried an old bowie, and when he wasn't tilting his whiskey bottle he used the knife to shave off slices of plug tobacco. He'd rub the shaved plug in the palms of his hands, then roll it in a paper and smoke it.

Left alone to represent the law in Flatpan, Roy moved along the bar, getting acquainted, or trying to. Then he circulated through the big room, idly watching the card

games. Out of the tail of his eye he kept tab on the play at Pat-hand's table. The youngster across from him was getting more drunk by the minute. And he was winning. Not large pots, but consistently. Roy was puzzled. Pat-hand Evoy didn't appear to be the type who would let even a sober man win consistently.

Roy hadn't liked the showy gambler from the first. Pat-hand's eyes were too hard and his fingers too soft. And he laughed too loud and too often. He laughed now every time his opponent's hand flopped out to rake in his winnings.

"Who's the kid playin' at Pat-hand's table?" Lanterman asked a whiskered souse standing, half asleep, against the wall.

**T**HE man blinked his eyes, saw where Lanterman was looking. "Him? Nobody, sheriff. Nobody. You take his pappy and he's one of the real old-timers. Like me. He come in when the buffaloes was a black cloud on the plains. And he taken raw land and made it into as purty a spread as there is on the border. But his kid, there, he ain't worth the lead it'd take to shoot him."

"Who is he?"

"Didn't I jus' tell you? That's Heck Blane from the Cross Bar spread over in against the Manzanita range. You ain't got the price of a drink on you, have you, sheriff?"

Roy slipped a coin to the old man, and moved away. So this was the twin brother that Helen adored! The one for whom Roy was supposed to be the good influence. He remembered Helen's words: "There's nothing the matter with him. He's just young, that's all, and maybe a little wild."

Roy sifted around the room awhile longer, then stopped in back of Heck Blane's chair.

The young man was really feeling his liquor now. He had the old bowie knife out, with the blade worn short and thin from much use, and he was trying to slice his plug tobacco. He was too drunk to manage it. The blade kept slipping and the handle kept raking across the plug. Lanterman, looking on, expected him to cut his hand any second.

But he didn't. What he did do was to swing around in his chair in drunken exasperation and shove violently at Roy.

"Get away, you," he said thickly. "You're jigglin' my elbow."

Roy moved a little away, humoring the Cross Bar scion because he was drunk.

"Move faster, damn you!" Heck Blane ordered. He was in the kind of mood where his liquor-inflamed arrogance fed on the slightest show of tolerance. Moreover, he had been slumped too long at the table. His cramped body craved movement. Violent movement. On sudden impulse he picked up the whiskey bottle at his elbow and threw it as hard as he could.

Lanterman saw it coming and ducked just in time. A man drinking at the bar wasn't so fortunate. He was the *mestizo* Gonzales, the informer who—always for a price—brought Ozzie Napgood the kind of information that had enabled him to keep a check rein on the Mexican quarter in Flatpan. Ozzie had put him on a still hunt this morning for threads that might tie in to El Lagarto.

The bottle caught Gonzales on the elbow. Judging from the way he jerked, it must have hit him on the

*Continued on page 122*

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Continued from page 120

crazy bone, and it must have hurt like fury. The thrown bottle skittered off the bar and crashed to pieces against the brass foot rail. Clear above the jangle of broken glass, Pat-hand Evoy's loud laugh sounded.

Gonzales was a little drunk himself. He could see in the bar mirror who had thrown the bottle. He grunted, swiveled his squat body around, scooped up the jagged-edged bottle neck from the floor, and came at Heck Blane, with the fearful weapon gripped for stabbing.

A hush clamped down on the room as Blane, sobered for the instant, heaved out of his chair to meet the attack. He had his bowie knife hard-gripped.

At least two men sized up his chances as hopeless, and kept their wits enough to do something about it. One of them was Pat-hand Evoy. The gambler's feet hit the floor and his hand slapped leather as he reached under his frock coat for the six-gun he always carried. The other man was Flatpan's new deputy. He got into it, too. But not with his six. It wasn't much credit to a man, Roy reasoned, to stop a drunken brawl by killing someone. So he didn't take the easy way. Instead, he flung his own muscle-knit body at the man with the jagged-edged bottle neck.

THE berserk *mestizo* swerved to meet him. Lanterman started swinging before he got anywhere near his man. It didn't look like he would connect. But the swing was timed to his fast leg movement, and his fist went through to the jaw.

That one punch was enough. Lanterman could feel the jolt through his knuckles, tingling all the way to his shoulder. The *mestizo* Gonzales tottered backward on his heels, with his knees wabbling. His stab-

bing weapon dropped from his hand, and he dropped, too, in a limp heap.

Lanterman bent to care for the man. With trouble averted, he held no grudge. Somebody else very obviously did, though. A knuckled blow from the side when he wasn't looking laid open the skin over Lanterman's cheekbone.

He got his balance, rammed around. But facing his attacker, he hesitated. It was Heck Blane who had hit him.

"What'd you have to butt in for?" young Blane railed. He had dropped his knife.

He swung, and Roy ducked that one. He had a clear opening, and reflex made his fist reach out. But he pulled the punch. He didn't want to hit a man as drunk as Blane.

But some of Blane's friends weren't as particular about fair play. They thought the new deputy was afraid to stand in to him, and since he was from outside, anyway, he was anybody's game. They closed in from all directions, ganging him.

Lanterman really went to town then. The glint of blue quartz was in his eyes, and his lips were thinned against his teeth in a grin of cold ferocity. His fists lashed out. No feinting and ducking now. Slugging, with his big fists, like ramrods, poking right and left.

They started to give way, and he carried the fight to them, pivoting, rolling with their punches when he could, and stepping into their hammering to land his own jolting blows. With three on the floor and others backing away in stiff-legged panic, he braced himself for a rush from Heck Blane. Blane came in with a drunken bellow, fists flailing.

"You won't be happy till you get

it," Lanterman gasped. "So here it is." And this time he hit him. Not any harder than was necessary. But he made it decisive. Blane dropped to the floor and went to sleep in the sawdust.

Lanterman stood over him. With the neck half torn out of his shirt, his knuckles cut, his cheek bloody and his hair disheveled, but with his eyes still like blue quartz glinting, he looked at the men who ringed him. "You had to find out about me, didn't you? All right, now you know. Do I put on another show or do you want to go back to your cards?"

They went back to their cards.

Pat-hand Evoy's loud laugh sounded. He shouldered forward. "Leave me buy you a drink, deputy."

Lanterman shook his head curtly, and raised Heck Blane from the floor and started slapping him to groggy consciousness.

Pat-hand edged in closer. "Never like to tell a man how to run his business," he let out softly, "but you're new here and it might be better not to stir up too much dust at the start."

"Throw a tighter loop," Roy advised.

Pat-hand shrugged. "Hard for a man to see his enemies in the dust, that's all."

Lanterman didn't seem to be impressed. He lifted Heck Blane to his shoulder and started with him to the door.

"Where you think you're goin' with my customer?" Pat-hand demanded, and he wasn't laughing now.

"Follow me and find out," Lanterman tossed back, and he wasn't laughing either.

## CHAPTER XIV

## THE LIZARD LAUGHS

ROY didn't let Heck Blane sleep it off in the Flatpan jail, which was probably what the youth deserved. Instead Roy took him home.

Lifting to the Manzanita range, the trail to the Cross Bar was white under the moon, and the *cholla* cactus, scattered over the gravelly hills, was drenched in glittering diamonds. Riding along, Lanterman breathed deeply of the night air, tanged with the pungency of greasewood slightly diluted with desert sage. He looked up where the stars, in vast clusters, hung in the sky. There was peace in heaven and earth.

But he knew it was an illusion. By day the *cholla* wouldn't resemble a tinselled Christmas tree. By day its billion deadly needles would be revealed. And almost any time now, tomorrow, the next day, or the next week, the savagery of which men are capable would turn this peaceful land into a shambles.

It would unless Roy Lanterman and Red Haw could stop it.

On the wide porch at the Cross Bar ranchhouse old Buffalo Blane had fallen asleep in his chair. He came awake in a hurry, tossing blankets in two directions, when Lanterman, very late that night, rode up with his charge.

"That you, Heck?" he called shrilly.

"Yeah, it's Heck," Lanterman made low answer.

Old Buffalo came out into the night shade of the pepper trees where Lanterman was untying the ropes he had been forced to use to hold Heck Blane in saddle.

"Drunk ag'in, huh?" The old man snorted in high disgust, then peered suspiciously at Lanterman. "Who are you?"

"New deputy over at Flatpan. The boy, here, was havin' a little trouble navigatin'. I brought him home."

"Mighty decent I'd say. Where'd you hook him out from, Pat-hand Evoy's?"

Roy nodded. "Pat-hand was leavin' him win chicken feed. Buildin' him up for a kill, from the looks of it."

Old Buffalo grunted, then turned fierce eyes on his son who had his feet on the ground now and was trying to make the porch under his own steam.

"Look at you," the old man said bitterly. "Drunk every night. Never amount to a hill o' beans. When I was your age I was fightin' redskin Comanches, and clearin' the range of buffalo. But you . . . you fight red-eye whiskey, is all. And all you clear is poker chips offn a table. You'd ought to be—"

"Shut up," Heck said thickly, his hand making an involuntary gesture toward his bowie knife which Lanterman had recovered for him. "Ain't gonna stand for much more out of you. Be fallin' all over you one of these times."

"That's a scan'lous way to talk to your old man, that is!" Buffalo told him. "Now get on in the house. Go on!"

With his father behind him, steadying him with one hand on the collar and one tight-gripped on the seat of the pants, Heck Blane moved right along, protesting and mouthing drunken threats.

**B**EFORE they reached the door it opened from the inside. A quick step sounded on the porch and a girl's taut voice said, "Heck, behave yourself!"

Her voice, low and controlled, had an almost magical effect on the boy.

His whole manner changed. "Oh, hello . . . hello, sis. Sorry—"

"Who's that with you, father?" the girl asked.

"New dep'ty over at Flatpan that bring Heck home."

Buffalo and the boy went in the house, and the girl stepped from the porch and came forward slowly. Lanterman stepped out of the jet night shade of the pepper trees.

"Helen!" His voice went out to her as though it was his arms reaching.

"Roy!" Her voice was a glad cry.

She started toward him, something—the sensuousness of the night, perhaps, or Helen's sweet face uplifted, her hair in disarray showing pale gold in the moonlight, made Roy forget his resolution. He pulled her closer and bent to put the kiss on her lips that he withheld that last night with the wagon train.

He didn't think of Red Haw, fair play, or anything else. Later he might have. But now he hadn't any ideas about anything except that here in his arms was the loveliest thing he had known. This girl had been in his mind and heart since the first time he had seen her, and now she was in his arms. There was nothing that could have stopped him from kissing her—except the one thing that did stop him!

That was Helen herself.

She pulled away from him. One second she had been limp and soft in his arms. The next second her lithe young body had tensed and she was pulling away.

She didn't actually say it, but it was whirling in Roy's mind that she might as well have. This: "You had your chance once. I almost threw myself at you and you wouldn't have me. Now it's too late. I . . . I'm sorry, but it's gone; I just don't feel that way about you now."

All she actually said was, "No!"

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No! There's Red, don't you remember?"

While Roy searched for any kind of an answer, a sound crept to them through the night—the distant hoof-beat of horses. It wasn't an alarming sound. The horses weren't being ridden hard. Then, wafting down from the Manzanita range came another sound, the howl of a coyote. It wasn't alarming either if you had heard it all your life.

The sounds reached inside the house to Buffalo Blane, who was as keen-eared as the day he was born. He came outside and poked around in the shadows near the chair where he had been sleeping when Roy first rode up. Then he stepped off the porch with a rifle in his hands.

"We've had some beef run off," Helen explained quickly to Roy. "Nothing serious, not more than a few. But dad's been sitting up nights with the rifle. I don't know what good it does him; he always falls asleep."

The horses were sounding closer all the time. Something about the dead monotonous beat of their hoofs got through to the old rancher. He shifted nervously.

"Some of the boys ridin' in from Sugar Crick camp, I reckon," he muttered.

The way it turned out, his guess was good as far as it went. Only it didn't go far enough. They were Cross Bar riders who trooped in to the ranchyard, but one of them was lashed across his own saddle, stomach down. When the ropes were removed he didn't slide to the ground and stagger around under his own power as Heck Blane had done. He just stayed slung across the saddle.

Pressing close, old Buffalo broke the unnatural silence. "What's happened here?" he demanded. "That's Bud Clay, ain't it, the feller Ozzie Napgood sent out here to stand guard fer me when I didn't—"

"Yeah, it's Bud—what's left of him," came the stark answer. "Keep Miss Blane back."

Even Roy Lanterman, who thought he was steeled against the sight of what man, in his incalculable cruelty, could do to man, had a cold chill when he looked upon the Cross Bar rider's mutilated body. Roy's eyes were fixed with fascinated horror on a mesquite pod that was thrust inside the mouth where the tongue had been. The pod was split at one end and a note stuck in it. With the reading of the note the hushed menace of the Lizard became suddenly very close.

The note was short. It said:

EL LAGARTO LAUGHS

**B**ACK in the town marshal's office on the main street of Flatpan Deputy Lanterman swapped war talk with Ozzie Napgood.

"It's out in the open now," Lanterman said. "Time's gettin' plumb short."

The tough little frontier peace officer drummed his fingers on the death note which his deputy had dropped on the roll-top desk. "The Lizard laughs," he said grimly. "What kind of a man is it that makes a joke out of—"

"The man's a maniac," Roy jabbed. "Delusions of grandeur that push Napoleon way back in a corner. With a brain the size of a dried-up *piñon* nut, and the low cunning of a starved lobo, and unlimited money backing, there isn't a more dangerous man alive. We're smack against the toughest proposition that's hit the border since Texas joined the Union." He hitched his chair closer to the desk. "Reckon it's time I cut you in the rest of the way, Ozzie. Listen."

Ozzie listened, dead-faced, but be-

traying his intense interest by breathing an occasional "Hm-m-m," and taking a restless twist on his cow-prong mustache.

"So that's the way of it," Roy finished. "It ain't only gun runnin' and revolution we're buckin'. With a twist-brained butcher like El Lagarto bossin' the roundup, the United States would be dragged into the mix in no time at all—"

"I get it," Ozzie cut in. "Why, Jepheth's Sunday pants, they sent you all the way down here to stop a war—one man!"

Lanterman smiled thinly. "They sent two of us. I always work with a partner. A red-headed bucko with a bullet scar across his scalp and a permanent grin on his mouth and—"

"Red Haw, you mean?" Ozzie interrupted.

"You've heard of him?"

"Heck, who hasn't?"

Roy looked pleased. "They don't come any finer. We had our orders, one to work this side the border, and one the other. We tossed for it and Red went down under."

"Hm-m-m," Ozzie murmured, jaw tightening as he looked again at that death note of El Lagarto's which lay under his hand. "Gettin' down to close cases, the Lizard's little joke last night at the Cross Bar—"

"My guess," Roy cut in, "is that it was meant as a last warnin' to Cross Bar riders to vamoose—or at least to keep lookin' the other way. I've been studyin' up your local maps. The Manzanita rough country looks like the logical place for the guns to go over. And with Buffalo Blane's Cross Bar lyin' in against the mountains on both sides the line, it narrows down farther to there."

"If that's the case," Ozzie observed, "the Cross Bar must've been

under observation ever since that windmill feller sold Buffalo the Deep Lift. He was the one tagged Miss Helen with El Lagarto's death sign, you said."

Roy nodded. "Last night's killin' has left light in from several directions. I had a talk with Buffalo. Like you said, he's stubborn as a Missouri mule. But I screwed a few things from him. Tyin' up the best I can, it goes like this. Buffalo had offers on the Cross Bar. Good offers. But he wouldn't sell. Then he got warnin's and threats. But he wouldn't scare. He did take notice of 'em enough, though, to send Helen to school in El Paso when some of the threats were directed against her.

"All right, things quieted down. But we know they were still plannin' on Buffalo's place for their gun-running operations, because the Deep Lift windmill man was there, *scouting out the situation for El Lagarto while sellin' Buffalo a windmill*. The 'salesman' learned where Buffalo's daughter was. He went to El Paso. He put the Lizard's brand on her—dropped the sun-dried lizard in her handbag when we were all ridin' the same stage-coach out of El Paso. She didn't know what it was all about, and I didn't either. But now it appears that it was for the purpose of throwin' a last-minute scare into Buffalo, showin' him how easy it was for the long arm of El Lagarto to reach out for his daughter. But when Buffalo still didn't scare enough to sell the Cross Bar and get out of the country, they threw this new scare into him, the one last night. And that brings us right up to now."

"What's Buffalo gonna do?"

"Fight 'em, he says. Claims he'll hire a gun hand to side every cowboy he's got on the place."

"He will, too, the stubborn mule. He'd ought to know he can't fight a whole Mexican army. He can't hire gunners to compete with New York *financiers*."

"That's what I told him. But maybe he won't have to."

"You mean, with things buildin' up so fast, maybe we'll scotch the Lizard right here in Flatpan by puttin' our finger on his key man?"

"That's part of it—and don't forget we got a good man in Mexico—"

"Pardon, *jefe*," a slurring voice interrupted. "You *had* a good man in Mexico."

ROY jerked around at sound of the voice, his hand slicing for his gun. Ozzie wasn't so precipitant. He had recognized the voice at once as that of the *mestizo* Gonzales, the man who—always for a price—brought the kind of news from the Mexican quarter that some day was going to earn him a cut throat.

The man was standing just outside the partly opened door.

"How long you been there?" Roy demanded.

Gonzales opened the door wide and insinuated his squat bulk inside. To Roy, he was like some huge, hulking cat. He stood there wringing his hands. "But jus' now, señor. I open the door and I hear this las' thing w'ich you say, and I have give the answer."

"What's on your mind, Gonzales?" Ozzie asked sharply.

"Yeah," Lanterman said, "and what do you mean by that crack, we *had* a good man in Mexico?"

The *mestizo* regarded him blandly. "I do not feel tough to you, señor, no, for the fist w'ich las' night you put my jaw. But the price of *frijoles* is mos' expensive—"

Old Ozzie tossed a silver dollar in the air. The *mestizo* reached out

for it with the alacrity of a lizard licking in a fly.

"Your gesture is mos' beautiful, jefe." He bowed and smiled. "Alas, it remains but a gesture. It is news of a great greatness which this time I bring you while my five little ones at home cry in hunger for frijoles. All five of them cry, jefe."

Ozzie scowled and handed the *mestizo* a five-dollar bill.

"*Mille gracias.*" Gonzales bowed. He moved his stumpy legs toward Lanterman. From within a grimy shirt he pulled a curious object, a small bag, apparently made of some coarse parchment. "For you," he said. "It has your name." He put the bag in Roy's hand and backed hastily away.

"Wait a minute, feller." Lanterman's voice cut like a bullwhip, and he took two strides, reached out and dug strong fingers in the back of the *mestizo's* neck. "Sit down!"

Silently the man plumped in a chair. Lanterman stood between him and the door, looking at the bag in his hand. His name was on it, ROY LANTERMAN, scrawled into the parchment in indelible ink. He kept looking at it, and all at once the hair at the back of his neck began to tug at its roots. A chunk of ice slid slowly down from the back of his neck along his spine. He didn't have to look at the scrawled wording of the note on Ozzie's desk. But he did look anyway. *The lettering was the same and so was the message.*

With growing dread he looked back to the bag which he held between stiff fingers.

"I have bring it," the *mestizo* whimpered, "because it has your name."

Roy's fingers, opening the crinkly parchment bag, seemed not to belong to him. He couldn't feel them. He could only see them moving. He opened the bag. Some curious

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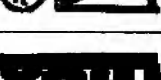
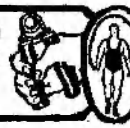
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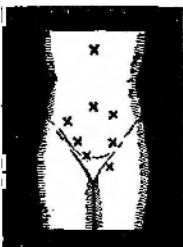
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animal skin, was his first thought, with the fur turned inside.

But the thought was a lie, because his eye had caught the color of the fur, and he had had a certain feeling about it anyway, a certain shrinking dread ever since the *mestizo* had placed the object in his hands.

It wasn't fur; it was hair. Red hair. With a furrow through it where some years before a bullet had burned. It was Red Haw's hair. The screaming knowledge clawed at Roy—Red Haw's scalp! Dried under the Mexican sun and turned wrong side out and the edges gathered to form this gruesome bag.

There was something in the bag. Roy pinched it out between two fingers. He knew what it was without looking. It was Red Haw's half of the beer token that had been chopped in two on the bar in El Paso. *Then had it been the hatchet man who had taken Red's scalp?* Roy looked down at the copper piece, at the picture of the horse-shoe on it. He turned it over. The writing said "Lucky."

Roy's other hand lifted in a mechanical way from his pocket, holding his own half of the copper token. He pressed them together. At first his fingers trembled and the two pieces didn't quite fit. But he kept trying and after a while the pieces fitted perfectly.

There was something else inside the bag. It was a scrawled note pinned to the scalp with a cactus spine. The four words danced before Roy's eyes. Then he made out:

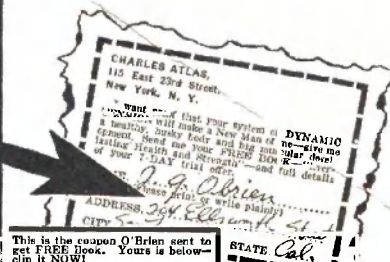
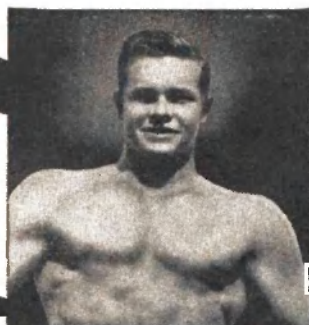
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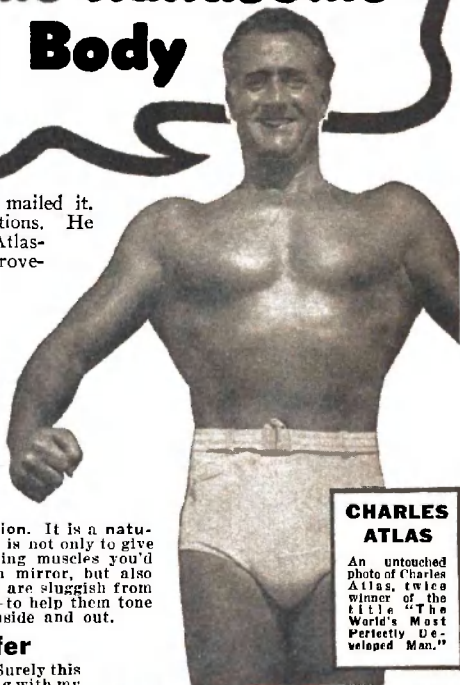
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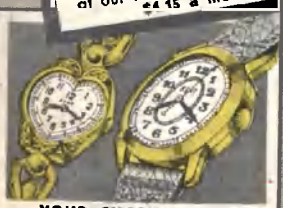
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