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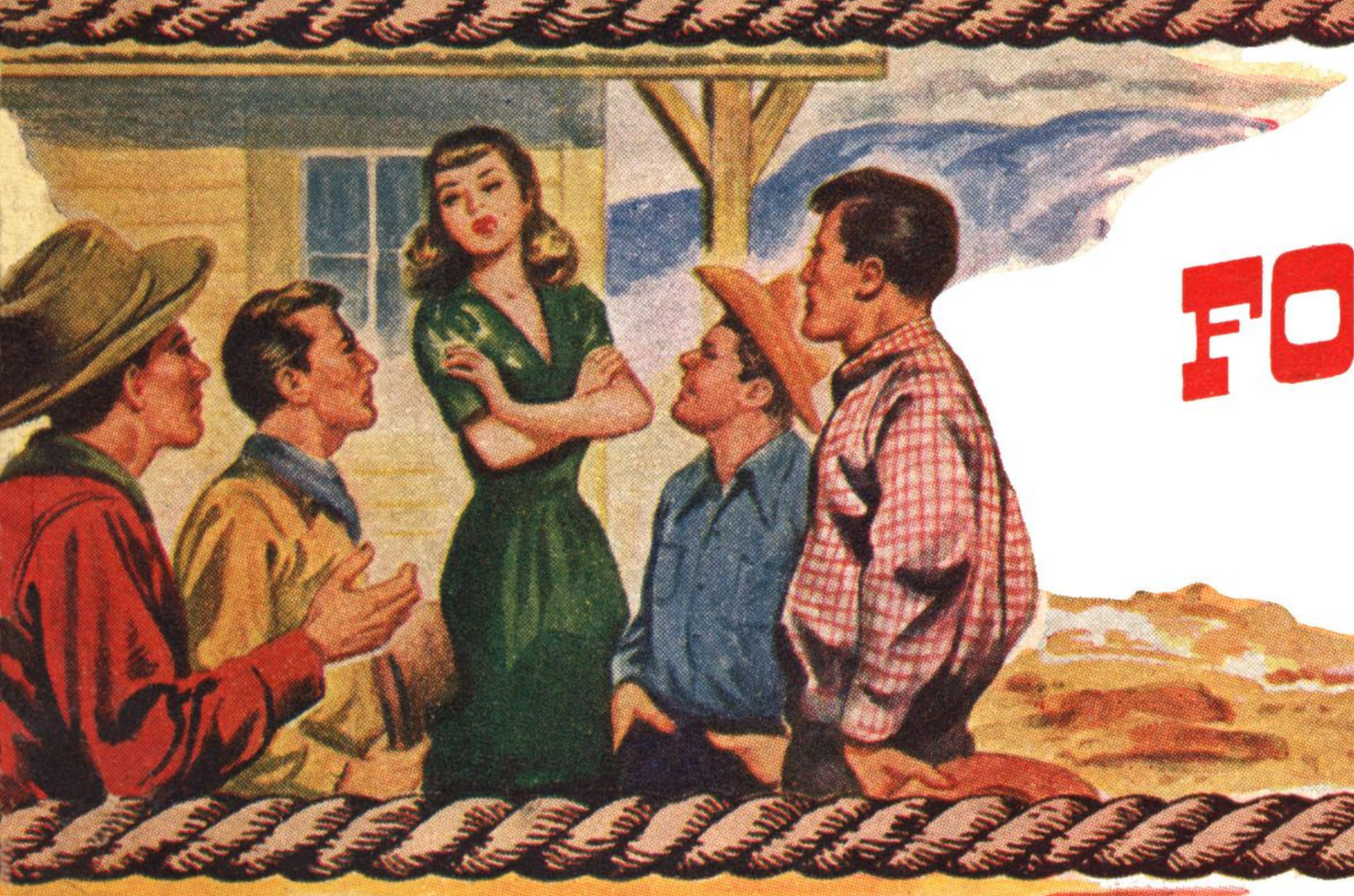

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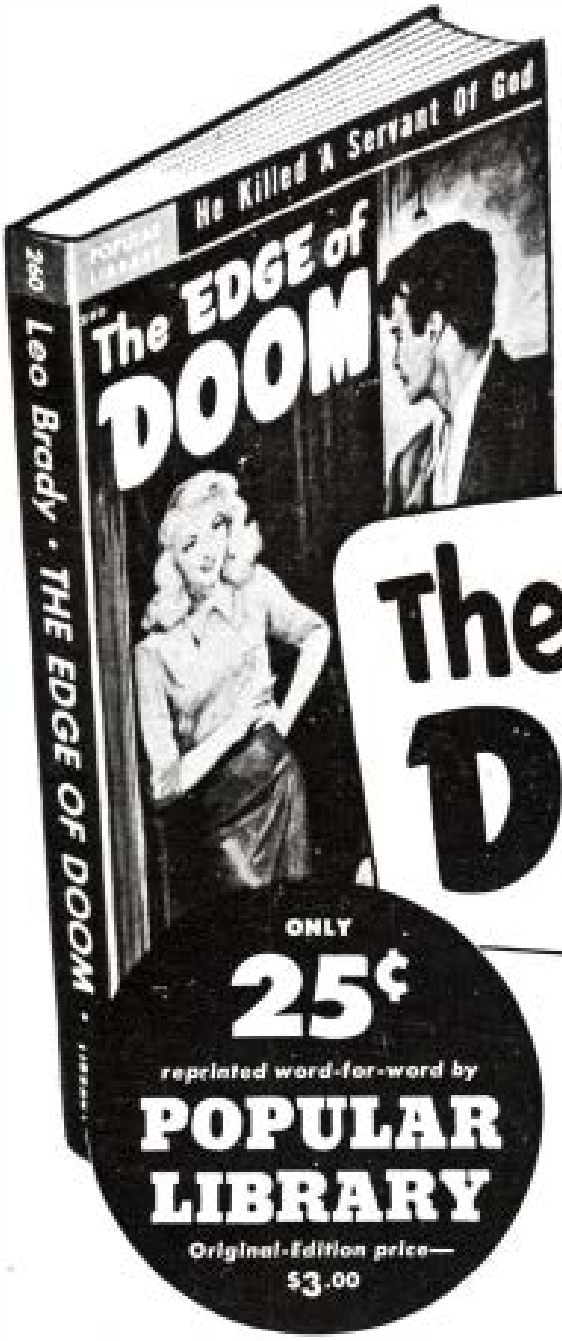

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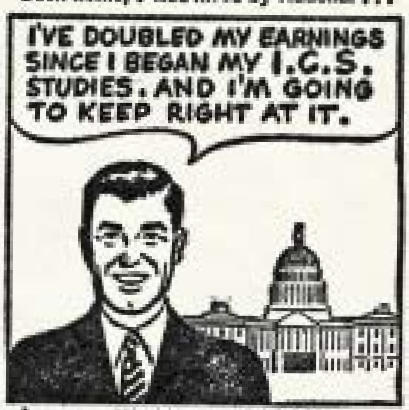

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The Trail Boss

A FRIENDLY GET-TOGETHER FOR ALL HANDS!

MAN'S endless struggle against the forces of Nature has provided many an exciting chapter in the history of the early West. But for all man's courage and his skill, Nature, when it has a mind to, can make mincemeat of his best laid plans. Droughts, floods and winter blizzards still play hob with ranchers, farmers and cattlemen.

From open range to fences and cross fences, from scrawny longhorns to fat, fast maturing beef animals like the Herefords, pioneer cattlemen and their succeeding generations of sons built a multi-million dollar cattle empire in the West. They made it as foolproof as they could—or as nearly foolproof.

Yet today many a Western stock-raiser has suddenly found himself giving new thought to an old denizen of the plains—the buffalo. How, they would very much like to know, was this big, lumbering grazing animal able to increase its herds to such vast numbers in a land where domestic cattle drift before its winter storms and die?

Blizzard Proof

What made the American bison practically blizzard proof? It is no idle question either, no mere curiosity on the part of Western ranchers. The answer may mean the saving of many beef animals now lost to winter storms, and more security for the cattle industry on the northern ranges in future. It could even extend the North American cow country range lands deep into the colder climates of the widespread plains areas in central Canada.

Scientists and college professors, as well as practical ranchers are giving this tricky problem all sorts of thought, attention and actual experiment. If they can breed—directly from the buffalo—this protective resistance to bitter winters into modern beef herds the whole horizon of the cattle country faces the possibility of an expansion that could be as startling and far-reaching in its effects as the establishment of the first cow herds on the northern ranges of Montana and Wyoming.

Winter on a Rampage

Every now and then northern winters in the West go on a rampage. There was a terrific series of severe blizzards back in 1889—the black year of the northern cattle country—that decimated herds and wiped out many a big rancher of the period. Then just a short time ago the winter of 1948-49 was another disastrous one.

That winter in 27 agonizing days 18 blinding snowstorms struck Wyoming, Nebraska and South Dakota. Temperatures went down to 40 below. Blizzard winds reached a velocity of 75 miles an hour. Snowdrifts piled up faster than plows could clear a passageway through them. Kansas, Colorado, Nevada and Utah suffered deep falls of light, dry sifting snow.

Livestock caught in the unprecedented weather bunched up and froze by the thousands. Sheep suffered even more heavily than the cattle. Even those animals that didn't die were left in a seriously weakened condition.

With bulldozers, tractors and snowplows men exerted every effort to reach their snowbound herds and bring feed to them. The Government gave the stricken ranchers every aid it could. The Air Force lent a hand with its famous operation "Haylift," which in the first 7 days it operated flew some 126 sorties over the worst of the blizzard-hit areas dropping 525 tons of baled

hay where the starving, half-frozen, bewildered cattle could reach it.

At Ely, Nevada the snow measured 24 inches on January 5th, and the mercury at times dropped to 25 below zero. Around Casper, Wyoming and Rapid City, South Dakota 36 inches of snow fell in weather that registered 40 below. On one ranch outside of Laramie 140 out of 275 Hereford yearlings succumbed to the blizzard.

A Heavy Toll

The toll was heavy throughout the storm-swept area in spite of all man could do, even with his modern machinery and the help of airplanes. Nature on a rampage was not to be denied her age-old potential for disaster.

Eventually the sun came out, and with it spring, then summer. Ranchers toting up their losses began looking for a new approach to prevent a recurrence of the tragedy. Severally and in far apart places individuals thought back to earlier days before the first white man ever set foot on the western prairies. What about the creatures that roamed the plains then? The millions of buffalo? They had thrived and prospered for unmolested centuries under all the winter weather the northern West had to offer.

Could it be, after all, that the American bison, which had been so ruthlessly and completely routed from the range held the answer to their troubles? Against heavier odds and with no assist from bulldozers, planes or air-dropt bales of hay the buffalo had always managed to maintain his numbers in a region where the ranchers' beef herds continued to drift helplessly before the storms—and die by the thousands when caught in a single blizzard.

Left to themselves buffalo had multiplied unbelievably. Why? Because Nature—the same Nature that sent the storms—had fitted them to live in such a climate. They were not creatures that had been dragged in, or driven in by man and raised there at his wishes.

Naturalists agree, I think, that of all the big game wild animals that have roved the earth within knowledgeable history, none ever equalled in numbers the millions of buffalo that once populated the western plains of the United States and Canada.

Without going into the terrible slaughter

[*Turn page*]

that virtually exterminated the buffalo within the short span of a few decades—that's water over the dam, and nothing can be done about it now—let's take a brief look at what kind of an animal this was that has, for better or worse, so completely vanished from the Western scene.

Perhaps it was inevitable that he had to go. But there is no dodging the point that he was admirably adapted to the vast grass country he ranged in.

Essentially a migratory animal, the American bison, or buffalo moved and grazed in herds. As many as a million animals at times in a single herd.

The great waves of migration swept southward over the plains with winter's coming; northward with the thaw. Yet there was no great trek of all the buffalo from the limits of the northern range clear down to the limits of the southern range.

The distance was too great. The buffalo's original habitat stretched from Great Slave Lake far up in north-central Canada clear down into Mexico at one time. Tens of thousands even crossed the Mississippi and, until the white man wiped them out, lived a life apart in the forests and grass-covered valleys of what are now the Atlantic States. These were only a minor offshoot of the Western herds.

Facing the Wind

For the most part the buffalo's seasonal migration was from about 250 to 400 miles from winter to summer range, and the same distance back. Thus herds that summered in Saskatchewan moved down into Montana in winter. Other herds that used Montana as a summer base, drifted south into Nebraska and Wyoming for the winter months. And so on down the range.

But the point our modern Western ranchers are most interested in is how they weathered the blizzards and blinding snowstorms. Unlike domestic cattle which will drift before a storm, buffalo always stood facing the wind. They didn't try to fight a snowstorm, or let it drift them at its will.

Instead, armed with the protection of thick-furred heads and shoulders, and thick-furred chaps well down to the hocks of their shaggy forelegs, they either waited patiently for the storm to blow out—whether it lasted days, or only a few hours—or else they bunched together in compact masses

with those on the outside constantly jostling to get to the inside and the warmth and protection of the inner animals' bodies.

Constant movement in the latter case kept them comparatively warm. The patient, standing still system saved their strength for pawing through the snow for food once the storm abated.

Both methods have been observed and reported on many times. Yet what probably was equally vital was their mental equilibrium. Through generations of beating the blizzards at their worst, the buffalo of the northern plains had long gotten away from the senseless, fear of domestic cattle caught in a severe snowstorm. A buffalo could take a blizzard in his stride. It was something to be expected, not an internally upsetting experience that caused butterflies to flutter in his stomach and make him lose his wits and strength and courage.

And those are qualities the northern ranchers would sure-as-shootin' like to see bred into their own domestic cattle—cattle breeds that have been at least partially protected, pampered and looked after by man since somewhere back near the dawn of human history.

For the buffalo those qualities meant that only in exceptionally severe winters was there any noticeable loss in numbers due to the ferocity of a northern blizzard. And buffalo regularly roamed as far north as the Peace river in northern Canada.

Aside from that the vanished buffalo, amazingly suited to extremes of both heat and cold, and to drought as well as storms is a "beef" animal—and the only fur-bearing member of the bovine species. Domestic cattle are also bovines.

The Cattalo

A cross is not only possible but has been made. For many years various individual ranchers and also Government authorities in both the United States and Canada have sought to produce a really workable cattalo —that is a successful cross between the bison and a domestic breed of beef cattle. They want desperately to combine those rugged, blizzard-scorning qualities of the buffalo with the beef producing abilities of domestic cattle breeds.

They've been thinking about it more than ever since the winter livestock losses of

(Continued on page 157)

when she said

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BY NORMAN A. FOX

Pride and pity lead Brian Ives to stand between the wrath of his foster-father and the homesteaders threatening the Hammer Ranch!

Ives felt the breath of a bullet, and fired his own gun (CHAP. XII)

SHADOW on the RANGE

I

THE town was called Tamerlane, and it was like all other prairie towns, a dusty clutter of buildings, vain-glorious with false-fronting. Horses had known Tamerlane; they had stirred the dust of its single street and left their droppings to gather flies. Cattle had known Tamerlane, too; they had butted at the wooden porch supports of the raw new town as they had been hazed through to Montana's thousand hills. And men —uncurried men, given to thick bull-

hide chaps and the promiscuous use of Colonel Colt's invention. They were here yet, the horses and the cattle and the men; but their sun was setting.

A man who had known all three before he had turned his hands to other things could find a sadness in the sight of Tamerlane after the years, and it was thus with young Dr. Brian Ives. A railroad had fetched him to the end of an aimless spur, a stagecoach had covered the last miles, and he stood before the stage depot in the afternoon's heat, seeing horse-and-rope men who jingled their spurs along the planking, but seeing, too, the calico and the denim of people who broke the sod.

At his feet sat his carpetbag and his instrument case; he had brought no more than these, and they held the last decade of his life locked in them. He had not been one to lay his hands on worldly goods, and even the Prince Albert coat, accepted garb of the professional men of his day, was worn thin at the elbows. The coat gave him an added tallness—he topped six feet—but it was his face that people remembered. It recalled photographs of the young Abraham Lincoln in his Springfield years and his eyes were gray and grave, his hair brown and unruly.

The coach that had brought him had wheeled on around to the wagon yard, and there was no one here to meet Ives. He'd expected that. He picked the two bags from the planking and headed toward the livery stable where he could rent a buggy. He took his time, letting the old, remembered things make their impact. He walked unrecognized; he had expected that, too. But when he saw a man seated on the edge of the board walk, his feet a tangle before him, he said, "Hello, Charley," making an experiment of it.

Charley, who was the town drunk, lifted his red-streaked eyes and looked long and hard and said, "Ives—Brian Ives," as though not believing it. Then, as Ives paced onward, Charley lurched diagonally across the street. Charley had found something to make this day different from the days before. Charley had news.

Ives smiled. He got to the livery, and there was no one in its shadowy depth; the horses stood listlessly in their stalls. Beyond was the street and the steady current of reality, and he stepped back into it reluctantly.

Across the street came three men. The leader was young and clean-shaven and golden blond; and Ives had never seen him before. He wore wool pants and a belted six-shooter, and his hat was a cowboy's, yet he was not of the ranch breed. How Ives knew this, he couldn't have said; perhaps it was the walk of the youngster. His eyes were on Ives, but he had not called out, so Ives put his back to him and headed along the street. He was abreast of the Congress Saloon and across the street from the drug store when the youngster said, "Hold up a minute, Ives!"

Ives stopped and turned around and said, "Yes?"

"You came in on the stage a while ago?" the youngster said.

"Yes, I came in on the stage."

"It leaves again this evening," the youngster said. "Be on it."

IVES thought, "Here it is. Already," and wished for his gun which was in his carpet bag; and then he saw the fourth man. He was across the street, lounging in the shade of a doorway, a square-cut man with a brutish hunch to his shoulders. This sort of maneuvering was older than grass, and Ives had known the pattern before he'd known the Latin that went into a prescription. He placed the flat of his palms against the chest of the youngster and shoved him hard into the arms of the two behind; and at the same time went down to one knee, expecting the man across the street to start the shooting.

The youngster rebounded from the two who'd caught him, a heady anger tearing all thinking out of him, and a

man in a window above the drug store said then, "Break it up, Cory!" The window framed a face that might have been a rising moon, round and fat and jovial, but it was the shotgun that Ives saw first. The man behind it said again, "Break it up, Cory! This old Parker is loaded with wagon bolts and broken bottles, and they'd have to bury you in a basket." And then, with equal affability, "Howdy, Doc. Welcome home."

BRIAN IVES

Ives said, "Hello, Stoll. You're certainly in the right place at the right time!"

Cory looked at Ives with hatred and said, "I've been pushed before. I've always found the time and place to push back. That goes for you, and it goes for Colonel Carradine, when you see him."

Ives said, "I'll tell him that," as Cory turned on his heel and strode away, the two wordlessly following after him. The square-cut man in the doorway had vanished. From the window, Stoll said, "Come on up and pass the time of day, Doc. You remember the layout? The stairs are at the back of the drug store."

The living quarters of the man were over-furnished and repulsive with mohair, a marble-topped table centered the room with a chessboard laid out. Marco Stoll waved Ives to a chair and said, "Whatever fetched you back here, Doc? It's been ten years, hasn't it?"

"Ten," Ives said. "One year knocking about. Two years in medical school. The last few I've been practicing in Oregon."

"You've built up a nice practice?"

"It takes in a lot of country," Ives said. "I'm a saddlebag sawbones who spends more time riding than counting pulses. And sometimes I take my pay in potatoes. But I like it. A city practice would stifle a range-reared man."

"Yes," Stoll said, "you had elbow room on the Hammer, and that would have become habit with you. You didn't say why you came back to Montana."

"Tana sent for me," Ives replied.

Stoll raised his eyebrows. "So?" he said. "She comes in sometimes. It's through her that I kept track of you." He smiled. "Tana told you of the trouble?"

Ives said, "The Colonel is getting old—and cantankerous. Tana thought I could be of help to him. Yes, she hinted of trouble." He gestured toward the street. "Apparently she knew what she was talking about. Who was that young fireeater?"

"Cory Lund," Stoll said. "There are a lot of nesters along the upper Sombra. An oldster who looks as though he stepped right out of the Old Testament is the leader of them. Elisha Lund. He believes that a soft answer turneth away wrath. Young Cory, his cub, hasn't lived long enough to learn that."

"He had me rigged good and tight," Ives said. "Across the street was a square-cut fellow with a pair of shoulders that would do credit to an ox."

STOLL frowned. "That would be Brule. He's a saddle bum who drifted in. I can't believe he'd be sitting in on Cory's game."

"Old Charley recognized me earlier," Ives mused. "He went legging it to spread the word. I suppose that's what set this Cory prowling for me. But how do I count in his scheme of things?"

"Colonel Carradine is crowding the nesters, Doc. It's the old, old story of big rancher and small rancher, except that the Colonel can't see that the day of the open range is over. The law favors the covered wagon over the chuck-wagon any day. But Carradine's talking of importing gunmen and making a wholesale clean-up."

Ives said slowly, "So that's what Tana was worrying about."

Stoll said, "You don't owe a thing to Colonel Carradine. Yes, he raised you, and he educated you after a fashion. But it was bitter bread he gave you to eat. And you just about worked your way through medical school. All the help you ever got from him you paid for in sweat before you left Hammer." He smiled. "Are you going to set up practice here, Doc?"

Ives said, "I'm going to Hammer and find out what it is Tana thinks I can do. Then I'm going to do it. You were right about the bitter bread, Stoll; but Colonel Carradine was as much of a father as I ever had. I've learned a few things since I took to doctoring. One of them is that all the ills aren't of the flesh."

Stoll shook his head. "Cory Lund's advice wasn't bad, even though it was given in belligerency. He hates Colonel Carradine and I suppose he's heard that you're a sort of foster son of Carradine's. Let me give you the same advice. Take that stage out tonight. You can't live the Colonel's life for him."

Ives also shook his head. "This is something I can't turn my back on. I'm heading for Hammer as soon as I can rent a buggy."

Stoll sighed. "If you must go, you're welcome to mine. I keep it in the livery stable yard. You can have one of the Hammer hands fetch it back."

Ives said, "Thanks," and came to his feet.

Stoll crossed to the chessboard. "If you must stay, it will be nice having you here. There's been no doctor since old Doc Ellenberg died." He glanced at the board. "Do you favor this game?"

"I understand it's for brainy people," Ives grinned.

Stoll sighed again. "I've played alone for a long time."

"I'll send the buggy back soon," Ives said and walked toward the door. Stoll still stood by the table, his finger caressing one of the chessmen. It was a pawn; Stoll raised his hand to wave a farewell to Ives, and his fingernail flicked the pawn and it fell, spilling half a dozen others.

II

STOLL'S buggy was the square box type. His carpetbag and instrument case stowed beneath the seat, Ives tooled it out of the wagon yard and along the street. The town fell behind, and Ives took the road north to Hammer and was alone with the prairie. He drove with no conscious thought, and he drove with a bleak aloneness.

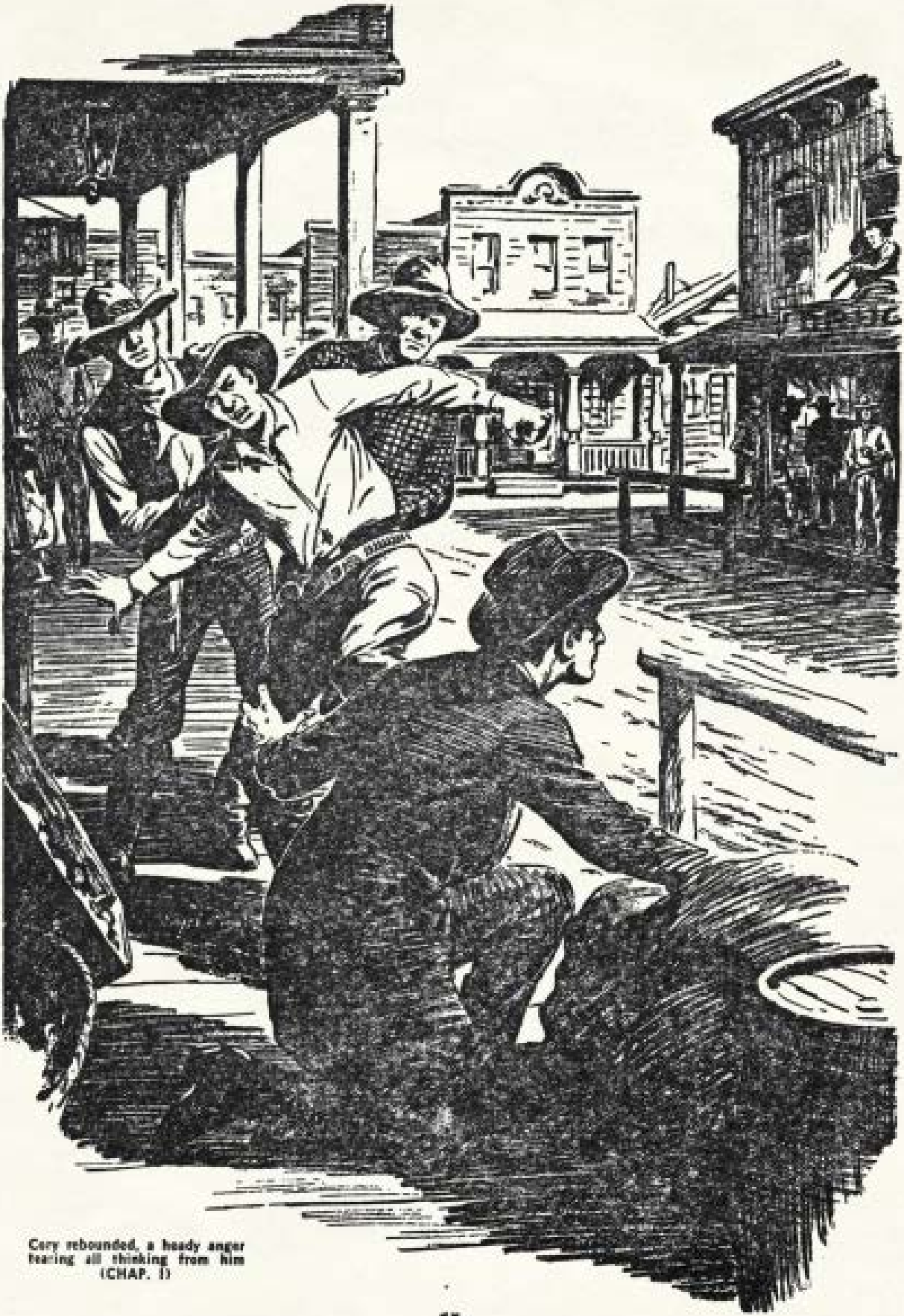
And then, suddenly, he was afraid.

A man should be able to dredge up something better than fear from his homecoming. He'd ridden these prairies as a small boy, he'd got his first schooling in Tamerlane, his formative years had belonged to this land. They should hold a wealth of memory. Yet there was nothing from those years worth the cherishing; he'd buried them under a layer of other years, and until Tana's letter had come he'd been satisfied to leave them buried. Two men had told him to take the stage out tonight. It would be an easy thing to do, and he was of a mind to do it. Yet he kept the buggy headed north, crossing the familiar land, and the old years burst through again like land tossed up by an earthquake.

The school in Tamerlane and the teacher—what had been her name?—and that ancient, crazy jingle, "As I was going to St. Ives, I met a man with seven wives." Her starchy voice. "Do you know where St. Ives is, children? Brian, your name is Ives. Probably once, long ago, the name was St. Ives. What sort of name is Ives, Brian?"

His childish voice quavering in his ears. "I—I don't know."

Then, later, a boy confronting that



Cory rebounded, a heady anger tearing all thinking from him (CHAP. I)

gray ghost of a man, Colonel Carradine. "I'd like to know, sir, who my people were." And Carradine's reply, the white scar on his forehead flaming red. "Don't ever ask me that! Don't ever ask me that again!"

Ives used the buggy whip, lifting the horse to a run, and he kept at this pace until he saw the straying saddler. Ives stopped the buggy. The road had swung near the Sombra River; over where the willows fringed the stream, there was a gay splashing; and Ives smiled, understanding. Some cowboy was easing the heat of the day by having himself a swim, and his horse had strayed meanwhile. Thinking this, Ives pulled the buggy to the side of the road and dropped the iron weight with its leather strap and climbed from the vehicle.

He approached the horse gingerly, afraid it would bolt, but the animal let him come to its head and get a hand on the bridle. Thinking to save its owner a long trudge home, he led the mount toward the willows and wedged his way through them and came to the bank of the Sombra just as the owner—a girl—waded ashore.

The girl, seeing him, crossed her arms before her body and darted up the bank. Stooping low, she scooped up a bundle of clothes and plunged into a thicket of brush. From this cover she said tartly, "You could have called out!"

"I could have called out," he conceded and lowered his glance to the ground and kept it there until shortly she emerged, wearing denim trousers and buttoning a cotton shirt. She had brown hair and brown eyes and the kind of face that went with gaily-curtained kitchens and flour dough and the smells of baking; but that was only at first glance. Her lips were a little too full, and they made her sensual and roguish at the same time. She clapped a shapeless felt hat upon her head and seated herself upon a rock and began tugging on her boots, and he thought, "Why, I'm more embarrassed than she is!"

"I found your horse straying," he explained at last, and then, hoping it would help relieve the awkwardness, "I'm a doctor. I'm used to the unexpected."

She said, "The next time, you holler."

"I will," he promised gravely and turned away.

He had taken five steps before she said, "Just a minute." He turned, and she said, "Thanks for fetching back my horse, Doctor."

She was smiling, and her smile was as roguish as he had imagined it would be. He said, more gravely than ever, "Perhaps our positions will be reversed some day. Then you can do the same for me."

"I'll be glad to." Her smile never wavered; her eyes were dancing when he put his back to her a second time.

IT WASN'T until he was in the buggy and had clucked the horse into motion that he realized he hadn't learned her name. He wondered if he would ever see her again, and he carried the thought of her with him until it was banished by the second adventure of this trip from town.

The land had taken to humping its back; the road, veering away from the river, cut beneath sandy banks, and it was in the shadow of one of the cutbanks that he heard the voice. The single word, repeated, might have been, "Help!" Again Ives hauled at the reins and wrapped them around the whipstock and dropped the iron weight; but when he let himself to the ground, he could see no one, and he cried, "Where are you?"

"Up here!" Feebly.

He clawed his way up the sandy face of the cutbank and found the man writhing upon its crest, the square-cut man with the brutish shoulders. Beyond, and screened from the road, a saddle horse stood ground-anchored. Not six feet from the man, a rattlesnake lay twitching, but the snake was dead. Cigarette stubs littered the ground around the man, his gun lay at his fingertips—the gun that had killed the snake. But first the snake had struck.

"How long ago?" Ives demanded, but Brule's answer was a babbling, without meaning.

Ives got a jackknife from his pocket and ripped at Brule's right pants leg and exposed the wound; it was in the fleshy part of the calf of his leg, and the leg was swelling. Ives fumbled for a match and held the blade of the knife in

the flame, and then bent quickly and made his incisions and put his lips to the wound. He sucked hard and spat, gagging and growing sick. He did this again and again. When he was sure he had drawn the poison, he felt Brule's pulse and found it strong.

He edged Brule around, wanting the man's body to lie uphill; and a wisp of yellow caught Ives' eye. A bit of paper had worked from Brule's pocket as the man had writhed in pain and had been concealed by his body. It was the torn half of a hundred dollar bill.

"Am I gonna live, Doc?" Brule groaned.

"Likely," Ives said. "You'll have to take it easy for a while, and then I'll get you down to the buggy. I'm going on to Hammer."

Brule said, "If I can travel by buggy, I can travel by horse. I'm not going to Hammer."

Ives shrugged. "Suit yourself."

Brule said, "What do I owe you for this, Doc?" and it was a sneer.

Ives' lips stiffened. "You don't deal in the kind of coin that interests me. I want you to know I'm not pleased with myself for this. You're a hired killer. In town you were backing up a play for that Lund kid, and I was supposed to be in the middle of it. Now it looks like you're hunting bigger game—hundred dollar game. Would that be Colonel Carradine?"

Brule's eyes narrowed. "So you found the dinero?"

"There was enough sign as it was," Ives said. "Your horse out of sight, an hour's smoking, the gun. The snake was the thing you didn't count on—the biter got bitten. And of all the men in the world, I had to come along. I should have left you lie. If I'd been more a man and less a doctor, I would have. You weren't worth the bother, Brule."

Brule said, "You talk too much, Doc. You better get along, Doc."

"Yes," Ives said, "I'd better get along. And you'd better favor that leg for awhile. Don't try moving until you are sure you're able."

He turned and clambered down the cutbank to the road; he paused here to beat the dust from his Prince Albert coat, and, this done, he set his foot to the buggy's step. There was fire and sound then, and a motionless moment when the fire and sound engulfed him. Now he knew, too late, for whom it was that Brule had waited by the roadside.

"YOU'VE got to get up!" Suddenly Ives could make that out clearly. "I can't get you into the buggy, unless you help. You're too heavy!" She said the same thing again, her hands tugging at his armpits. "Don't you understand?" she panted. "I'm trying to help you!"

He remembered Brule then, Brule and the rattlesnake and the torn half of a hundred dollar bill, and the shot. It was the same girl he'd caught in swimming. She had got him to a sitting position, and tried lifting his head. Then he realized that time had passed; the sun had moved. He concluded that Brule had left him for dead and that the girl had come riding along and found him.

She said, "Do you think you could get to your feet?"

He made the try, got to a shaky stand, and she got his left arm across her shoulder. She said, "Just stand like this till you're a little stronger. Then we'll try getting you into the buggy."

He made an impatient gesture with his free hand and took a lurching step toward the buggy. He said, "I'm glad you came along." He got to the buggy and reached out for it, getting his foot on the step, and she pushed at him as he tried hoisting himself upward. He sprawled across the leather-covered seat and might have fallen out the far side, but he reached for a hold on the dashboard. He hoped Marco Stoll's horse wasn't skittish and wouldn't decide to take off at this precise moment, but the horse hadn't run at Brule's shot. He wanted nothing more than to sprawl out on the seat and go to sleep, but the seat was too narrow for that; he'd tried sleeping in a buggy in Oregon when night calls had taken him too far from his office.

The girl seemed to have vanished; she was tying her saddler behind the buggy. She came back into his range of vision, tossing his hat into the buggy and climbing in and tugging at him again, forcing him to a sitting position. She

hoisted the iron weight and set it upon the floorboards, unwrapped the reins from around the whipstock, and said, "Where to?"

"Hammer," he said.

She turned her head, her eyes startled and a little afraid. She said, "Then you'd be Dr. Ives. I should have figured that out."

He said, "You're one of those nesters, I'd guess. If you're afraid of Hammer, I'll make out alone."

Her eyes became steel. "I'm not afraid of Hammer," she said.

"Good for you!" he said, but it was lost in the clatter of wheels. She had clucked the horse into motion and they were off down the road.

They should be at Hammer's gate within the hour, he judged, and then he forgot about it, losing himself in a half-world of pain and fever. The girl was keeping the horse at a good lively clip; her glance, when it was directed at him, grew worried. It seemed increasingly harder for him to sit up; he wanted to explore his wound but he didn't dare take his hands from the dashboard. After a while he saw the dying sunlight glinting on barbed wire, and a gate ahead. It was a wooden gate with a rustic arch above it, made from peeled willows, with the word HAMMER shaped upon it.

The girl said, "We're nearly there."

"Hammer," he said. "They should have added Dante's line, 'All hope abandon, ye who enter here'."

She started to dismount to open the gate; some instinct of gallantry made him try to struggle out of the buggy. She pushed him back firmly, saying nothing, and after they had driven through and she had closed the gate, they wound along a remembered avenue of cottonwoods. And then the buildings sprawled ahead—the long, low ranchhouse, the barn and outhouses and corrals; and the buggy wheeled into the space before the ranchhouse and came to a stop.

A DOG came running to greet them; Ives didn't remember this dog. He had expected to see part of the crew in the yard, but the crew wasn't here; there was just the one old man standing before the ranchhouse gallery, the wild-maned old man in the tattered clothes, and the girl on the gallery. The girl was tall and black-haired and she was peering at the buggy as if trying to see whom it held. Ives didn't remember the girl, either, not at first. And then he said, wonderingly, "Montana!" Tana had been thirteen when he left. Thirteen and ten made Tana twenty-three and a woman.

The girl at the reins said sharply, "Well, come and help me with him!"

Tana came running down the steps and across to the buggy; Ives tried rising to meet her and almost pitched to the ground. Tana got hold of him, and the nester girl's hands were under his armpits again, and between them they managed to get him unloaded. Tana cried, "Tom! Come here and help me."

The old fellow came forward, his laughter a dry cackle, and he said, "So the grave give him up. I always said it would."

Ives thought, "Why, it's old Tom Feather, and just as crazy as ever!"

Tana had an arm around him, and between the two, Tana and Tom Feather, they got him up the gallery steps; he wondered about the nester girl, he struggled to turn and look for her, and he saw her untying her horse from the back of the buggy and mounting the animal. He tried to call after her, but it was only a croak.

"I think he wants you to wait," Tana called.

The girl turned in her saddle. "I've got him here," she said. "He can tell you all you'll need to know. Tell Colonel Carradine I wouldn't have set foot on Hammer for my own sake." She wheeled her horse and, lifting it to a gallop, was soon lost in the cottonwoods.

Tana said, "Come, Brian. We've got to get you to bed."

They half-dragged him through the house, and he saw the cool whiteness of a bed in a dim room, and it was the easiest thing in the world to fall upon that bed. Tana tugged at his boots, and he heard her say, "Get his clothes off him, Tom, and get him under the covers. I'll heat some water."

Ives said, "I never even found out her name!"

"She's Marybelle Lund," Tana said. "She's new here since your time, Brian."

"Lund," he repeated, wondering where he'd heard the name, and then it came back to him. Lund—Cory Lund. He began to laugh; it seemed funnier than all get-out. Cory Lund's sister!

Tana turned to Tom Feather. "Tom, you'd better go find the Colonel and tell him about this. Can you remember?"

Feather's laugh was that familiar dry cackle. "I'll remember, and he'll remember," he said. "Oh, it will be a great day for the Colonel!"

He was gone then, and Tana stood beside the bed and said, "Do you suppose you could eat something, Brian?"

He said, "I'll sleep. I'll feel better then. But first tell me—what the devil is happening on this range?"

"You mustn't talk now," she said. "Wait till after the Colonel comes."

Twice now she'd referred to her grandfather as "the Colonel," as though there were no personal tie between them. She might have been a hand drawing Hammer's pay. That was queer, he thought, and he tried to remember if she'd always talked that way, or if she'd had another name for the Colonel in the old days. He couldn't remember and the task seemed hardly worth the bother, and it was much easier to slip into troubled sleep.

III

COLONEL KEVIN CARRADINE had come to Montana from Texas. Carradine was of the South, but in his lean lankiness and thin, blue-veined hands and finely chiseled aristocratic features there was the remembrance of a different South than Texas', a malarial South of swamp and moss-veiled trees and great white houses with fluted pillars. An unreconstructed Rebel, his title was more than honorary. He had followed Beauregard through the years of the war, and he affected the white goatee and mustache of a Kentucky judge of horses and whiskey.

There was little of cattledom about

Half supported by Marybelle the wounded Ives staggered to the buggy (CHAP. II)

him. He had spent a lot of his life in a saddle, but his walk didn't show it. He dressed as though every day were Sunday; he favored black suits and black string ties and hats that would have needed only the insignia to be Confederate campaign hats. Your cattle king is salty of speech, and a sprinkle of Spanish is on his tongue. Colonel Carradine's house held more books than one man could have read in a lifetime, but he had read them, and you knew it when he talked.

He had not talked today, not yet. He sat on Hammer's gallery; and Brian Ives sat beside him, nearly a whole man after his night of tossing and turning. At last Carradine said, "What brought you back to us, sir?"

The "sir" was the surprising thing; perhaps it was a concession to Ives' maturity; perhaps it was a closing out of older days when they had been father and son, after a queer fashion. Ives had had no chance to talk with Tana, and because of this he was careful with his answer, wanting it to hold no commitment, and he said, "Call it homesickness, if you like."

Carradine said, "I took the liberty of having one of my crew return the horse and buggy to town this morning. Marco Stoll knows he is not welcome on this ranch, in any form or manner!"

"He intimated as much," Ives said. "But I was grateful for the buggy."

"It was his way of jibing at me," Carradine said emphatically. "I grant your innocence in the matter." He dismissed the subject with a wave of his hand. "Perhaps you intend to start a practice here. The Aesculapian art died on this range with Doctor Ellenberg."

"It might not be a bad idea," Ives said. "The country is filling up."

The scar on Carradine's forehead turned a slight pink. "That might be changed."

Ives said bluntly, "You mean that you intend to run the nesters off the range? I'm told that you intend importing gunmen. I don't think I need to tell you that you'll be writing your own doom if you do."

Carradine's eyebrows arched. "Whoever your informant was, he seems to know a great deal about my affairs. You've evaded my question, sir. Are you going into practice here?"

"I haven't decided," Ives said. "Would I have any patients? Or would they all remember that I'm tied to Hammer? I've stopped a bullet since I came home. I suppose that's a sign of the times."

CARRADINE said, "That makes me obligated to you. From what Montana tells me, the bullet was likely intended for me. Will you inform me how I can discharge the debt as quickly and as thoroughly as possible?"

Ives thought, "You might give me a civil word, and that would do!" But he merely said, rather lamely, "I hope you'll call off this notion of warring against the nesters."

The Colonel said, "Should it matter to you?"

"I don't know," Ives said. "Each of us has got to think according to his light. I used to suppose that a doctor was some kind of miracle man; I've lived to learn that his knowledge isn't as omniscient as people like to think. I've ridden thirty miles through an Oregon blizzard to sit by a bedside where I knew I couldn't do any earthly good. But maybe I made some poor devil's last hours a little more comfortable, and maybe I brought a measure of faith to the people he left behind him. We can't stop suffering, but it's been kind of worked into my grain to lessen human suffering as much as I can. And that can't be done with imported gunmen."

He expected the Colonel's sneer. But the Colonel didn't sneer. He only nodded.

"Certainly we must think according to our light! Mine is a more practical one. I came north to this range. I brought my cattle here and wintered them through a hard winter and saw myself ruined, so I started over. I claimed this land and salted it down with my sweat to prove my claim. Now barbed wire has been strung upon it and corn fields shut me out from a river I've always owned, and my beef goes into nester frying pans. The law says the nester has a right to be here, and the courts move almighty slow. A gun works faster. I've always fought for

what is mine. I always will."

Ives said hotly, "Then go ahead and fight. And before the year is out, they'll be planting wheat over your grave."

"Perhaps," the Colonel said, and suddenly his lanky body stiffened. Ives looked and saw a man riding up through the avenue of cottonwoods to the very yard of Hammer.

Carradine said softly, "The nerve! The unmitigated nerve of him!"

The man was dismounting; he was a youngman, and he wore the hateddenim of the sod-busters, but he also wore a calfskin vest, and a ball-pointed sheriff's star was pinned upon it. He came toward the gallery with a loose-jointed stride and said, very casually, "Good afternoon, Colonel."

Carradine said, "Can it be, sir, that you didn't understand me the last time we met?"

The sheriff shrugged. "This isn't a pleasure jaunt. I wouldn't have set foot on Hammer if I didn't have to." He looked at Ives. "You'd be Doctor Brian Ives?"

Ives nodded.

"I'm sorry," the sheriff said. "You'll have to ride to town with me. I'm Rod Benedict, sheriff of the county."

"For what reason?" Carradine demanded.

"Arrest on suspicion of murder," Benedict said. "He had a run-in with young Cory Lund yesterday. Cory hasn't been seen since. This morning his horse was found standing at his corral gate. With blood on the saddle. I'm sorry, but you see how it looks."

Carradine came to his feet, fire blazing in his eyes; but Ives thrust out his arm, the gesture holding the Colonel silent.

Ives said, "I can account for my movements, Sheriff. I left town not long after I saw Lund. I met two people on the road to Hammer. One of them came the last half of the trip with me."

"I know about that, Doctor," Benedict said. "Marybelle told me. But you were alone for quite a spell. Supposing Cory cut out of town ahead of you and waited along the road to take up where he'd left off. Supposing one word had led to another, and you hadn't had any choice. You see how it could have been?"

MEN were drifting into the front yard, the men of Hammer who weren't in saddles today. They stood in little knots of twos and threes; their thumbs hooked in their gun-belts; they stood, saying nothing, but they were here. Ives could feel them as well as see them, and the makings of big trouble were in the air. Only a signal was needed now, and the signal would have to come from the Colonel.

Then Carradine said, "You can go back to the farmers who put you in office and tell them that this insult to Hammer failed. Tell them you haven't grown wide enough across the britches to pluck a prisoner off Hammer."

Benedict said slowly, "I'm not going back without him, Colonel," and he reached for his holstered gun and drew it, the movement deliberately awkward and slow. Any man in that yard could have beaten him, but the signal hadn't come from the Colonel.

Carradine said, "You realize, sir, that you'd get no farther than the gate?"

Tana, who had come onto the porch, drew in her breath. "Rod! No!" she cried.

Benedict shook his head. "I'm not going back without him," he said. "I don't say he's guilty; that's for somebody else to decide. But he's under arrest."

Ives said quietly, "I'll go along with you, Benedict."

Tana said quickly, "You'll want your things. I'll get them for you." She darted into the house, and Ives turned and followed her. He met her returning from the bedroom, the carpetbag in one hand, his instrument case in the other. He hadn't meant to take the instrument case along; the carpetbag held clean shirts and he might need a change, but he took both bags. In the semi-gloom of the house, Tana's face was a white shadow.

Ives said softly, "Don't worry. No harm will come to him."

She pressed his arm. She said, "Thanks, Brian."

He said, "I'll clear this up in a hurry. We'll have our chance to talk then."

He came out upon the gallery; Colonel Carradine still stood, and Rod Benedict hadn't moved in the yard, and Ham-

mer's crew waited. Ives went down the gallery steps, not looking at the Colonel, and he said to Benedict, "Will your horse carry double? I haven't a mount of my own."

Benedict grinned then, and, grinning, pouched the gun.

"I reckon," he said. "Here, I'll tie those bags to the saddle."

They rode in silence at first; then Ives broke the silence to ask, "Does the girl think I shot her brother?" And Benedict said, "Nobody's ever known what Marybelle thought about anything. . . . Who was it cut you down yesterday, Doc? Did Cory Lund get in one good lick?"

"The fellow calls himself Brule."

Benedict considered this for a moment. "That makes more sense. Brule, eh? He hasn't showed himself since yesterday."

Ives said, "You puzzle me, friend. Farmer votes may have pinned that star on you. But I'll bet the dust you've tasted was the dust of the drag, not of the plow."

Benedict grinned.

"Can't a cowboy hanker to put down roots?"

"With a star on his vest?"

"I worked for Carradine," Benedict said. "That was long after you left the ranch. The cattlemen preempted the land; you know that. To make it legal, when the Homestead Act came into effect, they had their men file on a hundred and sixty acres each, and they threw up shacks for us so we could qualify. The thought came to me one dark night—since I was going through the motions of being a homesteader, why shouldn't I end up by owning the land?"

"How long did it take the Colonel to hand you your walking papers after that?"

The sheriff grinned again. "I disrecollect. He was a powerfully angry man when I told him. But maybe he was right, at that. I raised the sickest damn corn you ever did see. But the farmers knew which side I was on. Come last election, they wrote me into the ballot. They tell me the Colonel didn't eat for three days."

Ives looked at the sun. "We'd better be getting on into town."

THEY rode into Tamerlane at dusk, and they spread excitement before them as they came down the street; Ives saw men stare and then turn and run to carry the news to others, and the word was a rock dropped into water and spreading out ever widening circles. Marco Stoll sat at his window, and Ives gave him a wave. Stoll nodded back; he looked like a man far too surprised for coherent thinking.

The jail-house sat on the town's edge, but Benedict passed it. To Ives he said, "The jail isn't the best in the world, Doc. I'm taking you to my home."

Ives said, "If it had been me that had turned up missing, and Cory Lund you had to collar, where would you have put him?"

"In the jail, I guess."

"Then that's where I'm going."

Benedict spread his hands. "Hell, Doc, I might not have ridden away from Hammer with a whole skin today. Don't you think I know that?"

Ives said, "That doesn't matter. There's likely to be trouble enough on this range without hurrying it. What are your farmers going to say if you pamper me?" He stepped toward the door. "Do I have to lock myself up?"

Benedict said slowly, "Maybe you're right. Maybe you're right at that."

They turned back. Before the jail-building, Benedict untied Ives' bags from the saddle and fetched them into the office and placed them on his desk. Behind this room was another, the single cell of the jail, its barred door ajar. When Ives walked into the cell, Benedict said, "I'll go fetch you some supper. Just make yourself at home." He hesitated, looking toward his desk where a huge key lay. "If you would just give me your word—"

"Lock me up," Ives said.

Benedict shut the barred door and turned the key in the lock and put the key back on his desk. Ives watched him walk across the office and close the outer door behind him quietly. Within half an hour, Benedict was back, bearing a tray. He watched while Ives ate, then said, "I'll be moseying around the town, Doc. If you want anything, set up a holler. Somebody will hear you. Send him for me."

"I'll make out."

Again the door was locked. An hour passed before he heard boots in the office again; it was too dark to see who had entered, but he knew from the step that it was not Benedict. The man fumbled about; a match flared and was touched to the wick of a lamp on Benedict's desk, and then the man stepped to the barred door. He was a big, broad-shouldered man with a yellow beard and gaunt, hard-planed features. He said with just a trace of Scandinavian accent, "You're Doc Ives?"

"Yes," he said, "I'm Ives."

"I'm Elisha Lund."

Only the barred door was between them, and the key was there on the desk. Ives thought, "Did he leave the key lying around so anybody could pick it up and pay me a visit?" And then he understood. That was exactly what Rod Benedict had done, but the key was for Hammer if Hammer came to try a jail-delivery. But no one had counted on Elisha Lund.

Lund said, "I just—"it sounded a little like "yoost"—"wanted a look at you."

"Take your look," Ives said.

Lund peered at him; then shook his giant's head. "You didn't do it," he said. "You ain't a killer."

Startled, Ives said, "How can you be sure?"

"You wouldn't have let yourself be brought in and locked up. You wouldn't have risked that. You are a goot man, I think. My son is wild; he was born to trouble. But he wouldn't have got bad trouble from you."

"He ordered me out of town."

Lund's huge shoulders lifted, fell. "As long as Colonel Carradine lives, our people will know not peace but a sword. My son had heard of you. You was one more gun on the side of the Hammer. He did what he thought best. Now he is dead. But you didn't do it."

Ives said, "I hope the other farmers see it that way."

Lund said very somberly, "I hope so, too." Then he extinguished the lamp, and a moment later Ives heard the outer door open and close.

Ives sank back upon the cot, and it was then his name was whispered at the cell's window. He walked to the bars and peered out and saw dimly the full-moon face of Marco Stoll.

Stoll said, "I've been waiting here till that old fool left. I heard what he said."

Ives said, "I think he meant it."

One of Stoll's pudgy hands flicked a gesture of dismissal. "He couldn't stop a pack if it came howling for you. There's a lot of talk in town tonight. Cory was well liked. I've come to tell you to get set for a run. I'll fetch you a horse as soon as I can sneak one out of the livery stable."

"The talk's ugly?" Ives asked.

"Very ugly."

For a moment fear strangled Ives. Then he said, firmly, "No."

Stoll held silent for a moment. Then he said, "Would you mind telling me why?"

Ives said, "Supposing a mob comes and finds this jail empty, Stoll. They'll be up into saddles and riding for Hammer, won't they? Some little thing like that will set off the fireworks. And what will it add up to but a bunch of dead men?"

Stoll said, "This is a poor time to play noble!"

"It's not that," Ives said. "I'm scared—scared as hell. But I didn't need to come here. Now that I'm here, I'd undo what I've done if I cut and ran."

"Perhaps you're right," Stoll agreed at last. "But remember this. There'll be three against them. Benedict and Elisha Lund. And me."

"Thanks," Ives said and Stoll began to fade back into the shadows. "And thanks, too," Ives called softly, "for that horse you intended bringing."

Stoll called back, "I'll keep an eye on things."

FOOTSTEPS were in the office again. One person. His first hope was that it was Rod Benedict, but he knew instantly that it wasn't the sheriff, the steps were too light; the steps were a woman's. She was groping about the desk; the key rattled in the lock and the door opened. It was Marybelle Lund.

"Thank heavens for a careless sheriff," she said. "The key was on his desk, big as life. And your bags are

out here, too. I've got a horse for you."

The humor of this struck him, and he said, "This is the damnedest jail to stay in! Everybody wants me free. Everybody but me."

She said, "I've found Cory."

He came to his feet. "Alive?"

"Up in the Sombra Hills. He needs a doctor. Come on, now."

He crossed the cell. "I'll have to find Benedict first."

She said angrily, "There's no time! Cory's unconscious—shot. Maybe he'll die."

He fumbled in the office's darkness and got his hands on his instrument case and carpetbag. He said, "Do you suppose there's pencil and paper around here. I'll leave a note for him."

She said, "Can't you understand that every second may count? What good will a note do? Bring Cory back to Benedict. That will make more sense than any note. Please, oh please, hurry!"

He said, "All right."

IV

MARYBELLE led the way out of Tamerlane; they clattered into the darkness quickly and thereafter the night was their cloak, and this escape had been so woefully easy that Ives wondered again if Rod Benedict had made it so. They were pointed due north, not taking any of the roads, and Ives sensed soon that they were skirting the Sombra; he could see the marching willows dimly, but all the land was different by night. They rode on, and after hours he saw lights twinkling, yellow pinpoints of kerosene lamps in unshaded windows; and this surprised him.

He raked up all his memories of this land and couldn't account for the lights; by his calculations Hammer lay almost due east of them now, and the other cattle ranches were across the river. Then he remembered the homesteaders and realized he and Marybelle were flanking the settlement that had grown along the upper Sombra. A dog barked at them, and the sound held a strange comfort. The night lost its vastness and its mystery; people were near.

Once they rested their horses so close to a tar-papered shack that Ives could see into the window. A gaunt man passed back and forth, lost to sight and appearing again, like some mechanical man, wound up and set to this definite to-and-fro motion.

"Jensen's place," Marybelle explained. "Their child's been ailing." They lifted to a gallop again. "It's not much farther now," the girl told him.

The shack for which they were heading lay back in screening timber, and they didn't see the light until they were almost upon the place; and Marybelle, back in her saddle again, reined short then and reached her hand to Ives' arm. She said, "I left no light!" and fear was in her voice.

He said, "Why, this is Tom Feather's place. The old coot is probably here." He remembered this place; it was as old as Hammer.

Still the fear was in her. "I wish we had a gun," she said.

"Tom wouldn't hurt a fly," Ives told her and jogged his horse forward.

Lamplight made a rectangle when the door opened; against the light Tom Feather stood, his wild eyes peering out from his wild tangle of whiskers like a beast's in a thicket. He shaded his eyes with both hands and said, placidly, "Oh, it's you, Jim. Come in. Come in, boy." Then, cautiously, "Who's that with you, Jim?"

"A friend," Ives said. "You got a sick fellow here, Tom?"

"He stopped lead," Feather said. "Always it's guns, eh, Jim?" Fear took hold of him and he was a man about to run to cover; he crouched, looking to right and left. "You won't let them gun down Tom? You won't let them, will you, Jim?"

Ives said, "Of course not," the one word beating steadily through his brain. Jim . . . Jim. . . . Feather had never called him by that name, not in all the years.

The one room of the shack held a rusty stove, two rickety chairs, a table, a bunk. Cory lay in the bunk, his eyes closed and the flush of fever upon him, his body turned slightly to favor his left arm. His sleeve had been cut away and his arm was crudely bandaged, but dried blood showed. Ives looked at him in the

lamplight and said to Marybelle, "How did you find him?" Oddly, he'd not wondered about that till now.

"His horse came home," Marybelle said. "The sign said it came down out of the north. I tried back-trailing it as far as I could. Rod Benedict had given up the same notion. The hill country is too rocky. But I began riding circles. It seemed to me that if a person were wounded they would try to head for some sort of shelter. This place is the only one up here."

Ives nodded. Cory's breathing was shallow, but his pulse seemed sound enough; pain had pulled his mouth out of shape. Ives removed Marybelle's bandage and looked at the wound; it was in the upper arm, and it didn't look good. Ives was afraid that the arm might have to come off. He walked to the table and tested its sturdiness. He said, "Tom, give me a hand. We're going to move him to the table."

THEY lifted Cory from the bunk to the table top and spread him out, Marybelle helping. Ives said to her, "I'm going after the bullet. Build up a fire in the stove. Fill everything you can find with water. There's a well out in the yard."

To Feather he said, "Get out front, Tom. Keep an eye peeled, will you? Might be a fellow riding up on a white horse. If he comes, keep him busy out there till I'm finished."

Feather left the shack, and Marybelle said, "What's this about a man on a white horse?"

"I invented him," Ives said absently. "I just don't want Tom under foot when I really go to work."

She said, "He belongs to Hammer. Suppose he heads down there and tells Carradine that Cory's lying helpless here?"

"He won't go," Ives said.

"You've known him for a long time?"

"All my life. He came up from Texas with the Colonel, I believe. He's a sort of pensioner. Hammer feeds him and clothes him, but he does as he pleases. He's crazy, of course. Mostly, he's still living in Texas, but he has lucid moments. Don't let him worry you."

"He called you 'Jim'."

"I know," he said and frowned. "It didn't make sense to me, either. But maybe it will. Maybe it will."

Marybelle built up the fire, heated two kettles of water. Ives, having sterilized his instruments in a basin, bent to his work; he became oblivious of the girl and the cabin and the night; he sought the elusive lead, turning his head only when he had to reach for an instrument. Once Cory opened his eyes, and tried to raise himself, and Ives said sharply, "Lie still!" Cory sank back upon the table; his eyes closed, and his face was a dead man's face.

A moment later Ives said, "The basin." Marybelle extended the basin and something rattled in it, and Ives said, "There's the slug. Forty-five, I'd guess."

Marybelle said, "And every man along the Sombra packs one."

He nodded and busied himself at the bandaging. Marybelle had found very

[*Turn page*]

little to qualify for bandages, but Ives did the best he could. When he was finished, he stepped back. The sweat was coming down and blinding him, and he sluiced it away with his sleeve.

Cory opened his eyes and looked hard at him and said, "So it's you!"

Ives said, "Lie back and sleep, if you can. You'll be all right now." To Marybelle he said, "Later we'll move him back to the bunk, if we can." He took a step and found that he staggered. "I'm done in."

He walked to the door and stepped outside and sat upon the sill. It was always this way afterwards, this feeling triumphant and defeated all in one. Tom Feather shaped up in the darkness and squatted on his heels not far away. Ives smiled and said, "That jigger show up?"

Feather said nothing, and in Ives was the thought that now was the time to do another kind of digging—now was the chance that had been denied him at Hammer yesterday and at this cabin earlier tonight. He thought, "He knows . . . he knows." Then he said softly, "Tom, speak up. It's me—Jim. You remember Jim?"

Feather said in a voice of bewilderment, "You're a sawbones. I looked in the window and watched you. You ain't Jim. Jim was no sawbones. What in tarnation was it made me think you was Jim?"

Ives said desperately, "Keep talking! Tell me all about Jim!"

Feather said, "A sawbones!"

He stood up and shambled off, and Ives let him go. There was no way of bringing Tom Feather back; the distance was more than the width of a stump-strewn clearing—the distance was infinite.

MARYBELLE came to the door and stepped out. She seated herself beside Ives and leaned her shoulder against his, and suddenly he knew that this night had taken as much toll of her as it had of him. He put his arm around her shoulder and drew her close and let her weight lie against him.

"I'm tired," she said.

They sat in silence for a long time. Then Ives said, "Marybelle?"

"Yes?" she said sleepily.

"What is it you want out of life?"

She needed no pause for reflection. "The same as any woman. Security."

He said, "A home and a husband? Children? Ground to plow with no need to have a rifle handy?"

She said, "One way or another, a man would probably always need his rifle. I can't change that. So I won't worry about it."

He turned this over in his mind. "Then it doesn't really matter to you whether Carradine imports gunmen?"

"It matters, yes. But what can I do about it? I was only a child when I learned that I couldn't shape people to my way. I gave that up long ago. Now I spend most of my time thinking of myself."

He said, "That's selfish!"

"No, just blunt," she said.

He said, "But you fetched me up here tonight for Cory's sake. And for something bigger, I hoped. Cory, dead, could have set the nesters on the warpath."

"Cory's my brother," she said. "He's quite a bit of a fool, but he's my brother. That's what I was thinking about. If his staying alive keeps the homesteaders from oiling their guns, so much the better. Does that answer you?"

He said slowly, "I'm trying to put all the pieces together and make some sense out of them."

She laughed. "You're trying to see me as a reflection of yourself. That's what any man does when he meets a woman who interests him. And you're interested."

"I'll not deny it," he said. "But I want to believe that hardness of yours is only a pretense."

"I'm shameless, Doc," she said. "You already know that. You might as well know that I've set my cap for you."

He had to smile. "Do you know how much security you'd get out of a saddlebag sawbones?"

"All I'd need, if the sawbones were you, Doc. And I'm not really completely heartless. I'm just practical. That should make a fine balance between us."

He said, "You're amazing! Amazing!"

Cory's voice reached them; it was an incoherent mumble, but it touched Ives

and awoke the medico in him. He stepped inside the shack. Cory was trying to turn on his side; his bandaged arm prevented him.

Ives said, "He should be put back in the bunk." He stepped to the door and cupped his hands to his mouth and called, "Tom! Tom Feather!" He listened, then turned back into the shack.

"He's gone," he said. He walked to the table and carefully got one arm under Cory's shoulders, the other under the boy's knees. He lifted Cory and staggered to the bunk with him, being very careful about that arm.

Cory's eyes opened. Ives said, "How are you feeling?"

Cory said, "Fagged out."

Ives said, "If you feel up to it, I'd like to know who shot you."

Cory tried shaking his head. "It was last night, I guess. What day is this?"

"Tuesday. Maybe Wednesday now."

"The day I met you in town. I rode out. Took a swing up toward the hills. Just riding. Somebody shot me from cover. I fell . . . off horse. Crawled and crawled. I knew there was a shack up here."

"You didn't see the bushwhacker?"

"Never . . . saw . . . him. . . ."

"Sleep, now," Ives urged. "That's what you need. Sleep." He took Cory's pulse again, automatically.

Marybelle said, "We ought to get him out of here."

Ives shook his head. "He can't be moved. Not for a while. He might have lost that arm. I should have got here sooner." He paused, lost in reflection. Then he said, "We'll need food up here. I'll ride to Hammer. I think I can make it there before dawn."

She said, "You could stay with Cory. I could ride to the settlement."

"As the crow flies, it's closer to Hammer. That means that I'll be the one who goes. He won't need me, not until he's slept himself out. You're not afraid of staying here alone?"

"I'm not afraid," she said. "I just don't want Hammer to know he's here. That's why I was worried about that crazy old fellow, Feather. If Carradine could chop down Cory, he'd have taken the fighting leader from the homesteaders. Sure, my father is really the leader, but Cory will be up front if they ride to war."

Ives said, "If it will make you feel better, Hammer won't know. But I've still got to go after those things."

She said, "You know best."

He went to the door, and again he cupped his hands to his mouth and called Tom Feather. The night had stolen Tom Feather; the night had whisked him away.

Ives mounted his horse and rode towards Hammer.

V

WHEN Brian Ives, groping in the darkness before dawn, found his way across the gallery of Hammer's ranchhouse to the door, he knocked upon it. He heard the bar lifted; the door opened and Tana stood there. In her right hand was a Colt's forty-five; it looked big and ponderous and all out of proportion. She looked at him, not saying anything; and then the gun sagged until it was pointed at her feet, and she teetered. His fear was that she was going to faint.

She said, "Come in. Oh, come in!"

He moved into the house and closed the door after him and dropped the bar back into place. They went into the house's biggest room, where Tana placed the gun on the table. She seated herself upon a divan which stood against one wall.

She said, "You got out of jail?"

He said quickly, "Cory Lund's alive. He got a slug in his arm. He managed to make it to Feather's shack. His sister found him there. She came to town for me. Benedict was careless with the key, and there was no trouble. I dug the slug out of Cory."

She rocked back and forth. "Knowing that might have made all the difference," she said hopelessly. "A few hours ago."

"The Colonel's gone?"

"Everyone's gone. To Tamerlane. To snatch you out of jail."

He began pacing the room. "The Colonel will have blown the lid right off!" he said, and measured time and distance in his mind. "They found me missing, of course. Then why aren't

they back?" His voice empty, he added, "The Colonel must have supposed I was whisked out of town. If he's gone to the nester settlement to search every shack, we might as well figure that the war's on."

Tana said, "Yes—yes—"

Ives made a fist and beat it against his left palm. He said, "That isn't at all the way you hoped it would be, is it? You sent for me to save him from his own folly; but because I came here, the lid blew off."

"That wasn't your fault," she said.

He said, "What did you think I could do, really?"

She said, "Who else could I have turned to?"

He came to the divan and sat down beside her and took her hand in his and said, "Let's hope everything isn't lost yet."

SHE turned and looked at him and she was trembling and then suddenly she slid against him, not as though this were a conscious move but as though strength had left her. Their shoulders touched; he put his arms around her and drew her close; and without meaning to, he kissed her.

Her mouth clung to his; she was all woman with a woman's hunger and a woman's need.

The kiss was her surrender, and it was complete.

Then she was pushing him away from her, her hands beating at his chest. He drew back from her and stood up.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I know how it is. There's Benedict. He's in love with you."

She said, "I wasn't thinking of him. I was thinking of us. We must never let this happen again."

"I think we've both been too lonely for too long." He moved close to her again and said, "Two things brought me home, and your sending for me was one of them. The other was something that I thought didn't really matter, but it always has. You know what I mean, don't you?"

"Know what, Brian?"

"Who I am. Who my folks were."

She nodded, but said nothing.

"I'm waiting, Tana."

HER voice was so low he could scarcely hear it. She said, "Will you believe it's better that you don't know? Will you believe that the only reason I can't tell you is because you mean a very great deal to me?"

He thought of Tom Feather. "The roots of this thing were in Texas," he guessed.

"Yes," she said.

"Is that all you can tell me?"

She said, "I'll have to ask you for faith."

He stood looking down at her for a long moment, then he kissed her again, not putting his arms around her. It was a gentle kiss. He stepped back.

"I need some things," he said briskly. "Food. Some cloth for bandages. A couple of clean sheets will do. I can tear them to size."

"I'll get them for you, Brian."

"Young Lund may have to stay where he is for a few days. There's nothing much up at the shack."

She walked from the room. He could hear her moving about in a distant part of the house. He waited; she came back tugging a gunny-sack that bulged with canned goods.

"I put the sheets inside the sack," she said.

He took the sack from her and walked toward the door. "I've got to get back at once. If you want, you can make a ride for me today. Go to Tamerlane and find your Rod Benedict. Tell him about Cory Lund. If the nesters aren't up in arms yet, maybe that will stop them. Our only chance is that the Colonel hasn't yet bought a full-sized war."

She said, "I'll do that, Brian."

He smiled at her, knowing then how dear she was to him. He said, "We'll make out, you and I."

She lifted the bar and closed the door behind him. Faint gray light washed the yard now. He fastened the sack to the saddle and stepped up and turned his face to the north. He rode along with the light growing stronger and the grass glistening with dew and the meadow larks caroling the dawn. He rode with a deep inner satisfaction that was at first nameless until he traced it to its roots, and its roots were Tana. He had

known no family, not really, and he had found a sister. That was good. Yet the memory of that first kiss was still with him, and his thought was that it would take some living to bury that memory.

Then the airlash of the bullet came, and the echoing bark of the gun.

He fell out of the saddle; that was pure instinct. Hitting the ground, he rolled, came up on his hands and knees and scuttled crab-fashion for a nest of rocks nearby. He got into these rocks; they were slippery with dew and none of them was high enough, and he had a naked feeling. He lifted his eyes and peered; yonder, within six-shooter range, was a clump of gnarled cedars, and from that clump the shot had come.

He expected a second shot, and he wished mightily for his gun. He was going to have to get it out of his carpetbag and keep it handy on this range, but the carpetbag was at Feather's place. He looked toward his horse. As he'd dropped from the saddle, he'd flung the reins out and they had fallen to the ground, anchoring the horse. That mount was range trained, however Marybelle had come by it. He was glad of that. But he couldn't lie here, waiting for the hidden bushwhacker to show himself, to come closer for the coup de grace. He'd have to risk a run for the horse and a hard gallop afterwards; therein lay his only chance.

He came to a sudden stand, headed for the horse and flung himself into the saddle; he snatched up the reins and wheeled about, expecting the bark of a gun. Then he saw movement over yonder by the cedars; a man spurred from that ambush, riding away, a man bent low over his saddle and quirting his horse. He was visible for a moment but there was no identifying him, not in the early light. The bushwhacker topped a rise and was briefly skylined.

"Brule!" exclaimed Ives, as the bushwhacker dropped out of sight. "Twice now!"

He guessed that Brule had sighted him across the distance and waited here for his quarry to come within six-shooter range. He listened; far away he heard the ring of shod hoofs upon rock; the sound diminished and was lost. He rode onward; soon he was on another rise that gave him command of a sweep of country. He could see all of Sombra Range, the winding river, the buildings of Hammer, the nester settlement, and far to the south, the hazy outlines of Tamerlane.

He knew that someone was deliberately laying a shadow across this range, and that was why Cory Lund had stopped a bullet and Brian Ives had stopped a bullet and had almost stopped another this morning.

They didn't count, he and Cory; they were puppets on strings, and some unseen hand was manipulating them. They were pawns in a game. Oddly then he remembered Marco Stoll's chessboard, and only then was his first suspicion born. But it was a ridiculous suspicion and he banished it as such as he faced north again, toward Tom Feather's shack.

IVES moved forward cautiously; he dismounted before the shack came in view and led his horse through the thickets, approaching so that he didn't have to cross the clearing. When he came around a corner of the building, Marybelle appeared at the door. He unsaddled and handed over the gunnysack.

"Breakfast," he told her.

Soon she had bacon sizzling in a frying pan. He looked at Cory; Cory was still sleeping. He found his carpetbag and hauled out a gun, belt and holster. He buckled the belt around his waist.

Marybelle's eyebrows arched. "Has it come to that?"

Ives nodded. "Somebody started shooting again. Next time I'll be able to shoot back."

She put dishes on the table. The two of them sat down at the table, and Marybelle passed food to Ives.

"Did you have trouble at Hammer?" she asked as she poured coffee.

"No one was there but Tana. She fixed the sack for us."

"She knows about Cory being up here? And me?"

Ives nodded.

"That was foolish, Doc," Marybelle said, a trace of anger in her voice. "We'll have Hammer upon us before the day's over."

"You don't know Tana."

"I know women," she countered. "Your Tana's Colonel Carradine's granddaughter, isn't she?"

Ives felt the heat grow in him. "Do you think she wants Cory's blood on her hands?"

Marybelle made a face. "She'll talk herself out of that. She'll have herself believing it's for the best."

He put down his cup. "Look," he said, "we've got grub, and we've new dressing for Cory's arm. And we can thank Tana for it!"

Their voices had risen, and now Cory Lund's eyes were open.

His voice was sneering. "What the hell is this?"

Ives nodded toward him. "Better feed him."

Marybelle moved to prepare a plate. She took it to Cory and lifted a spoon, and Cory allowed himself to be fed. Afterwards Ives moved to him. "Let's have a look at that arm." He kept his thoughts to himself as he examined and dressed the wound.

WHEN Ives was finished, Cory glanced at his sister. "You've got a horse? We'll be getting out of here this morning."

Ives said, "You're going to stay where you are. At least today."

Cory said, "I know you're a doctor. And I know she must have fetched you here because there wasn't any other doctor. That doesn't change anything."

Ives said, "Nurse your grudge, if you like. But I say you're not going."

"And I say I am!"

Marybelle came to the bunk. "You headstrong fool! You'd have lost your arm, but for him. Now quit acting like you ought to be spanked!"

Ives expected Cory to answer her in kind; instead he said grudgingly, "I guess I'm beholden to you, Ives. You'll be paid for what you did."

Ives said, "Have you got half of a hundred dollar bill, Cory?"

The boy looked surprised. "I've never seen a hundred dollar bill in my life."

"Brule backed that play you made in town. Afterwards Brule laid for me along the road. He had half of a hundred dollar bill in his pocket."

CORY seemed to turn this over in his mind. "You've got it figured wrong somewhere, Ives. Old Charley was running around town babbling that you were back. I'd heard that Carradine had some sort of stepson, a doctor named Ives. I thought I'd tell you to climb on the stage again. Brule wasn't in on it. If he was across the street, he was taking care of his own business."

Ives said, "Maybe it was him shot you."

"I wouldn't know," Cory said.

Ives frowned thoughtfully. "Look, Cory, I didn't come to back the Colonel with another gun. I came to try to talk him out of his war. That puts us on the same side, doesn't it?"

Cory said, "You'll have to lay more than words on the line."

"Give me time," Ives said.

He walked out of the shack. Marybelle came and stood behind him.

Ives said, "Would you like to take a ride?"

"With you?"

"Alone. One of us had better stay with Cory. It's your turn now. I'd like you to ride down to your place. Your father will want to know about Cory. And I want to know what's going on down there."

"You're worried," she said.

He nodded. "Hammer tried last night to snatch me out of jail. The outfit wasn't back at sunup this morning. They may have ridden to the settlement."

"I'll find out about it," she said.

When she was gone, he felt a strange loneliness. He wondered if Tom Feather were in the vicinity; he'd meant to ask Marybelle if Feather had showed back, but he'd forgotten. He went into the shack again and got his razor from the carpetbag and shaved himself. At noontime he prepared food, then awoke Cory and fed him. Bringing a fresh bucket of water from the well, Ives placed it handy to the bunk.

"Holler if you need anything," he said. "I won't be far off."

"I'll make out," Cory said.

Into the clearing again, Ives idled about and then walked into the woods; at a distance he could hear the gurgle of a creek. He walked toward the sound.

It gave him an objective, and soon he came upon Tom Feather squatting beside the creek, a gold pan in his hands. Feather was swirling water in the pan.

"Hello," Ives said easily. "Any color?"

Feather looked up with no more than normal surprise. "Tobacco money, maybe."

Ives paused a moment, then made his plunge. "You know a fellow named Jim Ives? Hailed from Texas, I believe."

Feather's face puckered. "It's got a familiar sound," he said.

"This Ives looked something like me."

Feather peered up at him. Feather seemed to be reaching for something; there was a sort of strained, intent look about him. Then he said, "It's a big crick, mister. I'm kind of busy today."

Ives' despair was not too great; he'd expected this kind of defeat. "Sorry to have bothered you, old-timer," he said, and turned back to the shack. Cory was awake, but Cory said nothing when he looked in at the door. Ives crossed the clearing again and found a grassy spot among the trees and stretched himself upon the ground, using his hat for a pillow. Soon he was asleep.

HE HEARD his name called softly. Marybelle was sitting beside him; she'd pulled a blade of grass and was tickling his nose with it. She laughed and said, "Mostly you look like a grim old man, but when you sleep, you look like a little boy. How old are you, Doc?"

"Old enough to be your great-grandfather," he said. He looked at her. "You had no trouble?"

"I found Dad and told him about Cory. He sends you his thanks. He said he knew you were a good man."

"Then he wasn't oiling a gun?"

She frowned. "There'd been trouble. Hammer shot up Tamerlane last night, then found the jail empty. They rode out to the settlement."

"Yes." He drew a long breath.

"They didn't come a-whooping and a-hollering. But they called at every shack. They asked if Rod Benedict was around. It's pretty plain how the Colonel figured. If you weren't in Tamerlane, he supposed Benedict had hidden you out, and what better place than the settlement? But they didn't find Benedict, and they didn't find you. They spent all night looking."

"Benedict was in town." Ives felt exhilarated. "Then the lid wasn't blown off after all. If the Colonel had gone slam-banging among the homesteaders, they'd likely have given him a fight. I wonder if he thought of that."

Marybelle put her arms around him. "Don't you ever have anything but trouble on your mind?"

He stood up, pulling her to her feet. He said, "How about supper?"

"Oh," she said, "you weren't born. You were carved out of ice." But she laughed.

They were at table when Ives heard hoofbeats. Marybelle heard them, too. She came to a stand, her face white, and made a move toward the door, and Ives said soothingly, "It's just one rider."

"Her!" Marybelle said from the doorway. "I told you you were foolish, Doc. Supposing she's followed?"

Ives was at Marybelle's shoulder; he saw Tana slipping from a horse. A great fear was in her face. Ives brushed past Marybelle. "What is it, Tana?" he demanded.

"Rod!" she cried.

"You got to town and got word to him?"

She shook her head. "Before I could get saddled up this morning, the Colonel rode in with the crew. He demanded to know why I was going to town. I couldn't tell him—not unless I told him everything. He refused to let me go."

"He's still at Hammer?"

She nodded. "All day. He sat on the gallery and looked like a man wrestling with the devil. Then Rod came."

"To Hammer?"

"Late this afternoon. He was looking for you. He said you'd broken out of jail."

Ives swore. "The fool!" But there was no rancor. "What happened?" he asked.

"The Colonel had the crew get Rod under their guns. He's holding Rod in the bunkhouse as a hostage, and he's sent word to the nesters. Either they turn you over to Hammer, or Rod stays a prisoner."

Ives said grimly, "We'll straighten that out!"

"If there's time," Tana said. "Brian, don't you see what this will mean? What else can the farmers do now but saddle up and come after Rod? And then the lid's off for sure. The Colonel's already posted guards at the fence."

Ives opened his hands and closed them. "This is the end of everything," he said.

Tana asked, "Isn't there a chance? I rode as fast as I could, Brian."

Ives had no answer. "I'll get saddled up," he told her.

Marybelle pursed her lips; she stood lost in thought for a moment. "I'm going with you!" she said at last.

He shrugged; he didn't know how to go about pitting himself against Marybelle, and he sensed that he never would. He turned to Tana. "Could you stay with Lund till we get back?"

"If you wish, Brian," Tana agreed, and Marybelle, suddenly flaring, said, "Doc, will you never get it through your head that there are two sides to any fence?"

Something rose in Tana's eyes that was the ghost of the Colonel.

"I won't poison him," she said quietly.

One girl looked at the other. It was eye matched against eye and both gazes holding steadily; Marybelle was taking a careful measure of Tana, and Ives judged that the run of Marybelle's thoughts was stormy. But Marybelle said then, as quietly as Tana had spoken, "*I'll* stay with Cory."

Color came to Tana's cheeks as if she had been slapped. But she said, "Very well," quite calmly and her seeming unconcern made it her victory.

Ives turned to Tana. "Come on," he said.

VI

THEY rode through the timber to a game trail. They started descending; dusk gathered the hills in its shadowy arms; the night came unobtrusively. Soon they were down out of the timber, the range spreading before them, and the lights of Tamerlane twinkling distantly.

"You're not heading to Hammer?" Tana said.

Ives shook his head. "The Colonel's holding Benedict and standing pat. That makes the next move up to the nesters. If the trouble's to be stopped, it has to be stopped first at the settlement."

Tana said, "Then it would have been better if the Lund girl had come along."

He saw the solemn gravity of her face. "You two just don't like each other, do you? Why is that?"

She said in surprise, "Don't you know, Brian?"

Irritation edged his voice. "There's a very great deal I don't know!" Then abruptly he said, "You don't need to fret about Rod. The Colonel won't harm him. When it comes to a last ditch, the Colonel will remember that Rod wears a badge. And he'll also remember that Rod once rode for Hammer."

Tana said, "I can't help worrying."

Ives swept his arm toward Hammer. "Can you make it alone from here?"

"I'll ride with you," she said.

He had no time for arguing. He said, "Very well," and looked toward the Sombra. He could pick out the distant pin-points of light that marked the nester settlement, and these became his beacon.

At last he and Tana rode into a yard before the first of the shacks. When Ives halloed, the door opened and a woman stood framed, a child tugging at her skirts.

Ives said, "I'm looking for Elisha Lund's place."

The woman said, "Down a piece farther," and waved her arm to the south. The door closed with a solid finality, and Ives remembered then that Tana's horse bore Hammer's brand.

They were to stop at several of these places within the hour; always there was the woman, always there was the wave to the south; and this became a changeless routine until they found the woman with a different fear in her face. She looked at the black garb of Ives and said, "You'd be the doctor? If you could look at my young one . . ."

He realized then that this was Jensen's place where last night he'd watched a man walk to and fro.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," he promised.

The woman said, "I'll be obliged."

When they were riding again, Tana said, "Have you noticed that we haven't found a man at any of the places?"

"Yes," he said. "I've noticed."

SHORTLY thereafter they saw the fire. It stood in the openness between a shack and the scattered outbuildings of Elisha Lund's place. About this fire, men stood massed in ragged ranks, bleak and bitter men, and the firelight danced upon rifle barrels; and the high gauntness of Lund stood outlined.

Into the rim of the firelight Ives rode boldly.

'Good evening, Lund," he said calmly.

Lund's hard-planed features showed astonishment, but he said, "Good evening, Doctor Ives," with that trace of Scandinavian accent that made it, "Goot evening."

Ives said, "Cory's doing fine. Just fine."

Lund said, "That's goot." He hesitated. "Marybelle told me. I'm much obliged."

"I'm on my way to Hammer," Ives said. "The Colonel will be turning Benedict loose when he realizes you fellows aren't holding me. I dropped by to tell you that if you'll give me a few hours, I'll have your sheriff back."

Somebody said, "He's a damn spy for Hammer!"

Ives said, "You're wrong, friend."

"Let him have his say," Lund ordered.

"I've had my say," Ives said. "I'm riding to Hammer. I'm only asking you fellows to wait till I come back. What difference whether you have your war tonight or tomorrow, if war it's got to be? I tell you I'll bring Benedict back to you!" He appealed to Lund. "Haven't you told them why I've been missing? The Colonel doesn't know I broke jail. And I couldn't have sent word to him without letting him know where Cory is."

Lund plucked at his yellow beard, his eye troubled. He looked toward the massed men. "Jorgensen," he said, "tell him what you told us when you got back today."

[Turn page]

A man moved in the crowd. He said, "I was down to the railroad this week. The telegraph operator there said Colonel Carradine sent a wire not long ago. To Cheyenne. For all the gunmen that would hire out. He wanted them as fast as they could come."

Ives said desperately, "He won't have any call for gunmen unless you fellows ride against Hammer."

Anger brightened Jorgensen's eyes. "You want us to stall for another day or two. Then maybe his gunmen will get here. I'm thinking that's why he sent you." He sprang forward. "You damn spy! Come off that horse and take a beating!"

Elisha Lund said sharply, "None of that!" and Jorgensen fell back. Nevertheless he said, "I say keep him here while we've got him. That gives us him to stack up against Rod Benedict."

Ives looked at Lund. Lund plucked at his beard. "I don't know. I yoost don't know."

Tana nudged her horse into the firelight. "You want a hostage," she said. "I'll be your hostage." She faced Lund. "You know me," she said. "I'll make you a better ace in the hole than Doctor Ives. Let him go."

Lund had little defense against this. He said, "This is a man's business."

Tana said, with just a shade of scorn, "Don't you men even take a chance when you've everything on your side?"

Lund's eyes puckered, but he kept his lips stiff. He spoke to Ives.

"You're riding one of my horses," Lund said. "I'll get you a fresh one. You'd better get back here mighty fast."

IVES went at Hammer as the crow flies. A thin rain fell as he rode, and though it had slackened off to nothing when he hit Hammer's fence, the overcast was thick, and the moon broke through only intermittently. Ives began following the fence toward the gate, but whenever the moon lost itself, he lost the fence. He began using matches, chafing at the delay. Then he found himself upon a road, and when he gave the horse its head, the horse followed the road.

It came to Ives that this was the road the nesters used to take them to Tamerlane; farther down, it forked into Hammer's road. A nester horse would know a nester road, so he let the mount pick its own way. He might lose a mile or two by this method, but if he watched for the fork and turned there, he was bound to come to Hammer's gate.

When the moon showed itself again he rode at a lively trot, and when he reached the fork he saw a buggy coming up out of the south, a square box buggy, and he knew it instantly. He hauled his horse to a halt and waited; the buggy came up and stopped. It had rained harder farther south; mud fell from the wheels.

Marco Stoll exclaimed, "Man! Where have you been keeping yourself?" Then he added sharply, "How and when did you get out of jail?"

Ives said, "I left with the Lund girl. She'd found Cory; he wasn't dead. But he needed a doctor."

"Hammer hit the town with the idea of grabbing you," Stoll said. "They came just a little late."

"I know." Ives looked impatiently northward. "I'd better be riding. What brings you out on a night like this?"

"I'm heading for the settlement. The word's got to town that the lid's about to blow off. What fool business is this—the Colonel holding Benedict?"

"He's hostage for me. I'm on my way to make the swap."

Stoll's face grew reflective. "I'm going to the settlement to try talking those fool farmers into thinking twice before they start the fireworks. What good would a war be to anybody?"

Ives said, "You were a cattleman once, weren't you? Aren't you heading the wrong way?"

Stoll shrugged. "Why ride a horse that gets too old to ride? I told you this is going to be sodbuster country. I gave you a piece of advice once; it still holds. This road leads back to Tamerlane. You're too late for tonight's stage, but there'll be one tomorrow. You can bed down in my quarters, if you like." He began probing his pockets. "I've got the key here somewhere."

Ives laughed. "I'm the key—the key to the whole thing tonight. Lund's waiting for Rod Benedict to come rid-

ing back. There's going to be war if he doesn't."

Stoll said explosively, "You're a fool, Doc!"

"Yes," Ives said, "I'm a fool." He drew his horse aside. "I'm in your way."

The buggy jerked forward. Ives watched it go. He shrugged; and headed north along the main road. He reached Hammer's gate not long after; men moved dimly in the shadows beyond. Hammer was alert. A voice lifted in the night saying, "Sing out you!"

He reined short. "It's me—Ives."

The voice beyond the gate said, less truculently, "Where the devil have you been?" The gate creaked open, and Ives rode through.

"The Colonel at the ranch?" Ives asked.

"He's up there."

Ives rode on up the avenue of cottonwoods. When he came upon the buildings he left the horse in the yard, and walked toward the bunkhouse. A man shaped up before him; he knew this one from other days. "Where's the Colonel, Harry?" he demanded.

"Bedded down," Harry said.

"Rod Benedict here?"

"Yonder," Harry inclined his head toward the bunkhouse.

Ives stepped to the bunkhouse window. He said, "Rod," very low, and Benedict's boyish face framed itself in the window. Benedict grinned when he recognized Ives and said, "It comes to me that the last time it was the other way around. Then I was the one on the outside looking in. Where you been keeping yourself, feller?"

Ives said, "We've got a ride to make and time to do our talking then. I'm here to get you out."

"Who told you about me?" Benedict wanted to know.

"Tana," Ives said, then walked to the door of the bunkhouse and found it padlocked. "Harry," he called angrily, "unlock this thing!"

Harry said, "Colonel's got the key."

Ives turned to the window again. "Rod," he said, "I'll be back in a minute."

Ives made for the gallery. He reached the door; the door gave to his touch. He had a map of the house in his mind and, recalling where the Colonel's bedroom was, he edged upstairs toward it. Carradine was in bed; he could make out the Colonel's white hair. He called the man's name softly; Carradine didn't stir. Ives felt about the room and found a chair with the Colonel's black suit laid neatly upon it; he found the trousers and groped through the pockets for the key to the padlock. But the key wasn't there.

He reached for the coat, feeling into its pockets and his fingers touched paper. The paper had the feel of money; he ran his thumb along the edge and found one edge jagged; and then, suddenly, he was sick. He didn't want to believe what his fingers told him; he drew forth the paper and held it in one hand and dug into his own pockets for a match. He snapped the match aflame with his thumbnail and looked at the paper. It was the torn half of a hundred dollar bill.

The Colonel said calmly, distinctly, "Have you stooped to picking pockets, sir?"

Ives let the match go out, and he said in the darkness, "I always knew that you hated me. But I never knew how much."

The Colonel said, "Just what is that gibberish supposed to mean?"

Ives said, "You know what it means," and then, remembering that the Colonel had always slept with a loaded forty-five beneath his pillow, took a quick sideward step, trying to make of himself a hard target to find.

VII

IVES got his gun into his hand. He said, low-voiced, into the darkness, "I know you keep a gun handy. Make a move for it, and I'll start shooting!"

Carradine said, "Have you gone completely insane, sir?"

His voice was firm but it held a certain bewilderment; and because the bewilderment was genuine, Ives' conviction was slightly shaken. Ives thought, "Doesn't he realize that I know?"

He said, "The time's past for bluffing. I was looking for the key to the bunk-

house. I found the other half of the hundred dollar bill."

Carradine said, "Would you mind explaining?" Again his bewilderment seemed genuine.

Ives said, "Brule had the other half. The day he shot me from the cutbank."

Silence held for a long moment. Then the Colonel said, "Would you light a lamp?"

Ives groped toward a bureau, found a lamp, and scraped a match aglow. But instead of touching it to the lamp, he held the flame high. The Colonel had not moved. Ives laid his gun on the dresser top and touched the match to the lamp wick. He adjusted the wick and turned toward the Colonel again, leaving the gun lie.

The Colonel said, "One of the crew went to town for the mail the other day. There was an envelope addressed to me in a fist that had been made to appear a childish scrawl. That torn half of a bill was inside—nothing more. The envelope was postmarked Tamerlane that very day."

"I don't believe you," Ives said.

The Colonel shrugged. "Doubtless I wouldn't believe it myself, if our positions were reversed."

Ives said, "You must have found out that Tana had sent for me. Didn't you give half that bill to Brule, intending to give him the other half when his work was done? Or are you trying to imply that the person who hired Brule mailed that bill to you on the thousand-to-one chance that I'd find it in your pocket?"

"You knew that Brule had half the bill," Carradine said. "Did he know that you knew it?"

Ives nodded.

"Then Brule could have told the man who held the other half."

"And that man mailed it to you?" Ives shook his head. "That would be too long a chance."

Carradine shrugged again. "A man fires in the dark. If he misses his mark, he's wasted his lead. But there's always the chance that he may hit. Supposing I'd showed you the bill and told you how I'd come by it? Wouldn't you have been just as suspicious?"

Ives passed the back of his hand across his forehead. "I don't know what to think," he said.

"Why should I want you dead?" Carradine demanded.

"That," Ives said, "is what I don't know. All I know is that when I walk out of this house tonight, I'll never come back."

"Then," said Carradine, "the time has come to tell you." He flung back the covers, brought his lean legs to the floor and crossed to the bureau. Lifting the lamp he said, "In here," and led the way to the big room. He set the lamp upon the table and waved Ives toward the sofa. "Sit down."

"I'll stand," Ives said. He'd taken the gun from the bureau before he'd followed the Colonel. He thrust the gun into its holster and folded his arms.

The Colonel took a chair. "I don't suppose you remember Texas?" Ives shook his head. "You were born there. You were about two when you came north. That was twenty-three years ago."

Ives said, "Yes?"

CARRADINE leaned back. "A lot of us were leaving Texas; the graze had thinned out and we had gone looking for new range. My boy, Dave, rode up here and scouted this range and built the first dwelling on Hammer."

Ives started. "Tana's father?"

"Tana's father. Tana was born here; that was why she was named Montana. Dave left his little family in the north and came back to Texas to report, and we got ready for the big move. We threw our herd in with a neighbor's who was also trailing north. A widower named Jim Ives."

Ives said, "My father. I guessed that much from something Tom Feather said."

Carradine nodded. "We put both herds under the same road brand. And we headed them north. We had trouble in the Nations. Trail wolves hit at us and some men died, and after that suspicion was born. One among us took long rides at night, and the suspicion was that he was an intimate of the men who'd struck at the herd. Finally we put him on trial. He was Jim Ives' segundo—Marco Stoll."

"Stoll!" Ives exclaimed.

Anger edged the Colonel's voice. "I was for tipping up a wagon tongue and hanging him. Dave was of the same mind. We were equally convinced of his guilt. Jim Ives pleaded for Stoll, and as the evidence was flimsy, when the vote was taken it was decided that Stoll would be punished and banished. I named the punishment. Fifty lashes with him tied to a wagon wheel. Well, we drew straws to see who'd mete out the punishment. And now I shall show you irony. The man who'd argued for Stoll's life was the man who drew the short straw. Jim Ives laid on with the whip, and Stoll was sent stumbling into the night."

Ives exlaimed, "So that's why Stoll was told never to set foot on Hammer."

Carradine closed his eyes. "That should have been the end of it, the whipping and his going in the night. But it was only the beginning of trouble that grew between Dave and Jim Ives. They were both young, both hot-headed. There was one night when they drew guns and only the crew's quickness kept them from shooting each other. As it was, a couple of bullets flew." Carradine touched the scar upon his forehead, and Ives knew now how the Colonel had come by that scar.

"The next day," Carradine resumed, "we divided the herd and Jim Ives went his separate way. Later, we stopped at Dodge. We'd seen no town since we'd left Texas, so we planned to rest for a day. We gave our men part of their pay on the flats of the Arkansas and drew straws again, this time to see who'd stay with the herd while the others visited Dodge. Some men wanted whiskey and some wanted cards and some wanted women. But Dave had a different desire. He was a man with a wife and a child waiting for him in Montana. All he wanted was to know how if felt to sleep in a bed, after those nights on the trail. He rode into Dodge to get a hotel room. He got one. He never came out of it alive."

Ives said, "Marco Stoll?"

CARRADINE answered, "No — Jim Ives." The old scar stood out upon Carradine's forehead. "One of my crew dropped in at the hotel to pass a word or two with Dave that night," he said. "Tom Feather. There were guns, and the sound of them drew the marshal of Dodge to Dave Carradine's room. He found Dave dead, a gun in his hand, and Jim Ives dead, and Tom Feather shot to doll ribbons. Feather never recovered from that night, so we never knew the whole truth. But we pieced it out after making inquiries. Ives came looking for Dave, and of course he came with anger in him. Feather must have sided with Dave."

Ives said, "And that's how I came to Hammer?"

"With Ives dead, his crew had nothing to do but drift," the Colonel said. "That left a two-year-old child with nobody's care. I took you. Yes, that's how you came to Hammer."

"But all the while you've hated me."

Carradine said, "If you want to see Jim Ives' picture, look in any mirror. Every time I've looked at you, I've seen Jim Ives alive and Dave Carradine dead."

"And Tana knew?"

Carradine nodded. "Your father and hers."

Ives said, "I'll be going now. I owe you more than I owe any man. I'll never trouble you again."

"There's still that matter of the torn hundred dollar bill," Carradine said.

"Who sent it to you?" Ives said.

Carridine made a gesture. "How should I know? The nesters, perhaps. They probably supposed you came home to help me. It's an old device, dividing the enemy."

Ives shook his head. "Elisha Lund isn't a subtle man. It was someone else. Stoll perhaps?"

"Stoll hates me," Carradine admitted. "But he has no reason to hate you. Or was Brule waiting for me?"

Ives said, "I don't know."

Carradine said, "I've told you the truth about what happened on the trail so that your judgment of me can be honest. Yes, I despise the name of Ives. But I do my own gunning."

Ives said, "Then we've finished with our talk. I came for the key to the bunkhouse. There's no reason for you to hold Benedict."

Carradine said, "Perhaps *I* might play

at dividing the enemy. I've got Benedict; I could keep him."

"Tana's at Elisha Lund's," Ives said. "She offered to be hostage until Benedict was returned."

Carradine said, "Tana!" and his scar flamed. He walked from the room and returned presently, the key in his hand. He gave the key to Ives. "Tell Harry I said to let him go," the Colonel said, "and be damned sure that Tana gets back here safely!"

ELISHA LUND came to the door of his shack. Ives said, "I fetched him, Lund."

Tana appeared behind Lund. Benedict looked hard at her and stepped down from the saddle. He said, "Doc told me, Tana," and stood waiting.

Ives thought, "If she'd only smile—if she'd only say one word to him!"

But all the life seemd to go out of Tana; she placed a shoulder against the door jamb and said in a small voice, "I'll be getting back to Hammer."

Benedict said almost imploringly, "I'd like to ride back with you."

For a moment Ives' sympathy was so strong it choked him, but he knew that Benedict's desire could be the undoing of all of them.

"How much prodding do you think the Colonel will stand?" he said sharply.

Benedict looked like a man with a bullet in him. It took him a moment to speak. He said then, "You're right, Doc. You'd better be the one who takes her through the gate."

"No," Ives said. "I'll never ride through that gate again."

The sheriff jerked. "I really am beholden!"

Ives shook his head. "I don't want you packing that notion. You were only a small part of it, Rod." He looked at Tana. "The Colonel talked to me. He spoke of Texas and the trail north. He spoke of Dodge City."

"Brian!" Her voice was stricken.

He said, "Nothing's changed for us, Tana," and he was remembering her hands beating against his chest. "It's just that we both know now." He looked at Elisha Lund. "You'd better be the one to take her to Hammer."

Lund had frowned his perplexity, but he asked no questions. Lund merely said, "I'll hitch up the wagon. She can tie her horse on behind." He lifted a huge hand; there was welcome in the gesture. "You ain't had no breakfast yet."

Ives said, "All I want to do is sleep for a million years. Get her there as fast as you can, Lund. The Colonel's got a right to be edgy till she shows up."

He went into the shack. It was partitioned into two rooms and this one was the living room, he supposed, though it had a bunk built into one corner, and that made it a bedroom, too. He stripped himself of his gun-belt and looked for a place to hang it. A curtained doorway gave off the room; he swept the curtain aside and peered into a lean-to tacked onto the back of the shack, making a third room. Here was a small iron bed; it was darker in the lean-to, and he stepped inside and laid his gun-belt upon a chair and fell into the little bed. He lay, his body slowly relaxing, and after a while he heard a wagon creaking in the yard; that would be Lund and Tana starting out for Hammer, he decided. He wondered about Marco Stoll; Stoll had headed this way last night, but he hadn't seen the man about and he hadn't thought to ask.

Benedict came into the shack. He said in a soft voice, "Doc?" Ives muttered, and Benedict said, "I'm getting on into town. See you later, Doc."

Ives said, "You can do something for me, Rod, when you get the chance. You can lay your hands on Brule. I want very much to talk to that gentleman."

"You'll get the chance," the sheriff promised.

Benedict left the shack; and Ives fell asleep.

He awoke with that strange sensation that comes to a man who has turned day into night. Someone had pulled a chair beside the bed and was sitting there; it was Marybelle.

"That's my bed you've been sleeping in, Doc," she said.

SHE leaned over him, smiling; it was good to find her here. Scarcely realizing what he was doing, he reached

for her, and his arms went around her and he drew her to him. Her lips came to his with no evasion; he held her thus for a long moment and then she gently removed herself from his arms.

"Doc," she said, "that wasn't exactly fair." She was shaken; he could tell that.

He said, "Then I'm sorry. You came close to me just once too often."

She shook her head. "I'm the one who cheated. There's always a time when a man doesn't stand a chance. I've sat here by the bed waiting for that time." She stood up. "You'll want something to eat. I'll get it for you."

When she had gone, he got up and came out into the other room and Cory Lund sat there. Ives looked at him and said, "So you came, too. Well, let's have a look at that arm." Ives unbandaged the wound and had his look and then redressed Cory's arm. Ives said, "You're coming along fine. But I meant it when I told you to take it easy. You're a hell of a patient, Cory."

Cory said, "You're a good man, Doc. I told you the other day I'd change my mind if you laid more than talk on the line. Maybe I pegged you wrong."

"So you've talked to your father?"

Cory frowned. "No, he's not back from Hammer yet. But some of the boys were still around when we rode in this morning. I know about Benedict's getting back. I know how that was worked."

Ives said, "Your dad isn't back?" He felt faint alarm. "What time of day is it?"

He stepped to the door. The sun showed midafternoon. Marybelle came in from the kitchen and said, "Eggs are on the table."

Ives said, "I wonder what's keeping your father?"

Marybelle made no answer. She merely nodded toward a wash basin she'd filled. "You'll want to wash up and shave," she said. "I brought your things down from Feather's place."

Later, he sat at a table in the kitchen and Marybelle watched him eat. Cory came and stood in the doorway, saying nothing. When Ives had finished Marybelle said, "I suppose you'll be going back to Hammer."

Ives shook his head. "I've got a ride to make if I can borrow a horse. Jensen's. I told the woman last night that I'd drop back and look at the child."

Marybelle said, "I'll ride with you."

He smiled. "I get all tangled up in fences when you're not along."

Cory said, "I'll saddle up for both of you," and left the shack.

THERE was a bleak alikeness to these homesteads, and Jensen's looked the same as the others they'd passed on their northward journeying; the tar-papered shack, the scattered out-buildings, the hard-packed yard with its scratching chickens, the garden beyond. Adversity made a familiar pattern along the upper Sombra. Ives had passed this way twice, but he might have had difficulty finding Jensen's if it hadn't been for Marybelle. She said, "Here," when the time came, and they rode into the yard. He stepped down from his horse and remembered the fear that had first come to him when Marybelle had told him about Jensen's child the other night.

"You wait outside," he ordered.

Marybelle nodded. She got down from her saddle and walked off toward the garden and began an inspection of it. Ives lifted his case from the saddle and found the shack's door open and the woman standing there. Her man was with her now; her man loomed up behind her gaunt and red-eyed and hopeless looking. He'd been one of those who'd gathered at Elisha Lund's place last night; he frowned at Ives.

Ives said, "I told you I'd come back."

The woman dried her hands on her apron. She was tall and raw-boned and her hair kept falling into her eyes. She brushed at her forehead with the back of her hand. She was wearing a thick gold wedding ring.

"Come in," she said.

This shack was not as large as Lund's; it had only one room, and all of living was done in this room. The child's bed was in a far corner; the child lay there listlessly. He looked to be about twelve. Ives went to him and looked down and smiled and said, "Hello, young feller," trying to be brisk and

professional and comforting, but there was a feeling in this shack that made him defensive; they had him pegged as belonging to Hammer.

The boy looked at him with large eyes; the boy looked scared.

Ives glanced at the parents. "Tell me about it."

Jensen moved his weight from one foot to the other, still frowning. Mrs. Jensen said, "He started getting headaches a few days ago. He just didn't have no gumption at all. He doesn't want to eat, and he doesn't sleep at night. He just tosses and turns."

Ives placed his case upon a chair and opened it. He took the boy's temperature and began a careful examination. He placed his hand on the boy's abdomen in the appendical region; he found a slight distension there. He said, "Tummy hurt?" and the boy nodded. Ives looked for rose spots on the abdomen, but there were none. He turned to the parents. "There are other children sick in this same manner?"

"Half a dozen," Jensen said. He had a deep, rumbling voice. "Beamis' is the worst, from what I've heard."

Ives snapped his case shut and picked it from the chair. "Don't go near him any more than you have to," he said. "I'll drop in again. Probably tomorrow."

Jensen said, "Ain't you going to do nothing? Ain't you going to give him medicine? What the hell kind of doctor are you?"

It was there, the belligerency, flushed out into the open; and against it Ives put a professional aloofness. "We have to study these things to know what they are. And we have to know what they are before we begin doctoring. He might have appendicitis. He might have something else."

Ives went to the door; Jensen stood aside to let him pass, and Mrs. Jensen said in a small voice, "We're obliged to you, Doctor."

"I'll be back tomorrow," Ives said.

Marybelle sat upon the platform over the well, her back to the pump. Ives looked at the pump, then looked to see the location of the outhouse. He frowned. He said, "Will you take me to Beamis' place?"

Marybelle said, "It's back down the river."

They mounted and headed southward in silence; when Jensen's place was a piece behind them, Marybelle said, "You look worried. Is it bad?"

"I don't know yet," he said.

THEY came to Beamis' place within the hour; here, too, was another tar-papered shack, another scattering of out-buildings, and it might have been Jensen's scrawny chickens that scratched in the yard. Beamis kept pigs; they squealed in their pen. Beamis was chopping wood; he put down his ax when the pair rode up, and he came forward slowly, another gaunt, harassed man. He said, "You'd be the doctor," and he looked at Marybelle as if to find some confirmation from her that Ives' presence was professional.

Ives said, "I've heard you have a sick child. I'd like a look at the child, if you don't mind."

Again there was that belligerency, that feeling that he was suspect and unwanted, but this gave way to a strange gratefulness in Beamis' eyes. He said, "Come in. Come in."

His wife had come to the shack's door; she was slattern and rail-thin, and worry had put years onto her. Again there was the one room, and the bed in the corner, but the patient was a girl, possibly fourteen. Fever had covered the child's lips and tongue with a dirty brown crust, and she muttered deliriously. Marybelle had followed as far as the door. Ives turned and said sharply to her, "Stay out of here!" For now he knew what he was up against, and the knowledge filled him with fear.

He looked at the parents. "How long has this been going on?"

"Two, three weeks," the woman said.

Beamis said, "When she kept getting worse, I went to town. Mr. Stoll gave me medicine." He took a bottle down from a shelf. "Here it is."

Ives pulled the cork and smelled the bottle's contents and walked to the door and flung the bottle as far out into the yard as he could. When he turned, anger had drawn his lips thin. But he said nothing. He took the child's temperature, and then he said, "Bring me

a basin of cold water."

He fell to sponging the child; he worked at this an hour and more, forgetting time, forgetting everything but the need of his patient. From time to time he took the child's temperature again; her delirious babbling grew less. Ives turned to the mother. "I want you to watch how I do this. I want you to be able to sponge her when I'm not around. It may have to be done often this week."

Hoofs beat out of the south and made a clatter in the yard. Through the open door Ives saw a farm boy upon an unsaddled horse, his naked heels thumping against the horse's flanks. The boy flung himself from the horse and went to Marybelle. Beamis walked out; and Ives turned back to his patient. He commenced sponging again; he kept this up for another half hour, then had a look at his thermometer. One hundred and three degrees.

Beamis had come back into the shack. Beamis paced, saying nothing. Ives drew his sleeve across his forehead and felt like a man flung headlong into a nightmare. He said, "My God! My God!" and it was a prayer.

He remembered the parents. He said, "I'll be back again tomorrow. How many more of them are there, I wonder."

He picked up his case and came out into the yard. He saw Marybelle waiting for him; he had forgotten about Marybelle; he had forgotten about the farm boy who'd come bareback. The boy had gone.

Marybelle pulled herself slowly into the saddle. She said, "I've got to go home now. Dad's dead."

The land uptilted and Ives almost fell from his own saddle. He was thinking that there'd been much too much of everything lately. He was thinking that he'd finally got numb, but not too numb to understand this. "Hammer?" he asked and knew what the answer would be.

"The horse brought the wagon home," she said in an empty voice. "He was in it. Shot dead. That's all I know."

"You should have gone on home," he said.

"I thought you'd want to know. I knew you had your hands full in there. I told Beamis not to tell you."

"Hell!" he said. "Oh, hell!" And he rocked in his saddle.

And now there was nothing to do but ride. He had met calamity once today; he had met it again, and he was beyond thinking. They headed southward; Marybelle found her way through the maze of fences, and they said nothing to each other on that ride, but Marybelle's face was a dead woman's face. The day was about ended; the shadows marched down from the hills, and the river reflected the setting sun and ran bloody. Ives looked upon the river and shuddered.

THEY came to Lund's place to find the yard teeming; wagons were here, and men and women and children. More than one messenger had carried the news, Ives decided, to have caused so many to assemble so soon. Ives and

[Turn page]

Marybelle stepped from their horses in this milling crowd, and the people opened a lane for them, giving their sympathy to Marybelle by their silence; and through this lane the two moved to the shack. Elisha Lund was here; they had laid him out, as was the custom; they had placed boards upon sawhorses in the largest room, moving the table with its silver-clasped Bible aside, and Lund lay upon these boards, a blanket thrown over him, his beard rigid.

Only then did Marybell begin weeping.

Cory Lund was in the room; he sat with his head bowed, not even looking up when the two entered. Marco Stoll was here, too; Ives remembered now that the square-type buggy had been in the yard. Stoll filled a chair and kept a respectful silence; Stoll looked properly solemn.

Ives said, "How did it happen?"

Stoll's rubbery lips moved. Stoll said, "I just got here. They tell me that the wagon came back, and Lund was in it. Some of the nesters were still here from last night; they rode out to look for sign. They found blood just beyond the fork. Lund had got that far and turned north toward Hammer. That's where he was shot, we'd guess. The tracks were pretty badly scrambled, but it looks like the wagon was turned around by a man on foot. One of Hammer's crew likely; there may have been more of them. It might have been the Colonel himself. Tana seems to have gone on by horseback from there—on her own horse."

Ives said angrily. "Are the fools going to jump at that—a few tracks in the dirt?" And a fear was in him, a fear for Tana.

Stoll shrugged. "That's not for me to say." He gestured toward the laid-out body. "He's dead. That's sign enough."

The anger was still in Ives, a futile anger, a waiting to strike at something but having no tangible opponent. But from the one anger came another, and he crossed to Stoll and reached down and closed his fingers over Stoll's left wrist. Ives said, "I've just came from Beamis' place. I saw the medicine you sold him. In the name of sanity, man, why don't you find out what's wrong with a patient before you start mixing a prescription?"

Stoll's little eyes glinted and he wrenched his wrist free of Ives' grasp. Stoll said, "I've tried to be friendly with you, Doc. I want to stay friendly. But keep your hands off me! I've never let any man lay a hand on me. I'm not starting now!"

Ives said, "But to be so careless about medicine! It's pure murder!"

Marybelle said, "Do you have to bicker here?"

Ives stepped back from Stoll. "I'm sorry," Ives said.

Cory Lund looked up. He saw Ives, but he looked through Ives without seeing him. Cory said to Marybelle, "We'll bury him tonight. Some of the neighbors are doing the digging."

Ives said, "So soon?"

Cory had that coldness in his eyes. "We've work to do, mister!"

Ives said desperately, "Let me look into this. "I'll drag whoever did this to Benedict's jail, if you'll give me time. Even if it's the Colonel."

"It was the Colonel," Cory said emphatically. "No matter who pulled the trigger. He never could stand to take a beating. Any kind of beating. Dad wasn't even packing a gun. What kind of a chance did Dad have?"

He was raging inside, Cory was; he was being swept by an anger so great that it had no outward manifestation. There was only the coldness in his eyes. There was only the steel in his voice.

Stoll said, "You might as well know all of it, Doc. Half a dozen men got off the noon stage today. Hardcase fellows with tied-down guns. They came in from Cheyenne. They put up at the hotel, and asked the way to Hammer."

Cory glared at Ives. "And you want to fool around trying to put a man in a jail! We've wasted too much time. We should have hit days ago when our chance was better!"

Ives looked at Marybelle, and in his look was an entreaty; he implored her support. And, looking at her, he suddenly stood alone. She had ceased her weeping; he judged that she would never weep again. She was there beside her father, and grief had torn her face.

apart. She was a stranger to Brian Ives now—no, she was more alien than that; she was an enemy. She said coldly, passionlessly, "Cory's right. I was a fool not to have seen it before."

Ives had the reckless feeling of a gambler down to his last chip, and he flung his chip out, not caring whether it brought him anything, yet caring desperately. He said, "You start leading your men toward Hammer, Cory, and I take the stage out tonight!"

"Take it and be damned," Cory said.

"You don't understand, Cory. I'm the only doctor on this range. When I go, you're left with this fat fool who hands out any kind of medicine. You need me, but you're not going to have me if you start your war. That's a promise."

Cory said, "Then we'll get along without you."

"You can't," Ives said. "You have a typhoid fever epidemic on your hands."

Cory looked at him unbelievingly. This news was a blow to Cory; it left him stricken; it left him furious. And there the last chip lay.

IX

TANA had ridden away from Elisha Lund's place not once looking back, her face wooden and her thoughts a turmoil. On the buckboard seat beside her, Lund kept his huge hands on the reins and held silent. They climbed a rise of ground and dropped over it, Tana's saddler trailing behind. Lund reached the road to Tamerlane and wheeled along it. Tana sat staring ahead, remembering Ives tugging off his boots and dismissing her with that gesture, remembering Rod Benedict coming to help her into the buckboard and saying nothing, not even goodby, though his eyes had been eloquent enough.

She shook inwardly; she had held herself seemingly serene for so long, so very long, that she wanted now to let loose and weep.

Lund broke his silence.

He said, "He is a goot man—a very goot man."

She supposed he was speaking of Benedict, though she couldn't be sure and she didn't ask. She wanted no sympathy; sympathy would be her complete undoing, so she made her lips stiff and looked handsome and regal and self-contained. The buckboard rattled along; the range spread before them, and she caught the distant glint of sunlight on barbed wire. Yonder lay Hammer, where cattle grazed. Lund looked in that direction; Lund's hard-planed features softened and his beard moved with his smiling.

He said, "When you are young, you want to fight against things, to change the world to your way. It is so with my daughter. When you are older, you learn to sit back and let what is to happen happen. And one morning you wake up, and all the walls you been butting your head against have fallen down—just like the walls of Jericho."

Tana said, "Who wants to wait to be old?"

Lund shrugged. "Maybe the walls fall tomorrow. Maybe the next day. Maybe a year from now." He looked again toward Hammer. "That is why I do not hate your grandfather. He is butting his head against a wall. Meantime, I must try to save my people from folly. Only the land stays the same. All the rest changes, whether we want it to or not."

She was strangely comforted; she looked at this man beside her and he was no longer alien, he was no longer an invader come to tear her world apart. He was wisdom and tolerance and patience; she wondered why she had never seen the philosopher behind the weathered face. He had no learning, not like Colonel Carradine's; he had no wealth. But he had learned the great fundamentals through the process of living, and thus he had amassed the greatest wealth of all. He had come to sense inevitability and to bow before inevitability and thereby defeat it. And, realizing this, Tana felt freed.

What Elisha Lund had learned, she could learn likewise, and therein lay the freedom.

She said, "I never had a father to talk to."

His eyes clouded. "A man holds his children to him only so long. Then they walk their own way. Maybe, after a while, they come back."

She said, "The walls come tumbling down."

His beard twitched with his grinning. "Which one of us is supposed to be making the other feel better?"

She laughed. She said, "I'm glad I met you. So very glad."

Lund flicked the reins. "Soon now we be at Hammer."

"And you're coming into the house!" she cried. "You're going to settle this trouble for once and for all."

"That will be goot," he said solemnly.

She began talking then, a pent-up flood of talk bursting free. She told of Texas and of the migration north; she told of Marco Stoll and Jim Ives and Dave Carradine and Tom Feather. She told all of the tale the Colonel had told her ten years before when she had wept because Brian Ives had left. Lund gave her his quiet attention. Then she told of Rod Benedict, who had come to work for Hammer, and she confessed to moonlight rides the Colonel hadn't known about; she confessed to stolen kisses. She talked freely; she had talked to no man in this fashion, and the talking was good.

Afterwards Lund said, "All the time you have looked backward, never forward. And you have been too much alone. That was not goot."

He lifted his eyes. "Look. Here is the fork in the road!"

THEY turned northward toward Hammer; they rode in silence again, but it was a different kind of silence; it was a communion. Tana felt warm inside; she felt fetterless. They came into the shadow of one of the many cutbanks flanking this road, and the shadow was cool and comforting—until the gun spoke. The sound broke the silence sharply, and Elisha Lund sagged gently against Tana, blood on him; Lund died against Tana.

But for a moment there was still strength in him. He used it to haul at the reins, but perhaps that was some reflex beyond his bidding. His shoulder was against Tana's, and in this stunned moment she knew no fear nor even surprise; she'd been swept beyond those things. She got an arm around him; his eyes were already glazing, but in his last lucidity he could still measure and weigh, and he knew what had happened and what it could portend; she could read that knowledge in his eyes.

He said thickly, "It's lost now—everything—"

She knew what he meant, and she knew that even now he was selfless, concerned with how many men might die because he was dying, and she said, "No!" frantically. "I won't let it happen!"

Then he was dead.

Brule came sliding down the cutbank, gun in his hand and his face wolfish, with his yellowed teeth showing. Tana knew him; she had seen him a time or two in Tamerlane and had heard him called by name, and she had listened to Ives' feverish babbling of his encounter with this same man. Brule had worked himself up to the killing pitch; moreover, fear was in him, and that was what made him really dangerous. He came to the buckboard and yanked at Tana's arm.

"Down, you!" he ordered.

He dragged her from the buckboard and, keeping a hold on her elbow, fetched her with him as he went about unfastening her horse from behind the vehicle. Lund's team was smelling blood and showing skittishness. Brule released Tana and grasped at the reins and brought team and buckboard around, facing them south. He slapped them hard with the reins and let them clatter away. Tana found her legs and turned to run; Brule pounced upon her. His hands were offensive; he got her to her horse and made her mount. Then he produced pigging strings from his pocket and proceeded to lash her hands to the saddlehorn.

Tana said stonily, "Hammer will kill you for this!"

He looked to the north, the whites of his eyes showing, and she sensed the nature of his fear. Hammer's gate wasn't so far away, and the sound of the shot might have carried. He cursed her obscenely, then led her horse around the cutbank. On its far side, hidden from the road, his own mount stood with trailing reins. He climbed carefully into the saddle—he was still favoring his right leg—and began leading

Tana's horse away from the road.

She could have shouted, but there was no one to hear. She let herself be led along, keeping her eyes on Brule's wide shoulders, but now the shock was leaving her and sickness came, and she was afraid she would faint. She was remembering Elisha Lund dead; his blood was on her blouse. She was remembering his body bouncing in the buckboard as the team had galloped south. She forced this picture out of her mind.

She wondered at Brule's intent as concerned her; she had expected to die with Lund, but now she supposed she was to be held for ransom. This Brule, as far as she knew, was a lone wolf, a drifter, and she presumed this to be some game of his own. But she recalled how methodically he had turned Lund's team around and headed the buckboard homeward; she recalled that Brule had lain in wait for Brian Ives another day, and she wondered then what real pattern lay behind this procedure. Her head ached and her mouth was dry, and she couldn't fight off fear.

At first it seemed that Brule moved aimlessly across the prrairie, and then Tana again saw sunlight glinting on barbed wire, and shortly they were paralleling Hammer's fence northward yet keeping a good distance away. They rode steadily for an hour and another; the Sombra Hills drew nearer, and Tana realized that the hills were their destination. And now she saw Brule's strategy; he was keeping between Hammer and the strung-out nester places; he was running this narrow gauntlet boldly, and though help lay to the right and the left, Tana felt as remote as if they were on the moon.

Twice Brule stopped, his head tilted, his whole body listening. On these occasions he said, "You keep quiet," saying it ominously. Neither time did she hear anything; whatever had disturbed him escaped her notice, but she prayed then, prayed hard.

SOON they were climbing. Into the area of stunted trees, she could look back and see the Sombra and the smoke rising from ranchhouse and nester shack, and Tamerlane shimmering distantly. Brule moved with greater surety; she sensed that he was near his destination, and her fear grew. She closed her eyes for long minutes, trying to detach herself from reality, but always when she opened them the first thing she saw was Brule's broad back.

Into deep timber, Brule searched out a game trail and followed along it, but there was a regular maze of these trails and at many forks he hesitated. Then, suddenly Tana knew where he was headed, and relief left her teetering in the saddle. Feather's place! He was taking her to Feather's place, and Marybelle and Cory Lund were there, but Brule didn't know that! At first this seemed unbelievable luck, until she put herself in Brule's place and did his kind of thinking. South, east, and west were closed to him, for Tamerlane, Hammer, or the nester settlement held dangers. Therefore, he'd had to turn north, and the only shelter in this section was Feather's shack.

She tried not to let her face show elation. Brule had found the right trail and they moved along in single-file; soon they were in the clearing before the shack. Brule dismounted carefully; his gun came into his hand again, and he said once more, "You keep quiet." He made no attempt to gag her, and she wondered how he could be so sure that she was intimidated—until she looked down and saw Elisha Lund's blood.

He moved slowly across the clearing, leading her horse and his; a vast silence held all the hills, and the heart went out of Tana then, for now she sensed that the place was deserted. Between suns the Lunds had left. Brule reached the door; it was partially open, and he kicked at it. He peered inside; he grinned. Then he moved to Tana and fumbled at the knots holding her wrists.

He said, "Git down."

She almost fell. He caught at her, steadying her. Again the feel of his fingers revolted her. She wrenched free; he seized her and shoved her inside the shack.

Tom Feather was sleeping in the bunk.

Now Tana glimpsed a new shadow of hope, but Feather rolled over and propped himself up on an elbow and brushed away his tangled mane with a

sweep of his hand.

He said, "Howdy."

Feather was surprised, but he showed no real curiosity, no real interest. He was in that peculiar detached state of mind in which Ives had found him at the creek bank yesterday; he had these moments when he knew nobody.

Tana said, "It's me—Tana!"

Feather frowned. He seemed to be wrestling with something beyond his comprehension. Finally, he said, "Make yourself at home."

Brule said, "Yes, make yourself at home. We'll be here a couple of days."

Tana let herself down into a chair; it was sit down or fall down. Brule took a chair and spun it around and sat -straddling it, folding his arms on the top of the chair back. He sat like this for a long time, watching the two of them. Feather climbed out of the bunk and yawned and stretched himself. He was fully clothed, even to his boots. He made no overt move, and some of the tension went out of Brule.

"Couple horses outside," Bruce said. "Put 'em away, if you've got a place for 'em. But leave 'em saddled."

Tana thought, "He's fixing it so he can get away fast."

Feather said, "There's a lean-to out back."

Feather left the shack; Brule kept his unblinking gaze upon Tana. Once he rubbed his hand across the stubble on his chin.

Tana said, "Would you mind telling me why you dragged me here?"

"You won't be hurt none," Brule said. "Not if you behave yourself. You're just staying here a couple of days." And he shook with inward laughter.

She tried making sense out of this; she wondered again if it was ransom he wanted. She knew what would happen when she didn't show back at Hammer; she knew what the Colonel would think. There was more at stake here than Brule understood—or was she wrong about that? Perhaps he was hiding her out in order to foment trouble. She wondered if she should accuse him of that; she decided against doing so.

Feather came back into the shack. It was getting on to dusk, and Feather poked into the stove and laid a fire. Before food was on the table, it was lamp-lighting time. Feather got one of the lamps burning and set it in the center of the table. The three ate silently; Tana had no appetite. Feather gathered up the plates afterward.

"A lot of strange faces in the hills these days," he said.

Brule looked at Tana. "What's the matter with him?"

Tana said softly, "Can you tell? He's sick in the head."

FEATHER climbed into the bunk. He lay there, his hands locked behind his head, his eyes gazing at the ceiling; he was alone with himself again. Brule grew bored; Brule roamed the shack aimlessly and looked often from the door. Then he straddled a chair again and sat in silence, the minutes running on. There was no sound but the sputtering of the lamp, and then Tana slowly came to realize that something was in this shack she hadn't been here before.

At first she was only mildly disturbed; she had grown tired of the steadiness of Brule's gaze, and she had kept her eyes away from him. Now she looked and read his face, and her fear rose and choked her. His face was wooden, but he was breathing hard, and his eyes betrayed him. She sensed that his desire had been no part of his intent when he'd first brought her here, but that made her terror no less.

Brule saw her glance and was done with pretense. Brule looked toward Feather. "Old-timer, go take a walk for yourself," Brule said.

Feather said drowsily, "Eh?"

"Get out of here!" Brule said savagely.

Feather swung his legs to the floor and came to a stand, looking from one to the other in bewilderment.

Tana cried, "No, Tom!" and freed herself of her numbness and ran toward the door. Brule spilled his chair getting off it; he snatched at her and flung her hard against the wall. He began cursing her.

Tana screamed, "Tom!"

Feather's face puckered with anger. "You keep your hands off her!" he shouted.

Brule dragged out his gun and waved it; and Tana, pressed against the wall, gave up hope. Guns were the terror of Tom Feather's existence; she had seen him cringe at the sight of one bracketed to a wall, and she knew how he had come by his phobia. She expected Feather to wilt before the threat of Brule's gun and go scurrying into the darkness, but Feather had found some strange reservoir of courage. He charged at Brule, and this was suicidal but it was also magnificent. It was as though a man who had dealt in futility a score of years had now shed himself of futility and found a cause. And so Tom Feather died.

The roar of the gun in the confines of the shack was like thunder in a well. Feather spun about, his hands clutching his chest; he went down to his knees and bowed forward, looking strangely devout. He shook his wild mane; his eyes lifted to the window of the shack, and he screamed, "Stoll—Marco Stoll!" Then he fell forward.

Brule glared about. Brule looked toward the window and ran outside. Tana made another lunge for the door then, but her legs wouldn't hold her. She stumbled; she tried picking herself up; she became aware of clattering hoofs, of some great commotion outside. And then, astonishingly, the Colonel was in the doorway. The Colonel's scar flamed, and the man cried, "In the name of God, what is this?"

"Brule!" Tana said weakly.

"He just rode away," the Colonel said. "He must have heard me coming up."

"Stoll . . . outside . . . window . . ." Tana muttered.

Carradine went through the door as though released from a bow. He came back in a few minutes; he shook his head. "Nobody is out there," he said. "I even lighted matches. Not a sign of a footprint beneath the window."

Tana had got to her feet; she reeled, and the Colonel moved to support her. Tana had never seen him so shaken. He said, incoherently, but with a strange intentness, as though the explanation was important: "I came up here to examine the lie of the land. I thought perhaps I might post some of the crew at the shack later. This is the backdoor to Hammer. Somebody might think of that when the shooting starts."

"Shooting?" She looked at Tom Feather upon the floor and shuddered. Then she understood what the Colonel was implying. "Lund was fetching me home," she cried. "They kept their bargain. Brule waylaid us and shot Lund and brought me here. Don't you understand? It just looked as if they were still holding me!"

Carradine said darkly, "I only know you didn't come back. I was going to give them until morning. One of the reasons I took this ride was to keep from going insane. I've men coming from Cheyenne. Perhaps they're already waiting at Hammer. I'll put an end to all this business!"

She remembered Elisha Lund dying; she remembered her pledge to Lund, and she tore herself away from the Colonel. "No!" she said, and this was her first real defiance of him.

X

NOW Ives began his walk with death. . . . First there was the funeral of Elisha Lund; they buried him on a slight bluff overlooking the Sombra, overlooking the nester settlement; they buried him at dusk of the day he'd died; Cory was single-minded about that. Cory was a shaken man; he had talked to Beamis and Jensen and some of the others, and Ives judged that he'd mentioned the ultimatum Ives had laid down. There had been much shaking of heads; there had been many glances directed Ives' way; there had been some sawing of the air with hands. But Ives had allies; he knew it now. Allies of the moment. Those with sick children no longer cared about Hammer; the need at home was their great need.

Elisha Lund had been placed in a crude coffin which someone had hastily fashioned. They carried this coffin to its hole at sunset; they stood grouped around the hole, men in denim and women in calico and children turned quiet by the soberness of the moment. One among them took upon himself the job of delivering a sermon; he was an-

other gaunt man, and he had a nasal twang to his speech. He knew his Scripture and he chose many texts, sprinkling them at random through his talk. He kept to no straight path in his sermon; he wandered through wordy mazes.

Ives looked down at Elisha Lund before the lid was fastened. Ives remembered that night in Tamerlane's jail when Lund had come to him and Ives had expected wrath but Lund had fetched him tolerance instead. Ives thought that here lay a friend, and he thought, too, that the rag-tag preacher might have done better to have taken his text from Shakespeare: *If you have tears, prepare to shed them now.*

Marco Stoll was present, as were several other townsmen, and, oddest of odd, a couple of cattlemen from across the Sombra. Stoll still had a look of professional sympathy upon his face; there was no reading Stoll. But a real grief rode the homesteaders; they had lost a leader.

The preacher ended a windy prayer; hands busied themselves at the lowering of the box. Ives remembered Marybelle's saying that any man should own at least as much earth as he needed to be buried in. He looked at Marybelle across the grave. She had the face of a sleepwalker. He looked at her, but he thought of Tana; he was worried about what had really happened on the road to Hammer today. Whichever way his thoughts ran, they snarled themselves in worry. If Hammer had done for Elisha Lund and packed Tana off to the ranch, therein lay the making of disaster. But supposing it hadn't been Hammer. He tried not to think about that.

The funeral was over. The dirt was falling and the crowd began to disperse. Cory clapped on his narrow-brimmed sombrero and took Marybelle by the elbow. She let him lead her away. The crowd spilled down into Lund's yard and milled aimlessly; they'd showed no guns at the service, but the guns were with them, in the wagons, in the buggies. The cattlemen from across the Sombra stepped up into saddles and headed for the ford. Stoll wheeled his buggy out of Lund's yard and took the road to Tamerlane. Ives stood in the yard, not wanting to go inside Lund's shack. There would be food heaped about, brought by neighbors for a brother and sister who didn't want to eat; there would be prairie flowers and no eyes to see them. There would be grief.

Someone plucked at Ives' sleeve. He found a bearded man, harassed by worry. The man said, "You're a doctor?"

Ives knew what was coming. Ives said, "Yes."

"My oldest boy—"

"I'll go along home with you," Ives said.

And now indeed did he begin his walk with death.

HE WAS not to sleep that night. No other disease demanded so much from a doctor as typhoid, and the case he rode to attend was in the dread third-week stage and there seemed to be a bad heart condition as well. Ives sat by the bed through the dark hours, feeling lost, feeling impotent. His patient had a pulse so feeble that time and again Ives was sure it had flickered out. But the boy was alive when morning came, and Ives pulled himself wearily into a saddle and promised the people he'd be back. Now it was another day, and there were the patients he'd attended the day before, the patients he'd promised to look in on again.

Jensen's boy was better; so was Beamis' girl. But there were two new cases demanding attention. Ives got so that he left no bedside without expecting to find some frantic messenger awaiting him.

Somewhere in that day's traveling, Marybelle found him. He was sponging a feverish patient, trying desperately to reduce the fever. He was wishing he had a trained nurse. He came upon Marybelle in the yard when the work was done. Marybelle's voice was wooden. She said, "She's safe."

At first he didn't grasp her meaning; he thought she was speaking of one of his patients. Marybelle said, "Cory's making no move against Hammer. You've got him in a split stick, and he knows it. But he did some scouting—

with field glasses. Tana's on Hammer. He got a glimpse of her."

Ives said, "Thanks."

Marybelle nodded toward the shack he'd just quitted. "How is it?"

"Stay out of there!" he said sharply.

She made a futile gesture. "Is there nothing can be done to stop it?"

He shrugged. "Some Britisher is supposed to have developed an anti-typhoid inoculation. I remember reading about it in a medical journal a while back. But such things take time to get into general use. That hope is for another year."

His glance dwelt on her; he wanted to ask her to help him, but he wanted, even more, to have her volunteer to help. But he could drag no one through the shadows in which he walked; she was standing aloof from him; she seemed to have buried part of herself with Elisha Lund.

She must have felt his glance; her face softened. "When you need a place to sleep or something to eat, come to us," she said.

"Thanks," he said and helped her into her saddle. He did sleep at Lund's one night. Cory was there; Cory treated him with a frigid politeness.

THE man who had built a coffin for Elisha Lund had more work to do; Ives lost two patients in a single night, and there were two funerals. The next day there was a third. Death roosted on every man's doorstep. And Ives forgot what it was to sleep.

He came to Cory one day. He said, "I think I know what's causing this thing. The water. These farmers have been using wells instead of hauling from the river. You've got men standing around with guns in their fists, doing nothing. Put them to loading barrels into wagons and hauling water from the Sombra. I want that water boiled. And I want every well in the settlement filled in or boarded over."

Cory nodded. "I'll have it done," he said. He laughed, and his laughter had an edge of hysteria. "Have you heard? We don't need to watch so close. Those Cheyenne gunmen never got to Hammer."

Ives had forgotten about the gunmen.

"They heard there was an epidemic on this range," Cory said. "They lit out. They'd have bucked bullets, but they wouldn't buck typhoid."

Cory kept his word. Cory had water hauled from the Sombra, and men bent their backs over shovels and the wells were filled in. Ives saw crews at work as he rode from one homestead to another. But still there were fresh cases; the sick, from whom the germ discharged, were isolated as much as possible, but the shacks were small and sometimes a parent came down with the disease. There was no stopping it; it was like a fire running wild.

"You dug your wells so they'd be handy to the house," Ives told one nester. "Then you put your outhouses on a rise of ground away from the house. Every last one of you made the same mistake; you never thought about seepage. That's why you've got polluted wells."

Again he went to Cory. He found Cory directing the work of a shovel crew, and every man of them had a gun belted about his waist, and Ives knew that only half of them were at work. The others were patrolling the fringe of the settlement, keeping an eye alert for an attack from Hammer. Ives called Cory aside.

"What we need is a hospital," Ives said.

Cory sleeved sweat from his face. "A hospital?"

"A shack will do. One big enough to put all the sick in it together. Then we won't have them handing the fever to others. And I'll have them all where I can work on them. They won't be dying on me while I'm riding from one place to another."

Cory nodded, "We'll get to work on it."

Ives measured this youngster. Ives thought, "You're obeying me because it's best for your people. But you're remembering that I've got you hog-tied, and you're hating me for it."

He nudged his horse. "I've got to be getting along."

And so he went his endless rounds. There were more funerals. It got so that he could be sitting at a bedside and look out through a window and see a

group of people trailing by, a small coffin perched upon the shoulders of four of the men, the weeping women stumbling after them, the self-appointed preacher trailing the lot. The settlement had been too new to have a cemetery; it had one now.

One day he sat by the bedside of a new patient, busy at his sponging and trying the while to comfort a mother who had been reduced to weeping incoherency. His words were a drone in his own ears; his hands made mechanical movements; he was a man who had become an automaton. He heard a horse come into the yard; he supposed it bore some frantic messenger demanding his presence elsewhere. He didn't even look up when the rider stood in the doorway, a shadow falling across him.

She said, "Brian—"

Her voice brought him around. Tana stood there wearing the divided riding skirt and sombrero she'd worn when last he'd seen her. Only the blouse was different. He didn't know that she would never wear that blouse again, that it had had Elisha Lund's blood on it.

She said, "We heard about the sickness here. There must be something I can do."

"Yes," he said. "You can help me with this sponging. Come here; I'll show you how."

He knew he was wrong; he knew he should be sending her on her way. But he was too tired; he needed help too desperately. He looked at her; he saw the sincerity in her face. In him then was a need for weeping and a feeling that he should be down upon his knees.

XI

HE DIDN'T take time to inquire into the miracle that had brought Tana to him, or even to think about it. Not at first. She was someone to lean upon, and he was deeply grateful, too grateful to care about the whys and the wherefores. He took her with him on his rounds that first day; once again a horse wearing Hammer's brand stood in nester yards, but the people, too, had grown apathetic; the people accepted Tana as incuriously as Ives had accepted her.

They met Cory on their riding. Cory touched his hat brim at sight of Tana and went on about his business; later Ives was to learn that Tana had come first that day to the Lund place and had been directed to Ives by Cory. There had been brief talk between Cory and Tana, and good had come of it.

From bedside to bedside Ives took Tana, and his was the job of turning her into a trained nurse in a single day. He watched her work, and he remembered the day he had come back to Hammer, feverish from Brule's bullet, and how she had cared for him then, her every movement precise. He smiled, knowing now that he might go and sleep.

But still nester men wore guns; still they looked toward Hammer.

One day Rod Benedict came to the nester settlement seeking Ives. Ives and Tana were working together that day, and Benedict waited outside a shack for them; and when Ives came to climb into the saddle, Benedict said, "Howdy, Doc." Ives shook hands with him. Benedict said, "Just dropped by to let you know I've been trying to cut sign on Brule. The ground's opened and swallowed him."

Tana came out; Tana heard the last of this. She shuddered. Benedict gravely removed his sombrero. He looked at Tana, smiling with his lips, his eyes hungry, and then he said, "Mind if I tag along a while? I've got nothing special to do."

The three made the rounds together; there was little talk among them; they kept stirrup to stirrup whenever they could, Tana in the middle; and Benedict was quick to open the gates. Thus they spent the hours of an afternoon, but always there were the shacks where they stopped, and always Benedict had to wait in the yard then, and thus was he shut out. They were working southward, and at supper time, when Tana and Ives were invited to stop over at the shack they were visiting, Benedict pulled himself into his saddle.

"I'll be getting along," he said. "I'm batching now. Maw took the stage out a couple of nights ago. Heading for Kansas. Said she was afraid of the sickness that's going around. I don't think

she ever liked it this far west."

His glance touched Tana. Tana's smile reached across to him; her smile was wistful, but it promised nothing.

"So long," Benedict said.

The hospital shack was finished sooner than Ives expected. Then came the moving of the patients to it; they came in wagons and upon improvised stretchers, and Ives fetched the last one in his arms. The hospital consisted of one big room with two rows of beds neatly spaced. Cory was here. Cory waved his hand and said, "How does it suit you, Doc?"

Ives said, "Just fine," and his look met Cory's, and then they were friends.

"We all got to jumping at shadows for a while, Doc," Cory explained. "Tana told me, the day she came here. It was Brule who did for Dad and packed her off. We could have made a bad mistake that day." Cory made a fist of his right hand. "I've been looking for Brule. He must have skipped the country."

"Brule?" Ives said speculatively and tried to follow his thoughts through, but a patient in one of the beds was babbling deliriously; he had still to be the doctor.

Tana came to him. Tana looked tired. She said, "I'm going to Hammer for a day or two." She hesitated, then added, "*She'll* be giving you a hand until I can get back. She's worked with me several times lately."

He looked and saw Marybelle at the bedside of a patient. Some of the old roguishness was in her face. "Yes, Doc," she said, "I know when I've had coals of fire heaped on my head."

He said, "I learned from her myself."

He turned back to Tana. Tana was gone; so was Cory Lund. Ives asked a question. Cory was escorting Tana to Hammer's gate.

Now Ives' work was easier for him. He had a bed for himself here in the hospital, and he could make his rounds without leaving this building. He had stopped the spread of the infection by checking it at its source; all drinking water came from the Sombra now and was boiled as an extra precaution; and the patients were isolated here in the hospital. He still had nights when he sat through the darkness till sunrise; but one by one the beds began emptying; one by one the patients were going home. The plague was beaten.

He found a day when he could leave Marybelle with the patients, and on this day he strode about aimlessly, a wooden-minded man who had walked too long with death. He came to the Sombra; he found a grassy place along the bank and seated himself and dreamed without dreaming. And here Tana found him.

"Hammer is no more, Brian," she said.

He stirred, "What's that?"

"The Colonel's leaving. On tonight's stage. He's divided up Hammer among the hands, giving them each the ground they originally homesteaded for him. Some will be staying; some will be drifting on. It will be farm country soon, I imagine. He's going back to Texas. Part of him never left there."

He said, "There was more to it than that!"

She met his gaze. "The night Elisha Lund died there was a showdown. I told the Colonel that the day he made war against the nesters would be the day I'd ride away from Hammer forever. That licked him, I think. Then, when we heard of the plague, I came to help you. When I went back to Hammer, he'd made his plans. Now he's headed for Tamerlane to take the stage."

"And you?"

"Hammer's house is mine. I'll stay there. I'll run a few cattle till I decide to sell and move on."

He said, "What of Tom Feather?"

She said, "Didn't you know? Tom's dead." And she told him the story of her abduction then, all of it.

FIRST he felt a terrible anger against Brule, but that was tempered by the thought of Feather's sacrifice, of Feather's final courage. "Perhaps dying was best for Tom," he said, not meaning to sound shallow. "He would have been helpless without Hammer."

"Poor Tom," she said. "As he was dying, he pointed at the window and shouted Marco Stoll's name—as though Stoll were out there. But when the

Colonel looked, there were no tracks beneath the window."

Ives harked back to that night; it seemed an eternity ago. "That was the night Lund was buried," he recalled. "Stoll was here, at the funeral. I saw him. Tom was just having another of his delusions." Suddenly he came to his feet so abruptly as to startle Tana. He stood staring, his hands clenching. "Tana," he said, his face white. "The Colonel's a dead man!"

She didn't understand him, of course. Ives went on, "He left him alive all these years because he wanted to deal him worse than death. That was his scheme; I can see it now. A war with the nesters was to have ruined the Colonel. But the Colonel's given up the fight; he's going back to Texas. Don't you suppose that news has got around? And now there's nothing left for him to do but kill the Colonel!"

"Him? Who, Brian?"

"Stoll! Marco Stoll!"

She looked puzzled. "I don't understand. Stoll's never shown an enmity toward the Colonel."

He seized her arm. "Give me your horse," he said. "It's faster than any nester horse." He didn't wait for her permission; he ran to the mount and flung himself into the saddle and headed through the willows, bending low and keeping an arm before his face, riding recklessly.

He reached Tamerlane just as the stage pulled up before the depot, and relief strangled him as he flung out of the saddle. The stage driver was loading baggage; the stage was empty.

"Colonel Carradine?"

The driver spat into the dust. "Yeah, he bought hisself a ticket. Asked me when I'd be pulling out and took his saddler to the livery."

This much of Ives' judgment had been correct. He had wondered how Carradine was traveling; and he had concluded that the Colonel would take a saddle horse from Hammer, planning to leave the mount at the livery stable. He started up the street afoot, and he saw the Colonel emerge from the stable and come walking toward him. The Colonel was dressed as always in staid black. He looked imperiously Old South and self-contained. He was saying farewell to a good share of his life, but he was giving Tamerlane no last lingering glance as he paced the planking.

Lamps were just winking to life; the street was almost deserted at this hour. Ives ran toward the Colonel; he tried to shout, but the sound he forced out seemed a feeble croak. Still, it stopped the old man. It stopped the Colonel in the precise spot where Ives had once stood and been accosted by Cory Lund —the spot across the street from the drug store.

Ives thought, "The fool! The fool!"

The Colonel was staring at him as though Ives were mad. The aristocratic face was a question mark. But up there in the darkened window of Stoll's quarters something moved slightly, and it was all the sign Ives needed.

This was no time for talk, not with the seconds running out. Ives sprinted forward and dived at the Colonel; his shoulder struck against the man's knees, and the two of them went down in a tangle.

That was when the shotgun boomed.

XII

THERE was this to be said for the Colonel; he was a good man in a pinch. He guessed all that needed guessing at once. He freed himself from Ives and went rolling off the boardwalk. The buckshot had screamed over their heads and spattered against the siding of a building behind them; Carradine quickly reared himself to a stand. He pulled Ives to his feet and dragged him with him, and the two of them went running across the street. Ives gained the doorway of the drug store, the Colonel with him. Now they were directly below the window in Stoll's quarters, and if Stoll had reloaded they might be in their greatest danger. But the door gave to their hands and they were inside and safe from a second blast from overhead.

Ives gasped, "Have you got a gun?"

The Colonel dug an ivory-handled forty-five from beneath his coat; it was the gun he'd slept with many years. He said, "But I believe our bird has flown, sir. Look, the back door's open."

Ives edged up the stairs to Stoll's quarters. They were deserted; the shotgun lay on the floor, furniture had been overturned by the haste of Stoll's departure, chessmen strewed the floor. Ives came below; he looked out the back door; there was no sign of Stoll.

"His nerve gave way when he didn't get you," Ives said. "He's run for it."

Carradine said, "I should have expected Stoll's play. I see that now. How did you know?"

"Men coming," Ives said warningly.

Townsmen crowded the doorway; the Colonel looked at them. "An accident," the Colonel said. "Nobody's hurt." He waved them away; he shut out their questions with that gesture; he was still the Colonel. The men glanced about, their faces ludicrous. They drifted. Ives left the building, the Colonel with him. A few paces down the street, Ives put his back to a wall, and his foster-father did likewise. Here Ives could look either direction, commanding the street. The old man carefully brushed the dust from his suit.

"I think, sir," the Colonel said, "that you have something to say to me."

Ives said, "He hated you. For what happened on the trail from Texas. And he hated Jim Ives, too, because Jim Ives handled the whip. Not long ago I grabbed Stoll's wrist. It was a thing he couldn't stand. I should have known then that he'd never forgiven the man who laid a whip on him. And because he hated Jim Ives and you and your son, two of you three died in Dodge."

The Colonel's face was heavy with thinking. "How do you make that out?"

"Tom Feather," Ives said. "He went to Dave Carradine's hotel room in Dodge. Jim Ives came there, and Jim Ives was on the prod. When the smoke settled, two men were dead and Tom Feather's memory was gone. But he had his flashes after that. Tell me, was there any way a man could have climbed to the window of that hotel room in Dodge?"

Carradine passed his hand across his forehead. "Possibly. I don't remember."

"Stoll did it, just the same. Stoll came to the window and started shooting. Jim Ives and Dave Carradine didn't shoot at each other; they shot at him. And Tom Feather got caught in the middle of it. Tom, shot to doll ribbons, ever after was addled and therefore not dangerous to Stoll. But the night that he braced Brule in his shack, he was shot again. And that took Tom back to the night in Dodge."

The Colonel nodded. "So that is why he pointed to the window and shouted Stoll's name!"

"Exactly," Ives said. "He felt a bullet, and he remembered Marco Stoll at another window long ago. Well, Stoll got two of the men he hated in Dodge City. That left you. And it left me, because later he hated me, too. That was because I looked like Jim Ives; you hated me for the same reason. And Stoll had two more of us he wanted dead."

Carradine said, "Stoll's been on this range for many years. He came to Tamerlane just after it was built. Time and again he must have had his chance."

"Yes," Ives said, "but it's my guess that he wanted more than your death. You'd had him stripped down like a peon and flogged. Some men's souls would have healed with their scars; not Stoll's. He wanted you humbled; he wanted you stripped, too, but in a different fashion. He's a chess-player, so he moved pawns. And all of us were the pawns."

"Didn't he befriend you the day you came back to Tamerlane?"

IVES glanced up the street; a few men loitered about; to them, he and the Colonel must have seemed two men making idle talk. Ives said, "Yes, he bought in when Cory Lund braced me on the street. But that was Stoll's way of winning my confidence; Stoll had to learn why I'd come back. Because I felt obligated to him, I admitted that Tana had written she needed my help in handling you. Tana wanted you to give up your war against the nesters.

"That war was something Stoll wished; he was sure you would lose and that way he'd see you brought to your knees. He must have feared that I'd have some influence on you because he tried to talk me into leaving. When I refused, he kept up his pretense by loaning me his buggy. And then he set Brule to lie in wait for me. I was to be killed. I

wasn't to be saved for something special as you were."

Carradine said. "Then it must have been Stoll who mailed me the half of the hundred dollar bill."

"It must have been. It was a shot in the dark, just as you guessed then; there was little lost if it didn't work. Meanwhile, he'd had Brule shoot Cory; that was to be blamed on me, and that was to have set off trouble between nesters and Hammer. Stoll didn't dream that Benedict would be allowed to take me off Hammer; Stoll was mighty surprised when I came riding into town with the sheriff. Later that night he came around and offered to help me break jail. My escape would have been pegged onto Hammer, thereby arousing the nesters. I did escape, but only so I could patch up Cory Lund and stop the war."

Carradine said, "And I raided town!"

"Stoll must have expected that, too, knowing you. But your raid was too late, so he had to make another play. Brule took a second shot at me. Then you held Benedict hostage. When the time came to exchange Tana for Benedict, Stoll was out at the nester settlement. He must have got word to Brule at once. Elisha Lund was shot by Brule, and Tana was carried off, to be held captive for a couple of days. Stoll was really growing desperate when he planned that one. Lund's death was to have aroused the nesters; Tana's disappearance was to have aroused you. But I held off the nesters because they needed me, and you found Tana. Then you gave up the fight. When I heard that, I reasoned that Stoll had likely heard it, too. Once you stepped on that stage, you'd be gone out of Stoll's life. He'd failed in his scheme to break you by forcing you into a lost cause; the only thing left was for him to kill you."

Carradine said slowly, "That was superb reasoning on your part."

"One by one, I picked up the pieces. Tana gave me the last one today when she told me about Tom Feather's dying. When I realized that Stoll had done the killing in Dodge City, I understood everything. And I knew what you were facing."

He looked across the street. "Your stage's about ready to pull out."

Carradine said, "I won't be taking it. We have a hunt to make, you and I."

Ives shook his head. "You really beat Stoll the moment you decided to call off your war. The greatest service you can do Sombra Range is to climb on that stage. I'd like your gun, if you don't mind. You won't need it where you're going."

Carradine's face was uncompromising until a thought softened it. "I dealt you injustice for many years," he said. "Stoll needs only one bullet, and only one man can send it. I owe something to you, and something to Jim Ives." He produced his gun and passed it to Ives. "Good-by, Brian," he said.

They shook hands for the first and last time. They walked across the street together; Ives held open the coach's door. The driver frowned impatiently; his whip cracked. Ives watched the stage careen away; one of the Colonel's thin hands emerged from a window and waved. The sunset caught the coach and made a blur of it; the rattle of wheels died; the dust plume settled.

IVES stood aimlessly; he became aware of the Colonel's gun in his hand; he frowned at the weapon; he had been trained to heal, and he held a strange instrument now. He thrust the gun into the waistband of his trousers. Dusk fogged the street; Ives suddenly grew wary of shadows. Hoofs rattled, and he looked up to see Cory Lund leaping down from a lathered horse.

Cory said, "Tana told me you were heading here to stave off some sort of big trouble."

Ives talked; he told Cory a very great deal in a very few words. He finished his talk, and Cory frowned. Cory said, "Stoll's likely still in town. There's a few empty shacks up the street. I'll head that way and look into doors. You go the other way. When you get to your end of the street, turn and head back. I'll meet up with you somewhere."

"This isn't your game," Ives said.

Cory smiled; there was no humor in it. "Have you forgot Brule? And Elisha Lund?"

Ives said, "If you run into Rod Benedict, tell him what's up."

Cory nodded. "I'll be seeing you."

Ives turned to the first of the saloons; he shouldered the batwings aside and looked at the few men who were liquoring; Stoll was not here. He came back to the planking and glanced toward the Oriental Cafe, but he judged that Stoll would not be so bold as to be loitering in a public place. Likely Cory's theory concerning the deserted shacks was more nearly correct. Still—

The young doctor paced along; he turned toward the wooden awning of another saloon, and Charley came lurching out. This was the first time Ives had seen the town drunkard since the day of his return to Tamerlane, but Charley knew him. Charley's breath reeked. He said in a hoarse stage whisper, "Stoll's down in Benedict's jail. Now ain't that a place to hide! In a jail!"

Ives fished a dollar from his pocket and passed it to Charley. It jingled against other coins in Charley's pocket, but Ives wasn't to think of that till afterward. He went quick-striding toward the jail; he came into Rod Benedict's office cautiously. Only shadows were here. He moved to the barred cell door and said softly, "Stoll? Marco Stoll?"

Some vast bulk moved in there, and Ives quickly flattened himself against the office wall beside the door. Stoll said wearily, "I'm not armed. I lit out too fast to take the shotgun."

Ives said sharply, "Come out of there!"

Stoll said, "The door's open."

Ives reached and hooked a toe between two of the bars of the door. He tugged, and the door swung open. He got the Colonel's gun in his hand, and he lunged into the cell. Stoll was seated on the bunk; Stoll was a black botch against blackness. Stoll said, "What are you going to do? Shoot me down?"

Here was surprise; Ives had expected a defiant, fighting Stoll; he had expected to run against the courage of the cornered. He walked across to Stoll; he reached down and patted Stoll's clothes for a weapon. Stoll made no move; Stoll might have been a sack of sawdust. Ives said, "I'm going to light a lamp. I want to be able to watch you."

He stepped out into the sheriff's office and fumbled with the lamp on Benedict's desk. He got it burning and fetched it into the cell and placed it on a stand. Stoll looked at him unblinkingly; Stoll was never more like a toad.

"You're in jail now," Ives said, "and you'll stay here until Benedict comes to turn the key."

Stoll lifted his hands and let them drop upon his knees. It was a shrug.

Ives said, "There's just one thing I've got to know. What profit was to be in it for you? There wasn't a red cent, so far as I can see? Was it just revenge?"

Stoll's face came to life. It showed hate. He said, "Can't you understand how it piled up as the years went by until it was bigger than a mountain?"

Ives shook his head; he could understand this, yet it was beyond his understanding; it was like sick tissue under a microscope, only it was a man's soul he was seeing.

Ives said, "A bullet would have balanced up for you any of the time across the years. But you would have had cattleman pitted against farmer and half a hundred of them dead. All because of something twenty-three years past!"

Stoll said, "And it was all going my way till you came back!"

Ives said, "God, if you knew how sickening you are!"

Stoll lifted his head; Stoll seemed to be listening, and then the awareness of danger was upon Ives like a blanket thrown over him. He remembered Charley's money, and he understood; he knew that Charley had been bribed to tell him that Stoll was here. He realized this just as the gun went off; the gun spoke beyond the cell window—out there in the weed-choked lot where once Stoll had stood. Ives heard the gun and a second gun and a hoarse shout and a name said vilely, and the sound of a man falling.

Stoll was upon his feet. He was reaching behind him, and a six-shooter lay on the cot—a six-shooter which Stoll had been sitting on. Stoll got this gun into his hand, and the lamp flickered with the concussion of his first shot. Ives felt the breath of the bullet; the lead drew splinters from the wall, but he

was firing then, making the Colonel's gun work. Stoll folded over and fell into a heap upon the floor.

Boots were stampeding in Benedict's office, and Cory came lunging inside. Cory stood looking at Stoll's body, and Cory said, "I can see it now. He was to be the bait to hold you while Brule got in a lick through the window. But their timing went wrong. I got back down the street to find Brule out there skulking around."

Ives looked toward the cell window; he looked out there where Brule had been.

"Dead," Cory said.

Ives let the Colonel's gun slip from his fingers. He put a hand to the wall, feeling very sick. Ives said, "I've had enough for one day."

XIII

THE nester hospital stood empty, and Ives moved about the building aimlessly this sunny afternoon. His instrument case was here, and so was his carpetbag; he had come for these things, but with them ready to be removed, he still lingered. He had grown to like this place. He looked at the two rows of empty beds; he had made a good fight here; moreover, he had made friends. In the days since Stoll and Brule had died, Ives had eaten many meals at many different tables. Now the work was done, and now, suddenly, he felt rootless again.

He had his plans made, but there were the little last things to do. He flung his Prince Albert over his arm; he picked up the two bags and went out to the waiting horse. It was a Lund horse; he had long since returned Tana's mount to her. He fastened the bags to the saddle and rode toward Lund's place. There were good-bys to be said, good-bys to some who had touched him closely.

He reached the place in late afternoon; silence droned in the yard; a hundred memories lingered here. He came down from the horse in the shadow of one of the outbuildings; he walked toward the shack and heard voices. Rod Benedict was here. Benedict, Ives judged, was sitting on a bench before the place. He was saying, "This range has got so quiet I'm thinking of asking the taxpayers to hire me a deputy. I need somebody to play checkers with."

Marybelle's laughter came. Marybelle must be standing in the doorway of the shack.

She said, "I'm no good at the game, but I could try."

Benedict held silent a moment. Then he said, "Would it be seemly if I came out here often? It's been mighty lonesome since Maw took off for Kansas. Sometimes a man just needs somebody to talk to."

Marybelle said, "You come as often as you like."

Ives felt like an eavesdropper, yet because his thoughts always turned inward, he reflected that here was rightness he hadn't perceived. He had never thought of Benedict and Marybelle together, but now he saw the sense of it. Benedict was a man of courage and energy, but there was a certain aimlessness to him. He needed his footsteps directed, and he had found a girl who would direct them. Yet there was one thing Ives didn't understand; surely Benedict knew that the Colonel was no longer at Hammer.

Ives coughed and made unnecessary commotion with his feet and came around the corner of the shack. Marybelle straightened herself in the doorway; Benedict looked up lazily. Ives said, "I just stopped by to say I'll be taking the horse into Tamerlane, if you don't mind. I'll leave him at the livery stable."

Marybelle's eyes clouded. "You're going, then?"

"Back to Oregon. On tonight's stage." He made his voice very casual. "I just stopped by to say so long. Cory around?"

"He's out riding."

Ives said, "Tell him good-by for me."

"Does Tana know?" Marybelle asked.

"I haven't seen her lately," Ives said and wondered if the pain showed in his eyes.

Benedict pulled himself to a stand. "I'll be riding along." He came close to Ives; he looked at Ives broodingly for a moment, then made a fist of his right

hand and beat it softly against Ives' shoulder.

"Oh, hell, Doc," he grinned. "How could I hate you if I tried?"

Ives said, "That's one of the good things that have come out of all this."

Benedict walked to his horse and climbed into the saddle. Marybelle called after him. "You come back, Rod. Soon."

Rod lifted his hand and trotted the horse out of the yard. Marybelle watched him speculatively, and Ives waited out the moment and said, "You won't bag him easily. Tana's free now. Are you very sure he's what you want?"

She said, "He'll tie me here, to this land. But you've always guessed that I'd never get away, not really. Maybe you knew me better than I knew myself." She smiled with the old roguishness. "So it's good-by, Doc."

He kissed her gently, not holding her long. He said, "Be good to him, Marybelle. If you get him, you'll have yourself a boy to raise."

She said, "You be good to yourself, Doc." She blinked. "Damn you, Doc," she said.

TAMERLANE was hazed by dusk when he reached the town; he came first to the stage station and bought a ticket to railhead; he found that he had nearly an hour of waiting. He led the Lund horse down the street to the livery and arranged for the mount to be kept till Cory could come after it. This was the first time he'd been in the livery since the day of his return to Tamerlane. The timelessness of the place impressed him again; the horses still stood listlessly in their stalls; the air was heavy with the smell of them. He walked out into the street. A wagon rolled along, a man and woman and child upon the seat, spooled barbed wire filling the wagon box.

Once before he'd stepped from the livery stable and there'd been a nester wagon with this same cargo; and now this gave him a start—this was too much like that other day. But the man at the reins was Beamis; Beamis noticed him and sawed at the reins and said, "Good evening, Doc."

Ives walked over to the wagon. The little girl was emaciated from the fever; she was all eyes.

Beamis said, "They tell it that you're leaving us, Doc."

Ives nodded. "Tonight's stage."

Beamis looked out across the land; Beamis looked to where the Sombra Hills lifted. "You come back any time, Doc. We'll always find room for you."

"I'll remember that," Ives said.

He moved along the planking; Stoll's drug store was dark; a new man was coming to take it over. Also, a new doctor was coming to Sombra Range. Thus had Ives' last usefulness here dissolved.

He saw Charley seated aimlessly on the edge of the boardwalk, his feet a tangle before him. He remembered that Charley had been paid to toll him into the death trap Marco Stoll had prepared. He spoke to Charley in passing; he forgave Charley. He turned in at the Oriental Cafe and had a meal, lingering over it. He had been busy for so long that this wealth of time seemed a burden to him; all things were aimless.

The luggage was loaded when he came back to the stagecoach; the driver was climbing aloft. Ives stored his carpetbag in the rack overhead, but he kept his instrument case in his hand. The case he took with him inside the coach; there was only one other passenger; she was seated in the far corner; she wore a trailing dress that rustled with her slightest movement; a plumed hat shadowed her face.

Ives said, "Tana!"

The driver's whip cracked; the coach lurched forward, wheeling along the street. Ives raised his voice above this clamor. He said, "You're going, too?"

"Wherever you're going, Brian."

He carefully put the instrument case down on the floor between his feet. He let his hands lie aimlessly in his lap. He could find no words.

She said, "Why didn't you come to me, Brian? Mary told me about Stoll—and the finish. Up till that day, this was impossible for both of us, I know. There were Jim Ives and Dave Carradine, and we'd have had them to shadow us all our days. But when the truth came out about Marco Stoll, the last wall came tumbling down."

He said, "Yes, I know. But what

about Benedict?"

She said, "It was lonely on Hammer. When Benedict rode for us, there was someone on the place to remind me that I was a woman. Yes, we made the motions of being in love. That was good for me. But you were there, somewhere in a corner of my heart, always—that lonely boy I'd cried for. Marybelle Lund knew how I felt—she must have read it in my face the night I came to Feather's place to tell you about the trouble. That's why she couldn't be friendly with me."

He said helplessly, "But it was always Benedict you were concerned about. Take that day he put himself into danger by coming to Hammer to arrest me—"

She said softly, "Don't we owe something to those who love us, Brian?"

He looked out the window; they were beyond Tamerlane; the road snaked across an expanse of prairie and the yesterdays were dropping behind them. He looked and understood everything then; he had had a kinship with this girl, always, and even their years apart hadn't changed that. She had lived for the Colonel, and lately she had lived for Rod Benedict, while he, Ives, had lived for myriad patients who'd taken their toll of him. That had been their lot, sacrificing themselves for the good of others. They were of a kind, and they had found each other now, and the wonder of that, the miracle, was too big for easy grasping.

Tana said, "Rod came to me after the Colonel left for Texas. I told him how it was with me. He came again today, to tell me that you were leaving. When you didn't come to say good-by, I knew you hadn't really understood. That left me only this to do."

He said, "I haven't much for you in Oregon."

She said, "You have you."

He remembered Marybelle saying, "You'd give me the real security that all of us are after—the security of knowing I was owned and would therefore be protected because I'd be the most priceless of all properties. Yes, Doc, I'll have security when I have you." He had learned from Marybelle; he was grateful to her.

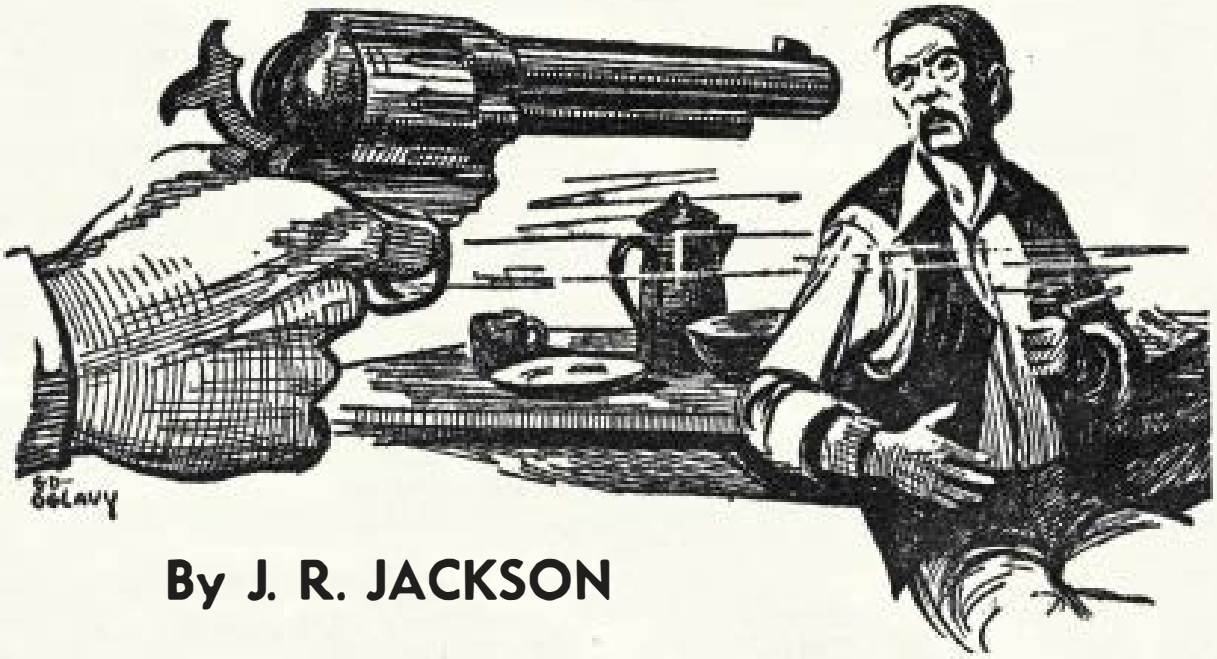
He said, "We can be married before we catch the train."

They both fell silent; if she shared the yearning that was suddenly in him, she didn't show it; and he supposed that it was the same with her as it was with him; he wanted to taste the wonder of this, he wanted to taste anticipation.

He said presently, "I've been thinking. If it hadn't been for Stoll, I might have been raised like a true son of the Colonel. Then I'd have likely stayed at Hammer and turned cattleman; and when the nesters came, I'd have reasoned as the Colonel reasoned. And so it might have all been different—for myself and for this range. Perhaps I owed Stoll something. At least I owe him forgiveness."

She said, "You'll always find the good in all things. I'll try to be good for you, Brian. Will you kiss me now?"

BOOT HILL BUGLE



By J. R. JACKSON

IT WAS late afternoon as Sheriff Ben Tolan rode up to old Sunfisher Jones' long shanty on Big Snake creek. The ground was snow-covered, an ice-edged wind howling down from the sullen foothils. The chunky, tow-headed layman was thinking eagerly about the hot coffee he knew was waiting for him in Sunfisher's cabin.

When Ben Tolan worked hard at the sheriff's job in Banf's Pass, he also delivered the *Weekly Bugle,* getting around to the remote ranches in the valley once a week. He usually got to Sunfisher Jones' place several days earlier, but the snow had held him up this time. Sunfisher was a friendly, talkative oldtimer who lived alone in his cabin, raising a few sheep and chickens and hunting in the winter.

Tolan pulled up and looked at the cabin, sniffing appreciatively the smell of coffee coming from the place. He got down, bending his chunky body against the icy blast of the wind, and tied his dun to a post. It wasn't snowing yet, but unless he read the sign wrong, a humdilly of a snow storm was about to come screaming and snarling out of the Panamints within the next four hours.

When Tolan pounded on the door, a cracked voice said, "Come on in outa the wind, Ben. Coffee's nearly hot."

BEN TOLAN pushed open the door and went in, and the warm air covered him like a blanket. It was a moment or so before his eyes could see in the dim light. A round-bellied cast-iron stove was red with heat. Old Sunfisher was heating coffee on this. The place was filled with a delicious smell.

Sunfisher was a blue-eyed little man with a white longhorn mustache and thinning gray hair on his head. He grinned broadly at the sheriff. "Howdy, Ben. Wondered if you'd get through with all this snow on the ground."

Behind the sheriff's unsuspecting back a deadly killer waited—but how could old Sunfisher warn the lawman?

"*Bugle* gets through sooner or later. I got to get back to town 'fore the blizzard breaks. Everything all right, Sunfisher?"

"Sure is. Why wouldn't it be?"

"I figured mebbe—"

"You lawdogs allus worry too much," Sunfisher interrupted. "As I said, coffee's most hot. Let's drink while we talk. You say you got my *Weekly Bugle* with you?"

"Sure have," Tolan grinned. "Here it is."

The sheriff pulled a folded newspaper out of his pocket and put it on the table. Sunfisher started to open it, then reluctantly put it aside and began to put the cups on the table. He knew the sheriff would have to get started back right away so as to reach town before the storm.

They drank the coffee with the pleasure of hard-working men, old Sunfisher pawing through the newspaper.

Feeling just about thawed out, the sheriff said, "Sunfisher, I got to tell you something—"

"By grabs, looky here!" Sunfisher suddenly yelled, almost spilling his coffee. "Says here that no-good Joe Kurdo has escaped from the state pen!"

"He sure has," Tolan nodded. "That's what I aimed to tell you about. It was you saw him throw that stolen herd across the border, remember, and swore him into the pen. I thought mebbe—"

"Paper says he killed a man in the break!" Sunfisher exclaimed. "Says the state law figures he's headed back this way toward the Panamints. If that don't beat all! First I knew—I ain't been away from the place in a spell."

"Happened two days ago," Tolan said carefully. "He was seen twenty miles east of here, near to Copper Butte."

Joe Kurdo was a man with a mighty mean reputation. Until a few years ago he had hired out to small ranching outfits not far from Sunfisher's place. He had been accused of a lot of things, but it was only Sunfisher Jones who had caught him red-handed with stolen cattle. He had testified against Kurdo at the trial, and his evidence had sent the man to prison for ten years.

"I don't reckon he'll come back to these parts," Sunfisher said uncertainly.

"Hope not," Ben Tolan agreed. "But don't forget, when Kurdo was led out of court, he swore he'd come back and pay you off. If I was you I'd keep a sharp watch."

"Why, I'll do that. But I never figured that jasper was as bad as everybody said. I hardly reckon he'd go to all the trouble just to come back and kill an old codger like me who ain't long for this world anyway."

"He's a pretty mean hombre. You be careful." Tolan pushed away from the table, stretching with satisfaction. "Sunfisher, I do believe you make the best java west of the Rockies. I never drank no better. Well, I guess I better start back."

He pulled on his waterproof mackintosh, gazing uncertainly about the warm cabin. The place was crude but neat as a pin. At the back of the room was a curtained-off corner, behind which Sunfisher kept his food stores and a few pots and dishes.

"Hope you ain't held up next week," Sunfisher said, a little wistfully.

Tolan went out, untied his dun and rode away, his head bent against the icy blast of the howling wind.

ALMOST instantly, the curtain in the back of the cabin pulled aside and a man came into the middle of the room. He was a blocky, black-bearded man with cold, narrow eyes. Joe Kurdo had a dirty bandage across one side of his face. A gun was in his hand.

"It's a good thing you done what I said," Kurdo growled. "One false move, just one wrong word and I'd of blasted you and that lawdog into kingdom come!"

"That's why I acted like I didn't know you had broke outa the pen 'till I read it in the newspaper," Sunfisher said. "Ben Tolan's my best friend—I don't aim to see him murdered."

"Guess you didn't want it yourself either?" Joe Kurdo sneered. "Look here, old man, you do just what I say and mebbe you won't be. I got to stay here a few days, 'till this blasted blizzard blows itself out. After that—"

After that, Sunfisher knew, he would kill him without mercy.

Kurdo swore angrily. "That lawman

drank up all the coffee. Heat some more!"

Sunfisher got up wearily, went to the stove and put in some logs. He poured more coffee grounds into the pot. He acted like a doomed man resigned to his fate. Soon the outlaw was drinking thirstily.

The coffee was half gone when there was a crashing, violent sound and the door burst inward. Ben Tolan pounded through the doorway into the room, gun in hand, yelling:

"Freeze, Kurdo, you skunk!"

The ex-convict's reactions were sudden and violently wicked. Kurdo threw himself sideways from the table, rolling and clawing at the furniture. Then he grabbed for his gun.

Tolan's gun roared and bucked, and Kurdo, just charging to his feet, shrank back from the fiery blast of the keening lead. He fired twice, hastily, and the bullets went wild. The sheriff, warding off the hurtling chair with his left arm, fired carefully. Joe Kurdo screamed, dropped his gun, smashed back against the wall with a torn shoulder. He bounced away, snarling like a mountain cat, his wicked eyes searching for the gun on the floor.

"Don't do it, Joe!" Ben Tolan warned.

"What I don't see," Kurdo whined sullenly, a few moments later, "is how you knowed I was behind that curtain. I didn't leave no sign, and that old coot didn't say or write anything, because I was watching and listening all the time."

"Mebbe so," Ben Tolan agreed. "But Sunfisher told me you were here in the cabin, just the same. He told me when he read that story in the paper about you."

"That don't make no sense—"

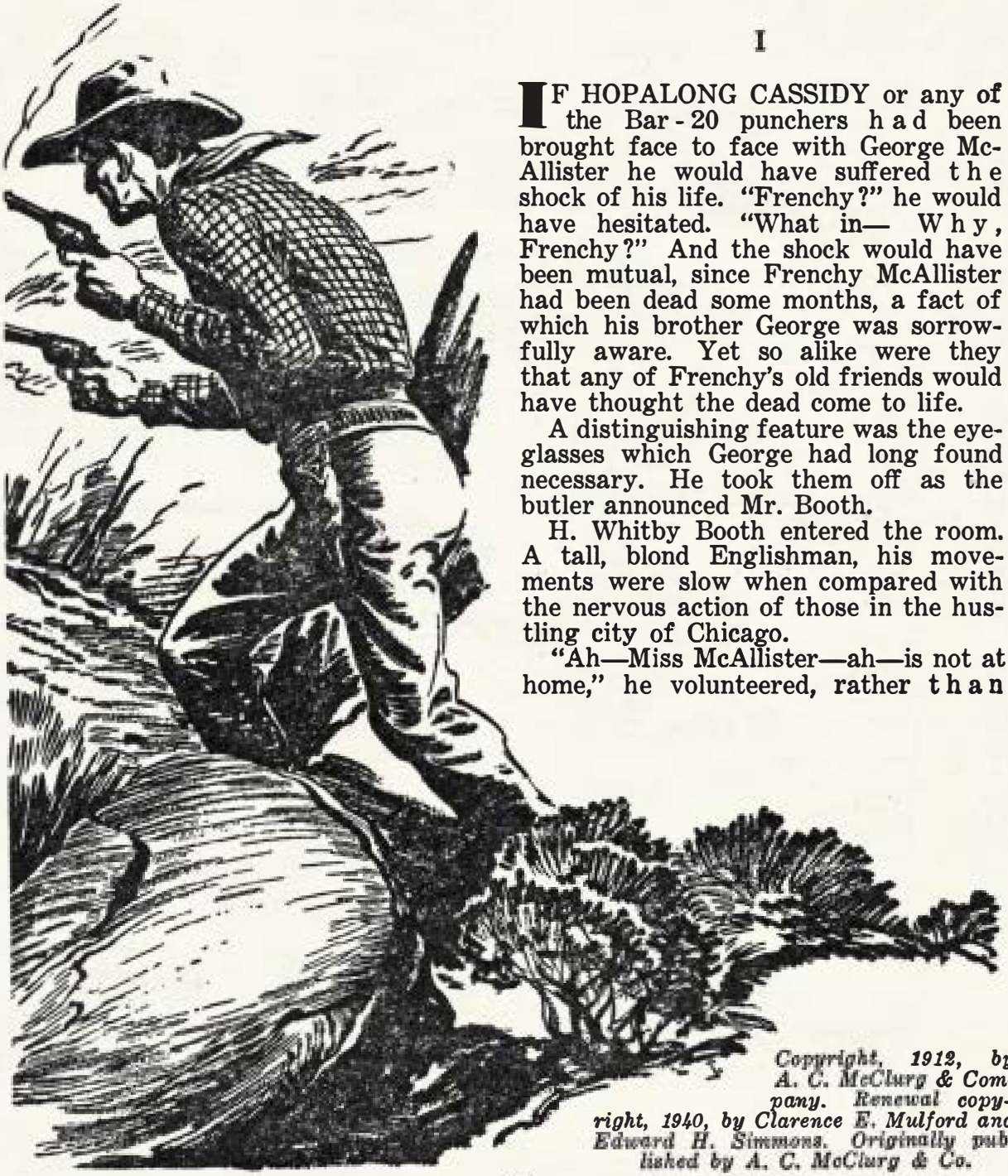
"Don't it?" Ben Tolan smiled grimly. "It would have, if you'd figured like I did—how the snow delayed me. You see, Sunfisher was reading about your escape from the pen which only happened two days ago. That paper's four days old!"

A HOPALONG CASSIDY NOVE

BUCK PETERS, RANCHMAN

BY CLARENCE E. MULFORD

Montana rangeland resounds with the bark of six-guns and the thump of hoofbeats when Hoppy and his crew come riding to help a friend plagued by rustlers!



I

IF HOPALONG CASSIDY or any of the Bar-20 punchers had been brought face to face with George McAllister he would have suffered the shock of his life. "Frenchy?" he would have hesitated. "What in— Why, Frenchy?" And the shock would have been mutual, since Frenchy McAllister had been dead some months, a fact of which his brother George was sorrowfully aware. Yet so alike were they that any of Frenchy's old friends would have thought the dead come to life.

A distinguishing feature was the eyeglasses which George had long found necessary. He took them off as the butler announced Mr. Booth.

H. Whitby Booth entered the room. A tall, blond Englishman, his movements were slow when compared with the nervous action of those in the hustling city of Chicago.

"Ah—Miss McAllister—ah—is not at home," he volunteered, rather than

questioned. The older man eyed him quizzically.

"No," he agreed, "she and Mrs. Blake are out somewhere; I am not just sure where. Shall I inquire?"

"No, oh no. I rather wanted to talk to you, you know—that is—ah—"

"Sit down, Whitby, and relieve your mind."

"Awfully good of you, really. The fact is I want Margaret—Miss McAllister—and I thought I'd ask if you had any objections."

"Margaret has."

"But I say, Mr. McAllister, you don't think—"

"No, my boy, I don't think where Margaret is concerned — M a r g a r e t thinks. Don't misunderstand me. I like you, Whitby. Confidentially, I believe Margaret does, too. But I am quite sure she will never marry a man who does nothing and, as she expressed it herself, lives on an allowance from his father."

"Then I understand, sir, you have no objections?"

"None in the world—because I believe you will strike your gait before long. But let me tell you, Margaret doesn't deal in futures. She insists on fact."

"In that case, sir, I'll try my luck." Whitby arose to say goodnight.

"You know where to find them?"

"Rather! I was going there when I had spoken to you."

"I see," said Mr. McAllister, somewhat grimly, remembering the other's greeting. "Sit down, Whitby. The night is young, you can't miss them, and I am so sure of the badness of your luck that I should like to give you a little encouragement to fall back on."

Whitby resumed his seat.

"NOT TO go too far back," Mr. McAllister began, "my grandfather was a boy when his father took him from Ireland, the birthplace of the family, to France, t h e birthplace of liberty, as the old man thought. Those were stirring times for that boy and the iron of life entered into him at an early age.

"He married and had one son, my father, who thought the liberty of this country so much better than that of France that he came here, bringing his young wife with him. The wife died in giving birth to my younger brother, John. All that line were hustlers, Whitby. They had to be, to keep alive. Margaret knows their history better than I do and glories in it. You see?"

Whitby nodded mournfully.

"My father would have been alive today but for an unfortunate accident which carried off both him and my mother within a few days. My brother and myself were found pretty well provided for. My share has not decreased. In fact, I have done very well for a man who is not avaricious. But I had to fight, and more than once it was a close call, win or lose.

"Margaret knows all that, Whitby, and the dear girl is as proud of her father, I do believe, as of any who went before him. Her mother left us very soon and Margaret has been my companion ever since she could talk. Are you beginning to understand?"

"I am, indeed," was the reluctant acknowledgment.

"Very good. Then here is where you come in. My brother was, in my opinion, peculiar in many of his ways. The choice of his path in life was quite on a par with his character. He invested every dollar he had in land out in Montana, he and a partner whom I have never seen, bought and paid for land and stock at a time when government land was used by any one without payment of any kind and when livestock raising w a s almost an unknown industry, at least in that part of the country.

"But that wasn't all. He went out to the ranch and took his delicate young wife with him, a bride, and lived in a wild region where they saw only Indians, outlaws, and those w h o were worse than either." His face hardened. "Worse than either, Whitby," he repeated.

"John returned to the ranch one day

to come upon a scene that drove him crazy, I verily believe. I had the details from his partner at the time—John did not write me for years. They both started out after the murderers and wandered over a great part of this country before finding the chief fiend.

Rose flung herself from the saddle and headed for the figure huddled in the road (CHAP. XI)

Even his death brought no peace to John. He would never go back to the old place nor would his partner, out of feeling for him.

"After much persuasion I got them to put matters into my hands, but so many years had passed that I found the ownership in dispute and it is but lately that I have succeeded in regaining title. It was too late for John, who died before I came into possession, but his partner, a man named Peters, has gone up there from a Texan ranch — the Bar-20 — to run the place. He is half owner and should be the best man for the job.

"But—and my experience with those Westerners places emphasis on that 'but' — I do not really know just what kind of a man he is. I am putting quite a large sum of money in this venture, relying upon Peters' knowledge and hoping for a square deal. And if he is the best man for the place, you are the best man I know to show me that. Don't interrupt.

"I know right well what Margaret will tell you tonight, and if you want to

make her change her mind, you could have no better opportunity than I offer. My brother's history is an abiding grief with Margaret, and if you go out there and make good you will surely make good with her.

"That's all. If I'm right, come and see me tomorrow at the office. I will have everything noted down for you in writing. Commit it to memory and then destroy the notes, because you would be valueless if any one interested discovered you were acting for me. And don't see Margaret after tonight before you go."

He arose and held out his hand. Whitby grasped it as he stood up and looked frankly at him. "It's awfully good of you, Mr. McAllister," he declared. "You've left me deuced little hope, I must say, but there's no knowing where you are if you don't ask, is there? And if I come a cropper I'll try your way and chance it."

"You'll find my way is right. I've made mistakes in my life but never any where Margaret was concerned. Goodnight."

II

THE TOWN of Twin River, the nearest settlement to the ranch in which George McAllister was concerned, straggled with indifferent impartiality along the banks of the Black Jack and Little Jill branches where they ran together to form the Jones' Luck River, two or three houses lying farther north along the main stream. The trail from Wayback, the nearest railway point, hugged the east bank of Jones' Luck.

Boomerang, pet hobo of Twin River and the only one who ever dared to come back, left Little Nell's with his characteristic harried shuffle and approached the wooden bridge where the Wayback trail crossed the Jill. Boomerang was errand boy just now, useful man about the hotel or one of the saloons when necessity drove, at other times just plain bum.

Coming to the bridge, he looked casually along the trail and espied a horseman riding his way. He studied him reflectively a few seconds and then spat vigorously.

"Stranger," he affirmed. "Cowpunch," he added. "Old man," he shrewdly surmised, and shook his head. "Dunno 'im."

The horseman came at a steady gait, his horse, a likely-looking bay with black spots, getting over the ground considerably faster than the cowponies common to the locality. Approaching the bridge, he was slowed to a walk while his rider took in the town with comprehensive glance. A tall man, lean and grizzled, he had the far-seeing, almost vacant eye of the Plainsman.

He forded the stream near the bridge at a walk. Pop Snow, better known as Dirty, greeted him from in front of the I-Call Saloon. "Come a long way, stranger?" asked Dirty.

"From Wayback," announced the other.

"Wayback ain't fur," chuckled Dirty. "You can a'most see it frum here through the bottom uv—"

"How d'you know it ain't?"

Dirty was hurt. This was not according to Hoyle. Two more words and no self-respecting "gent" could refuse to look toward Wayback through a glass—and certainly not alone.

"Why, stranger, I been there," explained Dirty, in aggrieved remonstrance.

"How long since you been there? Not since two-at-once, was you? Didn't it used to be at Drigg's Worry?"

Snow nodded, open-mouthed.

"Course it was—at Drigg's Worry—and now it's way back," and with a chuckle the stranger loped on to the Sweet-Echo Hotel.

Dirty stared after him. "Who in hell's that?" he asked himself. "It's never Black Jack—too old; an' it ain't Lucky Jones—too young. He sure said 'two-at-once.' Two-at-once. I ain't heard that in more'n twenty years."

He got up from his box and turned and looked at it. "Used to be at Drigg's Worry, didn't it?" he mimicked. "An' now it's way back." He kicked the box viciously against the tavern wall. "This yer blasted town's gettin' too smart," and he proceeded to make the only change of base he ever undertook during the day, by stamping across the bridge to the Why-Not.

The door of the I-Call opened and a

man appeared. He glanced around carelessly until he noticed the box. "Huh!" he grunted. Having satisfied himself of its condition, he drawlingly announced it for the benefit of those inside. "Dirty's busted his chair," he informed, and turned to look curiously after Pop Snow, who was at that moment slamming the door of the Why-Not behind him.

The rider meanwhile was talking to his horse as he covered the short distance to the Sweet-Echo Hotel. "Wonderful climate, Allday. If twenty years don't wear you down no more'n old Snow you'll shore be a grand horse t' own." He swung off the trail to ride around the building, catching sight of Boomerang just disappearing through the door of the barroom. "Things has been a-movin' 'round Twin River since Frenchy an' me went after Slippery an' his gang: bridges, reg'lar hotels, an' tramps. An' oblige *me* by squintin' at th' stable.

"If Cowan'd wake up an' find that at th' back door, he'd fall dead." He dismounted and led his horse through the stable door. "Twenty stalls! Well, he ain't meanin' to build again in fifty years, or my name's not Buck Peters!"

ALLDAY went willingly enough into one of the stalls. Buck, throwing saddle and bridle onto his shoulder, walked back to the hotel bar. No one noticed him as he entered, all, even the bartender, being deeply intent on watching a game of cards. Buck grunted, dropped his belongings in a corner.

The game was going on at a table close to the bar. Only two men were playing. The one facing Buck was a big man, in the forties, his brown hair and beard thickly sprinkled with gray; his brown eyes were red-rimmed from dissipation. The other man was of slight build, with black hair, and though he was dressed like a cowpunch, the motions of his hands were those of a gambler.

Buck walked up to the bar and a soft oath escaped him as he caught sight of the thin, brown face, the outstanding ears, the keen black eyes—and his glance leaped around to discover how many of the gambler's friends were with him. He was satisfied that the man was playing a lone hand. There was a tenseness in the air which Buck knew well, but from across the hall came a most incongruous sound.

"Piano!" breathed Buck in amazement.

At the big man's left, standing in the corner between the bar and the wall, was a woman. Her blonde hair and blue eyes set off a face with some pretensions to beauty, and in point of size she was a fitting mate for the big man. Close to her stood the hobo. Surrounding the table were several men quite evidently punchers, two or three who might be miners, and an unmistakable travelling salesman.

Buck watched the gambler's hands and a puzzled expression gradually appeared on his face. Was the man playing fair or were his eyes getting old? Suddenly the frown disappeared. The motion itself had been invisible but Buck had caught the well-remembered preliminary flourish. His interest quickened as the big man stood up.

"I'm done," he declared. "That lets me out, Dave. After tonight I'll have to pound leather for forty a month and my keep." He turned to the woman. "Go on home, Nell. I won't be up yet a while."

She pushed past him to the door. "You won't be up at all," she told him. "You've lost your pile and sent mine after it. I warned you not to play. Now you take the consequences."

The door slammed after her. "Boom" silently opened the door into the hall and vanished.

The big man turned to the bartender. "Slick, gimme a bottle," he demanded. Slick complied and he bore it to the table behind the door, where he sat drinking alone.

Buck dropped into the vacated chair and laid his roll on the table. "The time to set in at a two-hand game of draw," he remarked, "is when th' other feller is feelin' all flushed up with winnin'. If you like to add my pile to that load you got a'ready, I'm on." He beamed pleasantly and called to the bartender. "Barkeep, set 'em up," said Buck, flicking a bill behind him.

Slick became busy at once and Buck,

in a matter-of-fact manner, placed his gun on the table at his left hand and picked up the pack. "Yes," he went on, "the best man with a full deck I ever saw told me that. We crossed trails down in Cheyenne. They was shore some terrors in that li'l town, but he was th' one original." He shook his head in reminiscent wonder. "Same game you was playin', Bud?" he asked, genially.

"Suits me," was the laconic reply.

Buck raised his glass and drained it. "Here's to Tex Ewalt, th' man who showed me th' error of my ways." The tail of his eye was on Dave.

The name of Tex must have shocked him like a bucket of ice water. Tex Ewalt and he had been friends in the Panhandle. Buck knew Dave's history in Texas, related by Ewalt himself, who had illustrated the tell-tale flourish with which Dave introduced a crooked play, but he did not know that Dave Owens was really David (Black Jack) Jones, returned to the place of his nativity.

Luck smiled on Buck from the start. He meant that it should. Always a good player, his acquaintance with Tex, who had taught him all he knew of crooked plays, had made him an apt pupil in the school in which his slippery opponent was a master. With everything coming his way Buck was quite comfortable. Sooner or later the other would force the fighting. Time enough to sit up and take notice when the flourishing danger signal appeared.

IT CAME at last. Dave leaned forward and spoke. "Cheyenne, how'd jackpots strike yer? I got ter hit th' trail before six."

"Shore!" assented Buck.

The pot grew in a manner scandalous to watch. "Double the ante," softly suggested Dave.

"Shore," agreed Buck, with genial alacrity.

Pass after pass. At last, with a graceful flourish a good hand fell to Buck, a suspiciously good hand. Buck looked reproachful.

"Bud, you should oughter o' knowed better'n that. I got six cards."

The smile faded from Dave's face. "Funny," he said. "Funny how a man'll make mistakes."

"I forgive you this once, but don't do it no more," and Buck shuffled the cards, executed a particularly outrageous flourish, and dealt.

"Ha! Ha!" barked Bow-Wow Baker. "Darn if they ain't both makin' th' same sign. Must belong to th' same lodge."

Chesty Sutton dug him in the ribs. "Shut up!" he hissed.

Dave passed and Buck opened. Dave drew three cards to two high ones. Buck stood pat. Dave scanned his hand. Whatever suspicion he might have had vanished. He had never seen the man who could deal him a straight in that fashion. He backed his hand steadily until Buck's assurance and his own depleted cash made him pause, and he called.

Buck solemnly laid down four aces. Four—and Dave would have taken his oath the diamond ace had been on the bottom of the deck before the deal! And Buck had not drawn cards!

"They're good," said Dave shortly, dropping his hand into the discard. "If you're goin' to stay around here, Cheyenne, I'll get revenge tomorrer." He started to rise.

"Nope, I guess not, Bud. I never play yore kind of a game with th' same man twice."

Dave froze. "Meanin'?"

"I don't like th' way you deal."

"D—n you!" cursed Dave. His hand flew to his gun—and stopped. Over the edge of the table a forty-five was threatening.

"A two-gun man, eh?" Dave sneered.

"Shore. Never bet on th' gun on th' table, Bud. You got a lot to learn. Hit her up or you'll be late—an' down where I came from it's unhealthy to look through a winder without first makin' a noise."

"Yore argument is good. But I reckon it'd be a good bet as how you'll learn somethin' in Twin River you ain't never learned nowhere else."

Dave sauntered carelessly to the front door. Half a minute later his pony's hoofs were heard pounding off toward Big Moose.

"Cheyenne, put her there! I like yore style!" Chesty Sutton, late puncher for the Circle X, shoved his hand under

Buck's nose.

"Me, too," chimed in Bow-Wow.

The chorus of congratulations that followed was so sincere that Buck's heart warmed toward the company. They had lined up before the bar and all glasses were filled. Buck glanced at the silent figure by the window, set down his glass, and started to cross the room. Chesty Sutton put out his hand and stopped him.

"I wouldn't worry him none, Cheyenne. Ned Monroe's th' best boss I ever worked for, but hard luck has been pilin' up on him higher'n th' Rockies since he lost his ranch. Better let him fight it out alone, friend."

Lost his ranch—Ned Monroe— Buck's intention was doubly strengthened. He strode across the room and in front of the window. "Friend, it's on th' house." A rapid glance at the bottle told him that Monroe, in his complete oblivion, had forgotten it.

Ned eyed him with a puzzled frown. He rose heavily to his feet. "Sure," was the simple reply.

At the bar, significant looks were exchanged. "I'm beginnin' to *like* Cheyenne," declared Slick, the barkeep, thoughtfully. "Well, gentlemen, here's to th' continued good health of Mr. Cheyenne."

Down the line ran the salutation and Buck laughed as he replaced his empty glass.

"I shore hope you-all ain't tryin' to scare me none," he insinuated, "because I'm aimin' to stop up here an'— Who in hell's poundin' that pie-anner?"

"Ha! Ha!" barked in his ear, and Buck wheeled. "That's Sandy," explained Bow-Wow Baker. "He thinks he's some player. An' he is. There ain't nothin' like it between here an' Salt Lake."

"Oh, yes, there is," contradicted Buck. "You an' him's a good team. I bet if you was in th' same room you'd set up on yore hind laigs an' howl."

Bow-Wow drew back, abashed.

"Set 'em up, Mr. Slick," chuckled the salesman.

"Don't notice him, Cheyenne," ad-

Dave's gun sprang to his hand and there was a deafening roar (CHAP. X)

vised Chesty. "It's just a habit. It's got so I'm allus expectin' him to raise his foot an' scratch for fleas."

"You was sayin' as how you was aimin' to stop here," suggested Ned Monroe, his interest awakened.

"Yes," acknowledged Buck. "If I find that—"

Crash! Ding-dong! Ding-dong! The noise of the bell was deafening.

"Grub-pile!" Bow-Wow shouted, making for the side door, grasping hold of Chesty's hand as he went out and dragging that exasperated puncher. "Come on, Cheyenne! No 'angel-in-th'-pot,' but a good, square meal, all right."

III

FOOD there was plenty, to eat and to spare. Little talking was done, as everyone was hungry, with the possible exception of Ned Monroe. Sandy McQueen, the Scottish proprietor of the Sweet-Echo, and the cook officiated.

An immediate adjournment to the barroom was the customary withdrawal, and Buck, doing as the others, found Ned in his former seat.

"Ned," said Buck, leaning towards him across the table, "it ain't none of my business, but was that straight about bein' broke?"

"That's straight."

"Lookin' for a job?" asked Buck.

"You bet."

"Chesty said as how he used to work for you. Was you foreman?"

"I was foreman an' boss of the NM ranch till them bloodsuckers back East druv me off'n it."

"Boss, was you? But you wouldn't refuse a job as foreman, would you?"

Ned's interest became practical. "Where's yore ranch?"

"Why, I was aimin' to stop 'round here some'rs."

"Hell! There ain't a foot o' ground within eighty mile o' where yo're sittin' as ain't grazed a heap over, less'n it's some nester hangin' on by his toes. Leastaways, none but th' NM an' Schatz's range, which they says belongs to th' old Double Y, both of 'em."

"What's keepin' them free?"

"'Bout a regiment o' deputies, I reckon." He smiled grimly. "It's costin' 'em somethin' to keep th' range free o' cattle. Mebby you could lease it. That McAllister feller ain't never goin' to get a man to run it for long. Some o' th' boys is feelin' mighty sore, an' Schatz is a tough nut. It's goin' to be a mighty big job when he starts, an' that's certain."

"I'd like to see it. We'll go t'morrow."

The door opened to admit a short, broad man who made his bowlegged way to their table. "Ned, haf you seen mein Fritz?"

"Nope," answered Ned, "I haven't, Dutch. Hey, boys!" he called. "Anybody seen Pickles?"

A chorus of denials arose and Chesty sauntered over. "Why, you durned ol' Dutch Onion, you ain't gone an' lost him again, have you?"

Dutch stole a look askance at Ned. He laid a glove on the edge of the table. "Dot's Fritz. I turn 'round, like dot," suiting action to word, in a complete turn, his right hand reaching out, taking up the glove and whirling it behind his back as he faced the table again. He looked at the empty spot with vast surprise, in delicious pantomime. "Yoost like der glove iss Fritz—I know ver he iss bud I can't see him."

"Dutch, come here." Ned's voice was stern. "Where was you when you 'turn 'round like dot'?"

"In Ike's I vas, yoost a minute."

"Ain't I told you to keep out o' there?"

Dutch cleared his throat; words seemed to fail him. While he hesitated the door opened again, and Boomerang shuffled up. "Hey, Dutch, I been chasin' you all over. Pickles went home wit' Little Nell, see? An' she sent me ter tell you."

"Vat? Mit dot—" he broke off and turned to Ned. "I begs your pardon, but Fritz, he iss leetle—he learn quick. Right avay I go."

He was at the door when Slick hailed him. "Hey, Dutchy, this yourn?"

The other caught the tossed glove, and nodded. "Yah, first der glove, soon iss Fritz," and the door closed behind him.

"Good as a circus," laughingly declared Buck. "About pay now — how would eighty a month hit you?"

"Fine," declared Ned.

"Then here she is, first month," and Buck handed it over. "You'll be all ready to hit th' trail with me in th' mornin'?" he asked.

"Shore. But s'pos'n you can't get th' ranch?" suggested Ned.

"I'll get it." Buck's smile was infectious.

"Cheyenne, I like yore style. Put 'er there." Ned shoved a huge fist at Buck. "'Nother thing," he went on, "Chesty an' Bow-Wow was a-goin' over to th' Bitter Root. I'll tell 'em to hang 'round for a spell. Them's two good boys. So's Dutchy — when he ain't a-runnin' after Pickles."

"All right, you talk to 'em. See you in th' mornin'," and with a general good-night, Buck went to his room.

BUCK and Ned had just turned into the trail the next morning when a rider passed them at top speed, causing Ned's cayuse to shy. "If Hoppy could see that horse," Buck thought, "he'd give all he's got for him—bar Mary."

The horse merited his criticism. A powerful black, he showed the sloping thigh bones and shoulder of a born galloper. His rider had pulled up at the general store just beyond the hotel and, Ned joining him, Buck expressed his admiration. A moment later he added to it: "By th' lord, Ned, that's a woman!"

The rider had dropped from the saddle and paused to wave her hand to Ned before she entered the store. Buck caught the glance from a pair of beautiful dark eyes that rested on him a moment before it fleeted past to his companion.

"Best horse in these parts an' th' finest woman," agreed Ned. "An' honest," he added.

"Why, o' course!" Buck stared at him. "Anybody says different?"

"Um—no, not as I *knows* of. Her daddy's a nester, got a quarter-section 'tother side o' Twin River, off th' trail a piece. Rose LaFrance—pretty name, ain't it? Th' boys calls her the French Rose."

"Yes, 'tis pretty," drawled Buck. "What I'm askin' about is this recommendation o' character."

It was Ned's turn to feel surprised. "I reckon I warn't exactly speakin' to you, Cheyenne," he explained. "More to myself, like. You see, it's this way: Dave Owens, he won that horse from McReady of the Cyclone, one night in Wayback. Next day Rose rides into Twin River on that same horse.

"John, that's her daddy, he never bought him; he couldn't. Then how did she come by it? That's one thing. For another, Dave Owens travels that way considerable, an' Dave ain't no company for the French Rose. I'm too old to interfere or I durn soon would."

Buck burst into a laugh. Ned eyed him with disapproval. "I was thinkin' of Hopalong Cassidy," explained Buck, in apology. "He'd interfere so quick, there wouldn't be time to notify th' mourners."

"Eh?" questioned Ned.

"Th' name slipped out. But now's as good a time as any to tell you. Did you ever hear o' Frenchy McAllister?"

"Owner o' the Double Y?"

"Half owner — leastways, he was. Frenchy's dead. You was cussin' his brother last night. I want to tell you about Frenchy."

Buck told the story in terse, graphic sentences. It was a terrible story, even in the mere telling of it, and Ned's judgment was without restriction: "That hell-hound deserved whatever he got. Durned if you ain't made me sick. But where do you come in?" he asked. Buck's narrative had failed to connect the new-born "Cheyenne" as "Frenchy's pardner."

"I'm Buck Peters," was the simple explanation.

They rode on for many miles without speaking, their way leading through an excellent grass country. Studying the trail ahead of him, Buck finally broke the silence by asking: "Ain't we near the boundary of the Double Y?"

"You'll know, soon enough. Th' first big butte we come to, some cuss'll be settin' there, hatchin' out trouble."

"That's him, then," and Buck pointed to the right, where a solitary horseman showed dark against the skyline.

"Yep, that's one of 'em."

"Beats me how you let 'em stand you off, Ned."

"Well, when we made good and sure you owned the range, Buck, there weren't no use in fighting. That McAllister would 'a run in th' reglar army next, durned if he wouldn't."

Buck chuckled. "I'm mighty glad it looks peaceful."

"We'll have fightin'. When I was turned off my ranch, it just about foundered me. I sold th' stock, every head, an' you saw where th' last o' th' cash went. But don't forget Smiler Schatz. He's a bigger man an' a better man nor I ever was, an' he's a-layin' low an' a-waitin'. He calculates to get you—dunno how."

"An' I dunno how," mused Buck.

"Wonder who's that pointin' this way?'

Buck glanced ahead to see a moving speck disappear behind a knoll far along the trail. "Dunno. Maybe another deputy," he suggested.

The distant rider came into sight again. "No," Ned declared, "I know that figger. It's Smiler."

"That's the feller gave us the fight, ain't it?"

"Did his share. Some over, mebbe. He's a hard nut."

THE STEADY approach was uninterrupted and Buck looked with interest at the "hard nut" as they met. In a land of dirty men—dirty far more frequently from necessity than from choice—Schatz was a byword for slovenliness nearly approaching filth. His habit of smiling was constant, so much a part of him that it gave him his name. A big man, with a fine head, he sat in his saddle with the careless ease of long practice.

"Hello, Ned!" he called. *"Wie geht's?"*

"Howdy, Karl!" replied Ned. "How's sheep?"

"Ach! Don't say it, der grasshoppers! Never vill dey reach Big Moose. Also, I send East a good man to talk mit dat McAllister to lease der range yet. Before now he say a manager come from Texas, soon. Vat iss Texas like Montana? Nodding. Ven der snow come—"

"Hol' on! This is th' manager, Mr. Buck Peters, half owner o' the Double Y, an' he's put me in as foreman."

"So. It pleases me greatly, Mr. Buck. Ned iss a good man. If you haf Ned, that iss different."

He shook hands with Buck, who took note of the blue eyes and frank smile of the blond German, at a loss to discover where he hit that hardness Ned had referred to.

"It iss a good range," he went on, "und der iss mooch free grass ven you haf der Double Vy for der hard years. But dere iss not enough for you und for me, too, so I turn farmer. Also some of der boys, dey turn farmer. I take oud quarter-section alretty. Well, I can no more vait. So I say good-morning und vish you luck."

Ned wheeled his horse to gaze after the departing figure. "Luck," he echoed. "Bad luck, you mean, you grinnin' Dutchman! Heck of a farmer you'll be! Now I wonder what's his little game."

* * * * *

Up from the south, keeping Spring with him all the way, rode Tex Ewalt. When he reached Twin River, toward the end of a glorious day, he had become as tireless as the wiry pony beneath him, whose daily toll of miles since leaving the far-off Bar-20 was well nigh unbelievable.

Tex crossed the ford of the Black Jack behind the Sweet-Echo Hotel. One glance at that imposing edifice and Tex turned his pony's head toward the trail. "No, no, Son John, you'll not sleep there with your stockings on—though I shan't ask you to go much farther," Tex assured him. "I've seen prettier, and ridden cleverer, but none more willing than you, Son John.

"Ah, this begins to look more like our style. I-Call—sweet gamester, I prithee call some other day; I would feed, not play. Ike's—thy name savors overly much of the Alkali, brother. Ha! 'By the prickling of my thumbs, something wicked that way bums.' " He had turned to cross the Jill and saw Pop Snow basking in the failing sunlight. "Why-Not—well, why not? I will."

"Come a long way, stranger?" asked Dirty.

Tex swung his right leg over his pony's neck and sat sideways, looking indolently at the pickled specimen who

sat as indolently regarding him.

"Tolerable, tolerable," he drawled in reply. "Been a-comin' thirty year, just about."

Dirty looked at him with frank disgust, spat carefully, then yelled: "Hey, boys! Come on out an' meet Mr. Comin' Thirty. Comin' is some bashful 'bout drinkin' with strangers, so get acquaint."

Scenting a tenderfoot, half a dozen of the inmates strolled outside. When they saw the sun-tanned Tex they expressed their opinion of Dirty in concise language, after which they invited Tex to "sluice his gills."

One of them, a delicate-featured, smooth-faced boy, added facetiously: "Don't be afraid, we won't eat you."

Tex released his left foot from the stirrup and slid to earth. "I wasn't afraid o' bein' et, exactly," was his slow response. "I was just a-wonderin' if it would bite. I notice it's slipped its collar."

"Go to hell! Th' lot o' you!" screeched Pop, and stamped off across the bridge to the I-Call.

The others watched him in fascinated silence until he plumped down on his inevitable box, when the smooth-faced first speaker turned to his nearest neighbor and asked in hushed tones: "What do you think of him, Mike?"

"Me boy, if I thought I'd ever conthract Dirty's partic'lar brand o' sinfulness, I'd punch a hole in th' river with me head," and he solemnly led the way in to the bar.

"Gentlemen, it's on me," declared Tex. "Give me a large and generous glass," he requested of the barkeep, "and fill it with 'Water for me, water for me, and whisky for them which find it agree.' You see, gentlemen, liquor an' I don't team. Here's how."

"If I'd begun like that I'd be a rich man this day," observed Mike.

"If I'd begun like that I wouldn't be here at all," responded Tex.

"Well, ye'll have a cigar with me, anyhow. Put a name to it, boys, an', Fred, whisper: Pass up that wee little box ye keep in th' locker. Me friend, Comin', will take a good one while he's at it."

A blue-shirted Cornish miner next him interposed: " 'Tis my trate. He'll hev a cigar with me, he well. Das' thee thenk I be goin' to drenk with thee arl the time, and thee never taake a drenk 'long o' me? Set un up, Fred, my son, and doan't forget the lettle box."

IV

CERTAINLY the Cornishman was a character in more than speech. Wherever gold, or a rumor of gold, drew the feet of miner, there sooner or later would be Bill Tregloan. Bill had his way in paying for the order and turned to lounge against the bar, when his eye caught sight of that which drew from him a torrent of sputtering oaths and a harsh command.

The only one who had failed to join the others at the bar was Charley, a Cheyenne Indian, who lay sprawled on the floor, very drunk and asleep, and about to be subjected to one of the pleasing jokes of the railroad towns, in this instance very crudely prepared. The oil with which he was soaked had been furnished far too plentifully, and he stood an excellent chance of being well roasted when the match, then burning, should be applied.

The man holding the match looked up at the Cornishman's shout. When the miner, growling like a bear, started to rush at him, his hand dropped to his gun. The smoothfaced boy promptly stuck out his foot. Tregloan went down with the youngster on top of him.

But it takes more than one slight boy to hold down a wrestling Cornishman. The flurry that followed, even with the added weight of numbers, would have been funny but for the scowling face of the olive-skinned man who stood with ready gun until assured the struggle had gone against his opponent. Then he slipped gun in holster and felt for another match.

"Take him away," he said, with a sneering smile, "he make me sick."

"What did they do that for?" asked Tex of Mike as the rest were pushing Tregloan out of the saloon.

"That's Guinea Mike," was the explanation. "He'd murder his mother if

she crossed him."

"Interestin' specimen," observed Tex.

Guinea Mike found another match and calmly lit it.

"Blow that out!" Tex said.

Two stares met and grappled. Guinea slowly raised the match to his lips and puffed it out. Slowly the hand of Guinea descended to the sagging waist of his trousers.

The roar of the explosion was deafening. Guinea Mike's right shoulder went into retirement and his gun dropped from his nerveless fingers. Screaming with rage he stopped to grasp it with his left hand, and pitched forward at full length, both kneecaps shattered, at the mercy of this stranger who shot as if at a mark.

Tex walked over and kicked the gun across the floor. "I could a' killed you just as easy as I didn't, Guinea," said Tex. "I don't like you an' yore ways. It's just a notion. So don't you stop. An' don't send any o' yore friends."

The spectators had filed back to the room and were engaged in audible comments on the justification and accuracy of the shooting, while they busied themselves in the rough surgery which had to serve.

To the suggestion that he ought to be taken to the doctor at Wayback, Fred, the bartender, interposed the objection: "No, dake him to Nell's. Mike is a friend mit her."

Pop Snow, attracted by the excitement, stood peering in a window. A man rode up and stooped from the saddle to look over his shoulder. "What's up?" he asked.

" 'Taint nothin'; only Guinea Mike. See th' feller the young 'un's hangin' onto? Well, that's him: Comin' Thirty has notions—an' I ain't never seen better shootin'."

Dave Owens swung down, tied his pony to the rail and went inside to see the new badman of Twin River.

IT WAS very late when Dave turned a tired pony to pasture and entered the three-room cabin of Karl Schatz. "Vell?" Karl asked, as Dave dropped into a chair.

"Double Y has got a new bunch o' cattle. Hummers. Bought 'em out of a drove come up last Fall on Government contract." He paused. "Cameron's got back, he's took up his note at the bank. Paid full interest."

Another pause, with no comment. Dave continued to display his items of information in sections.

"I met One-eye Harris at Eccles'. Th' Cyclone ranch has got some with th' itch. LaFrance wants to bleed you for two hundred. Don't you. He'll get too rich to have me for a son-in-law."

Karl nodded. "Farming iss goot," he murmured "—mit vasser."

"Them new steers o' th' Double Y oughta fetch forty in th' Fall. Will, too."

"Farming iss goot," repeated Karl "—mit vasser. Also, to lend money. But Camerons, dey pay und der money lies idle. Ven do ve eat up der Double Y, Dave?"

Dave glanced at him sullenly. "Why don't you let me kill that damn Peters?"

"Kill him? Ach! Soon anoder manager come. Killing iss not goot, Dave. You must plan besser, *aber* I do id."

"Guinea Mike's shot up."

"Vell, he iss anoder von likes killing. Who vas id?"

"Stranger. Reminded me of a feller, somehow—an' then, again, he didn't. Well, let's roost," suggested Dave, and led the way to the inner room. Karl fastened doors and windows, put out the light, and followed him.

* * * * *

Sitting at a table in the crowded barroom of the Sweet-Echo, Dave seemed intent on mastering the difficulties of a particularly intricate game of solitaire. Actually he was brooding on his pet obsession of how the Double Y might be "eaten up."

The usual class of patrons were present, augmented in number, since the Spring roundup was at hand and strangers were dropping in every day. To none of these did Dave give any attention, though he looked with interest at Tex Ewalt when he entered. The increased hum of voices and several loud greetings had taken his mind momentarily from his thoughts. Tex's reputation had lost nothing in force since the excitement of his advent.

Suddenly, and for the first time, Dave

hesitated in his play. A querulous voice was damning Buck Peters.

"Donner und Blitzen! Vas it my fault *der verruchter* bull break loose *und ist hinaus gegangen? 'Yah!'* says Buck, *'Yah!'* loud, like dat. Mad?—*mein* gracious! Vot for is a bull, anyhow? 'Gimme my time,' I say; 'I go.' 'Gif you a goot kick,' says Buck; 'here, dake dis und get drunk und come back *morgen.'* I get drunk und go back und break his neck—only for leetle Fritz."

"Lettle Fritz" sat swinging his legs on the bar. He looked at his father with plain disapproval. "Ah, cheese it, Pap!" was his advice. "What's th' good o' gettin' drunk?"

Dave rose and sauntered over to the bar. "That's th' way to talk, Pickles," he endorsed. "Yo're a-going to hold yore likker like a man, ain't you?"

"No, sirree! Ther' ain't goin' to be any likker in mine. I promised Mother."

"Bully for you! Hi, Slick! Pickles 'll have a lemonade. I'll have a lemonade, too. Better put a stick in mine, I'm a-gettin' so's I need one. An' Pap'll have a lemonade, too—oh! with a stick, Pap, with a stick—I wouldn't go for to insult your stomach."

They drank their lemonades, Gottlieb's face expressive of splinters, and a minute later Pickles sat alone while his father endeavored to win some of Dave's money and Dave endeavored to let him. Tex tilted his chair, and with a fine disregard for alien fastidiousness stuck his feet on the edge of the table and smiled. He almost crashed over backward at sight of a figure that entered the room from the hall.

"God bless our Queen!" murmured Tex, "he's a long way from 'ome. Must be a remittance man come over the line to call on Sandy."

H. WHITBY BOOTH swept an appraising glance over the company and, without a pause, chose a seat next to Tex. "Surprisin' fine weather, isn't it?" he observed, taking a cigar case from his pocket. "Try a weed?" he invited.

"I don't mind if I do, old chap," and Tex selected one with a gravity he was far from feeling.

Whitby looked hard at him while Tex lit the cigar. "I say, are you chaffing me?" asked Whitby.

It was a very good cigar. Tex laughed. "I'm afraid I was," he admitted, "but you mustn't mind that. It's what you're here for, the boy'll think—that is, if you don't stop long enough to get used to it."

"Oh, I don't mind in the least. And I expect to stop if the climate agrees with me."

"What's the matter—lunger? You don't look it."

"Not likely. But they tell me it's rather cold out here in winter. I say, what's the row?"

Tex's feet hit the floor with a bang. Gottlieb Gerken was shaking his fist in Dave's face. *"Du verdummter Schuft! Mein Meister verrathen, was!"* He sent the table flying, with a violent thrust of his foot. "I show you!"

Watchful as he was, Dave did not anticipate what was coming. As the table toppled over he sprang to his feet, the forward thrust of his head moving in contrary direction to the hurtling fist of Gottleib, which stopped very suddenly against his nose. Dave went crashing to the floor, but the next moment Dave was on his feet. His gun slanted and the roar of the discharge was echoed by Gottleib's plunging fall.

A frenzied scream, feminine in shrillness, rang through the room. Dave's gun dropped from his hand and he sank to the floor. A whisky bottle, flying the length of the room, had struck him on the head, and Boomerang, struggling with maniacal fury in the arms of several men, strove to follow his missile.

At the other end of the bar the numbed Pickles suddenly came to life and leaped to the floor. Caught and stopped in his frantic rush across the room, he kicked and struck at his captor.

"Lemme go!" he shrieked, "lemme go! I'll kill the—"

The men holding Boomerang ran him to the open door with command to "Git, an' keep a-goin'!"

A sullen murmur formed an undertone to Tex's efforts to revive the stunned culprit. "Lynch him!" shouted a dozen men, and Tex came on guard

barely in time to stop a concerted rush. Straddling the recumbent figure, his blazing eyes shocked the crowd to a stand-still. With a motion quicker than a striking rattler, a gun in either hand threatened the waverers.

"Dutchy's got a gun," he rebuked them. "He was a-reachin' for it when he dropped."

They gathered about Gottleib to look for the proof. Suddenly the door was flung open and Rose LaFrance stood in the opening.

"What are you doing?" she questioned. "What is the matter with Fritz? Come here, Fritz." The boy, released, staggered weakly toward her. She folded him in her arms. The men, moving, discovered to her the figure of the prone Gottleib.

"Oh-h!" she breathed and her gaze rested on Tex, the fallen table hiding from her the man he was protecting. "You wolf!" she accused. "Kill, kill, kill! You and your kind. Shame to you for mad beasts! Come, Fritz." She led the boy out and the door was closed after her.

"Well, I'm durned!" said Tex.

Dave had recovered consciousness. "Get off me, Comin'," he requested. "Who hit me?"

"Boomerang flung a bottle at you," informed Tex. "How you feeling?"

"All serene. Head's dizzy," he added, swaying on his feet. He walked to the nearest chair and sat down as the inert form of Gerken was carried out. "Sorry I had to do it," he said, "but I had to get him first or go under. He oughtn't to said I cheated him."

"I say, that's a bally lie, you know." Whitby's drawling voice electrified the company.

Dave, with a curse, reached again for his gun. It lay on the floor where it had fallen.

"Drop it, Dave!" came Slick, the bartender's grating command. "Go outside and cool off."

"You tell me to git out?"

"That's what," was Slick's dogged reply.

Dave walked over and picked up his gun. The door slammed open and he was gone.

Slick turned to Whitby. "See here, Brit, don't you never call a man a liar 'less yo're sure you can shoot first."

"But dash it all, the man is a liar, you know! The German chap said 'you damn scoundrel! Traitor to my master, eh!' There's nothing in that about cheating, is there?"

THE HOME of Jean LaFrance, a small cabin built principally of the ever-ready cottonwood, was located in a corner of his quarter section. Rose was standing in the doorway when Buck Peters dismounted.

"I've come for Pickles," he told her.

"M'sieu Peters?" she questioned.

"That's me," admitted Buck. "Can I have him?"

Rose considered. "Enter, M'sieu Peters. We will speak of it," she invited.

"I shore will!" Buck's alacrity would have called forth hilarious chaffing from the Bar-20 punchers. It surprised himself. She set out a cup and a bottle on one end of the table and sat down facing him.

"Why do you take Fritz from me?" asked Rose.

"*Take* Fritz?" This was seeing the matter in a different light. Take anything she wanted? Why, he'd give her his shirt! "You see—I sort o' reckoned," he faltered, "Dutch bein' one o' my boys —Pickles—Fritz—ought to be taken care of, an'—"

Rose considered. "You shall take him, M'sieu Peters," she declared at last. "He grow up a man, a strong man—yes. Only a strong man have a chance in this so bad country. *Mais oui,* it is better. I call him."

"Let me," Buck interposed, and stepping to the door he cried out a yodeling call that brought Fritz scampering. Rose called him to her.

"M'sieu Peters have come to take you with him, Fritz. You will go?"

"Betcher life," said Pickles. "Yo're all right, but I want to be a cowpunch an' rope an' shoot. Some day I'll get that ol' Dave Owens for killin' Dad!"

Rose was on her feet. "Dave kill—Dave—"

"Sure, he done it! Who'd yeh s'pose?"

Rose stood staring until Buck pushed

the boy out of the room. "I wish—" she began passionately.

" 'Course you wish he hadn't done it. Dutchy was a good man, an' a square man, an' Dave ain't neither—though I shore hates to hurt yore feelin's in sayin' so."

"I know him. He is bad—bad. No one know him like me." The deep voice seemed to hold a measureless scorn.

Buck wondered at this. "Well, if you know him I'm right glad. I figgered it out you didn't."

"I know him," she repeated, and this time she spoke with a weariness that forbade further remark.

V

TEX SLUNG a leg over Son John and ambled away from Wayback, in the wake of Dave. His unobtrusive observance of Dave had been without results, unless there were something suspicious in the long conversation held with a one-eyed puncher who rode away on a Cyclone-brand pony.

Tex, however, was by no means cast down. He already had learned the only quarter from which trouble might come to Buck. He delayed action now in the hope that something tangible might turn up, and he fervently hoped that it might be before Hopalong found himself foot-loose from the Bar-20.

He rode slowly, not wishing to overtake Dave before he settled in Twin River. Tex had left the foot of the road leading to the LaFrance cabin half a mile in the rear when he heard the sound of a horse coming up behind him. Darkness hid Tex until the other was nearly abreast, when he hailed.

"Turned off to see Rose," reflected Tex, as he returned the greeting and Dave rode up.

"That you, Comin'?" said Dave. "I been wantin' to see you. Goin' anywhere particular?"

"No," drawled Tex. "I was just considerin' which of them shanties in Twin 'd have th' most loose money."

"Bah!" exclaimed Dave. "There ain't no money in Twin River. You an' me could make a good haul over in Wayback, but I got somethin' better'n that. Let's go to Ike's. I want to talk to you."

Ike's was primitive. The regular *habitués* of Ike's were tight-lipped, cautious, slow in movement, except at a crisis. The opening door was a target for every eye and not a straight glance in the crowd. The entry of Dave and Tex was noted in the usual manner.

As they sauntered over to an unoccupied corner table, Tex noticed Ronald, the young boy, much the worse for liquor, while his three companions showed the gravity of sober winners.

"What'll you drink, Comin'?" asked Dave as a preliminary.

"I ain't drinkin', Dave, not never. But I'm right ready an' anxious to hear o' that somethin' good you've got to deal out."

"Y-e-e-a—well, it's this way," began Dave, sampling his liquor in the customary gulp. "Got any friends in Twin River?"

"Nary friend, nor anywhere else."

Dave looked hard at Tex. "What about that bunch Ronald travels with?"

"You said friends," was the significant answer.

"All right, all th' better. I seen you play a mighty good game o' cards."

Tex snorted. "I'm allus willin' to back my play."

"You won't have to back it. If yo're as good as I hopes, I'll back it. It's this way: I want to back you agin' a man as thinks he can play. He's considerable of a dealer, considerable, an' he won't play me because he beats me once an' thinks I'm no good. He's got money, a-plenty, an' I don't want a dollar. You keeps what you wins—an' I wants you to get it all!"

He turned and called across the room: "Ike, flip us a new deck." The pack in his hands, he faced Tex again. "Suppose we plays a few hands an' you gimme a sample o' yore style."

Tex tipped back in his chair. "Lemme get this right. You backs me to play, all to best th' other feller—on'y he pockets th' losses, gives up th' winnin's, mustn't win."

"You got it."

"On'y he mustn't win. Must be a friend o' yourn. Who is it?"

"Peters o' th' Double Y."

"Ah! I've heard o' him. But how'll you rope him?"

"I got a bait—best kind. They allus fall for a woman." Dave's sneering tones, as he broke open the pack, sorely taxed his companion's self-control. "What'll we play?" he continued. "Better make it stud. Th' gamer a man is th' quicker he goes broke at stud, an' Peters is game enough."

Tex dropped back into position and took his hands from his pockets. "I shine at stud," he remarked softly, taking the deck Dave offered him, and at the same time thinking: "What sort of deviltry is this? Break Buck Peters at stud! Maybe he plans to get us shooting. I'll bet a hat old Schatz never hatched that scheme."

Later that night Tex ambled over to the Why-Not. He borrowed paper and pencil of Dutch Fred and rapidly composed a note. Much adroit maneuvering secured the services of Cheyenne Charley, not yet too drunk to understand the repeated instructions of Tex.

Thus it came about that Buck, without knowing how it got there, found on his table a communication of absorbing interest, signed: "A Friend." It read:

Buck Peters: Don't play cards with strangers, especially stud poker. Dave Owens aims to have Rose rope you into a frame-up. John is in it, too. Mighty easy to plug you in a row.

" 'A Friend,' " mused Buck. "An' Rose is to rope me into a crooked game. I'm damned if I believe it." He made as if to tear the paper, but changed his mind. "No, I'll just keep this. Mebby there'll be more of 'em."

IN THE LaFrance cabin, meanwhile, Dave sat silently watching Rose. Jean had left them to go to his work. She went about her daily duties, patiently waiting. Something in Dave's manner told her he had come for more than the mere pleasure of seeing her.

"Rose, sit down," he said at last. "I want to talk to you."

"*Allons,*" she prompted him, obeying.

"You see, it's this way: Here's me, errand boy for Schatz. I draws my time, same as I'm a-punchin' for him, but what is it? Not enough to live on. I can make more with th' cards, a whole lot more, on'y you says no. An' there ain't nothin' reg'lar 'bout gamblin', anyhow. Schatz is honin' for his ranch. He's bound to get it an' I'm bound to help him. 'Cause why? I strike it rich, Schatz will put me on as foreman or mebby better. Now, how do we get th' ranch? Break that McAllister-Peters combine, that's how. An' how do we break 'em? You!"

"Me?"

"You. It's pie. You get him here—Peters—an' I got a man as 'll clean him out like a cyclone lickin' up a haystack. You get him here, that's all. You know how. Just get Peters a-comin' here an' then some night Comin' Thirty drops in casual to see yore daddy. Comin' knows his business."

"Who is Comin'?"

Dave grinned. "He's th' on'y man can deal a deck between th' Mississip' an' th' Rockies. When Peters gets through with him he won't think so much o' that feller he met in Cheyenne—Hell!" He sprang to his feet, consternation on his face. Rose gazed at him in mute wonder. "It can't be!" he muttered. "He went out long ago." He was silent in troubled speculation for a while.

"Rose," he continued abruptly, "you ask Peters, first time you see him. When'll you go? Today?"

"Go where?"

"Over to th' ranch," he explained. "Go over to see Pickles, can't you?"

"Yes, if you say go."

"All right, go today. An' ask Peters when he's seen Tex Ewalt. Don't forget th' name: Tex Ewalt."

"Tex Ewalt. I go now. It may be difficult. Men do not come here like before—"

"Before I showed 'em th' way? You'll get Peters, if you try right."

"And you? Is it to Big Moose you ride?"

"No, I got to go to Wayback. Will I throw th' leather onto Swaller?"

"No, Swallow come when I call."

"All right. Then I'll hit th' trail." He went off laughing, and in a minute more swung past the house with a shout of farewell.

Rose stood in the doorway, looking after him.

"If I try right. You beast!" The words were laden with loathing. "But

what can I do?" she cried. "What can I do?"

* * * * *

Swallow put the trail behind him with praiseworthy speed, and brought Rose quickly to the ranchhouse. Buck appeared at the door and sprang forward to greet her, his stern face aglow with pleasure.

"Why, ma'am, I'm right glad to see you," he declared, appreciative of the firm clasp of the hand she gave him. "Honest as a man's," was his thought. "Jake!" he called to the cook, who quickly appeared. "Better run him in the stable, Jake," advised Buck. "An' take some o' th' sweat off'n him. Take yore time. We'll wait.

"You see," he went on to Rose, "none of th' boys is up, but Ned ought to be here right soon. An' Pickles 'll be that pleased, he won't eat nothin'. Pickles says yo're a brick an' he likes you 'most as well as Whit."

Her bubbling laughter set Buck to laughing in sympathy. "It is a disappointment I have not come before, M'sieu Peters," said Rose, "you make me so very welcome. But Whit—who is Whit?"

"Whit? Oh, he's th' Britisher we took on when—when we went short a hand. He's willin' an' strong an' learns quick, though he shore has some amazin' ideas about cows."

The momentary clouding of her face as she recalled how he had "gone short a hand," he allowed to pass without comment. "Pickles, he likes to hear him tell stories. Fairy stories, you might call them. You wouldn't think a kid like that would take to fairy stories, would you, ma'am?"

"No-o. Always he is for the grand minute—to be a man, to ride, to throw the rope—like that. And to shoot—he must not shoot, M'sieu Peters."

"Well, you see, ma'am, he—you—I—" He was clearly embarrassed. "Why, he's just naturally boun' to shoot. Yesterday I gave him a rifle an' a big bunch o' ca'tridges. He won't hurt nothin', ma'am."

"*Mais non,* I hope not. Make him to —to be good. A strong man can be good, M'sieu Peters?"

Buck frowned in thought. "Yes," he declared. "But there's more ways than one o' being good. Our way'd never do for some places, an' their way'd never do for us. Th' quickest man with a short gun I ever knowed, an' one as has killed considerable few, first an' last, he's a good man, ma'am. He wouldn't lie, nor steal, nor do a mean act. An' he never killed a man 'less he was driven to it. I say it an' I know it. I'd trust him with my life an' my honor. An' there's more like him, ma'am, a-plenty."

He stood tensely upright, an admirable figure. She watched him, silent, studying his face, deciding how best to approach the object of her visit. True to her nature, it was less an approach than a direct appeal. She spoke abruptly:

"What time did you see Tex Ewalt last? I think, I am sure, it is better if you have not seen him for a long time."

"Well, I ain't seen him in a long time." He was plainly surprised. "Do you know Tex?" he asked, wonderingly.

"No. Some one ask me—but you have not seen him. That is good. Once I tell you I am glad if you come to see me about Fritz."

"Shore I'll come," he promised heartily.

"You must not," she warned him. "In the morning, a little while, yes. At night, or to stay long—no."

A light broke in upon Buck, who recalled the mysteriously delivered letter of that morning. He tested her shrewdly: "You don't want to see me, then?"

She looked reproachful. "*Mais, quelle folie!* I am glad to see you always," she assured him. "But it must be like that. It is better *aussi* if you will not play cards. I like it, much, if you will not play cards."

"I knew it!" cried Buck. "I knew it!"

Rose was startled. "What is it you know?"

"I knowed that gamblin' habit'd grow on me so my friends could see it! An' I hereby swears off. I never touches a deck till you say so, ma'am. That goes as it lays."

The color came and went in her cheeks as she regarded him. "I am glad," she said at last. "Oh, I am very

glad," and turning, she left him at a speed that vied with her racing thoughts.

WHEN DAVID OWENS next visited the LaFrance cabin, it was in no amiable frame of mind. Indeed, as he loped through Twin River his irritability blinded him to everything but the trail ahead. But if Dave failed to notice his friends, one of them at least bore him no ill-feeling for the oversight.

This one was so solicitous for Dave's welfare that he followed all the way to the LaFrance cabin, and when Dave went indoors he still lingered, hugging close to a window, while he listened with much interest to the talk that went on inside.

"Where's Jean?" asked Dave, briefly, as he entered.

Rose glanced at him. "He go to the station. Something about a harrow. He will be late."

"See Peters?"

"Yes."

"What'd he say about Tex Ewalt?"

"He have not see him for many months. When I ask he look at me strange like he suspect something."

"He ain't got nothin' to suspect. Did he try to kiss you?"

"No. He just look at me, straight, without any smile."

"Bah! You didn't take th' right way with him. You go ag'in. Make him glad to see you."

"*Quel jour*—when I must go?"

"Oh, whenever you get th' chanct. Soon as you kin. You got Pickles for an excuse, ain't you?"

At this point the solicitous caretaker outside risked a look through the window. What he saw was a revelation: scorn, contempt, loathing, in the woman's face, then placidity sweeping again over the regular features as she replied: "*Mais oui,* Fritz is excuse."

"Well, you won't need any excuse if you play th' game right. You'll be excuse enough, yourself."

Enthralled, the watcher prolonged his stare beyond safety. Rose's gaze rested full on the window. The watcher changed instantly to the listener with one hand on his gun, but not so quickly that he failed to see the brilliant smile that flashed across the face of Rose. He realized the significance of that smile and of the way Dave was being fooled.

Dave's moodiness persisted. "Well, there's some as help me better'n you do," he declared. "If I can't get Peters here, I give him somethin' that'll keep him busy at home."

"*Bien,* but how?"

"I give him the itch," replied Dave.

"Itch?" repeated Rose.

"Yes—itch, mange, scab! His cows'll be scratchin' their hides off afore he knows it. Th' Cyclone had it an' I got One-Eye Harris to save me out some. Mangiest lot o' cows ever I saw. We put 'em across th' Jill, up by th' Rocking Horse, a while back. It'll spoil some o' their cows, you bet."

"M'sieu Schatz, he tell you do this?"

"Smiler? The cussed ol' bear! He just sits an' says: 'Gimme th' Double Y, Dave.' Mus' think I carry it in m' hat."

"But you will get it, Dave—yes?"

"You bet yo' boots I'll get it! An' if you get him comin' here, it'll be done quick."

"I will try," murmured Rose.

Dave rose.

"Guess I'll drift back to Twin. Have to see Comin' an' keep him on edge, or he'll get tired o' waitin' for that good thing I promised him."

Rose stood in the doorway until the sound of his horse's feet assured her that he was certainly on his way to Twin River. Then going to the window, she called out clearly: "Enter. I want to talk to you, Tex Ewalt."

Tex slipped through the window with the suppleness of a naked Indian. Rose motioned to a bench and seated herself near him.

"I think you kill Fritz' father that night," she began. "I am sorry."

Tex waited.

"You are M'sieu Peters' friend?" she questioned.

Tex thought swiftly. "Yes," he replied.

"You are Tex Ewalt. Dave call you Comin'. M'sieu Peters not know you are here. You spy for M'sieu Peters, yes?"

"Buck told you, eh? Did you tell him

I was in Twin River?"

She shook her head. "But no. I guess, when I see you at the window." She paused. "You will tell M'sieu Peters about the itch?"

"Why don't you tell him? I can't risk going out to the ranch."

"No! No! Dave must not suspect. You tell him quick so Dave not think it is me."

"Why, Dave is in a hole. One-Eye will squeal the minute I put my fingers on him."

"Dave will suspect. He must not—Oh, you do not understand!"

"Like Dave?" Tex inquired, casually.

"No."

"That's good," observed Tex, "because I shall have to put a crimp, a very serious crimp, in his anatomy one of these days. I can feel it coming. Well, goodnight, Miss LaFrance," he said, and departed.

VI

BUCK PETERS had been staring unseeingly at a folded paper, tucked partly under his bunk blanket. Suddenly he sprang from his seat, strode to the bunk and snatched up the paper. The warning it contained read:

Buck Peters: Itch on the YY. Crossed the Jack at the Rocking Horse. A Friend.

"If you told me who sent it across, you'd be more of a friend," muttered Buck—in which he was less wise than Tex, who did not see the sense in having the servant removed while the master remained.

Hoofbeats rolled up in the darkness and a moment later Whitby entered the house, his pink, English complexion aglow from his ride. Buck was glad to see him. He needed a little of the other's cheerful optimism, and after a few minutes of random conversation Buck told him of the latest development.

Whitby's surprise was genuine, and the practicability of his nature asserted itself. This was ground upon which he was thoroughly at home.

"I say, Buck, we can show these swine a thing or two they don't know," he began. "They don't know it in the States, I'll lay, nor north of the Line either, for that matter. My governor is a cattle man, you might say—on the other side of the pond, of course. And I've knocked about farm land a good bit, you know.

"Now, a chap in the same county had a lot of sheep with this what-d'you-call-it—scab, they said. He used a preparation of arsenic but a lot of the beggars died. Poisoned, you know. He had tried a number of other things and he got jolly well tired of the game, so he wrote to a cousin, chemist or something, and told him about it. This chap sent him a recipe, after a bit, that killed off the parasites like winking, without injuring a simple sheep."

"That ain't goin' to help us none, Whit. You ain't got th' receipt an' you don't know how to make th' stuff."

"Ah! But I do, though. I gave him a hand with the silly beggars, and bally good fun it was, too. We passed them through a long trough and ducked their heads under as fast as they came along. But it was work, no end, mixing the solution. There was nothing funny about that part of it."

"See here, Whit, are you really in earnest? Do you think you can make the stuff and show us how to use it?"

"Absolutely certain, dear boy. Cattle aren't sheep, but I'll be bound it'll do the trick."

"How fast can you run 'em through?"

Whitby reflected. "We could do a thousand a day, perhaps more. It depends on how many you do at once, you know." And Whitby went into a detailed description to which Buck gave close attention.

At the end, Buck shook his head. "Reckon we'll have to stick to th' old way," he adjudged, regretfully. "There ain't that quantity of lime and sulphur in all Montana."

"Ah, yes, your point is good," drawled Whitby, smiling. "But your partner lives in Chicago where there is any quantity of it. If we wired him tomorrow to get the stuff and ship it at once he would do it, don't you know. I'll bet you a good cigar it will be here within a week after we wire. Let *me* send the wire and I'll bet you a box."

"Let her go," said Buck. "If it's all you say, we'll show them coyotes we

know a few tricks ourselves!" He turned toward the door to the kitchen. "Jake! Jake!" he called, and, when the cook appeared, said: "You tell Ned I want to see him."

When Ned Monroe reached the ranchhouse Buck explained the situation, then gave sharp orders: "Send Bow-Wow to Twin River and Wayback first thing tomorrow. Tell him to leave word we want two dozen more punchers for our roundup—fifty dollars a month an' a full month's work guaranteed. Jake's goin' to dig some big holes in th' ground in th' next few days—he ain't fit for nothin' else, not even cookin'."

A crash in the kitchen interrupted him. "Jake!" he called. There was a scramble and the cook appeared, much excited. "What's th' fuss about?"

"Fell off my chair," replied Jake. "An' it hurts, too."

"Yo're gettin' too soft, Jake. A little exercise 'll toughen you. I'm going to let you dig some holes first thing tomorrow."

JAKE had visions of extensive excavations, dug by him, into which thousands of dead cows were being piled for burial. "Wouldn't it be better to burn 'em, or push 'em into th' river an' shoot 'em there?"

"I never saw holes you could handle that way, Jake," gravely replied Buck.

"I don't mean holes—I mean *cows!*" explained Jake.

"Oh, then it's all right," responded Buck. "I ain't goin' to ask *you* to dig no cows, Jake. But yo're goin' to dig some nice ditches tomorrow—long, deep ones, an' good an' wide."

"I ain't never dug a ditch in my life," hastily objected Jake.

"Why didn't you tell me how you dug that railroad cut down there in Iowa, an' got a hundred dollars extra 'cause you saved th' company so much money?" inquired Buck.

"Oh, but that was a steam shovel!"

"All right; you'll steam afore yo're at it very long."

Jake backed out again, slipped out of his kitchen, and stood reflective under the stars. He would quit now and flee to Twin River, if it wasn't such a long walk. "Durn it!" he growled, and forthwith threw two stones into the darkness by way of getting rid of some of his anger.

Invited to spend the night in the ranchhouse, Whitby accepted with alacrity. In carrying out McAllister's wishes he could not be too near headquarters, he concluded. But added to this, he entertained a sincere admiration for Buck Peters which increased as the days went by.

Some few minutes after the lights were out, Buck was brought back from the shadowy realm of sleep by Whitby's voice coming from the other room. "I say, Peters, did you keep those dipping calculations?"

"Yes," answered Buck. "Why?"

"There's the lumber, you know. It might be a good idea to have McAllister send it on."

"Shore would. You tell him."

"I will," promised Whitby. A few seconds later he broke out again: "Do you know, Buck, the railroad companies of America are cheerful beggars. They take your luggage and then play ducks and drakes with it, in a very idiotic way. Why, mine was lost for two weeks and I was in a very devil of a fix. So it would not be a bad idea, you know, if I tell your partner to send a man with the consignment. He can sit on the barrels and see that they aren't placed on a siding to prove the theory that loss of movement results in inertia. Am I right?"

Buck laughed from his heart. "If there's anything you don't think of, make a note of it an' let me see it," he commended.

* * * * *

Monroe and the three men left to him after Bow-Wow Baker had departed for Twin River and Wayback, in the company of Whitby, were too small a force to attempt the roundup, so they put in the day riding over those sections of the range farthest removed from the Hog Back, examining every cow they found. At nightfall they had the pleasure of reporting to Buck that the entire portion of the range along the Little Jill, extending from the river to the middle of the ranch, was free from infection.

As a matter of fact, the conclusion

reached in council was that only that portion of range bounded by the Black Jack, the south line, and Blackfoot Creek needed to be cleaned up. This meant that two-thirds of the ranch was free from the itch, and the infected third contained less than a fourth of the Double Y cows.

Plans for the roundup were considered and soon arrived at. All the men, with the exception of three, were to be actively engaged in the roundup. They were to start from the south line and drive northwest towards the Hog Back. The Black Jack made a natural barrier on the west and would hold the herd safely on that side. The three other punchers were to ride even with the drive line, but on the other side of Blackfoot Creek, and keep ambitious cows from crossing onto the non-infected portions of the range.

This arrangement would constantly force the cattle onto the wedge-shaped range at the juncture of the two waters. Here the herd could be dipped and driven across the shallow Blackfoot onto a clean territory, where they would be held for further observation. Then, if the rest of the range showed signs of infection, the roundup and dipping could be carried on again at other points. If a strict line could be maintained along the Blackfoot, the Hog Back range would be fenced off effectually from the non-infected cattle on the other parts of the ranch.

The question of building an actual fence to separate the Hog Back range from the rest was gone into thoroughly and the decision was unanimous that twelve miles of fence was too big a proposition to be attempted at that moment. If necessary, it could be put up later when it was found that patrolling the creek was inadvisable. But perhaps a side light could be thrown on this quiet decision when it is remembered how fervently a cowman hated fences. These men were all of the old school and preferred to keep barb-wire as a theory and not a fact.

BOW-WOW returned that evening with a crowd of cowpunchers of varying degrees of fitness, all eager to take cards in any game at fifty dollars a month. Thus the roundup went forward swiftly, and the day that the special train arranged for by McAllister puffed into Wayback, found the Hog Back country swept clean of cattle, the herd being held close to Jake's two big ditches.

The hauling of the lumber strained the resources of Jean LaFrance, the only man in the locality who possessed anything on wheels capable of carrying it. Inasmuch as he could ill spare the time, although sorely needing the money, it exhausted Jean's stock of oaths in his own language and he fell back on carefully reserved specimens of German expletives. And these with constant repetitions carried him through.

Two men, driving the two borrowed chuckwagons, succeeded in transporting the rest of the shipment, and Whitby, to his great satisfaction, found that McAllister had not forgotten his fee.

The junction of the Blackfoot with the Jack presented a busy scene. Close-packed blue clay, which had made hard work for the diggers, now proved a help, the timbers fitting snug without backing. Meanwhile the more important part—the preparing of the solution—went on under the direction of Whitby. Under huge caldrons, wood had been piled ready for the match; on bases made of logs stood rows of whisky barrels; shallow troughs were filled and refilled with water until the swelling wood took up and became watertight.

Far into the night they worked, and it was not until the barrels were filled with the first lot of the mixture that Whitby relented and the men stumbled off to rest.

With the dawn they were at work again. And now the dipping troughs came into use as the saturated solution was drawn off from the barrels, leaving the sediment at the bottom, and dumped into the troughs, where water was added to reduce it to the required strength.

Night was approaching again before the water arose to nearly the required level. The men were thoroughly tired and Whitby, reluctantly and as a result of a direct order from Buck, called a halt.

The prudence of Buck's reasoning

was shown by the eagerness with which the men responded to the call next morning. In less than an hour Whitby announced all was ready. At Whitby's shout, two of the men riding herd cut out the first bunch of cattle and drove them toward the dipping trough. The flimsily constructed horse corral swarmed with laughing, joking punchers who roped their mounts with more or less success in the first attempt.

Outside, the wranglers darted forward and back, wheeling on a pie dish, checking the more ambitious of the ponies that resented a confinement limited to a single line of lariats. Saddles dropped onto recalcitrant backs and were cinched with marvelous speed, and the whooping punchers were jerked away to the herd.

Soon the first lot of cows, some twenty in number, flirting their tails and snorting in angry impotence, entered the wide opening between a wedge-shaped pair of fences and galloped toward the narrow vent which led to the trough. And now was seen Buck's wisdom in continuing the fence along the edge of the troughs a few feet, both at entrance and exit.

The first brute, a magnificent three-year-old, appeared to realize the crush that would come and spurted for the opening. The significance of the situation did not appeal to him until he was close to the edge. He slid to the very brink and gathered himself for a leap, but the fence was too high; the next instant the cattle behind, urged on by Cock Murray, whooping like an Indian, bumped into the hesitating brute and he fell forward into the trough with a bellow of rage and started on his swim to the other end.

VII

CATTLE were dropping into the trough with praiseworthy regularity and making their way to the other end. When about half way there and swimming resignedly, a kind-hearted puncher, wearing a delighted grin in addition to his regular equipment, and armed with a strong pole, forked at the business end, leaned forward swiftly, jammed the fork over one unsuspecting cow's head and pushed zealously.

The result was gratifying to the few onlookers, and disconcerting to the cow so rudely ducked. Just before the unfortunate bovine touched the sloping runway to dry earth, another grinning puncher repeated the dose. The cows, reluctant to enter the bath, showed no reluctance to leave it and the scene of their humiliation, and they lumbered away with a speed surprising to those whose ideas of cows are based upon observation of domesticated "bossies" in pasture in the East.

But they were not allowed to run free, being driven slowly across a roughly constructed bridge to the farther side of the Blackfoot, onto the non-infected range, and held there.

"This yere trough is shore makin' some plenty of Baptists," grinned Chesty Sutton.

"Yep, but with Mormon inclinations," amended Bow-Wow.

"Some high-falutin' picklin' factory," chuckled Chesty. "Messrs. Bow-Wow Baker an' Chesty Sutton, world's greatest mite picklers. Blue-noses, red-noses an' other kinds o' cow inhabitants a specialty. Give you a whole dollar, Bow-Wow, if you fall in."

"Is that just a plain hope, or a insinooation?" demanded the cheerful Bow-Wow. "I sleep next to you, so don't get too blamed personal. But we might put Jake in—though mebby his ain't th' right kind. Hey, Jake, come here!"

"If you wants to see me, you come here," retorted the cook. "I've seen all of them ditches I wants to. An' I ain't takin' no chances with a couple o' fools, neither."

"Hey, Chesty!" called Bow-Wow, delighted. "Here comes that LX steer we had such a time with in th' railroad pens. Soak him good! Ah, my long-horned friend, you was some touchy an' peevish down there in Wayback. Take *that!* Don't worry, Chesty's been savin' some for you, too. Hard, Chesty! That's th' boy!"

"Here comes Kinkaid o' th' Cyclone," announced Cock Murray.

Chesty handed his pole to Murray, grabbed up a lariat, and started for the newcomer, shouting: "Here comes some

itch! Dip him, fellers! Quick!"

Kinkaid maneuvered swiftly, grinning broadly. "If that stuff is warmer'n th' water in th' Jack, why, I might be coaxed into it. Howdy, boys. Thought I'd come over an' pick up some points."

"How you makin' out on th' Cyclone?" asked Buck.

"Bad—very bad. We tried isolatin' th' mangy ones, but they're dyin' like flies in frost time. Lost forty million so far an' I reckon th' other two'll die tomorrow. We thought our north range was free, but they're on that, too. We drove clean cows up in th' Rockin' Horse territory an' now they're showin' signs o' havin' th' itch. Beats all how it travels."

Cock Murray listened intently.

"That's where we spotted it first," said Buck. "We found some o' yore cows on th' Hog Back, an' their trail left th' river just below th' Rockin' Horse."

Kinkaid looked surprised and asked questions. He sat very quietly for a few moments and then looked at Buck with a peculiar expression. "Sick cows don't swim th' Jack, cold as it is now. I wonder who in hell—" he muttered softly.

"We're wonderin', too, Kinkaid," replied Buck, slowly. "It's lead or rope for anybody we ketch at it."

The first day's work finished less than half the herd, but they continued the following day, until the last cow scrambled out. After which, as a matter of precaution, Buck gave the boys the fun of driving every pony through the mixture. While this did not take long it was too late when finished, and the men too weary, to break camp.

But the next morning saw the chuckwagon piled high with barrels and caldrons on the way to the ranchhouse. Some of the extra men, having in mind the wording of the guarantee of a full month's pay, cherished the hope that there was no further use for their services and that they would be paid off and told to leave.

They were disappointed, for half of them were set to planting posts for the fence which it was found necessary to erect along the creek, while the others were put over the range on the lookout for cows with signs of itch.

A small herd of about a hundred, found scattered along and near the creek, were dipped as a precautionary measure, and after a week had elapsed without finding further signs of the disease Buck ordered the second squad to begin the Spring, or calf, roundup. The fence division patrolled the creek to effect a quarantine until the wire arrived.

They had a two-strand fence extending along Blackfoot Creek from its source to the river when the roundup was half over, and were immediately put to work with the others. When the last calf was branded, the extra force was let go and Buck waited for some new deviltry. It came, with crushing effect.

THE ROUNDUP was still under way when Cock Murray was taken off and sent to Twin River in a chuckwagon to get provisions for the ranch. He had just left town when Dave Owens pulled up beside him.

"Howdy, Murray," said Dave. "Spring roundup over yet?"

"Nope. 'Bout half."

"Itch all cured good?"

"Can't find no more signs of it."

"I've got a little job for you an' Slow Jack," Dave remarked, after a moment's thought.

"Yeh? What?"

"I just want you an' Slow Jack to drive a couple o' thousand head up in th' Hog Back country some'rs an' hold 'em hid till I can take care o' 'em."

"If yo're goin' to start up in business for yoreself, I'd keep away from th' Hog Back," replied Murray. "Better try down on th' southeast corner. There ain't no itch hangin' 'round there."

"Business nothin'!" snapped Dave. "I've got somethin' in my head that'll make a fortune for you an' Slow Jack. I don't want no profits—just th' joy o' takin' a good punch at Peters. But you two ought to split 'bout twenty thousand dollars atween you."

"Music to my ears!" chuckled Murray. "Slow Jack's goin' to work on a salary basis on *this* job—th' profits 'll be mine. Whereabouts is this gold mine located, did you say?"

Dave did not heed him but continued

hurriedly: "There's a good pasture atween th' Hog Back an' th' river, an' th' only way to it or out of it is up that ravine. You an' Slow Jack can drive cows to it whenever you gets a chanct, an' a couple o' ropes acrost th' ravine 'll hold 'em in. When you get a couple o' thousand there we'll drive 'em north o' th' Cyclone's line to Rankin, put 'em on th' cars there an' get 'em south into Wyoming. There's good money in it, Murray."

The driver was staring at his companion, blank amazement on his face. "Gosh! That sounds easy! I suppose we're goin' to tie th' herd to balloons an' get 'em to Rankin that way?"

"You collect th' herd an' I'll attend to all th' rest o' it," declared Dave.

"Can't be did, Dave," emphatically replied the driver.

"It *can* be done, an' I'm goin' to do it. The first black night," he added.

"All right. You ought to know," responded Murray, tactfully. "Who are th' miracle men that are goin' to get th' herd off that tableland an' to Rankin without bein' seen or leavin' a trail?"

"Big Saxe, th' hunchback, is one," Dave explained. "Th' trail we'll leave ain't botherin' us any. They won't be missed till it's too late to look for tracks, an' by that time th' cows 'll be sold."

Murray thought of one objection that would kill the plan without mercy: the railroad was not in the habit of accepting unaccredited cows for shipment. But Dave was so hopeful, so earnest, that Murray decided to talk the matter over with Schatz before dispelling Dave's dream.

"Well, that's true, Dave," he soberly replied. "When you think it over ca'm like, it ain't so plumb foolish. Me an' Slow Jack 'll see what we can do, let you know as soon as we can."

Murray, on reaching the ranch, nursed his secret until after dark and then slipped away. Arriving at the Schatz domicile, he drummed lightly on the door. Schatz opened it and dragged the visitor inside.

"You must nod come to see me more as iss necessary," began the German. "It iss such carelessness as puts peoples in chails. Vat iss it dis time?"

Murray, grinning, unfolded Dave's plans to the German. Suddenly Schatz brightened and a faint twinkle came into his eye. "Dot iss a goot plan, Murray. A very goot plan. *Aber* it goes too far. Dose railroad peoples vould spoil it quick. You get der herd like Dave says, more if you can, und hold it till I say somet'ing. Neffer mind vat Dave say—but ven I say somet'ing, den you do it. *Verstanden?*"

"All right, Schatz," agreed Murray, smiling. "I'll back yore play to th' limit, every time. But what'll I say to Dave when he gets anxious?"

"He von't ged anxious. I vill speak der vord before he haf time to ged anxious. I vill tell vat to do mit dot herd, und it von't be vat Dave vants."

IN THE middle of a forenoon some days later, Slow Jack loomed up in the fog of the driving rain and slid from his saddle in front of the ranchhouse. Buck opened the door and instinctively stepped back to avoid the wet gust that assailed him.

"There's a lot o' cows floating in the backwater o' th' Jack where th' creek empties in. I roped one an' drug it ashore. Just plain drowned, I reckon. There was signs of itch, too," Slow Jack reported.

Buck hastened into his storm clothes, got Monroe from the corral, and started through the storm to see for himself. When he reached the river he saw a score of Double Y cows drifting in circles in the backwater, and at intervals one would swing into the outer current and be caught in the pull of the rushing river to go sailing toward Twin. The stream was rising rapidly, its gray waters turning brown and roiled.

Sending Monroe to follow the stream to town, Buck and Slow Jack rode close to the water toward the hazy Hog Back. When he met Monroe at the ranchhouse that afternoon he learned that most of the inhabitants of Twin River were swarming upon the point behind Ike's saloon, busily engaged in roping and skinning the cattle as fast as they drifted by. The count varied from one hundred to five hundred, and he knew that the fight was on again.

There had been no clues found upon which to base action against the perpe-

trators. True, the pasture behind the Hog Back had been burned since he last saw it, but Slow Jack's tardy memory recalled that one morning, several days before, he had detected the smell of grass smoke in the air. He was going to investigate it, but hesitated to go through the quarantined range for fear of bringing back the itch. During the day the smell had disappeared and he had seen no signs of smoke at any time. He had meant to speak of it when he returned to the bunkhouse, but had forgotten, as usual.

When left alone Buck stared out of the window, not noticing that the storm had ceased, burning with rage at his absolute helplessness. The loss of the cows was not great enough to cripple him seriously, but this blow, following hard upon the other, showed him what little chance he had of making the Double Y a success without a large outfit of tried and trusted men.

To his mind again leaped the recollection of Ned's warning regarding Schatz: he was a "hard nut." Buck was beginning to think he would have to crack him on suspicion. He looked in the direction of the German's cabin and a curse rumbled in his throat.

Whitby opened the door and reported that everything was all right on his part of the range, and asked for orders for the next day. After a few minutes' conversation he moved on to the bunkhouse, troubled and ill at ease at the appearance of his employer. He paused, and finally decided to thrust his company upon Buck for the evening. In his opinion, Buck would be all the better for company.

He had almost reached the ranchhouse door when behind him there was a sound of furious galloping and Bow-Wow flung himself from his horse and burst into the room, excited and fuming, Whitby close upon his heels.

"They've shot a lot of cows on th' southeast corner, close to th' Jill. I'd 'a' been in sooner, only I went huntin' for 'em. Lost their tracks when they swum th' river. Three of 'em did it, an' they dropped nigh onto fifty head."

Winded as he was, Bow-Wow yet found breath for a string of curses that appeared to afford him little relief.

A look came into Buck's face that told of a man with his back to the wall. The piling on of the last straw was dangerously near at hand. He waved the two men away and paced to and fro across the room, fighting the greatest battle of his eventful life.

One man against unknown enemies who shot in the dark. His outfit was an unknown quantity and practically worse than none at all, since he had to trust it to a certain extent. He thought that Ned Monroe was loyal, and Bow-Wow was more likely to be honest than otherwise, but how could he be sure? Chesty Sutton had no cause to be a traitor, but the workings of the human mind cause queer actions at times.

Cock Murray and Slow Jack might well be enemies. While as for Jake and Whitby, the cook could be dismissed as of no account, and though the Englishman seemed to be loyal, there was no positive assurance of it. True, he had killed the itch, but that was so dangerous a plague that every man's hand should be turned against it.

VIII

WHEN Buck tried to reason the matter out he came to the conclusion he had reached so often before: the only man in Montana whom he trusted absolutely was Buck Peters. If he had some of his old outfit, or even Hopalong, Red, or Lanky, one man in whom he could place absolute trust, he felt he could win out in the end—and he would have them.

He ceased his pacing to and fro and squared his shoulders. He would give his outfit one last tryout, and if still in doubt of its loyalty he would send a message to Hopalong and have him pick out a dozen men from the Bar-20 and near-by ranches and send them up to the Double Y.

Lucas, Bartlett, and Meeker could spare him a few men each, men friendly to him. It would be admitting preliminary defeat to do this, but the results would justify the means.

When he thought he had mastered himself and was becoming calm and self-possessed, Chesty Sutton and the foreman entered with troubled looks on

their faces. Monroe spoke:

"Chesty reports he found a dozen cows lyin' in a heap at th' bottom of Crow Canyon, and Murray says th' fence has been cut an' stripped o' wire for a mile on th' north end."

Buck lost himself in the fury of rage that swept over him at this news. A desperate idea entered his head: he would force the fighting.

He slipped out to the corral, roped his horse and led it around back of the ranchhouse, where he tethered it and returned to the house to wait for night. Night would see him at Schatz's cabin, there to choke out the truth and strike his first blow.

Jake came in, muttering something about lights and supper, to retreat silently at the curt dismissal. The long shadows stole into the room, enveloping the brooding figure, and deepened into dark. The time was come and Buck arose and went out to his horse. With his hand on the picket, he paused and listened.

Across the Jill a broad moon was beginning to cast its light, and from the same direction, a long way off, came the sound of singing. The singer was coming toward him.

Buck stopped as if shot. He doubted his senses and feared he was going crazy, hoping against hope that he heard aright. Who in Montana could know that song!

"Th' cows go grazin' o'er th' lea—
Pore Whisky Bill, pore Whisky Bill.
An' achin' thoughts pour in on me
Of Whisky Bill. . . ."
An' achin' thoughts pour in on me
Of Whisky Bill. . . ."

"Hello th' house! Hey, Buck! *Buck!*"

Buck ran toward the creeping buckboard, yelling like an Indian. The bunkhouse door flew open and the men tumbled through it, guns in hand, and sprinted toward the point of trouble. Bow-Wow led and close upon his heels ran Whitby, with Murray a close third.

When the leader got near enough he saw two men apparently wrestling, and he maneuvered so as to insert himself into the fracas at the first opportunity. Then he snorted and backed off in profound astonishment, colliding with the eager Englishman, to the pain of both.

The wrestlers were not wrestling but hugging. And there was a woman in the buckboard. Bow-Wow shook his head as if to clear it and began to slip back toward the bunkhouse. The idea of two cowmen hugging each other!

Whitby strolled after and overtook the muttering puncher. "I fancy that's one of those Texans he's been talking about—or, rather, two of them. Perhaps we shall see some Frontier law up here now—and about time."

Slow Jack veered off and swore in his throat. "*Texas* law, huh? We'll send him back where he come from, in a box!" he growled.

He stopped when he heard Buck's laughing words, and sneered: "Hopalong Cassidy an' his wife, eh? She'll be his widder if he cuts in *this* game!"

BUCK'S visit to Schatz was forgotten as he listened to Hopalong and Mary Cassidy chatter about old times and people he wished he could see again.

But after supper, Hopalong noticed how tired his wife was and sent her to get a good night's rest. The long railroad journey and the ride in the buckboard had been a great strain on her.

When left alone, Buck demanded to know all about the Bar-20 and its outfit, and laughed until the tears came as he listened to some of the tales. Finally Hopalong leaned forward and said abruptly:

"I got other things to talk about, Buck. Texas can wait."

"Kind of a dry job, Hoppy," replied Buck, going to a cupboard and returning with a bottle.

"Better stuff than Cowan ever sold," smiled the visitor, and then plunged into what he considered real news.

"It's this way, Buck. Mary and me decided to come up here and see how you were makin' out. We left Red Conners in charge of the Bar-20. Well, when we got off th' train at Wayback, I went huntin' for a wagon an' purty soon we was on our way to Twin River. I knowed we'd have to spend th' night there—Mary couldn't stand forty miles in a buckboard after that train ride. We hadn't got very far from town when I hears a hail an' looks around to see Tex

Ewalt comin' up. He spotted me when I left th' train, but he didn't want to show he knows me there."

"What?" exclaimed Buck, in great surprise. "Tex Ewalt! Why, I thought he went East for good!"

"He thought so, too, at th' time," Hoppy grinned. "Well, when he got back to th' ranch he was restless an' decided to come up here an' help you. He's been very busy up here in a quiet way. He tells me he knows th' man that put th' itch on yore range. Tex says he could 'a' stopped it if he knew enough to add two an' two. But he says there's another man behind him, slicker'n a coyote. Tex's been hopin' every day to rope an' tie him, but he ain't got him yet."

"Who is it?" asked Buck, with grim simplicity.

"Tex won't tell me. He says you can't do no good shootin' on suspicion. He's tried watchin' him, but he might as well be goin' to church when he does leave home, his travels is that innocent."

"Why didn't Tex come here? I been wantin' one man I could trust, an' me an' Tex could 'a' wiped out th' gang."

"He says different—an' he was afraid o' bein' seen. You see, that would kill his usefulness. Just as soon as he could get to th' bottom o' th' game an' lay his fingers on th' real boss, *then* he'd 'a' come out for you in th' open, put th' boss in th' scrap-pile for burial, an' burned powder till you had things where you wanted 'em. We about concluded you ain't makin' good use o' th' punchers you got, Buck, though I shore hates to say it."

"How can I make use o' men I don't trust? You don't know th' worst, Hopalong—"

"About th' couple o' thousand head went swimmin'? I ain't heard much else in Twin River. How'd it happen?"

Buck ran over the day's occurrences graphically. Hopalong's comment was characteristic of the man.

"The two men on yore south pasture is liars," he declared. "Yore foreman is some doubtful. 'Pears like to me if he's honest an' attendin' to business, no point o' yore range ought to go shy o' him for long. Th' Britisher's white: it's no part o' his business to help you, th' way Tex tells me. Th' other two is all right if they ain't just fools what'll do as th' foreman says 'cause he's th' foreman, right or wrong. That's how I reckons you stand. Now we got to prove it."

"Fire away," said Buck, earnestly. "I agrees to every word. Provin' it's th' horse I ain't been able to rope."

"Th' outlyin' free range don't count. You ain't missed no cows in th' roundup, has you?"

"No, they tallied high."

"Goes to show there's a head to th' deviltry. You don't get no losses on'y right on yore home range. Now, we divide th' range in sections, a man to each section, an' work 'em that way a few days. There won't be no night ridin' at first. Then we set 'em night ridin' when they ain't expectin' it an' shift th' men every night. We soon know who to trust, don't we?"

HOPALONG, passing the bunkhouse on his way to the stable, paused to listen. Through the open window Pickles' voice had reached him quite clearly: "I don't guess I'll ever get him, Whit, but if I do, it'll be for keeps, you betcher."

Hopalong was interested. The death of Gottleib Gerken was an unknown story to him and Pickles' murderous intention was so evident that Hopalong wondered how the boy came to conceive so deadly a hatred.

He stepped to the window and stood looking at the two figures within. They neither saw nor heard him as Whitby, stealing a look at the glum face beside him, began to draw circles with the point of the switch he held in his hand—he was never without one.

"It's a pity," he said, "a pity."

"What's a pity?" asked Pickles.

"It's a pity you never heard of the Witch's Spell."

"What's that?"

"But then, of course," reasoned Whitby, "if you can't find a Witch's Ring, you can't work the Spell. And I rather fancy there isn't a Witch's Ring in all the world outside of Yorkshire."

"What's it like?" demanded Pickles.

"Why, the Old Witch makes it, you

know. She runs around in a ring and blows on the grass and it never grows any more. That's to keep out the bad fairies. The Old Witch is quite a decent sort, you see. She lives inside the Ring, under the ground, and that's where you go to get your wish."

Pickles pondered. "Any wish?"

"All sorts," declared Whitby.

"Did you ever get a wish, Whit?"

"I could only count to seven." Whitby shook his head.

"How many do you have to count?"

"Nine," said Whitby, with a regretful sigh. "You run around the Ring nine times, holding your breath and saying your wish to yourself over and over again. Then you run into the middle and lie down. When you put your ear to the ground you can hear the Old Witch churning out your wish. 'Ka-Chug! Ka-Chug! Ka-Chug!' Then you know you will get your wish."

Pickles straightened up. His voice was solemn: "Whit, there's a Witch's Ring right here on the range!"

"Nonsense!"

"Hope I may die! I'll show you tomorrow. An' I'm a-goin' to wish—"

Hopalong lost the rest as he continued on his way to the stable. Pickles' Ring puzzled him only for a moment. "Means some place where th' Injuns used to war-dance, I reckon," was his conclusion. "But that Britisher seems like he believed it himself."

Two minutes later Hopalong was in the saddle and riding south, edging over toward Big Moose trail. He melted into the surrounding darkness like a shadow, silence having been the evident aim of his unusual preparations earlier in the evening.

Hopalong meant to quarter the section of range allotted him like a restless ghost and, if the others did as well, he had a strong conviction that night-deviltry would lose its attractions in this particular part of the country.

Just short of the Big Moose trail he halted, listening intently for five minutes, and then, turning west again, began to quarter the ground like a hound, gradually working south. He stopped from time to time to listen, and it was during one of these pauses that he espied a dark shape at rest not far from him.

He eyed it with suspicion. It should be a cow, but there was something not quite normal in its attitude. He rode forward cautiously. Circling it at a walk, a similar object loomed up some little distance from the other.

"Calf!" he decided. A few steps nearer and he changed his mind. "No, another cow. I don't know as I ever see cattle look like that. 'Pears like they was shore enough tuckered out." And then there came to his ears a sound that stiffened him in his saddle.

"Injuns!" breathed Hopalong. He slipped to earth and ran noiselessly to the nearest recumbent figure. A single touch told him. It was a dead cow—warm, but unquestionably dead.

With his horse under him once more, Hoppy crept forward. Careful before, his progress now had all the stealth of a stalking tiger. There it came again—the unmistakable twang of a bow-string. The pony veered to the left in response to the pressure of Hoppy's knee, when there sounded a movement to the right and he straightened his course to ride between the two. His spirits began to rise with the old-time zest at the imminence of a fight to the death.

IX

INDIANS! The odds could not be great and Hoppy expected to reduce them at the opening of hostilities. Warily he glanced about him as he moved slowly forward, then saw that which brought him up standing.

"Great Land of Freedom! Please look at that," he pleaded to his unresponsive country.

Head up and facing him with ears pricked forward, alert yet waiting, stood a horse that filled Hopalong's soul with covetousness.

"An' a' Injun's!" sighed Hoppy, in measureless disgust. "But not if I sees th' Injun," he added hopefully.

Wishing that he might, his thought back-somersaulted to Pickles and Whitby and the Witch's spell. A whimsical smile wrinkled the corners of his mouth, and at this very moment the thing happened.

A nerve-racking screech, the like of

which no Indian ever made, lifted the hair on Hoppy's head, and his pony immediately entered upon a series of amazing calisthenics induced by the inch or two of arrowhead in his rump. Hopalong caught one glimpse of a squat, misshapen figure that went past him with a rush and let go at it, more from habit than with the expectation of hitting.

When he had subdued his horse to the exercise of some little equine sense, the rapidly decreasing sound of the fleeing marauder told him that only one had been at work, and with grim hopelessness he set after him.

"Might as well try to catch a comet," he growled, sinking his spurs into the pony's side and momentarily distracting its attention from the biting anguish of the lengthier spur behind.

The pony was running less silently than when he left the ranch. Portions of unaccustomed equipment, loosened in his mad flurry, were dropping from him at every jump. This, and the straining of Hopalong's hearing after the chase, allowed to pass unnoticed the coming up of a third horseman, riding at an angle to intercept the pursuit.

The first intimation of his presence Hopalong received was the whine of a bullet, too close for comfort, and Hopalong was off and behind his pony to welcome the crack of the rifle when it reached him.

"Shootin' at random, damn his fool hide!" snorted Hoppy. "An' shootin' good, too," he conceded, as a second bullet sped eagerly after the first.

Hoppy released a bellow of angry protest: "Hey! What'n hell do you reckon yo're doin'?"

There was an interval of silence, then a voice: "Show a laig, there! Who is it?"

"Show you a boot, you locoed bummer! It's Cassidy!" He mounted resignedly and waited. The unknown rode up full of apologies. Hopalong cut him short. "What d' they call you?" he asked, curtly.

"Slow Jack," was the answer.

Hoppy grunted. "Well, you camp down right here," he ordered, "an' don't let nobody blot that sign. I'm a-goin' to be here at daylight an' foller that screech-owl to th' limit. Good-night."

* * * * *

"Sweet birds-o'-paradise! Would you —would you oblige me by squintin' at that!"

Straight north, from the few dead carcasses where the trail started, it led to the creek bank east of the ranch-house. And like hounds with nose to scent, Hopalong, Buck, and Ned had followed it from the point where Slow Jack had been found doing sentry-go and sent, in profane relief, to breakfast and sleep.

Hoppy was in the lead, and as he came to the creek he raised his eyes to look across at the other bank for signs of the quarry's exit from the water. It was the sign on the north bank, coupled with that on the somewhat higher bank where they stood, that had made him exclaim.

Ned Monroe's face cleared of the frowning perplexity that had darkened it at first sight of the hoofprints they tracked. "Must be a stranger," he affirmed. "Dunno th' country, or he'd never jump when he could ride through."

"Jump?" exclaimed Buck, startled. "Why, of course," he conceded. "Hoppy, that's shore one scrumptious jump."

Hoppy nodded. "I never see th' horse could do it right now, an' that bird flew over there last night. Mebby you know a horse as could do it right easy, eh, Ned?"

With Hopalong's sharp eyes on his face, Ned shook his head in denial, gazing stolidly at the sign. "Too good for any in these parts."

Buck glanced quickly at Ned and then, pulling his hat low over his eyes, struck up the brim with two snappy blows of the back of his hand.

"Well, Buck, I reckon I'll leave you an' Ned to foller this. I got a feelin' I'm wanted at th' ranch. So long." Hopalong rode off in obedience to one of the signals that had helped to simplify affairs among the Bar-20 punchers.

BUCK had signified his desire for Hoppy's absence. He pushed Allday to the creek and set off at a lope. "Easy as follerin' a wagon, Ned," he remarked.

"Yep," agreed Ned.

They rode a couple of miles. "Be at th' Jill in a minute," Ned announced.

"Yeah. Thought he was driftin' that-away. Lay you ten to two he don't *jump* th' Jill, Ned."

"Here's Charley," was the irrelevant response.

The Indian was a welcome diversion. Buck waved Charley an amiable salute. The Cheyenne rode to join them.

"Hey, Charley, whose horse is that?" asked Buck, pointing to the hoofprints.

The Indian barely glanced at them. "French Rose," he declared. "Cross trail, swim river before sun. Heap good horse."

"Where goin', Charley—ranch?"

Charley shifted uneasily under Buck's stare. "That's all right," assured Buck. "Tell Jake to give you—no, wait for me. I'll be there as soon as you are."

He turned away and Charley accepted his dismissal in high good humor, riding off with cheering visions of a cupful of the "old man's" whiskey, which was very different from that dispensed over the bar in Twin River.

"Well, Ned," said Buck.

"Well, Buck," returned Ned.

"You knew it was Rose's horse."

"I was a-feared."

"You knew it, you durn ol' grizzly!"

"Look a-here, Buck. You ain't goin' to tell me as how Rose—"

"Not by a jugful! That's a flower without a stain, Ned, an' I backs her with my whole pile."

"Here, too," coincided Ned.

"We lost th' trail, Ned."

"You bet! Couldn't pick her up agin, nohow."

* * * * *

Hopalong had taken his cue from Buck without question but not without curiosity. On his way to the house he decided that Tex Ewalt would be all the better for a knowledge of recent events. Therefore he paused only long enough to inform Mary of his intention before starting in search of him.

At Twin River, he pulled up at the Why-Not and went in for a drink. Tex was standing at the bar, and ten minutes after Hopalong left Tex had overtaken him on the Wayback trail. Tex was soon acquainted with the latest attempt at stock reduction. He listened silently until Hopalong mentioned the kind of man who had done the killing.

"Big Saxe!" he exclaimed. "So, that's his game! Well, we got 'em now, Hopalong. I can lay my hands on that cow-killer right soon, an' he'll squeal, you bet. An' I got a long way to go. *Adios!*"

"Blamed grasshopper!" grumbled Hopalong. "Never even guessed where that horse come from. If Big Saxe is on him yet, you shore got a long journey, Tex."

* * * * *

Karl Schatz rode leisurely up to the ranchhouse and called. Mary Cassidy came to the door and behind her Buck Peters, whose brow was wrinkled in the effort of composing a letter to McAllister. It was not an easy letter to write and Buck had enlisted Whitby's services. He asked Karl to climb down and come inside.

Mary disappeared, and Karl, entering, shook hands with Whitby, accepted the proffered chair and plunged into the reason of his visit. Whitby sat making idle marks with his pen. Soon he began to write swiftly.

"Big lot of cows you loose, ain'd it?" Karl asked. "Vat you t'ink: stampede?"

"Looks like it."

"Look like it? *Donnerwetter!* Look like a drive!"

"You seen it?"

Karl nodded. "Look like a drive," he repeated.

"Wouldn't surprise me none," admitted Buck. "We had Injuns shootin' 'em on th' range last night."

"*Himmel!* Vat fools!"

"Looks like they're tryin' to drive me off'n th' range."

"*Yah, aber* not me. Ten years und no trouble come."

"Huh! Well, what would *you* do?"

"Fight," advised Karl. "I vill fight if you let me in. I haf a plan."

"In where?" asked Buck, in some wonder.

"In der ranch—a partner. Look! Cows you must haf, money you must haf, brains you must haf: I bring dem. I bring shust so much money as you und your partner togedder. Der money in der bank *geht*. You buy der cows,

goot stock, besser as before. Goot cows, goot prices, ain'd it? You pay for everyt'ing mit der money in der bank. I stay here und stop dot foolishness mit precipices und parasites und shooting. Vat you dink?"

"Let me get you. You want to buy in on the Double Y, equal partners. I put in so much, McAllister puts in so much, and you put in as much as both of us. Th' money goes in th' bank an' I have th' spendin' of it. You do yore share o' th' work an' yo're dead certain you can stop th' deviltry on th' range. Is that it?"

"Yah!" assented Karl, emphatically.

PETERS was astounded at the audacity of the proposal. His gaze wandered to Whitby, whose pen was moving over the paper with a speed that impressed Buck, busy as his mind was. Buck recovered his wits and faced the expectant Schatz.

"I just been a-writin' to McAllister," he informed him. "You'll have to give me time to see what he says. Let's liquor."

They drank together, and a little later Karl rode away. As soon as he had gone, Buck called, "Hoppy!" Hopalong came in from the kitchen. Buck met his entry with the question:

"What do you think that Dutch hog come for?"

Rapidly he repeated the German's proposition. Hopalong glanced meaningly at Whitby, who still appeared to be writing against time.

"What'd *you* say?" asked Hopalong of Buck.

"Nothin'. I wanted a chance to get my breath. But if he can stop th' deviltry, mebby he's at th' bottom of it. Next time he comes I'll tell him to go plumb to hell!"

"I wouldn't, Buck."

"What's that?" asked Buck, staring hard at Whitby.

"I wouldn't," repeated Whitby. "This German chap. You can't fight him yet, Buck."

"Oh, can't I? What do you know about it?"

"Do you mind if we have in Mrs. Cassidy? Clever woman, Mrs. Cassidy." He left the room and presently returned with Mary.

"Now you boys listen to Whitby," said Mary.

"It began in Chicago," said Whitby. "McAllister is a friend of mine. He rather thought Buck underrated the difficulties here, so he asked me to run out and look it over. I soon found it was jolly well too big for me, so I wrote to the Governor—my father, at home you know—and he said he'd foot the bills. So I put it in the hands of a detective agency.

"Very thorough people, 'pon my word! They tell me this German chap is at the bottom of the mischief, but they can't prove it. Now he's come with his offer of partnership. No doubt he expects to trick you, Buck, in some way, perhaps lending you money—then, you out of it, he has McAllister at a disadvantage. Well, my idea is this: take Schatz in as a partner and he'll grow less careful. We shall be able to trip him up. I'll lend you the money, Buck—"

"But what in—what do I need money for, Whit? Ain't th' range an' th' cattle enough?"

"Of course they are. But the German wants to see some cash capital and it will do no harm to give him plenty of rope, will it now?"

Buck turned to Hopalong. "What do you make if it?" he asked.

"What does McAllister think o' this partnership deal?" Hoppy asked Whitby.

"He hasn't heard of it, but I'm sure he would agree with me."

"All right!" exclaimed Buck. "We'll let Mac make th' runnin'. But I shore hates to pay big interest, like I must, a-puttin' up money that way."

"Let me lend it to you, Buck," advised Whitby. "The Governor will cable it fast enough when I ask for it. You won't have to pay me a penny interest." He paused. "I say, Buck, have I made good out here in the West?"

"Made good! Yo're th' best Britisher I ever knew!" Buck slapped him on the shoulder. "Now, let's get that letter off to Mac."

"I've written it," answer Whitby. "If you like, I'll get it to Wayback tonight and stop over until morning."

X

STRAIGHT from Wayback, without a stop, rode Dave. Hate consumed him. Rumors of Smiler Schatz's defection were floating about the town and, though no one but those intimately concerned knew the actual agreement made, the presence of the principals and their several places of call had been noted and fully commented upon. From such premises, the town's deductions came near the truth. But whatever Schatz might be planning, Dave was satisfied that *he* had no part in it.

"What's all this I hear o' you an' Peters in a lovin' match?" he demanded of the German when he reached the latter's cabin.

"*Ach!* If you not come today, I send for you. Vy you stay avay like dot?"

"I'm busy tryin' to drive Peters back to Texas, where he come from. What are you doin'—payin' his passage, or backin' him to win?"

"Paying his passage, Dave. Vere, I am not sure. Look, here iss Herr Peters," stabbing a finger into the palm of his extended right hand, "und here iss McAllister," duplicating with his left. "Und ven I do so," closing both hands tightly, "nobody iss left but Schatz."

"Easy as that, eh?" said Dave, skeptically.

"Schust so easy like dot. Look! I make me a pardner by der Double Y. Peters, he get all der money vat he can. McAllister, he send der same as Peters. Me, I got dot money already. Der money vas in der bank. Der range iss my property schust so much as Peters und McAllister."

"Fine," drawled Dave.

"Peters, he dink he spend der money. Soon he go to buy cows. Now iss de point: tomorrow I go by der bank, I dake oud all der money. Four men iss guard. I say I go over by der Bitter Root vere der Deuce Arrow herd for sale iss, und I take all der money. Because dot bank in Vayback too small.

"I leave der bank und stop by der Miner's Pick Saloon. Ve drink. A man vot vears a mask comes in. He cover us mit a gun. He take der money, ride away to Coon River by der Red Bluff. Dere iss man und boat. Der man mit der boat take horse und ride to first relay und pretty soon he iss in Rankin. A relay every ten miles. Der man mit der money go downriver in der boat five mile und dere iss man mit two horses. He ride to Vayback und den here mit der money. Vat you tink?"

"Fine," repeated Dave. "An' who's goin' to do all that tumblin' with th' money?"

"Dave Owens," replied Schatz.

"Me!" Dave laughed. "Why, Karl, if I had somebody to do all th' hard work, I can make plans like that, myself. Talk sense!"

"Hard vork! It iss easy, like a squirrel up a tree. Everybody iss by der station ven der train comes. You take all der guns und ve not make noise, *aber* some thief know you got all der money und catch you first und rob you. Ve got no horses ven ve go by train, und must run, get horses to run after you. So you get avay. You come here mit der money und who know it?"

"Who's makin' th' blind trail?"

"Denver Gus."

"I don't envy Gus none."

"Vy? I pay him goot. He vas go to Texas, anyvay, pretty quick."

"How you goin' to get out of it?"

"I don't have to get out of it. I don't steal der money, it iss steal avay from me. Can I help it?"

"Suppose I drop that money an' somebody on a good horse gets away with it? Because you can bet yore whole pile I ain't aimin' to stop an' stand off th' beginnin' of a Judge Lynch party."

"Dave, many days mit *my* head I tink und tink, everythings, possible und not possible. Den ven der plans iss made, *you* mit *your* head mistakes find. Der money vat you steal, it iss no matter, *aber* don't lose it. Besser you burn it, as lose it."

"*Burn* it?"

"Yah! Paper it iss, schust paper."

"Paper!" Dave struggled to grasp the idea. "What th' blazes am I a-goin' to run away with paper for?"

"Maybe somebody smarter as I tink. Two men, already, much questions ask. Maybe Peters take all der money before me. So I go by der bank und get der money first. Dey can't help it. It iss

my bank anyvay, und der check iss dere."

"You've *got* th' money?"

"Yah, here in der house I got it. All der mistakes vat come I know, possible und not possible. Noding can slip, noding can break."

"Yo're a wonder!" congratulated Dave. "Th' one an' only original, sure-fire, bull's-eye wonder!"

Gun sprang to hand, a deafening roar followed his words. Schatz gave a convulsive start and slid slowly from his chair to the floor. On his face was an overwhelming surprise.

Dave's grunting laugh spoke immeasurable contempt. "Brains!"

Dave found the money without difficulty, and by the time he left the cabin for the last time, the still figure of Karl Schatz rested under two feet of earth. Dave's plans were already made.

The disappearance of Karl would be associated with the disappearance of the money. The bank would maintain that the money had been drawn on the day the check was dated, which necessarily must be tomorrow. The four men who were to act as guards would conclude some difficulty had arisen and await further orders, it would be the same with all the others involved. The way was clear for him. There remained only Rose.

PICKLES was hungry. With all his soul he now wished he had not fled from the Double Y in murderous quest of Dave. But sudden resolution armed him. He shoved his hands in his pockets and marched manfully in the direction of the LaFrance house. He refused to go hungry for anybody.

Topping a rise, his head barely showed against the skyline when he dropped as if shot. The horseman making for the house might be Jean. His glance had been too hasty for recognition. Flat against the earth, Pickles pushed himself backward until he felt it safe to turn and gallop clumsily downgrade on hands and feet. Far enough, he sat and thought.

He could gain the barn unseen, and if he ran would have time to dash into the house, grab some chuck, and get away again before the horseman got there. He sprang to his feet and ran like a long-horned steer. He gained the barn, but went through and crossed to the house without pausing.

Back of the house, he stopped to listen. He had cut it too fine. The horse was coming up to the door.

"Darn it!" said Pickles.

Then the snap of the catch on the front door and Rose's voice told him she had gone outside. Maybe the rider wasn't coming in.

He squirmed through the end window, dropped noiselessly to the floor, sped through the doorway, and almost dislocated his spine with the ferretlike turn he made in trying to get back into the room the same instant he left it. He had barely escaped the other's entry.

If Rose came to the bedroom she would be certain to exclaim at sight of him. Pickles breathed a very short prayer. He put his hands to the window ledge, and stiffened.

"No, I can't stay. Rose, I'm pullin' my freight. How soon can you come along?"

It was Dave. Pickles knelt silently by the bunk and muffled his rapid breathing in the blankets, while he listened.

"Where?" asked Rose.

"Anywhere you say. I'm a-goin' to clean up a gold mine in a few hours an' yo're goin' to help me spend it. We'll get married first stop."

"A gold mine?"

"More money than you ever saw!"

"And you want—me—to go with you?"

"Not with me. I got to get th' money first. I'll get th' train to Helena tonight. You get on at Jackson. You can make it easy on Swaller."

"Perhaps you tell true. Perhaps you run away. I must know more."

"All right. It's this way: Schatz deals to Peters from a cold deck. He gets all th' money out o' the bank—Peters', McAllister's, an' his. Then he lets me lift it, him not knowin' who I am, o' course. I do th' mysterious disappearance act an' Schatz makes foolish noises too late. A posse take after me an' runs into a blind trail. I circle back to town. Right there is where I fool Schatz.

"He thinks I'm driftin' along the Big Moose trail to hand th' money over to him graceful. 'Stead o' that, I'm snortin' along the tract to Helena with you. Schatz dassent make no holler, an' we leave him an' Peters to fight it out. Do you get me?"

"They will kill you."

"Oh, not a whole lot, I reckon. I'm gettin' so used to bein' killed thataway, I sorter like it. Talk sense. Where's th' ole man?"

"I will leave a letter for him."

"Hip hooray! Mighty nigh kissin' time, Rose! Would be, on'y I can't leave this blasted cayuse. 'Fraid to trust him. Which way you goin'? Don't show in Wayback. Hit th' river farther west."

Pickles had heard enough. His exit through the window was rapid and silent. His own pony, the Goat, was at pasture, but Swallow would be in the corral. Yes, there he was, close to the fence. Pickles never bridled and saddled so rapidly in his short life. An instant later he was heading straight for the Double Y ranch.

HAVING made her decision, Rose listened carefully to Dave's advice. The more he talked the better she understood the situation. Dave was scarcely on his way before Rose hurried to the stable. She was surprised to find her bridle missing. On the next peg was Pickles' bridle, the only one ready for instant use. She hesitated a moment, then hastened to the edge of the pasture, sending a clear call for Swallow as she ran.

There came no answering hoofbeats and she waited to reach the fence before calling again. The wait of a few seconds told her that Swallow was not in the pasture. Then where was he? Jean was riding the only saddle pony—no, there was the Goat. Pickles' pony! Suspicion awoke in Rose. Was it possible Pickles had dared to ride away on Swallow?

Ten minutes later the Goat, properly saddled, turned short out of the farm road with a catlike scramble onto the Twin River trail. The tied-in gait of the Goat was irksome to Rose, but she kept him to his work and Twin River drew rapidly nearer. With Dave's instructions in mind she knew there was plenty of time, but it would be foolish to lessen the margin of safety by loitering.

A quarter of a mile from the ford she passed the stage from Wayback. The driver was just whipping up to enter Twin River in style and the stage occupants had opportunity to appraise Rose as she forged ahead.

"My heavens, what a beauty!" exclaimed a young lady on the seat beside the driver, herself no mean specimen of God's handiwork. "Who is she?"

The driver shifted his whip and swept off his hat with a flourish. He gazed admiringly after the rider. "That, ma'am, is the French Rose, an' this is certainly my lucky day. I ain't seen two such pretty women before in one day, not in a dog's age! I ain't *never* seen 'em," he amended with enthusiastic conviction.

The coach cut through the ford to the hiss of the swirling water and turned into the straight in time for them to see a man run out from the Sweet-Echo to meet Rose, standing with his hand on the bridle while Rose leaned forward in what looked suspiciously like a warm greeting. Another exclamation escaped the young lady on the stage.

"Whitby!"

Rose's imperious call had brought Whitby running. They had achieved a warm regard for each other during Rose's numerous visits to the Double Y, made at Dave's instigation, visits that had not ceased until the arrival of Hopalong and Mary, when Dave had declared it was no use to try longer. Whitby grasped the significance of Rose's hurried words in very brief time.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, thinking rapidly. "By Jove! He will do it, too! They can't refuse to honor his check, you know. Buck is the only one can stop it. Lucky Pickles was gone and you came here, instead of going to the Wayback bank. Buck hasn't long left me. I can catch him."

He ran around to the shed at the rear, and was going fast when he turned into the trail astride his pony. His reassuring wave of the hand to Rose stopped in

mid-air as he caught sight of Margaret McAllister, standing on the footboard of the stagecoach and looking at him with an expression he did not in the least understand. He made as if to pull up, thought better of it and, sweeping off his hat, shot out over the Big Moose trail at top speed.

Buck had got farther south than Whitby suspected—so far, that Whitby was beginning to hope he had not struck off from the trail, when he sighted him. Buck was riding with head on shoulder, as if he had heard the coming of his pursuer, and he pulled up at the other's wild gesture.

"Twin River, Buck! Twin River! And ride like hell!"

Buck's quirt bit into his pony's flank. Never before had he known the Englishman profane. It must be serious. As they ran side by side, Whitby rapidly repeated Rose's news.

"I can make it, Whit," declared Buck. "They won't try to work th' game till closin' time at th' bank. Train bound west is due at Wayback about then. Wish I had Allday under me. So long."

Whitby slowed to a lope and Buck drew away rapidly. His duty accomplished, the Englishman's thoughts turned to the puzzling expression on Margaret McAllister's face, as he had last seen it. He tried in vain to analyze it and unconsciously pressed his tired horse into a faster pace in his anxiety for an explanation.

XI

BUCK did not spare his pony. He *must* be at the bank before the money was paid over. The stringing up of Schatz by Judge Lynch would not bring the money back, and in any case Buck had grave doubts of his ability to accomplish this retribution. Buck's grim face was never sterner. He *must* get to the bank.

Resolutely putting aside all other considerations, he gave his whole mind to his horse. But presently he shook his head: "Never make it," he muttered. "Have to relay at Twin."

Even as he said it he saw ahead of him another rider approaching. An expression of gratified pleasure appeared on Buck's face as he saw the other dismount and begin to lengthen the stirrup leathers. It was Rose.

"What a woman!" exclaimed Buck. "She thinks as quick as Cassidy an' never overlooks a bet!"

He urged his pony to its best speed. With a fresh mount in sight, his object was practically assured.

As he drew near, Rose called out: "Horse wait for you at Two Fork Creek."

He pulled up short beside her in two jumps. "Rose, I love you," he declared, his eyes sparkling with pleasure. "You'd oughta been a man!" He sprang to the ground while speaking and was astride the Goat at a bound, turning in his saddle to call back to her: "But I'm most mighty glad yo're not."

A wave of his hand and he faced about, settling in his seat for the run to Two Fork, five miles beyond Twin River.

Rose stood with lips apart and eyes wide, watching him ride away. Then trembling seized her and she clung to the saddle for support. The tears gathered in her eyes.

"He is not mean it that way," she murmured. "It is only that he is glad I think about the horse."

She mounted and rode soberly toward Twin River.

* * * * *

"Seems like Buck Peters might be in a hurry," observed Slick Milligan, the bartender. "It's th' first time I see him use a quirt."

If Margaret had chanced to overhear Slick's remark it would have explained much. Mrs. Blake, her aunt, was resting in the hotel, preparatory to sallying forth on the last stretch of their journey, and Margaret was about to make inquiries regarding a conveyance, when the rapid drumming of a horse's feet drew her to the window as Buck went past.

Margaret had never met Buck, but she was far too good a horsewoman to fail to recognize the pony as the very animal that the French Rose had ridden. The present rider and Rose must have exchanged horses on the road. But, why?

It was an enigma Margaret was prepared to allow Whitby to explain, when he was so unfortunate as to appear in

company with Rose. He had overtaken her, a half mile down the trail, but Margaret could not, of course, know this. They had remained in earnest conversation for two or three minutes, when Rose went on and Whitby went around to the shed to put up his pony.

Margaret ran downstairs and went out onto the porch. She felt better able to face him in the open.

Whitby advanced with outstretched hand. "Ripping idea, taking us by surprise, Miss McAllister. Awful journey, you know, really."

"We wished to avoid giving trouble. You are looking very well, Mr. Booth."

"Fit as a fiddle, thank you. But, I say, you'll excuse me—but aren't you feeling a little—ah—seedy, now? I mean—"

"I quite understand what you mean. But if I look a little dragged with the journey, you must remember that I do not pretend to have the vitality of a cowgirl."

"Ah! Just so. Miss McAllister, you don't know me very well, not really. Perhaps no better than I know you. My presumption doesn't go so far as to imagine you are jealous. I am not seeking causes. All I know is, you made me a promise when I came West, a conditional promise, I grant you: I was to make good. Well, I haven't done half bad, really.

"I fancy Mr. McAllister would admit as much. Buck Peters admits more and one has to be something of a man, you know, to merit that from Peters. He's the finest man I ever knew myself, bar none. It is very good of you to hear me so patiently. I'm coming to the kernel of the difficulty just now.

"Rose LaFrance, the cowgirl you mentioned, is the right sort. She brought word this morning that will save Peters a goodish bit of money. Incidentally, Mr. McAllister also. Buck had to be in Wayback at the earliest possible moment and I was fortunate enough to overtake him. Miss LaFrance not only was thoughtful enough to ride to meet Buck and give him a fresh mount and to send a man ahead with whom Buck will change again, but she insists that we follow him, which is a jolly good idea. These fellows are very careless with their firearms and he might require help.

"If the blackguard he is after succeeds in withdrawing the entire deposit from the bank and it is given to him in cash, before Peters gets there, he will certainly require help. I leave you to reflect on these facts, Miss McAllister. Give my kindest regards to Mrs. Blake."

WHITBY stalked back the way he had come, remounted his horse and pushed the animal sufficiently to overtake Rose who, he knew, was riding slowly. Just outside the town he met Cock Murray, astride the Goat. The Goat was a very tired pony and showed it.

"My dear man! Why aren't you following Peters?" asked Whitby, in surprised remonstrance.

"My dear Brit! I sorta allowed it wasn't healthy," answered Cock. "I tells you th' same as I tells th' French Rose: 'When Buck says "Scoot for th' ranch an' tell Cassidy to hit Wayback *pronto* an' he'll get news o' me at th' bank," it 'pears like, to my softboiled head, that's what I oughta do.'"

"I beg your pardon. Of course! Rather odd Peters didn't tell me." And Whitby hastened on to overtake Rose.

He had left Two Fork Creek four miles behind him before sighting her. In her impatience, she had gone faster than she knew. Whitby had almost caught up, when he saw Rose bend forward, wave to him and then dash away, as if she were inviting him to a race.

"Buck!" exclaimed Whitby, with intuitive conviction. "It's Buck as sure as little apples!"

Fifty yards' advance showed him that he was right. The figure lying huddled in the road was certainly Buck, and beside him was his dead pony. Rose flung herself from the saddle and ran to him. Whitby was not far behind. Together they laid the unconscious figure at full length.

"It is there," said Rose dully, pointing to the right thigh.

"Ah!" breathed Whitby, in a sigh of relief. "Drilled through!" he exclaimed. "Why, the swine must have been near enough to do better than that. How ever did he miss? We'll bandage this as it

is, Miss LaFrance, and do it properly. Now, should you say take him to the doctor at Wayback?"

"No. He is a drunken beast. I will nurse him."

"Very well. A good nurse is better than a drunken doctor. Just cut this sleeve from my shirt, will you?"

Rose took the knife and cut, instead, a three-inch strip from the bottom of her skirt, Whitby meanwhile producing a flask, from which he carefully fed Buck small quantities of whisky. Buck slowly opened his eyes to see Whitby's face bending over his.

"Got away, Whit," he whispered weakly. "Ambushed me," and relapsed into unconsciousness.

"He have lose much blood," murmured Rose.

"Yes," assented Whitby. "How shall we carry him? He can never ride."

"Travois," said Rose. "I show you."

Buck again regained consciousness and his voice was distinctly stronger. "Get after him, Whit. He mustn't get away."

"Oh, nonsense, Buck! They know the cat's out of the bag by this time and they will never be such asses as to try it on now. As for Dave, he can't get away. The agency will be jolly glad to do something for the money they have had by turning over Dave, if I ask it of them. And McAllister will think you are worth a good bit more than the money, I lay. I know *I* do."

Buck was attempting feeble remonstrance when Rose returned from her survey of the timber available and swiftly placed her hands over his lips.

"Do not talk," she commanded.

"What price the nurse, eh, Buck? Oh, you lucky beggar!"

"Rose," murmured Buck. "Why, that's right kind."

Admonishing him with raised forefinger, Rose gave instructions to Whitby, and he hastened away to gather material for the travois.

MARGARET was carrying a pair of driving gloves when she returned to Mrs. Blake. "Are we going to start, Margie?" Mrs. Blake asked, with languid interest.

"I am going to start, but I am going the other way. We shall not be able to leave for the ranch before morning, probably."

Mrs. Blake sat up with surprising suddenness. "And may I ask why you are going the other way and when you purpose to return?"

"I am going to Wayback to telegraph. Some thief has planned to get all of papa's money from the bank there, and of course he will try to escape on the train. We shall catch him by telegraphing to the officers at the next town."

"How did you learn all this?"

"Whitby told me just now. He has gone on to Wayback. But he never will have the sense to telegraph. That is why I am going."

Margaret went out and slammed the door. Downstairs she was met by the burly Sandy, who hastened from the barroom at the sound of her descent.

"I want a hitch of some kind," requested Margaret. "And the sooner the better."

"Hitch?" queried Sandy.

"A horse, a team, a rig, something to drive, and at once," explained Margaret, impatiently.

"Oh, ay! I ken ye meanin' richt enough. I ken it fine, but I hae doots o' yer abeelity."

"Very well, then I will buy it, only let me have it immediately."

"It's no' th' horses, ye ken. What would I tell yer mither, gin ye're kilt?"

"Bosh!" said Margaret scornfully. "I can drive anything you can harness."

"Oh, ay! Nae doot, nae doot. But it willna be ane o' Sandy's, I tell ye that."

A voice was heard from out front, roaring for Slick and demanding a cayuse in a hurry.

"Losh! Yon's anither. They must theenk I keepit a leevery." Sandy hastened out to the porch to see who was desirous of further depleting his stock. When he saw the condition of the Goat his decision was quick and to the point: "Ma certes! Ye'll no run th' legs of ony o' my cattle, Cock Murray, gin ye crack yer throat crawin'. Tut, tut! Look at yon!" He shook his head sorrowfully as he gazed at the dejected appearance of the Goat.

"Won't, hey?" shouted Cock, slapping back the saddle. "Then I'll borrer Dutch

Fred's, an' Buck Peters 'll burn yore ol' shack 'bout yoreears when he knows it!"

A man, watching interestedly from the barroom, left by the hall exit, running.

"Buck Peters? Weel, in that case — Slick, ye can lend him yer ain?"

"I was just a-goin' to," declared Slick, hurrying off.

"Yo're very generous when it don't cost you nothin'."

Cock loosened the cinch. "Generous as — Miss McAllister!" he exclaimed, aghast.

"Why, of all the people! How delightful! What on earth are *you* doing out here?" Margaret ran to him, extending both hands in warm greeting.

Cock took them as if in a dream. "Miss McAllister—Chicago— Oh, what a fool I've been!"

The man who had left the barroom tore around the corner of the hotel on a wicked-looking pinto which lashed out viciously at the Goat when brought to a stop, a compliment the Goat promptly returned, though with less vigor.

"Here y' are, Cock. He'll think he's headin' for th' Cyclone an' he'll burn th' earth."

The Cyclone puncher pushed the straps into Murray's hand and led away the Goat to a well-earned rest.

"I have to go, Miss McAllister," Murray said. "See you at the ranch. I'm punching for the Double Y. They call me Cock Murray. It—it's a name I took." The man called Cock Murray had, in his past, been in love with Margaret one time in Chicago. Then he'd come West.

"I'll remember—Cock Murray. It fits you like a glove!" and Murray mounted to her ripple of laughter. "We shall be out there tomorrow. Aunt is with me." She turned and faced the dour Sandy. "See here! Do you *ever* intend to get out that rig?"

"Weel, gin ye're a relative o' Buck Peters, I jalouse ye'll gang yer ain gait, onyway," and he went grumbling through the hall to do her bidding.

XII

MARGARET, speeding towards Wayback, suddenly drew in the ponies firmly and approached the group on the trail at an easy lope. Whitby ran up from the river bank as she pulled the team to a stand.

"Who is it, Miss LaFrance? How did it happen?" asked Margaret.

"It is M'sieu Peters, ma'am'selle. He is wounded," replied Rose.

"Just in time, Miss McAllister," said Whitby. "We'll commandeer that wagon as an ambulance."

"Miss McAllister!" exclaimed Buck, wonderingly. Then, energetically: "Whit, you get after that polecat. I can get to th' ranch, now. Get a-goin'."

"Buck, I'm like Jake: 'sot in my ways.' There is no necessity to follow that polecat, as you so aptly call him. And you are not going to the ranch, you know. Miss LaFrance has kindly volunteered expert service in nursing and I intend that you shall get it. Miss McAllister, Miss LaFrance, whose services you already know; and Mr. Peters, your father's partner."

"You must not think of going on to the ranch, Mr. Peters," persuaded Margaret. "I only hope it is not too far to Miss LaFrance's home. I'm afraid these horses won't stand. Come, Whit, get him into the rig quickly."

"Have I made good, Miss McAllister?" asked the Englishman hopefully.

"You've more than made good, Whit," smiled Margaret.

* * * * *

Hopalong, having heard Pickles' story on the latter's arrival at the Double Y, lost no time in mounting Allday and starting in pursuit of Dave. The rest of the Double Y punchers were instructed to head for Wayback. Before he had gone very far, however, he met up with Cock Murray, who delivered Buck's message. They changed mounts, and Hopalong drove Murray's pinto onwards for every ounce there was in him.

Ten minutes beyond Two Fork he saw the buckboard, and the curse in his throat had its origin in a conviction as accurate as Whitby's had been. He turned and rode beside them.

"Well, they got you, Buck," was his quiet comment.

"Shore did," admitted Buck. "Ambushed at four hundred—first shot—

bad medicine."

"Dave?" asked Hopalong, looking at Whitby, who nodded.

"How far?"

"Two miles, possibly less," answered Whitby.

"I'll get him," said Hopalong, with quiet certitude. "So long, Buck."

"So long, Hoppy. Go with him, Whit. Can't afford another ambush."

Whitby turned and rode hard after Hopalong who, nevertheless, arrived at the dead pony considerably in advance, and after a searching look around rode straight to the ambush. The signs showed Dave had led his horse from the spot, finally mounting and riding off in a direction well to the east of Wayback. Hoppy guessed that this was a ruse and that Dave would eventually head for Wayback.

But exhaustive inquiries in Wayback seemed to show that Hoppy had guessed wrong. No one had seen Dave, or Schatz, either. The station agent declared Dave had neither purchased a ticket nor taken any train from the Wayback station. Whitby became downcast but Hopalong, with each fruitless inquiry, gathered cheerfulness almost to loquacity. It was his way.

"Cheer up, Whit," he encouraged. "I'd 'a' been punchin' cows an' dodgin' Injuns in th' Happy Hunting Grounds before I could rope a yearlin' if I'd allus give up when I was beat."

Whitby looked at him gloomily. "I'm fair stumped," he admitted. "D'you think, now, it would be wisdom to go back and follow his spoor?"

"Spoor is good. He came to Wayback, Whit, sure as yo're a bloomin' Britisher. Keep a-lookin' at me, now. There's a bum over by th' barber's has been watchin' us earnest ever since we hit town. He's stuck to us like a shadow. See if you know him. Easy, now. Don't scare him off."

WHITBY won his way into Hopalong's heart by the simplicity of his maneuver. Taking from his lips the cigar he was smoking, he waved it in the general direction of the station.

"You said a bum near the barbershop," he repeated.

His pony suddenly leaped into the air and manifested an inexplicable and exuberant interest in life. When quieted, Whitby was facing the barber's and carefully examining the bum. Hopalong chuckled through serious lips. Whitby had allowed the hot end of his cigar to come in contact with the pony's hide.

"No, can't say I do, but he evidently knows me. Dashed if he doesn't want me to follow him," and Whitby looked his astonishment.

Hopalong's eyes sparkled. "Get a-goin', Whit. Here's where ye call th' turn. What'd I tell you?" He wheeled and rode back to the station.

Whitby followed the shambling figure down the street and around the corner of a saloon, where he discovered him sunning himself on a heap of rubbish in the rear.

"Well, my man, what is it?" asked Whitby.

The crisp, incisive tones brought the bum up standing. He saluted and came forward eagerly.

"Youse lookin' f'r Dave?" he responded.

"What of it?"

"I seen him jump d' train down by d' pens. She wuz goin' hell-bent f'r election, too. W'en Dave jumps, I drops. Dave an' me don't pal."

"Why not?"

"Didn't he git me run out o' Twin? Youse was dere. Don'tcher 'member Pickles an' Dutch Onion—Pickles' old man — an' dat Come Seven guy w'at stopped d' row? Don'tcher?"

"Yes, I do. Are you the man who shied the bottle?"

"Ke-rect. I'd done f'r him, too, but dey put d' kibosh on me."

"And are you sure it was Dave? Did the train stop?"

"Stop nothin'! 'Twas a string o' empties. Dave jumped it, all right. An' I'd hoof it all d' way to Sante Fe to see him swing."

"Deuced good sentiment, by Jove. Here, you need — well, a number of things, don't you know."

Boomerang gazed after the departing Englishman and blinked rapidly at the bill in his hand. Whitby returned to Hopalong.

"We have the bally blackguard," was his glad assurance.

"Where?" asked Hopalong. "In yore pocket, or yore hat, or only in yore mind?"

Whitby explained, and Hopalong promptly appealed to the station agent.

It was a weary wait. Whitby, a patient man himself, found occasion to admire the motionless relaxation of Hopalong, who appeared to be storing energy until such time as he would require it. To Whitby, who was well acquainted with the jungle of India, it was the inertia of the tiger waiting for the dusk.

The station door opened again, but this time with a snappier purpose that seemed promising. Whitby turned his head. The railroader nodded as one well satisfied with himself.

"Got your man," he announced, with a grin of congratulation. "He dropped off at X. Don't seem a whole lot scared. Took a room at th' hotel. Goin' to turn him over to the sheriff?"

"No," answered Hopalong, "an' I don't want nothin' to get out here, *sabe?* If it does, yo're th' huckleberry. When's th' next train east?"

"Be along in twenty minutes."

"I'll take a ticket," and Hopalong rose to his feet and followed him into the station. He returned shortly, to apologize for leaving Whitby behind. "I know you'd like to go, Whit, but you ought to find out about that money. Better stay here an' see them bank people in th' mornin'."

Whitby acknowledged the wisdom of this and agreed to call on Buck at Jean's on his way back to the ranch.

"You tell Buck Dave is at X," said Hoppy. "An' that's where he stays," he added grimly. "Here she comes."

LONG before this, the usual crowd of idlers had gathered, and now the rest of Wayback began to ooze into the road and toward the station. As the train drew in it attracted even a half-shaved man from the barber's, hastily wiping the soap from his face as he ran. After him came the barber, closing the razor and sticking it in his pocket.

The first man off the cars was a fox-faced hunchback, Big Saxe, whose deformity in no way detracted from his agile strength. After him, with studied carelessness, came Tex Ewalt. Hopalong grunted, turned his head as the clatter of hoofs sounded through the turmoil, and signaled Chesty Sutton, first man of the rapidly arriving Double Y punchers.

"Don't you stray none, screech-owl, or I'll drop you," he warned the captive, who shot one impish glance at the speaker and froze in his tracks. "Chesty, tell Ned to take this coyote to th' ranch. An' don't let him get away, not if you has to shoot him."

"Hold hard, stranger. He looks mighty like Big Saxe to me, an' if he is, I got a warrant for him." The deputy sheriff started forward.

"Wait!" commanded Hopalong. The deputy waited. "Tex, hold that train. You an' me are goin' th' same way. Mr. Sheriff, I got a warrant ahead o' yourn an' I wants him. You'll find him at th' Double Y ranch when I gets through with him."

Slow Jack, the last of the Double Y punchers, loped up to the station, swung from his saddle and joined the interested group surrounding the disputants.

"If that's Big Saxe, I wants him now an' I'm goin' to take him."

"Don't you, son." Kind as Hopalong's tone sounded, the deputy halted again. "Bow-Wow, hit th' trail an' have eyes in th' back of yore head. Straddle, boys."

The crowd scattered as the mounted punchers moved their ponies about, to open a clear space. Hopalong met the eye of the hunchback, whose clear, shrewd glance recognized the master of the moment. "Screechy, that pinto's a-waitin' for you, an' if any son-of-a-gun gets there first *you* won't need no bracelets. Git!"

Struggling between indecision and duty, the deputy saw the group of punchers, the pinto in advance, turn into the Twin River trail.

"Looky here!" he began fiercely to Hopalong, " 'pears to me—"

"Bah! Tell it to Schatz," and Hopalong sprang up the steps, followed by Tex, to the outspoken regret of Wayback's citizens there assembled.

When the eastbound accommodation pulled into X at dusk, two men jumped off and started toward the nearest hotel. The proprietor of the Come-Again as-

signed them a room and spoke of supper, to which they intimated their ability to do justice to "anythin' you got."

As they turned away carelessly toward the washroom one of them halted, said, "We're expectin' a friend," and he gave a concise description of the third man.

"Why, he's upstairs now — first door to th' left at th' top of th' flight. Got in this afternoon. But he said he didn't want to be bothered none," hastily warned the proprietor. "Said his nerves was all stampeded."

"Reckon we'll go up an' hustle him down to his feed," Tex remarked, leading the way, with Hopalong stepping on his heels.

The proprietor studied the three names on his register, and spoke to a horseman, who was playing solitaire in a negligent way. "Wonder what's up, Dick?"

"Dunno," replied Dick. "That redhead looks like a bad customer, if his corn's stepped on. Mebby their nervous friend has did somethin' they don't like."

Knocking upstairs now reverberated through the house and a peevish voice threatened destruction to the door unless it opened speedily.

"That's th' redhead," remarked Dick.

The proprietor hastened from behind the bar and went up the stairs with undignified haste. "Don't bust that door!" he cried.

"Aw, close yore face!" growled a voice, and Dick nodded his head wisely. "Both of 'em bad customers," he mumbled.

XIII

THERE was a crash and the sound of splintering wood, followed by disgusted exclamations. Dick arose and sauntered up to see the show. The redhead was looking out of the open window, while the other man rapidly searched the room.

"He dropped his belongings first," audibly commented the man at the window. "Then *he* dropped." He turned quickly to the proprietor: "Did he have a horse?"

"Yes. Bought one first thing after he registered."

"We want one apiece," crisply demanded Hopalong, "with speed, bottom, an' sand. Got 'em? . . . No? Then where can we get 'em tonight?"

"I reckon I can fix you up," offered Dick. "I sold him th' hoss he's got. He wanted th' best in town, which he didn't get for bein' too blamed flip. But he paid for it, just th' same. I got a roan an' a bay that'll run Big Gray off'n his feed an' his feet. If yo're comin' back this way I'll buy 'em back again at a reduction. I'd like to keep them two. I don't reckon I'll get no chance to buy back th' other."

They departed for the corral. Dick chuckled.

"Th' gray I sold yore missin' friend carried Bad Hawkins from Juniper Creek to Halfway in fourteen hours—ten miles an hour. Th' roan an' th' bay did it in ten hours even, which puts a period after th' last words of Hawkins. Bad Hawkins weighed less 'n you," he said to Tex, "an' th' gray shore sprains a laig a-doin' it. It don't show, that is, not when he was sold it didn't. That feller was too flip — one of them Smart Alecks that stirs my bile somethin' awful!"

With three days' rations fastened to their saddles, Hopalong and Tex whirled away from the Come-Again as the first streak of gray appeared in the eastern sky. They had learned the night before that the way south most likely to be taken by a man unfamiliar with the country was through Lone Tree Pass.

Heading straight for the Pass, they picked up Dave's trail less than two miles from town and then settled into a steady gait that ate up the miles without punishing their horses. They had not made any mistake in their mounts, for they were powerful and tough, and the way they covered ground brought a grim smile to Hopalong's face.

"I don't reckon I'll do no swappin' back, Tex," he chuckled. "I've allus wanted a cayuse like this'n, an' I reckon he'll stay bought, even at th' price."

"They look good, but I'll tell you more about 'em by night," Tex replied. He glanced ahead with calm assurance. "I

don't figger he's so very far, Hoppy."

"Why no, Tex. He couldn't ride hard last night, not over strange country. It was darker'n blazes. Besides, we've got th' best cayuses, we've had more sleep than him, we know this game better, we're tougher, an' we can get more out of a cayuse than he can. I reckon we ought to get sight of him afore sundown, an' I wouldn't be surprised if we saw him shortly after noon."

"I'd ruther get him this side of Lone Tree Pass. I ain't hankerin' for no close chase through th' mountains after a cuss like Dave," Tex replied. "What do you say 'bout lettin' out another link?"

Hopalong watched his horse for a minute, glanced critically at his companion's, and tightened the grip of his knees. "Might as well find out what this cayuse can do. Come on, let 'em go!"

Pounding along at a gait which sent the wind whistling past their ears they dipped into hollows, shot over rises, and rounded turns side by side, stirrups touching and eyes roving as they searched the trail ahead. The turns they made were not as many as those in the trail they followed, for often they cut straight across from one turn to another. The ability to do this brought a shrewd smile to Hopalong's thin lips.

"Let his cayuse pick its way, Tex—told you he couldn't go fast last night. Bet a dollar we come to where he slept afore long — an' say, luck's with us, shore! Notice how he was bearin' a little off th' course all th' time. That gray of his must a' come from som'ers up north. He had to correct that when he could see where th' Pass lay. Come on, we'll try another cutoff, an' a big one."

"Yo're right. We'll gain a hour, easy," Tex replied as they shot off at a tangent for the distant mountain range on a line for the Pass.

The sun was two hours higher when Tex laughed aloud, stretching his hand across his friend's horse and pointing some distance ahead of him. "There's th' track again, Hoppy," he cried. "You was right. See it?"

HOPALONG waited until they swept up along the fresh trail before he replied, and the reply was characteristic of him. "Pushin' th' gray hard, Tex. Them toe prints are purty deep — an' darned if th' gray ain't havin' trouble with his bad laig! See that off fore hoofmark? See how it ain't as deep as its mate? Th' gray's favorin' that laig, an' only for one reason: it hurts him more when he don't.

"Move away a little, Tex. Don't do no good to be bunched so close where there's so much cover. He ain't a long way off, judgin' from them tracks. We don't know that he ain't doubled back to pick us off as we near him."

Tex tightened his knee-grip and rowelled his spurs tightly along the side of his mount, darting ahead with Hopalong speeding up to catch him. It was a test to see how the horses were holding up, and when the animals took up the new speed and held it with plenty of strength, the two men let them go.

As they shot down a rough, sloping trail to a shallow creek flowing noisily along the bottom of a wild arroyo, Hopalong looked ahead eagerly and called to Tex to slow down to a walk. Tex, surprised, obeyed, and took the reins of the bay as Hopalong went ahead to cross the stream on foot.

But Tex's surprise was only momentary. He quickly understood the reason for the play and he warmed to his sagacious friend while he admired his skill.

Hopalong waded the stream and looked carefully around on both sides of the tracks where they left the water. Motioning Tex to come ahead, he grinned as the other obeyed. "Didn't want to splash no fresh water around here till I saw if th' water Dave splashed was all soaked up. It is, but th' spots is moist. An' another thing: see th' prints o' that hoof where he takes up an' sets down, where is he lame?"

"Shoulder," replied Tex with instant decision.

"Shore is. An' he's been a-gettin' lamer every step. Bet he ain't an hour ahead, Tex."

"An' he'll be above us all th' way till we cross th' top of th' range, so we better keep under cover as much as we can," Tex replied. "We've trailed worse men than Dave, a whole lot worse an' far better shots, but he ain't really due to miss twice in two days. Th' Pass

ain't so far ahead now. There it is, with th' blasted pine stickin' up like a flagpole. Half an hour more an' we'll be in it."

Ahead of them, toiling up the Pass on a tired and limping horse, rode Dave. The night ride over strange country had been hard and his rage at the shabby trick played upon him by the horse dealer had not helped him any. To win up to the point where success was almost his, and then to have a half-breed horse coper — one who had absolutely no connection with the game—threaten to defeat him! To fool all the players, to gain, as he thought, a big handicap and then to be delayed by a man who sought only to gain a little money and be well rid of a poor horse!

Dave's temper was like that of a rattler hedged in by thorns and the rougher part of the mountain trail had been saturated with profanity. There was not much chance of meeting any one on that trail, and by the time he reached a place where he could get another horse the need for one would have gone.

Let him see a horseman and he knew who would ride the horse. He struck the limping gray savagely as it flinched over a particularly rough part of the trail, and he was growling and swearing as he rounded a turn in the Pass and came to a place where, by climbing a boulder just above him, he could get a good view of the way he had come. Dismounting, he made the climb and looked back over the trail.

Miles of country were below him, the trail winding across it, hidden at times and then running on in plain view until some hill concealed it again. The sun was half down in the western sky and he swore again as he realized how much farther he should have been, how near the end of his ride.

"A hundred an' forty miles in ten hours!" he snarled, squirming back to descend to his horse. "No wonder Bad Hawkins got caught! Served th' fool right, an' it'd serve me right for being such a —" The words ceased and the speaker flattened himself to the rock as he peered intently at a hill far down the trail, waiting to be sure his eyes had not deceived him. "Hell!" he muttered, for far below him something moved out into the trail where it emerged from behind the hill, and two mounted men came into sight, riding rapidly to take advantage of the short run of level country.

DAVE could not make them out. They were only two men at that distance, but he wasted no time nor gave heed to any optimism. He wriggled backwards, dropped to the trail and looked around for a place to hide his horse. Not seeing one at hand, he mounted again and forced the limping animal forward until he saw a narrow ravine cut into the mountainside by the freshets of countless years.

Leading the gray into this and around a turn in the wall, he picketed the animal and then hastened back, scurrying to and fro in search of a hiding place that would give him a view of the trail for the greatest distance. His mind worked as rapidly as his feet. The coming horsemen might be innocent of all knowledge of him or of his need. If so, he preferred to ride behind them.

If they were in pursuit—and he could not believe it to be a mere coincidence that any but an enemy would be following him so close through Lone Tree Pass — they had not started from the town he had just quitted, unless they had traced him by telegraph!

Dave cursed softly and settled himself a little more at ease in his ambush.

Hopalong and Tex, enjoying that friendship that sets no embarrassment on silence, rode forward side by side when the trail permitted it, grim, relentless, dogged. The trail narrowed again and Tex took the lead.

"Closer now," he remarked, more to himself than to his companion, whose reply was an affirmative grunt.

When they entered the Pass itself it was Hopalong who led, and to see him as he sat slouching in his saddle, apparently half asleep, one would have wondered that a man whose wariness was the basis of so many famed exploits could ride thus carelessly, allowing his horse to pick the way.

But in the shadow of his straight-brimmed hat two hard, keen eyes squinted through the narrow lids,

among the wrinkles, and missed nothing that could be seen. Under the faded red shirt sleeve was an arm ready for the lightning draw that had never yet been beaten, and the hand-worn butt of the heavy Colt rubbed softly against the belt-strap of its holster.

Hopalong rolled a cigarette and took advantage of the movement to speak: "Goin' back to Texas, Tex?"

"Why," replied Tex, pausing to reflect, "why, I said as how I would to all yore boys, but I reckon mebby Buck needs me worse'n you do. What think?"

"Stay up here an' run for sheriff," was the crisp reply. "This country's sick with crooks."

"Reckon so."

"Good place for undertakers, while th' b o o m is on," continued Hopalong, smiling grimly at the truth in his jest. He knew Tex Ewalt.

"Th' boom'll be busted flat afore you go home," Tex responded. "It's fallin' now. Dave was its highwater mark."

They were riding side by side now, and Hopalong growled a suggestion; "Go slow, Tex. Mebby he's holin' up on us, like he did on Buck. He ain't more'n a million miles ahead of us now."

"Uh-huh, an' if he is he ought to get us easy in this place. Got to take a chance, anyhow. Gimme a match — *Look out!*"

As he spoke he hurled his horse against Hopalong's, and his left arm dropped to his s i d e with a bullet through it, while his right hand flashed to his hip, where a pungent cloud of smoke burst out to envelop his horse's head.

Off his balance from the unexpected shock, Hopalong's shot went wide, but the next five, directed at Dave's headlong rush as he came crashing down through the underbrush, gave promise of better aim.

"I owed him that, anyhow," muttered Tex, his ears ringing from the fusillade. "An' I owed you th' play, Hoppy, ever since that day in th' brush—"

"You don't owe me nothin' now, Tex. That's as close as any in ten years," returned Hopalong. "Well, he showed hisself an' ambushin' snake just as we thought he would. He could a' got us both if his nerves hadn't got th' chills an' fever. We was some careless!"

"We was a pair of blasted kids," Tex remarked. "Now what'll we do with him? We can't take him back, an' buryin' in solid rock ain't been in my schoolin'."

"We can cover him with rocks, I reckon, but we ain't got time. Besides, how'd he leave Buck?" demanded Hopalong sharply. "Why, he got you, Tex! Here, lemme fix that hole!"

TEX stood quietly thoughtful until Hopalong had finished his task. "We'll just chuck him off th' trail, Hoppy. Then we won't have to answer no question or shoot sense into no thick skulls. How 'bout it?"

"Uh-huh, go ahead," grunted Hopalong and the two w a l k e d over, picked up the unresisting bulk and placed it in a fissure in the rock wall.

"By th' Lord!" swore Tex: "Five shots out of five when you got yore balance! *That's* shootin'! *You* better run for sheriff!"

"I hadn't ought to 'a' done it when I knowed th' second got him, but he kept a-comin' an' I was a-thinkin' of Buck. Come on, let's get goin'." He mounted and waited impatiently for Tex, who was still standing beside his horse as if unwilling to leave the scene. "His pot-shootin' is over, so let's start back."

"Uh-huh," muttered Tex, still lost in thought. Hopalong waited. "Hoppy, why did Dave ambush Buck an' have to run, just when he was goin' to skin Schatz for a pot of money?"

"Give it up," answered Hopalong.

"Well, why didn't Schatz turn up when everything was set for the play?"

"Got to pass again, Tex," was Hopalong's indulgent reply.

"Dave had plenty of chances to kill Buck — better chances than that one — an' no need to run, if he was careful. Th' Twin River trail is traveled some — it was shore risky. No time to waste in Wayback waitin' for Schatz after that, huh?"

"Mebby th' kid didn't get it right," suggested Hopalong.

Tex nodded his head convincingly. "Yes, he did. Told a straight story. Hoppy, D a v e knew Schatz wasn't comin'. Schatz is dead and Dave killed

him! Hoppy, I got a feelin' — Hoppy, what'll you bet Dave ain't got th' money right now?"

Hopalong stared at his friend, his mind racing along the scent like a hound to the kill. He dropped from the saddle and became hidden in the crevice.

"No money, Tex. Only a few —"

"Where's his horse?" demanded Tex.

"*Yo're* goin' to run for sheriff," came the retort, and Hopalong followed the track of Dave's horse and turned into the ravine, out of sight of Tex, who waited impatiently.

Tex was surprised at the result of the quest when a crazy man came buck-jumping into sight, yelling like an Indian and frantically waving a tightly grasped saddle-pad of sacking. He would have come out with more dignity if the money had been his, but belonging as it did to his old foreman, the big-hearted man who had been for so long a time on the verge of despair and defeat, allowed himself the luxury of free expression to the bubbling joy within him.

FRENCH ROSE faced her father, Jean, and did battle for love and happiness, though she knew it not.

The easy-going Jean had known nothing of the manner in which their guest was wounded, nor by whom, and Rose had not thought it wise to tell him, even if it occurred to her in the stress of that first day. But Jean had heard many rumors in Twin River. He demanded an explanation.

"Is Dave here yesterday?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Rose. "For why you go so fast to Twin?"

"No one is here but me. Fritz, he go to the Two Y's ranch."

"You tell him?"

"No. He hear Dave talk an' go to tell M'sieu Peters Dave have stole all his money."

"*Diable!* Steal?"

"Yes."

Jean knitted his brows. "For why you go to Twin?" he repeated.

"I go for men to catch Dave when he steal the money." This, while not strictly true, was the nearest to truth that Jean could understand.

"Dave — he know?" Jean asked.

"Yes," was the brief answer.

"*Mon Dieu!*" exclaimed Jean. "For why," he asked, "for why you do this?"

"For why?" repeated Rose. "Figure to yourself. That devil he come here and he sneer at you, and he insult me— yes. Many times he insult me that I have to hold myself, so that I do not kill him. I endure. He send me—*Dieu!* that I should say it — he make dirt of me to walk on, to arrive at a man who is high, good. Ah, a man, *mon pere,* a man like you, one time when you have no fear! He send me. I say nothing. Many times he try, like a dog, to spring at his throat, but always, it is nothing but snap at his heels. Like a dog which he is.

"Then he come to me and say he is triumph. He get much money. And he tell me go with him. Me! Me he command like he is master and me slave! He steal money from M'sieu Peters and him and me, we go away together, like that, like man and his squaw. And I say nothing. Ah, *mon père,* it is too much, too much! If it be some other man — not M'sieu Peters — then I go. I save you, *mon père,* though it kill me. But, it is too much."

Jean stared at her, motionless, then his dumb amazement slowly lifted. He came to her and rested his hand lightly on her bowed head. "*Ma Rose, ma belle Rose,* when you have for a good man so big love as that, I would die, with gladness, to know so big happiness is come to you." And he went from the cabin.

At the closing of the door, she sprang to it. A voice behind her called weakly:

"Rose!"

She went back and stood beside the bunk. Buck's hand closed over hers.

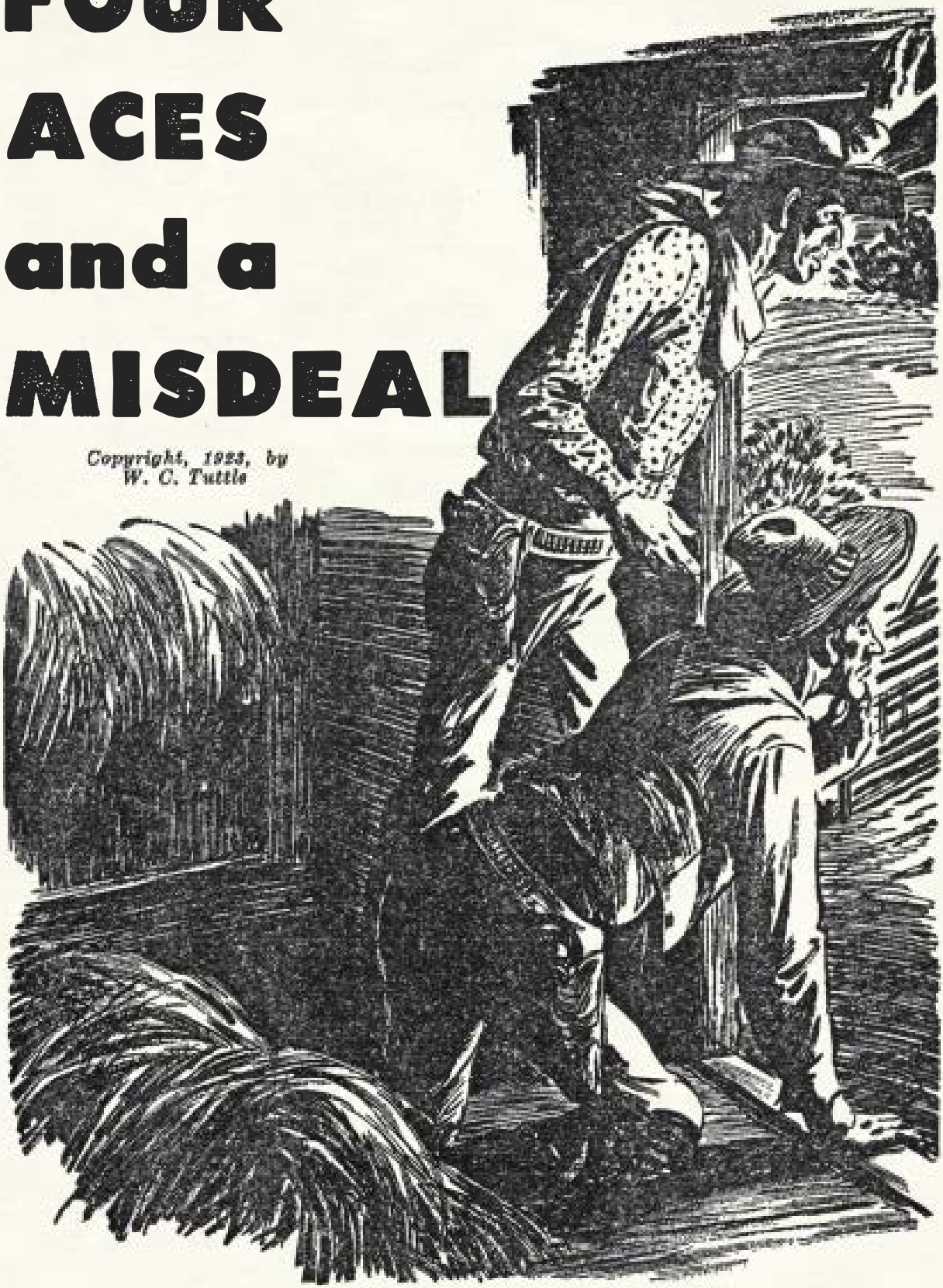
"Rose," he whispered, "I heard."

She slipped to her knees, hiding her face in the pillow. "Oh, I am ashamed," she said brokenly, "I am ashamed."

"Ashamed! And I —" He stopped, drawing in a deep breath. Then raising himself on bent arm, he laid his cheek against her hair. "I'm th' one as ought to be ashamed, Rose. A man o' my age an' feelin' th' way I do, an' you a girl. But I've got to have you, Rose. I just got to have you! An' if you don't say 'yes', I swear to God I'll give up an' pull out o' this country! I don't want to stop another day if you say 'no'!"

FOUR ACES and a MISDEAL

A COW COUNTRY NOVEL



BY **W. C. TUTTLE**

Amid the din of six-gun blasts, Leather Kleig decides that when cattle rustlers turn philanthropists, it's time for him to quit!

I

TELL you he did make out a will! You're danged right he did! That day he had lawyer Williams from Broken Butte he made out that will. Aw-w-w, you make me tired!"

"Wheezer" Bell spat angrily and hammered his bootheel against the wall of the NR bunkhouse. Wheezer was half-inclined to be mad at "Leather" Kleig, who was humped up in the shade, his thin, impassive face hidden under the brim of his wide sombrero.

"Chet" Wells, a broken-nosed, scar-faced cowboy, was stretched out, half in shade, half in sun, chewing a big portion of tobacco; while just beyond him sat "Wooden-shoe" Van Dorn—fat, stolid-faced and pig-eyed.

"You engineered this deal, Leather —" Wheezer stopped hammering the bunkhouse wall and glared down at the top of Leather's hat—"and you sure raised hell and put a block under it, if anybody rises from the dead to inquire."

Leather did not look up, but said slowly, "Wheezer, you're talkin' too much!"

The Death of Rancher Ralls Sets Off a Chain

"Well, there ain't no use of talkin' too much," observed Wooden-shoe slowly, "and we don't want to make trouble among us, do we, Wheezer?"

"Aw, I ain't huntin' trouble," Wheezer assured him, "but we ain't got a thing to show that the NR owes us a plugged nickel."

"True as gospel preachin'," agreed Chet warmly. "If Leather'd only said like this to the old man. You write—"

"Now, you're gettin' the tongue-trouble, too, eh?" interrupted Leather ominously, but did not look up.

Wheezer shoved away from the wall and stepped around in front of Leather Kleig, his thumbs hooked over the top of his cartridge-belt.

"Kleig, if you think for a minute that you can stop me from talkin'—cut your wolf loose." Wheezer's voice was pitched low, but was full of meaning. "You've bossed this outfit too much; sabe? We've been gypped out of everythin'. Now, put up or shut up."

Kleig did not move, but his eyes flashed to Wheezer for a second.

"Like I said before," stated Wooden-shoe impassively, "we shouldn't quarrel among us. Watcha say, Wheezer? Let's all be good little friends together."

"Thassall right," nodded Leather. "I ain't sayin' that I didn't make a mistake, but you gotta agree that I lose as much as you fellers do."

"Sure, sure," agreed Chet indifferently. "I heard the old man tell you that he was goin' to sell the NR and split the pot. You can't blame Leather 'cause the old man decides to die off, can you, Wheezer?"

"'S far as that's concerned, no," admitted Wheezer. "But it sure leaves us high and dry, Chet."

Wooden-shoe suddenly burst into a dry chuckle. "Now, what are you laughin' at?" demanded Chet.

"Just laughin'," replied Wooden-shoe. "Here we've been stealin' stock for over a year for old Nick Ralls, and ain't got nothin' for ourselves."

"Except experience," said Wheezer gloomily.

All of which was both sad and true. Many years previous to this time, Nick Ralls, an old gunman of the Southwest, had migrated to the Broken Butte ranges and taken up the NR ranch. He was a bitter old codger, quick of temper, and very flexible of conscience.

He did not prosper, but made a living. There were few NR cows on the Broken Buttes when Leather Kleig, Wheezer Bell, Wooden-shoe Van Dorn and Chet Wells rode into the yard of the tumble-down ranchhouse and informed old Nick that they were both hungry and tired.

The sheriff of the adjoining county lost them in the brakes and went home disgusted; but they did not know this. They needed sanctuary, and old Nick Ralls gave it to them, because he recognized them as kindred spirits.

OLD NICK was growing old — raspingly old. The Broken Butte range was a fertile field for those who carried a running-iron and little regard for the law. And when the adjoining county had practically forgotten the four men who attempted to rob the bank at Dry Wells, the four men made an oral contract with old Nick Ralls.

Leather Kleig was a brand counterfeiter. His skill with a running-iron or razor was uncanny. Combination brands were an open book to him. Every animal that fell within their loop or corral was quickly made over into an NR that would pass muster even on close examination. Old Nick Ralls chuckled evilly, while his herd grew until the hills of Broken Butte range were dotted with his possessions.

Then, as Wheezer described it, "He ups and dies. And the or'nary old son-of-a-sea-cook knowed he was goin' to die, didn't he? Then why does he send for a lawyer to make out his will?"

All of which was not at all cheerful to the four men in the shade of the NR bunkhouse.

"Yeah, it leaves us high and dry," admitted Chet. "We ain't got nothin' to show for all our hard work. If you asks my opinion, I'd suggest that we

all line up, give the word and all start shootin'. If there's any survivor, he can take what money the other fellers has got and pull out."

"Good idea!" exploded Wooden-shoe. "I'd like—"

"You would!" interrupted Wheezer sarcastically. "You ain't got a danged cent to lose. Leather must have about six-bits, which is four-bits more than I've got. I dunno about Chet, but I reckon two-bits would about tap him."

"Then that idea ain't so good," said Chet mournfully. "What'll we do? Brand the NR cows all over and sell them to the sheriff?"

"Aw, hang the sheriff!" grunted Leather.

"One thing's a cinch," observed Chet thoughtfully. "If them misbranded critters are ever discovered, they can't hang the deadwood on us. We don't own 'em. And no sensible man ever steals cows as a pastime."

"I'm through stealin' cows," declared Wooden-shoe, emphatically. "I tell you, I'm through."

"Reformin', eh?" sneered Leather.

"Yeah, I'm goin' to rob banks or trains—and I'm goin' to steal for me; sabe?"

"We're a fine bunch of outlaws," declared Wheezer. "Bad men from Bitter Crick. If we don't look out some old lady is goin' to hoodle us off this range with a parasol."

"For his heart was hard and so was his hide,
And the rattlesnake crawled away and died,
The da-a-a-y he bit Bill Jo-o-o-nes."

Chet's voice quavered lovingly on the last line, and his broken nose twitched feelingly.

"You can do a lot of things better than you can sing," observed Wooden-shoe sadly. "You ought to twist your ears a little, Chet. You sound like a couple of your strings was loose."

"Bein' funny ain't gittin' us no place —" Wheezer dug his heel into the hard dirt. "What are we goin' to do? That's the question. If old Ralls didn't leave no will, I s'pose the whole works will be sold by the sheriff."

"I'd love to set on a fence and see that sheriff sell my cows!" exploded Leather.

"What 'd you do?" asked Wheezer. "Would you tell him how it comes that you feel bad about it, Leather?"

"Talkin' makes me hungry," stated Wooden-shoe. "Let's go and see what Ma Coogan's got for supper."

"And that's another thing," said Wheezer. "What is goin' to become of Ma Coogan?"

"Yessir, that's another thing," agreed Wooden-shoe.

MA COOGAN was the cook and housekeeper of the NR, and was as much a part of the ranch as the old ranchhouse. She was about sixty years of age; thirty of which had been spent in the range country.

Ten years before, Jim Coogan and his wife had been nesters in the Broken Butte range. Nesters were not wanted, and old Jim had absorbed a bullet; which left Ma Coogan destitute.

Nick Ralls, whose heart was bitter against everything, and nesters in particular, had installed the old widow as cook and housekeeper on the NR. He swore at the time that he did not do it to be kind, but to prove that he could be contrary to his own nature.

Ma Coogan was a little woman, with a typically Irish face, a heart of gold, but with a tongue that had proved to Nick Ralls the advisability of running his end of the ranch and not interfering with the household.

It was five days since the burial of Nick Ralls, and Ma Coogan was beginning to get back to normal. She had never considered what Ralls' death might mean to her. She was sitting on the porch fanning herself with a magazine as the four men came up to the ranchhouse.

"Ye're all hungry, I suppose," she remarked. "And what have ye done to make ye hungry, I'd ask? Are ye goin' to sit in the shade all the rest of your life?"

"Looks kinda like it, Ma," said Wheezer. "But what's the use of workin'? There's nobody to pay us."

"Nobody?" Ma Coogan stopped fanning herself. "Nobody to pay — well, bless me soul!"

She stared at them and her eyes shifted to the hazy hills, as a sudden realization of things came to her.

"I never thought of that," she said softly. "Nobody to pay salaries, nobody to run the ranch. Now, what's to become of everybody, I'd like to know?"

Wheezer shook his head. "I dunno, Ma. Do you remember that lawyer comin' up here a couple of days before Nick Ralls died?"

"That fat, fish-eyed feller from Broken Butte? Aye, he was with Nick Ralls for a long time."

"He's a lawyer, Ma. We was wonderin' if Nick made out a will. He knowed he was goin' to die, I reckon."

"He did that," declared Ma. "Belike he heard the banshee wailin'; I dunno."

"What's a banshee, Ma?" asked Wooden-shoe.

"Sure, it's an Irish ghost. When ye hear one wailin', ye'r goin' to die, Wooden-shoe. There's a lot of thim that has heard the banshee."

Leather Kleig laughed sarcastically. "Ghosts! No ghost would wail over Nick Ralls. What I'd like to know is did Nick Ralls make out a will?"

"There was such a thing mentioned," said Ma slowly. "I heard thim speak of a will, and there was a paper that I had to sign me name to, but I did not read it.

"This fish-eyed feller he puts his finger on one spot, and he says for me to write me name there. Ould Nick says that I'm a witness. I dunno what it was all about, but it looked like some sort of a cer-ti-fic-it."

"That was a will," declared Wheezer. "Did he ever tell you about any of his relatives, Ma?"

"He did not, Wheezer. I misdoubt if he had any. But Nick Ralls was no man to blather about any one. Hated the world, so he did. He even swore at the lawyer. Well, the poor soul has gone to glory, and if I don't go in and finish gittin' supper, the rest of ye will be failin' for want of food."

"If Nick Ralls has gone to glory, I hope I don't," declared Leather Kleig. "He wasn't entitled to it."

"Aw, sure, now—" Ma Coogan turned at the doorway and looked down at Leather, "ye mustn't wish ill of a dead man. He wasn't all bad, Leather. I tell ye, I think that Nick Ralls went to glory."

"All right, Ma," said Leather gloomily. "I hope, if he has, that he can look down and see what a fool he was to leave the NR in this kinda shape."

"Amen," said Ma Coogan piously.

It was three days later that Eph Williams, the lawyer from Broken Butte, came again to the NR; and with him came Ben Murtch, the sheriff, and a lady.

The four cowboys looked with great

disfavor upon Ben Murtch and Eph Williams, because they had little use for the law in any of its forms. But there was a certain amount of speculation regarding the lady.

Murtch was a bandy-legged person, broad-shouldered, and with a massive head. His features were of the type commonly known as bulldog, and he was reputed fast with a gun. On account of their wild doings in Broken Butte, Murtch had no use for the boys of the NR—and did not conceal his feelings.

II

WILLIAMS, Murtch and the lady came out to the ranch in a top-buggy, and went straight to the ranchhouse. The four cowboys sat at the bunkhouse and speculated as to who the lady might be, until Murtch left the house and came down to see them.

"Howdy, boys," he greeted them pleasantly, but they were not receptive to his greeting. He stopped near them and hitched up his belt. "Thought you might like to know who the lady is," he remarked.

"Yeah?" Wheezer squinted sideways at him. "You thought so, did you?"

"Yeah, I thought you would."

"Reckon we ought to take a vote on it?" questioned Chet.

"That," said Murtch, not a bit perturbed over their indifference, "that is Miss Jane Cleveland, who owns this ranch, lock, stock and barrel."

"Oh, yeah!" Wheezer nodded quickly. "That's who she is, eh?"

"Yeah, that's her."

"Who's she?" Wooden-shoe hugged his knees and grinned at Murtch.

"That's a hell of a question," declared Murtch.

"It's a good question, and there ought to be an answer layin' around somewhere."

Eph Williams was coming down from the house, and Murtch decided to wait and let him explain things.

"Fish-eye," chuckled Wheezer. "Shore fits him."

The rest of the cowboys grinned, and Eph looked uncomfortable, even if he did not know what had been said.

"Did you tell 'em, Murtch?" asked Williams. His voice was rather husky, as if suffering from a heavy cold.

"I left the job to you," said Murtch. "You sabe it better than I do."

"I sure hope he does," growled Leather.

"Well, it is simple," smiled Williams. "Miss Cleveland just arrived from Helena to take charge of this ranch. Just before Nick Ralls passed on he had me make out his will. Miss Cleveland is the daughter of his only sister, and the only living relative of Nick Ralls. He had kept track of her all these years, and when he felt that his days were numbered, he sent for me, made out his will, and—" Williams spread his hands —"that is all there is to it."

"Well, now, that's quite a lot," admitted Leather, and the other three cowboys knew what he meant.

"Miss Cleveland knows nothing about cattle," stated Williams, "but she was more than willing to take charge. I do not know whether she will retain any or all of you boys. I have made no suggestions. As far as I can see there is no use of having four cowboys to handle the cattle, but I am leaving it to her to do things to suit herself."

"That's kind of you, I'm sure," applauded Chet. "What did you say your business was?"

"I am an attorney-at-law," said Williams stiffly.

"Oh, yeah—a lawyer?"

"Don't waste words on 'em, Eph," advised Murtch. "They're tryin' to get under your hide."

"Wouldn't be under it for the world," denied Chet. "I'd smother to death in a minute."

WILLIAMS whirled on his heel and went back toward the horse and buggy, walking stiff-legged, like an angry bear. Murtch looked after him and turned to the grinning cowboys.

"You fellers likely don't know that Williams will have quite a lot to say about this place, do you? He's goin' to advise Miss Cleveland on business matters."

"Lord help her," said Wheezer sadly.

Murtch scowled and turned away, starting back to where Williams was

getting into the buggy.

"You didn't tell us what your business is," reminded Wooden-shoe.

Murtch grunted something unintelligible, but did not turn his head.

They drove down past the bunkhouse, on their way out of the ranch, but neither of them looked at the four grinning cowboys on the steps.

"A heiress," said Wheezer dolefully. "A blasted heiress to our cows!"

"And a fish-eyed lawyer advisin' her what to do with them," added Chet. "If somebody'd stick a fork into us they'd find us well done."

Chet got to his feet and executed a double-shuffle on the steps, while he sang sadly:

"Oh, Williams, you're a louse
Oh, Williams, you're a bum;
There's nothin' good about you,
And your breath sure smells of rum.
You're killin' us by inches,
I know I am your slave
But when you die, you son-of-a-gun,
I'll dance upon your grave."

"That record sounds scratched," observed Wheezer dryly. "Sounds like an Injun with hay-fever, tryin' to give an imitation of Caruso singin' soprano."

"Aw, hell!" Leather Kleig snorted his disgust and got to his feet. "Let's go and meet the new boss."

"Maybe she'll appreciate my voice," said Chet hopefully. "I'll take a chance."

"I'll shoot you, if you try singin' to her," threatened Wheezer, as they trooped to the ranchhouse.

"Aw, he won't make no never mind," assured Wooden-shoe. "I hope he yodels and busts his windpipe."

"What's a yodel?" asked Wheezer.

Wooden-shoe stopped, pointed his nose toward the sky and began:

"*Hi-i-i lee-e-e-e o la lay-ee-e-e*—Leggo! Ouch!"

Wheezer and Chet had moved in swiftly beside him, each grabbing him by collar and boot and dumped him unceremoniously on top of his head. Then they let go at the same time and his heels hit the ground with a thud.

For a moment, Wooden-shoe's breath was jarred from his body, and he lay there goggling at the sky.

"I hope he isn't injured."

The cowboys turned and stared at Jane Cleveland, who was standing on the porch, staring at Wooden-shoe, who sat up and puffed the atmosphere back into his lungs. He saw her and tried to laugh.

"No, ma'am," said Wheezer foolishly. "You can't hurt him."

Wheezer had removed his hat, and now he stepped over, lifted Wooden-shoe's hat off his head and placed it in his lap.

Jane Cleveland was a brunette, well-dressed, possibly twenty-five years of age. There was no question of her beauty, but it was marred a trifle by the superiority of her manner. She might well have been a queen, looking down upon them; making them feel rather out of place before her. Her lips lifted slightly in a semblance of a smile at Wheezer's rough wit.

"You are the cowboys, I suppose?"

"Yes'm, I s'pose we are," nodded Chet. He looked at the other three and back at the girl. "Yes'm, I'm sure of it now. Get up, Wooden-shoe. My gosh, you ain't got no manners a-tall."

"You're Miss Cleveland, I s'pose," observed Leather.

It was a perfect imitation of her question, and her eyes hardened slightly.

"Yes, I am Miss Cleveland, the owner of this farm."

"My gosh!" breathed Chet. "Farm!"

Ma Coogan had come out of the door, and Miss Cleveland turned.

"Was there something you wanted?"

"Nothin', me dear," said Ma Coogan.

"Then I think your place is in the kitchen—not on the veranda."

Ma Coogan looked wonderingly at Miss Cleveland. "Would ye mind sayin' that again?"

"Are you not the cook?" Miss Cleveland's voice was icy.

"Yes, I'm the cook."

"There is nothing to cook out here."

"Well—" Ma Coogan swallowed painfully and looked appealingly at the four cowboys—"well, I s'pose that's right. I never thought of that—in ten years."

SHE turned and went back into the house. Leather Kleig cleared his throat, and his eyes narrowed dangerously, but Wheezer trod heavily on the

Wheezer and Chat grabbed Wooden-shoe by collar and boot and dumped him unceremoniously on his head (CHAP. II)

side of his ankle and saved Leather from saying the wrong thing.

"I have not made up my mind what I am going to do with this place." Miss Cleveland was talking, but the four boys were still staring at the doorway where Ma Coogan had disappeared and paid no attention to her.

"I would like to know just what I inherited from my uncle. Can you give me an estimate of how many cows, horses, and so forth, are included in this ranch?"

"Well—" Wheezer scratched his head thoughtfully — "that's k i n d a hard, ma'am. There won't be no roundup for a month, and till we kinda bunches them cows there ain't no way of tellin'."

"Didja know your uncle very well?" asked Wooden-shoe.

"No, I never have seen him."

"He didn't have much sense, ma'am."

"Is that so?" Miss Cleveland seemed indifferent to that statement.

"You goin' to run the ranch yourself, ma'am?" asked Leather.

"I suppose I will. Mr. Williams, the lawyer, will advise me in some of the details, and Mr. Murtch has offered his services at any time. Is there any reason why I cannot handle it?"

"Not with all that help." Leather shook his head. "Of course you've got to hire some cowboys."

"Naturally. Mr. Williams said that I could probably get along with less hired help than my uncle did. In fact, they informed me that every one wondered how uncle managed to make the ranch pay, with four cowboys in his employ."

"Yeah, it is a wonder," agreed Leather softly. "You see, he hired us by the year and died two days before payday. This ranch owes us each four hundred and eighty dollars apiece."

"Four hundred and eighty dollars apiece?"

"Yes'm," said Wheezer grinning widely and making some rapid calculations. "The old NR owes us four punchers the grand total of nineteen hundred and twenty dollars."

Wooden-shoe blinked and wet his lips with his tongue. He was a willing but slow liar, and he marveled at Leather telling a thing like that.

"And we sure worked faithful-like," added Chet sadly. "A year's a long time to go without a payday. 'Course the ranch is good for it, ma'am; so we ain't worryin'."

"Well," said Miss Cleveland dubiously, "I know nothing about such things, but I shall take it up with Mr. Williams."

"And Ma Coogan kinda got the worst of it," said Wheezer mournfully. "You see, when she goes to work for your uncle, he says to her, 'If you work for me for ten years without pay, I'll give you enough to keep you for the rest of your life.'

"Well, she's sure worked faithfully, y'betcha. It ain't no cinch runnin' her end of the job. Now, she's old and can't land no other job, but I reckon you'll see that she gets what old Nick Ralls promised her."

"But I know nothing about these things," protested Miss Cleveland. "Is there any agreement—a written agreement, I mean?"

"Shucks, folks use their word instead of ink out here," said Leather. "We've all heard Nick tell what he was goin' to do for Ma Coogan. Why, jist the other day he says to me, like this, 'Leather, if anythin' happens to me, will you see that Ma Coogan gits what's comin' to her?'

"I told him that I sure would, ma'am."

"Why wasn't she mentioned in the will?"

"I'll tell yuh why, ma'am." Chet moved in closer and lowered his voice. "Old Nick Ralls wasn't in his right mind. He heard the banshee wailin'."

"The—what do you mean?" Miss Cleveland frowned slightly. "What did he hear?"

"A banshee wailin'. There's lots of 'em, ma'am. When you hear one, you might as well practise up on some kind of a harp, 'cause you ain't got no chance left."

"I do not think I understand—nor care. By the way, I do not know your names."

"I'm Wheezer Bell," Wheezer indicated himself. "That's Leather Kleig. Got his front name from reachin' for a saddlehorn so often. This'n," pointing at Chet, "this'n is Chet Wells. He's old man Wells' son. That other one is Wooden-shoe Van Dorn, the only Dutch cowpuncher in captivity. He can squeak like a windmill, and he wakes up yelling at night, thinkin' that the dykes have busted."

"Thank you very much."

She turned and went into the house.

THE four bowboys looked at each other and went back to the bunkhouse, where they draped themselves in the shade and stared at each other.

"Leather," said Wheezer softly, "you're the first liar I ever loved. But can we work that idea."

"Who can say that we lied?" queried Chet. "Nick Ralls never kept no books."

"I dunno—" Leather shook his head sadly—"I'm a son-of-a-gun if I ever seen a look on anybody's face like there was on Ma's, when Miss Cleveland ordered her back to the kitchen."

"Aw, that was too bad," nodded Wheezer. "And Ma took it, too."

"Yeah, and we better kinda look a little out," said Wooden-shoe. "She'd fire the whole bunch of us. There wasn't no use lyin' about Ma Coogan. Us liars can stick together, but Ma wouldn't back us up."

"She's goin' to be advised by Williams and helped by Murtch," mused Leather aloud. "I dunno—"

He shook his head sadly and began manufacturing a cigaret.

"Old Nick Ralls!" exploded Chet.

"He sure had a cause to keep away from his relation," said Wheezer. "That woman ain't got no heart, don'tcha know it?"

"Pretty ones hardly ever do have," said Leather.

"You've knowed so many of them," grinned Chet.

"I betcha she won't eat at the table with us," offered Wooden-shoe. "I betcha she makes Ma set a table in the front room for her."

"I sure hope she does," declared Chet. "If she don't—we will. By golly, she's pretty, though."

"Your rope's draggin'," cautioned Wheezer.

"Well, suppose it is, I didn't say I was stuck on her, did I?"

"I suppose Wooden-shoe will be makin' love to her pretty quick," said Leather.

"No, sir," Wooden-shoe shook his head vehemently and his face flushed hotly. "I stole cows for a year for her, and that's enough. She can't expect too much."

Ma Coogan's hammering of the steel triangle, which hung at the kitchen-door, broke up the meeting, and the four cowboys trooped to the rear of the kitchen to wash up for supper.

There was no sign of the new owner, and Ma Coogan was strangely silent. Even the cowboys ate silently, which was unusual.

"My gosh!" grunted Wheezer. "You'd think somebody done died around here."

"Somethin' has, I reckon," whispered Chet seriously, and Ma Coogan shook her head warningly at him.

At the conclusion of the meal, which none of them enjoyed, Leather Kleig drew Ma Coogan out of the back door, while the others grouped close around them.

"Ma," said Leather, "did you know that Nick Ralls told you that, if you stayed here ten years, he'd fix you up so you wouldn't have to work no more?"

She squinted at Leather and around at the other cowboys wonderingly.

"You know he said that, don'tcha, Ma?" asked Chet.

"Well, bless my soul! Where did ye ever get that strange idea?"

"That's what he told me."

Leather Kleig was serious enough to have been telling the truth.

"Nick Ralls told ye that, Leather?"

"Honest Injun, Ma."

"Well, I dunno—" Ma looked vacantly around. "That's news, so it is. I've niver heard—sure, you're jokin', now."

WHEEZER put his hand on her shoulder. "Ma, look here," he said, "you've been here ten years, workin' hard. Did you ever think what Nick Ralls' death would mean to you? This here lady boss ain't noways human. She'd fire her own father. If she lets you out—what'll become of you, Ma?"

Ma Coogan gasped slightly and shook her head.

"Sure, I—I dunno, boys. Why, the old ranch has been a home and I niver thought of bein' fired. I—I'd hate to leave—here. But," she lifted her head and smiled around at them, "sure, there's no use of borryin' a lot of trouble. The things ye worry the most about never happen."

"Jist the same it's wise to have your gun loaded," observed Wheezer. "We was jist wonderin' if you knowed what Nick Ralls intended to give you. We supposed that you knowed all about it, 'cause he told us."

Ma Coogan looked straight into Wheezer's eyes, and he turned away under her steady gaze.

"Ye're a lovable liar, Wheezer," she said softly, "but ye can't fool old Ma Coogan. Sure, it's nice of ye, but ye know well that Nick Ralls niver had any such foolish ideas."

Wheezer shuffled his feet nervously and shoved his hands deep into his pockets.

"Ma, we're tryin' to get a square-deal, thassall. If that fish-eyed lawyer asks you about it, would you mind askin' him if it ain't in the will?"

"In the will?"

"Yeah. You don't have to tell no lie, Ma. If he starts jawing around, which he will, just ask him that, will you?"

"Sure, I dunno what good it'll do, but I'll ask him."

"Where's the beautiful princess?" asked Wooden-shoe.

"Eatin' in her own room. She'll have her breakfast in bed, so she says—at tin o'clock. She asked me if you boys were fair samples of cowboys, and I told her that the NR niver hired samples.

"Thin," Ma Coogan lowered her voice,

"she asked me what a cattle rustler was, and I told her it was a cowpuncher out of work. She said she'd have more respect, or there'd be four cattle rustlers lookin' for new positions. Sure, that's what she said—'positions'."

Leather grinned and shook his head. "She's goin' to be advised by the fish-eyed lawyer, Ma."

"Thin, may God help the old ranch!" Ma exclaimed piously.

"It'll sure need somethin' from the outside," said Wheezer sadly. "Don't forget what you've got to say to him, Ma. It won't be lyin'."

Ma nodded and went back into the kitchen, while the four cowboys went back to the bunkhouse.

"Suppose we can't make that stick with the lawyer; what'll we do?" asked Wooden-shoe.

"Do?" Leather Kleig flung one of his boots across the rough floor and wiggled his toes through a hole in his sock. "What'll we do? We stole most of them NR cows for Nick Ralls, didn't we? Then what's goin' to stop us from stealin' 'em from the NR?"

"Not me," Wooden-shoe shook his head quickly. "I'm a re-formed cattle rustler, by gosh! From now on, I don't rob nothin' but stages and banks."

"You goin' to Broken Butte tomorrow, Leather?" asked Wheezer.

"What for? We ain't even got enough money to play a game of seven-up."

"Mebbyso we will have. Clay Hardy offered me fifty for that glass-eyed sorrel a week ago, but I wanted a hundred. Maybe he'll be wantin' sixty dollars worth tomorrow, and if he does—that's fifteen apiece."

"I sabe a roulette system," declared Wooden-shoe. "It's a cinch. All you do is—"

"Make it twenty apiece for three of us," interrupted Leather. "That's a better system than Wooden-shoe's."

III

THE town of Broken Butte was a county seat, but outside of that fact it had little to boast about. Perhaps there were a few more false-fronted buildings than in the average Western cowtown; perhaps it was a little hotter in summer and colder in winter; but it was still a weather-beaten, hitch-rack decorated, dusty-streeted cowtown.

There was the usual array of restaurants, where the inner man might be well appeased for two-bits. The fact that there were two livery-stables rather lifted Broken Butte out of the mediocre class, but its chief claim to distinction was the Shoshone Saloon, where wine, women and song brought surcease from rangeland sorrows, and kept the cowboys broke but contented.

"Battler" Morgan owned the Shoshone, a pugnacious jaw, one cauliflower ear and a memory of the days when men fought with bare knuckles. He could throw a bottle almost as straight as a cowboy could shoot a gun—but not quite.

He had found this out to his sorrow, when he tried to bounce a bottle off the head of Wheezer Bell. Wheezer had incurred Battler's displeasure by slamming a bullet into the bottle, in mid-air. The bottle was coming toward Wheezer, but the .45 bullet caused it to sort of evaporate and the neck of the bottle boomeranged into Battler's front teeth.

Wheezer admitted that he shot at the bottle, which the rest of the NR gang knew to be a mistake, but it established Wheezer as a bad man to monkey with. Battler bought some store teeth and quit throwing bottles at gunmen.

Eph Williams owned an office on the main street, and he was climbing into a top-buggy when the four cowboys rode in from the NR ranch. Williams sighed with relief as he drove out of town.

He had no wish to meet these four men. He knew, to his sorrow, that they did not respect him in the least, and he secretly wished that they might be hailed into court, charged with a serious offense.

For Eph Williams, in spite of the fact that he passed the collection plate at church, did not, "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you." These four men laughed at him, and he did not like that. He had often wondered why Nick Ralls hired them. One day he had asked Nick Ralls regarding them, and Nick Ralls had told him that it was none of his adjectived business.

The four cowboys watched Eph Williams drive out of town, and Chet wailed over the fact that they would not be at the ranch to greet him.

"We'd take off his wheels and make him walk home."

"Yeah, and have him advise Cleopatra to fire us," said Wheezer. "You ain't got a bit of fi-ness."

"That's a nice word to call a friend," said Chet accusingly. "You go and sell that wall-eyed cayuse to Clay Hardy, professor."

"Yeah, you do that," agreed Leather. "But if you see that bat-headed Murtch, don't antagonize him. He's in cahoots with Williams."

"Rope's draggin'!" Wheezer whispered warningly.

Leather turned quickly and saw Murtch standing within five feet of him. He had come out of the Shoshone Saloon while they were talking. There was not the slightest doubt but what Murtch had heard what Leather Kleig had said, but his face told them nothing.

"All right, I'll go and find Clay," said Wheezer. Then to Murtch, "Is Clay at the office?"

Clay Hardy was Murtch's deputy; a vile-tempered, pasty-faced individual, who was reputed to be the best rifle shot in the country, in spite of the fact that he was of the jerky, nervous type.

"I reckon he's there," replied Murtch softly, and walked past them, going across the street.

WHEEZER led the sorrel down the street toward the sheriff's office, while the other three cowboys went into the Shoshone, to wait for Wheezer to bring them funds enough for a little riotous living.

There was little warmth in Battler Morgan's reception, but he did invite them to have a drink.

"What'sa matter with it?" asked Chet wonderingly.

"With what?" asked Battler.

"Your liquor," explained Chet. "You givin' it away, kinda makes me wonder. How's tricks, Battler?"

"All right," growled Battler. He was not very quick witted. "Whatcha drinkin'?"

"I'll smoke a see-gar," stated Woodenshoe. "Gift whisky hurts my stummick. Got any of them two-bit Flor de Loco Weeds? You know what I mean—them dusty ones."

"Never look a gift see-gar in the dust," advised Leather, leaning across the bar and studying the labels on some dusty-looking case goods.

"Well, name your drinks," said Battler impatiently.

"W-h-i-t-e S-e-a-l," spelled Leather. "What's that—sody-water, Battler?"

"Champagne," gruffly.

"I'll take a chance on her," nodded Leather.

"You will? At ten dollars per bottle?"

"Well, ain't we your friends?" asked Chet. "Ten per bottle ain't nothin' between friends, 'specially when we've got a lady boss. Didja hear about it, Battler?"

Battler nodded. "Murtch was tellin' me. What you jaspers goin' to do for a job?"

"Work for the NR," replied Leather dryly, motioning for the bartender to open a bottle of champagne.

"Want me to open a bottle, Battler?"

The bartender wanted official sanction.

"No!" snapped Battler. "I ain't wastin' champagne on cowpunchers. Whisky's good enough."

"Not for me, it ain't," declared Leather, turning his back on the bar. "Battler won't treat us right, 'cause he thinks we ain't got nothin' to spend in his danged place."

"You fellers ain't had no payday."

Battler was so old in the liquor business that he did not mind admitting a lack of enthusiasm in treating men who were broke.

"Did you ever know us to have a payday?" asked Chet.

Battler thought it over and shook his head.

"No, I don't think I have. You fellers has spent money, but I never heard you mention payday."

"You remember that, will you?" asked Leather, but before Battler could ask a reason for remembering such a trifling thing, Wheezer came bustling in, kicking his spurred heels on the floor.

"Hookum cow!" he chortled, executing a very poor jig-step. "Nailed Clay for seventy dollars."

He pulled the money out of his chaps pocket and piled it on the bar.

"Are you a sport?" queried Leather.

"Dang right!" exploded Wheezer. "Gimme action."

Leather poked a ten-dollar gold piece out of the pile and shoved it across the bar.

"Give me that bottle of champagne."

The bartender handed it across to him, while Wheezer leaned in close and peered at the dusty, long necked bottle.

"Whazzat?" he asked curiously.

"This?" Leather patted the bottle. "This is the drink of kings, Wheezer."

He took out his knife and inserted the blade under the wired top.

Wheezer glanced at the cash register and blinked at Leather.

"Ten dollars for a little bottle? What's in it?"

Pwhop!

The cork hit Wheezer in the mouth, and most of the champagne struck him in the chest. Leather tried to hold his hand over the neck of the bottle, with the result that a stream of the liquor shot square into Wooden-shoe's face. A shift of the hand shot the stream up into Leather's face and he dropped the bottle on the floor.

Wheezer wiped his sleeve across his face and looked down at the bottle. He scooped up the rest of the money and stuffed it into his pocket.

"You're all through playin' king with my money," he announced.

"You don't open champagne like that," explained the bartender chokingly. "You put a towel over—"

"Aw-w-w, hell!" snapped Leather. "I've opened lots of it."

"Yeah, there was quite a lot in that bottle," admitted Chet, feeling of his sticky shirt collar. "Kind of a magic bottle, ain't they?"

"I'll open a bottle," announced Battler joyfully. "I'll show you how it's done."

"After we're gone, Battler—not now —" Wheezer was very emphatic—"I've swallered a cork and I smell like I'd had a bath in hard cider. If you want to treat, I'll take a see-gar."

THE other three nodded dismally and accepted an ancient cigar on the house, which they discarded after a puff or two in favor of a Durham cigaret. Wheezer relented and split his money amongthem, after which they wooedthe goddess of chance in their own ways.

It was about three hours later that Eph Williams drove back to Broken Butte. It was only five miles to the NR ranch, which was far enough to give him a chance to cool his anger against the four cowboys.

He took his horse and buggy to the livery-stable and went back to his little office. Murtch had seen him, and wended his way to Williams' office where he found Williams in a vile mood. Murtch sat down and waited for Williams to cool off. These two understood each other very well.

"What's the matter?" queried Murtch. "You act all het up, Eph."

"Aw, heck!" exploded Eph, kicking a perfectly good law book off the corner of his desk, that he might have a resting-place for his feet.

"I just came in from the NR, and I find out that them four punchers are claiming that Ralls agreed to pay them once a year, and that the NR owes them four hundred and eighty dollars apiece."

"That's a fine thing to claim!" exclaimed Murtch indignantly. "Why, they can't—"

"That ain't all, Murtch. Miss Cleveland told me that Nick Ralls had promised old lady Coogan that he was going to settle enough money on her, after she had been there ten years, to keep her the rest of her life. And she's been there just ten years."

"Of all the fool things I ever heard!"

"Nick Ralls never kept any books. There ain't a scratch of a pen to show how he run his ranch."

"But they can't get away with anythin' like that," protested Murtch. "There ain't nobody runs a ranch that way, Eph."

"Them four claim a total of nineteen hundred and twenty dollars," said Eph thoughtfully. "That's a lot of money, Murtch."

"Ain't she goin' to fire 'em, Eph?"

"I suppose."

Eph got to his feet and walked over

to the door. Wheezer and Chet were coming across the street and their legs seemed a trifle unsecure. Eph opened the door and scowled at them.

"H'lo," greeted Wheezer owlishly. "We're after some legal advice."

"Legal advice, eh?"

Williams squinted at them closely, but, in spite of the fact that they had been drinking, they seemed deadly serious.

Murtch came to the door and looked at the cowboys, who grinned widely at him.

"H'lo, sheriff!"

Wheezer cuffed his hat onto one side of his head and grinned wickedly.

"Whazza matter? You in trouble, too?"

"Not that anybody knows about," retorted Murtch.

"Oh—" Wheezer's lips formed a perfect O and he nodded wisely. "Not that anybody knows about, eh? Well, I s'pose it ain't right to expose yoreself, but me and Chet are open and aboveboard in everythin', ain't we, Chettie?"

"Oh, very much so," nodded Chet. "We don't have no mustache to deceive the eye."

Murtch grunted angrily and hooked his thumb over his belt above his holster. But this action did not frighten the two cowboys.

"He's half-way home after his gun," observed Chet wisely.

"Just what did you want to know?" asked Williams.

He knew that this talk was only leading up to trouble, and he wanted to avoid it if possible.

"Li'l point of law," explained Wheezer. "Me 'n Chet has had a argument about lawyers, don'tcha see?"

"What was the argument?"

"Well—" Wheezer cuffed his hat sideways again and grew very solemn — "well, this was the argument — I said that lawyers was predatory animals, but Chet argues that there must be a open and a closed season on 'em. Me 'n Chet don't want to break no game laws."

WILLIAMS' lips tightened and his face flushed. He was fighting mad, but his better judgment told him to move carefully. Murtch swore under his breath and looked away, but Williams said nothing, as he turned slowly and went back into the office.

"There ain't no answer," said Chet softly.

"Betcha he's gone to look in a book. Lawyers always have to look into books, Chettie."

"My advice to you fellers would be—" began Murtch angrily.

But Wheezer interrupted with,

"Nobody asked you for advice, Murtch."

"And nobody, if they've got any brains, ever will," added Chet.

"Is that so? Lemme tell you fellers somethin'. Broken Butte is tired of you four jaspers from the NR, and if you want to get away with a whole hide, you better move fast."

"My, you frighten me!" squeaked Wheezer. "My tonsils are weak and any sudden shock makes me choke all up."

"Aw, that's too bad," wailed Chet sadly. "Broken Butte is all through with us, Wheezer, don'tcha know it. Just like the song:

"Out in thish wide wor-r-rld alo-o-one,
Nothin' but sorrow I see-e-e-e;
I'm-m-m nobody's dar-r-rling,
Nobody car-r-r-res for me-e-e-e."

Chet's unmusical voice clung lovingly to the last notes and his eyes closed with ecstasy. Murtch snorted his indignation and walked swiftly away toward his office, both hands clenched around his cartridge-belt, while Wheezer sat down on the wooden sidewalk and shook with unholy mirth.

"What's so funny about it?" demanded Chet. "That's a sad song, ain't it? Somebody has to tell you when to cry. My, my! You're ignorant, cowboy."

Leather came out of the Shoshone and crossed the street to them. He was perfectly sober and his thin lips were tightly drawn, as if suppressing a grin.

"I tapped the old roulette for a hundred and fifty," he informed them. "And Wooden-shoe has corraled most of the chips in the stud-poker game. C'mon."

"Where you goin'?" demanded Wheezer.

"Clerk and Recorder's office. I'm goin'

to take a look at old Nick Ralls' will."

"Why spoil a perfec' day? We jist insulted Williams and Murtch."

"We hope we did," amended Chet, "but I doubt it."

"All right," nodded Leather. "Go ahead and get us all fired."

The clerk's office was located at the north end of the town. Broken Butte had never been financially able to build a courthouse; so the county offices were badly scattered.

The clerk showed them the recorded will, and even volunteered to read it to them. It was short and to the point.

"Bein' in good health and sound of mind, eh?" grinned Leather, as the clerk finished reading. "That danged old gopher never was sound of mind. Leaves all his earthly possessions to Miss Jane Cleveland, his niece, who is his only known living relative."

"I understand that she has taken possession," remarked the clerk.

"You're danged right she has," grinned Wheezer. "Man, she's sure took right hold of the old ranch."

IV

THEY left the clerk's office and started down the street. The stage was just driving up to the front of the general merchandise store, in which the post office was located, and the three cowboys stopped to watch a newcomer disgorge himself from the interior of the dusty stage.

He was of medium height, slender of build and well dressed. His olive-tinted face was handsome, in spite of its lines of dissipation, and his tiny black mustache was waxed to needlelike points.

He dusted himself off with his hands, paid the driver his fare and watched him unpack two valises off the boot of the stage. He looked at the three cowboys and a flash of recognition crossed his face, but he turned back to the driver, picked up his valises and went down the sidewalk toward the Broken Butte hotel.

"You know that dude hombre, Leather?" asked Wheezer.

"Yeah. That's the crookedest gambler unhung. I dunno who he is now, but when I knew him in Sunset City he was called 'Spade' Hollister."

"Here comes Wooden-shoe," said Chet. "He's grinnin'; so I betcha he made a clean-up, too."

"Hundred and eighty dollars," announced Wooden-shoe joyfully. "Such an easy game to beat."

"Let's go home," suggested Leather. "This town ain't noways friendly. And I'm kinda curious to know what the beautiful maiden has done to the NR since we left."

"Go home—now!" Wooden-shoe was explosively surprised. "And me with a hundred and eighty?"

"Ain't noways fair to the heathen," admitted Chet.

"All right, I'm goin'," announced Leather, starting toward the hitch-rack.

"I'll trail your bet, Leather."

Wheezer turned and followed Leather, but Chet and Wooden-shoe laughed derisively at such a foolish move, and went back to the Shoshone Saloon. That hundred and eighty dollars was burning a hole in Wooden-shoe's pocket, and the fact that Broken Butte was hostile to him made not the slightest difference.

Leather and Wheezer went back to the ranch. Miss Cleveland was sitting on the ranchhouse porch, as they rode past, and motioned for them to stop. They dismounted and came up to her.

"Mr. Williams was here this morning, and I spoke to him in regards to your yearly salaries," she stated evenly. "He said that your claims were absurd. I quite agree with him. We have decided to pay you each forty dollars and dispense with your services, beginning tomorrow.

"Mr. Williams will be here in the morning and pay you off, I believe. I also spoke to him regarding Mrs. Coogan, and her claims, and he said that such a thing would be impossible."

"Yeah, I see," nodded Leather absently. "Williams is takin' quite a lot upon himself, ain't he, ma'am?"

"He is handling the legal matter for me."

"You known Eph Williams long, ma'am?"

She shook her head.

"You need somethin' beside legal advice, ma'am," said Wheezer solemnly.

"That fish-eyed lawyer'll git you into trouble, if you don't watch out."

"I am perfectly able to attend to my own affairs."

Miss Cleveland's tone chilled Wheezer, but he grinned widely.

Leather dropped his reins and leaned against the railing of the porch.

"Ma'am, I'd like to talk to you a little," he said. "I ain't sayin' nothin' for me and the boys. We don't like this ranch—much. Losin' a job don't mean nothin' to us, but I'd like to say somethin' for Ma Coogan.

"Ma's old, ma'am. Must be past sixty. It ain't noways easy for her to land another job, don'tcha see? She's fine, Ma is. You won't find nobody like her. She's got to have a home. Old folks, like her, has got to have a home, dont'cha see, ma'am?"

Miss Cleveland studied Leather, as he talked, but he knew that she was not impressed with his argument.

"I am sorry," she said, "but Mr. Williams will handle that part of it for me. I have no doubt but that Mrs. Coogan is a fine cook, but Mr. Williams has advised that I change the personnel of this ranch entirely and I am following his advice. Of course, you know, I am not running a charitable institution."

"No, I didn't reckon you was," Leather sighed and picked up his reins.

FOR a moment he seemed downcast over her decision, but lifted his eyes and looked squarely into her face. Wheezer started instinctively forward as he saw the expression on Leather's face.

Wheezer knew that Leather was at white heat. He had seen that same expression on Leather's face before, and it meant that the devil within him had torn loose.

"Ma'am," Leather's tone was hoarse, as if he were suffering from a bad cold, "we ain't askin' for charity—ain't askin' nothin' from you—now. You own the NR ranch, and you can do what you please with it. Lookin' at you, I wonder what makes your blood circulate. You ain't got no heart."

She sprang to her feet and faced him, and for a moment Wheezer thought she would attack him with her hands, but Leather's eyes did not waver and she stepped back, as if wondering.

"You coward!" she exclaimed. "To talk that way to a woman!"

"You are a woman," Leather nodded slowly. "But you are not a lady—not human."

"You get off this ranch!" Miss Cleveland bit her under-lip and pointed back to the road.

Leather shook his head.

"No. You own this ranch, but you don't know how much of it you don't own."

"What do you mean?"

"This is what I mean." Leather turned and pointed toward the rolling hills.

"There's a lot of NR cattle out in them hills, but you don't own many of them."

"Why—if they are NR brand—what do you mean?"

Leather laughed and walked off the porch to his horse, before he replied.

"Ask Eph Williams what I mean. If he don't know, I'll tell him. C'mon, Wheezer."

They led their horses down to the barn, while the girl looked after them, her face a mixture of emotions. Then she swore a good United States oath and went into the house.

It was nearly daylight the next morning when Chet Wells rode up to the NR corral fence, tied his horse and hammered loudly on the bunkhouse door. After making considerable racket he kicked the door open and went inside, where he war-whooped like an Indian.

"Shut up and come to bed," said Leather sleepily. "Whatcha think this is around here?"

"Yee-o-o-o-ow!" yelped Chet. "I'm a coyote!"

"Dang right you are," agreed Wheezer. "Crawl into a hole before a he-human collects your ears. Chet, you fool brayin' burro, shut up!"

But Chet would not shut up. He climbed up on Wheezer's chest and sat down, while he sang—

"I'm a tough ol' jasper and I'm lookin' for a fight;
I'll cut, shoot or rassel from mornin' until night
With a whang de oodle addy aye, addy aye."

"Yeah, and you'll get it, too," de-

clared Leather angrily.

"Woosh!"

Wheezer managed to dump Chet on to the floor and sat up, gasping for breath.

"Are you all woke up?" queried Chet. "My gosh, you sure are heavy sleepers!"

"Where's Wooden-shoe?"

"Wooden-shoe is in jail."

"In jail?"

"Yeah, in jail! Want me to yell it louder?"

"What for, Chet?"

"Talkin' too much."

Leather slid out of bed and reached for the makings of a cigaret.

"Oh, he talked too much, eh?" said Wheezer. "If that was a crime, you'd a been hung years ago, Chet. What did he talk about?"

"That wall-eyed bronc you sold to Clay Hardy. You see—" Chet helped himself to Leather's tobacco and papers —"Clay and Murtch runs into me and Wooden-shoe, and they asks us to have a drink. We got to talkin' about that wall-eyed bronc, and Wooden-shoe, like a danged fool, tells 'em that he was the original owner. He says that you won it from him in a poker game out here."

"Well, s'pose he did," asked Wheezer. "What then?"

CHET said, "Murtch asked Wooden-shoe who he got the bronc from and Wooden-shoe jist naturally can't say. Murtch says it's kinda funny, bein' as the bronc has got a D-Bar-D brand on its shoulder and no other marks.

"Well, Wooden-shoe's drinkin', which makes him foolish and he tells Murtch to go to hell. Then Murtch arrests him for stealin' a D-Bar-D horse."

"And that's a hell of a note!" exploded Wheezer.

"The D-Bar-D outfit is over in Foster County," volunteered Chet dismally. "Murtch says that the brand never was put on very deep, and the hair covered it."

"And if the D-Bar-D keeps a sale record—Wooden-shoe is in bad shape," said Leather. "Dang the luck, I don't know how we overlooked that brand. Cinch to burn on the two sides to that bar and make it a DAD brand."

"Which won't get Wooden-shoe out of jail now," Chet reminded them sadly.

"We vented a lot of D-Bar-D's, if I remember," said Wheezer thoughtfully, "and if that outfit comes over to identify that wall-eyed bronc they'll likely kinda look around for more."

"Yuh can't identify a vented brand," said Chet.

"No, but you can get suspicious of an outfit with as many as the NR has on the range. Believe me, gents, I'm plumb ready to pull my freight."

"What we need is a lawyer," grinned Leather.

"I betcha we do," Chet was serious.

"Might hire Eph Williams," grinned Wheezer.

"Yeah, we might do worse," nodded Leather. "He's just crooked enough to defend a bunch of horse thieves and get away with it. I s'pose he'd want us to give him a bill of sale of the animals we stole."

Chet kicked off his boots and stretched out on the bunk, where he proceeded to snore loudly. It was too early to dress; so Leather and Wheezer crawled back under their blankets again, and in a few minutes there was a trio of snores.

It was about eight o'clock when Leather and Wheezer got out of bed and slid into their clothes. Chet still snored loudly, but they did not wake him up. Wheezer went to the window and looked toward the ranchhouse.

"Horse and buggy up there," he announced. "Reckon the sweet lady's guardian angel has arrived already."

They finished dressing and went up toward the house. Eph Williams backed out of the door, carrying one end of a trunk, the other end of which was being carried by a Chinese.

Williams merely glanced at the two cowboys and went back into the house, followed by the Chinese.

"Well, whatcha know about that?" grunted Wheezer.

They walked around to the back door, where they found Ma Coogan sitting on the wash-bench. Her old face was streaked with tears, and she was wearing a very old alpaca dress, which she had not worn for years, and beside her on the bench was a little old hat with a moth-eaten feather.

She looked up at them, but did not speak. Leather frowned and hitched at

his belt as he and Wheezer looked at each other queerly.

"I—I'm goin'—somewhere," said Ma Coogan painfully. "They got a furriner for a cook."

She did not look up at them. Leather turned away and rubbed his chin violently. Then he whirled on Wheezer.

"Go down and wake up Chet and saddle the horses. We'll have to bust that jail and get Wooden-shoe out and—"

Wheezer whirled to go back to the bunkhouse but Leather stopped him.

"Wait. That won't do no good either. I was going to kill that lawyer, but that won't help Ma."

"Bless your hearts," Ma looked up at them. "Sure, ye don't need to worry about me."

"No, I reckon not," said Leather softly, "but we don't want to have to eat Chinese cookin', Ma."

"But the Lord love ye, we're all fired."

"That's right. I'll have to see that lawyer. Set still."

LEATHER hurried around the house and Wheezer almost trod on his heels. Williams and Miss Cleveland were on the porch, and the Chinese was putting the trunk into position to load it on to the back of the buggy.

"Whose trunk is that?" asked Leather.

"Mrs. Coogan's," said Williams defiantly.

Leather strode out to the Chinese and pointed at the trunk.

"Roll it back to the porch, John."

The Chinese squinted at Leather and then at Williams.

"Didja hear what I said?" asked Leather.

"Yessah." The Chinese tried to grin, but it was a weak effort.

"Then roll it back like I told you to do."

"Just a moment."

Williams grew very indignant and came down the steps.

"Let that trunk alone."

"Roll it over to the porch, John," ordered Leather. And then to Williams, "You're on thin ice, pardner. Keep out of the argument."

The Chinese rolled the trunk back to the porch.

"Now, get into that buggy," ordered Leather, and the Chinese lost no time in obeying. He had lived long in the range country and knew better than to refuse an armed cowboy.

"You are just wasting your breath," stated Williams with a weak smile. "Being armed, you have the advantage —for the moment."

With a quick twist of his wrist, Leather flipped the gun from his holster and tossed it aside.

"Now, whatcha say?" he asked softly.

"My dear man, there is no use of a quarrel."

Williams spread his hands and shrugged his shoulders. He tried to be friendly, but it was all lost on Leather.

"You're seven-eighths coyote and—no, I won't say that either. There's two skunks in Broken Butte, and you're both of 'em."

"You seem determined to quarrel with me, I see," said Williams sadly. "I am only doing my duty, Kleig."

"Yeah?"

Leather considered Williams for a space of time and nodded slowly.

"I reckon you're all right, Williams. I never trust a man that'll back down. Shake, will you?"

Leather shoved out his hand, and Williams, a look of wonder on his face, shook hands solemnly with him. Wheezer swallowed with great difficulty and kicked himself on the ankle to see if he was asleep. Miss Cleveland's face expressed astonishment, and even the Chinese's expressionless face changed its placid contour for a moment.

"I want to talk with you kinda private," said Leather softly. "Maybe we better go down to the bunkhouse, eh? C'mon, Wheezer."

Williams swallowed painfully, wonderingly, and looked at Miss Cleveland, but followed behind them to the bunkhouse steps, where they sat down.

"I ain't never hired a lawyer before," stated Leather, "and I dunno just how to go about tellin' him things. Is it a fact that what you tell a lawyer is kinda—uh—"

"I think I know what you mean,"

nodded Williams. "Whatever you tell me will be sacred."

"Yeah, that's the word I was huntin' for," grinned Leather. "You're educated, Williams, and I sure like to talk to educated folks."

WHEEZER choked over his cigaret and dug his heels into the dirt. He wanted to yell out loud. Williams accepted the compliment as his just due.

"It better be sacred," said Leather, "or four good punchers will swell the census of the penitentiary."

Williams pricked up his ears, but tried to appear unconcerned.

Leather glanced sideways at him, but Williams was rubbing his chin thoughtfully and trying to control his elation. He had been insulted many times by these four wild-riding cowpunchers, and he was more than willing to have them bare their guilty secrets.

"I ain't doin' this so much for us as I am for the lady," explained Leather slowly. "She thinks she inherited somethin', pardner."

"Ahem-m-m!"

Williams cleared his throat raspingly, but waited for Leather to continue.

"It dates back quite a while," continued Leather. "You see, old Nick Ralls wasn't no saint. The NR wasn't no payin' proposition and old Nick was just about at the honda end of his rope when we showed up. We kinda made him a proposition. It's hard for a cattle rustler to dispose of stock these days, don'tcha know it?"

"I — er — shouldn't be surprised," nodded Williams.

"Anyway," continued Leather, "here's what was done. The four of us misbranded every danged critter we could find. We worked plumb over into Foster County. 'Course we didn't steal a lot of Broken Butte cows, but there's a few. We branded 'em with the NR iron, and Nick Ralls was to do the sellin'. His idea was to make the old NR look like a regular cow ranch and sell out the whole works. Then he was to split the money; sabe?"

Williams squinted painfully at Leather. Somehow he could hardly believe that statement, and wondered where the joke came in. But Leather's face was serious.

"You—you are not joking?" asked Williams.

"Don'tcha believe it. I ain't tryin' to excuse us. The NR owes us plenty of money, which we've got to collect, but I just wanted you to know how we stand, and how the lady—well, you can see what she inherited."

"Yes, yes!" Williams seemed to be doing a lot of fast thinking. "Do you think there is any danger of an investigation? Is there—nobody suspects you, do they?"

"Here's the point." Leather tapped Williams on the shoulder and lowered his voice. "Yesterday we sold a horse to Clay Hardy. We didn't know it, but that horse had a D-Bar-D brand on its shoulder. Murtch arrested Wooden-shoe Van Dorn and throwed him in jail. Murtch is goin' to send word to the D-Bar-D outfit, over in Foster County, and find out how it comes that we had that horse."

Leather pointed out toward the hills and laughed grimly. "Them hills are full of D-Bar-D cows, with the brands vented and the NR run on. If that outfit comes over here to see about that wall-eyed bronc, they'll start lookin' for other stock they've lost, don'tcha see?"

"That's right. But you vented the brands—"

"Yeah, and there'll be a lot for us to explain if they find out about all them vented brands. It'll look kinda bad, don'tcha think?"

Williams got to his feet. "You sit tight, all of you," he ordered. "I'll stop Murtch, if it isn't too late."

He hurried toward the buggy, sprang in beside the Chinese and whirled the horse around. Miss Cleveland called to him, but he put whip to horse and turned out of the ranchhouse gate on two wheels.

Leather watched him disappear in a cloud of dust and then looked wonderingly at Wheezer.

"He—he's in a hurry," observed Wheezer.

LEATHER looked back up the road and nodded slowly, as a smile creased his thin features.

"Whatcha want to—" began Wheezer,

but Leather stopped him.

"Don't talk to me, Wheezer! Lemme think, will you? I've got an idea, but some of the parts are missin'."

Chet Wells opened the door behind them and blinked into the sunlight.

"Leather hired Williams for our lawyer, Chet," said Wheezer solemnly.

"Yeah, I heard it," nodded Chet. "I heard old fish-eye's voice; so I glued my ear to the door. Whatcha tryin' to do — put us in the penitentiary, Leather?"

"He won't talk to you," stated Wheezer. "He's thinkin', Chet."

"She's about time he done a little thinkin'. He sure didn't do any thinkin' when he told our shame to that danged lawyer."

Leather got to his feet and went to the house. Ma Coogan was still sitting on the wash-bench, waiting for Williams to take her away. She looked up at him and he grinned softly.

"Ma, you take off that dress," he ordered kindly. "You can't cook no breakfast, all dressed up thataway."

"Cook breakfast? The Lord love ye, I'm—"

"Williams has gone back with his Chinese, Ma. You go right back and fry us a flock of eggs. Mebbe there ain't goin' to be no change."

"Do ye mean that, boy?" Ma got to her feet and put a trembling hand on his arm. "Ye're not jokin', are ye?"

Leather shook his head.

"No, I'm not, Ma. You're still the chief cook of the NR ranch. The lawyer feels kinda different than he did a while ago."

"Sure, I dunno what to say." The old lady's eyes sparkled with happiness as she looked around and picked up her old hat. "It's like wakin' from a bad dream, so it is. God is good to me, Leather Kleig. I'm goin' to fry thim eggs—now."

She stopped in the doorway and looked back at him, the tears running down her face, but went on into her beloved kitchen. Leather blinked uncertainly and shoved down on his cartridge belt, after which he went around the house and picked up the six-shooter he had discarded.

Jane Cleveland was standing on the porch and she looked curiously at him. He grinned at her and gazed down the road.

"The lawyer went away in a hurry," he observed. "I reckon I better carry Ma's trunk back into her room."

"I do not understand it," she said.

"Neither do I," he admitted, swinging the trunk back on to the porch, "but I reckon it'll be all right, ma'am."

He deposited the trunk in Ma Coogan's little room and came back to the porch, but Jane Cleveland had gone to her room.

It was about three hours later that Wooden-shoe rode into the ranch and dismounted at the bunkhouse. He was grinning widely.

"Bust out?" queried Chet.

"Huh!" Wooden-shoe grinned knowingly. "Much obliged to you. That sheriff was mad enough to eat hay. How did you fellers manage to sneak in and vent that brand last night?"

"Eh?" grunted Wheezer. "Whatcha mean?"

"Aw-w-w!"

Wooden-shoe turned the horse around and showed them the left shoulder of the animal, where a hot iron had completely destroyed any possibility of ever deciphering the original brand.

"That's a g o o d joke," grinned Wooden-shoe. "Murtch was awful sore. He said it was a good thing that he hadn't sent word to the D-Bar-D. He knows who done it, but he can't prove it, and he knows that, too."

Chet and Wheezer looked inquiringly at Leather, but he merely grinned and nodded.

"Well, what's the answer?" queried Chet wonderingly.

"Our lawyer is workin'," Leather said with a chuckle.

"Kinda looks like it," admitted Wheezer. "But lawyers come pretty high, don't they? How are we goin' to pay him, Leather?"

"I dunno—yet."

V

THAT afternoon the four cowpunchers saddled their horses and headed for Broken Butte. There was nothing for them to do at the ranch—

and they still had money left.

Miss Cleveland had spent most of the day in the shade of the porch, reading, while Ma Coogan lifted her quavering voice in song in the kitchen.

Half-way to town they met Eph Williams, driving toward the ranch. He drew up his horse and smiled, or rather smirked at them.

"You sure got into action real fast," said Leather, "and we're sure much obliged to you, Williams."

"Yes, I think it was well handled, Kleig. Now, my advice to all of you would be to leave this country as soon as possible. In defense of my client I shall bend every effort to protect what is legally her property. As far as your salary claims are concerned, I am afraid they can not be met. Miss Cleveland has no money, and Nick Ralls left nothing but property, which would be hard to dispose of right away."

"Yeah, that's right, I reckon," nodded Leather, "but it ain't hardly fair to us. I'll tell you what we might do—we might each take twenty-five head of beef steers and sell 'em. They're worth about twenty dollars on the hoof right now."

"Well—" Williams smiled weakly—"I'd hardly advise that either."

"How many would we take for Ma's share?" queried Chet seriously.

"Hard to tell." Leather rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Ranch cooks get about fifty per month, and if you figure that out for ten years and divide it by twenty—it would be quite a few cows."

"Be about three hundred head," said Chet. "We'll take four hundred head of NR steers and call it square."

WILLIAMS shook his head quickly. "No, that would hardly be fair to Miss Cleveland. She had nothing to do with this matter, and all claims against the estate must be in a form that the court would consider. Verbal agreements are. I am sure, something that would hardly be considered in a court of law."

"Well, we'll kinda hang around," stated Leather. "You never can tell what might happen. I think that old Nick was plumb loco when he wrote that will."

"Not at all, Kleig; he was perfectly sane—perfectly."

"I dunno how he got thataway," grinned Wheezer. "He sure was always loco before."

They rode on toward town, and Williams went on toward the NR. Leather was very thoughtful. There was the germ of an idea in his mind—a far-fetched feeling that it was a bright idea, and he grinned softly under the brim of his sombrero.

There was a big poker game in progress in the Shoshone when they came in. Battler Morgan, "King" Cole, a big horse raiser from the south end of the range, Jim Kelly, owner of the general merchandise store, Clay Hardy and Spade Hollister.

A number of men were watching the play, among them being Murtch. He scowled at the four cowpunchers, and moved around to the far side of the table. Spade Hollister glanced up at Leather, who was standing almost behind Clay Hardy, and half-nodded in recognition. Leather watched Spade closely—especially when he was dealing. His long, slender fingers dealt with baffling speed, but there was little chance for crooked play.

"Deal 'em a little slower, if you don't mind."

Clay Hardy was losing and inclined to be nasty about it.

"I didn't learn poker in a hayloft," said Spade softly, and King Cole laughed heartily.

Clay Hardy scowled, as he picked up his hand, but did not reply. Leather glanced down at Hardy and noticed that Hardy's holster was empty. A closer inspection showed that Hardy had the gun on his lap.

Leather's lips tightened perceptibly. It looked to him as if Hardy was anticipating trouble. Leather glanced at Murtch who had moved from behind Hollister and was almost directly behind King Cole.

Clay lost that pot and swore softly at his luck. Spade glanced keenly at Hardy and flashed a look at Murtch.

"Spade's the one Clay's watchin'," observed Leather to himself, "and Spade knows it."

BATTLER MORGAN dealt and the pot was passed. Hardy failed to deal openers and the deal passed to Kelly. On Kelly's deal, Cole passed. Spade deliberated, but passed, and Battler opened moderately.

Hardy tilted the pot heavily, which caused Cole and Kelly to pass, but Spade called the raise and boosted the pot a hundred dollars. Battler passed and Hardy called. It took all of his chips, except one small stack of whites.

Leather watched the draw closely. Hardy tossed his discards on to the table, spinning them just a trifle too far, and two of them slid in front of Hollister, who brushed them aside.

Spade drew one card and Hardy drew three. He peered at the corners of his cards and his right hand drew off the table and dropped to his lap. Spade passed. For a moment Clay Hardy's eyes squinted grimly at Spade and his lips tightened. Then—

"Pass," he said softly.

Spade flipped his cards over. He had three kings and a pair of nines. Hardy leaned across and looked at them. Then he exposed his hand.

"Aces and sevens," muttered Battler.

"Yeah, aces and sevens," said Hardy, "and they'd a-been good, if that tinhorn gambler hadn't stole the king I discarded."

For an instant there was a dead silence. Then Spade jerked back in his chair. Quick as a flash, Clay Hardy's hand came up over the table-top gripping a revolver, but before he could level it at Hollister, Leather had flung himself across Hardy, blocking him and tearing the gun out of his hand.

Then he upset Hardy, who went sprawling and cursing against the corner of the wall.

Leather staggered sidewise, caught his balance and faced the crowd. The players had got to their feet and were looking at Hardy, who was swearing vengeance and getting to his feet.

"Lucky thing you blocked him, Kleig," said King Cole. "He sure gets his gun quick."

Leather was facing Hardy now, and Hardy was frothing with anger, but mindful of the gun which Leather was holding against his ribs.

"Yeah, he gets a gun quick," smiled Leather, "but he got it off his lap—not out of his holster."

"He stole my discard!" panted Hardy. "I tell you—"

"You're a liar," said Leather softly. "I watched him. You discarded in to him to get an excuse to kill him. You wasn't goin' to give him an even break."

"What's that to you, you horsethief?"

Clay Hardy spat out the question loud enough for every one in the place to hear. Leather did not move for a moment. He seemed to be deliberating just what to do. Then he handed King Cole the gun he had taken from Hardy.

"Put that in his holster," he said softly.

Cole looked curiously at him, but stepped over and dropped the gun into Hardy's holster. Hardy's hands were hanging loosely at his sides, and he was hunched forward staring at Leather, who had lifted his right hand behind the butt of his holstered gun.

"Hardy," Leather's voice was low pitched, "you're a dirty coyote pup. You spoke out of turn just now, and I'm givin' you a chance to see if you've got guts enough to reach for a gun. I'm waitin'."

Hardy's face looked pinched and white now, and he was breathing fast. His eyes flashed around, as though wanting some one to interfere. Then his eyes came back to Leather Kleig and his knees quivered.

His hand came slowly up to his mouth and the back of it trembled across his dry lips. He turned and went out of the door, striking his shoulder against the side, like a drunken man who is not sure of his step.

"He's whipped," stated King Cole hoarsely. "Didja ever see a man get scared thataway? My, it sure was worth seein'."

"Yeah, he sure turned yaller," agreed Battler, turning back to his chair. "I s'pose that busts up a perfectly good game."

MURTCH had nothing to say. Spade Hollister seemed to watch him closely, but Murtch did not look toward him. Battler cashed in the chips and invited everyone to have a drink, but

Murtch went out without accepting the invitation.

Spade Hollister came over to Leather and stood beside him at the bar.

"Kleig, I'm much obliged to you," he said.

"Tha'sall right," said Leather gruffly. "I wouldn't a-said a word, if you'd a-stole that king."

Spade looked curiously at him and back to the bartender, who was taking their order. Wheezer, Chet and Wooden-shoe were at the bar, chuckling among themselves over what had just happened.

They drank and moved away from the bar. Hollister looked at Leather, who started away from the bar. He half-smiled and stepped over beside him.

"Kleig, if I can ever help you in any way—just speak the word."

Leather turned and looked keenly at him.

"Spade Hollister, I'd a-done that for any man. I'm no angel, but I'd have to hate hell out of a man to stand by and see him murdered. I s'pose you know what it was all about, don'tcha? Then you know who to look out for. If I need you—I'll yelp."

"And I'll come," nodded Spade as he turned and walked over to a roulette layout.

The other three cowboys edged up to Leather and they grouped together near the door.

"Cowboy, you sure work fast," applauded Wheezer, slapping Leather on the shoulder. "And you sure put the fear into Clay Hardy."

"Yeah, but look out for him," cautioned Wooden-shoe. "He's whipped, but he ain't dead. That gambler sure owes you a lot. In another second he'd have been plugged."

"And what for?" questioned Wheezer. "He's a plumb stranger here, ain't he? What's Clay Hardy gunnin' at a stranger for, I wonder?"

Leather shook his head and turned to King Cole, who came up to him. Cole grinned and slapped Leather on the shoulder.

"Kleig, I hear that you've got a female boss out at the NR. It can't be done. If you fellers need a new job, come down to the KC horse outfit and go to work. It's the same old forty-a-month and eats."

Leather smiled and shook his head. "You heard Clay Hardy call me a horse-thief, didn't you Cole?"

"Yeah and you never denied it. You never did steal many horses, did yuh?"

"Half a dozen, maybe."

"Pshaw, that don't make you a horse-thief. Some folks draws the line too close." Cole laughed at his own wit and went to the door, where he turned. "That offer holds good. Come any old time."

"Thank you, Cole," grinned Leather.

"Well, that's a job, if we need it," said Chet.

"If we need it," nodded Leather.

The cowboys went back to the games, but Leather did not play. He took a seat against the wall, where he tilted back and appeared to be half asleep. Once he counted his money carefully and stowed it away in the watch-pocket of his overalls.

There was no sign of Murtch nor Hardy. The afternoon wore away, and the oil chandeliers of the Shoshone were lighted. It was Saturday night and there was a heavy influx of cowboys.

The three-piece orchestra began screeching, and the dancehall girls were out in force, mingling with the men. Wheezer, Chet and Wooden-shoe were firmly implanted in different games; so Leather crossed the street alone to a restaurant. The waiter was the same Chinese that Williams had brought to the ranch, and he grinned in a friendly manner at Leather.

"No sabe," he told Leather seriously. "Catchum job quick, lose 'm allesame."

"You didn't last long, that's a fact, John."

"No last. Man swear alletime. Velly mad, I t'ink. W'at you like eat, eh?"

Leather finished his meal and went outside. He was a trifle cautious, for fear that Clay Hardy might try to ambush him. He knew that Clay would welcome a chance to get even for what had happened in the Shoshone, but he was sure that Clay would never face him in the light.

He strolled up the street and was going past the Broken Butte hotel, but stopped and stared in the window. Then

he whirled around and went quickly inside. Ma Coogan was sitting in one of the hotel chairs against the wall, her hands folded in her lap. She looked up as he came in and a smile wreathed her wrinkled old face.

"Sure I've been wonderin' if I'd see you," she said.

"Well, what are you doin' here, Ma?" he demanded.

"I was brought here by the lawyer. Ah! I think it's no use, Leather. He came this afternoon and had a long talk with Miss Cleveland, and thin—" Ma Coogan stopped and shook her head sadly—"and thin they loaded my trunk in the back of the buggy and made me come along."

"I see." Leather's face hardened and he squinted thoughtfully. "He waited until we were gone. Have you got a room here, Ma?"

She shook her head. "Leather, I have no money. Ye well know that Nick Ralls only gave me a home and—"

Leather turned and strode over to the desk.

"Give this lady a room," he demanded. "She's got a trunk somewhere. Here—" He tossed a twenty dollar gold piece on the desk—"that's enough for now. When that's gone, I've got more."

"Yeah, sure, I'll fix her up," said the frowsy-looking clerk. "Dollar a day's the best we've got."

Leather went back to Ma and handed her another twenty.

"You got to eat, Ma. This feller'll fix you up for a room. Now don'tcha worry about anythin'."

He patted her on the shoulder and escaped out of the door before she fully realized what he had done.

VI

MURTCH snorted angrily, "You're a gunman, ain'tcha!" but it had little effect on Clay Hardy, who sat hunched up in one of their office chairs, chewing tobacco violently. He only increased his mastications per minute.

Murtch jerked a chair into position and flopped down, facing Hardy.

"Everythin' worked wrong," complained Hardy nervously. "If Kleig hadn't come in when he did and put the whole thing into a jam—"

"You had an even break with him."

"Yeah—with him."

"Scared of him, eh?"

"I ain't no crazy suicide, Murtch."

"You was plumb scared to breathe, Clay."

"Uh-huh. You'd a-been the same. He's got under your hide, and you never call him for it, Murtch. How did I know that Kleig was goin' to block me?"

"You was a fool to have that gun in your lap."

"Yeah," nodded Clay seriously, "I was a fool to have a gun a-tall. I ought to pack a doughnut."

Murtch laughed hoarsely. "Well, I reckon it kinda spoils our plans, but there's more than one way to skin a cat. We've got the goods on that NR gang, if we want to use it."

"You're the boss, Murtch. All I ask is that you don't get me into no mix-up with 'em. They don't use no judgment. Law and order don't mean nothin' to that bunch, and a sheriff's star looks like a bull's-eye to them."

"I'd hate to hear what folks will say about you, after the way you acted in front of Kleig."

"I'd a sight rather be able to hear 'em say I backed down than to not hear 'em say I was crazy to try to beat Kleig on the draw."

"Well, there might be somethin' to that. Let's go and see what Williams has got to say."

They locked up the office and went up the street to Williams' place. He had but lately arrived from the ranch and greeted them with a grin.

"I brought the old woman down with me," he explained. "So that's that much done. I'll take the Chinese out there again in the morning. What did you do on that other proposition?"

Briefly, but with sundry oaths, Murtch told of what had happened in the Shoshone. Hardy made no comments. Williams scowled deeply and tapped on the tabletop with his fingertips.

"What do you advise?" asked Murtch.

"Sitting tight. There has been too many mistakes. There will be a howl raised when they find that the old woman has been discharged. Miss

Cleveland did not want to stay out there alone, but I assured her that everything would be all right."

"Well, I hope you're right," nodded Murtch getting to his feet. "If that bunch get drunk, you never can tell what they'll do. They think a lot of the old woman."

"Pshaw! What does a horsethief care about an old woman? They've got enough to look after if they keep themselves out of jail."

"All right. We'll figger things out in the mornin'. Come on, Clay."

They went out and closed the door. Williams lighted a frayed cigar and opened his safe, which was set into the wall behind his desk. It was an old-fashioned safe, which opened with a key.

He took out a mass of papers and looked them over in the light of his lamp. For a long time he studied them and then replaced them in the safe, after which he pocketed the key.

As he turned down the lamp, preparatory to blowing it out, there came a knock on the door. He hesitated for a moment and seemed about to call out, but changed his mind and went to the door. He turned the knob and looked outside.

There was no one in sight. He leaned out and glanced down the street. Then something crashed down upon his head and he fell backward into the room.

IT WAS about three o'clock in the morning when Wheezer, Chet and Wooden-shoe decided to go back to the ranch. None of them had seen Leather, and, as his horse was missing from the hitch-rack, they decided that he had preceded them to the NR.

The gods of the green cloth had not been good to the trio, and there was little merriment within them as they left Broken Butte.

"I'm as clean as the dew," said Wheezer sadly. "I spent my substance in tryin' to make two-pair beat three of a kind."

"You ought to play roulette," observed Wooden-shoe. "Get you a little system, that's all you need."

"How much you got left?" demanded Chet.

"I still got my system left—and a four-bit piece."

"I sure hope that Leather's got some money left," said Chet. "My pesos has all gone where the woodbine twineth and the pelican trilleth to its mate."

They unsaddled their horses and went up to the bunkhouse door. It was bright moonlight, almost as light as day, and their eyes beheld a great and varied assortment of things piled on the steps.

They looked the things over carefully and grunted their amazement.

"Looks like somebody done moved us out," observed Wheezer. "What's on the door?"

He climbed over the stuff and studied a square of white paper which was tacked on the door. He scratched a match and read the message aloud.

"Notice. Any one entering this building without my permission will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law."

Wheezer whistled softly and looked back at them.

"And she's signed by Miss Jane Cleveland, owner of the NR ranch."

"Door locked?" asked Chet.

"Locked! It's nailed tight."

"Well," observed Wooden-shoe optimistically, "it's a good thing that it ain't Winter and zero weather."

"That's a great thing to be joyful about."

Wheezer climbed back and sat down on a pile of blankets. "I wonder where Leather is."

"Prob'ly asleep in the barn," said Chet. "That lawyer sure foxed us, didn't he? That whippoorwill ain't workin' for us, that's a cinch, and I'm goin' to curry him to the queen's taste. Yessir, I'm goin' to hit him so hard that he'll have a permanent part in his hair."

"I hope," said Wooden-shoe, "he dies before his time comes."

"Let's go down to the barn and join Leather in the hay," suggested Wheezer. "Mebbe there ain't no notice on the hayloft."

They filed down to the big barn and crawled into the loft, which still contained a ton or so of hay, but Leather was not there.

"Prob'ly never left town," said Wheezer as he burrowed into the hay. "Gosh dang it, we'll wake up full of foxtail, I betcha."

He was facing the opening of the loft, a doorless opening, about six-feet square, which gave him a view of the ranchhouse yard and the big gate. The moon was partly obscured for a few minutes, which made objects rather hazy, but he saw a horseman coming toward the gate, traveling slowly.

"Here comes Leather," he stated. "Let him see the notice, et cettery, and then listen to him cuss."

The others shifted their positions to watch him. He was almost under the arch of the gate, when a streak of orange-colored flame seemed to spurt up at him from a brush-tangle just beyond, and the thud of a revolver shot broke the stillness.

The boys in the loft were unable to see just what did happen, but the rider was shooting now. Another spurt of flame came from the tangle. Three times the rider's gun spat fire, the reports mingling with those from the brush.

"My, what's goin' on?" gasped Wheezer, almost falling out of the loft opening.

"There he goes!" exclaimed Chet.

The rider had turned and was riding rapidly away, the sound of the galloping horse dying in the distance.

They tumbled out of the loft and raced toward the gate, each man carrying a gun in his hand. Out through the gate they ran and stopped in the road.

"Over here!" panted Wheezer. "He was shootin' from that bunch of—look out! There he is."

A MAN was lying sprawled on his face in the tangle, and the moonlight glinted on his revolver, which was lying on the ground near him. They did not need to turn him over to see it was Clay Hardy.

"Whatcha know?" panted Chet. "The dirty bushwhacker!"

"Yeah, he shot first," agreed Wheezer. "I seen him shoot first. Wonder if he's dead."

"Feel of his heart," said Wooden-shoe. "If it ain't beatin', he's dead."

"It sure takes brains to know that!" grunted Chet.

Wheezer turned him over and felt of his heart. It was beating jerkily.

"He ain't dead—yet. What'll we do with him?"

"Take him to a doctor," suggested Wooden-shoe.

"And go to the pen for shootin' him?" queried Chet.

"He got cultivated on the head," stated Wheezer. "A bullet sure danced a jig on his noodle, but I don't reckon it went through. Was that Leather?"

"Looks like it might a-been. Him and Hardy had a run-in, and I'll betcha Hardy sneaked out here and laid for him. He never budged when we came through."

Chet walked back down the road, where a number of cottonwoods made a black blotch against the sky. Just to the left of them grew a tangle of stunted willows.

"Here's his horse!" called Chet, and went over into the willows after it.

They could see the outlines of the ranchhouse, but the shooting had not caused any one to light a lamp nor come to investigate.

"I'll betcha that Cleopatra's scared stiff," said Wheezer.

"Cleopatra ain't got a thing on me if she is." declared Wooden-shoe.

Chet came back with the saddled horse and they boosted Clay Hardy aboard.

"We've got to have ropes to hold him on with," said Chet, as they tried to balance the swaying figure. "We'll take him over to the barn and rope him on good, and then we'll saddle up and take him to town."

It took Eph Williams a long time to wake up from the smash on his head. He had been hit a solid clip and things were rather hazy in his mind for some time. It cost him considerable pain to crawl over to his chair, where he sat and recuperated.

He was not in the best physical condition and he cursed himself weakly, while he wondered what had happened to him. A bump the size of an egg on his head attested to the fact that something had hit him—and hit him hard.

Gradually he recovered sufficiently to try to analyze what had really occurred. He knew now that some one had knocked

him down. Who it was and why, he did not know. He examined the contents of his pockets, but everything was intact. The safe was locked, the papers on his desk all in place.

"Must have been a personal matter," he observed thankfully, but was unable to blame any certain person. A lawyer of his type makes many enemies.

He secured some water and bathed his head carefully, after which he took a bottle of whisky from his desk and indulged freely. It was nearly daylight now. He looked at his watch, tried to put his hat on over the knob on his head, but decided it was too painful; so he went outside bareheaded, locked his office and went down to see Murtch.

MURTCH was not ready to get out of bed, and he swore peevishly at Williams, who persisted on hammering on the front door of the office. Finally Murtch came and opened the door.

"Now, what do you want?"

"Somebody hit me on the head," explained Williams.

"Yeah?" Murtch was very sarcastic. "Prob'ly didn't want to hurt you."

"Must have had a gun or something," said Williams, feeling tenderly of his recently acquired swelling.

"What's the joke?"

"No joke," Williams shook his head. "I tell you, I got knocked down in the doorway of my own office. Look at my head."

Murtch examined the swelling and his demeanor changed.

"Come on inside."

Murtch lighted a lamp and drew on his pants and boots.

"Now, who hit you, Eph?"

"I don't know. A while after you left I heard some one knock. I went to the door, stuck my head outside—and got hit. I tell you, it made me sick."

"Huh!"

Murtch drew out his watch and glanced at it.

"You must a-been knocked out quite a while."

"Yes, I think so. I didn't come down here right away, because I was too sick. I haven't the slightest idea of why it was done. I was not robbed and there is nothing missing from my office."

"That's danged queer," observed Murtch. "You're sure they didn't take anythin'?"

"Not a thing. Where is Clay Hardy?"

"I dunno. He got sore at me and went away. Maybe I talked a little too tough to suit him."

Williams rubbed his sore head and thought deeply.

"Those cowpunchers have likely gone back to the ranch," he said thoughtfully, "and I've promised to bring that Chinese out there this morning, but I dont' feel like it."

"I'll take him out," offered Murtch.

"You will? Well—" thoughtfully—"perhaps that would be better. You see, I nailed up the bunkhouse door, after I moved out all their things, and put a trespass notice on the door."

"And you think it would be better, eh? No wonder you don't want to go out there. Moved 'em out and nailed the door, eh?"

"Miss Cleveland suggested it."

"I thought you was supposed to be her adviser."

Williams tried to grin, but it was a sorry effort. Murtch looked again at his watch.

"What time does that Chinese restaurant open?"

Williams shook his head.

"What difference—"

"Lot of difference. If I can get that fellow now, I can get him out there on the job before they wake up."

"We can find out. If they're not up, we'll wake 'em."

VII

MURTCH put on his coat and they went to the restaurant. There was no sign of life, so they went to the rear, where the proprietor and his hired help slept in a sort of a shedlike annex.

Murtch hammered on the door and a sleepy-eyed Celestial shuffled into view. It was the proprietor of the restaurant, and to him Murtch explained what he wanted.

"Yo' want same boy like yo' take before?"

"Yeah, the same one. Catchum good job. Same ranch."

The proprietor turned and hurled a

volley of words toward the rear of the shed. Began a conversation which lasted fully a minute. Then the man shook his head.

"Boy say no."

"Lemme see him," said Murtch, and a moment later the Chinese came to the door.

"Good job this time, John," explained Murtch. "You go with me and take charge of the same ranchhouse."

"Same place we go before?"

"Yeah, same place, John."

"No can do."

"No can do! Whatcha talkin' about? This good job."

"No can do," said the Chinese stolidly, and went back to his bed.

The proprietor shut the door softly and barred it from within.

Murtch and Williams went back to the street.

"Whatcha goin' to do?" queried Murtch. "There ain't no other Chinese and we can't get a white cook. If you'd had any sense you'd a-left the old woman there."

"Things are in an awful tangle," agreed Williams. "An awful tangle."

"Now, that made an impression on my mind," said Murtch angrily. "You've balled up everything. I'll go out and explain things to Miss Cleveland. She's got such good ideas, such as nailing up bunkhouse doors and posting notices—maybe she'll see a way out of this."

Murtch hurried after his horse and rode toward the NR ranch. It was daylight now, and Murtch hoped he would not meet any of the NR cowpunchers. Not that Murtch was afraid, but their rough humor was too pointed to suit him.

About two miles out of town he ran into them. There was no way to dodge them, so he drew up in the center of the road and tried to think of a reason for being there so early in the morning. He inwardly cursed Eph Williams for nailing that bunkhouse door.

Then he saw that there was a fourth man, roped to his saddle and riding in an unusual position. They drew up near him, their faces very serious, and waited for him to speak. He knew at a glance who the fourth rider was and he frowned wonderingly.

"Somebody shot him," offered Wheezer. "We found him and was takin' him to the doctor."

Murtch rode in closer to Hardy and tried to get a look at his face.

"He ain't dead, is he?"

"Wasn't when he started," said Chet, "but he ain't in the best of health right now."

"No?" Murtch glanced around at them. "Where did you find him?"

He emphasized "find" very strongly.

"None of that!" snapped Wheezer quickly. "We didn't have nothin' to do with it. Hardy tried to bushwhack somebody and got leaded for his trouble."

"Did, eh? Who was that somebody?"

"We dunno."

"Dunno, eh? Where's Kleig?"

"Dunno that either."

"Thasso?"

"Why argue with the danged fool?" queried Wooden-shoe. "He's got his mind fixed. Give him his second-hand deputy and let's go back and finish our sleep."

"That's a good idea," agreed Wheezer, handing the lead rope to Murtch. "He can take better care of Hardy than we can."

"Wait a minute!" snapped Murtch. "You can't pull nothing like that. You come back with me—all of you."

"You mean to arrest us?" asked Wheezer.

"That's what I mean to do."

"All right," grinned Chet. "We'll remember it."

MURTCH clamped his jaws and looked them over. Here were three men who had no respect for him or the law. He knew it would be useless to insist on them going back to Broken Butte with him; not only useless, but dangerous as well. But he was willing to try and bluff them.

"You know what it means to resist an officer?"

"Did somebody resist you, Murtch?" asked Wheezer.

Murtch studied them for a moment and tightened upon the lead rope.

"All right," he said meaningly. "I asked you to come with me and you refused, remember. Next time I want you I'll bring men enough to take you."

"Kind of a mass meetin', eh?" grinned Chet. "Maybe we won't stay for your party, sheriff."

"You'd be wise not to!" snapped Murtch as he turned and rode away, leading Hardy's horse.

The three cowboys watched him several minutes, but he did not look back. Then they whirled their horses and went back toward the ranch.

"We'll pack what stuff we want and fade out," said Chet. "There's no use takin' any chances. If he once gets us behind the bars—adios."

"What about Leather?" asked Wheezer. "I ain't goin' to fog away without hearin' from him. If he was the one that nailed Clay Hardy he'll show up or send us word."

"What do you think, Wooden-shoe?" asked Chet.

"I been wonderin'. Ain't it kinda funny that the sheriff advised us to pull out of here? That ain't accordin' to my idea of what a sheriff ought to do. He can't hold us for what happened to Clay Hardy."

"If he does, he can," observed Chet. "And if they ever put the deadwood on us for all this rustlin'—whooee! Nawsir, I can't see myself waitin' for him to come out with a posse. Williams knows that we loaded this range with cattle, and I don't trust that jasper atall. Maybe Leather had the right idea in tellin' him—I dunno."

They found Miss Cleveland on the porch of the ranchhouse, and from her appearance, she had slept little. She was not the imperious lady of the day before, and seemed rather glad to see the three punchers.

"Howdy," greeted Wheezer, as they dismounted. "Nice morning, ain't it, ma'am."

"Yes, it—it's very nice. Did you just come from town?"

"Well, not quite from town, ma'am. Yuh see, a man got kinda shot up down there by the gate this mornin', and we had to take him in."

"A man got shot! Oh, I heard the shots! Who—how did it happen?"

"Some feller pulled the trigger," explained Wheezer. "Three times."

"But who was it?"

"Nobody you know, ma'am," said Chet. "One feller laid for the other one. Didn't amount to nothin'."

"But I want to know who it was."

"The one that got shot was Clay Hardy, the deputy sheriff."

"Was—was he trying to make an arrest?"

"Prob'ly," said Wheezer dryly. "I wouldn't put anythin' past that sheriff's office."

THE girl looked inquiringly at them and adjusted her tumbled hair. "Did you see Mr. Williams this morning?" she asked.

"Old fish-eye?" Chet shook his head. "We're layin' for him, and I'll betcha he don't show up. Wonder when Ma is goin' to have breakfast ready."

"Oh!" Miss Cleveland looked curiously at him and frowned slightly. "Didn't you—er—Mrs. Coogan is not here. Mr. Williams took her to town last night."

"Oh, yeah."

Chet rubbed his chin and nodded slowly. Wheezer and Wooden-shoe squinted at each other and back at Miss Cleveland.

"Went to town, did she?" asked Wheezer. "That's funny."

"Mr. Williams took her," repeated the girl. "He said he would bring me another cook early this morning."

"Said he would," parroted Wheezer. "Whatcha know?"

"Ma'am," said Wooden-shoe. "I don't reckon you sabe about Ma Coogan. Mebbe folks has told you wrong."

"You lemme do the talkin'," Wheezer interposed impatiently. "You don't want no Chinese cook. You—"

"Are you running this ranch?" asked Miss Cleveland, but her voice was a trifle weak, and she seemed to force herself to be stern.

Wheezer laughed softly and shook his head.

"No, ma'am, I ain't. You're the owner and boss, but we know this here ranch better than you or that fish-eyed lawyer does. We seen that notice on the bunkhouse door and we seen all our stuff piled outside.

"Thassall right. We ain't wailin' about that part of it. Ma's old, ma'am. This is her home. She's been here a long time.

Mebbe you had a mother, and if she was old like Ma, and—"

Wheezer stopped and scratched his head. He had about run out of words. Miss Cleveland bit her lip. She seemed very thoughtful, and the boys waited for her to speak.

"And Ma didn't have no money," said Chet softly.

"I—I'm sorry," said the girl. "I—oh, don't talk to me! I had to stay alone in that house all night and I never slept at all, and curse such a place!"

She whirled on her heel and fairly ran into the house, leaving the three cowpunchers gawping after her.

"She cusses jist like a human bein'," said Chet wonderingly. "She said, 'curse such a place!' I betcha she's mad at the old NR."

They sat down on the steps and rolled smokes. There was no use in them staying at the ranch, and they knew of no place to go.

"We're in a fix," declared Wheezer.

"Wooden-shoe can cook," observed Chet. "If I could cook I'd go into the kitchen and cook."

"I ain't et nothin' since yesterday noon," complained Wheezer. "My insides are paralyzed from inaction."

"I wonder if she'd let me cook?" questioned Wooden-shoe.

"You try it and see." Miss Cleveland spoke from the doorway. "I had a can of corn for my dinner and I haven't had anything since. I don't know how to cook."

"Lemme at that kitchen," grinned Wooden-shoe. "I'm plumb familiar with food. If the lawyer comes you tell him to tie his Chinese to the corral-fence, 'cause there's a horsethief in the kitchen."

"Honest?" Miss Cleveland stared at him.

"Well, about as honest as a horsethief ever gets," grinned Wooden-shoe, and jingled his spurs into the kitchen.

MURTCH lost no time in taking Clay Hardy to a doctor—old Doctor Chisholm, the only M. D. in Broken Butte. He was a tall, very severe old man, whose spectacles were forever threatening to slip off the end of his long nose.

He made a quick examination of Clay Hardy, who had never regained consciousness, and shook his head.

"Sher-r-riff, this is no job for a sur-r-rgeon. Ye a r e wantin' t h e coroner."

"Is he dead?" asked Murtch quickly.

"I ha' never seen a deader one, sir."

Murtch shook his head wearily.

"Well, you're the coroner, Doc."

"Aye. How did ye say he came by his wounds?"

"I didn't say," growled Murtch. "That gang from the NR outfit turned him over to me awhile ago. They told a fool story about some one shootin' Hardy at the ranch, but don't know who done it."

"Then the cir-r-rcumstances calls for an inquest?"

"I think he was murdered."

"Ha' ye any idea who would do it?"

"There's one of the NR outfit missin'. Name's Kleig."

"Weel—" the doctor adjusted his glasses and rubbed his nose thoughtfully—"weel, I suppose we may as well sit on the case in th' mor-rnin'.

"Ye will pr-r-roduce the necessary witnesses, sheriff?"

"I'll come dang near doin' it," growled Murtch, and went back to his horse.

He found Williams at his office, a bandage around his head and a frayed cigar clamped between his teeth. Murtch lost no time in telling Williams what had happened to Clay Hardy. For several moments Williams was incoherently explosive, but overcame his feelings enough to try and think calmly.

"What was that fool doin' out there, anyway?"

Murtch shook his head. "How'd I know? I bawled him out for lettin' Kleig run that sandy on him, and he got mad about it. Mebbe he tried to salivate Kleig, I dunno."

"Went out after him, eh?"

Murtch nodded gloomily. "Looks like it, Eph. Kleig is missing today—so the boys said, but I don't believe 'em. I'm gittin' cock-eyed over this thing, I tell you."

"You'll be lucky if you don't get worse than that."

"Thasso?" Murtch flared for a moment, but cooled off quickly. "Maybe you're right, Eph. What is the best

thing to do?"

"Well—" Williams rubbed his sore head and smiled sourly—"my advice would be to throw Spade Hollister into jail on a murder charge, raise that one thousand nine hundred and twenty dollars for those four NR thieves and tell 'em to get out of the Broken Butte country."

"You would, eh?"

"Well, then you suggest something, Murtch."

"That ranch can't stand payin' that much money."

"You might take a mortgage on the ranch."

"I wish somebody'd shot me before I ever heard of the NR."

"Go ahead and get it out of your system, Murtch."

Murtch got to his feet and stamped to the doorway. There was no doubt but what the sheriff of Broken Butte was both angry and disgusted. He leaned against the door-jamb and glared around.

Suddenly he leaned forward and looked intently toward the Broken Butte hotel. Then he turned and called to Williams.

"Come here!"

WILLIAMS joined him and together they watched Chet Wells help Ma Coogan into a buggy, behind which was tied Chet's saddle horse, and drive out of town toward the NR ranch.

"What does that mean?" grunted Williams.

Murtch shrugged his shoulders. "I s'pose it means that you ain't got a lot to say about the NR ranch, Eph."

Williams spat out his frayed cigar and looked gloomily after the departing buggy. Murtch squinted at Williams, as if enjoying the lawyer's bitterness.

"Well, what's the answer?" he asked.

"It won't suit you, Murtch, but it's the only solution that I can see. You are going to howl like a wolf, but it's got to be done. Come back into the office."

Murtch debated for a moment, after Williams had gone back to his desk, but followed him inside.

Miss Cleveland came out to the ranch-house doorway as Chet drove up to the porch with Ma Coogan. To the new owner of the NR it seemed as though fate was bound to keep Ma Coogan on that ranch. The old lady smiled up at her as Chet helped her out of the buggy.

"Sure, I'm glad and proud to be back," said Ma happily, "and I'm pleased that ye sent for me, miss."

"Oh—uh—yes," faltered the girl, looking hard at Chet, who turned and glanced toward the bunkhouse, as if looking for the moral support of the other boys.

Miss Cleveland had not sent for Ma Coogan. Wooden-shoe's culinary efforts had not been appreciated.

"He means well," Wheezer had explained, "but the food ain't noways sympathetic enough, ma'am."

And then Chet Wells had had an inspiration.

"Ma'am, do you want to hire a good cook?" he had asked.

"It appears that such a person is desired," she had replied, and Chet had appointed himself to employ just such a person. Hence Ma Coogan's return.

VIII

WHEEZER and Wooden-shoe came out of the barn, got a glimpse of Ma Coogan on the porch and came up on the run. Chet had not explained who he was going to hire.

Ma Coogan shook hands with them and beamed widely.

"Sure, the old ranch needed me," she laughed. "Chet tells me that Wooden-shoe set himself up as a cook."

Wooden-shoe patted her on the back and grinned widely.

"I plumb ruined the food to git you back," he explained. "I'm smart, I am."

"But not as smart as Chet," stated Wheezer, looking at Miss Cleveland.

Ma laughed and turned to the girl.

"God bless ye, miss. Ye dunno how much happiness it gives me to be back here. Sure, the world wasn't much for the old lady away from here. Ye can't understand. It's just home to me—and the children—" She smiled affectionately at the cowboys. "Ye are children, so ye are. I had four fine little boys when I went away, and I've four little boys and a little girl when I came back."

She threw one arm around Miss Cleveland and gave her a squeeze, before she went into the house. Wheezer lifted his shoulders in a sigh of relief. Miss Cleveland turned from watching Ma Coogan and looked straight into Wheezer's solemn eyes.

"You ain't sorry she came back, are you, ma'am?" he asked softly.

"Sorry?" The girl stared at him unblinkingly for a moment and turned toward the door. "No, I'm not sorry—I —I think I'm glad."

"Then there's four glads around here," said Chet slowly. "Ma's a dinger, y'betcha."

She went into the house and in few minutes they heard her talking to Ma Coogan.

"You got more brains than I gave you credit for, Chet," said Wheezer. "I never figured you was thinkin' about bringin' Ma back here. What'll Williams say?"

"He's all through sayin' things about Ma," said Chet. "Me and that jasper is goin' to lock horns if he comes out here again. I seen him and Murtch in Williams' office, and they was watchin' us leave."

"Didja hear anybody talkin' about Clay Hardy?" asked Wooden-shoe.

"Nope. I wasn't doin' no talkin'. Broken Butte didn't seem much stirred up about it."

It was possibly an hour later that Murtch and Williams rode up to the NR on horseback. The three cowboys met them at the door of the ranchhouse, but there was no welcome in their greetings.

Williams smiled in a sickly way as he said, "Well, I see that you brought the old lady back here. Good idea. Was thinking about it myself."

"With a reverse English," nodded Wheezer seriously.

"Not at all."

Williams smiled and shook his head, as he glanced around. Then he asked, "Where is Mr. Kleig?"

"My gosh!" grunted Chet. "Mister Kleig!"

"We dunno where he is," replied Wooden-shoe.

"I see," nodded Williams meaningly. "Perhaps you might be able to find him later. At any rate—" He drew a bulky package from his pocket and opened it —"I have drawn one thousand nine hundred and twenty dollars against the NR estate to be paid to you four men for services rendered. I shall have to entrust you with four hundred eighty of it for Mr. Kleig."

Wheezer started to cuff his hat to one side of his head, but the blow sent the sombrero spinning off the porch. Wooden-shoe sagged at the waist and his hand went uncertainly to his mouth; while Chet merely kicked himself on the ankle with his spurred heel.

MURTCH tried to smile, but it faded quickly. "Your year's salary," said Murtch thickly, and then seemed to have difficulty clearing his throat.

"Yeah—year's salary," p a r r o t e d Wheezer foolishly, as he watched Williams separate the four payments.

"I have talked it over with Miss Cleveland," said Williams, handing them each the money and giving Leather's share to Wheezer, "and we decided to meet your claims. Perhaps it is hardly legal, but, under the circumstances, and out of the goodness of her heart, she decided to do this."

"All I can say is 'hurrah for our side!'" g r u n t e d Wooden-shoe. "My gosh!"

He looked down at the money and his nose fairly quivered.

"Have you any plans?" asked Williams.

"Plans?" Chet looked up quickly. "You don't need plans when you've got a year's salary in your hand."

"I'll take her as she comes," declared Wheezer, trying to be serious.

"You will be leaving this range soon?" Williams' tone was suggestive as well as interrogatory.

"Maybe," nodded Wheezer. "You can't sometimes always tell."

"I had an idea that you'd leave as soon as you got that money."

"Yeah?" Chet pocketed his money and grinned widely. "Cowboys, lemme at that old roulette. I'm goin' hawg wild and bull strong."

"I've got the good system," offered Wooden-shoe. "All you got to do—"

Murtch snorted disgustedly, and Wooden-shoe stopped.

"What'sa matter with you?" he demanded. "Ain't a feller got a right to have a system?"

"Didja find out who shot Hardy?" asked Wheezer, who wanted to promote peace.

"Naw!" snarled Murtch. "But I'm goin' to. And when I do, he'll hang!"

"I betcha," nodded Wheezer. "You won't even wait for judge nor jury, Murtch. Right now you're mad at something, ain'tcha? You've got a terrible disposition."

Murtch snorted something unintelligible and stamped back to his horse, but Williams went into the house, where he engaged in conversation with Miss Cleveland. The three cowboys sat down on the steps and looked at each other queerly.

It was more money than they had ever had—all at one time. They were not entitled to it, that much was sure.

"I wonder if they're goin' to give Ma some money," said Wheezer softly. "I betcha that girl has done felt sorry for what she done. I hate to take her money."

"So do I," nodded Chet. "Mebbe I'll pay it back to her some day—maybe."

Williams came out and hesitated for a moment before he told them of the inquest.

"I suppose you boys will have to be there to tell what you know about it."

"Yeah," agreed Chet. "We'll come early. Fact is, I reckon we'll start pretty soon. You goin' to have Miss Cleveland? She heard the shots fired."

Williams frowned slightly, but went back into the house for a few minutes. When he came out he told them that Miss Cleveland would attend the inquest.

"It will be a good chance for her to meet some of the Broken Butte folks," he added, and went to his horse.

Murtch did not speak to him, and they rode silently away from the ranch.

WILLIAMS and Murtch had hardly reached Broken Butte before Wheezer, Chet and Wooden-shoe came in sight of town. Their future was a pink haze of riotous living and their horses' legs were not swift enough. They pounded into town, barely took time to stable their horses and headed for the Shoshone.

They were questioned regarding the shooting of Clay Hardy, which, under ordinary circumstances, would have given them food for much conversation and argument, but with four hundred and eighty dollars apiece—they were tongue-tied.

Battler Morgan grinned widely and pointed at the ceiling, which meant that there was no limit. Murtch looked into the Shoshone, groaned bitterly, spat viciously and went away. Wheezer had put Leather's money into his boot, rather than to entrust it to any one.

It was nearly daylight the next morning when Chet and Wooden-shoe bumped into each other at the doorway, as they were both going out.

"Whazza matter?" asked Chet owlishly. "Doorsh too li'l f'r you, par'ner?"

"Thaz' ri'," clucked Wooden-shoe, hanging to a porch-post, which seemed to sway him about. "Whazza m'r with you, eh? Shame y'shelf?"

"Broke," dismally. "Money all gone and somebody stole m' rudder. Can't steer m'shelf."

"Ep'demic," hiccoughed Wooden-shoe. "Ter'ble ep'demic. Awful losh of life. Blew m' shubstanch in ri'tous livin'. Whazza use?"

"Poor li' girl," wailed Chet, suddenly becoming remorseful. "Lied her out of for'shun. Shame m'shelf, y'betcha. Poo-o-or li'l girl."

"Thash ri'," sobbed Wooden-shoe, getting into the spirit of the occasion. "Poo-o-o-or li'l girl. Oh, my gosh! Poo-o-o-or li'l thing!"

And together they sobbed tearfully, remorsefully, trying to pat each other on the back at a distance of eight feet apart.

The cool air revived them somewhat and after a time they quit crying and became dignified. There was a lighted lamp in Williams' office. Chet's eyes focused upon it.

"Wooden-shoe," he said seriously, "our lawyer is indushtrious. Works night 'n day. Let's go and shee him. What you shay? Mebbe we can think of shomethin' he ain't paid for, eh?"

"Sh-sure," stuttered Wooden-shoe. "Never can tell. we've had a nice night

f'r thish time of the year. You go 'head, Chet, 'cause you know the way acrosh better'n I do."

They started out in single-file, but cross-currents interfered, and at times they were fifty feet apart.

They finally reached the sidewalk on the opposite side of the street, but below Williams' office.

"Mus' a-been cloud-bursht," observed Wooden-shoe. "Never sheen the river so swift before. Mus' a-had to git off and swim, don'tcha know it. I'm all wet."

" 'S'nawful current right here," admitted Chet thickly. "C'mon."

They started up the street, bumping into the wooden sidewalk at intervals, but managed to reach the corner of Williams' office.

Wooden-shoe began to laugh hoarsely.

" 'S'all right, Chet. I thought I fell in river, but 's only a bottle of hooch busted in m' hip-pocket."

CHET slid across the sidewalk and peered into the office window. Williams was there, sitting at his desk, and just in front of the desk stood a man, with his back toward the window. Wooden-shoe crawled over and peered into the window.

Williams was hunched back in his chair, saying nothing, but the other man was tensed forward, talking rapidly. As Chet's eyes began to focus properly he saw Murtch leaning against the wall, partly in the shadow, and about six feet from the man who was talking.

The conversation was pitched too low for Chet or Wooden-shoe to hear what was being said, but they knew that it was a heated argument. Neither of the cowboys were eavesdroppers; so they crawled to the corner, dropped their feet over the edge of the high sidewalk and sat with their backs to the street.

"Whozat arguin' in there?" asked Wooden-shoe.

"Tha's Hollister, the crooked gambler."

"Zasso? I wonder—"

Came the thud of a muffled shot, and the corner of the building, against which Chet was leaning his shoulder, jarred slightly. At the same instant the lamp went out.

Chet and Wooden-shoe promptly fell off the sidewalk and landed on their hands and knees.

"Sh-h-h!" cautioned Chet, as they turned around and poked their heads above the sidewalk. There was not a sound for a minute or so, and then a door closed softly. It sounded like it might be the rear door of Williams' office.

Then the front door opened and Williams came out. He lighted a cigar, surveyed the street for a few moments and walked slowly away.

"Whatcha think?" queried Wooden-shoe, poking his head above the level of the sidewalk.

"Yes," grunted Chet enigmatically. "Let's go down to the livery stable and find a shoft place to sleep."

"But what was the shootin' about?" persisted Wooden-shoe. "There was a shot fired in there as sure as—"

"Tha's none of my business—in my condition," declared Chet. "C'mon and sleep it off."

The inquest had been fairly well advertised by word of mouth, and quite a crowd gathered in Broken Butte. Clay Hardy was not popular. Had he been killed in an open fight, or if his slayer was known, there would have been little interest shown. But there was an element of mystery, which always appeals.

Williams had sent a man out to the NR ranch after Miss Cleveland, and he had brought Ma Coogan along. The inquest was to be held in Williams' office, which was hardly large enough to accommodate a crowd.

Chairs had been brought from the Shoshone Saloon and placed in orderly rows. Doctor Chisholm, with the able assistance of "Judge" Myers, a justice of the peace, conducted the inquest.

Chet and Wooden-shoe slept late in the hayloft of the livery stable, and were hardly in physical shape to enjoy the proceedings. Wheezer had not slept, but his winnings amounted to seven hundred dollars and he was vocally jubilant.

The three of them managed to worm themselves to a point of vantage near the middle of the room, in spite of Murtch trying to keep them back. It was hot in there, and the three cowboys wished that they were outside.

"Slim" Carey, proprietor of the stage-office, Gus Welch, a restaurant keeper, Buck Harmon, owner of the Box-H, "Peevee" Sorenson, blacksmith, Jud Reeves, owner of the livery stable and King Cole, were chosen as a coroner's jury.

WHEEZER BELL was the first witness, and he perspired copiously over his explanation of what happened at the gateway of the NR ranch. Murtch asked him where Leather Kleig was at that time, but Wheezer did not know.

Murtch testified as to how he had taken possession of Clay Hardy's body, and that the three cowboys had stated that Clay had tried to bushwhack some one.

"The bullet holes r-r-ranged downward," stated Doctor Chisholm, indicating the angle with a poke of a forefinger. "He was shot fr-r-rom above."

"Didn't he have trouble with Kleig?" questioned Buck Harmon.

"Hol' on!" snapped Chet. "If Leather had killed Hardy he wouldn't a-run away, y'betcha."

"You're not a witness, Wells," advised Murtch.

"The devil I'm not!"

"Order!" yelped the judge, hammering on the desk. "One more remark like that and out you go."

"Gimme a chance and I'll go before that," retorted Chet. "This danged place would cook a ham."

"He had trouble with Kleig," said Murtch, ignoring Chet and speaking to Harmon. "Kleig shoved a gun in his ribs—"

"Sa-a-ay!" interrupted Wheezer. "Where's the jasper that Clay was framin' to shoot in that poker game?"

Murtch turned and spoke to the judge, who shook his head quickly. Murtch turned back, saying, "Kleig disappeared that night and—"

"I asked a ladylike question and can't git no answer," wailed Wheezer. "Where's that gambler?"

The judge rapped sharply again and glared at Wheezer.

"I told you once that I'd put—"

"Try doin' it," invited Wheezer. "I want to know where that gambler is. He's the jasper that knows."

"Do we have to suffer all these interruptions from three drunken cowpunchers?" asked Williams angrily.

"Who's drunk?" demanded Woodenshoe, and started to get up, but Wheezer drew him back.

"Ar-r-re we goin' to make this a place of hecklin' and blatherin', or do we pr-r-roceed with the inquest?" burred the doctor impatiently.

"Are we sure that this shootin' was done at the NR ranch?" asked Slim Carey. Slim was very slow in his speech, which was partly muffled by a huge chew of tobacco.

"Miss Cleveland heard the shots," offered Williams.

Miss Cleveland nodded quickly and waited for him to question her, but the jury seemed to take it as conclusive evidence. Every one in the room endeavored to catch a glimpse of the new ranch-owner.

"Miss Jane Cleveland inherited the NR ranch from her uncle, Nick Ralls," explained Williams.

There was a shuffling of feet and several talked in undertones. Suddenly a man came worming his way through the crowd. It was a cowboy from the Box-H, and he was excited, as he called to Murtch.

"Sheriff, I found a dead man down in Cannon-ball Gulch! He's been shot and looks like he'd been dumped over the edge."

Cannon-ball Gulch paralleled the stage-road, and was only about a mile from Broken Butte.

"Who was he, Bud?" asked Harmon.

"I dunno him. Looks like a gambler to me."

"That's the feller!" exclaimed Wheezer. "Name's Hollister, or somethin' like that."

IX

MISS CLEVELAND had got to her feet and was staring at Wheezer, while she grasped the back of the chair in front of her. The place was momentarily in an uproar.

"That's the feller that Hardy had the trouble with!" yelped Wheezer. "I'll betcha—"

"Don't you go to bettin' too much!"

rasped Murtch, half-yelling his words.

"Order!" yelled the judge. "Set down and shut up!"

Miss Cleveland ignored every one and forced her way to Wheezer.

"Say that name again," she panted. "Was it Hollister?"

"Yeah—they called him Spade, ma'am."

"Spade Hollister!"

The girl gasped out the name and stared at Williams. He had heard her, and his cheeks went pale. His fishy eyes shifted quickly to Murtch. There was so much conversation that only those vitally interested were paying any attention to the girl.

The cowboy was explaining to those around him how he had accidentally run across the body. It was not in a place where it would be easily discovered. Chet got to his feet and put a hand on the girl's arm, as he looked at Murtch and Williams.

"Say, do you want me to tell you who killed that Hollister?"

Murtch jerked back, as if afraid, but hunched forward again, staring at Chet. Williams grasped Murtch by the arm, trying to gain his attention, but Murtch was waiting for Chet to speak again.

"What do you know about that murder?" asked Jud Reeves.

But before Chet could tell what he knew, there came a mutter of voices, the shifting of feet, and in through the crowd came Leather Kleig and a young woman. She was a stranger to Broken Butte.

Kleig was grinning. He stopped near the center of the room and glanced around.

"Heard somebody say that I got here just in time," Leather smiled widely. Murtch and Williams were staring at him. He turned and looked at Miss Cleveland, whose face was white.

"I reckon I got here in time," continued Leather. "I didn't know that Clay Hardy was dead. You see—" He glanced around the room—"I had an idea that even a lawyer can make mistakes. Mister Williams, I'd like to have you meet Miss Jane Cleveland, the new owner of the NR ranch." Leather indicated the girl with him, and a gasp of surprise went up from the crowd.

"What do you mean, Kleig?" Williams' voice was hoarse with anger and fear.

"What do I mean?"

Leather leaned forward. His smile was gone now, and the lines about his eyes were drawn tightly.

"I mean that you picked the wrong girl, Williams. You helped the old man make out his will, and you saw a chance to steal the ranch; so you picked the wrong heiress. Murtch was in on the deal."

"That's a lie!" Murtch fairly screamed his denial.

Leather turned to Miss Cleveland. "Did you know Spade Hollister?"

The room fell silent.

For a moment she stared straight ahead, and then said faintly, "Yes. Spade Hollister was my sweetheart."

"And Murtch and Williams killed him!" yelled Chet. "I seen 'em together, and me and Wooden-shoe heard the shot!"

"Murtch killed him!" screamed Williams. "I—"

WILLIAMS' confession, or accusation, was cut short. Murtch had whirled sidewise and fired his six-shooter so close to Williams' side that the report was only a jarring thud.

As Williams fell, Murtch whirled on the crowd like a cornered wolf, but Leather's gun was spouting lead into him and he went down cursing thickly.

"Good boy!" yelled King Cole. "He'd a-killed like a coyote with the rabies. What a mess!"

The room was in an uproar. Doctor Chisholm lifted Williams' head and Leather crowded in close. Williams was conscious, but evidently knew that he was passing fast. He sneered at Leather and spat a curse.

"Open my safe," he croaked to the doctor. "Key's in my pocket. Quick."

The doctor took out the key and opened the safe.

"The package with the rubber band," croaked Williams.

He slipped the band loose and peered at the papers wonderingly. What he looked for was not there.

"Look in the safe!" he panted. "Find —paper."

"She s plumb empty, Williams," said the judge.

"Empty?" Williams nodded weakly and peered up at Leather. "I guess you win, Kleig. I might as well tell it all. Miss Cleveland is a honkatonk actress and we got her to play this part.

"Hollister was stuck on her. He found out something and came here to ask for his share and to see that she wasn't harmed. I guess he killed Clay Hardy. He demanded five thousand dollars not to tell that it was a crooked deal. Murtch shot him.

"Murtch had Clay frame it to kill Hollister in that poker game, but you spoiled that. We were going to buy the NR from—her—for—one—dollar."

WILLIAMS laughed chokingly.

"You know what ruined our scheme, Kleig. Too—many—crooks."

He rolled sidewise and his head pillowed on his arm.

"It's a good thing we ain't got nothin' to arrest," said Wooden-shoe foolishly. "We ain't got no sheriff nor lawyer. What do you reckon he was lookin' for in the safe?"

"I'll take char-r-rge now," said the doctor wearily. "And I per-r-rsume there won't be any inquest."

The crowd moved back to the street. Ma Coogan was trying to mother Miss Cleveland, or rather the one who had been Miss Cleveland, and get acquainted with the real Miss Cleveland at the same time.

Leather Kleig drew King Cole aside and they walked down the street together, while the other three cowboys went to the livery stable to arrange transportation back to the ranch for the women. When King Cole and Leather came back, the two-seated spring-wagon had drawn up to the sidewalk, with Chet driving.

Leather motioned to him to get down, and then spoke directly to the new owner of the NR.

"Like I told you before, ma'am, the ranch ain't nothin' for a lady to run. Mister Cole kinda wants to buy the place, as soon as the papers can be fixed up, and he offers a good price.

"You better just stay here at the hotel until it is all fixed up, which will take a week or so. Ma will stay with you, of course."

HE TURNED and put a hand on Ma's shoulder. "You're fixed for life, Ma. Miss Cleveland insists that you take the money from the sale of the ranch and live easy the rest of yore life."

"But—but—" spluttered Ma Coogan, bewildered.

"That is true," replied the young lady. "I feel that it should belong to you."

"Hurrah f'r our side!" blurted Wooden-shoe.

"Sure, and what will become of you boys?" asked Ma Coogan anxiously. "Isn't there money enough—"

"We've got jobs down in the lower end of the valley," assured Leather, "and we'll see you once in a while."

It was two hours later that the four cowboys rode away from the NR ranch. They had gone back to get their belongings, and each man had a bulging war sack tied behind the cantle of his saddle.

"Now will you tell us where we're goin'?" asked Wheezer, as they halted at the top of a hog-back ridge and looked back at the old ranchhouse.

Leather laughed softly and looped one leg around his saddlehorn while he rolled a cigaret. "I was suspicious of Williams," he said slowly. "He was too interested, don'tcha know it? They wanted all of us off the place. I smelled a crooked deal.

"Then when they tried to kill Hollister, I knowed he was mixed up in it. Well. I wasn't so danged sure about any will bein' made out, so I out-smarted old Williams, knocked him on the head, opened his safe and put the key back in his pocket.

"That will was what he was lookin' for in that bundle of papers. I dunno what he ever saved it for, 'cause that was what cinched the deadwood onto him. I slipped out of town and headed for Keogh. I didn't know what luck I was goin' to have, but—"

"Hold on," interrupted Wheezer. "Do you mean to say that you got the will that old Nick made out?"

"Yeah—sure." Leather scratched a match and lighted his cigaret. "Their will was a forgery."

"Then why didn't you jist show the will and—"

"Nope," Leather inhaled deeply and shook his head. "I'll show you why." He took a legal-looking document from inside his shirt and opened it.

"This is the will that Ma Coogan witnessed. It gives the whole NR ranch to us four fellers."

"To us!" blurted Chet. "Whatcha mean?"

"That's what the will says, Chet. Us four fellers owned every danged stick and stone on the NR."

"Well, but—goshdang it, talk, can't you?" croaked Wooden-shoe. "Where does this Miss Cleveland come in?"

"Her name wasn't Cleveland—nor mine wasn't. Her name was Hollister once. Spade Hollister was her husband. He mistreated her awful, and I danged near killed him for it. Now, she's married to a good feller and they're doin' fine. She's my sister."

"Oh, my gosh!" exploded Wheezer. "And you got her to—I getcha, Leather."

"Yeah," nodded Leather. "I knowed how you all felt about Ma Coogan, and that's the only way I could figure to fix her up for life. And her money'll be clean, too.

"I told the whole thing to King Cole, and gave him a list of what we stole for the NR. He's goin' to tell these different outfits and see that they take back their stock and keep still about it.

"And he's goin' to pay Ma a good price for the NR and what honestly belongs there. My sister will see that it is all done on the level."

Leather grinned softly and touched a match to the document as he said, "Ma wouldn't touch a crooked nickel, but she don't have to now."

"Where's the jobs you spoke about, Leather?" queried Wheezer.

"Somewhere," smiled Leather. "There ought to be jobs for honest and capable cowpunchers somewhere, hadn't there?"

Wheezer nodded solemnly, as he said, "Y'betcha, cowboy. I take back what I've said about old Nick Ralls. He meant to shoot square, but he never figured Ma in on the game; so we'll jist call it a misdeal."

Leather nodded as he pinched out the fire on the remaining corner of the will and crumpled it into a tiny ball, which he tossed aside.

Then, as if by mutual consent, they turned from looking at the old ranchhouse and rode out of sight over the hogback.

MOUNTAIN MEN Die Hard

Blessing brought his weapon down on Dayton's head

by ALLAN K. ECHOLS

IT WAS a busy Saturday morning in Redoak, and Jim Dayton was bringing in his fourth saddle horse from the shed alongside Crane's blacksmith shop. He had already shod three animals and had four more to go before he could expect to stop for a breathing spell.

As he led the saddle horse into the shop, the rattle of shots in the near distance made him pause. There was a flurry of them, then a few scattered explosions, then silence. Dayton stepped up to the front door and looked down the dusty, sun-scorched street. He saw people moving, but he saw no sign of a gun battle, and he dismissed it from his mind. Redoak, in the Kiamish hills, was a feuding town, and gun play was not uncommon on Saturdays when the wild mountain men came down to catch up with their drinking.

He went back into the shop and began shoeing the horse, wishing Crane hadn't taken this morning to go out to Doc Henshaw's to fix his buggy for him.

Jim Dayton Lived According to the Code of the Hills!

There was too much work for one man to do. He had hardly got the first shoe yanked off the animal's forefoot when there was a commotion out in the horse shed beside the shop. He heard a man curse, heard the stamping of a nervous animal's hooves.

He dropped the hoof in his hand and went to the side door—and saw a man jerking at a horse's bit, trying to still the animal while, at the same time, he tried to untie the next horse from the hitchrail. The man worked with a speed that made him awkward.

Dayton recognized that man—knew these were not his horses. He stepped out and approached him.

"You can't take those horses, Blessing," he said. "They don't belong to you."

Blessing, a gaunt man, over tall and stooped, and with drooping eyes and mustache, turned on Dayton, and a black rage spread over his face that gave him the look of a cornered animal.

"Keep back, Jim," he said. "I ain't got no time to argue."

"But you can't take those horses!" Jim Dayton kept going toward the elder man from the mountains, and was almost upon him when the man pulled his gun and lifted it.

"Back, I told you!" Blessing barked. "Or I'll blow your head off."

Jim Dayton grabbed at the man's gun with his hand and knocked it away just as Blessing pulled the trigger. Then he reached in and grabbed for the man's neck. Blessing lifted his foot and kneed Dayton in the stomach, sending him backward in an agony of pain. Then Blessing lifted his weapon and brought it down in a slashing blow on Dayton's head.

Jim Dayton sank to the ground as the earth spun around him, and then lost consciousness.

WHEN he regained his senses he was still lying on the ground. His head felt as though he had been crowned with an eight-pound sledge hammer, and when he lifted his hand to the bump on his skull, his fingers came away sticky with blood.

He got to his feet and looked around. The old man he knew as Joe Blessing was gone—and the two saddle horses were also gone. The animals belonged to ranchers who had left them to be shod.

Jim went into the shop and washed his head at the half-barrel tub of water. He was drying his face when Marshal Tobin came in through the front door with his pistol in his hand, and Drake Skinner, from the saddle shop, came in through the rear with a pistol. Two or three others, all armed, followed them in.

Jim went forward to meet the officer. Tobin said, "Where's Blessing?"

"I don't know," Jim answered, and did not explain further.

He had come out of the mountains himself, and it was not the way of mountain men to volunteer information to officers of the law, or to anybody else, for that matter. Close-mouthed—that was the mark of a mountain man.

"He came down this way," Tobin said. "Cut down the alley when we hit Mark. Mark was hurt, and Joe was leading him. Couldn't have got far."

"What was the trouble?" Dayton countered. "I thought I heard shooting."

"*Thought* you heard it?" Tobin snapped impatiently. "Them Blessings, all five of 'em, walked right into our trap when they started to rob the bank. We kill three of them and wound another, and they kill Harry Skinner, and you *thought* you might have heard shooting!"

Tobin was a hard man, a man of little patience. He was an honest peace officer, but he had seen too much murder in his day to have any softness in him. He knew things in this country, and he knew people, but he was a man with a sharp lip. Now he looked at Jim Dayton with a new interest.

"You're kind of neighbors of them Blessings, ain't you?" he asked.

Jim Dayton froze, and resentment arose in him. This was not a new thing to him, and it was not a thing he liked. He had lived with his father in the mountains for ten years, and his father still lived there, right among the wild bunch. But they were not of the wild bunch. His father trapped a little and raised a little corn and a few pigs for

meat, and minded his own business, and the wild bunch let him alone.

"I used to live in the mountains," Dayton answered. "Why?"

"And you mountain people stick pretty close together."

Tobin studied the young blacksmith shrewdly. "I was just wondering how it was that you didn't happen to see them when they came this way. They came down the alley, and they'd have to pass your back door." Then he added, "If they went past."

Those last four words came out like an accusation.

Jim Dayton did some quick thinking. He was going to have to report the theft of those two horses, anyway.

"I didn't say I hadn't seen them," he said to Tobin. "I just said I didn't know where they are now. The fact is, Joe Blessing came by here and was stealing a couple of saddle horses belonging to Fred and Buck Fontana when I saw him. I went out and tried to stop him, and he knocked me cold with the barrel of his gun. When I came to, just a minute ago, he was gone with the horses. Maybe Mark was hid in the alley, waiting for him."

Drake Skinner, a brother of the Harry Skinner who had been killed, was a sour man, and he snorted his disbelief.

"Sheriff," he snapped, "this feller is just giving you a run-around. He's one of that mountain bunch, and they stick together like flies on a molasses jug—"

Jim Dayton spun on his heel and knocked Drake Skinner down into the cinders on the floor of his shop.

"Say that again," he snapped, "and I'll beat your head off."

SKINNER got to his knees, picked up the pistol that had fallen from his hand, and got to his feet, cursing Dayton. Tobin caught Skinner's wrist, jerked the pistol from his grasp and put it in his own belt.

"We've got trouble enough," the marshal said. "I'll handle this business."

Then Tobin turned back to Dayton, "Where'd Blessing hit you—so hard it knocked you cold?" There was frank disbelief in his voice.

Jim Dayton parted his hair with his fingers, exposing the bump with the cut on it still oozing blood. "If you want to feel it to make sure I ain't lying," he said angrily, "just reach up and feel it."

Tobin ignored this, and was lost in thought a moment. Then he studied Jim Dayton carefully. "You say you and your dad ain't mixed up with them Blessings and their friends?"

"If we were a pack of thieves, would he be out in this heat working a cornfield with a mule and a double shovel? And would I be lifting horses in my lap all day for two dollars?"

"That was the thing that I'd wondered about," Tobin answered. "Well, if you ain't with them, then you're against them. You know every path and deer trail up in them hills. I'm taking a posse out there after those men, and I want you to lead us to every hiding place they might be holed up in. Come on!"

Jim Dayton shook his head negatively.

"No," he answered shortly. "I don't hang out with 'em, but it's not my business to help you find them. I just can't do anything for you."

Tobin gave him another sharp look which was marked with suspicion, thought a moment, then said, "All right." Then he turned to those standing around and said, "Come on, boys. We'll get organized. We're wasting time." Then back to Dayton, "I want to talk to you when I get back."

Jim Dayton watched the men pour out of the shop, and he was conscious of the angry looks the men gave him. He knew that they believed, like everybody else down at the foot of the mountains believed, that everybody who lived up in the slopes of those wooded hills was an owlhooter, and made his living by making forays out into settlements, stealing cattle, robbing banks and stages and freight wagons and the like.

He went back to his work, anger building up in him swiftly. By the time he had finished the horse he was working on, Crane came in with the two Fontana men. They had heard about the missing horses from the marshal, and they put Dayton through a long grilling. The Fontanas were frankly

suspicious of him, and told him they did not believe his story.

"It's easy," Buck Fontana said, "for them to give you a light tap on the head just to make it look good."

Jim Dayton took a swing at Buck Fontana and knocked him down. Fred Fontana hit Dayton from behind and knocked him down beside Buck. They got up at the same time, and Crane jumped between them, breaking up the fight.

Buck Fontana said, "Crane, I'm holding you responsible for that horse and saddle. I left them in your care."

"It wasn't my fault," Crane argued. "It was Dayton that let them be stole."

"He ain't got a dime to pay for nothing," Buck said. "It was you I left him with, and you I'm holding for his value."

"You can make that two horses and two saddles," his brother echoed. "And if you ask me, that helper of yours knew what he was doing when he let 'em be taken. Them mountain men—"

"Go on and say it, and I'll kill you," Jim Dayton said coldly.

Fred Fontana saw the look on his face and did not finish his statement.

Crane turned to Dayton. "I won't be needing you no longer," he said. "A man that can't take care of the stock that's left in his care, ain't no good to me."

"Well, Crane, what are you going to do about my horse?" Buck Fontana said.

JIM DAYTON did not wait to hear how their argument ended. Filled with bitter rage, he went to the back of the shop, shed his leather apron, put on his shirt and hat and went out of the place, not asking for his day's pay. He was boiling inside, and he had to get away before he hurt somebody. He was through with living in a town where the cards were so completely stacked against him.

He went down to the house where he boarded, got his horse out of the back lot, and rode off up a mountain trail leading to his father's cabin on the river bank, high up toward the peaks. And as he rode, he threshed out his trouble, trying again, as he had done a thousand times, to find a suitable answer. Most of the trouble had to be laid at the feet of his father, and yet he held no blame against the old man.

Old Ezra Dayton was a queer man, and there were those who said he was "touched." But he was not crazy. He had once been a moderately successful farmer and stockman, with a wife and a young son and a position in the community down here around Redoak at the foot of the mountains. And then one day a spirited horse had thrown his wife, who was riding him. Her foot had got caught in the stirrup of her side saddle, and the horse had dragged her to death.

Ezra Dayton changed on the day he buried his wife. He sat and brooded, and when for lack of work, his farm had run down to nothing but the bare land, he had ridden away from it, taking Jim, who was then ten years old, and just a wagon full of furniture and equipment. He had followed the wagon road up into the mountains as far as his team could take him, and there on a small bench on the mountainside he had built himself a cabin by the side of a stream.

Here he had lived for the last ten years, raising a little corn to make cornmeal and to feed a few hogs which roamed the woods until butchering time. In the winter he trapped a few furs to trade for supplies. And the rest of the time he just sat and looked off down toward the valley below, where he had buried his wife and his hopes.

He and his son were perhaps the only honest people who lived in the heights of these hills. The wild ones had control of it, the owlhooters and those useful to them. But they assumed that old Ezra Dayton was crazy—perhaps because of his naive honesty—and they did not molest him. He was always good for a mess of vittles when they passed in a hurry.

They knew that he was familiar with their trails and their hideaway caves and their hidden cabins, but they rated him more handy than dangerous, and so they had not bothered him and his son who roamed the woods with him. He had not concerned himself with their affairs, and like all men who live in solitude, he had learned the value of silence.

It was late in the afternoon when Dayton arrived at the clearing where his father's cabin was located. As he pulled down the trail between corn rows he noted that there was no smoke coming from the cabin's fireplace chimney, though the old man would have ordinarily been cooking his early supper by this time. The big blue tick hound did not come barking to meet him.

He felt a tug of apprehension, and instinctively looked down at the dust of the trail. Then his apprehension turned to genuine fear. There were two sets of horse tracks going toward the house—and two returning.

Two riders had been here and had gone—and from the depth of the tracks, they had been moving swiftly.

Jim hurried his animal up to the open door of the shack and slid out of the saddle. He saw the hound lying outside the door. The animal had been shot to death. Then a curse escaped from his lips, and he dashed into the cabin.

HIS father lay on the floor of the single room, and the shack showed evidence of having been ransacked. He heard his father groan, and dropped to his knees beside him.

"Dad," he said sharply. "This is Jim. What happened? Are you hurt bad?"

The old man's face was deeply etched with the wrinkles of pain, and was pale and gray. He did not open his eyes. His shirt front, just above his belt, was splotched with fresh blood, some of it already drying.

"Joe Blessing and Mark. They came by, and I bandaged a wound in Mark's leg. Then they accused me of tipping the marshal off that they was planning to rob the bank. Said Joe's son and both Mark's boys were killed."

"Did you know they were going to rob the bank?" Jim asked. He was afraid to hear the answer.

"No," the old man answered. "But the three boys were by and stayed over a couple of nights ago. They'd been drinking, and they were talking loud about something, but I didn't hear what it was. Joe claims I overheard the boys and told the marshal. But I didn't. I haven't been to town for a month. You know that."

"How come they shot you?"

"Just polecat mean. They was riled at you. Said you tried to keep 'em from escaping in town when their horses bolted at the time they shot Joe's boy that was holding 'em. And they was riled at me because they thought I'd tipped the marshal who set the trap for 'em. I told 'em I didn't, but they shot me anyway. Shot me in the stomach, so I'd die slow and painful."

"I'll try to get you to town, or get Doc Henshaw out here. We'll have you fixed up all right."

The old man put his hand across his middle and clamped his teeth as the pain struck him. Then in a moment he said, "No, it ain't any use, even if I wanted it that way. They can't do nothing for a stomach wound like this, even if I'd let 'em. I won't last long enough to see a doctor."

"Don't say that—"

"I'm just stating facts, but don't let it bother you. I want to go on. That's all I've been waitin' for since your mama went away. You're old enough to look after yourself now, son, so I want to go and be with her."

The old man had to stop frequently while the pain took his breath away, but he kept on until he had had his say.

"I made a mistake bringing you here, son," he continued. "But something happened to me when she went away. It took something out of me. I shouldn't have brought you here among these outlaw people. I minded my business and thought they would mind theirs, and I thought that was enough. But it is not enough for men with crooked minds. They'll use you as long as it suits them, and then they'll kill you.

"Not that I mind dying, but they also bragged that they killed a man down in town. The man they killed belonged to somebody, and his folks will miss him. He had a right to live, and they had no right to take his life from him and from those he belonged to. I see that now. I should have seen it that way before, but somehow, I was so busy thinking of my own troubles that I didn't.

"Son, get out of these hills. Don't be friends with these people—they're rattlesnake mean, and they'd kill you

the minute it suited them. They don't deserve any protection from honest people. They're the enemies of all decent people. Just get out of here and stay away."

Jim gave him a few moments' rest, then asked, "Have you any idea where Joe and Mark Blessing were headed for when they left here?"

"I heard 'em mention Three Pines. That's why they stole my grub. Afraid to stop closer."

The old man was exhausted, and Jim dared not even move him to the bunk, but brought a pillow for his head, and the water for which he frequently whispered, and sat with him in the gloom.

And just before dawn the tired old Ezra Dayton went at last to join his wife.

AT ABOUT midmorning, Jim Dayton mounted his horse and for the last time rode away from the cabin which had been home to him for ten years. At the outer end of the lane between the corn rows, he turned once and looked back at the newly made grave under the big sycamore tree where his father had sat so long looking down into the valley below.

Then he turned and rode higher into the hills, wearing his father's old six gun, freshly oiled and stuffed with shells.

It was a long ride through the twisted mountain trails to the spot known as Three Pines, and in finding his way through the blackness, it took Dayton until the moon was setting just before daylight to reach the place, which had formerly been a logging camp.

There was a small clearing on a flat bench of land where there had once been a sawmill, and Dayton pulled up to this clearing just before the gray of dawn. He tied his horse in the shelter of the trees and crawled to the edge of the clearing, where in concealment, he could examine the place.

There were three or four primitive log huts scattered about, long since deserted, the road leading to it having been choked with new growth. As day dawned, Dayton saw the dark mass of the cabins gradually take shape.

At a few moments after daylight, he saw Joe Blessing come out of the farthest cabin with an axe and cut up an armload of wood from an old pile of slabs near the big mound of rotting sawdust. Blessing returned to the cabin with his load of wood, and after a few minutes black smoke began pouring out of the stone chimney of the hut.

Dayton squatted in his concealment and studied the layout. He dared not go directly to the cabin and attack it frontally, for he was certain that Mark Blessing would be in some kind of position that would allow him to cover the closed door with a gun—and there were no side windows to the simple log hut. It would have to be some other way.

Then he saw what he would have to do. It would be risky, but there was no other way. He made his decision, and acted on it. Keeping in the concealment of the trees, he encircled the clearing until he was at a point to the rear of the house. Then he went into the clearing, going as silently as he could toward the stone chimney which ran upward from the ground on the outside of the rear wall.

The chimney was made of flat sandstone slabs daubed with mud, leaving chinks between each layer wide enough for him to get his toes into. He gripped the stones over his head and climbed upward.

And now he took no pains to be quiet. The men inside could not fail to have heard him as he made his way to the roof.

He got to the roof and quickly jammed his hat into the smoking chimney. Its crown and wide brim completely filled the small opening of the flue, cutting off all the smoke.

He was already hearing a stamping of feet inside as he jumped to the ground and circled the cabin to its forward corner. He began to hear curses.

The first voice he heard was that of the wounded Mark Blessing. "He's trying to smoke us out, Joe. Go on out and kill the dirty son. Wonder is it the marshal?"

"How do I know who it is?" Joe barked. "And you open the door and go kill him."

"How can I get around with a bullet

in me," Mark whined. Then he had a coughing spell. "Go out and do something. I'm choking."

Then Joe Blessing coughed. "I'll lay you down on the floor," he said. "It's better there."

"Ain't but one thing you can do—and that's to go out and kill that jigger. I'm choking to death."

Dayton heard Blessing circling the inside walls of the cabin. Some of the mud chinking had fallen out from between the logs, and Blessing was trying to locate his besieger through one of these cracks, hoping for a safe shot at him. Dayton discovered one of these cracks at the level of his chest, and dropped beneath it just as the man inside fired a shot.

"Got him," Blessing barked exultantly. "I seen him fall."

DAYTON squatted at the corner until after he had heard the front door open, then he got to his feet and rounded the corner with his gun drawn. Joe Blessing halted in his tracks, his eyes widened, and he cursed as he lifted his weapon.

"Why you dirty polecat!" he yapped, and fired his gun at the same time.

Dayton triggered his weapon. And then there was a roaring blast of gunfire as the two men moved warily and shot at each other. Dayton went down as a bullet drilled his thigh.

Blessing gave a roar of triumph and took two steps forward, the better to finish off the fallen man. And then Dayton lifted his weapon and shot Blessing between the eyes with his last load.

Blessing kept coming, momentum bringing him forward on mincing steps until he toppled forward and fell on top of Dayton. He was dead when Dayton rolled him over and pulled himself up, supporting himself against the cabin wall while he reloaded his gun. One leg was numb.

Smoke poured out of the cabin door now, and Mark Blessing was yelling. "Joe, get me out of here. I'm choking to death."

"Joe won't be able to help you," Dayton answered. "Throw your gun out the door and I'll come in and get you."

"Who're you?"

"Jim Dayton."

"Come on in, Jim, and hurry."

"I said throw your gun out."

"Why? Ain't we friends?"

"No, we're not. Throw your gun out, or I'll leave you there till the smoke suffocates you."

A .30-30 Winchester came sailing out the door through the smoke.

"And now your handgun."

Mark Blessing cursed, but threw the weapon out, and Jim Dayton limped into the smoke-filled cabin and managed to drag him out into the open, where he lay coughing and groaning.

"Now where are your horses?" Dayton demanded. "Those you stole."

"In that other cabin. Where are we going?"

"Back to Redoak."

Dayton hobbled to the other cabin where he found the two horses still saddled. The wound in his leg was bleeding, and he was beginning to feel weak. It took him the better part of an hour to get the dead Joe and the wounded Mark Blessing tied onto their animals, and to mount his own and get started down the mountain. Throughout most of the long tortuous ride he felt himself growing weaker, and he was having spells of light-headedness when he could remember nothing. Then he felt himself falling off his horse, and things went black for him.

When he regained consciousness he found himself lying under a tree with Doc Henshaw just finishing the dressing of his leg. There was a crowd of men around him, their horses in a clump down the road. Marshal Tobin was sitting on a rock with his pipe in his mouth. And the bodies of Joe and Mark Blessing were stretched out by the side of the road.

"Feelin' better, son?" Tobin asked.

Dayton looked on the scene and asked, puzzled. "Where'd you people come from?"

"We was out looking for the Blessings when we found all three of you right here, Joe dead, Mark dying, and you passed out. You been out quite a spell, but Doc says it ain't anything serious. Just lost a lot of blood. Son, you done a good job. What made you

(Concluded on page 162)

A TRUE STORY

The pair rode in front of Nevins

The Saga of Lazy Nevins

By SIMPSON RITTER

TOM NEVINS was a man who liked his peace. In that case, you may well ask why he held the position of deputy sheriff on the American Frontier in the year 1869. For no more turbulent place could a man have possibly found at that time if he'd circled the globe on horseback! What with half-wild buffalo hunters, wild Indians, and outlaws fleeing in droves from the East where the law was clamping down after the throes of reconstruction, peace was a dream that seemed far from realization.

But Tom Nevins understood the paradox which said that peace, like all good things, to be attained must be fought for, and being a man of judgment and ability, competent in all branches of frontier lore, and able with arms, he felt it his duty to accept the lawman's job when the sheriff of Valencia County, New Mexico, asked him to act as his deputy in the town of La-

Meet the Checker-Playing Deputy of the Frontier!

guna, and the few solid citizens of that town backed up the request.

"Tom," the sheriff had said, "I know you like to take things easy, but the quickest way you'll be able to, is to take this job and help me clean up the county. For there's no one else in Laguna that has the all around savvy."

But Tom found little that he could get a grip on for a long time. He sat in the shade of the adobe jail playing checkers with his friends until folks began calling him, though not to his face, Lazy Nevins. He was an able checker player, and seemed to prefer that pastime to any other.

Then one day when the heat lay heavy over Laguna, and the people of the town had retired into the depths of the deep walled adobe buildings to glean the lingering coolness of the night, the muffled clopping of a trotting horse entering the one dusty street broke the stillness of the siesta hour, and brought people sleepy eyed to their doors.

Tom Nevins roused off his bunk and came out of the jail. The horse was a bony gray. One hanging rein was broken and he held his head high to avoid stepping on the other. He wore an army type saddle with a pair of saddle-bags attached to the cantle lugs, and on top of them a light blanket roll.

Blood-Stained Saddle

The horse slowed down as the smell of water from the watering trough reached his nostrils, and he walked over and began to suck noisily around his bit. By this time a number of people had gathered around him.

"Blood on the saddle," one of them remarked as Nevins came up.

The deputy touched the ugly, dark stain that had run down the dish of the cantle into the seat. In spite of the hot, drying sun it was still sticky.

"Fresh, too," he remarked. "Anybody know this horse?"

No one had ever seen the beast before, nor did they know the saddle or the brand on the gray's left thigh. Nevins untied the blanket roll from the cantle. Underneath he saw that the straps of the saddle-bags were unbuckled. Except for some articles of spare clothing and a Bible there was nothing in them. There were no marks of identification. He unrolled the blanket and found nothing in there, either, to give a clue to the identity of the owner of the horse.

Bart Hendricks, who had recently experienced a holdup of his mercantile establishment and had been one of the deputy's most persistent critics, spoke up.

"Well, Nevins?" he said. "Looks like robbery and maybe murder. Are you going to shake some action out of that lazy carcass of yours this time, or are we going to have to take the law in our own hands?"

"Don't get your tail in an uproar, Bart," Tom told him dryly.

He selected a few of the most dependable onlookers, and they got their horses. About a mile outside of town they found a man lying near the side of the road. Blood was oozing slowly from a wound in his side and he was holding a bandanna pressed against it in an attempt to stop the flow. He was pale and weak, and so thirsty that his voice came out in a rasping croak.

"Take it easy, my friend," Nevins told him. "You're in good hands now, and you're going' to be all right. Let's have a canteen, boys."

Two of the posse propped the man up in their arms and he drank gratefully. They carried him carefully away from the road and laid him in the shade of a mesquite clump. He was a large blond man with a beard and mustache, and the gray trousers that he wore suggested that he had recently seen service with the Confederate forces.

Tom Nevins sent a man back to town for a wagon and a doctor. After he had cleaned the wound with canteen water and bound it tightly with the tied together neckerchiefs of the posse, he gave the man another drink and told him to rest.

In a little while he was feeling well enough to talk. He was, he said, Clark Forrest Williams, late of the Confederate army and of Mississippi. Like so many others whose plantations had been despoiled and whose fortunes had been dissipated by the war, he had come West in the hope of making a new start in a land far from the scene of tragedy. He

had carried some six hundred dollars in gold in his saddle-bags. This sounds like a lot of gold, but actually at the then current rate would have weighed only about two and a half pounds.

In response to Tom Nevins' questioning he made clear what had happened to him. He had been riding along pleasantly anticipating a night in a bed in Laguna and a meal other than scanty rations cooked over a campfire when a pair of road agents had suddenly ridden with drawn guns out of a mesquite clump similar to the one in which they were now lying. While one held a gun on him and made him keep his hands in the air, the other had gone through his saddle-bags and taken the money.

Unfortunately for Williams, as it turned out, they had neglected to go over him thoroughly enough to find one of the new Colt revolvers that he had concealed in a shoulder holster. After they had made off he had got it out and started firing at them, but at the first shot they had put spurs to their horses and ridden out of range before he could score a hit.

Then one of them had pulled a rifle from a scabbard, turned in his saddle and fired back. It was a lucky shot, perhaps, but it had hit him in the side with a shocking blow that had almost knocked him out of the saddle. He had managed, nevertheless, to turn his horse and hit a high lope toward town. But he hadn't gone very far before he had passed out and had fallen out of the saddle. He didn't know why the bandits hadn't come back to finish him off and dispose of the horse.

"Reckon they were afraid the shootin' might bring someone from town and spoil their getaway," Tom suggested. "Now, feller," he went on, "if you can hold out a mite longer, give us the best description of the two rascals you can."

Nevins Trails Bandits

The stricken man complied as well as he was able. The description wasn't complete but it might serve. Not wanting to waste any more time than was necessary Deputy Nevins left Williams under the care of the posse to wait for the wagon and doctor, and began to follow the tracks of the thieves.

Nevins was a spare, wiry man, tough as a maverick longhorn, keen of eye and quick in his movements. If there was anything lazy about him, it was in a dislike of engaging in a lot of unnecessary physical activity. He had no admiration for a man who made a lot of breeze riding around the country with his elbows flapping and accomplishing nothing. He believed in using his head to spare his hide.

In the time he had been deputy he had made a systematic study of the history and habits of the badmen of that country. He had discovered that many of them holed up in the little town of Magdalena, or used it as a way station on the way to the Border, and it soon became evident that his quarry was headed in that direction. So with only an occasional check to make sure that he had not lost their tracks, which he had memorized thoroughly, he kept pointing toward that settlement.

Magdalena was some seventy miles south of Laguna straight down the valley between the Sangre de Christos, San Andreas and the Sacramentos on the east and the mighty Rockies on the west. That was a long ride for any horse, but Nevins was well mounted on a desert hardened, line-backed buckskin, much longer legged than is usual with that type—an ideal road horse if ever there was one.

He gave the beast rest and water as he crossed Arroyo Colorado and then eased him along through the day. It was sunset by the time he reached the Salado that flowed northeast into the Rio Grande. There he stripped off his saddle and let the buckskin drink and graze at the end of his throw rope while he stretched out on the warm ground and relaxed—of course only after having made sure that the thieves had crossed the river some time ahead of him.

From there on into Magdalena in the cool of the evening he pushed the line-back right along and they made good time. It was only about eleven in the evening—they had left Laguna around nine-thirty in the morning—when they approached the town. In 1869 Magdalena consisted of little more than a single street with nine buildings on one

side and eleven on the other. Of the twenty structures eight were combination saloons and dance halls. Two were "hotels," and one was a restaurant. Another was a store where you could buy anything from buttons to bullets.

Magdalena was in Socorro County and therefore out of Deputy Tom Nevins' jurisdiction, so he would have to enlist the help of the local law in arresting the fugitives—if he caught up with them. He veered away from the main street, and riding quietly back of the building pulled up and dismounted back of the combination jail and sheriff's office. He entered and made himself known to Deputy Sam Dowing.

Dowing listened with interest to Nevins' story. At the end Tom said, "I'd like to amble around town and see if I can spot those two. If they are here, I'll try to take them in."

"I'll go along with you," Dowing proposed. "That'll make it legal."

Nevins said he'd be glad to have him. At the first three saloons they visited they drew blanks. In the fourth Nevins was just deciding they had drawn another blank when Dowing said, "There's a special gambling room in the back. Let's look in there."

Outlaws Turn the Tables

They walked past the long bar that stood along one wall. Nevins eased open the door to the back room, and keeping as much out of sight as he could, peered in. At a large round table sat eight men playing poker. All looked grim. The clothes of two of the men drew the attention of the Laguna deputy. They tallied with the partial descriptions given by the wounded Williams. The two sat next to each other. One was quite broad of shoulder, bearded, wore his hair pushed far back, and had a blue and white kerchief around his neck. The other, thin and taller, was smooth shaven, with his dark hair worn long in the fashion that Custer was making famous. The left pocket of his dark shirt was torn. The description fitted.

The lawmen retreated from the door. At the bar Nevins suggested that they wait outside for the two robbers. They went out and moved around to the alley of the saloon which separated it from its neighbor less than five feet away. They stood facing the street sure that they'd catch sight of the road agents when they left the premises. They hadn't long to wait.

Suddenly each felt the barrel of a gun in his back. There was a curt command.

"Reach, lawmen, reach high!"

The two thieves had evidently caught on to the visit to the gambling room, had come out the back way, and had sneaked up quietly on the soft dust.

Both Nevins and Dowing seemed to realize the same thing at the same time. If they made a false move these two would shoot; if they allowed them to get out of town they'd be shot once the men felt themselves free from pursuit. Both lawmen were trained for just such an emergency, and both acted at once. Lazy Nevins turned abruptly on the man behind him, and grabbed for the wrist of the hand that was holding the gun on his back. The gun went off in the surprised bandit's hand, and the bullet took Nevins in the left thigh. But Nevins had a two-handed grip on the gun, and with a clever twist wrested it away. Somehow Dowing had been equally lucky—luckier in fact, for the other man's shot had gone entirely wild.

Now it was Nevins and Dowing who were holding the guns. A crowd streamed out of the saloon attracted by the shooting. Dowing, as deputy, commandeered several he knew to help the wounded Nevins, while he marched the two badmen off to the local jail.

A few days later, Nevins, having obtained extradition papers giving him authority to take the bandits back for trial to the county in which their crime had been committed, rode down the main street of Laguna with the pair riding in front of him. A crowd gathered as he approached the jail. Clark Forrest Williams was there, the bandage around his middle a thick bulge under his shirt. Bart Hendricks was there too, looking a bit sheepish. "Well, Nevins, I reckon I owe you an apology," he said manfully.

"That's all right, Bart," Nevins told him, grinning. "All I want is peace, but sometimes I have to get after folks who interfere with it. And now, I could go for a game of checkers. . . ."

THE TRAIL BOSS

(Continued from page 9)

1948-49. Such a cross would have a tremendous economic value and a far-reaching effect on the northern cattle industry as a whole. As a matter of fact Governmental experimental farms in Canada have been quietly working on the project for well over a quarter of a century.

Heretofore, the toughest problem in cross-breeding buffalo with domestic cattle has been the high percentage of sterility in the resulting cattalos—especially in the males. Not until cattalos will regularly beget other cattalos can a definite cross breed really be established.

But even on this score progress is being made. We can make no definite predictions at this time but someday the cattalo may emerge as the answer to the blizzard problem on our northern ranges. The buffalo—or at least part of him—will be back on his ancestral grazing grounds.

And back this time to stay

Just thought you'd like to know, Trail Hands. It is one of the many interesting yet little-told-about facets of the West's great and thrilling cow country. So long for now. See you all again next issue.

—*The Trail Boss*

OUR NEXT ISSUE

LARRY DICKON was an outlaw with thousands of dollars in reward money offered for him, dead or alive, and it is he who tells his story of being hunted by the law, and canny old Sheriff Wally Ops in particular, in Max Brand's great novel, "Trouble Trail," which will head the list of colorful reading in store for you in the next issue of TRIPLE WESTERN.

The reason Larry had never been caught was largely due to the wonderful horse he rode. Cherry Pie, he called her, and the best was none too good for Cherry, as far as the outlaw was concerned. But with Sheriff Wally Ops and posse breathing ever hotter on the back of his neck, the best wasn't always obtainable, and so Larry cooked up a scheme that he hoped would take some of the heat off him.

While the sheriff was out hunting him, he would slip back to the sheriff's ranch and kidnap his pretty daughter, Julie, and then trade her back to the sheriff in return for the promise that the law lay off chasing him for a while—at least till Cherry had a chance to rest up and get some meat back on her bones.

But at the sheriff's place an incident occurred that turned him from his plan. As night fell and he sneaked up to a window of the ranchhouse, he found a fresh loganberry pie cooling on the sill, and to a man who hadn't been eating regular the temptation was too great. Larry took the pie down and ate it whole.

Then when the sheriff's good wife found the pie gone she scathingly blamed the son, Lew, for pilfering it. Lew denied it, of course, and was promptly twisted by the ear and accused of lying. But Julie intervened at this point, confessing that she had eaten the pie, and Larry Dickon, already much taken by the girl's good looks, decided then and there he would have to square things with her.

What happened in the next few minutes can best be told by Larry himself, in his own inimitable way:

I parted my hair with my hands, dusted the inch of sand off my coat and face, and sashayed up to the front door. Lew came in answer to my knock.

"Hello, Lew," says I. "Is your sister here?"

"Hello," says Lew. "Who might you be? Sure she's here. Come on in."

I said I was all over dust from a long ride and would he just call his sister to the door? He said he would, and along came the sheriff's daughter. She walked out onto the porch and stood looking up at me. She didn't come no higher than my chin, or not much, because I was made more broad than long.

I told her I had come with a message from Danny Murphy, who I knew was supposed to take her to the dance that night, and I said Danny had got held up and wouldn't be along till about an hour later than he had expected.

"What in the world has happened?" says Julie. 'Has he had another fight? He promised me—oh, well." She stopped. "I didn't hear you say who you were?"

"Name is Ripley," called Hank. "I was riding past Danny's place, down the road, and he spotted me."

"Isn't it odd," said Julie, "that Danny never mentioned your name to me? And you must be a deputy, wearing two guns like that." She was laughing a little as she reached into the nearest holster and pulled a Colt out. Says she: "Hold up your hands, Mr. Ripley!"

I could feel the nose of that gun jabbed into my floating ribs and she had a steady hand. Her eye was steady, too.

"Please don't do that, Miss Ops," says I. "Even a sheriff's daughter might make mistakes while she was joking.

"Is this a joke?" says she. "Keep your hands level with your head and don't do anything jumpy."

She was cool about it. She didn't raise her voice a mite.

I don't suppose I ever done anything in my life that was harder than lifting my hands up and getting them past where I could grab that gun. But something told me that she was not bluffing.

"I'd like to know why this is done to me," I said.

"Because no road runs past the Murphy place," said Julie. "The road just ends there! Now step over to the window where there'll be a bit of light on your face."

I obeyed, all the time hoping she wouldn't recognize me. Then I remembered her father had scattered pictures of me all over the mountains, and she wasn't blind.

"Larry Dickon!" she gasped, and the pressure of the Colt weakened just a mite.

I brought down my left hand like a shot and grabbed the gun and her hand that held it and with the other hand I caught and held her.

"You young she-devil!" I said.

Jammed up against me, she said so quiet that nobody but me could have heard: "Larry Dickon, you have killed Danny!"

Cool? Tool-proof steel, she was.

"No," I says, "he's safe and sound."

"Well, then," says she, "do you mind hugging me not quite so tight? I can't breathe very well."

I loosened up right quick. "I sure beg your pardon," I told her. "I didn't aim to—er—I mean—"

"To hug me?" said Julie Ops. "Oh, that's all right. But what is all this driving at? Am I to be kidnaped to get even with Dad for hunting you?"

"I would say," said I, "that you have come pretty near to it. But one thing stood in between."

"Well?" said this girl.

"A pie," said I. "A loganberry pie. I ate it and thought I'd better come around and explain. And for the sake of the way you stood by Lew, I wanted you to tell me what I could do to make up."

She looked me right in the eye and she said: "If you're here, Cherry Pie isn't far off. I'd like to see Cherry."

I reached for the nearest wooden pillar of that veranda and steadied myself. I have known hardy gents to turn white at the sight of me, because of what folks have said about me, and what the fool newspapers have printed. But this girl didn't bat an eyelash as she walked through the moonglow with me to see close up the horse that the whole country was talking about

And so begins one of the strangest romances you will ever read, between the notorious Larry Dickon and the daughter of the

sheriff who had dedicated himself to bringing him in at any cost. It's a novel filled with the gripping suspense of a man hunted, yet a man who has not forgotten how to live and laugh. A novel we predict you'll fully enjoy is Max Brand's "Trouble Trail," coming up!

Second on the list of three big novels in the next issue of TRIPLE WESTERN, is "Boss of the Rolling M" by Betrand W. Sinclair. It's a tense novel of action on the wide-open range, and concerns chiefly the mystery which confronts Ches Williams, who has been riding the hard trails all over the West for four years, when he finally returns to familiar graze.

For instance, who had framed the lie that old Baldy Cooper had been rustling Half Moon stock from Ches' father, king of the cattlemen for counties around? And who had killed Baldy? And why was Vinnie Cooper, the pretty ash blonde with whom Ches had practically been brought up, now slinging hash for a living when Baldy had earned good pay for years as wagon boss of Half Moon as well as owning a little spread of his own?

And what was the hold that Frank Duchain, new foreman of Half Moon, had on the old cattle king, Ches' father, that made the elder Williams look as though the devil himself had him by the shirt-tails? And what was it that had led the old man to all but retire and let Duchain run the Half Moon empire as he chose?

Ches meant to get these answers if it was the last thing he did, and from the grim warnings he got to clear out and keep riding, and from the lead thrown at him under cover of night, it looked as though it might very well be his last act.

But Ches, who had inherited a goodly chunk of grass called the Rolling M from an uncle, wasn't an easy man to scare off. And when he went into the cow business, with the aid of some old friends and a new kid who called himself Mike Stratton, who could sling a gun with the best of them despite his tender years, why all hell just naturally popped four ways from the middle of the little Montana town of Saco.

You're in for some mighty jolting surprises in this epic novel of the old West, "Boss of the Rolling M," by Bertrand W. Sinclair. Full of the sound of guns and the warmer, more personal notes in a cowboy's

[*Turnpage*]

life, it's a tale well worth the reading.

To give you the widest variety of Western entertainment, Number Three novel is about a young engineer, a former cowhand, "Curly" Wolfe, who rushes back home when he hears that old Zack Wolfe, his rancher father, is suffering from a case of bullet poisoning.

A couple of Zack's loyal hands tell young Curly that they had trailed the two horses that had ridden up the night the old man was called out of the house and shot, and that the trail led straight to Andy Parson's corral. Andy Parsons had been one of Zack's closest friends in the old days and was the father of Sue Parsons, Curly's best girl, so this was a thing hard for him to believe.

But that a feud was on between the ranches of the two former old friends was soon made clearly evident. And Curly found himself square in the middle of said feud, as well as in the middle of a bullet-studded argument over the rights and advisability of constructing a new dam to furnish irrigation and power for that swiftly developing section of Arizona.

"Power of the Cross P" is the title of this fast novel by Ralph Anderson Bennitt. And besides some real brawling good action of the he-man variety, it contains some right interesting characters on the distaff side—such as pert and pretty Sue Parsons, and the beauteous, exotic brunette, Leah-Rose Lander, who had been bullet-widowed but a short time before and meant to find out by whom and why.

For some thoroughly entertaining reading, we can sincerely recommend any or all of the three novels we've briefly noted here and which you will find (all three of them) in the next TRIPLE WESTERN. More fine short stories and features will be included, of course, as well as the usual departments that are a part of every issue. So be on hand for a feast of reading pleasure in the next TRIPLE WESTERN.

FROM OUR READERS

FROM out of the Southwest—Phoenix, Arizona, to be specific—comes an interesting letter signed by Louis Del Rose. Says Louis:

I've been a TRIPLE WESTERN fan since the magazine started, a couple of years back, being

at once attracted by the many "name" writers it features. In no other magazine that I know of can you find novels by, say, Max Brand, William MacLeod Raine, and B. M. Bower, or others equally as well known, all in the same issue. These authors are not famous without good reason, and since by nature I'm not a gambler, I part with my hard-earned coin only when I'm assured of getting back its worth or better in first-rate stories. And so far, let me say, these authors have yet to let me down. In fact, speaking monetarily again, I feel that I'm considerable money ahead for having bought every issue of TRIPLE WESTERN to date.

Well, that's one way of looking at it, Louis, and not a bad way at all, we'd say. As a matter of fact, it was on this premise we began the magazine in the first place, but it has been you and thousands like you who have proven the idea really a sound one by regularly purchasing the magazine, for which you have our deepest appreciation, leave us say right here and now.

And now from Cleveland, Ohio, comes a note from Jim McClellan to the following effect:

Always have been going to drop you a line, but you know how it is—one thing after another popping to make you put it aside till tomorrow when something else pops up. But anyhow, after your June issue and your super swell novels "The Desert's Price" by William MacLeod Raine and "The Hard Riders" by Tom J. Hopkins, I finally got myself in hand, or anyways this leaky pen, for long enough to jot down these pearls you read. Seriously, though, you give us more like the June number and you won't make me mad at all. Really enjoyed your article about Wild Bill Hickok's shoot-fest with the McCanles gang, too. Keep 'em coming as good as this and you got my vote

Thankee kindly, Jim, for your good words. And if you liked that June issue, we don't see how you can miss on the one coming up, particularly in the case of Max Brand's "Trouble Trail" about an outlaw who laughed at the law but was a heap gooder'n he was bad, for all of that.

[*Turn page*]

Room for one more short one from Beth Wilks of Trenton, New Jersey:

I'm a Max Brand fan myself, and since you seem to average a novel by him in every other issue or so, I'm also a TRIPLE WESTERN fan. He's one of the few writers I've ever read who tells a story so naturally you never realize you're sitting in a chair reading. Instead, you're transported deep into the West and are really living every word. Brothers, there is a writer!

We agree, of course, or we wouldn't be using so many of his fine novels. But thanks just the same, Beth, for saving it so nicely.

And so we come to the end of another issue. There'll be more excerpts from our mailbag next time. And we'd sure like to hear from a lot more of you out there, so why not let the things that pop up to intervene just go ahead and pop for a few minutes and get yourself in hand, like Jim McClellan above, and drop a card or letter to The Editor, TRIPLE WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N.Y. Our thanks once again to all of you, and so long till next issue.

—THE EDITOR.

MOUNTAIN MEN DIE HARD

(Concluded from page 152)

change your mind about helping us?"

"My dad. They killed him, too, and that made me realize nobody was safe as long as people like that was around. So I went and got 'em for you. I'm sorry I turned you down before. I see things different, now."

"I was going to talk to you about that later," Marshal Tobin said. "You're too decent a young man to even think of protecting that type of trash, even by silence. That just makes it tougher on decent people. If those three young Blessings hadn't got drunk and talked down at the livery stable, we wouldn't have got the tip-off and broke up their robbing. But I reckon you'd rather hear this—the state has a standing reward for bank robbers, you know. A thousand dollars a head. And another thing, I'll give Crane a talking to, and make him give you your job back."

"I don't believe I'll take it," Jim Dayton answered. "I think I'll take that money and re-open the old farm and raise horses. That's what dad hoped to do and I feel the same way."

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