



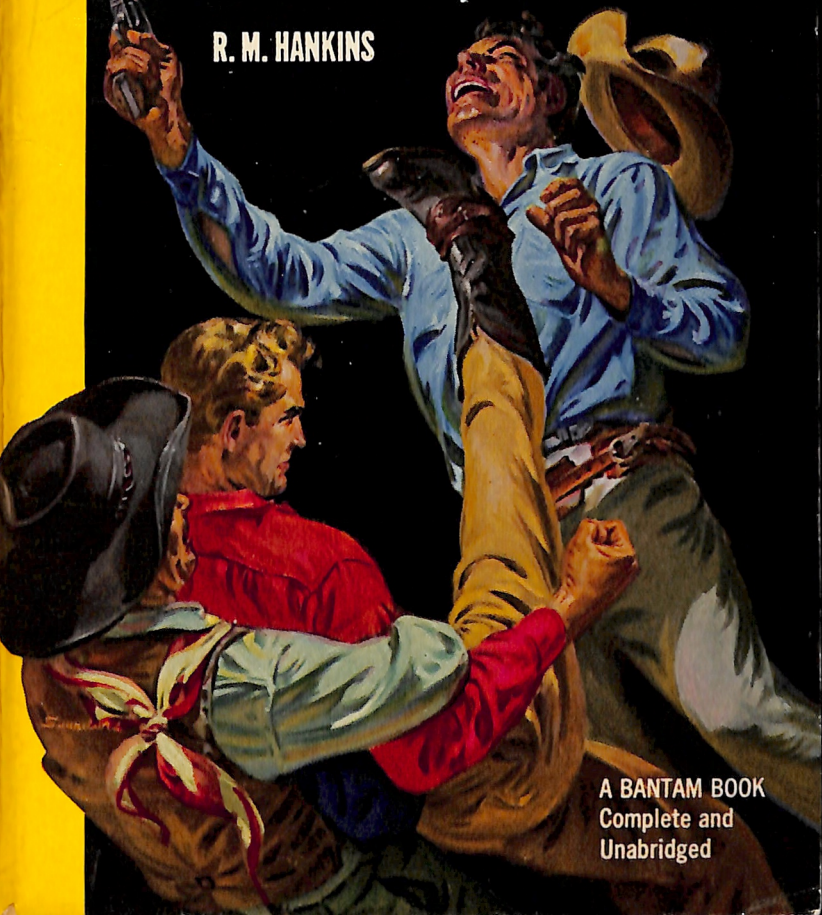
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A TEXAS OUTLAW ON THE LOOSE

RIO GRANDE KID

(LONESOME RIVER JUSTICE)

R. M. HANKINS



**A BANTAM BOOK
Complete and
Unabridged**

EDWARD J. J. MARHEFKA
633 HIGH ST.
CLINTON, MASS.

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Lefty Allen—OUTLAW KILLER!

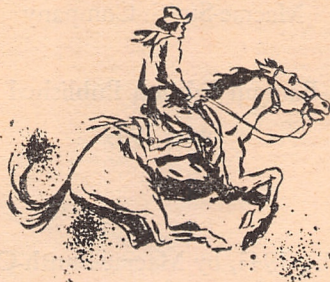
You could forget all those wild stories of Lefty Allen robbing the bank at Alpine, riding hell-for-leather through New Mexico and Texas, holding up the Southern Pacific, cracking the Chino safe. You could forgive a hungry man for beefing somebody else's steers, stealing a little bit away from them that had plenty. But when Lefty's hand went inside his shirt to his hide-out gun, when he shot a defenseless man right through the heart, that was more than any man could stand.

Was this the killer coming out in the man who once had sworn off killing? Was Lefty Allen still a killer, nothing but a killer? Or was the kid with the flashing gun and the hard fists doing what he had to do . . . no matter how it looked . . . even if he'd hang? Here is a startling Western thriller, swift as the pounding hoofs of an outlaw pony—a smashing yarn of a killer who could do no good until *all* the chips were down.

About THE COVER

Two against one—but Lefty Allen, outlaw from the Rio Grande country, was not through. Not even with a gun shot in his shoulder, and losing blood fast! Artist Norman Saunders catches all the smashing action of a fighting man's battle for a ranch and his life, with the odds two against one, just as they always seemed to be whenever Lefty Allen faced danger.

Rio Grande Kid



Originally published under the title
Lonesome River Justice

by
R. M. HANKINS



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This book
is for
SARITA

CAST OF CHARACTERS

LEFTY ALLEN: he could whip a knife out of his sleeve faster than any outlaw alive.

HUGH McGOVERN: wicked with a bottle of Old Crow.

JACK HAMLIN: two-fisted owner of the Jack-in-the-Box ranch.

PHILADELPHIA FILLY: prettier than a red heifer.

THREE JAY JOHNSON: he went riding with the Filly—and never toted a gun.

JOE WHEELER: a cocky young banker and ranch owner.

OLD HENNERY: Jack-in-the-Box cook and champion liar.

FATHER ANTONIO: a good man.

JEOPARDY JONES: a killing deputy.

"HELL, HUGH, I know you ain't mixed up in it," the sheriff said, "but there ain't any doubt about your foreman. We got plenty evidence to prove he done it—so don't go off half cocked and call me seven kinds of a liar. Can't see why you'd want to hire an outlaw in the first place."

"All right, John," I told him, floored by the warrant he had out for Lefty Allen—not for murder, as I had expected, but for bank robbery. "Don't know why he'd want to rob a bank—he's welcome to anything I've got and he knows it. You reckon you can corral him yourself, without sending Jeopardy after him?"

"Do my best, Hugh," the sheriff said. "Somebody likely will get killed if I send Jeopardy after him."

"Lefty know this warrant is out?" I asked.

"Nope, don't think he does, Hugh."

"Reckon I'll ride with you," I told him; "could be that I might get him to give up without a fight." I could get Lefty Allen out of jail and help him get to Mexico—but Lefty Allen dead I couldn't do anything about.

It all had me stumped for sure. Why, if Lefty Allen had wanted my right eye I would have given it to him and never asked him what he was going to do with it or was he ever going to bring it back. Lefty hadn't asked me any questions that time when Frank Reilly's gang had me and Jack Hamlin with our tails in a crack. No, sir—Lefty had pulled his guns and started shooting and damned near died from the wounds he got saving Jack Hamlin's life and mine.

Lefty was welcome to anything I had and anything that Jack Hamlin had—and Lefty knew it! Why the hell he had to go and rustle cattle and rob banks when he had the world by the tail was more than I could figure out!

Sure, Lefty Allen had been an outlaw, but he'd lived it down the four years he'd been working on the Jack-In-The-Box. He'd proved out good those four years. He was level headed and hard working. He hadn't pulled a gun on any-

body, or been in any fights, or got drunk in public. He'd made as good a foreman as you could ask for—and the boys all would have followed him to hell and back. He was a man, Lefty Allen was! I couldn't have thought any more of him if he had been my own son—and it didn't add up right, him going to the bad when there was no need of it.

It could have been the Philadelphia Filly that caused it. Women have been known to upset many an applecart—and she let him down right bad and right afterward he started going haywire.

Father Antonio claims it was just Lefty's past catching up with him, like a bill collector. Father Antonio says that whatever you do you got to pay for—and that Lefty's past just naturally crept up on him and sucked him down again.

I reckon I better rub out and start at the beginning—and tell you how Lefty Allen went to the bad on us and there was hell to pay on Lonesome River!

If you go back and study the deal Lefty Allen got when he was a kid, and where he grew up and all, you'll wonder that he didn't turn out worse than he did. Hell, the deck was stacked against him from the start. He didn't have a chance to live decent. He got shoved outside the law when he was twelve years old and he had to stay there to keep alive.

Lefty never told me the whole story all in one chunk, but little by little it all came out—and here is how I pieced it together:

Seems like Lefty's folks had run a ranch of their own down in the Big Bend. Nothing big, but they worked hard and saved their money and had a tidy little nest egg in the bank when bandits from across the Rio Grande killed them both and ran off their stock—leaving Lefty an orphan. The court appointed some orphanage Lefty's guardian and they took Lefty to raise until he was of age.

As I said, Lefty was only twelve at the time—but he did a man's work for them every day until he was nigh on to

seventeen. By then he thought he ought to be getting a little pay like other folks did—and one day he mentioned the matter. The old skinflint that ran the Orphanage told Lefty to get back to work and mind his own business.

Lefty mulled this over in his mind for a few days, and finally decided he'd better start out and see some of the world and get him a job that paid him some money. So he asked the old skinflint that ran the orphanage for some of the money that had been left in trust by Lefty's parents.

"What money was that?" the old codger asked.

"The money my folks left me," Lefty told him, "somewheres around fifteen hundred dollars."

"Oh, that," the old codger told him. "Hell, son, you done used that up. You been here five years now. Board and room's a dollar a day here. Likely you owe us a little something by now. Have to figure it up."

Right there is what started Lefty off on the wrong side of the law, this old codger charging him board and room all the time he had been doing a man's work. That very night Lefty stole a horse and a gun and headed for the border, over the Rio Grande into Mexico. About a week later some Mexican bandits found him, half starved, and took him in hand. Took a liking to Lefty, they did, and made a bandit out of him.

Lefty rode with these Mexican bandits for two years, cutting wood and cooking for them—learning to ride and shoot and whip a knife out of his sleeve and all the other tricks an outlaw needs to keep alive. Finally he helped drive a herd of stolen Terrazas steers to sell up in Texas. They crossed the border near Ft. Davis, sold their steers—and Lefty got a tidy sum for his share.

With money in his pockets Lefty drifted into El Paso, figuring that his horse stealing had been forgotten the couple of years he'd been in Mexico. The very first night he was in El Paso he made the mistake of showing his roll in a saloon and got sand-bagged and robbed of his money before the night was over. Had to take a job swamping in

a saloon—a job that doesn't do a hell of a lot to improve the morals of a nineteen-year-old kid that already had the wrong slant on the world.

Even then Lefty's instincts must have been all right—he must have come from good stock—for he saved enough money to buy him a horse and another gun. Maybe I give him too much credit—maybe he was just too smart to steal another horse that would be easy to trace. Anyways, he got him a little stake together and hit the trail. He drifted all through New Mexico, Colorado and Wyoming—working when he could get work, rustling a steer or two when he couldn't—and finally wound up in Casper, Wyoming. Casper was wide open in those days and Lefty ended up behind the eight ball again.

Yes sir, Lefty got all tangled up with the law in Casper—and he was just as innocent as a new born babe. He got sucked in to something by a lot of thick-headed law men. He got thrown in jail because he couldn't prove he wasn't an outlaw—not because the law proved he was one.

Lefty was sitting in a saloon, drinking some beer and reading a catalogue and minding his own business—when a fight broke out between some deputies and some known outlaws. The law finally got the best of it—and Lefty got taken for one of the outlaws and thrown in the hoosegow with them. He was a total stranger—he didn't have a friend or acquaintance in Casper. He packed two guns and had a good-sized roll of money on him. He looked like an outlaw and he couldn't prove different—so the judge gave him ten years in the Wyoming penitentiary!

Ten years—just for being in the same saloon with some outlaws! If that's the law, Lefty thought, to hell with it—he'd live outside the law, when and if he got out of the penitentiary. And get out he did! Three months later he and four or five others escaped, killing a couple of guards in the break—and Lefty wound up with a price on his head and his face plastered up in all the post offices in the state.

It was a case of eat dog or die—so Lefty strung along with

the outlaws—robbing a few trains, knocking off a country bank or two, rustling some cattle now and then—just taking a little away from those that had plenty. Reckon there wasn't much else he could do—but he was bound to wind up stretching a rope sooner or later—and that's just what he did. But I'm getting ahead of my story.

In spite of all that Lefty pulled on us later, and it was plenty, I always believed him when he said he never killed a man that didn't have his gun out and needed killing. That's why he busted up with the Wyoming gang. They got to killing too free and easy—and Lefty didn't like the idea of shooting folks for money. He didn't mind the stealing—but he didn't like the killing—so he drifted over the divide and out to California.

The honest folks were all starving to death out in California. The gamblers and the thieves took everything that anybody had. The miners dug the gold and the gamblers tricked them out of it. The ranchers raised the stock and the outlaws rustled it.

Lefty tried working for wages for a while, but prices were so high that he hardly earned what he ate—and so, in the end, he took up with Ace Bridgers' gang!

Lefty rode with Ace Bridgers for a couple of months, but the pickings were kinda slim—there was a lot of competition and protection came high. Ace was just about down to his last few dollars one day, and started to raid a mission. Lefty had to kill him and two, three more to keep them from it—and had to high tail out of California with the rest of Ace's gang on his trail.

Mexico seemed like a peaceful place to Lefty after all he had been through, so he drifted down there for a spell, sorta resting up where he had friends and was liked. But shucks—a man gets lonesome for his own kind, no matter how nice he is being treated—and Lefty finally got back to El Paso and got him a job dealing stud at the Silver Dollar. Made himself a nice stake and built himself up a reputation

as an honest dealer. Might have still been there if Johnny Dow hadn't got drunk and lost his shirt.

They tell me that Johnny Dow called Lefty plenty of hard names, but that Lefty was right patient with him and told him to go on home and sober up. Folks that were there say that Lefty took a lot from that young whippersnapper, trying to stay out of trouble—but trouble was still dogging Lefty Allen's trail!

In the end Johnny Dow pulled a gun—and Lefty couldn't do anything else but plug him. Tried to break an arm, but he got Johnny Dow too high up in the shoulder and he died a couple of days later from some fancy infection.

Now Johnny Dow was a young rake-hell, but he came from a family that had plenty of property and ran cattle on both sides of the Rio Grande. Yes sir, Johnny Dow's folks stood in pretty good with the law—and Lefty Allen didn't stand a chance of getting out of the killing. He had to high tail it again—two jumps ahead of a posse!

Lefty crossed the Rio Grande, went west a piece and doubled back into New Mexico. Three days later found him up on Salt Creek, just one big ache from three days and nights in the saddle. A nester family took him in and fed him and let him rest himself and his horse. Not bad folks, those nesters—they took right good care of Lefty and shared what they had with him—even when their old man had broke his leg and couldn't get out to kill them some meat. Yes sir, they fed Lefty even when their own larder was running low.

According to Lefty's ideas these nesters had helped him—so he had to help them. The quickest way to get them some more grub was to rustle a steer and butcher it for them—and *the first steer he came to was a Jack-In-The-Box steer!* If it had been anybody else's steer but ours all that happened afterward never would have happened. But it was a Jack-in-The-Box steer—and five of us rode up and caught him and threw down on him before he could get a gun out.

We'd caught quite a few rustlers that year and turned 'em over to the law—but the law never could convict any of 'em—so we decided to just go ahead and hang the next one ourselves—and Lefty was the next one!

"You wouldn't, by any chance, be stealing that steer, would you, stranger?" I asked him when we had the rope around his neck.

"Mister," said this Lefty Allen, "you are plumb clairvoyant. You can see clear to the heart of a thing right off. It must be a gift." I can still remember the guts of him—a rope around his neck, laughing at us!

"You don't have any friends you want any dying messages sent to, do you, stranger?" I asked.

"Nope, Mister," this guy answered, "I'm high, low, jack and the game in this deal. Nobody was with me—so why drag it out? Go ahead and get it over with before you lose your nerve."

"All right, stranger," I told him, sorta admiring his nerve. "Pull him up, boys!"

But Lady Luck was siding with Lefty Allen that day and he didn't get strung up after all. Young Jack Hamlin came riding along and stopped us right then and there. He was the guy we worked for—and we did what he said as long as we drew his pay, whether we liked it or not.

They say one curly wolf recognizes another—and Jack Hamlin took a liking to Lefty on sight and gave him a job—and Lefty followed Jack around like a dog, thinking of nothing but Jack's interests. We were all sort of down on Jack Hamlin at the time—he was suspected of killing his own brother-in-law and a lot more meanness—so it was Lefty and Jack against the whole blamed country for a while. But Lefty and Jack cleared the trouble up and made us all look like mighty small potatoes.

I never was much of a religious man. It had been a long, long time since I had been to Sunday School—but I'll always remember something about "greater love hath no man than he lay down his life for a friend." Maybe those

aren't the exact words of it, but that's the rough idea.

That's what sold me on Lefty Allen, the rustler. He practically laid down his life for Jack Hamlin—a little later on in a ruckus with Frank Reilly's gang. Lefty Allen pulled his guns and started shooting at seven of them, all with their guns in their hands—to save Jack Hamlin's life and mine. He just the same as laid down his life—only Doc McClary sewed him up and stopped the bleeding and Miss Sally, Jack's wife, nursed him back to health again.

So now you see why I was for Lefty Allen—win, lose or draw. You see why I didn't go prying into his past—why I didn't give a hoot where he'd been or what he'd stolen or who he'd killed!

You can see why I rode with Sheriff Banks that day to try and keep Lefty Allen from getting killed—even when I knew, like the sheriff did, that Lefty had robbed the bank. Even when I knew, like the sheriff didn't, that Lefty had been stealing from his own spread and had killed a man in cold blood!

2

SEEMS KINDA funny, somehow, a man using the training he got as an outlaw to make a cattle ranch pay more money—but that's just what Lefty Allen did on the Jack-in-The-Box after he got made foreman. Not rustling or brand blotting—that ain't what I mean. What Lefty did for us he did honest enough.

Take an outlaw, now—if he wants to last he has got to think of all the things that could happen to him and see that they don't happen. All the ways the law can get him, all the tricks that can be used against him—he's got to figure them out and build up a defense against them before they happen! In planning a robbery he's got to know how many men he's up against, study their habits and such, and figure what accidents could happen. And then he's got to know how to get around those things.

So, after I'd sorta slowed down and retired and Lefty got made foreman, he went to work on the cattle business with the same general idea in mind. I don't think he knew he was doing it, exactly—I think it was his instincts of self-preservation sorta transferring themselves to Jack Hamlin's interests. Lefty was all right with the local law and didn't have to do more than the average amount of looking out for himself—so those instincts just naturally went to work somewheres else!

"What do you do, Hugh," he asked me one day, "when you have a hell of a hard winter and it snows like blue blazes and the cattle can't scratch down to grass?"

"Why, we lose a lot of stock," I told him. "Sometimes we're able to buy a little hay down in Silver City, but mostly they don't have any, because they never know when we're going to have a bad winter. But we don't have more than one hard winter in five—so why lose any sleep over it?"

"Every steer we lose is thirty, forty bucks," Lefty answered. "You reckon you could get one of the boys to ride herd on a plow?"

"Yea, I guess we could—not that any of them would be overjoyed to do it. What you aiming to plow?"

"Hell, Hugh, they ain't no use letting a lot of good steers starve to death when we got lots of good bottom land along Lonesome River and plenty water to irrigate with. I'm going to raise us some hay and feed them steers the next time it snows."

"Might be an idea, son," I told him. "How you going to work it?"

"Shucks, I don't aim to work it," Lefty laughed. "I thought of it—you're going to work it. You've been honing for weeks to up and take a trip somewheres and you ain't had no reason for it. Seems like you could take a trip without a reason, but I reckon you ain't built that way. But now you got one."

"Yea, you're right, son. Never was one to go somewheres just to be going. Where am I going now, and why?"

"Hell, I never bought no plows and things," Lefty said. "Where do you suppose a man ought to go to get a good outfit?"

"Kansas City is a right nice place," I told him. "Haven't been there in years. Likely they sell plows and such. What all you want me to get?"

"Shucks, I wouldn't know." Lefty scratched his head. "You go on and find out what it takes to raise hay and buy a whole hell of a lot of it. Plows and harrows and mowers and stackers and all. Likely you better get a ton or so of seed. Better go to a good place and find out all about it and get 'em to write it down for you—and come spring we'll plant us a couple a hundred acres of hay."

So I went to Kansas City and had me a little fun and bought us a mess of plows and harrows and mowers and all—and come spring we planted a lot of alfalfa down on Lonesome River, with a nurse crop of rye to shade it until it got its growth. Old Hennery used some of the rye that fall to make him some drinking alcohol and it turned out even more potent than the stuff he made out of potatoes.

The boys didn't like it much when we made 'em jockey plows around—but we raised us a nice lot of hay and that very winter it saved a lot of stock for us. Saved some time, too—didn't need to do so much riding, tailing steers out of snowdrifts and such. Our losses weren't hardly anything that winter.

That was just one of the ways that Lefty Allen helped us keep out of trouble that could be dodged. He got the boys busy and fenced all the mudholes and quicksand so that cattle couldn't bog down and starve to death before we found 'em and dragged 'em out.

Hired a professional wolf hunter, too, Lefty did, and got rid of all the lobos that pulled down our calf crop. He studied all the cattle magazines and read up on blackleg and scientific dehorning and such. He even got some blooded bulls that toned up our stock to where it was weighing a lot more than the average.

Yes sir, by learning to figure out things before they happened, Lefty Allen had trained himself to make a blamed good cattleman—and the Jack-In-The-Box prospered while Lefty was ramrodding it. He made a Grade-A foreman. He was rough and tough enough when he had to be and the boys all respected him. He did two men's work himself and never asked anybody to do anything he couldn't do.

For an ex-outlaw who had lived by his guns for five or six years, Lefty did a helluva good job of staying out of trouble, too. All he seemed interested in was making Jack Hamlin's ranch pay for him. Jack really didn't care a lot whether it paid or not—he had enough money coming in from his coal mine to keep him busy night and day trying to spend it—but as long as Lefty enjoyed running the ranch Jack gave him a free hand.

No sir, Lefty didn't do any shooting to speak of the first four years he worked for us—right up to the day he shot Three Jay Johnson. Just one time did I even see him pull a gun to get out of trouble.

Something I didn't understand was brewing even then—something I never even guessed was going on. Somebody must have been gunning for Lefty—but I had no way of knowing it—and he never let on that it had him worried.

Lefty and I had been over toward Georgetown, looking at some of his prize bulls he'd bought, and we thought we'd just as well go on in to town and see if they had any cold beer—it being a warm day—and maybe sit in a friendly game of cards. We were standing at the bar, minding our own business, when a hard-looking young squirt came in and ordered a double whiskey.

He was a right tough looking kid, just plain bad from the looks of him. He gulped his double whiskey and let it sort of take hold—studying Lefty all the while in the mirror, like he was trying to fit Lefty's looks to a picture he had in his mind.

"You Lefty Allen?" he asked after a spell.

"Yep," Lefty said, "that's me. What of it?"

"Well, pull your gun, you dirty son," this tough kid said—but Lefty's gun was already poking this kid in the ribs and the kid never even got his gun out.

"How much is Scotch a bottle, George?" Lefty asked the bartender.

"Dunno, Lefty—can't remember ever selling a bottle. Round ten bucks' worth in it when you sell it by the drink, I guess," the bartender told him.

"Wham-wham-wham!" Lefty shot his other gun three times and three bottles of Scotch busted just like that!

"Pay the bartender thirty bucks, stranger," Lefty said, "and figure you're getting off cheap."

This tough kid didn't say a word—the air all went out of him and he planked some gold pieces down on the bar and didn't wait for his change. Didn't even look back—just tore out the door like the devil was after him.

"Old friend, son?" I asked Lefty.

"Never saw the jigger before."

"Likely you should have killed him, son," I told him; "he'll probably lay for you somewheres now, and try to finish up what he started. You should have killed him when you could have done it legal."

"Never bet your aces in another man's game, Hugh," Lefty told me. "Chances are you're bucking a straight flush."

"What you mean, son?"

"Hell, I could have killed that kid easy as falling off a log. Anybody that knows me well enough to want to have me killed would know that, too. Somebody wanted me to kill that kid, Hugh."

"Why you reckon they'd want to do that, son?"

"I dunno." Lefty was stumped. "Looks like somebody wants to get me out on a limb. Get me in bad with the local folks, maybe. Hell, I can't think of anybody smart enough to frame me that way—that is around here. You reckon we got some new talent in the country?"

"Could be, son; they's new people moving in all the

time," I told him. "Finish your beer and let's push on home before dark. No use getting bushwhacked up some dark canyon."

"Reckon you're right, old timer," Lefty said—and we got our horses and went on home. Lefty was on the lookout for a day or two, but nothing more was ever seen of the young squirt that tried to get him in a gunfight. All I could think of for a couple of days was the way that Lefty had busted those three bottles in half a split second—when he could just as easy have been blowing that tough kid's guts out!

That, as near as I can remember it, was the extent of Lefty's gun slinging the first four years he worked on the Jack-In-The-Box. No sir, he didn't do any fighting or shooting and his drinking wasn't enough to excite a temperance woman. In fact Lefty got so blamed pure and hard-working that I should have kept my fingers crossed—I should have smelled a rat—but I always was one to forget easy.

Why, gentlemen, Lefty even got so reformed that he started reading books!

"You know, Hugh," he told me one day, "I used to think that a *Police Gazette* or a catalogue with a lot of pictures in it was prime reading. But, as I look back on it, I can't remember anything I ever read in a catalogue or a *Police Gazette*. Now you take this Napoleon jigger"—he was reading the life of Napoleon—"he was quite a guy in his way. Too bad he had to go and get too big for his britches and get spread out over too much territory. He'd been all right if he'd just kept on using his head!"

Yes sir—Lefty took to reading books—learning all about the world and what made the wheels turn, and politics and all. Guess the schooling he'd got down in the Big Bend must have stuck with him some. Got to where he could talk pretty good, if he watched himself. Got to where he shaved every day, too, and put on a clean shirt before the old one was wore out.

Even the Philadelphia Filly never guessed that Lefty was an ex-outlaw, he'd got so civilized and law abiding. She didn't learn about Lefty's past until a couple of years after she'd met him. By that time she'd fallen in love with him and thought he was the guy on the white horse that gals dream about—and there was hell to pay. She didn't even know she was in love with Lefty—she only found out how she felt when he murdered Three Jay Johnson!

Yes sir—I got right proud of Lefty Allen—the way he was making a cattleman, and a good guy all around, what with his reading and studying and all. Reckon if he hadn't read up on all the tricky jiggers in Napoleon's time he never would have thought to suspect Joe Wheeler!

3

JOE WHEELER had been in the country three or four months before I ever laid eyes on him. I'd heard about him buying Frank Reilly's old place from Frank's heirs—but I'd never got around to calling on him and hadn't met up with him in town or out on the range anywheres.

The first time I ever saw him was at a cockfight over on Salt Creek. Lefty and I had dropped in at Jesus Garcia's place to see if he had any beans in the pot, we being hungry and ten miles from home at supper time. There were plenty beans, all right, and quite a gathering of people. Garcia was having a cockfight and the boys had gathered from miles around—to watch a couple of gamecocks that Jesus had brought up from Mexico. There were folks from Silver City, quite a smattering from Georgetown, and some of the boys from the Lazy-J. Even Father Antonio was there. And, of course, this Joe Wheeler.

He was a big, good-looking jigger—with those cold, fishy blue eyes that don't have a sign of life in them. Kinda cocky he was—but shucks, you expected that in a healthy young man.

Seems like he'd been betting kinda heavy on one of

those fancy fighting chickens and it got the whey beat out of it by the other one. Joe Wheeler got mad as hell when the fight was over and the bets paid off—just flared up like prairie fire! He grabbed that bloody, beaten rooster like he was going to wring its neck.

"Hey, hold on, stranger," Lefty Allen said to him, "don't go manhandling my fighting chicken that way. Hell, I just bought him yesterday and I want him to last a while, anyways. If any neck-wringing is done I'll do it myself."

Joe Wheeler got kinda red in the face, but he finally got a hold on himself and said, "I'm sorry, friend. Guess I kinda lost my temper." He grinned, sheepish like a kid caught stealing candy. "I would have paid Garcia for his rooster. Didn't know he was yours."

"It's all right, stranger," Lefty told him, "think nothing of it—everybody's apt to lose their temper once in a while." And he was right—hell, I've even seen preachers get mad a time or two. Remember one that cussed a blue streak, one summer, just because he got a little bitty old trout fly hung up in his ear.

So we shook hands all around, bets were collected and a few drinks downed and we started to ride on home.

"Momentito, Señor Lefty," old Garcia said, serious as all get-out. "You owe me ten dollars."

Lefty reached in his pocket and pulled out some money and asked, "Ten enough, amigo?"

"That is all I paid for him, Señor," said old Garcia, "and I would not take a profit from a friend."

"Paid for who?" Lefty wanted to know.

"For your gallo, for your rooster, my friend."

Lefty looked kinda stumped. He hadn't wanted to buy any fighting rooster. He had just wanted to keep that rooster from getting its neck wrung—and he thought that maybe old Garcia couldn't stand up to Joe Wheeler. Lefty and Jesus Garcia were friends of long standing, and this wasn't much to do for a friend. But it seemed that old Garcia wanted to have a little fun of his own.

"Shucks, amigo," Lefty told him, seeing the way the wind was blowing, "I wouldn't want to take one of your very best fighting chickens away from you. Anyways, he ain't in such good shape right now. I don't believe he could stand the trip home, leaking like he is. Why don't you just keep him for me and I'll come back and get him some-times?"

But old Garcia wouldn't hear of it—he was having him some fun. Some kind of streak in folks, I reckon, that just naturally makes 'em like to play jokes on their friends. "But Señor Lefty," Garcia said, "if you say this gallo is yours, then he is yours. And if you do not take him with you people will say that you are a liar. I will not have people saying that my friend is a liar, Señor, just for the sake of a rooster who does not fight very well. So take him, my friend—he will heal quickly. Feed him good and bring him back again some day and we will have another fight, yes?"

That is how we met Joe Wheeler for the first time—and that is how Lefty Allen got his Fighting Chicken, as he called his gamecock. It was the Fighting Chicken, later on, that told us who had kidnapped the Hamlin twins!

Don't get me wrong—I don't mean the rooster was smart enough to talk—but after the kidnapping had happened and we got to mulling over the evidence, it was the Fighting Chicken that furnished the key to the whole puzzle.

It was a kinda sickly chicken for a day or two—but Lefty nursed it along and took right good care of it—feeding it bran and whiskey mash and rubbing axle grease on its cuts and all. Wasn't more than a week or ten days before it was cocky and fighting mean like a good gamecock ought to be. And don't think it didn't have gratitude! Why, that chicken knew what Lefty had done for it. Followed Lefty around like a dog when he was in the barn or corral. He would perch on Lefty's saddle and watch his horse while Lefty was taking his meals. Finally took to roosting in Lefty's room at nights, just like a watch dog!

Yes sir, that Fighting Chicken was just like Lefty's dog,

all right—but he was a one-man dog—wouldn't have a thing to do with the rest of us. And full of fight—why, that Fighting Chicken would tackle anything that moved. It sure did my heart good to see him whale the daylights out of Miss Sally's tomcat and make it high tail for cover. It was the funniest sight I ever saw—watching that little three-pound Fighting Chicken whipping the tar out of that big tomcat. Never did like cats, anyways!

The only folks the Fighting Chicken would have anything to do with was the Hamlin twins—Little Lefty and Little Hugh, named after me and Lefty. They were little and tough themselves and not afraid of anything either. Guess that made all three of them members of the same club, or something. Anyways, the Fighting Chicken got to where he was right friendly with the twins and sometimes he'd roost in their room at night when Lefty was out on the range somewheres.

As I look back on it now, it was that day at the cockfight that all the trouble started between Lefty and Joe Wheeler—and worked itself up to where Lefty got to robbing banks and rustling cattle and finally burned down Three Jay Johnson—and hell broke loose on Lonesome River.

Yes sir, that must have been the day it all started. At the time I didn't think Joe Wheeler was such a bad guy. I didn't know that he was one of those jiggers that's got to have a fancier gun and a bigger hat, and a showier horse than other folks. I didn't know that he couldn't let any man—or any ranch—outshine him. Yes sir, I believe that Joe Wheeler's losing money at that cockfight was the cause of all the trouble that followed! Or could it have been the Philadelphia Filly that caused it all?

Dip Sherman hung that handle on her. I reckon that Philadelphia was the only town east of the Mississippi that Sheep Dip had ever heard of, so anybody from back east was from Philadelphia, as far as he was concerned.

Her real name was Mary Ann Morgan—but to us she was the Philadelphia Filly ever since that first summer she came out to the Jack-In-The-Box. It was an accident, naming her like that—but it was a pretty good name for her and it stuck. Have you ever seen a spirited, thoroughbred filly? High spirited, pure bred? Young and slim and clean limbed—and not afraid of anything? That was Mary Ann Morgan, all right! Yes sir, Philadelphia Filly was a good name for her and she didn't seem to mind us calling her that.

Seems like she'd been ailing back there in all that rain and wet, so they sent her out to New Mexico where the air is dry and crisp. She started coming out summers when she was about seventeen—soaking up the sunshine, getting the color back into her. Learning to ride in overalls in a man-sized saddle instead of one of those puny pancakes they use back east.

She and Lefty took to each other like two ducks to water—and he had him a hell of a good time teaching her the fine arts of brush-jumping on a cow pony, how to open gates on horseback, how to snag a calf with a forty-foot rope and all. Lefty hadn't had any brothers or sisters, or much of a childhood as far as that goes—and she must have been just like a little sister to him. At the start, at least, that's the way it was—big brother and little sister, sort of. It would have saved a lot of trouble if it had stayed that way—but it didn't—peaches don't stay green.

The Philadelphia Filly didn't know that Lefty had been an outlaw—but Lefty never forgot it for a minute. Never did get any notions about her—all he wanted to do was to help her, to amuse her, to teach her how to take care of herself around cattle and horses. He probably liked her, kinda from a distance—but he wasn't in her league and he knew it and never got any ideas.

She kinda amused Lefty, too, I reckon. She was a high-toned little baggage and treated Lefty just like one of the help—she didn't know that Lefty was one of the family as far as everybody on the Jack-In-The-Box was concerned. She bossed him around—and he “yes ma'amed” and “no ma'amed” her right and left, all very serious like—but every once in a while you could see a twinkle chasing its tail in the back of his eyes.

The second summer the Philadelphia Filly came out to the ranch she had grown up considerable and thawed out some, too. She remembered Lefty right well and asked about him the first day she got there. Likely she'd been telling the girls at school about him—and maybe had sorta built him up a little in her mind. You never can tell what notions a gal will get. She asked about Lefty—how he was and what he'd been doing all winter and such—and seemed downright glad to see him a couple of days later when he came in from one of the line camps.

Yes sir, whatever she had been thinking about Lefty all winter must have been favorable—for she didn't treat Lefty like one of the help any more. Lefty was more of a friend the second summer that the Philadelphia Filly spent on the Jack-In-The-Box.

That was the summer she rode Champagne to win, after our jockey had got doped—but I'll tell you about that when I come to it. That was the summer that we first began to figure Joe Wheeler out for what he was. As I look back on it, the Philadelphia Filly must have helped cook up a little more trouble that summer—for she had just turned eighteen and she was a sight for sore eyes!

She'd just got over that gangly stage that girls go through and was beginning to bud out here and there—and her hair, you should have seen it. A bright, coppery red that strung out behind her like a stream of fire when she took Champagne over the corral gate!

Sorta stuck up, though. Reckon it was her raising. Near as I can remember they bring 'em up that way back east.

Sort of an I-don't-go-to-the-bathroom attitude. All sugar and spice and proper talk and such. Draws men like flies around a honeypot—nothing men take to more than a snooty woman.

The Philadelphia Filly didn't know she was that way. She thought she was better than most people, just because she'd been raised to think that. Hell, it wasn't her fault and I didn't hold it against her. Away down underneath it she was the real McCoy that would stick to her friends—and we all knew it. I knew it, Lefty knew it, the Hamlins knew it—so we didn't pay any attention to what she thought of herself. Her raising just wasn't western raising, that's all—she was a perfect lady who looked down on dirt and drinking and sweat and fighting and common people. Particularly on lawlessness and killing. Yes sir, the Philadelphia Filly was a stickler for law and order. That's why it was so blamed funny when she took up with Lefty Allen—ex-outlaw, horse thief, cattle rustler—with more than one killing chalked up against him.

Lefty hadn't been what you'd call a careless killer, you understand—but he'd done his share when he had to. If a man pulled a gun on Lefty, Lefty didn't call a cop—he pulled his own gun and went to shooting and asked questions later. That was one way to keep yourself all in one chunk—that was the school that Lefty Allen had been brought up in. That was the only way a man could stay alive to tell about it in the places where Lefty had grown up.

Yes sir, they'd been brought up in two widely separated schools of thought—and sooner or later things were bound to come up and cause them a lot of trouble. Lefty sorta smelled this out for himself—never forgot who he was or how he'd lived—and never let his ideas about the Philadelphia Filly get out of hand. Guess it never occurred to him that she might get notions of her own about him.

Lefty hadn't any business getting mad when Joe Wheeler started making up to the Philadelphia Filly—but he did. Hell, Joe Wheeler seemed like a nice enough

young fellow at the time. Had him a good big ranch, ran it right, and seemed like a hard worker and a square shooter. Why shouldn't he make up to a nice looking young gal if he wanted to?

Lefty didn't like it. "That guy apologizes too damned much, Hugh," he said. "He tries too hard to be nice and agreeable and get along with people. Betcha two-bits he's soft soaping us along, waiting for something."

"Make it a dollar or nothing, son," I told him. "You'll have a chance to find out if he can take it when Champagne beats his fancy Indian horse."

"Hugh, you give me a pain," Lefty said, disgusted like. "There ain't an Indian pony in the whole country that could beat Champagne. If Joe Wheeler knows anything about horses at all he'll know that!"

"You reckon he don't know much about horses, son?" I asked.

"Could be, Hugh, could be," Lefty said. "And there are a lot of funny things that can happen in a horse race, too. Don't go betting your life's savings on that race, Hugh—I might have to keep you in whiskey in your declining years, and I couldn't afford that on a foreman's wages."

5

It COULD have been an accident that our jockey got drunker than seven hundred dollars the night before he was supposed to ride Champagne against Joe Wheeler's Indian horse, Lucky Boy. It could have been. There could be icicles in hell, too—but I'll have to see them.

Jack Hamlin had brought him two race horses back from England, on a trip that he and Miss Sally took—Champagne and Zannzibar. Champagne was the track horse, faster than greased lightning—and Zannzibar was the jumping horse, the cross country (what the hell do you call 'em?)—the steeplechaser, that's it. Zannzibar was the steeplechaser that took gates and ditches and fences,

that cow ponies had to go around, in his stride. There weren't any jumping horses in New Mexico to speak of, so we never got a match for Zannzibar—but somebody was always turning up with a running horse they wanted to match against Champagne.

Joe Wheeler showed up one day with this Lucky Boy, a rangy gelding he'd bought from some Indians. Wild as a coyote—hadn't been broken very long, I reckoned. Indians trap a lot of wild horses and break 'em and this Lucky Boy looked like one of the best. That wasn't his name in Apache—but nobody could pronounce it—something like "too many fleas in the blanket" or "tail feathers going over the hill" or something like that said with a mouthful of mush. Joe Wheeler re-christened him Lucky Boy for short.

I think that maybe way down underneath Joe Wheeler was a little bit riled over the way Lefty had called him down at the cockfight and wanted to get even—sorta build his pride back up again to where he was smarter than Lefty in folks' minds. So he'd gone to work and got this fast horse and worked up to this race—coming over and making friends—and telling us about the fast horse he'd heard about and was going to try to get for a real race with Champagne.

What Joe Wheeler really did, we found out later, was to have him a racer shipped out from Kentucky. Must have cost him a pretty piece of change. Then he got these Indians to keep the horse for a couple of months or so without any grooming—and the horse sure looked wild when they brought him down from the mountains.

Joe Wheeler didn't have any trouble getting a few small bets laid here and there—maybe enough to cover his expenses if he won. Roots Ansell took a hundred, I took five hundred, Shorty McGuire and Bert Wilson both drew three months' pay in advance and bet on Champagne. It got nosed around Silver City and Georgetown—and the first thing you knew there was quite a stir about the race. Half the folks in Grant County had money up on that race.

It didn't seem strange to me at the time, because I just didn't give it much thought, I reckon—but the gamblers, the wise jiggers, were putting three to one on Champagne. Most of 'em had never even seen the horse or watched him run—yet they thought he was that good. And all the smart guys—the ones that go by tips and hunches—were watching the gamblers—and put their money on Champagne! If Champagne won, the gamblers would take an awful beating—and if Champagne lost the gamblers got three dollars back for every dollar they'd risked!

Somebody wasn't taking any chances on the outcome of the race—and, considering the betting, it could have been the gamblers—or it might have been Joe Wheeler. I didn't know at the time, but it looked like Joe Wheeler to me—he had a lot at stake and might have been the jigger that doped our jockey. Joe got ribbing Lefty about not wanting to bet on his own horse and the first thing you know they had some big money up. Yea, it could have been Joe Wheeler.

"Seems like a man would back his own horse," Joe Wheeler said to Lefty. "Couldn't be you're afraid of not winning, could it?"

"Shucks," Lefty told him, "I'm afraid of so many things that I can't remember 'em all—but that ain't one of them. I just don't want any easy money, that's all. It would be just like taking candy from a kid, Wheeler—and I don't want none of that easy money."

"Looks like you're just plain afraid to risk a little money, Lefty," Wheeler laughed good-naturedly. "Guess one excuse is as good as another. And then it could be that your horse is going to lose and you know it—and have got a few little quiet bets out here and there. Three to one is pretty good money."

Lefty fell right into the trap, smart as he was dodging trouble. Reckon there was something about Joe Wheeler that just naturally rubbed Lefty the wrong way and made him forget his common horse sense.

"How many three-year-old steers we got, Hugh?" Lefty asked me.

"Dunno," I said, thumbing through the tally book. "Can't tell exactly. Somewheres around nine hundred or a thousand head—if too many of 'em haven't got rustled."

"All right, friend," Lefty said to Joe Wheeler, "we got anyways nine hundred marketable steers that will bring around forty bucks each. Every third one of 'em is mine since Jack took me in as a pardner. That right, Hugh?"

"Yes, son, that's right," I told him. "Use my third, too, if you've a mind to. Never did like to see a man do a piddling job of things."

"Nope, Hugh, I wouldn't want to leave you destitute, with only half your teeth and the price of fighting whiskey going up every day. I'll just bet mine. Let's see now—every third steer, forty bucks a steer—can you cover twelve thousand bucks, Wheeler?" Lefty asked.

"Yes, I can cover that all right," Joe Wheeler said. "I'll give Mr. McGovern a check to hold and you give him a bill of sale—and when the race is over tomorrow I'll collect 'em both."

"All right, Wheeler," Lefty told him, "a deal's a deal. Got a pencil on you, Hugh?"

So Lefty wrote out a bill of sale for three hundred prime steers and Joe Wheeler wrote out a check for twelve thousand dollars—and *that night* our jockey disappeared! We couldn't find hide nor hair of Tiny Flowers—the little guy that Jack Hamlin had brought over from England when he brought the horses. The only man on the Jack-In-The-Box light enough to ride Champagne the next day—and he just naturally disappeared.

"Don't lose any sleep," Lefty told me when we found out Tiny was missing. "Likely he's got him a Mexican girl over on Salt Creek, or something like that. Shucks, even if he don't show up Champagne's smart enough to run a race by himself. Go on and get your sleep. A man your age ought to sleep a couple hours a week at the least."

Roots Ansell brought Tiny Flowers home in the wagon next morning, along with a couple of sacks of flour and a few slabs of bacon and such for Old Hennery, the cook. Old Hennery was expecting to feed a lot of extra people on account of the race.

"Brought you a present, Lefty," Roots sang out as he drove up.

"You don't tell," Lefty said, always on the lookout for some kind of a frame-up.

"Yea, it's in the back of the wagon."

"Just dump it on the ground, and I'll pick it up later on," Lefty told him, leery of any presents Roots might bring him.

"Just as you say, boss," Roots said. "After all, he's your problem, not mine." Roots pulled out the endgate, tugged a little—and planked Tiny Flowers down on the ground, plumb dead to the world.

Yes sir, there was Jack Hamlin's fancy English jockey, Tiny Flowers, drunker than a hoot owl. It had cost Jack Hamlin a pile of money—building a race track, hiring trainers and all—and there was his prize jockey dead to the world the day when we needed him most. It was a pretty kettle of fish!

Lefty shook his head. "They said there would be days like this, Hugh. Sure a good thing I didn't bet your steers, too. Mind putting Tiny to bed, Roots?" Lefty asked, cool as a cucumber, just like he didn't stand to lose twelve thousand bucks.

"Sure, boss," Roots said. "Maybe if I dump him in the horse trough he'll come around."

"Nope, not a chance, Roots," Lefty said. "Had the same thing happen to me once. I got doped down in El Paso and I still remember the what-you-call-'ems."

"Symptoms, Lefty?" asked the Philadelphia Filly, who had just come up and seen Tiny Flowers and guessed what was up.

"Yes, ma'am—that's the word—symptoms. Somebody

has put some knockout drops in Tiny's beer, and he's going to be out for a long, long time. Me, I'm going to dig me up my guns and hunt the guys that done it."

"Did it, Lefty—not done it. And you aren't going to do any such thing. What good are guns, anyway?" the Philadelphia Filly asked.

"Well, ma'am, they are useful things to have along when you are questioning people. I can run down the jigger who is right interested in Lucky Boy winning the race and ask him a few questions."

"You wouldn't shoot a man over a little money, would you?" the Philadelphia Filly wanted to know.

"Now that you ask me, ma'am, I wouldn't—not over a little money. But maybe I could sort of reason with him and get him to call the race off for a day or two," Lefty told her.

"The honor of the ranch and all that, Lefty?" she asked.

"You're right clairvoyant, ma'am."

"Don't ma'am me, Lefty Allen," the Philadelphia Filly snapped at him. "And don't bother having the race postponed, either. Put away your guns, Lefty Allen—I can get a lot more out of Champagne than Tiny Flowers ever could!"

"You really want to ride this race, ma'am?" Lefty asked, forgetting not to ma'am her. "It ain't going to be no picnic."

"Of course, Lefty."

"I sorta hoped you would, ma'am," Lefty said, "but I didn't have the nerve to come right out and ask you. So, you see, guns have got their use after all. As for Champagne—shucks, you and Champagne get along better than Tiny and him ever did. You can ride him all right."

"Why, of course I can, Lefty," she said. "Was there ever any doubt about it?" Just like that—of course I can—! Maybe they breed 'em high-toned back east, but they breed 'em right. No squawking, no showing off, no I'll-do-it-or-die malarkey. She just said she'd do it and Lefty said he sorta had a sneaking idea she would—and nothing more was said about it!

Riding a spirited stud in a race against another fast horse may not sound very dangerous—but there are a lot of safer things to do. Ask any old-timer around the race tracks. Look at the records—read about the spills and broken legs and jockeys maimed or killed, before you pass judgment. After you've read 'em it won't sound exactly like a brisk canter into the sunset. No sir! The Philadelphia Filly was going up against something pretty tough and she knew it—but all she said was "Of course I can!"

Maybe they raise 'em high-toned and snobbish to put that spirit in 'em. Quien sabe? Anyways, my respect for the Philadelphia Filly went up a couple of notches when I saw how calm and confident she was about it!

"Don't say nothing about it at dinner time," Lefty told her. "I want to have a little fun with a guy I know."

"Anything—not nothing, Lefty."

There was quite a gathering the day of the race between Champagne and Lucky Boy—and Old Hennery had his hands full feeding them all. Joe Wheeler was there, of course, and Jeopardy Jones—Sheriff Banks' deputy—together with cow pokes from half a dozen ranches. Three Jay Johnson that ran the general store in Silver City drove out, too. Honest John closed his gambling hall over in Georgetown and came to the race, too. Queer jigger, Honest John—had one of the biggest gambling halls in the territory—and yet he did his level best to convince folks they didn't have a chance winning anything. You meet some queer cases out here in the territory!

The cow pokes ate down at the cook shack with our boys—but the kingpins ate up at the house. Nothing was said about Tiny Flowers being out of the running. Nobody, I thought, knew about it but Lefty and the Philadelphia Filly and me—and we all kept our traps shut.

Joe Wheeler was all duded up in a silk shirt and fancy whipcord pants and looked a hell of a lot fancier than Lefty did in his washed-out denims. Joe was packing a fancy gun, too—a pearl-handled forty-four that must have

cost him a tidy sum. Lots of pearl and chased silver work and all. A regular show-off gun if there ever was one—the kind you'd expect a rich Mexican to pack.

Lefty noticed it, and I noticed it—and we noticed each other noticing it. Lefty's eyes kinda filmed over and looked innocent—just like a jigger that is drawing one card to four of a kind and wants you to think he's drawing to a bob-tailed flush.

"That is a right nice gun, Mr. Wheeler," Lefty said.

"Yes, it is a pretty piece of artillery," Joe Wheeler answered. "Cost me two hundred and twenty dollars over in Tucson, a year or so ago."

"Kinda dangerous, though, carrying a gun like that around," Lefty told him.

"Dangerous?" Wheeler asked. "Didn't know carrying a gun was dangerous. Thought not carrying a gun was dangerous around here."

"You never can tell about those fancy guns," Lefty said. "Never can tell who will try to steal it from you. There are folks that almost go crazy wanting to own a fancy gun like that one."

"Yea?" Joe Wheeler asked.

"Yea, that's a fact," Lefty said, buttering him a biscuit. "Why, I remember a time years back when I was just a young sprout I spent six months' wages on a gun like that."

"You don't say," Wheeler said. "I must have heard wrong about you. Fact is, I heard you'd never worked for wages before you started working for the Jack-In-The-Box."

Lefty let that pass, didn't even let on he didn't like it. "Yes sir," he said, "I spent six months' wages on a gun like that. Guns like that sorta set a man loco sometimes."

"Well, what has that got to do with fancy guns being dangerous?" Wheeler asked, sorta sensing he was in for a ribbing.

"Oh, that?" Lefty gulped his biscuit down. "It was on the way home from town that the danger came in. Met

up with a band of Indians. Must have been forty, fifty of those jiggers—and the chief wanted my fancy gun. Invited me to pass the night with 'em and gave me a lot of their red-eye and fed me until I mighty near popped. Then he tried to trade me out of my fancy gun. Offered me three squaws and six horses for it."

"And I suppose you took the six horses and the three squaws and that's where the danger came in—from the squaws." Joe Wheeler laughed.

"No sir," Lefty said, "I was kinda young and foolish then and that gun meant more to me than twenty horses and ten squaws. So I stalled around and waited until they all got drunk and went to sleep—and then I lit out with my fancy gun."

"Hell—excuse me, Miss Morgan—I don't see anything dangerous about that," Joe Wheeler said.

"I didn't either," Lefty told him, "until the next day about noon when they caught up with me. They started shooting right off, without any palaver. Reckon they were going to take that fancy gun, since they couldn't trade me out of it."

"And," Wheeler horned in, "I suppose you killed all fifty of them and escaped unhurt."

"Nope," Lefty answered, "it wasn't quite that easy. I downed a few of them—but they were pretty fair shots for Indians and they finally winged me. Reckon they'd been to the agency school and learned to shoot."

"So," Wheeler sneered, "you were wounded and ran out of ammunition—and had to club them to death with your rifle butt. Then I suppose you crawled nineteen miles to the nearest ranch house?"

"No, friend," Lefty said, "I didn't get away. They caught me and scalped me and took my fancy gun and left me for dead."

"You don't mean they really scalped you?" Wheeler asked. "What a shame! It must have been after you were

scalped that you crawled to the ranch house. My, you must have been a sight."

"Nope, I couldn't crawl a single crawl, Mr. Wheeler," Lefty told him. "They scalped me and left me for dead—and that night, in the cool of the evening, the coyotes came out and ate me! *I really was dead!* Pass me another biscuit, will you, Hugh?"

Everybody like to busted a gut laughing—except Joe Wheeler. Even the Philadelphia Filly forgot her upbringing and snickered like ordinary folks. Joe Wheeler got red as a beet for a minute—but he finally got hold of himself and laughed too.

"By golly, I fell right into that one," he admitted. "You had me almost believing you there for a while. Tell you what I'll do, Lefty—you seem to set so much store by fancy guns—I'll just make you a little side bet on the race this afternoon. Bet my gun against yours."

"That wouldn't hardly be a fair bet," Lefty told him. "Your gun is worth a lot more than mine. Besides, I don't need your gun—got me a couple of good ones that shoot where I point 'em. Haven't used 'em much lately, but I guess they still shoot straight. What would I want with another gun?"

"Well, if you think your two guns are worth my one, we'll bet that way," Joe Wheeler insisted.

"All right, Mr. Wheeler," Lefty told him. "We'll bet that way. You want to hold the guns, too, Hugh?"

"Guess that's the best way to do it, Lefty," Wheeler said—so Lefty unbuckled his two old, well oiled guns in their tie-down holsters and gave them to me to keep along with Joe Wheeler's fancy artillery. Somehow those old guns looked good to me—substantial and reliable—alongside of that fancy, show-off gun.

Seeing them kinda ran my mind back over the troubles Lefty and I had been through together—troubles that those plain guns had got us out of many a time. Seeing them was sort of a comforting feeling—it was good to know that

I had a man like Lefty Allen to side me. Those guns sorta restored my confidence in Lefty and made me forget the ugly rumors that were going around about him. Suspensions being cast by folks that didn't know Lefty like I did.

It wasn't until an hour later that it dawned on me that Joe Wheeler might have been looking for trouble down at the race track—and that he had taken care that Lefty didn't have a gun!

6

RIGHT AFTER dinner we all went down to the track and watched some Indian ponies and some cow horses run off a few preliminary races. Bert Wilson ran his palomino against a flea-bitten paint horse from the Ladder-H and there were a couple more races—and then we were all set for the big race between Champagne and Lucky Boy.

Have you ever got into an argument with another fellow—not so much to prove you were right—but more to prove you were smarter than he was? Well, that's the way that race seemed to me that day—sort of a test of nerves between Lefty Allen and Joe Wheeler. Dumb as I am I could smell it in the air, somehow. It wasn't so much whose horse was the fastest—it was more who was going to outsmart who. Somehow or other I got the idea that horses were a side issue—they were just the weapons that Lefty and Joe were using to settle the argument—that they were trying to prove something that I didn't quite sabe. Somehow or other the future of those two—and maybe the lives of a lot of people—were mixed up in that horse race. Just what it was all about I couldn't tell—but I smelled trouble in the air.

Lucky Boy was first on the track, his handlers warming him up. You could see that Joe Wheeler was all tense, ready to crow a little and take Lefty's money—when Lucky Boy won by default. Yes sir, Joe Wheeler was plenty sure of himself, all right—plumb cocksure—and it would have

been hard to make me believe that he didn't have a hand in Tiny Flowers getting doped. It kinda set me back—I'd always thought myself a good judge of human nature and Joe Wheeler seemed Grade-A to me.

Lucky Boy began to jig around and got downright restless after a spell. "Well, let's go, Lefty," Joe Wheeler said. "What are we hung on—your horse die in the night or something?"

"No, friend," Lefty said, cool as a cucumber on ice—sorta enjoying himself. "Our horse didn't die in the night. In fact he's fit as a fiddle and ready to run away from that goat of yours. Our trouble is jockey trouble. Seems like some unprincipled gent, not mentioning any names, has done gone and tampered with our jockey."

"You don't say," Joe Wheeler sympathized. "You know, that's too bad. It would be a shame to have to call the race off after all the money that has been bet. Couldn't be that you think you can get out of paying off that way, could it?"

"Nope," Lefty said patiently, "we pay our bets on the Jack-In-The-Box, any and all of 'em. But we don't pay 'em until we owe 'em. Up to now you haven't won any bets, Mr. Wheeler."

"Well, I will very shortly, my friend, if you don't get your horse on the track. A default is the same as a loss, everywhere I've been."

"Mr. Wheeler," Lefty told him, "you are exactly right. Old Hugh has got your dough there ready to give you—the minute we default. You ready, kid?" Lefty asked the Philadelphia Filly who had just come up leading Champagne.

"All set, Lefty," she said.

"Hold him in until the last quarter, and then hang on!" Lefty told her, boosting her up into the saddle.

"Champagne and I will get along all right, Lefty—so don't go telling me how to ride him. If you want to raise

your bets, I've a little money of my own, Mr. Wheeler," the Philadelphia Filly said.

"But look here," Joe Wheeler said when he saw her in the saddle, "I won't have this—you can't ride this race. It isn't—well, it isn't right for a girl to ride in a race."

I couldn't figure out whether he was afraid of losing his money—or maybe had a good streak in him after all and didn't want to risk the ride. He even wanted to call the race off—but the Philadelphia Filly wouldn't listen to him.

I was right proud of her that day! All at once she was one of us, instead of a stuck-up cousin from back east. As I look back on it now she must have been a helluva lot smarter than I thought. She must have sensed some trouble in the air, too—and had lined herself up with her own folks. Reckon she didn't know what it was all about, either—but she was standing with her folks and giving them all she had!

What a sight she made, that little redhead, her knees cocked up jockey fashion atop that big English racer. As one man the Jack-In-The-Box let out a yell:

"Ride him, kid!"

And ride him she did! From the pop of the starter's gun she hung on Lucky Boy's heels—never letting him get away, yet never straining Champagne a bit. She let Lucky Boy set the pace and take the rail, keeping Champagne well on the outside—safe from fouling and cutting in. If she'd ridden a hundred races she couldn't have done better. For three quarters she hung on Lucky Boy's heels, eating that long-maned Kentucky horse's dust—but coming down the stretch, that was something else!

I kept the glasses on her all the way around—watching her face for signs of fear or trouble—but she wasn't a bit panicky, that Philadelphia Filly. No sir—she sat her saddle like a veteran, leaning into her knees, balancing her weight with Champagne's stride. Ordinarily she was a quiet, poker-faced little thing—but there must have been a pirate away back somewheres among her ancestors—for coming down

the stretch she was grinning from ear to ear with just plain joy and excitement!

Through the glasses I watched her lean a little farther forward, talking to Champagne, patting his neck. It was almost as if I heard her say, "Let's go, boy." And Champagne went—the second she eased up on the bit he was around Lucky Boy and into the stretch quicker than I could down a snort of Old Crow!

From then on it was a walkaway—and a grand sight it was—to see Champagne come skimming home like a scared jack rabbit, head stretched out, almost touching the ground it seemed like. And that Philadelphia Filly perched up on him—no bigger than a minute—her hair flaming out behind her and her cheeks whipped red by the wind!

It was a great day—that day on the Jack-In-The-Box—when the Philadelphia Filly brought Champagne home to win by a good six lengths!

"Judas Priest!" Lefty Allen said, "I'm glad that's over—I'm as weak as bar whiskey. I should never have let her do it, Hugh. What if something had happened to her? Jack Hamlin would nail my hide to the barn."

"Shucks, Lefty," I told him, "Jack would have thought just like you did. And he would have been just as proud of her as you are."

"Yea—I reckon you're right, Hugh—but a guy gets to wondering, when something like that is happening, whether he done right or not. Nice work, ma'am," Lefty said to the Philadelphia Filly, who had finally got Champagne stopped and jogged him up to the fence where we were sitting.

"Whew," she said, "what a ride. Most fun I ever had in my life. Did I do all right, Lefty?" she asked, knowing blamed well she had, but wanting to hear him say it.

"Why, of course, ma'am. Never was any doubt but what you could. Thanks for showing those tin horns up for us."

She eyed Lefty kinda funny for a minute. "Is that what

I was doing, Lefty?" she asked. "Showing up some cheap tin horns?"

"Yea, I reckon." Lefty wasn't quite sure about it all himself. "Yea—I guess that's it. You were sorta helping us prove something."

"The money didn't have anything to do with it, I suppose?" she asked.

Somehow or other that made Lefty mad. "Money, hell! Excuse me, ma'am. Money had little or nothing to do with it. You think I would have let you risk that ride just for a little money?"

"Oh, fudge, Lefty Allen, come down off your high horse and admit you are a little bit excited over winning twelve thousand dollars."

"Why, sure I am, ma'am, who wouldn't be? But I'm not near as excited as Father Antonio. Give him Wheeler's check, will you, Hugh—and tear up that bill of sale? Thanks," Lefty said.

"And the fancy gun, Lefty?" I asked him.

He thought a minute. "I'll take it, Hugh," he said and picked up that forty-four, flipped it over a few times and spun the cylinder—and handed it butt first to Joe Wheeler.

"Better keep your gun, Mr. Wheeler," Lefty said. "Father Antonio can use your money—he's been honing to build him a school for quite a spell—but I don't like taking a man's gun, somehow. Besides, it don't look like it would shoot very straight."

Joe Wheeler was stumped. He couldn't figure out just what to say for quite a spell. Spluttered around a little and then said, "Guess I owe you an apology, Lefty—I thought you really were afraid to bet. Looks like I had underestimated you—I'll bet you aren't afraid of anything. Drop the mister, will you, and just call me Joe?" Sure was good at saving his face, that Joe Wheeler was!

Father Antonio couldn't quite believe his ears. "You mean it is really for my school, Lefty, my friend? Twelve thousand dollars? It is too hard to believe! Maybe tomor-

row I will believe it—but today, no, it is too hard to believe.”

“It’s a fact, Padre,” Lefty told him. Lefty was a little bit steamed up and kinda proud of everything in general and the Philadelphia Filly in particular. “If that check don’t bounce, and I don’t think it will, your school is just as good as built.”

The check didn’t bounce. It was good for twelve thousand dollars, payable at the bank in Alpine, Arizona. It was a funny thing—Lefty rode over to Alpine with Father Antonio to see that he got back with the money—and he found out that the Alpine Bank was owned by nobody else but Joe Wheeler!

Anyways, they got back with the money and Father Antonio was as busy as a beaver getting himself a school built over on Salt Creek—to take care of all the Mexican kids and feed the orphans and all.

It’s a funny thing the way the chain runs sometimes. Here Lefty Allen—who didn’t want to bet in the first place—practically had a bet forced on him. Lefty won a lot of money and gave it to Father Antonio to build a school—and in the end both Lefty and Joe Wheeler got shown up for what they really were right in that very schoolhouse! You never can tell what’ll come up after a rain—but I’m getting ahead of my story again!

7

YES SIR, when that race was over the Philadelphia Filly and Lefty Allen had pretty good opinions of each other. Lefty admired her right smart for all the sand she’d shown and the way she’d handled Champagne—and giving away a lot of money to start a school for poor kids made the Philadelphia Filly think that Lefty Allen was a pretty good guy at heart.

Too bad it couldn’t have lasted—but the Hamlin twins spilled the beans. They up and talked out of turn and

ruined it all for Lefty—and sent the Philadelphia Filly hurrying back home a couple of weeks before her visit was up.

It was a rainy Sunday afternoon, the day the twins upset the applegart—and they couldn't go outdoors and play. They fretted around the house a spell and the Philadelphia Filly read some to them out of a jungle book—and they had a fight or two—but they weren't having them a very good time. Hell, they wanted to be outside, down at the corral, into some kind of mischief or other. Try keeping two five-year-old kids quiet on a rainy afternoon—it ain't no picnic!

The Philadelphia Filly finally got them to playing charades—and from that they went into imitating folks they knew right well. Little Hugh got him a ketchup bottle and a chocolate cigar and piped up:

"Look it, look it me, I'm Uncle Hugh." He cocked his feet up on a footstool and took a couple of imaginary nips from his ketchup bottle. "I'm Uncle Hugh—that's who I am—just setting around drinking whiskey and smoking cigars all day!"

"Why, Hughie," the Philadelphia Filly scolded him, biting her lips to keep from laughing, "you mustn't talk that way about your Uncle Hugh."

"Well, that's all he does," Little Hugh insisted. "I seen him at it just the other day."

"Saw, not seen, Hughie."

Little Lefty wasn't to be outdone. He went up to their room, buckled on his cap pistols and came galloping back on an imaginary horse, bang-banging as he came.

"I'm Uncle Lefty," he announced, "making a get-away."

"You're doing what?" the Philadelphia Filly asked.

"I'm Uncle Lefty making a get-away," Little Lefty repeated. "I just cracked the bank at Tombstone and the posse is on my trail. Yippee!"

The Philadelphia Filly was sorta set back by this. Kids have an uncanny knack of uncovering the truth some-

times, and she sorta suspected there might be something in this. "He can't be serious, can he, Hugh?"

But before I could answer, Little Lefty piped up, "Sure I'm serious, you big jughead. I'm Uncle Lefty and I'm an outlaw. Bang! Bang! Bang!"

It was high time I took a hand. "Don't be calling your Aunt Mary those corral names, son," I told little Lefty, not blaming him at all for what he said. Hell, he worshipped the ground Lefty Allen walked on—particularly where it had to do with fighting and shooting. "You kids run along out in the kitchen and see if Maria's got any of that fried chicken left, and then beat it upstairs and take your naps."

"All right, you betcha, Uncle Hugh," and they were gone like a flock of blackbirds flitting over—completely forgetting their cigar smoking, whiskey drinking, bank robbing uncles. But the beans were spilled—the Philadelphia Filly had something new to think about.

She was right quiet the rest of the afternoon—sitting there reading a book for hours on end, without ever turning a page. Every once in a while I'd ask her a question, trying to get some conversation started—but all she'd ever said was "what" or "uh huh" and things that folks say when they aren't listening to you.

Finally I couldn't stand it any longer—there she sat fretting about one of the best jiggers that ever drew breath, or so I thought at the time.

"Hell," I said to her, not even bothering to excuse myself for cussing, "he couldn't help it! Lefty couldn't help what happened to him. He got shoved into it. And now it's all over with and done. There ain't a cleaner, finer man in the Territory of New Mexico right now than Lefty Allen!"

"It's all true, then, Uncle Hugh?" she asked. "Lefty really robbed banks and stole cattle and killed people like the gossips say he did? I'd heard those things before, but I never paid much attention to them."

"Yea, it's most all true," I told her, "but he couldn't help it. He got off to a bad start, that's all—but he's lived it down. Lefty has more than paid for any crimes he's committed." I went on to tell her how Lefty had been orphaned by bandits and robbed by his guardian and all. "Hell, he wouldn't be alive today if he'd done any different. You got to fight back in this country or you don't last long."

"But the law, Uncle Hugh—couldn't he have got his money back through the courts? Couldn't he have hired a lawyer when he got arrested in Wyoming? And as for killing people, I don't see any excuse for that at all."

"It's kinda hard to explain," I told her, and it was. "Law and justice aren't always the same thing, kid—and they don't have a cop on every corner out here. Sometimes you've got to do a little shooting. Particularly when you're being shot at. I've killed a man or two—and so has Jack Hamlin—but it has always been in defense of our lives or property. You wouldn't call either one of us particularly bloodthirsty, would you?"

"No, not exactly—but it isn't right, Uncle Hugh—men shouldn't settle things with guns. It isn't their right to take lives—that is what laws are for, and sheriffs and juries and things. Men should let the law decide, and let the law do the killing if it has to be done."

I argued with her until bedtime, but she just plain couldn't bring herself, or maybe it was her Boston mind, to see things in territory terms. Finally I gave up—it was still all wrong to her.

"Poor, poor Lefty," was all she said as she started up the stairs to go to bed.

"Good night, kid," I told her, feeling kinda sorry for her. Reckon her world was kinda upside down right then. I guess maybe that she thought Lefty was the guy on the white horse that all the gals dream about—and she must have been pretty upset when she found out he'd been an outlaw. "Sorta sleep on what I been telling you, kid," I

told her, "and maybe things won't look so bad in the morning. They hardly ever do."

I looked in on the twins before I turned in. They were sleeping like a couple of cherubs. Bless their little hearts—they had no more idea of the stink they'd stirred up that day! Lefty's Fighting Chicken was perched on the foot of their bed, watching over them like he always did when Lefty wasn't at home. The Fighting Chicken let out a few hostile squawks, but I guess he figured I was harmless and went back to sleep when I put my lamp out.

Reckon the Philadelphia Filly didn't do much sleeping that night, after all—for the next morning, come daybreak, she was all packed up. I was down at the cook shack swapping lies with Old Hennery and she came looking for me.

Old Hennery was telling me a big windy about the pancake frying contest he'd had once with a cook of some outfit down on the Pecos, where he had worked as a younger man. He must have been a lot younger and told the story lots of times, making it better every time he told it—for he sure was a pancake frying fool to hear him tell it.

"Fryer Tuck, this jigger was knowed as, Hugh," Old Hennery told me, "funniest looking jigger you ever saw, but man, he could turn out them pancakes. Long, skinny, bowlegged jigger—with a pair of mustaches that looked like an iceman's tongs. It was them that was winning the cake frying contest for him."

"You really was losing, Hennery?" I asked, not believing my ears. Hennery hadn't been known to lose anything in forty-one years.

"Yea, I was losing. That skinny jigger was turning out four cakes to my three. Couldn't figure it out for a long, long time. Both of us had the same size griddle, the same number of hands—and I was about to think that this guy was naturally a better fryer. And then I saw his nose."

"His nose?" I asked. "What in the name of mud was he doing with his nose? Turning pancakes with it?"

"Naw—it was the way he screwed it up and unscrewed

it all the time he was turning cakes. He'd get his griddle hot, plop a lot of batter on it and go to flopping them cakes over with both hands, screwing his nose up all the time."

"Maybe he smelled something bad, Hennery. Seems like I begin to smell something myself."

"Could be, Hugh—man your age can develop a mighty good smeller if he has practised all his life." Hennery took him a water glass full of potato whiskey, gulped it down and wiped his mustache on his apron. "Mustache, mustache—yea, that's where I was. This here Fryer Tuck was turning them pancakes with his mustache, Hugh. I know it don't seem hardly possible, but that is what he was doing. Every time he screwed up his nose them long mustaches would clamp under a pancake and flop it over, just as neat as pie. Then he'd unscrew his nose and them mustaches would let go. It just wasn't fair, that's all—winning a cooking contest with mustaches!"

"So what did you do, Hennery? Grow you a mustache like his over night and win by a nose the next day?"

That was the way Hennery's stories usually wound up—him winning in the last round with a surprise of some kind.

"Hell no, Hugh," Hennery went on, "I couldn't grow no mustache and train it to turn cakes over night. Takes time for something like that. It was a three-day contest and two days was already gone before I got on to him."

"So what did you do?" I asked. You had to pretend to believe Old Hennery and ask him a question now and then just to egg him on. Don't know why, but that's the way he did his best lying—sorta under pressure.

"So I got the son-of-a-gun drunk," Hennery continued. "Filled him plumb full to the top with my potato whiskey. Gave him enough to kill an ordinary cowhand, but I reckon cooks is tougher. He woke up next morning still alive."

"Reckon he couldn't cook no hotcakes with the hang-over he must have had."

"Hell, he didn't have no hang-over, Hugh," Hennery

said. "That Fryer Tuck woke up fresh as a daisy next morning. Drinkingest cook I ever did see."

"Don't tell me you lost that pancake frying contest, Hennery. I just plain won't believe it," I told him.

"No sir, I didn't lose—when was I ever known to lose?" Hennery asked. "But I come mighty close—I would have lost if the rats hadn't saved me."

"Whose rats was that?" I asked, wondering what angle he was going off at next.

"Hell, I don't know whose rats they was," Hennery said. "I never was a man to study brands. Likely they just hung around the place. Don't see why you can't let a man tell his story without bringing up a lot of questions about whose rats was they."

"All right, Hennery, let the rats ride. How come 'em to help you win the contest?"

"Well, it was this way—that Fryer Tuck had just plain dribbled my potato whiskey all over that ice-tong mustache of his. And there's nothing rats like better than potato whiskey. They was laying around drunk all over the place next morning."

"What's that got to do with Fryer Tuck's pancake turning mustache?" I asked, getting a little impatient with the way this yarn was dragging out. What I'd really come for in the first place was a cup of coffee, anyways.

"Hell, the only way them rats could get the whiskey out of that mustache was to eat the mustache and get the whiskey along with it. Fryer Tuck was plumb clean shaven when he woke up next morning—the rats had ate every hair of that mustache while he slept. Wasn't no trick at all to beat him that day. I got the jump on him and turned out over forty-one hundred cakes."

"Well, turn me out a couple, will you, Hennery, and pour me about a quart of coffee? Have a cup, kid?" I asked the Philadelphia Filly who had turned up and had been listening to Hennery's windy.

"Guess I might as well, Uncle Hugh. Could you have

somebody drive me into Silver City as soon as you finish?" she asked. "I'm all packed and ready."

"That the way it is, kid?" I asked.

"That's the way, Uncle Hugh." She looked like she would have cried with a little encouragement, if she'd been the crying kind. "You are all very nice out here—but I guess I'm just a little homesick. Guess I'd like to go back home where there are policemen—and people don't fight and kill people—and lie their heads off all the time."

"All right, kid, all right—don't take it so hard. We'll get you on the train today," I told her.

So the Philadelphia Filly nibbled at her breakfast and went on back home, without even leaving Lefty a note. Didn't even tell him good-bye or kiss-my-foot or anything. He was out on the range and didn't get in until a couple of days later.

"What was her hurry, Hugh?" Lefty asked when he got back.

"Seems like she got a little homesick." I tried to break it to him easy as I could. "Seems like she pined for a law abiding place again. Seems like she's been hearing things, Lefty."

"Yea—I figured she would, sooner or later, Hugh. Didn't think she thought enough of me to let it make any difference, though. You never can tell what'll come up after a rain, can you, Hugh?"

"Nope, son, I reckon you can't."

"Do you suppose that if I had been a big shot, Hugh—owned my own ranch like a lot of the horse-thieves around here do—that it would have made any difference to her?" Lefty asked.

"Dunno, son—you got me there," I told him. "Lots of our most pious citizens have killed a few men in their time and branded a few calves they couldn't prove was their own. Now they go to church two, three times a year and act like they was decent. Maybe it was the bank robbing she didn't like." I tried to make a joke of it. "Can't remem-

ber any ex-bank robbers among the ranchers around here.”

I thought I was being funny, but I wasn't. The queerest thing about it all was that the bank at Alpine, Arizona—Joe Wheeler's bank—got robbed that winter—by three masked men. Lefty Allen was away when it happened. Gone for four days—and he took with him the two gun-slingers he'd hired that fall—just before hell broke loose in Grant County!

8

LEFTY DIDN'T mention the Philadelphia Filly again after that one time. Right after she left we got started on the fall roundup and I guess he was just too busy to say any more—or too proud maybe.

The roundup was considerable of a disappointment. We combed the Jack-In-The-Box clean, we hunted through the back canyons and the brush country along Lonesome River—and our gather was still a hell of a lot less than it should have been. Something was haywire on the Jack-In-The-Box—we were short too many steers!

“I reckon I better hire us a couple of gun-slingers,” Lefty said when he saw the tally. “There's too many of them steers gone. That many don't just wander away by themselves. Somebody must have coaxed 'em along a little. I know a couple of salty jiggers I can get.”

“No need of doing that,” I told him. “We got plenty of good men on the Jack-In-The-Box. And we got an honest sheriff. I don't see any call to pay out good money for a couple of gun-fanners. Kinda give us a bad name.”

“Hugh,” Lefty told me right determined, “don't go giving me any trouble right now. There's something in the wind—I've felt it ever since that jigger laid for me over at Georgetown—and I don't want us to get caught with our pants down. I know a couple of good tough hombres that I can hire and I'm going to do it. Might save some of our regular boys from getting killed.”

"You're running it," I told him, still not liking the idea. "What makes you think we're in for trouble?"

"Me, I've been reading about it in a book," Lefty told me. "All about amassed wealth and such. We've got a lot of it—and there are folks that ain't got so much. And, according to this book, those that ain't got so much are always trying to take it away from them that's got a lot. Been going on for generations, the book allows. Sooner or later somebody is going to try and take something away from the Jack-In-The-Box. Looks like they done started, judging by the tally book."

"Have it your way," I told him. His judgment had always panned out pretty good, so I didn't argue any more about it. "You going into town and wire those two guys you mentioned?"

"Yea, I could do that. You want to ride in with me and we'll send 'em a wire?" Lefty asked, reading my mind, the son of a gun. I'd been wanting to get to town for quite a spell and didn't have any good excuse for it. A man sorta goes to seed, just sitting around after he's retired.

So we rode in to Silver City and put up at the hotel and I hunted me up a card game while Lefty tended to his telegraphing. I lost forty, fifty dollars before I got me a hand worth betting on—and was just about even again when Lefty got through.

We started over to the Chinaman's for supper and were just crossing the street when somebody yelled out, "Lefty! Valga me Dios. Long time no see!"

"Juanito!" Lefty yelled back and ran across the street and pumped this jigger's hand. "Juanito, you old horse thief!"

They jabbered in Spanish for about five minutes before Lefty said, "Excuse me, Hugh, but this is an old friend of mine from Chihuahua. He and I used to—well, we used to work together, you might say. Mind if he eats with us?"

"Friend of yours is a friend of mine," I told him. "I'll go along and order some steaks and things—likely you'll

want to have a drink or so, meeting up after all these years. Like yours rare, Juanito?"

"Whatever the señor orders will be bueno," this Mexican friend of Lefty's said. Polite son-of-a-gun for a bandit, I thought.

So I went over to the Chinaman's and ordered supper and got to wondering about this Mexican and Lefty and all while I was waiting. I had a sneaking idea that Lefty and this jigger hadn't led what you'd call honest lives down there in Chihuahua, for Lefty admitted he'd been pretty much of a rustler. What the hell was this Mexican bandit doing way up here off his home range—right after we'd discovered a beef shortage? A man can't help wondering sometimes.

"Too bad you lost your money, Juanito," Lefty was telling this Mexican as they came into the Chinaman's. "Stick around a few days—maybe a week or so—and I'll see what I can do."

"No hurry, amigo," this Juanito said, "there is no hurry. I did not tell him any especial time."

"I don't suppose you'd want to mention the man's name, would you, Juanito?" Lefty asked.

"It would be better if I did not, amigo," Juanito answered, "and I think it would better if you and I were not seen together after we leave here."

So we ate supper and Lefty and this Juanito talked about the fun they'd had in Mexico and the times they'd saved each other's lives and all. Seems like Juanito had been just one of the small fry, back in those days—but since Lefty had pulled out the boss bandit had got shot or hung or something and Juanito was now the big augur. Couldn't figure out what he was doing up in Silver City, but I finally decided it was none of my business—so I left 'em talking and went back to my stud game.

Long about twelve-thirty or so I got tired of playing stud and went on up to bed—and there was Lefty sleeping like a baby, his guns hung over the back of a chair. Four

years sure had civilized Lefty Allen, I thought as I pulled my boots off. There was a time when he slept with his guns under his pillow or near his hand—and a mouse walking around would mighty near wake him up.

I lay there a while, thinking things over. Here the Ham-lins were—gone on a world tour—maybe be away five or six months. They'd left their twin boys in charge of that jigger laying over there asleep. They thought enough of Lefty Allen to leave their kids in his care—and that very day I'd been arguing with him over hiring a couple of gun-men to help protect those very kids. Hell, I decided, I didn't have good sense.

And I didn't! It never occurred to me until later that Lefty could have any other reason for hiring a couple of professional gun fighters!

It was the deputy sheriff, "Jeopardy" Jones, that started me wondering. It was Sheep Dip Sherman that hung the name of "Jeopardy" on him. Got to calling him the Jeopardy Sheriff, all in fun—but it was a good name for him. He was a killing deputy, this Jeopardy Jones, and the name fit him like a glove. He was Sheriff Banks' right hand man—and a salty jigger he was, too. Did all Banks' riding and trailing and hard work for him—and built him up quite a name for bringing in law breakers—mostly dead!

I hung around Silver City three or four days after Lefty went back to the ranch, chinning with old friends, getting me a store shave every day and generally enjoying life. One morning this Jeopardy Jones came over to the Buck-horn Bar where I was passing the time and called me aside.

"Hugh, it ain't none of my business, exactly, but there's a couple of fellows over at Three Jay's store charging quite a lot of shells and rifles and stuff to your account."

"You don't say."

"Yea, I do say. They claim Lefty Allen told 'em to get outfitted and report to the Jack-In-The-Box."

"That could be right, Jeopardy," I told him. "Lefty hired a couple of hands few days back. Could be those

two guys you're talking about are them. Could be it's all right, them getting outfitted."

"Yea, I know, Hugh—that part is all right. It's the guys I am questioning. Don't know what names they go under now, but I've seen both their faces on the wanted list or my name ain't Jones."

"They ain't wanted in New Mexico, are they, Jeopardy?"

"No, they ain't."

"Reckon that kinda lets you out, Jeopardy," I told him.

"That ain't the point," Jeopardy said. "Here we are trying to keep the law and order and all—and you guys out at the Jack-In-The-Box go and hire a couple of bad hats with records as long as your arm. They're bound to make trouble. Folks ain't going to like it, either. It's bad enough to have an ex-outlaw for foreman without hiring a couple more. It ain't right, Hugh."

"Could be you are right, Jeopardy," I told him, "but I didn't hire these two new jiggers and I ain't running the Jack-In-The-Box. Maybe you better do your complaining to the right party."

"All right," Jeopardy said, "if that's the way you feel about it I won't say no more—but I just thought you ought to know what's going on under that old red nose of yours."

"Thanks, Jeopardy," I told him—getting kinda mad at him talking about my nose. What if it does look like a tomato? "Thanks a lot. You just take right good care of the sheriff's department and likely the Jack-In-The-Box will manage to get along somehow. We got along for years before you ever came to the territory. Where did you come from, anyways, Jeopardy? Never did hear you tell."

Likely I'd taken a long shot in the dark and it had hit home—for Jeopardy gave me a funny look and walked out of the Buckhorn without answering me.

I was in the same Buckhorn Bar a couple of nights later talking to Stud Markham, the cattle buyer, when this

Mexican friend of Lefty's came in. He got him a bottle of beer and sat over in the corner playing some kind of Mexican solitaire with two decks of cards for quite a spell. After a while Lefty and two guys I'd never seen before came in. These two strangers headed for the bar—and Lefty eased over to the table where this Mexican, Juanito, was.

By perking up my ears and straining a point I could just barely hear what Lefty was saying. "Here you are, amigo," Lefty said, throwing down a sack that clinked, "just the right amount."

"Thanks, Lefty," this Juanito said. "I am sorry that things had to be like they are, but es la vida."

"Es la vida, Juanito," Lefty answered. "Glad I ran into you before things got tangled up worse. Who can a man turn to if not his friends?"

"Well, Lefty, who knows, maybe I don't ever see you again, eh?" Juanito shrugged his shoulders. "This life I lead, she is not very certain."

"Better take the veil like I did, amigo—and go to work," Lefty told him. They talked a while—and then Lefty called his two new gun hands and they went out together. Never did see me at all—or at least he didn't let on he had.

What the hell, I wondered, is Lefty Allen doing giving a big sack of money to a Mexican bandit? And where did he get it? I thought and thought and finally decided I was getting too nosey and was worrying about things that weren't any of my business. If Lefty Allen wanted to help his friends out that was his affair, I decided. I took me a big slug of snake bite medicine and went on up to bed.

I was kinda late getting down to breakfast the next morning—and by the time I did the whole town knew that the bank over at Alpine, Arizona, had been robbed the day before—by *three masked men*! Joe Wheeler's Bank—robbed of thirty thousand dollars that was all ready to be shipped out on the stage to the Chino mines to meet the payroll.

But hell, I didn't connect it up with Lefty Allen—you just don't connect your friends up with things like that!

9

IT WAS A LONG hard winter, that year on the Jack-In-The-Box. Don't know why I hung around, hugging the stove—could just as well have been out in California or down on the Gulf, soaking up the sunshine—but some kind of a hunch kept me on the ranch. Reckon I was beginning to suspect Lefty Allen without knowing it. Folks can do that, sometimes—know something without knowing they know it. Sounds kinda haywire, the way I put it—but that is the way it happens.

Anyhow, I must have sensed that something was going wrong and wouldn't admit it—even to myself—but just the same, I hung around and waited for hell to break loose. And it did.

I've already told you that the bank at Alpine, Arizona, was robbed. Later in the winter the Southern Pacific was held up when it slowed down for a grade. The safe at the Chino mines got cracked and a hell of a lot of bullion taken. And we lost three hundred prime steers.

It was a long, cold winter—and I puttered around the place and got in everybody's way and got meaner than hell before spring came. A few times I got over to Georgetown for a little stud or draw—but mostly I hung around the ranch house and got touchy as a sore thumb.

Every time I saw those two hired gun-slingers of Lefty's I got madder than the time before. They didn't do a damned thing—they didn't do a lick of work. Just ate their heads off and drew a hundred bucks a month each for it. Oh, they did do a little riding once in a while—but they couldn't have gone very far or done very much because they nearly always managed to meet up with the Hamlin twins and ride home with them from the school over on

Salt Creek. That was only seven, eight miles and couldn't be called a day's work for two grown men.

No sir, I couldn't see any call to be putting out two hundred bucks a month to those two gun-slingers and I told Lefty so one day.

"Hell, Lefty," I said, "the days of outlaws and Indians and rustlers are over. We're plumb civilized out here now. Got fences and grow our own feed and all. We even got an honest sheriff. What do we need with a couple of gun fighters—eating their heads off and drawing good pay and doing nothing."

"Hugh, I hope you're right," Lefty laughed. "I hope we are just throwing our money away. I hope we never need those jiggers—nothing would please me better. But I've been looking at the tea leaves. I'm plumb clairvoyant—I see some numbers coming up."

"You don't say."

"Yea—I do say." Lefty laughed some more. "Seems like I heard some talk of a bank being robbed recently around here somewheres, wasn't it?"

"That's a fact," I told him.

"Could be something else might bust loose around here too," Lefty said. "Could be we'll need those jiggers before the year is out." He grinned at me. "Could be I'll want to take 'em along the next time I rob another bank. Hear by the grapevine that's what I've been doing."

"Heard something like that myself, son," I told him, and I had. Somehow the story had got around that it was Lefty that had robbed the bank at Alpine, Arizona. Nobody knows who started it, but the first thing you know it was common knowledge. One of those known facts. Folks got to nudging each other when Lefty went by—pointing at him and wondering why the hell the law didn't do something about it.

"Yes sir, I hear you've sorta gone native again, son," I told him.

"You never can tell what will come up after a rain, now can you?" Lefty asked.

"Seems like you'd dig you up an alibi and get all this talk hushed up," I told him, kinda fishing around to see where he had been the night the bank got robbed.

"Shucks, Hugh, talk won't kill anybody," Lefty told me. "Anyways, they can't prove it. Nobody saw me for sure—I was masked, they say. And if I did rob the bank likely I had sense enough to hide the money where nobody can find it and prove it on me."

"Yea, son," I laughed, never for a minute thinking he was serious. "You wouldn't let yourself get caught out on a limb."

"You going over to Georgetown tonight?" Lefty asked, trying to get the subject changed, I reckon.

"Yea, I thought I might set in a little poker game and maybe look at the bottom of a glass. You got something in mind?"

"Yea, I got a hen on, you might say," Lefty told me. "Little deal working that may hatch some trouble. Might need some help with it. You going to lose your money in Honest John's as usual?"

"Guess so," I told him. "You fixing to stick up Honest John's place next?"

"Nope, Hugh—might shoot it up a little, that's all. Better take along that belly gun of yours just for the hell of it."

At the time I thought he was ribbing me—but shoot up Honest John's place he did—or rather I did! Damnedest thing I ever did in all my life!

I went over to Georgetown early in the evening to get one of the Chinaman's steaks—nobody can cook a steak like a Chinaman—and to chin with the boys for a while. I ended up in a friendly game of draw with some of the boys. Joe Wheeler was there, and the deputy, Jeopardy Jones, Honest John—and Three Jay Johnson that had bought out Myers' store two, three years back.

This Three Jay was one of those quiet jiggers that hailed from back east somewheres—the kind that ain't much at shooting off their mouths but are right capable in a pinch. John Julius Johnson, his full name was—but everybody called him Three Jay for short. Nice, clean-looking young fellow that minded his own business and played a cautious game of poker. Made a pretty good citizen, even if he didn't talk like territory folks.

Seems like Three Jay and Jeopardy Jones had the habit of riding over to Georgetown once a week to play cards. Reckon a respectable storekeeper and a deputy sheriff couldn't feel right playing poker over at Silver City, their home town—so they rode over to Georgetown—and Joe Wheeler mighty near always joined them.

Lefty Allen was there, too—but he wasn't playing cards. He was just sitting at a table off in a corner, nursing a bottle of beer and reading a magazine. He sorta looked at me like he wanted to talk to me, so I dropped out for a hand and went over and talked to him for a spell.

"Got your larceny all planned, son?" I asked him.

"Yep—got her all planned, Hugh."

"What you want me to do—hold 'em off while you blow the safe, or would you rather hold 'em off while I blow it?" I joked with him.

"Nope," Lefty told me. "That ain't the program. What I want you to do is to remember something you forgot to do somewheres else—and let me play your hand while you go and do it. I want you to stay away about half an hour or so—and then I want you to shoot the light out. You any good with that belly gun of yours?"

I thought he was just ribbing me so I went along with him. "Shucks, my eyes are still good—I can hit a kerosene lamp at thirty feet, I reckon. Which one you want shot out?"

"Both of 'em," Lefty answered. "I want it plumb dark in here."

"You really serious, son?" I asked—not quite believing

that he wanted me to shoot the lights out of Honest John's place.

"Yea—serious as hell."

I tried to straighten it out in my mind. Now Lefty Allen wasn't the kind of damned fool that wanted the lights shot out just for the hell of it. And if he had been working off a personal grudge, he wouldn't be getting me mixed up in it. So I decided that it must have something to do with me, too. Must have something to do with the ranch, or the Hamlins. Something serious must be afoot, I decided, and Lefty was dealing with it the best way he could—and he'd been pretty good at dealing with things in the past—so I went along with him.

"Give me half an hour or so," Lefty told me, "so I can sort of get organized in that poker game. Then you sneak back and pot those lights through the window. Bet you two bits you can't get the two of 'em in two shots—bet it takes you three."

"Make it a dollar, son—never did like these two-bit bets."

So I excused myself from the poker game and told 'em that Lefty would play my hand for a while to give 'em a chance to win back what they'd lost to me. This seemed agreeable all around—so I went in to the bar and fortified my nerves against anything that might possibly happen to upset them and went outside. I walked around for a spell and when I figured half an hour had passed, I took out my belly gun and sneaked up to a window at Honest John's place.

I couldn't help looking in the window before I shot. Curiosity has got me into lots of trouble from time to time. Lefty was sitting with his back to the window, Joe Wheeler had thrown in his hand and was standing back of Lefty rolling a cigarette—and Three Jay Johnson was sitting across the table from Lefty, smiling like he had a full house and didn't care who knew it!

It was as easy as falling off a log. I took the far light with my first shot and the near light with my second shot—and

right on the tail of it a third shot blasted out—inside Honest John's place!

Honest John's place was dark as hell—and what a commotion broke loose! Tables were overturned, bottles and glasses smashed—and some jigger busted loose with a long string of Spanish cuss words. Not ordinary garden Mexican—but that high toned Castilian that you don't hear often out here. Yes sir, there was nigh on to a riot that night when I shot the lights out at Honest John's!

They finally got the place lit up again—and the town marshal came running up to count the dead and arrest the living and all. I didn't want to miss out on the fun, so I sneaked in with him.

There weren't any dead—although Joe Wheeler had a flesh wound in one arm—and the marshal couldn't pin the shooting on any of 'em. There was glass all over the floor and a couple of chairs smashed—and there was Lefty Allen looking innocent as a lamb.

The marshal smelled everybody's gun to see if any of 'em had been fired—but he couldn't find a one that smelled of smoke. I noticed that he didn't bother the hide-out gun that Lefty wore shoulder-holstered under his shirt. Reckon the marshal didn't know about that.

Joe Wheeler wasn't hurt bad, and it looked like all three shots could have come from the outside—so there wasn't anything done about the shooting but a lot of talking. Lefty and I had a couple of drinks to sort of settle us down a little and lit out for home, nobody wanting to play any more poker that night.

"Reckon you owe me a dollar, Hugh," he said as we rode home. "Might have known that when you get to be a hundred and ten your eyes ain't what they used to be."

"You're crazier than hell, son," I told him good-naturedly. "Nothing wrong with my eyes. Arm's steady, too. I only shot twice, son—that third shot came from inside Honest John's place—so fork over a dollar."

Lefty handed me a dollar and didn't say a word for quite

a spell. Finally he said, talking more to himself than to me, "That settles it, yes sir, that settles it. It must have been Hoolio—and it was me he was shooting at, not Joe Wheeler."

Now who is Hoolio, I wondered as I turned in that night—and why did I have to go around shooting lights out just to find out? Never thought I'd spend my declining years potshotting lights in a gambling hall. And if I'd known the trouble it was going to cause I never would have done it!

10

I WAS DOWN at the cook shack the next morning after our ruckus at Honest John's, chinning with Old Hennery—and filling up on the hair dye that he called coffee—when Lefty walked in, armed to the ears. Had a gun on each hip, a bulge under his shirt where his hide-out gun was—and he was carrying a Kraag saddle carbine that would kill a man a mile away.

"You going to the wars, son?" I asked him.

"Nope," Lefty said, "I ain't looking for no wars. Had some idea of going around a nest of rattlers, though. You never can tell what I might do, either—I might get to picking on 'em so bad that they'd up and start a fight and then I'd have to wipe 'em out."

"You sound sorta on the prod at that," I told him.

"Yea—it sorta looks like I'm going to have to kill some folks, and I don't particularly want to." Lefty looked kinda downhearted about the whole thing. "There was a time when I would have looked forward to it—but a guy's ideas change, I reckon. Sure is a shame we can't do things the way the Philadelphia Filly thinks they ought to be done. She thinks you can call a cop and a lawyer and settle everything peaceful like."

"It ain't none of my business," Old Hennery horned in, "but there is a lot to her way of thinking. Take me

now, I'm nine hundred years old and have seen danged nigh everything—and I can't remember a fight that couldn't have been settled without bloodshed if it had been handled right."

"What you going to do if somebody is gunning for you, Hennery?" Lefty asked.

"Main thing is not to let 'em shoot at you," Hennery told him. "Have a few more cakes or some more coffee?"

"Don't care if I do," Lefty said. "Just what was you saying about not getting shot at?"

"Hell, you're more than nine years old," Hennery said, "and you know who's apt to be shooting at you, and you know the places where they're most likely to do the shooting. All you got to do is to stay away from them people and them places. Sooner or later an accident will happen to the people and you can go back to the places again without getting shot at."

"That sounds all right, Hennery," Lefty told him, "but I'm sort of an impatient jigger. Just can't sit around and whittle, waiting for an accident to happen."

"Did I say anything about waiting for an accident to happen?" Old Hennery asked.

"Nope, reckon you didn't."

"Many an accident has been nursed along," Hennery told him, pouring him a dipper full of drinking alcohol, and he was off. "I always was a peace-loving man myself—barring a time or two. Quit me many a good job because the bosses was always getting into fights with some other outfit. I remember once down on the Pecos I'd quit so many jobs that I decided to settle the next fight my boss got in myself. Some new-fangled young dentist give me the idea. That was before I discovered drinking alcohol."

"Take it kinda easy, will you, Hennery?" Lefty asked. "You're jumping around so fast from jobs to dentists and drinking alcohol that my head is fairly swimming."

"Excuse me," Old Hennery said. First time I'd ever heard him excuse himself. "It was like this—I had me a

hell of a toothache, a regular Grade-A toothache—and I went to see this young whippersnapper of a dentist. He looked at my teeth and pried around in my jaw some—and then he put some medicine on one of my teeth. Not the one that was hurting, but one away around in the other side of my mouth. I thought he was just an ignorant young squirt—but he told me it was the very newest thing. Counter irritant, he called it. Made you hurt one place to forget you hurt another.”

“It work all right?” Lefty asked.

“Sure as shooting. It stopped the ache in no time—just as quick as a shot of drinking alcohol does now. Worked so good I’ve remembered it all my life. Tried it myself next job I got.”

“You tried treating your own teeth, Hennery?” Lefty asked.

“Nope—that ain’t what I mean. It was all the fights folks was getting into. Very next place I worked the boss got into a row with some sheepherders. It was a right good job and I didn’t want to quit because of the fighting—so I found me something to get mad at so’s I would forget the fighting.”

“Didn’t know you ever got real riled, Hennery,” I horned in.

“Hell, Hugh, I’m a peace loving man—but them moths would have made a schoolma’am cuss.”

“What moths was that, Hennery?” I asked. “I thought it was sheep and teeth you were talking about.”

“If you’d keep that old red nose of yours out of things, maybe I could get done talking to Lefty,” Old Hennery informed me. “As I was saying—I got madder than hell at them moths and it took my mind off the sheep war.”

“Where was all this?” Lefty asked.

“Down on the Pecos—one of the biggest ranches I ever cooked for. Cooked for forty-one punchers. Good job, too—had me three helpers and a Mexican to cut the wood—and I hated to see it get all messed up on account of a

sheep war. Some big sheep outfit had moved in and was hogging the range and everybody was primed for some shooting and killing and such. Being a peace loving man I had almost decided to quit and go somewheres else. I was just packing up to quit—and if it hadn't been for my overcoat I reckon I would have."

"What's your overcoat got to do with it?" I asked. "Minute ago it was moths that was bothering you."

"It was," Hennery told me. "They was in my overcoat. Started to put it in my war bag and about forty-one hundred moths flew out of it. Damned near filled my kitchen full. Don't see yet how they all got in one overcoat."

"What did they do, fly away with your kitchen?" I asked, expecting almost anything.

"Naw—they just flew around a spell—and then headed for a batch of drinking alcohol I had fermenting. Must have drunk three, four gallons of it before they started passing out all over the place. Made me so blamed mad I forgot all about that sheep war—just like that counter irritant made me forget my toothache. All I could think of was getting even with them moths for eating my overcoat. Killing was too blamed good for 'em."

"Kinda hard to torture a moth, I reckon," Lefty said. "Don't see how a man could get a good hold on one, hardly."

"Well, I fixed 'em up right," Old Hennery bragged. "Or at least I thought I did at the time."

"You don't say."

"Yep, I do say," Hennery went on. "I swept 'em all up and put 'em in a sack and got to thinking of the worst place a man could wake up with a hangover. Seemed to me like a sheep camp would be a helluva place to wake up with a hang-over—all that stink!"

"How your mind runs on, Hennery," I told him, but there was a lot to what he said. "Can't think of any worse place, at that."

"I couldn't either," Hennery said, "but for once in my

life I was wrong. Them moths went for them sheep like long lost brothers."

"You don't say," I said again—wondering what was in the air besides the smell of sheep and Old Hennery's story.

"Yes sir, it wasn't more than two, three days before them moths had every hair of wool ate off them sheep. Come winter they all froze to death."

"Can't see anything wonderful about a lot of moths freezing to death," I told him. "Shucks, there's likely millions of moths freeze to death every winter."

"Not the moths, you blamed idiot, the sheep!" Hennery fairly yelled at me. "Them moths had ate them sheep right down to the hide—and the first cold spell they all froze stiffer than a cowhand's socks."

"So you didn't have no sheep war after all," Lefty said. "No fighting, no shooting, no killing."

"Yea, that's right, son," Hennery said. "There could have been hell to pay around there—but a nice good accident gets cooked up and nursed along proper and calls the whole fight off."

"I kinda get the idea," Lefty told him. "Could be that there is something to what you say. Some accidents could be encouraged to happen to these jiggers."

"What jiggers you talking about, Lefty?" I asked, wondering what was in the wind. "Who the hell you mad at, anyways?"

Lefty looked at me kinda funny for a minute, and shook his head. "I ain't mad at nobody," he said. "I been trying to tell you things—that there's trouble coming up, that there's guys after what we got. But you think I'm plain full of sheep dip—so I won't say no more about it."

Right then and there I could see a little wall start up between me and Lefty Allen. Without him telling me I knew that from then on he was going his way and was going to do what he thought was best, without asking me. A word from me could have changed it all—maybe saved

a lot of grief—but I get kinda stubborn at times, and anyways I didn't think anything serious was brewing.

But Lefty must have thought so. "You got any idea where Jack Hamlin is now, Hugh?" Lefty asked me.

"Hell, he may be in China, for all I know. I just send him his mail care of the outfit that's running the tour he's on."

"You got any influence with him?" Lefty asked.

"None to speak of, son," I told him, "but I can try to fix something for you if you want."

"I don't want nothing fixed," Lefty said, getting kinda sore, I reckon. "Just tell him he better come on home, Hugh. Tell him there is going to be some trouble around here. Tell him that I might not always be here to look after things."

"You sound downright serious," I said.

"Yea, that's the way I mean to sound," Lefty said, sorta laughing even if he was serious. "Hell, Hugh, they might catch me the very next time I robbed a bank—and where'd you be without a good man around? Better send for Jack Hamlin."

"Somebody really gunning for you?" I asked.

"I ain't worried about myself. If it was just my trouble I could get on my horse and fade out. It's something more than that—the whole blamed ranch is going to be mixed up in it. I ain't afraid of what's going to happen to me."

"Shucks, I was only ribbing you, son," I told him. "I know you ain't worried about your own personal troubles—and if you were out on a limb you'd move on before you'd get the ranch mixed up in it. But we wouldn't let you go, Lefty—the whole blamed ranch would stand behind you if you were in trouble, and you know it."

"You reckon they would?" he asked.

"Yea, they would," I told him, believing that they would. "I'll send for Jack like you say—I think you're jumping at your own shadow. I don't no more think anybody would be crazy enough to tangle with a ranch this

size—but just the same I'll tell Jack you want him back."

"Thanks, Hugh," Lefty said—and the next day I went to town and wired Jack Hamlin care of the travel agency. Couple days later this answer came back:

Having a very good time. Will be home in two or three months. If you two illegitimates can't run the ranch sell it or give it away. Regards to Lefty and the boys. Tell the twins hello. JACK

I showed the wire to Lefty and he laughed. "Well, the old son-of-a-gun. Guess I can't let him down. Reckon that's his way of telling us he thinks the ranch is in good hands."

"Sounds like it," I agreed.

"I'll just have to strain a point and take care of things for him," Lefty said. He hitched up his belt and stuck his Kraag in the saddle holster and rode off without saying another word.

There goes a man, I thought! Got a few crazy ideas right now about things that are threatening the ranch—but he means well and he'd go to hell for his boss. Yes sir—I thought right highly of Lefty Allen that day. I forgot all the wild stories about him robbing the bank at Alpine and holding up the Southern Pacific and cracking the Chino safe. Yes sir—I thought right well of Lefty after that wire came from Jack Hamlin—right up to the day when I caught Lefty rustling three hundred head of prime Jack-In-The-Box steers and selling them over at Pinos Altos. Kept all the money himself, Lefty did—didn't bank a cent of it!

11

IN SPITE OF ALL of Lefty's worrying things ran along right smooth for a spell. It wasn't until about a month later, when I had business at Jack Hamlin's coal mine, that things began to happen.

Jack had asked me to tend to a few little things for him up there, the last time he'd written me, so I saddled up.

one nice sunny day and started for the coal mine. Some sort of a hunch told me to take my field glasses along.

The coal mine was about eighteen miles from the ranch, up in the foothills. It was rough, rugged country and we hadn't run cattle on that part of the ranch in years. The feed was sparse and it was a hard place to work cattle—so we just fenced it off and kept the stock out of it. You could have knocked me over with a feather when I cut the trail of a sizable herd being driven toward Pinos Altos, over the old mountain trail. We used to load cattle over there, fifteen or so years before the spur line came into Georgetown. It was a good sized bunch—looked like two hundred fifty or three hundred head, with three shod horses hazing them along, judging by the tracks.

Who was driving cattle over our range to Pinos Altos, I wondered as I rode along. Hadn't nobody asked me if they could—and Lefty hadn't mentioned anybody asking him. I'd got maybe two-thirds of the way to the mine before it dawned on me that it might be our stock and that somebody might be rustling them!

Given an even break I'm not rightly scared of man or beast—but all the gun I had was a sawed off forty-four that I carried under my belt. Not worth a damn if you're more than twenty, thirty feet from what you're shooting at. Hardly a gun to go hunting three rustlers with. Rustlers generally have an ample assortment of six shooters and thirty-thirty saddle guns and aren't to be tampered with by a guy packing only a belly gun. No sir!

I trailed them slow and easy all day, never letting myself show up on the ridges, never going faster than a walk, making as little noise as possible and keeping out of sight all I could. Along about sundown I came over the divide and could see the plains stretching out below me, all the way to Pinos Altos. Through the glasses I could see a sizable herd of cattle, just making the loading pens at Pinos Altos.

Hell, I thought to myself, they are driving 'em right up

to the loading pens—right out in the open where everybody can see—it all must be on the level. Must be that somebody caught a bunch of strays off their range and figured it closer to drive them to Pinos Altos than home. Served me right for butting in to somebody else's business. There I was, on a tired horse, twenty-five miles from home—without a bite to eat or a drop of drinking whiskey handy.

Nothing to do but ride on in to Pinos Altos and put up for the night, I decided. Hadn't been there in six or seven years, but the last time I was there they had a fair hotel, eight or nine saloons and a couple of eating houses. Figured with all that I'd be able to make out for one night—should be able to pick up a meal and a rejuvenator or two.

About two miles out from town I heard a horse whinny down the road ahead of me—and some instinct or other told me to get off the trail. I hadn't no more than got hid good in the brush than two horses came down the trail from Pinos Altos and stopped almost where I'd left the trail. It was Lefty Allen's two hired gun-slingers!

They waited round four, five minutes, smoking a cigarette—and pretty soon a third horse came down out of a side draw and joined them. Yea—you guessed it already—the third horse was carrying Lefty Allen.

"Everything go off all right, boys?" I could just hear Lefty ask.

"Yea, didn't have no trouble at all," one of the gun-slingers said. "That there cattle buyer looked at the bill of sale you gave me like he thought maybe it was forged. But he didn't say nothing about it. Paid off in gold, too. Harder to trace than a check."

"Well, throw it in the saddle, boys," Lefty said, "and let's try to get back before we're missed."

They hit the trail, the three of them, back toward the Jack-In-The-Box. I gave 'em time to get out of sight—and went on in to Pinos Altos. I really had something to think about on the way, too—and all the rest of the evening. Got in to Pinos Altos about an hour later, found

me a room, washed up and had a bite to eat. Had a few shots of anti-chill medicine, too—and didn't feel half bad for an old man with doubts in his mind.

Pinos Altos hadn't changed much since I was there. Same false front saloons and stores you see all over the territory. Same 'dobe jail, same post office and general store. There really wasn't much excuse for Pinos Altos being there—except that it was close to the Arizona line and made a good hang-out for the wild bunch that worked back and forth in both territories.

I looked the saloons over, hoping to find a card game I could get into, and ended up at the Last Chance. There was the usual run of cowhands, miners and gamblers—and there was a poker game going in the back.

"Private game, gents," I asked, "or can a stranger sit in?"

"Why, Hugh McGovern, you old side-winder," a man said. "Haven't seen you over in these parts for eight, ten years."

"Why, hello, Harry," I said. It was Harry Perkins, man I used to do business with back in the old days. Used to sell quite a lot of stock to Harry, at one time—but he got into some kind of trouble with the brand inspectors and folks quit selling stock through him. Hadn't seen Harry in a long, long time.

"Set right down, Hugh," Harry said. "Just a friendly little game. Two dollar limit, but you're welcome to set in if you're interested."

"Thanks, Harry," I told him, "two dollar limit is just my speed."

We played along for a spell, having a lot of fun, winning a little, losing a little—just a nice friendly game like the boys play down at the bunkhouse.

"Grass good in the Jack-In-The-Box this year, Hugh?" Harry asked.

"Yea—stock's in good shape," I told him.

"Couldn't see your way clear to throw a little business my way, could you?" Harry asked. "Trying to get estab-

lished again. Doing a little buying—but a few steers from you would help out a lot.”

“I’ll speak to the foreman,” I told Harry. “He handles all that now. Little farther to drive it over here, but I reckon he could work it out if the price was right.”

“The price’ll be all right, Hugh,” Harry said. “Got good connections. Always get top prices for what I buy.”

We played along some more—and I started losing money too fast to enjoy myself. I couldn’t keep my mind on the game—got too interested in trying to figure out why Harry Perkins was pretending he wasn’t acquainted with my foreman, when just that afternoon he’d got a bill of sale signed by him. Or that’s what I thought I had heard one of those gun-slingers tell Lefty just a few hours before.

It all looked and sounded kinda fishy to me. Lefty Allen had the right to buy or sell any stock he saw fit. He was the foreman and could run the ranch to suit himself—but he’d always done his selling in Silver City or Georgetown, and he’d always talked it over with me first.

Why the hell, I wondered, was he selling stock way over here at Pinos Altos? And why was the guy he’d sold it to pretending he’d never heard of Lefty Allen? It didn’t make sense to me. Looked like Harry Perkins didn’t want me to know he’d been buying steers from Lefty Allen—and it looked like Lefty didn’t want me to know he was selling these steers, or he wouldn’t have gone so far out of his way to do it!

Yes sir, it all smelled kinda fishy. Why would Lefty be driving steers so far, cutting down their weight that way? And why would he use those two fancy gun-slingers to drive them instead of some of the regular boys? Was Lefty rustling somebody’s cattle and rebranding them and selling them as Jack-In-The-Box steers, I wondered.

The more I thought about it the less I knew for sure—and I finally went to bed and tried to sleep—but somehow a little seed had got sown in my mind and I couldn’t sleep.

By morning the seed was in full bloom—and I had a full grown suspicion that Lefty Allen had slipped back to his outlaw days again!

Or maybe he was trying to build him up a stake to buy his own ranch somewheres. Maybe he thought he'd cut a little more ice with the Philadelphia Filly if he owned his own spread. *Quien sabe?*

Anyways, I didn't sleep much that night for thinking—and at daylight I was down at the freight yards. In the loading pens were three hundred Jack-In-The-Box steers—all fat and prime. And I had a hunch they were being stolen right out from under my nose!

My mind went back to the fall roundup, to the big shortages that had showed up then—and I wondered just how far Lefty Allen had gotten building up his stake. I got to wondering just how many steers he'd really stolen!

I had my breakfast and got on out of town before Harry Perkins could catch me snooping around. I went on home and didn't say a word to Lefty Allen about where I'd been and what I'd learned. He didn't mention the matter to me, either. Didn't say a word about selling any steers. Did the best I could to pretend that everything was all right and that I didn't suspect Lefty Allen of any underhanded dealing.

Couple of weeks later an idea seeped into my feeble mind. Why not check with the bank and see if Lefty had deposited the money for the sale of those steers? It could be that he'd done that and just forgot to tell me about it.

When I saw the books at the bank things looked even worse. He hadn't deposited a cent of that money—and, a couple of months or so back, right around the same time that the Alpine Bank had been robbed—Lefty Allen had cashed a check for five thousand dollars.

What a stake he must be building up—and what a crook he turned out to be, I thought—stealing from those that trusted him most!

IF THERE EVER was a man between a rock and a hard place it was me when I found out about Lefty Allen turning wild again. Hell—he'd saved my life—he could have the shirt off my back and he knew it. He didn't have to steal a thing—he had a good job, drew down nice wages, and every third beef we raised was his. I swear I couldn't figure it out—and I couldn't see how Lefty was going to end up!

If he had come to me and talked it out, maybe I could have helped him get whatever it was he wanted out of life—but instead he was stealing everything he could get his hands on, and covering it up by pretending he was protecting the ranch from some mysterious danger. And, I figured, he couldn't be doing all that stealing just for the hell of it—when he's got enough money for ordinary purposes—so there must have been something big he wanted to buy. Something that took a lot of ready money.

Don't get me wrong—I was mighty provoked at Lefty and there were times I wished I'd seen the last of him—but away down inside of me he was my friend, and always would be—no matter what he did.

So I got to mulling things over in my mind, and I decided that I had better get all the money I could lay hands on together in one chunk and give it to Lefty. That way he could buy whatever it was he wanted—without stealing any more. Maybe I could keep him from getting killed by some law man.

I had a few securities I could sell and a tidy sum in the bank, but I didn't know just how to go about giving it to Lefty, and I didn't know just how much he needed. I hinted around some, but Lefty was pretty close mouthed. I gave him every chance in the world to tell me all about it, but Lefty never so much as said boo about his own interests.

Finally I up and talked straight to him. "How would you like to own a ranch of your own, son?" I asked him one day.

"I reckon that would be mighty nice some ways," Lefty answered. "Be quite a change from the way I started out, on what a kindly man would call a borrowed horse."

"Yea, it would," I said. "I been thinking. I ain't going to live forever. In fact I'm some surprised that I've lived as long as I have."

"I been wondering about that myself," Lefty told me. "I can't figure out whether you're just too blamed mean to die—or whether it's the Old Crow that preserves you so good."

"Little of both, I reckon, son," I said. "Anyways, I got quite a tidy sum of money kicking around in banks and things. Ain't a bit of use to me. And the twins—they got all they'll need for the next hundred years. Had some idea of leaving it to you when I die, Lefty."

"Shucks, Hugh." Lefty was downright embarrassed and hardly knew what to say. "Hell, you're good for another twenty, thirty years. Man that wolfs down half raw steaks like you do ain't going to die any time soon. What brought this on, anyways?"

"I was thinking," I said, bound to get it off my chest, come hell or high water, "that this here money I speak of ain't drawing any interest to speak of, and I've got damned near everything I need. Why don't you take this money and buy you a little ranch, or a saloon, or whatever you got your heart set on?"

Lefty didn't answer me right off. He thought some and drew little patterns in the sand with a stick he'd been whittling and finally said, "Hugh, you old son-of-a-gun, I don't know what you've stumbled on—but whatever it is you haven't read the sign right. Hell, I'd take your money in a minute if I needed it and know I'd be welcome to it. If I was in a tight place I'd even come and ask you for the loan of it. Just by offering you've made me feel fine—and some day I hope to own a ranch of my own—but right now I've got my hands full running Jack Hamlin's ranch."

Maybe after Jack comes home and things get ironed out we'll talk about it again, huh?"

"Suit yourself, son, the offer stands any time," I told him—stumped for sure. Lefty didn't want my money, he didn't want my advice—in fact he didn't seem to want anything but to go to hell in his own way.

As I mulled things over it came to me that Lefty Allen had been all right, a good hard-working boy, loyal and on the level—right up to the time that the Philadelphia Filly had packed up and gone home, condemning him without even hearing his side of it.

Maybe that is what had soured him on the world, I thought, and thrown him back to the ideas he'd had in his outlaw days. Threw him back with his old friends maybe—like this Juanito, the Mexican bandit. And those two fancy gun-slingers he'd hired—likely they were some of the wild bunch he used to run with.

I mulled it over a couple of days and finally decided to go over to Salt Creek and talk with Father Antonio. Sometimes it's a good idea to get another man's slant on things that are bothering you. So one day I saddled up and jogged over to Salt Creek to see Father Antonio.

Lefty and Father Antonio were as thick as a couple of thieves—two of the best friends in the territory. They seemed to have a good, wholesome admiration for each other. Maybe Lefty envied Father Antonio his goodness, or calmness of mind or something. And the Padre—who knows what goes on in a priest's mind? Maybe Lefty was the kind of a rip-snorting young fellow Father Antonio would have liked to have been if he hadn't been a priest. Quien sabe?

As I look back on it now, it was kinda funny—an ex-outlaw and a good, kindly priest being such close friends, but they were. Reckon I'll have to go back three or four years to tell you all about it.

The first time Lefty ever saw Father Antonio was over at Honest John's place in Georgetown. First time Lefty ever

saw Honest John was the same day, for that matter. Lefty and I had stopped in to see what we could see—and there was Father Antonio playing blackjack with Honest John.

Lefty was plain puzzled. He'd seen priests before, I reckon, but he'd never seen one in a gambling hall playing blackjack. "You never can tell what'll run out from under a rock, now can you, Hugh?" he asked. "This has sorta got me interested. Reckon I'll watch and see how good a gambler the Padre is."

We took a couple of chairs where we could watch, and the Padre won two hands out of every three, regular like. Not because he was a good gambler, but because Honest John was dealing.

"Thought this Honest John was a square gambler," Lefty said after watching Honest John deal for a spell.

"He has that reputation," I told him. "Nobody's ever complained about his being crooked."

"What's he dealing off the bottom of the deck for then?" Lefty asked. "Never did like a crooked dealer."

"Dunno, son," I told him and I didn't. "Looks like he ain't doing it to win, though—Father Antonio is winning two hands out of three."

"Nope, he ain't doing it to win," Lefty said. "Reckon it's none of my business, anyways—man's got a right to do whatever he wants to with his own money."

Father Antonio got about fifty dollars ahead, gathered up his winnings and got ready to leave. "Thank you, friend John," he said with a twinkle in his eye. "I will not win all of your money today. I will leave a little for seed so that there will always be some for me to win."

"You're welcome, Padre," Honest John told him. "Come back again when you feel lucky."

Father Antonio nodded to us and left, and Honest John came over to where we were sitting and sized Lefty up, slow and careful. Honest John had seen Lefty watching him and probably knew that Lefty had seen him dealing

off the bottom of the deck. He could see Lefty was smarter than most.

"Got anything on your mind, stranger?" Honest John asked Lefty.

"Nothing but an apology, Mister," Lefty said, grinning kinda sheepish. "Excuse me all to hell, will you? There was a minute there I thought maybe you were a crook. Reckon there's more ways than one of skinning a cat. My name's Lefty Allen."

Lefty held out his hand and Honest John took it. "Guess it did look kinda peculiar," Honest John admitted. "Glad to know you, Lefty. Friend of Hugh's is a friend of mine."

"What does he do with the money he wins?" Lefty was curious about Father Antonio.

"Him? He mostly gives it away," Honest John said.

"You mean he wins money just to give away?" Lefty asked.

"Yea, he gives it all away," Honest John explained. "Mostly to orphans and widows and guys on the run from the law, and sick folks and such. Even gives to them that are too damned lazy to work sometimes."

"What does he get out of it?" Lefty wanted to know.

"Hell, he don't get nothing out of it," Honest John said. "You mean to tell me you never heard of religion?"

"Yea, I've heard lots about it, off and on," Lefty answered, "but up to now I ain't ever seen much done about it."

"Well, you're young and got a lot to learn," Honest John said. "He's a good man, that Father Antonio. If people paid more attention to him I'd likely have to work for a living—wouldn't be near so many people losing their money here. Damned fools, they ain't got a chance in the first place. Should know better."

Lefty must have done considerable thinking about Father Antonio—finding it hard to believe, I reckon, that a man would just go around helping everybody without wanting anything back. It all didn't fit in with the way

Lefty had been raised, and it took him a while to get used to it.

Next time we saw Father Antonio he was skinning out some steers that had got frozen in a snowdrift. It was still pretty cold and the coyotes hadn't ruined the hides, and Father Antonio was skinning them out to pick up a few extra dollars selling the hides.

We rode up to where he was and he said, "Hello, amigos. You do not mind my skinning your steers. They do not seem to have any more use for their hides, and I thought that I might sell them."

"Help yourself, Father," I told him; "there's six, eight more up the canyon a piece. Might bring you in a few more dollars."

Lefty went me one better. He got down off his horse and pulled his knife out of his boot and went to work alongside of Father Antonio. "I'll just help you get through in a hurry," Lefty said. "Me and Hugh are riding over your way and we can just as well pack the hides in for you."

It was news to me. I hadn't known we were riding that way—but if Lefty could get all bloodied up skinning out those dead steers I guessed I could stand to ride a few extra miles.

We packed the hides in for Father Antonio, and he thanked us simply, showed us where we could wash and invited us to stay for supper.

Me, I'd had enough of the padre and his wet hides for one day, but Lefty decided to stay a spell. "You ride on home, Hugh," he said. "Old man like you ought to be in bed with the chickens anyway. Me, I'll ride back later."

So I went on home and Lefty stopped to eat with Father Antonio and must have liked what he found—for he spent the night. Didn't come back until around noon the next day.

"You know," he told me, "I can't quite get used to that jigger. He ain't like the way I was raised. Everybody for himself and the devil take the last guy—that's the way I

was brung up. But this Father Antonio—he's different—don't want nothing for himself, seems like. Sounds kinda haywire in a way, and yet I think that maybe he's on the track of something."

"You reckon we ought to sell the ranch and give the money to the poor?" I said, meaning to be funny.

"Naw, that ain't what I mean," Lefty said, sorta ashamed of showing a soft streak, "but it wouldn't hurt us none to send him a side of beef or something now and then, would it?"

"Reckon not," I told him. "Just never thought of it before, I guess." And I hadn't, but after that every time we butchered a steer we sent a good big chunk of it to Father Antonio to help feed his poor and sick.

That was the beginning of a three-way friendship that lasted for years and had a lot to do with the affairs of the Jack-In-The-Box. A friendship between an ex-outlaw and rustler, Lefty Allen, and Father Antonio, the priest that gambled and went to cockfights and gave everything he had away, and Honest John, the gambler that told his customers at the start that they didn't have a chance!

Anyways, as I was saying a while back, I threw my weary bones in the saddle and jogged over to Salt Creek to see Father Antonio—to see if he could help me get Lefty Allen straightened out. Father Antonio and about nineteen little Mexican kids were as busy as a bunch of beavers washing the windows of his new school.

It was Father Antonio's pride and joy, that new school, and every last brick, every pane of glass, every nail and tile in it was bought with money that Lefty Allen had given him! A fat chance I've got, I thought, of convincing Father Antonio that Lefty Allen is anything but a little tin god on wheels!

FATHER ANTONIO didn't seem a lot worried when I told him all the things Lefty had been doing. It sorta surprised me the way the padre took it all. I thought he wouldn't believe all the things I told him about Lefty, but he did, and he didn't seem to see any particular harm in them. It didn't make sense!

"What are a few steers, amigo?" Father Antonio asked. "You have plenty of steers—you will not miss a few. Just a few marks less in your little book, that is all."

"That ain't the idea, Padre," I told him. "Lefty has been doing other things—he has been stealing from other people, too. He's breaking laws, and that ain't right."

"He is doing very bad things, yes?"

"Very bad, Padre, very bad indeed," I told him.

"Lefty is a good man," Father Antonio said; "if he does bad things there is a good reason for it."

"What has that got to do with it?" I wanted to know.

"Things are not always the way they look, my friend," Father Antonio said. "Three men can look at a picture and see three different things, and maybe none of them sees what the artist painted. You do not think I am a bad priest because I gamble to win a little money for my pobres?"

"No, I reckon not," I told him.

"And you do not think Honest John is a crooked gambler because he cheats to let me win?"

"Nope—Honest John is on the square."

"Yet someone who did not know would think that he was a crooked gambler. A stranger would not know that Honest John is, how you say it—the hard-boiled fellow who does not believe in charity. It is against Honest John's principles to give money for charity—so he cheats and I win his money. He keeps his principles, I get the money. To a stranger it would look bad—but what is wrong with it?" Father Antonio asked.

"Nothing as far as I can see," I told him, "but I can't see what it has got to do with Lefty Allen."

"Maybe he is like Honest John, amigo," Father Antonio said. "Maybe he does the things you say he does for reasons that you do not understand. Maybe there are things that make it necessary for him to steal."

"Such as what?"

"Quien sabe—who knows?" Father Antonio was puzzled, just taking a shot in the dark, I reckon. "Maybe there are things that have come out of Lefty's past that make him steal. Maybe he does not want to become a thief again, but maybe something has happened to make him. A man cannot get away from his past."

"If he wants money, why don't he come to me for it?" I asked.

"There are other things in the world besides money," Father Antonio said. "If it was that simple he would come to you and you would give him money. No, it is something out of his past that is making him steal again, amigo."

This made me kinda sore, I reckon.

"Lefty Allen's past is paid for as far as I am concerned. Anything he did wrong he has more than paid for in what he has done for his friends. Just luck he is alive today—he was plenty willing to die for us at one time."

Father Antonio laughed. "You give yourself away, my friend—it is Lefty you are interested in, not the laws."

"That's right, Padre," I told him, getting all the more mixed up by his way of looking at things. "Admitting that you are right and Lefty has the best damned reasons in the world for what he is doing—he is still breaking the laws. And it's ten to one he'll get caught, sooner or later, and likely killed."

"Then, my friend, we must help him," Father Antonio said.

"Help him break the laws?" It didn't make sense.

"But of course not," Father Antonio said; "we must help him to not get caught."

"How are we going to do that?" I asked, beginning to think I was wasting my time talking to the padre.

"I will talk with Honest John," Father Antonio said. "He sees everybody and knows everything, and perhaps we can figure out to, how you say it, palm a few cards?"

"You do that," I told him, "and I'll ride over again in a week or so and see what's on the fire."

I really meant to go back and see Father Antonio again, but on the way home I got to thinking about what he said, and it all added up to exactly nothing. He didn't seem half as smart a man as I thought he was before I had talked to him. How the hell, I wondered, can those two jiggers—a soft-hearted priest and an honest gambler—how were they going to be tough enough, mean enough to take cards in a game where there is a lot of hitting below the belt?

The more I thought of it the less sense it made, and by the time I got back to the Jack-In-The-Box that night I was a mixed up old man. I was just about ready to wash my hands of the whole deal. Lefty Allen hardly seemed worth bothering about, all the trouble and worry he was causing me.

Hell, I wasn't Lefty Allen's nurse. He was over twenty-one and knew the ways of the world. If he didn't have any more sense than to get tangled up with a lot of stealing, why should I worry? Let him go to hell his own way—let him take Father Antonio and Honest John with him, I thought. Why should I lose any sleep over it, anyways?

They say a man ain't really crazy that just plain talks to himself—it's when he goes to answering himself back that he is really crazy! If that's the case then I was crazy as a loon by the time I went to bed that night, for I was sure talking to myself and I was answering myself right back.

Lefty Allen is as good as gold! Yea, gold—he steals gold from banks, I hear. You hear—but you didn't see him do it, you don't know that he did it. A bank was robbed, wasn't it?—A leopard can't change his spots, can he?—Lefty used to be a thief, didn't he? Lefty has made up for

all his crimes—he's paid back all his debts. Yea? Yea! Lefty Allen gave away twelve thousand dollars, didn't he? Just a bluff—he turned around and stole twice that before the winter was over.

That was the way my mind was working that night—half of it calling Lefty Allen names, the other half sticking up for him. Yes sir—I was sure talking back to myself—crazy as a loon.

If it hadn't been for the Old Crow I never would have got Lefty Allen off my mind and gone to sleep. I know it's sorta frowned on in the best of circles, but hell, a man my age has got to have his rest, so I tipped the bottle up a time or two and finally went to sleep. Didn't come to till around noon the next day.

Reckon it's kinda hard to judge your drinking out of a bottle that way. Had a right bad case of shakes when I woke up the next day, and I was still talking to myself. "Calls for a little hair of the dog that bit you," I told myself and took about three fingers to steady my nerves.

The hair of the dog that bit you, the hair of the dog that bit you—it kept running through my mind, over and over—the hair of the dog that bit you. All at once I knew what to do about Lefty Allen! Get him a little hair of the dog that bit him!

The Philadelphia Filly, that was the answer!

I sat down and wrote her a letter. Told her a long story about how the Hamlins were still gone and how the twins were sorta going to seed without a white woman to boss 'em, and couldn't she come out a little earlier in the spring instead of waiting until summer as usual.

I sent the letter to town with Roots Ansell, and about a week later I went on in myself to see what I could see and maybe find an answer from her.

She must have read between the lines—she was pretty smart for her size and weight—and guessed that something was in the wind. She didn't write any letter, but I found a telegram waiting for me in Silver City.

IT WAS SUNDAY then and I'd taken the buckboard just on the hunch that she might be on her way, so I decided to wait over for the train. It was on time for once—bright and early Tuesday morning—and the Philadelphia Filly looked pretty as the picture on a tomato can when she stepped down from the train. A little thin looking, but still the prettiest gal in Grand County by far.

"Hi, Uncle Hugh," she said. "Long time no see."

"Long time no see, Mary," I said surprised at hearing her use territory language. "Reckon you could use a little breakfast?"

"Sure could, Uncle Hugh, quite a lot of it," she said. "How is everything at the ranch?"

"Tell you after we eat," I said, remembering that a full stomach is supposed to take half the worry out of things. "Wait until I get your bags and we'll tackle the ham and eggs."

Did my heart good to see her again, the red-headed little baggage. Did my appetite good, too—ate a better breakfast than I had in years. Reckon there's just naturally something about a pretty young gal that makes an old man feel better.

"What kind of trouble is Lefty giving you, Uncle Hugh?" she surprised me by asking, soon as we'd eaten and hit the road.

"What makes you think Lefty is cutting up?" I asked.

"You old fraud, you," she said, "writing me that you couldn't handle the twins—two grown men. Why, they mind you better than they do their own parents. I wasn't born yesterday, Uncle Hugh."

"Reckon you must be all of eighteen, Mary Ann," I said.

"Nineteen, come spring grass," she laughed, talking territory language again. "I'm just about what you'd call

a grown young woman, so don't go trying to pull the wool over my eyes."

"All right, sis," I told her, feeling close to this young gal, somehow. Seemed like she might be on my side. "Here we go—Lefty Allen has gone plumb bad on us again. Thought maybe you might be able to help get him straightened out."

"Quit beating around the bush, Uncle Hugh—what has Lefty been doing?"

So I told her all about the cattle I knew he had stolen, and all about the bank being robbed, and the Chino safe being cracked, and the Southern Pacific being stopped, things I was sure Lefty had a hand in, too.

"Supposing all you suspect is true," she asked, "just what does it have to do with me? What can I do about it?"

"You can help me get him stopped, Mary Ann—you can help us keep him from doing anything more. Maybe we can stop him before the law gets on to him and kills him, maybe."

"Well, Uncle Hugh, I'd like to help you—but I'd rather not have anything more to do with Lefty Allen if what you say is true. The sooner I forget about him the better, I guess." She looked kinda down in the mouth about the whole thing, like deep down inside of her she didn't want to forget Lefty.

"So he was the guy on the white horse, after all?" I asked.

"He was the guy," she admitted, "but he turned out to be a shade darker than his horse, didn't he? And I'm still not so very sure about anything."

"Sorta between a rock and a hard place, huh, sis?"

"Something of the sort," she said. "It's all a mess. I didn't even take it seriously until I got home last fall and started missing Lefty terribly. After a while his past didn't seem very important—I didn't care if he had been a bandit. I know it wasn't right for me to feel that way, but I did! But something tells me I'd better just forget Lefty Allen."

"You wouldn't want to try your hand at reforming him, would you?" I asked.

"I'm afraid not, after what you've just told me." She was kinda quiet and thoughtful for a minute, but she seemed right sure of herself. "We're just different kinds of people, that's all. Maybe I am attracted to Lefty Allen, but our lives are too far apart, Uncle Hugh, and I'll just have to get over it, that's all. It wouldn't work."

"Shucks, child, I'd been counting on you to help me out," I told her. "Seems like you wouldn't mind—seeing as it was you that started him off again." I let her have it, straight from the shoulder, figuring that it was going to take a shock to change her mind.

"What do you mean, I started him off again?" she snapped at me.

"You heard about the life he used to live, and you pulled out on him without even saying kiss-my-foot," I told her. "You up and judged him by your own ideas, not his, and then you ran out on him when he was thinking the sun rose and set on you."

"Did Lefty think that?" she said, softening up a little.

"I couldn't say for sure—he's never come right out and admitted it," I told her, "but I've known Lefty Allen quite a spell and can tell pretty much what he's thinking by what he says."

"Well," she said, "I don't see how my leaving abruptly would turn him bad again, really I don't. If a man has any character at all things like that don't change him."

"Put yourself in Lefty's place," I told her. "Here he has been doing his best for four years to make an honest citizen, and then you run out on him, leaving him thinking he ain't fit to associate with nice folks. Naturally a man is going to take that kinda hard. Likely he'll look up his old friends again—the ones that aren't too good for him. Likely he'll take up those old friends' ways of doing things, too."

"Look, Uncle Hugh," she said, all upset by what I'd told her. "A few minutes ago I said I was a grown young

woman, but I'm really not. I'm rather young and just a little frightened of all this. I think I'd better just visit you for a few days and see the twins and then go on back home."

I argued with her for miles, but she was stubborn as a mule. She just wasn't having any, that's all. Lefty and I were both grown men and could work out our affairs without her—that was her way of looking at it. She'd like to help, but she guessed she belonged back east, after all.

Reckon I never would have got to first base if we hadn't rounded a turn of the canyon sudden like and met up with Jeopardy Jones, the deputy sheriff. Jeopardy Jones and a pack horse.

Strapped on the back of that pack horse were two men—both of them deader than hell, their legs dangling and bouncing with every step that pack horse took. It wasn't a pretty sight—especially for an eastern-raised young gal.

"Howdy, Hugh." Jeopardy lifted his hat. "Howdy, Miss. Sorry you had to run on to me like this, but I didn't hear your buggy in the sand. Could have pulled off behind a bush if I'd heard you coming."

"It's all right, Jeopardy," I told him, trying to pass it off the best I could. "Why don't you hunt that bush now and we'll go on by?"

"Sure, Hugh, sure as all get-out," Jeopardy said. "It's really them guys' fault"—he pointed to the dead men on the pack horse—"if they'd had a bit of sense they wouldn't have resisted arrest in the first place and I could have brought 'em in alive. Just doing my duty, that's all, Hugh."

"Go and do your duty behind a bush, will you, Jeopardy?" I said, and he pulled his horses out of the road while we went by. Must have driven five or six miles after that without either of us saying a word. All at once the Philadelphia Filly cut loose and cried like a baby—great big, shaking sobs that made my heart bleed for her.

"It's all right, sis," I told her. "It's all right. We'll get

you rested up and a couple of good meals in you and put you back on the train again."

"But I'm not going back, Uncle Hugh, I'm not going back," she fairly screamed at me. "Those men—they resisted arrest—we can't let it happen to Lefty, we just can't!" She shuddered, thinking of it.

It was kind of a dirty trick to play on her, but I thought I'd better argue with her a little so she would make her mind up all the stronger. "We won't let that happen to Lefty, sis—we'll work out something, me and the boys. You just forget about it and tomorrow or the next day we'll ship you back home."

"But I'm not going back," she yelled at me. "I'm not going back, and you can't make me."

"Yea, you better go on back home," I told her. "This is a rough, tough country. Ain't no place for a cry-baby."

"Who's a cry-baby, you tomato-nosed old has-been?" she snapped at me. "Here, let me drive while you roll that cigarette right. Takes a good man to roll a cigarette with one hand. A person would think you'd quit trying."

So she took the reins and drove and I fumbled more than necessary with my cigarette, giving her time to pull herself together.

"We'll show 'em, huh, Uncle Hugh?" she said after a spell.

"We'll show 'em, sis, we sure will," I told her. I didn't know who we'd show or how we'd do it, but I had a feeling that we would. Had me a little red-headed spitfire to help me now—and things were looking up!

15

THE PHILADELPHIA FILLY kept her word and went right to work softening Lefty up the minute we got to the ranch.

"Howdy, Lefty, long time no see," she said as we drove up to the ranch house where Lefty was refereeing a boxing match between the twins. "Hi, kids!"

"Hi, Aunt Mary." The twins were tickled to death at the sight of her, and Lefty didn't seem mad about it, either.

"Howdy, ma'am," Lefty said; "right glad to see you again."

"Glad to be back," she said. "You going to be too busy to take me fishing one of these days?"

"Never too busy for that, ma'am," Lefty answered. "Hear they are catching some nice trout already over on Willow Creek. Quite a ride for a tenderfoot, though."

"Give me a day or two to sorta get loosened up?" the Philadelphia Filly asked. "Then I'll tackle any ride that you will."

"Any time you say, ma'am," Lefty told her. "Just give me a day's notice and I'll be ready."

The Philadelphia Filly and the twins went on in the house and Lefty stared after her, shaking his head. "The blamed, spoiled little brat," he said but he didn't say it like he meant it much. "What do you suppose brings her out here so early?"

"You never can tell, son," I said, not wanting to talk too much and get him suspicious of my meddling. "Reckon maybe her folks went off somewheres and she got lonesome and came out here."

"Wish to hell she had stayed at home," Lefty said.

"You ain't glad to see her?" I asked.

"Yea, in a way I'm glad to see her," Lefty said, looking at me like he wasn't quite sure of himself. "She's a good kid and I'm glad to see her, but she ain't for the likes of me. Besides, she's just one more thing for me to take care of."

"Don't see that a little hundred-pound gal would take much looking after," I said. "Don't see how she could cause much trouble, for that matter."

"It ain't what she could do—it's what could happen to her, Hugh," Lefty said. "I hear tell that her folks are worth a lot of money. Could be they'd turn loose some of it to

get her out of trouble. Could be that somebody else might think of that besides me. There's a lot of dirty work going on around here, Hugh."

"You sound like a man who knows what he's talking about," I said, figuring he was mixed up in most of that dirty work himself. "Reckon you ought to know, son."

"Hugh, I thought better of you than that," he said looking kinda sore at me.

"Excuse me if I trod on your toes," I said, trying to get him mad enough to admit something.

"Hell, Hugh, you couldn't make me mad if you tried," he said, reading my mind. "Got to make allowances for old soaks and imbeciles, and such." Lefty laughed at me, refusing the bait, refusing to get mad and talk. "Could be you aren't half as tough as you pretend. You might even help me out if I got my tail caught in a crack."

"Could be, son," I told him.

"Could be I might get in jail sometimes, and you'd maybe get me out on bail?"

"You fixing on going to jail?" I asked.

"It ain't the most impossible thing in the world," Lefty laughed.

I laughed, thinking that he was ribbing me. "Sure, it could happen, but don't worry. I'll bail you out."

"Don't do it, Hugh."

"Don't bail you out?"

"No sir. That's the favor I want to ask of you. If I do get thrown in jail, just plain disown me. Call me seven kinds of a son right loud in some public place where everybody will hear you."

"That's a promise," I told him. "If that's what you want it will be a pleasure to do it. Sorta runs neck and neck with my opinion of you, anyways."

"Thanks for them kind words, Hugh," Lefty said. "Don't forget your promise."

"I won't," I told him.

The first couple weeks the Philadelphia Filly was at the

ranch things were slick as glass, and I began to think that I was smarter than seven hundred dollars. Began to think I ought to run for governor, I was so blamed smart. There I was, running the world, I thought—pulling strings and making folks dance and changing their lives and destinies around to suit myself.

As if anybody could change folks' destinies!

Good-looking gals were scarce in the territory in those days and it wasn't long before the whole county knew that the Philadelphia Filly was back—all grown up and prettier than a red heifer. First thing you know there was a steady procession of cowboys leading spare horses, and jiggers with buggies, too—trying to get the Philadelphia Filly to go riding with 'em.

Have to give her credit for good intentions, however. She was out here to try to help Lefty get over whatever ailed him, and she didn't waste much time on anybody else. Didn't want to make Lefty feel friendless, or out of her class. Spent most of her time riding with him—fishing a time or two over on Willow Creek or riding out to the line camps with him. She took some awful joltings just to show Lefty she could keep up with him.

Oh, she did fool around with Joe Wheeler a little—more to let Lefty know he wasn't the only frog in the puddle than anything else—but all in all she stuck pretty close to Lefty and things concerning the ranch.

If it hadn't been for Three Jay Johnson she never would have got Lefty mad at all. But Three Jay showed up, and she made Lefty mad, and there was hell to pay!

Personally I didn't blame her a bit for going riding with Three Jay Johnson. He was a nice, clean-looking young fellow—with a brand new buggy and a team of bays that were the envy of half the county. Reckon she got lonesome for a little back east talk, too—and Three Jay supplied plenty of that. She must have got to where she kinda liked buggy riding with Three Jay, for she started going out with him three, four times a week.

I couldn't see a bit of harm in it. Three Jay was a nice quiet young fellow just like she'd be apt to know back east. Good-looking, too—without being too damned handsome. No sir, I couldn't see a bit of harm in it—but it struck Lefty different. First time I ever saw him do a sneaky thing. Made me as mad as it did the Philadelphia Filly when Lefty sent one of his hired gun-slingers to trail her every time she went buggy riding with Three Jay.

"Look here, Lefty Allen," she snapped at him after she'd found out she was being trailed, "look here—I'm nineteen years old and I don't need a nurse. You find something else for those outlaw friends of yours to do besides following me around."

Lefty overlooked the reference to his friends. "Yes'm," he said, biting his lip to keep from laughing at her, she was so mad. "I just thought that maybe a couple of tenderfoots might have a little trouble and maybe a man around somewheres would come in handy."

"Tenderfeet, Lefty, not tenderfoots. Aren't you ever going to learn?"

"Don't look that way, does it, ma'am?" Lefty said. "Anyways, I'll call off my dogs—but if your horses run away and upset that dinky little buggy and you have to walk nine miles, don't take it out on me later."

"I'm sorry, Lefty," the Philadelphia Filly remembered what she was at the ranch for. "Sorry, I didn't mean to be nasty, but I'll take care of my own affairs, thank you."

So Lefty called off his gun-slingers and the Philadelphia Filly went riding with Three Jay Johnson without being watched. Started going with him every day, just to show Lefty a thing or two, I reckon. Started riding farther and coming in later—way after dark, sometimes!

Lefty was a good poker player—you never would have suspected to look at him that he was bothered by the Philadelphia Filly riding with Three Jay all the time. Yet he must have been—for it didn't seem to me he had any other reason for what he did to Three Jay.

Three Jay wasn't even packing a gun that night that Lefty Allen started a fight with him over at Honest John's place in Georgetown!

16

IT MADE me wonder what kind of a snake I'd been raising when Lefty Allen pulled his gun on Three Jay Johnson.

We were sitting in Honest John's place, Lefty and I—having a few beers and watching the suckers lose their money—just sitting and relaxing after a hard day at the branding camp.

"Gimme a hunk of that genuine smelly, will you, George?" Lefty asked the bartender. George cut him off a chunk of foul smelling greenish cheese and set out a dish of pretzels—and about that time Three Jay walked in and sat down by Lefty.

"Good evening, gentlemen," Three Jay said.

"'Evening, Three Jay," I told him.

"'Evening, Julius," Lefty said. "Have a hunk of genuine smelly?"

"Thank you, I believe I will." Three Jay took a chunk of cheese and ordered a bottle of beer. "It isn't often that you get good roquefort out here."

Lefty looked at him kinda funny, but he didn't say nothing, and we all sat there drinking our beer with no signs of hard feelings. No reason for any shooting at all.

After a while Three Jay spoke up and said, "I'd like to thank you, Lefty, for sending a man to guard Mary Ann when we go buggy riding. It's hard for me to realize that it is necessary, but I suppose this still is a rather wild country, and if you think a guard is necessary, then it must be so."

"That's all right, Julius," Lefty told him. "Never can tell what will happen out in this wild and woolly country. Lots of things go on out here—banks get robbed and cattle get stole—can't be too careful with a pretty young gal.

You'll have to fend for yourself from now on, though, Julius—I got orders to call off my dog."

"Mary Ann was telling me that," Three Jay said, "but I don't think it is best for her to go around unguarded."

"She is pretty well looked after on the Jack-In-The-Box, Julius," Lefty told him. "You could just stay away and there wouldn't be no problem."

"I had thought of that," Three Jay admitted, "but it seems that she enjoys my company. Seems to get a great deal of pleasure from our buggy rides. Nothing personal, you understand—she just likes to talk to someone from back home. So I have hired a bodyguard to ride with us. A former Mexican bandit, I have been told—very proficient with knives, side arms and rifles, too. Quite a character."

"Must be, Julius," Lefty told him. "How does it feel to be called Don Julio again?" Julio—the Mexicans said it "Hoolio"—wasn't that the name I'd heard Lefty mumbling the night that I shot the lights out of that very same gambling hall?

Three Jay looked kinda queer for a split second, but I didn't give it a second thought at the time. "I find it rather quaint being called Don Julio by a Mexican bandit. Much more romantic than Three Jay, isn't it? Things are so different out here than back home, aren't they?"

"That's what I heard," Lefty said. "Heard a man say once that back east folks had so much manners they wouldn't even think of mentioning a nice girl's name in a saloon or gambling hall. What part of the east did you come from, Don Julio?"

Three Jay got a queer, mean look in his eye—sorta like a rattlesnake sounding a warning, that's the kind of a look it was. He got kinda nervous like, too.

"Look, my friend," he said, "I came here to tell you that I had hired a bodyguard for your employer's cousin when she goes riding with me. I did not come here to be given a lesson in manners by a man with a past as questionable as yours is."

"Spoken like a man, Three Jay," Lefty laughed at him. "Personally, I think you missed your calling. Storekeeper—hell, you ought to be on the stage, Don Julio."

Three Jay was getting pretty mad by now—I couldn't see why—Lefty was only ribbing him a little—but Three Jay was getting mad and trying hard not to show it.

"You know, I think I shall have to adopt the western custom of carrying a gun," he said. "I can see now that there are times when a man might be justified in using one."

"There are such times, Three Jay," I told him.

"Have one of mine, Don Julio," Lefty said, laying his gun on the table with the butt near Three Jay's hand. But Three Jay didn't want the gun—he let it lay and got up to leave.

"Well, I'll be going now, gentlemen," he said; "that is, if I can walk out of here without being shot in the back," he added to Lefty.

It didn't make sense to me—I didn't see any reason for any talk about shooting in the back. But it must have given Lefty an idea—he must have seen a way to get rid of Three Jay.

Lefty didn't say a word as Three Jay walked away, but Lefty's hand went inside his shirt to his hide-out gun. His eyes narrowed down to two slits and he didn't take 'em off of Three Jay for a second.

Three Jay took about ten steps toward the door, stopped and turned around sudden, as if he had forgotten something, and Lefty let him have it. Shot him plumb dead center, right through the heart!

17

THERE WAS HELL to pay that night in Honest John's! Three Jay dropped when Lefty fired—deader than hell. Didn't even say a word. Men ducked under tables and ran out the doors, and somebody finally got Pop Sears, the night marshal.

Poor old jigger, I felt sorry for him. There he was, sworn to uphold the law—faced with the job of jailing Lefty Allen. Lefty Allen with a gun in his hand! Pop Sears was old and shaky, but dead game—he made a stab at doing his duty.

“Better put up that gun and come along to jail with me, Lefty,” Pop Sears said. “I can’t make you do it—you got your gun on me now—but it won’t help you none to kill a law man. Put up your gun and come along, or we’ll have to shoot it out!”

“Shucks, Pop,” Lefty told him, still tense and shaken by the killing he’d just done, “I’m through shooting for the night. I’m not going to do any more killing—but I’m not going to jail, either. Got a lot of unfinished business to tend to. Hugh, here, he’ll likely put up a bond or something to guarantee my showing up when you want me.”

“Not me, Lefty,” I told him, plumb disgusted at what had just happened; “you got yourself into this mess, you get yourself out.”

“My word good with you, Pop?” Honest John horned in. “Good as gold, John.”

“Well, I’ll guarantee that Lefty won’t leave the country; that right, Lefty?” Honest John asked.

“Yea, that’s right,” Lefty told him. “Got a few things to tend to before I go to jail. I’ll be out at the Jack-In-The-Box in about three days, Pop. You can come and get me there.”

“You heard him, Pop,” Honest John said, not changing a line on his gambler’s face. Couldn’t tell whether he was disgusted like I was or just plain hard and didn’t give a damn. “You’ve done your duty, Pop, that’s all a man can do. Reckon you had better get on your way, Lefty—before some of Three Jay’s friends turn up and make things worse.”

“All right,” Lefty said. “Sorry to have messed up your nice clean floor—but the rat had it coming to him, even if Hugh don’t agree. Why don’t you go on home, Hugh,

and try to get some sleep and pull yourself together? Come morning you can ride in to Silver City and tell the sheriff all about it. Just as well he gets the story straight."

"Ain't much to tell him," I said, still stunned by the suddenness of it all. "Looks like you shot him and that's all there is to it." I was getting kinda sick of Lefty Allen, right then, and all the trouble he was getting in. "You want me to tell the sheriff? I'll tell him—but it won't be nothing but the plain unvarnished truth."

"Thanks, Hugh, I'll come to your wake," Lefty said. "Good night, John, sorry to have caused any trouble in your place." Lefty backed cautiously to the door, both guns in his hands now—just in case Three Jay had any friends in the place. But Three Jay didn't—and Lefty got away without a hand being lifted to stop him.

I felt right old and shaky by then, so I took a few snorts of Old Crow to fortify myself against the ride home. Took the bottle along just in case I needed refortifying on the way. I let my horse pick his own trail and set his own gait, and I did nothing but try to think things out clear all the way home.

Somehow I couldn't get it through my head that Lefty Allen had shot a man down in cold blood. I kept telling myself that I was dreaming it all—that pretty soon I'd wake up and find out it hadn't happened.

But there was my horse jogging along, there was the bottle of Old Crow I'd bought, still nearly full, bouncing around in my hip pocket—there was that cold, depressing feeling that the bottom had dropped out of the world.

Finally I began to believe it—to believe that Lefty was a cold blooded killer! And the hard part of it to take was that it was all my fault—it was me that had brought the Philadelphia Filly back to the Jack-In-The-Box!

It must have been her that made him go haywire, I decided. It was her that got him all bogged down in meanness again. Probably the first decent woman he'd ever known—and she'd thrown him down and picked him up, and then

thrown him down again and sorta walked on his face, just for good measure. Kinda rubbed his nose in it—riding with Three Jay the way she'd been doing, coming in way after bedtime and all.

I could understand that making a man madder than seven hundred dollars. I could understand how he'd want to raise a little ruckus in return, and maybe beat hell out of the other guy. But shooting him down in cold blood—I just couldn't understand that. I decided that the Philadelphia Filly had just naturally driven Lefty Allen crazy, and I felt lower than a snake's belly about it.

I reached around in my back pocket for another nip of Old Crow—feeling mean and soured on the world in general and Lefty Allen in particular.

There was only one thing left for me to do—I'd caused the killing, I'd got Lefty in the worst jam he'd ever been in—so I had to try and save Lefty's hide and get him out of the country alive. He was in a mess because I'd monkeyed with his affairs—so I had to get him out of it whether I liked it or not.

Seemed to me it was taking my horse an awful long time to get me home that night. I prodded him with the spurs a time or two and he started bucking a little, and I looked around to see that we were smack up against the corral gate all the time. Hell, my mind must have been mixed up to be home maybe thirty, forty minutes and not know it.

Things have come to a hell of a pass, I thought, when an old man sober enough to sit his horse can be home and not know it. Why stay sober, anyways, I asked myself—why not forget Lefty Allen and the Philadelphia Filly and Three Jay Johnson lying dead on the floor? Why worry about all the people that go around getting into trouble anyways? Why worry?

To hell with 'em all, I thought, as I pulled my boots off. Tomorrow I'm going to settle my affairs here and cash in all my chips and move to California. Pick me out a nice little town with a saloon or two and a place to play a

little friendly poker—to hell with all this fighting and shooting and other people's troubles. Life is too short, I thought—and took another good swig of Old Crow.

I reckon I didn't go to sleep until about daylight—for I didn't wake up until around noon. Hardly a soul on the ranch—the twins were at school and most of the boys were out branding. Thought maybe I'd eat dinner with the Philadelphia Filly, it being about that time, but I couldn't find hide nor hair of her.

I asked Old Hennerly if he had seen her. "Yea, she was around a while this morning. Some jigger come along telling how Lefty had burned down Three Jay last night. Little while later I saw her leaving."

"She take her bags and things?" I asked.

"Hell, she didn't take nothing but her hat," Old Hennerly said. "Just saddled up that English horse of Jack Hamlin's and took off down the road like the devil was after her."

I rode over to Salt Creek to see if Father Antonio had any new ideas on how to get Lefty out of the country alive—but Father Antonio wasn't there, so I went on in to Silver City to see the sheriff like I'd promised Lefty I would. Somehow or other I must have missed the Philadelphia Filly—she'd been to town and left—but it wasn't until the next morning when I met up with the sheriff that I found out what she'd been up to!

She had sworn out a warrant for Lefty Allen—not for murdering Three Jay—but for *robbing the Alpine Bank!* And she brought in enough evidence to convince Sheriff Banks—I caught him just as he was leaving to arrest Lefty Allen for bank robbery!

18

NOW MAYBE you'll understand why I was floored by the warrant Sheriff Banks had out for Lefty—not for murder, but for bank robbery. Lefty hadn't agreed to surrender to

the sheriff on any bank robbery charge—he'd only agreed to give himself up to the marshal at Georgetown. If Banks, or Jeopardy Jones went after Lefty there was bound to be some shooting—that's why I rode with Banks that morning. Maybe I could get Lefty to give up without a fight—maybe I could keep him alive!

What had come over the Philadelphia Filly, I wondered—swearing out a warrant for the man she'd promised to help. And, if she was hell bent on keeping the law to the letter, why hadn't she mentioned the killing of Three Jay to the sheriff? Where, I wondered, had she got enough evidence to convince the sheriff that Lefty was guilty of robbing the bank?

There wasn't much for me to say to Banks as we rode along. It don't pay to tell too much to sheriffs, even if they are old friends. Law men got a different way of looking at things—they got to protect the people and preserve the peace and do what does the most good for the most people—and sometimes their friends' toes get tramped on. So I kept my trap shut and didn't unburden my mind as we rode along, for fear I'd get Lefty in more trouble than he was in already. I didn't say a word about the killing of Three Jay.

Banks did most of the talking as we rode out after Lefty. "You know, I'm ashamed to admit it, Hugh," he said, "but I'm glad you talked me into serving this warrant myself."

"You don't say."

"Yea, I was about to play a dirty trick on somebody. Maybe on Lefty, maybe on Jeopardy—just to satisfy my own curiosity. You come along just in time to stop me."

"You been wondering about something?" I egged him on.

"Yep—I been wondering about Jeopardy Jones some. Seems to me he gets a mite too enthusiastic sometimes—brings in more corpses than he does prisoners."

"It does for a fact," I told him. "Still, all in all, a law man can't afford to be squeamish. It's better to shoot first

and ask questions afterward, I always did say. Jeopardy has brought you in a lot of law breakers, John."

"Yep, he has, and I'm thankful to him for doing a lot of hard jobs for me. Not that he don't get paid well—he's got his salary and some expense money and I let him keep all the reward money he collects. Nope, Jeopardy ain't underpaid."

"Made him quite a reputation the couple of years he's been working for you," I said.

"That he has—and that is what has got me wondering—his reputation. What good would it do him if he was up against a real fighter?"

"Damned if I know," I said, not quite following him.

"Take this Jeopardy now," the sheriff said; "he's built him up quite a name as a killer and a crook catcher. But how has he done it? By knocking off a lot of small fry, Hugh—a lot of Mexican horse thieves, knife slingers and two-bit crooks."

"Guess you're right at that," I told him. Come to think of it I couldn't remember Jeopardy ever killing anybody of any importance. "Don't seem like I can remember Jeopardy bagging any Billy-the-Kids."

"Naw—I can't either," the sheriff said. "I been wondering about him—can't make my mind up whether I got me a real hell-roaring deputy or just a small-fry killer. That's why I was thinking seriously of sending him out after Lefty—just to see what would happen, Hugh. It would have been a low down dirty trick—but I reckon you can see the temptation of the idea."

"Yea," I told him, remembering the mess I'd cooked up trying some of my own crazy ideas, "I can see the temptation of it. Reckon it's a good thing I happened along and stopped you. Better let nature take its course and keep your conscience clear."

"Them is wise words. Things mighty near always work themselves out if you leave 'em alone and give 'em a chance. You reckon Old Hennery will have anything fit

to eat after we get Lefty corraled and all? I sure would relish a change from that Chinaman's cooking."

There was quite a bit of smoke coming out of the cook shack as we rode up to the Jack-In-The-Box, so Banks was sure of some good grub, if he lived to eat it—if Lefty gave up without a fight. Banks wouldn't have a chance, otherwise, and we both knew it.

Lefty was down behind the barn with the twins, trying to teach them the manly art of self defense. We could hear him long before we could see him. "Quit leading with your right, Hughie, and keep your chin down, man. You'll get it knocked clean off one of these times. And you, Lefty, keep that belly covered better. Yea, I know you're tired—but keep your mouth shut—somebody will knock all your teeth down your throat if you don't."

Whang, sock, squeal—the twins were at it hammer and tongs! "Whoa, better rest up a spell," Lefty said when he saw us coming. "Howdy, Hugh, howdy, Sheriff."

"Howdy, Uncle Hugh, howdy, Mister Sheriff," the twins echoed. "We been learning how to fight right. We're getting pretty good. You want to see us?"

"Not right now, boys," I told 'em. "We better wait two, three more days until you're perfect and then we'll put on a real exhibition. Why don't you run on up to the house and see what Maria's got for dinner? Me and Lefty'll be up and talk things over with you later on, maybe."

"All right, Uncle Hugh—see you after while. Don't forget what you promised us, Uncle Lefty."

"I won't, kids," Lefty told 'em. "You all be good now and remember we got plans for some fun one of these days."

So the twins beat it up to the house and Lefty put away their boxing gloves and took down the punching bag before he said, "Well, I guess lessons are going to be over for a spell. See you done told the sheriff, Hugh."

"Not me, son," I said, relieved at seeing that Lefty wasn't packing a gun. "I just happened to meet him coming this way. He'd already got a warrant for you."

"Yep, Lefty," Banks said, "looks like I was going to have to try and arrest you."

"You don't say, Sheriff," Lefty grinned. "What laws am I charged with breaking?"

"This here warrant charges you with robbing the bank of Alpine, Arizona."

"You don't tell me," Lefty said. "Always did wonder which one of my crimes would catch up with me first. You don't mind if we eat before we go, do you, Sheriff? I swear, I been so busy around here that I didn't eat hardly any breakfast to speak of."

"Lefty, for a hardened criminal, you're a man after my own heart," Banks said—relieved to know that Lefty was giving up without a fight. "Lead the way."

So we sat down to Old Hennery's grub and stuffed ourselves with steaks and eggs and dried apple pie and such—washed down with a few sips of Old Crow—just like one big happy family. It must have looked kinda comical, the three of us eating there together—a bank robber and a murderer, the sheriff that was taking him to jail—and me, Hugh McGovern, feeling nine years older than Buddha, the guy that caused the whole mess!

Even Old Hennery seemed human that day. Didn't even bother to tell us one of his long winded lies—just dished out the grub and said to Lefty, "Hell, young squirt, I knew you couldn't last—they was bound to catch you sooner or later."

"Hennery, you're plumb clairvoyant," Lefty told him. "You saw it coming, did you? Couldn't be that you are the guy that told on me, could it?"

"Naw, it wasn't me," Hennery said.. "I wouldn't tell off on a dog, let alone a good respectable outlaw like you. But I'll bet you an even dollar I can guess who it was."

"Who you bet it was, Hennery?" Lefty asked.

"I'll bet a dollar—American money, you understand—that it was the Philadelphia Filly. She sure high tailed it out of here the other day with blood in her eye."

"That right, Sheriff?" Lefty asked.

"That's exactly right," the sheriff said. "Kindly reach them biscuits over this way, will you?"

"What did she have to offer as evidence?" Lefty wanted to know.

"Her? Oh, she had a passel of masks, and some money bags with Alpine National Bank printed on 'em. And a few wrappers like they put around their green money. Claimed she found 'em hid in your office and I didn't see any reason to doubt her word."

"Was they anything in those paper wrappers, Sheriff?" Lefty asked, stirring his coffee right thoughtful like.

"Nope, not a dollar," the sheriff answered. "Seems like you or some other unprincipled party, as yet unknown, had removed all the money. She really fixed you up, though."

"Yea, she did," Lefty said, pleased as punch. It didn't make sense, him being pleased because the gal he was hay-wire about had him jailed. "Bless her little heart, she sure had the courage of her convictions. Got a head on her, too."

Sure seemed funny to me the way Lefty took it. Love sure does queer things to folks. There Lefty was admiring the Philadelphia Filly for having guts enough to stick up for her convictions—not giving a thought to the fact that he was going to jail because of her. He seemed downright proud of her, the crazy son-of-a-gun.

"You got anything to read in your jail, Sheriff?" Lefty asked.

"Nothing strictly high class," the sheriff answered. "Maybe a few old catalogues. Few reward notices and maybe a list of counterfeit bills to watch out for. Nothing real high class, though."

"You mind if I take along a few books and such?" Lefty asked, looking for an excuse to ease away and get his guns, I thought.

"Don't see why not," the sheriff said. "We might have to look 'em over before we let you keep 'em, though. Might

have a knife or a saw hid in 'em, like they do in story books. Reckon you could be trusted to go and get 'em yourself, or do I have to go along and watch you? I'd rather polish off another piece of pie, if it's all the same to you, and another cup of that coffee."

"Sheriff," Lefty said, "I saw you folks coming two hours ago with Hugh's field glasses. Had I wanted to light out I would be half way to the Arizona line by now."

"All right—kinda hurry it up, will you?" the sheriff asked. "Long ways back to town—and I never did like to be out after dark with hardened criminals like you."

So Lefty went up to his office after his books and catalogues and such—and the sheriff and I sat and waited for him. Seemed like he stayed away an awful long time.

"Ain't you kinda trusting, Sheriff?" I asked after a spell.

"Could be, Hugh." He scratched his head and thought a spell. "It could be—but I doubt it. You know, that jigger don't seem to mind going to jail at all. Never did run in to a case just exactly like his before. He sorta acts like he wants to go to jail. What you reckon it's all about?"

"I wouldn't have no idea," I told him—and I didn't. It wasn't until three days later that I found out—but I read the sign wrong again! Three days later the Hamlin twins got kidnapped—and I suspected damned near everybody in the county. Everybody except Lefty Allen. Hell, he couldn't have done it—he was in jail!

19

"YOU RECKON you could have Father Antonio or Honest John come see me at the jail, Hugh?" Lefty had asked, when the sheriff was taking him away.

"I dunno," I answered. "I can tell 'em you want to see 'em, but if they think you're as low down as I do I doubt if they'll have any truck with you."

"Thanks for them kind words," Lefty said, kinda sarcastic like. "You are a big help to a man. Do what you

please about the branding—I don't give a damn if it don't get done if you don't."

So the next day I decided to ride over and see Father Antonio—he being closer than Honest John and also on the way to where the boys were branding calves. I was just mounting up when the Philadelphia Filly came down to the corral.

"Going for a ride, Uncle Hugh?" she asked, just as if she couldn't tell.

"Yea—getting ready for a brisk canter where the grass-land meets the sky and all that malarkey," I told her. "Just the thing for a man my age."

"Golly, you're on the prod this morning," she said. "Did somebody hide your whiskey bottle or something like that?"

"Nope, I'm all right, and I feel fine," I told her. "I haven't got a care in the world. My foreman just killed a man, you had him thrown in jail for robbing a bank—and now I've got to ride twenty miles running errands for him and then go and boss the branding. Me who is supposed to be retired and living off the fat of the land. Why should I be on the prod, sis—I haven't got a care in the world."

"Aw, come on, Uncle Hugh—things could be a lot worse," she said, laughing at me. "Suppose you broke both legs? Or you ran out of whiskey and they quit making it?"

I couldn't help laughing with her, the sassy little baggage. Reckon getting it all off my chest made me feel some better. "Want to go for a ride, gal?" I asked her, sorta wanting her company, I reckon. Something about her just naturally made me feel better—she was so young, and clean and fresh.

So she got her horse—roped and saddled it herself—and we hit the trail for Father Antonio's place on Salt Creek. The Philadelphia Filly seemed in high spirits. She shouldn't have—but she was. She should have been way down in the dumps, according to the rules—on account of the trouble Lefty was in and all. But she wasn't—she was

brimful of fun—frisking her horse around, putting him over gulleys and jumping down cutbanks that I rode around. Didn't seem according to Hoyle, her feeling so good.

"You seem right kittenish today, sis," I said.

"Right you are, Uncle Hugh, right you are," she told me. "It's because I'm so old."

"Old?"

"Yes, old! I was born one hundred and fifty years old, Uncle Hugh—wise as a witch. That's why I feel so good today when you think I should be feeling bad."

"Better get down and draw me a picture in the sand, sis," I told her. "Sometimes I wonder how I got through the second grade, my mind works so slow."

The Philadelphia Filly dropped her playful talk and got right serious. "Women are just born wiser than men, Uncle Hugh, that's all. Oh, I don't mean about horses and cattle and guns and how to get rich—but they are born knowing more about what makes the world go around. They know what makes people do things. That's why I'm not so upset as I should be about Lefty killing Three Jay. Not that I like it, or approve of it—but it isn't the way it looks, Uncle Hugh."

"Just why did he kill him?" I asked, really wanting to know and half way believing she could tell me.

"I'm sure I don't know—but I have a sneaking idea. Do you remember one day—the fall before last I think it was—when you found Lefty and me eating our lunch up on Willow Creek?"

"Yea—been deer hunting, hadn't you?"

"Yes, that was the time."

"Yea, I remember that day, all right. How could I forget it when Lefty darned near burned my britches killing a rattlesnake I was mighty near sitting on." It had been a close call, as I remembered it.

"That was the day, all right," the Philadelphia Filly went on. "That same morning we had hidden in some rocks for nearly three hours, waiting for a deer to come

down to the water. Finally, when one did come, Lefty missed it twenty feet. He said the sights were wrong, or something like that."

"So?"

"So, a little while later he shoots the head off a rattlesnake, with the very same rifle. The sights were all right, then. Your horse stealing, bank robbing, cattle rustling friend was just too soft hearted to kill that deer, Uncle Hugh. He made up that story about the sights. They were all right when you were trying to sit on the rattler, weren't they?"

"Yea—he shot its head off, plumb clean, as I remember."

"Lefty Allen didn't kill Three Jay just because I went buggy riding with him—you don't think that, do you?" the Philadelphia Filly asked.

"Is that what I've been thinking?" I asked back.

"Yes sir; that's the way your mind works," she told me, half laughing, half serious. "But me, I was born one hundred and fifty years old and know better. Lefty wouldn't be that childish. He isn't a natural born killer, either—or he would have killed that young man you told me about. The one he didn't kill—broke the bottles instead, you told me."

"So?"

"So figure it out yourself," she snapped at me.

"So Three Jay was a rattler?" I asked, finally figuring out what she meant. I hoped she was right, too—but I didn't see how she could be.

"It couldn't have been any other way, Uncle Hugh," she said like she almost believed it. Just wanted a little encouragement from me. "That is the only thing I can figure out. Of course that doesn't make the killing right—it is still against the law and still wrong—but I really believe Lefty did what he thought had to be done. It takes it out of the class of cold-blooded murder, at least."

Poor kid, I thought, trying to make things figure out the best she could. Still trying to fit Lefty to the pattern she'd

made for him in her mind. Didn't blame her exactly—I'd done a lot of the same thing myself.

I didn't see any reason for telling her how wrong she was. "Well, admitting that you are right and Lefty had a good reason for killing Three Jay—why did you have to go and swear out a warrant charging Lefty with bank robbery?"

"I'm just a little bit ashamed of the way I acted, Uncle Hugh," the Philadelphia Filly admitted. "When I heard from Sheep Dip that Lefty had killed Three Jay I was furious. I thought it was about me at first, and that Lefty was just a murderer! I went down to Lefty's office—I'm not quite sure why—and started going through his things—his desk, his bedroll and everything. Then I found all the evidence."

"I suppose you got it all doped out that it was Lefty's Christian duty to rob the bank, too?" I asked her, sorta sarcastic like.

"I can see you don't agree with my way of thinking, Uncle Hugh," she said, "but getting back to the bank robbery—all the evidence was there, just like he wanted it to be found, or like he at least hadn't tried very hard to hide it."

"You don't suppose somebody could have planted it there, do you, sis?"

"I don't know," she said, "I haven't given it any thought. All I thought of, after I'd cooled off a little, was that here was enough evidence to get Lefty put in jail—and if he was in jail he couldn't kill anybody else. And Three Jay's friends couldn't kill him. So I went to town and you know the rest."

Slowly it dawned on me that the Philadelphia Filly, in her own roundabout way, was trying to protect Lefty Allen. From who or what, I wasn't sure—but I did know that she was on Lefty's side still—even if I wasn't so sure about myself!

"Kid," I told her, "I apologize. I have been having some

unkind thoughts about you and they were all wrong. I thought you had Lefty jailed just because you were mad at him."

"Yes, I know. Maybe I didn't do the right thing"—she looked a little worried—"but I was really trying to help Lefty, like you asked me to. This Three Jay must have some friends—and if they are like other people they will try to get even—but they can't hurt Lefty while he is in jail. That's what I was trying to stop, mostly."

It sounded all mixed up, her reasoning was sort of left handed, I guess you'd call it—but it was comforting to know that she was doing all right.

Father Antonio had already heard the news—knew all about the killing and Lefty's being arrested, too. It surprised me—a good, holy man like him—taking a killing and a bank robbery so lightly. Seemed like he should have condemned Lefty and quoted a few verses of Scripture about burning in hell and such.

All Father Antonio had to say was "Judge not, lest you be judged, friend Hugh."

I reckon religion must be a great thing. It must be wonderful to forgive and forget and leave the judging to the higher-ups—but it's a damned poor way to get along in a rough, tough country like the Territory of New Mexico was in those days. Particularly that turn-the-other-cheek business. Reckon it's a sure ticket to heaven to turn the other cheek when some jigger is pumping lead at you! But hell, I ain't built that way.

Looking back on it now, I must have been kinda mad at Father Antonio that day, telling me to judge not lest I be judged—to mind my own business and let banks get robbed and cattle stole and people murdered and not lift a hand!

Two days later, when the Hamlin twins got kidnapped I thought of Father Antonio—and wondered if I should put up a little notice in the post office inviting the kid-

nappers to come back and help themselves to the ranch and cattle, too!

Yes sir, all in all, it was enough to drive a man to drink!

20

I DIDN'T HAVE any burning desire to go out and boss the branding—sleeping in a bedroll ain't what a man my age would call a picnic—but somebody had to do it. We had calves to brand, trouble or no trouble. So I packed a couple of bottles of Old Crow in my bedroll and went on up past Signal Rock where the boys were branding calves. Seemed like my duty to go—but if I had listened to my hunches I would have stayed at home.

A man ought to pay more attention to his hunches. Something told me to stay at the ranch house, where the beds were soft and there was plenty of nice cool shade—but I chalked it up to plain laziness and went out to the branding camp.

It was the second morning, along about eight o'clock, when Roots Ansell asked if I had brought my field glasses. I gave them to him and he climbed up on a little hill and watched a cloud of dust blowing toward us, about five or six miles away.

"Well, I'll be a monkey's uncle," Roots said after a spell of watching. "First time I ever saw the Philadelphia Filly ride two horses at once. Man, look at the gal come!"

"You reckon she is playing circus, or something?" I asked.

"Hell, no, Hugh," Roots said, "it looks like something serious must be up. Maybe you'd better take a look."

So I took the glasses and picked up the Philadelphia Filly, coming hell for leather down off a ridge. Gentlemen, it was a sight to see! She was riding Champagne and leading Zannzibar—coming full gallop down a rocky ridge where I would have walked my horse—coming into rough country, full of gulleys and washes and outcroppings of

rock. It was a place where a sprinting horse wasn't worth a damn—and I could already picture him piled up in the bottom of a gulley, with the Philadelphia Filly underneath him.

"Stop him, kid, stop him," I yelled—forgetting that the field glasses made them seem close. Hell, she couldn't possibly have heard me five or six miles away—and she didn't stop him. She didn't have to!

Gentlemen, it was a sight to see! That little hundred pound gal changing horses in full gallop, coming down off that rocky ridge—swinging from one to the other like a cat, without even throwing a horse off balance!

Champagne went tearing off up the flat, sandy bed of a draw—and Zannzibar came thundering across that rough country like the devil was behind him, taking gulleys and washes and rock outcroppings in his stride. Yes sir, it was a pretty piece of riding—the way that little Philadelphia Filly lifted that big steeplechaser over jumps higher than her head, glued to the saddle like she'd grown there!

"Reckon we'd better ride out and meet her before she breaks her purty little neck?" Roots asked.

"Yea—get me a horse. Tell the boys to put the fires out and come on," I told him. "There must be hell to pay when a gal comes riding like that!"

And there was! We met her a couple miles out from the branding camp. "It's the twins," she said, all out of breath and damned near unconscious from the jolting she'd taken. "They got the twins, Uncle Hugh, they got the twins."

"Who, what, where?" I asked, all in one breath.

"Three masked men," she gasped. "They tied me up and gagged me and took the twins. They left a note—they want fifty thousand dollars or they'll kill the twins."

"Take it easy, sis, and get your breath and tell us all about it," I told her.

She took a few good deep breaths and shook her head to clear it and said, "I had just got up and dressed and

stepped out into the hall—when a man grabbed me from behind and put his hand over my mouth so I couldn't yell. Somebody gagged me and tied me up and left me on the porch. After while I saw three masked men ride away with the twins. Then I worked loose and found the note they left, and got the horses, and here I am."

I read the note she had brought. It was made of letters—cut out of a book or something—pasted on brown wrapping paper to form words. It read:

If you want your twins to stay alive have fifty thousand dollars ready. You will be told later where to take it.

That was all. No more, no less. If we wanted our twins to keep on living we'd have to have fifty thousand dollars. That's all there was to it. I got out my pencil and gave Roots a note to the bank.

"Go on in to town, Roots, and get the money. Tell 'em I'll be in later and sign whatever they want signed. Send a wire to Jack Hamlin, too. Tell him what has happened and to get the hell back here pronto. Better tell the sheriff while you're at it. Ride like the devil was after you."

"Is that all you are going to do, Uncle Hugh?" the Philadelphia Filly asked. "Why it will be hours before Roots can get back with the sheriff. Aren't you going after them? Or do we just sit here and wait for the sheriff?"

"No, kid," I told her, "we'll have to do something and do it quick. We're going to hunt for the twins—but we got to get the money and we got to tell the sheriff."

"They might get hurt," the Philadelphia Filly cried; "those men might kill them, or hurt them some way—and take the money just the same. You never can tell what will happen out in this Godforsaken country." The Philadelphia Filly was just plain bawling now—all worn out from her ride and excitement and all.

"Buck up, kid," I told her. Bless her heart, she was entitled to a good cry after what she had just been through, but I knew she would be ashamed of herself later for cry-

ing. "We'll find the twins, and we'll do it pronto before anything can happen to them."

So I sent Sheep Dip over to Salt Creek after Jesus Garcia, the best tracker in Grant County, and I sent Bert McGuire over to Joe Wheeler's to see if he could lend us a few men to help.

"You boys kill your horses if you have to," I told 'em, "but get Garcia, and get Wheeler's men here as quick as you can. Meet us at the ranch house—we'll pick up the trail from there. Better get Miss Mary another horse to ride back."

So they rode off, and I let the Philadelphia Filly rest a while before we started for the ranch. No need of us getting there before the boys and old Garcia did.

"Where were those two fancy gun-slingers of Lefty's all the time this was happening?" I asked her as we rode back.

"They were tied up, too, Uncle Hugh," she told me. "I guess they still are tied up, for that matter," she giggled, kinda hysterical like. "I just got in such a hurry that I forgot all about them. I don't think they'll like it very much, Uncle Hugh."

And they didn't—they were both sore as boiled owls. Kinda sheepish they were, too.

"Reckon we sure fell down on the job, Hugh," one of them said.

"Well, there ain't anything to keep you guys around here any longer that I can see. You want your pay, or you figure you got anything coming to you?" I asked 'em.

"Look, Hugh," one of them said, "forget the pay. It ain't important no more. We'll ride with you and help you get your twins back. Not that we give a damn about you—but Lefty Allen is a friend of ours and he ain't here to do his own riding."

I never had liked those jiggers before, but it looked like I had the wrong opinion of 'em. At least they were sticking by their friend, which was something money can't buy.

"All right, boys," I told 'em, "you want to ride off on

your own hook, or would you rather wait for the rest?"

"Reckon we better ride with the rest," one of the gun-slingers said. "We ain't worth shucks at tracking, but we can hold our own in a shooting scrape. Might be a good idea to have a few good shots along."

"What were you jiggers hired for in the first place?" I asked.

"We was supposed to be guarding your twins," one gun-slinger said. "We was supposed to be keeping them from getting kidnapped—and we got caught with our pants down. Lefty'll nail our hides to the barn if we don't get the twins back. That's why we ain't leaving."

But the hired gun-slingers didn't get the twins back. Nor did anybody else—they were just plain gone and we couldn't follow the trail!

Sheep Dip came back with Jesus Garcia and Bert McGuire brought six or seven of Joe Wheeler's men back with him. Joe wasn't at home—he was over at Alpine looking after his bank, which had got kinda shaky after the robbery—but Joe's foreman sent the men to help us out.

The trail of the kidnappers was easy to follow—plain as the nose on your face, for a ways. Three shod horses walking away from the corral, down past the alfalfa fields, right into Lonesome River. But they never came out. We combed the banks on both sides, an inch at a time almost, for miles up and down the river—but we couldn't find the track of a single shod horse coming out. Just a few places where cattle had crossed, a few bands of wild horses had left their tracks—but not a sign of the ones we were trailing.

Jesus Garcia was stumped. Joe Wheeler's men weren't any help. Lefty's gun-slingers weren't any good without somebody to shoot at. Yes sir, there was hell to pay and no pitch hot.

To top things off, Roots Ansell couldn't find Sheriff Banks. The sheriff was up on the Beaverhead serving a

warrant. "Why the hell didn't you bring the deputy sheriff, then?" I asked Roots.

"Him?" Roots said. "Hell, he wasn't there either. Went on down to Deming, two, three days ago, the jailer said. Sure a fine thing—you need a law man and they ain't one in the country. Wonder what they get paid for, anyways?"

I was up a tree for sure. I didn't know where to turn or what to do next. "What you reckon we ought to do now, Roots?" I asked, needing some advice.

"If I was you, and in the trouble you're in," Roots said, "I'd go to the jigger that made the biggest tracks in these parts and I'd tell him I needed some help."

"You reckon he could do any good?" I asked.

"Hugh, you'll be making a mistake if you don't—he's the one guy in this country that can find them twins if anybody can. And most of us would go to hell a-helping him." So I swallowed my pride—and went to Silver City to see Lefty Allen in the jailhouse.

21

I WAS JUST climbing into the saddle to go to town when the Philadelphia Filly yelled at me, "Why don't you take the buggy, Uncle Hugh?"

"Shucks, I can still set a horse," I told her. "I ain't old enough for a buggy."

"It isn't your age I was thinking about," she said, "it's my—well, I just don't feel like riding a horse today, but I would like to go to town with you."

"What do you want to go to town for, sis?" I asked her, not wanting her in the way when I was trying to get Lefty out on bail. "Can't I just bring you whatever you want?"

"You're going to see him, aren't you?" she asked.

"Yea, I'm going to see him," I told her. "I'm going to eat crow and try to get him out of jail to help us find the twins."

"That's what I thought," she said; "you should have done it the day they were kidnapped."

"You reckon you've got any influence with him?" I asked. "Don't see what help you'd be—you haven't been treating him any too nice yourself. You had him thrown in jail—now I suppose you want to get him out again."

"It does seem like I should try, under the circumstances," she said. "He seems to be the only man around here that knows his way home in the dark. But he can find the twins if anybody can. I could try to get him to help us, couldn't I?"

"Better pack you a bag," I told her, knowing that I was going to get out-talked and had just as well give in. "Likely we'll have to spend the night."

The Philadelphia Filly got her little bag with some extra things in it and we climbed into the buggy and went in to Silver City to try and get Lefty Allen to help us—but we had just as well stayed at home. It didn't do a bit of good—not a damned bit of good.

Lefty just laughed in our faces. "Look—a couple of days ago I was a dirty dog," he said. "I was one of the lowest forms of human life, to hear you tell it. You didn't have a damned bit of use for me, Hugh McGovern—but now you're in trouble and you come running to me for help. You give me a great big pain, Hugh, and it ain't in the neck, either."

"But you got to help us, Lefty," I told him. "We've had the sheriff out and his deputy, and we've got posses all over the county—but they ain't none of them doing any good. You just plain got to help—you're the only man around here that knows the ropes."

"Set a thief to catch a thief, huh, Hugh?" Lefty sneered.

"I didn't want to put it just that way," I told him, "but I guess there is no use beating around the bush."

"Well, I'm still the dirty dog you called me," Lefty said. "You got yourself in a mess, now get yourself out—that sound familiar?"

"Yea, son, it does," I admitted. "I don't blame you for being sore at us. We got it coming—but this is different, Lefty—this is the twins that are in trouble."

"It's your worry, not mine," Lefty said; "somehow I can't get all worked up over your troubles. Go kill your own snakes, Hugh—you left me to kill mine."

"We need you badly, Lefty," the Philadelphia Filly horned in. "The twins may be in danger, they may get hurt any day—these kidnappers may even kill them. Everybody says you can find them if you just will."

"I'm right sorry, lady," Lefty said, not looking at all sorry. "Guess you'll just naturally have to call a policeman. Or hire you a lawyer."

The Philadelphia Filly flared up like coal oil in Old Henner's cook stove. "Why you—you low down contemptible dog, you!" She was burning mad, the Philadelphia Filly was. "I hope they hang you from the highest tree in the territory." And she stomped out of the jail, bawling like a bull calf!

"Reckon I was a little too hard on her, Hugh?" Lefty asked me. "She sorta had it coming to her, just like you do—but maybe I was a little too rough with her."

"I dunno, son," I said, feeling older than the Dead Sea and sorta let down by Lefty's refusing to help. "You were my ace in the hole, son. I was counting on you."

"Can't do a thing for you, sorry," Lefty said, his face cold and hard. "Got worries of my own, Hugh."

"All right, Lefty, if that's the way you feel about it," I told him. "You wouldn't have any idea what else I could do, would you, to get the twins back?"

"Hell, Hugh," Lefty laughed at me, "a child of three would know what to do."

"Well, what?" I yelled at him, getting plumb tired of his stubbornness and sarcasm and all.

"Pay the money, you old jackass!" Lefty yelled back at me. "Give 'em their fifty thousand bucks. You got plenty of money—so pay 'em off and get your twins back. And

get the hell out of here, will you—I been reading a story and I'd like to finish it."

"You think I been doing wrong trying to find the twins?" I asked, refusing to leave until I'd found out a few things.

"I think you been wasting your time," Lefty told me. "I think your twins are perfectly safe. Take me now—I'm an authority on outlaws—I'll betcha that no self-respecting outlaws would hurt any kids or women. They wouldn't be welcome anywhere in the world if they did—and outlaws have got to have places they can be welcome, just like anybody else."

"That's a load off my mind," I said—wondering why I hadn't paid out the money and saved all the trouble I'd been through. Guess I got panicky and didn't use my head—didn't think clear like Lefty did. All I could think of was harm coming to the twins. "Thanks, son—you've been a big help, even if you didn't want to be."

So I got the Philadelphia Filly and went on home—wishing whoever had kidnapped the twins would hurry up and tell me where to leave the money—so I could get the whole thing wound up and get the twins back.

I didn't have long to wait. Honest John came riding up around noon the next day. "Here's a letter for you," he said; "found it leaning up against a bottle in the bar. Dunno who left it—must have been two, three hundred jiggers in the place last night. Brought it over myself—thought it might be something important."

"Thanks, John," I told him. "Light and rest. You must be kinda tired riding in all this heat."

So Honest John got down off his horse and fished a bottle of beer out of the well where Lefty always kept it cool for him—and I read the note he handed me.

Bring money to Signal Rock Sunday morning.
Leave it in the trail in plain sight. Do not look
back. The twins will be returned if you do not try
any monkey business.

It was fixed up like the first note—letters cut out of a

book or magazine, pasted on brown paper. No handwriting to tell off on anybody—nothing that I could hang a suspicion on.

“Bad news?” Honest John asked.

“Nope, reckon you’d call it good, John,” I said. “It’s about the twins—tells where to take the money and all. Reckon you’d call it good news, even if it does cost a lot of money.”

“You need any money, Hugh?” Honest John asked. “Send you some over if you do.”

“Nope, got plenty—Roots brought some out from town the other day. Keep this under your hat, will you, John—they say they don’t want no monkey business, and the fewer folks that know about it the better.”

“Sure,” Honest John said. “Well, I guess I’d better get back to my den of iniquity. Tell Lefty thanks for the beer next time you see him.”

So Honest John rode back to Georgetown to fleece his suckers honestly—and I took me six, seven good big shots of Old Crow and went to sleep. Must have needed the sleep bad—for I slept all afternoon and all night. Woke up next morning with my head as clear as a bell, feeling better than I had in days—ready to go bear hunting with a switch, I felt so good.

Yes sir, I woke up feeling that my troubles were about over—like this was the day—the day I was going to get the twins back and everything was going to come out right. I felt so good I was even going to try to get Lefty out of jail and ship him off to South America to start all over. Yes sir, it was going to be a great day, I thought.

But it was just the whiskey talking in me. Things didn’t pan out the way I saw ’em at all. I took the money to Signal Rock and left it laying in the trail. I didn’t look back, I didn’t tell anybody about it—I did just like the note said and then I went home and waited!

I waited damned near a week before I decided that somebody had been pulling the wool over my eyes! Every

day I thought, "Well, this is the day. The twins will be back today." But every day they didn't come back—and I'd decide to wait just one more day!

All I did was give whoever had kidnapped the twins more time to get out of the country.

When a week was up I told the sheriff about it, and he told his deputy, Jeopardy Jones. Jeopardy told Joe Wheeler and some of the boys around the Buckhorn Bar—and the first thing you know the whole county knew that I had paid out the ransom money and hadn't got the twins back.

Folks held meetings, preachers preached sermons, there was some talk of posting a reward for the killers. They were calling 'em "killers" now, not "kidnappers."

That was the whole sorry story I had to tell Jack Hamlin and Miss Sally when they got back from their trip a couple of days later. I had to tell 'em that their twins were gone, that half the county gave 'em up for dead. I had to tell 'em that I'd paid out fifty thousand dollars ransom money and didn't get the twins back!

I would have rather cut my own throat than tell Miss Sally about her kids—but I had to tell her!

22

MISS SALLY took it like a man—a lot better than her husband, Jack Hamlin, did. I couldn't quite understand it—her, the twins' mother, being so calm and cool and undisturbed about it all.

She and Jack Hamlin got to the ranch a couple of days after I'd given the twins up for lost. They had just docked at San Francisco a few days back. It was the first they'd heard of the kidnapping, I reckon—and they caught the first train. Got into Silver City in the middle of the night and came on out to the ranch in a hired rig. Didn't even talk to anybody in town.

"Let's have the story from the start," Jack said. So I told him the whole thing—from the day Lefty didn't kill

that young punk, right up to the day he did kill Three Jay Johnson. I told him about Lefty being arrested, about the twins being kidnapped, and about the big hunt we'd made for them—leaving out nothing!

"Where is Lefty Allen now?" Jack asked. "He out looking for the twins?"

"Nope—he's still in jail," I told him. "He and I had words a while back and he's still sore, I reckon. I tried to bail him out to help me, but he turned me down cold."

"Why the dirty skunk," Jack Hamlin swore a long string of cuss words, "the dirty, low down son!"

"Did I hear you right, Hugh?" Miss Sally asked. "Did you say Lefty was still in jail?"

"Yes, that's right," I said. She looked tired and drawn and dusty and her face was streaked where she had been crying. But when I told her that Lefty was still in jail it was like somebody had dropped her in the creek, she looked so refreshed. You could just see the strain go out of her face and the worried look leave it—when I told her Lefty was still in jail! She didn't look like the mother of a pair of missing twins at all—just like a tired little girl that was sleepy and didn't care who knew it.

"Ummaah, excuse me, boys." She yawned from ear to ear. "I think I'll just go to bed. Here it is almost daylight and I haven't slept any since we docked. Yes, boys, I think I'll go to bed."

Jack Hamlin looked at her kinda funny, like he couldn't understand her wanting to go to bed and sleep when her kids were gone, maybe in danger somewheres. He just couldn't understand her being so calm about it—and neither could I.

"You all right, Sally?" Jack asked her.

"Yes, I'm all right, honey," she told him, "and the twins are all right, too. So relax and come to bed."

"You got a hunch, or an idea, or are you just plain smarter than the rest of us?" Jack asked.

"Just plain smarter, that's all." Miss Sally laughed and

yawned again. "But I'm too sleepy to stop and explain—I can hardly keep my eyes open. Just take my word for it—things are going to be all right—and come to bed and rest."

Jack studied her a spell and noticed how changed she was—how soothed and relaxed. He shook his head. "I don't get it, Hugh, but I'll bet she's right. Good night, see you in the morning!" And off they went to bed, just like they didn't have a care in the world.

There was a time when they weren't both crazy, I thought. Shucks, they'd had good sense when they went away. They seemed more than average fond of their twins three or four months back when they'd left. And there they were—going to bed and sleeping until noon—just like nothing was wrong. What kinda people had they turned into, I wondered?

Along about noon I wandered into what had been Lefty's room in the foreman's cabin. The Philadelphia Filly was down there trying to get Lefty's Fighting Chicken to eat something. He hadn't been worth shucks since the twins had been kidnapped—just moped around like an old dog does when his master dies.

"You know, kid," I told her, "if I was in his shape, I think I'd take me three, four good drinks of whiskey."

"Hugh, you old sinner," she laughed, "go get the bottle. Maria tells me the Hamlins got home last night."

"Yea, they did—still sleeping, I reckon," I said, and we mixed up some bran and chopped corn and whiskey and stuck it under the Fighting Chicken's nose, and after the first peck he didn't waste any time downing the rest of it.

It was about then that Jack Hamlin and Miss Sally came along—looking for some breakfast, I guess. That Fighting Chicken saw Jack Hamlin, ruffled up his feathers, let out an unearthly squawk and made a beeline for him. Spurred hell out of Jack's boots before Jack finally shooed him off!

Miss Sally and the Philadelphia Filly were hugging each other and laughing fit to kill at Jack beating off that little bitty rooster.

"Don't know whether it's the whiskey we fed him or the sight of Jack," the Philadelphia Filly said after things had calmed down a little, "but something seems to have cured him completely. He's been a little sick, I think—he hasn't made a noise since the twins have been gone."

"You don't say," Jack Hamlin said. "Has he been bunking with the twins like he used to do when Lefty was away?"

"Yes, he has." The Philadelphia Filly looked kinda puzzled. "He must have been sick even then—the morning the twins were taken. Usually he won't let anyone go near them without squawking and trying to fight them, but that morning I didn't hear a sound out of him. Strange."

"Yes, isn't it?" Miss Sally asked—and the two girls grinned at each other like they had some big secret between them.

"You feel like riding into town after we've eaten a little?" Jack asked. "I want to see the sheriff and see what I can learn. And I want to see Lefty—the dirty skunk—and tell him a thing or two."

"Yes, I'd like to go," Miss Sally said. "I'd like to see old Lefty again myself. You coming, Mary Ann?"

"You two go on," she said. "I've seen the sheriff, I don't want to see Lefty, and I've been riding before, too. I think I'll just stay home today and clear up a few things in my mind."

Jack asked her a couple of times more, just to be polite, just to be sure she meant it—and then they rode off to town. They hadn't asked me whether I wanted to go along or not—but I went, anyways. I wanted to be there when Jack Hamlin nailed Lefty's hide to the barn!

And, gentlemen, he did that very thing! He cussed Lefty out four ways from Sunday. Called him every name a cow-hand knows—cussed in Spanish, English and Apache! Lefty didn't say a word—he just stood there, grinning from ear to ear.

You could have knocked me over with a feather when Miss Sally said, "Oh, Jack, shut up!" She ran over and

put her arms around Lefty and hugged him like a long lost brother, crying to beat hell! She even kissed the dirty son!

It didn't make sense—after all that had happened—for her to be treating Lefty like that. She should have been hating his guts, but there she was hugging Lefty and crying, "Lefty, Lefty, I'm so glad to see you—here in jail, Lefty."

There she went again—being glad that Lefty was in jail. It didn't make a bit of sense to me, but it did to Lefty. He said, "It's all right, Miss Sally—stay in jail the rest of my life if it will make you happy. You don't miss much, do you?"

"I'm just an ignorant country girl, Lefty," Miss Sally laughed, "but I don't always believe what I hear when I know differently."

Jack Hamlin was getting pretty sore by now. He'd been right mad at Lefty to begin with—Jack thought Lefty hadn't done right in refusing to hunt for the twins, and so did I—and here Miss Sally was making things worse by making fun of Jack.

"Come on, Sally, let's get out of here and see the sheriff," Jack said. "The sight of this dirty son is making me sick."

"And you make me sick, Jack Hamlin," Miss Sally snapped at him. "That's Lefty Allen you're talking to. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. I wonder why I married you sometimes! Talking about your best friend that way."

"Yea," Jack was getting sorer every minute. "A fine friend he has turned out to be. Best friend, my eye!"

"Look here, Jack," Miss Sally said, "do you think that there is a jail in the world that could hold Lefty Allen if you, or I, or the twins—or even old Hugh there—was in real trouble? That's how I knew the twins were all right last night—Lefty knows they are safe or he would have busted out and found them a long time ago. That's why you make me sick, Jack Hamlin—talking about Lefty the way you have been."

Miss Sally was so mad she was crying—so she went over in the corner of Lefty's cell and dried her eyes and looked through some of his magazines a while.

Jack looked at Lefty for a minute—right straight into his eyes—and Lefty looked right straight back. They were talking to each other without saying a word. You could mighty near see them remembering things—fights they'd fought together, breaking up the toughest gang in the territory—Lefty taking seven bullet wounds to save Jack Hamlin's life. They looked and looked and thought and thought—and all at once everything cleared up for Jack Hamlin.

"Hugh," Jack yelled at me, "go and get the judge, you old fossil. Get Lefty out on bail and him and me will go and find out who kidnapped the twins."

"You don't have to stir a step to find that out," Miss Sally interrupted. "You don't have to stir a step, Jack—the man that kidnapped the twins is right in this room."

Jack looked at me. "What did you want to do it for, Hugh?" he asked.

"Don't be silly, Jack," Miss Sally said, waving one of Lefty's magazines under Jack's nose. "Look at all the letters cut out of this magazine, Jack—and then look at the ransom notes—and you'll know who kidnapped the twins!"

Judas Priest! No wonder Lefty Allen didn't want to get out on bond and hunt for the twins! He'd kidnapped them himself—or he had a hand in it!

23

"Is SHE GUESSING right, Lefty?" Jack Hamlin asked, his gun out and pointed at the breast pocket where Lefty carried his tobacco.

"Yea, she's right, Jack," Lefty admitted. "I kidnapped your twins. I sneaked out of jail and got 'em and then sneaked back in again."

"All right, Lefty," Jack said in a tired, beaten voice—

like he couldn't understand his best friend being the kidnapper. "Tell us what you want out of it, Lefty, and we'll get it, and you can bring the twins back. You want to get out of this murder charge, or is it the bank robbing?"

"Hell, I don't want a damned thing, Jack Hamlin," Lefty said, soft and quiet like. "Your twins are safe—Miss Sally is right about them. You can put away your gun—there ain't no need of gunplay yet."

I think it was the tone of Lefty's voice more than what he said that quieted Jack down. He put his gun away and said, "I'm taking you at your word, Lefty, but you've got some tall explaining to do. Your story had better be good, and if you've harmed one hair on the twins' heads I'll kill you like I would a wolf. Where are the twins, Lefty?"

"Your kids are over at Father Antonio's, boss," Lefty said. "They are safe and sound and eating their heads off. Father Antonio, Honest John and I kidnapped them. Father Antonio is taking care of the ransom money until you want it back."

"You're sure they are all right, Lefty?" Miss Sally asked.

"Of course they are, ma'am. They are having the time of their lives. Shucks, it ain't every kid that gets kidnapped," Lefty told her, easing her mind. "How did you ever pick up the trail, anyways? Some of the best men in the country tried it and couldn't get to first base."

"It was your Fighting Chicken, Lefty."

"My Fighting Chicken?"

"Yes, he didn't let out a sound while the twins were being kidnapped. The Philadelphia Filly was awake and dressing at the time and would have heard the noise if there had been any. You are the only man that could have gone near the twins while they were sleeping without the Fighting Chicken raising a rumpus. All very simple, don't you think?"

"Sounds simple," Jack Hamlin said, "but I can't see why the hell you'd have to go and kidnap kids and scare hell out of everybody and worry Miss Sally to death and all. Seems

like you could have got along without doing all that."

"Yea, it would seem that way," Lefty told him, "but things have come up since you went away, Jack. There's a gang operating in Grant County that Frank Reilly's gang couldn't hold a candle to."

"It all sounds fishy to me," Jack snorted. "Seems like you could have got along without kidnapping the twins. Hell, I thought you were a man and could handle a fight without dragging a couple of little kids into it."

"Look, Jack Hamlin," Lefty was getting mad himself now, "I've taken about enough off of you for one day. I saw a lot of trouble coming, and I sent for you to come help me. You said run the ranch or sell it, you were having a good time—so I've been running it. I was doing all right, too—in spite of Hugh being a snoopy old rooster. And then the Philadelphia Filly had me thrown in jail."

"So?" Jack sneered.

"Hell, I couldn't protect the twins while I was in jail, so I sneaked out and kidnapped 'em. I couldn't do anything else!"

"What were you protecting 'em from?" Jack asked.

"From being kidnapped," Lefty told him.

"What the hell—you kidnap 'em to keep 'em from being kidnapped. It don't make sense," I horned in.

"Oh, shut up, Hugh," Jack said. "I reckon Lefty done what he had to do. Go and find the judge and bail Lefty out so we can go and get the twins and forget it. He can tell us all about it on the way."

"You think I've been telling you the truth, boss?" Lefty asked. "You think your twins are all right where they are?"

"Yea, I believe you, Lefty," Jack said. "I'll admit I was kinda sore for a minute, but likely you did what you thought best. Did you have to ask?"

"Well, look, boss," Lefty said, "I got an idea. I think we can bust up this gang for good—if you'll just leave your twins where they are for two, three more days. Would that be all right with you, Miss Sally?"

"I guess so," Miss Sally said. "I haven't seen them for four months. I can stand a couple of days more if I have to—can't you, Jack?"

"Yea," Jack said, "I reckon so."

"Sure glad to hear that," Lefty laughed; "gives me a couple of days more to live."

"You figuring on dying soon, Lefty?" Jack asked.

"Nope, boss, but you said you'd kill me if there was a hair harmed on the twins' heads. You're sure going to kill me when you see 'em, boss. Honest John was in yesterday and said they'd give each other a haircut. Hardly any hair left at all, Honest John said."

"Lefty, if that is all that's wrong with the twins, I'll give you the Jack-In-The-Box for a wedding present." Jack Hamlin laughed with Lefty. "What you want me to do to help bust up this gang? You sound like you had a plan in mind."

"Yea, I got an idea," Lefty said. "I'd like you to spread the story around that the twins have been found dead—it's already pretty well started. Then I want you to offer a big reward for Juanito Valdez, the guy that done it. Juanito is a friend of mine and won't mind doing me a little favor like becoming a kidnapper and a murderer."

"He mixed up in it, or just a friend?" Jack asked.

"Both," Lefty said. "I used to know him down in Mexico. Hadn't seen him for a couple of years until one day last winter Hugh and I ran into him. He told me somebody had hired him to come up here from Mexico and kidnap some kids. Got five thousand dollars in advance for the job, and lost every cent of it gambling over at Honest John's. Then he found out that the twins were mine, so to speak, and he was really out on a limb. He'd lost the money—couldn't give it back—but he couldn't kidnap his friend's kids, either."

"So you robbed this bank I've heard so much about," Miss Sally said, "and gave Juanito the money to return

to the man that hired him. And Juanito called the kidnapping off."

"Right as rain, Miss Sally," Lefty said. "Sure wish everybody around here saw right through things like you do. Anyways I got the money—I won't say just where, it might be used against me—and gave it to Juanito. He called off the kidnapping, but the son-of-a-gun wouldn't tell me who hired him. If I'd known I could have been on the watch for him to try it again, but Juanito wouldn't tell me who it was. He just wouldn't talk."

"Thought he was a friend of yours?" I sneered.

"Yea, he was—but he still wouldn't tell on the guy that had hired him. All I could do was trail Juanito and see where he took the money and who he gave it to."

"You find out who it was?" Jack asked.

"Nope," Lefty said. "I trailed Juanito around all evening and he finally met a guy up behind the blacksmith shop. It was as dark as the ace of spades and I couldn't see who Juanito was talking to."

"You recognize any voices," Jack asked, "or did you get close enough to hear 'em?"

"Yea, I got close enough, all right," Lefty said, "but the sons of guns spoke in Spanish. Never heard the other guy's voice before—it wasn't ordinary Mexican Spanish he talked—it was that highfaluting Castilian stuff. Lisped just like a girl."

"I've heard 'em talk that way," Jack Hamlin said. "Guy like that in my outfit in the Spanish war. He must have been a bad hand, fighting against his own country. He lisped, just like you say this jigger did—sorta spit all over you when he talked, and sorta pranced when he walked. But boy, was he a fighting fool. Julio something-or-other his name was."

"Sounds like the same jigger," Lefty said. "Anyways, that was the kind of a voice I heard talking to Juanito, and I couldn't connect it up with anybody that amounted to enough to have five thousand dollars cash money to pay

out. That's why I had Hugh shoot out the lights at Honest John's a couple of nights later—to find out who spoke Castilian Spanish when he got excited."

"Hugh, you old fossil, you didn't tell me you'd been cutting up again," Jack said.

"Yea, he has," Lefty said, "and he ain't a bad shot, either, for a man his age. Got two lights in two shots, he did—and the minute them lights went out somebody started cussing a blue streak in that highfaluting Castilian Spanish. Got excited and started talking in his native language—instead of the one he was pretending to talk natural."

"I remember now," I told him. "I remember somebody cussing to beat hell in Spanish, and then I heard another shot. How come you to miss him, Lefty?"

"Hell, that wasn't me you heard shooting," Lefty said. "I was under the table. That was him shooting at me—only I wasn't where he thought I was. Reckon he must have known he'd give himself away and he tried to get me right there—but I was under the table and he winged Joe Wheeler instead. Remember, Hugh?"

"But the marshal, Lefty—he smelled every gun in the place and none of 'em had been fired recent," I said. "That's why I thought you must have shot Joe Wheeler with your hide-out gun."

"Nope—it wasn't Joe Wheeler that I would have shot, and I wasn't the only guy there with a hide-out gun, Hugh. Other guys besides me can carry 'em. This guy with the Castilian voice did the shooting—with a derringer he snaked out of his sleeve."

"It couldn't possibly be who I think it is, could it, Lefty?" I asked, trying to put the puzzle together in my mind.

"Yea, it was who you think all right, Hugh," Lefty said. "I was sure who the Castilian voice had come from, but it seemed so damned ridiculous that I couldn't believe it at first. I didn't want to make any mistakes, so I wrote some

jiggers I know and I found out about this guy. Seems like he came from a good Spanish family down in Mexico. He had been educated in Europe and back east and spoke English better than most people. One of them blond, blue-eyed Spanish that can pass for almost anything. Seems like he got so ornery that his family plumb disowned him."

"Son, you could have fooled me," I told him, "it don't seem hardly possible."

"No, it don't," Lefty admitted. "I thought maybe I was all wrong, even after what them jiggers wrote me. But one of 'em sent me a ranger's bulletin from down at Austin. Take a look at that picture, Hugh."

Lefty showed me a ranger's bulletin, listing half a dozen horse thieves, a few smugglers and marihuana peddlers and such. Along down near the bottom of the bulletin, circled in pencil, was:

WANTED FOR MURDER! JULIO ESCOBAR—blond hair, blue eyes. Height about five ten, weight about one sixty.

SPECIAL WARNING! This man is doubly dangerous. Pretends to be unarmed but shoots without warning from sleeve holster, usually when victim's back is turned. Shoot on sight and then ask questions. \$1,000 REWARD, DEAD OR ALIVE!

I read the notice, then I looked at the picture above it. Yea—maybe you've already guessed it—it was the picture of Three Jay Johnson! The picture was a little different—the hair was cut longer, the mustache was waxed and curled, Mexican style, but there was no mistaking who it was!

Three Jay Johnson was the man who had hired Juanito Valdez to kidnap the Hamlin twins! Three Jay was a renegade Mexican killer that shot from a sleeve-holstered deringer without warning. Lefty hadn't shot him down in

cold blood at all—the Philadelphia Filly had been right—Lefty was killing a snake before it struck!

I couldn't believe it, but there the evidence was!

24

"SO THE PHILADELPHIA FILLY was right, after all," I said, half to myself, half to Lefty.

"Was she on to Three Jay?" Lefty asked.

"Nope—she was on to you," I told him. "She allowed that Three Jay must have been some kind of a snake or you wouldn't have killed him like you did. She does quite a bit of her own thinking, that gal does."

"Did she really side with me?" Lefty asked, like he could hardly believe what I had told him.

"Yea, she actually took up for you," I told him.

"What I don't see," Jack Hamlin horned in, "is what all the fuss is about. If you already killed the guy that planned the kidnapping, what is there to worry so much about now? He can't hurt anybody if he is dead, can he?"

"Nope, he can't, Jack," Lefty admitted, "but there's two more of 'em still alive. They was three of 'em in on it at the start."

"You know who the other two are?" Jack asked.

"Yea, I know, but I can't prove a thing on 'em," Lefty said. "I could go and pick a fight with 'em and likely kill 'em both, boss, but I done enough killing. I don't want to unless there's nothing else to do. I—well, I got my reasons."

"So you want me to get this Juanito Valdez jailed sorta for bait for the other two, huh?" Jack asked.

"Yea, I reckon that when they hear the twins are dead and that Juanito is in jail something will bust loose. The two jiggers was a hundred miles from each other the day the kidnapping happened, and I'll bet forty dollars each of 'em has a sneaking idea that the other one was in on it. Yes sir, one of 'em was at the other end of the country.

When they hear about the ransom money being paid and all—somebody is going to blow his top!”

“Anybody special you want watched?” I asked.

“Yea, two guys,” Lefty said. “Neither one of ’em is a friend of mine, yet they both of ’em offered to go my bond when I first got put in the hoosegow.”

“You didn’t want me to go your bail so you could see who would offer to do it?” I asked—beginning to get a flicker of light through my feeble mind.

“Yea, that’s right,” Lefty said. “Honest John heard ’em framing that bank robbery. They was going to time it so they would get a shipment that was ready to go out on the stage the next day. The box was going to be all ready, and the jiggers that was to rob the bank was to leave a lot of evidence around that made it look like I did it.”

“Did you?” Miss Sally asked. “Bet you did, and I’ll bet it was easy, robbing a bank that was waiting to be robbed.”

“Yea, I robbed the bank,” Lefty said. “I laid for the guy that was going to do it and—well—I encouraged him to leave the country. Then I robbed the bank—easy as falling off a log.”

“Did you get much?” Miss Sally asked.

“Not a dollar, not a dime even,” Lefty said. “There wasn’t a cent in that box I took from the bank. Just a lot of old newspapers, cut up and tied in packages like paper money. And the bank—claiming they lost around thirty thousand dollars.”

“Sounds like you weren’t the only crook in the country, Lefty,” Miss Sally laughed.

“Yea, it sure does,” Lefty told her. “Anyways, I got thrown in jail, and whoever planned the whole business must have started nosing around and found out I really did rob their damned bank.”

“Well, even so,” Jack asked, “why would they want to bail you out?”

“To keep me from talking, of course,” Lefty told him.

"It's awful hard to kill a man in a good jail like this. Lots easier to bushwhack him outside somewheres."

"Who were these jiggers, Lefty?" Jack asked. "Just tell us who they are and we'll go clean their plows for 'em."

"One of 'em is already dead," Lefty said, "and the other two—well, you'd hardly believe me if I told you their names. When you go to swear out the warrant for Juanito, ask the judge who offered to put up bail for me—then watch them two jiggers after you get Juanito in jail."

So we went over to Judge Brennand's, and Jack Hamlin and I lied our heads off, and Miss Sally cried a bucketful of tears—convincing the judge that the twins had been found dead and that Juanito Valdez had done it. Finally we convinced the judge and he made out the warrant.

"Couldn't we bail Lefty out while we're here, Judge?" Miss Sally asked. "It seems a shame to keep him in that stuffy jail for something that he didn't even do in New Mexico. It happened away over in Arizona and I don't think it is right to keep him in jail for it."

"No, I don't think it is right, either," the judge said. "I don't even think Lefty is guilty, but he has refused bond twice. He says he doesn't want out. Says he hasn't had a vacation in years, and that he'd rather rest in jail until his trial."

"What makes you think he is innocent, Judge?" Jack Hamlin asked.

"Well, for one thing, the guy that owns the bank Lefty is supposed to have robbed offered to bail Lefty out. He wouldn't have done that if he thought Lefty was guilty, and he ought to know."

"No, it don't seem that way," Jack allowed.

"And there was another guy that wouldn't have no truck with Lefty if he thought Lefty was guilty. Why, one of our local law men, not mentioning any names—offered to go Lefty's bond, too."

"Well, thanks for the warrant, Judge," Jack said. "It's all right if I deliver it to the sheriff myself? Got to go over

there anyways and put up some reward money—just as well handle it all at once.”

“Reckon it’s all right,” the judge said. “If Banks don’t mind, I don’t.”

On the way over to the sheriff’s office I got to thinking about those two jiggers that had offered to go Lefty’s bail. Joe Wheeler I could believe was a crook—I could understand how he might have gutted his own bank. But Sheriff Banks—I just somehow couldn’t bring myself to believe bad about Banks. Still and all, I’d been wrong about so many things lately that I decided Banks could be crooked, just like anybody else.

Banks was in his office and Jack gave him the warrant. “I want this jigger taken alive, Banks,” Jack said to him. “I want to see him hung. You reckon you can take enough men along to sorta surround him and capture him alive?”

“Yea, I can swear in some men,” the sheriff said. “It ain’t always as simple as it sounds, though. A man can see a big posse coming miles off, and one man can often sneak up on a jigger’s blind side.”

“This Mexican won’t be able to see you coming,” Jack told the sheriff. “I just heard where he is, and he’s dead drunk—been that way ever since Old Hugh here paid the ransom money out. He’s over at Georgetown, drunk as a skunk! You won’t have no trouble with him, Sheriff, but take along some men just to be sure. I’m offering ten thousand reward, just to make it interesting.”

The news got around town like wildfire. The Hamlin twins were found dead! Ten thousand dollars reward for Juanito Valdez! Sheriff’s swearing in men! Folks that rode in that posse told me that riders joined them at every ranch they passed on the way to Georgetown. The grapevine beats the telegraph any day!

The funniest thing about it all was that the news got to Georgetown ahead of the posse, and not one of them got a cent of that reward money. How the news got there

quicker than the guys that could have carried it beats me, but that is what happened.

No—Juanito Valdez wasn't gone. He was there, all right—tied up tighter than a calf at a rodeo! Honest John had Juanito all wrapped up and ready to deliver to the sheriff. Not a gun was pulled, not a shot was fired, and not a cent of money for those thirty, forty men who had ridden half a day for their share. Honest John had captured Juanito, hadn't he?

The posse mounted up to take Juanito back to Silver City—tired and sheepish looking, and some of them kinda disgusted with themselves. Good honest citizens, most of them—they'd ridden half a day after that reward money, and Honest John, the gambler, had shamed them all. He wouldn't take a cent of the reward money!

"Why the hell should a man take money for helping his friends?" Honest John asked them. "You boys have a drink on the house? It's a long, dusty ride back to Silver City."

25

JOE WHEELER's men started drifting into town right after the news that the posse had left leaked out. Jack and I kept checking the saloons and gambling halls to see what was developing, and we'd see two of Wheeler's men in one, three in another. They rode in singly and in pairs—never enough of them at once to attract attention.

The posse got back with Juanito about eight o'clock that night. Jack had the reward money in his pocket, and when he heard that Honest John had refused it, he offered it to the posse. But shucks, they weren't going to let any gambler show them up—they wouldn't take the money, either. So Jack told them to drink what they liked, and all they liked, at any of the bars and he'd pay for it.

"You boys get drunk on me, if you feel like it," he told 'em, "but don't get so full of liquor that you let anybody

talk you into a lynching. I want to see this Mexican hung, but I want him tried and convicted and hung decent like. He don't deserve a fair trial, anybody that did what he did, but he's going to have it just the same!"

So the posse took their aching backsides to their favorite bars and soothed their souls with their favorite poisons, and Jack and I rounded up all the Jack-In-The-Box boys we could find. Jack had sent out to the ranch earlier in the day and got ten or twelve of 'em, just in case something might come up. And something did!

Joe Wheeler hit town along about sundown, and by that time his whole crew was there. Fifteen to twenty rough, tough hombres, and they hadn't come to town to blow their wages. It wasn't payday. There was trouble in the wind!

"What do you reckon they are up to, Jack?" I asked.

"Damned if I know, Hugh. I just got back to this country and I ain't posted on all of Joe Wheeler's troubles," Jack said. "But it don't look like no Sunday School picnic was being organized."

"They could be after Juanito or Lefty," I said.

"Hugh, you amaze me sometimes," Jack answered. "Don't see how you ever figure those things out. Reckon we better round up the boys and spread 'em around the hoosegow, here and there, just in case."

"You think we ought to tell Banks there is trouble in the wind?" I asked him.

"Nope, he's getting old and needs his sleep," Jack said. "Anyways, we might want to kill a few guys and a sheriff ain't nobody to have around."

I put Roots Ansell and Sheep Dip Sherman in the general store across the street from the jail. I put Lefty's two hired gun-slingers on the jail roof, where they could cover either side of it. Five or six boys we put in back of the jail, and the rest in the blacksmith shop where the street turned—they could blast the street clean from the blacksmith shop!

Then I went over to the Buckhorn and borrowed the bartender's shotgun! Double barreled ten gauge, sawed off short and loaded with slugs and buckshot!

"You going to have a massacre, Hugh?" Jack laughed when he saw me with that shotgun.

"It ain't funny," I told him. "My conscience is sorta working on me overtime tonight. Half of the trouble Lefty is in could have been stopped if I hadn't gone sticking my nose in his business! I been thinking some pretty hard things about Lefty the last few months—instead of helping him when he needed help! So they ain't nobody going to get to Lefty—until after they get me!"

"Stay in there, Hugh," Jack said. "Funny how everybody's got their own worries. Here you are all primed to look out for Lefty—and me, I'm trying to forget I am a married man and a father long enough to enjoy a good fight. Hell, a guy can't cut loose and have him a time when he remembers he's got a wife and kids to take care of. Won't be no fun at all, Hugh."

"Miss Sally's a mighty fine woman," I told him. "Seems like you could let the fighting go, having a wife like that. How come Miss Sally thinks things out quicker than we do, anyways?"

"Could be she's got something to think with, Hugh," Jack said.

"Could be," I admitted, feeling better now that I had got things off my chest. It was kinda like old times again, too—a good fight coming up, with Jack Hamlin at my side and Lefty Allen in on it, too. Yes sir, made me feel sorta young again—and I hadn't had any Old Crow, either!

It was along about two in the morning when Joe Wheeler's boys finally got their minds made up. Joe had been priming them all evening with fighting whiskey and they were worked up to raise merry hell. I was hiding on the dark side of the jail with my ten gauge cocked and ready—when Sheep Dip whispered from across the street.

"Here they come, Hugh—sneaking along soft and easy

like a bunch of Indians." I squinted up the street, and there they were—their spurs off, sneaking up on the jail as quiet as they could!

"You boys all set?" Jack Hamlin asked. They all were—the boys across the street, those in the back of the jail, those on the roof, and those at the blacksmith shop. About a dozen of us against Joe Wheeler's fifteen or twenty, but we had a good, strong 'dobe jail to fort up in that more than evened the odds.

"Don't shoot until I say so, boys," Jack Hamlin whispered, "but when I give the word don't waste any time. We can't let anything happen to Lefty or Juanito."

We were all set, all ready. We had about a fifty-fifty chance, I reckoned, but hell, I wasn't worried, I was getting old anyways and I'd just as well go out a-shooting!

I was just drawing a good bead on Joe Wheeler with my ten-gauge—when a man stepped out of the jailhouse door. He had a gun on each hip and a rifle under his arm, and he walked out to meet Wheeler's gang!

"Don't come any farther, Wheeler," this man said, calm and quiet and sure of himself. Judas Priest—it was Jeopardy Jones, the killing deputy. The man had guts after all!

"Better not try to stop us, Jeopardy," Wheeler said. "We want Valdez and we are going to have him. We are hanging him tonight—we ain't waiting for no trial. Folks have been acquitted or broke out of jail before this!"

"You'd doublecross your own grandmother, wouldn't you, Joe?" Jeopardy asked.

"Hell of a lot of nerve you've got—talking about double crossing," Wheeler said. "Valdez hasn't got a chance of even coming to trial while you are a deputy. Somebody will slip him a key or he'll accidentally break out of jail one of these nights. That's why we're here to hang him now."

"You can't get away with it, Joe," Jeopardy said and I admired his guts for facing that mob down, no matter what his reasons were. "You've passed the buck for the last time

—making a grandstand play—pretending to lynch a kidnapper. You won't have to split with Valdez if he's dead—will you, Joe?"

"So you are trying to hang it on me," Joe Wheeler marveled, his hands on his guns now. "If that don't take the cake. To hell with the money—burn him down, boys!"

"Grab your ears instead, boys!" A voice snapped out from in back of Wheeler's mob—it was Sheriff Banks with a riot gun, facing down that whole street full of fighting men. "Drop your guns, all of you. You, Jeopardy, and you too, Wheeler—both of you are coming to jail with me and thrash this out in private!"

"Yea," Wheeler sneered, "who is going to make us?"

"I, for one," yelled Jack Hamlin from his corner of the jail. "We got 'em covered from the roof for you, Sheriff, and on both sides, too."

"Shall we shoot now, boss?" Sheep Dip Sherman yelled from across the street.

"Not unless they start something, Sheep Dip," Jack answered. "Sorta wish they would—we got 'em covered front and back and on both sides. Bet we could clean the buzzards out."

But Joe Wheeler's men didn't start anything, and Jeopardy Jones didn't either. They all reached for their cars, ready to be herded into jail. But the sheriff only took the two of them. Locked 'em in separate cells and let the rest of Wheeler's gang go. They scattered too.

"You on the prod, Sheriff," Jack Hamlin asked, "or is this just part of the day's work?"

"It's long past my bedtime," the sheriff said, "and I'm always mean when I'm tired and sleepy. Been riding all day and sitting up half the night. Didn't want no drawn out ruckus so I just threw them two jiggers in the cooler. Glad you boys were around, though—nice to have a little help."

"Sheriff, you were scared to death and you know it," Jack Hamlin laughed at him.

"Hell, sheriffs are always getting scared," Banks said.

"That's why I am old and wore out—and still alive. If I hadn't been scared lots of times I'd have been dead years ago. Don't see why I keep on being sheriff, anyways, but they elect me every term. I ain't gonna have no deputy to succeed me next turn so I reckon I'll have to run again."

"You about to lose your prize deputy?" I asked.

"Yea," the sheriff said, "I been talking to the Philadelphia Filly and Napoleon."

"You feel all right, outside of being a little tired, Sheriff?" Jack Hamlin asked.

"Yea," the sheriff said, "I feel all right. I was out to see the Philadelphia Filly this morning early. She showed me the money Lefty stole from the Alpine Bank—it was all cut out of the Tucson paper and tied up neat like bills. So I went to talk to Napoleon."

"Who the hell is Napoleon?" I asked.

"Your friend Lefty, he thinks he's Napoleon," the sheriff said. "Filled me up with a lot of malarkey about dividing and conquering and all. Made out a right good case."

"And he told you you weren't going to have no deputy pretty soon, huh?" Jack asked.

"Yea, smart guy this Lefty Allen," the sheriff said, "even if he does think he is Napoleon."

"You got lots of evidence and proof and such?" Jack asked.

"Nope, just a lot of crazy theories, that's all Lefty had—but they add up pretty good. Part of 'em was that Joe Wheeler would try and bust into the jail tonight, and another part was that Jeopardy Jones would stop him."

"Sounds all right as far as it goes," Jack Hamlin admitted. "We sorta figured something of the sort might happen. But what does it prove? You can't solve a kidnapping case with theories."

"Maybe not, Jack," the sheriff said, "maybe not. Anyways, I'm too blamed tired and sleepy to worry about it tonight. Come on back in the morning when we put the screws on Joe Wheeler. And my prize killing deputy."

"LET THEM sweat all night in jail," the sheriff said before he went to bed," and tomorrow we'll put 'em through the wringer. One of 'em is bound to talk. Got a hunch it'll be Wheeler—Jeopardy's got more nerve than I thought he had."

The sheriff was right. Jack and I met him after breakfast the next morning and went over to the jail with him. Joe Wheeler was nervous the minute we got in his cell. There his breakfast was, untouched, and his eyes were bloodshot and haggard like he'd been on a ten-day drunk. He looked like a man ready to spill his guts, and he did!

"I didn't have anything to do with the kidnapping," he squawked, the minute we got in his cell. "Jeopardy is the guy you're looking for—he done it. I was over in Arizona the day it happened and I can prove it."

"That ain't the way Jeopardy told it," the sheriff said and I knew he was bluffing. He hadn't even talked to Jeopardy yet. Guess Lefty must have told the sheriff what to say. "Jeopardy allowed you'd have a good alibi, but that you were in on the kidnapping as well as all them robberies."

"He's lying, Banks, he's lying," Joe Wheeler said.

"Jeopardy done spilled his guts," Banks said, "and the jig is up. You're in it up to your neck, by God, and that's how they'll hang you—by your neck!"

"No, Banks, no—I wasn't in on the kidnapping, I swear." Joe Wheeler was white as a sheet now, thinking of the hangman's noose, I reckon. "I'll admit my part in the robberies, but I didn't have a thing to do with the kidnapping. Jeopardy did it, and I'll be damned if he is going to hang it on me. I won't let him do it."

"How you going to stop him if it's true?" Banks asked.

"It ain't true," Joe said. "I can prove where I was the day it happened."

"Jeopardy says you planned it together after Three Jay got knocked off," Banks said.

"It ain't so, Sheriff, it ain't so," Joe Wheeler said. "Three Jay planned to kidnap the twins way back last winter, but it fell through, somehow."

"Yea, Jeopardy told me," Banks said. "Claimed you planned it again, and done it together, too."

"No, Banks, no—we planned it, I'll admit—just like we planned the Chino robbery and the S. P. holdup. But Jeopardy jumped the gun on me, Banks. He done it all by himself and he kept every cent of the money. No sir, you can't hang me for kidnapping, Sheriff. I can prove where I was that day."

"Maybe you'd better write out the whole works and sign it," Banks told him. "Don't leave out nothing. Maybe if you can help me convict Jeopardy the territory will go a little light with you on the other counts. Robberies ain't half as bad as murder—likely they'll let you off easy."

So Joe Wheeler sat down and wrote out his confession, and Jack Hamlin and I witnessed it. Three Jay Johnson had been the brains of the gang. After a job was done the money was run through Three Jay's store and banked casual like so it wouldn't excite no suspicion. They practically had a monopoly on all the thieving in our end of the territory, for Jeopardy Jones, the killing deputy, would go out and kill off any competition in the line of duty. Yes sir, it was a good set up—until Lefty Allen killed Three Jay and the outfit lost their brains. They hadn't pulled any jobs since Three Jay's death, but they had planned the kidnapping all out to the last detail. Then Jeopardy had jumped the gun and done it before the day they planned it.

That was the gist of Joe Wheeler's confession. He practically signed himself into the penitentiary—to keep from hanging for the kidnapping of the Hamlin twins.

"One thing you left out," I told Joe Wheeler. "You didn't say anything about the young gun toter you sicked on Lefty over in Georgetown a while back."

"Oh, that," Wheeler said; "that was Jeopardy's idea, too."

"What did Jeopardy want Lefty killed for?" I asked.

"He didn't have nothing against Lefty," Wheeler said. "He just wanted to get elected sheriff—if he'd been sheriff instead of just a deputy we could have got away with almost anything. Jeopardy figured Lefty would kill this young gun toter and then Jeopardy could arrest Lefty for it and make quite a name for himself. He needed to bag one big killer to make him sound good enough to get elected over Banks next term."

"The poor damned fool," Banks said. "I was going to retire and give him the job. Well, come on, boys, we got to go and put Jeopardy through the wringer now."

So we locked Joe Wheeler in good and went down to the other end of the jail to Jeopardy's cell. Jeopardy didn't scare worth a damn! No sir, he was hard as nails and not afraid of anything.

"Hear you wanted to be the sheriff," Banks told him.

"You can't blame a man for wanting, can you?" Jeopardy asked.

"Nope," Banks said, "you can't blame a man for trying. You might have made a good sheriff, too—so I thought, anyways. I was going to retire at the end of the term and let you have it. Shame you won't be alive to take the job."

"I'm awful hard to kill, Banks," Jeopardy said.

"Yea, you're a pretty tough hombre," Banks told him, "but the rope won't know it. It'll choke you off just as easy as it will a blabbermouth like Joe Wheeler."

"Wheeler's been talking?" Jeopardy asked.

"Yea, he allowed you kidnapped the Hamlin twins. Too bad you couldn't have been satisfied with all that money—too bad you had to go and kill the kids, Jeopardy."

"Why the dirty, lying son," Jeopardy said. "I don't know nothing about them twins being kidnapped. Wheeler is your man, Banks—you're wasting your time giving me the third degree. Go turn your wolf loose on Wheeler."

"We already done that," Banks told him, "and Wheeler spilled his guts. He allowed you planned the kidnapping together, but you jumped the gun on him and done it yourself before the day it had been planned for. Claims you wouldn't split with him."

"So you think you can hang it on me, huh?" Jeopardy asked.

"Yea, we got plenty evidence," Banks said, "and it won't take a hell of a lot. Mrs. Hamlin will just have to cry a little in front of the jury and they'll hang you both higher than kites."

"You know damned well I didn't do it," Jeopardy said, cool as can be. Pretty smart, and pretty hard, he was. "But you got me in a corner, Banks. I'll make you a little deal."

"I'm listening," Banks said.

"I don't want to go to the pen," Jeopardy said, "but it is a hell of a lot better than getting hung for something I didn't do. Supposing I tell you a few things that will sew Wheeler up tight, and you sorta go easy on me? That's what you wanted in the first place, wasn't it?"

"Yea, you got a good head on you," Banks said. "Write it out and sign it and I'll get you off as light as I can. Too bad you had to go haywire on me, Jeopardy—you could have been sheriff without any trouble if you'd only waited a little."

"Well, here goes nothing," Jeopardy Jones, the killing deputy, said and wrote him out a statement and signed it. He admitted practically everything that Joe Wheeler had, but he emphatically denied the kidnapping!

"Well, see you at the trial, Jeopardy," the sheriff said. "Anything you need to make you comfortable, just yell for it."

So we left Jeopardy Jones in his cell and went and sat in the sheriff's office. Banks sat there a spell and scratched his head, trying to figure it out. He couldn't seem to get nowheres.

"It beats all," he said, "here I put those two jiggers

through the wringer to find out who kidnapped your twins, and I'm just as far from an answer as when I started. Got me two good confessions that solve a lot of crimes, but I still ain't any nearer finding out who done the kidnapping. Let's go on up on the next floor and see Napoleon."

So the sheriff and Jack and I went on up to Lefty's cell. The sheriff let us in, locked the door and looked at Lefty like he was waiting for Lefty to say something.

Lefty said, "Well?"

"I got two nice juicy confessions—dealing with all sorts of robberies and other unsolved crimes—but I don't know a damned thing more about the kidnapping than I did when I started, Napoleon. You reckon I could have done that kidnapping myself? And maybe forgot about it?"

"Naw, Sheriff, you didn't do it," Lefty said. "Hell, I can't keep a secret from you any more—I did it!"

"This ain't no time for joking, boy," the sheriff said. "You were in jail when it happened. You've had some pretty good hunches, so far, but we still ain't found any twins or any kidnappers. You got any more hunches, Mr. Lefty Napoleon Allen?"

"Nope, I'm fresh out of hunches," Lefty admitted.

"Look, Sheriff," Jack Hamlin horned in, "if a guy does you just one hell of a big favor, could you sorta overlook him making a jackass out of you?"

"Yea, I guess so," the sheriff said. "I'm pretty much of a jackass most of the time, anyways, or I wouldn't have this job."

"Well, we sorta hung one on you, Sheriff," Jack told him. "The twins ain't dead, and Juanito Valdez, nor Joe Wheeler, nor Jeopardy Jones didn't kidnap 'em."

"You mean Lefty really did it?" Banks asked.

"Yea, Lefty did it," Jack told him. "The twins are alive and healthy. They are over at Father Antonio's school on Salt Creek. Lefty took 'em himself to keep Wheeler and Jeopardy from doing it, like they had planned."

"But Lefty was in jail," the sheriff said.

"Jails is awfully easy to get out of." Lefty laughed.

"You aren't fooling an old man, are you, Jack?" Banks asked.

"Nope, we're giving it to you straight," Jack told him. "You get your horse and come on and ride over to Salt Creek with us, and see for yourself."

Banks mulled that over for a minute. "I can't see that I've got anything to lose," he said finally. "You boys have sorta been tampering with the laws, but if it is like you say I reckon you have done more good than harm. Yea, I'll ride with you, but I think I'll just leave Napoleon here in jail until I see them twins with my own eyes. That way I'll have me an ace in the hole if they aren't where you say they are."

So we rode off to Salt Creek to Father Antonio's school to get the twins and convince the sheriff—leaving Lefty Allen in jail.

We left Jeopardy Jones and Joe Wheeler there, too—and we were all so blamed pleased with the way things were working out that we plumb forgot that Jeopardy Jones had been a deputy sheriff! Banks must not have frisked him very well when he threw him in the hoosegow the night before!

Jeopardy still had his keys to the jail, and he'd sneaked up to Lefty's cell and heard every word we said!

27

WE GOT OUR HORSES, picked up Miss Sally at the hotel, and started out for the Jack-In-The-Box, meaning to have dinner there and get fresh horses and go on over to Salt Creek for the twins. We got to the ranch around noon and I went down to the corral to see about fresh horses. I couldn't help but notice that Champagne was gone from his box stall in the barn.

"The Philadelphia Filly out exercising the horses?" I asked Old Hennery when we sat down to dinner.

"Yea, she took a little pasear on that fancy English horse," Old Hennery said. "I told her she hadn't ought to be running around by herself with all the devilment there is going on in these parts, but she said even the devil couldn't catch her on Champagne. Said she was only going as far as Father Antonio's, anyways."

"Nothing much could happen in that distance, I reckon," I told Old Hennery. "She give you any idea what she was going to do over there?"

"Yea, she told me, all right," Old Hennery said, "but I never did figure out what she meant by it. Funniest little gal I ever did see—got the makings of a good liar in her. There she was, not a day over nineteen—claiming she was a hundred and fifty years old. But she was going over to Father Antonio's to make sure. Yes sir, she has got possibilities, that gal has."

"Looks like Philadelphia Filly is playing her hunches," Miss Sally volunteered. "You know, there's a smart girl, a good girl. Too bad she had to be born back east and Lefty way out west."

"Yea, it's too bad," Jack said. "Lefty's a good boy, too. Shame she has to be so high faluting—all gone on law and order and everything—she and Lefty would have made a good pair, otherwise. I'd just as soon get started if you're through eating."

So we got going and didn't waste much time getting to Salt Creek. We started slow and easy at a walk, just like we were going to town for the mail, but I noticed that the going got faster and faster as we got nearer Salt Creek. Miss Sally was setting the pace, and I guess she got a little more anxious as we got closer. But hell—you couldn't blame her—she'd staked everything on Lefty's word. She'd believed everything he'd told her, she'd agreed to let her kids go for a few more days, and she was bound to get a little anxious about them at the last!

We finally rounded a bend in the canyon, where it ran into Salt Creek, and there, down below us, was Father Antonio's school. Quite a place it was—with its great big main room and its dozen or so smaller rooms in an L on the end. Housed twenty, thirty orphaned kids.

We were so anxious to get inside and find the twins that we didn't notice the uncanny quiet of the place. There wasn't a kid in sight, there wasn't a horse in sight—just that big whitewashed schoolhouse throwing back the sun in our faces as we rode down the canyon.

We were so anxious to get to the twins that we didn't notice a thing—just tied our horses to the hitch rack and busted in to the main schoolroom.

"Where you reckon they are?" Jack Hamlin asked, opening the door for Miss Sally, and we all went in.

"They are down at the far end of the room," a voice behind us said. It was Jeopardy Jones' voice—we'd gone on past him where he stood at the side of the door and he had two six guns covering our backs. "Reach for the rafters, gents. You, too, ma'am."

There wasn't any fooling note in Jeopardy's voice—he meant it and we reached. "It's all right now, Joe," Jeopardy said when he had taken our guns and carefully tied our hands behind us, "you can take the gags out now."

They were all down at the far end of that big schoolroom—the twins, the Philadelphia Filly and Father Antonio. They couldn't have been gagged very long—they were still fresh and full of fight—and the twins let out a yell the minute Joe Wheeler took the gags out of their mouths.

"Hi, Mom! Hi, Pop! Hi, Uncle Hugh! You got here just in time," they yelled the length of that long schoolroom.

"Hi, kids," Jack yelled back at them.

Miss Sally grinned at 'em and didn't say much, either. Just "Hello, boys," that was all, but the way she grinned and the way she said it told the twins not to be afraid and that everything would come out all right just as plain as if she'd spoken the words.

"Don't worry about us, Mom," Little Lefty said; "we ain't been tied up very long, and we won't be. Uncle Lefty'll come and get us."

"Uncle Lefty had better hurry," Joe Wheeler sneered, "for you kids are going to Mexico with us just as quick as we can get the horses and pack a little of Father Antonio's grub. And you won't get off for just fifty thousand this time, Jack Hamlin—this time it's going to cost you."

"No use going to a lot of trouble, boys," Jack told 'em. "Name your figure and I'll give you a check now."

"Thanks, friend," Jeopardy said. "Thanks for nothing. There ain't a bank in the territory that would cash a check for us now. The word's got around—we're wanted men. We'll just take the kids, Hamlin."

"Take me instead," the Philadelphia Filly piped up. "Miss Sally has had enough trouble and she wants her boys. Jack will pay just as much for me as he would for the twins, won't you, Jack?"

"Sure, kid," Jack told her, looking at her kinda in awe, like he'd seen her for the first time. "Don't blame Lefty, at that, I'll swear I don't. Sure, I'll pay all they want for you."

"Lady, you have give us an idea," Jeopardy said. "We'll take you, too! That way we'll have the three of you. Cost you half of what you own before we're through, Jack Hamlin!"

"Ain't there some better way we can settle this thing than what you're planning, Jeopardy?" Sheriff Banks asked. "Look—I can tear up them confessions and smooth things over—you can be sheriff next election just like you wanted and we'll forget all this. Ain't that better than being a hunted man, Jeopardy?"

"Nope, Banks, it won't work," Jeopardy said. "There are too many people on to us. You folks might keep your word—you're all good folks—but Lefty Allen has done jinxed us. He'd get us in the end, so we're leaving with the kids."

"Maybe we could fix it up with Lefty," Jack said. "Maybe we could get him to call off his wolf."

"Nope, it won't work," Jeopardy said. "That guy is just plain bad medicine as far as I am concerned. I sent a man to get him into trouble once, but Lefty just scared hell out of him instead of killing him like I wanted."

"Everybody gets outfigured once in a while," Jack said.

"It wasn't just once in a while," Jeopardy said; "that Lefty Allen outfigured us at every turn, and we ain't having any more. Wheeler framed a bank robbery, he was going to pin it on Lefty, but Lefty outfigured him and robbed the bank himself, and found out that Wheeler was broke. Three Jay hired a kidnapper, and Lefty bought him off and killed Three Jay when Three Jay was supposed to have shot Lefty in the back. Then we hired some jiggers to rustle some Jack-In-The-Box cattle and Lefty got on to 'em somehow, and ran those jiggers out of the country."

"Lefty is in bad with the law himself," Banks horned in. "Maybe we can make a deal with him. Everybody shut up and everybody go free."

"Nope, we ain't having any," Jeopardy repeated. "That Lefty Allen just naturally messed us up. He got in bad with his friends and the law doing it, and he won't rest until he gets it all straightened out again."

"That's right, Jeopardy, that's right, and I'm starting now!" a voice rang out, away down that long schoolroom, at the front door!

"Uncle Lefty, Uncle Lefty," sang out Little Hughie, "look, Uncle Lefty—we cut off our dod-damned curls!"

It was Lefty Allen, all right—bareheaded, streaked with dust and sweat, his face scratched and bleeding in a dozen places where he galloped full blast through catclaw and mesquite.

It was Lefty Allen all right—bloody and dirty and sweaty—but I never saw a handsomer sight in all my life!

JOE WHEELER's mouth popped open at the sight of Lefty Allen, but Jeopardy's instincts were working better. He pulled both guns and started blazing away at Lefty, and Wheeler finally got the idea and cut loose with his pearl-handled forty-four.

Jeopardy's first two shots missed and Jack Hamlin yelled, "Shoot, you damned fool, shoot. Never mind about us!"

But Lefty wouldn't shoot—we were all bunched back of Wheeler and Jeopardy—right in the line of Lefty's fire if he missed either of them, and Lefty wouldn't take the chance of hitting those he had come to save!

Lefty Allen shucked his guns and threw them out a window—paying no more attention to Jeopardy's and Wheeler's bullets than if they had been flies! He just came stalking down that long schoolroom—slow and steady like the Day of Judgment approaching.

The Philadelphia Filly looked like a girl in a trance—watching Lefty, her eyes a-shining with the wonder of it all. There he came, the guy on the white horse, after all—coming to rescue her the way that girls dream about sometimes. Doing it her way, too—he had thrown his guns away and was doing it her way. Yes sir, it was a marvelous sight to see the Philadelphia Filly's eyes, all shining with the wonder of her thoughts.

"You've got to shoot straighter than that, Jeopardy," Lefty said as he stalked on. "You've already wasted two shots—you've only got eight more." Lefty completely ignored Wheeler, figuring that Wheeler's fancy gun just wasn't worth shucks. And it wasn't!

Jeopardy fired again—Three! Four! Five! Six! Seven! Seven times he missed and Jeopardy was losing his nerve fast, but his eighth shot caught Lefty high up in the shoulder and spun him around, but Lefty still came on, slow and steady!

Wheeler's gun was empty now and Jeopardy was plumb

unnerved—he missed his ninth and tenth shots—and threw his guns at Lefty as he moved out to close in with him. Joe Wheeler followed suit, and the two of them came at Lefty!

Lefty Allen with a gun shot in his shoulder, losing blood fast! Lefty fainted at Jeopardy and kicked Wheeler in the chin, the way the French boxers do, and Wheeler went down for a spell, but Lefty was losing blood too fast to last.

Jeopardy closed in on him now—giving Lefty an awful beating—rights and lefts to the head and body, and Lefty was beginning to wilt, when the Philadelphia Filly worked her ropes loose.

The Philadelphia Filly worked her ropes loose and grabbed a hunk of stove wood and went to help her man! You could just see that Boston crust of hers crack all to hell as she waded in!

“Kill ‘em, Lefty, kill ‘em!” she shrieked, and waded in with that hunk of stove wood swinging like a windmill!

Joe Wheeler was just getting up from where Lefty had kicked him, and the Philadelphia Filly let him have it on the side of the head with her hunk of wood, and Wheeler went down to stay a long, long time!

Lefty heard her, and saw her—through the haze that blood loss was spreading over his eyes, and mustered all his strength for one last blow. Starting a swing from the floor Lefty landed an uppercut smack on Jeopardy’s chin, knocking him end over appetite, out like a candle in a windstorm. Lefty looked once at what he had done and collapsed, flat on his face.

The Philadelphia Filly was down on the floor now—holding Lefty, trying to stop the bleeding—just like she was in another world, forgetting all about the rest of us.

“If you’ll stop for just a second,” Miss Sally said, gently, “and untie me I’ll untie the boys and we can get Wheeler and Jeopardy trussed up before they come to.”

It was like bringing the Philadelphia Filly back from another world. The sound of Miss Sally’s voice puzzled

her for a spell—she turned and looked at us, bewildered like and then she remembered where she was. She untied Miss Sally and went back to Lefty.

"You sure poured it on 'em sis," Jack Hamlin said, after he was untied. "You really waded in when you was needed, kid."

"I don't care, they had it coming to them," the Philadelphia Filly said, pleased with herself—like she had learned something as well as done something. "I don't care! I wanted to kill them! If ever two men needed killing it was Jeopardy Jones and Joe Wheeler!"

Lefty was conscious now, and what she said was music to his ears. She understood him now—she knew the need of killing men sometimes. The wall that had been between them was gone! Not a word was spoken between Lefty and the Philadelphia Filly—but they knew! They both knew!

"You weren't ribbing me about that wedding present, were you, Jack?" Lefty asked before he fainted again from loss of blood.

Jack Hamlin wasn't fooling. He gave them the Jack-In-The-Box for a wedding present. Lefty had to go back east and wear a store suit for the wedding, but shucks, he took it like a man. Father Antonio went along and read the ceremony for them.

The Philadelphia Filly hasn't tried to change Lefty much. Oh, she still corrects him when he speaks wrong, and little things like that, but nothing of any consequence.

They still live on the Jack-In-The-Box, the Philadelphia Filly and Lefty Allen. She put in a little fancy plumbing and such, and she still rides Champagne in a flat saddle, but all in all I think she likes the west better than the east.

Funniest damned thing, though—she won't let Lefty stir a step off the place without carrying a gun!

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