

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

10¢

FEBRUARY



TEN FICTION BULL'S EYES

FEATURE NOVEL

● **BLOOD, OIL — AND BULLETS !**

by **BILL JONES**

NOVELETTES

● **RANCH FOR THE DYING**

by **WILLIAM R. COX**

● **LEFT FORK TO HELL**

by **FRANK BONHAM**

● **ROAN**

● **FOX**

● **SCHOENFELD**

● **BLACKBURN**

● **MCINTOSH**

● **MARTIN**

● **SANDS**



EASY WAY...

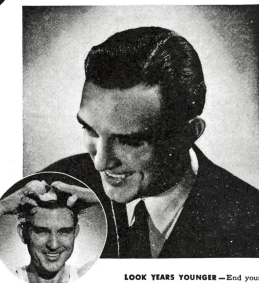
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New Creme Shampoo instantly imparts lovely black color to hair that is STREAKED • DULL • GRAY FADED • GRAYING • AGEING BURNT • LIFELESS

THIS remarkable new creme shampoo discovery, Tintz Creme Shampoo Hair Coloring, lathers and washes out dirt, grease and grime as it *instantly* gives hair a real smooth, Jet Black Tint that fairly glows with life and lustre. Don't put up with gray, faded, dull, burnt, streaked, off-color hair a minute longer. Tintz Creme Shampoo contains genuine Paraphenylenediamine and is a real Instant Hair Coloring. The first application leaves your hair completely tinted; black, lovely, easy to manage. No waiting for results. Colors so smooth and even, experts find it difficult to detect. Won't hurt permanents. Now being specially introduced all over America by mail for only \$1.00.



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Tintz' chemists have at last perfected an amazing new hair coloring method. It is a creme shampoo containing genuine PARAPHENYLENE DIAMINE, the best hair coloring agent known to mankind! Tintz Creme Shampoo Hair Coloring *instantly* colors all gray, streaked, faded hair right in your own home to a natural-like, lasting color that matches and defies detection. Won't wash off or run off. Positively will not affect permanent waves. Leaves hair soft—easy to manage.

CHOICE OF 8 LOVELY SHADES

JET BLACK—BLACK—DARK BROWN
MED. WARM BROWN—MED. DRAB BROWN
LIGHT BROWN—AUBURN (TITIAN)—BLONDE

We want you to try Tintz Creme Shampoo Hair Coloring. We want you to take advantage of this special introductory offer and mail the coupon today. Send no money. On arrival of package, deposit only \$1 plus postage and tax with postman. **READ THE CAUTION**—Use Only as Directed on

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MAIL THIS COUPON TODAY SURE

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Canadian Office: Dept. 978, 22 College Street, Toronto, Ont.
Send one full size tube Tintz Creme Shampoo Hair Coloring in shade checked below. On arrival I will deposit the special introductory offer price of \$1.00 plus 10% tax and postage charges with postman on guarantee I can return the empty tube for any reason within 7 days, and you will refund my \$1 and tax. (If money comes with order, Tintz pays the postage.) ☐ 3 for \$2.50 plus 10% Federal Excise Tax.
☐ Jet Black ☐ Dark Brown ☐ Med. Drab Brown ☐ Auburn (Titian)
☐ Black ☐ Med. Warm Brown ☐ Light Brown ☐ Blonde

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Address
City State

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THAT I CAN MAKE GOOD
MONEY IN RADIO.
I'M GOING TO START
TRAINING FOR RADIO
RIGHT NOW.

NO- NOT ME.
I'M NOT GOING TO WASTE
MY TIME. SUCCESS IS
JUST A MATTER OF
LUCK AND I WASN'T
BORN LUCKY.

**BILL SAID
"YES"**
HE'S MAKING
GOOD MONEY
IN RADIO
NOW



THIS N.R.I. TRAINING
IS GREAT. AND THEY
SENT REAL RADIO
PARTS TO HELP
ME LEARN
QUICKLY

YOU CERTAINLY
KNOW RADIO.
MINE NEVER
SOUNDED
BETTER.

I'VE BEEN STUDYING RADIO
ONLY A FEW MONTHS AND
I'M ALREADY MAKING
GOOD MONEY IN MY SPARE
TIME

THANKS

OH BILL! I'M
SO PROUD OF
YOU. YOU'VE
GONE AHEAD
SO FAST IN
RADIO

YES! I'VE GOT A
GOOD JOB NOW AND
A REAL FUTURE.
THANKS TO
N.R.I. TRAINING

**TOM SAID
"NO"**
HE'S STILL
WAITING
FOR "LUCK"



BILL'S A SAP TO WASTE
HIS TIME STUDYING
RADIO AT HOME



SAME OLD GRIND --
SAME SKINNY PAY
ENVELOPE -- I'M
JUST WHERE I
WAS FIVE YEARS
AGO

GUESS I'M A
FAILURE.
LOOKS LIKE
I'LL NEVER
GET ANYWHERE

YOU'LL ALWAYS BE
A FAILURE, TOM,
UNLESS YOU DO SOME
THING ABOUT IT.
WISHING AND WAITING
WON'T GET YOU
ANYWHERE



I will Train You at Home in Spare Time for a GOOD JOB IN RADIO

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National Radio Institute
Established 25 Years

Here is a quick way to more pay. Radio offers the chance to make \$5, \$10 a week extra in spare time a few months from now. There is an increasing demand for full time Radio Technicians and Radio Operators, too. Many make \$30, \$40, \$50 a week. On top of record business, the Radio Industry is getting millions and millions of dollars in Defense Orders. Clip the coupon below and mail it. Find out how I train you for these opportunities.

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able practical experience. You also get a modern Professional Radio Servicing Instrument. My fifty-fifty method—half working with Radio parts, half studying my lesson texts—makes learning Radio at home interesting, fascinating, practical.

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Mail the coupon below. I'll send my 64-page book FREE. It tells about my Course; the types of jobs in the different branches of Radio; shows letters from more than 100 of the men I trained so you can see what they are doing, earning. MAIL THE COUPON in an envelope or paste on a penny postal.

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Dept. 2889, National Radio Institute
Washington, D. C.

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National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

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10 FICTION BULL'S EYES IN EVERY ISSUE

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

NEXT ISSUE
ON SALE
FEBRUARY 11TH

VOLUME XVII

FEBRUARY, 1942

NUMBER 3

1—Complete Novel—1

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Somewhere in the earth, between Mexico and China, there had to be oil! And Dellson vowed he would get it—even though victory meant a cell in a far-off Texas pen!

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- TERROR OF THE RIO GRANDE**.....Ralph C. Schoenfeld 59
Ranger Hughes left a bloody trail across the pages of Texas history and helped build the state to greatness—with fists and guns and guts!
- GUN-WHELP'S HERITAGE**.....Frank MacIntosh 63
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- NO-GUN LAW**.....Mark Martin 68
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Western Feature

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THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU



AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!

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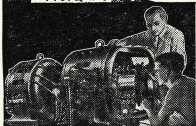


H. C. Lewis

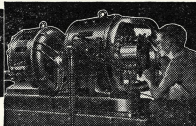
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QUICK EASY WAY ELECTRICITY IN 12 WEEKS

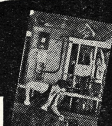
by Actual SHOP WORK **NOT BOOKS**



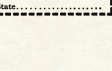
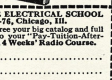
FIRST—You are told and shown how to do it.



THEN—You do the job yourself.



HOUSE WIRING
only one of the many
branches you
"Learn By Doing."



DOES YOUR PRESENT JOB QUALIFY UNDER THESE 4 IMPORTANT RULES?

Don't be fooled by a "mere job." Does your present job offer you a permanent job and a future in good times or bad times? If it doesn't... If it is just a "job" because conditions are good today... It may not be a job when conditions slacken up again.

You should take an inventory of your prospects now—

Ask yourself these 4 important questions—
No. 1.—Does the field I'm in today offer me a permanent job and a future regardless of good or bad times?—No. 2.—Is the field I'm in a permanent one?—No. 3.—Is it growing and will it continue to grow in the years ahead?—No. 4.—Is it a field that will always exist?

If it doesn't qualify under these 4 rules, now is the time to do something about it.

Electricity is a fast growing field. It qualifies under all these rules. It offers you your opportunity— if you will get ready for it.

Here at my school in Chicago, the world's Electrical Center, you can get 12 weeks' Shop Training in **ELECTRICITY** and an extra 4 weeks' Course in **Radio**. Here at Coyne you "Learn By Doing."

You will be trained on actual equipment and machinery and because of our method of training, you don't need previous experience or a lot of education. You do actual work on electrical machinery.

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First the instructors tell you how a thing should be done—then they show you how it should be done—then you do the actual work yourself.

AN EXTRA
4 WEEKS
COURSE IN
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I'LL FINANCE YOUR TRAINING

You can get this training first—then you can pay for it later in easy monthly payments, starting 60 days after your 12 weeks' training period is over—then you have 12 months to complete your payments. If you need part time work to help out with expenses while training in my shops, my employment department will help you get it. Then after graduation this department will give you valuable lifetime employment service.

Send the coupon today for all details. When I get it I'll send you my big free book containing dozens of pictures of students at work in

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WHY NOT EASTERN?

WHY *Western*? Why not *10 Story Southern*—or *Northern*, or *Eastern*? There's glamour and adventure and drama aplenty in the North, East, and South. Each section of the nation has a vast store of fiction material, of its own kind. In all fairness, it might seem that the thinly populated West gets more than its share of attention.

Why don't the Chambers of Commerce do something about it? They could start bearing down on their State Legislatures and get a few laws passed. They could write in and say, "Now look here, you gents ain't tending to your business. Of course the West is a fine, upstanding part of the country, but what's the trouble with the East (or South or North, as the case might be)? Ain't we in the East got no pride? Why don't you get some smart publisher to put out an Eastern Stories Magazine that will make the West sit up and take notice? Why don't you, huh?"

Those are what the grammarian people call rhetorical questions. Which means that we're not fooling anyone, least of all ourselves. Because everyone knows that there's no such thing as sectional pride when it comes to choice of exciting adventure fiction. And, as for stories of the West, they belong not to the West but to all America—and to all the English-speaking world.

A lot has been said and written about the courage and straight-shooting honor of the Western pioneers. And their noble sacrifices and hardy, untiring drive toward whatever goal they may have set themselves. Their gallantry toward women and their quick, gun-flaming resentment to an insult. All that is a large part of the picture. But there is something else, another angle that hasn't been talked of so widely, that had a great deal to do with molding the Western character into a vast treasure house of fiction—to capture the imagination of the world.

And that is the land itself. It is a world apart. Even today, with swift, stream-lined trains spanning its mighty rivers, roaring over its waterless deserts, tunneling its unscalable mountains, and with automobile highways lacing its length and breadth, it is a challenging, untamed and untamable land of mystery—and adventure. It is the unknown and unknowable.

Steel rails and concrete pavements have changed it only a trifle. Today a man can go West without arduous, danger-fraught months on the trail, it is true. But once he gets to his destination, whether in the shade of some pine-clad pinnacle or the sweltering glare of the desert, he hasn't really scratched the surface of the West. Let him go back country a ways, away from the railstop or roadside town, if he wants a glimpse of the real West.

Then he will know how remote it is. Let him keep on going, plodding over hundreds of arid, searing miles; climbing those shadowed mountain sides; exploring gulches for a sign of gold; fording flooded rivers; accepting vittals at chuck-wagons along the way and gathering firewood in return; breaking a bronc for one man, riding fence for another. Let him do all these, and the thousand and one other things that are warp and woof of the West. Let him spend a lifetime at it, and he may begin to have a feel of the pulse of that great, unconquerable, unchangeable land.

In a flat, colorless, predictable land, few great traditions are born. Its conquest is easy. But it takes hardships to make heroes. Also, it takes an inaccessible, remote, up-and-down country like the West to resist the leveling influences of spreading civilization. There, the law cannot reach easily; there, men are free, answerable only to themselves and their power in getting what they want.

It will always be a setting for dashing adventure, thrilling drama. And, in its infinite variety, it will always make good story material.

Here is a picture of one corner of the West that will never be tamed, a forgotten corner of hell where a man can lose himself—or find himself:

Afternoon heat waves hung in still clouds below the rims. The hot, barren walls stretched up at every hand, endlessly eroded and many-

(Continued on page 8)

BILL, YOU SURE HAVE A SWELL BUILD! DID YOU TRAIN FOR A LONG TIME?

ABSOLUTELY NOT! THE ATLAS DYNAMIC TENSION SYSTEM MAKES MUSCLES GROW FAST!

Here's the Kind of MEN I Build!

Charles Atlas

an actual, untouched photo of Charles Atlas, holder of the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."



J. G. O'BRIEN
Atlas Champion
Cup Winner
This is an extraordinary snapshot of one of Charles Atlas' Californian pupils.

Will You Let Me PROVE I Can Make YOU a New Man?

MEN—Meet J. G. O'Brien, of California, one of my Silver Cup Winners! Look at that strong neck—those broad, handsome, perfectly proportioned shoulders—that muscled chest and stomach. Read what he says: "Look at me NOW! 'Dynamic Tension' WORKS! I'm proud of the natural, easy way you have made me an 'Atlas Champion!'"

I was once a skinny weakling of 97 lbs. I didn't know what real health or strength were. I was afraid to fight, ashamed to be seen in a swimming suit.

Then I discovered the secret that changed me into "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man," the title I won against all comers. My secret is "Dynamic Tension." It is a natural method. Its purpose is not only to give you the powerful, rippling muscles you'd like to see in your own mirror, but also—for those whose systems are sluggish for lack of proper exercise—to help them tone up their entire body, inside and out.

ONLY 15 MINUTES A DAY

Do you want big, broad shoulders—a fine, powerful chest—biceps like steel—arms and legs rippling with muscular strength—a stomach ridged with bands of sinewy muscle—and a build you can be proud of? Then just give me the opportunity to prove that "Dynamic Tension" is what you need.

No "ifs," "ands," or "maybes." Just tell me where you want handsome, powerful muscles. Are you fat and flabby? Or skinny and gawky? Are you short-winded, peepless? Do you hold back and let others walk off with the prettiest girls, best jobs, etc.? Then write for details about "Dynamic Tension" and learn how I can make you a healthy, confident, powerful HE-MAN.

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Mail the coupon right now for full details and I'll send you my illustrated book, "Everlasting Health and Strength." Tells all about my "Dynamic Tension" method. Shows actual photos of men I've made into Atlas Champions. It's a valuable book! And it's FREE. Send for your copy today. Mail the coupon to me personally, CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 88P, 115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.



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I want the proof that your system of "Dynamic Tension" will help make me a New Man—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your FREE book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

Name (Please print or write plainly)
Address
City State

(Continued from page 6)

colored, deep-bitten into what had once been a great tableland as flat as a floor, save for the rise of a granite peak here and there, thrust like fantastic cones reaching high into the blistering sky above a world of mystery and sullen silence.

It was the forbidden land, as stark and grim as the smile of death. Here the lone lobos prowled, the rattlesnakes and lizards crawled. A bird came plummeting out of the sky now and then, to wheel back into it. After great intervals one saw a wild bull or steer go charging through an occasional cluster of sage and dwarfed bushes, like a brush-popping ghost on the move. Only God knew where to find the water holes.

There's one place in the world that those two paragraphs could apply to: the Black Hills along the upper reaches of the Missouri drainage country, the Bad Lands. The above is quoted from a novel by Tom Roan, who was born and raised not far from that wild setting that he describes. The story is to be published in next month's *10 Story Western*. We'd like to borrow a few more paragraphs to give a picture of the sort of man that country produces:

All day long Sheriff Jim Cloud had been following the lone trail of a man afoot. A man on horseback following one on foot could soon overtake him—if the one on the horse was fool enough to try it. Yellowstone Jim Cloud had been too well schooled in the art of tracking down badmen for that. The man ahead always held the advantage.

His footweary man ahead had shot a rabbit. A sprinkling of fur and blood on the ground had told that tale, and the dead rabbit now had its own part to play in this grim stalking. The bandit would stop somewhere to cook it, probably at the first water hole, and there the law would ease into the picture.

A rifle shot rang out, ahead. Moving on quietly, Cloud came to a bend in the wall at his right. Leaving his horse behind him a few yards, he slithered forward with his back to the wall. A wider little valley among the eroded walls showed ahead of him. Its rim began at the foot of a sharp slope. As if it had been a long time since he had seen such a sight, his eyes widened as he saw the tall old willows around a big pool of deep blue water.

The man he had been trailing lay between him and the pool. He was a good seventy feet from the water, a short, broad-shouldered man in gray. Flat on his face, battered gray hat to his right, and his rifle and the dead rabbit to his left, he lay with his heavy arms thrust ahead of him and his fingers clutched into the short clumps of buffalo grass growing out of the dry sand and soft shale above the pool.

Cloud studied the walls of the valley, noting that they were deep-gashed in many places where the shot could have come from. Then, to his amazement, he saw a girl move forward from a gash-like opening ahead and to his right. A pinto mare trailed her with the reins flipped back over the horn of the saddle. She was a tall girl. The sunlight in her hair made it look like shining silver. She wore a leather skirt, high-heeled boots and a wide-brimmed white hat on the back of her head. A six-shooter with a mother-of-pearl butt hung at her right hip. Cradled across her arm was a long rifle.

"The killer coming to see her kill!"

That was Cloud's first thought, and then it came to him that the girl was not walking exactly toward the dead man. He saw her stop, and stand there looking down into a little depression in the earth.

His horse snorted behind him, at the delay, and impatiently came on up to him. There was nothing to do but slip quickly into his saddle and go forward.

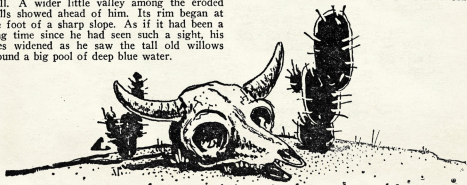
The girl had looked up at the sounds of the hoofs. Cloud saw her move backward to her pinto, and noted with narrowed eyes that the muzzle of the rifle was toward him. She kept the rifle in that position until he passed the dead man and pulled rein in front of her.

"Howdy," he nodded, slipping carefully out of his saddle. "You must be a mighty good shot."

"I am!" she answered flatly. Her eyes were big and blue, fearless eyes looking unflinchingly into his own from a face so unusually fair and pretty it might have belonged to a saint. "I got him on the run."

A surprising land—and surprising people. They don't come like that in the North, East, or South—or anywhere else in the world.

THE EDITOR.





To the man who wants to enjoy
an ACCOUNTANT'S CAREER

IF you're that man, here's something that will interest you.

Not a magic formula—not a get-rich-quick scheme—but something more substantial, more practical.

Of course, you need something more than just the desire to be an accountant. You've got to pay the price—be willing to study earnestly, thoroughly.

Still, wouldn't it be worth your while to sacrifice some of your leisure in favor of interesting home study—over a comparatively brief period in your life? Always provided that the rewards were good—a salary of \$2,000 to \$10,000?

An accountant's duties are interesting, varied and of real worth to his employers. He has *standing*!

Do you feel that such things aren't for you? Well, don't be too sure. Very possibly they *can* be!

Why not, like so many before you, investigate LaSalle's modern Problem Method of training for an accountancy position?

Just suppose you were permitted to work in a large accounting house under the personal supervision of an expert accountant. Suppose, with his aid, you studied accounting principles and solved problems day by day—easy ones at first—then the more difficult ones. If you could do this—and if you could turn to him for advice as the problems became complex—soon you'd master them all.

That's the training you follow in principle under the LaSalle Problem Method.

You cover accountancy from the basic Principles right up through Accountancy Systems and Income Tax Procedure. Then you add C. P. A. Training and prepare for the C. P. A. examinations.

As you go along, you absorb the principles of Auditing, Cost Accounting, Business Law, Statistical Control, Organization, Management and Finance.

Your progress is as speedy as you care to make it—depending on your own eagerness to learn and the time you spend in study.

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BLOOD, OIL— AND BULLETS!

A Western action novel

By Bill Jones



Driller Stake Dellson vowed he'd bring that gusher to roaring, thunderous life, though he knew full well that failure meant death before a Border robber chieftain's firing squad—and victory a cell in a far-off Texas pen!



His face felt stiff with strain as that solid torrent of flying oil hit the first group of riders.

CHAPTER ONE

"This Is My Town."

A LONG the still, hushed length of Concho Street four men moved forward to the kill. Leaning languidly against a store-front, all alone, Stake Dellson waited for them. Most of the stores in Morales

town were closed. Shopkeepers—and citizens—realized that in the looming fight one man would battle four. But they weren't taking chips in this game. That lone man was just a Ranger; let him take what was coming to him.

Trouble was, Stake thought wryly, he wasn't a Ranger. He stared earnestly at a scrap of paper blowing along the street. There wasn't any blamed reason at all why he should be in this fix. But now that he was in it he wouldn't back down or let anyone bluff him out. That was his code—about all the code he had left.

The four men were spread out, one on each boardwalk and two strolling down the middle of the street in an innocent amble. But the way they came, slow and quiet, with their hands poised near their guns, told the whole story. Stake had seen this thing too many times to mistake it now.

A white face appeared in the doorway of the store across the street, stared out at him for perhaps five seconds, then disappeared. Stake caught the faint smell of street dust and the fragrance of *enchiladas*. He stood relaxed, watching idly. At the last moment he moved clear of the building and swung half around to face the advancing men.

They stopped immediately. The raw-boned man nearest him on the walk said easily, "You had an hour to leave town, friend. You ain't gone."

"No," Stake drawled. "No, *pelado*. I ain't gone."

The hard, sharp edge to his tone stopped them for a second. Nervous as he was, he sensed at once his momentary advantage.

The door of the store across the street opened with a bang. A Mexican boy, face hidden under a huge sombrero, came out, carrying a big box and walking straight toward Stake. The picture changed instantly. The gunmen looked once at the boy, then swung back on Stake. But now they seemed undecided, not quite so sure of themselves.

"*Carramba!*" One gun-swift grated. Stake sensed shock in the man's tone, and risked one stabbing glance at the boy with the box. What he saw sent quick triumph through him, stirring him with rich, heady excitement.

On the box, in glaring letters of red were the words:

**NITROGLYCERINE DRUMS.
EXPLOSIVE! HANDLE WITH CARE!**

The boy stopped just two steps in front of Dellson. "They haven't got the guts, mister," he whispered. "Make 'em eat dirt. Then follow me back across the street."

Stake felt another jolt—for the soft-voiced words were spoken in perfect English!

The fight had seeped out of the leading gunman at sight of those stark letters. His eyes shifted again to the boxed death. Stake grinned.

"Yes, friend," he said. "You got any more words with me?"

"I think it's a bluff," a gunman said. "Jest a crazy Mex kid."

"Move on, *hombrecito*," Stake murmured, his eyes never leaving the leading gunman's face. "I'll be just a step behind you."

The boy walked back across the street, and Stake went with him. On the farther walk he nudged the kid inside the store. Stake stood outside the door.

"You've lost your toughness, friend," he called to the four would-be killers. "You don't know who's inside this door, do you? Want to take a try?"

The hired executioners had halted in the middle of the dusty street. They had a job to do, but a box of dynamite was in that store—and they weren't exactly certain who or what else.



THE peon grabbed Stake Dellson's hand and pulled him into the store's interior. Moving past the dim shelves of merchandise, he felt tension easing out of him, felt the bubbling rise of humor at what had happened. He saw a door open; a moment later they stepped into a lighted room.

"Thanks, friend. That was a tight—" Dellson broke off in the middle of the sentence. A bandaged man lay on a bed, looking at him—and the pale, taut face almost turned Stake's stomach.

This couldn't be Garson Landing!

Without stirring a muscle, Stake looked into the man's eyes.

"He's got courage, Ben." The peon addressed the man on the bed. "If he can run a rotary table, I think he'll do."

Stake didn't savvy. He took a short step sideways, pressed his back against the wall. The peon had said Ben—not Garson. Now Dellson saw it wasn't Garson. The sick hombre had the face of a boy—almost. The young face was filled with pain, and a determination to fight that pain.

"Good," Ben said huskily. "Bring him closer."

A figure moved in the shadows, helping Ben sit up on his pillows. The newcomer was a mature man, with the steady blank face and straight bearing of a trained gunman. This hombre, Stake knew, was a person to fear, and he watched him covertly.

"He's the fellow for the job, Ben," the older man said. "Stake Dellson. That's the name he gives. He's tough—and we'll need a tough man."

Ben nodded agreement. "Lynn"—he motioned to the peon—"saved your life just now." His eyes were hard and steady in spite of the pain. "But forget that. We had our reasons. Luke, here, says you're a driller, and we have a job for you. Fighting pay. You want to work?"

At the name Lynn, Stake had half-turned, and the peon looked up at him, pulling off the heavy hat. Brown, steady eyes in a slim, oval face met his—a girl's face! Now Stake's memories of another woman's face, just like this, turned him ice-cold with repressed emotion. The girl, watching him, had a tiny smile at the corners of her lips. "Dreaming, stranger?" she murmured. "Or do you want the job?"

Stake withdrew his eyes, tried to rid himself of the shock Lynn had given him. There was a pattern in the lives of men, he knew. And that pattern seemed to have been weaving its dark way in his life, right to this moment. But he had to be sure.

"Kind of sudden," he observed to the room at large. "What outfit is this?"

"Landing Drilling Company," Lynn said quietly. "It's a wildcat job . . . and on a shoestring."

"Landing?" Stake tried to make his voice casual. "Since when did Landing Drilling git down to a shoestring? Last I heard, it was a big outfit."

"That was when Garson Landing ran it," Ben said bitterly, his eyes on Stake. "Dad . . . he got killed last year. I haven't done so good since. This time, though, we got a well."

Stake was silent for a moment. He was remembering what a little man named Whiskey Tanners had told him, a week ago. *There's a job in Morales, below the border, for you, Stake. I think you'd like it.* Whiskey had sent him here, deliberately. Stake figured Whiskey had some explaining to do, later.

"I see," he said, woodenly. "Where's your well?"



"**S**HAKE with Luke White," Lynn said, indicating the dour gunman in the shadows. "Blamed good roughneck, Luke is. He'll show you the well, ten miles south of here, in the *brasada*. But unless we get it down in six weeks, it goes back to Ladro O'Blaine, the local *jefe*. A friend of yours."

"Yeah," Stake drawled absently, remembering the smooth, blue-eyed man who had ordered him out of town an hour ago. Ladro O'Blaine was a dope-smuggler—and plenty other things. He was a *malo hombre*, slick and dangerous as a snake.

Stake grinned. "Yeah. Him and me are real chummy."

The girl put down her nitro box and sat soberly on it. "Well, one of his boys shot Ben on the job a month ago," she explained. "We found out since what O'Blaine is—and that he lets nobody go in that country, to spy on his dope-running route. He found out we had that lease, and he shot the Mexican that owned it. He's bad."

"Where do I come in?" Stake asked.

"I'm O'Blaine's spy," Luke White said bluntly. "He figgered you was a Ranger. Seein' I knew you was a driller, I figgered we could use you. I seen you some place before, Dellson, whilst I was roughneckin' around."

Stake stiffened. If this big hairpin had

seen him, what more did he know? About a time in Texas, for example. . . .

"Our shirt's in this pot," the girl broke in, "and you can nearly name your own pay, mister."

Stake's eyes left Luke White's and swiveled to Lynn's. "Lady," he said bluntly, "this is Mexico, see? Four thousand feet to oil, then prob'ly no oil. Every *bandido* takes a shot at you fer luck, with no law to stop 'em. You can't get supplies hauled in. And if you had a crew, you couldn't pay 'em."

She was watching him, a sour little line between her eyes. "And if we could, they might not live to spend it."

That honesty of hers almost decided him. Dellson was an honest man and he liked honest people. But he was remembering Mother Landing. The one woman who had been kind to a renegade kid; who had been like a mother to him. Mother Landing was dead.

"Well?" Lynn asked, measuring him with her eyes. "What do you say, mister?"

"I reckon I'll set in," he said softly. He would pay at least one debt to Mother Landing . . . unless someone found out who he was. "We'll settle the pay when the job is done." He grinned. "That should be—"

He broke off, listening. Steps sounded out in front of the store; Stake came up onto his feet at once. In that single gesture he was all iron again, the poised fighter. Driving his glance once around the room, he caught up the nitro box.

"They're coming in," he said drily. "I'm the jinx on this deal, so I'll pull out. Lady, change them trousers for a dress. Me and the Mex boy came through here, flashed a badge on you, and went out back. If trouble starts, I won't be far away."

From inside the store, a voice called calmly, "Señor Landing. It is I, Ladro O'Blaine. May I come in?"

Lynn Landing smiled at Stake and stepped behind a curtain. Swift and silent, he went out the back door, the box in his hand, leaving the door an inch ajar. His eyes swept the buildings about him.

He stood in a shallow bay, formed by the shortness of this building. The rutted alleyway ran at its end, flanked beyond by a solid row of adobes, leaving only the

open ends—which would be blocked by men, waiting for him. He stood here for ten seconds, wondering if this shabby alley was to be his graveyard. For every man like him, he had learned long ago, there came such a time and place. In him, the glory and the joy of battle had died years ago, leaving only a vast, unsatisfied yearning for the ways of peace.

He heard O'Blaine say, inside the house, "You are alone? No doubt you saw two men pass through here, my friends?"

Stake looked past the almost closed door and got a narrow view of the room. A small, dapper man was smoking a cigarette and looking idly around. This dark-skinned, suave O'Blaine looked what he was—a border captain, certain of his power and not proud of it, but only using it to serve his ends. Stake couldn't see Lynn, but her voice came clearly to him. "Two men? Why do you ask, Señor O'Blaine?"

O'Blaine turned toward her voice, and his injured pride showed in his face. He was half Irish, half Mexican, this little man, and sensitive of it. Her calling him señor was a deliberate insult. "I had thought they needed help, Miss Landing," he answered smoothly. "Certain ruffians were after them. This is my town, and I wish no one injured here."

"They went through here, out the back way," Luke said, and Stake wondered if the big man wanted O'Blaine to catch him. He did not believe for a second that Luke White was no more than a friend to Ben and Lynn. "A big, tough, white man, and he flashed a Ranger's badge on us," Luke said. "A Mex kid was with him."

"Thank you." O'Blaine turned toward the door behind which Dellson stood. "I will go find them." As he turned, Stake saw two gunmen, beside him, coming this way. His pulse quickened.

Ben said, "O'Blaine, I want to talk to you."

◆ ◆ ◆

O'BLAINE turned at once to Ben, and Stake knew the man was too shrewd to want to be on hand when a Ranger died. He was only a stopper in this bottle of death—his men would be waiting at the ends of the alley to make the kill.

"I'm drilling my well in the *brasada*, right away," Ben said. "What do you think of the idea?"

O'Blaine shrugged, his face blank. "Very dangerous, as I told you before," he said softly. "Bad men use that country. I don't think you will ever finish a well there."

The warning in his tone was too plain to be missed. Stake slid away from the door, thinking the situation over. This little bay was only temporary refuge. When he tried to go out either of the alleys it would happen. He grinned as his eyes measured the adobes across the alley. They were buildings of one story, but impossibly high for a man to scale. And therefore, perhaps they would not be guarded.

way, kid! Go over them front buildings! They got you covered here!"

He was laughing softly to himself as he wriggled along the roof. They'd never find that mythical Mex kid—but they'd never be sure there wasn't any such boy. He finished his run across the roof standing straight up, and when he glanced off he almost yelled his relief. Six saddled horses were dozing at the hitchrail, just ten feet below him. He came off the wall like a flash of light, hit the ground. A moment later he had a horse.

Seconds later, as gunmen raced into the street on foot, Stake was spurring his stolen horse out into the *brasada*. There was a big job to do. And he would have no reward except his one bright memory of a woman who had been kind to him.

The author of this swift, colorful epic of the Mexican oil fields has another gripping novel in March NEW WESTERN. If you like Bill Jones' hard-hitting Western stories, be sure to read his great drama of frontier outcasts, "Renegades Can Die For Glory!" Now on sale!

The dynamite box in his hand, he crouched like a sprinter about to take off. He leaped forward, getting a driving run before he cleared the buildings. The split second he dived into the exposed length of the alley, a gun hammered and a slug screamed, sickeningly close. That man could shoot!

Stake raced for the adobe walls. Without a wasted motion, he set down his box. Then, with the echo of another shot ringing out, he crouched, stepped up onto the box in a little rush and sprang straight upward into space!

The roof seemed too high. His clawing fingers stretched their fullest limit—and one hand barely hooked the edge! He hung there for a split second, then got the other hand over and hauled himself upward.

A bullet went *spann-ang* just under his chin, screaming with deafening force off the adobe. He threw up a leg, scrambling in a desperate, driving haste—got the leg over and fell flat on top.

His chest was sucking air in gasps, but he yelled down hoarsely, "Go the other

CHAPTER TWO

"It Don't Show No Oil!"

SUNLIGHT streamed down through the tangled, thorny branches of a stunted mesquite, flashing back the dull sheen of metal. As two riders came up the little valley, Stake sat up from where he was sprawled in the saddle of the big, pot-bellied boiler, watching them come with a faint smile on his face. Then he lay back down again, relaxing in the shade.

The hoofbeats came up close and stopped. He heard Lynn say, with disappointment in her voice, "He isn't here, Luke. He couldn't find the place."

"Find it hell," Luke growled. "That hombre's lit a shuck for Sonora, Lynn. Bit off more'n he could chaw."

"He *will* come. He's the kind of man you can depend on." Lynn's earnestness gave Stake a pleasant glow. "I just know it, Luke!"

Stake crawled up from where he was hidden. "Takes a long time to git a crew

around here," he grinned. "Done got location laid, managed three teams to move the rig—an' you two just showin' up. Blazes alive, let's git to work!"

Under a battered sombrero Lynn's face went faintly indignant, but her eyes belied her chagrin. "Mister," she accused, "you were just plain eaves-dropping. And you had us worried sick."

Stake moved to her stirrup, looking up into her eyes. "That's mighty fine," he said soberly. "Nobody's worried about me in a coon's age."

He led the two of them up the slope, pointing to a rough outcropping of up-thrust stones. "There's your formation, ma'am." He put a foot on it. "A nice salt-dome down there somewhere. This is the place to drill—only we don't drill here."

"Why not?" she asked quickly. "Ten feet away might miss it completely."

"Up yonder!" Stake pointed to the steep bluff that rose steeply above them. "There's where we build our derrick. We'll have to pump our water from down here—but it's our only way."

"Why?" Luke asked thoughtfully. Then: "There ain't a sign of formation up there. Ben picked the spot you're standing on to drill. He'll bust a gut if you change it."

"You want to get killed, Luke?" Stake said suddenly, looking squarely into the older man's eyes. "We drill here, and O'Blaine's men will shoot at us from that slope, or down the valley—ever'where. That hill's a natural fort—and this is a heathen land!"

"But—" Lynn's face was puzzled.

"We," Dellson cut in, "will drill down about three thousand, then drill off on a bias, shooting down this way to hit our pool. Why was Ben shot? Because he was right down here where we're standing; that hill's the only way we can do it."

"Risky," Luke drawled.

"But not as risky as a bullet." Stake's tone killed any more argument. "Thanks be you got a steel derrick. Luke, you git on back to town and pick up some Mexes. Tell 'em it's to steal cattle or trap lions—anything. But get 'em here. I'll see their work after that. Git Ben a Mex nurse; he's safe there in town. Tell no-

body nothing, and hustle. Lynn, you and me are going to move this rig."

"Alone?" she gasped faintly. "That's a six-man job!"

"Don't ask questions," he ordered. "We got a big job to do. Six weeks—and we ought to have three months. Come on, lady. You're head roustabout on this job, startin' now."



LUKE rode off, and Stake and Lynn went to work. Stake had three teams, bought the night before from a Mexican ranchero. With Lynn standing guard up on the peak, he blocked up the boiler on peeled cedar rollers, using the huge Stilson jacks to lift one side at a time. Hitching his teams tandem, he pulled the boiler a foot at a time up the steep slope.

Stripped to the waist, under a broiling sun, he smoothed his dragpath systematically, making a kind of road up the talus, running back and forth to carry his crude rollers from the rear of the boiler, as they rolled from under it, up to the front again. That job alone took him half a day.

By nightfall he had the slush pump and the engine moved up on location. Lynn grinned up at him when he came to their tiny campfire, eyeing his bare, blocky-musled chest and shoulders.

"Stake," she said, "I apologize. You're a six-man crew all by yourself. Come on; we have coffee and fried rabbit, and we act like we like it. Chuck's on, you human work horse."

Rolled in blankets borrowed from Luke, Stake looked at the stars a long time before he went to sleep. His work was done . . . Lynn slept near him, an arm curled under her head. He had to admit he was more contented than he'd been in many a rowdy, dangerous month. Maybe, he decided drowsily, he might let Whiskey Tanners get away with his life, after all.

Luke showed up before noon the next day with four Mexicans. Dellson put the gunman and two of the crew to work jointing the steel derrick together, and used one to drive his teams. With a crew under him, he turned into a boss who was at once driving and good-natured. He loved work, exulted in the feel of his great

strength under a joint of pipe or on the end of a forty-eight wrench. His workers caught the contagion and went at it with a will.

They sank foundations, and the derrick went up like a giant, raw skeleton against the sky. Atop the high bluff, it gave him a wide view of the rough, broken country around them. He and Luke did the sky-work, keeping the hired help down on the ground to hitch on the steel cross-arms and haul them up to the two wrenchmen. But Stake kept his eyes on the wooded draws and slopes that wrinkled the earth in every direction. He was expecting an attack. Ladro O'Blaine, with a fortune and his dope-smuggling racket at stake, was not going to allow this work to go on in peace.

The first trouble came when the derrick was nearly done. A Mexican rider drifted into camp one night, rolled his bed apart, and said almost nothing. But with morning, every Mexican hand was gone!

When they discovered this, the next morning, Luke looked dourly at Dellson. Stake grinned. "Good," he snapped. "What if they'd stayed and asked fer pay? I'm new derrick-man. Git that steel comin' to me, Luke—we're goin' straight to Heaven!"

"Or Hell," Luke said slowly. Then the two went at it alone. A hundred feet high, working a heavy steel girder into place, Stake hung on with fingernails and teeth, scrambling along a cross-arm and balancing like a tight-rope walker. But it was worth the killing effort and the risk, when he came down and saw the strain lines ease out of Lynn's lips.

"Relax, honey," he drawled easily. "I got stickum on my feet. When I go to work, the law of gravity don't apply no more. Let's eat!"

The work went merrily along, with them joking and laughing about their difficulties. But always Stake felt the growing tension. Five weeks to go, and they still had to get the well drilled. Several times he caught Luke looking at him with an unreadable expression in his agate eyes. The man knew a hell of a lot more than he was saying, and Stake never got the nerve to ask him where he had known Stake Dellson before. The fact that Luke

never mentioned it made him more suspicious. One night, getting up to take a check-up of camp, he found Luke's blankets empty. But next morning Luke was in them as usual.



SEVEN years before, Jim Nelson had been just an orphan kid, living on the streets of Spindletop, Texas. Without even the memory of a home, he was only another starving waif, till Mother Landing had taken him off the streets. Her own two children had been in the East, in lady-and-gentleman schools—far away from the rough oil camps that Garson Landing had made a fortune in. She sent Jim to school, planned for him to become a geologist. For her, he studied rocks with eager enthusiasm. She was . . . well, she was mother.

One night a roll of money vanished. Garson Landing, who hardly noticed the kid around, because Jim stayed from underfoot when the big boss-contractor roared into the house with gangs of men and stormed away again to drill another well; Garson accused the kid, and had Jim thrown in jail. Jim had ripped that can wide open; and he'd had to shoot a deputy to do it. So, ever after, he had been Stake Dellson, wanted outlaw—a renegade and outcast, accused of robbery and armed assault on an officer. Those two counts would bring him fifteen years in Texas prisons—if they caught him.

Stake knew he'd ridden some rough trails since then, but always the memory of frail little Mother Landing, dead four years ago, had kept him from doing anything that would have shamed her.

"We'll spud 'er in," he grinned at Luke. "Folks, we got the rifle made; nothin' now but four thousand feet of rock between us and glory!"

Luke grunted, stoking wood under the boiler. They took shovels to start the hole, got down twenty feet and started a bit and jerk-line to going. At two hundred feet, they ran in twenty-four inch casing and rigged the rotary table. Then he and Luke kept ranging down the slope, gathering wood for the boiler during a run. To pull string, Stake had to work the engines and use the pipe tongs, while Luke

worked up on the crow's nest. Lynn filled in, with the coolness of a man, and the three of them did the work of ten.

It was killing toil. They ran night and day, putting flares in the derrick and cat-napping during a run. Like any seasoned driller, Stake could wake up with a start when the tempo of the motors changed for a second. All three grew thin and taut with the strain. But they grinned at fatigue, for it was just a part of wild-catting and shoestring prospecting for oil—the lure of which drew men on like a madness.

What did hurt, and made them edgy and wire-tight, was the constant anticipation of attack and their inability to know what O'Blaine was planning. One day, shortly after dawn, the thin *spat* of a distant rifle sounded, and a bullet missed Stake by an inch. Riders slunk along the hilltops, vanishing like smoke. O'Blaine was simply wearing them down. He was a powerful, ruthless man, in a strange land without law, where he held all the aces. It was a tough set-up.



ONE morning Ben rode up to the job, a thin, pale ghost who couldn't be kept away from the well. Schooling and soft Eastern ways hadn't taken the oil-fever out of this boy's blood. He was Garson Landing all over again, with something of his mother's fineness in his nature besides. Stake was always seeing something in the boy, or in Lynn, that would make his skin tingle—some little gesture of Mother Landing's, or some likeness to her. These two, Stake soon found, were kids worth fighting for.

Time raced away. Their water ran low and Ben had to haul the stuff up the dangerous slope from a distant stream, until Stake rigged up a half mile of pipe and a suction pump, just before the boy collapsed of exhaustion.

At two thousand feet, Luke got a string of tools snagged in the hole, and they had a fishing job on their hands; forty-eight hours of gruelling, nerve-wrenching work. It left them a spent, white-faced group of people who cheered wildly when Stake inched out of the hole with the missing tools. Their jars, and their best rock bit

were on that string. The well couldn't run without them.

As dusk came crawling like slow smoke through the manzanita-clad draws, one night in the fourth week, Stake read the core-barrel and went trudging heavily down to camp. Lifting a steaming cup of coffee with a hand that was shaking slightly, he met Ben's inquiring eyes over the campfire. Lynn and Luke stopped eating to look at him.

"Twenty-eight hundred feet," he said, keeping the grimness from his voice. "Twelve hundred more to go—and we still got nine days. Folks, we're gonna make it."

"What was in the core-barrel, Stake?" Ben asked bluntly.

Stake took a thoughtful look at their faces and decided he wasn't fooling anybody, so he said, "Wilcox sand, Ben. No show of oil in it anywhere."

Lynn gasped faintly. Nobody said a word. Twenty-eight hundred, and the Wilcox already. That sand was their oil-bearing formation—if there was any oil. And it showed no oil. It simply meant that they had a freak formation, another shattered dream.

They looked at one another in silence. Each was thinking the same thing. It was the end of the trail. Ben's face, with its tightly repressed feeling, made Stake say softly, "But we're going on down, folks. We ain't quittin' till the last chip's counted. Four thousand feet—or bust."

"Why?" Ben murmured. "What you got to gain, Stake? There's other jobs for a boomer—plenty of 'em. And the others can pay you wages. Let's quit."

"We'll not quit!" Lynn's face was set tightly, her eyes flaming. In that moment she looked very like her dad. "As long as we have a bit to drill with, we'll go on drilling. We *won't* be licked."

"That's the spirit," Stake clipped. "We'll—"

He turned suddenly as a sound came to his ears. He hardly knew what it was, thought it was only a vagrant murmur from the slopes below. But it was full of deadly implication. With a long, single step, he kicked the fire apart.

"Get to cover!" he snapped, his hand going to his holster. "Keep your guns! I think, folks, we got some callers!"

CHAPTER THREE

"I Won't Say Goodbye."

ALMOST on the heels of his words a gun cracked viciously down yonder on the slope. The bullet whined high overhead. Horses' hoofs pounded down there; then came the hard, dry cracking of broken branches. The riders were charging the camp.

Shoving Lynn ahead, Stake leaped for the shelter of the boiler that loomed up in the darkness. He saw a vague figure racing into view and snapped a shot at it. The man collapsed in the saddle, then fell almost gracefully to earth.

Straining his eyes, Stake saw a group of horsemen cutting off to the left. Men trying to get to the well! He raised his gun and fired as fast as he could thumb the hammer back. The group swung abruptly, evidently puzzled. The riders cut a short circle, then came charging directly at Dellson.

The falling darkness made good shooting difficult. Stake pushed Lynn down on the ground. "Stay there," he whispered. "Don't move a muscle, lady!"

He leaped from the shelter of the boiler in a zigzag run, drawing the riders after him. A hoarse howl showed he had spot-hammered a slug at the bunched horsemen. The lead rider lurched abruptly and toppled from his snorting pony.

A hail of lead swept about Dellson. Bullets clipped the branches around his head, one of them smashing through the muscles of his neck, knocking him backward. His gun hand felt suddenly numb, and he grabbed the weapon left-handed as his right arm fell useless at his side. The men, riding in a tight knot, were less than fifty feet away, racing past the boiler, straight for him!

He raised his left hand for a shot, and in that second fire streaked from the blackness of the boiler in a crazy pattern of flashes. Two riders weaved crazily in their saddles. Dellson realized with a jolt that Lynn was firing at point-blank range!

Curses whimpered in his throat. A freezing fear for the girl's safety jerked him forward, sent him racing squarely at the advancing riders. With a single,

frantic shot he dropped one of the remaining four men; the others wheeled and spurred desperately away. But he heard the wild ring of bullets against the steel boiler, and he never paused till he got to it. If Lynn. . . .

She rose suddenly from the darkness, almost in his arms. "I—I thought they had you," she stammered. "Guess . . . I just went—crazy. It . . . was just like shooting rabbits!"

She came into his arms with a convulsive shudder. Stake felt how his own hands on her shoulders were shaking—shaking with an emotion new to him. Her face came up; then her lips were trembling against his in sweet, proud surrender. "Lynn, baby," he murmured huskily. "I—didn't ever think. . . ."

Gunfire sounded from one direction of the slope, and he pushed Lynn gently away. "You stay out of sight," he ordered. "I—well. I can't lose you now, honey."

He went up the slope at a clumsy run, one leg buckling under him oddly, and saw a tight ring of flashes from near the well. Ben and Luke were standing them off from the shelter of the derrick floor. Stake swerved wide, coming up behind the attackers, for a rear assault. The group of men was hunkered down, and in the hand of one was a fast-burning fuse. *Dynamite!*

His cold fear told him what it meant: they'd blow up the well, kill Ben and Luke. Without a pause, he flung himself to one knee. His gun came up, steady as a rock. An odd coolness came into him, and a sense of utter finality. As he swung the gun into line, he wondered in a quiet way if it was loaded, realizing he didn't even know. His thumb drew back the hammer, the muzzle centering on the head of the hombre who was about to throw the dynamite. The Colt roared, and the man fell—with the dynamite.



THERE was an instant, mad, scrambling flurry of men in that spot, then a mighty, dazzling mushroom of light and a roar which sounded like hell's own boilers going up. He felt himself slammed backward to the dirt, his shoulders grinding painfully into it. Dazed, stunned beyond reason, he lay a moment,

supine, looking upward blankly. When he managed to sit up, he was half deaf and strangely calm. The only noise was that of men below, crashing through the brush; then the sound of fading hoofbeats down the slope. Finally he got wearily to his feet and limped forward to the pipes.

Bits of splintered debris were still raining down; the stench of burned powder was in the air. A shattered tangle of pipes lay twisted like so many lengths of wire, around a great, gaping hole. As he stood, he saw the others gathering in the darkness near him. Ben moved to his side, putting a hand on his shoulder and looking intently into his face.

"You're all right," he said soberly, as if to himself. His eyes were very bright, gleaming with excitement. "I . . . saw you do it, Stake," he murmured. "Thanks, friend."

Luke had his hands jammed in his pockets. "Might's well have blowed the well up," he said dourly. "Without no pipe, we're washed up."

"We're not washed up," Stake said calmly. He felt Lynn come to him in the darkness. He put his arms around her, feeling how intimately she seemed to belong to him in this moment. Ben turned and looked surprisedly at them.

"So it's this way." He grinned slightly. "God, things happen fast around here!" He paused, looked first at Lynn, then at Stake. Then: "God bless you both." He stood, with that pleased look on his face, and turned on back toward the camp. Stake looked down at Lynn and wondered at her loveliness, as she stood so close to him.

Luke came forward, stumbling in the darkness, and looked at them, hard. "What's this?" he asked roughly. He looked at Lynn, then turned heavily to Stake. In that single glance Stake saw the whole naked truth. Luke was in love with Lynn.

"Are you in love with this girl, Dellson?"

Stake felt something cold grip his spine at the words. His eyes were locked with Luke's. Lynn turned softly in his arms. "Stake," she asked, "what does he mean?"

"Nothing," Stake said quickly. Terrible fact had just hit him. Luke knew

who he was: Jim Nelson, renegade. And for the first time, he had done something to make Mother Landing ashamed of him: he had let this girl fall in love with him. Him, a hunted outcast. Carefully, he took his arms away from her. "It's nothing," he said. "Ask Luke. He'll tell you."

With a numbed feeling of being struck in a place where he could not defend himself, he walked slowly down the hill. Still without conscious thought, he hitched the three teams to the big pipe-wagon. He climbed up and drove the team along the slope till Ben came walking down to meet him in the darkness.

"I'll be back in three nights, Ben." Stake spoke in a bitter, biting voice. "We need some pipe."

"Across the Border?" Ben cried. "Stake! You can't do that! O'Blaine will way-lay you! And, besides, the Border's patrolled. And we have no money." He reached up to lay his grip on Stake's knee. "You don't lead a charmed life, man," he said earnestly. "This is asking for death!"

"I'll be back in three nights!" Stake let the team move on, so that Ben's hand was pulled away. "Have the ground ready, and don't lose any sleep. *Dios*, friend."

Ben moved determinedly along, to stand by the wagon step. "You want to say goodbye to Lynn?" he asked, peering in wonder at Stake. "She'll . . . expect it."

"No!" Stake sat straight on the seat, his eyes fixed on the restless horses. "No. I don't want to say goodbye. Three days, Ben."

Without looking at the boy again, he swung his bull-whip in a short arc. The lash cracked viciously, an inch from the leader's ear. Stake never glanced at the boy as he drove away.

That same bitterness rode him all the stormy, dangerous journey to the Border. In the dead of night he pulled his wagon to the sandy edge of the Rio Grande. He sat there a moment, pensive, his eyes on the hundred yards of dark water that surged along ahead of him. Then, with a hard, drawn twist in his mouth, he put the reluctant horses down into the edge of the swirling water. His only reflection was that it just didn't make a bit of difference whether he got across the river or not. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

When the Long Arm Reaches . . .

SWEATING in the hot, dusty stillness of afternoon, Stake tooled the heavy wagon into a short turn, down the wide, deserted street of the town of Trumbull. He had his hat pulled down to hide his face. Acute and nervous from long fatigue, his senses were warning him that trouble was in this town; this heavy stillness on Main Street was unnatural. Hoping he was wrong, and that he could pass unnoticed here, he drew up in front of a big, cracked sign that read: **WHISKEY TANNERS — OIL FIELD SUPPLIES — FISHING TOOLS.**

He dropped stiffly off the wagon and walked into the cool darkness inside. A little man, feet propped up on the counter, was snoring softly under the hat that was draped over his eyes. As Stake looked at him, he felt a slow grin warm his tired face. Then he reached over and started to shove Whiskey's feet off the desk.

Whiskey's voice from under the hat

was the merest whisper, and he never stirred. "Careful, Stake. The whole town's bushed up, waitin' for you. Watch that front door!"

Dellson's hand stayed right where it was, the low words each driving its separate shock through him. He sensed, rather than saw, that three shadows had moved up outside the painted glass of the front door, quietly stalking him. His nerves leaping into focus, he slapped the feet roughly off the desk. He took a long step backward and drew his gun.

"Stick 'em up, friend!" he barked, loud enough for the men outside to hear. "This smokepole's out an' ready. Don't try no tricks!"

Whiskey came to his feet, his eyes going to the door. The three men had frozen. "All right, mister," Whiskey said. "You got the drop—I ain't fool enough to brace a sure thing. What you want?"

Stake swung sideways, moving along the counter and picking up a pencil, keeping his eyes on the men outside. "I want the money you got in that cash box, friend," he said loudly. "Then I'm goin'

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out that front door and drive that wagon away. You make one cheep while I'm doin' that, and I drive a slug in your guts!"

Shifting the gun to his left hand, he wrote swiftly on a pad: "Five hundred feet of eight inch. Cover it with wood barrels—a mile south in the *brasada* at dark."

Meantime, his eyes were on the door. The gunmen were shifting back, getting to the corners of the building. He had fooled them; they were planning to cut him down when he stepped out front! Whiskey gestured with his hands, then catfooted back toward the rear of the little office.



WHISKEY'S round face was etched with anxious lines. "I been nearly crazy," he whispered. "They're layin' for you. A Mex *jefe*, name of Ladro O'Blaine, come into town today, to wait for you—and they got two Texas Rangers with 'em, aimin' to put the deadwood on you. What in hell have you stirred up down there, Stake?"

"What's the Ranger's names?" Stake asked softly. A queer oppression had settled on him, even before Whiskey answered.

"Luke White's one," Whiskey said. "T'other's Tipton MacDougall." For a second, Stake stood and let the shock of that run through him. Luke White was a Ranger! Crazed with hate and jealousy, White was on the prod for him and siding with scum like Ladro O'Blaine to get him. The man he had worked with, ate with: in that moment Stake's faith in men went bitter.

Whiskey plucked at his sleeve. "Out the back way," he whispered. "I'll tell 'em you had me scared too stiff to yell. Go on."

But as Stake turned to the back door, Whiskey followed him. "What are they like, Stake?" he asked softly. A dreamy look had come into his eyes. "Lynn; what's she like? Last time I see her, she was a wild young colt in pigtails, with city ways. She changed?"

Stake gave him a hard look. "You old outlaw," he clipped. "You sent me to Morales after that job, knowin' who it

was for. I oughta ham-string you."

When Whiskey's eyes met his they were sober with thought. "You've run from that past of yours long enough, son," he said. "'Bout time you faced it. You're too good a man to spend your life dodgin' shadows, gittin' old and bitter and mean. I know."

Stake said simply, "She's just like her mother, Whiskey. Same eyes and hair, same straight way of talking. She's . . . all right."

Whiskey looked understanding. "I hope you git her, son," he said gravely. "If you don't you won't never have no rest. Don't let her git away from you."

As Stake laid his hand on the door, he was remembering that, twenty-five years ago, Whiskey Tanners had been in love with Mother Landing. When the colorful, roaring swashbuckler, Garson Landing, had captured her heart, Whiskey had followed the oil fields, running tool yards, mostly just to watch out for her. Stake and he used to worry together about her, back in Spindletop—and now Stake knew Whiskey was extending that same loving care to her two children. A fine, square little man, this Whiskey Tanners.

Gun in his left hand, Stake went through the door, fast. A foot away, a man was jerking wildly at a gun, swinging it up to fire. Stake swung his Colt in a short, deadly stab. It hit the tall man right between the eyes; his face went blank. Blood started where the barrel had struck, and the man stood completely rigid, staring blindly at Stake. Then he turned away, took one stiff, halting step, his mouth working in vague words, and toppled heavily to the ground. As he rolled on one side, Stake saw the big, shining star on his chest. This, he thought bitterly, was MacDougall.

Stake was crouched, eyes stabbing in every direction for new enemies. Only after a tense, strained scrutiny of the orderly racks of tools did he decide the other two men had sent just this one back here while they watched the front.

He drifted like a shadow back through the tool-yard and into the high *brasada* that crowded up close behind, circled well back into the broken country and found himself a thick covert to hide in. Several times during the afternoon he had narrow

escapes when riders beat their way through the brush. But finding one man in the thorny tangle was an impossible task, and he didn't worry much.

At dark he circled cautiously and found the wagon where he expected it—loaded with the best of new pipe, all of it hidden under new whiskey barrels. He grinned briefly at a short, cryptic note which was wrapped around the whipstock:

One sick Ranger layin' in the dirt. Blood on his face and a star on his shirt. *More cussin'!*

But as he climbed up onto the high seat and turned the team south, a new, tight-drawn caution was laying its grip on him. He had just committed a fresh offense; the dragnet was out for him. And these tools *had* to get through. He picked a winding, tortuous course through the *brasada*, avoiding the trails. Twice his tense nerves made him think that he was being followed, but he clamped his jaw and drove doggedly on. These pipes, he resolved bleakly, were going through—if he had to lick every damned ranger in Texas to get them there.

◆ ◆ ◆

MORNING was just a reluctant, dirty smudge above the tree-tops when he pulled in at the river's edge. Stake was so tired his feet almost refused to obey him. But he climbed down, stamping feeling back into his feet, and unloaded all the whiskey barrels. He prayed silently that his scheme to get his pipes over this rolling waste of water would work.

Methodically, he strapped all the barrels around the edges of the wagon, lashing them tight, to make a kind of raft of it. The job done, he stepped back and surveyed the result. It looked, he thought amusedly, like a giant sausage. Then he took the reins and drove the whole top-heavy load down into the water.

Snorting, trying to resist, the team balked at the cold, swift torrent of treacherous water. Stake went to work, with whip and soothing voice. As the wheels left solid footing, the load began to sink. Stake, clinging to a front wheel and floating in the water, watched with bated

breath. When the wagon floated, almost completely submerged, he felt like cheering.

Peering ahead, he could just make out the dark, low line of the distant shore. It was moving past him, and he sensed that the current was getting swifter and more dangerous every minute; the center current was beginning to pull them along with greater speed.

Then, with a sickening little wrench, the whole load began to swing broadside to the yonder shore. Stake shot one look at the swirling lines on the water and knew the truth. The wagon was caught in a whirlpool!

The horses were plunging madly in the harness; Dellson saw, with cold shock, that they were about to tangle the harness. That meant drowning!

He started to dive free of the swaying load, to make a desperate try for the horses' heads. He was prepared to spring when he saw a dark form in the water, not twenty feet away!

Incredulous, he dashed water from his eyes, to see better—it was a horse and man, bearing down in a swift arc to come at Dellson's critters heads. It was Luke White!

Luke swung out of the saddle, grabbed the lead team's bridles, then turned and began swimming his horse strongly for the distant shore. Dellson quieted the team, and they swam free of the whirlpool. Stake scrambled up onto the double-trees behind the wheel horses and hand-led the reins from there.

On shore, as the trembling horses struggled up the bank, Stake stepped off his double-tree. Luke came back to the wagon, keeping the teams between him and Dellson.

"Howdy, Luke," Stake said. "You come in at some mighty sudden times, don't you, friend? If you'd come on up with me, you could of rode in the wagon."

Luke stood just as he was, and both of them knew exactly what the other was thinking. Then Luke said, "Ben sent me on to help you with the pipe. I just caught up with you."

Stake, his stand taken, would not back up, for the memory of Trumbull was strong in him. "You looked for me in Trumbull?" he asked softly. "I could have been found there—by a friend."

Luke stiffened, but it wasn't in fear. Stake sensed that this man had reason to control his anger. "Ben and Lynn need this pipe mighty bad," Luke said in a cool, silky voice. "Maybe we ought to take it on to them, Stake."

Stake grinned defiantly. "All right, Luke," he rasped. "You're still dealin'. Let's take the pipe on in."



ON THE long ride together, Stake was wary as a hawk. Never once did he turn his back. But he could not figure Luke out. White had certainly saved his bacon in the river, and he was unswervingly loyal to Ben and Lynn—yet he had used the killer O'Blaine to try to waylay Stake in an American town. It didn't make sense.

When the wagon went toiling up the steep slope at the well, Ben came down to meet them. Stake spoke crisply to him, keeping his eyes averted from camp. Rigid at the thought of meeting Lynn, he swung the team sharply and pulled up at the repaired pipe-rack.

Unloading the pipe, he worked with such furious energy that several times Luke looked at him in astonishment. At last, with the pipe unloaded and a killing weariness in him, he trudged down to camp.

Lynn turned from the fire as he stepped into sight. Her face was alight with pure joy, her lips opening for a glad welcome. Stake looked at her once, and his lips set in a cold, rigid line. "Ben!" he roared at the boy. "Luke, what the hell you two waiting on? Let's git up to the well and go to work!"

Grabbing an armload of tools he didn't even see, he stamped back up the hill to the well. Blind to everything except his own misery and his need of self-control, he plunged like a madman into the work. Out of his own unhappiness, he drove two men like slaves, and worked twice as hard as both of them.

He worked like that for all the next week, never leaving the floor of the well, taking his meals from Ben, who carried them to the job. At three thousand, he ran in a concrete plug, and repaired equipment while it set. Then he drove the equipment so hard, putting down hole,

that it seemed the motors would come apart at any moment. But he was putting down hole!

The third day after work began, he came down from the derrick floor and laid a handful of core-rock into Ben's hands. "There's your proper reading, Mister," he said wearily. "Trouble before was, there's a hell of a big fault on top of this bluff—it's got the rock layers shoved outa line all along this hill. But yore valley formation is good—it'll make you a well."

Ben met his eyes gravely. "I'm not worried about the well," he said slowly. "I'm worried about you. Stake, you look like a ghost, and you haven't slept in a week. Lynn says—"

Dellson gave him a level, icy stare, then climbed back to the well floor. His misery never got as far as his eyes, for he kept them slitted and cold. But whenever he glanced toward camp, he felt the chilly wave of unhappiness sweep over him. He wanted to know how Lynn was feeling; what she was thinking and doing, every moment. But he took it all out in the one way he knew—a frenzied drive of work.

He guessed he was not made for love or a woman's care. He was only a mongrel kid, reared in roughness and abuse, with a nature hard and callous as the palms of his hands. He knew no approach to all the kind and tender things he'd like to do for her and, for her sake, he must never let her know.

On the morning of the last day of their grace period, they were all gathered on the ground around the well, while Stake came slowly out of the hole. He was pulling the swab—and the whole outcome of their venture was in the balance.

The swab came free of the hole. Stake, with a tight, constricted feeling in his chest, turned and shut down the motor. Then he walked off the floor, to stand alone, his eyes fixed on the greasy snout of the hole. If there was oil down there it would come now.



A DRIBBLE of muddy water dripped slowly from the sides of the hole. It puffed upward slightly, became a slender column. It was going to blow!

Against his will, Stake's eyes found

Lynn's. She wasn't looking at the well, but at him. He tore his gaze away, stared at the hole—and the stream slowly died into a thin dribble of water again.

Bitter defeat like a burnt taste in his mouth, he glanced at Lynn. The distress in her face wrenched his heart like a gripping hand. She turned, with her lips set, and came toward him.

A sudden rumble shook the ground. "*Look at her go!*" Luke's wild roar broke through their raptness. At the well, the tiny spear of water was emitting a deep-toned, growling sound. Then a solid, thundering shaft of liquid leaped out, climbing straight up the well and driving toward the sky. The unleashed power of it was like a huge, raging beast. A gusher—the prettiest picture any wild-catter ever saw!

Stake felt the locked tension melt from his chest. He watched the girl as she walked slowly forward—and both knew she was coming into his arms.

A fortune in oil was hurtling into the sky. The ground under them was shaking with the mighty drive of unleashed power from the bowels of the earth, but Lynn and Stake stood a foot apart, looking into each other's eyes.

Then, with a glad little cry, she came into his arms. "Stake." Her voice was a half wail. "I know, dear. I've known who you are. But now I know you do love me, and you aren't sorry we met. And, mister, that's just all I want to know!"

They were still standing so, locked in each other's arms and lost in the deep tenderness of their feeling, when Luke's voice said quietly behind them, "Stake, you better shut the well down. Because there's gangs of men just coming out of every canyon. They're Ladro O'Blaine's men—and they intend to take this well!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Satan from Boothill

LIKE a spring uncoiling, Stake whipped around and stared down the hill. From a dozen different arroyos, little bands of mounted men were charging for the steep slope. There were more than a score, all told. Leading one group, Ladro O'Blaine came racing to the bottom of the slope.

Stake stood there for a second, trying to figure out what the hell to do. They were below the Border; anything Ladro O'Blaine did here was perfectly legal. There was just one way!

"Get guns!" he snapped to the men. "Fire as fast as you can. Do anything—but keep 'em from makin' that slope! Hurry! All three of you!"

He was back on the derrick floor in a single bound, shutting off the roaring rush of oil. The first second, and he was dripping from head to foot with heavy crude. A gunshot here, even a spark, and he was a goner!

Shutting off the heavy flow with a few hard twists, he grabbed a wrench and began screwing an L-shaped joint on the top of the pipe. Working like mad, he aimed this projecting arm at the downhill slope and swung the shut-off wheel again. His breath was heaving in his throat as the stream of crude oil leaped out the improvised nozzle and streamed down the slope below, playing across the rocks.

The racing lead riders were just reaching the hill slant; and his stream of liquid was squirting to one side of them. Throwing his gate wide open, he dove for a wrench. His feet slipping frantically in the heavy oil, he slammed the wrench recklessly on the joint of pipe, then heaved it around. His face felt stiff with strain as that solid, eight-inch torrent of flying oil hit the first group down there! A lead rider was knocked bodily backward from his saddle; two horses running at his shoulder reared and spun in terror, and one of them slipped to his knees. The surging column of oil was like a liquid battering-ram!

Two other groups came charging up from the left, the smoke of their guns blossoming clearly. Stake spun his pile-driver of liquid at them, tumbling a packed mass of men and horses around in a confused tangle of bodies.

Deliberately, Stake moved his nozzle along the slope, making the whole steep slant a sticky morass of mud. When O'Blaine rallied a charge of men, the tightly packed group raced in a wild charge to the edge of the mud—and then slipped and floundered as they tried to ascend the slope.

By now, Luke and Ben were firing steadily, and Stake saw a Mexican rider

next to O'Blaine suddenly flop to the slime.

Dellson shut off the oil for a second and heard Luke's shout: "Attaboy, Stake! We got 'em covered now!"

But Stake was guessing at the new line of attack. He eyed the streaks of gunfire worriedly. One flick of fire on that oil, and this well would be a raging inferno of flame.

Fire! In the split second that thought struck his mind, he knew the whole pattern of the fight; knew exactly what O'Blaine was planning now, the perfect method. O'Blaine would set the whole slope on fire!



HE STOOD for just a frozen second. *He* had made this possible. His glance fell to his own oil-soaked clothes, to the slippery boards and drenched earth around the well. This *he* had done, in the wild excitement of fighting.

He looked deliberately at the draws below. The Mexicans, tiny figures down there, were moving around in their oil-blackened clothes—moving like men with an orderly plan to perform.

Bitterly he realized that Lynn and Ben had lost. The four of them, they could retreat back along the spur yonder; they could get away. But the well, and Lynn's future would be lost. Her chance to live like a lady, to have travel and luxury; he had stolen it from her very fingertips. So *this* was what he had to bring her!

With that thought in mind, he turned from the well, and walked over to where the three of them were crouched, their faces turned down the slope.

"You three get your horses," he ordered, curtly. "Ride up the slope, there. Git out of sight and wait till I fire a signal shot. Then you attack. I can hold 'em here. Understand?"

Luke started to protest, but Stake's face stopped him. Quietly he brought up horses; the three started to mount. Lynn turned and looked at Stake as if trying to read him.

"Sure you're doing the right thing?" she asked, her eyes calm. "Up here alone, Stake . . ."

"Yeah. This is the right way." He

kept the grin on his face. "Goodbye, sweetheart. Whatever happens, remember I love you."

She nodded, her eyes holding to him, clinging there. Then she got on her horse and the three rode away, shielding themselves from the lookouts below by staying behind the boiler.

The second they left, Stake spun and ran to the force-pump for water. He was remotely thankful there was still pressure in the boiler; that he had this one last chance.

He started the pump to going, and as the water leaped out of the nozzle of the heavy floor hose, he began sluicing the stream across the floor-boards. If he could just get this oil off the floor—and the ground around it, he might save the well. He went at it as if he really expected to succeed.

But he didn't have the mighty pressure of a million feet of gas, now. Only a water-pump with a few pounds of steam behind it. Glancing down the slope, he saw a tight bunch of riders gather below, at the edge of an arroyo. Men were handing them flaming torches! In one second, they'd be putting the torch to that hillside of oil and making a roaring hell of twisting, withering flame.

The stream of water splashed along the soaked boards, in a futile, thin little stream. But he gave his whole mind to it, working the oil off the derrick floor. Not daring to look up, he heard the fierce, distant yells, and heard the first low hissing of flame at the bottom of the hill. The fire had been started!

When he lifted his eyes smoke was pouring from the bottom of the hill; a wall of smoky flame was girdling the slope. Heat was already tingling on his skin—and he saw with a shock how fast the fire was climbing the hill. There was just enough water mixed in that oil to make it burn fast!

For what seemed an eternity, he grimly sprayed his water on the floor. The boards were almost swept clean of oil at last—but as he turned the stream on the ground below the well, he knew that he'd have to clean an area for fifty feet around the well; just the heat of that furnace would be enough to blow this oil well to bits!

When he turned to face the fire, the heat of it blistered his face. The fire was

roaring upward, fifty feet high, marching up at him in a quarter mile ring—the mesquite scrubs along the upper slope were exploding like so many torches . . . That would cut off Ben and the others from coming back here.



A TINY figure working madly in the midst of this mighty scene, he felt dwarfed. This was like trying to turn the course of a hurricane! But still, with his arm half up to shield his face from the heat, he kept playing his thin stream on the ground. The mud curled backward, carrying its greasy film with it. He could hardly breathe; the air was being sucked upward by heat, and it seared his lungs as he gasped madly for air.

His clothes burst into smoldering patches of flame; burning drops of oil flew out from the wall of fire, falling on the ground around him. When they struck him, his clothes caught fire at once. Although the furnace-blast of fire was barely a hundred feet away, the hose in his hand blistered at every touch.

And then, as the heat battered him a step backward, the thin stream of the hose wavered and almost died entirely! Sickly, he knew the boiler, emptied of fire to avoid an explosion, was out of steam!

Stark despair was in his mind as he staggered back to the well. Bright, dazzling streamers of flame were leaping up from the wall of fire, and his blistered skin was sheer agony. But he was thinking only of his inability to save the well.

Nothing could be done. He turned, and, with his clothes afire, ran up the slope, away from the fire. There was only one

chance in a thousand. The well *might* be saved by that thin strip of wet ground. But he was thinking of one man—Ladro O'Blaine!

Dellson paused a second on the upper slope, to rip off his smoldering shirt. Then he circled widely, his breath bursting in his seared lungs, and began angling down the slope toward the lower ground. If he could get to Ladro O'Blaine . . .

His ears, deafened by the roar of fire, began to pick up the staccato bursts of distant gunfire. With the terrible thought that Ben and Luke had alone attacked O'Blaine, he went sprinting down the rough, boulder-strewn slope, toward the sound of those gunshots.

Six men spurred out of the mesquite below him, firing back over their shoulders as they came. Stake paused, eyes probing the brush, trying to figure out this new twist to the fight. But that half-formed thought broke off sharply as another man spurred from the brush. Ladro O'Blaine!

Teeth gritted in fierce triumph, Stake quartered the slope, angling down for the man in great, reckless leaps. "O'Blaine!" he roared. "Here's how! Come an' get it, you murderin' son!"

O'Blaine had spotted him, and swerved up the slope. Stake saw his fierce grin, as the little man fired. Stake paused, waiting with his gun half lifted. Now, in this moment of crisis, he was quite calm. He was thinking of nothing, except the man coming toward him.

"O'Blaine, this is your chance!" he barked. The words seemed to calm O'Blaine, for he quit the horse at once, landing and sliding to a stop twenty-five feet down the slope.

"Dog of a gringo!" he called. "You



have cross me once too much. This time I win the pot!"

They both fired at once, and Stake felt the sledging impact of the shot slam him to the ground. He came to one knee, and O'Blaine was still standing, smiling at him.

Stake's gun seemed to weigh a ton. Slowly, with infinite, careful pains, he tried to line it on the man before him. His own breathing was coming in heavy gasps. He *had* to get in one shot. One telling, final, fatal shot. Because this was the end . . .

Then, all at once, O'Blaine turned vaguely half-around and took a couple of short steps along the slope. His knees, his hips, his neck, all buckled at once. As he fell, Stake saw a great, spurting hole ripped in his back. The bullet had smashed out his heart and torn a great cavity through his spine. He had been dead on his feet!

Stake was still on his hands and knees when a squad of horsemen raced up, after the other fleeing Mexicans had swerved aside toward him. Whiskey Tanners! It was Whiskey who dropped off his horse and hobbled to him! The little man's round face was pale, and a bloody sleeve showed that his left arm was wounded.

"Stake," he bit out. "Stake, boy . . . you hurt bad?"

"Hell, no," Stake clipped. "Barely . . . got a . . . scratch!" Then he was going under a roaring wall of water that rolled him under into a black void and under a black waterfall.



WHEN he came out of it, Lynn was sitting with his head in her lap. "Lie still," she murmured sternly, her face very near to his. "You lied to us, you big lug. Trying to get yourself burned alive!"

Stake felt the deep, hard drive of pain, and saw that Whiskey was probing in his side. The little man's face was wet with sweat when he lifted a bloody bit of metal in his hands. "Got it," he choked, as if the pain were his rather than Stake's. "He's gonna be all right, Lynn. You got your man all in one piece."

"How's . . . the well?" Stake grinned up at her.

She nodded, smiling. But there were tears on her lashes, too.

"It didn't catch. The fire's about burned down." She turned her eyes upward, and Stake followed her look. What he saw made his heart almost stop beating. Luke White was standing over him, with three other men at his elbows—and all four of the men wore Ranger badges on their vests!

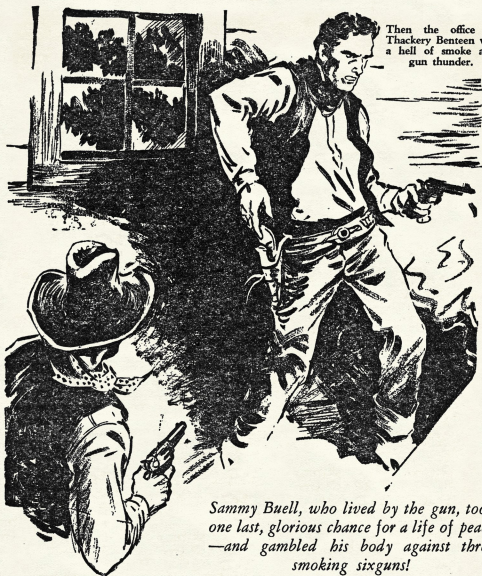
Luke grinned. "Git that pained look off your face," he ordered. "Whiskey told you I was a Ranger, friend, but he didn't know it all. I was sent down here to get some deadwood on Ladro O'Blaine . . . dope runnin' and stuff. When I saw you in Morales, I knew you, and knowed you was a better man than the record showed. Night you left here, Lynn drug the whole story outa me. Then she made me go to Trumbull to wire for a full pardon . . . Seein' she's the heir of the injured party, she had a perfect right to ask for a pardon."

He grinned briefly at Stake and Lynn. In this moment, losing Lynn, Luke White was all man. Only Stake, watching the gentleness in his eyes, knew how much suffering this was costing a top-notch Ranger.

"To tie 'er up," White went on, "I met O'Blaine headin' for Trumbull to wipe you out. So MacDougall and me strung along, jest to see you was taken peaceful or not a-tall. And all this last week, mister, yore friend Whiskey's been hidin' out in the brush, waitin' for O'Blaine to make his break, jest to show these Rangers the kind of stuff you had in you. I reckon, Jim Dellson, this about cinches your pardon for you. Congratulations—to you both." He pumped Dellson's hand vigorously.

Stake, feeling like a reborn man, was looking up into Lynn's face. And when her eyes met his, he knew he *was* reborn—and that for the two of them, a new life was in the making. The kind of life a man dreams of in his wildest visions. Together, they two had just about all life can offer two people. Their love, a chance to live free, useful lives . . . and the bright future ahead, waiting for them to conquer it.

THE END



Then the office of Thackery Benteen was a hell of smoke and gun thunder.

Sammy Buell, who lived by the gun, took one last, glorious chance for a life of peace—and gambled his body against three smoking sixguns!

Gunsmoke Trail to Peace

By Norman A. Fox

HE CAME to Goldrock because a storm, moaning through the mountains, just happened to blow him into the boom camp. He gravitated to the Northern Bar because its lights promised warmth. Once inside, he crept toward the free lunch counter because his three-day hunger was vicious

enough to overcome his timidity. Insignificant, these things. Yet in that combination of circumstances was the beginning of a legend that was to grow in gunsmoke.

His name was Sammy Buell. He wasn't much to look at, this kid who'd run away from old Eli Buell, his stepfather,

over in Sunburst Valley. Scraggly and thin and undersized, Sammy was only sixteen, but something in his eyes made him older. There were many men in the Northern Bar that night. The soft-hearted ones looked at him with pity; the hard-hearts looked not at all.

He might have taken a sandwich and slipped into the night and nothing would have come of it. Nothing. But destiny had a hole-card—big Zack Rapidan, who staggered through the doorway, a gun in each hand. He was very drunk, was Zack Rapidan, and very mean. "Whee!" he shouted, and proclaimed himself a curly wolf, born to howl.

Sammy faded behind the stove. The guns in Rapidan's hands fascinated him, mainly because Eli Buell had never permitted him to have one. But more fascinating was the respect born of fear in the tense faces of the spectators. Big and strong Rapidan certainly was, but his size alone wasn't commanding respect. Huddling there, Sammy's thought was that it would be a glorious thing to have men respect him thusly.

Rapidan veered to the bar, casing one gun to free his hand for a bottle. Sammy's eyes pivoted toward the piled sandwiches—and hunger submerged fear. Slipping forward, he reached for food. But his fingers never closed on the sandwich. Rapidan's palm lashed across his face, spilling him into the sawdust.

"A thief!" roared Rapidan, who'd jumped the claim he worked beyond Goldrock. "A dirty little thief!"

"I'm—I'm hungry," Sammy squawked.

The spectators laughed; it was forced laughter. Sammy knew that. They laughed because Rapidan was making a joke. They laughed because Rapidan had guns.

The second gun lay on the counter, now, but the fact didn't register with Sammy until he made another try for a sandwich, only to be sent reeling by a heavier blow. Coming to his feet, his fingers closed on the gun and he swung it up—instinctively, desperately.

"You little—" Rapidan began and clawed for his other gun.

Sammy didn't mean to squeeze the trigger. But when the weapon bucked in his hand, the bigness of Zack Rapidan

wilted, and for the first time in his life Sammy saw a man die.

Fear claimed Sammy then—fear greater than he'd known even when Eli Buell had used the blacksnake on him. He swung the gun, expecting the crowd to rush him. But the dragging seconds kept the peace and suddenly Sammy understood. Fear can be a double-edged sword! They were afraid of him—afraid of the gun in his hand!

He laughed—tight, hysterical laughter, wrung from that surging something within him. They feared Sammy Buell. Beaten down all his life, humbled in the dust, he'd won respect by virtue of a mechanism of blued steel scarcely bigger than his hand.

"Easy, all of you!" he cautioned.

Snatching a handful of sandwiches, he backed into the night. No one followed him. He was swaggering when he reached the hitchrail and he inspected the horses with luxurious deliberation before selecting a speedy-looking animal. If there was a chill in the thought that rope law punished horse thieves, he shrugged it away. From now on there'd be no law save his own will.



H E'D DOWNED a heady drink, this night, and it shaped a dream as he thundered into the hills. Sammy Buell—gunman! His name on every man's lips; a respect for him in every man's eyes! And that dream still sustained him a week later in the timbered Bearpaw Hills when a whiff of woodsmoke drew him to a campfire where three men crouched.

He rode boldly toward them until he saw the face of one. Then some of the confidence went out of Sammy Buell. Eyes like flint, thin lips as taut as stretched leather—that was Lobo Peek. Therefore the small, swarthy man at his side was Paint Wagner, and the lanky, horse-faced oldster with the melancholy look had to be Sad Slim Ryan.

Yes, Sammy knew these three, just as all Montana knew them—by reputation. Lobo Peek was already a legend, for whenever guns were needed, his crew had them for hire. Skirting the fringe of the

law, they somehow always managed to ride within its bounds.

"Who're you?" Peek demanded, getting to his feet.

"Sammy," the boy said. "Sammy Buell."

Peek's look swung significantly to his companions; the gesture restored Sammy's surety. "Light and eat," Peek invited. "We've heard of you. I always figured I'd get around to closing that big mouth of Zack Rapidan's some day. Hear tell you beat me to it."

This Peek was poker-faced, expressionless. Watching him, Sammy tried to set his own features the same way. "I'd sure like to join up with you," he said.

"We'll see," was Lobo Peek's half-promise.

He strolled off into the dark, and Paint Wagner followed him and it was Sad Slim Ryan who passed a loaded plate to the boy. In the heavy silence that followed, Sad Slim finally cleared his throat.

"I like your cut, kid," he said. "Will you take an old man's advice? Pile on your cayuse and ride away."

Sammy stared into the fire. "No," he decided. "Peek's a top gun-hand. He can teach me plenty."

"I know what happened in Goldrock," Sad Slim went on. "You got hold of a gun and it made you equal to a bigger man. You had a taste of power and now you aim to make a name for yoreself. And, in the end, you'll be sorry, because you'll find they's things bigger'n a gun."

"What?" Sammy asked scornfully.

Sad Slim shrugged. "Lots of things," he said. "Death, for one. And guts. And love, maybe; the kind of love a woman has for a man. Them things can't be beat by a brace of sixes. Ride away, kid."

But Sammy Buell didn't ride away, for to him the advice of Sad Slim Ryan was the muttering of an old man, and there could be nothing of prophecy in it. There was to be a day when he would remember the words of Sad Slim. But that day was five years distant. . . .

FIVE years. . . . A legend can grow big in that time, and it did, wrapping itself around the name of Sammy Buell, a legend built upon bullets. And now they knew of Sammy Buell along the brimstone border, and in the Four Corners country, and in his own Montana. And wherever men gathered there was free liquor for him who could say he'd been in the Northern Bar the night Zack Rapidan had died, and a thin, undersized kid had chosen a trail.

Not that Sammy ceased to be undersized. On the day when Lobo Peek's crew headed for Sunburst Valley, Sammy stood five feet six, and weighed exactly one hundred and thirty pounds. He was twenty-one now, but something in his eyes still made him look older.

A nameless dissatisfaction still rode him, even though his name was on every man's lips, and a respect for him was in every man's eyes. Maybe that was because Lobo Peek, once his idol, had proved to be a kill-crazy wolf, while Paint Wagner was little better. Sad Slim Ryan owned the only heart among the three of them. But Sad Slim was old and Sammy was young and their language was not the same.

There was no nostalgia in Sammy as he looked upon Sunburst Valley again. This had once been home, but it had held nothing for him but Eli Buell's brutality. He did notice the changes, though, and chief among them was the concrete spanning Sunburst River, at the valley's head. A dam was being reared here. From the rimrock above it, Lobo raised his hand for attention.

"You boys have been curious about what's brought us here," he said. "Now I'll tell you. The man who's promoting yonder dam needs gun protection. Sammy, you recollect a feller in Colton town called Thackery Benteen?"

"I remember," Sammy nodded. "A big-bellied gent. Lent money out at interest and had his finger in every pie. There was talk of a dam even in them days, to store water against a dry spell."

"Benteen promoted this," Peek went on. "The valley ranchers subscribed the money and Benteen brought in builders. But a man in Colton says Benteen is building with cheap material and pocketing four-bits of every dollar subscribed. He's rilin' the ranchers, that gent is. We've got to protect Brother Benteen from him."

Sammy nodded. A pretext went with every job, some veneer of righteousness to varnish the work their guns did. Not that it mattered to Sammy. But when they rode into the valley and a familiar trail forked away from the road, surging memories gave a meaning to a growing urge, and he reined short.

"My step-dad lives yonder," he said. "I never told you about him. He worked my mother to death and he wore out a blacksnake on me. He fancied himself handy with a gun in them days. I crave to see how he really stacks up. Come along, if you want. But remember that Eli Buell is my meat!"

They followed him silently, and Sammy gloried in what would lie ahead. Eli Buell had heard of him. Perhaps Eli Buell had tasted a bit of hell whenever hoofbeats drummed to his door in the night. Perhaps Buell would squirm and beg when he faced his step-son again. Those things would be sweet, and when the ramshackle ranchhouse sprawled before them, Sammy's eyes were alert for the first glimpse of that hulking giant who'd built a nightmare for a boy.

But Eli Buell wasn't about. An air of desertion clung to the empty barn and the tumbled corrals. For a moment Sammy sat his saddle, his mouth grim, his eyes roving.

"A grave," said Sad Slim. "Yonder, on the hill."

Sammy rode toward it and read the name of Eli Buell on the headboard, a date and an inscription which told him that pneumonia had cheated him by less than a year.

"Come on," he said as he turned to the waiting trio. "We'll want to make Colton before sundown."

The town, he discovered, had grown some. A new brick building dignified the spot where Alb Candle's feed store had been. They racked their horses before the

cubby-hole office of Thackery Benteen and were halfway across the boardwalk when the girl came from Glover's Mercantile, next door, her arms loaded with bundles. One fell as she wriggled through the doorway.

Sammy picked it up. And looking into a face wreathed by golden curls, he knew that some things improve with time, and the beauty of Honey Carmody was one of them. At fourteen she'd been freckled and mostly legs. At nineteen she was what a man saw in lonely campfires. And because Sammy's decisions were as quick as his trigger finger, he only needed this moment to know he'd found the embodiment of his own shapeless dream.

"Honey!" he said, and wondered if the daughter of Biff Carmody, the valley's biggest rancher, would remember the stepson of that keep-to-himself cowman, Eli Buell. "It's me—Sammy Buell."

"We've heard about you," she said stiffly, and went down the street. Paint Wagner exploded with laughter and when Sammy turned, even Lobo was permitting himself to smile.

"You'll need spurs to take the kinks out of that one," Peek observed.



R AGING inwardly, Sammy said nothing. But his thought as they trooped into Benteen's office was that Honey Carmody would hear a great deal more about him before he quit Colton. You didn't sneer at a man whose name was on everybody's lips. You didn't...

"Sit down, gentlemen," Thackery Benteen wheezed as he came around his desk with hand outstretched. He was balder than Sammy remembered him, a moon-faced man, squat as the iron safe in yonder corner. "Sit down. You sure got here at the right time!"

"This gent you wrote me about?" Peek asked at once. "Who is he?"

Benteen was pumping hands. "Wagner? And Sad Slim Ryan? And Sammy Buell! Boy, what a terror you turned out to be! The gent's name, Peek? Vic Haynes. He's a new-comer hereabouts. Runs the town newspaper. I'm collecting a few things along his backtrail that may

tack his hide on the wall, but I can't wait for that. Haynes has called a meeting of the cattlemen in town tonight. Aims to make 'em believe I'm appropriating the funds I've collected."

"You'll want that meeting busted up," Peek reflected.

"It'll be easy," Benteen said. "We have a jail here, but this isn't the county seat, and ordinarily there isn't even a deputy in Colton. But I've gotten the authority to appoint some if they're needed. You'll wear badges, boys. This Haynes is fomenting trouble, or inciting a riot, or something like that with his damn meeting. Savvy?"

Peek nodded. "How do the cowmen feel about this ink-slingin' galoot?"

"He's makin' them think," Benteen admitted. "Especially since Biff Carmody is on his side. Haynes is engaged to Carmody's girl."

Sammy's laugh was brittle. "Busting up this meeting is a one-man job," he said. "You boys get your sleep."

Thus, less than three hours later, Sammy Buell stood in the gathering dusk with a badge pinned upon his vest; stood and waited while saddle leather creaked and buckboards lumbered through the street as the people of Sunburst Valley came to the big meeting hall on the cowtown's outskirts. When the last man had filed inside, Sammy still stood for the better part of a half-hour. Then he entered the building.

Benches filled the room, and at the farther end was a lantern-lighted stage. A man stood upon it, a man not much older than Sammy and only slightly bigger—a smooth-shaven man who wore cattleman's garb but whose skin was pale from inside confinement. In the middle of a sentence that held Thackery Benteen's name, Sammy stopped him.

"Time was," said Sammy, "when this here hall was used for *amusin'* folks—not for talkin' 'em to death. Don't stand there, Haynes! *Dance!*"

♦ ♦ ♦

HE HEARD his own name ripple across the hall and he heard the thunderous hush which came after it. But with every face turned his

way, Sammy saw only two—the chalky features of Vic Haynes and the strained face of Honey Carmody, who had an aisle seat not far from where Sammy stood.

Scared, were they? This was the way Sammy wanted it to be. She'd turned up her nose when he'd spoken to her, eh? She'd scorned him for what he'd become. Then let her see what manner of man was this creature of her choosing, this Vic Haynes who was shortly going to be capering with bullets biting at his heels—making a fool of himself for all Colton to see.

Yes, there'd be a lot of satisfaction for Sammy Buell before this business was finished. But it wasn't working out as it should. Vic Haynes still stood without moving.

"Dance!" Sammy repeated and his gun flowed into his hand. A smooth draw, that. He'd learned a lot, had Sammy Buell.

"I'm wearing no gun," Vic Haynes said, and his voice shook a little. "But I'm not putting on a show for you, mister. You might as well shoot and get it over with."

The gun spoke, the bullet plowing a furrow across the floor between Haynes' planted legs. But Vic Haynes never moved.

Sammy's eyes flicked to Honey's face. Fear was still there, but now there was something else, something that twisted her lips. Scorn! And Sammy Buell, casing his gun, stalked out to the silent street.

He was beaten; no mistake about that. His defeat was duly reported to Thackery Benteen when the sun stood high the next morning and Lobo Peek's crew again gathered in the promoter's office. Gone was the affability that had marked Benteen the day before. In its place was a cornered man's fury.

"You had a badge, and a gun to back it," he raged. "Why in hell's name didn't you stop Haynes? Now the cowmen are on the prod. Already a delegation's been here asking me to open my safe and produce the invoices for all dam materials purchased so far. I can't show those things!"

"He didn't have a gun," Sammy said stonily. "They'd have lynched me if I'd shot him down when he wasn't

heeled." And, remembering the spell his name had cast, he knew he was lying.

"Maybe it doesn't matter," Benteen went on in a milder tone. "I told you I was back-trailing Haynes. The mail that come on this morning's stage brought me the card to fill out a royal flush. I've been curious about Haynes. He acts like a cowman, but he looks like he hasn't seen the sun for years. Gents, Vic Haynes learned the printer's trade in Deer Lodge pen! He killed a man who was tromping on the ranchers down in the Bitter Root where Haynes grew up. The jury called it manslaughter and the judge said five years. Haynes escaped after three years. You can lock him up for that today."

Paint Wagner was carving his fingernails with a ponderous jackknife. "Locking him up won't shut him up," he observed.

"Yes, but exposing his past will," Benteen countered. "Wait'll the cowmen find out he's a jailbird. It won't be hard to make them believe Haynes has been hollering about me being crooked in order to blackmail me. Savvy?"

"I'll fetch him in," Sammy said.

Benteen shot a dubious glance toward Lobo Peek but Peek nodded. "Give him another chance," he decided. "But you, Slim, go along with the kid. Looks like Sammy's slipping."

And so the two went into the street—the youngster who'd mastered guns and the oldster who'd once warned him that such a mastery might be impotent at times. But there was no Vic Haynes in the littered newspaper office. A grimy printer's devil mentioned the Carmody ranch. In saddles, the two took the trail.

There was silence between them as they rode along but Sammy's thoughts were company enough. Slipping, was he? He'd failed last night and Lobo was giving him another chance. That, Sammy decided, was all he was going to need.



THEY found Vic Haynes on the shady gallery of the Carmody ranchhouse. Honey was with him.

"You're coming to town, Haynes," Sammy said without prelude. "You'll be jailed until you can be sent back to Deer Lodge to finish that stretch you started."

"Deer Lodge!" Haynes barked, coming to his feet. Sammy wondered how telling this blow would be to the girl. "You can't make this stick, Buell! Sure, I was in Deer Lodge. But I was *pardoned* after three years!"

"I dunno anything about that," Sammy said. "My chore is to jail you in Colton. Come along."

Vic Haynes came—after no more than a word to the stricken girl.

Sammy found the jail in Colton and rummaged in its office for a ring of keys. Shoving Haynes into a cell, he locked the door, slipped the keys into his pocket. When he came outside again, Sad Slim was waiting. Honey Carmody, too.

"Turn him loose," she begged.

She might have melted stone and Sammy knew a brief stab of contrition. "If he was pardoned, like he says he was, there's nothing to worry about," he muttered.

"Of course he was pardoned," she flared. "He told me all about it when I first met him. But this is Benteen's trump card and Benteen must be desperate now. He may fool some folks but he doesn't fool me. Vic will never leave the jail alive. You know that."

Sammy shrugged.

She came closer and her hands clutched at his narrow shoulders. "You've struck against Vic in order to hurt me," she said. "I'm woman enough to know that, Sammy. What is it you want of me? Turn him loose and I'll—I'll ride away with you. Would that be enough?"

Just for an instant the temptation was there. Then: "You'd ride away with me," he said hoarsely. "But your heart would still be here—with him."

"I've no say over that," she said softly.

He shrugged her hands away angrily, stalked down the street. Sad Slim, a silent witness to all this, swung along at his side. The others awaited them in the cubby-hole office.

"He's in jail," Sammy reported tersely. "I didn't slip this time. But you'll play hell holding him. He claims he was pardoned from the pen."

"Sure, he was pardoned!" Benteen smiled. "I knew that. But we've got him in jail now. Tonight there'll be free liquor, enough to put warpaint on every stumblebum in Colton. With you boys

leading the crowd, a lynching shouldn't take long."

"A lynching?" Sammy repeated.

"Sure," said Lobo Peek.

"Then," said Sammy, "you'll have to kill me first."



THUS Sammy Buell made his final choice. But in the very moment he made it, he had time to wonder what had prompted such a decision. A love for Honey Carmody? But Vic Haynes was the man of Honey's choice. Certainly there was no reason why Sammy Buell should do anything for Vic Haynes! And the odds in this room were four-to-one. He couldn't see Sad Slim, for the man stood behind him. But Peek and Paint Wagner were across the desk. And grabbing for guns!

"They was bound to be one job I couldn't swallow without gagging," said Sad Slim Ryan, and put a bullet between Paint Wagner's eyes.

Then the office of Thackery Benteen was a hell of smoke and thunder, and Sammy Buell was triggering in the midst of it, hurling bullets and taking lead in return. Something white-hot furrowed along Sammy's cheek, but Thackery Benteen slumped across his safe, dead. Sammy was never to know whether his bullet had broken the promoter's bulk or whether Sad Slim, who fought at his side, had tallied. But it was Sammy's gun that slammed Lobo Peek into a corner, dead. And that was the end of it.

"Hit?" Sammy asked.

"Nicked," Sad Slim admitted.

A crowd, drawn by the gunfire, was gathering, but Sammy paid it no heed, shouldering toward the jail where Honey Carmody still stood. To her Sammy handed the keys. "Let him out," he ordered. "And tell him those invoices he wanted to see are in Benteen's safe. Likely the money's there too."

Whatever she said when words finally came to her escaped him. He was already piling into a saddle.

"Which way you headin'?" Sad Sam asked.

"To cow country—somewheres else."

And so they put their backs to Colton and it was while they were riding stirrup to stirrup that Sammy remembered what Sad Slim Ryan had once said—that three things are greater than gunflame.

He realized then, did Sammy, that all three had beaten him here in Sunburst Valley. Eli Buell had died and put himself beyond the vengeance of Sammy's guns. The courage of Vic Haynes, last night in the meeting hall, had made him immune to anything bullets could do. And the third thing. . . . It had shaped Sammy's choice in Benteen's office when the man Honey Carmody loved had been doomed to die.

Thus Sammy Buell was thrice conquered. Yet in defeat he had won, for gone was the dissatisfaction that had shadowed him across the years. And respect for himself had been born.

He rode with his chin held high and the sun in his face, for all that the world could hold for such a man lay before him. . . .

NO! NO!



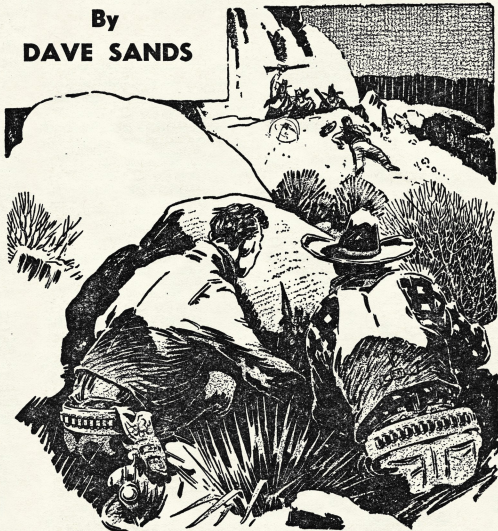
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By
DAVE SANDS



Bullets came stabbing down among the rocks.

THE HERO OF BLACKSMITH BEND

FOR THREE DAYS, blinding clouds of dust had swirled through Blacksmith Bend, blotting out the blazing sun. Every tree up and down the street had become white. Still there was no end in sight for the storm sweeping in roaring hot gales across the glaring Arizona sands.

Only one man could possibly have been pleased about such a rip-snorting sand storm. At least, that was what Hard Luck Bill Hannigan thought at the time.

Hannigan liked it simply because of the job that lay ahead of him—at the little one-story Stockman's Exchange on the eastern side of the street.

The notion to rob the bank had come to him rather suddenly. He had not exactly made up his mind about it until he came slow-poking into the head of the street on his hammer-headed old bay and saw how ideally the town was prepared for just such a thing. He was riding with a black neckerchief pulled up over his

nose, and even in the storm he looked like a badman all ready for a job. It was the way a cowboy usually wore his neckerchief in a dust storm.

Taking a few thousand dollars, he reckoned, from such a land-grabbing money hog as Dabro Burnside would be no great sin. Hannigan did not know the man, but he had heard enough about him. Burnside worked every man to death who came under his thumb; he dished out the lowest pay in the country and fed the worst grub. The horses he gave a man to ride were the scrawnier in all Arizona, and if an accident happened to one a cowboy had to pay for it, like buying a thousand-dollar Kentucky thoroughbred.

Hannigan was calm enough about it when he pulled up at the hitchrack and eased his long, lean frame out of the saddle. Every door and window up and down the street was closed, in an attempt to keep out the wind and dust. At times a

ain't got but six-bits, my old hog-leg, an' a pocket clock that won't run an' never did keep good time when it did."

"Shake 'im down, boys!" snapped the man with the six-shooters. "If he's lyin' crack 'im over the head with yore guns."

His eyes were becoming used to the shadows. He could see five heavily armed men in the bank now. A sixth one lay sprawled on the floor behind a desk. He was big and as dark as a half-breed, and dressed in shiny black like a city dude. From what Hannigan had heard of the man that rooster would be Dabro Burnside.

A gray-bearded man and a red-haired girl stood beside the vault, with their hands lifted above their heads. Now and then one of the robbers turned to curse Burnside; and one of the men said something about having had to knock half the side of his head off with a sandbag. From all the talk these badmen did not like

Six desperate bank robbers raced out of Blacksmith Bend, to lose themselves in the roaring sandstorm. Then a lone-wolf seventh, acclaimed as a hero by the misguided townsmen, picked up their trail, to either cut in on his share of the loot, earn his right to a hero's accolade, or end his days of drifting—in a cliffside cave of death!

man could not see across the street, because of the clouds.

Once this little job was finished, the getaway in the storm would be simple. The whole thing would be done quickly and in style. Hard Luck Bill Hannigan usually tried to do things in style, although this was his first stab at robbery.

He moved on, opened the door, and stepped inside. A split-second later he had kicked the door closed with his heel, and was stretching both his long arms and hands for the ceiling—while his big, green-gander eyes stared straight into the muzzles of a pair of black .45's.

"Line up with the rest of 'em!" ordered a big, dark-bearded man who had most of his face covered by a mask. "If yuh've got any money on yuh we'll take it, brother."

"I—I thought I was walkin' into a saloon," lied Hannigan, as another man stepped forward and snatched his old six-shooter out of its well-worn holster. "I

Mr. Burnside any better than anybody else in the country liked him.

The robbery was progressing smoothly. Two men were hastily stuffing money into stout canvas bags. The job did not take long, and Hannigan was soon being herded toward the vault, with a six-shooter rammed against his spine.

"Leave the other buzzard lying where he is!" ordered the dark-bearded man. "He won't wake up for an hour. Move, you!"

"If you lock us up we'll suffocate!" cried the gray-bearded man. "You can't do that! That vault's air-tight and has a time lock on it that won't open until tomorrow morning, once you close the door!"

"Get in it—an 'shut up!" snarled a tall, sharp-faced old gunman. "We ain't leavin' yuh out to beller yore fool heads off an' spread the news 'fore we get outa town. Get in, yuh!" He gave Hannigan a swift kick. "We can't play around with

yuh damned bug-eyed monks all day!"

Hannigan moved on into the vault with the old man and the girl, but he was not so submissive about it. The man who had searched him had not bothered to take his old key-winder silver watch. As the heavy door came slamming to behind him he snatched the watch out of his pocket and thrust it upward. It caught on top of the door, jamming it.

Oaths snarled in at him through the crack. The dark-bearded man came forward. A six-shooter's muzzle poked forward, but the crack was not wide enough to admit it.

Hannigan hung onto the inside handle to hold the door shut. "If you shoot," he yelled, "you'll call the whole dang'd town in on you!"

"He's right, Jake!" snarled the sharp-faced man. "Let's get the hell outa here—fast!"

Hannigan heard the dark-bearded man swearing as they scurried out a back door to their horses. As soon as the three in the vault were certain the way was clear they started jamming their shoulders against the door.

Hannigan, the first out when the door finally opened, ran forward and picked up his old six-shooter in the corner, where one of the bandits had tossed it. Rushing on to the front door, he threw it open and started shooting in the air to rouse the town.

It was the last thing he remembered for the next thirty minutes. A startled bartender in the Owl Hoot Saloon, across the street, made the mistake of thinking he was a robber, and promptly took a pot-shot at him through the window. The bullet slapped the side of Hannigan's head. His knees shook, and he pitched forward and landed on his face in the dust.

When he came to his senses he was sprawled on his back on a long table in the bank, and the red-headed girl was bathing his face with ice water. He stared at her for a few moments, unable to remember what had happened. Then he sat up, and a few moments later he realized that he was the hero of Blacksmith Bend.

"Saved our lives!" the gray-bearded hombre was crying. "If that door had

been locked on us we would not have come out of the vault alive."

"But he didn't save seventy thousand dollars!" Dabro Burnside was up and raging as he bathed his head in a bowl of water in the corner. From his bull-bellowing and cursing, he seemed to be getting stronger every second. "Seventy thousand dollars, I say! And God only knows what valuable papers they picked up when they were cleaning my vault!"

The town was a madhouse by this time. Clouds of horsemen were pouring out of it and trying to pick up the trail of the bandits. There had been six of the badmen, counting the one who had held the horses.

Hannigan finally got out of the bank and blundered across the street. He found himself bellied up to the bar in the Owl Hoot, and the big, bald-headed bartender was pouring a drink for him.

"Take the house, if you want it, friend," apologized the man. "It was a fool thing for me to do, but I had been asleep there in my chair near the window, and I guess I was still half asleep when I started shooting at you."

"It's all right." Hannigan lifted his right hand and gently touched the bandage on his aching head. "I'm used to runnin' into hard luck. Fact is, my friends call me Hard Luck. Ain't got the makin's of a smoke, have you?"



WITH a quart of whiskey in his old saddle bags, he left town three hours later; the bartender had insisted he take a bottle with him. It made a fellow feel mean to hang around, with everybody slapping him on the back and buying him meals and drinks, and even feed for his horse. If they only knew why he had come to town they probably would want to string him up to the nearest limb.

These were good people, and he wondered how the devil the thought of robbing a bank had ever come to him, even if Dabro Burnside did own it. Just tired of playing in hard luck, that was all! Tired of always being on the move. Everybody said he was one of the best bronc stompers to ever throw a hull on a horse. He

knew cows, too, but luck was never on his side for very long at a time. Nobody found fault with him or his work, but for three years it had just so happened that he was the fall guy when cowhands and bronc stompers had to be cut down. Maybe it was because he never complained about it and could always see the need of a cowman shortening down his hired help.

He headed southeastward. The kindly but quick-triggered bartender had said there was a big cow outfit twenty or thirty miles down this way, and a good man might be taken on for at least a few weeks. At the end of three miles he came upon a little creek and, knowing cow camps would hug the water, he started following it.

The confounded storm was still blowing. The sand and dust went right through a man like hurling needles, but the country ahead seemed to be breaking into a deep gorge. As the wind pitched back and forth he could catch a glimpse of trees in the distance; they would offer some protection.

He allowed the bay to drink from time to time. At least, it would wash some of the dust and sand out of his nose. He reached down several times and dipped his old neckerchief in the water, and tied it back across his mouth and nose.

It was while he was washing out the neckerchief that he saw hoof prints along one shallow place in the stream. In a moment he was off the bay to inspect them. Possemen were out in all directions, but there was something about these tracks that did not smack of possemen. They kept as nearly as possible to the center of the stream, and possemen would not be riding like that.

Six horses, yes! He was able to see that two hundred yards on down the stream. He had not seen the sixth bandit, but from the tracks they had left at the back of the bank he had been holding the horses. The gang had not followed any of the trails leading out of Blacksmith Bend. That would have been a dead giveaway, and yet they had to follow something in this storm. In such weather riders were too apt to get turned around and find themselves coming back to the place they had started from.

He was puzzled when he came to a place that told him there were now seven riders ahead. That did not jibe with a plugged nickel! He got down again to examine the prints, and soon the mystery of them was disappearing.

"The seventh rider," he told himself, "is followin' the others. That's plain. He's not botherin' about the creek to hide his tracks. Whoever he is, he's a lone-wolfer stackin' his chips against that gang ahead."

He turned and rode back a short distance, and soon was looking at the place where the seventh rider had come down the bank of the creek. Here was where he had dismounted to inspect the creek, leaving the marks of his boot heels and his spur tracks at the edge of the water.

The tracks of the seventh man left the water from time to time. Hard Luck Bill Hannigan could read the meaning of that. The lone-wolfer was short-cutting whenever it was possible—which meant that he knew every mile of this country, while the bandits ahead probably did not.

Out of the force of the storm, two hours later, between the wind-eroded cliffs of a deep gorge, he saw a white horse ahead of him. A gray-bearded man powdered with dust sat in the grass beside the horse. Wearing a pair of .45's slung low in their holsters, he was little, old and dried-up from years in the sun. A star glittered on the left side of his vest.



"HOWDY!" he growled when Hannigan rode up. "Yuh're the fella who saved the folks in the bank. I'm John Hardy, sheriff of the Bend. Glad yuh come along. That fool hoss of mine slipped, back there. Before I could get clear he come down on me, an' my left shoulder jumped out of place. Know anything about poppin' a shoulder back in its socket? It's hurtin' the devil out of me."

"I saw a horse doctor once set one for an Indian," Hannigan slid out of his saddle and dropped his reins. "It'll probably hurt like thunder, but I'll try anything once. Roll over on your side."

It was the next thing to murder. The old man had nerve, but he had waited too

long. The shoulder had started to swell. At Hannigan's third attempt to throw the shoulder back in place, the sheriff broke away, unable to stand the pain of it.

"The next best thing, I reckon," Hannigan told him, "is to do what the horse doctor did to the Indian."

It came then, a clean-cut blow straight to John Hardy's jaw. It stretched him back on the ground, knocked into unconsciousness. Hannigan jumped astride of him. He brought the man's arm up and over, giving it a twist as he remembered seeing the horse doctor twist the Indian's. Nothing happened at the first try, but he heard the bones snap when he made a second attempt. A few minutes later he had brought water from the creek in his hat and was bathing the sheriff's face.

"Yuh get things done, don't yuh?" The old man's eyes opened and he looked up with a grin. "Maybe I can ride now. That dad-burned shoulder jumps out on me ever'time I stub my toe. Gettin' used to it."

"Still goin' after that gang ahead?" Hannigan sat back on his heels and rolled a couple of cigarettes from a bag of tobacco the bartender had given him. He thrust one of them in the old man's mouth and lighted it for him. "I might like to go along."

"How do yuh know I'm followin' that gang?"

"Been followin' your tracks back there. I could see where they're keepin' to the creek, an' you're not. I started following the creek because it leads in the direction a cow outfit's supposed to be in over this way. Here's some pain-killer." He gave him the bottle of whiskey he had brought along. "Keep it. I don't care much for it."

"Now I know I'm goin' to be all right." The sheriff took a long drink from the bottle. "Nothin' kills pain any quicker. An' I can use yuh, too. Heap better than a posse howlin' like Indians an' makin' more noise than sixteen fightin' mules in a tin stable. It's dangerous territory ahead. Meanest hole in Arizona. But I think we'll pull through an' bring them suckers back."

They started on a few minutes later.

They had not gone far before the sheriff was calling out a low cry of warning and jumping his white horse into a cluster of tall rocks and brush on the south side of the creek. At once both men were out of their saddles and holding their horses by the nose. Hard Luck Hannigan was staring about him.

The storm was still raging up there, high above them, but most of the blowing sand was going on over the rims and filtering down only in clouds of dust. Over the howl of the wind up there, the keen ears of the old sheriff had heard something, and now Hannigan heard it too.

Hoofbeats were making a ringing and crunching noise that sounded like fast hammers pounding on glass. They came from across the gorge, where a V-shaped break ran back into the high wall. In a few moments more a rider on a high-strung gelding appeared. Covered with dust, the man and horse looked like white ghosts suddenly popping out in the gorge to turn down the creek, but Hannigan could tell that the horse was black and the big man in the saddle was dressed in black.

"Say," he whispered, "ain't that Dabro Burnside, Sheriff?"

"It is," nodded the sheriff, now gumming a little chew of tobacco. "He come out with the posse I had. One reason why I sorter lost myself from it was that when I looked around in the storm I saw he was gone. He's a smart man, Dabro is, but I still don't like the quick way he got over that sandbag beatin' on the head he was supposed to get. Also, I don't know why a fella out in this country would be totin' a sandbag when he could just up with a sixgun an' knock hell sweet home outa the man he'd want to hit. It just don't make sense.

"There's somethin' else I don't like, too." He stared down the gorge with a sudden glitter in his eyes. "This makes three times in the past five years that that bank's been robbed. Banks do sometimes have bad luck enough to get robbed that often, but men who own 'em don't go out soon afterwards an' build 'emself a fifty thousand dollar house to live in. From now on, rooster, we ride slow an' mighty careful."

THE sun was going down when Dabro Burnside came to the wildest place in the entire gorge.

Burnside had nothing to fear. He had a perfect excuse to be out, and the storm made an absolute cloak for him. Men on the trail of bandits sometimes do not return to town for a week.

Besides, Dabro Burnside was watching everything. The prints of hoofs here and there in the creek showed that only the six men he was seeking had gone on ahead of him. He figured that John Hardy was probably holed-up somewhere and taking it easy, waiting for the storm to blow itself out.

He rounded a bend in the gorge, then started cutting across the creek. He had to lift his stirrups and crawl up on his knees in the saddle as the water swirled higher around his tall horse. When the horse was almost swimming he turned in under a dense cloud of willows whose limbs were buried in the swirling water around him. When he came out of the water he was in a narrow, winding gash in the rocks.

The going was simple then. A man did not need to watch anything, and when Burnside came out into a little valley covered with dense groves of blackjack he spurred his horse into a gallop.

Indians had once lived here in this well-hidden and well-protected hole in the earth. Burnside had many good reasons to know all about it. When he swung

around a bend to the left the valley grew into a pit two miles wide and he saw ancient cliff dwellings through the black-jack ahead. They ran up for hundreds of feet in the cliffs at the head of the valley and above a big, deep-blue water-hole. Below them unsaddled horses stood in a brush corral under the thick trees.

With a nervous move of his right hand, Burnside slid forward the big black Colt on its broad belt under his coat. He felt of his large sleeves above the wrists, just to make certain that his two stubby-nosed Derringers were there. Two more exactly like them were in snug pockets inside the legs of his boots.

He felt better when he saw a big, sloppy Mexican come to the door of one of the old huts and wave an enormous sombrero at him. Enrique Alberto was the one man he had ever trusted thoroughly. The man's signal now told him that everything was all right, and he spurred his horse into a gallop. At the brush corral he pulled up and swung out of his saddle.

It was perfect. Burnside smiled, but hell was in the air when he hurried on up a steep ledge and came face to face with the Mexican. Enrique's eyes told him that something had gone wrong.

"Don't blame Enrique, yuh scummy rat!" That hard, danger-laden voice behind the Mexican belonged to Jake McKinney, the gang leader. "He's got a .45 aimed at his backbone. Come on in!

BURR!

PURR!

HER!

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It was nice of yuh to send Enrique out here to cook for us an' wait on us like yuh promised, but we didn't drink none of the poisoned whiskey like he fed to the Bud Jackson boys when they pulled that last holdup for yuh eighteen or twenty months ago. Come in, I said!"

Burnside moved forward. He had lost his breath, and all color had left his face. His hands had come up. Jake McKinney stood there with a .45 in his hand and a snarl on his round, wicked face. Old Pop Wheeler was to the man's right. To his left grinned the cold-blooded Dude Henshaw, while Frank Dixon sat at a table of stout rough planks behind them.

Burnside did not see Utah Jack DeSpain and Rube Gore, the other two members of the gang, but there was hell enough facing him here without them.

"What—what," Burnside was finding his voice at last, "is all this talk of poisoned whiskey?"

"Don't start lyin'!" snarled McKinney. "We made a deal to pull that job for yuh. We went more'n that. We agreed to lock old Milt Tilton an' that gal in the vault so that it would be the end of them. Yuh know how that back-fired after we'd spatting yuh down with a shot sack loaded with a dime's worth of smokin' tobacco. We was to get thirty thousan' dollars outa that job an' let yuh claim seventy or eighty was gone. That was, accordin' to yore yarn, so the bank examiners wouldn't catch yuh 'way short in yore books an' crooked dealin's. Well, we got just seven thousan', an' yuh was afraid Tilton an' the gal might talk an' wonder how in hell seventy thousan' got in the bank.

"Then we blow here to wait for things to cool down." The man laughed. "Just like Bud Jackson an' his boys did, an' their bones are back in these holes. Enrique was never sweeter. Even got a big meal cooked for us below. Got that whiskey, too, what'll make yuh feel like yo're drunk when yo're only dyin'. After we was dead yuh'd come an' lug the money back to some safe hole yuh keep outside the bank for nice little deals like this. It didn't work out well this time.

"Take his guns, Pop, an' don't forget them we've heard about up his sleeves an' in his boot legs. Somehow or some

way he's goin' to dig up twenty-three thousan' dollars."

"Better not do any shootin' yet, Jake!" The tall, raw-boned figure of Utah Jack DeSpain scooted into the hut just as Pop Wheeler finished relieving Burnside of all his weapons and stepped away from him. "Sheriff John Hardy's just slipped into the valley. With him is that long-legged bean-pole who jammed the door of the vault on us. Rube Gore's down the valley, trying to see if anybody else is comin'."

"That's good!" McKinney's face had gone white, but his voice was hard and steady. "Maybe Mr. Hardy an' the long-legged fella can sorter help Mr. Burnside dig up that twenty-three thousan'. It's known yuh've got a strong box hid somewhere outside yore one-hoss bank, an' I'm just the dude who'll make yuh scratch 'er up. Get out yore long guns, boys. Hardy's got about as much chance here as either one of us had to get past Saint Peter at the Pearly Gates. Just for the moment, though, yuh had better put Mr. Burnside an' Enrique back there in them holes where we found all them skeletons. Maybe them bones will give 'em somethin' to sorter think about."



BROKEN limbs in the willows had pointed out the way to John Hardy's keen old eyes. Burnside had not been very careful about them when he had gone through the tangle.

The sheriff had his rifle. Hannigan had nothing but his battered old Colt, a weapon close to being worn out, and only a half-dozen cartridges for it. Hardy had glanced at it several times before he took off one of his belts and a six-shooter.

"Take this," he had ordered.

They were now working their way up the valley, shielded by the shadows and blackjack thickets. Finally they halted.

The old sheriff finally nodded. "Somebody's betwixt us an' where we come in, Hard Luck. My ears may be old, but they don't fool me."

They had reached a place where they could see the ancient cliff dwellings, when the first long-ringing report of a rifle came to them. It sounded from a spot over

against the bend in the valley wall to their left.

"Back down the valley!" snapped the sheriff. "Whoever that dude is, he ain't very smart, an' he'll be most shore to think we're goin' on. Yuh generally run away from bullets, yuh know."

"Wait!" Hannigan caught his arm. "You go back. I'll make it on to that clump of bushes ahead. I'll shake the branches, an' he'll just know we're goin' on. It'll give you your chance for a shot if he breaks cover and tries to follow."

"Good idea, gander."

Hannigan hurried on. When he came to the bushes he was like a bull charging through them. Another crash of the rifle came then.

A beat of hoofs started forward across the valley. The sheriff's old rifle was like the fierce, brassy blaring of a cracked trumpet as it roared. It brought a yell, and a few seconds later a horse, with saddle empty and stirrups popping, headed toward the foot of the cliff dwellings.

The sheriff was gone a long time. When he came crawling back up the wash he had an extra pair of belts and six-shooters as well as a long, handsome rifle.

"Yuh can give me back my trouble-stopper," he half-growled as he handed the weapons over to the cowboy. "That was one of the best shots I ever made. Got 'im square through an' through, an' he's worth five thousan' dollars wrapped in a pine box. It was Rube Gore I killed over there."

It was time to leave the wash after that, but there were plenty more of them to use as hiding places until they were getting close to the cliff dwellings. The men up there had the advantage now. They could look down through the trees and see almost everything below, and a fierce firing suddenly broke out.

Bullets came stabbing down among the trees and rocks. There was only one thing for Hannigan and the sheriff to do. They turned like a pair of fleeing jack-rabbits and headed back down the valley. They dropped into a little ravine—without the ghost of a chance of making a two-sided fight of it.

"We ain't goin' at it right," Hannigan spoke between gasps for breath; he was raking away the balls of perspiration

streaming down his face. "They can't get out of here from this end of the valley. Not with horses, anyway. An' you know they ain't goin' out afoot, with the whole country after 'em, even if they could climb out over the cliffs. Let's wait for dark. You can hold that narrow pass down by the creek against all comers, an' some of your possemen somewhere might hear the shootin'."

"An' what'll yuh do?" demanded the sheriff, still panting from his run and mopping perspiration.

"Why, hell!" answered the cowboy. "I'll make it up into the cliffs somehow, an' just drive 'em down to you."

"That's good!" chuckled the sheriff. "I can imagine Jake McKinney an' his bunch runnin' away from one man! Maybe they'll even make a pack-saddle out of their hands an' bring yuh down with 'em to save yuh from walkin' in them run-over boots."

"You may be right," grinned Hannigan. "But I've been hard luck to myself for so long I'd feel better if I could swap it around on somebody else I meet for a change. It might work on Jake."



WHEN darkness settled, Dabro Burnside sat and shook for an hour from one chill after another, in the deep, dark corner of the old room where Jake had penned him. A stub of candle, burning in the center of the room, gave off a ghostly glow. Skeletons stared at him, the rat-gnawed skulls grinning.

Enrique Alberto sat in the corner to his right. Now and then Burnside could see the man lowering his head and hear him praying softly in Spanish. Enrique, he knew, was keeping his eyes closed most of the time, to shut out the ugly picture in front of him.

Placing that candle in the center of the floor and forcing a man to sit and stare at the skeletons of his victims was a dirty trick, just about as mean a trick as one cold-blooded, utterly ruthless devil could play on another. Burnside could recognize Bud Jackson's skull by the tarnished gold teeth in its fleshless mouth. He could not help shuddering when he looked at it, yet it seemed that he could not take his

eyes away from it. The thing was ghastly.

The law north and south of the Mexican Border had never known what had happened to the notorious Bud and his men. They had literally dropped off the face of creation. Enrique Alberto had done a perfect job of it. For a week before the robbery of the bank he had wine and dined them in the cliffs, and had poured their noisy gullets full of the best whiskey money could buy.

Like hellions would, they had wanted a good meal and plenty of drink after the job, when they had come back to the old cliffs with thousands of dollars in easy money tied to their saddles. Not a dime of it had done them any good, for every man had been dead within two hours after Enrique had finished setting out the food and whiskey for them, and then had slipped away to hide until the poison had run its course.

Burnside tried to keep his mind on what was happening right now. He had heard the shots outside. A wild hope had come to him that he might yet escape from Jake McKinney. Backed by plenty of money, he might make a fight of it in court and win—if he had to go to court. No such thing would happen if he could get McKinney and his gang out of it, but there was little chance of that.

He could hear the men cursing and snarling out there. Twice, Burnside had stolen to his feet to look out through a break in the wall to his left, but he could only see down for two hundred feet of space. There was an old crack in the wall to his right, but it was no wider than a man's hand. Given time and something to pick and pry with, a man might work his way out to a narrow ledge, but that was impossible with no tool to work with, and the only thing he could do was sit and wait.

"I'm tellin' yuh we can't stick here like rats in a hole!" Old Pop Wheeler was arguing out there now. "Maybe we ain't seen but two birds down there, but can't one of 'em blow it to hell outa here an' go for help? Rube Gore must be dead or too bad hurt to ride. That leaves only five of us. Five men an' eight broncs, countin' Rube's, Enrique's, an' that banker skunk's. Can't yuh see any way out for us?"

"No, I don't!" barked back McKinney's voice. "I don't even know what in hell you're talkin' about!"

"Then I'll tell yuh yuh ain't run through the lead I have in my forty years of stompin' it out with the law." Wheeler was getting mad. "We'll pile dry brush an' grass on the extra broncs, an' set fire to it. We'll head 'em out through the pass to sweep it clear. We'll draw straws to see who gets which an' what for protection. Enrique an' Burnside are both big enough to stop lead if kept in the saddle in front of a man."

"An' what in the hell," roared McKinney, "becomes of the three of us that ain't got nobody in front of us?"

"There's three extra saddles, ain't they?" Wheeler was stamping the floor. "We'll draw straws for 'em, an' them who gets 'em will hold one up across his belly an' face—an' ride like hell for it. I've rid through damnation like that with a saddle in front of me to turn lead, an' I ain't afraid to ride through it agin."

"Then get ready!" barked McKinney. "We're shootin' our way outa here. Go on down, yuh an' Utah an' Dude, Pop, an' start gettin' them broncs ready to travel. Me an' Frank'll bring down our truck an' them two monkeys back there."

Pop Wheeler and Dude Henshaw must have gone out together. Burnside was sitting there, shivering, when he heard a fierce yell. Something scraped like a banjo string along the outside of the wall beyond the hole overhanging the two hundred feet of space. Burnside jumped to his feet and darted to the hole just in time to see two figures caught by the feet on the end of a long rope and swinging below while the other end of the rope was made fast somewhere high above.

Utah Jack DeSpain was the next to go darting out to see what was wrong, and again a rope whizzed down from somewhere high up there, and DeSpain was hurled out into space and slapped into unconsciousness against the old wall below.

Frank Dixson and Jake McKinney rushed outside a moment later, but they were going out fighting a leaping and-bobbing thing up there on the room above them. Dixson turned to run down the ledge. At the same time he was trying to

fight it out by shooting back over his shoulders. A heavy slug from a .45 caught him through the hips; with a yell of pain, he was down. His six-shooters flew out of his hands as he rolled for almost a dozen yards before he came to a stop and lay still.

Jake McKinney turned and came racing back inside the hut, a man cursing his luck at the top of his voice. He rushed to the doorway of the room where Burnside was now cowering against the wall. A six-shooter filled each of his hands and a white froth was on his lips, while an insane light burned in his eyes.

"They've come over the top of the cliffs!" he half-screamed. "I guess I'm done for, but so are yuh, yuh two rats! Look me in the eye, Burnside! Straight in the eye!"

"No, you don't!" A tall figure had silpiped off the roof and had suddenly appeared in the room behind McKinney, with a six-shooter jamming forward and pressing against the man's spine. "I think the law wants to hang you, an' there ain't no use in wastin' good lead. *Drop your guns!*"



IT WAS all that Dabro Burnside knew of what was taking place for a long time. He remembered a shot, a roaring gash of fire striking at him in spite of the man there behind McKinney with a gun in his back. A bullet splattered into the wall above his head, missing its mark by only a few inches. Then the tall man behind McKinney lifted his six-shooter and knocked the man cold upon the floor.

Dabro Burnside simply fainted from fright. When he opened his eyes old Sheriff John Hardy was in the picture, and possemen were all around him. He found himself handcuffed to Enrique Alberto on one side and Jake McKinney on the other.

"I didn't believe yuh could do it," Hardy was saying that to the long-legged man in the outer room. "It was just too much for one man, Hard Luck, an' still yuh did do it. I heard the shootin' from the pass, an' I heard some of the boys from town comin' down the gorge. The rest was just a matter of comin' on in an' pickin' up. Ain't they purty monkeys?"

"They are, I reckon," Hard Luck Hannigan was laughing out there. "They didn't figure we'd try rushin' 'em, I guess. Anyway, I got some ropes off their saddles an' made my way up here. The rest was just like catchin' spring calves in a roundup corral. How far did you say that cow outfit was from here?"

"What in hell do yuh wanta know for?" John Hardy was growling his best growls now. "When yuh hit Blacksmith Bend, yuh hit pay dirt as far as a job's concerned. For more'n a year I've been lookin' for a good deppity, an' yo're it. Along with that, joybird, there's some rewards yuh an' me are goin' to collect."

A cheer went up out there. Unmindful of Jake McKinney cursing him and blaming him for all of their troubles, Burnside sat staring at Bud Jackson's skull. Somebody had bumped it with a foot. The mouth had sagged open. And to Dabro Burnside, the cheer sounded like it came from the damned thing, like it was enjoying a big belly-laugh at him.



LEFT FORK TO HELL

Honesty might pay on other ranges, but not for a rustler's neighbor, concluded young Val Riley after ten years of poverty. And, with a running iron and a loaded six, he followed a gold-digging dancehall siren's advice—to sign on with the man who had ruined his straight-laced father!



A novelette of a rustler who found himself

By Frank Bonham

CHAPTER ONE

Where the Trail Forks

IT had been different from this in years past. Tom Riley could remember when the beef herds he brought to Dusty had crammed four of the big stockyard pens. He remembered with a sigh the old, easy way cattle buyers used to figure with him.

"Well, Tom, how many you selling?"

"Twelve hundred head. How many you paying?"

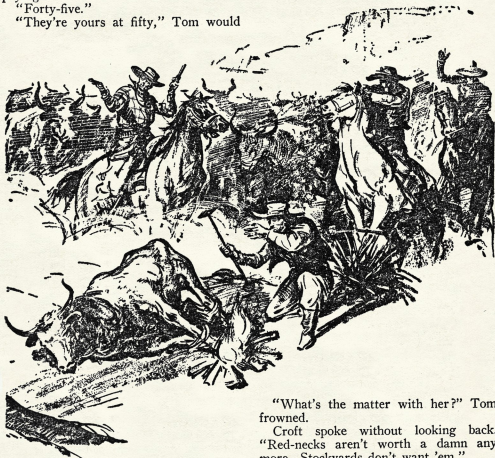
"Forty-five."

"They're yours at fifty," Tom would

the beef-cut, now, with his boy, Val, and Sam Croft, the Dallas buyer, Tom Riley was conscious of amused eyes following them from the top rail of the stock pen.

The little Diamond Link beef herd was almost lost in the pen. One hundred and fifty animals didn't make much of a bulge. Croft rode straight up in the saddle with his face sour, as if he were afraid of being contaminated by Tom's rangy Herefords.

"That heifer," he snapped, pointing. "Give you half price on her, or you can take her back."



say, and the buyer would write out a check for forty-seven fifty.

But it had been many years since Tom had brought in a big Diamond Link herd, or even top-pay cattle. Shoving through

"What's the matter with her?" Tom frowned.

Croft spoke without looking back. "Red-necks aren't worth a damn any more. Stockyards don't want 'em."

Tom started to ask why, but Croft was looking with critical eyes at a two-year-old steer.

"Don't want that one a-tall. Why should I pay freight on two cattle to move

one long-horned devil, when I can ship dehorned stuff for half the price? Shove him out."

Tom signaled wearily, and Val Riley went after the steer on his little cutting pony, to throw it into the hold-up in an adjoining pen. Val's face was flushed with fury. He'd sworn a week ago that he'd pull out if he and his father had to take any buyer's smart-alecky guff like they had last year.

Up on the corral bars, Barney Hines and his boys tried to mask their grins. Hines, flushed with liquor and pride, had just sold eight hundred head of his HEX cattle, every last animal registered, for sixty a head.

Sam Croft pointed at some more cutbacks and Val worked them out. He didn't like steers with heads so long and narrow they could drink out of a milk bottle. He cut down on long-haired animals because the meat was apt to be tough. Finally he rode out of the pen and dismounted.

"I'll give you twenty dollars a head except on the culls," he told Tom curtly.

"Twenty!" Tom looked at Val. Muscles bulged under the boy's sun-darkened jaws.

Croft began to sharpen a pencil with a pearl-handled knife. "But I'm going to have to whack off two dollars, Riley, on brands and earmarks. I'm sorry, but—"

Val Riley cut in hotly. "And mebbeso you don't like the way we comb their hair? What the devil's wrong with the brands?"

"Too big. You've got your Diamond Link all over the shoulder and flank. Cuts down on the value of the hide for leather. The earmarks—well, those gotch-eared, swaller-forked ears just don't make a good appearance in the yard. If I was a meat buyer it wouldn't make any difference to me. But I'm not. I'll feed the brutes on my wheat farm for a year and sell them for beef next year. I can't afford a gamble."

"At eighteen dollars you're copperin' your bets cold," Tom growled. "At that price, I've operated this year at a loss. I can't do it." Tom's eyes, gray and worried, stared at the herd he had laboriously brought to prime.

Croft's lips pursed, and he shrugged. "They're your cattle." Then: "A word of advice, Riley. Why don't you get some

good blood in your herd? I've got nothing against you personal. But when I see a herd of culls like these it sure don't make my blood run any faster. I'm in business to make money. I'm sure of a profit on blooded animals like Hines', here, even if I have to pay to get 'em. Why don't you play it smart?"

Tom Riley felt suddenly tired. As if he hadn't longed for some registered stock these ten years! He knew his kind of cattle were rapidly fading out of the picture. But it took money to buy blooded stock. Five hundred for a single bull, maybe. And these later years he hadn't been able to keep the ends lapping even on tough range stock that required little attention.

He thought of Barney Hines. He and Barney had started out as neighbors, busting wild cattle out of the brakes to build their herds. But Barney had made money, somehow, even in the tough years.

Croft had his fat billfold out and was tapping it against his palm. "You won't do any better, Riley. How about it? I've got some other cattle to look at unless you want to make up your mind right now."

Tom Riley's palms rubbed the faded blue of his levis. He felt like a tired old grizzly cornered by wolves. Without cash he couldn't take his little iron past the cold months.

"Figger it up," he said, at last. "Reckon I'll take it."



WITH twenty-one-hundred and sixty dollars cash in hip pocket, Tom mounted his line-backed dun, and he and Val rode into town. Nothing was said, for a time, and Tom rode with his hat pulled down on his face.

Tom Riley was big, solid and stubborn, like Gray Mountain, under whose looming shadow he had lived most of his life. Tom's hands were like him—or perhaps he was like his hands: strong and slow, but steady. They had few skills, little adroitness, but those things they knew they knew well. Tom knew cattle. He knew how to rope and ride and make honest citizens out of outlaw horses, but the one thing he had never learned was how to make a living on twenty-five sec-

tions of land stocked with bad-blooded cattle.

Suddenly Val spat an angry oath. "Did you see Hines settin' up there grinnin' like a damn monkey? I felt like draggin' him down and rubbin' his ears full of corral dust."

"Let him grin," said Tom. "One day we'll be bringin' in registered beef ourselves."

Derision wrenched at the younger man's mouth. "The first time you said that was ten years ago. We've brought in fewer cattle, and worse cattle, every fall since then."

"The breaks can't all be bad. I got a hunch we're about set for a slide right into some luck." Tom tried to make his eyes slyly meaningful.

Val winced, as if the spectacle of a man so completely blinding himself to the truth were too much for him. There was a deal of difference between son and father, and a deal of likeness as well, but the likeness was mostly physical. Both were built on big, wide-shouldered frames. Val's hair and beard were blue-black, as Tom's had been before he went gray.

But the boy's ways were quick and impulsive, where Tom Riley had always been slow and dogged. He'd found out early that devil-may-care manners went a long way with the ladies. Val Riley's eyes were bold, his smile quick, and his mustache trimmed by transit. He'd had a dozen girls, and every one he'd thought was The One. This time it was Lola, down at the Pastime Bar.

Val cocked his weight slantwise in the old Tipton tree. "You've been havin' those hunches as far back as I can remember," he said. "All I can see right now is that we've got a place for every cent Croft paid you. Salt, winter hay, forest tax—"

Impatience rankled in Tom Riley's eyes. "Maybeso you can tell me a better way to run the ranch," he suggested tartly.

"Maybe I can! Barney Hines—"

Tom scowled. "You can forget about Hines. I'll never get rich on his kind of money, if we starve first."

"He's a sharp-tradin' hombre, all right; a double-crossin', loan-callin' son if one ever lived. But he's got a backlog that's sledged him over a lot of tough spots. He

ain't the only one that's used it. We could use it too. I know a dozen men in this county that would be as flat as us if they hadn't."

Tom scowled, coming stiffly up in the saddle. "If you're talkin' about maverickin'—"

"I am! Hell, I don't guess the cattleman ever lived that wouldn't put his brand on a maverick calf he found close to his range."

"You're ridin' two feet from one such cattleman right this minute. Maybe I've had my share of trouble, but I've got the respect of every man in Dusty for shootin' square with my neighbors."

"You've got their respect until you turn your back. Then you get their snickers. If we had back every steer Barney Hines ever mavericked off us, we'd have to hire hands to help work 'em."

"What do you want me to do? Swear out a warrant for him?"

"I'm not calling him a cattle rustler. He's smart enough to know other men are ridin' the rims watching his range for early weaners, and he does the same. If we had a brain in our heads we'd be doing it too."

Tom Riley said, his mouth hard, "I'm too old to learn cow-stealin', Val. And you're too young."

"Who's talkin' about rustlin'?" Val's black eyes had angry glints. "If you find a wallet in the street you pick it up, because if you don't somebody else will. You don't call that stealin', do you?"

"I'm talking about claiming cattle that ain't mine. In my language, that's larceny."

Val's lips tightened, checking an angry reply. For a moment they rode in silence. Then: "I told you last year I was gettin' out if we didn't draw a decent price. Unless you're willing to play the game my way, I'm making that stick."

Tom wouldn't look at him. "A man don't want to go off half-cocked that-away," he said quietly. "A lot of things are liable to happen he don't want to be called responsible for. You'd best think on that a spell."

"I've thought on it—quite a spell. Maybe you're willing to go on sliding downhill. I'm not. I want a few things out of life. Spendin' money, decent clothes, a

paying ranch—things I won't get waitin' for the sheriff to auction the iron off under our noses."

He had drawn rein, and now his father pulled his horse around to face him. Tom's eyes were wide, his lips pulled tight, and a mixture of emotions lay in his features. After a moment Val Riley laid a rein across the neck of his horse.

"I'll be around later and pick up my stuff." He headed back and swung down at the Pastime Bar. He saw his father take the side road out of town. Tom Riley was chary of emotional display, but he sat his saddle like a man who is dead tired.

CHAPTER TWO

Orejana from Hell

IT WAS growing dusk, and Val had to wait an hour before Lola made her appearance. He had a lot of time for thinking, and his reflections were not pleasant. He knew he was leaving Tom in a tough spot.

Val had killed three drinks and was nursing a fourth when the big idea came to him. He sat up straight. It was as simple as falling off a log! He'd have his way and so would Tom.

Then a door opened in back and Lola was coming across the room to him. Val's thoughts went tumbleweeding. He threw down the rest of his drink and stood up. He was surprised to find his legs a little unsteady. Sight of Lola didn't make them any steadier.

He knew most of the young bucks in town were in love with Lola Steele. Knew, too, that she hadn't bought with her own money those diamond ear-rings and the ruby pendant she wore like a red star against the tawny velvet of her breast. But he had her promise that when he was making good money a plain gold ring would be all she wanted.

She came across the darkening bar toward him, a slender, dark-haired girl with a face and body that took a man's breath. A strain of Latin blood gave tawny-ness to her skin, carmine to her lips, fire to her temper.

She held out her hands to Val. He gripped them until she flinched a little,

looking down at the slimness and beauty of her and wanting to crush her against him.

She laughed softly, a little breathless. "Will it be like that after we're married?" she asked.

Val drew her into a chair. "Worse," he said, "because every day I have to wait for you I want you twice as much."

A little frown drew between the girl's dark eyes. She shook her head. "If you wanted me so much," she said, "you wouldn't wait so long."

Val grinned, leaning closer. "Maybe it won't be so long now, Lola."

Lola shrugged. "If I had a diamond for every time you've said that, I wouldn't have fingers enough to wear them."

"This time I'm not kidding. I've got plans. The Diamond Link's set to spraddle out *muy pronto*."

Lola's lips were scornful. "The Diamond Link will never get any bigger. You know that. And if you weren't a fool you'd realize it and get out on your own."

Val reached for her hand. "I've been a fool, Lola, but I'm not any more. You watch us. We'll brand more calves next spring than we have any roundup for five years."

Lola Steele looked narrowly at him, and finally she leaned on her elbows on the table, chin propped on small fists. "I think you're serious! How are you going to do it?"

Val had enough whiskey in him to want to talk, enough judgment left not to. He winked, pinched her cheek. "You wait around a little while and you'll see."

"You're going to buy somebody out!"

Val shook his head. A foolish, alcoholic grin still held his lips. The grin faded as she caught a breath.

"Not—not rustling!"

He thought there was more excitement than horror in her voice. But somehow the words hit him like a blow over the heart.

"No! Lord, no," he said hastily. "Can you keep a secret?"

"Let me try."

"All right, here it is: Barney Hines has rode the rims watching for Diamond Link *orejanas* for twenty years, and he's grown fat on them. Now it's going to be turnabout. His HEX beeves are going

to help us re-stock our own range."

"Mavericking," Lola murmured, sitting back. "How did you get Tom Riley to consent to that?"

"He didn't. But I'll be range-brandin' calves right along. He'll never see 'em till spring. And then he won't know but what they're late ones we missed this fall."

Lola's eyes looked hard and bright as ice. "Tom Riley's an old fool. You ought to be running the ranch, Val, instead of him. Some day you will."

Something in the hard brightness of her eyes disturbed him. He shook his head. "Dad's not a fool. Just old-fashioned as hell. I'd rather see him makin' good out there than own the outfit myself."

"But some day you will be boss of the Diamond Link. And you'll build it up bigger, even, than Barney Hines' ranch—for us."

"You bet I will, honey—you bet I will. For us."

country, plowed by deep, parallel canyons. Some of those canyons were sheer-walled, with countless feeder gulches in which wild cattle might evade rope and iron for two or three years. In scopes of salt cedar, live oak and piñon they were impossible to rope.

Val rode the rims for two hours, with a saddle iron in his boot and larceny in his heart. He had begun to think that the way of the mavericker was not easy when, at the foot of a long talus, he picked out a flash of horns. Swinging his pony sharply, he took the rubbled slide at a lope.

He came into the shallow stream-bed to see a bull, a cow and a yearling bull calf crash through a motte of cedar and head up-canyon. Bull and cow wore Hines' shoulder HE and flank X, but with a jolt of excitement Val saw that the calf was unbranded.

Val's pony gave him his throw and gave it to him quick. He barely had time to slip the rope-thong from horn when the

Val Riley, in this story, finds that a man's cattle are his own—only if he's tough enough to hold onto them! Another dramatic proof of this is given by Walt Coburn in his smashing novel of a hell-bound trail-drive—"That Bloody Sangria Trail!" in the current DIME WESTERN! Buy it—read it—today!

But later, as he rode the dark trail home, remembrance of the words gave him a stab of remorse, because coveting his father's ranch seemed too much like coveting his neighbor's wife. . . .

◆ ◆ ◆

EARLY the next morning Val saddled up, told Tom he was going to look for a mare and colt they had missed for several days, and headed across the scrub-timbered hills toward Barney Hines' range. The reconciliation had been wordless, but Tom understood that Val was not going through with his threat of quitting.

Hines had eighty thousand acres of patented land across the Cuchillos. In between the two outfits lay fifteen miles of forest reserve Hines leased from the government for winter range. It was rough

horse's knees were bumping the yearling's rump. Val made his throw and the pony sat back.

Pigging string in his teeth, Val left the saddle, bunching three wildly kicking feet before the maverick could get up. A little way up the canyon, the cow and bull stopped and watched as he gathered dry sticks for a branding fire.

His hands were nervous, sweaty, while he waited for the iron to heat. Muscles taut, he kept his ears keened for the scrape of shod hoofs on the rims above.

Take it easy, he told himself. This ain't rustling. It's turnabout. It's for all the cattle wearin' a HEX that ought to be sportin' a Diamond Link.

He burned the brand deep, the calf bawling with each panting breath while the hair smoked and the flesh cooked black. Val earmarked the animal and whipped the pigging string loose.

The calf went up-canyon like a bull heading for water. Val coiled his rope as he loped after it. It was as he started to turn the calf back that the thought hit him. Like a bull heading for water. Or—*like a calf heading for milk!*

"Hell's afire!" he gasped. He'd branded an unweaned calf! Wild horses couldn't separate cow and calf until the yearling had been corral-weaned. That would take two or three days. He couldn't take them back with him. Couldn't even leave them here, roped to trees. Too much danger either way. Not to mention the scene if Tom caught on.

Gradually a stream of logic melted through the ice of panic that filled him. Maybe the calf was weaned. Maybe the old bull just hadn't driven it off yet.

So he forgot the calf and went after its long-legged, longhorned mammy to see if she were dry. The cow had a start, now, that even his top roping pony could not overcome except after a long chase. For two hours Val took punishment he'd never dreamed of. Catclaw raked his hands and face. Buckthorn ripped his denim jumper to ribbons, put long scratches in his brown bullhide chaps. Up precipitous banks, through tangles of live oak and brush, down cutbanks where it was a toss-up as to whether the horse would break a leg.

Finally he took a chance and caught the slobbering brute on a steep talus. Braced for the shock, his horse was dragged a hundred feet down the slope before the grounded Hereford stopped rolling. Val ran down the rope before she could get her wind.

He felt the bag, and, dizzy with relief, fell back. She was dry. He'd missed being an out-and-out rustler by maybe three weeks. . . .

He didn't catch much sleep that night. He heard old Tom snoring, and thought maybe there was something in having an easy conscience, even if you were poor.

But the next day, when he rode back for his forgotten saddle iron, he began to feel better. He'd brought about thirty dollars, maybe forty, into the herd by that morning's work. That was worth a few scratches and a little risk.

For the next two weeks he worked Barney Hines' winter range like a dog

hunting fleas. His success took his breath a little; almost, it scared him.

Forty mavericks! Cows, bulls, calves. Some of them so old and wild he guessed they had never seen a man before. Barney Hines had grown so big he didn't have time to hunt wild cattle that weren't worth half what his blooded stock brought. But they were gold-plated *buenos* to Val Riley.

Yet he had a half-suspicion that it couldn't last. He was right.

CHAPTER THREE

Hire for an Outcast

VAL and Tom were working in the barn with a lame horse one morning when Barney Hines and Lear Norton, his foreman, rode into the yard. Tom Riley stood in the doorway and called.

The HEX men came over and dismounted. Hines didn't offer his hand. He was a big, sloppily built man with a red face webbed with blue veins. Too much success, too little work, and too much liquor were his trouble. He wore gray woolen riding breeches and a gray coat, with big, wrinkle-roweled silver spurs on his yellow boots. Under the stiff brim of his Stetson, his face scowled.

"What's the good word?" Tom Riley asked him.

"The word ain't good," Hines snapped. "I'm missin' about half a hundred calves."

Tom's gray brows frowned. From Hines, he looked to Lear Norton.

Tom said finally, "Not registered stuff?"

Val stood there behind him, trying not to let the pumping of his heart show in his face, as he watched Hines' mouth drag sourly on a cigar.

"No, thank God. A lot of mixed stuff. But good beef stock, nevertheless. I've been makin' a range count, and I'll be damned if I've seen a quarter of the mavericks I know were on my east pasture a month ago."

Norton leaned hip-shot against the thick mud door-jamb. He was a chunky redhead with tawny eyes like a coyote's and a face that was fat and surly. His red sideburns came down to the angle of his jaws.

"Counted over seventy mavericks on the forest myself, the last six months," he said. "Didn't bring them in, because we don't want to mix them with the registered. Now Mr. Hines's got a chance to sell all the mixed stuff in a block. And we find a couple thousand dollars worth of beef missing."

There was an instant's pause, and the three men looked at Tom Riley as if expecting him to speak. Thumbs hooked through belt-loops, he regarded them frowningly.

"Bad luck," he said finally. "But why are you telling me about it?"

Hines took the cigar from his teeth and held it a few inches away from his mouth. "I was just wondering," he remarked, "if you've been working my range, lately."

The remark fell between them like a bright, challenging blade. With no more warning than a jutting of his jaw muscles, Tom Riley went after him. His fist hit Hines in the face with a meaty, chopping sound. The cattle boss went back with a grunt, a look of dumb shock on his features. He floundered awkwardly as Riley's fist pounded into his slack belly. He would have gone down, but for the arm Lear Norton thrust out to support him.

"Now, by the Lord!" Tom Riley gritted, standing there with his big fists doubled as if uncertain whether to keep on. "You may have a bag full o' money and a belly full o' whiskey, Barney Hines, but you look like the same rim-ridin' long-looper you always were, to me. Next time you get to runnin' off at the mouth, you'd best come a-smokin', because I ain't the man to swallow it. I ain't never mavericked a calf in my life, though I reckon I'm the only man in Dusty that can say it. And if I ever hear tell of you makin' whiskey talk about me—I'm telling you out in front, mister, there'll be a funny-lookin', red-faced hide hangin' on my fence right soon."

Barney Hines had neither the breath nor the guts to make reply. Norton helped him into the saddle, and a moment later they rode back down the trail.

It was not until he turned to go back into the barn that Tom Riley saw Val standing there with features as white as

tallow. Val started to turn, but Tom's hand shot out and held him.

"By George, you didn't—" His tongue dragged to a stop, as he saw the truth in the boy's face.

Guilt was the prod that sent anger churning through Val's brain. "Yes, by hell, I did!" he retorted. "And why not? You just said, yourself, that Hines has mavericked plenty on us. It's fair play, ain't it?"

"It's coward's play. If ever I get proof of Hines' long-loopin', I'll take a revenge that'll stick. But I ain't going to skulk around like a yellow coyote afraid of the daylight." He took a deep breath, and began to roll the sleeves back from his stout forearms. "You can pack your war-bag now, Val. But first I've got a fatherly duty to attend to. I ain't licked you since you stole a pair of spurs from Johnson's Hardware. But I reckon I ain't too old to give you another lacin' right now."

White-lipped, Val watched him come on. Abruptly, Tom's hand lashed out. Knuckles scraped Val's chin, sending him back against the adobe bricks. He bounced off, filled with fury, but when he cocked his fist he found he hadn't the power to throw the punch.

"Don't be afeared o' hurtin' me," his father taunted. "You wasn't afeared of me bein' railroaded to the pen for something I never done."

He struck again, mashing Val's lips against his teeth. Then once more—stabbing a fist into his belly, and straightening him with an uppercut that snapped the boy's head back.

Val Riley's knees buckled. He found himself on his hands and knees, blood dripping from his nose. Through a humming in his ears, he heard his father mutter, "Yaller clean through! God! That I should have sired such a cull!"



VAL left the ranch an hour later, hating Tom Riley as he had never hated any man. Yet he could not prod his mind into sorting all his various grievances. Being treated like a kid was perhaps what galled him most. It was the thanks he got for trying to help the old fool to help himself. He saw now where

they had two distinct trails to follow. They had reached the fork two weeks ago, and he'd been blind to think he could find a middle path they could both tread.

In the Pastime, that night, he talked with Lola about what to do next.

"*Pobrecito!*" she murmured. "Your father is a fool, and worse—a blind fool. But tomorrow we'll be glad it happened."

"But it shore looked like we were goin' good for a while," Val muttered. "I'll bet, by heck, he doesn't even round them strays up next spring. And I know two more mavericks that won't be grazin' hereabouts much longer. You and me, Lola; we're getting out."

The girl's lips tightened. "Not without money," she told him.

"I'd be willing to scratch for a while,"

Val said. "What can I do here—take a job with Hines, buckin' the old man?"

"If you have to. Or with Ad Stouton, on the Bar L Slash Syndicate."

The liquor Val had consumed since hitting town gnawed sourly in his belly. His mouth was ugly. "Sometimes," he said, "I think you're more concerned with what I've got in my pocket than with me."

Lola's Spanish eyes flashed with angry sparks. Then, from the faro table in back, someone called her.

Val glanced. It was Barney Hines. Hines had been here since early afternoon, drinking with Lear Norton and Chris Hanley, his top bronc-snapper. Ad Stouton, Bar L Slash Syndicate foreman, was with them, a winning stack of chips at his elbow. A faro game had been going on for over an hour, but now the house dealer stood uncertainly behind his chair.

"Come over and wrangle these cards!"

Hines called. "Maybe a pretty filly in the game will change my luck."

Lola started to rise, but Val's fingers clutched her arm. He was staring at the HEX boss' loose-mouthed red features.

"Tell the lard-gutted slob to go to hell."

Lola's fingers disengaged his grip. "I wish I could!" she breathed. "But it's my job to deal if they want me to. I'll get away when I can."

Val sat there throughout the long evening, drinking beer and putting a stubborn wall between his mind and the Diamond Link. For two hours Lola dealt

faro to the cattlemen. Stouton ended ahead of everyone but the house. Afterwards, there were drinks. Hines and Stouton and Chris Hanley left soon after. But the red-sideburned Norton remained with Lola. Val got the impression that he was the subject of their conversation.

Jealousy began to burn along Val's veins. Norton had always been too attentive to Lola, and she seemed to like his loud-mouthed brand of hoorawing. Then at last both Lola and Norton came over to him. The stare he gave Hines' ramrod was not friendly, but Lear Norton grinned and shook his hand.

"I told Lear you're through at the Diamond Link," Lola said to Val.

Val bristled. "That's kinda my own damned business, ain't it?"

Lola shook her head. "It's mine, too. And Lear thinks he can help you get a stake."

Norton licked a cigarette and lighted it. "I've got a job for a rope-handly rannihan, Riley. How'd you like to be strayman on a little job I've got in mind?"

"Little late for ropin', ain't it, with roundups finished a month ago?"

"This is a different kind of roundup," Norton drawled. "You see the kind of bets Ad Stouton was a-makin' tonight? Plumb sizable, for a sixty-a-month syndicate jigger. Barney had a reason for gettin' into a game with him. He's got it figured out, now, that Stouton's been workin' our range instead of your old man."

"How are you going to prove anything if all you're missing is *orejanas*?"

Norton's yellowish eyes were narrow. "We're workin' a hunch that he's makin' himself some Syndicate dogies out of HEX weanlin's. Savvy? He's holdin' cows and calves on his forest until he can wean the calves. Then brandin' 'em, and driving the cows back home. If we could catch him at that—"

Val rubbed his chin. "It won't be easy done."

Norton nodded. "Correct. That's why Barney's willing to pay a hundred pesos for one night's work. There's risk in it. Plenty. If we get caught on Stouton's range we'll have to talk fast to explain ourselves out of trouble. Or he may have gun-guards around his weanin' pens."

"A little danger wouldn't stop Val," Lola said, and the flash of her black eyes put a ramrod down his back.

"That's what I thought," Lear Norton said. "What do you say, Riley?"

"When's this job going to come off?" Val asked.

"Tomorrow night. Pay in advance."

A reckless stream of excitement intoxicated Val. His voice was husky. "All right. I'll ride with you."

Lear Norton's hand came out of his hip pocket. He stood up, gripped Val's hand.

"Knew I could count on you," he told him. "See you tomorrow night, right here."

When his hand pulled away, Val felt something in his palm, and looked down to see a folded yellow bill. Norton left. Val started to pocket the bill, hurriedly, but Lola's slim, strong fingers took it and she slipped it into the bosom of her black evening dress.

"That's our traveling fund," she said severely, "and no gambler is going to get it. You won't see that money again until we're ready to buy stage tickets. Now you go down to the hotel and get some sleep."

CHAPTER FOUR

A Maverick Comes Home.

BY TEN the next night Val was in a savage, raw-nerved mood against the whole world. Tom Riley had always told him that a man could tell whether or not a woman was good for him by the way he acted when he was with her. By that standard, Lola Steele was poison. He fought with her in the evening because she'd been somewhere with Lear Norton all day. He had a notion to demand his hundred dollars back, but wisely refrained. He had a hankering to down about a quart of whiskey. But he decided against that in the interests of clear thinking for the job ahead.

At ten o'clock Norton came for him, and his jumpiness, instead of ending, intensified until he felt like a stick of dynamite hunting a lighted fuse.

Chris Hanley and three other HEX cowboys rode with them as they left town

and jogged up Mineral Canyon. The dry stream-bed, following pitted cliffs that climbed raggedly a hundred feet from the canyon floor, mounted sharply, with constant turns, into the timber. At one point the trail passed within a half mile of the Diamond Link ranchhouse. He thought of what Tom would say about his going out on a job like this. "Like a damn' night-rider!" he'd snort.

Higher the trail climbed, leaving the bottom of the canyon. They topped rim-rock and for an hour rode a saw-toothed ridge west, until it sloughed off into Box Canyon. Val heard Norton and Hanley talking as they came down into the silent, dark canyon. They broke off as he came up to them. Norton turned to Val.

"We aim to work this canyon as a starter," he said. "Best place in the world to manufacture dogies is up yonder a mile or two. One fence would hold the calves. Your job, Riley, is to set here and keep your ears peeled for anybody following us. If you hear anything, fire two shots. That'll give us time to find a trail up the cliff."

Val nodded. "How long will you be?" Over his shoulder, as he rode off, Norton said, "Maybe an hour."

Val Riley did not dismount. He sat motionless for perhaps fifteen minutes. Then he went at a slow walk up the canyon.

Something about this deal stank like a bloated cow-carcass. Somebody was using him for a catspaw. He wasn't greenhorn enough to believe that Ad Stouton would try to wean any of Hines' cattle this close to Hines' range. Lear Norton knew better than that, too. Norton was playing a little game of his own.

Two miles up, he saw a small fire flash through the trees. He heard cows bawling. In a small rock corral, about twenty cattle were bunched in a corner. Norton and Hanley worked over a downed steer, a squatting puncher tended the irons, and the other pair prepared to rope out a fresh animal.

It was obvious to Val Riley that the cattle had been held here for two days, at the least. He rode so close, keeping in the trees that came right up to the wall of the branding pen, that he could see Norton's cherry-red running iron tracing over a Syndicate Bar L Slash. He burned

a single downstroke, parallel to the standing part of the L. He extended the Bar on through the L, then laid a smoking line parallel to this one. Now he had changed the Bar L to an HE, by the addition of three lines. He stepped to the steer's flank and with a single stroke turned a Slash into an X.

Chris Hanley released the brute. The ropemen brought another steer. For a moment Val held indecisive, wanting to walk in and beat the ears off Lear Norton for getting him into a scrape like this. It was only an instant he hesitated, but while he carried a gun roared from the wall of the canyon, and the fire leaped into showering sparks.

"Stand your hands, boys!" That was Ad Stouton's voice breaking through the surf-roar of milling cattle. "We'll make this a real brandin' party if you crowd us."

Lear Norton dropped the iron and stood up. The others, blocked on three sides by men sliding down the rimrock, followed his lead.

Back in the piñons Val Riley watched while they came into the corral, Ad Stouton, and Sheriff Pat Akers, and a dozen others. From a cove of catclaw walked a lanky cowman who carried a long buffalo gun—Tom Riley.

Val felt the blood surge to his head, dizzying him, then slough away to leave him shaking. And suddenly he wanted only one thing—to get out. Oddly, the thought of personal danger didn't enter his head. He was thinking of Tom helping to capture a pack of brand-blotters and finding his son in the crowd. . . .

He wheeled the pony and gave it the steel. He had to cross a fire-lighted strip of bare ground to reach the trail. As he shot across it, Ad Stouton saw him and snapped his Winchester to his shoulder.

Val felt the shock like a sharp jolt in his side. Bent low across the horn, he rode as he had never ridden. He shot down the canyon so fast that he never knew when pursuit stopped. On down Box Canyon he raced, shuffling his memory for a trail that would take him out of here fast.

After a while he began to feel a hot, twisting pain in his side. It was like a crab hanging there, filling the spot with poison.

As he rode, he reached inside his shirt and jammed his handkerchief into the hole just above his hip.

He reached Dusty around midnight. By now the fever of his wound had touched his brain, making him giddy. He tethered his horse at a deserted rack. Then he slipped around to the back of the Pastime Bar.



HE HAD been waiting in Lola's room for forty-five minutes when he heard her coming down the hall. In the darkness he sat on the bed, watching her as she struck a match and lifted the chimney of the lamp. Then she turned.

"Val!" Her face went chalky under its heavy makeup. She stood with one hand against her throat.

"Think you're seeing a ghost?" His grin was ghastly. "Well, I'm not one, though I may look it. That little job you got me, with your friend Norton—"

"What happened?" She shut the door, and put her back to it.

"Stouton jumped us with a posse. Somebody must have tipped them off. Norton lied to us. It was a brand-blottin' job! Barney Hines was back of it. I wish to God that Hines had been there!"

"How did you get away?" Her voice had a curiously detached sound.

He pulled up his shirt to show her the crude bandage he had made. "That's how I got away. With bullets proddin' my trail. The slug went on through, but— Have you got any alcohol or sweet oil? Don't dare go to a doctor."

She stirred from the door. Bringing cotton and a bottle of cologne, she made him lie on his side on the bed. She took a little gold knife from her purse and heated the blade over the lamp chimney.

He could see her face as she worked. There was none of the flinching he would have expected from a girl. Her jaws were set hard and her eyes were narrow. She had a job to do, and she did it as coolly as though she were dealing cards.

When the job was almost done, they heard the posse coming into town. Horses stomped in the street and men's voices came as a low, muffled sound shot through

with an occasional cry. Pale, sick with loss of blood, Val struggled to his feet.

"Got to get out there," he muttered. "Maybe Norton won't talk. If he doesn't, they'll be huntin' down the man that got away. Best alibi for me is to act natural."

Lola snuffed out the lamp. "If anyone wants to know, I'll say you were drunk; that I put you in my room to sober up."

Val thought of how that would sound to Tom Riley. His son, sobering up in a dance hall girl's room. The thought came to Val that all the grief of these last weeks had been on Lola's account. It was to buy things for her that he had wanted money so badly. It was her friend, Lear Norton, who had got him into this scrape. Val Riley had a small, vagrant wish to be back on the Diamond Link, working hard and sleeping nights.

In the street, they were untying the five prisoners. Val mixed in the crowd. Suddenly he was conscious of a man's gaze upon him. Looking around, he saw Tom staring at him.

Tom growled, "You look like the mornin' after a quart of bad whiskey. What's the matter? Been drunk ever since you left?"

Val put a grin on his lips. "Just about. What's all the ruckus?"

"Barney Hines overstepped hisself. Norton and some HEX punchers tried to alter the brands on two dozen Syndicate cows tonight. Stouton got a tip that the job was going to come off. Akers swore me in as deppity. Smart business man, that Hines. Reckon he can talk loud enough to get out of this?"

Val's heart thumped weakly, and he leaned against the wall by the jailhouse door. "Wonder who tipped Stouton off?"

"I don't know. But he says it cost him five hundred for the information."

Tom had to go over and take charge of the prisoners' horses, then, and it was thus that Val was standing alone when Sheriff Akers led his men into the jail. Lear Norton hesitated, as he saw Val standing there. For one long second, the boy was looking through a door into hell. Then Norton grinned.

"Relax, kid," he growled. "She's your filly. But handle her with a spade bit. Damned if I don't think she sold us out!"

The puncher behind Norton prodded

him through, and Val went slowly down the steps to where Lola Steele stood in the crowd. He took her arm in a grip that made her gasp. "We're goin' back to your room," he said. "Got some things to ask you. . . ."

She was defiant, angry-eyed, when he faced her in the small bedroom. "What's got into you?" she snapped.

"Maybeso some sense. I'm wondering who sold us down the river tonight."

"How would I know?"

Val turned abruptly and yanked open the top drawer of her bureau. He went through it swiftly. Then he shoved it back and yanked open the next drawer.

Lola was upon him, then. "What do you think you're doing? If you don't get out—"

Under layers of fluffy pink feminine things, Val found it—a little roll of banknotes held by a rubber band. Lola snatched at it, but he thrust her roughly back.

He counted the money. "Five hundred dollars," he breathed. "So it was you."

There was something feline about the flare of her eyes, the way her lips pulled back from her small white teeth. "All right!" she snapped. "You were ready to take a risk to put a knife into Stouton's back. Now don't blame me because you got what you were asking for."

"You lyin' little hell-cat!" Val gritted. "You let me think it was a legitimate job. Lord, that I could have seen an angel in a she-devil like you! But I can't say the old man didn't warn me."

She took the money from him, flounced to the dresser and thrust it back in its place. "You think so much of the old mossback," she said sarcastically, "why don't you go back to him?"

"Maybe I will," Val said. "If I haven't burned too many bridges already."

Lola's smile was like a smear of acid. "And while you're doing it, you can tell him this for me: That I'm waiting for the two thousand dollars he got from his stock. That if I don't have it in a week I'll see his son in jail for cattle-rustling. I think the sheriff would like to know about the bullet wound you're carrying."

Val was rigidly silent, feeling hatred run through him like a hot flux. Suddenly, he was going toward her. But Lola Steele did not try to evade him. She was staring

at the door, which had swung open. Someone said, "Take it easy, son. She ain't worth goin' to the gallows for."



VAL'S head swiveled. The tightness ran out of his body. To Tom Riley, he said, "Well, now you know. I'm the one that got away. I guess you can take me to the *juzgado* as well as anybody."

"Turned in my badge five minutes ago," said Riley. "I thought you had better sense, Val, than to get mixed up with a baggage like this."

"Be careful," Lola sniffed. "Two thousand is probably all you want to pay."

Tom's face was like gray granite. "That's blackmail."

Lola shrugged. "You name it. I'll leave it to you to decide whether you'd rather pay up or see Val go to Santa Fé."

"I haven't got two thousand. There's only four hundred left after paying all my winter debts."

"You've got some cattle left. There's still a buyer or two in town."

Val broke in angrily. "You can both forget it. I wouldn't let dad buy my way out of jail if he did have the money. And I sure won't see him sell his range stock to save my hide. I got myself into this."

Lola spat an unladylike curse.

Tom Riley's hand thumped his son's back. "I was waitin' to hear you say that! I wouldn't have bought your freedom if you'd let me."

Val frowned, his eyes puzzled. But he still had some things on his chest that had to come off. "I'm ready to admit I was wrong," he told Tom. "You've got to follow one trail, and not try to keep a foot on both. But I'm not sayin' you were a hundred percent right. You let Hines bulldoze you a dozen ways. We could have caught him maverickin' if we'd laid traps. We could have raised hell when he let his

stock drift into our winter pasture in the middle of summer. You turned the other cheek so often you've got yourself dizzy."

Tom Riley frowned, "I guess I have. But I'm thinking we could work it out different if you'll come back."

"I'll come back," Val said. "But it may be two years. Anyway, I'll have enough hair-bridles made to last us a spell."

"You ain't going to prison." Tom shook his head.

Lola lifted her chin. "Isn't he? You've forgotten about me, in your little get-together. Unless I get that money—"

Tom Riley advanced upon her, until she fell back, frightened by the glare in his steel-gray eyes. "I'll tell you what you're going to do," he said. "You're going to keep your pretty little mouth shut, or you're going to have a Santa Fé address yourself! It's bad taste to make blackmail threats in front of witnesses. I can go across the street to the jail and reserve you a cell right now, if I'm a mind to."

"You don't dare!" Lola gasped. "They'd put Val in, too."

Tom nodded. "That'd be bad all around," he agreed. "It looks like you and us can't make a deal a-tall. Come, Val. Time we was gettin' back to the ranch."

Suddenly Val Riley grinned. He picked up his hat, tipped it gallantly to the girl. "So long, Lola. Right behind you, pardner," he said.

Tom poked his head back into the room just before he shut the door. "Tell you what, ma'am. You get in touch with Barney Hines. Tell him you're ready to swear to the sheriff that Norton told you he was making the raid on Hines' orders. Hines ought to be good for a couple o' thousand anyway. These jaspers that ride the rims are suckers for such deals. They ain't got the room to refuse. But us poor, dumb fellers, I guess we ain't got the savvy to make a deal with smart little gals like you!"

THE END



At Tres Jacales, on the Mexican side, the entire fighting force of the Olquin band lay in ambush.



Terror of the Rio Grande

By Ralph C. Schoenfeld

Ranger Hughes left a bloody trail across the pages of Texas history and helped build the state to greatness—with fists and guns and guts!

FOR more than a quarter of a century John R. Hughes matched his wits—and his guns—against the deadliest bandits in the Texas-Mexico border country. And, at the trail's end, he counted the corpses of two of Mexico's most ruthless outlaw bands, and found himself unscathed.

The famous Ranger Captain was born in Illinois in the late '50s. At the age of fourteen he left home for Indian Territory, where he appeared as a tall, well-knit youth, quiet and soft spoken, and was promptly adopted into the Osage tribe. Five years later, after he had learned Indian ways, and the fine points of riding and shooting, Hughes migrated West to Liberty Hill, Texas.

In the bottom of a twisted, rugged canyon Hughes set up a horse ranch, and prospered almost at once. Wild stallions roamed the mountains by the hundred. The neighboring ranchers had stock to trade, or bad ones for the young rider to gentle. Hughes accumulated a great herd, took on additional riders. Then an organized rustler band swept through the country. Overnight, Hughes' herd dwindled. Finally his favorite stallion, Moscow, disappeared.

"That's where those gents made a mistake—a bad one," the young ranger said, as he quietly took the trail.

Hughes returned with Moscow. Two of the rustlers were lodged in a New Mexico jail. Four more were stretched out on the Staked Plains.

This sudden justice was fine for the ranchers, but it made Hughes a marked man. Outlaw friends of the rustlers swore vengeance, and a man named Roberts was selected for the job. He promptly declared his intentions of killing Hughes.

A friendly Texas Ranger heard the outlaw's threats, and rode out to warn the rancher. He arrived at dawn, after an all night ride, and finding Hughes' cabin deserted, lay down in his bed to rest. Before he had time to fall asleep Roberts appeared and, mistaking ranger for rancher, opened fire.



THE ranger came up fighting, and in the end Roberts was driven off, slightly wounded. When Hughes returned, the ranger told his story and recited the necessity of killing Roberts. Hughes took the trail at once.

Roberts headed for the outlaw country, where he had protection, but Hughes clung, leech-like, in his wake. In the end he found the gunman and shot him.

But Roberts had friends on both sides of the Border. The wild bunch on the North, and the Mexicans, under the Carrasco and Olquin bandit brothers on the South, began a series of raids on Hughes' ranch.

And it was at this point that Captain Jones of Company D., Texas Rangers, visited Hughes.

"You have to fight the outlaws anyway," said the Captain. "So you might just as well get paid for it."

Hughes grasped the captain's hand, and with the exception of six months, when he was a bullion guard, accepted a lifetime job.

The Carrascos holed up in the Big Bend country of the Rio Grande. They were the outgrowth of an early Spanish convict colony, a mixture of soldier, convict and Indian, murderous and cruel to an insane extreme, yet with it all, crafty and cunning. Robbery, murder, and extortion were their specialties, and they had plenty of followers. Everyone was all for them, or kept their mouths shut. Talking against the Carrascos was suicide.

Thus it was easily understood why the superintendent of the rich Shafter Mine discovered that he was being robbed, but could obtain no information about who was doing the stealing. He hired Pinkerton detectives, brought in deputy sheriffs and Texas Rangers; but nothing happened.

The Pinkertons and deputies left the mine, but when the superintendent became too critical of the ranger methods the Texans offered to kill him. The captain of Company D. felt the need for a man like Hughes.

The young ranger had made a study of Mexican character, and he knew that every paisano in Shafter was helping the ore thieves. Yet the first ten days he did nothing, except look.

The angry superintendent called the ranger a fool, but nothing more. Hughes chuckled, as this was part of his plan. Working in the mines was a man he wanted to see, a gent called St. Leon, the son of a banished French nobleman, and a former ranger now in disgrace. Hughes approached him. "Do you think we can catch those ore thieves?" he asked.

"Yes," St. Leon replied. . . .

Besides being a shrewd detective, St.

Leon had a Mexican wife, and from her he learned the secret of the vanishing ore. While they worked, the miners picked out the high-grade stuff and stored it near the waste-filled mouth of an abandoned tunnel. Later, a band of gambosinos appeared, shoveled away the waste and carried the rich stuff out.

After visiting the tunnel, Hughes approached the superintendent and demanded that St. Leon be fired. The ranger said that St. Leon was a one-time brother-officer, who had been discharged from the service for stealing. The super finally fired St. Leon.

St. Leon promptly appeared in Presidio del Norte, across the Line, drunk and cursing gringos in general and rangers in particular. Antonio Carrasco, leader of the thieves, was so taken in that after a time St. Leon was invited to join the gambosinos. Finally, convinced by the erstwhile miner's oratory, Carrasco allowed

one hundred dollars for his aid. His actual reward was a meager one hundred and fifty dollars. And now the sights of every ladrone in the country were on him.

Keeping alive was miracle enough, but Sergeant Hughes did more. While trailing a horse thief into Presidio, Texas, across the river from Presidio del Norte, the ranger came face to face with Florencio Carrasco. When the smoke blew away Carrasco was dead.



ANTONIO CARRASCO vowed to devote the remainder of his life to killing Hughes, but now the bandit chieftain was forced to play second fiddle to the Mexican-Texican salt war.

An American, Howard, and three of his henchmen were gunned down in the streets of Yselta, near El Paso, for attempting to collect a tax from the natives

NEXT MONTH—There'll be a double measure of reading pleasure for fans who like their Western stories long! Two complete novels, by Tom Roan and Art Lawson, top the all-star fiction roundup for March 10 *Story Western!* On sale Feb. 11th!

St. Leon to accompany three of the bandits on an ore-packing expedition.

In the shadows beyond the tunnel Hughes and another ranger waited, armed with .45's and sawed-off shotguns. Presently the gambosinos appeared, but St. Leon remained behind, to hold the horses and act as lookout.

They were industriously sacking the high-grade, when the ranger spoke.

"*Atencion!* . . . Reach!" Hughes ordered in Spanish.

The bandits opened fire as they ran for the tunnel.

Hughes and his companion, aided by St. Leon, kept a steady stream of lead pouring into the yawning mouth throughout the night. Next morning the three bandits were dead.

Hughes received a five hundred dollar reward for breaking up the ore-stealing, and a promise of sudden death from Antonio and Florencio Carrasco. Their brother had died in the mine.

After dividing the money with St. Leon, who left the country until he would again be needed, Hughes gave the other ranger

who came to the local salt lake. Guerilla war broke out.

Finally, volunteer rangers and a troop of cavalry rode into the district to protect the Americans. But in the end they, too, were driven back.

Murder, robbery and smuggling now became a daily item. The Olquin brothers, Sebastian, Severo, and Priscellano, and their father, Jesus Maria, organized a powerful band that swept across the boundary at will, until finally the Governor of Texas called in Captain Jones.

"Get the Olquins!" was the order.

Jones led his men to Pirate Island, a strip of wooded waste running along the southern bank of the Rio, where the bandits holed up. And for the first and only time in history the Texas Rangers lost.

The Olquins, always crafty, used themselves as bait. Riding from behind a cover of underbrush, they exposed themselves in plain view of the rangers, then spurred their horses. The Texans rode right into the trap.

At Tres Jacales, on the Mexican side, the entire fighting force of the Olquin

band lay in ambush. As the bandit leaders swept by, their henchmen opened fire from behind an adobe wall. Captain Jones fell, mortally wounded. He ordered retreat as he lay dying. . . .

The Mexicans went wild, but their cheers soon faded. There is an unwritten law among the rangers that the death of any of their number must be avenged. John R. Hughes knew what was expected of him when he was named Captain.

The Olquins knew, too! Sooner than face the wrath of the rangers, they took refuge behind the walls of the Juarez jail, and remained out of reach for months.

As the first step in his plan Hughes sent for St. Leon. Diamond Dick, as the rangers called him, on account of the valuable stone he wore, soon put in an appearance, and at Hughes' suggestion disguised himself and went to work at Fort Hancock, in the heart of the Mexican district of Texas, as a section hand.

St. Leon spoke fluent Spanish, and in his buckskin jacket, and wide sombrero, looked like a Mexican caballero. That he was a good actor and a master detective is shown by the fact that three months later he turned over to Hughes a list on which were written eighteen names—the killers of Captain Jones.

About this time the Olquins decided it was safe to come out of jail, and a big fete was given in their honor. The Mexicans turned out en masse, and during a drunken brawl one of the Olquin brothers was killed by a buckskin-jacketed rider. A few days later another one of the brothers was found hanged to a tree near the scene of Captain Jones' death.

Hughes and his rangers were now ready for the grand finale. Sweeping the length and breadth of Pirate Island, they made wholesale arrests, killing all who resisted. Finally the rangers gave the other towns and settlements the same treatment. At the finish, the tally sheet showed hundreds of arrests and dozens of bitter gun-fights. And Hughes determined that all this bloodshed should have a lasting effect.

At intervals along the trails traveled by the bandits he had the bodies of their dead leaders planted. A white cross, which served as a constant reminder that crime

does not pay, adorned the top of each grave. Now the Mexicans understood.

His grim work finished for the time, Captain Hughes settled down in his camp near Yselta. The Mexicans played good, and in return the Captain organized a Sunday School and taught their children to do likewise. At one time he acted the part of Solomon.

On a raid, he recovered 140 cows and their calves, and when the ranchers came to put in their claims, there seemed to be more claims than stock. But Hughes noticed that while the ranchers argued their children were busily engaged in calling their pets, penned in the corrals. He promptly ordered the parents aside, and let each child call his own stock. This method of division was quite satisfactory, to the children, anyway.

So it was that with the passing of the years the Mexicans forgot the bloody banditries of the past. All except one man. Antonio Carrasco had not forgotten! Shortly before the Madero Revolution, he slipped across the Line and, backed by a hundred followers, ambushed Hughes and his Texas Rangers.

The grizzled outlaw's victory was a hollow one however. Two rangers died, but Hughes was not among them. And after this latest treachery, the Captain clung tenaciously to Carrasco's trail until he was far into Mexico. Finally, faced with the prospect of the rangers' vengeance or falling into the hands of the revolutionaries, Carrasco accepted the latter. And for some past double dealing the revolutionaries stood him against a wall and machine-gunned him.

With the passing of Carrasco the Captain's life settled down to a comparatively dull routine of chasing train robbers, or apprehending would-be toughs, and Hughes thought of retiring. He had a little money, a ranch near Yselta, and the respect of Texans everywhere.

Actually, however, it was fifteen years after the turn of the century before the final sunset of Hughes' glorious career. Gray haired, quiet, dignified, the Captain had earned a reputation as a fearless, first-class fighting man, and a gentleman . . . and in retirement he took these qualities with him.

Gun-Whelp's Heritage

By Frank MacIntosh

SAM SMITH, sheriff of Carson County, caught only a glimpse of the horseman. The narrow, begrimmed window of his office framed the rider for the briefest instant, reflected a loose-jointed, lean figure, a sharp profile—and then presented its customary slice of the drab, adobe buildings of Sandy Springs.

The glimpse had an odd effect. Sam Smith stopped in the middle of a word, and completely forgot the young fellow to whom he was talking. He forgot, too, the new, shiny badge in his right hand, though his fingers clutched it tightly as he strode to the door.

Twenty feet up the dust-covered street a black gelding with white feet bore the horseman—a gent in sand-colored clothes. This was the second time in his life Sam had seen that man. The first time had been twenty-one years ago to the day. Yet Sam knew him and, if they never met again for another score of years, Sam would know him then.

The young fellow spoke over Sam's shoulder. "Come on, Sam, it's just one more of them. All the more reason to finish the job you started."

The sheriff turned. A few steps away, the young man grinned infectiously. He was a good-looking youngster, lean and lithe. Sam didn't return the smile, just stared for a long, silent minute.

"Forget it, Sam," the other said. "Pin the badge on and we'll be ready for a dozen like that gent."

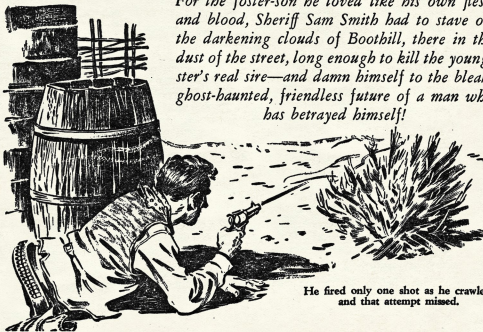
"You saw him, Bob?" Sam asked, stepping into the room.

Bob Martin nodded. "Sort of. Enough to know that he's a stranger and quite likely hitched to the other two that've been hangin' around town the past couple of days."

"Yeah," Sam agreed, without enthusiasm. "Reckon he is."

"The more the merrier," Bob announced gaily. "What a grand day for a gent to become a deputy. Pin the badge on, Sam."

For the foster-son he loved like his own flesh and blood, Sheriff Sam Smith had to stave off the darkening clouds of Boothill, there in the dust of the street, long enough to kill the youngster's real sire—and damn himself to the bleak, ghost-haunted, friendless future of a man who has betrayed himself!



He fired only one shot as he crawled, and that attempt missed.

The sheriff opened his hand and looked thoughtfully at the badge. "What would you say, Bob, if I changed my mind?" he asked softly.

"About what?"

"The badge."

A slow change transformed the youngster. He lost a little of his bubbling eagerness. His grin became more serious.

"I reckon I'd take it pretty hard," he answered evenly. "A fellow kinda likes to get his birthday presents, especially one that's been waitin' for him twenty-one years."

Sam nodded. "I know. That's what makes it so damned tough for me. You're not gettin' that deputy's badge today, Bob."

Sam never let his eyes leave the kid's face. He saw it whiten under the deep tan. He saw the lips harden into a line. He saw the gray eyes grow as cold as a winter sky. It wasn't pleasant to see such a sight for the first time in that face.

Now Bob was talking, all the anguish of deeply disappointed youth in his voice.

"Why, Sam?" he asked insistently. "Why?"

This was exactly what Sam had feared when he had made his quick decision, after confirming the identity of the rider in the sand-colored clothes. It wasn't to be expected that a boy like Bob would take this without question. And Sam had no honest, straight-forward answer such as he had always provided through the years since Bob's infancy. For the first time, the big lawman could not be honest and frank to one in whom he had instilled honesty and frankness as cardinal virtues.

"Because I ask it," he said, at last.

It was a long time before Bob could shape a reply. When it came, it was just as Sam had known it would be, and the loyalty behind it tore at his heart.

"Okay, Sam. I'll wait."

Nothing more. No defiance. But an acceptance that Sam knew was given half-heartedly but bravely, and was entirely at variance with the father-and-son relationship so clear and unstated between these two who were in no sense related.

"Thanks, Bob," the sheriff said kindly. "I knew you'd do it."

Bob made one last effort. "If you think you need me—if these strange hombres

are bank robbers, and they get the jump on you—"

With a slow shake of his head, Sam was obliged to deny the kid even that little solace. "We'll manage," he said. "And I promise you the badge will soon be yours."

It was a futile gesture that shamed the old lawman as if he had a guilty conscience. Bob had wanted the badge today. It had been promised him, and he believed in the promise and the man who had given it. What would happen to that belief now?

"One day's as good as another," Bob agreed dully.

"Sure," Sam said, putting the badge in his shirt pocket. "I'll see you later."



OUTSIDE, the lawman found the street quiet, no sign of the rider in the sand-colored clothes or of the two men he and Bob had been talking about. These two had first appeared in Sandy Springs three days before. Even then, Sam's sharp blue eyes had picked them out as the type to be watched. Nor had their actions since changed that conviction.

They had taken a room at the hotel, had made no effort to be friendly, played no cards, drank practically not at all. They didn't ask about jobs, didn't make any business inquiries, didn't mooch drinks or eats. It was evident they were trying to make themselves inconspicuous, and by their labored efforts succeeding only in making themselves more noticeable.

Now, the strange horseman made the picture all the clearer to Sam. As he wandered down the street and turned into Whiffletree Joe's lunchroom for a cup of coffee to while away the time, he knew it wasn't completely chance that had brought this rider into Sandy Springs before the other two had left. There was a connection there, for the gent in the sand-colored clothes wasn't the sort to change his stripes, even in twenty-one years. He would be the same today as he was long ago in the Texas trail town where Sam Smith had first met him. His name was Slade Martin, and he was the father of

the boy who so desperately wanted to wear a law badge.

Twenty-one years! Reflectively, Sam once more looked down across the years and saw himself as a wide-eyed young greenhorn rolling westward across the Texas plains in a swaying, careening Concord coach. In the seat opposite him, he saw the lovely oval of Judith Martin's face, her eyes alight with eagerness. He heard her young voice, warm and musical, telling him of the husband who had prepared a home for her in the trail town to which Sam himself was going. Meeting her, knowing her, had seemed to Sam an auspicious omen predicting the success he had dreamed of in the lonely hours before he had made his decision to come West. Surely the luck that brought her to him, even in friendship, would be with him in the future.

It wasn't. Judith Martin had met her husband all right, and met, too, a grimmer figure there in that roaring, booming town. All in a day she knew great happiness, suffered mortal anguish, and died so that a little boy might live. And it was Sam Smith who had stood beside the bed as she died. It was Sam Smith's face on which her vision had faded. It was his promise to look out for her newborn son that had brought the last smile to her young red lips. By that time, Slade Martin was miles away, dodging and twisting from a lynch mob which sought him for the killing of a pilgrim who had been too proud of a big bankroll.

After he left the drab hotel room that had been the only home Slade Martin had prepared for his bride, young Sam Smith had wandered aimlessly and unseeingly amid the noisy, clamoring crowd, lost in the power of a hate that astonished him. He had hated Slade Martin for the easy charm that had bound the girl Judith to him, and he had hated Slade Martin for the careless cruelty that could toss such love as hers aside, and could desert her in the most important hour of her life.

For a year Sam had stayed in that town, while the little stake he had accumulated to finance this adventure dwindled closer and closer to the vanishing point. Then, having grown to love as his own the little boy he had taken under his care, and fearing that some day Mar-

tin might come back to claim him, Sam had headed farther west. In three months he had reached Sandy Springs. First, he had worked in the general store owned by Caleb Warburton; then, backed by Warburton and the banker, he had tried ranching. Five years after his arrival, on the death of the old sheriff of the county, Sam had sought the office. He had held it ever since. That was part of his firm determination to make Bob Martin's life as different as possible from his father's.

In the years that hurried on, the shadow of Slade Martin had receded more and more, and Sam Smith had almost begun to believe the yarn with which he had answered Bob's first questions about his father—that he had died back in that Texas trail town, protecting the greenhorn Sam Smith from a gang of ruffians. Now the shadow was falling over them once more; and, as before, it seemed inevitably accompanied by that same grim figure which had sat at the converging of their trails before. Save for a lucky chance, who knew but what that spectre might have perched on the gun of Bob Martin, sardonically grinning as father faced son in the lead-filled spaces of a cowtown's dusty street?

Then he forgot it all. Through the big window of the lunchroom he saw three men stalking toward the bank, headed by the hombre in the sand-colored clothes. Sam got to his feet, loosened the gun at his hip and pushed through the door.



A QUICK glance satisfied him that his deputies had carried out his orders to the letter, just as he had given them the first day the two strangers had appeared. The chief one, Tom Davis, was between the bank and the sheriff's office, pretending to doze peacefully on the steps of Warburton's store. A second, Bard Conrad, was just inside the batwing doors of Ace Thompson's Rodeo Bar, across the street from the bank. The third, Judd Brown, was out of sight in the bank itself. Thus he had arranged his forces to converge quickly on the bank, to cut off the escape of any of the outlaws.

The lawman stepped onto the sidewalk,

his eyes sharply on the three walking down the middle of the street. Absorbed in that task, he didn't immediately recognize the significance of the sound behind him. He heard it dimly, vaguely, at first. Then finally it penetrated through his absorption, like the ringing of a bell.

Someone was dogging his steps.

He drew in his breath and whirled, his right hand streaking downward. He was too late. Before he was more than a quarter of the way around, a gun roared, and hot lead tore through his shirt and gouged the flesh along his ribs. Another slug smashed his right knee cap and sent threads of fire along his leg. Stabbing pain shot through him, wrapped him in a wave of nausea and bathed his body in the clamminess of a cold sweat. In a matter of seconds he was lying in the dust, his gun useless because he could no longer hold it, his every effort fighting unconsciousness.

Ten feet away, a big, broad-shouldered redhead Sam had never before seen grinned at the lawman's helplessness and turned away. Now other guns boomed out and brought hope to the sheriff. But the gleam died aborning, as his eyes swept the street and saw how Slade Martin had outfoxed him. In front of the Rodeo Bar sprawled the still figure of Bard Conrad, a victim of the same sort of trap that had caught his boss. At the foot of the steps leading to the Warburton store, Tom Davis had gone back to sleep after a brief arousing from his mock nap. This time not even a gun could awaken him.

It was evident that Slade Martin had not come to town alone. Three men had accompanied him, three men who had gone into hiding instantly, with the descriptions of star-toters tucked away in their minds.

Now the third deputy at the bank was contesting the issue. But his gun was one against the three led by Martin, and he had futilely tried to match them in a fight in the open. They paused only a moment, then circled his riddled body on their unhindered journey to the bank.

The three assigned to taking care of Sam and the two deputies now gathered in a loose group in the middle of the street, armed with scatterguns carried in slings at their sides. They paced in circles

twenty feet apart, arrogantly and masterfully surveying the suddenly quiet town.

A rifle barked once—then again and again. From the doorway of Sam's own office, a cloud of smoke drifted lazily out. In the street, one of the pacing outlaws collapsed silently. Another crawled on all fours to the shelter of a doorway and to oblivion. The third dropped full length on the ground and pointed the muzzle of his shotgun at the kneeling figure of Bob Martin. Before it boomed out, the figure was gone and one barrel of the scattergun was emptied uselessly.

Now the rifle poked its black barrel across the window sill and spoke again, and this time there was no reply.

All this Sam Smith beheld, first with a joy that threatened to exhaust his feeble strength; then a growing apprehension of what must inevitably follow. Successful here, Bob Martin would soon be outside, while up at the bank the doors were already swinging open to release his father. The imminent clash which Sam Smith had tried so desperately to avert could be interrupted only by the lawman himself.

He dragged himself along the ground to his gun, grasped it in his right hand, and headed for a hitchrack. His right leg was a useless, impeding thing behind him and he was forced to crawl solely on the left, with what support his hand could offer. At the rack, he pulled himself up, biting his lips fiercely as blood and pain flowed together from the wound in his side. Then he fell down again.

He saw Bob come out, clutching a gun in each fist. He saw the three at the bank spread fanwise, and Slade Martin advance grimly down the middle of the street. All the time Sam was pulling himself closer and closer to certain shooting distance. He fired only one shot as he crawled, and that attempt missed. Some day, if there ever was to be another day, he would be obliged to tell a son how his father had really died. He would have to be prepared for whatever consequences might follow that revelation, and he must accept the consequences with grace. At this present moment, those consequences were second in importance. First, he must prevent a gun duel between a son and his father. He got to his feet.

A gun boomed. On Slade Martin's

flank, his gunnie had lashed out at Sam Smith. The crippled lawman ignored it. Again the gun boomed, and again the sheriff was as indifferent as a third wound would permit. He staggered momentarily, but went on, trudging, trudging those long, endless yards. The gunnie fired once more, and Sam Smith found himself looking dazedly up from the ground.

He was an hour getting up. Once on his feet, he knew the time had come. Slade Martin's advance had narrowed the field of honor. Now Sam raised his gun and fired. Raised it higher for the second shot, still higher for the third and last.

He didn't need any more. The one target upon which he had so doggedly concentrated took all three of his bullets, and toppled dead into the dust as Sam himself dropped in the dust.



TWO weeks later the doctor admitted Bob Martin to the bedroom of the sheriff's office, where Sam Smith had won his fight against death. For a day the grizzled lawman had been looking forward to this interview, anxious to get himself free of the monstrous trouble that was bedeviling him. But as Bob came in and sat down beside his bed, Sam could find no words to open his confession.

There was something in the air, some-

thing in the way the boy walked or looked that seemed to freeze the words in Sam's mind. Besides, a gent can't just blurt out that he has killed his foster-son's father.

It was Bob who broke the awkward silence. "Reckon we kinda showed those gents a thing or two," he began.

Sam saw his chance. "Your dad would have been proud of you."

That strangeness in Bob seemed suddenly more pronounced. His young face grew solemn.

"Would you?" he asked softly.

Sam stared incredulously. "Would I?"

The youngster grinned, but his honest gray eyes never left the sheriff's face. "Shucks, Sam, you're the only dad I've ever had. You're the only one I want."

That explained Bob's strange attitude. Facing death together, these two had suddenly found just how great was the bond between them. Sam had to believe that. No one could look at Bob's earnest face and doubt him. Besides, Sam had been waiting to hear those words for years.

"Thanks," he said, closing the door of the past gratefully. "Now I reckon I'll have to give you that deputy's badge."

Bob's grin broadened and he fumbled at his shirt pocket.

"You're a bit late, Sam," he said, bringing the badge out. "I been wearin' it for two weeks."



"LIVE BY THE SWORD"

June, 1497—and I, Gaspare Torella, stalked the streets of Rome possessed only of a sword, the clothes I stood up in, and my degree as a physician—valuable in that order. Then, suddenly, the clatter of steel on steel in the moonlight, blood staining the cobbles as a man's life ebbed away, a buffet on the pate that knocked me unconscious and—a rude awakening next morning to find myself personal physician to Cesare Borgia—the Duke of Hell!

Don't miss this swashbuckling four-part novel of Renaissance Italy, by F. R. Buckley—beginning in February *Adventure*.

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NO-GUN LAW

By Mark Martin



"Hell, no! I ain't found it—but
I'm gonna!" snarled the deputy.
"Stick up your claws!"

For three years Tonto's sheriff hadn't been able to outdraw the slowest amateur gunman. But he had other ways of rodding the law—and baiting a two-way trap for the fastest pair of crooks in his bailiwick!

BRANT feasted gloating eyes on the fat roll of crisp new bills. Eight thousand, easy. What a laugh! He pulled the wad from the back of the old clock and stuffed it in his belt pouch. This was a cinch! Old No-Gun Casey sure had lame brains, to match his crippled arm!

He'd played it pretty cute, Brant had, ever since the news of Tonto's crippled sheriff had come his way. Yeah, who'd ever heard of a no-gun sheriff? Seems a gun-shot had paralyzed Casey's forearm, three years before, so he could scarcely raise that right wing shoulder-high. Left-handed, he was slow as cold

molasses, yet he'd held onto his job. Of course he'd hired Hi James for a deputy, and Hi was poison on the draw, but Hi was likewise solid hardpan underneath his hair.

Brant snickered. Well, Casey's luck was running out. Brant had broken into the bank a couple of times, to no advantage, but it had worked out neatly, all the same, by making Casey nervous. County Commissioner Al Gray's loose talk in the Frontier Bar had tipped him off. The county had just sold bonds for a new two-story jail, and placed the funds in Casey's custody. Since the sheriff didn't trust the bank, where would he

cache it? In his cabin, naturally. And here it was, right in the old shelf clock—almost the first place Brant had looked! That Casey sure was a thick old rooster!

He padded to the front door of the shanty. He was about to raise the latch, when he heard a muffled drum of hoofs across the prairie. His hand flashed instinctively from the door-latch to his hip. He crouched, peered from a window, and emitted a hearty curse.

The morning sun illumined, in bright outline, the bobbing figures of Sheriff Casey and Deputy Hi James.

Brant's horse was several hundred yards way, in an arroyo. He had anticipated a longer search for the money, and had wanted no telltale saddled mount in the vicinity. He couldn't risk a dash across the open to the arroyo now. It was a break against him. But shucks, it didn't amount to much. He darted for the rear exit of the cabin. His head, colliding with a ham appended by a meat loop to the ceiling, jarred another curse from him; then he slipped out of the back door.

Close at hand was the snag of a dead shade tree. Brant shinned up it and crawled to the flat dirt roof of the shanty. As he stretched out on his stomach he was grinning again. This was the last place anyone would think to look.

He heard Casey and James dismount and enter. "Hello, that's funny," came from the old sheriff nasally. "What is?" asked James' voice. "Why, that pendulum, Hi. I don't mean the clock. Look at that ham. It's swingin'."

A chill traversed Brant, for all the sun's hot shine on the adobe. Then he relaxed, at the deputy's careless, "Aw, we musta made a draft when we come in."

"Make yourself at home," he heard from Casey, presently, "but, like I said, I won't need you 'for night. I doubt if the coyote will show before then. He ain't the kind to risk a daylight job. Sam and Pete an' Slim ain't due till dark."

"I dunno," James retorted. "The way Al Gray planted the tip, the skunk's liable to drift along 'most any time. He knows that yuh can't use a gun."

Again the man upon the rooftop seethed inwardly. So it had been a plant, huh, after all! He knew they suspected him

of the bank jobs, but had no evidence. *Now*, what about a getaway? Casey might discover the loss of the money at any minute. Then if they looked around and found his horse. . . . Brant shifted, to draw his gun and place shells conveniently at his elbow.

"Hell, Sheriff," came from below, "yuh sure got rats up in those rafters. A piece of dirt just hit me on the nose."

"Yep, they're pretty bad," agreed the sheriff. "That's why I hang my meat up on the wire."

Brant breathed more easily, but he realized it was unsafe to move at all on that log roof, loosely covered with a few inches of dirt. His muscles were numbing from enforced strain and the sun was beating on his back intolerably before he heard James speak again: "Casey, whereabouts did yuh say you had that money cached?"

"I didn't say, Hi."

"Well, where *is* it?"

"Never mind. It's hid."

"Aw, all right. Say, I'll make some coffee. Why don't you put the hawses in the barn an' feed 'em?"

That struck Brant as singular. Who was James, to be telling the sheriff to put the horses up? However, Casey merely said, "Sure thing," and led the horses over to the barn.

Brant's finger tightened on the trigger. He was tempted to put a slug between those lean shoulders. But the occasion wasn't ripe, he concluded. The old fossil was merely crowbait, a setup any time. James was the man to get. He'd wait till James stuck his nose out on some chore, and pop him like a quail. The sheriff would be easy after that.

He heard a sustained commotion down below. James was certainly acting queerly, banging things and moving back and forth. He debated sliding from the roof and shooting it out with him through a window. But James was a gunman of repute. Better wait, despite the misery and blistering sun. Never give a man an even break, was Brant's motto.

Casey re-entered, and instantly Brant sensed a hostile situation. It was silence, but a silence as pregnant and menacing as though it had been punctuated by

gun-blasts and wreathed in powdersmoke. "Well, Hi," Casey broke it levelly, "did you find what you was lookin' for?" "Hell, no! I ain't found it—but I'm gonna!" snarled the deputy. "Stick up your claws!"



SHERIFF CASEY said coolly, "All right, Hi. They're up. You've got the drop on me. Now what?"

"I want that money!"

"Sure, I know you do. But I see the clock's turned 'round, so you've lifted it already."

"Like hell! Wa'n't no money in that clock! Where is it? Don't lie to me!"

"Not in the clock?" the sheriff repeated musingly. "Well, now, someone musta beat you to it. I kinda figured you had meanness in your mind, Hi, when you invited yourself out here five-six hours ahead of the other boys. But someone's beat your time."

"Shut up!" James rapped. "Quit stallin', or eat smoke! Where's the money? Keep them claws high, I said!"

"But, Hi, this old bone of mine's gettin' plumb tired. Let me hang onto this ham, anyway."

"Yuh aim to grab the meat an' paste me, huh?"

"No, no. Take the meat down, an' let me hang onto the wire, just to rest my arm."

James sneered. "Not a bad idea, at that. All right, then, hang!"

Brant heard a clink and a familiar snapping sound. He had been handcuffed once or twice himself. Casey verified his guess.

"Tied me to the meat wire with my own cuff. Pretty neat, all right. What next?"

"Lead—if you don't tell me where the money's at! Be quick!"

"Ye want the truth? All right, Hi. The money's on the roof."

Brant shivered. The sweat which beaded his brow was cold as ice.

"Don't lie to me!" James rasped.

"It's the truth, so help me, Hi. It's on the roof five feet above your head."

"All right, I'll look up there," James snarled. "But if you're lyin' I'll drill you like a sieve!"

Brant realized the issue was at hand.

His position gave him some comfort. The elements of surprise and ambush were on his side. He clutched his weapon. When James, climbing carelessly, poked his head above the roof . . .

But the sheriff's voice apparently halted him in the very doorway. "Hold on a minute, Hi. I didn't say exactly where the money was, an' you want the whole truth, don't you? Well, then, listen. It's under the belt of a man."

Brant's hand began to shake. The sweat-beads trickled down his face.

"What are you givin' me?" James roared.

"All right, Hi. G'wan up, then, an' get your fool head blowed off. Sure, have it your way. Maybe my old eyes have quit on me. Yes, sir, maybe they saw wrong three times."

"Talk fast!" James rapped.

"Well, first there was that swingin' ham. The draft wa'n't hard enough to do that, Hi. Second, someone stole the money in the clock. It was there, an' you say it's gone. Third, you sent me to feed the horses, didn't you? And I'd have to throw the hay down from the loft, wouldn't I? And the barn loft's higher'n the house roof, ain't it? . . . Like as not, the fella up there is hearin' every word I say. Like as not he's heftin' a sixgun, ready to crack down on you. You wouldn't have no chance, Hi, you on the ground, him shootin' from the eaves. Maybe you're faster'n he is, on a straight deal, but with you on the ground, an' him bendin' a barrel around the roof— Why, Hi, that mangy *hombre*, Brant—"

James bawled, "Brant? Yuh mean Brant is the man up there?"

"He sure is, son. If you don't believe it, step out in the sun an' watch him spill your blood. He was clawin' his gun when I saw him. He had a heap of shells in front of him in case he needed spares. But go right ahead, if you think—"

"Hell," James cut in, without too much conviction, "Brant *can't* be up there!"

"Well, son," said the old sheriff, "it's plumb easy to find out. Look, he's stretchin' just about there. Why don't you fire two-three times through the roof? Of course you might not kill him, but he'll likely holler some."

Brant didn't wait to calculate the de-

fensive possibilities of a carelessly placed log ceiling and eight inches of adobe soil. He rolled briskly a dozen feet to a spot less exposed.

"Thanks, Brant. Glad you moved," Casey applauded from below. "You was shaking dust down in my eyes. Now you're all right. Chances are that James can't hurt you through eight inches of dirt, even if he shoots between the logs. All you've got to do—"

"Hesh up, damn you!" James yelled. "I'll 'tend to him. You keep your trap out of it! You say Brant has the money?"

"I said it was under his belt."

"Quit talkin' riddles. It's the same thing!"

Brant jumped up. There was no longer any reason for keeping quiet. They both knew he was there. He cocked his big hip gun and felt under his armpit for the smaller one. He wasn't quite so shaky now. Let James come!



BUT James did not emerge, for he realized his position. Brant had an edge on him.

"Looks sorta even-stephens." There was almost a chuckle in the sheriff's dry voice. "You're afearod to go out, Hi, an' Brant is scared to come on down. Just like a jail. By golly, so it is. You're in the ground cell, Brant's upstairs. Dag-goned if that ain't what they voted the money for—a jail to pen up two hard birds like you!"

"Shut up!" James spat.

The minutes dragged into an hour, and another eternal one. In the end it was the old sheriff himself who suggested a solution.

"If you two was only half way honest men, or anyways not too crooked to mistrust each other, why it'd be a cinch. All you'd have to do would be agree to split the swag, an' each one go his way. Hi, you could get your horse outa the barn an' hit across the *malpais* for the border. 'Twoudn't be wise to head for town, o' course, because the boys might take a notion to ride this way ahead of time, but—"

"Stow the chatter!" snarled James again. But he was evidently turning the

matter over in his cunning mind.

Brant was doing a little thinking himself, cunningly and crookedly, his arm affectionately squeezing the little shoulder-gun. He started once or twice to speak, but decided to let James do it.

Sure enough, it did. James sang out, "Hey, Brant! Ain't no sense us pluggin' each other, is there? We both gotta travel *poco pronto*. How about fifty-fifty? You drop half the roll in front of the door and toss your gun out on the grass. Holler when you're ready an' I'll toss my iron out at the same time. We split the cash an' travel. What say?"

Brant concealed his exultation. "Why, sure, James. That suits me—provided you toss the sheriff's Betsy after yours." They haggled a while over details. Pride dictated that. Then Brant called out, "Here goes."

He flicked a wad of banknotes across the eaves, so that they landed well beyond the cabin door, then tossed his holster gun far out on the grass. At the same instant James' sixgun curved through the air and landed at an equal distance from the shack. The sheriff's gun sailed after it.

Brant snatched out his armpit gun and leveled it at the money lying on the ground. He figured James would step out to garner it.

He waited, gun arm cocked. And waited—until a shaft of flame stabbed through his body, filling it with agony. The shot cracked in his fogging ears even as he sprawled limply on the roof. He had half turned, in falling, and thus saw James through a veil of smoke. The man was clinging to the shade-tree snag.

Brant sagged, weakly cursing his own folly. It hadn't occurred to him that James might have a second gun, and two could play the double-cross. His swaying consciousness registered that James was creeping across the roof, that a hand was plucking at his money-belt.

He rolled, with his last trace of savage hate and energy, and the little armpit gun spat viciously point-blank in the face of the man bending over him. The deputy's jaw sagged. His stare was wildly incredulous, even as his eyes glazed in death. The stocky body collapsed, flailed over the roof edge. . . .

The sheriff, pinioned to the wire in the

room below, smiled grimly to himself. The ghost of that tight smile still lurked upon his lips when darkness gathered and his three other deputies arrived.

"Come in, Sam," called the sheriff. "Strike a light."

A match flared. Sam almost dropped it. "Say, what in billy-hell—"

"I'm sure glad to see you boys. Sam, for gosh sakes, find the key an' unlock this bracelet. My arm's killin' me."

Sam did so while the others stared blankly. "Who strung yuh thataway?"

"A coyote name o' Brant," Casey said calmly. He'd thought it all over and reached a firm decision long ago. The honor of his office was at stake. Let the dead rest in peace.

"Yeah? What was he after?"

"The money for the jail. Don't worry, though. He didn't get it. Hi James got him, instead."

"Where in tarnation's Hi, then?"

"Outside," the sheriff said quietly.

They carried James in and deposited his limp form gently on the bunk. Sam said, presently, "Well, anyhow, he got the money back. That's somethin'."

"The money?" murmured the sheriff. "Oh, yeah. That's the sad part of it. For James, I mean. I reckon you'd call it irony. Y'see, Hi thought Brant had the money, so he—so they shot it out . . . Hell, Sam, you don't think I'd hide no

money in that clock, do you? Recollect the haul in counterfeits we made last week? That's what I'd cached in the clock, Sam." He paused and tried to flex his aching left arm. "Dang it, I thought I'd die, holdin' my old bone up there all afternoon. My elbow feels like lead."

"Well, there's one thing, boss," Sam said consolingly. "You could relax now an' then—swing from the wire like any other piece o' meat!"

"That's just the trouble, Sam. I couldn't do that. If I had I'd have pulled it from the mud between them logs. It'd hold up the weight of a ham, all right, but no man."

Sam exclaimed, "Yuh mean you coulda pulled that wire out by swingin' on it, boss? Then why in thunder—"

"I didn't want no one to see what was on the other end of it," the sheriff said. "I mean—I wasn't downright sure that Brant was dead . . . You pull the wire. I'm tired, Sam."

Debris cascaded to the floor. A hole in the dirt roof was exposed, and Brant's body, clearly visible, spanning it.

"I told Hi the stuff was on the roof, under a man's belt," the sheriff explained, "but he took me wrong, I guess, an' then it was too late . . . Take the money outa that box, Sam, will you? Put it over there beside the clock, until we go to town."

"THE MARK OF THE MONTEREY KID"

Brief was the comet path he blazed across the history of the West—and blood and plunder lay in the wake of his thundering hoofbeats. . . . He rode hard, loved fiercely and killed quick—the Monterey Kid. . . . And from Santa Fe to Sacramento the mere mention of his name brought a curse to the lips of honest lawmen—and a nervous hand to their gunbelts. . . . But he six-gunned his way to glory, the Kid did—riding the bullet-cold verdict of the men of the West—"He's bad, clean through—and you'd better shoot on sight. But, by God, there's a man!"

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Twisting, he snapped a shot toward Thorson's charging form.

GOLD MADNESS

By Tom W. Blackburn

CRAGAR was after gold. Nothing in the world was worth a hoot except the yellow stuff—nothing. When a man has bummed a dozen empty years through the hard-rock country, he learns that. He learns it bitterly. It is hammered into him with rocker and drill-

steel, with sluice-box and blasting powder. He is kicked around without it. He is worked to death for starvation pay because he doesn't have it. He has neither a personality of his own nor friends nor women and their comforts. He is an outcast, because he is not one of the mighty.

This knowledge does not come easily. At first, a man rebels against it. Later it makes him feel sick and whipped. And finally, he turns as hard as the brittle quartz of the ledges. Any man does. Cragar had told himself so enough times to be certain. Nothing was worth a damn but gold!

Finding it, turned a man into greatness. It broke the back of his enemies. It warmed the sun and quickened the churn of blood in a bent and weary body. It brought all desire within reach. And now, Cragar had it! Here on this mountain! The pocket he had found in the creek bed was packed with thousands in nuggets. The sands for a couple of miles were rich with dust. And in the narrows below him, the mother lode was wide in the canyon walls. There was plenty of gold in the creek—all for the taking, and all for him!

Cragar rocked back and forth in the lee of his hasty, flimsy shelter, drawing his snow-dampened, ice-stiffened blankets tighter about his shoulders. A brittle chuckle ran out of him and was lost in the tumult of the storm. The gods made it hard for a man! They had put this ledge at the very foot of the Divide. They had let him reach it at the very end of the season and at the end of his grub-stake, weary and down to a last match which would not light. They had raised Satan's own blizzard in the canyons, when he had no snowshoes and knew no landmarks the driving snow would not hide or change. They had kept the gold from him until he was past the middle of his life, they had let him be thin and a small cast of man, in a country that cried for giants. The gods were malevolent. But they had made one mistake. They had led Cragar, at last, to his discovery. . . .

Now it was out of the hands of the gods. At last, he had the gold. It was here, under the storm and the snow and his pitiful, barren camp. And only he knew where it lay. Now no wind could freeze him. No fast could starve him. No storm could block his way. Life and the search for this gold had made him hard. Now nothing could best him. Nothing!

But Cragar did not know the gods of the mountains. He had been asleep a

long time, sitting stiffly upright in his frozen blankets and at the mercy of the blizzard, when some other force than the tumult of wind and snow roused him roughly. The penetrating weariness of savage cold was deep in Cragar. Even his brain was numbed. It was a strong effort by which he worked his senses free. This was a man above him—a snow-sheathed figure of a man, shaking him insistently.

"M'sieu, M'sieu!"

Cragar grunted sleepily, dazedly.

"You freeze. Get up! Move! Walk! You die!"

Cragar grunted again, and his mind began to function slowly—then with greater swiftness.

They'd followed him, just like they'd always followed him, waiting for him to make his strike! Many was the time he had eluded them and hidden in some deep valley, only to find, after all, that the gold was not there. But now, now, when a bonanza was in his hand, he had been careless, he'd been fool enough to make a quick camp right on top of the find. He'd given it all away, putting up his hasty lean-to, and all because he had been afraid of facing a mountain storm without shelter!

Eagerly, fearfully, his eyes cut through the white-smears darkness, looking for others. But there was just this one man, bending over him. A satisfaction drove back against Cragar's first fear. The snow would hide a body a long time, now. And by summer he would be a king in these hills—the biggest of them all. What would a dead man matter by summer? Cragar started a stealthy movement under his blankets toward the frosty butt of the gun at his belt. The movement stopped jerkily, against his will, and a searing pain tore through his stiffened muscles. He had been asleep in the wind a long time.

"M'sieu!" The man spoke again, with sharper concern. He bent lower, lifting Cragar, stripping the snow-sheeted blankets from him. Looking, Cragar saw the man's big hands were bare, saw huge mittens on his own unfeeling fingers. The man bent and worked free the lashing of the snowshoes on his feet, lifted Cragar's worn boots, and re-lashed them.

Cragar answered woodenly to the man's prodding and jerking, began lifting the webs up and down without knowledge of how he did it. He had a strange feeling of seeming to watch another man walking with his own legs and feet. Towering above him, talking little, prodding, keeping unmitten hands deep in the pockets of his coat, the stranger walked with him.

This man out of the storm was a big one, Cragar saw, and his boots cut deep into the heavy fall on the ground, making him breathe hard with the effort of breaking a trail. It was not at all like chopping along on the surface with the wide webs of snowshoes.

Slowly Cragar reasoned it out. This Frenchman knew that Cragar had gold. But he didn't know just where the discovery was. He didn't know it was right under the barren camp from which he had taken Cragar. He was helping Cragar out of the storm, likely taking him to better shelter. It was a gesture of kindness, of comradeship, but he was making it only for the purpose of building an obligation, of finding where the gold lay as payment. Men in the mountains were like that. They had no heart. They moved with but one purpose. Gold was all there was in the hills, and it was all that any of them wanted.

Cragar chuckled soundlessly. This Frenchman was too big to be smart. Let the fool get him out of the storm, let him provide shelter and comfort. Let him ease the agony of returning circulation to cramped limbs. Let him produce hot food and a warm bed. Let him do anything he wanted until the blizzard ended. Then it was Cragar's gold. And anything would go.

His mittened fingers bumped against his gun-butt in a clumsy, reassuring gesture. If the Frenchman knew too much, if he got to guessing too close, if he made an issue of it, Cragar knew how to handle him. He was a hard man, and gold had made him so.

But Cragar was not as hard as the storm. The hills and the wind and the snow faded from his consciousness. He was walking clumsily on the snowshoes, walking . . . walking . . . walking. His mind ceased to function, and he knew

nothing but the methodical up-and-out, forward-and-down movement of his feet.



IT COULD have been hours—a brace of miles or a dozen. Then the buffeting of the wind was gone, the bitter blade of the air, the awkwardness of walking on strange webs and unfeeling feet. In their place came other sensations, hazy and fitful. The smoky tang of burning pitch-knots, rich in a warm, heavy atmosphere. The savor of yesterday's cooking, snow-clothes in which someone had labored and sweat, the rich aroma of tobacco.

He was in a cabin. He was aware of it in snatches between sleeping and strong pain and delirium. It was a trapper's cabin. And there were other men in it. Sometimes it seemed there were a dozen of them, fanged like wolves, with hands clawing for his gold under the ledge of rotted quartz. Other times there were just three of them, the Frenchman, a Scandinavian called Thorsen, and a bandy-legged older man named Evans. The three of them played cribbage on the floor while he lay on a bunk.

When the fever and the pain of his frost-bite would let him, Cragar watched them narrowly. But they were clever and he could not be sure, just like he couldn't always tell when what he heard and saw was a product of his fever and when it was something else. One thing, only, remained fixed in his mind. He had spent a grim lifetime trying to make his strike. Frostbite nor fear nor odds of three to one, they'd not take it from him now!

Days filed by. A measure of comfort began to return. Cragar had been sleeping, and he awakened to the sudden knowledge that Frenchy and Thorsen and Evans were talking about him, heads down over their cribbage board.

"*Le diable*, no!" he heard Frenchy protest. "The stomach, she churns! I bring him here from the storm. No more for me!"

Evans muttered something, and Thorsen shook his head.

"He's scared, like a cornered cat," the Scandinavian said. "Ever'time I look, he's watching us. He don't say nothing.

He don't do nothing. Just watches. If we're going to do it, it'll have to be quick!"

Evans grunted. "What did you bring him here for if you didn't have the guts to go on with it?" he complained to the Frenchman. "I got to decide what we aim to do, then I got to do the job, too. Hell, ain't we partners?"

"I do not like the knife," Frenchy said uneasily, and Thorsen shook his head again.

Evans stood up, pulled a long, well-whetted blade from his belt, rasped his thumb across the edge, and started down the room. In his bunk, Cragar tensed. There was little feeling or flexibility in his fingers, no sensation at all in one foot, and every muscle of his body was stiff and sore. Cold sweat came out on him suddenly. Not from fear. He knew he wouldn't die—not when he'd found his gold, at last. It was the sweat of effort. Evans came on until he stood above him, holding the knife thoughtfully in his hands.

"You're going to lose some toes, brother," he said. "One now, maybe one later, maybe another. Depends how you and me get along."

Cragar drew himself up a little, so that his back was tight against the wall. He knew about this; all about it. He'd worried about that foot which had no feeling. But it was all right. He'd looked at it. White, not much blood circulating yet. But not swollen. No infection. It was all right.

This Evans was a cool one. He was a hard one, harder than the Frenchman, harder than Thorsen. But not harder than Cragar. It would take more than a threat of steel, more than promise of torture, to pry his secret out of him.

There was still some fever in him, and he cursed it. As he settled his shoulders more solidly against the wall, the face of Evans, above him, went out of focus. He fought the unsteadiness down and waited. Evans seemed to expect him to answer. The man stood there a long time with the knife in his fingers. Then the man's face set.

"All right, friend," he said, "don't talk." His voice was so mocking as to have almost a tone of sympathy in it.

And he bent swiftly toward the foot of the bed.

Cragar didn't know just how he did it. But his good left foot came up out of the blankets, caught Evans full in the face, and dumped him flat onto the floor. Cragar came after him, then, piling off the bed in a clumsy dive. One of his stiffened hands closed about the blade of the knife, twisted it from Evans' startled grasp. The edge put a deep cut across the palm of Cragar's nearly nerveless hand, but only a small, beaded trickle of blood edged the wound. Scrabbling with the weapon on the floor, Cragar reversed the grip, got the hilt into his fingers, and jerked the long blade up.

For a moment he was looking into the eyes of the man under him. They were startled eyes, mirroring a sudden, gripping fear for life. A savage satisfaction plunged through Cragar. This coward was the man who had stood coolly above him a moment before, taunting, threatening to cut off his toes, one by one, until he parted with the secret of his gold. A harsh, exultant oath tore from Cragar's lips, and he lunged forward, driving the knife down toward the man's arched and straining chest.

It was a swift drive, but Thorsen was quicker. From across the room, traveling with the velocity of a desperate man's throw, a chunk of firewood hurtled against Cragar, knocking the knife from his grasp, smashing against his face and the side of his head. It was a vicious blow. Cragar's stomach tightened in nausea. The room reeled before him. Desperately he tried to claw upright. But there was nothing to support him. . . .



C RAGAR awakened again in the night. The fire was low. By the faint glow of its embers, he saw that Evans and the Frenchman were both asleep. But Thorsen sat beside the hearth, stringing new webbing into a snowshoe frame and cutting a swift, alert glance toward Cragar's bunk from time to time. They were taking no chances with him, now that they knew he'd fight. They weren't letting him get out of their clutches. They were keeping a close watch

over him. They had him and they aimed to keep him until they got his gold.

Outside, the rush of wind was gone and kinder temperatures were abroad, recognizable even in the cabin. The week-long storm was done. In the morning there would be sun and traveling weather.

Cragar drew his hands slowly from the blankets. One was crudely bound with bandages; the one which had been laid open by the knife blade. Cragar unwound the bandage, looked at the wound. It had been clumsily sutured, its edges sewed tightly together with heavy, waxed shoemaker's thread. He looked at it in the dull light a long time. For a moment he felt grateful, before he realized that this was not kindness nor generosity. His captors did not want him to die. Naturally not. Not while he was a key to wealth for the three of them!

His head was hot and his mouth tasted dry and parched. He wished briefly for a cup of water.

Later, Thorsen came across and stood a moment above him. He even reached down and put the horny palm of his hand to Cragar's brow, as though feeling of the fever. Apparently satisfied that his prisoner was in heavy sleep, the Swede slid out of the door for wood from the stack along the wall beside the entry. It was a brief respite. Cragar seized it eagerly.

Turning the bedding hastily back from the lower end of the bunk, he got his bad right foot up in his clumsy hands. It, also, was bandaged. Awkward fingers probed the binding. And a sick sweat came from him, bound up with a shaking fury. Evans had done his job. The big toe was gone, gone flush with the nerveless foot!

Cragar swore. On the mantel across the room he saw the butt of his gun. Weaving crazily on his crippled foot, sobbing with the effort, he was almost to the hearth when Thorsen came in with the wood. The Swede dropped his load and leaped forward. The sound of the falling fuel awakened the others. But this time all of them were too slow.

Cragar's hand closed over the gun, jerked it down. Twisting, he snapped a shot toward Thorsen's charging form. It went wide, driving a geyser up out of

the water bucket on the table beside the door. But it stopped the mountain man. Bracing himself against the mantel, Cragar swept the gun against the other two and barked a command to Thorsen.

"Tie 'em down to their bunks!"

For a moment Cragar was afraid the Swede would try to ride him down. His vision in the shadowy room was uncertain, but his temper must have been plain in his eyes. Thorsen took down a coil of pack cording from the wall and moved woodenly across to the bunks. The Frenchman lay quietly. The Swede bound him competently to the posts of the bunk. When Evans' turn came, the older man sat half upright, his eyes hot and swift with thought.

Cragar wasn't sure, but he thought Evans said something in the ear of the man with the rope. Cragar swung the sights of his gun on Evans, and the man relaxed and eased back onto the bunk.

Evans was the old one, with the brains. He was the hard one. He was the boss of the three. Cragar remembered the knife in the man's hands and his cool talk of mutilation, of toes that would come off, one by one. Twice he made Thorsen tighten the bindings until there was discomfort on Evans' face and little doubt of his inability to escape.

Cragar teetered across the room to the bunk which had been his and tried to pull on his boots. But the right one would not come over the bandaged foot. Frenchy's huge pair were beside the table. Cragar took one of these. It would do for warmth and dryness, but a man could not walk in its sloppy fit. A man could not walk very far, anyway. Not with a great toe gone and great patches of frostbite left on his carcass.

A handmade toboggan, in fair condition, stood against the end wall. He had looked at it often enough. Now he told Thorsen to take it down. He had the man bundle bedding and food on it. He got into his cap and coat, and when Thorsen, also, was dressed, he had the sled dragged outside into the chill dawn.

Cragar got himself down on the toboggan, with the blankets about his legs, and jerked his hand toward the higher reaches of the hills, already brilliant with the rising sun. Thorsen took up the pull-

rope of the sled, then paused. His eyes went toward the cabin at Cragar's back.

"You'll be done with me by sundown?" he asked. His meaning was plain. Funny how a man that is partner to others takes their fortunes and health as if a blood tie lay between them.

Cragar shook his head at the man. It was his turn to be hard. "You'll not be back!" he answered.

Thorsen dropped the pull-rope. "They'll freeze tonight!" he protested hotly. "No fire, no water, no food . . . you're crazy! Crazy with fever!"

Cragar looked at the man bleakly and pulled the hammer back on his gun. The trigger-latch set with a clear, ominous sound. Thorsen took up the rope and surged against the drag of the sled with an angry, bitter oath.



FOR the first time Cragar felt a doubt about himself and his gold.

The fever was back upon him in new strength, and pain grew pulsingly stronger from his mutilated foot. Toward noon he tried to pull the Frenchman's oversize boot from the member and found the foot and lower leg so swollen he could not work the leather free. Savagely he cursed Evans. The man had not done a clean job with his steel. The wound was poisoned.

A grim, fitful humor shook him. They had tried to frighten him, to force him—in terror of that knife—to lay his discovery in their hands. Now he might die, and if he did it would be without one word of the thing they wanted to know. They wanted it so badly. Let them find the strike, then!

Thorsen stopped and began his false, insidious pleading anew. "Man, you're a sick one," he protested. And his voice held a touch of sympathy, of gentleness which, even in its falseness, was hard to resist. "You're off your head from fever. Think, man, think! Let me get you back to the cabin where we can take care of you. Be reasonable, friend. Let's get down out of these hills. There's nothing up here!"

The hell there wasn't anything up here! And Thorsen knew it! Cragar eared back

the hammer of his gun again. Thorsen took up the rope and began his wearisome pulling once more.

In the afternoon a familiar ridge rose before them. Cragar's eyes were burning with snow-glare, and for a long time he wouldn't let himself be sure. Finally Thorsen plodded down to a creek broken free of its ice since the end of the storm. The snow-mounded rise of a bar was plain before them, and Cragar signalled the man ahead of him to stop.

Thorsen dropped the rope.

"Camp!" Cragar said, and his voice sounded thick and shrill, even in his own ears. "Camp here!"

Thorsen came back to him, got the axe, and cut some saplings. Cragar sat on the sled and watched, fighting nausea and rising pain. It cost a man a lot to find gold—and keep it from wolves!

Later, Thorsen shook him. Cragar roused and saw that a good lean-to was made. The gun was still beside his hand on the sled, but he knew it was without shells now. He could tell that from the easier manner in which the Swede walked.

Thorsen grinned at him. Cragar did not move. Let the devil grin. He knew where the gold lay, now. He was free from the last threat Cragar possessed. And Cragar was a sick man. It was working out for Thorsen and his partners. Let the devil grin!

"I'm going back to the cabin," Thorsen told him quietly. "Come along?"

Cragar cursed him weakly.

Thorsen nodded. "That's all right," he agreed. "That's all right, friend. You'll get along here alone for a few hours. I got to get the boys out of those ropes I put on them. We'll be back fast as we can make it."

Cragar cursed again. Thorsen bent and lifted him into the shelter he had made, set the blankets tight around him, and touched flame to the fire he had already stacked. The sick man watched him bitterly. This was the end of it. This was all there was to it. They'd be back, all right, all three of them, but not until time and the weather had completed what the blizzard and their dirty knife, what frostbite and fever had begun. They'd come back to bury him under some rocks on top of ground too hard to dig. And

they'd find the gold whose location he had shown them in his madness. They'd find the gold without knowing a single portion of the bitterness and barren years its finding had cost. Tears stung his eyes, tears born of helplessness and fury and defeat. Thorsen turned away and left him under the shelter. . . .

In the hour that followed, Cragar's old life came back in splintered scenes, crowding about him, filling the night beyond the fire with fears and terror and forgotten faces. After a time, these passed, leaving Cragar limp and his blankets damp with clammy perspiration. He knew the sign. The fever had broken. If he had friends, now, if he had help and care. . . .

But a man without gold did not have these things. Nobody gave a damn for a hard-rock drifter. Not when he was penniless. He made his own way or he dropped out. Cragar knew he was whipped, with his gold almost under him. He was whipped cold and completely.

But a man's hope does not die, even in the face of such knowledge. And the sound of movement down the creek brought him eagerly up on his elbows. Three figures came out of the night: one of them plodding wearily from much travel up and down the canyons in a single day; one limping stiffly, as though cramped; and one walking easily. A Swede, an old man, and a big Frenchman.



EVANS dropped on the blankets beside Cragar, chafing wrists on which were yet the marks of mercilessly tightened bonds. Swiftly he exposed Cragar's booted and bandaged foot.

"Light!" he snapped. "More light!"

Frenchy took up an armful of wood and stacked it over the embers of the fire. Flames licked upward, throwing a brighter glare into the lean-to. Evans said something over his shoulder, and Thorsen put a thin-bladed, gleaming clasp-knife into his hand. The old man inserted the blade under the top of the boot and split the leather to the instep.

He raised his hands, scowling and

flexed them impatiently. "Stiffer than hades!" he growled. "Damn those ropes! Wish I knew more about what I got to do!"

Then his hands were moving again. The bandages parted. Looking down, Cragar could see his own flesh, blue and red and angry-looking. He watched the point of the steel in Evans' hand puncture and lance along the swelling, saw the man cut at the base of the infection, taking away flesh deadened by frost and turned gangrenous. And finally he felt the burn of precious whiskey poured freely over the rawness, and with weak relief he realized that it was all over.

It was only when a fresh bandage had been ripped from a shirt and bound on the foot that Evans raised his eyes to Cragar's face. "We'll spend the rest of the night here, and take you back to the shack tomorrow on the sled. We'd rest you another day, but you can make it, I think, and we're a week late, getting our lines reset."

Cragar stared at the man. There had been no malice in that voice, no word of the fight in the cabin, no mention of the close brush with death at Cragar's hands. There hadn't been any complaint.

"You don't figure to stay here?" Cragar asked him in slow disbelief. Evans shook his head and grinned wryly. His eyes went to the banked snow about them, to the rough shelter.

"I'll take the cabin," he said. He went on more quietly, "A man gets crazy ideas when he's sick, friend. And you had yours, plenty crazy ones, too! Like having to come up here. Like trying to get me with my own knife when I was goin' to trim off one of those frozen toes before it could start a poisoning like this last one did. Like driving Thorsen like a mule till he was within an inch of caving, and getting Frenchy so scared he won't sleep good for a month. But that's over. You're all right now, see?"

"But you'll not be traveling for a spell. Stick to the cabin. Keep the fire going when we're out on the lines. Do your share of the cooking. We'll call it square till spring. You can move where you like, come the weather-break."

Cragar thought about the stores in the cabin, carefully measured for the season,

to the needs of three men only. He thought about the night Frenchy had dragged him in from the savagery of the storm in this canyon, and for the first time he could see the effort it must have cost the big man. He could see the understanding among these men with which they had met his madness. He knew the hesitancy and the strength by which Evans had performed the amputations of which he had not been sure. And suddenly he realized not one of these men knew of his gold!

A kind of peace came into Cragar, then. It was a sense of peace such as he had never known. These men were his friends. They were strangers, yet friendliness was in them. And it was not because of gold. Maybe it was only because he was a man, like themselves, wintering the savagery of the mountains. He wanted suddenly to tell them what was in the sands of this creek upon which they were camped. He wanted to tell them what lay in the crumbling ledge under the snow at the edge of the firelight. And feeling that strange want, he won-

dered for a moment if the fever had returned. But he knew better—just as he knew he couldn't tell them, now.

He couldn't tell them without admitting the meanness of his fears. Not without letting them know he had been hard and merciless and without reason, even before the fever had come upon him. Not without letting them know there had been a time when he had thought there was nothing in the world worth a hoot in hell except gold. And it was suddenly important to him that they did not learn these things.

Better that he tended the fire and cooked until spring came. He'd get them to run a late-season trap-line up this canyon, and then all four would come together one afternoon to a certain bar on the creek and, passing time, would rinse the sand in idleness. Gold should come to a man that way. He saw it plainly now. It should be incidental to living, to friends, to comradeship. A good thing, to be shared. He propped himself up on the blankets and grinned at Evans.

"I make a fair cook," he said.



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A battle-scarred, four-legged veteran of the wilds poised for another out-of-season kill—in the name of a law mightier than a game warden's rule book!



The cat came closer, legs stiff.

By Tom Roan

BUCKBRUSH and manzanita made a mottled cloud on the slopes of the California hills. Olo walked slowly in their shade, pausing, lifting one forefoot, then the other, her tail a straight hard line behind her and her keen old nose busy with the wind.

The dingy-gray she-devil, Olo—half giant black timber wolf, half Indian dog

—was on the hunt again. Her one good eye, the right one, was as bright as polished copper. Scars marked her muzzle and head, reminders of all manner of fighting in the past. A mass of them showed on her right side, left there years before when a bear had swiped her a vicious blow and left her for dead. She was old, very old, and yet there was

plenty of honest-to-God fight left in her.

The wind and scent were right. They were always right when Olo hunted. She lived by the winds and the smells it brought to her. Straight ahead on the flat bulge of a shoulder of the slope was the object of her careful advance.

It was a lordly, four-point buck, standing in the dense shade, where the swarms of the ever-annoying deer flies were the least likely to find him in the hot afternoon. His place of hiding was also a point from which he could keep his wary eyes on the slopes above and below.

The buck knew—in that uncanny way all deer know—that it was not the hunting season. But mankind was not to be trusted too far at any time. Besides, there were other things to be on the look-out for. Big cougars of the hills were always on the prowl. They made most of their kills at night, but sometimes habits were changed by the hungry ones, both old and young.

There were other things, also, to be on the watch for. Bear roamed the hills, striking swiftly when they decided to kill. Bobcats and an occasional lynx were to be encountered here now and then. In pairs, lynx were likely to attack anything when in a fighting mood, and that was generally any old time a four-footed creature happened to run afoul of them. Not since he had grown out of the infant stage had the buck been troubled by them, but he still hated the sight or smell of them.

Then there were wolves in these hills, and a wolf was more dangerous than a cougar. A cougar usually struck swiftly from a limb or a ledge. If he missed his target he often gave chase, but unless he was desperately hungry he could be out-distanced and forced to give up. But a wolf, once on the trail, would follow day and night. His wails could bring help from the surrounding country, and a buck was often at his wits' end to escape the final slaughter.

More wolf than dog in her cunning, Olo—by reason of circumstances—had to make most of her kills close at hand. It was a case of kill or be killed on the spot, regardless of the task. In addition, it was always a lone job for her. She called for no help. It did come sometimes, in the heat of the fight, not for her sake, but

for the sake of the blood. It was then a fight to save the kill and see that it got to where it belonged instead of being devoured on the scene by the other wolves or the bobcats.

Close now to the battle that was to be, she slunk lower, like a shadow feeling its way. At the edge of the dense shade, she eased her belly to the ground, every muscle tense, the stout, wiry bristles along her back rising. She bared her fighting fangs, but no sound came from her battle-scarred throat.



THE buck was facing her at the moment, but he could not see her, and the wind was still blowing her scent away from him. Olo could see only his forefeet, but that was enough to tell her which way he was facing. She had to wait here for him to turn. No wolf-dog was fool enough to go charging in head-first against a buck. Olo didn't care to have his sharp-pronged antlers come slashing down to meet her in the face while one of those dangerous forehoofs ripped forward to burst her brains out.

It was a wait of no longer than a minute. The deer flies turned the buck. A deer could not get away from all of them, regardless of the density of the shadows. He kicked, snorted, stamped his forefeet, and wheeled angrily, his stub of tail switching furiously. It was the last time the buck was ever to be troubled with flies.

Olo went into action like a gray shadow of death on the move. Her one eye blazed. Her old fangs were still keen. Mouth closed until the last instant, head a sharp bullet, with the ears flat against it, she seized the buck before he could make one startled leap.

It was the ham-stringing stroke—one quick, sure blow to paralyze a hind leg and bring the buck flopping back on his rump. Yet that first blow was only the beginning of the fight.

The deer was not downed, by a long shot. He came about, floundering and scared, but he was full of fight. He had to be full of it. This would be death for attacker or attacked. Neither would give

quarter to the other animal now.

Olo had been flung clear, her mouth filled with blood. As sure-footed as a cat, she came down on all four feet. A bounce had carried her to one side and clear of the wheeling sweep of the buck's antlers. For a second she stood there, head and tail up, ears cocked, the one eye still glinting. Her bloody tongue lolled, panting as if laughing at the buck for his stupidity in being caught napping.

He would not be able to run away now, but the next thing to do was to get behind him again to hamstring the second hind leg. Olo knew exactly how that was to be done. Giving the deer time to become aware of pain along with his fright, she crouched, forefeet shifting from side to side as if tapping a tune on the ground. The buck lowered his head and snorted.

A wicked, challenging growl swelled up and out of Olo's throat. Suddenly, deliberately making a sharp scratching sound as she moved, Olo was again shot forward. Now it looked as if she was going head-on into those lowered antlers, but she was careful to stop short of her apparent target. Then she made another of those swift, bounce-like spring-aways to the left.

The trick made a fool of the buck. With his head down, the antlers slashing through the brush overhead, he was ready for the lunge that should have caught the wolf-dog on his prongs. He made the lunge with all his weight behind it, the blood-spouting hind leg forgotten.

Olo had played for that very thing. The buck's lunge stumbled him, throwing him off his feet. In a flash the wolf-dog was behind him, scrambling over his twisting body to get into position to attack the second hind leg. Her teeth closed in. There was a ripping sound of flesh, and once more the wolf-dog was clear.

Paralyzed in both hind legs now, still the buck was not done. He came up on his forefeet, helpless rump jabbed back on the hard ground. Olo came back around him to the front, and sat down on her rump, with her tail half-curved around it. She was three safe yards away from him, and she sat there, panting in a wolfish laugh as she looked him

over and took careful stock of him.

He was a big fellow, all right. In him she saw at least a couple of weeks of good eating for herself and those she had long taken it upon herself to feed. Once his throat was cut she would go for help, but the cutting of that throat was going to be the most dangerous job of the afternoon's work.

Olo never got a chance to cut it. Something wailed through the air just above her and sent scattered bits of twigs and leaves falling. A rifle *whanged* on a distant slope an instant later, its sound coming at half the speed of the high-powered bullet. With a snarl of rage, the wolf-dog leaped into the brush. Tail down, disappointment in her eye, she headed homeward to tell in her own dumb manner that her third day of relentless hunting had been nipped short with a kill half-made.



GAME WARDEN IRA FORDYCE lowered his rifle after the second shot, and shook his head, a man disgusted with himself from one end of his long, lean figure to the other. On a knoll down-wind from where the fight had been going on, he had had a fair target, and had missed. The wolf had slipped out of sight, but the lower limbs of the manzanita were still shaking up there, meaning the deer had been wounded and was unable to get away.

"It was that same wolf I got a shot at three days ago," growled Fordyce, as short, heavy-set Jim Brent, his deputy-companion, brought up their saddle horses from below the knoll. "Big devil. And I'll bet this makes no less than seven kills we've come across in the past year."

When they reached the flat shoulder of the slope the deer was still there. It tried to get away, but seeing the condition it was in Fordyce brought it down with one shot through the heart.

"I swore I'd get that killer wolf, and I will!" Fordyce scowled as he stood his rifle against a manzanita. "Look at the tracks in that soft spot. That brute's a big one. Has to be to make these big kills all alone."

"Plenty big," agreed Brent, squatting

to have a closer look at the tracks. "Our same old killer, too, and no mistake about it. Look at the way he throws that right forefoot. He's been in a trap somewhere. But I still say he ain't alone, Ira. I still say there were knife marks on two of the heads we've seen, in spite of 'em being chewed up by the buzzards and the bobcats. There's a man in this game somewhere."

"And—" Brent sat farther back on his spurred heels and took a chew of tobacco—"I think you muffed your chances of getting that man when you run the wolf off the kill."

"Don't be a jackass all your life!" For-dyce turned angrily back to his horse, to get the big hunting knife hanging on his saddle. "Let's get the guts out of this buck and get on into town with it. If you only knew it—and you do, damn it!—a bobcat's claw sometimes can make a cut almost exactly like a knife. I'm getting that wolf, Jim. I'm lying on these slopes day after day until I do."

"And I'll lie on the slopes with you," nodded the deputy, "if you'll do one

thing I ask. Let the wolf make the next kill, and then wait to see what he does about it. The brute gives me the creeps, Ira. He's got more sense than the usual wolf. Might be part dog."

"All right," agreed the warden, looking down the slope. "We'll see more about it next time. Barked in this kill, he'll be certain to try another tomorrow. . . ."

Olo watched them leave the bulge on the slope. With the cunning of a coyote, she followed them for a mile to make certain they were going away, and then turned back to the slope. The smell of blood and strange men still wavered in the air, but a new smell was mingling with the others that stopped her in her tracks, every bristle lifting.

It was the smell of a bobcat. She caught it clearly and without mistake as she came up the hill. Slipping closer, she could hear the cat quarreling with herself and gnawing at the leavings of the deer. With those same, careful steps with which she had come upon the deer, Olo moved to the edge of the dense shade again.

A snarl came from the bobcat. Smarter than the deer, the cat was up, back lifted and fangs bared as he saw the wolf-dog. All feet braced for a spring, the cat stood over the yet-warm entrails of the deer, ready to fight to keep them.

It was too much for Olo. Desperation had driven her back to that spot. She had been unable to make herself go on, empty-jawed as she had been for days. In righteous dignity she moved in, straight to the pile of entrails. When she was four yards away she made her charge. The cat started to meet it, but his courage failed him. With a sudden squall he leaped away, to seek the safety of the tip-top of a manzanita. There he cursed in cat squalls and snarls while the wolf-dog hastily gathered up the entrails, gave them a sling across her back, and left the spot at once.

Not for two cats was Olo going to be cheated out of those entrails. A poor showing it would be, of course, but there were others, far more hungry than herself, who would eat them, and with something better than nothing she was homeward bound.



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GAME was scarce the next day. It was no better the second, the third and fourth day. Lean-bellied, mouth hot from hunger, Olo ranged the slopes. The scent of bobcats came to her several times. Once she caught the smell of a cougar day-prowling along a deep ravine filled with brush. The smell of men came to her several times, but she avoided them by keeping downwind.

The presence of men on the slopes from morning until night had its own effect on the game. All the animals of the hills caught that smell and took themselves carefully away from the district for the shelter of the higher slopes. Even the rabbits seemed to have gone with the larger animals of the regions.

Day after day Olo returned to her charges, whined to them, and then slunk away to find a place to sleep. On the morning of the fifth day she was up before daylight and on the prowl. That day she ranged farther, always with her nose sampling the wind. She stopped dead-still, every bristle rising, as the sun topped the far Sierras in the east to spread its great flaring rays across the sky.

The first prospects of battle had just come to her. . . .

She went into it in that same deathly-still stalk by which she had hamstrung the four-point buck. It was on the same slope, eastward of the flat where that fight with the four-point had taken place. But this was an even larger buck, a six-point. He was taller, stronger, and wiser in the ways of defending himself against his enemies. The smell of a bobcat turned him as Olo came up the slope. He was standing there, shaking his antlers and snorting, daring his enemy to come down and fight, when Olo took him with complete surprise from behind.

It was lightning-swift, as such things had to be. The first stroke always had to be certain. Merely ripping, without cutting the hamstring, would leave the buck free to bolt. He came about, terrified for an instant in his furious wheel, the left hind leg suddenly going helpless under him and half-throwing him over on his side.

Olo had been carried clear by a leap

and a kick. She stumbled, floundered for a second, and then was up, with the wounded deer staggering hard after her. The terrible antlers were lowered, and one forefoot furiously slapped the ground like a beating spear.

She swung to the left, around the base of a manzanita. The buck crashed into it in his insane charge. And the thrashing antlers, dangerous weapons to their owner when fighting in such a spot, got tangled in the low limbs. In a panic at being caught, the buck tried to whip back. He was still a desperate battler, in spite of having only three legs to fight on. His quick swing tripped him. He went sprawling over on his right side.

Never in her life had Olo missed such a bet. She streaked into it like a boom-erang, darting in below the helplessly kicking left leg and reaching for the crippling spot. She cut through it even as the buck came storming up on his rump. He spun around, swift yet even though he had only two good legs. Rump smashed to the ground and against the

(Continued on page 108)



GOLD AND BLOOD FOR THE FORTY-NINERS

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"Drop that rifle!"
Reynaud snapped.

RANCH FOR THE DYING

CHAPTER ONE

Ranch-Bait for Robber Barons

THE preacher was a big man with a beard, dressed in Sunday black; steel-rimmed spectacles perched on

his sunburned nose. The witnesses were clean-faced and solemn-eyed; they reeked of hair-oil. Jim Reynaud stood near the door of the parlor and clenched his hands very tight, straining for control.

Then, very suddenly, it was over, and



Would foreman Jim Reynard surrender his ranch to night-riding raiders and condemn his fighting partners, and himself, to death by gunfire—for the beautiful warrior woman who could never stop loving a man who was long in Boothill?

**By William
R. Cox**

Mrs. Woods was weeping loudly, and Helen was being kissed by everyone, and Tucky was sweating like a bull in August, and Jim was able to cover up by joining in the confusion. But he did not kiss the bride.

He would never kiss Helen again. She was Mrs. Tucker Lewis, now. She was

married. It went on and on, like hammer blows inside his head: "*Helen is married, Helen is married.*"

He wrung Tucky's hand and said, "Have a good trip . . . Er—I mean, don't hurry back. I'll take care of things."

"You're my pardner, ain't you?" Tucky

said. "‘Course you'll take care. Keep Night from getting too fat, Jim. I'll be back in a week."

They were parted amid the rush of Tomsville citizens determined upon expressing best wishes to the bride and groom. Jim Reynard went out of the Woods's house and stood upon the porch. For a moment he stared back inside, filling his eyes with the vision of Helen Lewis, radiant and beaming. Her dark eyes met his, through the open door, and she smiled brightly, waving her hand. Jim turned and went down the street, rolling on his high heels, never looking backward.

She was dark and she was as pretty as a little speckled pup. Every swain in Boulder County, and from other Texan counties, too, had wanted Helen Woods. Jim Reynard had personally punched hell out of three men who had spoken boastfully of her favors.

Jim Reynard had always looked after the fatherless girl. Jim was thirty now, and for eleven years, since Helen was nine, he had been helping her over the rough spots, steering boarders of comparative respectability to her mother's house, spending his Saturday nights in policing the Woods domicile.

Tucky Lewis was only twenty-two. Tucky was an orphan. He had been a short, tow-headed kid when Jim had picked him up, already a horseman at sixteen. Through the ensuing six seasons, Jim had painstakingly taught Tucky range lore, cattle-punching, bronc-wrangling, making him part of Jim's little GEM ranch.

Then Tucky's Uncle Tom Lewis had appeared. He was a whiskery little man, with a long-unslaked yen for booze. But upon the back of his lone burro had been packs, and in those packs had been gold.

Uncle Tom had struck it rich. Unfortunately he was secretive, like all desert rats. Equally regretful was his overweening appetite for the whiskey of the Sandy Slope Bar and the company of bar-flies. Before he could reveal the secrets at which he everlastingly hinted, he was dead and buried.

But Tucky inherited the gold. And Tucky had been proud to buy a half interest in Jim's ranch. From a no-account orphan, Tucky became a man of affairs.

His gold built a new ranchhouse and fine corrals. They bought Herefords to improve the stock. The GEM flourished—and Helen Woods agreed to marry little Tucky. Helen Woods, that dark, slender girl who was practically a—niece, or something—to Jim Reynard.



JIM hastened along the boardwalk of Tomsville. He was stoop-shouldered, lath-lean, huge-handed. His gray eyes were narrowed by the sun, his gaunt face tanned. His face was entirely expressionless when he pushed through the swinging doors of the Sandy Slope Bar. No one was in the place at this early hour.

The bartender was Blackie Doe, whose eyes popped at sight of Jim. The liquor Reynard tossed down had a rank, fiery tang. "It's as bad as ever," Jim said. "Leave the bottle there, Blackie. I'll help myself."

Blackie had a cow-lick in his stubborn hair and a scar at the corner of his mouth, which made him look very tough. He said, keeping his voice low, "Groel and the Bar Y mob came in. Tandy Stafford is over at the Best Chance. Groel's in the back room."

"Puts me in the middle again, huh, Blackie?"

The barkeep frowned. "You and Tucky are good boys. I don't like to see you stampered. Groel and Stafford hate each others guts, but they'll both crack down on you."

"Dog eat dog," Jim nodded, pouring another drink. "I'm a peaceable man. They don't bother me."

"They tried to buy you out," said Blackie. "You wouldn't sell. I heard they wasn't going to take no."

"What can they do?" Jim asked mildly. "Tucky and me got the place the way we want it. Now Tucky's married, he wants to live in his own house. We don't aim to sell for any price—"

A voice from the back room roared, "Blackie! Bring more rum, damn you!"

Blackie's face turned to something resembling iron. He reached under the bar and picked up a Colt .45, which he placed in his belt, under the white apron. He

took a bottle of whiskey and a glass in his left hand and strolled toward the back room.

A man came bursting through the back room's door, a large, dark-visaged man with burly shoulders. He wore two guns, tied low on his flanks. He came past Blackie and the bottle, his eyes upon Jim Reynard.

Blackie stopped, and another man stepped into the doorway, his six-shooter in his hand. This man was tall and skinny and lantern-jawed. He wore doeskin trousers and a silken shirt, and about him was an air of authority. He was Nob Groel, owner of the Bar Y ranch.

"Hold everything, Blackie," he said.

The big man came reeling toward Jim, yet he was not drunk. In his eyes was a lust to kill, and his hand lurked near his right-hand gun.

"Reynard," he growled, "I don't like the cut of your ears!"

Jim hooked an elbow on the bar. "Hello, Weller. You on the prod?"

"Reynard, you been stealing Bar Y cattle," Weller shouted.

"That so? Why don't you see the sheriff?"

"I don't need no sheriff," Weller yelled. "Nob offered you a fair price to get out. We wanted to do this peaceful. Now you start throwing your irons on our calves. You know what that means . . ."



HE WAS coming closer, working himself into the rage which is necessary to kill a man in cold blood.

"I see your boss behind you," Jim said. "Why don't he speak up? Since when you doing all the dirty work, Weller?"

"You been warned! I'm giving you ten minutes to sell and get outa town. Lewis will be taken care of later. You can get your money from Nob, right now!" Weller's hand never left his gun-butt.

Blackie made a motion and Nob Groel's cold voice, like ice water dripping on tin, said, "You heard my foreman, Reynard. He's talking for me. You wouldn't listen when I spoke to you."

Reynard was very still, leaning against

the bar. There was no holster on his hip, and his lean body seemed lax and listless. There was silence in the Sandy Slope Bar.

Then Jim moved. His long legs carried him in front of Weller, blocking Groel's view. His left hand snaked out, his right went under his coat in a bewildering, swift snatch.

Weller drew, but Jim's grasp pinioned the gun. Weller's left hand went for the second weapon. Jim's shoulder-gun came sliding out, described a short arc. The muzzle raked Weller's face, splattering blood and crunching bone. Weller dropped like a poled ox.

Jim's gun covered Nob Groel. "Go ahead," Jim said. "I'll give you first shot. You got your iron in your hand—use it!"

Groel seemed frozen. Blackie seized the opportunity to step back, and his Colt slipped into view, pointing at Groel.

"That's right, Groel," Blackie said. "Go ahead and we'll shoot out right here and now. You big ranchers have been talking and walking tough for too long."

Groel's sharp features paled, then the color flowed back. Coolly, he holstered his sixgun.

"Well, I see you don't scare, Reynard," he said calmly. "I want your spread pretty bad. I'd do most anything to get it—but we only meant to scare you. We didn't know you were heeled."

Blackie said disgustedly, "He's yella, Jim."

Jim returned his gun to the spring holster under his left armpit. "Okay, Groel," he said mildly. "Let it go. You better get your foreman down to Doc Olean. He's bleeding like a stuck pig."

The ranchman came forward and helped Weller to his feet, supporting him as far as the door. He turned and said, "I mean to have the GEM, Reynard. It gives me the edge on Stafford."

Jim poured another drink. "Stafford wants it, too. But neither of you'll ever get it."

He drank deeply as Groel helped his foreman out the door. Tucky and Helen would be gone in the buckboard by now, off on a week's honeymoon. Groel had come out into the open. Tandy Stafford would be next. There would be a range war, occasioned by the rivalry of the two big outfits, the Bar Y and the Box Z of

Stafford—and the bone of contention was the little GEM, situated between the two.

Jim started to take another slug, stopped. He said to Blackie, "Thanks for backing my play. I reckon I better haul out, now. The fun is about to begin."

"I never saw you draw before, Jim," Blackie said. "That was mighty slick."

"A fast draw won't help in this," Jim said sadly. "I'm afraid Tucky's honeymoon'll be his last bit of peace for many a moon!"

CHAPTER TWO

A Western Woman Goes to War

FOR a week, nothing had happened. The GEM, lying up against the rocky slope of Devil's Hill, where it would be protected from north winds, was quiet and peaceful. Bottle Craig wrangled the horses and the hands rode the range in pairs, getting ready for the roundup.

There were only six punchers: Tory Jim Hunt, Wiley Cloud, Sid Sand, Drifter Davis, Joe Cracker and Monty Bond. All were young, all were fiercely loyal to Tucky and Jim. Bottle Craig was an old horseman, a Texan from away back. He and Jim did their own cooking at the ranch, but tomorrow they would hire a Chinaman, for today Helen and Tucky would be home.

The GEM was a nice little spread, and the cattle, crossed with Herefords, were growing fat and sleek on the range beyond the hills. The cavy yard was full of fine horses, including the famed Night, the black stallion that was Tucky's pride and delight.

East and West of the GEM lay the two rival outfits, the Bar Y and the Box Z. The GEM was tiny in comparison to these gigantic ranches which practically included all the rest of Boulder County. Stafford and Groel had driven out the little fellows long since, or had bought them out at low prices. Jim climbed the side of rocky Devil's Hill and sat upon a flat stone to light a cigarette.

He often came here to sit and smoke and stare at his beloved countryside. The rugged, deep brown and green of the spreading plain, the red rock and clay of

the hills were part and parcel of him. This was his country.

During this week he had come every day to sit and think. Over and over he had tried to imagine why the Bar Y or the Box Z needed his land. He watched the Llano River run deep in the valley and knew it was not water they wanted. There was plenty of water for them all.

He stared across the plains and knew it was not grass. There had been talk of fence, but the "bob-wire" had not yet encroached upon the domains of the open country. There was no need for it in this plentiful land. Why, then, must they attempt to run him out?

There seemed to be no answer. He sighed and stumbled down the hillside. Bottle Craig, bow-legged, gnarled, hickory-faced, called to him.

"Rider comin' up!"

"Cover me, Bottle," Jim said. "It may be Groel."

He went into the ranchhouse and buckled on his gun. The place was spic and span against Helen's homecoming. He had moved his own things into a little room in the bunkhouse. He glanced around at the rawhide chairs, the Navajo rugs and blankets, the chromos in their frames upon the whitewashed walls. It was a good home for Helen . . . and Tucky.

He went outside and the rider came up, alone. It was Tandy Stafford, fat and oily as ever, flamboyantly attired in the Mexican style which he affected. Stafford was a distinct type in the country, a business man with the instincts of a banker and the sartorial taste of a dandy. He carried two pearl-handled guns which no one had ever seen him fire. He was pink and perspiring and green eyed.

Jim said, "Light and have a smoke, Stafford."

"Hello, Jim," the fat man wheezed, smiling in a most friendly fashion. "Hear you had a fracas with that scoundrel, Weller."

"Nothing to it, Stafford." Jim's voice was quiet.

They sat on the porch, Stafford in a deep chair, Jim on the steps.

"Jim," the ranchman said, "I want to make you a real offer for the GEM. I'll give you fifty thousand dollars."

JIM almost choked on his makings. He stared at Stafford. "That's twice what it's worth!"

"Not in time," Stafford said smoothly. "You been successful with the Herefords. I'm buying futures, Jim. And I want to beat Groel!"

Jim struck a sulphur match on his thumbnail. He lit the cigarette and inhaled deeply. Then he said, "I can't sell. Not for any price. This is my home—and it's Tucky Lewis's home. We built this place with our own hands. Not for any money—no, I can't sell."

Stafford got up. His fat face was serene as he spread his hands in a futile gesture. "If you won't—then you won't. I'm not Nob Groel. I don't make any bad plays. But I'm warning you, Jim. There's going to be hell to pay in this country. You'd better get out."

"We'll take our chances, Stafford," Jim said.

The fat man got into the saddle with amazing alacrity. He sat looking down from the back of his big bay mare. The mare moved nervously, her hoofs making a clicking sound. Stafford said, "You'll be sorry. Sorrier than you ever were about anything. Even Helen Woods' marrying Tucky Lewis!"

He clapped spurs to the mare and was gone before Jim could answer.

It was pure reflex action which brought Jim to his feet. Stafford had struck deeply, and the wound burned. Jim stepped behind the pillar of the porch, his hands clenched. The whine of the bullet was like an angry wasp going past his head.

The lead struck inside the house, squarely in the middle of the chromo of the sheep in quiet pasturage. Jim's hands unclenched. He wheeled and dove through an open window, landing flat on the blue and red rug, skidding across the floor.

From out back, Bottle Craig's old Sharps buffalo gun whanged away—once, twice. Bottle yelled, "Up on the Cross, Jim! Get a bead on the devil!"

Jim had the Winchester on the sill of the window. A puff of black smoke still lingered, and another slug had torn the adobe on the front of the house. It was two hundred yards and better to the copse of buttonwood clinging to the side of the hill across the road to the south.

The Cross was a rude rock arrangement on the summit of the hill. Over beyond lay a ravine; then a path led to the outlands. It was a perfect place for an ambush. Even as Jim fired, he knew it was no use. The bushwhacker could slip from the trees, recover his horse in the ravine, and hit the high spots before Jim could climb the Cross.

Bottle held his fire, too. After what seemed an hour, the little wrangler came into the open, his gun ready. There was no further firing.

Jim sat on a rawhide chair, the Winchester across his knees. Bottle came in and said, "I reckon the war's begun, Jim. Should I bring in the boys?"

"If you bring them in, we'll lose the cattle," Jim said. "Take Night and make the rounds. Warn them. Tell them to pull the herds in as close as they can. Tell them to watch every hour of the night and day. Tucky and me will fight it out here."

The wrangler said fiercely, "I'll be back. I'll make it in two days—on Night-horse."

Jim nodded. "Get going, Bottle. I don't like this, but they're asking for it. Tucky and me will fight them just the way they're asking."

The wrangler went at a bow-legged run to catch up Night. Jim sat for a moment, staring at the rifle in his hands. Then he arose wearily and went to the cabinet where the ammunition was kept.

He found his old belt, the one with the double row of cartridges. He replaced his heavy Colt revolver with a Winchester .44 so that the shells would fit both rifle and side weapon. The Winchester was a trifle lighter, anyway, and split seconds on the draw were eternities of time when the showdown came.

He wondered a little how he would come out. He was not a warrior. He was a ranchman, a horseman, a fine hand with cattle. The fracas with Weller had been his first since his days as a button on his dead father's place. Weller was a loud mouth, and slow. How would Jim come out with the killers of Nob Groel . . . and Tandy Stafford?

He thought of Helen, and winced. She would be in the thick of it, of course. They could not put her in town, at her

mother's, for fear of abduction by the enemy. Jim knew range wars from history, from folktales. Everything went when the cattlemen started to feud. Helen would have to stick it out at the ranch, under guard. Bottle would be back . . .

The sound of the horse's hoofs was unmistakable. It was a team, running down the trail, running far too fast, even for a homecoming Tucky Lewis. Jim ran out, the rifle still in his hands.

The buckboard was bouncing over the rough ruts, the mustangs flattened out at top speed. The driver stood erect, balanced against the terrific sidesway, crouching with the reins wrapped about his wrists. Jim recognized the buckskins, the newly-painted rig over which he and Tucky had labored against the honeymoon trip. He ran into the road, peering through the dust raised by the vehicle, looking for hot pursuit.

There was no pursuer. Jim stared, and the hair at the back of his neck rose on end. The driver checked down on leather and the snorting mustangs swayed in through the gate. Helen Lewis stood straight as a ramrod, her face stony, the blood drained from her cheeks, holding with a death grip to the reins.

Jim leaped to the heads of the team. "Helen! What's happened? Where's Tucky?"

He would never forget her voice, dry, throbbing, sheer agony in the accents. "Tucky's here. Oh—he's here. I brought him in. He's here!"

She toppled, and Jim's leap barely brought him to her in time. He held her, high up on his chest, his legs spraddled. He could see Tucky now. The boy lay sprawled in the back of the buckboard. There was a bloody hole in Tucky's blonde head.



JIM sat upon the flat rock on Devil's Hill, but now he held the Winchester in his lap. Bottle Craig toiled up, his wizened face contorted in grief and rage. "We oughta get the boys in," Bottle said. "We oughta start something." "The shot came from the woods down below," Jim said. "Helen can place the spot. It was from the south, all right, on

account of where it went into Tucky's head." He winced and bit his lip. Then he went on: "It could have been anybody. It could have been Stafford's men, or Groel, or Weller, or any of his men. I'll have a look directly."

Bottle said, "The sheriff don't know a thing. He went back already. Is Helen going to town today?"

Down in the valley, on the side of the hill, there was a cairn of rocks which covered the body of Tucky Lewis. Jim stared at the rude marker. "No," he said.

"We could handle it better without her," Bottle said. "You could tend her affairs and we can get along."

"She saw her husband killed," Jim said. "She's in it. She's got a right to stay in it."

Bottle considered, screwing up his face. "Yeah. Reckon so. But when do we start, Jim? They took a shot at you. They killed Tucky. When do *we* start?"

"Tonight," Jim said. "We'll start tonight."

"I ought to bring in anyway two of the boys," said Bottle. "They might jump the house and burn it. They mean war, and they're so big and mean nobody can stop them."

"We'll chance the house," Jim said. "For now."

"But Helen . . ."

"I'll talk to Helen."

He handed the rifle to Bottle. The flat rock made a fine vantage point. It commanded the Cross, being slightly higher, and it gave a clear view of the road, the ravine upon the north and the plains beyond. Bottle sat down and rolled a cigarette. In his present frame of mind, Bottle would shoot anything strange which moved, Jim knew.

On the threshold of the house, he hesitated, knocked lightly. Helen's voice, low and calm, said, "Come in, Jim."

She was curled upon the couch, and she was dressed in black. But her attire was not mourning. She wore a black shirt and ebon-hued, close fitting doeskin trousers. There were boots upon her feet, with tiny silver spurs. Her hair was caught and bound in a black kerchief.

Jim paused, staring. Helen said, "I'm ready."

"For what?"

"For what must be done," the girl said. The pallor of her features was startling above the dark garments.

"You should go back to your mother," Jim said. "I know you won't do it, but you should."

"I loved Tucky Lewis, Jim."

Her eyes were steady, and even in their sorrow they were kindly, watching Jim wince. She went on, "You loved him. What you did for Tucky is something only you and I really know. You made him a man, and for that I am eternally grateful, Jim. Things were going to be fine for Tucky and me—because of your patience and your hard work. Now Tucky is gone."

Jim said haltingly, "It's a war, Helen. You've no place in it."

"There is the GEM to save. Not for me, Tucky's widow. You could sell to Stafford and we'd both have money enough. But you and Tucky built the GEM. It's your home. You're entitled to it."

"I was going to sell. You could—"

"Sell to Tucky's murderer?" she asked quietly. "Perhaps it was Groel who killed him. Perhaps it was Stafford. We don't know—and until we do, we cannot sell."

"It won't be easy to learn who did it."

"I'm ready," she said. She stood up and moved to the cabinet. She took out Tucky's sixgun and Jim saw that she had shortened the belt to fit her slim waist. She reached for the rifle and said, "You taught me to shoot. You taught me about everything I know, Jim. Can I ride with you, now?"

The pulses pounded in Jim's temples, in his wrists. He said hoarsely, "Yes! You can ride with me! We'll give them war! We'll give them a war such as they never dreamed of!"

Bottle saddled Night for Helen. Jim rifled his bag for black clothing to match the girl's. He chose a gray mustang from the cavy yard and Bottle roped the horse.

"I'll watch," the wrangler said. "You can depend on me, Jim: We got a good spot to sit on. I'll sleep on the rock at night. Tory Jim and Wiley'll be in tomorrow."

Jim nodded. "Hold it down if you can. If you can't, have a horse saddled and get to town. We can trust Blackie, at the

Sandy Slope. Blackie's a good man."

Bottle said, "Let 'em come, Jim. They can't make a mass attack on us. It's got to be bushwhacking. I'll kill any man who looks cross-eyed at the GEM."

Jim reined the gray to Night's side. Helen sat very straight in the saddle, staring over at the spot where Tucky's body lay buried. "It's almost sundown, Helen," Jim said. "Let's ride."

Without a word she fell in beside him. They rode up towards the Cross and the hiding place of the man who had fired at Jim two days before.

CHAPTER THREE

Forward, Sixgun Invaders!

THERE were two brass shells, from a Winchester. They proved nothing, of course. There were many Winchesters in Boulder County. Nevertheless, Jim put them in his pocket, looking up at Helen. "The tracks lead into the ravine. This man could not have shot Tucky."

"No," she said. "But I did not see Tandy Stafford on the road. He should have passed me."

Jim shook his head. "Stafford didn't have time to conceal himself. Tucky was killed by a rifle ball. Someone was planted in the woods before you came along."

Helen said, "That means that it is most likely Groel?"

"It means nothing at all. This is a hopeless search. But we got to do something. We just can't sit still."

They rode down the ravine. The tracks were plain for a ways, then disappeared on rocky ground. Jim cut the circle, picked them up, then lost them in a stream. Helen rode silently, watching his every move but offering no comment. The color had returned to her cheeks, but her eyes were tragic.

"It's getting dark," Reynard said, after a while. "We'll have to camp out tonight."

She nodded listlessly. Jim turned back to high ground. They had jerky and some biscuits in a package, so that they would not have to build a fire. They sat on a hilltop and watched the twilight change to blue-black night, and the stars come out one by one.

Through the night Jim awakened again and again, and each time the sobs of the girl were racking, stifled, but plain to his tortured ears. He arose with the sun and washed his face in the stream. When he came back, she was up and adjusting the bandanna on her hair.

He said, "You look bad, Helen. Why don't you go back to town?"

She shook her head. "I can't sit still, either."

They mounted and again Jim rode wide and around, trying to find where the rider of three days ago had left the stream. There had been no rain, but the tracks were gone—either dragged over or in a stony place where they could not be seen.

He said, finally, "It's no use, Helen. We might as well go down the country and try to pick up the other one."

They rode swiftly, looking for the trees from which Helen thought the shot might have come. They rode all that day among the hills and woods on the south side of the road to Tomsville. They found nothing.

They turned toward home of one accord, hungry, thirsty. To the west lay the Bar Y—to the east the Box Z. They had seen no one from either outfit in their prowling. Their own ranch lay a mile ahead, around a bend in the road.

Jim's eyes were on the road, his thoughts upon the taut, white-faced girl who rode the big black stallion. It was quite by chance that he noted the tracks leading off the main highway and into the grass to the south of the road.

He stopped, nevertheless. He dismounted and looked carefully. The tracks were of a big horse with a broken plate on his left front shoe. They led straight up to a small promontory covered with mesquite and cottonwoods, a grassy hillock.

"Hold the horse, Helen," Jim said. "I want to walk up."

It took but five minutes to attain the hilltop. Jim could see the tracks quite plainly. He stood for a long moment, noting that the horse had scuffled about, but had evidently stood only a few minutes in that place.

The markings then led down upon the other side of the hill, then back to the road. Jim followed them down and came

up to Helen at the rear. He mounted the gray and said, "We'll put in at the GEM for food. We got a lead, now."

"What did you find?" she asked.

"The trail of a skunk, I think," Jim said. "I'll know later."



IT WAS much later when they rode out, refreshed. Tory Jim and Wiley Cloud were at the ranch with Bottle, and Sid and Drifter Davis were expected later. Two men were holding the biggest part of the GEM herd in an arroyo, ten miles to the north.

"I don't expect them to run off the cattle," Jim told the men. "They would have done that before—before they started shooting. There's something else they're hot after. I don't know what it is; I wish I did."

Helen said, "Tell me, Jim. Whose tracks did you find, there by the road?"

They were riding to the east, going cross-country, avoiding the road. Jim turned into a dry gulch, and the black-clad riders and their dusky horses melted into the night. Helen reined close and repeated, "I want to know just where we stand. You must tell me, Jim."

After a moment he said slowly, "It was Stafford. He turned off there ahead of you and Tucky. From that little hill he could give a signal. If I had consented to sell—Tucky would still be alive."

"Then we are riding to get him, now?" she asked. "We are going to the Box Z?"

"We are going to prospect the place," the man said. "I can't be absolutely sure. But I heard a loose plate on his horse's hoof when he rode off. And he rides a big mare, being a heavy man."

"I'll kill him, Jim," Helen said.

"No," Reynard almost whispered. "You mustn't do that. You can ride with me, and you can cover me. But you mustn't shoot unless you have to. It's not—fitting."

"I'll kill him," the woman said again.

They rode in silence. It was twenty miles to the Box Z. Jim reckoned that it was about ten o'clock when they got to the outlying buildings of the great ranch. There were no lights in the main house, and only one lamp burning in the bunk-

house. Jim dismounted and trailed his reins. Helen dropped lightly to his side, carrying her rifle.

Jim said, "I'll have a look. You come near to that fence and cover me. Don't shoot unless something starts. Promise me, Helen."

"I promise," she said quietly. "But I'll kill Stafford if I get the chance."

"I don't think you'll get the chance. Something tells me he's not here."

He went on afoot, past the corral, to the window of the bunkhouse. There was a puncher playing solitaire, engrossed in the cards, the lamp shaded from the bunks. Jim counted the sleeping men. There were only four.

Stafford hired about twenty men. Fifteen of them were missing. Jim turned and went to the house. The back door was open, and he entered cautiously, his gun drawn. It was a large house, with several bedrooms. Jim went through them like a wraith in the dark. They were all empty.

In the front was an office. Jim took a chance striking a light, hoping it would not be seen from the bunkhouse in the rear of the ranch. Stafford's desk was piled with books and papers. Jim went hastily over the surface. One piece of wrapping paper with penciled handwriting stood out boldly:

We got to hurry. Come tonight and we'll make the try before the woman squeals.
N. G.

Jim snuffed the light and went out into the darkness. He broke into a lope, and now he was really anxious to evade notice. He could see the puncher through the window. Undoubtedly he had been set to guard, and had grown bored. Any moment he would come out to look around.

Helen was waiting with the horses. "Mount and ride," Jim said. "We got to attend a meeting."

She went up on Night without question. The puncher came out of the bunkhouse and stared about. He had a gun in his hand. Jim cursed under his breath and stayed Night with a hand on the bridle, managing his patient gray with his knees.

The puncher walked slowly to the house, went inside. A lamp went on. Jim

said, "Here we go! He didn't have a rifle. Make for that copse, circle it and go west."

"Stafford?" Helen asked swiftly.

"We're going after him," Jim promised. As they rode away, he muttered to himself, "And I'm afraid we'll find him."



THE Bar Y was a three-hour ride to the west. Night and the gray horse went like the wind, up hill and down. Neither Helen nor Jim spoke a word, fleeing across the country. They still avoided the road, taking short cuts, driving steadily ahead. They were four miles from their objective when Jim's quick ears picked out the sound of many hoofs.

He turned toward the road, now. He motioned Helen to stay behind, bringing the panting horses to a walk. There was a growth of chapparal at the turn in the road. Jim dismounted and caught Helen as she slid to earth. For a moment they stood close together, listening.

Men were riding in a leisurely fashion. Around the bend came two figures leading, a third one a length behind, then a troop. Stafford's thick body was unmistakable. The skinny Groel was silhouetted plainly against the stars. Weller, the foreman, rode behind them. The others were Box Z and Bar Y hands.

"Where are they going?" Helen whispered. "I thought they were enemies, that they were fighting one another as well as us."

"That's what they want people to think," Jim said. "They want something at the GEM, and I don't know what it is. The ranch itself is not that important."

"There are too many of them!" Helen said. "Our men can't stand them off."

"I can't understand it," Jim muttered. "How can they get all those hands to ride against us? It don't make sense. All those boys are not gunmen. Weller and some of his crew are tough. But mostly they're just wild boys."

"Are they going to really start a war?" "They're loaded for bear," Reynard clipped. "I don't get it at all. Helen—do you know any reason why they should want the GEM?"

"Why—no!" She stared at him.

"I just asked."

"What must we do now?" she said.

"You can ride in and warn the boys. You'll be safer in the house," Jim said. "Tell Bottle to bar up the doors, turn the horses loose and make a fight."

"What are you going to do?" she cried.

"I'm going to work on their rear."

Jim said. "I'm going to play cozy in the hills. I'm going to give them some plain and fancy hell!"

She said, "I don't want to leave you, Jim. You're all I have left!"

He gulped and made his voice steady. "They can't take the house by storm. Your six guns will hold them off for days. There's something phoney about this, and I got to learn what it is. Please go and warn the boys, Helen."

"If you're sure it's right. . . ."

"Please, honey."

She leaped into the saddle of the black horse. She said, "Take care of yourself, Jim. I can't do without you, now. I don't know how I'm going to live, anyway. . . ."

Some of the tightness was gone, her voice was warmer, as though she was awakening to the future.

"Ride hard and keep away from the road," Reynard said. "Take the trail we just came over—you know the country. . . ."

"Goodbye, Jim!"

She was gone. The man watched her, leaning forward on the big black's neck, riding as he had taught her years ago. It was no good standing there, watching her with his heart in his throat. She was Tucky Lewis's widow; she had loved Tucky. But he strained his eyes to catch the last glimpse of her in the night.

Then he was on the gray, crossing the road to the south side, riding for the hills. He wanted to see, and if possible to get close enough to hear.

He was almost to the ravine which led to the Cross, directly opposite the GEM, when he heard the first sound. It was a whirring, singing noise, and it came from somewhere close at hand.

Before he could spur the gray to action, the rope coiled about his shoulders. He tried for his gun, but the tightening loop jerked at him, plucking him from the saddle. He flew through the air for a considerable distance, and when he land-

ed he struck upon his left shoulder, and the pain ran up and down his body like hot knives.

Nob Groel's voice said jeeringly, "Nice roping, Weller. You got something that time."

Weller's footsteps came swiftly, and a heavy boot crashed against Jim's head once, twice, as Weller cursed and swung his leg. The pain stopped then. Everything stopped, and Jim was unconscious.

◆ ◆ ◆

WHEN he awoke there was a moon, and it was mid-way on its arc. He was lying on his back and the rope had been wound tightly about him. His ankles and wrists were hobbled for luck. He could scarcely move a muscle.

The pain in his shoulder had magnified, until now it took hold of his entire being and set his teeth on edge. Perhaps it was because of the pain that his mind awoke so clearly, so full of the knowledge of what had happened and what was going to take place. He held steady, his brain working like wildfire in a dry spell.

He could hear the shots very plainly. They were desultory, at vagrant intervals. He knew, then, that the GEM garrison was holding out. He had always known that a frontal charge upon the adobe ranchhouse would fail. The thirty or forty men gathered by Groel and Stafford were not enough.

He made himself think steadily. What had they to gain by this attack? There could be no sustained siege—even the incompetent sheriff could not allow that. The Governor would step in, if news of such an affair got to Austin. The Rangers might arrive any moment.

Groel and Stafford were smart. They had been smart enough to race to this place and bushwhack him. They could have killed him as he came up the ravine. They had killed Tucky without compunction. Why did they attempt this method of getting rid of the GEM?

Voices came back along the trail from the Cross. Nob Groel said, "If he tells, there'll be plenty time to grab it and go. We've got him where we want him."

"He is a stubborn hombre," Stafford said.

Weller came in, his voice thick and eager. "I'll make him tell. The Comanches taught me a few tricks."

"Yes," said Groel's nasal tones, "I think Weller can make him talk. It will be a sorry sight—but there is so much at stake, we must try everything."

Stafford said impatiently, "I don't care what you do to him. But we must have that gold!"

Jim Reynard blinked in the light of the torch in Weller's hand. The tall, thin form of Groel cast a fantastic shadow. Stafford was a bulking gargoyle, staring at him.

Groel said, "He's awake. Weller, you better get ready."

The big foreman stuck the pine torch into the ground. Smoke floated lazily towards the treetops.

"Reynard, we want that gold," Groel said.

Jim said contemptuously, "What gold? You want my ranch. You have a taste for torture, so you're going to kill me slow. Why tell riddles about gold?"

CHAPTER FOUR

Torture Trail to Victory

THEY leaned forward, all three of them, and Jim could see it in their eyes. They believed in gold—in some kind of gold. The lust for the yellow stuff was unmistakable. It was a thing Jim had seen before, in the rushes to the mining countries, in the sporadic, frantic expeditions to discover the lost San Saba Mine.

"We're going to have your ranch, Jim," Stafford said. "We need it, to clean up the country. But the gold is more important, right now. You'd better tell us."

"Tucky's uncle talked about it," Groel chimed in. "Weller saw him bring in burros loaded to staggering. You and Tucky played like he was crazy. You only spent part of it. Where is the rest of the gold?"

"At night the old codger sneaked out," Weller said. "I saw him, I tell you. He had the burros cached in this ravine, the night he come in. If I'd of known it was gold . . ."

Jim said, "You're all crazy. Tucky and I spent the money he inherited improving the GEM. There was no other gold."

"He won't talk," Weller growled. "Let me work on the hound."

Groel went on in his whining voice, "We've got you, Reynard. We got mavericks with your brand on them. We got our cattle with running irons worked over our brands, like you done it. We got evidence enough for the sheriff—for the Governor. We got you where we can hang you outa hand and make it stand up in Boulder County. Tell us about the gold and we'll let you go free to get out of the country."

Weller was carefully gathering dry, short sticks. Jim stared from one to the other of the three excited men. There was madness in them, the gold fever at its worst.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said. "You're a pack of fools, I tell you. There is no gold."

"Thousands and thousands," Stafford muttered, his thick lips moist in the flickering light. "Pure bullion. I saw Tucky Lewis bring part of it in, after the old man died. You know what happened to Tucky, Jim. Why don't you tell us?"

"I know what happened to Tucky," Jim said steadily. "Weller was planted in the woods. Groel was up here. When you rode away Groel shot at me and missed. Then you rode off the trail and up on that grassy hill and gave a signal to Weller that I wouldn't sell. So Weller killed Tucky."

"We couldn't handle the two of you," Stafford said in his oily, soft way, as though explaining to a child. "It was a lesson to you, having Tucky killed. He was a stubborn, wild kid anyway. Do you believe we mean business, Jim?"

The fat man, Jim thought, was the most dangerous of this gang. He was almost friendly, and his tongue was forked. Groel was greedy, gaunt with hunger for yellow metal. Weller was a brute. But Stafford was greasy with his ingratiations, his insults and hints.

Weller came, bearing a double handful of sticks. He said eagerly, "Yank out his shirt."

Groel reached down and stripped Jim's

stomach bare. Weller said, "I'll stake him so he can't move. Then we'll pile the faggots on him and light them. He'll talk. They always talk . . . when their flesh begins to scorch. The Comanches knew all about this business."

He drew a huge Bowie knife and began to sharpen a peg. The firing to the north grew in volume, then ceased for a moment, so that in the ravine back of the Cross all was still.

"Why don't you save yourself, Jim," Stafford said. "Why don't you tell us where the gold is hidden, and save us all this? You're a gone coon, anyway. We've got you under the law, don't forget. That stolen cattle—"

Jim said, "You damned fools! You'd have to kill us all to make that stick! You'd have to kill Bottle and all the boys, and Helen—"

Stafford chuckled. No one spoke. Weller hacked away at the second of the pegs to which they would tie his hands and feet while they made their hideous fire.

Jim stared at the rising moon. It was almost full that night, and the ravine was becoming well lighted. A star fell in the west. Jim's spirits sank with the gleaming, burning passage of the dying astral body.

♦ ♦ ♦

JIM was stretched out on the ground. They had been careful when they had unbound his hands and feet, and the lariat had still been around his body, binding his arms to his sides. Weller's ready hands had torn the shirt from his torso. The sticks were placed criss-cross,

and he could feel the harsh bark of them on his bare skin.

"Tell us, Jim," Stafford said.

"The hell with you!" Jim said. He tried to make his voice cool, and his eyes were steady, staring up at them.

"He'll talk!" Weller growled.

The burly man bit at a cartridge. The black powder poured into the palm of his hand. He leaned over, his face marred with the scars of the raking of Jim's gun muzzle. He sprinkled the powder slowly upon Jim's middle.

"It will hurt, Jim," Stafford said. "The powder alone will hurt when he touches it off!"

Jim clamped his teeth together. It would take all he had to keep from crying out, now. He bit at his tongue, anticipating the torture of fire. His shoulder hurt fiercely. Weller snatched the pine torch from the earth and came forward.

A shot sounded, far away. The torch wobbled and fell to earth, almost went out. Weller staggered back, cursing, clutching his right wrist with his left hand.

Another shot sounded. Stafford said, "Oh, my God!" and fell backwards and kicked a moment. Groel shrieked, "Kill that light! Duck for cover, Weller!"

Weller's curses resounded. He stomped upon the flickering flame of the torch, ran for the trees. Groel was already out of sight among the cottonwoods.

Jim struggled with the pegs. Weller had driven them in with the butt of his gun. The earth was firm, but Weller had been hasty. One stake came slightly loose. Jim's good right arm swelled with effort.

Another shot whistled through the

(Continued on page 100)



DO WE HAVE TO DIE?

A strange man in Los Angeles, known as "The Voice of Two Worlds," reveals the story of a remarkable system that often leads to almost unbelievable improvement in power of mind, achievement of brilliant business and professional success and new happiness. Many report improvement in health. Others tell of increased bodily strength, magnetic personality, courage and poise.

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(Continued from page 98)

brush, then Groel was firing a Winchester from behind his tree. The brass cartridges in Jim's pocket cut into him as he twisted on the ground, and he knew that he had been correct in his surmise that Groel had fired at him from the Cross. Groel was a bad shot.

There were no more shots from out in the darkness. As near as Jim could determine, they had come from the south. The sound of them was deceptive in this ravine, but Weller had been standing where a bullet from that direction would clip his right arm. Jim wondered who could have cut the trail in that direction, with his own men bottled up in the house.

Stafford was groaning like an animal in pain. His fat body thrashed in the dirt, his arms and legs flailing. Stafford had got it in the bad place, Jim knew, low down in the belly.

Another rifle cracked. The fire was coming from two different directions. Weller was trying to manage a carbine with his left hand, and not succeeding very well. "Kill Reynard!" Groel snarled suddenly. "No use letting him live to tell on us. Kill him, Weller!"



THE big man balanced the carbine over a low branch, wheeling it around, the muzzle trained on Jim's head. Jim made a last effort, and the stake came loose.

He rolled, almost screaming as his weight went upon the injured left shoulder. He grabbed and yanked at the peg on his left wrist. Weller's gun hammered.

The bullets tore up the earth, but Weller's aim was not steady. Jim reached for the stakes at his feet, his strong hand clutching the thongs, jerking with all his might. Weller fired again.

Jim could almost feel the flash of the powder, but the bullet missed him. The pegs came loose. Jim gathered his feet under him and jumped for the trees. Lead from Weller's gun sprayed around him and Groel shouted curses.

In a moment there was silence. Jim blundered on, staggering like a drunken

(Continued on page 102)

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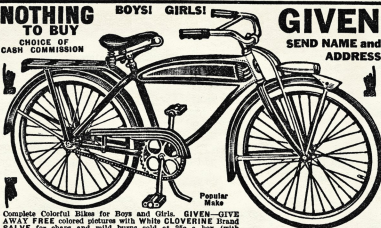
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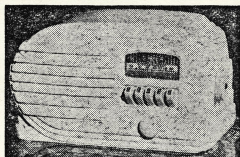
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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 100)

man, scratching his face and bared body on thickets of mesquite, banging into trees. He was almost spent.

The girl appeared as if by magic. She was leading Night, and the big black stallion was flecked with froth.

"Helen!" Reynard croaked. "How did you get out of the ranch?"

"I didn't go there," she said. "I met Tory Jim on the way and sent him in. I remembered what you said about Blackie Doe. I rode into town."

"You rode all the way to town? And back?"

"The sheriff was away on business, and his deputy was drunk," the girl said. "Nobody would believe that the Box Z and Bar Y were riding together, except Blackie."

There was a crashing sound from the south and Blackie came towards them, the scar showing livid on his ugly face. In his hands was a fine hunting rifle with a silver-mounted stock.

"They got away," Doe rasped. "They went out the south end of the ravine. They had horses down there. Is Stafford dead, Jim?"

"He will be," Jim said grimly. "You got him low down."

Blackie looked at Helen Lewis. Helen said, "I shot him. I did it on purpose. I picked him out and fired at him."

"It's all right, Helen," Jim said gently. "He deserved it."

He did not tell her that Weller had fired the shot which had killed Tucky. He shook his head at Blackie and said, "They think there is gold on the ranch. They claim Uncle Tom Lewis hid jack loads of it somewhere."

Blackie said quietly, "Uncle Tom talked some. He talked plenty in my place."

"Neither Tucky nor I," Jim said, "knew anything about it. Groel and Stafford have their men crazy with the idea of thousands of dollars in bullion. They'll be going after the house now—all of them. I reckon we better go down and save some of our boys from being killed!"

Blackie rode a mule he had borrowed in town. Jim mounted behind Helen,

(Continued on page 104)

FORTUNE IN CASH PAID FOR OLD MONEY



HIS "LAST DIME," yet if that dime was of the year 1894 with a mint mark "S" Max Mehl, the Texas Money King, would have paid him \$100.00 for it. He could have been dining on steak instead of coffee and doughnuts.



COINS WORTH FORTUNES may pass through your hands unnoticed, if you do not know how to recognize them. Mrs. Harvey, wife of a Fulton, Mo., farmer was paid \$140.00 for three small coins which she obtained as part payment for some produce.



IT PAYS TO BE POSTED—the owner of a number of \$5.00 and \$10.00 notes of the Kirtland (Ohio) Safety Society Bank was about to burn them, but hearing of Max Mehl, sent them to him and it was discovered they bore the signature of Joseph Smith, the late founder of the Mormon Church. They were, therefore, of considerable value.



ONE OF THE LARGEST TRANSACTIONS in the history of coins was the purchase by B. Max Mehl, the Texas Money King, of 632 copper cents from Dr. George P. French, of Rochester, for \$50,000.00. Above is shown a newspaper picture of B. Max Mehl handing over the check. The coin illustrated is one of the pennies dated 1793. Three of these were valued at \$5,000.00.



VALUABLE COINS turn up in the most unexpected places! A ticket seller on the Brooklyn Bridge took in a half dollar for which he later received \$300.00. It pays to watch your coins!



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RANCH FOR THE DYING

Groel's whine was excited. "Reynard's gone to town. We got to rush them and search the ground before they can get back here. We got to find that gold!"

"They'll get every one of us if we rush them," the man said. "We got to pick them off. You reckon the gold's buried?"

Weller said harshly, "Who the hell knows? We got to stop their guns and find out."

Jim took another step. He grasped a boulder and swung lightly up and over. There was a slanting bush behind which he crouched. Weller was sitting on the flat rock which was Jim's favorite resting place. Groel was leaning forward, talking to the Bar Y puncher who was firing steadily at the house.

Jim drew in his breath, gathering his slim resources. The key to the entire affair lay at hand. From this point he could gain command—if he could eliminate the trio before him. . . .

Groel was urging the man to give the signal to attack. This was evidently the headquarters of the cattlemen's forces. Jim slipped from behind the bush. The gun in his hand had belonged to Tucky, he remembered. Helen had taken it, but had not used it. There were five filled chambers. If he could, in three shots eliminate the men on the flat rock. . . .

"Stick 'em up!" he said. "We've got you covered!"

The three men froze. Weller's right arm was crudely bandaged, Jim saw, but the big man wore two weapons. Groel stood open-mouthed and the puncher, his back to Jim, sat with a rifle trained on the house.

"Drop that rifle!" Reynard snapped. "Weller—unbuckle your belt. You, too, Groel! Jump!"

The rifle clattered on the rocks. Groel's hands went nervously to his belt buckle. Then Weller roared, "He can't get the three of us!"

Weller's left hand darted for his gun. Jim shot him without compunction, aiming for the middle of his body. Weller screamed and fell over the side of the rock, rolling down the slope.

Groel had dropped flat and was already firing. Something tugged at Jim Reynard's sorely injured left shoulder. The

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

puncher was trying to get his rifle around. Jim turned Tucky's gun upon Groel. Even as the second shot came from Groel's belching sixgun, Jim let loose.

♦ ♦ ♦

THE slug caught Groel in the face. The tall ranchman spun about, once, twice, three times, then pitched forward onto the ground.

The puncher had the rifle ready. He was touching the trigger when two shots sounded simultaneously from behind. The Bar Y man groaned once and lay quite still. The top of his sombrero showed neat holes.

Blackie and Helen came scrambling across the loose rocks. Below, the firing had stopped.

"You two saved me again," Jim said. "Make sure of those devils, Blackie. I got Weller..."

Helen said, "All three of them, Jim. Tucky can rest now. We got all three."

She was pale as a wraith in the glow of the moon, but her eyes were steady and her voice serene.

"Hold steady," Jim said. "It'll be over soon."

He gathered up the rifles of the dead men. A flash down below showed the position of a besieger as the firing resumed. Jim aimed carefully, throwing lead at the spot.

A voice yelled, "Hey! Be careful up there! You like to get me!"

Jim answered promptly, "I aimed to get you! We got Stafford and Groel and Weller! You all are next!"

From the west a voice called, "That's Reynard! He got loose!"

"There's Weller!" another man yelled. "He's dead on Devil's Hill."

The moon was giving a brilliant show. Jim took hold of Nob Groel and heaved. The lanky ranchman's body flopped down beside that of Weller.

"Any more of you want it?" Jim said.

There was silence for a moment. Then a horse clattered away on the road west, the road which ran to the Border, miles away. Another horse followed, then another.

"It's all over," Jim said.

RANCH FOR THE DYING

Bottle Craig shouted from the house, "Is it you, Jim? Are you all right?"

Jim sat down on the flat rock. Blackie Doe was looking at him strangely. Helen called back, reassuring Bottle, but Jim was voiceless. His body was one great mass of pain. He was weary.

Blackie said, "Jim—this is Devil's Hill—right?"

"Yes," Jim said.

Blackie said, "Uncle Tom Lewis blabbed a lot. People who drink always talk to bartenders. Get off that rock."

Jim made an effort and got up. Helen came close to him and put her hand on his arm. Blackie went to the flat rock and lifted first one corner, then the other. At the third attempt the flat rock slid away with a great clatter.

They all stared at the contents of the hole. It was wrapped in canvas, but in places the cloth had rotted. The gold shone through dully. Uncle Tom had really played a joke on Tucky.

"And I never believed him!" Blackie said. "I thought it was whiskey talk! He babbled about Devil's Hill and a 'table'. That flat rock looks like a table top."

Jim said, "Weller was right! Weller saw him bring it in and surmised it was gold! Tucky and me never dreamed of it!"

They stood awkwardly, without attempting to touch the treasure. Helen said, "So many killed because of those rotting little sacks and that yellow metal. Tucky gone. Let's cover it up, Jim. Let's leave it there!"

"They'll be back looking for it," Jim said gently. "The men who were told of it by Weller and the others will drift back, sooner or later. Then other lives will be lost. You can take it and go away, Helen. It's yours, of course. You can go away and forget—all this."

She clutched his arm very tightly. "But I don't want to go away. I-I want to stay, and finish what you and Tucky started. I want to make the GEM the finest ranch in Boulder County. . . ."

They stood there, quietly, not close together, but staring into each other's eyes. It was going to be all right, Jim knew.

THE END

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(Continued from page 85)

butt of the manzanita, he lowered his head, eyes glowering at his foe. Not yet was this thing done—not as long as he could thrash about with those antlers.

Olo had moved back, the smell of the bobcat forgotten for a moment. She looked the buck over carefully. She whirled, with a snarl, to look up through the brush along the slope, as the bobcat odor came to her in a stronger puff of the wind.

A younger buck might have attempted to charge, now that the wolf-dog's back was turned, but the six-point was no fool. He sat there as if waiting for the inevitable, but he knew that his rump was protected by the butt of the tree, and he was going to make his last stand.

Olo sent her best growl snarling up the slope, as if calling, "Keep away, you cat!" She wheeled back, nervous now. The stout limbs of the manzanita just above the buck's head caught her eye, and an evil idea flitted through her quick wits. She started a quick sparring act, leaping from side to side, bouncing closer, then away, then back again, as if undecided which side she would attack first. She was trying to make him tangle the antlers in the limbs again.

The buck smashed his antlers down at her several times, but he seemed careful to avoid the limbs, and he did not move his well-braced forefeet. Olo wanted those feet to move, and she wanted them to move in one certain way. A slight slope was just beyond the left foot. Even as a man would have seen it, the wolf-dog saw it, and knew the advantage she could put it to.

◆ ◆ ◆

SNARLING and growling, she kept darting in and out, working her way more and more to the left. She got behind the tree. The antlers came thrashing back, raking through the limbs overhead. Suddenly the deer's left forefoot slipped on that slight slope. In a fast wheel-motion he went down, rolling completely over.

It was Olo's flash of opportunity. She went in, the same old dirty-gray light-

MEAT HUNGER

ning on the move, one eye half-closed, nose a pointed bullet. The antlers came smashing back, slamming her across the shoulders and slapping her down on the buck's neck. Hurt, but at the right place, she ripped into that neck, slashing deep for the vital vein. Once, twice, three times she struck, addled by the beating antlers, and fighting with sheer instinct now. Hot blood gushed into her face, filling it. Then, with the antlers lifting for another terrible stroke, she flung away, floundered once more on the slope, and came back to her feet.

The finishing strokes had been made. She stood there, watching the deer's head slowly lower, the dying look gradually beginning to fill his eyes. Olo's head and tail were down now. There was no proud glint in her one good eye. Some of the shiny copper had gone out of it. For a few moments she was sick from the fight, as if it had jarred something loose inside her. She turned her head to one side and tried to vomit. When she looked up, Death was staring her in the eye.

It was the bobcat she had driven away from the entrails of the four-point. Leaner, hungrier and more mangy-looking, he was here again, trying to muscle and bluff his way in on the spoils—and this time he would not be driven off without a fight.

All the cunning of wolf and dog now started making itself known. Olo turned and tried to vomit again. She was faking now, even as a wild duck might feign a broken leg and a helpless wing to lead a hunter away from her nest along the edge of some slough. As she moved forward she limped, stumbled, whined and went down, rolling over awkwardly on her side. In a flurry she got up. The cat was watching her, slitted eyes filled with cold yellow fire, yellow fangs bared, back arched.

The cat came closer, legs stiff, tail a spread bush. Again Olo stumbled, slipped awkwardly, and was down. With a squall of rage the cat shot forward, rusty-gray and ugly-spotted lightning in the air. But even in mid-air the cat turned. A terrible squall of self-pity came from him as he saw an instant too

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ABOUT RUPTURE



10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

late that he had been tricked into something that was going to be the end of him.

For Olo had come up, just as lightning-fast. Eye closed to protect it from the needle-sharp claws of the cat, she slammed through, got a mouth chok-full of hair and belly, and ripped her fangs all the way through until they came together with a fierce click. A wicked sling did the rest of it. It tore out the cat's belly.

A spinning, blood-showering object, Olo sent him hurling through the brush and on down the slope. He struck the ground, a rolling ball of fury. Up he came, everything torn out of him and hanging. Tangled with himself, he was down again. He got up, and fell again,

(Continued on page 112)

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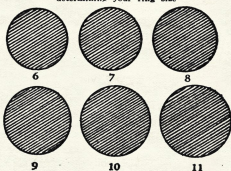
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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 110)

still spitting and snarling, until he lay there on the slope with his eyes slowly glazing in the glassy stare of death.

Olo lapped up some of the blood from the deer. She sniffed the wind again, then turned and hurried down the slope. At the end of a quarter mile she was entering the forest. She streaked along in the dark coolness of it, one eye bright, long tongue lolling. At the end of the next quarter of a mile she was coming upon something that looked like a strange growth of the forest, itself.

It was a one-roomed hut made of half-rotted logs. Its roof was of warped slabs dragged from an old sawmill three miles away. Its door was a moth-eaten old buffalo robe grown ragged and hard on the pegs that held it in place. A dank moss covered all the hut. Weeds and brush had grown up around it, leaving only a hard-packed path leading down to the creek fifty yards below. From the make-shift rock chimney a thin, blue streak of smoke arose, to lose itself high up against the thick forest roof, where the sun never came through except in spots.

In the doorway Olo halted and whined.

UP ON the slope, taking advantage of the wind, Ira Fordyce and Jim Brent waited, sweating with the delay. They had seen every move from a distant knoll. Suddenly Fordyce reached over and caught Brent's arm in a pinching grip.

"Half-wolf, half-dog!" he whispered. "That's the secret, Jim. Seeing is believing, but we'll be damned for trying to convince anybody who didn't see it! Look!"

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MEAT HUNGER

Brent was already looking. They had seen the wolf-dog leave the kill, had watched her here and there as she entered the forest. Now she was coming back. With her was an old, old Indian woman. Even from the distance, they could tell that she was blind. Her left hand had a firm grip in the heavy hair on the wolf-dog's shoulder. In her right hand was a long butchering-knife.

Straight on to the deer the wolf-dog led the woman. Fordyce and Brent watched her disembowel the buck and remove its head. The struggle to get it down the slope followed. It was long and back-breaking work for both the woman and the dog. At a safe distance Fordyce and Brent followed, always making it a point to keep the wind carrying their scent away from the wolf-dog's keen nose.

"I still say," Fordyce kept muttering, "that nobody's going to believe it."

"Damn it, Ira, I know that old squaw!" Brent stopped, mopping great beads of perspiration from his forehead. "She has a man in that shack—an old fellow, blind and bed-ridden for years. That wolf-dog's feeding them in the only way she knows how!"

"Sure, she's feeding them!" Ira Fordyce laughed, and mopped perspiration from his forehead. "But I still say nobody'll believe this yarn. It's impossible—utterly impossible."

* * *

But it was not impossible, for this story is based on facts. It happened in Northern California about fifteen years ago. I remember that the newspapers were filled with the story at the time, and many people of California will remember it. I am almost certain that the town was Chico, where the old man and woman were taken for trial after being arrested. The whole country was aroused by the facts of the case. The old man and the old woman were placed on a pension, and hunger came no more to Olo and her two blind loved ones in that dismal hut in the forest.—T. R.



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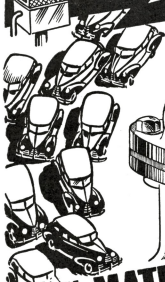
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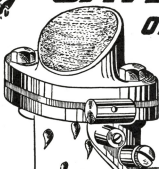


Calling all Cars!

A
MYSTERIOUS DISCOVERY
SAVES UP TO 30%
on GASOLINE!
OR COSTS NOTHING TO TRY



VACU-MATIC
SETS NEW COAST-TO-CHICAGO
RECORD



Scores
again

BOB MCKENZIE

TRANSCONTINENTAL AUTOMOBILE COMPANY
CHICAGO, ILL.

Vacu-matic Carburetor Co.
7017 W. State Street
Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

Dear Sirs:

Having just completed a new speed record between Los Angeles and Chicago, driving a Chevrolet equipped with a Vacu-matic carburetor, I thought you might be interested in knowing some of the facts and the important part Vacu-matic played in the success of the run.

The distance covered was 2322 miles in thirty-one hours and forty-two minutes, officially timed by Western Union, which gave an average speed of 50.7 M.P.H. based on elapsed time and with the Vacu-matic averaged 16-1/2 miles per gallon on gasoline.

Before leaving Los Angeles, we made several test runs both with and without the Vacu-matic, and the tests proved that Vacu-matic increased an average 3-1/2 miles per gallon at the driving speed of 50 M.P.H. and also very noticeable increase in both acceleration and power.

Yours very truly,

Bob McKenzie



In addition to establishing new mileage records on cars in all sections of the country, the Vacu-matic has proven itself on thousands of road tests and on dynamometer tests which duplicate road conditions and record accurate mileage and horse power increases.

You, too, can make a road test with Vacu-matic on your car and prove its worthwhile gas savings to your entire satisfaction.

Learn all about this remarkable discovery. Get the facts NOW!

Fits All Cars

Easy To Install

Vacu-matic is constructed of six parts assembled and fused into one unit, adjusted and sealed at the factory. Nothing to regulate. Any motorist can install in ten minutes. The free offer coupon will bring all the facts. Mail it today!

The Vacu-matic Co.

Wauwatosa, Wis.

Answer this call! Investigate this remarkable discovery that trims dollars off gasoline bills—gives you worthwhile gas savings—more power—greater speed—quicker pickup—faster acceleration. Proven so efficient, it is guaranteed to save up to 30% and give better performance or the trial costs you nothing.

Automatic Supercharge Principle

Vacu-matic is entirely different! It operates on the supercharge principle by automatically adding a charge of extra oxygen, drawn free from the outer air, into the heart of the gas mixture. It is entirely automatic and allows the motor to "breathe" at the correct time, opening and closing automatically as required to save dollars on gas costs.

Sworn Proof of Gas Savings

This certifies that I have carefully read 300 original letters received from Vacu-matic users testifying to gas savings up to 30%, many reporting added power, smoother running, and quicker pick-up. These letters are just a small part of the larger file of enthusiastic user letters that I saw at the company offices.



Signed *Marcello J. Blainy*
Notary Public

AGENTS Get Yours FREE For Introducing

Vacu-matic offers a splendid opportunity for unusual sales and profits. Every car, truck, tractor, and motorcycle owner a prospect. Valuable territories now being assigned. If you help us introduce it to a friend, you can obtain your own free. Check and mail coupon today.

SEND THIS Free Offer COUPON

THE VACU-MATIC COMPANY
7617-613 W. State St., Wauwatosa, Wis.

Please send full particulars about VACU-MATIC, also how I may obtain one for my own car FREE. This does not obligate me in any way.

Name

Address

City..... State.....

☐ Check here if interested in Agency Proposition.

10¢ A DAY - buys a Diamond or Famous Watch

On Our
NEW SAVINGS BOOK PLAN

Yes - only 10c a day on my Savings Book Plan will buy your choice of these Diamonds or Watches. It's simple - here's how you go about it . . .

WHAT YOU DO:

Send coupon below with a dollar bill and a brief note telling me who you are, your occupation, and a few other facts about yourself. Indicate the watch or diamond you want on coupon, giving number and price.

WHAT I'LL DO:

I'll open an account for you on my SAVINGS BOOK PLAN, send the watch or diamond you want for approval and

10-DAY TRIAL

If satisfied, you pay 10 monthly payments. If you are not satisfied after wearing the watch or ring for 10 days, send it back and I'll return your dollar on our

MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE

A Savings Book will be sent to you to help you save your dime each day. YOU PAY MONTHLY by money order or check. Try this easy, convenient method that has helped thousands to own fine diamonds and watches without burden on the pocket-book or savings. All prices include Federal Tax.

FREE TO ADULTS

A postcard brings my complete 48-page catalogue and full details on my SAVINGS BOOK PLAN. No Obligation.



\$2750

A7 - Brilliant Cut Diamond Engagement Ring. 14K yellow gold.

\$1 deposit \$2.85 a month



both \$33

A84 - Bridal Set. 8 Brilliant Cut Diamonds. 14K yellow gold.

\$1 deposit \$3.20 a month



\$3575

D122 - Man's Twin Ring. Diamond and simulated blue sapphire. 14K yellow gold.

\$1 deposit \$3.48 mo.



\$22

I157 - Man's Initial Ring. Diamond; 2 initials on black onyx. 14K yellow gold.

\$1 deposit \$2.10 a month



\$1925

P122 - Ladies' 10K coral rolled gold plate KENT Watch. 7 jewels. Guaranteed. Extra link bracelet.

\$1 deposit \$1.83 a month

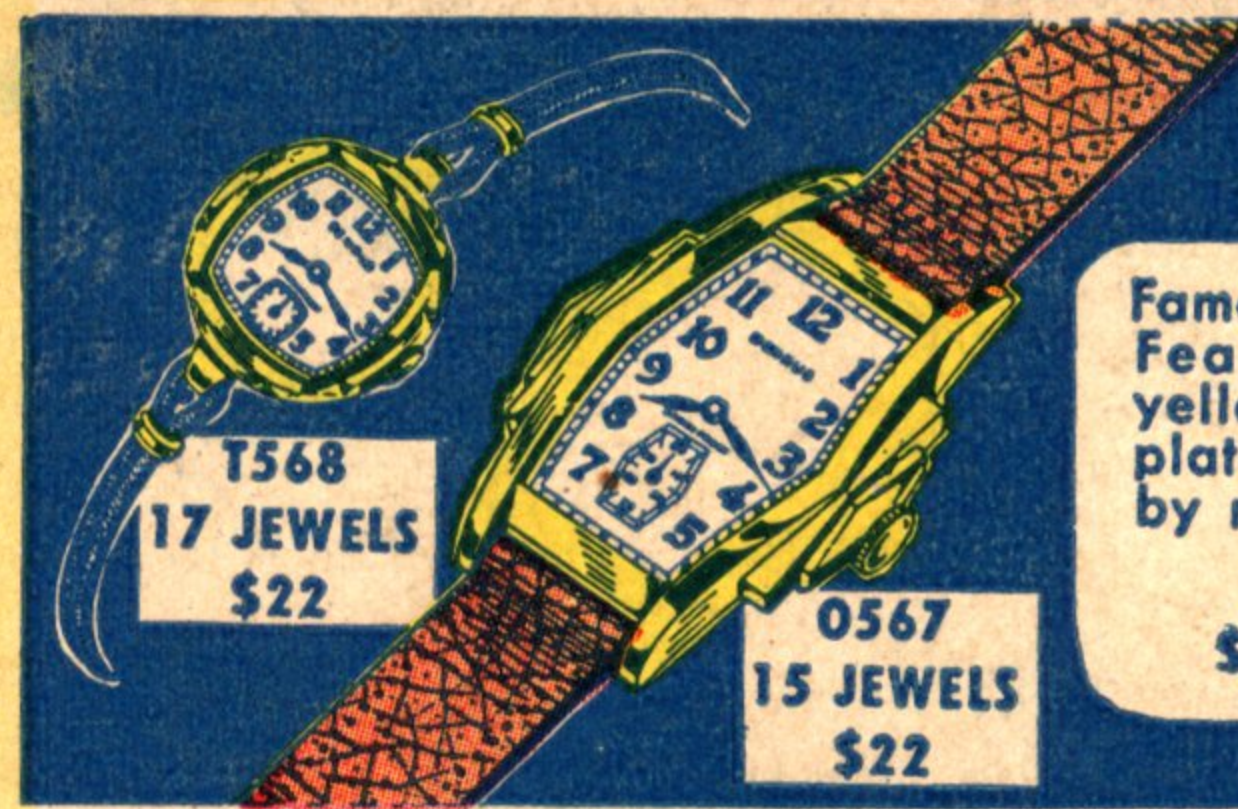


R154
17 JEWELS
\$33.75

M140
15 JEWELS
\$33.75

Bulova Watch Features for Men and Women. Both 10K yellow rolled gold plate case. Order by number.

\$1 deposit \$3.28 a month



T568
17 JEWELS
\$22

O567
15 JEWELS
\$22

Famous Benrus Watch Features. Both 10K yellow rolled gold plate cases. Order by number.

\$1 deposit \$2.10 a month



\$2750

K308 - Waterproof Watch for Service Men. Sweepsecond. 17 jewels; 10K yellow rolled gold plate.

\$1 dep. \$2.65 a mo.

JIM FEENEY
L. W. Sweet, 1670 Broadway (Dept. 12B)
New York, N. Y.

Enclosed find \$1 deposit. Send me No. _____
Price \$ _____. I agree to pay the balance
in 10 equal monthly payments, otherwise I'll return
selection and you will refund my dollar.

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