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15 BIG  
STORIES

# WESTERN

That jinete--breaker of horses--was very sure of himself, both with mustangs and another man's wife. Joe Slidell, he gave as his name. But Joe should have seen that Marion Stam was more she-devil than woman, and known that John Stam was the one they called

**THE NAGUAL** LUSTY THRILLER by **ELMORE LEONARD**

## MEN WITH GUNS

It was a tough trail, and you rode with whoever came along. Todd Steele hadn't yet learned this first law of the owlhoot...

GRIPPING DRAMA by  
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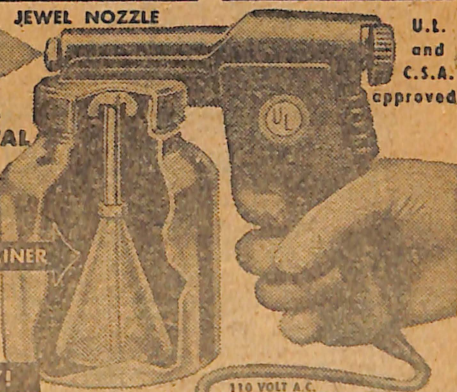
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No. 3

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- 14) **COW-THIEF OR SALTY SON?** ..... Rod Patterson 80  
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# ALONG THE TRAIL . . .

## RUGGED RATTLESNAKE

WESTERN  
FACT AND  
FANCY



Early day surveying crews in the Carson National Forest in northern New Mexico were startled to find themselves obliged to look out for rattlesnakes on San Antonio Peak, even all the way to its 10,832-foot summit, where winter snows pile deep and a midwinter temperature of 30 degrees below zero is not unusual.

Why were they surprised? Because, at this latitude in the Rockies, rattlers are rarely found above 7,000 feet, with 8,000 generally considered the absolute limit of their habitat.

But I was a Forest Ranger in that area in the spring of 1917 and can vouch for the fact that the snakes were there—and ready to buzz and bite.

And from what I hear, they still are, and I still have to find any naturalist who can explain how-come great numbers of these rugged rattlesnakes happen to live on a mountain upon whose upper slopes most of the vegetation is of a Canadian Zone type, some of it even sub-arctic.

## WHAT KILT THEIR ROMANCE

A tight-fisted cowboy and cow-lassie were  
Engaged to be wed, but they fell out,  
Because, though he claimed he was nuts about her,  
She never could get him to shell out!

## THIRSTY COWPOKE

Col. Jack (Lead Steer) Potter, an old Texas trail driver now deceased, told me this one about two thirsty cowboys. After a long dry, torturing ride they finally came to a little pond some ten feet across and a foot deep. Zeb lay down to drink right alongside the eagerly gulping horses. Jake went around to the far side where the horses' stomping had not muddied the water.

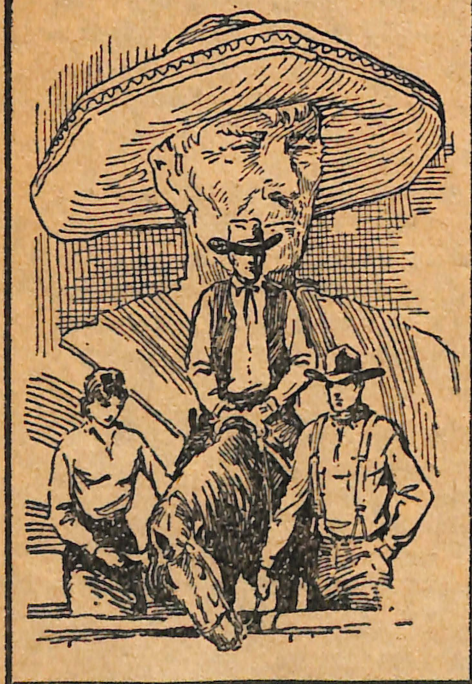
"Hey, Zeb," he called, "why don't you come around here where the water ain't muddy?"

Zeb quit drinking just long enough to answer. "It don't make a blame bit of difference, Jake," he declared. "I aim to drink it all anyhow!"

S. OMAR BARKER

**A wrangler with savvy tamed a wild horse with a great deal of respect, for he knew the animal was able to kill him. There were certain men it was wise to approach in the same manner.....**

**LUSTY THRILLER BY  
ELMORE LEONARD**



**O**FELIO OSO—who had been a vaquero most of his seventy years, but who now mended fences and drove a wagon for John Stam—looked down the slope through the jack pines seeing the man with his arms about the woman. They were in front of the shack which stood near the edge of the deep ravine bordering the west end of the meadow; and now Ofelio watched them separate lingeringly, the woman moving off, looking back as she passed the corral, going diagonally

across the pasture to the trees on the far side where she disappeared.

Now Mrs. Stam goes home, Ofelio thought, to wait for her husband.

The old man had seen them like this before, sometimes in the evening, sometimes at dawn as it was now with the first distant sun streak off beyond the Organ Mountains, and always when John Stam was away. This had been going on for months now, at least since Ofelio first began going up into the hills at night.

It was a strange feeling that caused the old man to do this; more an urgency, for he had come to a realization that there was little time left for him. In the hills at night a man can think clearly, and when a man believes his end is approaching there are many things to think about.

In his sixty-ninth year Ofelio Oso broke his leg. In the shock of a painstabbing moment it was smashed between horse and corral post as John Stam's cattle rushed the gate opening. He could no longer ride, after having done nothing else for more than fifty years; and with this came the certainty that his end was approaching. Since he was of no use to anyone then only death remained. In his idleness he could feel its nearness and he thought of many things to prepare himself for the day it would come.

Now he waited until the horsebreaker, Joe Slidell, went into the shack. Ofelio limped down the slope through the pines and was crossing a corner of the pasture when Joe Slidell reappeared, leaning in the doorway with something in his hand, looking absently out at the few mustangs off at the far end of the pasture. His gaze moved to the bay stallion in the corral, then swung slowly until he was looking at Ofelio Oso.

The old man saw this and changed his direction, going toward the shack. He carried a blanket over his shoulder and wore a willow-root Chihuahuahat, and his hand touched the brim of it as he approached the loose figure in the doorway.

"At it again," Joe Slidell said. He lifted the bottle which he held close to his stomach and took a good drink. Lowering it his face contorted and

THAT JINETE—THAT BREAKER OF HORSES—WAS VERY SURE OF HIMSELF, BOTH WITH MUSTANGS AND ANOTHER MAN'S WIFE. JOE SLIDELL, HE GAVE AS HIS NAME. BUT JOE SHOULD HAVE SEEN THAT MARION STAM WAS MORE SHE-DEVIL THAN WOMAN, AND KNOWN THAT JOHN STAM WAS THE ONE THEY CALLED...

# THE NAGUAL



Then John Stam spurred the stallion violently.

he grunted, "Yaaaaa!" but after that he seemed relieved. He nodded to the hill and said, "How long you been up there?"

"Through the night," Ofelio answered. Which you well know, he thought. You, standing there drinking the whisky that the woman brings.

Slidell wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, watching the old man through heavy-lidded eyes. "What do you see up there?"

"Many things."

"Like what?"

Ofelio shrugged. "I have seen devils."

Slidell grinned. "Big ones or little ones?"

"They take many forms."

Joe Slidell took another drink of the whisky, not offering it to the old man, then said, "Well, I got work to do." He nodded to the corral where the bay stood looking over the rail, lifting and shaking his maned head at the man smell. "That horse," Joe Slidell said, "is going to finish gettin' himself broke today, one way or the other."

Ofelio looked at the stallion admiringly. A fine animal for long rides, for the killing pace, but for cutting stock, no. It would never be trained to swerve inward and break into a dead run at the feel of boot touching stirrup. He said to the horse breaker, "That bay is much horse."

"Close to seventeen hands," Joe Slidell said, "if you was to get close enough to measure."

"This is the one for Senor Stam's use?"

Slidell nodded. "Maybe. If I don't ride him down to the house before supper, you bring up a mule to haul his carcass to the ravine." He jerked his thumb past his head indicating the deep draw behind the shack. Ofelio had been made to do this before. The mule dragged the still faintly breathing mustang to the ravine edge. Then Slidell would tell him to push, while he levered with a pole, until finally the mustang went over the side down the steep-slanted seventy feet to the bottom.

OFELIO crossed the pasture, then down into the woods that fell gradually for almost a mile before opening again at the house and out-buildings of John Stam's spread. That *jinete*—that breaker of horses—is very sure of himself, the old man thought, moving through the trees. Both with horses and another man's wife. He must know I have seen them together, but it doesn't bother him. No, the old man thought now, it is something other than being sure of himself. I think it is stupidity. An intelligent man tames a wild horse with a great deal of respect, for he knows the horse is able to kill him. As for Mrs. Stam, considering her husband one would think he would treat her with even greater respect.

Marion Stam was on the back porch while Ofelio hitched the mules to the flat-bed wagon. Her arms were folded across her chest and she watched the old man because his hitching the team was the only activity in the yard. Marion Stam's eyes were listless, darkly shadowed, making her thin face seem transparently frail and this made her look older than her twenty-five years. But appearance made little difference to Marion. John Stam was nearly twice her age; and Joe Slidell—Joe spent all his time up at the horse camp, anything in a dress looked good to him.

But the boredom. This was the only thing to which Marion Stam could not resign herself. A house miles away from nowhere. Day following day, each one utterly void of anything resembling her estimation of living. John Stam at the table, eyes on his plate, opening his mouth only to put food into it. The picture of John Stam at night, just before blowing out the lamp, standing in his yellowish, musty smelling long underwear. "Good night," a grunt, then the sound of even, open-mouthed breathing. Joe Slidell relieved some of the boredom. Some. He was young, not bad-looking in a coarse way, but Lord, he smelled like one of his horses!

"Why're you going now?" she called to Ofelio. "The stage's always late."

The old man looked up. "Some day it will be early. Perhaps this morning."

The woman shrugged, leaning in the door frame now, her arms still folded over her thin chest as Ofelio moved the team and wagon creaking out of the yard.

But the stage was not early; nor was it on time. Ofelio urged the mules into the empty station yard and pulled to a slow stop in front of the wagon shed that joined the station adobe. Two horses were in the shed with their muzzles munching at the hay rack. Spainhower, the Butterfield agent, appeared in the doorway for a moment. Seeing Ofelio he said, "Seems you'd learn to leave about thirty minutes later." He turned away.

Ofelio smiled climbing off the wagon box. He went through the door following Spainhower into the sudden dimness, feeling the adobe still cool from the night and hearing a voice saying: "If Ofelio drove for Butterfield nobody'd have to wait for stages." He recognized the voice and the soft laugh that followed and then he saw the man, Billy-Jack Trew, sitting on one end of the pine table with his boots resting on a Douglas chair.

Billy-Jack Trew was a deputy. Val Dodson, his boss, the Dona Ana sheriff, sat a seat away from him with his elbows on the pine boards. They had come down from Tularosa, stopping for a drink before going on to Mesilla.

Billy-Jack Trew said in Spanish, "Ofelio, how does it go?"

The old man nodded. "I passas well," he said and smiled, because Billy-Jack was a man you smiled at even though you knew him slightly and saw him less than once in a month.

"Up there at that horse pasture," the deputy said, "I hear Joe Slidell's got some mounts of his own."

Ofelio nodded. "I think so. Senor Stam does not own all of them."

"I'm going to take me a ride up there pretty soon," Billy-Jack said, "and see what kind of money Joe's askin'. Way the sheriff keeps me go-

ing I need two horses, and that's a fact."

Ofelio could feel Spainhower looking at him, Val Dodson glancing now and then. One or the other would soon ask about his nights in the hills. He could feel this also. Everyone seemed to know about his going into the hills and everyone continued to question him about it, as if it were a foolish thing to do. Only Billy-Jack Trew would talk about it seriously.

AT FIRST, Ofelio had tried to explain the things he thought about: life and death and man's place, the temptations of the devil and man's obligation to God—all those things men begin to think about when there is little time left. And from the beginning Ofelio saw that they were laughing at him. Serious faces straining to hold back smiles. Psuedo-sincere questions that were only to lead him on. So after the first few times he stopped telling them what occurred to him in the loneliness of the night and would tell them whatever entered his mind, though much of it was still fact.

Billy-Jack Trew listened, and in a way he understood the old man. He knew that legends were part of a Mexican peon's life. He knew that Ofelio had been a *vaquero* for something like fifty years, with lots of lonesome time for imagining things. Anything the old man said was good listening, and a lot of it made sense after you thought about it a while—so Billy-Jack Trew didn't laugh.

With a cigar stub clamped in the corner of his mouth, Spainhower's puffy face was dead serious looking at the old man. "Ofelio," he said. "This morning there was a mist ring over the gate. Now I heard what that meant, so I kept my eyes open and sure'n hell here come a gang of elves through the gate dancin' and carryin' on. They marched right in here and hauled theirselves up on that table."

Val Dodson said dryly, "Now that's funny, just this morning coming down from Tularosa me and Billy-Jack looked up to see this be-ootiful she-devil running like hell for a cholla clump." He paused, glancing at Ofelio. "Billy-Jack took one look and

was half out his saddle when I grabbed him."

Billy-Jack Trew shook his head. "Ofelio, don't mind that talk."

The old man smiled, saying nothing.

"You seen any more devils?" Spainhower asked him.

Ofelio hesitated, then nodded saying, "Yes, I saw two devils this morning. Just at dawn."

Spainhower said, "What'd they look like?"

"I know," Val Dodson said quickly.

"Aw, Val," Billy-Jack said. "Leave him alone." He glanced at Ofelio who was looking at Dodson intently, as if afraid of what he would say next.

"I'll bet," Dodson went on, "they had horns and hairy forked tails like that one me and Billy-Jack saw out on the sands." Spainhower laughed, then Dodson winked at him and laughed too.

**BILLY-JACK TREW** was watching Ofelio and he saw the tense expression on the old man's face relax. He saw the half frightened look change to a smile of relief, and Billy-Jack was thinking that maybe a man ought to listen even a little closer to what Ofelio said. Like maybe there were double meanings to the things he said.

"Listen," Ofelio said, "I will tell you something else I have seen. A sight few men have ever witnessed." Ofelio was thinking: All right, give them something for their minds to work on.

"What I saw is a very hideous thing to behold, more frightening than elves, more terrible than devils." He paused, then said quietly, "What I saw was a *nagual*."

He waited, certain they had never heard of this for it was an old Mexican legend. Spainhower was smiling, but half-squinting curiosity was in his eyes. Dodson was watching, waiting for him to go on. Still Ofelio hesitated and finally Spainhower said, "And what's a *nagual* supposed to be?"

"A *nagual*," Ofelio explained carefully, "is a man with strange powers. A man who is able to transform himself into a certain animal."

Spainhower said, too quickly, "What kind of an animal?"

"That," Ofelio answered, "depends upon the man. The animal is usually of his choice."

Spainhower's brow was deep furrowed. "What's so terrible about that?"

Ofelio's face was serious. "One can see you have never beheld a *nagual*. Tell me, what is more hideous, what is more terrible than a man—who is made in God's image—becoming an animal?"

There was silence. Then Val Dodson said, "Aw—"

Spainhower didn't know what to say; he felt disappointed, cheated.

And into this silence came the faint rumbling sound. Billy-Jack Trew said, "Here she comes." They stood up, moving for the door, and soon the rumble was higher pitched—creaking, screeching, rattling, pounding—and the Butterfield stage was swinging into the yard. Spainhower and Dodson and Billy-Jack Trew went outside, Ofelio and his *nagual* forgotten.

No one had ever seen John Stam smile. Some, smiling themselves, said Marion must have at least once or twice, but most doubted even this. John Stam worked hard, twelve to sixteen hours a day, plus keeping a close eye on some business interests he had in Mesilla, and had been doing it since he'd first visually staked off his range six years before. No one asked where he came from and John Stam didn't volunteer any answers.

Billy-Jack Trew said Stam looked to him like a red dirt farmer with no business in cattle, but that was once Billy-Jack was wrong and he admitted it himself later. John Stam appeared one day with a crow-bait horse and twelve mavericks including a bull. Now, six years later, he had himself way over a thousand head and a *jinete* to break him all the horses he could ride.

Off the range, though, he let Ofelio Oso drive him wherever he went. Some said he felt sorry for Ofelio because the old Mexican had been a good hand in his day. Others said

Marion put him up to it so she wouldn't have Ofelio hanging around the place all the time. There was always some talk about Marion, especially now with the cut-down crew up at the summer range, John Stam gone to tend his business about once a week and only Ofelio and Joe Slidell there. Joe Slidell wasn't a bad-looking man.

The first five years, John Stam allowed himself only two pleasures: he drank whisky, though no one had ever seen him drinking it, only buying it; and every Sunday afternoon he'd ride to Mesilla for dinner at the hotel. He would always order the same thing, chicken, and always sit at the same table. He had been doing this for some time when Marion started waiting table there. Two years later, John Stam asked her to marry him as she was setting down his dessert and Marion said yes then and there. Some claimed the only thing he'd said to her before that was bring me the ketchup.

Spainhower said it looked to him like Stam was from a line of hard-headed Dutchmen. Probably his dad had made him work like a mule and never told him about women. Spainhower said, so John Stam never knew what it was like *not* to work and the first woman he looked up long enough to notice, he married. About everybody agreed Spainhower had something.

They were almost to the ranch before John Stam spoke. He had nodded to the men in the station yard, but gotten right up on the wagon seat. Spainhower asked him if he cared for a drink, but he shook his head. When they were in view of the ranch house—John Stam's leathery mask of a face looking straight ahead down the slope—he said, "Mrs. Stam is in the house?"

"I think so," Ofelio said, looking at him quickly then back to the rumps of the mules.

"All morning?"

"I was not here all morning," Ofelio waited, but John Stam said no more. This was the first time Ofelio had been questioned about Mrs. Stam. Perhaps he overheard talk in Mesilla, he thought.

IN THE YARD, John Stam climbed off the wagon and went into the house. Ofelio headed the team for the barn and stopped before the wide door to unhitch. The yard was quiet; he glanced at the house which seemed deserted, though he knew John Stam was inside. Suddenly Mrs. Stam's voice was coming from the house, high-pitched, excited, the words not clear. The sound stopped abruptly and it was quiet again. A few minutes later the screen door slammed and John Stam was coming across the yard, his great gnarled hands hanging empty, threateningly at his sides.

He stopped before Ofelio and said bluntly, "I'm asking you if you've ever taken any of my whisky."

"I have never tasted whisky," Ofelio said and felt a strange guilt come over him in this man's gaze. He tried to smile. "But in the past I've tasted enough mescal to make up for it."

John Stam's gaze held. "That wasn't what I asked you."

"All right," Ofelio said. "I have never taken any."

"I'll ask you once more," John Stam said.

Ofelio was bewildered. "What would you have me say?"

For a long moment John Stam stared. His eyes were hard, though there was a weariness in them. He said, "I don't need you around here, you know."

"I have told the truth," Ofelio said simply.

The rancher continued to stare, a muscle in his cheek tightening and untightening. He turned abruptly and went back to the house.

The old man thought of the times he had seen Joe Slidell and the woman together and the times he had seen Joe Slidell drinking the whisky she brought to him. Ofelio thought: He wasn't asking about whisky, he was asking about his wife. But he could not come out with it. He knows something is going on behind his back, or else he suspicions it strongly, and he sees a relation between it and the whisky that's being taken. I think I feel sorry for him; he hasn't learned to keep his woman and he doesn't know what to do.

Before supper, Joe Slidell came

down out of the woods trail on the bay stallion. He dismounted at the back porch and he and John Stam talked for a few minutes looking over the horse. When Joe Slidell left, John Stam, holding the bridle, watched him disappear into the woods and for a long time after, he stood there staring at the trail that went up through the woods.

Just before dark, John Stam rode out of the yard on the bay stallion. Later—it was full dark then—Ofelio heard the screen door again. He rose from his bunk in the end barn stall and opened the big door an inch, in time to see Marion Stam's dim form pass into the trees.

He has left, Ofelio thought, so she goes to the *jinete*. He shook his head thinking: This is none of your business. But it remained in his mind and later with his blanket over his shoulder, he went into the hills where he could think of these things more clearly.

He moved through the woods hearing the night sounds which seemed far away and his own footsteps in the leaves that were close, but did not seem to belong to him; then he was on the pine slope and high up he felt the breeze. For a time he listened to the soft sound of it in the jack pines. Tomorrow there will be rain, he thought. Sometime in the afternoon.

He stretched out on the ground, rolling the blanket behind his head, and looked up at the dim stars thinking: More and more everyday, *viejo*, you must realize you are no longer of any value. The horse-breaker is not afraid of you, the men at the station laugh and take nothing you say seriously, and finally Senor Stam, he made it very clear when he said, "I don't need you around here."

Then why does he keep me—months now since I have been dismounted—except out of charity? He is a strange man. I suppose I owe him something, something more than feeling sorry for him which does him no good. I think we have something in common. I can feel sorry for both of us. He laughed at this and tried to discover other things they might have in common. It relaxed him, his imagination wandering, and soon he dozed

off with the cool breeze on his face, not remembering to think about his end approaching.

**T**O THE EAST, above the chimneys of the Organ range, morning light began to gray-streak the day. Ofelio opened his eyes, hearing the horse moving through the trees below him: hooves clicking the small stones and the swish of pine branches. He thought of Joe Slidell's mustangs. One of them has wandered up the slope. But then, the unmistakable squeak of saddle leather and he sat up, tensed. It could be anyone, he thought. Almost anyone.

He rose, folding the blanket over his shoulder, and made his way down the slope silently following the sound of the horse, and when he reached the pasture he saw the dim shape of it moving toward the shack, a tall shadow gliding away from him in the half light.

The door opened. Joe Slidell came out closing it quickly behind him. "You're up early," he said, yawning, pulling a suspender over his shoulder. "How's that horse carry you? He learned his manners yesterday... won't give you no trouble. If he does, you let me have him back for about an hour." Slidell looked above the horse to the rider. "Mr. Stam, why're you lookin' at me like that?" He squinted up in the dimness. "Mr. Stam, what's the matter? You feelin' all right?"

"Tell her to come out," John Stam said.

"What?"

"I said tell her to come out."

"Now Mr. Stam—" Slidell's voice trailed off, but slowly a grin formed on his mouth. He said, almost embarrassedly, "Well, Mr. Stam, I didn't think you'd mind." One man talking to another now. "Hell, it's only a little Mex gal from Mesilla. It gets lonely here and—"

John Stam spurred the stallion violently; the great stallion lunged, rearing, coming down with thrashing hooves on the screaming man. Slidell went down covering his head, falling against the shack boards. He clung there gasping as the stallion backed

off; the next moment he was crawling frantically, rising, stumbling, running; he looked back seeing John Stam spurring and he screamed again as the stallion ran him down. John Stam reined in a tight circle and came back over the motionless form. He dismounted before the shack and went inside.

Go away, quickly, Ofelio told himself, and started for the other side of the pasture, running tensed, not wanting to hear what he knew would come. But he could not out-run it, the scream came turning him around when he was almost to the woods.

Marion Stam was in the doorway, then running across the yard, swerving as she saw the corral suddenly in front of her. John Stam was in the saddle spurring the stallion after her, gaining as she followed the rail circle of the corral. Now she was looking back, seeing the stallion almost on top of her. The stallion swerved suddenly as the woman screamed going over the edge of the ravine.

Ofelio ran to the trees before looking back. John Stam had dismounted. He removed bridle and saddle from the bay and put these in the shack. Then he picked up a stone and threw it at the stallion, sending it galloping for the open pasture.

The old man was breathing in short gasps from the running, but he hurried now through the woods and did not stop until he reached the barn. He sat on the bunk listening to his heart, feeling it in his chest. Minutes later, John Stam opened the big door. He stood looking down at Ofelio while the old man's mind repeated: Mary, Virgin and Mother, until he heard the rancher say, "You didn't see or hear anything all night. I didn't leave the house, did I?"

Ofelio hesitated, then nodded slowly as if committing this to memory. "You did not leave the house."

John Stam's eyes held threateningly before he turned and went out. Minutes later, Ofelio saw him leave the house with a shotgun under his arm. He crossed the yard and entered the woods. Already he is unsure, Ofelio thought, especially of the woman.

though the fall was at least seventy feet.

WHEN HE heard the horse come down out of the woods it was barely more than an hour later. Ofelio looked out, expecting to see John Stam on the bay, but it was Billy-Jack Trew walking his horse into the yard. Quickly the old man climbed the ladder to the loft. The deputy went to the house first and called out. When there was no answer he approached the barn and called Ofelio's name.

He's found them! But what brought him? Ah, the old man thought, remembering, he wants to buy a horse. He spoke of that yesterday. But he found them instead. Where is Senor Stam? Why didn't he see him? He heard the deputy call again, but still Ofelio did not come out. He remained crouched in the darkness of the barn loft until he heard the deputy leave.

The door opened and John Stam stood below in the strip of outside light.

Resignedly, Ofelio said, "I am here," looking down, thinking: He was close all the time. He followed the deputy back and if I had called he would have killed both of us. And he is very capable of killing.

John Stam looked up, studying the old man. Finally he said, "You were there last night; I'm sure of it now ... else you wouldn't be hiding, afraid of admitting something. You were smart not to talk to him. Maybe you're remembering you owe me something for keeping you on, even though you're not good for anything." He added abruptly, "You believe in God?"

Ofelio nodded.

"Then," John Stam said, "swear to God you'll never mention my name in connection with what happened."

Ofelio nodded again, resignedly, thinking of his obligation to this man. "I swear it," he said.

The rain came in the late afternoon, keeping Ofelio inside the barn. He crouched in the doorway listening to the soft hissing of the rain in the trees, watching the puddles forming in the wagon tracks. His eyes would

go to the house, picturing John Stam inside alone with his thoughts and waiting. They will come. Perhaps the rain will delay them, Ofelio thought, but they will come.

The sheriff will say, Mr. Stam, this is a terrible thing we have to tell you. What? Well, you know the stallion Joe Slidell was breaking? Well, it must have got loose. It looks like Joe tried to catch him and... Joe got under his hooves. And, Mrs. Stam was there... we figured she was up to look at your new horse—saying this with embarrassment. She must have become frightened when it happened and she ran. In the dark she went over the side of the ravine. Billy-Jack found them this morning...

He did not hear them because of the rain. He was staring at a puddle and when he looked up there was Val Dodson and Billy-Jack Trew. It was too late to climb to the loft.

Billy-Jack smiled. "I was around earlier, but I didn't see you." His hat was low, shielding his face from the light rain, as was Dodson's.

Ofelio could feel himself trembling. He is watching now from a window. Mother of God, help me.

Dodson said, "Where's Stam?"

Ofelio hesitated, then nodded toward the house.

"Come on," Dodson said. "Let's get it over with."

Billy-Jack Trew leaned closer, resting his forearm on the saddle horn. He said gently, "Have you seen anything more since yesterday?"

Ofelio looked up, seeing the wet smiling face and another image that was in his mind—a great stallion in the dawn light—and the words came out suddenly, as if forced from his mouth. He said, "I saw a *nagual*!"

Dodson groaned. "Not again," and nudged his horse with his knees.

"Wait a minute," Billy-Jack said quickly. Then to Ofelio, "This *nagual*, you actually saw it?"

The old man bit his lips. "Yes."

"It was an animal you saw then,"

"It was a *nagual*."

Dodson said, "You stand in the rain and talk crazy I'm getting this over with."

Billy-Jack swung down next to the

old man. "Listen a minute, Val." To Ofelio, gently again, "But it was in the form of an animal?"

Ofelio's head nodded slowly.

"What did the animal look like?"

"It was" the old man said slowly, not looking at the deputy, "a great stallion." He said quickly, "I can tell you no more than that."

Dodson dismounted.

Billy-Jack said, "And where did the *nagual* go?"

Ofelio was looking beyond the deputy toward the house. He saw the back door open and John Stam came out on the porch, the shotgun cradled in his arm. Ofelio continued to stare. He could not speak as it went through his mind: He thinks I have told them!

Seeing the old man's face. Billy-Jack turned, then Dodson.

Stam called, "Ofelio, come here!"

Billy-Jack said, "Stay where you are," and now his voice was not gentle. But the hint of a smile returned as he unfastened the two lower buttons of his slicker and suddenly he called, "Mr. Stam! You know what a *nagual* is?" He opened the slicker all the way and drew a tobacco plug from his pants pocket.

Dodson whispered hoarsely, "What's the matter with you!"

Billy-Jack was smiling. "I'm only askin' a simple question."

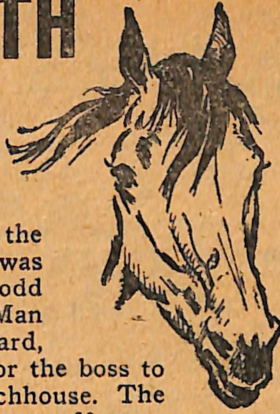
John Stam did not answer. He was staring at Ofelio.

"Mr. Stam," Billy-Jack Trew called, "before I tell you what a *nagual* is, I want to warn you I can get out a Colt a helluva lot quicker than you can swing a shotgun."

Ofelio Oso died at the age of ninety-three on a ranch outside Tularosa. They said about him he sure told some tall ones—about devils, and about seeing a *nagual* hanged for murder in Mesilla... whatever that meant... but he was much man. Even at his age the old son relied on no one, wouldn't let a soul do anything for him, and died owing the world not one plugged peso. And wasn't the least bit afraid to die, even though he was so old. He used to say, "Listen, if there is no way to tell when death will come, then why should one be afraid of it?" ●END

# MEN WITH GUNS

**B**Y DAYLIGHT the Walking T was ready to move. Todd Steele, holding Old Man Timkins' buckboard, shivered as he waited for the boss to finish closing the ranchhouse. The cook brought out the huge coffeepot,



by CLAYTON FOX

steam rising from it, and put it in the chuckwagon. Todd could have used a cup of coffee, but nobody but a top hand would get more than the edge of Baldy Joe's tongue between meals.

Timkins walked bandy-legged out the front door of the ranchhouse and made a little ceremony of locking the door and hanging the key on the porch post. Todd, in spite of his

**It was a tough trail, and you rode with whoever came along. Todd Steele hadn't yet learned this first law of the owlhoot . . .**



Flaming powder  
stung his face.

hatred of the old man, could admire the way he turned his back on thirty years of work. The Walking T was through in the Dutchman Hills. Five years of drought had burned out Timkins as it had burned out Todd's uncle. Only his uncle had had to fight Timkins and the climate, too.

Timkins came down the steps. "Better start rolling, Joe," he told the cook. He turned to Todd, "Think you can get those horses to Wright's Crossing?"

"I know the country. I've been handling horses quite a while," Todd said flatly.

Timkins started to say something, then checked himself. Todd could see his eyes going over his skinny sixteen-year-old length, from the worn boots to the perforated Stetson. Todd thought, as usual, he could feel amused contempt in that long look.

"Think you're a hand, eh? We'll see. Graze 'em through fast, but don't r n 'em; we'll need fresh horses when we get across the Snake." Timkins put one hand on the buckboard brake, vaulted into the seat, though he grunted when he hit. "In this drought, there shouldn't be anybody on the desert. If you do get jumped, don't take any chances. These horses aren't branded, but Red and the boys could trail them down.

"As I said, I don't think you'll see anybody. Take them north to the spring in Magpie Gulch, on your uncle's old place, then south through the Dead Ox Flats to the river. Be at Wright's Crossing day after tomorrow."

He stood up, circling his right hand over his head. Down the valley, his foreman, Red Jesse, saw and repeated the gesture. The riders started yipping and crowding the gaunt cattle.

"Day after tomorrow, Wright's Crossing." Timkins clucked to his team and left in a cloud of dust. Todd saw him pull to a stop at the sun-blasted orchard where Mrs. Timkins and Todd's aunt were buried. The old man wasn't all rawhide.

Todd watched him a moment, still smarting under Timkin's obvious doubts that he could do a simple job like driving a band of horses seventy miles.

He tightened his saddle cinch, checked his canteen, and dropped the corral bars. The horses streamed through the gate in a frightened rush as he whirled a lasso over their backs. An old roan mare took the lead. She'd be easy to handle in the first part of the trip, but once they got to unfamiliar range, she'd be trying to come back.

The horses were full of ginger and wanted to run, but he hazed them along as slowly as possible. He didn't want them sweating too much; the last of the Walking T tanks had gone dry the day before, and there would be little water in Magpie Gulch. They'd need all the moisture they could get to cross the desert. Even this early in the day the heat was a giant sponge which absorbed the sweat almost before it reached the skin. The horses were already coated with a white film of alkali and salt.

**H**ANDLING the horses was the first decent job Timkins had ever handed him on the Walking T. He probably wouldn't have got this one if Timkins hadn't needed every hand to move the cattle. Ever since he'd come to work on the Walking T the old man and Red Jesse had handed him every dirty, piddling job in the book. He'd been drawing fifteen a month and found for mending fence, cutting wood and washing dishes for Baldy Joe, and any other odd job which needed doing. He was sixteen now, and had to start doing a man's work and drawing a man's wage. The trouble was, on the Walking T he never got a chance.

Todd thought maybe it was on account of his uncle. The Steeles had moved into Magpie Gulch when Todd was five. Timkins hadn't liked it. "It's no place for a farm," he'd said. After two years Otis Steele had agreed with him. When the crops didn't burn out, the Walking T cattle got them. Otis Steele never got around to fencing his fields. Finally Otis had given up and had gone to work for the Walking T. He didn't last long at that.

"I'm not cut out to work for somebody else," he'd said. He hated the country, the continuous sandy blast from the Columbia Basin in the sum-

mer, the stinging gravel-like snow in winter. He'd wanted to pull up stakes; move to the Palouse country.

Todd's aunt had been different. She'd wanted to stick. "Someday irrigation will come. This will be the best farming country in the world," she'd said. "You've always run, Otis. There isn't any promised land. We'll have to make our luck right here."

Todd's uncle had stood it a long time. The longer he'd stayed the worse he'd hated Old Man Timkins. One day some Walking T cows had got into his unfenced winter wheat. The wheat was no good, it was already shriveled with drought, but he'd shot the cows. Old Man Timkins had come to see him. When they got through talking Otis Steele had stamped into the house.

"I'm leaving," he said. "Are you coming with me?"

Todd's aunt hadn't said anything for a long time; when she answered her voice was roughened with tears. "You travel alone, Otis," she said.

She'd tried to explain it all to Todd. Later it sometimes seemed to him she was trying to explain it to herself. He hadn't understood it clearly. She told of countless homes and countless moves, always chasing the rainbow, and yet each move always left the Steeles worse than they'd been before.

"A man never gets anything running," she told him. "I want you to grow up to be a fighter instead of a runner. Your uncle will be back. Whatever he finds will beat him; he'll be back."

She'd been wrong. She got a start in turkeys while she was waiting for irrigation. One March day a howling blizzard caught her turkey flock in the open. She'd saved most of them, but the chill she got developed into lung fever. When she got out of her head Todd loaded her into a wagon and started for the Walking T. She died on the way.

She had been wrong and Otis had been right, Todd knew now. The irrigation water never had come through. After five straight years of drought, the country was too dry even to use as range. Timkin was moving the Walking T over into the Blue Mountains.

The scab-rock and sagebrush uplands were broiling in the heat. The horse herd was plodding along, sullenly waiting for a chance to break away. The sun was so hot Todd's cheeks were burning under the layers of tan. He reversed his neckpiece and put it over his cracked lips.

AT NOON he sighted three riders on a high ridge to the northwest. They were angling in toward his own route. He saw them for about an hour, then they dropped from sight into one of the gullies which cut the ancient basalt. Todd squinted into the glare to the south, looking for the dust which would mark the progress of the Walking T cattle. A tight band settled across the back of his neck. Men didn't ride the desert in midsummer without a good reason. The reason mostly being that there was a sheriff looking for them. He didn't even own a gun, all he could do was sit tight.

He reached the spring in Magpie Gulch before sundown. He was kept busy for a while cleaning out the bitter alkali spring and keeping the thirsty horses in order. He kept the roan mare away from the seepage until it was almost dry. The mare would stay close to drink the water as it collected and the others wouldn't stray far from the leader.

He put his horse on a picket rope, cooked and ate his supper, and rested on his blanket for a while. He'd never learned to smoke, and he found it hard to relax. The three riders worried him. He rose and prowled the canyon, cat-nervous, to the cabin which had been his home. The doors and windows had been knocked out and the floor stomped to splinters. Some of the Walking T's cattle had used it for a shelter.

On a shelf he found the tablet where his aunt had kept the records of her turkey flock. Todd riffled the gritty pages. The figures, smudged and scratched-out, showed her efforts to stay ahead of the game. Toward the end there was an unfinished sentence: "If this hatch is good—"

His aunt had figured on everything, the hazards of wind and weather, poor feed, wolves and coyotes, everything but her own destruction. He

remembered her sitting at the kitchen table, the kerosene lamp yellowing her hair. His uncle had sat across from her while she planned how best to buy seed wheat.

"It's no use, Annie," he's said. "This desert won't pay off." And his aunt had looked fiercely at him.

"We'll make it pay," she'd said.

Todd blinked at the memory, but, just the same, his uncle had been right. It was better to give up and run instead of beating your head against a stone wall of odds. Todd tossed the tablet down and started back to the spring.

The strange riders had him on the hip. They were sitting by his campfire, drinking his coffee when he came up the dry creek bottom. Only two of them were there. His neck-hairs bristled with the realization the third man was probably up on the hill, holding a rifle on him. He cursed himself for being green as grass.

Todd walked forward boldly, trying to keep the way he felt out of his expression. He looked the men over carefully, trying to remember if he had seen them before. Both were heavily bearded, one red, one black. They wore pistols, and rifles were within reach of their hands.

"Howdy," Todd said. The single word splashed in a pool of silence, heard only its own echo. Finally Blackbeard jerked his head toward the horses grazing in the canyon.

"Yours?"

"Walking T," Todd said. He squatted carefully by the fire. He was scared.

"Heard Old Timkins had scorched out. These his *remuda*?"

"No. Extra stock, mostly unbroken."

"Not many men would have the guts to start over, at his age," Blackbeard said.

"He's got the stock to do it with," Todd said. "The rest of the outfit is south of me." He hoped the strangers did not know how far south. He watched them carefully. It was time to sound them out.

"Your friend camped out somewhere?" he asked.

"Friend? Oh—we had a fiddlefoot with us this afternoon. He was head-

ing for the Horse Heaven country. We're heading north." Blackbeard stood up. "Reckon we'd better do some riding while it's cool. Where's the next water?"

TODD LET his breath run out slowly, trying to ease the tension which gripped him. "Crab Creek runs on the surface about twenty miles north. The Potholes are forty. There should be a spring or two along the Dead Ox in between, but they are probably all dried up."

The strangers filled their canteens at the seepage. "North for us. Thanks for the coffee," Blackbeard said. He shook hands with Todd. "Who shall we tell the devil we seen out here?"

"I'm Todd Steele."

"I'm Ed Mapes. Red here calls himself Knudson. You make good coffee, Todd. I'll remember that."

After they had mounted and ridden out Todd sat dead still by the fire, waiting for the sounds of their horses to die away. There was a cold spot between his shoulder blades. Why did they give him their names? Riders of the desert gave a name only when it was absolutely necessary, and then their mothers would not have recognized the ones they gave. Those riders had come in to take a good look at the horses. They'd watch and wait, estimating the chances of other Walking T men horning in. If only he had a gun—but Old Man Timkins had never paid him enough money to buy one.

Todd rolled into his blanket, fully dressed. The roan horse came snuffing at the seepage. A lone night-hawk *doo—oom—ed* over the canyon. Todd lay quiet until the last stick of the fire had died out and the canyon lay black under the starshine. Then he silently crept from his blankets and climbed the ridge. On top, he stood for a long time listening to the faint rustles of the night. Satisfied at last, he turned back to the canyon and saddled his horse.

The horses were shapeless blobs in the canyon depths. He had no way of counting them, all he could hope to do was cut wide circles to bunch them. They were balky at being forced into a night drive, but Todd finally

got them strung out along the old wagon road beyond the cabin.

He fought off his impatience. The strangers might be waiting for him anywhere. If he could get out of the Dead Ox Flats, ten miles down the canyon, he stood a chance of losing them in the rocky wastes beyond. He thought of turning south and racing to catch the rest of the Walking T crew. He set his jaw. He'd be darned if he'd have the old man and Red Jessee rawhiding him about thieves that didn't exist! And they'd claim he'd been spooked by a pair of harmless saddle-tramps.

It was still early, in the black hours after midnight, when the valley walls were no longer shadows around him and he realized he was in the wide dry wash of Dead Ox Flats. He was weaving in the saddle from weariness. He felt he could lie down anywhere and sleep like a poleaxed steer. Twice within a half-mile his head dropped forward and jerked him awake.

Out on the flats the horses fanned away from the single file of the canyon. Without warning, they broke. One second they were walking quietly along, the next they were in full flight and scattering in all directions. Todd spurred up his horse and gave chase, but he knew it was no use. He'd have to wait until morning, and whatever advantage he'd gained by the night ride was lost. He unsaddled, gave his horse some oats, and spread his blanket on the rocky ground. He was instantly asleep.

**H**E AWOKE when the sun was high enough to shine in his eyes. His back was stiff and his eyes ached. He ate a cold breakfast, without coffee, and climbed a low sand-hill to look for the horses. They were scattered in groups of two's and three's all over the flats, searching for grass. He knew they would bunch up to go back to the Magpie for water by that evening, but he didn't have that much time.

Todd saddled up and began the slow, patience-wearing job of circling the horses into a bunch. He thought of the times he'd ridden through here with his uncle. Otis Steele had hated

the wide, dry wash above all other parts of the country.

"Look at it," he'd say. "I had a good farm in Illinois, a tenant farm. I coulda worked there all my days. Soil as deep and black and rich as—well, you'd have to see it. You don't have soil like that in this country. I would have stayed, but your aunt wouldn't hear of it. 'We've got to get a place of our own,' she said. Well, we've got it. In a desert fifty miles from running water. Look at it!" He pointed to a bleached cow's skull. "That's the place of your own you get in the desert."

Todd thought back to the days when his greatest pleasure had been following his uncle around the ranch, trying to walk and talk as he did. He could barely remember his own parents, and Otis Steele had been like a father to him.

It took him almost two hours to make his first wide sweep around the horses, and by the time he swung around them again, some of them had worked back to their original position. After a half-dozen narrowing circles he had them bunched, but even then a group broke away and it took him an extra hour to get them back. He was half blinded by sweat and so galled he could hardly sit in the saddle. His horse was growing tender-footed in spite of its shoes. His canteen was nearly dry, and already the horses were gaunting. He had to get them to water soon, even if he had to take them back up Magpie Gulch.

He saw the strangers coming this time. They rode out of the hills to the west just as he swung the herd south toward the Snake. All three of them were there this time. They seemed to be in no hurry to intercept him, knowing he could not outrun them in the flats. Again Todd wished for a rifle.

When they had ridden to within three hundred yards of him, two of them stopped. The third, swinging his hand in a signal for Todd to pull up, rode on alone. He was shouting, but Todd couldn't make out the words. Suddenly recognition shocked him cold. The approaching rider was his uncle.

OTIS STEELE looked very much as Todd remembered him, only a very little older. Faded jeans, worn boots with run-over heels, a dust-colored man with faded blue eyes. His shoulders drooped slack. His chin was covered with frosted pale-pink whiskers. His smile was the same, slow and sheepish.

"Todd! I'm glad to see you, boy."

"Me, too," Todd rasped through a sudden roughness in his throat. He looked hard, trying to bring his memories of his uncle up to date. "Where you been?" he asked.

"Here and there. Big Bend, the Okanagon, Palouse country."

"You heard about Aunt Annie?"

"I heard about it. I started back right away, but it's been tough going. Some rider told me you were working for Old Man Timkins, so I knew you were all right. I suppose he made you work off the cattle I shot?"

"Why no, he's given me a fair shake. I been drawing half pay as a chore boy," Todd said. "Didn't you have the right to shoot those cattle?"

"The cattlemen made the law," Otis said. "What do you think?"

"Where you headed now?" Todd asked.

"Well, my partners and I just happened to be riding this way. We were going to look at the Walking T trail herd, seeing if there was any strays, but these horses will do just as well."

"I was right then," Todd said. "You and your partners are rustlers."

"Nothing so fancy. We just try to make a dollar when we can. Mapes and Knudson are old hands. They know the trails. Ride along with us and you'll be in clover, boy."

Todd looked at him bitterly. "There ain't much else I can do, is there?"

Otis grinned. "That's right, they're with us, and they're pretty tough fellows. You can't do nothing else."

Mapes and Knudson rode in slowly. "I thought you two were going to palaver all day," the blackbearded Mapes said. "Is this your boy or ain't it? If we don't get these horses to water soon they'll gaunt up so much we can't sell 'em."

Todd nodded to his uncle. "It's your play."

Mapes grinned. "Is your boss likely to send any riders after you?"

"Nope, he don't have them to spare until he gets the cattle to the Blue Mountains. He trusted me to bring the horses."

Mapes was looking at him with the same faint contempt that Timkins had. "Some folks is careless with their stock. Makes it easy," he said. "Steele, you and your boy ride drag. Let's take 'em through to the Potholes."

All afternoon the Steeles in the dust of the herd while Mapes and Knudson rode in comparative comfort on the wings. By courtesy of the trail they should have been relieved after an hour or so, but the two outlaws made no effort to spell them off. Todd, his sunburned cheeks smarting under the layers of alkali, wondered why his uncle didn't protest. He realized that if the outlaws did take him along, they would treat him as a kid. As for his uncle—Todd was ashamed of him.

They reached a spring with water in it south of the Potholes, but late, after a drive that left them all staggering.

"Steele, you and the kid rustle some wood and get some grub," Mapes ordered. Otis Steele did not even answer him. Todd realized that with the outlaws, as he had been everywhere else, Otis Steele was a dust-colored nothing, a perfect cipher.

AS SOON as they had eaten supper Mapes went out on guard. "I'll take it till midnight," he said. "Knudson, you can relieve me. Steele, you take it at two. Get your kid up to get breakfast at three-thirty."

The silent Knudson stretched out at once. Todd was so weary his bones were sore, but he sat by the fire with his uncle for a few minutes, trying to reach back for the days they had gone hunting together, and had sat by a fire in the desert. In those days his uncle had been the greatest man in the world, in spite of what Aunt Annie said. Todd felt a sadness because time had brought him a clearer vision.

Knudson began to snore regularly. Todd moved closer to his uncle. "We've got the early morning

watches, when they both will be asleep," he whispered. "Why don't we pull out on these men? If we're going to steal something, let's steal it for ourselves."

Otis ran his hand over the frosty pink of his whiskers. "We can't do that, boy. These men are tough, they'd hunt us down and shoot us like rats. It wouldn't be the first time they've killed somebody."

"And you throw in with them!" Todd blurted.

"It's a tough trail, and you ride with whoever is along it."

"But you were honest," Todd protested.

"Honest, and kicked around like a yellow dog. Riding the trails is all right, you'll see. At least you won't have to take Old Man Timkin's charity, and the lip he hands out with it."

"I'm not on charity," Todd said hotly. "I work for what he pays me."

"Better get some sleep," Otis said. "Mornin' comes early."

Todd hadn't intended to sleep, but he had spent too many hours on the trail. He stretched out on his blanket, and though he fought against the weight of his eyelids, he dropped off. When he awoke again his uncle's blankets were empty, so he supposed he was on watch. Knudson and Mapes were talking by the fire.

"Think the kid'll do us any good?" Knudson asked.

"Naw, he looks like his old man or uncle, whatever he is, probably acts like him. As soon as we get the horses across the desert we'd better shake them. No use dividing the money with a couple of weak sisters."

Todd lay quiet in his blanket, fighting the anger which burned him. He wasn't being taken for a hand here any more than he had been on the Walking T.

Mapes and Knudson soon went to their blankets and began to snore resoundingly. Todd lay absolutely still, staring up at the bright clusters of stars. He looked and acted like his uncle, Mapes had said. Once he would have thought that was praise, but now that he had seen Otis Steele again, the words stung him. It might explain, too, why Old Man Timkins and Red Jessee rode him so hard.

Otis Steele hadn't been popular with either of them.

The outlaws were contemptuous because he had so tamely come to hand when they had taken over the Walking T horses. He tried to think what Red Jessee would have done, if it had been he who was bringing the horses through. Red couldn't have done anything without a gun, either, he thought.

But now there were guns handy.

Todd slipped from his blanket and moved a few feet. Knudson broke off his snoring, and fear laid a heavy hand on Todd's guts. After a long minute the rumble filled the night again. Again Todd crawled forward, trying to keep out of the light of the fading fire.

Knudson and Mapes were no green-horns; they were lying side by side, with their gunbelts under their heads and their rifles lying between them.

IN THE faint red glow, it seemed to Todd that Knudson's eyes were wide open and looking at him. He froze again, forgetting to breathe, the sharp stones digging into his knees. Knudson did not move or say anything.

Todd's hand closed over a fist-sized stone, afraid the pounding of his heart would wake them up if they weren't already awake. The stars were paling in the east, and a few sleepy birds were twittering in the sagebrush. He had a choice: tamely start getting breakfast for the outlaws, or take his horses and get out of there.

Gripping the stone tightly, he stood up, walking forward as quietly as possible. Knudson's eyes were closed tight, it had been a trick of the dim light which had made them appear open.

Todd leaned over the sleeping men. Mapes wasn't quite touching his rifle, but Knudson had his wedged against his hip. Getting the gunbelts was out of the question.

The rank smell of the outlaws was strong in his nostrils, helping to drown out his own fear smell. His hands shook only slightly when he reached for Mapes' gun. The outlaw's breath was warm on his hand as his fingers closed around the cold metal.

He pulled the rifle up, and in that moment Mapes rolled in his sleep and threw out a heavy hand, knocking the rifle from Todd's hand.

Mapes sat up, cursing. Todd drew the rock back and hit him between the eyes with all his strength, knocking the blackbearded man flat. Todd dove and got his hands on the rifle again just as Knudson rolled over and up with a six-shooter in his hand.

Flaming powder stung his face and ear as the cartridge exploded almost against his chin. Todd laid the rifle barrel along Knudson's head and he dropped, the gun spilling from his hand.

Todd whirled and ran for his horse, cursing himself for not having saddled and bridled it before going after the gun.

The blow he had hit Knudson was solid enough, but Mapes would soon recover from the blow with the rock.

He wasted precious minutes getting his horse saddled and bridled. Then he went to the picket ropes on Mapes' and Knudson's horses and cut them loose. When he gave them a slap on the rump they ran to join the Walking T horses.

As he remounted a rifle cracked, the bullet popping just over his head.

He turned with Mapes' big rifle and threw a bullet into the fire. He could see nothing of the outlaws in the uncertain light.

The rifle cracked again, and this time he saw the flash to the right of the scattered coals of the fire. He shot once, carefully, knowing he had to save the magazine load of cartridges for the trail. Then he turned his horse and spurred away. Afoot, Mapes and Knudson could do him no more harm.

He rode to where his uncle was sitting his mount halfway between the horses and the camp, apparently afraid to ride in, though he had a rifle in his hands.

Two more shots came from the fire, but the bullets were nowhere close. "Otis," Todd called. "Get the horses started south."

"What'd you do this for, boy?" Otis asked.

"Hurry up!" Todd snapped.

"We'll get you for this, both of you!" Mapes called. He poured another string of bullets in their direction.

Todd turned with a kind of contempt and sent another bullet to keep them lying low.

"You shouldn't have done it, boy," Otis said. "They won't forget, they'll carry the grudge."

"I'll take my chances," Todd said. He reached into the watch pocket of his overalls and pulled out his tightly folded pad of bills. It was the money he had been saving for clothing and a gun.

"Here's all the money I've got, forty-odd dollars," he said. "Two days north you can hit the railroad. Better take a train back to Illinois."

Otis looked at him a moment, chin trembling, as if he were on the edge of tears. "All right, boy," he said. "I'm sorry."

Todd handed him the money. "So long," he said. He spurred his horse forward, his eyes stinging. A man made his luck, but he could not help feeling regret. In a minute he had the horses strung out for Wright's Crossing of the Snake....

He reached the crossing two days late, not expecting to find anybody there. But the river was high from mountain rains, and Red Jessee had just finished pushing the tail end of the herd across.

"Have some trouble?" Timkins asked, his eyes on the two horses that had belonged to Mapes and Knudson.

"A little."

"Somebody make you a gift of those—and that rifle?"

"You might say that."

Timkins watched him with no expression on his wrinkled, old-shoe face. "I see."

Todd turned away and walked to where Baldy Joe was working by the chuckwagon. "Fix me some grub, Baldy," he said. "I've got to get these horses across."

Baldy Joe started to swear, then choked off as Old Man Timkins looked at him. "Steak and coffee for a hand," he said.

● END

# TOO COCKY AND HANDSOME

by  
**STEPHEN  
PAYNE**

**W**HEN CLINT Charles joined up with the Stirrup outfit, he took an immediate shine to Bertha Martin, and the boss's daughter warmed up toward the livewire young buckaroo sufficiently to catch old Bill's attention.

"Got to bust that up, Mace," said Bill Martin to me. "That handsome and cocky young squirt—" and Bill's lips curled, for he didn't like either handsome cowboys or boys or cocky ones; the handsome ones put in too much time primping and making eyes at Bertha; the cocky ones were wild and harum-scarum, rode the tails off Bill's horses and choused the fat off his cattle  
"—needs h i s

ears pinned back. I'll send him with you to my Tall Pine ranch and I'll impress on him that he ain't to wear out h i s saddle string with any thirty-mile jaunts to the home ranch after his day's work's done."

Clint wasn't happy to hear the news. Yet he realized that if he quit he'd give Bill Martin a chance to snort, "Humph! No guts." Maybe, too,

Stubborn, salty, loco, that was this new cowpuncher, Clint Charles. So it was funny, the Stirrup boss and a range veteran like me letting him push us around. . . .

I didn't hear  
her reply.

Bertha'd agree with her dad and he wouldn't be seeing her again ever. "I'll show the old rip-snorter I can take it," he told me.

Now, Bertha just loved all kinds of pets, cats especially, and on July first when we got ready to move a thousand cows to this Tall Pine range, Bertha boxed up one of her cats for us cowboys to have to keep down the rats and mice. Her choice was Prince, a self-reliant, battle-scarred, tough old warrior.

The last time I'd laid a hand on that cat he had sunk his teeth in my thumb. He would

let Bertha pet him and arch his back and purr for her. Bertha was somebody special. (Ask Clint.) She was just blossoming into womanhood; figure to make a man's eyes dance and face to go with it, dark hair, dark eyes, vivid smile, prettier than a fawn against a blue lake at sundown.

Clint put the box on the chuckwag-



on and he assured Bertha he appreciated the loan. "I'll take wonderful care of Prince. But I'll be thinking of you every minute, Bertha. Will you be thinking of me?"

I didn't hear her reply, but they went riding in the moonlight and the next morning old Bill was chewing one corner of his mustache and had a frost-like gleam in his eyes whenever they rested on Clint Charles. As usual, Bill helped the range foreman and the cowpuncher crew move a herd to Tall Pine.

The place is merely a summer cow camp on Injun Creek east of the Continental Divide where ancient peaks look scornfully down on the valley wherein lies the ranch. Once Bill and I visited that valley on snowshoes in mid-winter and saw no sign of a buck and pole fence enclosing a section of meadowland, nor yet of a log cabin, barn, shed and set of pole corrals.

"Snow neck-deep to a tall pine," Bill remarked and that's how his summer cow camp got its name.

The Stirrup cowhands shoved a thousand-odd cattle back into the gulches and canyons, the ridges and open parks behind Tall Pine and left me and Clint to ride herd. Sam Skittles, the chuckwagon cook, left us a load of grub, our beds, war sacks—and the cat.

I secretly hoped Prince would head for home right quick as most cats or dogs would have done. Not that big yellow tom. He took to this remote, lonely place as if going to the wild came natural to him, and he was just as independent as a lone wolf. Clint, probably thinking of Bertha, and that Prince was a definite tie between him and the girl of the Stirrup outfit, tried to stroke him and pet him. Prince'd fuzz up his tail and snarl, "Spt. Spt. Yow!" Meaning in cat language, "To hell with you."

"Bertha said you were a prince," Clint commented. "I think you're a doggoned savage."

"Regular Apache," I put in and a new name for our mouser was born.

OUR LONG busy days ran into weeks, and weeks ran into months. Clint fumed that time passed

as if it were a lame burro climbing a cliff. In mid-September snow began falling and early in October the Stirrup roundup crew came and picked up most of the cattle. Clint was busting to go to the home ranch with this outfit. But Bill's orders were: Mace McFee and Clint Charles are to stay on Tall Pine and explore every spot on the range to make sure no Stirrup dogies are pocketed.

After the punchers pulled out I overheard Clint making talk with Apache. "Apache, what would you do in my fix? That old boss is a tyrant, hell-bent to keep me away from his daughter. If you were me, 'Pache, would you stick here in this blamed hole and let him get away with it?"

Apparently Apache must have told Clint to stick, and eventually came the day when I told the love-sick, homesick cowboy, "We've wound up our job, can swear to the ol' man there are no cattle any place on this range, and pull out tomorrow."

Clint was up before daybreak. For a change he built the breakfast fire and dragged me outa bed. He hustled to get our horses saddled and our beds and other things packed on a couple of nags.

I made breakfast and when I opened the door to call Clint he was standing in knee-deep snow at the north end of the barn and looking up at its main ridge pole.

"Nice boy. Nice kitty," Clint coaxed. "Come now, jump! I'll take you to the home ranch. That'll make Bertha happy and you'll be glad to see her again. Not as glad as me! Come, 'Pache... jump."

Apache didn't move. He was scrooching a-top the out-jutting ridge pole which supported the dirt roof. Above it, was a sharp-peaked shingle roof, with a space between the two. Bill Martin had finally gotten fed up on winter caved-in roofs and had built shingle roofs above the regular ones, on all three shacks. But he'd neglected boarding up the open ends, and Apache liked these upper-story rooms.

Squinting hard at him, I realized he was an individual with a strong personality. Brindle and black mark-

ings set off his yellow fur. The tip of his tail was denuded of hair and bent at a right angle. By some freak of chance he'd caught it in a Number Four trap, and being unwilling to stay trapped, had scalped his tail's tip. Battles with other felines, battles with rats and weasels, and narrow escapes from coyotes, foxes, and bobcats, had left permanent marks on our pet: a squinted left eye, right ear split so it flopped two ways, and left chewed off, with no neat surgical operation performed to straighten the ragged edges.

"Bertha calls you Prince," Clint pleaded. "Be a prince for once and jump down, 'Pache. You'll starve—s-t-a-r-v-e—savvy? If you stay here. Snow's already knee-deep."

"And more of the white stuff due any minute," I muttered looking west to where grey clouds hid those rugged, canyon-scarred mountains, a haven for all sorts of wildlife during the brief summer. Now, except for the hibernaters, the wild creatures had already drifted. Even rabbits had enough sense to leave Tall Pine range come winter and today not even a camp robber was visible. "Less we mosey right pronto, we're going to be snowbound," I added with acute dread.

CLINT WAS still trying to sugar-talk our mouser. "'Pache, I stuck it out when the yearning to see Bertha was like nothing you've ever known. I wasn't going to have either Mace McFree or old Bill throwing in my teeth that I was a quitter. But now I'm crazy wild to be hitting the trail, and we can't leave without you, 'Pache. Perhaps a tough old warrior like you won't freeze, but what'll you live on? Come, 'Pache. Please."

Breakfast was getting cold, so I hollered, "Try roping him, Clint."

Clint's overshoes squealed against cold snow as he wheeled. "So you were listening, Mace! Well, give me a hand." He scooted into the stable and came back leading Ted, a tall bay horse. "Hold this brone and the crate, Mace," he commanded.

I obliged and Clint mounted, then stood up in his saddle and tried to

grab the cat. Apache lifted his upper lip in a snarl. "Pst! Yow!" Clint's hands closed on air. Apache was jumping down onto Ted's rump with his claws spread to hold on.

"Grab him, Mace. Get him!" Clint yelled.

But Ted was going away fast. Clint lit on his head in a snowdrift and I didn't see where Apache went. Clint struggled to his feet, mopped snow out of his coat collar and said things he wouldn't want Bertha to know he knew how to say, ending up, "Stop laughing, Mace, or I'll slam you."

I was laughing, yet I knew we couldn't look Bertha in the face if we failed to take that danged cat home. "The critter won't show up till dark," I groaned.

Clint's face stretched longer'n a well rope. "Meaning we'll have to stay another night." Suddenly a hopeful gleam entered his blue eyes. "Lend me your rifle, Mace."

He had a six-shooter, but I had only a rifle and one cartridge only for it.

"To kill Apache?" I asked.

"Not that! Maybe all the deer haven't quit this range. If I can shoot one, we'll leave it for the cat."

"No good, pard. The carcass'd freeze so danged hard you couldn't put a nail in it with a pile driver... I'll set a Figure Four trap for 'Pache. We'll drop a box over him."

"What'll we bait it with? A piece of dried apple? If I never see or smell or taste dried apples again—"

"We'll save one bit of your portion of the fried venison I've fixed for breakfast," I said. "'Twill please you to know we've got venison and biscuits and for a drink, dried apple juice. But, except for a couple of cups of oatmeal and half a box of dried apples, we're plumb outa grub."

SNOW HAD started falling and up on Injun Ridge wind was whistling, a shivery, ominous sound. Rock palisades at its crest, Injun Ridge borders Injun Creek on the north, and the only trail out of Tall Pine ranch follows the creek. Yesterday the snow had been knee-deep

to a horse on that trail. Wind was now whooping more snow off the ridge into the creek valley.

Clint was willing to save a morsel of his venison to bait the trap. I rigged it up and we set it in the cabin. There was a hole in the door so Apache could come and go as he pleased, and his habit was to slip in after dark, look to see if we'd put out any canned milk for him and probably grab a mouse or two. Yet for the past several weeks we hadn't heard one mouse. Apache had been making it tough for rabbits, and likely had parts of one or two cached, for he still had a well-fed look.

Clint appropriated our clothes line, fixed a running noose in one end of it and practised roping stationary objects. "I can't rope 'Pache with a regular rope," he said. "Yet maybe I can with this cord."

Naturally the young buck couldn't stay put, so he prowled all of Apache's regular haunts. But where that cat was hiding he did not learn.

I boiled a mess of oatmeal and stewed yet another batch of dried apples. This appetizing noon meal was ready when all of a sudden a snow horse and snow man loomed up in our yard. When the horse and the man broke apart and the man shook himself, we recognized Bill Martin.

Aggressive and cranky as usual he stomped in and said, "Humph. Didn't expect to find you cowboys loafing in camp."

All worked up and impatient as Clint was I reckon he couldn't help spitting back at the boss. "We've scouted every doggoned inch of your range, or you wouldn't have caught us loafing. We're set to pull out, only—"

"Set to pull out?" the boss broke in. "That means you have found the three head of stock I'm short on this range?"

"No," I said.

"No? And you haven't found carcasses of lion or bear or wolf kills? Haven't found any hide and bone skeletons in bog holes?"

"No!"

"Then your job ain't done. One of the critters is a bull worth five hundred dollars. You've got to find him, get him out of this snow hole before he starves."

"More to the point to get ourselves out of here before we starve," Clint bit off.

Bill glowered. "You claim to be a cowhand?"

"Yes," said Clint, turning red.

"Humph!... What you got to eat, Mace?"

"Oat meal and dried apples... Sit up to the table and enjoy a feed, Bill."

"Not bad to take. I've lived on lots shorter rations for weeks at a time... Come eat, Clint. Don't let me take away your appetite. You fellows were ready to pull out? Why didn't you?"

"The cat," said Clint shortly.

Bill's eyebrows lifted. "What cat?"

"That yellow tom Bertha calls Prince," I explained. "He's gone to the wild bunch and we can't lay hand on him."

Bill's head pushed forward and he laid his challenging eyes on Clint. "If you can't catch him why didn't you kill him? Superstitious?"

"Bertha wouldn't like it," Clint returned.

"Oh! So that's it!!... Mace, have you hunted everywhere for those cattle?"

"Yep," I said short.

Clint chipped in, "Be no trouble for you to find 'em, Mr. Martin."

The old man's eyes speared him. "If that's your way of asking for your time, I'm sorry I haven't got my checkbook."

CLINT CLAMPED his lips and went out in the storm to hunt for Apache. Apache did not show himself. The storm became a blizzard. Old Bill looked at the white wall of swirling snow and muttered, "It'll clear up by tomorrow, then we hunt cattle."

Clint rustled wood and water, fed the horses from our skimpy supply of hay and finally unpacked our beds. Bill shared mine, following

another meal of oatmeal and dried apples. Snow smothered the window; wind shook even the log shack. At some hour of the night I heard my box trap fall. Instantly Clint was out of his blankets and lighting a candle. The trap had been sprung and something was underneath the box, rocking it and shoving it around the floor.

"Here's a big gunny sack," said Clint. "We'll push the lower edge of the sack under the box and pull the sack up on the box, then shove box, Apache and all into the sack."

'Twas a good plan. But something went haywire, and Apache was just a yellow steak going out through his hole in the door.

Clint stared at me and I'll swear he was white-lipped. "Why didn't we block that hole? Am I a damn nit-wit?"

"I agree," chuckled Bill Martin, who hadn't gotten up.

Clint bristled. "Maybe you know how to catch this cat, Mr. Martin?"

"I ain't a sentimental young jack-ass who'd mess around with a worthless cat."

At daybreak the storm let up temporarily. Clint was taking care of horses and I was stewing dried apples with oatmeal—a delectable mixture if you've got nothing else—when I saw Bill get my rifle and sort of sneak outside.

A minute later I saw what had caught his attention: Apache on his favorite perch, the out-jutting roof stringer at the barn.

Evidently wanting to get a broad-side target to aim at, Bill wallowed through deep snow to the corral. I did a lot of troubled thinking in a few seconds and reached the conclusion, We ain't going to be able to grab that wild animal and take him out alive. No matter what Bertha thinks, Bill's got the right idea. Kill the brute mercifully, instead of just leaving him to die of starvation and cold.

Bill was outside the corral sighting the rifle when all at once a figure inside the corral rushed at him, shouting, "Don't do it!"

Crack! The gun spoke and the cat

leaped off the stringer as if it had been bullet-nicked. Apache landed in deep snow, fought a path through it to a tall pine and went up the pine like a squirrel.

At the corral, Bill and Clint faced each other with the fence between them—which may have been a good thing. "Look what you did," Clint exploded. "A cat'll climb a tree, but won't come down!"

"If you hadn't spoiled my aim, this problem'd be settled!" Bill returned. "Now, I'll blame soon bring him down from that tree." He jerked the rifle's lever throwing out the used cartridge. "Confound it! No shells in the magazine...Mace, bring me some cartridges."

"No can do," I said. "You've used the last one. Borrow Clint's .45."

"You won't get hand on my iron," Clint snapped, as if he meant it. "Mace, bring a gunny sack and my clothesline rope and the crate. I believe Apache's put himself in a spot where I can get hold of him."

I BROUGHT the items to the pine where Apache was roosting like an owl on a limb. Clint grabbed sack and light rope and began climbing. Bill Martin stood back jeering, "The fool cowpuncher'll get his head clawed open."

Clint slipped and fell in the snow. I propped my long body against the pine and gave him a boost. By planting his feet on my shoulders he managed to get his hands on a limb, plenty more limbs above it. Up he went. Apache snarled his battle cry and moved higher. Higher. The pine began to sway and it gave both Clint and me a snow bath. Bill slapped his thighs and hoo-hawed.

Apache crouched on a small, high limb. Afraid to venture out on it, he evidently decided to fight. Clint came closer, closer, reached for the cat. "Pst—spit!" Apache clawed his hand. Clint jerked it back, saying, "Why, you stinking thus and such," and then, "Nice kitty. Nobody's going to hurt you. Behave, 'Pache."

He got footholds on limbs and holding tight with his left hand began maneuvering his clothes line

rope with his right, I was tense, watching Clint and the cat. Bill turned silent, too. Clint flipped a small noose upward. Apache grabbed it with his claws and bit at it. Clint jerked it free, almost topping the cat. He tried again, failed again. But the third cast—Aha! Apache had learned he must hold on with all four feet or he'd fall, and now the tiny noose flipped over his head.

Clint jerked the noose tight, lost his footing, tumbled down the tree for eight, ten feet before he caught himself. But he yelped, "Hold the box open, Mace, and I'll try to drop 'Pache in it."

Clint jerked his rope and he wasn't a bit gentle either. "Yow! Spt. Spt!" Down from his perch came the cat, brushing through the branches yet unable to get a grip on any of them. I jumped to get the crate under him and into it Apache plummeted. I closed the lid and nailed it down.

Clint tumbled into the snow. "You reach in the box and pull the cord off his neck, Mace."

"Not me. I've got cat-tooth scars on my thumb already. You do it."

"Um? Reckon he'll claw the noose off his neck. He's a smart cat. Look! He's done it already!"

All of a sudden, and he was grinning, Bill asked, "How you going to feed the brute and keep him alive while we hunt cattle?"

Clint's eyes met mine. My thought was clear to him as his was clear to me. Neither of us fully approved Bill's idea to hunt for cattle. But Clint said, "I'm right with you, Mr. Martin. I'll put 'Pache in the shack for now."

AS CLINT plodded to the house with the crate, Bill said to me, "Impertinent cub! Got the plain gall to hoorah me. Yet, he went up the tree after that blame cat and got him."

"Like the young devil or not," I said, "Clint's a cowhand who generally gets what he goes after."

Bill handed me a shrewd look. "Double meaning, uh? I know one thing he's after that he won't get."

Clint rejoined us. The lull in the

storm was over. Definitely. Wind-driven snow pelted us, as he said, "You wore your horse out getting here, Mr. Martin, so you can use one of my string. Which way'll we ride?"

"Ride out of this damned hole, you fool," rapped the old man testily. "Hell! I was only kidding about hunting cattle in snow neck-deep to a tall horse and in a blizzard."

Clint kept a straight face, but I was grinning behind my hand. The young cowboy had called the boss's hand, and Bill had backed down with a weak attempt to save face by saying he had been kidding.

Disregarding the storm, we packed up in a hurry, and we contrived to rope Apache's box a-top a pack on one of two packed horses. Riders, loose horses, and packed horses, we made a single file procession wallowing down the meadow of Tall Pine. Knee-deep snow didn't stop us. Nor did breast-deep snow.

But snow, whooped across the open reaches of Injun Ridge at our north, had piled eight to ten feet in Injun Creek valley. No horse could plow through it.

"Snow-bound!" was Bill's shrewd analysis. "We can get back to the shack, but we can't get out of here. And all we've got to eat is those damn, revoltin' dried apples!... Boys, we'll have to kill and eat a horse."

"No. Not that!" said Clint. He had the real cowboy's love for horses. "I s'pose when a man's starving, he'll—but—" He shuddered.

"Any chance of a rescue party from the home ranch, Bill?" I croaked.

"No. The men'll figure that with your strings of horses, and probably some cattle, too, we'll be able to break trail out of this hole."

"Uck! We'll have to come to it, Clint. Eat horse, or the cat!"

"Old-timers," said Clint, "the snow has blown off Injun Ridge. We can ride out if—"

"Can't get a-top it," Bill snapped. "It's all a horse can do to climb up the slope to the rock palisade, and that rock wall—only a bird can get over it. If a certain young fool hadn't been determined to take that blasted

cat, we'd have got out yesterday afternoon."

"Okay. It's my fault we're stuck," Clint said with a shrug. "Men, I know of a gap in that rock palisade, and, if in this storm I can find it—thousand to one shot, but come on."

CLINT TOOK the backtrail. Said Bill to me, "I've been riding this range fifteen years and I never saw any gap in that wall. Is Clint just lying to cheer us up?"

Two hundred yards on the back trail and Clint turned right, put his horse to the job of scaling Injun Ridge. Bill and I forced the loose horses to follow him. At a speed of perhaps an eighth of a mile an hour we climbed the slope. Often the wall of wind driven snow was so dense we couldn't see Clint. But at least we were close under the rock palisade, the slope so steep the horses braced themselves to hold their feet.

Clint began slowly exploring along the rocks. Hope and desperation in our eyes and minds, Bill and I watched him. He was lost to our sight, then his voice rolled to us. "I've found the notch. Come this way."

Sure enough there was a narrow gap. Above it and to right and left were terrific overhanging drifts, and the wind was screaming.

"Bring up the broncs," Clint holstered, and as he pushed his mount into the gap, the overhanging drifts broke loose.

The avalanche of snow knocked horses off their feet, skidded them down slope. Just before my own mount went down, I saw the pack horse carrying Apache fall and I distinctly heard the crate stride a rock. The box split wide open; a yellow ball of fur leaped clear. Snow buried me.

'Twas several minutes before Bill and Clint and I got squared around, caught badly spooked horses and made ready to resume operations.

Clint noticed the broken box. "Where's 'Pache?"

"Gone back to Tall Pine," I told him.

Clint sat his saddle bleak-eyed and dumb until the ol' man bellowed, "Good riddance! Forget that crazy cat and let's get out of here while we've still got enough strength!"

Faced with a hard decision, Clint shook his head. "Go ahead, Mr. Martin, you and Mace. I'll get the cat." He spurred his horse.

"Hold up," I yelled. "You know it's nigh impossible to catch that—"

"Listen to me, cowboy," Bill cut in fiercely, "you'll be held up trying to rope or trap that brute and you'll starve... Come back here, dog-gone you! I'm ordering you to head out!"

Pushing his horse down the steep slope, Clint waved a hand, but didn't stop. Bill and I gawped at each other "Of all the stubborn, knot-headed, loco cowpunchers..." Bill began.

"Fight your way through that notch and go on home, Bill," I put in. "I can't quit Clint in a pinch like this."

The boss's teeth clicked together. "Well, then, neither can I."

TAKING THE horses with us, we rode back to Tall Pine. The storm broke for a brief interval and in the valley up above the buildings we saw four head of cattle, two cows and one calf and a bull. Bill shouted, "By golly! That pure-bred bull I was afraid I'd lost. Snow's driven that little bunch out of wherever they've been hiding."

"Yep," I agreed. "They're bad ganted but still strong. They can travel! Bill, if Clint hadn't come back for Apache you'd have lost the two cows, a calf, and that prize bull."

Bill looked at me, eyebrows drawn way down. "That cat, that damned cat!" he said.

Clint had peeled the saddle off his horse and was wadding the saddle blanket into the cat hole in the cabin door. "'Pache beat me home and he's in the shack," the cowboy explained. "Did you see the lost cattle, Mr. Martin?"

"Yes. How you going to catch Apache?"

"You fellows guard the door so 'Pache don't leap out as I go in, and

I'll box him up if I have to hog-tie him to do it."

Bill and I opened it a crack. Clint slipped inside and we closed it quick, hearing Apache's familiar Spt! Yow. Spt."

We heard Clint rattling a box and driving nails, then we heard a lot of savage cat talk mixed with Clint's persuasive argument. Bill chuckled. "That waddy's got nerve. I wouldn't try to grab that wild critter for three hundred bucks. Listen to the fight!"

"Got him," Clint whooped. "Open the door."

Clint was a hard looking sight, hat knocked off, head and face badly scratched. But Apache was in a box and the slats nailed down. "Thanks for helping me, Mr. Martin and Mace," he said.

"Don't mention it," said Bill, squinting up the meadow at his precious bull.

Two hours later, we topped out on Injun Ridge where the wind had swept the ground clear of snow. We had all our horses, we had the four ganted cattle and we had Apache. Bill shouted to make himself heard, "I've scouted the rimrock all along the ridge and I'd have sworn there wasn't a gap in it. Yet you found one, Clint—and have saved our hides."

"There was no gap in it," Clint replied. "Mace told me how bad the trail got snowed shut, and I made this notch during the summer."

Bill and I swapped looks once again. Clint was going on, "You fellows head out with the horses. I'll bring the cattle... Where can I put up overnight?"

"Put 'em in a feed lot at Jack Hobart's ranch, Clint," Bill said. "Leave 'em there and you can still get home by late tonight."

Clint reached the home ranch at nine o'clock. Bertha had a hot meal waiting for him, and, knowing this, I plodded wearily from bunkhouse to main house where Bill was taking it easy in his living room. I winked at him, tiptoed to the adjoining dining room door and opened it a crack. Old Bill silently joined me.

Clint was putting away a man-

sized meal. Bertha, and was she an eyeful in the yellow lamplight, was hovering close to the tired cow-puncher, and there was Apache, rubbing up against her trim ankles, arching his back and purring.

"How'd you get those ugly scratches on your face, Clint?" the girl asked.

"Uh?" stammered Clint obviously so fussed by her presence that he didn't know what he was eating. "Scratches? My horse ran under a low pine."

"Oh!... You liked having Prince for company this summer? He didn't cause you any trouble bringing him home?"

"As you said, he's a real individual, that cat," Clint said, and then, "Sure not."

Bertha stooped and ran her hand along Apache's back—and the darned savage brute liked it. "Poor Prince," she said. "You had a miserable ride in a nasty box on a pack horse and in a storm. But now you're safe at home and I'm so happy to see you."

"Then it surely was worth it," Clint said.

"What ever are you talking about? Here, Clint, I saved a big slice of dried apple pie for you—what's the matter? For a moment I thought you turned pale."

"No, no," choked Clint. "No pie like dried apple pie, 'specially if you made it... It's—surely good."

The girl made a pretty gesture, "Thank you, Clint. I did make this pie 'specially for you."

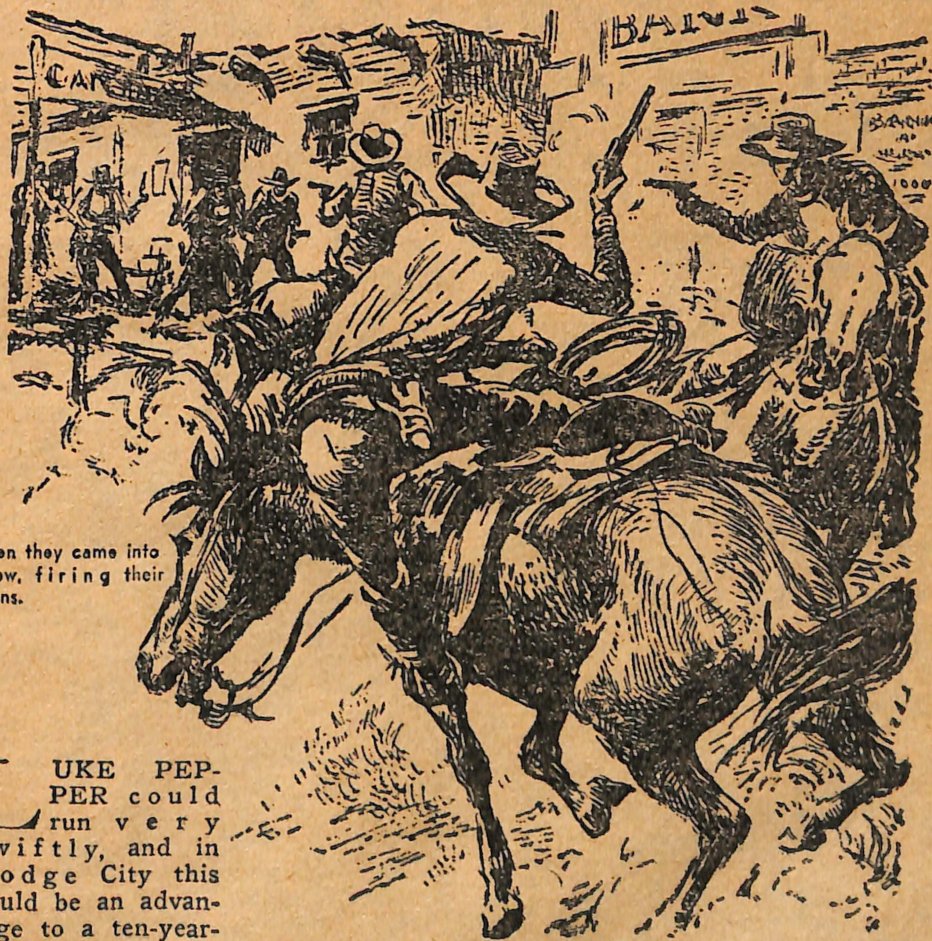
Clint came to his feet fast, and the light I could see in his eyes made me feel young once again, even romantic, same as he was feeling, "You did, Bertha? You're happy to see me as well as 'Pache—Prince? Happy I'm home?"

Smiling provocatively she replied, "Well, what do you think?"

Bill Martin softly closed the door and pulled at my arm. "Come away, Mace, you old snoop. I'll still have to pin Clint's ears back every so often. But thanks to the test Apache gave that cowboy, I'll be the proudest father-in-law you ever shared dried apples with!" ●END

# ONE FOR MR. EARP TO SIDE

by WILLIAM R. COX



Then they came into view, firing their guns.

**L**UKE PEPPER could run very swiftly, and in Dodge City this could be an advantage to a ten-year-old who hadn't yet learned how to do his own fighting. This afternoon the sky was like a bowl of brass and Luke choked with the dust which always hovered on the Kansas air, but he made it into Sam Semple's hardware store.

"Abe Lubbeck's come," he gasped. "I told the Marshal."

Sam Semple was young and lean, but he was no great scrapper. He was

from New York, a trader, an honest storekeeper. He licked dry lips, shoving back a lock of dark hair from his forehead, looking down at Luke.

"Get a rifle," Luke urged. "Hurry. He'll kill you and make Mama go away with him. Hurry!"

"I can't do that," Sam muttered.

"You're scared," Luke sobbed.

"That's right."

Luke was scared too. He ran to the

**So this was his famous Grandpop. The mountain man, the Indian fighter, the friend of Kit Carson. This half-pint old-timer. Young Luke Pepper had never been so disappointed. ....**

door and saw them ride up to the rack across the street and dismount, four men from the Bar-L and Abe the biggest of them, red-faced, with hair on his neck and on the backs of his heavy hands. Once, when Molly Pepper had not been looking, Luke had felt the weight of one of those hands, knuckling him, as Abe promised, "Get you down in Texas, I'll make a man of you."

He had been scared ever since. His pretty mother, widowed for five years, had been waiting for Sam to build up the store when Lubbeck first spied her a couple of years ago. Lubbeck had scared her, too.

Sam said, "You get out, Luke. The back way."

There were customers in the store. They drew back as Lubbeck slammed his way in, spurs a-jingle, the heavy revolver slapping his thigh. Luke hid behind stacked barrows, fists clenched, eyes smarting, helpless.

Lubbeck's voice was heavy and very loud. It thudded on Luke's ears. "I warned you, Semple."

"You got no call to warn me." Sam's voice was shaky but he did not attempt to run or hide.

"I do my own calling," bawled Lubbeck.

"Molly don't want you," Sam burst forth violently. "You push yourself in, trying to frighten people..."

Lubbeck hit him then. He slid out of his gunbelt as Sam staggered among the pots and pans with a great clatter. Then he caught Sam's shirtfront and drove him out the door into the street. Abe wanted everyone to see.

Luke slithered out, past the customers, into the quickly gathered crowd. The four cowboys whooped and hollered like their boss was doing something great. The Dodge City people were silent, even the Marshal, who stood against the building, disapproving but unwilling to interfere in a man-to-man fight.

Sam kept falling down and getting up, swinging his fists, but not doing any damage. Abe Lubbeck was clumsy but strong. Sam bled quite a lot. Luke hopped on one foot and wished he had a rock or a gun or anything; then he knew he would not have the nerve

to use a weapon if one were at hand...

An old man had ridden up on a Spanish mule straddling a strange skimpy saddle with tapederos into which were thrust his small, moccasined feet. He was tanned, had white hair worn rather long, and blue, misty eyes.

The old timer watched the fracas without expression. His shoulders were straight beneath a fringed buckskin jacket and his hat was disreputable, pulled down over his nose. He seemed out of place, somehow, out of date.

Sam, meantime, had gone down hard. Lubbeck, puffing a little, looked like a wild animal. He jumped in with the spurs to kill his man.

THE MARSHAL came loose from the building and stepped between Sam and the rancher from Texas. Lubbeck stopped and stared and the hatred in him was plainer than before.

"You got no call to butt in."

The Marshal didn't even look at the cowboys and their guns. "You can't kill a citizen while I'm around, Abe."

"I've warned you, Wyatt. I'm warnin' you again."

"You put out a lot of warnings." The Marshal spoke mildly. "You boys know where you stand with me."

"Nowheres, that's where we stand. We spend our money, make your citizens rich. What do we get?"

"You get below the Line and behave yourself," said the Marshal easily.

"I don't have to stay below no Line," yelled Lubbeck. "I'll show you. I've give my last warning."

Of course, it was a pretty big insult to tell Lubbeck to get below the Line, because he was a rich man and an owner, and only the cowboys and gamblers had to keep bounds. But Mr. Earp had a way with him. Not the five of them, not ten of them, could stand up to him.

Lubbeck went storming into the store and came out buckling on his gunbelt. He said, "Remember, Wyatt. You asked for it."

"Sure, Abe. Go and cool off."

Sam crawled up and steadied himself on the storefront. Luke could not look at him. Sam was good and kind and generous and had always been his friend. But nobody went near him now, except the Marshal. Luke was ready to cry.

Then Luke noticed that the strange old man had reined in close and was staring at him. An odd voice, almost a whisper, asked, "Boy, could you be Molly Pepper's son?"

"Yes, sir."

The old man bent down and before Luke realized it, he was borne aloft and seated before the stranger, and the blue eyes were kind and sad and possibly seeking. "You favor him. When he was your age he looked just the same."

"Who looked the same?" Luke did not know whether or not to be afraid.

"Joe. My son Joe. Your Dad. I'm your grandpa, little Luke."

"Jim Pepper? You're *Jim Pepper*?" It was unbelievable. It was the last straw. Sam Semple beaten, Abe Lubbeck triumphant, and now this little old man was the storied Jim Pepper. The mountain man, the Indian fighter, the explorer and discoverer, the friend of Kit Carson, had turned out to be a half-pint oldtimer on a big mule.

"You might show me where your Ma and you live, grandson," said the whispery voice.

The mule walked with long, even steps to the side street where several unpainted, unlovely cottages nestled too close together. The one with the sad little garden was home, with its sign in the window, MOLLY PEPPER, HATS FOR LADIES.

LUKE SCRAMBLED down, too full to keep quiet, running into the house, wailing, "Mama, Sam got beaten up by Abe and is nearly dyin' and Grandpop's here and what we goin' to do now, Mama?"

Wide-eyed, he watched the meeting between his mother and his father's father, two strangers, each unsure. They went into the kitchen, the room where they lived, where Molly had been working on the pine table with bits of lace and ribbon and straw on a hat for Mrs. Robinson.

Molly said, "Well. If I'd known you were coming...I mean...I never expected you..."

Jim Pepper, equally ill at ease, crumpled the old hat. "Got a notion to see the boy."

"You never saw him before," she snapped.

"Been in Californy. South, in the hills. Been thinkin', some. About Joe's mother, and Joe. Got word he was dead."

"We get along," she said. "We didn't need you."

He bobbed his white head. "Never should of got married at all. But we did. Then I had to go back." He gestured toward the western mountains.

"Left her, with Joe. Gallivanting in the wilderness."

"She wanted the town. Never could understand it." Jim Pepper shook his head. "Met her in Taos. Why, it was like what I seen ridin' in here. Only Taos had more color, more fun. Place to sell the plews, start the next season."

"And what has the wilderness got you?" Luke had never seen his mother so angry.

"Well, the town got Joe," said the old man simply.

Molly sat down and abruptly began to weep. It was true. A defective bandsaw had killed her husband. Indian arrow, bullet or bandsaw, Luke dimly realized, a man dead is a man not alive.

"No dust in the mountains," Jim Pepper was whispering. "A dream, we had, of a country free of towns. A country to walk over, independence you could feel inside you. Ah, now, it was just a dream. No use to cry, Molly."

She did not reply, her pretty face buried in her hands. Luke began to sniffle in sympathy. He felt his grandfather's eyes on him and stiffened.

Jim Pepper said, "Scared. You're scared, too, Molly."

She jerked back her head. "I'm not. I'm going to marry Abe Lubbeck and live in a big house on a big ranch in the biggest place on earth. I'm taking the boy to Texas, where he'll grow strong and be rich and safe."

Now Luke did utter an involuntary cry. Tears squeezed out and ran down his cheeks. He could scarcely protest, "You know you want to marry Sam. You know it, Ma."

Then he ran into the cubicle they had fashioned into a room of his own. He threw himself on the bed like a disjointed doll and buried his face so that he could not hear any more. Everything had fallen apart. He had been scared before, but now as never before he knew a deep and abiding fear of the future, transcending the optimism of youth, twisting in his belly, wracking him with dry sobs. For once time ran away from him, bathed in that fear.

When his mother called him to supper, Grandpop Pepper was gone. She scolded, "Uneasy under a roof. Mean as poison. I know all about him. A worthless old man, come to trouble me."

Luke could not swallow the fried meat and potatoes. His eyes ached and he was shaky in the middle.

"You'll have your own pony," his mother was saying. "Abe promised. He'll be good to us."

She knew better, Luke thought. Abe could not be good to anyone if he tried. Abe had hate in him and probably worse things. Abe was the big and the strong and everything they stood for, and they always won.

**H**E MANAGED finally to get back to his room with his fright. A coyote called from afar, matching his wildly unhappy mood.

He heard Sam Semple's whistle and his mother's exclamation. Amazed at Sam's courage, he crawled to the window and listened.

"Sam, you're hurt. You—you shouldn't be here."

"Let him kill me," Sam said dully. "He can't have you."

"Sam, listen. He will kill you. Me too, and the boy. Sam, look...I'm going to marry him."

Sam didn't answer for a long moment. Then his voice sounded old, as Jim Pepper's never would sound. "He's got us scared. Clean scared to death."

"He'll be good to me, I believe that. And to Luke." Molly was crying

again. "It's for the best, Sam. For all of us."

Craning his neck, Luke saw Sam put out his arms, saw the two figures melt together, move around the corner of the cottage, out of view.

Then he saw the small figure of his grandfather. Jim Pepper had also been listening. He was slipping away now, around the other corner of the house.

Luke threw his leg over the windowsill. He hesitated only a second, then jumped to earth and took off after the old man. He had to ask questions, he had to try and find an avenue of escape. Maybe Jim Pepper was too far gone to be any use, but he knew no one else, now that his mother had decided to marry Abe Lubbeck.

He was beyond tears now, verging on desperation. He used his speed of foot, following Jim Pepper. It was quiet and starlit above the Line, down Front Street, past the Dodge House and Wright and Beverly's and Sam's store and thence to the Santa Fe tracks. Jim Pepper went on, toeing in like an Indian, noiseless in his moccasins, quick without seeming effort. Luke took a deep breath and followed.

There were twenty saloons and the glare of kerosene lamps and there were the noises of men and women, that always made Luke uneasy and there was the slap of cards and the click of chips and jangling voices. This was the cowboy capital, where anything went below the Line.

There were bands of young boys, and Luke knew what would happen if they caught him. He ran a little, panting, watching Jim Pepper walk among horses tied at racks. He read for himself a string of brands on ponies huddled close—Bar L, the Lubbeck brand. His grandfather vanished down an alley.

He made a boy-like circle, scampering, going around the back of the saloon. It was darker here and he crept to the far end of the alley. He heard voices and his heart stopped for a moment as he recognized the bellow of Abe Lubbeck.

There was no sight of Jim Pepper but a cigar end glowed bright and

then the Marshal walked out of the alley with the old man at his side. Mr. Earp said, "I've always been afraid of this. They never treed this town, many times as they tried. Mostly drunk, wild cowpunchers, ridin' through. This is different."

"Reckon you got ideas." Jim Pepper's whisper was thin.

"Yeah. Can't stop them killin' some, though."

"You take a fellow like Lubbeck, full of hate, he'll always harm somebody."

"Sure, but once they tree the town, it'll be plain hell for decent folks."

**T**HE MARSHAL walked away in the darkness, shaking his head, full of plans and worriment. Jim Pepper turned and said softly, "You can come out now, boy."

Luke could have sworn he was well hid, but he came out.

"Can you run good, boy?"

"I can run real fast."

"Then you better find Sam Semple."

"Sam?" What good could Sam do, he wanted to ask.

"Tell him to meet me behind his store. I got a little more listenin' to do in yonder." The voices boomed out, mainly Lubbeck's, loud and profane.

"I seen Blackfeet. I been scared by grizzlies, catamounts, but mainly Injuns," whispered the old man. "I clumb the mountains and walked the deserts. I'm sixty, grandson. I been out here since '34. I seen a heap. Men like this Lubbeck, they come later. They're a bad lot. You go and get Sam, and run like a rabbit."

When Luke came upon Sam, the storekeeper was walking toward his establishment with his head down, dragging his feet. He jumped three feet when Luke grabbed him, but as he listened his shoulders straightened and his head came up.

"Your grandpop was a great man. He knew Clymer and Bridger and Carson and they knew him. The things he did and the things he saw are a part of history and don't you ever forget that. He puts a hope in me, your grandpop."

"He's old and he's awful little-like."

"His kind made this country and now Lubbeck's kind thinks they own it." Sam opened the store and they went in. "Main thing is that a man loses confidence. He knows he can't match them gun for gun, fist for fist. If they run on him, there's nothing he can do about it."

"I'm scared," confessed Luke. "Seems like I always been scared since Abe came courtin' Mama."

"Yes. Since Abe come courtin' Molly," said Sam, and his shoulders slumped again. But there was a knock on the back door and he hustled to let Jim Pepper in.

In the light of the night lamp, they looked over the guns. The old man said, "This here Sharps, it'll do."

"It's a 40-65-330, kind of new," said Sam mechanically. "Got a kick like a mule. But it'll blow a house apart."

"I'll borrow it," said Jim Pepper.

"You think you can fight them?" asked Sam bitterly. "Earp and the deputies will fight them. Some merchants won't, for fear of losing trade. If they kill Earp, they'll own the town forever."

"That's a long time, forever. Seems like I been alive that long," grinned the old man. In the half light he looked different, Luke suddenly realized. Maybe it was the big rifle in his hands, maybe the way he stood, crouched a little, balanced on his moccasins. The old man whispered, "I got me a boy here, bears my name. Appears to me that's all a man has got, huh? This boy's father got killed, but he's here. Why, I got several reasons for mixing into this ruckus, Sam."

Sam made a gesture. He reached for the case containing the Colt 45s. "I'll send the boy home and come with you."

Jim Pepper shook his head. "You walk down Front Street, but stay out of sight. And bring the boy."

"Bring him?"

"Cover him, but let him see. The boy shouldn't be scared. No matter what, a boy his age shouldn't be scared."

HE WENT out the rear in his sudden way and Luke felt the emptiness when he was gone. Sam put a hand on his shoulder, and he felt Sam taking a brace and he liked Sam a lot, but it was sure empty when the old man was gone.

He tried to answer Sam's questions, but all he knew was that Lubbeck had a plan and even Mr. Earp was worried. They left by the front door, neither of them thinking for a moment of disobeying Jim Pepper, and then Molly came running, her shawl streaming, calling Luke.

Sam's voice was firm. "His grandpop said he should go down with me and see what happens."

"His grandfather is a savage. Do you want to get the boy killed, too? Has everyone gone mad?"

"Go home," said Sam harshly. "Lubbeck is going to try and kill the Marshal and tree the town. Go home, unless you want to see it, the work of your future husband."

She winced, then looked at Sam with new eyes. Then she was walking along with them and they were heading for the section of Dodge City which was below the Line.

"It's—it's so quiet," protested Molly as they walked.

Luke always remembered that unhealthy silence. The lights went out, one by one, then with a rush. The gaudy, noisy street was empty, not a pony was tethered at the racks, not a soul ventured forth. Lubbeck could not take his followers out of town without giving notice, he realized, even had Earp been warned beforehand.

Silence ill became Dodge City. The trio moved into deep shadows, trembling. They came to the huge feed box set outside the livery stable and dived for it, huddling there.

The wait was a festering thing. No one stirred, no one issued defi. They were thinking of the fifty riders coming in. A score would have been too many against the thin defenders Earp would be able to assemble. Luke was too scared to think, he waited like an animal before a storm, numb.

Sam murmured "Whatever happens, Joe Pepper will be in it. Men like him, they know what to do."

"Nobody knows what to do," said Molly lifelessly. Kansas had not taken her youth nor her beauty but Luke heard a despair in her voice.

The night was still and always there was the smell of the dust and horses and the stale feed in the box. Little sounds became magnified and Luke's hands were damp with sweat. Once Sam dropped the six-shooter, but luckily it did not go off. Men were moving among the darkened buildings, but their coming and going was muffled, as though from far off.

The first warning came with the shaking of the earth, as the hoofs of horses pounded. They came over the bridge and grew louder and louder, drumming into Luke's ears a rolling as of kettle drums, so that in his later years the musical works of Wagner were anathema to him. His mother's arm was an iron band about him and the world stood still.

Then they came into view, a score of them riding with the reins in their teeth, young hellions from the trail herds, liquor-maddened and full of the pride of Texas, firing their revolvers. From the houses and saloons came a steady return, and lead thunked into the feed box. Molly whimpered.

Sam let off the Colt's. Even then Luke was quite sure his bullets went skyward without harm; even as release came to the boy.

THE RELEASE was a strange thing, probably because his ten year old mind could assimilate no more dread. He squirmed loose, suddenly intent on seeing what took place. He scurried away from Molly's protest, to the watering trough of the stable, behind which he could pop up his head.

He saw a cowboy flung from his saddle, tumbling in the dirt of Front Street. He saw the band hightail it through without stopping to make a pitched battle.

And then he saw the fruit of what turned out to be Abe Lubbeck's generalship. The main body came in behind the wild shooting advance guard, maybe forty of them, with Abe in the van. They rode slower

and they carried rifles for better marksmanship and they did not yell or brandish weapons. They were deadly, intent upon wrecking Dodge City and killing Wyatt Earp and his deputies.

Then Luke suddenly stood up, leaning across the trough, unable to believe his eyes. For among the invaders rode a small man on a tall Spanish mule.

There was no mistaking the fringed jacket, the heavy barrel of the Sharps rifle. Jim Pepper was riding with the Texans.

The old mountain man was riding close to Abe Lubbeck, but a half a length to the rear. Rifles began their drum of fire into the houses and a woman screamed in anguish. The cattlemen spread out, seeking targets.

Luke crept forward, unknowing and not caring that he was fully exposed to harm. He was on the edge of action when Jim Pepper spurred the mule, dropping down, Indian fashion, letting the reins rest on the long neck of his mount, holding the rifle in his left hand, reaching with his right hand clawed.

He was kneeling, watching from below when Jim Pepper grabbed Abe Lubbeck's heel and gave a shrewd lifting thrust. The big, heavy rancher landed within ten feet of Luke, the breath knocked out of him, his rifle sprawling beyond reach.

Jim Pepper had made a running dismount and was whirling, coming back. In the darkness and excitement, no one seemed to notice. Luke scrambled, beyond fear, beyond thinking, automatically going for the long gun resting in the dust as Abe Lubbeck turned and rolled toward it. He fumbled once, but on the second attempt he had the gun in his hands and was retreating, crabwise, determined to watch.

He saw Jim Pepper lift the big man by his shirt, twist him and thrust him to the center of the street. He saw the cannon-like muzzle go into the small of the rancher's back. He heard his grandpop's voice, keening now, on a high note, as though against a whistling wind on a high place in the wilderness, a voice to be heard and remembered.

"All right, Lubbeck. This here is a Sharps. It lets daylight into the guts, this here gun."

"Who—who are you?" Lubbeck, half-stunned, was confused.

"I'm the one who is tellin' you to call off your dogs," said the dangerous, wild voice. "I'm Jim Pepper and I can whup fifty like you and your pukin' cownurses. I'm half crocodile and half horse. I eat grizzly for breakfast and blow down redwoods for my fun. I'm goin' to teach you a lesson, Lubbeck. Call off the party, man, before I blow you to where you belong."

Some of them had heard the voice. Some of them had missed Lubbeck from his leader's tasks. There was a rude circle of them, and in the middle the old man who seemed to have grown six feet tall, holding the gun carelessly, sneering at them.

LUBBECK'S rumbling voice was plaintive, "He's got me, boys. Call it off. Can't you see he's got me?"

Any one of them might have tried a shot at Jim Pepper, but each knew it would mean death to Lubbeck. Long afterwards, Luke knew that it was another manifestation of the strong man against the mob, but now all he knew was that old Jim Pepper was daring them and they were quitting.

His grandfather was saying, "Yes, crawl back to your camps, you cownurses. Tell your children you seen Jim Pepper on the prod. And think what you're doin', a-shootin' at women and kids and people without the means to fight back."

The lights began to come on, and that had been prearranged with Mr. Earp, but Luke did not know it then, and it seemed magical, the way people appeared, and the Marshal with his gun holstered, in black and white, moving to side Jim Pepper.

The horsemen reined in and around. No one had anything to say. They saw plain, now, the big gun at Lubbeck's back. Maybe they understood Jim Pepper's words, maybe they were only transfixed by the predicament of Abe Lubbeck. They were not, after all, murderers nor criminals. This was half a vendetta, half a lark.

When Lubbeck cried out again to them, they turned their horses and rode out of town, to the camps, to the trails south. Lubbeck stood alone, facing the growing crowd, craning to see Jim Pepper's face, sweating. Luke crept forward, dragging the rifle and then Molly and Sam came from behind the feed box and more light went on.

Now it was the pack against Lubbeck and Luke felt a twinge of pity for the bulky man, so helpless under the vengeful eyes of the townspeople. A doctor hustled from one of the honky tonks and demanded aid in bringing out a woman who had been wounded and a growl came from the crowd.

Jim Pepper had no pity. "When a man walks like a bully, he lives to learn what's inside him. You're scared now, Lubbeck, scared of a rope, or what I might do with this here gun. There's the mark of Cain on you, Lubbeck, and there's a yellow streak crawlin' up your back. You're no different than any other man and now you know it."

He stepped back, trailing the rifle. Wyatt Earp touched Lubbeck's arm and said, "Better get down to the jail, Abe."

The boy would never forget the strained, bovine glance Lubbeck sent around, the lowering of the head in defeat, the terror deep in the narrow-set eyes of the rancher. Then the Marshal was ushering him down the street and the deputies were moving in the crowd, talking down any idea of lynching.

Jim Pepper had caught up the Spanish mule. When Luke ran out with Lubbeck's rifle, he grinned a little. He was definitely not the old man who had ridden into town as he waved to Molly and Sam to come closer. He handed the Sharps to Sam, winked and nodded toward the retreating Lubbeck.

"He won't be bothering anyone. You two better get hitched right away. Best for the boy."

Sam said, "Tomorrow, if Molly's willing."

Molly, saying nothing, gave consent. Luke danced a little, impatient of such development, asking, "Where did you learn that Injun trick, Grandpop? You ever use it before? When did you eat grizzly bear for breakfast?"

Old Jim Pepper was talking to the elder folks. "The boy was scared. Everybody was scared. Ridin' in here, might be I was a leetle spooked myself. Thing is, and don't you never forget it, the other fella's scared too. What you got to do is use the fear in the other fella."

He made that effortless mount into his California saddle. Molly cried, "You're not going?"

"I want to hear about the bears and the Injuns," Luke demanded.

Jim Pepper looked down at them. "Got a mind to ride through some mountains. Got a mind to get the dust of town outa my nose. You want to make talk, Grandson, you come to Californy. Got a few cattle on the hills outside Los Angeles. Got some sheep and a few pigs. Ask anybody in the town, they'll know. Then ride out to the hills."

He waved at them, turned to look down once more, as from a great height, at the milling, gabbling townspeople.

"Never did hold with passels of people in towns." He kicked the Spanish mule and rode westward.

Sam would let him go, some day, Luke thought. Sam was good. Maybe he could get him a big Spanish mule and ride all the way to California, and Los Angeles, wherever and whatever that was.

The old mountain man disappeared from view and again there was emptiness in Luke's world. His mother was hurrying him toward home and Sam looked embarrassed, carrying a six-shooter and the big rifle, and everything was going to be like before. But Luke didn't want it like that, not then, and not quite at any future date in his life. He wasn't scared any more. ●END

# KILLER by GLENN SHIRLEY

**H**E WAS A rough, giant of a man, Wal Henderson, with the courage of a she-grizzly, and a dead shot with revolver or rifle. A Missourian by birth, he had come over the mountains from Colorado in '71, soon after the discovery of gold in the Moreno hills. He staked a claim in Humbug Gulch, and apparently settled down to a quiet, honest life—then, virtually overnight, he became a terror to the whole mountain population, a desperado of the first order.

It happened like this...

One afternoon Wal decided to do a little prospecting in another part of the range. His claim in the Gulch was only partially opened, and to prevent someone jumping it in his absence, he got one of his more educated neighbors to come over and cut his name on a dead pine stump near the mouth of the pit. With a keen bowie, the neighbor slashed out a huge "WAL Henderson his Klaim." It took him nearly two hours to complete his literary labors, while Wal stood by and watched, a grin spreading wider and wider across his moon face.

"Well," Wal decided finally, "ain't nobody goin' to touch that now."

He swung his pick and shovel over his shoulder, took his bearing from the sun, and trotted off down the canyon.

He was gone three days. When he returned, he found his claim jumped by a party of Irish miners who had just arrived in the diggings. As quietly as his bulldog nature would permit, Wal told them to "Git!" But they swore they would hold the claim and fight him "even if he was as big as Finn MaCool."

Wal held his temper. Coolly he strode to his cabin. He armed himself with a revolver, a Spencer car-

**They buried Wal Henderson on a little hill above Humbug Gulch, where short months before he staked his first claim.**

bine, a wicked IXL blade, and returned to the gulch.

"Git out of there—quick! Jump!" he yelled. "Or I'll fill you full o' lead!"

The angry trio swarmed out of the hole. The leader lurched toward Wal, swinging his miner's shovel to lay him out with a single blow. Wal raised his pistol and fired, and the Irishman fell dead with a bullet between his eyes.

His two frightened companions fled, and Wal retired to his cabin to rest up from his trip, the incident already forgotten.

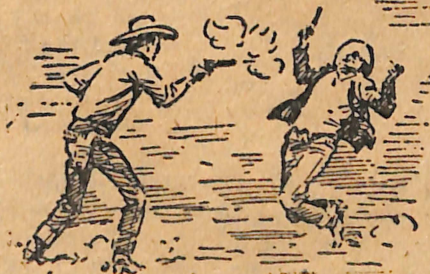
The two miners went into camp, told a story of brutal attack and murder, and a mob swarmed up to Wal's place and carried him off to the little log jail.

As the news spread, Irish min-

ers flocked in from the hills, openly proclaiming they intended to take Wal out at dark and hang him and that they would fight any element who resisted them.

**T**HE JAIL was an abandoned log store with a dirt and brush roof, a stone fireplace in one corner and a large chimney yawning against the sky. Shortly after dark, a motley, drunken crowd appeared at the jail, ran the guard away with pistol shots and broke open the door.

The room was empty. A quick examination by a few sober members of the group showed that Wal had escaped up the chimney, concealed himself on the roof, and during the excitement below, leaped to the ground and lit out for the hills. The rest of the night and the next day they scoured every building and hole



where he might possibly be hiding, without finding him.

Wal had fortified himself in an abandoned tunnel a hundred yards up the gulch, so close to town no one had thought to look for him there. About midnight, when the search had died down, he slipped into camp, broke open a stable, saddled a horse and rode to Taos, then sent the horse back to its owner, complimenting him on the endurance of the animal and for building a place that could be entered so easily.

A few weeks later, Wal rode down the street of the startled camp on a Mexican pony with four revolvers buckled around his waist and a carbine slung across his shoulders. He halted in front of Joe Stinson's saloon, swung down with a devil-may-care nod to the loafers on the sidewalk, and invited them in for a drink.

Leaning aloof at the bar, he related his adventures since he had been away. He had returned to look after his mining interests, he said, and anyone with ideas to the contrary could be the first to test the battery of weapons he had brought along. Receiving no objections, Wal tossed off another glass of Taos lightning, as whiskey was called, quietly mounted his horse and rode out to his cabin.

Back in camp, the excitement died down, and it was agreed finally that if Wal kept away from Humbug Gulch, they would leave him alone.

For about a month, Wal settled down to working his claim. Then one morning he came to town for supplies. He was sitting in Stinson's saloon when a party of half-drunk Irish miners came in.

A remark was passed about Wal's claim and their murdered companion. One of the miners approached Wal with a knife in his hand.

"Bejabbers," he said, "you'd look better cut to pieces than hanged."

A pistol flashed in Wal's hand, leveled at the Irishman's head. "Drop that knife!" Wal said.

The knife clattered on the floor. Wal replaced his pistol and finished his drink.

The gang was bent for trouble, but Wal was not to be intimidated. He relaxed with his back to the wall, lighted his pipe and began smoking.

He listened to their course jests and threats for nearly half an hour. Finally his patience wore thin. When one of them made a filthy reference, Wal leaped to his feet.

"By Judas, I think I'll kill you just for luck and stop this damfoolishness!" He whipped out his pistol and fired. The victim fell dead with a ball in the center of his forehead.

THE SHOT brought a crowd rushing inside. But no one attempted to arrest Wal. He waited against the side of the room until the Sheriff and Alcade arrived, then surrendered. They took him to his old quarters—the little log jail.

The drunken companions of the dead miner immediately began mustering another crowd to hang Wal. Every precaution was taken to prevent his escape. An extra guard was posted on the outside and two men watched the roof.

But when Wal heard the mob howling in the distance, he stepped close to the side of the door. As it crashed from its hinges, and the crowd plunged into the dark room, Wal quietly stepped past them into the street, circled the building and vanished in the night.

The miners were enraged that Wal had outwitted them again. They trailed him to his cabin, where he had got a horse. But by this time he was far into the hills.

The mob returned to Humbug Gulch, swearing to kill him on sight. But Wal dropped into town again in a couple of days, and no one molested him. He rode in and out of camp every few days after that, and everyone moved about quietly. The matter seemed to have ended by mutual agreement.

One morning the camp buzzed with the report of the robbery of the mail stage in the canyon between Ute Creek and Elizabethtown. The coach made tri-weekly trips between Humbug Gulch and the Cimarron to connect with the southern line of the Overland. At a lonely point where the canyon narrowed and the road wound around a hillside covered with scrubby pine, a masked bandit had pointed a rifle at the driver, ordered him to

throw the express box off the boot, then drive on.

Six such holdups occurred within a month, and the law-abiding population became aroused. Poses scoured the canyon, but found no trace of the robber or his hideout. They were convinced he was someone in their midst who knew when favorable conditions existed.

They noted Wal was gone from camp a day or two each time a hold-up occurred; that he would always show up the morning after and "demurely ride through town," as if nothing had happened, and it was "murmured about" that he could shed a lot of light on the depredations if he would talk.

In fact, Wal never mentioned the subject, nor expressed an opinion when it was being discussed in his presence.

Joe Stinson, the proprietor of the saloon Wal so frequently patronized, and where many such discussions took place, was also a professional gambler. His knowledge of monte, faro and poker made him as much a terror behind the green-covered table as a highwayman along the dark trails, and he never hesitated to fleece an unsuspecting victim.

One evening when a discussion of the stagecoach robberies was at its height, Stinson remarked:

"The damned rascal can't live a

great ways from this camp, and I would help hang the mother's son, by Judas, if we could catch him."

For the first time, Wal appeared concerned. He stated point-blank that he had more respect for a stage-robber than for some of the pretty-talking thieves in the boomtowns who "stole through a damned old faro box."

Stinson flushed. Realizing there would be trouble if the conversation continued, he said:

"Come on, let's all have a drink and go home."

As Wal stepped to the bar, Stinson asked: "What will you have?"

"Whiskey," Wal said.

Stinson shoved out a bottle and glass, and while he mixed himself a toddy behind the counter, Wal suddenly grabbed the bottle and emptied it on the bar.

"If you don't like what I said," he growled, "you know what you can do about it!" And his hand dropped to his hip as if reaching for his gun.

Stinson seized a pistol from under the counter and fired, and Wal fell dead with a bullet in his brain.

Stinson gave himself up. When the Alcalde arrived, the facts were related, and the jury brought in a verdict of "justifiable homicide."

They buried Wal Henderson on a little hill above Humbug Gulch, where short months before he had staked his first claim.... ● END

## HARD RIDING WASN'T ENOUGH

by T. A. OGLESBY

**Old-West cattlemen didn't have much use for punchers who could only ride and rope and shoot....**

Back in the 80's when the long-horns covered the Western plains, singing a soothing tune was an important part of a puncher's job. Some of the big ranchers would not even consider hiring a man who wasn't able to sing, even though he could ride and rope and shoot with the best of them.

The rancher knew how important it was for his riders to be able to control two or three (or more) thou-

sand when they bedded down for the night, by riding slowly around them and crooning a quieting tune.

The songs the cowboys sang to the footsore, trail-weary cattle were usually sad and mournful. The animals seemed to like this type best. Nor was the rider's singing job done when they finally reached Abilene or some similar market. If the herd still seemed restless, the cowboys of-

(please turn to page 48)

# INCIDENT AT THE BAR-X EAT-SHACK

by JOHN LUMSDEN



The third week she started pausing before returning to the kitchen.

**H**ARRY GENTRY was one of the Bar-X crew. He was a big-boned young cowpoke with a lion-like head of hair. He ate down on top of his plate, which diminished the chance of losing anything from his fork on its trip to his mouth. Harry wrapped all four of his big fingers around the handle of his fork.

Several other of the Bar-X punchers ate like that too. With their arms around their plates. In fact, most of them did.

Even the ramrod, Sol Smith. Sol, indeed, would take a hambone with him when he got up from the table,

**Would that hardcase Bar-X crew tear Miss Sally Peterson limb from limb, was the main problem. It was, at least, until the Comanches came . . .**

when dinner was ham and beans, and wander off to the corral with his head on one side chewing on it. On the hambone.

One of them, Pony Dillon, usually started a fight with somebody during dinner. And if they didn't get up

from the table and go outside with him on the spot, he'd take the thing up after dinner, when everybody was standing around the dooryard picking their teeth and staring at nothing. And usually Pony beat the tar out of his victim before he was through.

Who owned the Bar-X? Cantwell brothers. Some said they were more Easterners than Westerners, because they were never around. The Bar-X was a big outfit, very big, but the Cantwells were usually in Chicago or St. Louis or Denver, so that the Bar-X just sort of ran itself.

Those were the boom days, when that's the way the cattle business was, you couldn't lose no matter what you did or how you ran your outfit. Especially if you were doing business with the British, which was what they said the Cantwells did. Middle-aged, the Cantwells were, with wives and kids. Who lived in Denver; the Bar-X bosses had fancy houses in Denver for their families. Away from the still bad danger of Indian raids.

So the Bar-X was that kind of an outfit. The bad table manners of course weren't anything, they only mattered to Miss Sally Peterson, but the Bar-X crew was quite a bunch of boys above and beyond that detail.

Like with Larrimore for example, Al Larrimore. There was talk that he was no more a cow-nurse than Bill The Kid, and with more than a little resemblance to the notorious gun-wizard in both looks and talent; that he was "hiding out" here, counting on the anonymity a man gained when he became just another name (and Larrimore had doubtless, some of his mates opined, changed his besides) on the unusually large, rowdy Bar-X roster.

But Miss Sally Peterson found the bad table manners of great significance. She had been hired, the last time the Cantwells dropped in, to distribute the chow that Chuck Johnson concocted in the vast kitchen (the "Chuck" was short for "Chuck-wagon," old Johnson's full nickname; his actual given Christian name was Reginald).

The Bar-X "eat-shack" was the

original ranchhouse on the place (the present rarely-used pretentious one had been built two years before farther up the slope of this rim of the Bar-X's lush valley acreage) and Miss Sally Peterson lived in one of the original bedrooms.

**H**ER FIRST week she had simply made a point of not looking at the men eating. The second week she found she was not able to keep her exasperated eyes off them. This third week she had started pausing before returning to the kitchen and standing there with her hands full of dishes and her lips tightened in like a schoolteacher's.

Miss Sally Peterson did, in fact, look more like a schoolmarm than a waitress anyway. She had the typical small features and severe-drawn-back brown hair and slight figure. A couple of the men perked up at sight of her at first, with young females of any sort a phenomenon west of the Mississippi, but, as though unable to find what they were looking for, soon paid her little more attention than they had old Chuck when he'd done the whole hashslinging job alone.

If anything, they paid her less attention; some of the boys used to banter roughly with Chuck as he waddled irritably in and out with the full or empty crockery; but they felt uncomfortable from the start with Miss Sally Peterson and this situation never improved. It worsened, as a matter of fact. They reacted to her, you might say, as though she actually were a schoolmarm waiting on them.

"Well, I must say," she finally averred on the fifth day of the third week as she stood there surveying the two-dozen-odd Bar-X hands hunched over the two long-plank tables, "that you look a great deal more like a litter of pigs at a trough, than men at a dining room table."

A more stunning effect could not have been produced on the Bar-X crew if Miss Sally Peterson had shot each of them in the back simultaneously. Forks froze, loaded, in mid-air. Hands reaching for seconds looked like they'd been pinned to a backdrop by professionally spun daggers. Most of the men seemed, in

fact, to duck, as they would have if a cannonball had breathed on their ear.

"Now is that a nice way to talk, Miss Peterson." Harry Gentry was the first to find his voice. The others, exchanging blank glances, were swallowing whole whatever their mouths were full of, as though to get rid of the evidence.

"Yeah," Sol Smith echoed in a hurt tone.

Pony Dillon was the only one not completely flabbergasted by Miss Sally Peterson's remark. He had put his whiskey-red eyes on her and slowly lowered his fork, which was in his left hand, to his plate and wiped the hairy back of his right hand across his mouth. That was because anything that even remotely smacked of a fight was his meat, which to him this did indeed smack of.

"I take exception to that funny remark, lady," Pony Dillon said in his raw, hoarse voice.

Miss Sally Peterson had at that moment, however, turned on her heel and started back to the kitchen.

"I don't take that kind of talk from *nobody*!" Pony Dillon stood up and shouted after her.

"All right, all right," one of the punchers ameliorated.

Pony Dillon whirled on the fellow. "I don't take that kind of talk from *nobody*!" he repeated. "I don't care if it's a female or what it is!"

**WHY DIDN'T** Miss Sally Peterson quit, if she found her charges so unappetizing? Anyone would have wondered it. Did her background throw any light on the situation? No, not so far as anybody knew.

She had been a waitress at the Red Dog restaurant, when the Cantwells hired her. "They offered her twice what I was payin' her," the Red Dog's proprietor advised inquisitors simply. How long had she been working for him? Two-three weeks. Came in on the stage. Alone, so far as he knew.

Anyway, she didn't quit, and, as has been heretofore stated, the situation didn't improve. As a matter of fact, it worsened. Considerably. Everybody hung onto their temper, that was about all you could say. Of a favorable nature.

But as Miss Sally Peterson passed behind Pony Dillon's chair, Pony would not only dig into his food with exceptional violence but he also accompanied this optical assault on Miss Peterson's sensibilities with an aural one, making noises with his mouth and nose as he ate that would have turned the most asthmatically nasal porker green with envy.

And after Miss Sally Peterson had hung onto herself for a full additional week, she inevitably flung the gauntlet, so to speak, back into Pony Dillon's face.

"I have at last discovered one thing that I can say in your favor, Mr. Dillon," she suddenly stated this fateful day as, in the process of clearing the table, she picked up the chicken bones strewn about the periphery of his plate, "and that is that it could be hoped that sight of you partaking of nourishment might in time turn the stomachs of your companions, and so eventually lead to improvement in *their* table manners at least."

Which of course it didn't, and never would have; it took considerably more than this to change the table manners of the Bar-X crew; but we're getting ahead of our story. And that was beside the point now anyway. It was, more exactly, of no account at all now.

All that was of any account as of this moment immediately after Miss Sally Peterson had delivered herself of her latest bombshell, was: Would Mr. Pony Dillon, despite the undeniable fact that she was a frail female, tear Miss Sally Peterson limb from limb?

Fate had the answer to the question.

Fate has come in many integuments, but in this particular case it wore war-paint.

First, an arrow slashed obliquely across the top of one of the tables, shuddered in the wall timber. Then, plainly audible was a distant flurry of hoofs. The nearby crack of a rifle and the ricocheting whine of the bullet right in the room, brought half the Bar-X crew to their feet. Pony Dillon of course had already started to his feet, so he was among these.

Then the rest of them shoved up.

All except Al Larrimore, the mystery member of the outfit. "Mystery" in the sense that he didn't fraternize much with the other hands, and was the only one, tough boys though most of them were, who wore his holster tied down. Like a gunslinger wore it.

OLD CHUCK JOHNSON waddled from the kitchen holding his apron out in front of him, a sickly grin on his face. "Look at this, would ya," he said. An arrow had threaded its way through his apron, twice piercing folds of the grease-spattered sackcloth. Chuck extracted the brightly painted shaft.

"Injuns," one of the punchers said vacantly.

Al Larrimore rose then too. His face was an unaccustomed white.

Miss Sally Peterson had stood transfixed, searching the eyes of the men, satisfied to find an answer there instead of beyond one of the open windows.

She said to Al Larrimore, "Will the Indians attack us now?"

Larrimore jumped, as though caught in some embarrassing act, and the back of his neck became as red as his lean cheeks were ashen.

"Yes," he husked. "Yes, it's likely a raid."

"Why do they do this?"

"They raid ranches; the ranches that carry a lot of graze land and so don't have any near neighbors."

"But why?"

"Why? Well, they want horses. And—well, horses is what they mostly want."

"And what else?"

"What else? Well—scalps, too, some of them. The Comanches, mainly."

"Are these Comanches that are attacking us?"

Al Larrimore grinned then at Miss Sally Peterson what was supposed to be a reassuring grin. "Oh, no, these probably ain't—"

"Comanches, by Judas," Harry Gentry muttered from one of the windows.

"A couple of us got to make a run for the gun rack," Sol Smith said from the door, against the frame of which he was tight-jammed sideways.

The flat stretching to the horizon

shimmered with sun-haze and the Indians were materializing everywhere now out of the dazzling high-noon daylight. A number of them were already peeling off the inside of the wide, loose circle of naked brown riders that was forming around the house, and sweeping in wild dashes at it.

THE BRIGHT sunlight somehow lent a peculiar terror to the attack. Through its blaze and the roiling-up dust only the horses' hoofs could be seen much of the time; and the yells of the Indians had a muffled quality too; so that the attackers took on more and more a nightmare-like aspect. A nightmare in the daytime.

No least detail of this terrifying effect was lost on Miss Sally Peterson. She was finally looking the Comanche raid full in the face too. She was at a window, exposed. Her lips were tightened in a little thin line, and maybe there was a whiteness at their corners, but nowhere else on her face. Her color was good, emphasized the high cheekbones; her brown eyes were bright.

Al Larrimore went and yanked her out of the window, and her slim body, as he swung her by the upper arm, crashed face-on against him. And it was funny, but neither of them backed, at once, away from the other. And he with his mouth in her hair, and her face against his chest.

"You want to get killed?" he said in a cracked voice, as though a person wouldn't get killed here if he simply took reasonable precaution. With deadly arrows and bullets more and more finding the openings in this building, and thudding into walls and screeching off iron kitchenware and splintering furniture like lightning did a tree.

One arrow, in fact, thudded now into the back of one of the Bar-X punchers....

But you need to go back first. Way back. You need to know, for example, where Miss Sally Peterson had come from on that stagecoach. Where in the East.

Boston, that's right. That's right, that explained the schoolteacher

look. She was no schoolteacher, though. This was it: She was a rebel, was Miss Sally Peterson. Her family had been very strict, very la-di-da. Her father was a prosperous business man, the tea business, but no odor of commerce had ever invaded the Peterson Beacon Hill mansion. Here all was culture and respectability. Here Sally had been brought up, an only child, like a hothouse flower. One whole wing of the Peterson mansion, on the subject, was a huge, dome-shaped hothouse.

Sally exploded. She tolerated one and three-quarters years of Miss Hewitt's Finishing School For Young Ladies, and then she took a ball peen hammer to her pink and blue porcelain piggy-bank, and the next thing her apoplectic father knew, she was in St. Louis and they weren't to worry, she'd write, she was fine, she just wanted to find out what life was all about beyond the high spiked iron fences that ringed the Peterson estate and Miss Hewitt's....

**A**ND SO, these few short weeks after her arrival in the fabled West, life was more than cooperating with Sally. It had come more than halfway, certainly, to meet her. To show her what it was all about.

Like when the Comanches made their rush, afoot, at the house. One of the Bar-X boys, Jerry Tolland, had gone in a running dash for the main house where the gun rack was, but there was no sign of him yet, so this opening assault had to be answered with six-shooters and then bare hands.

One of the Indians, as they burst in like a flood at every door and window, almost immediately grabbed Miss Sally Peterson from behind; the first she knew, a great, greasy hand was clamped over her mouth and she was being dragged backwards by that hold alone. And when she tried to struggle and bite and kick, the hand left her mouth and tore at her hair, while the Indian's other hand swept her feet off the floor with the force of his swinging her up to carry her out the front door.

The Bar-X punchers had emptied their six-shooters at the onslaught,

and now they were using them like clubs, and Al Larrimore slashed his gun butt down on this Comanche's cranium, and Sally was busy for a while then untangling herself from the savage's limp, stinking body. She literally gaped, though, at what she saw when she was on her feet again. At the fury of the hand-to-hand combat in progress on every inch of floorspace.

She saw Sol Smith snap a Comanche's neck with the vise-like headlock the Bar-X ramrod had thrown on the Indian; she heard it, in fact.

She saw Pony Dillon boot a Comanche so hard in the groin that the Comanche actually did a forward somersault into total oblivion.

She saw Harry Gentry dragging every object with any kind of bulk off every shelf, wall-hook, table, sideboard, working at this like a terrible machine, and crashing most of it effectively onto Indian heads, or slamming it at Indian faces.

While other Bar-X boys slashed at the Comanches with chairs, or wrenched the knives and tomahawks out of their very hands and themselves wielded these weapons.

She saw war-painted, screaming savages come at her, she saw ears torn off, she saw arms broken, and faces explode into bloody shapelessness.

Yes, the color was high on Miss Sally Peterson's cheeks by the time this first Comanche assault was smashed, and her breathing came deep and a little jerky. She was otherwise, though, intact. The severe bun at the back of her head had been torn loose into a pony tail, and her crisp white blouse was no longer crisp nor white nor a blouse, but she had suffered no bodily injury beyond bruises and scratches.

Three more times attackers had grabbed up her slight body and got as far as a door or window with it, and the last of these she had scratched and kicked and bitten into releasing her, but Pony Dillon had booted the head half off the first one, and old Chuck Johnson had dispatched the second one with his butcher knife...

Sally looked around suddenly,

now, for Al Larrimore. Because she suddenly realized she hadn't seen him since the first minutes of the fight. And she didn't see him now....

**YOU** NEED to go back, at this point, with Al Larrimore, too. Back to how it was with him before he came to the Bar-X.

A gunslinger hiding out, like the other Bar-X hands figured him? Well, hardly. A coward hiding out, was more like it. Al Larrimore had been one of those unfortunate young men who grow up to find they've got a yellow stripe running down their back.

His family had come West out of Kentucky when Al was just turned eighteen. Al had two older brothers, and when their Conestoga had been attacked by Indians, Al's father and brothers and mother and even his grandfather had fought furiously and well and had broken up the attack—while Al trembled, his skinny body stark paralyzed with fear, inside the covered wagon. Flat down on his face on its warped oak floorboards.

Al had run away after that. His family had tried to be understanding, but it is not easy for fearless folk to fathom a coward, especially when he is one of their own, and Al knew that he no longer belonged with them. The night they stopped outside Pago City, he left the wagon, and he'd never had contact with his family, much less heard a word of their whereabouts, since.

Some young men, so cursed, go down fast, often drowning their terrible shame finally in liquor—while others simply refuse to be beaten. Al Larrimore was one of the latter.

He put himself on the spot. To make or break himself, completely, once and for all. He got good with a gun, and he spread the word that his gun was for hire. Three pretty fair notch-hunters braced him, after that, and he downed them. And each time, in these shoot-outs, he noted that he felt less fear. He began, in fact, to think he'd licked his trouble.

He was sure of it when The Taos Kid called him, one night, in a Tombstone honkatonkery. The Kid had

nine notorious notches on his gun. But before the evening was over, he was notch number four on Al Larrimore's sleek black butt.

Al thought it was about time, after that, that he put his attention to something besides conquering his cowardice. He was twenty-one now; he'd learn the cattle business; he took the line-riding job with the Cantwells... But, ironically, it was at exactly this point where he turned away at last from the problem of his courage, that his courage got its toughest test...

Miss Sally Peterson was the only one ever to know about this. And it was funny how it came about. She had been on the point of dashing out of the house to look for Al, which was kind of funny too, when he burst in loaded with weapons; shotguns and .30-30's mostly.

"Good boy!" Sol Smith whooped, already levering one of the Winchesters. "What happened to—"

"They got Jerry," Al said woodenly, dumping ammunition from his pockets. "So I grabbed up the guns and shells."

"Here are the guns!" somebody yelled, and the men were crowding around the pile of rifles.

"Are you—all right?" Sally asked Al.

"Yes, I'm all right. You know how I happened to be there to get the guns?" he asked Sally in the same dead tone. "I had turned yellow, when the hand-to-hand fighting started, and I'd run. That's how I happened to be out there. I'd probably still be running if I hadn't seen Jerry fall trying to make it here with the guns. I had my .45, and I can shoot some you know, so I cut down the Indians that came at me."

"Oh," Sally said. Then she added quickly, "The big thing, though, was that you did it, you brought the guns in. That wasn't yellow—"

He went on with his strangely frank confession: "The funny thing was, I'd got myself over being afraid of gunfights. It was the Indians that mixed me up again, the Indians and the hand-to-hand business, like when they attacked my family when I was a button—" And then it came to him,

delayed like that: *Sally hadn't been bothered by his cowardice, as his family had—quite on the other hand, the expression on her face now was sympathetic—even affectionate—*

A couple random bullets banged into the room at that moment, like the first big drops of rain that signal the resumption of a thunderstorm after a lull. It wasn't, as it turned out, much of an attack though; that first meeting had actually finished the Comanches. It was more as if the Indians wanted to show that they weren't afraid of the Bar-X bunch just because the latter had, bare-handed, smashed their raid. So the boys gave them a good send-off with a substantial volley of .30-30 lead....

**T**HE CANTWELL brothers dropped in for a couple days three weeks later. Some of their remarks were interesting.

Standing with their foreman, Sol Smith, in front of the Bar-X eat-shack, one of them scanned the bullet-pocked facade of the former ranchhouse and said irritably, "What happened here? The boys been using this building for target practice? It is to eat in, not shoot at."

"Well, not exactly," Sol began, pointing down the hill toward the "boothill" the crew had established for the Comanche corpses. "What happened was—"

"Well tell them to do their target practice elsewhere," this elder Cantwell brother concluded, and went inside to get on with their inspection.

It was the other Cantwell, the

milder, shorter, round-faced one, who remarked the unbelievable change in the crew's behavior at table.

"What's got into them? Could it be because of the little lady being here? Why, they all sit up straight like they were at a banquet or something, and I swear, half of them stick their little fingers up in the air when they drink their coffee."

"It was the little lady, all right," Sol grinned. "I'm tellin' you, you never saw such a fearless female, and like I was going to tell you, when the boys saw how she stood up to them Comanches, they figured well if table manners was so important to her—"

"But I thought I heard her saying what 'wonderful, tough, he-men' they were—nothing about being gentlemen, or—"

"Speaking of Miss Peterson," the taller Cantwell cut in, "what's this I hear about her quitting and setting up housekeeping with one of the men, what's his name, Lattimore—"

"Larrimore, Al Larrimore." Sol's grin stretched even wider. "Yes-sir, Mr. Cantwell, I'm a-feared that one of these days you're going to have a little competition in the cattle business. How it all began, like I been trying to tell you, these here Comanches..."

It's doubtful if, to this day, the Cantwell brothers know about that Indian raid on the Bar-X eat-shack. Those were boom days in the cattle business, when you couldn't lose no matter how you ran your outfit....

● END

### HARD RIDING WASN'T ENOUGH

ten sat on the top rails of the cattle pens, and continued singing their mournful chants until the train pulled in and the last critter had ambled up the loading ramp into the cattle cars.

Then the cowboy's job was finished and he forgot all about sad songs. He was ready to hooraw the town with wild shouts and six-gun blasts, before he bellied up to the nearest bar to wash the trail dust from his throat.

After a few days of fun, however, he was ready to ride back to the

(continued from page 41)

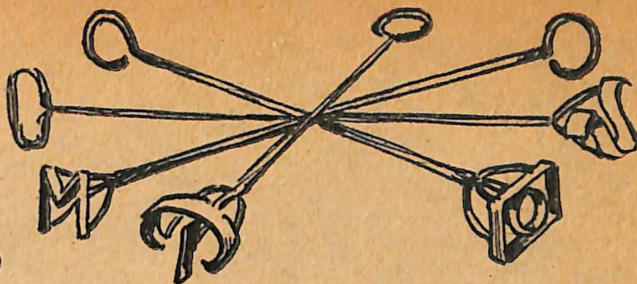
home ranch to start preparing another herd for market. Ready to limber up his vocal cords and start crooning again to apprehensive long-horns.

There was one outstanding big difference between the old-time singing cowboy and the movie actor crooning Western ballads today. The range-rider crooner of the 80's drew down a salary of from fifteen to forty dollars a month—the Hollywood Western star usually earns more than that in

(please turn to page 56)

# HIS DAY

by H. A. De ROSSO



**A**ROUND noon he spotted the brindle heifer who was still following her mother, a Slash 8 cow. He roped the mother first and threw her and tied her legs with a piggin' string. Then he roped the heifer. After that he built a small fire of dried cedar and put his running iron in the flames. When the iron was hot he went over to the heifer and drew a brand on her flank. The brand was Windowsash.

After he had released them, he sat a while in his saddle, staring at the spot where the cow and her calf had gone crashing into some brush. His

lips revealed a slight grin but there was no warmth in his eyes.

Three of them, he thought. Three

**For seven long years the hate had been building in Cole, and now that he had Hubbard under his gun, no cowgirl's pretty face was going to turn it to panic and fear. . . .**

weaned calves but still following their mothers, three weaned calves

Dunlap saw it coming but he was not quick enough.



branded Windowsash following Slash 8 cows. How are you going to like that, Hubbard?

He turned the grullo and rode up a slope and through some pines and came out on a small mountain meadow. All about the high crags of the Pinnacles reared. He came across several more Slash 8 cows with unbranded calves but these were much too young and he rode on. He found a Windowsash cow followed by her weaned male calf but this did not suit his purpose and he gave them no more than a passing glance.

Dusk found him on the bank of a shallow mountain creek. He stepped down from the grullo and hobbled the gray horse and then stripped off bridle and saddle. After that he built a fire and made some coffee and fried salt pork. Somewhere in the distance a coyote yapped, a shrill and lonesome crying sound, and he listened to it with something akin in his own heart. After he had washed the pot and pan and tin plate at the creek, he added wood to the fire and then unrolled his blankets.

He was very tired for he had been in the saddle since dawn but sleep did not come too readily. He lay on his back, staring up at the stars and thinking.

It's been a long time, Hubbard, he thought, a very long time. I suppose you've forgotten but you'll remember. You bet you'll remember.

The feeling in his heart was deep and bitter and lonely when he finally dropped off.

He came to as though emerging from a thick, baffling mist and he was so fatigued he started to fall back when he felt something prodding him in the side. This time he awoke fully and saw that the fire had been built up and that two men were standing there, staring down at him. One of the men, the one who had prodded him with the toe of a boot, had a six-shooter in his hand.

"Rise and shine, bucko," the man with the gun said. "You've got a long ride ahead of you tonight..."

**M**ORNING sunlight made white patterns on the floor from where it slanted through the windows. He sat in a chair and stared at the pat-

terns, feeling lost and helpless without his belt and gun about his waist. He did not mind the man too much. It was the woman who disconcerted him. She sat across the room from him, watching him with a quiet intentness, and he kept the right side of his face toward her.

"What's your name?" the man asked.

"Cole."

"I'm Wes Norton," the man said. "I own Slash 8."

Cole said nothing. He flicked a glance up at Norton and figured they were of an age, in their early thirties, although he undoubtedly looked much older with the black whiskers on his face. They made him look grim and forbidding, he knew, but without them he looked worse.

Norton stood in the center of the room, thumbs hooked in the pockets of his levis, staring down at Cole. "My riders tell me you've been riding my north pasture the past couple of days," Norton said. "They also tell me that they found a couple of Slash 8 cows followed by calves branded Windowsash."

Cole stared at the floor. He knew Norton was waiting for him to speak but Cole said nothing.

"Branding time is three weeks off," Norton said when Cole didn't speak. "By then those calves will no longer be following their mothers." His eyes speared Cole. "Do you work for anyone around here, Cole?"

"No."

"You're a stranger?"

"That's right."

"How long have you been in the country?"

"A week maybe."

"What do you know about those calves?"

Cole said nothing. He could feel the woman's eyes on him. He wanted to look at her, he'd had only a glimpse of her and she'd seemed to be very pretty but then he never saw many women. He began to wish that she'd get up and go away.

Norton's voice took on an edge. "You pack a running iron, Cole," he said. "You follow me?"

"Why would I brand them Windowsash—if I did do the branding?"

"That's for you to tell me."

Cole shrugged. "It doesn't make sense, does it?"

"You work for Windowsash?" Norton asked.

"No. You can check if you don't believe me."

"We'll check," Norton said. His gaze never left Cole. "You know something about those calves all right."

Cole said nothing. He stared at the floor, careful to keep the right side of his face toward the woman.

"Maybe you're thinking it's none of your business," Norton said. "Maybe you don't want to get involved in something. I can understand that, Cole. But this is *my* business. Those are *my* calves. I'm going to get to the bottom of it. I promise you that."

Cole stirred uncomfortably in his chair. "I'm no squealer," he said.

"I know that. But I want to find out the truth."

"I'm a stranger," Cole said. "I don't want to get mixed up in anything."

"Slash 8 will back you," Norton said. "We're the biggest outfit in the Pinnacles. My father was the first man to settle here. Slash 8 carries a lot of weight. We'll protect you."

"I saw no branding," Cole said, shifting his seat again. "I can't swear to that. I saw smoke, though, like from a branding fire. About yesterday noon. A little later I saw a couple of riders coming from that direction. I'd already spotted a heifer branded Windowsash following a Slash 8 cow earlier that day and being a stranger I didn't want to get mixed up in anything. So I stayed hidden. But I saw the riders."

"What did they look like?"

Cole frowned. "One's a big man, red-haired. The other's small and thin with a hooked nose."

"Hubbard and Dunlap?"

"I wouldn't know their names," Cole said.

"No, you wouldn't," Norton agreed.

He strode across the room and for a while stood at a window, staring out, apparently lost in thought. With the man gone the woman's eyes seemed to probe a little harder at Cole. He started to glance her way

once but caught himself in time. He felt uneasy with her watching him like that, uneasy and even uncomfortable and certainly lonely, very lonely.

Now Norton returned. His glance held a hard directness as he stared at Cole. "We'll have to do some checking," Norton said. "You'll stay on at Slash 8 while we do. There'll be a place for you in the bunkshack and you can have the run of the yard but no horse for you and no gun and no wandering away. Are we understood, Cole?..."

WITH NOTHING to do he sat on a wagon tongue in the afternoon sun. Its pleasant warmth made him drowsy even though he had slept several hours earlier but then he'd had hardly any sleep the night before and fatigue still lay on him. He sat, staring across the land, at the green-clad hills and above them the barren crests of the Pinnacles. He almost dozed once and thus it was that he did not hear her come up.

When he noticed her he came to his feet quickly and touched his hat and averted his face so that the right side was toward her but he supposed she had seen. Right then a vicious hatred flared in him.

Damn you, Hubbard, he thought. Damn you to hell.

"How are you, Cole?" she asked. She had a low, throaty voice that was very soft.

"All right."

"It must be awful tiresome for you with nothing to do," she said, "but we have no choice. You understand, don't you?"

"I don't mind," he said. He was watching the peaks of the Pinnacles.

"I'm Adrienne Norton," the girl said, "Wes is my brother."

Cole said nothing. In his heart the old loneliness was starting to cry.

The girl was looking at him now in an intent, examining way. He could feel it even though he did not glance at her. He kept his eyes on the high reaches of the Pinnacles.

"You know, Cole," the girl said, "your story doesn't sound right to me."

He started but only slightly so

that he dared to hope the girl had not noticed. His voice remained calm. "I don't know what you mean," he said.

"About Hubbard and Dunlap," she said, still searching his face with her glance. "Hubbard owns Windowsash. Dunlap's his foreman. It seems to me they wouldn't risk a thing like that branding, not personally. They'd send some of their riders to do it."

"Maybe they can't trust their riders," Cole said. "Anyway, I didn't say they did the branding."

"What else are we to understand from what you said?"

He lowered his eyes but he still would not look at her. "I'm sorry, ma'am," he said.

"Why won't you look at me?"

This time he started so that he was sure she had noticed. The knowledge made him angry and started the old hatred to flaring all over again. He said nothing.

She came ahead a step so that she could peer at him better. "Don't turn your face away," she said. "I want you to look at me."

He stared at the ground, his face averted, and said nothing.

"You've got something on your mind," she said, and her voice sounded soft and gentle but he credited the sympathy in it to his imagination and longing. "Something terrible and mean. You've had it there for a long time. It's not good for you, Cole."

He stared at the ground without speaking.

She sighed, soft as the whisper of a breeze. "I would bet you're a very nice person, Cole, if only you wouldn't keep to yourself like this. Why don't you look at me?"

Something else was building up in him now, something akin to panic. He felt his throat go dry and his hands tense. Damn you, Hubbard, he was thinking, damn you—

"Is that why you wear a beard?" she asked. "It makes you look old and I'll bet you're no older than Wes. Is that why, Cole?"

He did not know what prompted him to say it. He was so full of many things, panic and fear and hate and hurt and longing, he couldn't tell which one or if all made him say it.

"Why don't you mind your own business?"

He heard her gasp in surprise and then he was walking away.

"Cole," she cried after him. "Please, Cole. I'm sorry."

He walked on.

"I'm sorry, Cole," she called after him. "Please believe me."

He kept on without a pause or a break in his stride. He hardly saw the ground his eyes were that wet....

THE NEXT morning the Slash 8 foreman told Cole to saddle his grullo. There was a lot of activity about the corrals. It looked as though all of Slash 8 was saddling up and they all had rifles in saddle boots and six-shooters at their hips. Seeing this, Cole grinned secretly with no mirth at all, only coldness and hate in his heart.

Wes Norton came down from the house and mounted an orange dun. He lifted an arm in signal and the cavalcade started off. As they passed the house, Cole saw that Adrienne Norton had come out on the gallery to see them off. He gave only a passing glance at her but it was enough to show him the worry in her face.

They reached the north pasture at noon by the sun. At the edge of a small mountain lake they reined in. Two of the hands rode away, returning in a short while with a Slash 8 cow and the brindle heifer branded Windowsash.

Cole could sense the tenseness in the air. The men spoke little and smoked a lot. Norton stood by himself, lost in dark, somber brooding. He did not brighten up until the sound of horses came and then it was a sudden, cat-like tilting of his head that heightened the anger in his eyes.

Cole recognized the two approaching riders instantly. Seven years, he thought savagely as they rode up, seven years. You've put on weight around the middle, Hubbard, and there's gray in your hair and you look like you've softened up a little. Before I'm through you'll be softened up still more. And you, Dunlap, you slouch a little more in the saddle than you used to but your eyes and

mouth are still just as mean, just as mean. You had your day once, the two of you. Now it's mine. How are you going to like it?

There was a querying look on Hubbard's broad face as he and Dunlap dismounted. "I got your word, Wes," Hubbard said. "What you want me and Ward up here for?"

Norton indicated the cow and heifer with a curt jerk of his head. "Take a look," he said. "Take a good look."

Something in his voice made Hubbard pause. He gave another glance around, at the armed Slash 8 men standing silent and grim. Hubbard's eyes passed over Cole with no sign of recognition and again the silent, evil mirth grinned in Cole.

Hubbard's spurs tinkled faintly as he walked over to where the cow and heifer stood hobbled. When he turned around his mouth was grave and a little pale. He stared hard at Norton.

"You think I had a hand in this?" Hubbard asked.

"Who else would?" said Norton. Without waiting for Hubbard's answer, Norton went on, "You're through using my pasture, Hubbard, you're through in the Pinnacles. Get your cattle off my land by sundown tomorrow. For every head on my land after that I'm charging you a dollar a day grazing fees."

"Wes," Hubbard cried, "listen to me. I've been here in the Pinnacles four years now. We've always got along, we've been friends. Do you think I'd spoil all that for one measly heifer?"

"There are others," Norton said.

"I don't care how many there are," Hubbard cried. Color was deepening in his face. Anger and resentment ran through his eyes. "I never had a hand in it. I never touched one of your calves. Where's your proof that I did?"

"Cole," Norton called.

This was the moment Cole had been waiting for. A vile eagerness ran through him as he stepped out from among the Slash 8 riders. Hubbard's eyes picked him up instantly but still there was no recognition in them.

"These are the men, all right, Nor-

ton," Cole said, the cold mirth running in him.

"This man saw you and Dunlap ride away from a branding fire two days ago," Norton said to Hubbard.

"That's a lie," Hubbard cried. "We weren't away from Windowsash that day." He was eyeing Cole narrowly.

Go ahead and look, Hubbard, Cole thought. Go ahead and take a good look. You only saw me but once but I remember. I'll always remember. Don't you?

Wariness filmed Hubbard's eyes. A frown creased his brow for a moment. "Cole?" he said half to himself. "Cole? I've never known any one by that name."

"You never bothered to ask," said Cole, "but I did. After."

Hubbard frowned again. It was apparent that he was trying very hard to get through to something. "There's something about you—" he began and then stopped. He shook his head. "I can't place you."

A rush of anger brought Cole surging forward. He could feel his every fibre tremble with rage. His head flung up and he turned the left side of his face toward Hubbard and with his hands Cole parted the black whiskers so that Hubbard could better see the long scar that ran from the corner of Cole's mouth to his ear.

"Now do you place me?" Cole shouted, almost crying with fury. "Now do you remember? Damn you, Hubbard, do you place me now?..."

THEY GAVE him back his six-shooter and his rifle and told him he was free to go.

Go? he thought with that grim humor laughing inside him, go? Now that the fun was about to begin? Not on your life. I waited seven years for this. I'd have waited a lifetime for this. Go? Not me.

He rode northward, into the Pinnacles, intending to pitch a camp somewhere near Slash 8's high pasture. Once, when he had reined the grullo in on high ground for a breather, he spotted a rider in the distance. The horseman was too far off for recognition and Cole quickly forgot him. His

mind was too full of grim pleasure to trouble about other things.

He found a place to his liking on the bank of a creek where the water ran slowly and quietly. Pines grew tall and lofty, providing a break for the cold winds off the flank of the mountain. There was plenty of graze for the grullo.

He had a fire going when a sound in the pines brought him whipping around, hand reaching for his gun. Then he saw who it was and the alertness went out of him and in its place came a calm, sweet sadness.

Adrienne Norton reined in her paint and for a while she sat in the saddle, staring down at him with a grave examination. He felt his throat tighten for an instant as something cried in him. Then anger at himself rose in him and he turned away and pretended to be poking up the fire.

He heard her dismount. Then her voice came. "Do you realize what you've done, Cole?"

He straightened but he did not face her. He stood staring down at the fire. "What do you mean?"

"Do you realize what you've started between Windowsash and Slash 8?"

He made no reply to this.

"There never has been any trouble in the Pinnacles," the girl went on when he did not speak. "Slash 8 has always tried to be a good neighbor. That is why Wes let Hubbard move in. He helped Hubbard. He's shared his graze and water with Hubbard. Now all that is over."

Too bad, Cole thought, now that's just too bad. Aloud he said nothing.

"Hubbard won't take this lying down," the girl continued. "Do you know what that means, Cole?"

He lifted his glance and looked off at the heights of the Pinnacles. Wind ruffled the whiskers on his face and this and her presence made him remember and doubled the cruel sense of triumph in him.

"You're a lonely, bitter man," she went on. "There's a great hate in you for someone. Is that someone Hubbard? Is it because you want him destroyed that you caused all this?"

"I didn't cause anything," he said. "I only told what I saw."

"Did you?" she said. "Did you really see?"

He could not help but flick a glance at her. Then he pulled his eyes away, quickly.

"Slash 8 is bigger and stronger than Windowsash and they'll win any fight with Hubbard," the girl said, "but have you thought to look beyond the fighting, Cole? Have you ever thought of the dying that there surely will be, the dying of men who had nothing to do with the trouble between you and Hubbard?"

HE DID NOT like the turn the talk was taking but he did not know what to say. He could only stand and listen with a sort of angry helplessness.

"Why, Cole?" she asked. There was a quiver in her voice and a plea which he could not miss. "It can't be anything so bad to give you reason enough for a thing like this."

"I have reason enough." A growl had entered his tone.

"Have you?" she asked. He heard her come ahead. She moved over in front of him and strove to look up at his face but he lifted his glance and kept the right side of his face to her. "Have you really reason enough?"

"For me it's enough."

"Maybe it is," she said. "But have you ever stopped to think why it's enough? Have you ever talked about it to any one? Is that why it's reason enough, because you've kept it inside you until it's poisoned your mind and outlook? Is that why it's reason enough?"

He could feel anger growing anew in him, a vicious, violent anger. He did not answer her.

"Is it because of your face?" she asked quietly. "You see, I know what you've got there, Cole, even if you keep it turned away from me. The whiskers hide it a little but not all. Is that the reason?"

Years of repression and brooding brought it out of him in a shout. "What if it is?"

"But is it reason enough for other men dying?"

"To me it is. One man's been dead seven years, my partner, back in

Brewster County, Texas. He's been dead all that time and I've had this to remind me of it. He didn't have a chance. From the brush, they got him. They got me, too, but I was still alive so they just tied me to a pole and ran their brand on me as a warning to me and all the others to keep out."

Memory of it almost set him to crying. He was all a-tremble, from anger and recollection of pain and of the despair that had followed the pain.

The girl's face was white with horror. "But why, Cole, why?"

"We were maverickers and Hubbard and Dunlap wanted all the mavericks for themselves. They got them, too, after what they did to me. A Mex vaquero took me in and nursed me and by the time I was well again Hubbard and Dunlap were gone. It took me seven years to trace them to the Pinnacles."

"Seven years," she whispered, and he glanced at her long enough to see that her eyes were wet. "Seven years with it on your mind." Her hand rose to touch his cheek and he jerked his head aside violently.

"Please, Cole," she went on. "It doesn't make you ugly, it doesn't make you repulsive. It's what a person is inside that matters. He could be the handsomest man in the world but if he were a cold-blooded killer he'd be repulsive to me. It's what a man is in his heart that really matters. Please, Cole. Don't fight it like this. There are many women who wouldn't mind if you were all right in your heart. Won't you believe that?"

You've done it, he told himself. With both of them in your loop you went and did it. After seven years you finally had them and let them go. A fine time for you to go soft. Why, man, why?

**H**E KNEW why even though he hated admitting it to himself. A foolish, crazy whim born of years of loneliness and bitterness. A look of solicitousness in a woman's eyes, the throaty caress in her voice, the hope of a promise that he knew could never be fulfilled. These were the answers why.

It was a small thing to take with

him through the Pinnacles and on to their side and beyond to he knew not where. He didn't really care where. The purpose that had kept him going for seven years was no more and its place was nothing, unless a little more bitterness, a little more loneliness.

For a time he let the grullo pick its own way, not caring where the gray horse went. Then he grew angry at himself. Pull yourself together, he told himself. Forget. It will be hard to do but forget anyway.

Time passed. How quickly or slowly he had no idea. He looked up once and spied them, quartering down a ridge to intercept him. Even at a distance he knew them although he had seen them only twice in his life.

He reined in the grullo with a hard jerk of the lines. A rush of vicious anger spasmed in him for an instant. Then he was calm, coldly and purposefully calm, waiting their approach.

They came on with a studied, unhurried deliberateness, their horses moving at a trot. They made a straight line across the meadow to where he was waiting. His teeth showed once through the black whiskers in a mirthless grin. Then his features were stolid again.

They reined in their mounts side by side and sat a while, staring at him, Hubbard big and angry with his ire showing redly on his broad face, Dunlap small and slouched with his mean mouth pinched tight and his eyes squinting.

At last Hubbard spoke. "So you finally told Norton the truth, eh, bucko?" he said. "It saves a lot of us a lot of trouble but not you. You carry hate too long and too deep, boy. I don't know why you let up this time but you might try again. I don't aim to give you the chance."

This was all the talking, Cole realized. The rest of it was up to something more decisive and final than words. Quickly he sized them up Dunlap he put down as the more dangerous, the silent one who struck swiftly and deadly. Hubbard always had to make his fighting talk first.

There was no use waiting or prolonging it, Cole thought. They were two to one and they could ask for no

more than that. He cared little for the outcome, just so he could tag them both, not one but both. With only this in mind he jabbed the grullo hard with the spurs and as the gray horse leaped ahead Cole drew his .44.

Dunlap saw it coming and he was quick but not quick enough. The slug took him in the chest and drove him sideways and back and then the grullo was ramming hard into Dunlap's bay, crowding it up against Hubbard's chestnut.

Hubbard got his shot off but his chestnut shied at the same instant and Hubbard missed. Cole's second shot wrenched a groan out of Hubbard and tumbled him out of the saddle. He lay on the ground too weak and too sick to pick up his pistol where it had fallen out of his hand.

Seven years' hate and indignity blotted all else from Cole's mind. Reining in the grullo with a savage haul on the lines, he looked down the barrel of his six-shooter at Hubbard's chest. Then through the storm of rage and violence in him something angled in. A sweet, aching something, a soft voice saying, *He could be the handsomest man in the world, but if he were a cold-blooded killer he'd be repulsive to me...*

He hardly knew it but he was crying as he put his gun, unfired, away....

**H**E TOLD himself that Slash 8's headquarters was the nearest place and Hubbard's wound was a bad one (Dunlap was dead and no longer mattered) so he had nowhere else to go. That was what he told himself, several times over, but the truth lay poignantly and tormentingly in his heart.

#### HARD RIDING WASN'T ENOUGH

an hour. Yet the warbling cowpoke of the Old West was happy in his work and probably wouldn't have

Norton came out and saw to it that Hubbard was bedded in the bunkshack and then sent a rider to town for a doctor and the sheriff. Norton caught the look of surprise on Cole's face and smiled a little.

"Hubbard's wanted in Texas. Brewster County, wasn't it?" he said. "Our sheriff wired the authorities there and they confirmed the charge and said to hold Hubbard for extradition."

"How did your sheriff know?" Cole asked.

Norton smiled again. "My sister is a headstrong girl. This was all her doing. She rode to town and didn't come back until an answer had come from Texas. Hubbard's got her to thank for the fix he's in."

Cole caught up the lines of the grullo. He felt rather sad and lost because he had not seen her. He was about to mount when he looked at the house and saw her come out and stand there, bare-headed in the sun, watching him.

He went up to her, the grullo trailing behind him. "I just want to tell you," he said, "that I had no choice with Dunlap. I could have killed Hubbard, too, but I... I should have but I didn't. I suppose I'll be sorry but I didn't."

"You'll never be sorry," she said, and there was a shine in her eyes, "you'll never be sorry for any of the things you've done since you came to the Pinnacles."

She reached over and with a gentleness that amazed him took the grullo's lines from his fingers. "You're not going Cole. Not yet. You're staying. I hope you stay a long time."

She started toward a corral, leading the grullo. After a while, Cole followed....

● END

(continued from page 48)

changed places with today's glamorized, highly-paid replica of himself even if he could.

● END

# THE OLD SHELL GAME

by JOHN CONCANNON

I WAS straddlin' a chair, watchin' a card game at McDaniels' Gold Room saloon and a thinkin' of days gone by. I couldn't help but feel that there'd be no more Whingdings or makin' the town smoky for these old bones. It riled me to think that 15, maybe even 10 years ago I wouldn't have stood idly by and watched the likes of this Frenchie and his shills fleece a green young miner out of his hard-earned gold. I had to now. The spirit was weak and the flesh was slow. Guts and skill with a gun went with my youth to be replaced by caution and easily swallowed pride.

When I looked up and saw the figure standin' in the swingin' doors, something of old stirred within me. The stance was that of gun-fighters I had known—head high, eyes alert and near the guns with the body up on toes and leanin' forward in a slight crouch.



That it was woman, young and handsome of sorts, didn't startle me at first. Until I took in the riggin'. She was spraddled out in a buckskin suit, high heel boots, Stetson hat, wide ammunition belt and holstered .44 at each side.

"Buckskin," the name seemed to fit her like the suit, slowly moved to one side of the swingin' doors, put a shoulder against the wall and looked the crowded saloon over. Her hard, keen eyes roamed the bar, stand-arounds, card players, dancers and those at the tables. She seemed to be searchin' for someone. And not findin' that someone she relaxed, a little disappointed and a little relieved.

Then Buckskin moved through the tables toward the bar. Though she cut quite a figure no one paid her any particular heed. Most were too busy bendin' an elbow and carryin' on to notice. And in Cheyenne it wasn't

safe to pay too much attention to strangers. Though Cheyenne was no longer the end of the railroad and the "Hell on Wheels" town it had been, it was still the roughest, toughest cow town in the territory. Tempers were short and easily triggered. A body got the respect his guns could command. And there was somethin' about the woman—her gait and carriage, and the high hang of the .44's at her fingertips—that said she wasn't a woman to lock horns with.

Two ranch hands, never noted for their manners, tipped their hats and made room for her at the bar. She ordered drinks for all and started to

**None of us really saw Buckskin draw her guns. Man or boy, it was the neatest job of slapping leather I have ever seen.**

chew the cud with them, right friendly like. I deserted my stand at the card tables and ambled over for a closer look-see at this Buckskin with the two six-shooters.

It was hard to figure her age. Allowin' for what the wind, dust and heat of the west can do to the skin of even the very young, I'd say she was in her late 20's. From the way the Buckskin walked and toted herself I reckoned she was born to the saddle. Been doin' a lot of hard ridin' recently too. Her clothes were caked with dirt and dust and stiff from long hours of constant wear.

BUCKSKIN asked if any of us knew of her "friend, Jack McCall." She described him as "a cross-eyed, skinny little runt." There was a savagery in her voice that belied the off-hand way she asked it. None of us ever heard of McCall. She said

nothin' but downed her drink without battin' an eye.

"Friend McCall" was a dead man if ever she caught up with him. Forty of my 60 years I've spent fiddle-footin' through the west as teacher and preacher, cowboy and cook, and anythin' else that would earn my keep. I've seen too many men ridin' the long, lonely trail of revenge—sheriffs after outlaws and just ordinary cowhands gunnin' for someone...figurin' that two wrongs made a right.

I wondered what this Jack McCall had done for Buckskin to hunt him down. Most likely bushwhacked her husband or sweetheart. She didn't look like the kind that would take to being hitched. But a sweetheart—well, she could have had many of them. Buckskin was enjoyin' herself, tradin' talk with all around her and matchin' us drink for drink.

Our chinfeest was suddenly broken by an oath and the crash of an overturned chair. The young miner (Slim was the only name I knew him by), who had been playin' cards, rose from the floor. He was shakin' with anger and rage, lookin' left and right for somethin' to hit or break. Frenchie, the house gambler, was coolly raking in a pile of chips. Spread out in front of him was a straight flush. The miner looked down with tears of rage in his eyes at his aces full hand. He boxed the five cards and tore them in half one way and then the other. Slim tossed the pieces on the table and turned to walk out.

"Give you a chance to win back your money, kid," Frenchie called after him, stackin' his chips in neat piles. "The cards are agin' you so I'll match the keenness of your eyes and the speed of my hands."

Buckskin had joined the circle around the card table and I heard her whisper, "Who's the young fellow?"

Several volunteered answers: "A young miner from the Medicine Bow country...came in to buy supplies to work his mine but now he's lost all the gold dust he had to Frenchie...has a wife and young 'un too... assayer's report showed the mine to be good workin's."

"Have to do somethin' about this!" Buckskin hitched up her gunbelts.

"Be careful, lady," I warned. "That Frenchie is a snaky customer and bad medicine with a gun. We've put several guys, who didn't like the way Frenchie played cards, to bed with a pick and shovel."

"You don't say," Buckskin answered, not one bit impressed. She moved up next to Slim who stood rooted to the floor.

"I've got nothin' more to bet," Slim grunted, his head bowed and long arms hangin' limp.

Frenchie brushed aside the chips and cards and took out three walnut half-shells and a pea from his pocket and laid them on the table.

"I'll bet all that I have on the table plus two hundred in coin against a half-interest in your mine that you can't tell under what shell I put the pea."

Slim looked like a fellow who has his spurs tangled up and is tryin' mightily to straighten himself out.

Frenchie went on, "What the hell! The mine's little good to you without cash. But with this money you could operate it properly. You might as well shoot the works."

AS HE WAS talkin' Frenchie moved the shells with his quick, smooth-workin' hands. "Watch how easy it is."

He placed the pea under a shell, moved it around, switchin' hands and crossin' shells several times.

"Which one?" he asked. The miner pointed to the left shell. Frenchie lifted it up and there was the pea.

"Right!" Frenchie says. "This time a little faster." His hands whirled, and trickier movements than I could follow made me lose track of the shell with the pea. Slim trailed it though. And the same with several more trials. Only once did he pick the wrong shell.

"Not bad!" Only one wrong pick out of six tries. Ready now to stake a half-interest in your mine against what I got on the table that your eye can follow the fastest my hands can move?" The gambler's voice had the same tauntin' ring that I had

watched needle many a cardplayer into foolish bettin'.

Slim's "yes" was almost a "no."

Frenchie asked him to sign over a half-interest to the mine in front of witnesses. I looked for Buckskin and found her busily talkin' to everyone she could corral. Her anxious voice carried and it was easy to make out what she was up to. Buckskin was tryin' to raise enough to cover Frenchie's bet on her own.

"I'll make it good if I lose," Buckskin was pleadin'. "I'll pledge my horse, my saddle, my guns and my honor. And if that's not enough, damn it, I'll pledge myself."

Despite the pledges she couldn't raise the amount needed. There just wasn't that kind of money in the crowd.

"Stand back, folks," Frenchie yelled like a medicine show barker. "Give the young man room and let him concentrate. Here we go."

SLIM WIPED the sweat from his forehead and gazed at the shells on the table as if they held life and death for him. Buckskin elbowed to his side as Frenchie put the pea under one of the shells. Middle to left to right to left to middle the shell with the pea moved. Finally it stopped on Slim's right, I was almost positive.

"All right, now. Under which shell is the pea?" Frenchie asked with a sly smile on his face.

The miner slowly raised his right hand and stretched it toward the shell on the right.

Buckskin grabbed his wrist. "One minute, son. Don't do anything hasty. The eyes can be deceived."

Slim, who I don't think could drive nails into a snowbank, was startled and didn't know what to do or say as Buckskin gently prodded him aside.

"I'll make this choice for you," Buckskin said with all the confidence of a general ordering a private. "If I'm wrong I'll make it good to you."

Frenchie didn't like the idea of anyone hornin' in on his show. "No ladies allowed, sister! This is between me and the kid."

Frenchie's habit of movin' his

hand toward his gun whenever he was crowded didn't go unnoticed. Quick as a cat could wink an eye, in one smooth movement, Buckskin had her six guns unholstered and on Frenchie. Man or boy, it was the neatest job of slappin' leather I'd ever seen. And a two-gun draw at that. Even the saloon crowd, used to fast gunplay, was startled at the speed of her draw.

"I'm no lady, brother!" Buckskin snapped. The guns moved slowly in a short arc left and right but her eyes never left Frenchie. "I'm just a friend of the kid's, sittin' in on this hand." There was no doubtin' from her voice and manner that she meant business.

I had stayed alive this long because I minded my own business and never bought chips in other folk's trouble. But I liked the gumption of Buckskin standin' up to Frenchie. I had been eagerly waitin' for someone to cut him and the thieving pack that surrounded him down to size. So when Frenchie's followers started to stir and debate with themselves about helping the boss, I dealt myself in. I drew my guns and held them at my side, darin' anyone to interfere with the showdown between Frenchie and Buckskin. All the while I hoped to high heaven that some fool wouldn't cut loose and turn this into a corpse and cartridge occasion.

Frenchie brought his hands up in front of his body. He had been playin' cards and readin' faces too long not to know that Buckskin wasn't bluffin' and held high hand.

SHE TWIRLED the gun in her left hand and slid it back into the holster. The other gun counted off the walnut shells on the table as she talked out loud:

"Now let's see. The pea is under one of these three walnut shells. To win I've got to pick the one shell with the pea under it and stay clear of the two empty shells." Buckskin glanced up at Frenchie as if to say, "Isn't that right?"

Frenchie's poker face was beginnin' to show signs of wiltin' but he didn't say a word.

"I say the pea is under this shell."

Buckskin pointed to the left shell with the six-gun. The hoverin' crowd let out a chorused "no" and Frenchie reached toward the shell.

Buckskin's gun stabbed him in the chest and her voice snapped, "I'll lift them if you don't mind." Frenchie moved back, wipin' the sweat from his brow.

"I still claim the pea is under this shell and not any of the others," Buckskin went on, her eyes never leavin' Frenchie. She tapped the walnut shell on her right a sharp blow with the muzzle of the gun and prodded among the pieces.

"The pea is not under this one. And..." (another smart tap and the middle shell was cracked) "...it is not under this one." She hardly looked at the remains of the shell.

"So it must be under this last shell. The one I picked. I win. Right, Frenchie?" The gun muzzle rested on the last shell, holdin' it down as a curious spectator leaned anxiously to lift it.

"The lady is absolutely right," Frenchie said, reachin' toward the shell as Buckskin lifted the gun. When he turned over the shell the pea was underneath. The crowd cheered and Slim gulped.

"Gather up your money and mine deed, son, and get out of here. Go back to your wife and kid and stay there. Don't ever let me hear of you tryin' to take money out of any place but that mine."

Slim needed no urgin' from Buckskin. He stuffed the money and deed into his pockets and gathered up the chips. Even as he cashed them in, his eyes were on Frenchie and his henchmen, expectin' them to try 'n stop him. But Buckskin herded Slim and his winnin's out the door without any trouble.

When Slim had gone she turned to me and said: "Thanks for backin' me up, Mister. A friendly gun was right nice to have at my back. Let me buy you a drink."

"If you'll let me buy the second," I answered.

"Agreed." She took my arm and marched me to the bar. The tension was beginnin' to let down but I could still hear the whispers and feel the

eyes of the crowd on Buckskin. She didn't seem to notice that she was the center of attraction.

"Bill Barton is the name," I said to draw her out.

She nodded hello and answered, "Mine's Martha Jane Cannary, though nobody ever calls me anythin' but Jane to my face." Her thoughts seemed to be far away as she continued, "So your name's Bill. I once knew a Bill."

"He the fellow this Jack McCall you're huntin' killed?" I asked.

She nodded while makin' circles on the bar with the wet glass. I told her how I had guessed her mission.

"Yes, I have hunted him for two months through several states. Came across his tracks back a little ways and thought I might find him here. I'll catch up with him, and when I do I'll face him and give him a chance to draw. Not shoot him in the back like he did Bill."

"Was Bill your husband or beau, Jane?"

"Hell, no," she laughed. "Bill was old enough to be my father." Her eyes darkened and she became serious. "I guess he considered himself as sort of father to me, at that. We were in several tight spots together and he saved my hide many a time. I reckon I was sort of gone on him. I loved him and admired him for the straightforward, honest man that he was. Gee, I miss the big guy."

I'M AN OLD duffer and I guess my gray hair and long beard give me a fatherly look. Jane poured out all her bottled-up feelings to me. I "yessed" her and "noed" her at the proper times. I soon found out that what at first had looked like a headstrong, untamed bronco was really a confused filly. We talked into the mornin' and when she was talked out I took her to the Plains Hotel. After she had a good sleep, there would be plenty of time to wrangle her out of this foolish manhunt. I couldn't see any sense to a girl like Calamity Jane spending the best of her life hunting the killer of Wild Bill Hickok—a man who lived by guns and fully expected to die by them.

●END

During the attempted bank holdup, Sarah Ledbetter had been killed.



# GIVE ME A GUN!

by PHILIP KETCHUM

**F**RANK LEDBETTER ran the feed store in Waggoner. He was a man close to fifty and he lived in Waggoner a good many years. The feed store didn't do a rushing business and to supplement his income, Ledbetter served as the town's dentist. The back room of the feed store was equipped with what had

once been a barber's chair and a table on which Ledbetter

TIME HONORED  
WESTERN  
★ ★ CLASSIC

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Someday Frank Ledbetter  
vowed he'd find those  
three cold-eyed gents,  
and then his blazing guns  
would deal out the only  
justice able to reach bush-  
whackers . . . .

kept spread out the tools of this trade. Rumor had it that Ledbetter knew nothing about dentistry, that he had won his tools in a poker game, and that likely as not he would pull sev-

eral teeth from a patient before he got the one which hurt.

There may have been some truth in this for Frank Ledbetter never bothered with filling teeth, explaining, sadly, that he didn't have the proper equipment. It was common knowledge that the man, woman or child who ventured into his chair, usually lost a tooth before leaving it.

Ledbetter was a short man, a little stooped. He had powerful arms and shoulders. Since the tragic death of his wife he lived alone in a small house directly behind the feed store. He had changed since his wife's death. He had grown moody, sullen, bitter. In the old days he had often spent the afternoon on the porch of Herm Schwab's store with Herm and Doc Rowland and some of the other early settlers of Antelope Valley. He had taken his part in any argument. Sometimes, in the evenings, he had indulged in a game of poker in the back room of Tom Blakelee's Toltec saloon. He had been a friendly man, quiet, soft-spoken, easy going. He was friendly no more. Now in the afternoons he stayed at his store, The evenings he spent alone in his cheerless house.

Herm Schwab and Doc Rowland had tried to figure out a way of getting Ledbetter to snap out of his depression, but they had hit upon nothing that worked. "It'll take time," was Doc Rowland's judgement. "Frank Ledbetter was as crazy about his wife the day she was killed as he was the day he married her. What happened was a mighty hard blow."

"It might help some," said Herm Schwab, "if the men who killed his wife were run down."

Doc Rowland nodded. "It might, but it would take even more than that. Frank Ledbetter himself has to make some effort to snap out of it."

"Will he?"

"Who knows," Doc Rowland shrugged. "We can go on prodding him but it may never help. Things like this are in the lap of the gods."

**F**RANK LEDBETTER knew that some of his old friends worried about him, but he gave the matter

little thought. When he was invited to play poker he turned down the invitation. He turned it down because he knew he couldn't fit in with the old crowd. He ducked the afternoon sessions on Herm Schwab's porch for the same reason. No matter how he tried, he couldn't, for long, keep his mind off what had happened to Sarah. And when he remembered that, everything else seemed to black out. He didn't hear what was said to him. The bitterness he couldn't conquer would rise in his throat and almost choke him.

Sarah Ledbetter had been killed during an attempted holdup of the bank. She had been at the bank, in John Collins' office, when the holdup men came in. Neither she nor Collins had been aware of what was happening in the main part of the bank. Sarah had turned to the door, opened it, and stepped into the bank. The bandit who shot her probably triggered before he realized he was firing at a woman.

Three of the four outlaws had escaped and the posse which followed them returned from the long chase empty handed. By then, the fourth man, the one who had failed to get away, had died of his wounds. He had named the others, however, and the three names he had given, Frank Ledbetter would never forget. They were burned on his memory in letters of fire. *Sim Keeler, Bill Novak, Red Waldron.*

Some day, he told himself, he would find those three men and deal out the justice they deserved. Some day he would face them over blazing guns. But then he would remember—and here lay the source of his bitterness and the gnawing depression which was destroying him—that some day could never come. He could want it more than he had ever in his life wanted anything, but it would never come. The men who had tried to hold up the Waggoner bank were border outlaws. They were not likely to ever return.

One other nagging doubt contributed its share to Frank Ledbetter's misery. He had never known the measure of his courage. In the back of his mind he found it hard, now, to

keep those doubts smothered. Some men, he knew, would have gone after the three outlaws, no matter what the cost. He kept telling himself that very soon he would head for the border country, but he was secretly afraid that he never would.

The attempted holdup had been in the late summer and in the early spring of the following year Frank Ledbetter was still in Waggoner. He kept telling himself that he would soon leave for the border. He remained bitter, withdrawn, sullen in his attitude and brusque in his relationships with the men he had to see, to the extent even that his dental business had fallen off. It had never amounted to much, really, and now it was almost non-existent.

Every day Ledbetter closed his feed store at dusk. He usually had a late supper at the Waggoner grill and afterward he might take a walk down to Four Mile creek at the edge of town or he might go home to sit in the darkness on his porch. He was always late to bed. Sleep didn't come easily any more.

**E**ACH DAY was like the last, each evening like the next. Visitors no longer dropped by to see him. Even Herm Schwab and Doc Rowland seemed to have lost interest in what he did. For this reason, Ledbetter was surprised one evening late in April to find someone waiting for him on his porch.

"Are you the fellow who yanks teeth?" the man asked abruptly.

Ledbetter nodded. He didn't recognize the man on the porch. He couldn't see him clearly for the fellow stood in the shadows. He was tall and thin and had a harsh, rasping voice.

"Get your tools, then," the man ordered. "There's a rancher back in the hills who wants to see you. He's got a bad tooth. His jaw's puffed like a balloon."

Frank Ledbetter scowled. "I don't make calls. Tell your friend to ride into Waggoner."

"You'll make this call," said the man on the porch. "Where are your tools?"

A gun had appeared in the man's

hand and the man now stepped forward. He had a thin, tight-skinned face. Ledbetter couldn't see the eyes but he could feel them, could feel the impact of them almost as solidly as he would have felt a blow.

"Where are your tools?" the man asked again.

"In the store," Ledbetter heard himself answering. "I'll—I'll get them."

His voice was high. It scarcely seemed like his own. He could feel his heart thumping against his ribs. It was suddenly hard to breathe and he was perspiring. This was fear. Here was evidence of the doubts which had tortured him all his life. He turned. He started toward his store. Twice he stumbled and almost fell. With clammy, uncertain hands he gathered up his forceps, probe and mirror. He bundled them in a towel.

"I'll carry 'em," said the man with the gun. "I've got a couple horses back of your house. Let's go."

They rode west, angling toward the north fringe of the Indian hills. They rode pretty fast. The man with the gun didn't have much to say. Ledbetter asked where they were going and who had the bad tooth, but he got no answer. There were only a few ranchers in the hill country; and Ledbetter wondered which one of them had sent for him. He decided, grimly, that he would charge a pretty stiff fee for a night visit, particularly one made at the point of a gun.

They crossed Easter Creek just as it was beginning to grow light in the east, and by the time the sun was up they were deep in the rugged hill country beyond. Ledbetter was now rather puzzled. He knew of no ranches up this way. This country was too rough and rocky for cattle. A deepening apprehension came to him. He couldn't shake it off. He glanced at his companion. The man was scowling. His sharp eyes were endlessly searching the country ahead. His gun hand was ungloved.

"We're almost there," the man said abruptly. "You'd better be good at yankin' teeth. Red doesn't have much patience."

"Red?" Ledbetter repeated.

The man nodded. "Yep, Red Wal-

dron. Maybe you've heard of him. If you have, you know why you'd better be good at yankin' teeth."

Frank Ledbetter sucked in a long, slow breath. Red Waldron, one of the three men responsible for Sarah's death. This man with him was probably the second one. The third might be with Waldron. The meeting he had never thought possible was suddenly imminent. He had wanted to face these men. He was going to face them. But then what? He had no gun, and there was little chance he could get his hands on one. He was unprepared for what lay ahead.

**I**N THE SHELTER of the pines close to an almost dry creek was an ancient, prospector's cabin. A man came to the door as they rode up; a tall, broad-shouldered man, black-bearded, heavy. He stepped outside. There was an ugly, scowling look on his face.

"How is he, Sim?" asked the man who had come with Ledbetter.

"How would you think?" growled the bearded man. "He's half drunk, ready to take your head off. He figures you should have been here hours ago. Is this the tooth-yanker?"

"Yeah."

"I wouldn't want his job," said Sim Keller dryly. "That jaw of Red's is as tender as a boil. Any trouble, Bill?"

"Of course not."

Frank Ledbetter swung stiffly to the ground. He had the men tagged, now. The one who had come for him was Bill Novak. The bearded man was Sim Keeler. Red Waldron was the man with the bad tooth.

"Where is he?" roared a voice from the cabin. "Bring him in here!"

Bill Novak had dismounted. He brought Ledbetter the towel-wrapped instruments he had carried in his saddle-bag. "Go ahead," he said, pointing to the cabin. "Get it over with."

Ledbetter wasn't used to riding. His legs were stiff, sore. There was an aching pain in the small of his back. He took the bundle Novak handed him and managed a nod. The shock of realizing who these men were was starting to wear off, but he was still dazed, confused.

A heavy, red-bearded man appeared abruptly in the cabin doorway. The left side of his jaw was puffed, swollen. His hair was mussed. There was a haggard look on his face. He pointed a finger at Ledbetter.

"Come here," he bellowed. "Take a look at my jaw."

Frank Ledbetter moved forward. When he stood before Red Waldron he could see the glazed look in the man's red-rimmed eyes and the perspiration on his forehead.

"You a dentist?" Waldron asked.

Ledbetter moistened his lips. He nodded his head.

"I've got a tooth that's got to come out," Waldron continued. "I want you to pull it and I don't want my jaw ripped apart in the process. I killed a dentist, once, who wasn't as careful as I thought he ought to be."

Frank Ledbetter gulped. He could tell from the way Waldron's jaw was swollen that even a light touch would send sharp pain stabbing through the man's body. The pulling of Waldron's infected tooth would be no easy task.

"Come on in," Waldron ordered.

**A** CRUDE table and three box chairs left here by some former tenant were the only furniture in the cabin. A wall bunk was broken. Blankets on the floor marked the place where Sim Keeler had slept. Red Waldron, probably had been unable to sleep. The whiskey bottles on the table must have kept him company through the night. One was empty. The other was less than half full. Frank Ledbetter noticed these things vaguely as he laid the towel on the table and opened it.

Waldron sucked in a sharp breath when he saw the forceps. Ledbetter had brought three pairs. They were ugly-looking tools, highly polished. The sight of them was part of Ledbetter's stock in trade. Others had eyed these instruments with the same foreboding that Waldron was now feeling.

"I can't do this without hurting you," Ledbetter warned. "That jaw of yours is in bad shape. The tooth which has to come out is badly infected. If we don't get it right away the

poisons will seep into other parts of your body."

"Quit talking an' get to work." Waldron growled.

"Pull that box over in front of the window," said Frank Ledbetter. "Sit on it facing the light."

Ledbetter's voice was stronger, now. He was beginning to feel better. In a certain sense it seemed to him that he had command of this situation. Red Waldron might be a dangerous and desperate outlaw, but right now he was just a man in terrible pain, and half groggy from whiskey.

Bill Novak and Sim Keeler came in and stood watching. Waldron sat on a box facing the window. He opened his mouth. Ledbetter moved around in front of him and peered into the oral cavity. Waldron had all his teeth. Which one was bothering him Ledbetter didn't know. He reached into Waldron's mouth with the probe. He touched one of the teeth.

Waldron gave a howl of pain. He jerked to his feet kicking the box out of the way. He swung a vicious back-handed blow at Frank Ledbetter, driving him against the wall. "Quit poking at me," he roared. "Grab the tooth an' jerk it out."

He turned to the table, took a long pull at the whiskey bottle and then set it aside. He glared at Ledbetter. After a moment he righted the box and sat down again.

Frank Ledbetter got a pair of forceps. He was afraid that Waldron would never sit still long enough for him to even fasten the forceps on a tooth. He mopped a hand over his face. He was perspiring. "Open your mouth wider," he ordered, "and get ready for it. This is going to hurt."

**W**ALDRON opened his mouth wider but the moment Ledbetter reached in with the forceps he reared away.

Sim Keeler stepped forward. His gun whipped up. He brought the barrel down solidly across the side of Waldron's head. A half smothered gasp broke from Waldron's throat. He fell sideways to the floor and lay there motionless.

"All right," Keeler said grimly.

"Get to work on him. Yank out whatever teeth you've got to before he wakes up. Bill and I are going to need him tomorrow in Waggoner. He's no good to us the shape he's in right now."

Ledbetter's eyes narrowed. "Tomorrow in Waggoner," he said slowly. "The bank again?"

Keeler nodded. "Yeah. The bank again. Any objections?" He looked at his gun. He looked at Ledbetter. There was a tight cruel expression on his face. "Get to work on Waldron," he added sharply. "Yank his teeth."

Frank Ledbetter rolled Waldron over on his back. He pried the outlaw's mouth open. He got his forceps and knelt at Waldron's head. He could understand, now, why these men were here. They had come back to raid the Waggoner bank once more. They might have tried it by this time if it hadn't been for Waldron's toothache and his swollen jaw. They would try it tomorrow if Waldron was in shape. Ledbetter had his forceps fastened on one of Waldron's teeth. He twisted and jerked. The tooth came out.

Ledbetter glanced at Sim Keeler. He shook his head. "I'm not sure. I got one but maybe not the right one."

Keeler ordered. "Then get the right one."

Ledbetter nodded. He pulled another of Waldron's teeth. He had the sudden conviction that as soon as he completed his work on Waldron these men would have no further use for him. He knew who they were. He knew what they planned to do. He was from Waggoner. It was certain that they would never let him ride back to town.

Ledbetter pulled a third tooth from Waldron's jaw. He bent lower and peered into Waldron's mouth. He pulled a fourth tooth. He pulled a fifth. He pulled a sixth.

Waldron was groaning now. His head was rolling from side to side. He wasn't far from regaining consciousness. Frank Ledbetter got to his feet. He had to think of something—think of something fast. He stared at Sim Keeler.

"I'll need water," he said abruptly. "Hot water. Lots of it. A job like

this amounts to almost an operation. Waldron's jaw has to be washed out. I'll have to take stitches to stop the bleeding."

He had nothing with which to take stitches but he didn't mention that. Keeler came forward. He stared down at Waldron. He swore, meaningly.

"How long until that swelling will go down?" he demanded. "How long until he'll be able to ride?"

"Tomorrow," said Frank Ledbetter, "if I get his jaw patched up properly."

"Get some wood, Bill," Sim Keeler ordered. "Start a fire. Find something to heat water in."

**B**ILL NOVAK turned to the door. He stepped outside. Keeler rolled a cigarette and lit it. He sat down on one of the box chairs. "Your name's Ledbetter, isn't it?" he said slowly.

Frank Ledbetter nodded.

"I've heard that name before some place."

Ledbetter stood at the table, wiping off the forceps he had used on Waldron. "My wife," he answered, "was killed when you fellows tried to hold up the Waggoner bank last August. Her name was Sarah Ledbetter."

Keeler's eyes narrowed. His hand dropped to his gun, then fell away. "Maybe you didn't mind it, huh?" he suggested.

"I minded it like hell," Ledbetter grated. "Which one of you fired the shot?"

His hands were clenched and he realized, suddenly, that he felt no fear at all. He stared boldly at Keeler. He had no gun. He perhaps had no chance to walk out of here alive but he scarcely thought of that.

"Who was it?" he asked again.

Keeler was grinning. There was a mocking look in his eyes. "Bill Novak killed her. Do you want a gun? Would you like to go after Novak?"

"Yes."

Keeler chuckled. He said, "Maybe later on. Maybe after you've taken care of Waldron. You won't have a chance. Novak is faster with a six-gun than anyone living."

"Just give me a gun," Ledbetter

snapped. "That's all. Just give me a gun."

Keeler crossed to the door and looked outside. "Novak's got a fire going," he reported. "You'll have your hot water pretty pronto."

Frank Ledbetter mopped a hand across his face. He sucked in a long, slow breath. Waldron was moaning, rolling from side to side. He turned over on his face. Blood spilled from his mouth. He tried to sit up but couldn't make it. Ledbetter stared at the gun in Waldron's holster. He could have grabbed that gun when he had been working on Waldron's teeth. He might have another chance at it. He moved to where Waldron was lying, rolled the man to his back, pried open his mouth and nodded.

"I'll need that water, right away Keeler, even if it's not very hot," he said brusquely. "I'll use the towel for a swab."

Sim Keeler nodded. He swung around and shouted out the door at Bill Novak. This, Ledbetter knew, was probably the best chance he would have. He reached for the gun in Waldron's holster. He pulled it free. He lifted it toward Keeler. The man was turning back to face him and Ledbetter fired. His shot drove Keeler against the side of the door. Keeler's arm swung up lifting his gun. Ledbetter fired again and still kneeling at Waldron's side he watched Keeler fold and plunge to the floor.

Footsteps were racing up to the door. Frank Ledbetter got to his feet. He waited. He saw Novak appear in the doorway. This was the man whose shot had killed Sarah. This was the man who was so terribly swift with his guns. His speed, however helped him none this morning. Ledbetter drove a shot at him the moment he stepped into sight. He emptied Waldron's gun into Novak's chest. He watched Novak fall and he felt no pity for him at all.

**W**ITHIN fifteen minutes, Frank Ledbetter was heading back toward Waggoner. He rode one horse. He led the other two. In the saddlebags of the horse he was riding were  
(please turn to page 97)

# THE KID WHO LOOKED LIKE A KILLER

by  
D. B.  
NEWTON

No badmen greedy for blood money would bring in Deputy Brick Warner's saddlemate - - - even if the kid did drill that Horse-shoe Hills rangehog. . . .

**S**HIFTING the reins to his left hand, Brick Warner palmed gunmetal with the other. He waited like that for a long moment behind the screen of willows, blue

He said quietly, "Don't try anything, Johnny."

eyes studying the back trail. And then, quickly, he had kneed his bronc through into the open just as the trio that was following him cantered into view.

Dode Hawley, riding in the lead, dragged up his mount in startled surprise; one hand made an instinctive dive toward his own holster but only slapped wet leather and then fell away as Dode caught sight in time of the six-shooter in Brick's fingers.



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"Leave it alone!" Brick told him, crisply. "And all three of you turn around and head back the way you come. I don't much like you on my trail."

One of the Pruitt twins shrugged heavy shoulders at that and spat into the rain. "These hills are free, mister," he grunted. "You can't order us out of 'em."

Brick looked them over, carefully. They were all three pretty small fry—trappers and bounty hunters, who had a shack over near the Gap and got most of their cash income from the coyote pelts they turned in at the county seat. But small fry or not, they could be dangerous—Rafe and Zeb Pruitt the way a grizzly is dangerous, and Dode Hawley with the deep and narrow cunning of a snake.

"You heard me," Warner said. "Quit doggin' me or someone's apt to get hurt."

Hawley shook his head, and bearded lips parted in an evil-looking grin. "Let's make a deal, Warner," he suggested. He flicked a tobacco-stained thumb toward the tin star showing through the gap in Brick's slicker. "Even if we-uns ain't deputies like you, we're all after the same thing. We want to help see that this Lang gent gets it for bushin' old man Neff; and of course, we'd naturally like a hunk of that dead-or-alive money. It's the first chance us three's ever had at a really good bounty."

"We got a hunch you know where to hunt for Lang, seein' as the pair of you was pretty thick once. Well, we ain't greedy. There's enough for all four of us, and he's gonna be poison to tackle. How about lettin' us come in with you for a fair split, all the way around?"

Brick's temper, that matched the color of his hair, had flared high by this time, and he had a hard time keeping his voice steady. "How about the lot of you takin' the first fork to hell!" he gritted. "You and your damn blood money—Johnny Lang was my best friend, and I'm not forgettin' it, even if he did drill that range-hoggin' crook for trying to take his spread away from him. The law says he's got to be brung in; and I aim for him to come with me—alive

—and not have the likes of you pack him home with a slug between his shoulders." He arced the muzzle of his gun and gestured down-trail with it. "Now you git—all three of you. And keep off my trail. D'yuh hear?"

He thought for a minute that Zeb Pruitt was going to make trouble; but the twins were in the habit of looking to Dode Hawley for leadership, and Dode had sharper wits than either of them. He could see the odds that Warner's drawn gun piled against them. Now he ended a sinister pause by grunting a word to his companions and jerking at the reins to turn his bronc around.

"All right, mister," he said to Brick. "You stay out of our way and we'll stay out of yours... Reckon there's too many folks combin' these hills for Johnny Lang, anyway. The smart thing for me and Rafe and Zeb to do is go and set where the rest of you can chase him out to us."

Brick watched the threesome until they were out of sight in the rain-misty alder growth at the foot of the park; and then he sheathed the gun and turning his roan horse put him into the trees that fringed the upslope side. There were angry glints in his blue eyes, and a grim set to the muscles of his tanned face, as he rode on beneath the dripping branches.

**H**AWLEY was right. Plenty of others like him and the Pruitts were in the Horseshoes right now, all of them anxious for a try at the cash reward on Johnny Lang's head. And not a one but would prefer to aim for the back, when they found him; because, dead or alive, the price was the same, and that way they wouldn't be taking any chances with Lang's gun-swift.

Maybe Johnny Lang was only a two-bit rancher, but he could make it hot for anyone who tried to crowd him in a corner!

Too bad, Brick thought regretfully, that the range hog, Carl Neff, hadn't remembered that and taken warning when Johnny told him in front of a dozen witnesses that he'd kill him the next time he so much as set foot on Lang's Figure 8 spread. Maybe then Neff's body wouldn't

have been found two days later, plugged through the heart, on Johnny's range. Maybe Brick wouldn't be here now, trying to run down his boyhood chum and drag him back to a hangman's noose before the bullets of bounty hunters got to him.

At the top of the hill, Brick reined in and looked back into the hollow, swimming in green, and at the tracks his bronc was leaving in the earth. It was not raining hard enough to wash them out—only enough to soften up the surface so that it would receive them all the better.

Warner frowned. That last remark of Dode Hawley's, about going and setting where somebody else could chase Johnny Lang out of the hills for him and the Pruitts to get, puzzled him. Brick didn't know what that meant. Maybe Dode was just trying to throw him off guard so he'd get careless and let them trail him to where Johnny was hiding...

Knowing these Horseshoe Hills like the dents in his own stetson, Brick pulled off his course and headed instead for an upthrust shelf of hard lava rock, and then down through crumbling boulders. In the trough beyond a creek made its way, bright surface dimpled with the rain. When he'd splashed his way through this, Brick felt that he had got rid even of the lynx-eyed Dode Hawley.

Two hours later he found Johnny Lang.

It proved absurdly easy—merely a matter of following up the first hunch. He left his bronc with reins trailing, and worked forward along the hill-face to the shrub-screened mouth of a shallow cave, that was hardly more than a scallop sliced out of the face of the rock. The scent of cooking meat was the first hint that he was right; then he pushed away the leaves a bit and saw Johnny sitting, back to him, hunched over a tiny fire and roasting pieces of a rabbit on green twigs. A sixshooter lay on the ground near at hand.

Brick Warner looked at him a long moment, with his own gun ready, before he could find it in him to speak. Strange, he was thinking, how pals can drift apart for no reason at all—even pals such as Brick and Johnny

had been. It was just that as they grew up, they'd got busy with different things—Johnny at ranching, and him starting in the sheriff's office. They'd begun seeing less of each other, as time went on. That's the way things happened.

Strange, though, that they should wind up now, like this...

He said quietly: "Don't try anything, Johnny. This is Brick."

The other froze, motionless, and let fall the stick that he held. Then, not touching the gun beside him, he turned slowly. His brown eyes were sunken and haggard, his face unshaven. He looked at Brick without speaking.

"You thought maybe I'd forgotten this place?" the deputy asked. "I remember the day we found it, years ago. We were just kids. You said then if you was ever to become an outlaw, you'd make this your hideout. I had a feeling that's just what you'd done."

Johnny still said nothing. He watched Brick as the latter stepped out of the brush with the revolver leveled. "I'm takin' you in, fellow," Warner said. "It's got to be this way. They're combin' these hills for you; somebody else would get you if I didn't."

"The state'll hang me," Johnny reminded him, in a voice that hardly sounded like his own. "You savvy that, of course."

"I savvy," Brick said. "I'm sorry, Johnny. Sorry as hell."

**M**OUTH twisting wryly, Johnny Lang got to his feet, looked around at the shallow cave that had been his shelter. Against the back wall was a pile of his saddle and blanket, and his chestnut pony was also tied there nibbling at grass that Johnny had piled up for it.

"I'll throw a tree on my bronc," Johnny said, grimly. "Won't take a second."

Brick nodded, as he scooped up the other's six-gun. Johnny bent to get his saddle blanket.

Suddenly he was twisting pivoting on pointed boot heels. Buck saw the flash of gunmetal in his hand—and knew that Lang had had another

weapon hidden under his saddle. Even then there would have been time to drop him with a shot from the gun that was trained squarely on him; but somehow Brick couldn't bring himself to pull trigger. He couldn't shoot Johnny Lang.

And as he held his hand, the mouth of that other gun rocked up. He saw the hard glint in Johnny's eyes—and then the sudden blossoming of flame at the gun's muzzle. To the slap of the explosion Brick was falling, hot pain racking through his body...

"Not even you can take me in!" Those words, shouted in Johnny's strangely altered voice, were still pounding in his ears as Brick fought through the black mists. Worse than the pain was the thought of Johnny Lang throwing lead on him and gunning him down. He couldn't quite believe it, even yet.

Painfully, he managed to sit up, while questing fingers sought the angry furrow the bullet had plowed across his lower ribs. Everywhere was silence, even the *drip-drip* of the rain was missing, and the clouds overhead breaking up. Johnny's horse was gone from its place at the rear of the cave. He must have been in a great hurry when he went away leaving Warner here for dead, to judge by the cooking equipment still scattered near the dying fire.

Despite the throb of the wound, Brick got shakily to his feet. He peeled off the yellow slicker that hampered him, and thrust his neck cloth inside his shirt, to stem the flow of blood.

The roan mare would still be waiting, reins trailing, at the top of the hill. Brick staggered some as he started up toward it. He didn't know quite yet what he was going to do.

He could not think quite clearly, or plan ahead more than one step at a time.

He found the horse where he had left it, and with an effort hauled himself into the saddle. That was better. And soon he'd found the tracks that Johnny's pony had left in the soggy earth as he rode away from the hide-out.

Brick followed those tracks for a few hundred yards and then pulled

up as weakness began stealing over him again.

The direction of the tracks told plainly enough what Lang had in mind. He was headed for the Gap—that notch cut into the bend of the rock-ribbed Horseshoe Hills, that would give him escape into the range-land beyond. As well as Brick could judge, Johnny had at least a good half hour's start. It didn't seem possible to overtake him.

Then, however, Brick thought how he might head the fugitive off by making a line directly toward the Gap, over the flatlands below the big horseshoe bend. He could save miles that way. So thinking, he swung the head of his bronc around and started him stiff-legging down the face of the hill, toward the level.

But the jolting of it drove sickening waves of pain through him. Brick had to pull up and sit with fingers clenched tight upon the saddlehorn, to hold himself erect while the dizziness passed.

He couldn't make it—not with that furrow torn in his side. From here he could see the Gap almost directly opposite; but between lay four miles of heavy going—a rough floor of sand and rock, strewn with the boulders and talus rubbish tumbled from the face of the hills, and broken by spurs thrust out like so many rocky fingers. Brick thought of that ride, and shuddered.

Let Johnny Lang go; it would be better to ride back to the county seat and send a wire ahead to the range beyond the Gap. The law there would be ready for him, and it wasn't very likely that Johnny could squeeze through its fingers....

THEN BRICK thought: Dode Hawley, and the twins! He'd forgotten them. Apparently Johnny had, too—forgotten that their shack was located up there near the Gap, where they could easily get a bead on anyone sneaking through it. Suddenly, Brick understood what they'd meant, with that remark about going and setting until Brick chased Johnny out to them.

They were smart enough to figure the men who were beating the bushes

for Johnny Lang would sooner or later force him to try for a break—and the Gap was the only way he could get across the rock-ribbed crest of the Horseshoes. All they had to do was perch up there with their guns in their hands, and wait....

Suddenly, Brick put in spurs and started his roan once more down the steep hill face. The horse balked, took the drop in skittish lunges, and finally had to go into a stiff-legged slide that sent the rubble streaming as they plunged downward. What if Johnny had gunned him down? That didn't make any difference. They'd been pals once, hadn't they? Maybe Brick couldn't do any good, but he had to make that shortcut. He had to be there at the Gap, where all at once he knew that Johnny Lang was headed, blindly, straight for a hot lead reception.

The roan brought up at the bottom of the slope with a jolt that drove the blood from its rider's face. Brick gritted teeth and fought back the darkness that rushed in upon him. Then he had control of himself and got the horse leveled out into a gallop. At every stride the bronc's iron heels struck fire as it scrambled and slipped on granite surface. And every stride was torture.

A level stretch opened ahead, and here going was easier. Brick breathed a thankful prayer for that, while he gathered strength for the worse that was yet to come. Before him the Gap showed, enticing, yet hardly seeming any closer. He felt as though he were only crawling toward it, with an ant's speed—

His bronc was in the rocks again, toiling across one barren spur after another, fighting for each uncertain foot-hold among jagged granite spines and shifting rubble. Brick tried to speak encouragement, but couldn't clear the words. It seemed incredible that he was still hanging on, after all this, after all those hoof-beats that seemed to pound and hammer at his bullet-blasted body.

And now the clouds overhead had parted and sunlight shafted down. In all that twisted maze, steam began to rise from the rain-soaked boulders, in ghostly streamers. Gone was any

sense of time. Brick rode with this eerie landscape wavering before his eyes, the refracted heat beating back at him, blinding—

Suddenly all was quiet, and the motion had ceased.

Vaguely, Brick wondered at this. He got his eyes open, painfully, and then he had one elbow beneath him and was pushing up from the ground where he had fallen.

How long had he been lying there? He couldn't tell. Hours, maybe. Or perhaps only a few minutes. He didn't remember when it was he'd finally lost his saddle and pitched blindly to the earth, and his bronc gone on without him.

Brick looked around. Just above was the Gap, like a knife slot cut into the hills. So he'd almost reached the goal when strength failed him. Weakly he came to his feet, eyes trained on that silent notch where the wind flowed through. He heard no sound except the voice of it sighing in brush and trees, upslope.

What awaited him there? Was he in time?

Brick Warner started up into the Gap, on foot. The walls closed in around him; he left the hot hand of the sun and instead the wind blew cold and strong against his face. It braced him, and helped to clear his brain.

Then he saw Johnny Lang—just a glimpse, on the wall above him. He even felt the shower of rock dust Johnny's chestnut pony kicked loose. But before Brick could as much as yell at him, Johnny had ridden on out of sight and the brush and growth swallowed him up. Brick hesitated a moment. Just ahead, he knew, was a place where Johnny could ease his bronc down into the cut and so on to the other end of the Gap. Even now he heard the scrape of hoofs, and crashing of the bronc's body down through the growth upon the wall. The steel rang clear as it hit the stony floor—

Then a six-gun filled the narrow notch with sudden thunder!

**H**ORROR gripped Brick Warner at that sound, and at once he was running forward on unsteady

legs. A voice inside him shouted: *Too late—too late!* as he rounded the rock corner—and pulled back at what he saw.

Johnny was on hands and knees, where he had sprawled when he flung clear of his fallen horse. The bronc had taken the bullet, then. And opposite, Dode Hawley's gun was dribbling smoke as he stood with the Pruitt twins siding him, one at either elbow.

"Why didn't you plug me while you were at it?" Johnny Lang was muttering, as he crouched helpless under Hawley's gun muzzle. "Why'd you have to kill the pony?"

Hawley grinned, evilly. "Don't be impatient," he said. "You'll get yours in a minute!" He and the other two came further out now from the brush where they'd lain in wait. "I want to make talk a while first."

"What about?"

Without knowing exactly why, Brick Warner hesitated. Johnny was getting cautiously to his feet. None of them had noticed the deputy, where he stood in the shadow a few yards away. Maybe a few more seconds would help get back the bullet-drained strength that threatened to leave him again. . . .

"We got nothing to talk about," Johnny Lang said, defiantly. "You bounty hunters want my hide. You wouldn't care that I ain't guilty—that I never killed old man Neff!"

"That's just the point," Dode Hawley told him, still grinning. "Yuh see—I did!"

Brick saw Johnny stiffen at that. His own head felt as though it were reeling.

"Me and Rafe and Zeb was carvin' up one of his steers for meat," Hawley explained, calmly. "He saw us, and started an argument; and I finished it! Then we remembered what you'd said about killin' the old buzzard if he set foot on your land, so we just threw him across a saddle and took him over and dumped him there."

Zeb Pruitt added: "That's why we been special keen on collectin' the bounty on you ourselves. Any time, you might remember you seen us that day, over on your range—"

Johnny began swearing, tightly. "Of all the filthy, sneakin'—"

And then the gun in his hand stabbed forward, and Brick knew he was about to pull trigger. The gun in his own holster seemed to weigh a ton as he dragged the weapon out.

He stepped into clear view, on legs that took all his will to stiffen. He saw that Johnny was between him and the three, in line for the lead he had to throw. He yelled to him. "Drop, Johnny! Out of the way—"

In that same blurred instant, Dode Hawley's gun boomed and Johnny Lang fell to the hard floor of the pass. If it was Brick's order, or Hawley's slug that put him there, the deputy couldn't tell. He hadn't time to think about it. His own gun was bucking in his hand as his finger squeezed the trigger guard.

Gunthunder rolled deafeningly between the rocky walls. Brick's first bullet was wide, and with a snarl Dode turned his weapon on the deputy. Zeb and Rafe Pruitt, one on either side, were crouching and jerking out their guns, too. Lead zinged into stone at Warner's ear.

Dode Hawley was down, suddenly. And Zeb Pruitt tottering. Brick hadn't aimed at Zeb, so that was strange—Suddenly lead struck him in the shoulder, hard. Spun him around. The wrench of that motion tore open the furrow in the deputy's side—

"Brick! Brick! Damn it all—"

**W**ARNER opened his eyes, and the face above him blurred and resolved itself into Johnny's. There was anxiety in his brown eyes, and Brick could feel Johnny's arm around his shoulder, holding him up.

"Hawley—?" Brick muttered, trying to sit up. Johnny held him back.

"It's all right," he said. "We fixed them all. You got Hawley, and I took care of the Pruitts. . . . Brick," he went on hurriedly, "you're gonna get well—honest you are! I'll take you to a doctor, and I'll plug him if he don't pull you through!"

"Today, when I realized I'd shot you—you, Brick!—well, I reckon I just went out of my head. I thought  
(please turn to page 79)



# COLD-DECK CORRAL

**W**IRY, red-haired Johnny Ball got up from the restaurant counter and tendered a dollar bill in payment.

**You see, Bill Smiley had been like a father to Johnny Ball — that's why it was so hard on Johnny finding old Bill out in the pole corral with his head — bashed in . . .**

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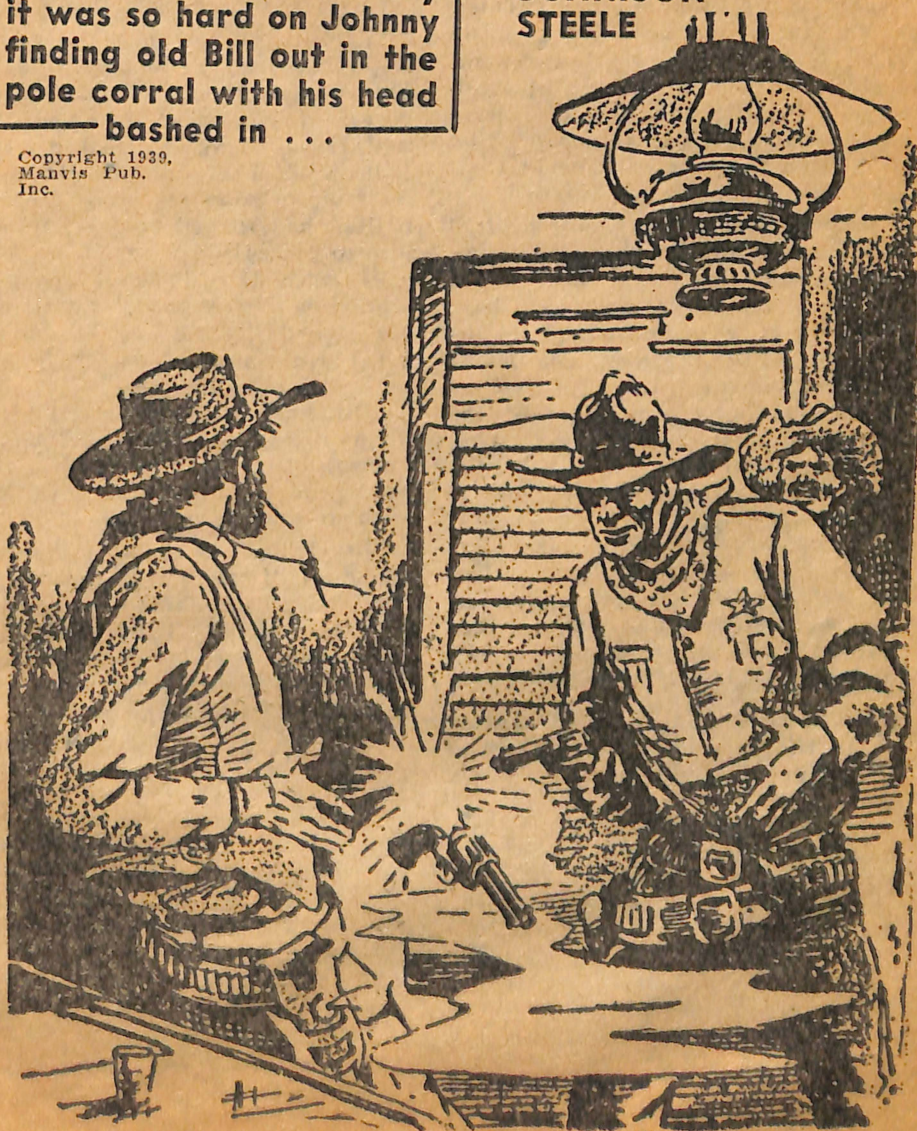
Cass Bean, the restaurant man, shoved out his change, then pointed with his fat chin across the street.

"I just saw Todd Jacks and Ike Brule go into the sheriff's office," he said. "Usually, them two stay as far away from the law as they can. What yuh reckon they're up to?"

"I'll find out," Johnny Ball said, and went out, his smoky gray eyes

His draw was, surprisingly, just as fast.

by  
**GUNNISON  
STEELE**



probing along the street toward the sheriff's office.

Two horses, wearing the Spade brand, stood at the hitchbar in front of the office. Todd Jacks and Ike Brule owned the Spade outfit, ten miles west of Cuidad. Jacks and Brule were a surly, unfriendly pair who were forever quarreling with their neighbors. The troublesome, gun-quick Spade partners had no friends on the Cuidad range, and wanted none.

Johnny Ball was a deputy under Sheriff Buck Tybee. But the enmity between the runty deputy and the Spade partners was personal. Once, two years before, he'd had a run-in with Jacks and Brule, over some cows he suspected the two of stealing. Soon after that he'd started wearing a badge, silently vowing that he'd catch the pair in some of their crookedness. So far, he'd failed.

Johnny went along the rutted street and into the sheriff's office. Two dusty, hard-eyed men faced Sheriff Tybee across a scarred desk. Buck Tybee was a paunchy, bald little gent. For the last couple of months rheumatism had kept him out of the saddle, leaving most of the sheriffling duties to Johnny Ball.

Johnny stopped just inside the way and looked without cordiality at Jacks and Brule. Ike Brule was squat, buck-toothed, with staring little black eyes. Todd Jacks was slender, ferret-faced, dull-eyed. Now, as the two looked at him, Johnny Ball thought he could see sardonic satisfaction in their staring eyes.

SHERIFF BUCK TYBEE cleared his throat, said, "Kid, Jacks and Brule just brought in some news. Bad news."

"It'd have to be bad, if them two brought it," Johnny grunted. "What is it?"

"Bill Smiley," Tybee said gently. "He's dead."

Johnny Ball's wiry body stiffened a little, the only sign of the shock that went through him. When he spoke his voice was taut, controlled. "Dead? When did he die—and how?"

Sheriff Tybee looked at Todd Jacks. "Go over it again, Jacks," he said.

"Sure," said Jacks, and Johnny could see that his sober face was a mask covering something else. "Me and Ike rode past Bill Smiley's place a little while ago, on our way to town, like we always do. Somehow, everything didn't look just right. Some cows in a little pasture close by were bawlin', like they were hungry. And that big black stud of Smiley's, Nero, was actin' funny. He acted nervous, and every time he'd trot from one end of the corral to the other, he'd shy away from somethin'. We couldn't see old Bill Smiley anywhere, so we decided to investigate.

"And then we saw what was wrong with that black devil of a stud. Bill Smiley lay out in the middle of the corral. He was dead, tromped all to hell. It was plain what had happened. Bill Smiley had gone into the corral, on foot, to rope the stud. And that hellion had turned on him, tromped him to pieces!"

"I warned Bill about that wild stud, not a week ago," Sheriff Tybee sighed. "I told him he was gettin' too old and stove-up to monkey with dynamite like that."

"Bill knew that stud was a killer," Johnny Ball said softly. "And he knew horses. It looks funny to me, him goin' into a corral with Nero, without a bronc under him."

"Likely he was drunk," Ike Brule spoke up. "I saw him in town yesterday, and he was soused to the gills."

"That's right," Tybee nodded. "I told him he better go home and sober up. A man'll do crazy things when he's drunk."

"Drunk or sober, Bill Smiley oughta had more sense than that," Johnny persisted.

"Mebby you think we're lyin'," Todd Jacks said sneeringly. "Mebby you think the stud didn't kill him."

"I didn't say that," the redhead denied. "I just can't savvy it. Did you move the body?"

"You think we're saps?" Jack countered. "We had an idea the law would want to look things over. We left everything just like we found it."

"Well, that's all we know," Ike Brule said. "If that's all the questions you got to ask, we'll leave. We'll

be in town all day, if you want us for anything."

The two went out. Johnny Ball watched as they untied their horses and led them along the street to a livery stable. Still he didn't show any signs of the grief that was inside him as he turned back to Sheriff Buck Tybee.

"Bill Smiley shipped a bunch of cattle yesterday," he said. "He got paid off, in cash. As you know, Bill never did have any use for banks. when he headed for home he had two thousand dollars in his jeans."

"I figured that," Sheriff Tybee sighed. "Well, I reckon it's still out at his place, somewhere. Tough, kid. I hate like heck for you to have to tend to this. But my rheumatics is botherin' me worse than usual today."

Johnny Ball nodded. "I'll get Doc Spears and ride out there," he said. "We'll bring the body back to town. I'll start right now."

**T**WENTY minutes later Johnny Ball headed west toward Bill Smiley's little cow ranch. Doc Spears trailed along behind him in a buckboard that held a rough pine coffin. Doc Spears was medico, undertaker and coroner, a skinny, meek-looking little man with an absurd goat-like beard.

Johnny Ball's freckled face was grim-set as he galloped along ahead of the buckboard. He hadn't wanted Buck Tybee to see just how hard news of Bill Smiley's death had hit him. Old Bill Smiley had been almost like a father to him, the only father he'd ever known. Ten years ago, when Johnny Ball was a button of twelve, hungry, cold, ragged, old Bill Smiley had taken him from the streets of Cuidad and carried him out to his ranch.

He'd fed Johnny Ball, clothed him, told him he had a home as long as he wanted to stay. Bill Smiley had been a queer, lonely man. About once a month he'd get roaring drunk. But his heart was as big as the hills. He couldn't have treated a son better than he'd treated Johnny Ball. Johnny had stayed there eight years, up till two years ago, when Buck Tybee had talked him into wearing a deputy's badge.

Johnny's trouble with Todd Jacks and Ike Brule had started over some cows that old Bill had lost. The Spade outfit adjoined Bill Smiley's place on the north. Lately, the Spade partners had been quarreling with Bill Smiley over the water rights.

Now Bill Smiley was dead. Johnny Wasn't surprised at the way he'd died. For the last year Bill had been trying to tame a wild stallion that he'd captured in the hills. But the stud refused to be tamed; several times he'd come close to tromping the old rancher under slashing hoofs. Johnny had heard a dozen men predict that the devil-horse would finally kill old Bill Smiley. And now it had happened....

As Jacks and Brule had said, old Bill Smiley lay in the center of the corral. He wasn't a pretty sight. His rawboned body had been battered and slashed by the sharp hoofs of the magnificent black stallion that pranced nervously about the pole corral. Plainly, the big stud was still nervous. There was dried blood on his hoofs and muzzle.

Doc Spears' goatish whiskers twitched. "Gawd, what a way to die," he said. "That black devil tore him nearly to pieces!"

Johnny Ball nodded, fighting the emotions that were rioting through him. "We'll have to rope the black, before we can get the body out of there. I'll do the ropin', and you drag him out."

It took Johnny Ball ten minutes to get a loop around the stud's neck. The black fought the rope savagely, rearing, squealing, slashing the air with sharp hoofs. But Johnny's big roan knew what to do. He took up the slack, slammed the black against the heavy poles and held him pinned helpless.

Doc Spears opened the gate, darted inside and dragged what was left of old Bill Smiley from the corral. Then Johnny released the black, and he and the skinny little coroner examined the body. Johnny Ball's heart rebelled at the task, but it had to be done.

Bill Smiley's clothes had been ripped almost from his body. There

wasn't a square inch of him that hadn't been bruised or slashed. His hat lay in the dust of the corral. Nearby was a broken whiskey bottle, and a lass-rope.

Doc Spears nodded solemnly. "Well, looks like there ain't no doubt about how Bill died," he said. "It ain't hard to figure out what happened. Bill was drunk, or he'd uh known better than to go into the corral without a bronc between his legs. But that's what happened. And the black jumped him. Ain't that the way you see it?"

Johnny nodded jerkily, said, "Looks that way."

**B**UT JOHNNY BALL wasn't satisfied. Bill Smiley had known horses, had known the black was a killer. It still looked funny to Johnny that Bill, drunk or sober, would do a thing like that.

Johnny walked slowly about, looking for signs in the dust. But the wind had been blowing hard most of the morning. Any sign that might have been left had been erased. Bill Smiley had paid off his three hands the day before in town. He'd been alone here, except for the killer stallion....

"What you lookin' for?" Doc asked impatiently. "What happened is plain as the nose on your face, ain't it?"

"Looks like," Johnny grunted. "You wait here while I go get a blanket to wrap Bill in."

Johnny Ball strode to the nearby three-room log ranch house and went inside. He knew where old Bill usually kept his money—in a cavity under a loose brick in the hearth. But the cavity was empty. The redhead's smoky eyes narrowed thoughtfully when he made that discovery. Even if Bill Smiley hadn't placed in the hiding place the two thousand dollars that he'd brought home yesterday, the cavity shouldn't have been empty.

Systematically, Johnny Ball searched the remainder of the house. He found no sign of Bill Smiley's money. But he found something else that brought a chill, hard light to his eyes. On the floor of the front room,

near the doorway, was a small dark splotch that quite obviously was blood.

Tight-lipped, Johnny looked about the room. A chair was over-turned, but otherwise the room was in order. Then, suddenly, he saw something on the door jamb: A couple of gray hairs that were clotted with dried blood.

His young lips curving downward at the corners, Johnny Ball stared at the two gray hairs. They explained a lot. Bill Smiley had been tromped by the stud, all right. But he hadn't walked into the corral—he'd been carried. Johnny didn't need the second splotch of blood on the porch to tell him that.

"Somebody came here last night," he thought. "Bill knew them, wasn't expectin' them to knock him over the head with a sixgun. But that's what happened. Then they carried Bill, unconscious but maybe not dead, out to the corral. Likely they tormented the black till he was killin' mad. Then they tossed Bill over into the corral, and the black, already mad, done the rest. Bill never knew what hit him!"

Johnny got a blanket, went back outside. Again he looked for boot prints on the ground between the house and the corral. But it was useless. Damn the wind, Johnny thought. It was pretty plain that old Bill had been murdered; at least he'd been knocked unconscious, then placed inside the corral to make it look like he'd gone there to rope the black stallion. But, with signs erased, there was no way of knowing who had done it, nor how many.

"It took you a long time to get that blanket," Doc Spears said. "What kept you so long?"

"Just lookin' around," Johnny grunted.

"If you've got some crazy idea about the stud not killin' Bill Smiley, you're away off," the coroner went on. "That's the report I aim to turn in."

"The stud killed him, all right," Johnny Ball agreed, and closed up.

**T**HEY loaded the body into the buckboard and headed back to-

ward town. He'd have to send somebody back to water and feed the black and the bawling cattle. Right now he had something else more important to do. Grief was still with him. But now, with the almost certain knowledge that Bill Smiley had been murdered, had come anger that was like a hot wind blowing through his heart.

In town, Doc Spears took charge of the body, and Johnny Ball went to the sheriff's office. Buck Tybee was anxiously awaiting him. He looked at the redhead's blank, set face, but it told him nothing.

"Well," Tybee said impatiently, when Johnny dropped without speaking into a chair. "What did you find?"

"Just what Todd Jacks and Ike Brule said I'd find," Johnny said slowly.

"So the stud got him, huh?"

"Looks like," Johnny admitted. "That's what Doc Spears said, and that was the way it looked to me."

Tybee shook his bald head regretfully. "Bill had his faults, but he was a swell gent in spite of them."

"He was like a daddy to me," Johnny Ball said softly. Then he added, "Where're Brule and Jacks?"

"Why, they're over at the Great Western. Playin' poker, somebody said. Why?"

"Just wondered," Johnny said.

Sheriff Buck Tybee eyed him shrewdly. "You got any ideas about anything?"

The runty deputy nodded, said, "But they mebbly won't pan out."

The sheriff waited, but Johnny Ball didn't say anything else. He sat there a while, looking moodily along the street. He kept seeing the battered lifeless figure of old Bill Smiley lying there under the broiling sun. And those blood-clotted gray hairs on the door jamb....

Johnny got up suddenly and went out. Buck Tybee opened his mouth to ask him where he was going, then closed his lips. Johnny Ball went along the board walk, crossed the street, pushed open the batwings and entered the Great Western saloon.

Two or three punchers stood at the bar. A four-handed poker game

was going at a table at the back of the room. Two of the players were Todd Jacks and Ike Brule. The others were a couple of ranchers, Turner and Olsen.

Brule and Jacks looked up as Johnny Ball came into the room. They watched as he crossed the room and stopped beside the table.

"Well, did you find everything like we said?" Brule grinned.

Johnny nodded. "Everything was like you said," he answered. "But Carr, the county attorney, wants to ask some questions. Just routine stuff, seein' you two discovered the body. Just one of you will be okay."

Jacks and Brule looked at each other. Then Ike Brule nodded.

"Sure, anything to oblige," he said. "I'll go with you. You gents deal me out till I get back."

The squat Brule got up from the table, went with Johnny Ball out onto the street. They went along the walk. As they came even with a livery stable, Johnny slowed, stopped.

"In here," he said softly.

**B**RULE stared into the shadowy interior of the livery, surprise and suspicion in his black eyes.

"In there? The county attorney ain't in there, is he?"

Johnny's hand was on the butt of his holstered gun, its muzzle tilted upward. He said, "What you afraid of, Brule? Get inside!"

Ike Brule looked at the gun, at Johnny Ball's smoky eyes. Then he stepped inside the livery, and Johnny followed.

Crippled, bald old Bullwhip Britt appeared. He peered through his spectacles at Johnny and Brule. "Howdy, Johnny," he said. Then, to Brule, "You come after yores and Jack's broncs?"

"Ask the law-dog," Brule sneered. "He's gone loco, or somethin'."

A gun was in Johnny Ball's hand now. He stepped forward, snaked Brule's .45 from its holster and handed it to old Bullwhip.

"Mebby I am loco," he said. "And mebbly I'm not so crazy as you think, Brule. I've got sense enough to know old Bill Smiley was murdered."

Sudden wariness leaped into Brule's

eyes. He licked his thick lips. "Murdered? Hell, you're crazy as a loon! But even if he was murdered, what's that got to do with me?"

"I think you and Todd Jacks killed him!"

"You 'think,'" Brule sneered. "Can you prove that?"

"Mebby I can't prove it," Johnny said, his voice velvety and purring. "Mebby I won't ever see you hang for it. But I aim to get *some* satisfaction out of it!"

He gave his own gun to old Bullwhip Britt. "If this skunk tries to run, or pull anything dirty, let him have it," he said.

Bullwhip spat, hitched at his jeans, "That'd be a plumb pleasure," he grinned.

Johnny Ball stalked toward Brule, stiff-legged, like a banty rooster bristling for battle. Brule watched, grinning a little. He out-weighted Johnny by fifty pounds.

But Johnny Ball had the banty's quickness and savagery of attack. He leaped suddenly at Brule, blasted his hard fist into the squat man's face. Brule cursed, and reeled backward, knocked off-balance. Johnny followed, his fists drumming a fierce tattoo on Brule's body and face.

The Spade man backed into a wall, rebounded, came back into the open. His face was cut and bleeding. His inky eyes were furious as he braced himself on thick legs and waited for the runty deputy to leap in again. But Johnny circled warily. Then he darted forward, feinted with his left. Snarling, Brule lunged forward and swung a bludgeon-like fist.

Johnny's forward momentum stopped abruptly. He ducked under the savage swing, straightened, drove his fist jarringly into Brule's face. The blow drove Brule to the ground. But he bounded up like a big cat and leaped recklessly at Johnny Ball.

Johnny lunged aside, and Brule's wild rush slammed him against the wall of a stable. Half-stunned by the impact, he whirled—just in time to catch a savage blow from Johnny Ball's fist that again smashed him to the ground.

Brule got to his feet more slowly this time. And then he saw that John-

ny Ball again had a gun in his hand. Johnny was breathing hard, but his freckled face was unmarked. He stepped forward, close to the cursing Brule, and there was a pair of handcuffs in his other hand.

"Hold out your hands, Brule," he clipped.

IKKE BRULE cursed again, savagely. "Now I know you're crazy! You don't have any proof me and Todd Jacks had anything to do with Bill Smiley's death. You said so yourself."

"Then what're you worryin' about?" Johnny asked. "I didn't say I was arrestin' you for killin' Bill Smiley. Hold out your hands!"

The cuffs snapped on Brule's wrists. Then Johnny Ball pouched his gun. He said to old Bullwhip, "You keep that gun, Pop, till I call for it. And if anybody asks what this scrap was about, you don't know a thing. All right, Brule, let's take a walk."

"Where to?" Brule growled.

"To the Great Western. Your friend might start worryin' if you stayed away too long."

They went out and along the board walk. It was late evening, and the street was almost deserted. Two or three punchers saw Johnny and the manacled, battered Brule, and followed along behind them to the Great Western.

Sudden silence gripped the barroom as they went between the batwings. The click of poker chips stopped. Todd Jacks, facing the doors, got slowly to his feet, his dull eyes wary.

Johnny Ball stopped in the center of the room. He stood well away from Ike Brule as he faced Todd Jacks. The ferret-faced Jacks, he knew, was the more deadly of the two. He was shrewd, lightning with a gun.

"What's wrong, Brule?" Todd Jacks asked softly.

"I'll answer that," Johnny said quickly. "He's under arrest. And I've got another pair of bracelets for you, Jacks!"

Todd Jacks showed no surprise. His voice was still purring.

"Under arrest? What for?"

Johnny Ball said, "For the murder of old Bill Smiley!"

Todd Jacks laughed then, easily, contemptuously. "That's a hell of a joke," he sneered. "What gave you that idea, runt?"

"It's more than an idea," Johnny told him coldly. "You might as well come clean, Jacks. I've already got the whole story. I know just how it happened. You two didn't exactly kill Bill Smiley, but it was the same thing. You went to Bill's house last night. He was drunk, wasn't expectin' you skunks to knock him over the head with a sixgun and steal his money. But that's what happened. Then you carried old Bill outside to the corral, and, after tormentin' that black stud till he was killin' mad, you tossed Bill Smiley into the corral with him. It was funny, wasn't it, watchin' that devil cut Bill to pieces?"

Todd Jacks wasn't grinning now. He was crouched a little. His muddy eyes were slitted, feral.

"And who told you them things, runt?" Todd Jacks purred.

Johnny Ball didn't take his eyes off Todd Jacks, but his red head jerked almost imperceptibly toward Ike Brule.

"There's more than one way of making a stubborn snake uncoil," he said.

Todd Jacks didn't look at his partner, but there was venom in his voice as he snarled, "Brule, you damn, yella rat! Couldn't take a little beatin' without spillin' your insides..."

**T**HEN Todd Jacks leaped backward, grabbing lightning-fast for his gun. But Johnny Ball had been expecting that. His draw was just as fast, a split-second faster.

Gun-flame writhed across the

room, a shot blasted. The bullet caught Todd Jacks in the shoulder and slammed him back against the wall. His gun clattered to the floor.

Todd Jacks wasn't dead. But he couldn't stand. He slid slowly down the wall to the floor. There was poisonous hate and rage in his snakish eyes as he looked up at Johnny Ball. Then his gaze shifted to Ike Brule, and he cursed his squat partner.

"Shut up, damn you," Brule said harshly. "It wasn't me that spilled the beans. You put a rope around yore own neck, and mine too, blast you! I never spilled a word about what happened to this law-dog."

"If you didn't, then how did he know about it?" Jacks growled. "He said he had the whole story."

"And I did," Johnny Ball said slowly, taking the wounded man's guns from the floor. "But I didn't tell you I got it from Ike Brule. I figured, seein' Brule all messed up, you'd think he'd squawked and make a play yourself. And you did."

"All right, we killed the ornery ol' coot," Todd Jacks admitted viciously. "What I can't savvy, is how you figured it out."

"That wasn't hard," Johnny Ball told him. "Old Bill's money cache was cleaned out. Then there was a little splotch of blood on the floor that you missed, and a couple of hairs with blood on 'em where Bill's head had bumped against the door jamb as you carried him out."

"But mebbly I never would started lookin' for them things if it hadn't been for somethin' else. One of the first things I noticed was a smear of gun-oil on Bill's white hair, left there when you knocked him over the head with your gun. Just a little thing, that grease smear, but it's gonna swing a coupla snakes mighty high!"

●END

#### THE KID WHO LOOKED LIKE A KILLER

sure you were dead. I dunno. Dunno how I could have done it."

Brick smiled a little, with an effort. "I know how it was, fellow," he said, quietly. "You figured the whole world was against you, thinkin' you was guilty. Even me.... But you should have told me, Johnny! Didn't you know I'd take your word for it,

(continued from page 72)

if you'd said you didn't kill Neff?"

"Sure," said Johnny. "I know that now. What happened to us, Brick? How'd a couple of saddle pards like us ever come to drift apart?"

"We didn't, really," Brick said. "I reckon we just got—busy. But it won't happen again."

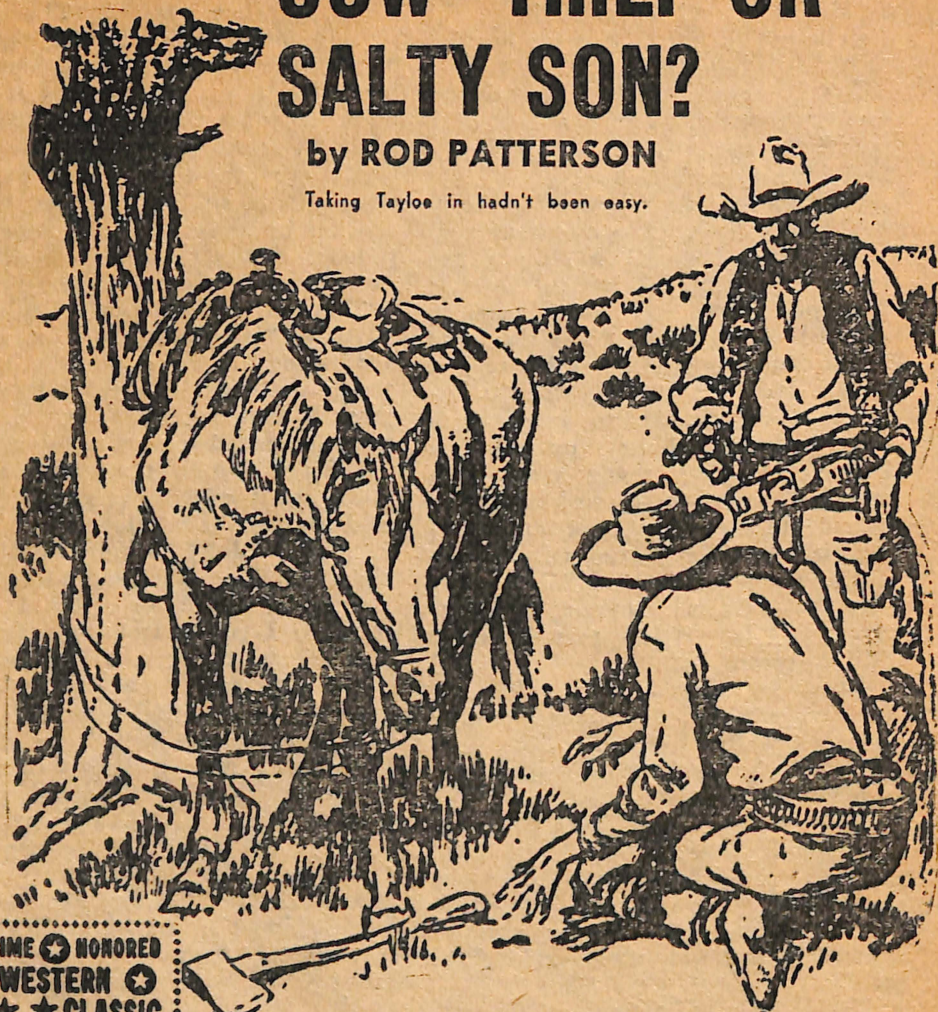
"No," Johnny agreed, softly. "It won't happen again!"

●END

# COW - THIEF OR SALTY SON?

by ROD PATTERSON

Taking Tayloe in hadn't been easy.



TIME HONORED  
WESTERN  
★ ★ CLASSIC

**M**ARSHAL Clay Barnett glanced up from his paper-littered desk in the courthouse at Bluff City to see his deputy, Eb Kile, stomp in out of the rain. Eb didn't peel off his slicker and hang it up as he'd done for the past three days, since the spell of wet weather had hit Alder County. Today he just stood near the door, water sluicing off his hat brim, his dour, gaunt face as dark as a thunder cloud.

"Hell's bells!" He spoke with habitual grumpiness, wrinkling his brow wrathfully. "I got to ride the hell-and-gone up to Crazy Woman Flats in this weather! If I ain't the

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**Bob Tayloe had stolen that Bar-H beef to keep his wife and kids from starving. Marshal Barnett didn't figure that made him a thief . . .**

tough luckest hombre—"

The marshal blandly considered his assistant with blue eyes that at the moment reflected a wry tinge of humor. "Yuh don't live right, Eb. If you'd only just crack that mug o' yours with a smile onc't in a while, things'd look a lot brighter. What's went wrong this time?"

"Bob Tayloe done held up Jonas Clagg an hour ago!"

"Taylor?" Barnett eased his lanky six-feet-two back in the swivel chair, a questioning look on his bronzed face. The marshal was in his late forties, a heavy, big-boned man, made shrewd and tolerant by ten years at his job. "You tryin' to tell me Jonas Clagg kept a hold-up quiet for an hour?"

"Taylor got a hundred dollars at the point of his shotgun," Kile stubbornly explained. "And now he's lit a shuck up-country towards High-point."

THE MARSHAL'S chair squealed as he leaned forward in it. His mouth made an intractable line beneath suddenly narrowed eyes. "Eb, there's something mighty queer about this. When Jonas Clagg lets an hombre git away with a hundred dollars and don't raise no hue and cry for an hour, Saint Pete's about ready to blow his horn!"

"I jest come from Clagg's store," Kile said doggedly. "All I know is what Jonas tol' me. It looks like an open and shut case to me, though. Bob Taylor's the one we took down to the Pen four years ago fer stealin' a Bar-H beef."

"Oh?" Barnett leaned back again, studying his deputy shrewdly. "He stole that beef to keep his wife and boy from starvin'. Never did think Judge Hinman should of sentenced him like he done."

"A thief's a thief," Kile stated flatly. "And belongs in jail."

"Jail never do anybuddy any good?" Barnett wanted to know.

Kile threw up his hands in disgust. "Don't go and start that argument all over again. We been over it time and time again. All I know is Taylor's a convicted thief and he jest held up Clagg and—"

"We'll mosey over to the store and talk to Jonas." Marshal Barnett stood up and moved his tall, gangling frame across the office to a line of hooks on the wall. There, he buckled on his gun belt and slid his shoulders into a worn yellow slicker. He beckoned to the obdurately frowning deputy, saying: "Come on, Eb. And leave me do the palaverin' for a change, will yuh?"

The two men—one wiry and short, the other tall and loosely built—went out through the door into the drive of the rain on Main Street. They crunched along the cinder walk in the direction of Clagg's General Store, their heads bent to the rain-lashed gale. "Always two sides to a case," Barnett shouted to make himself heard against the storm. "We'll hear Jonas Clagg's first 'fore we go skally-hootin' all over the county lookin' for that poor Taylor fella."

"Poor fella hell! He's guilty!" snapped Kile. "Walkin' into a man's store and demandin' money on the hot end of a shotgun oughta prove that, if his record don't!"

And Eb Kile was thinking what a chump Clay Barnett was, what a chump he'd always been, for that matter. Soft-hearted; soft-headed, that's what Clay was. The whole of Alder County was on to him—even the sheriff down to Meduna. Of course Eb had to admit, Clay *had* cleaned Bluff City up pretty well; also the country round about, in the past ten years. And it was true he'd done it without hardly turning a key in a cell door. Without swearing out charges or even taking a pot shot at anybody. But it was all fool's luck. Blind luck. One of these fine days Clay Bartlett was going to make a mistake, and then find himself out of a job. Eb grudgingly decided he'd hate to have that happen. Clay was square—and he had a wife and kid of his own, too.

Jonas Clagg's store stood at a corner where two streets spit muddy water at each other. A wooden sign over the store had the letters G'N'L-M'D'SE on it, as though Jonas had been too stingy to paint any more there. Barnett pulled up, looking at the sign and then down the street. A townsman splashed by, heading toward the meat market, his head bent low against the cold lash of the storm. A dray wagon rolled into town from the south, its big wheels making no sound in the foot-deep mud. Barnett felt an urgency in the air. A half-mile away, he knew, behind the town limits, Moose River was beginning to overflow its bank. If this storm held on for twenty-four

hours more there'd be hell and plenty to pay! There'd be a flood!

**B**ARNETT turned up the steps to the low-railed gallery of the store. He said to Kile: "Say, Eb, seems to me I remember Clagg's son Sid used to court Bob Tayloe's wife 'fore Bob married her. That right?"

Kile reared back, blank astonishment on his bone-lean face. "Jumpin' Jupiter, what's that got to do with this here case?"

"I was just thinkin'," Barnett mused then pushed on into the store.

Jonas Clagg stood in the middle of the merchandise-filled room as the two lawmen entered. The dim overhead lamps, lit against the darkness of the day, were turned down, but showed how fat the store-keeper was, and how untidy, how trapped and mean his mouth. *Bites nails in half*, Barnett thought grimly, *so's they'll come out an even pound!*

"'Bout time yuh showed up," Clagg declared in his insolent, child-high voice. "What kinda marshal've we got in this town, anyways? Tayloe's prob'ly barricaded hisself at his cabin by now and yuh'll have to blast him out and waste ammunition!"

Barnett took off his wide-brimmed hat and calmly shook the water off it, then slapped it gently against his knee. He put his eyes, which now were hard and cold and scornful, on the store-keeper's ruddy, plump-jowled face. "I come soon's I heard about your trouble. How come yuh didn't send word sooner?" He didn't bother keeping the rank dislike out of his voice.

"Listen!" Clagg blurted, his fat face growing pinker, his dewlaps shaking a little. "I sent my son down to the courthouse right after it happened! They wasn't hide nor hair of anybuddy there!"

Barnett never blinked an eyelash. "You'd of got a raise outa Bill Cavendish if you'd of tried the cell block. He was there."

"Makes no difference," Clagg retorted, staring balefully at the marshal out of small pale eyes pocketed in deep flesh. "You're Marshal. Not Cavendish. And look here, Clay; I

kin make a heap o' trouble fer yuh, if yuh don't git that sneak Tayloe. Why, he'd of shot me in cold blood if I hadn't handed the money over!"

"Worse luck," the marshal murmured.

"What's that you said?"

"I said, have yuh got any witnesses?"

"Sid seen it all," Clagg spluttered. "My son seen the hull thing."

"Where at's Sid?" the marshal wanted to know.

"He's out tryin' to trace Tayloe."

"I thought," Barnett murmured, "Bob Tayloe was workin' for yuh, Clagg. Thought yuh'd been payin' him a dollar a day to jackass freight in your warehouse."

Clagg licked his fat, moist lips. "He wasn't wuth fifty cents a day. I only hired him outa the kindness o' my heart. The damned jailbird! Worked a bit over three months and then wanted more money! And me feedin' him and his fambly! I fired him!"

"Jes so." The marshal nodded his iron-gray head. "Jes so."

Clagg cried, "Well, what're yuh standin' there grinnin' at me fer? Git a move on. Shake a laig, and—"

"Keep your hair on, Clagg," Barnett said soothingly. "Lottsa time. It's only nine o'clock. Got all day to—"

Clagg waved bunched flabby fingers. "You bring Tayloe back here dead or alive by dark tonight, or by grabs I'll take it up with the sheriff. I'll bust yuh, Clay, and—"

**B**OOTs scraped on the gallery of the store then, and a stringy bitter-eyed young man came barging in. He pulled up when he saw the two lawmen, and a sly look crawled over his face. "He's down at his cabin on Crazy Woman Flats," Sid Clagg announced triumphantly. "I follered him half way."

"Hullo, Sid." Barnett turned to face the store-keeper's slant-eyed son, a look on his own face as though he was tasting something bad. And he was seeing a thinner replica of the elder Clagg—the same pale eyes, same mean mouth, same truculent manner. *Either one'd shoot t'other for*

a ten dollar bill, the marshal wryly thought. Out loud, he said: "Me and Eb'll ride down there and have a talk with Bob."

"Talk to him!" Jonas Clagg screeched it.

There was a short run of silence. "Yeah," Barnett said finally, turning slowly toward the door. "Come on, Eb."

"He's a dangerous criminal!" Clagg yelled. "He'll use that scatter gun on yuh, yuh don't git him fustest!"

"I'll just mosey along with you," Sid Clagg volunteered, and moved to follow the lawmen.

Barnett swung around. "T'ain't necessary," he said flatly. "Me and Eb kin handle Bob without no help from a—"

Eb Kile horned in, speaking for the first time since they had entered the store. "Oh, leave him come along, Clay. I ain't sure where the turn-off is, and in this blasted weather—"

The marshal appeared to hesitate. And then he said, "All right, Sid. But keep your face outa this mess from now on."

Twenty minutes later the three men were mounted and riding north through the thick, shifting curtain of the storm. Kile, in the saddle of his bay gelding, was still disgruntled. But he showed where the river bent with the trail a mile out of town, and the others rode ahead, trying to see through the ruck of wind and rain and driving mist. Three miles farther on, Sid Clagg took the lead, and Barnett dropped back to ride beside his deputy.

"I don't like this none," the marshal complained. "You can't be sure Bob Tayloe's a thief."

"He's guilty," Kile rapped out.

"Jest because Jonas Clagg's a township supervisor—" Barnett began.

"A crook's a crook," Kile insisted in his grumpy voice.

"Oh?" Barnett was younger than Eb Kile by a ten years. Now, suddenly, his face looked older than the deputy's, with deep crow-feet wrinkles around the eyes and long lines leading down beside his mouth. His blue eyes, focusing on the narrow

back of Sid Clagg up ahead, now were stern and uncommunicative, under a pair of black bushy brows, above a straight nose, a long flat mouth.

"I brought Tayloe in myself," Kile was saying. "It was jest four years ago today. He give me one helluva time, too."

"He's was't more'n a kid then," Barnett reminded him. "A kid with a hungry wife and a six-year-old boy to feed. What'd yuh expect him to do? Cheer and whoop it up?"

They splashed through a slough of mud, hearing, on the left, the building roar of the flooded Moose River. A squall of wind whipped down the trail in their teeth, making the horses dig in with their hoofs on the rising grade.

"Here it is!" Sid Clagg sang out almost joyfully, reining up in front of them. "Down there!" He pointed with a dripping hand to a stretch of lower ground below and on the left, nearer the river. "That there's Crazy Woman Flats, and it'll be under six foot o' water 'fore night, if this rain keeps up!"

**B**ARNETT pushed his roan ahead, hearing Sid Clagg's tight-voiced warning: "Look out for his shotgun, marshal. Tayloe'll use it, shore as hell!"

Barnett waved it away and slid his horse down the muddy trail to the flat ground beyond. The others came slipping and sliding down after him. The trail ended abruptly at the boiling, muddy river. Through blinding sheets of rain they saw Bob Tayloe's cabin, half-hidden in a willow mettle which already was partly submerged by the rapidly flooding stream. It was a slab-sided shack with a rusted, crooked chimney sticking crazily out of one side of it.

They dismounted a hundred feet from the cabin and sloshed forward through the ankle-deep mud and slime, with the marshal a little ahead, and Eb Kile bringing up the rear. Rain hissed in the river nearby, stung Barnett's face like a million white-hot needles. He lowered his head and shoved on. It was at that moment that a gun banged deafen-

ingly in his ear and he whipped himself around to see Sid lifting his Colt against the cabin for a second shot.

"Cut that out!" the marshal shouted angrily, and he reached out and batted the weapon down. "What're you tryin' to do, Clagg? Hurt some-buddy?"

Clagg blinked in the rain. "He'll kill you, Barnett! Less'n we git to him first! I'm warnin' you—"

Anger flamed in the marshal's eyes, made a blade-thin line of his mouth. "Put that gun back, Clagg, or I'll take it away from yuh and bust yuh with it!"

Reluctantly, Clagg obeyed. "I'll wait out here, then," he put in sullenly. "Go ahead and get yourself shot ff you wanta!"

"You said it, you'll wait out here." Barnett motioned to Kile, and they waded through the deep mud to the porch of the cabin. Barnett knocked, tentatively at first. No one answered. He rapped louder, and then Kile said sourly, "Bust the door down if he don't come out peacable," and lifted the butt of his own gun to hammer at the flimsy pane. Barnett yanked his arm back. "Dag-gone it, Eb, cut that out! Yuh wanta go and scare his wife to death?"

He was thinking: Never act like you're out to make trouble going after a man. Never give him a chance or an excuse to make trouble, either. Just take it easy and slow-like, and he'll come out, and it don't matter if he *has* got a scatter gun all cocked and ready. You take it away from him, and after you've heard his side of the story, maybe you arrest him. And then again maybe you don't. It all depends on common sense.

Barnett yelled gently: "Bob—open up! It's Clay Barnett!"

The door eased open a crack. Eb Kile snorted and shoved a mud-cake toe into the slit, crying: "Open it, Tayloe! And no damned funny business!"

But it wasn't Bob Tayloe standing there when at last the door swung all the way back. It was a skinny youngster in overalls; bare-footed and with yellow hair sticking up every which way on his head. The boy's eyes were as big and round as dinner plates, almost, and there was

mud on his freckles, and he had been crying.

"Why, hullo," the marshal said, taken aback, and lowering his voice nearly to a whisper. "Who're you, sonny?"

"Freddie." Barnett had to strain his ears to hear, the kid spoke so low. "I'm takin' keer o' my mother. Whut yuh want with us?"

The marshal hesitated, at a loss for words for a moment. It sure was going to be a helluva note having to talk to Tayloe in front of his own boy—and his wife, probably. It would be even worse if Tayloe made trouble and they had to slap the irons on him.

"Whut yuh want with us?" the boy demanded again, and now his tone was filled with a pitiful attempt at bluster; the words were obviously calculated to sound flat and challenging, but failed utterly of their intent.

THE MARSHAL'S throat felt all choky. "Yuh better go now," the boy said faintly. "So's I kin shut the door. My mother, she—"

"Look, buster," Eb Kile broke in impatiently, "we wanta see your old man about somethin'."

"He ain't to home," Freddie shot back, his face paling a little. "Bé-sides, dad ain't done nuthin'—"

"Take it easy-like," Barnett gently urged. "We ain't goin' to hurt your dad."

"Aw, why don't we walk in and take him?" Kile growled. "What do we wanta stand out here ketchin' our death in the cold fer—"

"Button your lip, Eb!" Then Barnett heard a faint sound inside the cabin. Not exactly a moan, but something pretty close to it. The boy's face blanched. "What was that?" the marshal asked kindly. "You got a dog in there?"

"It's—mother." Freddie gulped hard. "She—she's gonna have me a baby sister, right soon."

"Hey!" Barnett almost yelled it out. His jaw sagged; his eyes were shocked and staring. "Yuh mean—"

"Well, good gosh!" breathed Eb Kile at his elbow.

"Call your dad," Barnett said softly.

"He ain't to home, I tol' yuh." The boy was really frightened now. "Don't yuh believe me, mister?" Then, the words came pouring out: "He's gone up the river to Cedar Point to cut logs. He—he done bought the cuttin' rights to a piece o' timber right on the river bank near the bridge. He's gonna float the logs down to Bluff City and—"

"Whoa, sonny. Whoa. Take it slow. Yuh say he bought the cuttin' rights to a piece o' timber? What with?"

"He got a hundred dollars in town this mornin'. I don't know—"

"There y'are," jeered Kile. "What'd I tell yuh, Clay?"

"Oh, shut up, Eb!" The marshal moved through the door then, the deputy trailing him cautiously. "Look, sonny." Barnett gently shut the door, turned to face the kid again. "Is—when's your dad comin' home? Don't he savvy about your Ma or—"

"He'll be here come noontime." The boy had backed a little away, a stubbornness, a desperation on his thin face. "He—said he'd come. He's gonna come—to git the doc and—help my mother—"

Barnett thought: *A woman having a baby in a place like this and in a storm, with no one but a kid to—*

"Good Godfrey!" Barnett gasped. "Doc Betts went down to Meduna this mornin'!" He swallowed hard, spoke as calmly and steadily as he could: "Freddie, how soon—when is your mother—"

"Soon's dad gits here, I guess. We gotta wait fer him, though. Mother says we gotta."

Rain roared on the tin roof overhead, beat against the windows of the shack. "Come here, Eb," the marshal ordered, striding purposefully toward the door of the cabin's only bedroom. He rapped briskly. "C'n I come in, Missus Tayloe? It's Clay Barnett."

There was no answer. Barnett opened the door softly, stepped gingerly into the room beyond. He was standing in a half-dark, cheaply furnished cubicle. There were two bunks against the far wall, and there was a woman in one of them—a wom-

an with a young face and dark, wavy hair. She was partly covered with an Indian blanket, and she was rolling back and forth, her eyes closed, her thin face white and drawn with pain. And she was whispering hoarsely: "Freddie, boy, is he coming yet?"

"My God!" Barnett groaned. "Now what're we gonna do?"

HE WHIPPED around and went into the living room again, his face showing white under its coat of tan. But he had made up his mind, and now he acted on that decision. "Eb," he barked, "put a kettle on that stove there and stoke it up. Hot water and plenty of it's what you're goin' to need. Hot water and—"

"I'm gonna need?" Kile was staring, his gaunt face puckered up incredulously. "Look, Clay, we ain't got time to fool with no woman now. We gotta git up to Cedar Point and find—"

"You're stayin' right here," Barnett said rapidly. "You're a married man with four kids grown up. You oughta know how to—"

"Great Jumpin' Catfish!" The deputy howled it out. "I'm a deputy marshal! I ain't no jab-jammed—"

"Shut up!" Barnett was thinking fast, and staring at the white face of young Freddie Tayloe. "Listen, sonny; you're to take my deputy's horse and bust hell a mile for town. My house is on Boulder Street. Tell Neva—that's my wife—to hire a rig at the livery and hurry right out here. Tell her I said to. Tell her it's a delivery. Special!"

"Now wait a minute!" Eb Kile wailed. "I ain't gonna go and—"

But Barnett had slammed the door and was hurrying the boy across the muddy yard. The marshal peeled off his slicker and wrapped the kid up in it, boosted him into the saddle of Kile's bay.

"What the hell's goin' on?" Sid Clagg asked when the boy had galloped away. He sat huddled in the saddle of his horse, soaked to the skin and plenty sore. "What's the idea o' drownin' a man whilst you—"

"Close your blasted trap, Clagg!" Barnett yelled. Then: "You savvy where Cedar Point's at?"

Clagg bunched his shoulders shiver-

ingly against the drive of the rain. "Yeah," he said sullenly; "what about it?"

"Never mind," the marshal snapped. "Git goin' and take me there!"

They traveled rapidly up the east bank of the river, hearing the roar of swollen waters above the scream of the wind, the constant beat of the rain against earth and foliage. The river would be over its banks in another hour, the marshal thought grimly. Then Crazy Woman Flats would be a hell of runaway water. There wasn't any time to lose.

Barnett gave his mind over to concentrating on the problem that lay ahead; finding Bob Tayloe and getting back to the cabin was vital now. Later they'd get to the bottom of this hold-up thing. He peered out from under dripping brows at the dim bulk of Sid Clagg pushing on ahead of him. And a hate filled the marshal—a new emotion—hate for a pinch-penny, cheat, Jonas Clagg, and his sneaky-eyed, vindictive son!

They had reached higher ground now, and the force of the storm hit them with tremendous impact. The wind and rain pelted them like solid blow after solid blow, slowing down the horses, making breathing difficult and vision next to impossible. Barnett sensed, rather than saw, that the river was below them now, snarling its way through high-buttressed walls—walls of Cripple's Canyon. Presently they came down to the bridge over the river, the trail dropping from the heights with startling abruptness and angling over the sagging boards to the yonder bank. A hundred yards farther on, and they were climbing again into the timber.

What was that? Behind them and below there came a muffled crash, a rending and ripping as though of wood. Barnett's heart plummeted into his boots. Sid looked over his shoulder, leering. "Hear that, marshal? That was the bridge goin' out! Now you're sunk!"

"What d'yuh mean sunk?"

"Only way we kin git back to the Flats is to swim—leastways till the water goes down. That'll be hours from now, if the rain quits."

"Never mind," Barnett shouted, and

gigged his roan on up the timber trail. But his heart was like a stone in his breast.

THEY REACHED a clearing in the cedars and spruce. A horse was tied just off the trail, in the lee of a huge haystack boulder. It was Bob Tayloe's horse. An ax lay on the ground nearby. The marshal pulled up short, swung out of the saddle in the shelter of the rock. Clagg did likewise, cursing and fuming under his breath. But when Bob Tayloe, himself, slid around the corner of the boulder, Clagg's sullen swearing stopped and he braced himself, staring out of slitted eyes, his right hand crawling slowly toward his holstered gun.

Barnett felt a wave of self-condemnation sweep over him. He'd been a fool for bringing Sid Clagg along. It was going to complicate everything, he saw now. He said to Clagg, "Pull that gun again and I'll plug yuh where yuh stand, Sid!"

The first thing Bob Tayloe said was: "Marshal, is there something wrong? My wife—is she—"

Barnett looked into the drawn, bony face of young Tayloe, seeing the fear that sprang to the man's tight gray eyes, the starved-down appearance of his whipped, lean frame, now dripping soddenly with water and plastered with red mud. "Don't worry, Bob," Barnett said. "But your missus is gettin' ready to have her young 'un, and I come up to bring yuh home." When Tayloe gasped, he added: "My deputy's there with her; he's a good man—the best. But now we better hurry and—"

Sid Clagg sneered, "The bridge is gone, yuh damned fools!" He was eyeing Tayloe with a cold hatred. "How yuh gonna git acrosst that river now?"

Tayloe looked quickly at Barnett, a question in his eyes, and when the marshal nodded grimly, Tayloe said, "There's a boat upstream a ways. Wait for me over on the bank—I'll pick you up with it in a few minutes." Then he was gone, his boots splashing mud and water as he ran across the trail toward the river brush.

The marshal glared at Clagg. "Better remember what I told yuh about that gun." Then he turned and sprinted for the river bank.

The small boat was almost upon them before they saw it. It came whirling end for end, a gray patch against the boiling yellow water, spinning incongruously between rocks and half-submerged trees. It was a small boat—almost too small to hold three men. Bob Tayloe was fighting the oars to get close to the shore. He made it finally, and then Barnett saw the two poles lying athwart the gunwales. It was going to be a wild trip downstream through Cripple's Canyon Rapids to Crazy Woman Flats—a wild trip and a dangerous one.

Barnett dragged himself into the boat which Bob Tayloe was holding against the washed-out bank by main force. When Sid Clagg appeared to hesitate, the marshal snapped: "Are yuh comin' or ain't yuh?" and made as if to shove off without him. Clagg, still scowling suspiciously at Tayloe who totally ignored his presence, stumbled overside and dropped into the bow and picked up one of the poles. Barnett took the other and they pushed off into the boiling ochre-colored water.

The marshal sat in the stern, facing Tayloe who had the oars. And the marshal studied Tayloe's face with a hard and constant care. A thief, huh? Belonged in jail? Just about now he belonged right here! Took plenty of guts to row like he was rowing now! And something to row for. Bob Tayloe had both, by God!

**T**HE RIVER swung in a wide bend, the muddy, swirling water piling up on the inside bank terrifyingly, and now they could see the wreckage of the bridge ahead; a twisted mess of timbers and broken planks. Then the boat seemed to pause in a whirlpool near the shore, and swooped breathlessly out into midstream and plunged away in the racing current.

They shot on, rocking and jarring. Tayloe madly back-watered with the oars, and the marshal and Clagg

wielded their poles with frenzied desperation to keep the hull off the jagged rocks inshore. Suddenly they were swaying into the eddying turbulence at the upper end of Cripple's Canyon Rapids and then were picked up and slammed forward by a stretch of smooth, fast river. All three men were drenched to the skin, if they hadn't been before. Three inches of water sloshed around their feet on the boat's floorboards, climbing slowly up around their ankles. The marshal put down his pole and began to bail with a rusty, battered pail.

Now suddenly they were on the rapids. Barnett looked at the banks and could see nothing—just a dizzy blur. To either side the canyon rims rose higher, the canyon faces steeper; where boulder chunks had fallen through the years these hulking rocks were great, black teeth on either side, waiting to trap and chew the boat to splinters.

The stern yawed widely, then fell far down at the stern and shipped more water. Barnett bailed like a crazy man while Tayloe battled the oars. Sid Clagg had lost his pole now and was rising slowly to a crouch, gripping the gunwales with both hands. Slowly, carefully, he turned in the bow, and Barnett glimpsed the stark terror on his shining wet face, the wildness in his staring eyes.

Then Clagg was screaming. "Damn you, Tayloe, you're tryin' to kill me! You know I can't swim—"

"Set down!" Barnett bellowed.

But Sid Clagg was in the grip of a merciless fear. He merely swayed there in the bow, his face contorted and ghostly white. Suddenly, he pulled his right hand away from the gunwale and stabbed it down to his belt. But he never succeeded in drawing his Colt. Hunkered in the water on the bottom of the boat, the marshal snaked his own weapon out of the leather and fired once from the hip. The muzzle-flame leaped past Tayloe's head but he never flinched, never turned. The bullet ripped a crimson streak in Clagg's right forearm and he screamed out his unexpected pain and sagged limply against the bow. Barnett didn't speak. He put his gun away and went to bailing

again. Clagg, writhing, groaned. "You've killed me—you've killed me—" over and over.

Taylor ignored everything but his job at the oars, Barnett everything but his bailing. The boat rose as though a giant hand had flung it.

They were on smoother water suddenly. Barnett found himself trying to paddle with his hands as Taylor leaned back on the oars and pulled steadily, evenly toward the cabin, now about a half-mile away. The shack looked small and somehow pathetic standing in two or three feet of water. And, the marshal noted with a pang of alarm, that water was rising even as he stared!

**T**AYLOR rowed with a clock-like cadence now, unerringly pointing the boat toward the house. In the bow Sid Clagg was whimpering, moaning, holding his wounded arm. To Barnett, Taylor's face was a graven mask, showing no expression at all. But his eyes proved he was worried, all right. And who wouldn't be? With a wife going to have a—

The cabin bulked larger. Clearer. A matter of yards now; of feet. The water seemed to be tugging at its foundations, the marshal saw, and sweated some. Somebody was opening the door. Barnett yelled. It was a man. It was Eb Kile. With his sleeves rolled up above his bony elbows. And grinning from ear to ear. Eb Kile, actually grinning!

Suddenly Bob Taylor had pulled the boat in close to the cabin and was reaching up to a hook near the porch post, was hauling down a long length of rawhide rope.

They left Sid Clagg cowering in the boat, and sloshed through the hip-high water into the house. Taylor made a bee-line toward the bedroom where voices were murmuring. Ed Kile wiped the smile off his face. "Where the hell yuh been, dag-nab it? We been waitin'—"

"Jest amusin' ourselves, Barnett

answered dryly. "Neva git here all right?"

"It's a girl," Kile said. "A right nice one, too."

"Freddie was right." Barnett smiled.

Barnett sighed. "S'pose we got to go and take Bob Taylor in and make Jonas Clagg place his charges. Hell and damnation!"

"I found out somethin'," Kile said laconically. "That shotgun—Bob was tryin' to borrow some money on it. Clagg wouldn't give it to him."

"So Bob jest naturally poked it in his ribs? Too bad."

"Hell no! Leastways, he had a right to do what he done," Kile said.

**T**HE MARSHAL'S black eyebrows went up. "Mind cuttin' it a little deeper, Eb?"

"Yuh see," the deputy went on, slowly, dryly, "Jonas never paid Bob fer that three-odd months Bob worked fer him. T'was a hundred dollars flat. Jonas kept puttin' him off. So—"

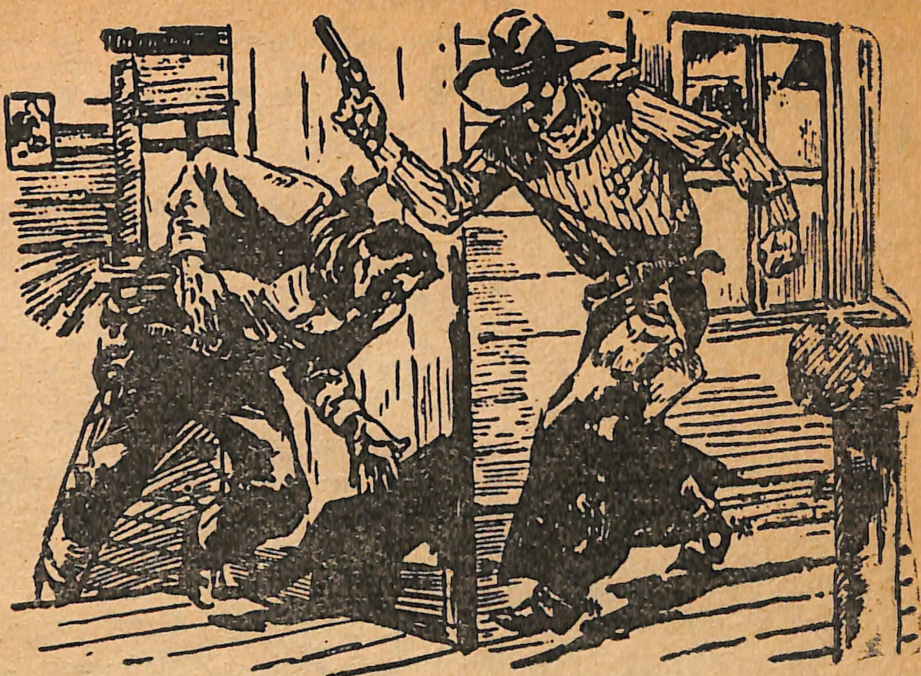
"Yuh mean to stand there and tell me that old skinflint made all this trouble jest so's he c'd hang on to his hundred dollars a little while longer?" Barnett's tone was loud and unbelieving. "Why, the pot-bellied, frawg-faced—"

Kile nodded. "Bob only took what was legally his. I guess that's all."

"The hell it's all!" Clay Barnett's voice rang flat and clear through the little room. "Not none! The rate o' pay for an able-bodied man around this town's two bucks a day and found. I'm goin' back and collect another hundred from that black-hearted bag o' taller and sheep dip!" He clapped his wet hat back on his head and started for the door, trailing a stream of water and mud behind him. "Come on, Eb," he ordered spitefully. "You got to bring back a sack of gumdrops for the boy!"

● END





Suddenly something crashed down on his head.

## SHALLOW - GRAVE SALVATION

by GLENN H. WICHMAN

TIME HONORED  
WESTERN  
★ ★ CLASSIC

JIMMY SEVERN had given up a good job to make this ride to Springville. It was a long ride and had taken considerable time for it had run across two states and part of a third. A friend has asked him to do it and "friend" was a six letter word which spelled a lot to Jimmy Severn. Now the long journey was behind and its hardships forgotten. As he jogged up the dusty street of Springville on his tired dun horse he thought of a crumpled letter in the hip pocket of his Levis, the letter which had brought this ride about.

"Dear Jimmy:

"You were right about the Z Bar F never making a cow ranch. You told me I was a jackass for sinking my wad in it. O.K. I was. Not enough water and the grass has been awful. But things are happening here which have got me all hot

Maybe a six-foot pine box and residence in boothill was stake enough for Jimmy Severn . . .

and bothered and considerably fearful. You see my eyes are getting suddenly worse and it's going to be pretty nearly impossible for me to defend myself. I move around like a bat in the daytime. Yet the screws are being tightened up on me. If I don't come across, something is going to happen. Perhaps a six foot pine box. I don't want to be gloomy, but that seems to be it.

"You could never guess in forty years what the trouble is. Somebody wants to buy the Z Bar F! You will say: 'Sell, you fool! It isn't worth anything.' But if someone wants to buy it it must be worth something. I have been offered a hundred dollars for my equity. But if I am going to take anything I am going to get enough to have my eyes fixed up. The doc says it will cost about three thousand, owing

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to special surgeons and a long stay in the hospital up in Denver.

"Why would anybody want a cow ranch that won't raise cows? Search me. I'm sure it is not gold or other precious metals for there are no metals within a long way of Springville. When I refused to sell for the hundred dollars things began to happen. The barn burned. Then an old cow shed. Two of my horses died from strychnine in the water trough. Somebody shot at me and knocked my hat off, but I couldn't see who it was. Men have been sneaking around the ranch. I've seen them dimly.

"Now if my equity is worth anything, it's worth more than a hundred. This seems to be my supreme chance to get enough for the operation. At least the only chance I'll ever have. I can't cut the mustard now on a cow riding job. However, I might do some bronc bustin' sort of by instinct.

"There's another thing that makes my heart sick. Judy Dunsmuir, who helps her mother with dressmaking in Springville, loves me. I shouldn't have asked her to marry me owing to my eyes but I'm a weak sort of a buzzard and I did. She wants to marry me, even if I'm blind as a bat. Of course I won't let her.

"Well, Jimmy, there's the sad story. You're off making your stake and getting up in the world. If you come back here nothing may come of this and you may get a shot in the back. Perhaps I shouldn't have written at all. Maybe I won't mail this letter.

"Your friend,  
"Wes Morley."

Jimmy Severn, as his horse ambled down the street, looked the cowtown over. It hadn't changed much in the three years since he had last been there, since he had advised Wes Morley not to buy the Z Bar F.

Severn put the dun in the livery barn for a good feeding of oats and then he went up the street to the Bald Eagle Saloon. As he stepped through the batwing doors and into the nearly deserted barroom he was astonished to hear his own name being spoken.

The cowboy neither paused nor changed expression. He moved up to the bar and stood beside the man who

was doing the talking. This man said to the bartender:

"If a stranger shows up here by the name of Jimmy Severn, I want to know it. Leave word at the hotel. I'll pay you five—"

Both the man and the bartender became aware of the cowboy's presence. Both looked at him and he at them.

The man who stood beside Severn was dressed in what were known as store clothes, although his garments were both worn and dirty. He carried a gun, low hung on his thigh. He was big, broad faced and his eyes were as hard as granite.

"Beer," Severn ordered. He turned to the man. "I'm no hand to drink alone. Smith's my name. Have one with me?"

The man grinned. "All right. My name's Curtis. Gus Curtis."

They shook hands.

"Stranger here?" Curtis asked, as he sipped his beer.

Jimmy Severn nodded. "And you?"

He saw the big man tense and then came the careless answer, "Yeah—"

"When I came in," the cowboy continued, "you were inquiring about a fellow named Jimmy Severn."

GUS CURTIS put down his glass of beer. He moved a foot or more down the counter and stood now facing the cowboy. "I was," Curtis said. "I wanted to find Jimmy Severn and tell him that he had no business in Springville. That he had no business within thirty miles of Springville. That the climate here is unhealthy."

The cowboy smiled and tossed off the remainder of his beer. "I'm Jimmy Severn." He was aware that the bartender was suddenly finding something to do down at the far end of the counter.

"I took it that you were," Gus Curtis said. "That 'Smith' business was a little thin." The big man had now moved far enough away from the bar so that his right arm had free play.

"I think this is a very healthy climate," Jimmy Severn countered. "And I have business both in Springville and within thirty miles of Springville. And I have a natural

dislike to being told what to do, or when, or how."

"You asked for it!" Gus Curtis snarled. Then he exploded all at once. His hand was darting toward his thigh.

But the cowboy was already on the move. Even before Gus Curtis could draw Jimmy Severn's fist connected with his chin. It rocked Curtis. Jimmy followed through with his left. By now Curtis, staggering backward, had his fingers on the block butt of his .45.

Jimmy Severn drew, but he did not fire. Just as Curtis' gun cleared leather, the barrel of the cowboy's Colt smashed the big man on the head. Curtis' legs wobbled, his arms dropped. Then he slumped down on the sawdust covered floor. Lay still.

Severn spun around, but there was no one in the saloon except the white-faced bartender, who had now come out from behind the counter.

"Better drag him into the rear room," Jimmy suggested. "It'll be an hour or so before he comes around. When he gets his wits back tell him that he wants to learn to move faster. Tell him that Springville is an unhealthy place for a slow gent like him."

"Yes sir," the bartender murmured. "By the way," Severn asked, "what's going on around here?"

The barman shook his head. "I don't know anything."

"How's Wes Morley?"

But the bartender wouldn't open up. "I don't know anything about anybody."

"Mebbe you're smart," Jimmy admitted. "Does this Gus Curtis play a lone hand here? Or does he have bosom pals?"

"Quien sabe," the bartender grunted. He had Gus Curtis by the shoulders and was dragging him toward the rear of the room. "Gus Curtis gave some good advice. That's all I'll say."

Jimmy Severn gave up questioning and went out on the veranda. He spotted a hash house and ate the first square meal he'd enjoyed in a week. The restaurant was run by a deaf mute; he gathered no information

there.

Outside again he walked down the street and came to a sign which pointed between two buildings. "MRS. TILLIE DUNSMUER, DRESSMAKING." He followed a path and came to a small cottage in among the cottonwoods. There was a girl in the yard, working with the flowers. She turned at the sound of footsteps.

Jimmy Severn felt his heart jump. He had never seen a girl who impressed him like this one did. Fair haired, blue eyed, her face was pleasantly round and there were dimples in her cheeks. He hoped that she might be Judy Dunsmuers' sister, for Judy Dunsmuers was in love with his friend Wes Morley.

The cowboy touched his hat. "Pardon, ma'am, I'm looking for Judy Dunsmuers."

The girl brushed the sunbonnet from her head. "I'm Judy Dunsmuers."

Severn tried to keep the disappointment he felt from showing in his face.

"What's the matter?" Judy asked. "You look frightened. Has something happened?" She was no longer smiling, and concern showed in fine lines around her mouth. Then she spoke rapidly, "I can guess who you are. You're Jimmy Severn. You're Wes Morley's friend. You've come—"

"Correct," Jimmy admitted. "Wes spoke of you in his letter. I thought I'd see you before I went out to the Z Bar F."

Judy Dunsmuers motioned toward chairs that were on the veranda of the cottage. "Let's sit down."

"Is Wes all right?" Jimmy asked, and dreaded to hear the answer.

Judy sat down and dropped her sunbonnet on the floor. "The last I knew he was. That was three days ago. Wes won't let me go out to the ranch any more. He's a stubborn dear. Claims it's too dangerous for me. Mr. Severn, I don't know what this is all about. But I'm sure something terrible is going to happen. There's some awful danger hanging over Wes."

IT WAS clear to Severn that his friend had not been as frank with the girl as he had been in the letter.

"How are his eyes?" Jimmy asked.

"Bad. And getting worse." She turned and looked at him and then continued: "I want Wes to marry me right away. But he won't. He says it isn't fair. If we were married we could live here with mother and I could look after him. The ranch is no good. There's very little stock left. Wes says that he'll not marry me unless he can support me. That wouldn't matter to me. I sew with mother."

Jimmy Severn felt a choking in his throat. Here was loyalty. A not too long-headed or wise loyalty perhaps but it was the real thing. Pure, twenty-four carat gold. He would have liked to have told Judy Dunsmuier what a fine woman he thought her, but the words would not come.

"Someone burned Wes' barn," the girl said. "And the cow shed. I got the sheriff to go out but there wasn't anything he did. He wanted Wes to move into town." Judy got up and there was a slight flush on her cheeks. "Mr. Severn, you're going out to the Z Bar F. Would you mind awfully if I went with you? I've got a fair to middling horse. I can keep up."

Jimmy's first inclination was to tell the girl to come along. Then he remembered Gus Curtis and the warning Curtis had given him. And the things Wes Morley had written in the letter. "Sorry," he said. "But I don't think you ought to. Some other time, mebbe."

"I've made up my mind," Judy told him. "I'm going anyway. I'm worried. If it won't bother you too much, I'll ride with you."

"I don't think you ought to," Severn repeated.

"Would you mind saddling my horse?" Judy Dunsmuier asked him. "In the corral behind the house." She did not wait for an answer. "While you're doing that I'll change."

Severn watched her disappear into the house. He walked around behind the cottage and saddled a rangy, long-legged sorrel. He liked women who were not afraid to ride big

horses. Mrs. Tillie Dunsmuier came out the back door and introduced herself.

"I don't much like this idea, Mr. Severn," the widow said.

"Neither do I," Jimmy admitted. "But I'll do my best to see that nothing happens."

Judy came running out, buckling on a .32. They hurried to the livery barn where the cowboy got his dun. As they rode down the street Severn glanced anxiously at the Bald Eagle Saloon. The bartender was looking over the top of the half pint doors but there was no sign of Gus Curtis.

Severn and the girl took the winding, dusty road that led up the valley. The scant vegetation was dry and parched; it hadn't rained in a long time. The cowboy and the girl rode side by side. Jimmy sought every possible excuse to look at Judy Dunsmuier. He wished that he had met her, say three years before, in Montana. Or out in California....

His cheeks flushed at these thoughts. It wasn't fair to have such thoughts. Not fair to his friend, Wes Morley. Nor was it even fair to Judy Dunsmuier. He concentrated on the riding.

After a time they stopped to let the horses breathe.

"Poor, poor, Wes," Judy said. "Did you ever hear of a man who had so many misfortunes? His eyes, his ranch, everything."

"Not everything," Severn told her. "He has you. You'll never go back on him."

Judy turned and looked off down the rolling valley. Severn saw her shoulders shake and heard the merest suggestion of a sob. And then Jimmy Severn wondered if Judy Dunsmuier were in love with Wes Morley or with the troubles that beset him. This thought, too, savored of disloyalty. He regretted having had it.

They rode on, pushing the horses to their limit. They rounded a bend in a narrow side valley and the ranch yard was no more than a quarter of a mile away. The sight of the Z Bar F gave Severn a shock. Dismal, bleak, unpainted, and there was scarcely a blade of grass. It already looked like an abandoned spread.

"Wes has taken to calling it the bat's roost," Judy said, as they dismounted in the yard and tied their horses to the hitch rail. "How he stays here, I don't know."

"He's no quitter," Jimmy murmured. Then he raised his voice: "Hi, Wes! The prodigal's returned!" But there was no answer to the hail.

"Maybe he's out somewhere," the girl suggested.

They walked up to the ranch house. The front door was closed. Severn rapped on it. From somewhere within there came an answer, weak and faint, "Come in."

Severn shivered. "You wait here, Judy."

He pushed the door open and stepped inside. The room was dimly lighted, the blinds down. Severn's eyes had no chance to become accustomed to the darkness. He had taken no more than two steps inside the door when something hit him a smashing blow on the head. He heard a woman's scream. A distant blast of gunfire. He was trying to get his gun out. Then a stygian blackness closed around him.

JIMMY SEVERN vaguely knew he was alive, yet it was a long time before he could open his eyes. Then, like a jolt, his strength returned and full consciousness came with it. He opened his eyes. The darkness was oppressive. It wasn't a darkness like a black night, but something vastly more intense. Unlike anything he had ever seen before. It closed around him like a fluid. Pushed against him.

I'm blind, Severn thought. That blow on the head has blinded me. Then another idea came, an idea that froze every fiber in his body. He had been buried alive! He lay on his back! He was in a coffin! Panic came and such fear as he had never known. He felt suffocated, strangled.

But in a moment he realized that he was breathing regularly and there was no lack of air. Summoning all his courage he raised his hand. There was nothing above him! He had not been buried. Then Jimmy Severn felt something touch his arm. There was an inarticulate sound, like a muffled

moan. He jerked away.

"Wes—!" Jimmy whispered

"Not Wes," came the answer. "It's Judy. You've awakened—"

Severn sat up and the girl's cold hand was in his. He grasped it firmly. He could not detect the faintest outline of her face or form. The blackness seemed twice as intense as it had before. As thick as tar.

"Hurt, Judy?" Jimmy asked.

"No," Judy Dunsmuier answered. "We're in a cave. Men brought us here. On horses. They tied rags over my eyes."

With his free hand Severn felt of his head. There was a huge, sticky knot above the left ear. He felt sick giddy.

"Seen anything of Wes?" he asked.

"No. After the man hit you with a blackjack he jumped at me. I got my gun out, but the bullet went in the floor. The man knocked me down. Another man blindfolded me. Then they loaded us on horses."

"How far did they take us?"

"I couldn't tell. It seemed like a hundred miles."

Jimmy Severn felt warmth coming into Judy Dunsmuier's fingers and into his own. Although terror still clutched him, there was an overlay of hope. They were at least alive. And he was remembering something that had happened three years before, when Wes Morley and he had ridden over the Z Bar F. It was at sunset and they had thought there was a fire in the rocky hills above the ranch yard, for there was what appeared to be an inverted cone of black smoke issuing from a gully. But investigation disclosed that it wasn't smoke but bats. A myriad of bats coming out of a cave at sunset.

"Ninety million bats," Wes Morley had chuckled. "No less. Can't see as they'll do any harm. They'll keep the bugs and gnats away."

"Judy," Severn asked, "did we go up or down from the ranch yard?"

"Up," she answered. "That's about the only thing I'm sure of. There were three men. They talked very little. After they took me off the horse one of them led me for a long way. Two of them carried you, and

they had to stop and rest several times. After a while they told me to sit down. Then I heard them walk away. I tore off the cloths over my eyes. I saw them for just a moment and then they disappeared. Three men, one carrying a lantern.

"Just before they left me one man said: 'They'll never find their way out. Not in a thousand years.'"

"The damn skunks!" Jimmy grated.

Severn felt for his gun. It was gone. He expected to find nothing in his pockets but to his surprise they had not been rifled. He had two boxes of safety matches and a water proof case partly filled with parlor matches. He mentioned his good luck.

"The men spoke of taking the matches," Judy explained. "They decided we'd die quicker with them. That we'd stumble into a hole and break our necks."

"Pleasant buzzards," Severn murmured.

He staggered to his feet and promptly rammed his head into something that he thought had pierced his skull. When the pain had subsided he felt with his numb fingers and found the object to be a stalactite protruding from the ceiling of the cave and as keen pointed as a rapier.

SEVERN struck one of the parlor matches. The blaze nearly blinded him. But before the match burned out he had seen considerable. They were in a cavern shaped room with three entrances and possibly four. The ceiling in the center was all of twenty feet high and sprinkled with stalactites. For every stalactite there was a corresponding stalagmite pushing up from the floor. The color of the rock was a sort of dirty gray.

He sat down beside Judy, his shoulder against hers. He felt a tremor pass over her. She spoke, and her voice was surprisingly steady.

"I hope the three men were wrong about our getting out of here."

"A nice way to put it," Jimmy said. "You keep your chin up. Fine. Panic will ruin us. We must guard against that more than anything."

"We'll laugh," Judy said. "We'll al-

ways laugh. We'll play a game against the darkness. Don't waste anymore matches, Jimmy, until we've decided what to do. We've got to get out. We've got to find Wes." There was eagerness in her voice, and a high courage which warmed the cowboy through and through.

"To wander aimlessly," he said, "will get us nowhere. From what I saw this isn't just one cave, but a whole mess of caves. Those men brought us here, so there's bound to be a way out. All we have to do is find it. Try one way and if that ain't right, come back and try another."

"Try another way," Judy Dunsmuir repeated. "How'll we be sure of getting back here?"

"That's the rub," Jimmy admitted. "If I had about a thousand feet of string that I could pay out behind me and then follow back—Judy, we'll do the best we can to make string. I'll tear my shirt into little strips, my undershirt, my bandannas, anything else I can spare—"

The girl gasped with joy. She contributed her neck scarf, two bandannas and a silk under-garment.

Severn knew now what it must be like to be blind. They set to work, feeling uncertainly in the darkness. He tore his shirt in strips, tied the ends of the strips together and wound the resulting cord into a ball. It was of necessity slow work, yet they went about it with frantic haste. They made many mistakes, tied knots loosely that came apart and had them to tie over again.

They talked much. Severn urged the girl to talk; the sound of her voice was the pleasantest thing he had ever heard. She spoke many times of Wes Morley. She recounted little things they had done together, the high hopes they had had, plans for the future. Jimmy Severn tried not to think.

They had no notion of time, whether it was day or night, sunrise or sunset. They were living in another world, a world of perpetual darkness. Perhaps the only light they would ever see again would be that from the flame of a match and there were not many matches....

The job was done. Jimmy Severn

held in his hand a ball that was eight inches or more in diameter.

"The beginning of the great adventure," he said. "Are you ready, Judy?"

"If we stay here we'll starve. Of course I'm ready. Lead on, Jimmy."

He directed that she put her two hands on his shoulders and follow in his footsteps. Severn struck a match and got a bearing on the nearest entrance to the cavern. While the match burned he picked his way easily enough through the stalagmites but after it had gone out and he had taken five or six additional steps and had stumbled twice he could not tell which direction he was heading.

"It's more to your left," Judy whispered over his shoulder.

"That's funny," Jimmy gasped. "I think it's the other way."

He squandered another match. Neither of them were right. They had turned completely around and were heading back in the direction they'd come.

Panic was very close. Severn felt sweat running down his face, though it was cool there in the cavern, almost cold.

"We must use our heads," Judy whispered. "We must—we must—"

Suddenly she screamed, a sickening, horror stricken scream of terror. The cavern and the still air seemed to jump at the sound. An echo came from a long way off. Another. Severn would have yelled with Judy and from the same sheer terror, but he kept his head. He spun around, took her in his arms. She sobbed on his shoulder.

"Steady," Jimmy soothed. "Steady—"

A few moments and her composure returned. "I'll never do that again. I promise—"

We're buried alive, Severn thought. We're worse than dead.

**E**VENTUALLY they came to one of the entrances. The ceiling was low. They had to stoop to get through. Severn found a protruding knob of rock and tied one end of the cord to it. A match revealed a narrow passageway ahead. At a short distance it curved off to the right. He began feeling his way along the wall, pay-

ing out the cord as he went. Judy, grasping his shoulder, followed behind.

Thirst began tormenting the cowboy. The near skull fracture had given him a fever. His temple throbbed, his throat was dry, breathing became increasingly difficult.

Before the cord gave out Severn had been forced to use six matches. The passageway had turned several times. All sense of direction was gone. There was no sign of any daylight ahead, nothing but stygian blackness.

"We must have come the wrong way," Judy said. Her voice bore a hint of hysteria.

"It gives me a great sense of relief," Jimmy replied, "to know that we can go back to where we started from. This thing's going to be a cinch because we've planned it right."

"Of course," the girl added. "It'll be easy. Of course—"

Both knew there was no truth in what they said.

Severn and the girl crept back through the passageway, winding the cord into a ball. They did it without light; bruised their head many times on hanging stalactites.

Severn tried to imagine that he were somewhere else. That he and Judy Dunsmuir walked in a green pasture, with the blue sky overhead. But it was no use. He thought for a moment he was losing his mind. That the darkness of the caves was seeping into his brain.

They found a second passageway and followed this as they had the first. When near the end of the cord they ran into difficulties. Trying to save matches, Severn fell into a hole. He fell all of six feet the girl narrowly missed tumbling in on top of him. He climbed out. They skirted the pit and came to a high ceilinged room. There was noise of some kind, a grating, rasping sound from overhead. It filled them with new terror.

A match flame revealed the source of the sound. Hundreds of bats hung from the ceiling of the vaultlike room. They moved restlessly.

"They have a way of getting out of here," Jimmy said. "If the bats can come and go, so can we."

It gave them momentary courage but confidence passed as the last of the cord was unwound. There was still no daylight ahead. They went back the way they had come and were once more in the room where the men had left them.

Severn heard the girl's hard breathing. "You're tired—"

"No time to rest," Judy interrupted.

They made their third try. But the way was blocked by an enormous hole before they had unwound half the cord. Sounds of gurgling water came from the bottom of the pit but there was no way to reach it.

On the next try one of the knots slipped and the cord came apart.

Panic came to Judy Dunsumuer. She clung to the cowboy. Severn did not mind this. Again he tried to dream that they were somewhere else. That the two of them stood under a sycamore with a soft June breeze rustling the leaves overhead.

Jimmy Severn used five matches finding the loose end of the cord. The thought of exhausting his supply chilled him yet the end of those matches was now very definitely in sight.

"Do you mind if I rest for just a minute?" Judy asked.

"Go ahead—"

They sat down, then stretched out upon the hard rock. Five minutes and the cowboy knew, from her breathing, that the girl slept. He listened and that she rested, pleased him. A great sorrow came, that nearly choked him. A sense of helplessness beat into him that made his temples throb. After a time, he, too, slept, slept fitfully from sheer exhaustion.

Time passed, how much neither of them knew. But after a while they were up and struggling on, stumbling in the darkness. They sought escape one way and then another and nothing came from the attempts. Hours passed that seemed like days, and possibly were days. They rested, slept, struggled on. By some miracle and none too soon they found water. The cowboy stumbled into it. It splashed pleasantly around his boots.

"I'll drink fast," Severn croaked.

"If it doesn't make me sick, then you can drink."

He drank, felt no ill effects, and then Judy had her fill. Hunger came, gnawing hunger that left them weak and trembling. The temptation to stay there by the water was nearly overwhelming. To just give up, to stay there for the end.

The girl might have, had it not been for Jimmy Severn.

"We must think of Wes," he told her. "He's waiting for you."

**B**UT TWO matches remained. The cord had all been paid out. They had repeated this process forty or more times. And the cowboy knew they were nearly at the end of their endurance.

"Judy, we'll make our final gamble. We'll just keep going without the cord."

He took her hand and led her in the darkness. They stumbled and fell repeatedly, and each time they fell they thought it was the end. Many times they stopped to rest and sometimes they dozed.

"Listen!" Judy gasped.

With a great effort Severn aroused himself. He heard voices, distant voices, that echoed hollowly. He faced in the direction the sound came. Staggered up.

"Come on, Judy."

With renewed strength they pushed on. The voices became louder. They rounded a bend in the passageway and saw a light. A faint glow of light that nearly blinded them. Neither could speak for the emotion that surged through them.

They were running now, stumbling, falling. Picking themselves up and plunging on.

Reason came to Jimmy Severn. He stopped the girl, held her firmly. "These men we hear probably aren't friends. And they may hear us. If they do, we're lost."

Judy agreed. They moved slowly. The light was getting brighter all the while, the voices louder. They were angry voices.

The cowboy and the girl rounded a bend and stood back horror stricken. They looked into an oblong cave.

Dimly illuminated by the sunlight which came through the narrow entrance. In the center of the cave lay Wes Morley. Surrounding him were three men. One of those men was Gus Curtis, whom Severn had met in the saloon.

"We're givin' you your last chance," Gus Curtis was saying to Morley. "We're tired of monkeyin'—"

Jimmy Severn felt strength surging through him. Strength born of a terrible anger. He forgot everything but that Wes Morley was his friend. On the floor of the cave lay a broken stalactite, a foot long and an inch in diameter at its thickest. He picked it up, grasping it by one end.

Severn sprang at the three men who surrounded his friend. They heard him before he barely started moving. A gun roared. Judy screamed. Jimmy Severn, moving with superhuman strength, plunged on. He brought his limestone club down on a man's head. The man wilted, groaned. The flash of a Colt was so close that it burned his cheek. He struck again with the club. Missed. He grappled with Gus Curtis, wrenched the gun from Curtis' grasp. He pulled trigger. Something had hit him. He was falling....

Jimmy Severn never knew how

much time had passed. He was in bed. Wes Morley and Judy Dunsmuir stood beside the bed.

"You're all right now, Jimmy," Judy whispered. "The doctor just left. You must sleep now, Jimmy. You're in the Z Bar F ranch house. Three dead men are in the cave."

But Jimmy Severn would not be denied the things he wanted to know.

"There's no precious metal on the ranch," Wes Morley explained. "But there's several hundred dollars worth of bat guano in the caves. It was news to me. Bats have been roosting in those caverns for a thousand years. Millions of bats. Those three men discovered the guano and went to a fertilizer company. I found papers in their pockets. They were torturing me into selling the ranch for a hundred dollars."

Wes Morley's voice choked as he grasped the cowboy's hand.

"Jimmy," Judy said, "you're going with us to Denver. And when Wes is out of the hospital you're going to be best man at the wedding."

Jimmy Severn, as he looked at Judy, felt pain around his heart. He knew the pain would be there for a long time. But that was all right. Wes Morley was his friend. ●END

## GIVE ME A GUN!

(continued from page 66)

his dental instruments. He might need them again.

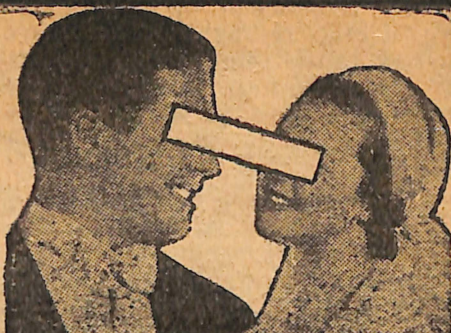
He had considered bringing in the bodies of Bill Novak and Sim Keeler but had finally decided against it as a parade which would look too boastful. He didn't have to worry about either Keeler or Novak. They wouldn't go away. They would lay right where they were until someone came along to bury them. He didn't have to worry about Red Waldron, either. The shock of losing as many teeth as had been extracted from Waldron's jaw on top of his alcoholic condition, would keep him flat for a good many hours.

Frank Ledbetter didn't hurry his return trip. He took it slow and easy. He looked around at the country. This was a good place to live. It

would be nice, late in the afternoon to sit for a while on the porch of Herm Schwab's store and talk to Herm and Doc Rowland. It would be pleasant, this evening, to join in the poker game in the back room of Blakelee's Toltec saloon. Things weren't the same as they had been before Sarah's death, of course. What had just happened could not even begin to balance the score. In some way, however, it had given back to him a measure of pride and a belief in himself as a man. All this was a little vague in Ledbetter's mind. He couldn't have put it into words. He didn't try. The feeling he had was enough. Far ahead, now, he could see the town of Waggoner. He lifted his horse to a trot. ●END

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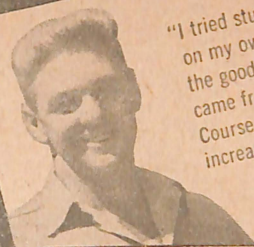
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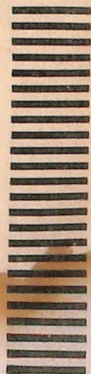
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