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ACTION STORIES

**WALT
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**JOHN
STARR**

**BLAZING GUNS SMASH
THE SILENCE OF THAT
OUTLAW WILDERNESS
RANGE OF
THE DAMNED**
by **GENE CUNNINGHAM**



Mising Ad

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 Drago, whispering its lead-slashed song of death!

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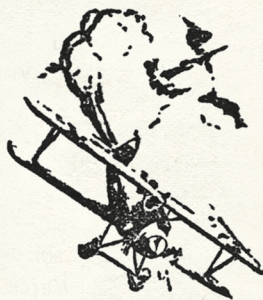


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RANGE OF THE DAMNED

By EUGENE CUNNINGHAM

The fate that killed the Lost Seven was trailing Ranger Drago. Once at Devil's Sink it whispered in his ear. Once in the Sombre hills it coralled him. Even when bank-loot guns led him away it still galloped his lead-slashed trail.

A Complete Fast-Action Novel



DRAGO rode up to the long house of the Duckbill outfit just before noon. Nobody was in sight on what was called the hardest spread in Sombre County. Drago sat Button behind the *casa grande* for perhaps sixty seconds, looking around, then yells from somewhere behind the house turned his head. He shrugged wide

shoulders and kneeled the tall chestnut toward the corrals.

Men were gathered around the circular corral behind the big house. Drago looked them over quickly, carefully, shrewdly. He had slept the night before in the Running M bunkhouse and, pretty well, he had the pedigree of the Duckbills, from Bill Drake down. He identified the owner by his bushy black beard—as Drake turned

from something in the corral to stare at the newcomer.

"Howdy," Drago greeted Drake carefully. "Riding toward the Broken Wheel range. Chance to eat and bed down?"

Drake only nodded. Even if he had recognized a Ranger sergeant—and Rangers were reputed to be highly unwelcome on the Duckbill—nobody could have read Drake's expression.

"Something going on?" Drago asked the grim Duckbill man. "Might think it was a bronc busting."

"Just about," Drake nodded. "Fella wants to buy him a hawse. If he can fawk him, he can buy him half-price. If he can't, I don't sell."

Drago swung down and let the split-reins trail. He wore precisely the correct shade of interest upon his dark face. If something approaching war had caused six murders here in the Sombre County section of Texas' post-oak country, it was on the Duckbill that a man would naturally hunt for explanation. For Bill Drake's oddly named spread was known as the hardest outfit in the neighborhood. And the Devil's Sink was only thirty miles from this corral, only ten miles north of the Duckbill line.

In the round corral a single horse stood with thick neck arched—a big buckskin with the curving nose and prominent eyes of the Arab. Two men were moving toward him, a grizzled cowboy who limped slightly and a stocky, blond youngster who shook out a loop as he walked toward the nervous animal.

The buckskin snorted, gathering himself like a cat. Drago and Bill Drake moved up to look between the close-set pickets of the corral.

"Man-killer?" Drago inquired.

"Uh-uh," Drake answered without taking his eyes from the corral. "But he's plenty mean. He—"

The grizzled man began to walk the buckskin in a circle while the roper moved backward, shaking out more loop. He was abreast the horse when he spun and dropped the big loop on the ground, jerked it shut on the buckskin's forelegs and leaned. The horse crashed down, caught deftly by the feet.

"Set on his head, gran'pa!" the blond boy yelled, holding the lariat taut. "Set

on his neck and twist his head! Show him the sun!"

The limping man snapped the rope, hog-tying under foreleg and hindleg. The blond cowboy moved as fast to tie up the left foreleg. Then, very calmly, he sat down upon the horse, fumbled in his overalls jacket for tobacco and papers and made a cigarette.

"All right. All right." Bill Drake called from beside Drago. "Come on. Ride him. You fawk him and you bought yourself a hundred dollars' worth of hawse for fawty dollars."

"I'll ride him, Mister," the blond cowboy said evenly, without so much as a glance at the speaker. "Let him come a sweat, oncet. Then I'll ride him. Trouble with you Duckbills is you think because *you* can't stick a hawse when he comes uncorked, nobody can. Me, I'm a Powder River man. I wouldn't give a damn for a hawse *wasn't* snorty."

"And he'll do her," Bill Drake said under his breath, rather as if speaking to himself.

"Good rider?" Drago asked.

Drake turned his bearded face about. Dark eyes were blank. He shrugged non-committally.

"Never seen him in a saddle," he grunted. "He rode in last night, hitting the chuckline same's you. Name's Jack Chittus, he says. All I know is he wants that hawse."

HE turned back to the corral and Drago, staring at his side face, puzzled this small problem. For there had been something in Drake's tone which made it plain that the Duckbill man knew something about that hard-faced youngster.

"All right," Jack Chittus grunted suddenly to his helper, getting up. "Let's bridle him."

He jerked the tie from the under feet while the grizzled man forced a bit between the buckskin's teeth and buckled the throat latch of the headstall. The horse scrambled up, to stand on three legs. Skillfully, carefully, Jack Chittus saddled him. A dark little cowboy at the corral gate yelled a question and, getting Chittus' curt answer, opened the gate. Chittus swung into the saddle and the grizzled Duckbill man cocked an eye at him.

"Got ary last wish?" he asked Chittus. "That buckskin has th'owed all the cowboys around heah that's had the luck other places. Mind when y' git outside—if y' make it outside with him—about the sharp rocks. Pick y' spot to land."

"Gran'pa," the blond cowboy said with sudden flash of teeth in his hard, young face, "on Powder River we aim to stick with our hawses. We wear our boots tighter'n you folks. We aim to ride and do mighty little walking."

"Ride him!" Bill Drake called from beside Drago. "More talking than riding, looks like to me."

Drago caught a queer flash of expression on the face of the Duckbill owner. Almost a grin it seemed to him. But Drake saw him staring and straightened his face instantly.

"Don't you worry about my riding, Mister," Chittus answered Drake, shifting in the saddle and hooking his stirrups. "Tell you what: See these two dollars?"

He fished in his overalls and held up two silver coins.

"A' right! Me, I'm going to set 'em under my legs. If I lose 'em, I pay you eighty for buckskin. If I got 'em when he promises to be a nice li'l colt, you donate me the hawse. Fair enough? Or does the Duckbill bet?"

"It's a bet!" Drake assured him, with that small grin flashing beneath his beard for an instant. "Yank that slip-knot, Limpy. Let's see what our noisy buster can do."

The grizzled cowboy freed the buckskin's lifted leg. Under Chittus' thighs went the coins. Then he jerked off his battered hat and slapped the buckskin across the face and spanked the haunches. The buckskin squealed and dropped his head.

He skyrocketed, hit the ground with a groan, scooping corral-dirt with stiffened forefeet. He plunged sidewise to scrape the very pickets of the corral. He bucked, climbing the sky, slinging his feet from under him until the man seemed to lie horizontal while the yellowish belly of the horse was turned to the sun. But Chittus gave with every move. The buckskin lunged through the gate, switched his bucking to a series of short piston jumps.

"Do-se-do!" Bill Drake muttered behind Drago, staring as if fascinated. "I

bet on it. Yes, sir. Bet on it. He's a buster from who-laid-the-chunk. Knowed it."

THE bucking was not so violent, now. The buckskin was lathered. He was not landing with the same violent force. Chittus slapped him scornfully and waked only a half-dozen buck-jumps. Then the buckskin broke suddenly into a lope and Chittus spurred him into a pounding gallop. He took him far out while the Duckbill men around the corral stared at one another and shook their heads.

"If that don't plumb tear the carpet," Limpy grunted, "then I'm a rimfire man. Was a time when I could set a bronc without having his parents' consent! He rode that outlaw. He's thumbing him, now! And look at that hammerhead take it. Won't do nothing but lope."

Chittus turned the buckskin and brought him at racing gallop back to the corral. He pulled in before Bill Drake and lifted right leg, left leg, to hold up the silver dollars.

"Well," the Duckbill owner admitted in a sad voice, "the hawse seems to be your personal private property, young fella. I bet."

Drago studied him again. There seemed to be more behind Drake's tone than his words indicated. But, apparently he was the only one there to notice the peculiarity.

He watched Chittus strip his saddle from the buckskin. Later, while he loafed beside the watering trough with two Duckbill men, swapping lies and waiting for supper, Chittus came up. He was younger than he had looked in the corral, and grimmer of face. There was arrogance about him. Drago wondered if that were due to the ride he had made, a ride none on the Duckbill had seemed able to make.

"Stranger, huh?" Chittus said casually to Drago. "Riding on toward the Broken Wheel?"

Drago nodded blandly and told the youngster that his ride of the buckskin was fine. Chittus laughed tolerantly.

"Some folks is good at playing the pianner, some rides the rough strings. Me, I never tried the music-end. Reckon you are strange to this neighborhood same as me."

Drago nodded again. From under droop-

ing lids and from behind blank face, he analyzed this swaggering boy.

Stranger in the Sombre country he might be. But—Drago added inwardly—Bill Drake had notions about Jack Chittus. What that might mean he had no idea. Sure a mixed-up range. Six important cowmen are murdered within six months, all in or around the Devil's Sink. Rod Ilers of the Long I, Clarence Quinett of the Hat, Ira Freese of the Lazy F, Dan Zelman of the Cross Z, Lance Newell of the Walking N, and Yoakum Utt of the U Bar. Six of 'em! Smallpox would hardly do better than somebody's lead has done. And Sheriff Zeans Ozman says he hasn't got a clue. Bill Drake runs a hard case outfit on the very edge of the Sink, an outfit that ships premium beef and good horses and has the name of being careless about shaking out a loop.

He thought that anything out of the ordinary was worth considering, even a young saddle-tramp who seemed to rouse mixed feelings in the grim, bearded Duckbill owner.

So, until supper came with the clang of the cook's triangle, he kept in Jack Chittus' neighborhood and listened to the boy tell of riding in Wyoming and Montana, riding in which he had always bested the other contestants. Possibly because Drago was the only man about who was not a Duckbill hand, Chittus seemed to address himself to the Ranger. And Drago nodded solemnly after every tale of buckers mastered.

"I'll side you, tomorrow," Chittus said at last. "I'm going up to Sombre, maybe on to the Broken Wheel after that."

II

THE buckskin was pure outlaw again by next morning but Jack Chittus mastered him easily. Drago, with Button saddled, stood beside Drake and watched as on the afternoon before. Drake stared fixedly at the boy who had won a good horse from him. Then, abruptly, he turned to Drago.

"Well, Hoolihan," he drawled, "we'll be seeing each other again, some time, I reckon. Hope you enjoy your time in Sombre and the post-oak country. Some like it. Some don't."

"Reckon it's like that all over," Drago said innocently. "My pa was a school-teacher and the restlessest man. Always a-hunting the place he could settle down in and not find a thing wrong with. Always hitched his hawse with a slipknot, he was so certain he was going on. We moved so much our two hound dawgs never slept nowheres but under the hind axle of the wagon—they wanted to be ready to trot along the next mawning."

Jack Chittus brought the buckskin around in a big circle and sat him, grinning down at the Duckbill owner.

"Well, I am glad to meet the Duckbill," he told Drake. "For I got me a hawse that is pure hawse. Lucky for me nobody on the spread could handle him."

"Well," Drake said thoughtfully, "I reckon you are lucky. Only one other man on the place, when you rode him, could've done the job. And he never wanted the buckskin."

"You, I reckon?" Jack Chittus inquired, grinning.

"No-o. No, I'm too old to be spraddling snorty hawses. The man I'm talking about used to do some busting you couldn't beat—even on Powder River—up around Fo't Worth. Well, see you some more."

He turned abruptly and walked toward the house. Drago stared after him with small frown creasing dark brows. Then he shrugged and caught a stirrup to swing up. He and Chittus rode north together and the boy was quiet for the first time since Drago had known him. But, after a mile, Chittus shook his blond head and stared blankly at his companion.

"Funny," he said. "Might've thought the old tarantula didn't think so much of my ride. Wonder who it was he meant was on the place yesterday who could've matched me on Buck, here?"

"I'm a stranger to the place," Drago evaded him. "Might have been one of the old hands."

But, coupling Drake's remark about enjoying a stay in Sombre County with that Fort Worth reference, he shook his head and asked himself if Bill Drake had recognized him.

"He might have seen me in those days, back there. Might have seen me ride old Eel, or Funeral Wagon. Well, I never expected to come into this country and

manage to stay under cover. Chihuahua may be able to do it but eventually Sergeant Drago will have to come from under the whiskers and admit that he's investigating."

There was little talk during the rest of the day until they dropped into the end of the Devil's Sink, a rugged cañon spiky with shafts of rock. Chittus waved a hand and spoke as if thinking aloud:

"Lots of men've been killed in here. The bottom of the cañon, you see, it's the road from a lot of outfits to Sombre. We're taking a short-cut, across the rim. It'll save time."

Then he looked hard and straight at Drago's blank face. The grimness of his young features was increased but Drago only nodded and looked from rock to rock.

"Hear they're building a railroad branch line around here som'r's," he said easily. "Boys on the Running M was talking about it when I bedded down with 'em the other night."

Chittus seemed to draw a long breath and relax. He nodded and talked more evenly:

"I heard that along with the story about the Devil's Sink. Us riders from the nawthern ranges—"

Whang! The echoes of a rifle followed like the sound of shattering glass as the sound of that shot rang up the cañon, sending them spurring right and left to the shelter of boulders.

DRAGO came out of the saddle and Button stood, split-reins trailing. The carbine was out of the saddle-scarb as Drago twisted. He looked side-long and grinned briefly, appreciatively, at the sight of Chittus already down behind a castle-like rock.

"Up on that hogback!" Drago called to the boy. "Let's do the old double-up on him. You shoot your Winchester empty and I'll take up the war. Maybe, we'll fool him."

Chittus immediately began to blaze at the ridge over which the shot had come. He squeezed trigger rapidly and the sound of his shooting made Drago grin reminiscently, for it was so like the rattle of fire he had heard many times in days past, when that battle-scarred veteran, Carlos José de Guerra y Morales, better known

as "Chihuahua Joe," had sided him in this range war or that.

He watched the ridge and, just as he had hoped, with cessation of Jack Chittus' shooting a head and a rifle appeared over that hogback.

"I'm no Chihuahua with a long gun," he said aloud, pulling down his sights. "But even a one-eyed man could hit that—"

With the flat, metallic report of his shots, thrown back from the rocky walls of the Devil's Sink, that half-seen rifleman jerked and came sliding down a stony slope.

Drago watched alertly. There was no sign of a second man on the hogback. So, at the last, he called to Jack Chittus.

"All right. I think we have abolished our bushwhacker."

"Looks very much like it," the blond cowboy answered. "If he's not dead he's giving a Number One imitation. Cover me and I'll take a look."

Drago reloaded quickly and sighted at the ridge over which that rifleman had come half-rolling, half-sliding. He watched the ridge but also he watched Jack Chittus as the boy moved from his cover, taking advantage of every rock and cactus and stunted bush, edging up the slope to where the still figure sprawled. But no movement on the ridge indicated a backer for that assassin who had fired upon them. Chittus made the body and, after brief examination, waved an arm.

Drago got slowly to his feet and walked up to him, carbine ready. The dead man, for it was a dead man, he studied intently if quickly. Then he shrugged.

"I do'no' who it'd be," he said, careful to hold to that slurred range-English he had used upon the Duckbill. "But she looks like somebody was aiming to keep folks from using around the Devil's Sink."

"Sho' do," Jack Chittus agreed, staring down at the brown-faced and blue-eyed man. Then his Winchester jerked, to cover Drago. The grim young face was like cold bronze. "It certainly does. And it looks, also, as if someone thought he could walk the rocks on his way to the Devil's Sink. I think you'd better do some talking, some truthful talking, Mr. Hoolihan."

Drago shrugged. The Winchester

sagged in his hands. Chittus had the drop with a cocked carbine.

"I do'n' what this is all about," Drago said easily, but watching the boy. "Seems to me like we-all's kind of passengers in the same boat. Somebody don't want us to be projecting around this part of the country."

"Don't try that on me!" Chittus snarled. "You may be a clever head, in some places. But if you really are bright you ought to know when you're not fooling anybody. I had my doubts about you, on the Duckbill. Maybe it was because Bill Drake watched you so closely, seemed to be studying you. Then you forgot yourself a while ago, forgot to try to talk like a cowpuncher. Why—" he looked superciliously up and down Drago's lean six feet "you don't even *look* like a cowboy. Come on. You'd better talk, and make sense when you talk. Or there will be two men found here the first time a railroad construction gang wanders this way. Talk! I'm not in a humor to be hurrahed right now."

"I resent your tone," Drago said easily. "I might be a lot of things, but *cowboy* is one thing I certainly am. You asked, a little while back, about the man on the Duckbill who could ride that buckskin you won from Drake, the man Drake mentioned without naming. Much as it pains a modest man—myself—I'm going to have to break down and admit that *I* was the one he referred to. Yes, sir, cowboy is something I've been for a long time and—"

HE moved flashingly, sliding to the side, twisting his body and striking out. Chittus' carbine crashed to the ground. Drago was covering him with the Colt jerked from under an arm before the boy had more than staggered.

"I might even be more than a plain cowboy," Drago continued calmly, just as if there had been no interruption. "I *might* work for the Cattlemen's Association. Not that it's any affair of yours, of course. Not that you're old enough, or tough enough, to signify. The point is, I'm not the only one Bill Drake was watching—studying—on the Duckbill. It happens to be my business to watch people."

Jack Chittus stared at him, then looked down at the dropped Winchester. He was

suddenly very young, very much taken aback. He lifted his reddened face to Drago.

"All right, then, I was wrong. You're a stock-detective. But you did act funny on the Duckbill. And I stick to it that you don't look to me like a cowboy."

"That *might* be because you don't know a hell of a lot about cowboys," Drago suggested gently. "It happens that I was punchin' li'l' cows around when you, probably, were hanging onto the front gate waiting for Papa to come home—a couple of years ago, say. You can ride a little bit, nobody will argue about that. But don't try that Powder River story too often. Some of us have forded the Powder in our day. Tell folks you're from the brushy country, then your thirty-two-foot rope and your double-barreled kak will be explained more easily. I laughed when you said northern ranges and I'd looked at your outfit. Bill Drake was laughing at something, too. Maybe it wasn't about that."

Jack Chittus' flush deepened. He scowled at Drago but suddenly shrugged defiantly.

"All right. You caught me. I never was on the northern ranges. But it's none of your business why I said what I said. And I can ride. You know that well enough."

"Know this fellow?" Drago asked him abruptly, waving with Colt at the dead man. "I *am* a stranger in this neck of the woods."

"He looks like Ingram Warren," Chittus said absently. Then, as if suddenly conscious that he had betrayed himself, he lowered at Drago. "I don't know," he said sulkily.

"Ingram Warren!" Drago grunted, staring at the dead man. "Then I'm in five hundred dollars. For he was one of the gang that stuck up the Denver train beyond Fort Worth, last month. There's a reward for him and for Bowen Gates, who was supposed to be the Big Auger of that job."

He looked thoughtfully at Chittus and lowered his Colt.

"Look here. There's no point that I can see for us playing at cross-purposes. You're no run-of-the-garden cowhand. You may have some special business in

Sombre County that needs a false name. I'm not going into that, now. But if you want to open up, now—tell me how you know this is Ingram Warren and all that, I'll play fair with you. I'll split the reward."

For an instant, it seemed that the boy was impressed, that he would tell what he knew. Then his hard young face went grimmer, more defiant. He lifted his chin and eyed Drago sullenly.

"I don't know what you're talking about. I never saw this hairpin in my life. So if you want to shoot, then shoot! It was what I was going to do to you."

Drago shook his head, the corners of mouth and eyes and brows lifting in a small, satanic grin.

"Go get that outlaw of yours. Get aboard him. I'll leave your Winchester where it's lying. Don't cross my trail again, young fellow."

III

THE construction camp was a tent city. Lighted by kerosene flares and lamps within the tents, it reminded Drago vividly of boom towns he had known across the West. Somewhere a piano made tinny sound, men and women sang or yelled or merely talked in raucous voices. He grinned and pushed Button on through darkness into the beginning of the street that wound snakily across the flat.

There was a saloon in what seemed the largest tent of the place. Horses stood before it. Cowboys from the surrounding ranges were evidently favoring the camp tonight. Drago let the split reins trail and walked into the saloon. There was a long bar made of pine lumber and it was crowded with men. The construction gang included members of a dozen races.

"Italians, Mexicans, Basques, Anglos of all kinds," he said to himself, pushing into a vacant yard of space at the center of the bar. "Now, the question is—Where is Chihuahua? Of course, if there's a dance going on anywhere he'll be swinging some blond around the floor."

The idea of Chihuahua laboring with pick and shovel in the contractor's crew amused him. Chihuahua was too thoroughly the *vaquero* to get any pleasure from ditch-digging. But it had seemed

necessary to have a man with this hell-roaring outfit which was building the railroad branch line into Sombre County.

A squat, bull-necked man next to Drago turned boozily and looked him up and down.

"Another cowboy! The damn' woods is full of 'em. They're worse'n ticks. Who the hell you think you are, anyhow, you ——"

"I'm the man who hit Billy Patterson," Drago said softly.

He smashed the belligerent one in face and belly with two crashing blows. He stood with dark head on one side, tight grin flashing, one eye squinted against the upwreathing smoke of his cigarette. Men turned at the bar to gape from the bull-necked one to the man who had sent him unconscious to the dirt floor with blows too fast for any there to follow.

"Anybody else that don't like cowboys?" Drago inquired, looking from face to face.

"Ah, Root's always like that when he gits him a skinful," the bartender nearest Drago said uneasily. "But you're the first that ever could hold your own with him. He is plenty tough. I never seen you hit him. Bet he never, either! Have one on the house, cowboy."

Drago nodded and accepted the bottle and tin cup shoved at him. The whiskey was rotgut, made on the premises, he decided, for consumption by men interested in bite, not quality. He looked thoughtfully over the drinkers. Root stirred and Drago twisted slightly to face him. The bull-necked laborer sat up and stared vacantly about. A roar of laughter greeted him and he scrambled to his feet.

"Who hit me? Where's that——"

Drago shifted his feet and moved quickly. This time he drove alternating rights and lefts into Root's middle. Six blows caught the staggering man and he dropped again.

A slender youngster, with flashing grin on daredevil face, came out of the line of drinkers and looked at Root, then at Drago. He was in overalls and flannel shirt and rough brogans. But there was something of intelligence, breeding, about him, for all his two-days' stubble of brown beard.

"If that fails to convince him," he said, "then he's real hard to convince. You'll have to use a sledge."

HE gestured toward the bottle and fumbled in a pocket for money. Drago returned his grin.

"My name's Gorman," the stranger told him. "Bob Gorman. And—" He stopped abruptly and pushed in beside Drago. "And I take it that you're the Ranger."

"Ranger?" Drago repeated. "What makes you think that?"

"We've got a deputy sheriff sort of policing the camp. The noble sheriff at Sombre sent him along to keep us from biting each other. But the rumor has been that a Ranger would appear, to take charge during the deputy's moments of irresponsibility—the twenty-odd hours of every day when he's drunk."

"Oh," Drago said. "Well, I suppose a Ranger would be a handy article in a camp like this if the deputy's a boozier."

He looked up and down the bar.

"In other words," Gorman drawled, eyes twinkling, "you aren't committing yourself. Fair enough. It's no business of mine, of course. But it was my guess that when Root picked a row with you he'd met the famous Texas Rangers, personally and painfully, one time or another."

A tall and shabby figure came into the saloon before Drago could reply to this cheerful young man. Chihuahua moved with bare, black head on one side. He stood over Root and clucked tongue against teeth:

"*Amor de dios!*" he cried. "She's them fierce, eat-everybody-alive Root, no? And she's go to sleep in them floor, w'at the hell. Ah! Ah! She's too sad. Them poor Root."

His bright sea-blue eyes flashed from face to face. He looked at Bob Gorman speculatively.

"You're do these bad thing to Root?" he asked without so much as a glance at Drago. "W'en she's wake up, Root, she's git ver' mad, *amigo*. Mabbe she's run you out from these camp."

"Maybe I'm lucky," Gorman said with a widening grin. "But, so far, in my twenty-seven years, nobody has ever run me anywhere. Root or anybody else. I didn't cool him, Morales. It was the cowboy, here."

Chihuahua regarded Drago interestedly, bare head again on the side. He nodded

slowly, mouth curving under the new-grown mustache.

"She's *un vaquero*," he drawled. "*Tiene Ud. el español, señor?* Have you the Spanish?"

"Huh?" Drago countered. "Talk English, fella."

"In them Spanish, me, I'm better to say how she's fine that you're fix Root," Chihuahua told him. "You're have them drink, now?"

"I'm buying it," Gorman said smilingly. "You and I seem to feel much the same, Morales. Well, it may be that our cowboy can handle two drinks."

He was pouring for them when Root sat up for the second time. Drago watched the laborer but Root seemed uninterested. He staggered to his feet and went lurching toward the door. Gorman looked after the swaying figure and there was something like calculation in his face, Drago thought.

"He's a sick man," Gorman said abruptly. "But when he gets rid of his load you'd better watch for him. He can be right dangerous."

Drago shrugged and asked the distance to Sombre, and to the Broken Wheel range where, he said, he heard men were being hired. Gorman called it thirty miles to the county seat.

"But why hit for the Broken Wheel? Why not try the Walking N? Saul Adkinson's running that for the estate since Lance Newell was killed in the Sink. He sells beef to this camp and I heard him mention the other day that he needed some good men. Since you're really a—cowboy there ought to be a job on the Walking N for you."

"It's interesting," Drago admitted. "Well, I think I'll straddle my *caballo* and hit the trail."

"Watch for Root!" Gorman counseled him, smiling. "He's a vindictive bird."

DRAGO nodded absently. A stocky Mexican was coming toward them, a shambling, middle-aged man who seemed to look at nothing but his heavy shoes. He turned in at Drago's elbow and in English that had hardly any accent ordered whiskey. Drago saw that Chihuahua was watching the newcomer. Gorman seemed to have no interest in him. The bartender

called the Mexican "Juan" and talked to him casually.

"Well, I'll be seeing you again, somewhere," Drago told Gorman and Chihuahua carelessly.

"Surely," Gorman agreed. "Hope you land a job on the Walking N, Hoolihan. Adkinson seems like a good man, if a little on the rough side."

"What makes you think I go by Hoolihan?" Drago demanded.

"Why, didn't you tell me your name was Hoolihan?" Gorman asked with blank, puzzled stare. "I thought you did."

"Maybe I did," Drago conceded. "Well—*hasta la vista!*"

But as he went outside to scoop up the reins and mount in leisurely fashion, he wondered about Gorman. He had *not* used the alias which he had given on the Duckbill. Yet the smiling and pleasant young man had called him "Hoolihan."

"It's just possible that Jack Chittus came through here after he left me in the Sink. And that he talked to Gorman."

He shrugged. After all, he had a very definite errand in Sombre County—the solving of six murders. Whatever Gorman was, unless he had connection with those murders, he was of no interest to him. He rode at the walk up the narrow street between lighted tents. There was the dance-place, ablaze with the glare of kerosene lamps, noisy with piano and fiddle and banjo and the voices of men and women. He went past it and on to the edge of the camp. Here he reined in to sit in darkness.

Chihuahua appeared as a huge shadow without sound. He laughed softly as he stood at the stirrup.

"Me, I'm think you're make them Bob Gorman wonder," he said. "W'en you're go, she's tell me you're mabbe one of these Texas Ranger."

"He called me 'Hoolihan' when I'd not used the name," Drago grunted. "I'm wondering about him, how he knew and why he's so interested in me."

"Oh, in these camp there will be many w'at's never tell their right name or w'y they're here," Chihuahua said easily. "But—" he slipped into Spanish, speaking slowly, thoughtfully—"of these murders which the Adjutant General wishes us to clear, I have done not so much, Gip. It

was the banker-rancher, Lance Newell, who asked for a Ranger. He was owner of the Walking N and lived in the town. Saul Adkinson has managed the ranch since Newell died in the Sink. I have not seen this Adkinson but his name in the county is that of a killer. Yet he has not been charged with any killing. Men are afraid of him."

"You haven't come across anything?"

"I am not certain," Chihuahua told him in a troubled voice. "It may be that something I learned from a drunken cowboy the other night has bearing. Years past, those six who are dead, with a man named Drake of the Duckbill, banded together to stop rustling in this neighborhood. But this is no more than a tale. None knows certainly that the Long I, the Lazy F, the Duckbill, the Walking N, the Hat, the Cross-Z and the U Bar joined in such an association. But I believe it. For by the tales I have heard, men vanished on the range. Their bodies were found or—not found. Always, they were small cowmen who had been accused by those of the brands I have said, of rustling. Then Saul Adkinson came to Sombre three years ago. And more killings were done after Adkinson began to manage the Walking N—killings done in the country he was known to ride over."

"It has happened before," Drago said slowly. "But, even if these killings—I mean the deaths of Freese, Ilers, Newell, Quinett, Utt and Zelman—have come because of killings they themselves planned, how will we know which men injured by the 'association' are responsible? And will we not find that killer somewhere on a ranch or in Sombre rather than here in the camp?"

"*Quien sabe?*" Chihuahua admitted. "But you saw the Mexican, Juan, who came into the saloon? He knows this country, yet says he has never seen it before. Those six were killed at very long range with bullet of a foreign make and off-caliber—an Austrian Schutzer bullet. I have never seen Juan with a rifle and I have followed him and searched his few poor belongings. But he is at least as good with the rifle as I am. I have seen him shoot. And—on three of the murder-days he was not in camp."

Drago grunted.

IV

THEY were silent for an instant. Then Drago asked the obvious question. Chihuahua nodded in the dark.

"Yes, there was among those hurt a Mexican. Medina, his name was. He had but one eye. Two years he has been gone. None seems to know if he were killed or but ran away, he and his daughter Margarita. But there are those who have seen our Juan Ramos of this camp who should know him if he were Medina. Also, this Juan Ramos has two eyes."

"What if it were a brother or cousin?"

"That is so," Chihuahua admitted.

"Well, you will go to Sombre, now?"

"I must go to Sombre and tell this sheriff, Ozman, that I am a Ranger. Because I killed a man in the Sink—"

Briefly, he told of his experience on the Duckbill, of the strange boy, Jack Chittus, of the attack upon them made by Ingram Warren. Chihuahua clucked at the end.

"It could be, of course, that this Warren shot, not at you, but at the boy."

"It could be. Also, it could be that I was seen and recognized. Well, you stay here until I need you. You have the pinto and your clothes where you can quickly get them."

Chihuahua laughed ruefully.

"She's in them house of one friend, twenty mile away. And w'en you're need me, Gip, me, I'm ver' glad. For these shovel and pick, she's not so nice for them lazy man. My hand, she's blister."

Drago laughed and gathered up his reins. And from somewhere across the dark and narrow street there came a shot—and another and a third. Automatically, the two veterans moved. Drago could not see what Chihuahua did. It was too black, there beyond the last tent. He was whipping a Colt out of his shoulder holster as the lead sang past his head. Chihuahua it was who got in the first shots.

On the ground, Drago called softly to Chihuahua. Then the two of them ran quietly in the direction from which the firing had come. There was only silence, now.

They all but stumbled over the body. Drago bent and with a touch knew that the man was dead or nearly dead. He ventured to scratch a match. It was Root and

there was a pistol under his limp hand. Chihuahua had recognized the face. He made a snarling, contented sound.

"She's not like to have them fist in the face, hah? So, she's try to be them bush-whacker."

Men came crowding up. The body of Root was carried back to the dance-place. A bleary and gray man staggered up. He wore a badge on his dirty chambray shirt.

"What's it?" he demanded. "Who done the killing?"

Drago, looking about, found Bob Gorman staring from the rim of the crowd. Gorman shook his head.

"You were lucky," he told Drago seriously. "Root was bad medicine when he'd had a lot to drink—as he had, tonight—and when he was crowded. I warned you. But it seems that you didn't need a warning."

"What's it?" the deputy growled. "Talk up, somebody."

Drago told him of the fight in the saloon and of the shot out of the darkness. The deputy nodded owlshly. Bob Gorman pushed closer to him.

"That was the way it was," he said. "I warned Hoolihan to be on the watch for Root."

"I—I—" Root gasped suddenly, moving on the floor at their feet. "I—What happened? I—never—"

THEN he slumped. This time there was no doubting that he was dead. The deputy shrugged bleakly.

"Reckon it was one of them things," he said. "When a man shoots at somebody else, in Sombre County, we call her self-defense—or suicide—or something. Reckon you're clear, Hoolihan. But the charge for burying him's twenty dollars. Got it?"

Grimly, Drago got from his pocket a gold piece and handed it over. He ignored Chihuahua and pushed out of the tent.

"I'm going to Sombre," he called back to the deputy. "I'll tell the sheriff about it, there."

This time he mounted and rode straight out of the camp. He pushed steadily on through the night and at dawn made the county seat. The court house was of field stone, a high, narrow, yellowish building. But the sheriff's office was locked and his knocking roused only an ancient from a

house across the street. Drago asked for Sheriff Ozman and the old man jerked a thumb toward a white house that stood to itself on the very rim of town.

Drago thanked him and rode that way. It needed more knocking to bring out a fat man with shifty green eyes and a baldish pink head. Drago looked at Ozman without pleasure.

"No use beating around the bush," he said curtly. "I'm Sergeant Drago of the Rangers. Ordered into Sombre County to give you a hand while the railroad's building."

"Oh," the sheriff said vaguely. "Oh, yeh. Well, I got me a deputy with the camp, all time. But I'll appreciate you a-helping out. That's a right tough bunch in the camp."

"Coming through the Sink," Drago said drawlingly, "Ingram Warren, one of the robbers wanted for the Denver stick-up beyond Fort Worth last month, decided to swap lead with me. I left him under some rocks where I killed him. And in camp, last night—"

Ozman listened to the story of Root. His green eyes were never still. Drago found himself wondering how much of all this the sheriff had known before. He told himself that it was impossible for Ozman to have heard either of Warren or of Root. But also, he thought that he would trust Ozman no farther than he could see him.

"I'll send somebody out to bring in Warren," the sheriff nodded. "Reward'll go to you, di-rect, of course. Well, like I said, the railroad's brung in some tough folks. Like we never had enough trouble before with all our big cowmen gitting killed. Reckon you heard about that?"

"Somebody told me you'd had some trouble. Who was the last one murdered?"

"Lance Newell. And he was a fine man, Drago. Mighty fine. Run the Sombre Bank and the Walking N. Friends with everybody. Left a lovely daughter, Marian. His brother is here from Dallas, a-settling up Lance's estate. Wesley Newell, his name is. He's a lawyer and a lay-preacher. Seems like a fine man. They're out on the ranch, right now, Marian and her uncle. Went out to see Saul Adkinson. He's a fine man, Saul is."

Drago stared at him, disliking the oily

smile and even oilier voice. Suddenly, he asked the sheriff if he knew a man named Chittus. Ozman shook his head, green eyes focussing for the first time on Drago.

"Never was no Chittuses in Sombre," he claimed. "Why?"

"I met a young cowboy, good bronc' rider, by that name. Any cowboy on a big buckskin, a stranger to you, in town?"

"Was. But he's gone ag'in. Chittus, huh? He never give a name. Sulky kind? That'd be the one I see in here. But he rode out. Says he's heading for the Busted Wheel hunting work. Asked a lot of questions about the outfits in Sombre. Somebody says he was going to the Walking N, to hit Saul Adkinson for a job before he went on to the Wheel."

"Well," Drago told him abruptly, "I'll be hunting breakfast, then. I'll be around, here and there. Feel free to call on me for anything I can do. Oh! These murders of yours—have you ever stumbled onto any clues about 'em?"

A GAIN the green eyes narrowed and were steady on his face. There was fear in the eyes, in the jerk of the loose mouth, Drago thought. But Ozman shook his head and his voice was only sad when he answered.

"Not a thing. And that's what gits me, Drago. Every one of them men was a good friend of mine. It was through them I won out in the election. Yes, sir. Ira Freeze and Rod Ilers and Clarence Quinett and Yoakum Utt and Dan Zelman and Lance Newell and Saul Adkinson."

"But Adkinson's not dead!"

"No. No, he ain't dead. But—"

"But it begins to seem that, with the others of your crowd bushwhacked, it's Adkinson next," Drago nodded. "And—then the sheriff who was the friend of them all," he added maliciously.

"Uh—I do' no," Ozman said jerkily. But the twitching of his face told Drago that it was precisely this fear which he had seen in the sheriff's expression.

As he rode down the waking street, hunting for a restaurant, Drago considered the string of mysterious murders. He thought of the story Chihuahua had repeated, of a group of cattlemen making their own small association for the prevention of rustling—and of the subsequent murder of each man

with the sole exception of Bill Drake.

"I think," he told Button softly, "that I want a look at Mr. Saul Adkinson. Apparently, he's the chief survivor, if we except the noble sheriff who has the spots and earmarks of the famous trained poodle. And when Mr. Adkinson came into the county and went to work for Lance Newell, killings became even more common."

He nodded grimly as he swung down before a narrow-fronted stone building which stood with open door.

"And if the executor of Lance Newell's estate is on the Walking N with the heiress to the Newell bank and ranch, I'm pretty sure it's worth a trip out."

The restaurant-owner was a small, foxy-faced and red-haired man. He stared at Drago, then thrust out a hand over the counter. Drago looked at him carefully but did not place him as anyone he had ever known.

"The Ranger!" the little man cried. "I ain't seen you in—why, it was before you got charged with that murder and all. Then you got cleared up and back in the Force. Don't you remember me a-tending bar in the Longhorn at San Antonio?"

Drago lied and said he remembered him perfectly. The little man beamed as he fried a steak and potatoes and brought coffee up to the counter. Then it occurred to Drago that here was a source of information. He began to put questions deftly and within ten minutes had verification of all that Chihuahua had told him about the "association" of ranchers in Sombre County. The little man, his name was "Red" Borrum, talked incessantly. He had seen Jack Chittus in Sombre.

"Something powerful familiar about him, too. But I reckon maybe it's one of them resembling things you hear about. He says he never was in this country before. Says he's from the brushy country. Yeh, I reckon he just looks like somebody I seen oncet."

"The way everybody talks," Drago said carefully, stirring his coffee, "this Saul Adkinson is about eleven feet tall."

"He's tough people. Funniest man I ever seen in some ways. Mostly, when a man drinks, he kind of warms up and wants to fight or he likes everybody. But that man is one of them cold drinkers. More he takes in, more he gits colder and colder

and liker to a snake. Not that I'd want Saul to hear me say anything like that! Only time he ever opened up the least bit was when he was setting right here at this—here counter and I says something about the Territory and he admitted he used to live over there. Then he shut right up. Well, I reckon he'll marry Marian Newell and inherit him the bank and the Walking N."

HE gabbled on, prodded here and there, now and then, by Drago. He took a dollar and followed to the door. Drago got Button and thanked him, sincerely, for there had been a good deal to think about in the miscellaneous gossip of Red Borrum.

On the road to the Walking N, he considered the various things Red Borrum had said, about Lance Newell and Rod Ilers and Dan Zelman and the others of that half-dozen who, with Bill Drake of the Duck-bill, had apparently made up an association to control Sombre County.

"Elbert Prong. . . They accused him of rustling, according to Borrum. Then Saul Adkinson came into the country and suddenly Prong was found dead out on the range. The Sombre Bank held a mortgage on the EP outfit. They foreclosed and even got a deficiency judgment against the estate. And the EP was added to Newell's Walking N. *Por dios!*"

He sat straighter in the saddle and stared over the wilderness of post-oak range.

"I wonder if Elbert Prong had any family. Borrum didn't mention anybody surviving."

He made the Walking N house in mid-afternoon. A girl was on the long veranda, a pretty, dark girl. She stared at him, then when he took off his hat, smiled. A tired, gray man came out to stand beside her. Drago got down.

"I'm Sergeant Drago of the Rangers," he told her, seeing no point, here, to trying concealment. "I think you're Miss Newell."

"Marian Newell," she said. "This is my uncle, Wesley Newell from Dallas. Uncle Wes is settling my father's estate. We came out yesterday to pick me a saddle horse. Mr. Adkinson, our manager, is somewhere on the range. Won't you put your horse in the corral and stay the night?"

When he had turned Button into the

corral and come back, the gray executor of Lance Newell's estate was smoking on the veranda. He looked curiously at Drago.

"A pretty country," he nodded, in agreement with Drago's casual remark. "But a hard country, too. I don't think I'd want to live here. My brother liked it. He came here from Dallas thirty years ago and went from banking to ranching and back again to the bank. He—There's Adkinson, the manager, coming up."

Adkinson was as tall as Drago, and as dark. He might have been anywhere from thirty to forty-five, in age. There was nothing about his quiet, smooth-shaven face to tell. He came around from the corral and nodded courteously to Drago when Wesley Newell introduced them.

"Glad to know y'," he said in slow drawl. "Where's Marian, Mr. Newell? I got her a pinto that is a pinto. Reckon she ain't seen one the like of it."

He went on into the house. Drago studied the weary man opposite him. Something troubled Wesley Newell. That was plain. But what it was he could not guess. Adkinson and the girl came out. Marian Newell seemed very fond of the tall, dark foreman. His manner toward her was at once formal and affectionate. He took her down to look at the pinto.

"A strong character," Wesley Newell told Drago in a nervous tone when the two had disappeared. "Yes, a very strong character. I don't know whether you know it, Sergeant, but I am both an attorney and a lay-preacher. Life worries me at times. The strong are not always conscious of their gifts. They do not always employ them to best advantage."

DRAGO studied him but found nothing to say. A negro cowboy came around the house.

"Mistuh Ranger," he said with flash of teeth and bob of kinky head, "Boss Man say he like you come down to the house a minute, you don' mind."

Drago nodded and got up. He followed the negro to the neat two-room house of the Walking N foreman. The girl was still at the corral, admiring the pinto Adkinson had brought in. The dark manager looked at Drago levelly.

"I'm mighty glad y' showed up, Sergeant," he said slowly. "Reckon y' don't

know much about Sombre County? Well, she's a tough place, sometimes. Right now I got more on my hands than ary one man—even a Texas man—ought to be troubled with. I got a contract with the construction camp for what beef they use. And somebody else wants that contract. They aim to deal me misery."

"How's that?" Drago frowned. "I heard that the Walking N was able to deal misery for misery."

Adkinson grinned faintly.

"Generally we do it," he admitted. "But when y' can't see y' can't hardly shoot. That's the way of it, now, with me. I been aiming to ask for a Ranger. Now y' walk in. Would y' help out a fella?"

Drago nodded. He was looking shrewdly at the tall man from under drooping lids. Wesley Newell was right. Here *was* a strong man. If he had been the killer for Lance Newell and the others of that "association" there was nothing in his smooth, calm face to proclaim it, and that alone proved his caliber.

"There's a rough strip of country in our south range," Adkinson told him, staring at the end of his cigarette. "Over our line is a cabin that's been used by rough characters for a long time—before ever I come into the Sombre country. My notion is, the men that're using around that cabin now are working for the Hat outfit. That used to belong to an old tarantula name' Quinett. The Hat would like to have the Walking N contract with the railroad."

"So you think the Hat is trying something?"

"I can't figger what," Adkinson said in a troubled voice. "I got beef all over this range. Which way would a bunch hit? I might take some of the boys down and try wiping out that outfit in the old cabin. But it might pull us into plenty trouble. Would y' mind taking a look around that neighborhood? It may be off y' track, but if y' could help us—"

"Let me get this thing straight," Drago checked him. "The Hat is suspected of trying to steal Walking N beeves. You want me to see if that's right and, if it is, stop it?"

"I swear, I just don't know," Adkinson shrugged. "A Mex' boy that used to ride for me come in with the tale. We'd lost fifty-sixty head of big fours but I put that

down to plain rustlers. We always had plenty of 'em in Sombre County. Now, I got a bunch to deliver. I ain't picked 'em, yet. But we can't afford to lose another bunch like that, not with the estate jammed like she is. If you'd ride down there—"

"Of course I'll have a look," Drago assured him.

"I can send a man down with you," Adkinson offered. "Or I can tell y' how to hit that spot. All depends on how y' want to work. I ain't asking y' to tie into no bunch of rough thieves. All I want to know is what are they aiming to do? And what can we do to stop 'em. I thought the world and all of Lance Newell. Not much I wouldn't do for his girl."

"Tell me how I make that range and I'll make the sneak after dark," Drago said easily. "I don't seem to be doing a lot in Sombre County. Maybe I'm not exactly certain about what I'm supposed to do except keep things quiet while the railroad bunch is around. But if I can smooth Sombre County, I'd say that's my job. How do I hit this cabin?"

DIRECTIONS were very simple. He nodded when Adkinson had finished talking. Then they went to the corral and looked at the pinto. Adkinson went away and Drago and the girl sat on the veranda together. She looked curiously at him.

"I know a good deal about you," she said at last. "Uncle Wes was a friend of your uncle. I knew about the murder they charged you with. What, really, are you doing in Sombre?"

He told her the fiction of the construction gang, of keeping an eye on the roughs brought in by the railroad. Then he led her on to talk of the county. He was surprised that she wanted to talk about Elbert Prong and of the annexation of the EP to the Walking N.

"I knew Jack Prong so well," she said slowly, frowning out at the twilight scope of wooded range. "We, we were sweethearts when he was seventeen and I was fifteen. It's sad to see an old family die out. His father was one of the original settlers here. But Jack and the old man quarreled and Jack took his horse and saddle and rode off. He came to see me and told me he'd come back, one day, to marry me. I think I called him Young Lochinvar. I was

thrilled by it all. Then somebody murdered him, Mr. Drago, murdered Elbert Prong. Just as—as somebody murdered my father."

Drago smoked quietly and watched her. Jack Prong—Jack Chittus. He could not help wondering if perhaps the two were the same. He asked questions and became sure that, whatever her father had done to old Elbert Prong, she had no idea that any reason existed for enmity between Newells and Prongs.

"Probably young Jack—Young Lochinvar—will eventually come riding out of the west," he told her. "Fairy tales do come true, sometimes. Well, there's Saul Adkinson. And there's supper."

When he had eaten and the girl and her uncle had disappeared, he looked at the Walking N manager. Adkinson shrugged.

"Maybe y' better take one of the boys?"

"I can make it," Drago told him easily. "Your directions are plain enough. I'll make my slide now."

There was a moon tonight. He rode across Walking N range and watched the landmark Adkinson had described, the jagged peak of a high hill that loomed above the post-oaks of the flat pasture. As he rode he wondered about the tall, dark man. Was this an honest errand such as any cowman might ask a Ranger to do?

HE had not slept the night before. Now, he began to be sleepy. Questions seemed unimportant. He drowsed in the saddle and, just before dawn, pulled aside into an arroyo. Here he shucked the saddle from Button and rolled into his blanket. He slept until sunrise and was undisturbed until he stretched with bright sun in his eyes. He saddled Button drowsily.

Deer ran before him as he rode on. There was the trail of an inquisitive coyote which had come almost up to his bed while he slept. Wild turkeys were all about him and when he came to a narrow creek a brown bear snorted and ran from a wide shallow.

When he had washed his face and drunk, he began to think again of the murders in Sombre, and of Saul Adkinson. He shook his head.

"You pay your money and you take your choice," he told Button. "Maybe he's a cold-eyed killer. Mabe he's just a tough

hairpin. But today ought to show something. If I run into some rustlers, it will go far toward showing that he's just a hard-case foreman with his outfit's interests at heart. A man can be hard and yet be honest. Even be a gunnie though people in the neighborhood might call him something else."

He saw the cabin from the crest of a ridge. Smoke came from its stone chimney but there was no sign of life anywhere. He was riding down toward it, going very cautiously with carbine across an arm, when eight or nine men appeared, coming from almost as many points of the compass, to close in upon him.

He fired two shots, to right and left, then whirled Button and went at the pounding gallop back in the direction from which he had come. There was a hollow, surrounded by rocks, no more than a mile from this wooded slope. If he could make that shelter he figured he could hold off any number of attackers so long as he had ammunition.

But these were warriors! Well-mounted, too. They rode hell-bent to right and left to flank him. Even Button's racing hoofs were not enough. There was a man on his either side, firing wildly, but uncomfortably close to him, before he had gone a hundred yards. Drago lay over the saddle horn and watched grimly. He had never been more closely pressed.

A slug thudded into his saddle fork, scarring the leather and shaking him. Button jumped ahead with sudden surge of extra speed. Drago looked behind him. Four or five men came after him in a short skirmish line. He pulled in short and Button stopped, then ran on when Drago had dropped to the ground.

"Come on!" Drago yelled, lifting his carbine. "If this is it, some of the rest of you will know about it."

He fired three quick shots, saw a horse go down. Then the rest of the attackers vanished behind the post-oaks. He settled himself, knowing that they, also, would dismount. There was no cover here sufficient to protect one man against eight or nine. He could not possibly get clear this time.

It might be his last fight.

"But, there's always the prospect of taking a few with me," he thought. "So—"

VI

THEY began to work closer as if moved by signal but he was a veteran at this ancient game. Kill-or-be-killed was the rule along the border and south of it where he had spent his days of outlawry. He could have told those bushwhackers the tale of a dozen such stands as this made against odds almost as great.

He drew both pistols and put them down before him, shoved more shells into the loading gate of his carbine. Then he waited, dark head bare, shuttling left and right. Movement beside a little oak drew his stare. With upward jerk of one mouth corner he fired two flashing shots and a man scrambled away from that tree on hands and knees, to collapse within six feet.

Someone behind began to rain lead all around him. He twisted to face that one and the man—encouraged, it seemed, by Drago's failure to answer the fire—showed himself briefly. But he was exposed for time enough to take a slug in his shoulder.

"So far, so good!" Drago grunted savagely. "But certainly not good enough for the whole show. Two hit. Six or seven left—"

Three men had got boldly to squatting position and were coming at him, shooting, as if they had popped from the ground itself. He lifted himself to his knees and shot as fast as he could squeeze trigger and jerk lever. One man he fairly shredded, knocking him flat and moveless. A second one he hit but without idea of the spot. The third dropped and crawled back to shelter. But Drago was also down, right hand bleeding and carbine lever smashed. A bullet had caromed off the Winchester, gashed his palm and gone into his left leg.

He swore furiously and scooped up a pistol with left hand. That third attacker was coming back with sight of Drago fallen. Drago braced himself and steadied the Colt. The hammer dropped. He stiffened even more because he had missed narrowly. He fired again but the man, and others from right and left, were shooting fast if almost blindly.

A distant Winchester sounded. Drago hardly noticed, occupied as he was, with unloading his Colt and snatching for the second gun. Slugs kicked up leaves. A

shrill yell carried to him, then another.

"Yaaaaiiaaah!" Chihuahua yelled. "We're come, Gip!"

Then the yell was drowned by a rattle of shots. And from Drago's attackers came other yells. The men scrambled back, dragging their hurt companions with them. The wilderness of little oaks swallowed them with all the suddenness of a magician's trick. And Chihuahua came hell-for-leather through the scrubby growth, twisting and swaying on his great pinto, bare-headed, brandishing his carbine, a charging statue of the warrior.

"They're run!" he grinned savagely. "But you—you're hit? Then, me, I'm follow them. I—"

"It's nothing to matter, much," Drago said between his teeth. "Hurts like the devil. But, if you hadn't charged up exactly when you did, I'd be looking at the grass roots about now, looking at 'em from the underside. They had me ready for skinning. Sure they won't come back?"

"They're run for them horse. They're throw some men into them saddle. Me, I'm think they're have one fi-ine bellyful. You're hit some, hah?"

"I don't know how badly. But I did slam some lead into three or four. Dig this slug out of my leg, will you? My right hand's creased."

CHIHUAHUA got down and with the point of a bowie he dug the .44 from Drago's thigh. It had been almost spent. He laughed:

"She's nothing. Just under them skin. But them hand—"

Drago shrugged. He whistled shrilly and Button came at the run. A clean shirt from the saddle bags made a bandage. Drago asked Chihuahua how he had found him.

"I'm come to them Walking N. Them Juan Ramos, she's go from camp. So I'm think she's no use to stay. I'm git my horse and clothes and I'm ride fast behind you. Them Adkinson, she's not at the house. Them girl and uncle, they're not know w'ere you're go. But one Negro, she's say you're go fast back to Sombre. But w'at the hell! Me, I'm come from Sombre and I'm not meet you. So, I'm say to them Negro, she's all right. I'm go back to Sombre for to find you. But

I'm look for them trail of Button. And she's show, coming for these way."

"I owe you whatever my life's worth, Chihuahua. Adkinson sent me up here to look over a rustler situation. Maybe it was all straight, maybe he has some of the old Hat outfit on his edges, trying to rustle his stuff and keep him from making the beef contract with the construction camp. Maybe the hard cases you and I met this morning are the Hat men. But what if he sent me up here to get killed?"

"She's them thing!" Chihuahua agreed. "You're never know until you're know. These cabin—"

There was nobody in or around the cabin. But they found the tracks of twenty horses and in a tiny meadow among the post-oaks the churned hoofprints of cattle. It was Chihuahua, who had the nose of a questing hound, who found the blackened running irons beneath the eaves of the cabin. They stared at these slender rods which can, in the hands of an expert, simulate the brand of any cowman. Chihuahua shook his head.

"Me, I'm see them Walking N iron on plenty cattle," he said slowly. "And w'en I'm cross them Hat range, going to them camp, I'm see plenty Hat steers. Always, Gip, my friend of innocence, them iron she's one stamp—them Walking N; them Hat. W'y will we now see them running iron?"

Drago made a cigarette awkwardly, using his left hand. He flicked a match and set the tiny flame to the end of the slim brown cylinder.

He hardly heard Chihuahua's cheerful talk for he was considering all the angles of this affair and the more he thought of them, the more complicated the picture seemed.

In Texas, when a man decided upon a brand—the Walking N, or the Hat, for instance—the simple thing was always to have a branding iron made in the form of that chosen design, a Hat or a Rocking Chair. Heated in the range-fire that iron needed only to be pressed against a calf's hide to produce upon it the owner's brand. A "stamp-iron" the cowboys called it. But with an iron rod that same brand could be *drawn* upon the side of a cow or horse, the neatness of the finished design depending entirely upon the skill of

the rod-user. Never would it be so uniform, so readable, as the imprint of a stamp-iron.

CATTLE sold by the Hat, say, to the Walking N, would be "vented." If the Hat regularly branded upon the left hip, then the vent-brand would be repetition of the Hat upon another part of the animal sold. Afterward, the buyer—the Walking N—would put the new owner's brand somewhere on the creature bought. In Sombre County, as Chihuahua had said, that purchaser's brand should be a design made by a stamp-iron. Yet here were running irons that had been used.

"I saw two men hanged, one time, beyond Uyalde," he said slowly. "They were caught with lengths of telegraph wire under their saddle skirts. Funny, the boss of our crowd just ran his wet finger over those bits of wire and looked. His finger was black. So we strung up those thieves to the same branch of a cottonwood."

Chihuahua nodded, staring at the running irons.

"Me, I'm see something like that, too. Well, mabbe them rustler, she's camp here on one edge of them Walking N range. She's blot them brand or she's vent them brand. And you're running them rustler, and me, I'm run into them rustler. So—"

"I think I want to talk to Adkinson," Drago told him grimly. "He will think—everybody on the Walking N will think—that you went back to Sombre. Is that so?"

"*Es verdad!* Me, w'en I'm ride on them trail, my horse will have no feet to leave them trail. So w'at will I do?"

"Meet me in Sombre. I'm going back to the house and find Adkinson. If we had managed to hold onto one of our bushwhacking friends we might have identified him and decided whom we were bucking. But, as it is, we'll have to discover that some other way. But I'm going back to the Walking N. Meet me around Red Borrum's restaurant in Sombre. And, just in case you hadn't made up your mind, don't put any faith in Sheriff Ozman."

Chihuahua laughed.

"Hah! Me, I'm meet Ozman in them camp. You're not need to say to me that we're never trust Ozman. She's one ver-

scared sheriff. She's play all time with them fella w'at's killed. Now, he will wonder in them night, them morning, w'en *she's* go like them other. If them fella, she's make one association for to kill them small man, Ozman, she's their sheriff. So now, when them other's dead, she will be afraid."

"He is afraid. Mighty afraid," Drago agreed. "If somebody they missed is on the warpath, he has damn' good reason to be afraid!"

HE told Chihuahua quickly of what he had heard of Elbert Prong. Chihuahua nodded.

"And so if them fella Chittus w'at you're see is mabbe young Prong—how long will he be in the Sombre County, hah? It could be that them Juan Ramos w'at's mabbe One-Eye Medina or them Medina family, she's not our man. But them Chittus—"

Drago nodded briefly. They mounted and rode back on the trail which Drago had followed up to the moment of the attack. Chihuahua looked at the sun, then at the country. He grinned and lifted a hand.

"I'm meet you in Sombre," he said. "But *not* in them restaurant. W'en you're come in you're find one fi-in dance-place on them south side. Plenty w'iskey, plenty pretty blond gal. You're come there, Gip, my old, sour friend. We're show you about them shake-of-them-foot."

He was gone in a surge of the big pinto's haunches. Back to Drago carried the high, care-free yell that, with Chihuahua, indicated perfect contentment with life. Drago grinned, despite the dull ache of his bullet-scarred leg, the neuritic throb of his gashed palm.

"The perfect *compañero*," he said aloud. "When Chihuahua was made the mold for him was broken in public meeting. Never another like him, never will be another."

Then he thought ahead to the meeting with Saul Adkinson.

"I'll know," Drago assured himself. "When I can look into his eyes I'll know if he tried to do a sandy on me."

He rode back over the trail he had covered the day before. It was late in the afternoon when he saw the long house of the Walking N sprawling in its wooded flat elbow him. And, as on the other occa-

sion, Marian Newell sat on the veranda and waved at him.

"I thought you'd gone back to Sombre on some very important mission," she said smiling. "I— *What* did you do to your hand? You're hurt!"

"Hurt?" Drago repeated with blank stare. "Oh, you mean my hand. Nothing. I was asleep in the saddle and a bear jumped out of the post-oaks. Button is like all other horses, he can't stand the smell of a bear. He jumped and I came out of the hull and landed on a sharp rock. It's nothing at all. Just a little cut."

"And your leg— That was a rock, too?" she asked softly.

VII

DRAGO sat down on the veranda and showed her the gash in his right hand. He showed her in detail how the edges of the rock had cut the palm. As for his leg, he persuaded her that it was only a slight strain suffered when he was thrown. She got clean cloth and hot water from the house and after she had replaced the bandage on his hand she seemed convinced. She told him that she was riding back to Sombre that night with her uncle.

"Where's Mr. Adkinson?" he asked her blandly. "I'm going to Sombre, too. If you don't object to my company, I'll make it three of us. But I should see Mr. Adkinson, first."

"He rode out just after you disappeared," she said in a troubled voice. "I wonder what is the trouble with the Walking N. I could believe that the EP brought us trouble. We never had anything more than usual range-troubles before Elbert Prong was found murdered and Dad took over the Prong ranch. Ever since that— Oh, I suppose it's foolish, sounds superstitious, but even Saul's management of the Walking N hasn't made it a paying place. Then Dad was killed—"

Wesley Newell came quietly out behind them. Drago turned. The gray little man wore an expression which seemed to Drago to hold more of worry than, even, he had owned before.

"Don't worry, child," he said to his niece. "The papers. . . . I have been going over them all day. Within two or three days I think I will have everything in order,

ready to turn over to you. I know how you feel. But you mustn't worry."

He asked Drago if he would ride to Sombre with them or if he wanted to wait and talk to Saul Adkinson about anything.

"I'll go in with you," Drago said on impulse. "I can see Adkinson in town or on some other trip. Of course my real work is just to keep the construction crews from taking your county apart, you understand."

"I wondered if perhaps you had come about the—the murders," the girl said hesitantly. "Six men, all close friends, all murdered in the Devil's Sink—"

"I will think about that if you want me to," Drago told her evasively. "But, after all, they're dead. They died more easily than many men die, from what I have heard. Why don't you go to Dallas with your uncle for a while? Don't brood about these things. After all, dying's not so hard a thing. Ask anybody who has almost died. It's living that's hard."

"Living," Wesley Newell said in a far-away voice. "You're right, Sergeant. Anyone can die bravely, with a smile. But to keep on living, struggling, seeing problems arise— That is the hard thing. Let's have our supper and go into Sombre."

They ate silently. Saul Adkinson did not make his appearance. The Negro puncher saddled horses for Marian and Wesley Newell. Drago put the hull on Button and when they were ready to go he turned suddenly to the Negro.

"Who told you to say that I'd gone back to Sombre?" he demanded savagely. "Talk up, you're on the edge of Jordan River! Who told you to tell that tale?"

"Why—why, Mistuh Adkinson. He say you gone back to town, case anybody ask," the Negro stammered. "Me, I don't know you ain't, Cunnel. I—I—"

"Never mind," Drago grunted. "But you can tell the truth this time—I have gone back to Sombre."

THE three of them rode across moonlit range, the girl between Newell and Drago. It was she who saw the rider on a ridge and touched Drago's arm. He stared, then got the glasses from his saddle bags. He stiffened.

"Come on," he said tensely. "Over that next ridge."

When they had dropped into the sheltering hollow, he stopped short, to face them both:

"Stay right here, both of you, until I get back. I want to talk to that young fellow who's watching us."

He sent Button along the lower edge of the ridge and by covered tracks to the rear of the position where the stocky rider had sat. He worked the last part of the mile very slowly. So he came up behind Jack Chittus while the blond youngster was still searching the tangles of the post-oaks with his glasses.

"Thought I told you to stay out of my path," Drago said softly. "Ah! Don't try for that Winchester. It will get you killed some day, that impulsive habit."

The boy turned his sullen face but he kept his hands clear of the carbine stock. Drago studied him for an instant.

"Come along," he ordered grimly. "We'll take that Winchester. We're going somewhere."

"Go ahead and shoot," the stocky youngster invited. "I'm not going anywhere. I don't know what—"

"But you'll find out," Drago assured him, spurring across to jerk the carbine from the scabbard. "As for going with me—you'd better go riding nicely and comfortably, than to come along at the end of my loop."

He herded Chittus back to where he had left Wesley Newell and Marian. The girl leaned forward in the saddle and made a gasping sound.

"Jack!" she said. "I didn't expect to see you."

"Queer," Drago drawled. "But I did. I could make him out through the glasses. I knew it was Jack Prong."

"All right, then—" the boy looked at Drago, rather than at the girl—"now that you've got me, what about it? I don't know who you are always ramrodding into somebody else's affairs but what's it to you what I do? If I can't ride over a range that used to belong to my family before my father was murdered and robbed—"

"Robbed?" the girl cried, spurring up against him. "What do you mean by that? Of course your father was murdered. So was mine. But how was he robbed? What do you mean?"

"I—" Then Jack Prong stopped short. His voice was almost gentle as he faced her. "I don't know. I was in Del Rio when I heard that he was found dead, shot in the back, out on our range. Then I heard that someone had taken the outfit."

"But he had given a mortgage to the bank!" Marian said desperately, as if she were protesting to herself as much as to him. "And when he died, *naturally* the bank had to protect itself. Can't you see that, Jack? It was just business. Wasn't it, Uncle Wes? Tell him! This is Jack Prong, the son of Elbert Prong of the EP. Tell him, Uncle Wes!"

DRAGO looked in the bright moonlight at the gray little man, who was staring vaguely from one young face to the other. He saw the twist of Wesley Newell's sad mouth.

"Of course he sees it," Drago interrupted quickly. "The only reason for my bringing him down here, the way I did, was curiosity. I had a pretty clear notion that Jack Chittus was Jack Prong. There's so much around here that's mysterious, I thought I'd take the chance to clear up one small problem, anyway. Here's your long gun, young fellow. No hard feeling?"

Jack Prong looked vacantly at him, then back at the girl.

"And who *are* you, really?" he asked.

"My name's Drago. I happen to be a sergeant of the Rangers."

"Ah! No wonder Bill Drake said there was another man on the Duckbill who could ride this buckskin, or anything else that had two hairs to cross," Jack grunted. "Drago! I've heard about you, about your riding and about your shooting. If you don't mind, Drago, I'd appreciate shaking hands."

"I don't mind at all," Drago assured him, smiling. "And if there's anything I can do for you, hereafter, just call on me. You may have heard that I have a reputation for helping people I like. Trying to help them, anyway."

"But—but, Jack!" the girl cried. "You're not going to leave the country, now? Why don't you come to work on the Walking N. There's always a good chance for a man like you, with Saul Adkinson."

It seemed to Drago that the boy stiffened

with that name. But when he spoke his voice had still that odd gentleness which had appeared when first he addressed her.

"I'm going to stay around Sombre County for a while," he assured her. "I'll be seeing you, Marian. Don't think for a minute that I won't. I certainly will be seeing you."

He gathered up his reins and accepted from Drago the confiscated carbine. When he had rammed the short Winchester into its scabbard he seemed to hesitate, looking from one to another of them. Then he spurred off at the gallop, jumping the tall buckskin into racing gait.

"I've always liked him," Marian Newell said as if thinking aloud. "His father was hard on him. And Jack tried to be a Prong. Until he couldn't stand it any longer and had his last quarrel with Elbert Prong and rode away. I wish he didn't feel the way he does. I wish he hadn't said that about his father being robbed."

"You mustn't think of that. It must have been a shock to him, to hear about his father's death," Drago told her. "Now, we'd better be riding on. We want to make Sombre by daylight."

But that seemed to be a ride of interruptions. They were all but at the slopes which guarded the county seat on this side, when Drago saw in the road ahead of them a dark, sacklike object. He stopped Marian and her uncle short with a word and jerk of the hand, then rode up to the dark thing that lay across the dust of the trail.

HE had no need for a light to know that it was a moveless man. But in the little flame of a match he recognized the round, bald face of Sheriff Zeans Ozman.

Closer examination showed the smallish bullet-hole, the mark of a high-powered rifle. And to him came instantly the speculations of Chihuahua.

"All six were killed by an off-caliber, high-powered rifle, the Austrian Schutzer," he muttered. "And here, by the look of the thing, is just such another case. I wonder! Which way did Jack Chittus Prong ride when he made that ridge back there? Was he coming from Sombre?"

And it occurred to him that, if Jack Prong were the killer of the sheriff, his nearness to the Walking N was logical.

For of all the men who might be held responsible for Elbert Prong's death, only the tall and dark manager of the Walking N was now alive.

He rode back to the pair who waited. Wesley Newell moved his horse up to meet Drago.

"A man dead in the road," he said quietly. "Isn't it?"

"It's Ozman, the sheriff," Drago admitted. "Somebody has killed him. I don't know where his horse went. I think I'd better take him up behind me. But-ton carries double."

"There's no trace of the one who killed him?" Marian asked almost in a whisper. "He— Ozman was a very close friend of my father. In fact it was my father and his friends who made him sheriff. I knew him very well."

Drago looked her way but in that darkness he could not see her face. He could only detect the troubled tone she used. He said something vague to her and rode back to pick up the sheriff's body. When Ozman slumped in the saddle, Drago swung up behind the cantle and rode on toward the county seat. What the two behind him were talking about he had no idea. But somehow he could not put out of his mind the worried face Wesley Newell had shown him, particularly when facing Jack Prong.

"There's more to this Sombre County business than shows on the surface," he told himself with a certainty that he could not explain. "Zelman, Freese, Ilers, Quinett, Utt, Newell. . . . Now, Ozman. Will it be Adkinson, next? And who's the killer? Young Jack Prong? He could be. That jaw of his is like a mule's."

He made a mental note to try checking the time the boy had been back in the country. There was, of course, the possibility of One-Eyed Medina leaving a vengeful relative.

"I'll check Juan Ramos too," Drago said grimly.

VIII

THERE was a tough young deputy in the sheriff's office when the three of them rode up to the courthouse. He said his name was Perch Leeper. Drago liked his quiet face, his steady blue eyes, on

sight. Leeper studied the dead sheriff and it seemed to Drago that he was not too grieved about Ozman's death.

"Well," Leeper said tonelessly, "I reckon it never come on him unawares. No sign? O' course, it was dark."

"Too dark to look for sign," Drago agreed. "Anyway, that bullet came from a distance. Any notions? Where was he going when he left town? Reckon we can check? You see—" he hesitated, then decided to go the whole way with this efficient young officer "—the bullet seems to have been the same as the kind which killed the others. Newell and Utt and Quinett, Zelman and Ilers and Freese. If we can pin this killing onto somebody—"

"The same kind of bullet?" Leeper grunted, looking down again. "I wasn't in the office when the others was killed. I never knew about the bullets. I just been working for Ozman a couple weeks. Been riding for the Long I."

"Let's see what we can uncover," Drago suggested. "Oh, you happen to know Jack Prong?"

"Raised with him. We seen the elephant and heard the owl together when we was kids. I rode one roundup for his old man, Elbert Prong. But I ain't seen Jack since he pulled stake and cut stick out of Sombre. Why?"

"He's back," Drago grunted. "I'll tell you more about that, later on. Let's see the Newells home, then pick up a Ranger of mine who ought to be around town."

"The tall half-breed?" Leeper asked, with sudden grin. "I spotted him when he rode in a spell back. You can look at him and say to yourself: 'There's Somebody!' a'right. Let's go."

They sent the Newells home and went down the street of Sombre toward the restaurant of Red Borrum. It seemed to Drago that Perch Leeper was another who looked longingly at the pretty, dark face of Marian Newell. And the cowpuncher-deputy spoke as if thinking aloud, before they had walked fifty yards:

"Funny you talking about Jack Prong when Marian was right at our elbows. They was going to be married. Always talked about it. But I reckon even if Jack come back to stay, them wedding bells'd never jingle. There was something funny about that EP deal. Lots of us figured it

funny. Elbert never borrowed a nickel until right before he got killed. Had a kind of horror of being in debt. Nor there wasn't much need of him hitting up the bank for a loan. The EP always paid. It was to buy a bunch of pure-bred bulls and some fancy mares and a stallion that Elbert borrowed. But it wasn't much, at that, we guessed. Then he got murdered out on the range and the bank come in and sued to foreclose, and Newell not only took the whole EP but he got one of them deficiency judgment things—you know, where they take your shirt off you with lawyer-doings, then tell you that if ever you collect another shirt, you owe 'em that, too. Lawyers! Bankers. The—"

For thirty seconds his remarks about the professions were both salty and unprintable. Drago laughed, but he was thoroughly interested in the story of Newell's deal with Elbert Prong. For if young Jack felt the same suspicion that this shrewd cowboy seemed to feel, what would he do? Kill the man he held responsible? And kill the weak, perhaps crooked sheriff who stood in with the banker? Too, there was that persistent tale about Newell and the other five who had died making a powerful little association.

"You hunt up your man," Leeper grunted suddenly. "I know where Ozman went when he left the office. I'll see if I can find out what was taking him out of town without saying something to me about it. I'll be back here."

CHIHUAHUA was not in Red Borrum's place. But there was a dance at the big barn-like hall on the edge of Sombre. Borrum was anxious to know what Drago had discovered at the Walking N but Drago put him off with evasions and moved toward the lilt of string instruments. He found Chihuahua with a large blond girl and a quart of whiskey, very happy, but in no sense affected by his drinks. He got him away from the girl and told him quickly what had happened. Chihuahua nodded cheerfully.

"Me, I'm see Ozman," he informed his friend. "She's talk with one Mexican boy from Agua Verde, one *plazita* twelve mile from Sombre. Them boy she's name' Nabor Lopez! *Si como no!* She's come for one time to work in them railroad camp

but them father of him, she's not like it. So Nabor's quit. We're find Nabor and we're ask him w'y will he talk so much, so long, with them Ozman, hah?"

"I'm getting to be an old man," Drago said wearily. "I hope we find him in town, hope we don't have to ride out to this Agua Verde to talk to him. I've been riding and going without sleep."

"Hah! She's one ver' old man," Chihuahua scoffed. "She's only fight like them trapped wolf. *Zapatazos!* You're do your sleeping in them winter-time, Gip, like always. *Andarle!*"

Drago grinned. The wound in his hand was less painful. The shallow hole in his leg hardly troubled him. For he had the feeling that comes to the man-hunter when he is sure he is on the trail of his quarry. He crossed to the table where the blond waited impatiently and poured himself a large drink.

"Im taking your gallant squire away," he told her, grinning. "But maybe the quart and *this* will salve things until we come back?"

She caught the gold piece and smiled widely up at him.

"Two nicer gents *I* never seen," she cried. "You bring him back or send him back or come along to tell me why he never got back. Sal's the name and—"

"Hey!" Chihuahua called. "And now, who will it be w'at's have to git dragged away? *Andarle!*"

They went back to Borrum's and stood outside, waiting for Perch Leeper to come back. The young deputy appeared quietly out of darkness. And the name he gave was that Chihuahua had used, young Nabor Lopez'.

"I think he's still in town," he added. "He told Ozman something that started the sheriff out on the road to Agua Verde. I want to know what he told him and maybe who told him to start Ozman that way. Looks like a plain bushwhacking, to me."

Drago nodded. He introduced the two beside him. Then they separated, when Drago had received a description of the Mexican cowboy including his fancy batwing *chaparejos* of which Nabor was said to be inordinately proud. They had the Walking N brand spotted upon them.

"He never takes 'em off, not even to sleep, I'd bet," Leeper called after Drago.

"He was a kind of flunky for Saul Adkinson a good while. Pretty foxy kid."

BUT Drago did not find Nabor. And when he met Chihuahua and Perch Leeper again they were mounted and leading Button.

"He's skipped," Leeper grunted. "Left town twenty minutes ago. Thought we ought to hit right out after him. Catch him at home in Agua Verde before he gits him a chance to make up a good story. All right?"

Drago nodded and swung into the saddle. The three of them left Sombre quietly and broke into an easy lope when out of hearing of any who might be curious about their going. They had covered perhaps half of the dozen miles to Agua Verde when Chihuahua suddenly grunted sharply and shoved his pinto into a pounding gallop, forging ahead of the others. They followed quickly and so, Button being faster than Leeper's stocky bay, made a column in the darkness over the rough road.

Drago could hear the hoofbeats ahead of Chihuahua, now. Then the breed's carbine made crashing sound and someone yelled, far ahead. When Drago came up to the scene, Chihuahua was gripping a frightened Mexican boy by the arm and talking softly—but very savagely—in Spanish.

"It is not that I wish to be hard upon you," Chihuahua told his prisoner. "I am not a man to spill blood unnecessarily. Sometimes for days I cannot bear the sight of blood and must choke even a chicken to death, rather than cut its throat. But tonight I am in no mood to wait for answers to my questions. Say quickly why you talked to the sheriff and what you said to him. But, first, say even more quickly who told you to say what you said, to Ozman. Speak, *jovenito!* while yet you have the tongue which will save your throat from the edge of my knife!"

"Do not kill him—yet!" Drago protested. "Give him time, if no more than two small minutes. You have killed three times already this week. Is that not enough? Bethink you! It is but a small child. One tiny jerk of your knife and he will die!"

"It was Juan Ramos!" Nabor gasped.

"Do not kill me, *señores*! He but said that he knew much which the sheriff has wanted to know, of the murders of those six who died in the Sink. He is a man of brains, that Ramos. He has hunted for the killers because, he told me and my father, one was his *amo* in years past, his *patron*. And he feared that the sheriff, also, would die. So he sent me to the sheriff, to ask that he come to meet him upon the Walking N road and hear what he would say. The sheriff was afraid. But I think he was more afraid not to hear Juan Ramos than to go. And why do you ask this? Did not the sheriff tell you of the matter?"

Drago studied Nabor Lopez, his tone, while Chihuahua put question after question. He was not certain either that the boy lied or told part of the truth. Finally, he ended the examination with an impatient grunt.

"Let's take him back and cool him off overnight in your jail," he suggested to Leeper. "Tomorrow he may decide to tell more. Or we can have a look at him in daylight and see what we think. It's a good story he tells—a good story this Juan Ramos is supposed to have told. It might even be true. But I'd like to go into it more before I accepted or rejected it."

Nabor protested bitterly against arrest but turned his little horse obediently when Chihuahua snarled at him. He talked a good deal as they rode back toward the county seat, elaborating, but never altering, the story he had first given them.

"This is too large a chance," Drago told the deputy. "It's as I said in the beginning. The killer of Ozman is probably the murderer in all the cases. Who is it? I have suspected Jack Prong. But, also, I have suspected this Juan Ramos who may be a relative of old Medina. Maybe both guesses are wrong. But if we clear up Ozman's death, it's pretty certain we'll have the others cleared, too, and *that* is what brought me here!"

IX

THEY were within a quarter-mile of the town limits when the heavy explosion sounded. They pulled in short to stare, first at Sombre, then at the unseen faces of each other. No one spoke.

"If my old ears don't deceive me," Drago said slowly, "that was dynamite! Let's see!"

Nabor Lopez was forgotten. His scrubby pony could not keep up with their tall horses and, suddenly, the Mexican seemed unimportant. Button jumped into the lead and kept it. They charged into the street and found men running up and down the plank walks before stores and saloons. Somewhere at the far end of Sombre there was desultory shooting. A man yelled in reply to Perch Leeper's question:

"The bank! Six-seven men stampeded every hawse in town, then blowed open the bank. Some folks is fighting 'em down yonder. Me, I'm going for my gun."

They rode down the middle of the street at the gallop. But the robbers had got to their horses and were riding away before they reached the wrecked stone building which had been Lance Newell's bank. Only the distant pound of hoofs told the direction taken by the gang.

"Wait a minute!" Drago called to young Leeper. "No use going hellbent out of here without knowing a few things and getting a good posse behind us. We can be heroic damn' fools or sensible men with a chance to corral those gentlemen. You pick up five or six well-mounted men, stickers who have heard lead sing in the smoke. See that they're packing plenty of ammunition. Throw some grub in the saddle pockets. Get back here. I'll be finding out what I can. Get me a .44 carbine somewhere. Mine was smashed."

The deputy vanished with a whirl of his horse that sent a dust cloud up in the street. Then Drago and Chihuahua began to question the people crowding up. At last it seemed certain that six men had come quietly into town, quietly because nobody had observed them until they were at the bank. They had loosed all the horses along the main street of Sombre, then with whoops and shots had driven them out. While the townsfolk ran out, the robbers had set off their explosion in the bank. They would have been gone long before Drago, Chihuahua and Perch Leeper could reach town but for the shooting of a handful of old-timers who kept their rifles close at hand.

Perch Leeper came galloping back with-

in twenty minutes, leading nine or ten men. Drago looked at them in the vague light which came from a store across the street from the bank. He nodded.

"All right! Let's go after 'em," he said curtly. "From the hoofbeats they're heading for the railroad construction camp. That might or might not be a good place for them."

He led the way at long, hard trot. A mile from town, Chihuahua got down to strike matches and call quickly that they were on the right road. The process was repeated a half-dozen times, until they were past the point where the gang would have turned off to make for the construction camp.

"She's hit for them open range and them Mundy Hills," he told Drago. "We're have trouble, mabbe, w'en we're come to them Mundys. She's ver' rocky. Now, we're better go slow until we're have daylight."

THEY went deliberately on what began to seem a cold trail until in the gray dawning, under a chill October wind, they could all stare at the ground. Chihuahua found the trail without much difficulty. He grunted and jerked a hand at the distant ridges of the Mundy Hills.

"She's like I'm say," he told Drago. "Them fella's know these country. Me, I'm only see a little around here w'en I'm first come in. But I'm hear plenty. She's tough, them Mundys."

True to his prediction the trail vanished in rocky gulches before they had more than gained the foothills of the low mountains. They spread in a fan-like line and hunted for sign but noon came and they gathered in a grim and silent and angry group to eat bread and cold beef and bacon, whatever had been snatched up before leaving Sombre.

"They're in the hills, or they've cut through to round about," Red Borrum the restaurant man said irritably. He had got a gaunt black horse somewhere and a rifle almost as long as himself. "It's like Morales says, these hills are so damn' rocky, you could hunt for weeks and never cut a sign. If we had some notion who 't was—"

"Hard cases from the construction camp, mebbe?" a grim, gray mule-skinner sug-

gested. "That giant kind of seems like it might be. They use a lot of dynamite over there. It'd be easy for some of them fellas to loop some. And what I seen of 'em, there's some of 'em would be perfect pictures of bank-robbers."

"It's not much like a cowboy job," Drago said. "I've seen a good many bank-robberies and where they blow the vault the way this gang did you can usually count on professionals being at the head of things. So unless we've got a gang of regulars in the country, a gang that kept under cover while somebody staked out the Sombre bank, the chances are that it's a bunch from the camp, hard cases who were sheltering there. Let's scatter out, see if we can cut the trail. If we don't, by dark, we'll meet here and take a look at the camp."

They made a long skirmish line which very quickly fanned out until no man saw his neighbors to right and left. Drago rode alertly through the forepart of the afternoon. He saw nobody, made out no hoof-scarred rocks. Chihuahua rode over to him and shook his dark head grimly.

"Me, I'm think she's damn' funny," he said slowly. "You're believe them horses she's flap little wing, mabbe and fly over these ground. We're have to try them camp, Gip."

He stiffened in the saddle and Drago turned with instinctive lifting of the borrowed carbine on his arm. It was a horseman who had appeared on a ridge ahead. He was beckoning to them.

"One of our bunch?" Drago suggested frowningly.

"No. *Por amor de dios!* She's them Juan Ramos! But she's want to talk, hah?"

"It could be a trap," Drago said. "Suppose Ramos was drawing Ozman out of town last night, both to kill him and to clear the way for the robbery? I'll ride up to him and you cover me."

"She's come to meet us," Chihuahua said doubtfully. "If we're wait we're know about them trap."

THE grizzled Mexican rammed the spurs to his chestnut, a horse as long of leg, almost, as Button. He rode like a part of the animal, swaying to the upslope lunge of the horse. He drew in before them and swept a hand out to indi-

cate the country from which he had appeared so unexpectedly.

"You look for the robbers of the bank," he said, as if stating a fact. "Very well! I have them for you. I have them as if they were in the palm of this hand. Within a mile there is the shell of an old house. There they make camp, sure that none will find them. But I will take you there. There are six, but one was struck by a bullet in the town. He lies inside the house, badly hurt, perhaps dead."

"And how do you know this? Why do you come to tell us?" Drago asked. "Juan Ramos! I have had thoughts about you. Why did you work for a time in the camp of the railroad-builders, then leave? Why are you riding here like a man who was born to these hills? I think I cannot trust you. Is this, then, some fashion of trap? Do you think to make it close upon us?"

The Mexican had looked directly at neither of them. He shook his head, now, with a sort of dignity.

"If you think that I lie to you, I will stay here, handing you my arms, while either of you rides quietly along the path to see if *you* cannot look through the glasses at the old house of which I speak. As for the other things—why I worked in the camp, why I left, why I ride these hills so easily they are of no import, they concern me only. I have good reason for all that I do. So what will you, *Sarjento?*"

Drago and Chihuahua looked doubtfully, one at the other. Then Drago shrugged.

"Let's ride," he said, and Chihuahua nodded with flash of teeth.

They waved the stocky Mexican ahead and he took them at the gallop over the ridge on which they had first seen him, to the left down a narrow cañon, then by a very network of dry water courses higher and higher into the hills. At last he stopped.

"It is but on the other side of that slope," he said. "You *can* trust me. But perhaps you do not? If you will, I fight with you. Tree of us are enough to take or kill the six of them."

"We trust you," Drago told him, slowly. "If there were time I should bring up the other men who came with us. But since we are here, let us see this house and the men who use it."

Juan Ramos nodded and got to the

ground. Drago and Chihuahua dismounted and, with Winchesters across their arms, went with the Mexican up the hill. They looked over the crest of it upon an ancient stone wall, part of what had been a house. There was a fire going. The smoke of it was gray against the yellow rock. Three men sat beside it. There was a fourth lying upon a blanket. Then a tall figure came out into the open, leading a horse, the only animal in sight.

Beside Drago, Juan Ramos made a choking sound. He had a long rifle. It came whipping up and he fired. Drago swore at him but the tall man had staggered as if hit. He went into the saddle without touching stirrups and before Ramos could fire again he had got behind the house and vanished.

The men beside the fire jumped. Drago and Chihuahua began to shoot. The man on the blanket did not move. Lead began to hammer the rocks around the three. Then Ramos moved off to one side, Chihuahua to the other. Drago waited for a target and, when he found it, a shoulder showing briefly beside a fallen section of the old wall, he squeezed the trigger, flinching with the pain of his sore hand.

Chihuahua or Ramos drove a man into the open, then dropped him. Drago waited patiently. He was not sure of his aim, with his gashed hand. But the fire of the others, on right and left, seemed to make the old shell untenable. A man came crawling out, a man in vivid red shirt with one faded sleeve.

"Oh!" Drago grunted viciously, recognizing the shirt. "So *you* were one of my rustler friends! Well. . . ."

He aimed at the man's arm but with the shot the red-shirted one dropped with the unmistakable sag of a dead man.

X

SOMEONE yelled frantically, from behind a part of the old house. Chihuahua called to Drago. "She's mabbe one trick, hah?"

"Tell 'em to come up to us with *their* hands up," Drago answered. "If it is a trick lord help 'em!"

Chihuahua yelled to the unseen one. Two men stepped into the open with their hands lifted. They marched stiffly up the slope.

Cowboys, both, they had nothing about them to set them apart from a hundred others whom Drago had seen. He scowled uncertainly. They could have come from any of a thousand line camps.

"Y' got us," the younger one said in almost a casual tone. "No use running ag'in' rope, I al'ays say. And I knowed all the time ary job that was started on a Friday wouldn't pan. Y' got us dead to rights. Just me and Roy, here, is on our feet. Shorty Hanson got a slug in his guts, in Sombre. Art Johns is dead. Gates is cashing in—"

"Gates?" Drago grunted, staring. "You don't mean Bowen Gates? The train-robber?"

"Shut up, Zenor," the other man snarled furiously. "Y' talk too damn' much with y' mouth!"

"Ah, what's the difference?" Zenor grunted. "They got us and we got to take the pill. O' course it's Bowen Gates. No matter to him, he's heading for the Jordan. Yeh, he was the Big Auger, Mister. And I don't see, yet, how y' come up to us. But y' done it and me, I say, don't run ag'in' rope."

Chihuahua and Juan Ramos came up to the prisoners. They searched both cowboys and Chihuahua shook his head.

"They're Walking N hands," he told Drago. "Me, I'm see these fella many time w'en they deliver beef to them camp."

"Walking N," Drago said slowly, staring. "Then who was the tall man who came out leading a horse, the one Ramos here shot at?"

"Tall man?" Zenor repeated blankly. "Y' must've had them willy-things, Mister. Wasn't anybody around but me and Shorty Hanson and Bowen Gates and Art Johns and Roy Steen, here. Was there, Roy?"

"Nary other soul," Steen said in a flat voice. "Gates was leading his hawse, though, come to think about it."

"Who was it at whom you fired?" Drago asked the Mexican.

"A man with a horse," Ramos answered, his face as blank as the others. "I thought that perhaps one tried to escape."

Drago grunted and led the way down the slope. The blond youngster on the blanket did not open his eyes. He was groaning. It was obvious that he had little time to live. Art Johns lay behind the

mass of stone where he had dropped when Drago shot him. But beyond was that slender, daredevil youngster, Bob Gorman, who had bought Drago drinks in the construction camp tent-saloon. He looked up, even essayed a pale grin.

"We—meet again!" he said gaspingly. "Well, Ranger, I have to tell you that you didn't fool me a little bit. Funny! Poor Root almost killed you without firing a shot."

"So it was you shot at me in the camp," Drago nodded. "Something told me that Root was a fist-fighter, not a gunman. And he got killed because you talked him into feeling insulted."

"Had to—try to—wipe you out," Bowen Gates grinned palely. "We had this—Sombre hen—on the fire. Knew you—were ordered in. Ingram Warren was scared. Knew all about—your record. So he watched for you. But you got him. See you—somewhere—Drago!"

His eyelids sagged, then lifted again.

"I wasn't really—Bob Gorman. And—Bowen Gates—won't help you much—for a name. Just—leave me here—a damn' fool who—has had a lot of fun!"

DRAGO shook his head and turned away. After all it made no particular difference what good family would never know the end of its black sheep.

He looked at the money bags, each marked with the brand of the Sombre bank. He shrugged.

"Let's get going," he said to the others. "We haven't done exactly what we started out to do, but we have cleared up the Sombre bank robbery."

"We're not clear up them murder, you mean?" Chihuahua drawled. "No? *Mira!*"

He moved like a cat to twist from Juan Ramos' hand the long rifle the Mexican carried. For an instant Ramos struggled furiously. Then he sagged in Chihuahua's iron grip.

"She's them Schutzer!" Chihuahua said softly. "Me, I'm see him w'en we're on them hill. But w'at the hell? She's one more gun w'en we're need him!"

"You?" Drago grunted, staring.

"*Es verdad,*" the Mexican said calmly. "There is no reason to tell you a lie. For in Sombre you can find many who even with this lovely eye of glass that was made

for me in Fort Worth would know Medina of the one eye. I swore that I would kill each of them. Now, I have done it. Except for Adkinson. And he, *Sarjento*, was the tall man with the horse."

They made a slow procession, going back to where the posse gathered. The two prisoners, Zenor Montell and Roy Steen, rode ahead of Medina who was merely disarmed and not tied as were the others.

"We got 'em, thanks to Medina, here," Drago told the posse curtly. "If you men don't mind, we won't talk about the business for a while."

HE rode at the head of the column through the rest of the afternoon and until they reached Sombre in the night. When dead men and prisoners had been unloaded in the sheriff's office he looked at Perch Leeper, lifted a shoulder and let it sag.

"Young fellow," he said, "I think I'll turn operations over to you. My job seems to be pretty well finished—more or less by accident. But that's the way these things happen."

There were excited and curious townsmen crowding into the courthouse. Now, through these gabbling ones, Jack Prong came with hard young face grimmer than Drago had seen it.

"I suppose I have to talk to you, Perch," he said slowly. "Or to you and Drago. I killed a man about two hours ago. I've got him on his own horse out here behind the office. I came back here to kill him and, when I met him outside town, in Razo's *cantina*, I told him about his murder of my father. I killed him before he could kill me. It was Saul Adkinson."

"Adkinson!" Leeper grunted. "Why—

Why, we wanted him for this Sombre bank-robbery. Jacky, you old son!"


Drago shook his head again. When from the doorway Wesley Newell beckoned to him, he groaned, but went toward the little man. Newell drew him out of the crowd and to a dark and quiet corner.

"Drago," he said desperately, "I have to talk to someone. And you're a man I feel like trusting. It's about that mortgage on the EP, the Prong ranch, you know. I told you that I'm both an attorney and a lay-preacher. I have been over all of my brother's papers. I find evidence of several forgeries in connection with that foreclosure. What can I do? Marian would want me to make restitution to the boy. But how can I protect my brother's name, my niece's faith in him, yet be fair to Jack Prong? What can I do?"

"I'm a tired man," Drago answered. "What I need is a bath, a shave, a large drink, and a bed. But, tired as I am, I think I can settle your troubles for you. If you want to cover your brother, save Marian's faith in him, but be perfectly fair to Jack Prong, it's simple. Just call him out of the office yonder and take him home with you. See that he sees a good deal of Marian in the next few days. That's the formula and it will end in a marriage. He'll get back his own. Now—"

Chihuahua came out of the crowd. He was waving something that Drago saw but vaguely in the small light from the door.


"Hey, Gip! Gip!" he called. "You're happy, hah? Listen! She's them telegram. *Seguro!* Them Adjutant General, she's say w'en you're finish here you're hurry for Austin. She's got one ver' tough case for you w'ile you're rest. W'at the hell!"



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Back down the out-trail galloped Bill Dunn, branded with a thousand fiery scars, to cut loose his hate-guns against the two-faced hombre who'd sent him up.



THE ONE-WAY TRAIL

By RALPH CONDON

A Fast-Action Novelet



BILL DUNN crossed the last up-building ridge and passed into the cool pines that clothed the mighty flank of Hatchet Mountain.

Dunn rode with a full seat in the saddle. His long, flat-bellied frame was thrust a little forward and his legs dropped straight down to bend at the knee, as is the manner of men who ride often and far. His pack horse came punching along behind without a lead rope.

With the aid of time and bitter circumstance, a man may strike the good feel of pine country from his thoughts but never

from his deep memory. And sooner or later, that memory will bring him back to the country where he knew it first and he will find it clean and strong and the same. He will know that he is home again.

But Bill Dunn allowed no gladness to enter the hard order of his purpose. After seven bitter years, he was returning to strike the Crowder Country with every force he had, to smash it if he could. His lean face was set, his gray eyes bleak as he came out of the timber and hauled up at the edge of a long, narrow meadow.

A swift running stream took its source in the willow marsh at the upper end. Beyond the stream where the ground started



to rise, there was a shed and a horse corral. In the first rank of trees above the corral a log cabin stood in a small green clearing.

A ribbon of smoke came from the cabin chimney, and some faint cross-stirring of air brought its pitch scent across the meadow. There were three horses by the shed. Two men came out to stand in front of the cabin.

Bill rode straight up and drew rein ten feet from them. They stood watching his approach, their faces still, their eyes narrow with uncertainty.

"Howdy," one of the men said but there was no friendliness in his voice.

BILL surveyed them both for a moment in silence. Then he swung around and checked to see that one of the three saddles over the rail fence was a pack tree. After that, he got grimly down from his horse and went around to face the two waiting men.

"I'll give you just fifteen minutes to gather every damn thing that's yours and be gone from here," he said and his voice

was cold beyond belief. Cold and bitter.

The men stood for a moment without moving or saying a word. Then the one who had spoken before, said from the corner of his mouth:

"What do you make of it, Joe?"

Joe shrugged and his voice was pitched to a tone of exaggerated surprise, "It beats me, Galt. You don't suppose he could be bluffing, do you?"

The other man ran an appraising eye along the hard length of Bill Dunn. "That might be it," he said. "Some folks will try the damndest things."

"He's a great big feller, ain't he?" Joe said. "And I bet he's as strong as a bull. They ought to put him in a cage."

"I'd have thought you'd know better than to say that," Dunn said in the thin voice of fury. He moved in and struck from the shoulder. His left fist slammed Joe's head back like a loose ball and a terrific right nearly tore away his jaw. As the man flopped down, Bill Dunn spun around, went in under Galt's rising gun and bore him down in a flying tackle.

They hit the hard-packed dirt with a numbing crash. Galt swore as the gun was lost from his hand. Bill drove two short, hard rights in over his heart.

The heart blows slowed the man a little and he was a second behind Dunn in getting to his feet. But there wasn't anything

yellow about him. He charged the instant he was up.

Bill kicked the spilled Colts down the hill and stood straight against the rush. He took three body blows that caught his wind and a thundering blow to the jaw before he could get in his right. He knocked the man down again.

Galt rolled over, got to his knees. He shook his head and spat out a mouthful of blood. For a moment, he stayed so, weighing the situation. His eyes traveled down to the gun belted to Bill's hip.

"Are you figuring to make a fist fight of this?"

"You were asking for it," Dunn said harshly. "Stand up and get it now."

"I will," Galt growled and wiped the blood from his lips as he got to his feet.

As soon as he was up, Bill moved against him, struck out with a left and a right. But the man went in under the blows and drove home a murderous left to the body.

The blow wrenched the air from Bill Dunn's lungs, brought a dulling ache to his spine. Yet he managed to block off the following smash to the head and put the man back on his heels with a left.

A savage joy surged through Bill's veins as Galt spat and came in again. The man could fight. He had the toughness and knowledge of an old ring battler. The quality of fear was not in him. He charged with a lashing fury to meet the man.

Galt weaved and countered. He rolled with punches he could not block but he was no match in savage power and he was hammered down. He got up once—twice—even a third time. Then he was down and out and through. He never moved the last time.

DUNN stood looking down at him for a moment. Then he went over and got a bucket of water that was on the bench by the door. He doused it over Galt's head and waited while consciousness filtered back.

Galt got himself up as far as his hands and knees and stayed there for a long moment, his battered head hanging down.

"Damn," he said at last. "You sure can hit."

"Get up," Bill Dunn told him harshly. "Get up and take your partner out of here

before I change my mind and kill you both!"

Galt started to say some word but the light in Dunn's eyes checked him. He got up and went down to the corral. His mind hadn't had time to clear fully and he was a bit slow. But he got all three horses caught and saddled at last and brought them up to the cabin.

Joe was groaning some but he hadn't come around yet. Bill took him up like a sack of meal and threw him over the pack saddle.

"Tie him on and get to moving," he ordered. "His gun is on him and yours is yonder. I didn't take the loads out but don't make any mistakes."

Galt rubbed his swollen lips with the back of his hand. "Our rifles and duffle are inside," he said hoarsely. "How about it?"

"You'll leave now or never," Bill Dunn said bluntly.

Galt stood a moment in silence. Then he shrugged, lashed Joe into the pack saddle. He went around to where his gun lay and picked it up. He didn't let any of his motions get fast. He shook the shells out before he put the weapon in its sheath with exaggerated care.

"All right," Bill Dunn said. "You can get going now and spread the news that I'm back. You can say it hither and yon, that Dunn is back. And you can say that before I'm through, I'll shove this damn country down a rat hole!"

Galt spun around and a light flamed in his eyes. "Dunn? Good Lord—why didn't you tell us you were Bill Dunn? If we'd known that—"

"Known!" Bill's tone cut through the other man's words like a whiplash. "What the hell are you trying to give me? I heard his crack about the cage!"

Galt met the fury of his eyes for one brief moment. Then he climbed wearily into his saddle and with the two other horses following, rode away down the meadow. He looked back just once as the trail went into the timber.

DUNN stood watching until they were gone. Something of the furious satisfaction that the conflict had brought him ebbed away. A deep weariness settled in its place and to escape the trouble of his

thoughts, he went swiftly about the business in hand.

He unsaddled both horses and slung his things down in the yard. When he had turned the animals into the corral and measured them a feed of oats, he went back up the hill to the cabin he had built nine years before.

A quick tide of memories rose in defiance to Bill Dunn's will. In spite of himself, he flashed back to a picture of the year he'd taken over the Short Creek place.

He'd started this log house a month before his twenty-first birthday and the driving enthusiasm of his youth had left no room for doubts. There had been only the promise of great doings ahead. The Crowder Country had been good then, its people the finest on earth. Dunn swore in disgust and went inside.

Both the bunks were made up. There was a stack of old magazines on the table and a pile of dishes and grub. Two Winchesters stood in one corner and it was altogether plain that people had been living there for a considerable time.

Cold anger flamed again in Bill Dunn. He took every single thing except the rifles out of the cabin and flung it in a heap down by the shed. When he finished, he brought in his own few things.

It looked pretty bare when he was through but the hot flare of temper had died out of him. He stoked up the fire in the stove and set his coffee pot on to heat. He had four eggs packed in a can of oatmeal and he laid them out on the table with some bacon for his supper.

Then he went and stood in the doorway.

The sun was nearly gone. Only the soft gold of its last rays touched the pine tops beyond the meadow. There was no sound but the low-voiced stream and it came to Bill Dunn's mind, that in all the world, there is nothing so deeply lonesome as the mountain country when the sun is going down. It is like the sadness that comes when an old love is dead and the new one of tomorrow has not yet brightened the sky.

Dunn twisted a smoke and drew a long, impatient draught into his lungs. He had ridden fifteen hundred miles across mountain and desert to strike his blow. He

threw down his cigarette and stamped it out. Then as he turned to go in, he paused abruptly and stood listening.

There was a horse coming down from the timber across the way. By the directness of its gait, Bill knew that it was under saddle and no wandering stray. He peered intently across the clearing.

After a little, a rider on a sorrel horse cut into the open, forded the stream and came on up toward the house.

Dunn watched without moving. There was no sign of emotion on his lean face, no hint of surprise when he saw that it was a girl.

She drew up a dozen feet from him and met the hard force of his gaze with the steady brown of her own. "Hello, Bill Dunn," she said gravely.

Dunn shifted a little on the balls of his feet. The tenseness went out of his body but his eyes remained the same.

"Good afternoon."

The girl swung down and came forward with one small, gloved hand outstretched. "They told me in town that you'd passed through," she said simply. "So I rode around this way to tell you we're glad to have you back."

"Very kind," Bill Dunn said but there was no warmth at all in his tone. He took her hand briefly and let it go.

The shadow of hurt passed in her eyes but she forced a smile. "I guess you don't remember me."

"No," Dunn said.

The girl stood straight before the finality of his word and her eyes never shifted from his. In spite of himself, Bill couldn't miss the fine, clean strength of her or the unconscious pride in her bearing.

"When they told me you'd thrashed the marshal in town, I was afraid you'd be like this," she said gravely. "That's why I came."

"I struck Fred Creel because he's a fool," Dunn said harshly. "He prated to me of fresh starts and fresh beginnings. I have but one answer to such men."

"It's time you talked to yourself of such matters," she told him directly. "It is more than three years since the law found it was wrong and turned you free. You should have left bitterness behind. You should have learned to live again."

DUNN got out the makings, wondering a little why he should be talking to her at all. No point to it. But he said, "Circumstance teaches every man his way. I've learned mine."

She looked squarely at him for a moment and there was a quick impatience in her eyes.

"I don't think you've learned at all, Bill. Where did you go when they turned you out?"

"On the move for the most part," he told her, and knew a quickening stir of anger. "I haven't stayed long in any place."

She half turned away and stood for a moment looking away up the meadow.

The sun had gone from the pines and even across the bold thrust of Hatchet Mountain, the thin, purple shadows were crowding the gold.

"I guess it's hard for us to understand," she said softly. "But you should have come home. You should have come back to your own people and let us make it up to you as best we could."

"My own people!" Bill said harshly. "My people—hell! Twelve of them sat like bleating, self-righteous sheep on my jury. They heard a handful of scattered, circumstantial evidence and decided I was guilty of murder. And then on the decision of those fools, Judge Harper, who'd known me all my life, muttered a lot of weak drivel about regrets and justice and duty and sent me to Canyon City for life. And as soon as I am gone, they move in on my land and my water like a flock of black buzzards. Heaven help me if these are my people!"

The girl turned and took a quick step toward him, laid an impulsive hand on his arm.

"It must have been awful—knowing you were not guilty and feeling that you were the only man alive that believed it. It must have been even worse than I thought."

Bill Dunn said roughly:

"Worse than *you* thought? Who are you to know of such things?"

The color rose in the girl's cheeks but her eyes were steady and unafraid.

"I remember you before all the trouble came," she said simply. "I was only a little girl then."

Dunn struck down a desire to ask her who she was. He demanded bluntly, "What has all this got to do with now?"

"Everything," she said and smiled. "You haven't asked me to stay to supper so I'll have to ask myself. And I'll not only accept but I'll cook it for you." She stepped by his surprised protest and went into the cabin.

Bill Dunn followed her, still half resentful. He stood watching while she checked his supplies.

"You haven't much variety," she complained. "What were you going to have?"

"I had it in my mind to eat those eggs," Bill said.

"It'll be the eggs then and you'll have to share them with me," the girl declared. "How do you like them, fried, poached or scrambled?"

The straight line of Bill Dunn's mouth softened for an instant in the faintest hint of a smile. "Well," he admitted, "I mostly get 'em scrambled no matter how I start out. But if you should happen to have the knack of frying an egg so that it's kind of brown on both sides and frilly around the edges without being hard in the middle, I—"

The girl caught the change in his tone and gave him a smile. "I didn't invent that way of cooking them," she said, "but I've improved it."

He got soap and a towel from his war bag and went down to the stream to wash. When he came back the pleasant smell of hot food was in the air and the eggs were nearly done.

Bill, running his eye around the room, felt compelled to say, "This place would do with a lot of cleaning. There was a couple of mavericks holed in here and I scattered things some when I hove 'em out."

"I know," she said. "They've been here ever since the water trouble started with Shaw."

"They were riding horses with the Bar H brand," Dunn said. "That's Judge Harper's outfit and he has no right to put men on my land for any reason at all. My title is still good."

The girl transferred the eggs to a plate and swung around. "Of course it's good. That's why dad put those men here to keep Carlton Shaw from fencing and establish-

ing a water right on it. He felt that—"

Dunn stiffened. "Your dad? Are you telling me that Judge Harper is your father? The man that sent me to Canyon City?"

The girl paused before the look in his eyes. "Yes, of course. I'm Doris Harper. I was hoping you'd remember."

BILL DUNN'S mouth drew into a straight, hard line. "I might have known it," he said thinly. "I might have had brains enough to know that you turning up here was part of the game. The Short Creek water must be damned important to your old man if he's willing to use his daughter to bait a jailbird!"

The color rushed to the girl's face before the lashing blow of his words. Then it ebbed away again to leave her white, trembling with anger.

"You mean you dare to think—" she dropped the plate of eggs to the corner of the table and they slid off onto the floor unnoticed.

"What the hell would I think?" Bill Dunn snarled. "And you damn near got by with it, too! Your sweet friendship stuff, nearly got under my hide!"

Doris Harper raised a hand to her throat. "Oh, how can a man's thoughts be so rotten?" She started by him toward the door but Dunn was in her way and his big hands on her shoulders, stopped her dead in her tracks.

"It doesn't become you to talk of rotten thoughts," he said harshly. "You figured I'd be lonesome and weary and that I'd be easy in the hands of a pretty woman! Well you're a pretty woman all right—a damn beautiful one from the outside at least. But I warn you, you're playing with no school kid when you play with me. You're apt to get more than you bargain for."

She stood very straight before the weight of his hands and her eyes were squarely on his. "You are terribly warped," she said evenly. "But I'm not a bit afraid of you."

"If you aren't, you're a fool," Dunn exploded. He jerked her roughly against him and kissed her hard on the mouth.

She made no effort to escape but her lips were cold and lifeless under his. Their touch killed the fire of rage within

him and he thrust her away with an empty feeling of defeat.

She swayed a moment before him and her brown eyes showed almost black with anger and scorn. "Are you all through now?"

"Yes," Bill Dunn said hoarsely. "I am through. Get going."

"I'll not go letting you think I'm afraid," Doris Harper cried and struck him full across the face with her open hand. When he didn't move, she struck him again and again. The blows rang out sharp and brittle in the stillness.

Dunn waited without flinching. A little ribbon of blood had started from the corner of his mouth. He noticed a red smear of it across the fingers of her right hand as she stepped back.

The fury was suddenly gone from her eyes.

"Oh, Bill, I'm sorry. So terribly sorry—But why can't you try to understand?"

Bill Dunn said, "Are you through with your fool slapping? Are you all through?"

For an instant she stood as though seeking some word. Then she nodded helplessly and went by him through the door into the yard.

Dunn swung around in time to see her stop short. He caught the sound of horses coming up the hill from the creek. Rubbing a lock of hair back from his forehead he checked the looseness of his Colt's gun. Two riders were coming up by the corral. One glance at the leader was enough to set Bill's nerves up hard.

II

SEVEN years hadn't changed the huge bulk of Judge Morgan Harper or lessened his great mane of white hair. He rode with his great body heaved forward in the saddle and the thrust of his black eyes was like a lance.

Doris stood quietly by her horse as the two came up and drew rein.

"The timing was bad," Bill said derisively. "You're a minute and a half late and it spoils the righteousness of the whole thing. Keep your hands away from your guns."

Harper cast a long, appraising look at Dunn before he turned to his daughter. "How is it that you are here, Doris? I

thought you said you were going to town."

The girl turned for a brief glance at Bill before she swung wearily into the saddle.

"I guess I made a mistake, dad."

The lank rider behind Harper forced his horse forward and his little eyes were mean, "Boss, if you want me to—"

"Hold it, Weltz," the judge said sharply. "We'll make no rush of things here. Is everything all right, Doris?"

She waited a moment and then her voice was very grave. "It's all right as you mean it, dad. But otherwise it's all wrong. Maybe you can explain things so that Bill Dunn will understand."

Bill waited dead still, watching the lean man with the hard eyes. He didn't shift his hand toward his gun but he was ready.

"I had word that you'd passed through Steptoe," Harper said to Dunn. "I saddled and rode at once but I seem to have been late. I met my two men on the trail and you'd used them hard."

"They were lucky to go from here alive," Bill told him bluntly. "This is my land and my water."

"Your violence was a mistake," the old man said gravely. "Those are both good boys and I have had them here for your advantage, to prevent the fencing of a water right."

Bill shifted his weight onto the balls of his feet and his words came out singly and hard.

"You made a lot of hollow words when you sent me away, Harper. You mentioned duty and law and regrets because you'd known me a long time. But all the time you said your drivel, you had a hungry eye on the Short Creek water. You were waiting the day when you could get it. Well damn you, I've still got it—I'll fence it solid and wait the day when the rest of your springs go dry and every rancher in the valley is busted and has to move out. I wouldn't save you if you crawled on your bellies!"

The old judge waited a moment before he said quietly, "I am sorry that you have returned with your mind so. It will defeat you in the end. You could make a good life here if you would."

"I'll make fences," Bill Dunn said. "And I'll beef the stock that breaks 'em. Get going now and ride out of here. And the next time you try to get around me, don't

count on a woman to do it and if you send a gunman, don't let it be a weasel like the one you have now."

The color flamed high in Harper's face as he swung his horse around. "Come on," he said to the other two and his voice was hoarse with an effort to control it.

The man Weltz moved beside him. Doris hesitated an instant as though she would speak, then she, too, turned away and spurred after her father.

Dunn stood watching them go. When they had disappeared in the timber beyond the meadow, he went bleakly back into the cabin.

HE got a can of beans from his pack and dumped them in the frying pan. While they were getting hot, he scraped up the eggs that Doris Harper had cooked and threw them out back.

He was nearly through when he caught the sound of another horse coming across the meadow. He didn't get up or even change his position but he pulled out his Colt's gun and laid it on the table before him.

The horse came straight up into the yard and somebody called, "Hey Dunn! Are you there?"

Bill took a last swallow of coffee and set the cup down. "Yes," he said to the man he couldn't see. "What the hell do you want with me?"

There was a grunt and the squeak of saddle leather as somebody swung down. Spurs rattled across the yard and an enormously tall man loomed in the doorway. He stood looking into the gloom for a long moment before he said.

"Hello, Dunn. I guess you don't remember me."

"I remember you," Bill said. "You are Carlton Shaw. You started running cattle through here the year before they sent me away. What do you want?"

The big man nodded and came on in. Bill watched him steadily.

"I heard you were back," Shaw said. "One of my riders was in town when you passed through."

"The news of my coming seems to have spread," Bill observed dryly and waited for the other man to go on.

Shaw chuckled. "Well you can't expect to lam hell out of the Steptoe city marshal

and then not have the news get around.”
“Get to the point,” Bill said impatiently. “You didn’t come here because I dusted Fred Creel.”

Shaw laughed again. “All right. I see you want action with your talk and I’m no man to beat around the bush. I heard you were back and I came here tonight because I want to make you a proposition before anyone else gets to you.”

Bill just waited.

Shaw let a minute pass before he said bluntly, “Dunn, I want the Short Creek water.”

Bill watched him, saw the eagerness in every line of his great body.

“A lot of folks are going to want this water before I am through.”

“Yes,” Shaw agreed. “A lot of people are going to want it in the next few years. But the one that has it, can control the whole of the Crowder Country. This water is the key to all the upper end!”

Dunn waited a moment and then said very softly, “Well, I’m the guy that’s got it.”

Carlton Shaw set both his closed fists on the table and leaned across. His long, narrow face was tense and eager. There was an urgent ring to his voice.

“That’s why I’m here. That’s why I came tonight. And I have no piker’s offer to make you. Listen, you have the water. I have better than four thousand head of stock. Neither is worth a damn without the other but together, we can write our own ticket. We can run the country.”

“My water is not for sale, trade or bargain,” Bill told him flatly. “I intend to hold it.”

“But good lord,” Shaw protested, “take a look at it. It’ll take you years to build even a small herd. Together, we can start like a landslide and take everything with us.”

Bill got out his tobacco and built a careful smoke.

The tall man lowered his voice a little and spoke again.

“And I ain’t missing another thing, Dunn. I ain’t overlooking the fact that you’d likely be pleased to bust this Crowder Country wide open. God knows you have reason.”

“You are wasting your time,” Dunn said bluntly. “I’ll keep my water.”

Shaw stood back and the tense breath went out of him in a long drawn sigh. “My deal is a good one.”

Bill finished his smoke and put it between his lips. But he didn’t light it and he didn’t say anything.

After an uneasy moment, the tall man grunted goodby and went out. Dunn heard him mount up and ride away in the night.

III

WHEN five minutes had gone by, Bill got up and put his dirty plate and cup to soak in the frying pan. After that, he lighted his cigarette and went out to sit on the bench by the door.

The thin white of a half moon silvered the yonder pines, marked them out like the sails of phantom ships riding in the sea of jet-black shadows. Down in the willows of the meadow bottom, the frogs had struck up their evening croaking.

Bill sat listening. His eyes were half closed and in the soft dark, some of the bitter hardness went from his face. There was peace here and rest for a weary man.

There was some faintly disturbing thing deep down in Bill Dunn. Without his conscious bidding, his mind brought him back to the girl who had ridden that way and had stayed to cook him a dinner that they had never eaten. He took a long impatient suck at his smoke.

“Well, hell, she looked as if she meant it. Maybe—” then with a single motion, he crushed out the fire of his cigarette and got to his feet.

For a moment he stood dead still. It took him time to place the thing that had warned his senses. It was the silence. The frogs had become utterly still.

Bill reached around inside the door and got his Winchester. With it in his hands, he crossed the yard in a half dozen silent bounds. When he reached the deeper shadow of a pine clump, he paused to listen again.

It was a long time before his straining ears picked up the sound that had disturbed the frogs. When he did, he recognized it as the soft punching of horses hoofs coming through the meadow grass beyond the stream.

The rider stopped a moment in the

willows, then splashed across and came up the hill toward the house. Bill Dunn watched and thumbed back the hammer of his gun.

He saw the horseman haul up and dismount in the heavy shadow of the shed. He waited until the figure had advanced nearly to the house before he said harshly:

"You stop right there! Get your hands up high!"

There was a quick gasp and a small voice said, "Oh!"

Dunn swore under his breath. He lowered his rifle. "Now what?" he demanded and went across the open moonlight to face Doris Harper.

The girl hadn't raised her hands. She stood quietly waiting while he came up to her. Dunn stopped a pace away.

"This beats anything yet," he said drily. "You'd better give me your gun."

He saw her chin go out a little and she made a defensive gesture with her left hand.

"I haven't got a gun."

"Maybe not," Bill grunted. "But you just hid something under your coat. What was it?"

"It is eggs," Doris said and brought a cardboard box from under her coat. "I spilled yours on the floor so I got these and rode over. I was going to leave them on your doorstep for breakfast."

"Well, I'm damned," Bill said helplessly. He took the box she held out to him but he couldn't think of anything else to say.

The frogs down by the stream were taking up their song again. One by one they joined in, the high ones and the low ones until it was a solid, ringing chorus again.

"I'll have to go now," Doris said. "I'll have to be getting back."

BILL DUNN shifted restlessly. He felt awkward before her open friendliness and it made him resentful because he didn't know how to meet it.

"There was no call for this," he said. "But thanks."

The girl turned as if to go, then hesitated. For a moment they stood listening to the frogs and there was no word passed. Then she spoke:

"I couldn't leave it the way it was—with you thinking all those terrible things.

Neither dad nor I knew the other was coming."

AND with a suddenness that shook him, Bill believed her. With the belief, came the first real pleasure he had known in years and he knew a desire to tell her so. But he couldn't seem to get the words together beyond saying, "All right then." It sounded flat and incomplete. It filled him with quick impatience at himself.

"Everything will be fine if you will just let people be friends," Doris said eagerly. "Dad just happened to be the judge when your trouble came and he had to do what he thought was right. But it was hard for him and a hundred times worse after French Joe confessed. He went to Canyon City the day they turned you out but you were already gone. If you only knew how hard he tried to find you after that."

"I didn't stick anywhere," Bill said. "I wasn't good company for any man. Not even—" he broke off in the middle of a sentence and pushed the girl into the shadow with a hard hand.

The song of the frogs had cut off as though slashed with a knife and a man was running through the open moonlight toward the house. He was bent low to the ground and he wasn't making any noise.

Bill Dunn set the box of eggs down on the bench. "Get inside quick!"

A shaft of moonlight struck in through the south window and touched Dunn's heap of things on the bunk to the left. Bill made a quick survey there and then took the girl across into the black shadow by the stove. He felt out a chair and pushed her into it.

Doris Harper caught his arm for an instant in mute appeal and he found her briefly in warning with his left hand as he laid down his rifle and drew his Colt's.

Then there was a long period of utter silence. Minutes dragged by with the endless weight of hours. Bill could feel the presence of the girl close behind him.

Then suddenly the open frame of the door was filled and a man stood looking in. He held a short-barreled gun half leveled to his shoulder. For a time, he stood looking at the bunk where the moonlight struck. He lifted the gun full up and took careful aim. The double, bellowing roar of a shotgun thundered out.

Bill Dunn's shots were so close after it, that their dry bark sounded more like an echo than any separate thing.

The man in the door stood up full and very straight. Then his gun slithered from limp fingers. He fell backward stiff and hard. His boots stayed across the sill.

Bill didn't move from his tracks until he had shoved fresh loads into his gun. He said flatly to the girl, "You stay right there."

He went across the room, stepped over the body and went outside. The horses were nervous, stamping, but there was nothing else.

"Somebody sent a boy to the mill," Dunn muttered grimly. He took the man by the collar to drag him into the moonlight so he could see his face.

Somehow he felt no surprise at the man's identity, only a deadening sense of helpless futility. These things that were moving against him. He got up and went back to the door.

"It's all over," he said and wondered at the quietness of his own voice. "You'd better ride for home. There is no telling what the shooting will bring."

In an instant, the girl was beside him, white-faced and tense. "Who was it—who—?" she made a desperate gesture toward the still body.

"That does not concern you for now," Dunn said. "But you'd best be gone from here." He took her arm and started her down the hill.

WHEN they came to the shelter of the shed, she stood back while he brought her horse and tightened the cinch. Then she swung into the saddle and sat a moment looking down, held out her hand to him imploringly.

"Bill, won't you come home with me? Won't you come and stay with father and me until this thing is settled? I'm afraid if you stay here—"

"No," Bill Dunn said. "That's no way. Nothing will happen to me. But there is one thing—"

"Yes?"

"That you tell no single person of your visit here tonight. Not now or ever. You hear?"

"Yes. But—"

"There are no buts," Dunn said. "And

as for the rest, I'll do the best I can with what there is. Goodby."

"Bill," she said desperately, "you'll remember? You won't forget about our being friends?"

"No," Dunn said gravely. "I won't forget that."

He took the hand she offered him and held it for a moment. She looked very small, frightened, in the moonlight and he wished there was something more he could say.

"You come our way soon," Doris Harper said and turned her horse away. "We'll be waiting for you."

Bill Dunn stood watching while she rode away. He had his feet punched down solidly in the dirt but there was a weary sag to his shoulders.

When the last sound of her horse had died away, he went back up to the cabin and looked again at the still body of Ed Weltz. "A hell of a mess," he said aloud. "One hell of a mess."

DUNN got a couple of gunny-bags and threw them over the dead man. He didn't like the white shine of moonlight on his face. After that, he got his Winchester and went to sit on the bench again.

For a long time he sat there watching and listening, pondering his problem.

After awhile the moon went down and the stars moved in close and bright overhead. The frogs sang along until the cold set in with the small hours. Then they fell away by ones and twos until there were none left. Nothing came to the meadow.

Bill rose at last and stamped his feet against the chill, took his time from the stars. It wasn't so far until the first day.

"It's the only out," he said aloud. "I don't like it but there is no other thing to do. If I stay, her father himself will make a try for me and I'll have to deal with him the same. If I go, she'll never have to know and it makes no matter, there are no long stops on a one-way trail like mine."

He went into the cabin and started to pack his few belongings. By the time the east had grayed enough to supply a thin light, he had them slung on his pack horse and was ready for the trail.

He mounted up and sat for a moment considering which way to go. He could

think of no single place over his back trail to which he wished to return. There was new country to the north and that seemed best. He touched his black gelding with a spur and started for the timber. The next instant, he set up hard and ripped his Winchester from its saddle boot! A horse had whinnied in the willow brakes.

IV

BILL searched the thick of the trees with a hard, sweeping eye but there was nothing moving. Then his mind got to working and he put his rifle back with a grunt. This was only Ed Weltz's horse, still tied where the gunman had left him.

Bill rode down across the open and into the willows. A tough hammer-headed little buckskin was tied there. It wasn't the same horse that Weltz had been riding when he was with Harper and Dunn smiled grimly when he saw that it wore no brand. The only thing that had been overlooked, seemed to be getting a killer good enough for the job.

Bill turned the animal loose and started it off with a slap on the rump. Then he swung into the saddle again, gathered his pack horse and struck north into the timber.

The sleepless night had left no outward sign on him other than to flatten the line of his jaw a little and narrow his lips. But Bill Dunn felt old and very weary. It passed in his mind that in all the long trails he had traveled before, this place had always been at the end. There had always been the deep-laid knowledge that sooner or later, he would return. But now, his mind would carry him no farther than the fact that he was going away and he cursed bitterly at the weight of his thoughts.

Where the trail crossed a rocky spur, he paused a moment for a last look back. The meadow spread green and soft below him. There was a patch of frost in a low spot beyond the stream and the flanking pines looked still and gray for the sun was not yet upon them.

Bill saw the hammer-headed buckskin clear the willows and go up across the last open ground at the head of the meadow.

The animal moved at the shambling trot common to a riderless horse going home. Dunn watched it for a moment without

thought, then jerked suddenly straight in his saddle. The hackle hairs rose along the back of his neck! The buckskin was not headed toward Judge Harper's Bar H, that lay to the east. It was headed straight southwest toward Carlton Shaw's mule-shoe spread in Winter Valley!

The explosion of this fact and the possibilities that it brought, struck Dunn with the force of a physical blow. His mind raced through the angles that were opened before him.

Though Bill had neither trust nor liking for Shaw, his mind had been centered on the single belief that it had been Harper who had sent Weltz to murder him. But if the killer had come from Winter Valley on a Mulehoe horse, it could either mean that the two ranchers had joined together against him or that Weltz had been taking Judas' pay from Harper while he was spy and henchman of Shaw!

Bill Dunn's mind shifted back to the girl for an instant and with no conscious direction of thought, he made his decision. He swung his horse around, scratched it with a spur and struck out at a swinging lope after the riderless buckskin.

THE trail to Winter Valley led up out of the Short Creek recess, swung across the timbered slope of Hatchet Mountain and dropped down into the lava country where Shaw's holdings lay.

Bill didn't catch sight of the hammer-head again but he picked up its trail in the timber and saw that it hadn't changed its course. A very hard smile pulled at his lips and he slowed his pace to a jög-trot. An hour more or less didn't make any difference in the job he was set to do and he wanted the buckskin to get in well ahead of him. As he rode, he took out his Colt's gun and checked each of the six loads.

The sun was nearly two hours in the sky when Dunn crossed the last of the lava rims above Winter Valley. The buildings and corrals of Shaw's outfit lay spraddled out around an aspen spring on the flat below.

There was a big herd of red stock bunched under the fence at the lower end of the little valley and their restless bawling lifted up loud and discordantly in the morning still.

"Bellow and be damned to you," Bill

Dunn growled. "You'll right soon be on your way." He went down the slope and across the dusty plain at a shambling trot.

There were five saddled horses along a harness rack by the barn but the buckskin wasn't one of them.

Bill saw that there were five men bunched on the sun-bleached porch of the ranch house and the great frame of Carlton Shaw loomed in their center. As the rider drew near, they shifted and spread a little. All stood facing him and waited in a tense silence.

Bill Dunn rode straight into the yard and hauled up. He said, "Whoa, boy," to his pack horse and got out tobacco and papers. He twisted up a smoke and got it going before he favored the watching line with any slight attention or word. Then he ran a sardonic eye along them and said:

"You guys look foolish as hell standing there in a row. Why don't you relax?"

Shaw grinned ruefully and took a step forward.

"All right, Dunn. But you can't blame the boys for being a little jumpy. Word has filtered around that you play pretty rough some times."

Bill Dunn blew a thin ribbon of smoke from his nose and watched the tall rancher through the rising swirl of it.

"Your outfit looks like a coyote pack to me," he said flatly. "They strike me as a sorry bunch—but that does not matter. It is you that I came to see."

Shaw's eyes narrowed before the coldness of the words and he lifted his hand a trifle to still the rumble from his men.

"Your pack horse is loaded, Dunn," he said. "You seem ready for the trail."

"I am," Bill said. "Yesterday, you made me an offer. I come now to make you one."

Shaw rubbed his lips with the back of his hand and a bright light flickered very deep down in his eyes.

"Last night, you would have none of my offer. What's your proposition now?"

Bill thrust forward a little in his seat and jerked a thumb at the other men. "What I have to say is to you alone. If you want to hear it, all right. If you don't, all right."

The light showed again in Shaw's eyes. "Get on down to the horses," he ordered the men. "I'll join you there in a little."

In sullen silence they obeyed. Bill met their hard, hostile eyes one by one as they trooped off the porch.

Shaw waited for a moment, until the others were half way to the corral, "All right. What's on your mind?"

Bill got down on the side away from the other man and went around his horse. He walked over to within a few feet of the rancher and threw down his smoke, carefully stamped it out before he said:

"That guy, Wertz, that's been riding for Harper, rode over my way last night late. He shot some holes in my bunk and I killed him deader than all hell!"

Shaw whistled softly. "He did! I told you you'd better throw in with me."

V

BILL looked him right in the eyes. He smiled without any humor. "Cut it out. The act is over. I followed that buckskin horse straight over here. Don't raise your voice or go for your gun unless you want to get killed."

For an instant the color went out of Carlton Shaw's face and fear showed stark naked in his eyes. Then he threw a quick look at his waiting riders and his courage came back. A hard grin pulled at his mouth.

"You damn fool. What chance do you think you've got of riding out of here alive?"

"A swell one," Bill Dunn told him flatly. "You're going with me."

Shaw licked his lips. "You're crazy. You're crazy as hell. One word or move from me, and the boys'll blast you wide open!"

"Maybe. But we're never going to find out. You ain't going to make that move. Did you ever have to hang around for a day or two while some poor devil was dying of a gut-shot? It's an awful thing to see."

The tall man's face grew damp and he said hoarsely, "You can't get by with this. My men—"

"To hell with your men!" Bill Dunn told him. "I told you they were nothing but a coyote pack. To prove it, I'm going to walk right down there with you while you tell 'em to get that fenced herd started over the hills toward my Short Creek

water. You can pick your own words but you're going to make 'em think everything is right."

Shaw ran a shaking hand across his mouth. His voice was hollow with panic. "Listen—you can't do this—we can make a deal. We can—"

"It's up to you to convince 'em," Bill Dunn repeated. "Let's go."

Shaw's face was ashen, his lips blue. He opened his mouth in an effort to speak but Bill ordered him to be still. There was a horse coming up from the other side of the buildings and it was close on.

"I don't have to tell you to watch yourself," Dunn warned softly. The next instant, Doris Harper rode around the corner of the ranch house.

THE girl drew up short when she saw the two men and blank amazement marked her face. She started to speak but no words came and Bill Dunn said sardonically.

"I guess there ain't any fool-killer around here or he'd have had me. Your act last night had me fooled complete. I didn't think you were in on it."

"In on—" she started faintly.

Shaw's four men were coming up the hill at a run and there was a triumphant grin on the tall man's face. He ripped out his gun and jammed it deep into Bill Dunn's belly. He exploded in a cackle of relief.

"Get your hands up, you jailbird punk! You'll start nothing now unless you want to take this skirt to hell with you!"

He took Bill's Colt's and slung it on the ground.

The four hard-faced riders closed in, guns ready.

"Watch this bird," Shaw ordered. "Blow hell out of him if he makes a break!" He turned to Doris Harper and his voice dropped to an insinuating rasp, "Get down, sweetheart. We've got what you're looking for."

Bill Dunn saw the horror gather in her eyes. She lifted a desperate hand to her throat and Shaw's voice raised a little.

"You come to the right place if you're looking for your old man. He wasn't feeling so good a minute ago but I guess he's likely come out of it now. Fetch him out, boys."

The girl gave a strangled little cry as she jumped down from her horse and started running toward the house. Shaw waited until she was close to the steps before he stuck out a foot and sprawled her in the dirt.

WITH a snarl, Bill Dunn lunged forward. He sent one man spinning with a slashing left hand and staggered another with a right to the body. But a third was upon him before he could turn, struck him a murderous blow with a pistol barrel and as he went down.

"All right, Hal," Shaw said. "But if he makes another break, let him have it."

Bill pushed himself up as far as his hands and knees. The blood was running down across his head and dripping from his chin. He saw the girl crouching by the side of the steps. Her eyes fixed in horror on the house. Two of the men were half dragging Judge Harper out onto the porch.

The old man's white hair was a matted smear of blood and his face was gray and drawn. His legs had barely enough strength to carry him but there was no fear in his eyes until he caught sight of his daughter. A groan escaped him then.

Doris sprang up to go to him but Shaw shoved her down against the porch again.

"Never mind the sob stuff. He'll keep for now and we've got business to do."

"Damn you," Harper stormed. "There'll come a day when I'll—"

But Shaw turned his back on the old man and grinned dourly at Bill Dunn. "Well hard-case, what do you think of the set-up now?"

Bill got to his feet and stood swaying a moment. He wiped a flow of blood with the back of his hand.

"You were riding too high for my deal last night," Shaw said. "The one I'm going to make you now, ain't nearly so good but you're going to take it."

Bill Dunn let his eyes shift around the whole group and then brought them back to the tall, grinning man who stood by the girl.

"You seem to have your pants in the saddle. What is this deal?"

Shaw's head moved forward and Bill saw the same expression in his eyes that he'd seen the night before when he'd made his bid for the Short Creek water. It was

a deep-burning fire of fanatical greed.

"You're going to get the blood cleaned off your face and ride to town with me, Dunn. When we get there, we're going to the land office and I'm going to give you one hundred dollars for your title to the Short Creek spread. And just so you won't get out of hand, the boys can keep the other two here until I get back. And may heaven help 'em if I ain't here by dark!"

"Listen, Bill," the old judge said thickly, "make him take Doris along and turn her loose before you sign. He can keep me as a hostage."

Bill Dunn looked Harper straight in the eyes and his voice was flat and utterly cold. "Whatever made you think I'd do anything for you? You never eased the way when you skidded me into Canyon City."

THE old man stiffened before the lashing words. Shaw laughed.

"I figured you'd think of your own skin when it came to a pinch, Dunn. Let's get headed for town."

"Wait a minute," Bill said. "I ain't getting much out of this the way it stands. I ought to get something more."

"You're getting a hundred bucks and your worthless life," Shaw said in heavy contempt. "You take it or die right here."

Bill swayed a little on his feet. His voice grew plaintive. "You might make it five hundred. With five hundred I could—"

"You're only getting a hundred so it'll look right," Shaw told him. "And to make sure that you don't come back and beef about it later you're going to leave a written confession that you killed Ed Weltz in cold blood. After the trimming you gave the marshal in Steptoe yesterday, he'd be right willing to pick you up and hang something on you."

Bill shrugged resignedly. His gaze shifted around to the girl who stood stiff and tense by the steps.

"All right, Shaw," he said wearily. "You seem to have thought out all the angles. I guess I ain't in a spot to choose. But there's just one thing before we go—"

Shaw regarded him with hard eyes. "Well?"

One side of Bill Dunn's mouth twisted bitterly and he swung away from the girl to jerk a thumb at the old judge. "Ever

since that old buzzard sent me to Canyon City, I've waited the day when I could bust him down. If I can have just one sock at him now I'll be ready for the trail again."

Dunn heard the girl draw in a long gasp of air but the old judge only squared his shoulders and said no word.

A puzzled light showed in Shaw's eyes for a moment. Then he nodded. "You sure remember your private hates," he said. "But if that's all you want, you can have it. I got a lot of good out of socking him myself!"

He turned to the man Hal, and said briefly, "Get down and throw a saddle on my horse."

Bill wiped the blood from his face with his sleeve. "I've waited a long time for this. I used to lie awake nights in my cell planning it." He started across the yard grimly but stopped dead by the steps when the girl threw herself defiantly before him.

"Hit me," she cried. "Hit me if that's what your crazy warped mind wants. But don't you dare touch him!"

"What the hell!" Bill Dunn exploded.

Both his hands shot out to her shoulders. With a single heave, he swept her off her feet and hurled her across the yard. She smashed down a full three yards away and rolled two more.

Bill Dunn never paused. He let the full effort of his pitch carry him around and his left fist exploded like a bomb on Shaw's chin as he swung back from giving his order.

The blow spun the man like a top. Before he could fall Dunn had him locked around the neck from behind. His left arm hand had ripped the Colt's gun from Shaw's thigh.

The two men who had taken Dunn's blows a moment before were quick to get into action. But Bill Dunn got in the first shot.

IT was point-blank range. He couldn't miss. He had them both falling at once as their guns roared futilely in the dirt.

Hal and the forth rider had started down the hill together for the horses. They swung, crouched, went for their guns.

Bill Dunn managed to fling his living shield around in time to catch the slogging impact of their opening volley. He missed

his first shot. He shot again to sprawl Hal down writhing in the yard.

The fourth man held his gun low firing as fast as he could fan the hammer.

Bill felt the raking burn of one bullet across his neck. The dull force of two more ripping into Shaw's body. He took careful aim and put a wicked black hole straight between the wild eyes of the fourth man.

Somehow the dead weight of Shaw's body took Dunn to his knees then and by the time he was up again, the girl was by his side. The old judge was coming across the yard.

Bill ran his eye around the men who were down. There was no menace left. He said gravely, "I am sorry that I slammed you down so hard. But I wanted you well clear of the guns."

The girl shook her head and her eyes were filled with deep concern, "Oh, Bill, I'm all right. But you—"

"These scratches of mine don't count," Bill Dunn said gently. "A fool like me, ought to be hit over the head. Look to your father now, he's the one that's been the worst hurt."

"I took a beating," the old judge rumbled. "But I'll survive. Doris, how did you come to ride into this thing?"

"I went to Bill's last night, dad. While I was there a man came and tried to kill him and Bill shot him. He tried to keep me from seeing who it was—it was Ed Weltz. When I got home to tell you, you were gone. I waited for daylight and followed your trail here—"

Harper nodded grimly. "It was Weltz that told me to ride here last night. He said a Shaw rider had brought him word

for me to come. That Shaw was licked and ready to come to terms over our boundary and water. When I got here at daylight, the devils jumped me and smashed me down. They thought Weltz would have killed Dunn and they were going to leave my body there with his to look as if we'd killed each other. Just before they were ready to go, Weltz' horse came in and they knew he'd slipped."

Bill shifted his weight restlessly. "I've been a little slow in putting things together."

Doris Harper took one swift look at Bill's pack horse and when she turned back to face him, there was a soft light shining from the depths of her eyes.

"You have all your things there, Bill. Were you ready for the trail when you found that horse?"

"Yes," he admitted slowly. "I was moving out."

"Why?" The girl's single word was very low.

Bill Dunn fumbled awkwardly for speech that wouldn't come. "Well—"

But the girl understood and didn't wait. She went swiftly to lay her hands against him. "Oh, Bill, Bill—suppose you'd missed that horse! Suppose you'd gone without ever knowing!"

At the touch of her fingers, some old, forgotten thing came to life in Bill Dunn. The bitter weight of the years was suddenly gone. He was young, happy again. The past was swept wholly away by the bright promise of the future.

"Be still," he commanded softly and lifted both his big arms to take her. "We will have no talk of such things. This is the way it was figured to be."



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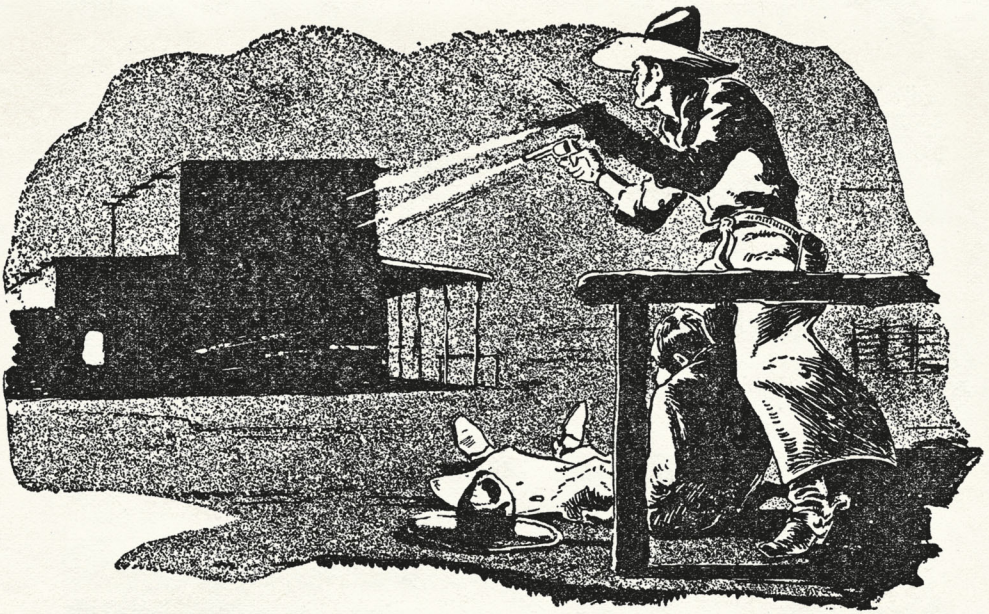
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FIT GEM AND EVER-READY RAZORS



TWO FROM THE DEAD

By JOHN STARR

They rode back from the dead to keep a promise signed by a scarlet claw. A gun had broken them both—yet only in gleaming lead did they seek for payment!



HEY called Johnny Dunn "Cry Baby" because of a little ruction he busted into out near the Circle-Dot-2. A 'breed named Gabe Starr was hauling timber in an old spring wagon and his team had stalled at the foot of a steep grade. Gabe was doing his best to encourage the team along by raising bumps on the head of the off horse with a length of chain, and cussing appropriately in Brule Sioux and what he called English. Just about that time Johnny came along and tried to show Gabe the error of his ways by scattering most of Gabe's teeth about the countryside. Which same was what might be called downright foolish, since Gabe was at least six inches taller than the kid and outweighed him fifty pounds.

For a couple of minutes Johnny gave the 'breed all he could handle, but Gabe was too strong for the kid. He landed a round-house swing that knocked the boy down,

and as Johnny leaped up another fist caught him on the side of the head. Old Buck Bradley who saw it all, said the kid must have gone down six times before he got there; and when old Buck did ride up to calm Gabe with a gun barrel, Johnny was getting up again, groggy and weak. He could just barely stand, and yet he was swinging blindly with both hands and crying like a baby.

"Stand still!" he was sobbing. "Stand still, you horse-beatin' Injun, an' fight!" And he was punching weakly at where Gabe might have been if old Buck's gun barrel hadn't happened along.

After that, whenever the kid would ride out to the Circle-Dot-2 the boys would sorta hooraw him a little. Jim Mapes would run around hollering for someone to get his hip-boots and his slicker. Gila would make motions like he was swimming fast and furious. Hap Wilson would dash this way and that bellowing, "Flee fo' yo' lives, fella citizens, fo' the dam has

done busted!" Even old Buck Bradley, the toughest rannyhan that ever rodded a spread, would sorta curl up his gray mustache into a grin and say, "Hello, there, Babe. Looks like rain."

Johnny would get all red in the face, pretend he was sore as the devil, and make out he was going to tear up the mail he brought over. Then he'd say, "Aw, you all can go to hell," and come over and tell them all the news. He was just that sort of a likable kid.

The kid and his brother were running a small outfit just across the river. There had been a right sizable herd when Old Man Dunn died, but Joe—the kid's brother—had gradually run it down to the ground. He wasn't much account, this Joe Dunn, and he inherited the Old Man's weakness for cards and liquor. Most nights he'd spend down at Poison Krell's place, playing stud. And Krell was winning the Dunn herd cow by cow.

The kid tried to auger with Joe. So did Jim Mapes and Hap Wilson and even old Buck Bradley. But it was no use.

"I'm too much loser to quit now," Joe would say, and he'd laugh a little.

That was why the kid played around at the Circle-Dot-2 so much. He wanted friends and he couldn't be friendly with Joe. Buck Bradley, who everyone said didn't have no more sympathy in him than a sidewinder, was the hombre that took the job of teaching the kid what his brother should have taught him.

Ropes and cows and trails and things like that were what old Buck taught, things that a cattle man has to know. And every evening he'd put the boy through his paces with the gun. Everyone said old Buck had the fastest draw in the county, and night after night he'd fool around trying to show the kid how it was done.

They were shooting at a post out behind the corrals when the news came. Old Buck was standing there with his legs spread wide and his hand swinging easily at his side.

"Don't drag it out," he was saying; "just sweep it out . . . like this."

Gracefully, effortlessly, his hand darted down and the heavy .45 seemed to leap out to meet it. In one sweeping motion he drew and fired—and splinters flew from the top of the post.

Johnny looked at him in awe. "Gosh, that's fast, Buck," he said.

Old Buck shook his head. "Just fair," he denied. "I'm gettin' old, Babe, an' my fingers ain't as quick as they was. Why, one time. . ."

He broke off as a horseman came plunging around the barn. Hap and Gila and the rest came running out, and old Buck and Johnny hurried toward the little group. The white face of Jim Mapes told them something serious had happened.

The little knot of men spread out as the two approached, and a strange silence came, Old Buck barked a question but no one answered; they were all staring at the kid. Johnny felt their stares and a nameless sort of fear clutched him. His hands twitched nervously at his sides.

"What's the matter, Jim?" he asked, a shrill tenseness in his voice. "What—" and then he couldn't say any more.

"I came back for my gun," Jim Mapes said huskily. "One uh the C-M boys jus' told me Krell killed Joe half an hour ago."

The boy's face went white and his breath came out in a long, unbelieving gasp. He closed his eyes for a long moment, and when he opened them something that might have been a tear glistened in the corner of each. He spoke to old Buck Bradley and his voice was very low.

"I'll trouble yuh for the loan of one of yore guns, Buck."

They all turned to Buck Bradley, then—Buck Bradley, whose lined old face was drawn and tense and bitter. Old Buck shook his head slowly.

"Sorry, Babe, I'll be usin' it myself. . . . Get yoreself a hoss."

SIX horses burned the dust into the sleepy, dusk-shrouded cow town of Brazos. Six men jabbed deep their vengeance spurs. For, according to the story Jim Mapes told, Joe Dunn hadn't had a chance. He'd accused Krell's dealer of running a cold deck; had tossed the cards in his face and gone for his gun. And Krell, sitting beside him, had calmly pumped three derringer bullets into his side. Any one of them would have been enough.

Six horses jerked to a halt at the hitch rack in front of Krell's place. Six men, tense and bitter and mad, stamped through the swinging doors. And then they paused.

The tables had been pushed back along the walls, leaving just one in the center of the room. At that table, lounging indolently, sat the black-coated, sallow-faced man who was known as Poison Krell. His arms were crossed in front of him, his hat was pushed back to show gleaming black hair. He spoke before any one of them could say a word.

"We have been waiting for you," he purred. One long finger had waved toward the bar that ran down one side of the room, and the gambler's lips curved in a grim, taunting smile. For he knew he had them licked.

In front of the long bar four men stood; four hawk-faced gunmen who caressed the triggers of four sawed-off shotguns. There was no one else in the place. No one else unless you wanted to count that blanket-draped figure sprawled out stiffly in one corner—that figure that had been a man just a short half hour before.

"You see," Krell purred on, "that we have been expecting you. Do you want a drink, or a little stud—or is there something else you're wanting?"

Old Buck started to speak, but Johnny Dunn's voice came first. It was shrill, brittle—the voice of a man who doesn't know what he's saying and who plainly doesn't care.

"Damn you, Krell," the kid gasped out, "listen to me, I haven't got a gun—couldn't beat you to the draw if I had one and you'd give me an even break. But if you're any part man, you'll stand up so's I can tear out your sneaking throat with this here hand."

He took three stiff paces toward the table and held a shaking young hand before the face of Poison Krell. The kid was trembling all over; was just like some wild beast waiting to spring. Yet he had sense enough to wait; knew there was no use throwing his life away just to make a gesture.

Krell laughed harshly. "If you want to talk to me," he said evenly, "go fill that hand with something." And he tapped the bulge of a holstered gun that snuggled against his hip.

The kid dropped back a pace and his hand fell to his side, clenching, knotting. Then he felt old Buck's fingers on his arm and heard Buck's voice speaking.

"And how about me doin' a little talkin'?" old Buck asked.

One of the gunmen shuffled forward a little, but Krell waved him back. "Oh," he smiled, "so you think you want chips in this game?"

Buck Bradley nodded his head. "Reckon I do," he grunted.

Soundlessly Krell pushed back his chair and rose to his feet. He was a tall man, this Poison Krell, and a man who bore the name of killer. He hadn't been in Brazos long, and few knew much about him or dared to ask—until now.

He said, "I had to kill one man tonight to keep a friend of mine from dying. He was drunk and dog-crazy. I suppose I'll have to kill you, Bradley, to make it safe for the rest of my friends. . . . Well, let's get it over!"

And even the men of the Circle-Dot-2 those men who had fogged hell-bent on a vengeance mission, couldn't help but admire, in a sneaking, unconscious way, the guts of this Krell, the gambler.

He stood facing old Buck Bradley; old Buck who was known in every cow-camp for the darting speed of his draw; old Buck who had been road-agent, and soldier of fortune and even sheriff in the days when gun play was an art; old Buck who could have cut notches in his gun for twenty men who'd thought their draw was fast. And Krell, the gambler, faced him and laughed and smoothed the gleaming white bosom of his shirt.

"Come on, old Whiskers," he laughed. "It's you and me for it."

It was an even break. The moment of sheer silence that fell was broken by the faint creak of boot-leather as someone in the back moved. And, as if that had been a signal, two hands swooped down to open holsters. Two shots sounded almost as one, and a gun clattered to the floor as the echoes died. Old Buck's face twisted in pain and he stared down at his right arm, stared at the sticky, dark moisture that was seeping through his shirt.

"Got my arm," old Buck's voice came hollowly in the stillness. "Must be gettin' old—too old."

Krell, the gambler, laughed—a nervous laugh that broke off into a snarl as he twisted to face—Johnny Dunn. The kid had leaped for old Buck's fallen gun; was

bent over it with clutching hand when Krell's snarl stopped him. The boy's face was stark with rage and pain as he slowly came erect under the spell of the gambler's menacing .38.

"So you would, eh?" the gambler spat. "Stick 'em up!"

Slowly the boy's hands rose to shoulder's height, palms out.

Krell's eyes glittered, and a grim, awful rage was lined in his face. He wanted to do something to show these cow-nurses what manner of man he was, to do something they wouldn't forget.

"So you would, eh?" he repeated. "First you'd tear out my throat with that hand. . . . Then you'd try to lift a gun and shoot me in the back. Damn you—damn all of you—it's about time you were learning that it doesn't pay to buck against Poison Krell. . . ."

The gun that had beaten old Buck to the draw was still dangling from his hand. And now it crept forward, its black, menacing muzzle wavering in queer, nervous little arcs like the head of a rattler about to strike. It pointed straight toward the white-faced Cry Baby, and suddenly, without warning, it spat out yellow tongues of flame, and a dull, deafening thunder filled the room.

One — two — three — four — five shots barked, following each other so swiftly they seemed as one. And above their echoes shrieked the voice of the Cry Baby in a biting plaint of agony and disbelief.

Once again the kid screamed wildly, and the eyes of every man in the room became riveted on him. Slowly, weakly, his right arm crumpled and his hand dropped to his side. He tottered for an instant—an instant in which an awful silence fell—and then, his face distorted with pain, he awkwardly reached down to clutch his right wrist and lift his numb hand into the light.

Dumbly, almost uncomprehending, the Cry Baby's wide eyes gazed down at his hand, and an uncontrollable sob that wasn't fear or pain broke from him. For that hand was a bloody, broken mass of useless flesh through which five bullets had seared a blazing path.

And as the kid stared, the voice of Poison Krell bit into his mind.

"You'll tear out damn' few throats with that hand."

The sinister *clicks* of four riot guns echoed his sneering laughter.

THAT night Jim Mapes and Gila led twenty cowmen against Krell's stronghold. Until dawn they swapped lead in a furious siege that ended only when the Rangers came. There were three of Krell's men buried that afternoon, while men stood beside their graves and cursed. And out at the Circle-Dot-2 they laid Hap Wilson in his last bed ground. Beside him they buried a waddy from the Arrow-N, who had caught a leaden slug between the eyes.

The Rangers came and brought the Law to Brazos. And the Law, which must sometimes see through blinded eyes, sent Krell back to his gambling house a free man. For when the boys came back to the Circle-Dot-2 after the battle, old Buck Bradley and the Cry Baby had disappeared. No man knew when they left or where they were going.

Several times during the next two months a bullet would whine from the darkness and *spat* against the wall near Krell's chair. Several times mysterious fires broke out and, as Krell's men fled, they were met by screaming lead from ambushed guns. But Krell stayed, and fought back, and soon even the boys at the Circle-Dot-2 forgot Buck Bradley and Johnny Dunn who was called the Cry Baby. For the memory wounds of men must yield to the healing hand of time.

Krell, too, might have forgotten except for a scrawled note that came to him through the mail. It was post-marked from San Antone and it bore this curt message:

*I'm going away for a while—
but I'll be back.*

The blurred print of a twisted thing that might have been a hand was the only signature.

THEY must have been mad—old Buck Bradley and the Cry Baby. They must have been driven by that father of all mad-nesses that hate alone can spawn. They spoke just a few words when the others had gone leaving them alone at the ranch, and the words they spoke were meaning-

less. Yet somehow, with only a half-formed plan to build upon, they found themselves riding away from the Circle-Dot-2; riding toward the south where the Rio Grande winds lazily; to Mexico, where the crimson flower of vengeance blossoms in the tropic sun—where a man may forget and be forgotten.

But neither Buck Bradley nor Johnny Dunn wanted to forget.

They came into the little Mex town of Torrizal at midday; rode down the single dusty street on jaded horses and dismounted wordlessly before the darkened *cantina*. Emilio Vargas, who was *alcade* and *jefe de politico* and owner of all six of Torrizal's battered 'dobes, crossed himself twice when he saw them and muttered a prayer to Our Mother of Sorrows. It was obvious to Emilio that they were mad.

What sane man rides in the heat of the sun even during the *siesta* hour? What sane man spends but a few pesos for food and yet lays down many pieces of gold to buy pistol shells? And what sane man would carelessly show Emilio Vargas—who everyone knew was almost a brother to that great bandido, *El Falcon*—that there were many more pieces of gold in his heavy money-belt?

Yet all these things did the two mad gringos do. They bought a burro from Emilio, paying twice its worth, and loaded him down with their packs. They drank once of *tequila*. The old one snarled evilly at Emilio when he asked politely if they journeyed far. And then, as suddenly as they came to Torrizal, they departed. A hundred yards out of town they left the road and belabored the burro into that wilderness of brush and stunted trees that marked the beginning of the foothills.

Emilio Vargas watched them go, and when they had disappeared he crossed himself again. *Carramba*, but was not that old one the hell of a tough hombre! And the young one whose arm was bound to his side—hah! those staring, brooding eyes would haunt a man's sleep for weeks. All of which reminded Emilio that he hadn't had a drink since noon; so he took three and promptly fell asleep. He dreamed of a fierce old man with shaggy gray mustache; of hollow, sorrow haunted eyes, of his friend *El Falcon* and of many gold

coins that sounded *clink, clink, clink* as he counted them.

Yet when young Juan Castano, the herder of goats, came to town with his strange tale, Emilio promptly forgot about gold and lost all desire to tell the Falcon of the so-very-rich gringos. *Mil demonicos!* Even Padre Jaime, when the tale was told, admitted that the men must be possessed of many devils and that their gold was accursed without doubt.

For such was the tale of Juan Castano, herder of goats:

One of his herd had strayed into the bosque and Juan had trailed after it, drawing far away from his little camp. It may be that a very small drink of *tequila* he took before starting befuddled him, or, perhaps, the heat of the sun caused his brain to sleep. But whatever the cause, the truth remains that he lost his way for a moment. He was about to lie down and rest until his brain cleared when he heard the sound of voices. Gringo voices.

With the greatest of quiet Juan drew nearer, for a herder of goats leads a lonely life, and moreover these gringos are always of much interest. He came close enough to see them plainly, and for a long hour he lay quietly on his belly at the edge of a little clearing and watched the strange ways of these mad men. Indeed, he watched until darkness came and enabled him to steal away without fear of discovery.

And these are the things that were done before the very eyes of Juan Castano, who is a man of truth and swears them by the Holy Saint Sebastian.

In front of a rough, hastily built shack stood the two gringos facing each other. Though the sun was hot, the young one wore no hat and his yellow hair hung down almost in his eyes. The old one said many words that Juan Castano did not understand—and with a very great quickness they both grew tense and made their bodies crouch. For perhaps a second they stood even as motionless as the trees, and then they snatched at the little guns that were strapped around them. Out of their sheaths the little guns flew even with the speed of the striking snake. . . . *Click . . . click*. On empty shells the hammers fell and both of these madmen straightened, as

the little guns were once more sheathed.

The old one said many more words and made fierce motions while he of the yellow hair watched in silence. Then they crouched again. . . . *Click . . . click.* Over and over, until the belly of Juan Castano was of a very great soreness from too much resting.

Just before dusk they stopped this mad game, and the young one of the yellow hair brought forth many bullets from the shack. Then he shot many times at a scarred tree until the noise almost deafened the ears of Juan Castano. The old one talked much and sometimes cursed. He was a very evil man, this old one.

Finally dusk came and Juan Castano crept away. He had searched no more for that accursed goat but had come straight to Torrizal, that Padre Jaime and all the rest might hear. By the Holy Saint Sebastian it was the truth!

Whereupon, having heard, Emilio Vargas blessed himself piously and walked back to the *cantina* where he drank much *tequila* and became very drunk.

IN that little clearing in the foothills outside Torrizal, the Cry Baby and Buck Bradley carried on even as Juan Castano had told. Days of blistering sun passed. Lonely nights drooled out their span while their campfire glowed red under a star-choked sky. And the days and nights became weeks, and the weeks months, as old Buck Bradley tried to teach the kid that lightning draw old Buck's hand could never make again—the draw that had made Buck's fame wherever gunmen met; that once had been the fastest thing in all of Texas.

Sometimes as they sat before the fire, Johnny Dunn would clench his wrist and hold into the light the twisted thing that once had been his right hand. For long minutes he would stare down at the scarred flesh—at the fingers, drawn and distorted into a half-clenched claw. He would curse softly, and old Buck Bradley would drop his eyes so he couldn't see the pain that came to the boy's face.

"Dammit, Buck," Cry Baby would whisper, "I wish it could be this hand I'll get him with—like I promised."

Buck would nod understandingly.

"Won't be long," he'd mutter senselessly. "Can't be long."

And then the day came when the *click* of Cry Baby's gun sounded a split-second in advance of Buck's. Days later the kid sent twelve shells screaming into the scarred tree at ten paces—and old Buck covered eleven of them with a silver dollar. Yet they stayed on . . . and on. Adding speed to a draw that old Buck admitted he never could have matched. Adding accuracy to a hand and eye that could almost clip the buttons from a man's vest.

Six months passed before they again rode into Torrizal, and few men would have recognized them for the same two. Old Buck Bradley's grizzled mustache was gone, and his gray hair grew almost to his shoulders. And the Cry Baby, too, was different. The roundness had gone from his face, and the boyishness. Hate and pain and vengeance had stamped on him the solemn seal of manhood.

They rode into Torrizal and stopped at the *cantina* of Emilio Vargas. When they came out their puncher garb was gone. Low-pulled sombreros darkened their faces—faces that a fiery sun had scorched a swarthy brown—and the maimed, twisted hand of the Cry Baby was hidden beneath a short cloak.

Up the road they jogged—two men from the dead returning to where the winding ribbon of the Rio marked the Land of the Living; returning to Brazos and Poison Krell.

Old Buck Bradley pushed back his sombrero and peered at the golden crescent of the moon. "Won't be long," he whispered senselessly.

And Johnny Dunn, the Cry Baby, echoed him hollowly, "Won't be long."

AT Norcross, just across the border, two Mexicans got into a ruckus at Clem McCann's Four-of-a-Kind. Before it was over, the smaller one—a youngish sort of sombre who shot with his left hand and whose right was forever hidden beneath the folds of a short cloak—gave evidence that he was plumb bad-medicine with a Colt's. He shot the gun from Shorty Miller's hand, drawing after Shorty's gun was half-way from its holster. He made Joe Darrow—Bad Joe Darrow from Torreon—look positively slow. He cornered Clem McCann behind the bar and amused himself by showering Clem with broken

glass from the bottles that lined the wall, calling his shot each time.

Two days later, at Cottonwoods, the same man beat Sad James on the throw-down and plugged him through the shoulder. Something similar happened at Amargo. And wild tales spread about this young Mex and his gun mastery; tales that grew with every telling. Several tin-horn hombres who wanted to build up a name for themselves took pot shots from the dark at various travelers who happened to prefer sombreros to straight Stetsons. Many a dead body was cursed because it was wrapped in no short cloak.

So it wasn't strange that the first man to see Buck Bradley and the Cry Baby as they rode into Brazos just after dusk should hasten to Krell's place to spread the news. No wonder a moment of quiet fell when the door was pushed softly open and the two marched in. Not one man of the crowd looked up from his cards; not one man turned from the bar to look them over—yet everyone in the place was tense with their coming. Especially those four men—those four gunmen of Krell's—who sat at a table near the end of the bar and pretended to be immersed in their game of stud.

The crowd was disappointed if it expected anything spectacular. Quietly the two selected a table that placed their backs to the wall; calmly they surveyed the room from beneath sombrero brims. "Five of the gang here—Krell and those four in the corner. All the rest local boys." Old Buck's lips barely moved as he whispered the words.

The Cry Baby nodded slightly; lifted his hand from beneath the short cloak and snapped his fingers sharply. The bartender approached.

"Wheesky," the kid said, pronouncing the word as Emilio Vargas would have spoken it. "Wheesky—an' I wish that it be served by the pro-prietor. I do not deal with peons."

The bartender muttered something; backed away. He circled toward the table where Krell sat dealing Black Jack and whispered from the corner of his mouth. The chair of one of the four gunmen scraped slightly, as Krell passed the deck to the next player and rose to his feet. The gambler flashed a quick, meaning look to

his henchmen; laughed nervously. Now he was coming toward the Cry Baby and Buck Bradley, one hand smoothing the gleaming white of his shirt front.

"You wish to see me?" he asked.

The Cry Baby nodded, and beneath the rim of his sombrero his eyes gleamed with a quick, deathly sparkle. His left hand, resting on the table, knotted spasmodically and the knuckles whitened.

"Si," the boy nodded. "I wish the wheesky—an' I wish you should explain to those so good friends of yours—" he waved nonchalantly toward the gunmen at the end of the bar—"that they live only so long as their hands remain above the table."

Krell's eyes narrowed and his teeth came together in sudden anger. The greasy Mex tin-horn! Did he think he could get away with this stuff against Poison Krell?

"What you mean?" the gambler rasped, and he fell back a half-step, his hands dropping swiftly.

"I mean," Cry Baby whispered, "exactly what I have said." And all at once Krell was aware of the black snout of a .45 leering at him from under the short cloak. He hadn't seen the kid's hand move at all—yet it had disappeared and a menacing gun was resting on the table top.

"Come closer," Cry Baby ordered in a bare whisper. "Sit down!"

Mechanically, almost as if hypnotized by the suddenness of the thing, Krell obeyed. As he dropped into a chair at the side of old Buck Bradley, the gambler felt something jabbed against his side—something hard and cold that the older man was pressing against him under the table. And right there Poison Krell showed his stripe. His face went white and tiny drops of perspiration beaded his forehead. He attempted to speak, but his mouth was dry and the words would not come. He could think of but one thing—of those four men near the bar whose hands had disappeared beneath the table top.

As in a daze the gambler watched the younger man rise slowly. He knew his men were waiting for another sign; knew that if it were given these two strange gunmen would die. But if they died, they would surely take him with them. That he knew, and he sat there moveless, face emotionless.

There were twenty men in Krell's place.

Yet not one sound came from them. Cards were dropped, drinks forgotten. All eyes centered on the Cry Baby, who was facing the table at the corner of the bar—the table where Krell's four gunmen sat. The kid didn't seem to move, but a quick shrug loosened the short cape and let it fall softly to the floor. Right hand hidden behind him, left swaying easily above the open top of his single holster, he faced the four.

"You will please to place your hands on the table," he said. "*Please!*"

His voice wasn't harsh nor biting; instead it was low, almost toneless. But there was an easy confidence in it that told these gunmen of Krell's many things. By the speed of their draw these men earned their living; to them a pistol scrape was neither sport nor pleasure—it was business. They figured the kid knew he could beat any one of them to the draw—and being good business men, they never raised in the face of a possible lock.

One man coughed nervously, and his hands slowly raised to the table top. Another followed his lead, and so did the third. The Cry Baby smiled grimly, as the fourth man's shoulder twitched nervously.

"Don't be a fool," he said evenly, "up!"

And then it happened.

Perhaps that fourth man hoped to gain fame; perhaps he figured he was lucky; perhaps it was just sheer guts. *Quien Sabe? Sabe Dios.* . . . One hand came up straight enough, but as it came level with the table's edge, the gunman lurched with his body and hurled himself sidewise, clutching at his holster as he fell. The table spun clattering to the floor carrying one man with it. The two others sprang erect, hands darting down. Four shots sounded in one great roar . . . then a fifth. A haze of smoke rose and billowed and, as the rolling echoes died, a faint groan sounded.

No one had seen the Cry Baby's draw; no man could even swear that his gun had left its holster. For when the smoke cleared he was standing just as he was before; standing there easily and gazing innocently at the man who lay face down in an ever-widening pool of blood . . . at another man who clenched a shattered arm and swore softly . . . at the two who stood with hands held high and an awed fear blanching their faces.

Two swift steps he made; jerked away their holstered guns and tossed them to the floor. Then he wheeled, and his back was to the wall. He was gazing straight at Krell and a bitter chuckle was on his lips. With one sweep of his arm he knocked the sombrero from his head, and his yellow hair shone in the dim light.

"Krell," he ordered from stiff lips, "stand up!" And his voice was no longer disguised.

There may have been times when Krell had courage, but it takes something beyond the usual brand of nerve to fight when you know you can't win. Every man in the room heard the gambler's gasp; saw the shudder that came over him. But only the Cry Baby could see the deathly fear that gleamed in Krell's wide eyes; only he could catch the words that came almost soundlessly.

"*Johnny Dunn!*"

The hate that for six months had festered in the kid's soul came out in a snarling, merciless laugh. "Yes," he almost whispered, "Johnny Dunn. . . . The same Johnny Dunn whose brother yuh murdered. The same Johnny Dunn yuh gave *this!*"

His right hand whipped from behind his back and he stretched it out before him; held it trembling in the light. And even old Buck Bradley, who many times had seen that twisted claw of a thing, turned his eyes away.

The Cry Baby laughed again shrilly and his arm dropped. "Yes," he repeated, "Johnny Dunn. Yuh told me once to fill my hand with something when I wanted to talk to you. Well, I want to talk now—an' I'm ready to fill. How about you, Krell?"

The gambler had never moved. His eyes seemed powerless to evade the Cry Baby's steady, searing stare; he tried to speak, but couldn't; licked his dry lips with a flickering tongue. Before the eyes of twenty men from the town of Brazos—Brazos, where he had made his boasts that no man living could back him down—Poison Krell showed yellow and would not fight.

The kid's lip curled in a sneer.

"A' right; then let's play this thing off in a game you know somethin' about." He picked up a deck of cards from the table, shuffled them, and put them on the table

again, and spread them out, fanshaped. "Now, Krell, we'll both draw together. The one who cuts the high card goes for his gun first—if he can." Krell licked his lips nervously, looked at the kid and then at the cards, as though they fascinated him. The other men crowded silently up to the table behind the two. The kid grinned.

"All set, Krell. Draw!"

Two hands shot out to the deck; two cards were turned up. Krell stared unbelievably from his own queen of hearts to the kid's king of spades, then to the kid's hand, still inches from his gun. His mouth fell open; his face turned pasty white, but he did not move toward his gun. The kid's face was like a thundercloud, mirroring his rage and disgust. Behind them a man spat in contempt.

Like a figure carved from stone he sat there. When the kid cursed him with every word he knew, Krell seemed not to hear. When the kid's open palm struck his face thrice, Krell took it without flinching, as if he did not feel. He even endured it when the kid spat in his face. . . . Just sat still.

Suddenly, then, the Cry Baby's curses died and he stepped back. The bitter lines that had twisted his face were gone for a moment, and a look of calm replaced them. The boy's voice was solemn as he spoke, almost gentle.

"Krell," he said, "you know damn' well I can't shoot you down unless you make a break. And even if you make a break it will be murder just the same. For I can kill you, Krell, before your gun is half-way drawn—and you know it. Mebbe you thought I'd get tired trying to make you fight. Mebbe you thought I'd be satisfied to show how yellow you could be. But I'm not, Krell. You're goin' to draw, an' I'm goin' to kill you. . . . Lissen!"

Emotionlessly he lifted his gun from his holster and placed it under his belt on the *right* side! Carefully he adjusted it so that the black butt was jugged outward. Then he raised his eyes to Krell's and held out that twisted claw of a thing that once had been a hand.

"I promised," he said softly, "that some day I'd tear out your throat with this here

hand. I aim to do it now, Krell. . . . Listen! Buck, there, will count three. At the count of three I'm goin' to draw *with this hand*—and I'll kill you before you can finish me off."

Old Buck half-rose with a muttered protest, but a flashing look stopped his words. "Stand up!" the Cry Baby ordered, and as if impelled by some hidden force Krell, the gambler rose. His hands were held stiffly at his sides, palms down.

"Count!" the boy ordered, and old Buck's white lips moved.

"One!" There was a quaver of deep emotion in the old man's voice—old Buck Bradley who men said had never been human once.

"Two!" Old Buck's fingers drummed on the table in a panic of something that was worse than fear.

"Three!" And Buck Bradley's gun leaped out to shoot Krell down like a dog if the cards should fall that way.

For an awesome fraction of a second the two were motionless; stood as if they had not heard. Then Krell's hand sped down and his gun flashed up like a thing alive, to spit flame once—twice before the kid's gun spoke. Through the haze that rose old Buck saw both men sway and totter . . . saw one of them fall. And as he leaped forward, he heard a solemn voice:

"Knew you were yellow, Krell," the Cry Baby whispered huskily. "Knew you'd shoot wide."

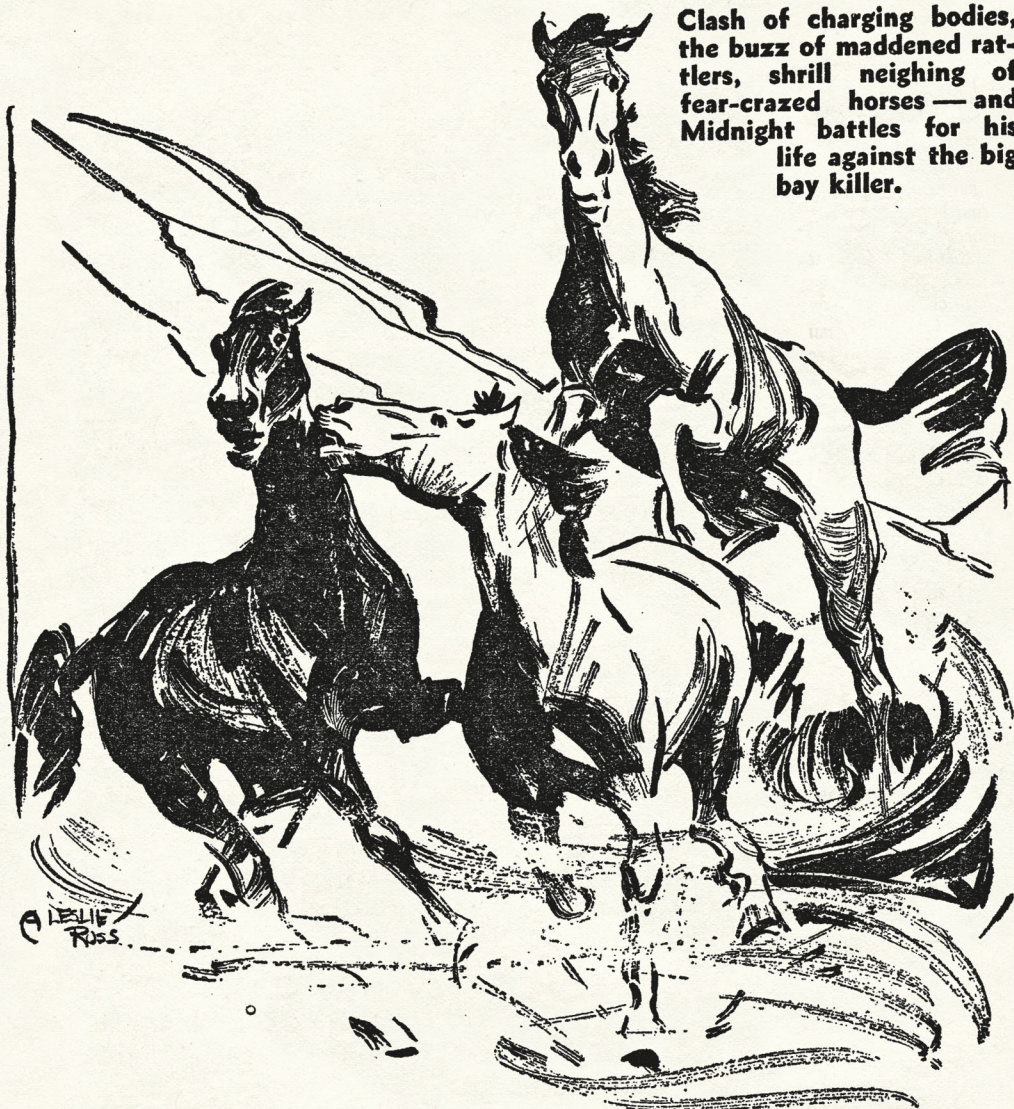
Old Buck's arms were around the kid but he jerked loose. With his left hand he gestured toward a moist stain that was widening on his shoulder, trying to grin.

"Just a scratch," he muttered. And old Buck knew that the tears that gleamed in the Cry Baby's eyes were not tears of pain.

They both turned as a startled gasp sounded. A man who bent over the slumped body of the gambler straightened up with a gasp. "Look!" he breathed, and he stepped back in awe.

For the Cry Baby's bullet—the bullet that had been sped by his twisted claw of a hand—had glanced from the barrel of the gambler's gun, and, mushrooming, had ranged straight up to tear Krell's throat away.

Clash of charging bodies,
the buzz of maddened rat-
tlers, shrill neighing of
fear-crazed horses — and
Midnight battles for his
life against the big
bay killer.



HOOFS OF DEATH

By BARRY SCOBEE

A "Midnight" Story



INSTINCTS far deeper and wiser than knowledge had guided the wild horse herd to the protection of the sheltered hills. Mares were heavy with foal. They wanted isolation in order to give birth to their young. So they had returned to the hills.

More than that, the mating season was running its course under the hot South-

western springtime sun, and I, the herd stallion, was at the keen height of my temper and watchfulness.

Suddenly, in the mid-forenoon, I sensed the presence of another male. It may have been that my far-hearing horse ears caught a distant sound. Dozing sluggishly at the moment, I threw up my head, startled and alert, ready for battle.

My herd stood there in a cosy rincon,

dozing or indifferently grazing—adult mares, yearling colts, two-year-old fillies. I had long since chased out the older males. No stranger, no intruder was among them.

I whirled to scan the brushy foot-hills. Some distance away I saw a two-year-old dappled stallion that I had thrashed and chased off. Annoyed by his persistence I squealed and raced down the rocky hill-side toward him. He fled.

I kept on to the butte where he had been standing, looking about for other signs of danger. A small herd of antelopes a mile away bristling their white rump patches, a certain signal to all range animals that trouble was in the air. They took swift flight and quickly disappeared. I caught the regular hoof-sounds of ridden horses yet almost immediately three wild horses came into sight around a point of brush, a big bay stallion and two fillies.

The stallion stopped, head up, gazing toward me. He had caught the scent of my herd. Spreading his forelegs he sent a challenging neigh blaring over the rangeland.

A moment later three horsemen galloped over the rock rim. With the cunning of the hunted wild stallion I eased into deeper brush. The men, touching everything with their eyes in the manner of riders of the range, took in the butte where I stood but did not see me. But they saw at once the bay stallion out there and the two fillies. I heard their talk start up.

"By jiminy!" one exclaimed. "Look, there's old Red Pelt."

"That big bum!" another rasped. He hauled his rifle from its boot.

"Hey," protested the third man coldly, "what you doin'?"

"I'm a going to lead that big brute down f'r keeps."

"Yeah?" drawled the first man. "He's got some mighty good colts in his day. I'm riding one now."

"Hell, yes," said the second man. "Put up that lead slinger. I'm aimin', when I get time, to round him up over toward my ranch."

"And leave him alive to toll my remuda off again!" said the gun drawer sulkily, ramming his rifle back into its yellow leather boot. "You'll help me get 'em back, if he does—the big, fightin' red devil! He's killed more good studs than any other

wild herd stallion that's still runnin' loose."

"He'll meet his match if he ever runs into that black they call Midnight."

"Hell, he's two hundred pounds heavier than Midnight. He'll kill that black devil in one mouthful."

The sound of my name, Midnight, made me shrink deeper into the buckbrush thicket. I had heard men speak the name before when they hunted me with ropes and guns. But the riders below forgot me in looking at Red Pelt.

"**W**HAT the blazes," asked one of the men, "is that big red scoundrel trying to do?"

"Trying to rid himself of them two fillies, looks like, way he's biting 'em and squalling at 'em."

"And kicking them. Yeah, that must be it. It's the mating season and a stud always runs his own young filly offspring off come the mating season."

"Bah, you saying a stud knows his own children, and nature tells him not to interbreed. Everybody that believes that stand on your ear. Look at the Indian horses. Most of 'em interbred calicoes. The rule don't work there."

"Yeah, but look how the Indians keep their hawses herded together. It don't give nature a chance to operate instincts and separate blood kin. And look at the Indian stock—mostly scrawny, interbred, little stuff. A buck will swap ten of his ponies any day for one good hawse. Wild stallions will sure drive off their own daughters, and by the looks of them two fillies now, that's what old Red Pelt is doing."

"But why? Why is he at it now? How come he ain't up-tailin' and hittin' for safety, with us in sight?"

"He may be scenting another herd around some'rs." The men scanned the landscape for other horses. They saw only the dappled young male I had just chased away. "There's a young stud old Red has run off. Bunch o' mares around some'rs. That's one reason Red ain't fleeing at sight of us. If we'd head toward him he'd be off like a flash."

"Wisht we had some time to waste. We might find some good colts, er even that Midnight."

They rode on without bothering Red

Pelt. With them out of sight, the big bay gave the fillies a final rib-raking with his teeth and turned back in my direction. I shoved up out of the brush and stood against the sky, arching neck and tail. I flung out a shrill warning, a challenge, half minded to go down and try to turn the fillies into my band. I glanced back at my troop. They were all standing still watching me, wondering what was out of their sight below the rim.

Red Pelt gave back my cry, and came on, flinging his big body. I galloped to meet him. He found a slit up through the rimrock, came into sight, paused cautiously.

I pricked my ears and sized him up. He was much larger than me. His hoofs were huge clubs. He was in excellent condition. His red coat glistened in the sun. Down the rocky slope he picked his way, pausing in the shade of a cliff.

We came face to face, not two lengths distant. He looked past me toward my mares and fillies. He neighed to them, reassuring them, claiming them. I squealed and rushed. He met my rush, striking me with his full weight, knocking me down on my side.

I was up in a flash, dodging his next rush. My teeth nipped his flank as he flashed past and he squealed in pain and fury. He whirled, reared and clashed with pawing hoofs. Suddenly we reared back short, ears up.

It was the buzz of a rattlesnake.

I flung around wildly. A big rattler was lying full length in the shade of a boulder. He was as long as my foreleg, and as thick. His rattle vibrated where it projected past the shade into the sharp sunlight. Red Pelt stepped toward him, muzzle down. The snake jerked into a thick coil, furious, truculent, his rattle buzzing with that vicious, dry sound that a horse fears.

Red Pelt jumped back. Another buzz started up at his heels. I leaped to get out of the way of the snakes. A snake, two snakes, rattled at my heels. I whirled. A moving, sliding coil was a horse length beyond my muzzle. I went closer, hating the thing and reared, lifting my hoofs up three feet from the ground. I threshed down at the serpent. It struck at my descending hoofs. Struck an instant too quickly and

was stretched out full length for a split second. And there my hoofs, close together, caught it, broke it.

I heard Red Pelt's hoofs thwack the earth. Then there was rattling all about us—that vicious, thin, dry, grass-rattling of pain and death. In a sweeping, terrified glance I saw snakes all about us. We were in a den of rattlers.

THE stench of the aroused snakes filled my nostrils. In the midst of this the powerful bay lunged at me. I twisted aside, and leapt to the summit of a low knoll. Another rattler was coiled in the small space of the top. He struck as my hoofs struck too soon, missed, shot under, and was stretched out on the ground. One hoof caught him six inches back of the head. I reared again. His head and the portion of his body forward of the dull pink wound lay still, but the length of body behind the wound coiled and threshed. I landed on him, time after time.

Then I felt a terrific impact against my body. I was hurled stumbling from the little knoll. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the red flash of Red Pelt's side. He had sprung up and against me from behind. He was coming at me. I tried to scramble up. His breast struck me and knocked me rolling. He flashed past, raking my ribs with his teeth.

I was up instantly, facing him as he wheeled back. He reared to pound me down with those tremendous hoofs. I scrooged aside but a jagged edge of his roof raked my hip. Then he was rearing again.

I fainted, pretending to rear to meet him. But I raised no more than a third of the way upward. It was a trick that I had learned when I was a prisoner of old Spike Hilliard in his high-fenced yard. He had tried to break my spirit, when I was first taken captive as a yearling. Rearing at him, baring my belly, I would feel his great hairy fist strike in against me in a terrific blow. Sometimes he used a club. I learned to cut my rearing short and nose him as he came in—and when once he used a pitchfork I struck and killed him with my hoofs, making myself a killer horse to all mankind but Turk Dundeele. But I had learned the trick and had used it more than once in fighting other stallions.

Now, cutting my rise short, I came down to the ground again just as he was up-reared to his full height. It was the position in which I wanted to take him. And I did take him, with my shoulder, full weight against his belly. My blow did not hurl him backward. It only turned him a little so that his descending hoofs missed instead of breaking me down.

That great body of his seemed immovable. Seemed like a solid wall. It filled me with a sudden fear. I had met my match, perhaps my better. I wheeled and raced toward my waiting band.

For the first time in my life I was running from another horse, and when a stallion loses his courage nothing will give it back. Even death was better. I planted my hoofs, throwing up dust and rocks. I jumped sidewise. The hurtling red body raked past me. He whirled and came back, eyes mad with fight, great strong teeth bared, a whistle of wrath deep in his mighty throat.

Red Pelt was now between me and my troop. He rushed me and again I gave back, back until the little knoll was behind me again. I whirled and went to its top in a long stretch, whirled again to face the red demon. He did not try to come up after me. There was room on the bit of flat surface for but one of us. And now, being half his height higher than he, I had the advantage. He circled me, clacking his teeth and squealing. Feeling soon that he was the master, his wrath subsided somewhat and he began to take heed of my troop.

The mares were standing still, immovable, watching us, knowing they would have the victor's—the survivor's—protection. Such is the way of the female of the horse kind.

But standing out in front of the band, nearest to us, were Silver White and Bay Beauty, my constant companions. Both were heavy with foal. They were concerned about me, these two of all the troop. Silver White whinnied softly, then Bay Beauty.

Red Pelt strode away from me momentarily, chesty, arching, strutting, giving his entire attention to the mares. It maddened me. I leapt from the knoll and raced to get between him and my band, ready, stallion-like, to fight to the death.

AS I rushed the big bay something flashed past me like the gray break of a gray day. It was the big two-year-old dapple gray stallion that I had been driving away from my troop day after day for a week. He had seen the fighting and was taking advantage of our battle to make whatever gain he could. He would help me only as long as it aided his cause.

Together the dapple and I rushed the bay. The huge red horse screamed in fury and met our charge. Three bodies thudded together. For a moment we were a tangle of black and bay and gray. In the break-away I raked Red Pelt's side. I turned and whipped with my heels, thundering on his ribs. Dapple reared and struck him across the hips with his forehoofs. The bay struck the gray aside and came at me. I seized the back of his neck in my teeth, as mules fight—a trick I had learned from a great jack that had been with the horse herd soon after I escaped from the prison yard of old Spike Hilliard. The gray lashed Red Pelt mightily with his hoofs, until, caught between us, the bay squalled gruntily in pain and fear.

But the gray was not helping me fight my battle. In our twisting and milling he got close to me and began to nip and slash at my hide with his teeth. I had to let go of Red Pelt to whip Dapple off. Then both horses were on me.

Swiftly I was pushed backward, past my knoll of advantage and down the slope to where the snakes had their shelves on the wall of the solid rock cliff. The snakes scurried to get from under our hoofs, rattled, coiled, darting their red tongues. That huge monster, that seemed as long and thick as my leg, was coiled squarely at the foot of the shaded cliff. His rattle was loudest of all.

I tried to dart between the gray and the bay, but they blocked me. The impact of our bodies stopped us. Their weight threw me backward from the full stretch of my hind legs upward and I went falling on my back. But before I struck I managed to twist so that I slammed the earth on my side.

My ribs struck a boulder half as large as my head. The pain knocked the breath out of me. Red Pelt, in that instant, could have mauled out my life with his vast hoofs, but he turned on the horse that was

up and for a moment Dapple faced him with shrilling courage.

I tried to rise. I could only flop my head. My rolling eyes caught the coil of a big snake close to my struggling hoofs. It was a big one, his tail flickering with that vicious buzz. Fear sent me rolling to my knees. I heaved to my feet. Then the two horses were at me again, one on each side. Red Pelt stuck out his long jaws. His clacking teeth closed on the skin just back of my shoulder knuckle. He twisted and tore, and I felt skin and flesh wrench away in Red Pelt's teeth. Then Dapple was going for the bay again and I lept away.

I STUMBLED up the slope at one side of the cliff and came out on the cliff's brink, sick, dizzy, hardly aware of my movements, my vision hazed. I spread my legs and stood there braced, knees trembling, hot blood flowing down my right foreleg.

The dapple gray, twenty feet below me, was fighting for his life. He tried to run, but the red blocked him. Yet he was brave. He faced that stallion, twice his size, and gave all he had.

Red Pelt rose and struck Dapple just below the backbone, along the bend of the ribs. His whole weight was behind the blow. His huge hoofs landed squarely. Dapple went hurtling over on his back among a litter of rocks. Stumbling back to his feet he went high-tailing off. I knew my time had come.

Red Pelt was coming. He was scrambling up the loose rock of the little slope. He swung in a half circle.

I managed to back around, my fetlocks at the brink of the cliff. He paused out there on the bit of level ground. Shaking his head, neighing. Then mustering his strength he lunged at me.

Fresh strength surged sluggishly in me.

Strength born of desperation whipped up sharply in that brief second. My vision cleared a little. There was but one thing I could do: dodge. Dodge that giant stallion.

He did not try to rear and sledge me with his hoofs. He, too, was weary. He flung himself at me, mouth open, teeth bared, nostrils flaring, his eyes flaming a killing fury.

As he lunged I threw myself aside, raked at him with what strength I had. He struck me a glancing, sliding blow which threw me against the cliff. His charge carried him on. Too late he saw the brink and tried to stop. He went down almost on his rump, his hind hoofs digging up dust and rocks. He couldn't stop. He went over with a shrill shriek.

I heard his body smash a little ways below. I whirled and looked down. He was flat on his side and I saw a great thick rattler gather to strike. I shrilled a warning, but too late. It struck Red Pelt just back of the throat.

Red Pelt scrambled up. He screamed. He went running off crazily, running with all the leaping swiftness of a horse terrorized.

I shook myself, violently, like a horse that has been in water. Blood was still running down my foreleg but that did not matter. I looked toward my herd. They were still standing still, watching, Silver White and Bay Beauty out in front. Silver whinnied softly. I made my way toward them, down the rocky slope.

My vision cleared as I moved along. My strength came back. I detoured the place of the snakes and went on to Silver and Bay, I touched muzzles with them. Then I turned and throwing up my head, neighed and set the troop to moving, heading away from this place of snakes and conflict to the deep shelter of the hills.





LEAD PROPHECY

By BUCK STRADLEIGH

Roar of six-guns, thunder of pounding hoofs—and Steve Claiborn matched his hair trigger speed with the magic gun of the killer in the game of “Dead Man!”



It was the morning after “court day” in Sunrise. The little county seat town was still more-than-usually crowded. Steve Claiborn reined in his big, ugly gray before the White Palace Saloon. He looked thoughtfully at the ranchers and small farmers and nondescript townsmen on the plank sidewalks of the “business section.” He had never before been in Sunrise.

In their turn, the men looked curiously at Steve’s evil-faced gray, with his six-

teen brands—all vented except Steve’s own Steeple-C. Those brands told the story of an unwanted animal; told, too, a great deal about the riding abilities of the slim, middle-sized puncher sitting the silver-trimmed kak so casually.

They glanced from the gray to Steve, noting the new black Boss Stetson on his yellow head; the snug fit of his blue flannel shirt and clean waist overalls; how polished were his shopmade half-boots; how canny the hang of the bone-handled .45 in its tied-down, hand-carved holster on the right thigh. Last of all, they saw the

quick play of expression in his devil-may-care blue eyes.

He was a salty-looking hairpin, Steve; you picked him safely, at first glance, as A-Number-1 candidate for "fight, fun or footrace," in the good old Texas term.

"Hi-yah, Steve!" called a squat, dark, black-bearded man from the sidewalk.

Steve looked quickly that way; then the smile came back to lips and eyes:

"Why, *coma'sta*, Tedrick? *Coma'sta*? How's sher'fin?"

"*Bien! Bien!*" shrugged the sheriff quietly. "Light an' liquor."

Steve nodded and "lit." When he had hitched the gray mankiller, he and the grim-faced sheriff clicked across the gallery and into the White Palace, Sunrise's biggest saloon. The place was jammed, early as the hour was. These two were acquaintances of auld lang syne. They elbowed into a narrow opening in the press of men before the bar. When a bottle of Four Roses and glasses were put before them, they looked each other in the eye:

"How!" said Tedrick gravely.

"An' how!" Steve returned the toast. "What's doin' in yo' bailiwick? Ever'body peaceable an' happy an' sweet an' likewise kind?"

"Tol'able—but not hardly more'n that," shrugged Tedrick. "What you been explorin' into, last some time?"

"Had me a kind of a job, over on the Snake. Chasin' fence-cutters till that gray devil o' mine wore down his near laigs to the knee, roundin' them hills. Landed two hard cases—but they won't be convicted. All catchin' 'em done was to get me bushwhacked the night after. Hole in a right good Stetson ain't a half-year old. So I up an' left.

"We had a bank-robbery over at Alamito. Last week, 't was. An' a plumb good one. Posse's out after 'em, but—I do'no'. They shore got a good start, them fellas—"

Loud voices down the bar interrupted both his even drawl and Steve's listening. There is a note in the voice of drinking men which is a storm-signal. In a bar-room, where men are talking, there can be argument—hot, loud, even threatening. Hardly an eye turns toward the sound. Then comes a disagreement between two men whose voices are hardly raised, carrying a strained, metallic note, and—

"That's Jim-Ham Eddelman," Tedrick grunted to Steve.

"Huh!" grunted Steve explosively. Immediately, he turned to stare past the drinkers between, to get a glimpse of one of the half-dozen most famous killers Texas ever produced. "I *hear* he was out o' the pen and' up this way some'r's."

"Belongs to Alamito, not to Sunrise. Hung out his shingle over there. Studied law in the pen' an' now he's a-practicin', Come to Sunrise yesterday to try a case here. Understand he's advertisin' he's the same ol' Jim-Ham he used to be—chain lightnin' an' eleven claps o' thunder with the sixes; Trouble—from the forks o' Dead Man's Creek. . . ."

TEDRICK began to move quietly that way. Men let him pass, once they had seen who he was. Steve followed, after a flashing hesitation. He had never laid eyes on Jim-Ham Eddelman, but the tales of the gunman's magic speed on the draw; his deadly accuracy at shooting; the list of his thirty victims, piled up ten years before; these were known and discussed all over the state. Steve was keenly interested.

Tedrick stopped within six feet of the stocky, frock-coated man who was now doing the talking. Steve sized up Jim-Ham Eddelman. The lawyer-gunman was immaculate of clothing. His neat gray trousers were outside of polished alligator boots. A gray Stetson was on the bar beside him—a fifty-dollar hat with red silk lining. His was a square, forceful face, but with the whiskey-bloom beginning to crimson it. His eyes were dark, dancing, very much alive, under heavy dark brows. His curly black hair had a sprinkling of gray in it, now.

"Now, what?" frowned Tedrick. "He's been lordin' it around Alamito. You know Jim Willacy, the deputy U. S. Marshal?"

"From the back! We used to be side-kicks, till Jim went in the Rangers. Eddelman been fussin' around with Jim?"

"Yeh. Their set-to was patched up, but—Eddelman 'lows to kill Jim. . . ."

"The hell!" Steve grunted. His blue eyes hardened as he looked at Eddelman. "Jim is no great shakes with a pistol. But—" he grinned suddenly "—he is the *luckiest* li'l ol' halfpint ever yuh see! Can happen that's because he's all nerve an' whang-

leather; never loses his head; always ready to heel just the littlest calf of a chance when it shows a corner. If him an' Ed-delman's due to tangle—well, I prophesy Jim'll gether in the scalp while Ed-delman, he collects the posies."

They had talked in murmurs audible only to themselves. The argument between Jim-Ham Ed-delman and his hard-faced opponent came suddenly to a climax. The young fellow's hand went flashing under his coat. There was a twinkling blur of motion—that was made by Ed-delman's hands. Out from hipholsters came two Colts. They roared and the young man fell over against the bar. He slid down it and lay on the floor. The hand he had rammed beneath his coat had come out empty.

Ed-delman was a gunman! Steve Clai-born told himself. He was waiting, now, with Bisley Colt in each hand. He was rigid, alert, calm; he was ready for whatever might be the next move. There was no sign of emotion on his square face.

"A' right, Ed-delman," Tedrick said grimly. "Put up yo' hoglegs. You got him. Now, how'd this come about?"

"I—objected to certain lying testimony he gave yesterday," the killer replied in a judicial sort of drawl. "He was foolish enough to try this mode of objection. I had no intention of killing him—if I didn't need to."

"I said: Put up yo' guns," Tedrick commanded evenly. "I'm in charge now."

"I—prefer to holster my Colts after I'm outside," Ed-delman returned calmly. "This Johnson was of your county. Some of his friends might intend to take advantage of me. I am privileged to guard myself. And—sheriff . . . Don't crowd me. . . . Don't—crowd—me! You may have heard that Jim-Ham Ed-delman isn't to be crowded!"

"Now, now, fella," drawled Steve Clai-born. "Yuh mustn't go actin' that-away. Put 'em up, like the sher'f told yuh. Act nice, now."

"Who, just who, might you be?" inquired Ed-delman. His keen dark eyes bored into Steve's calm face.

"Who? Me?" Steve said in plaintive whine. "Why, I ain't nobody. Just a kind o' ramblin' cow-person. Sher'f never ask' me to help him none, so I wouldn't interfere for nothin'. I'm just tellin' yuh what he said."

THE bone-handled .45 had somehow slid from the holster. Held at hip-level, its muzzle covered Ed-delman very neatly. Steve was humming softly:

"As I walked out on the streets of Laredo,
As I walked out in Laredo one day,
I seen a poor cowboy in a suit o' white linen,
A suit o' white linen as cold as the clay. . . ."

"You don't mind stacking up trouble for yourself, do you?" drawled Ed-delman.

"Nary speck!" grinned Steve cheerfully. "But, fella—I was a-prophesyin' to the sher'f a spell back: I says to him that, if yuh're aimin' to lock horns with li'l Jim Willacy, yuh're goin' to be decoratin' the grass-roots. Yessir! But the way youh're lookin' at me, now, to remember, I'm goin' to change that prophesyin' a li'l bit:

"Fella, if yuh come huntin' trouble with Jim Willacy or with me—well, one o' us is shore-ly goin' to fix it up so's yuh won't never smile ag'in. Now, this-here bein' a fine, free kind o' country, yuh can take that any—way—yuh—want—to!"

"Put yo' guns up! I'm gittin' tired o' tellin' you," Tedrick remarked just here. "Then git yo' horse an' hightail. If you ain't out o' town in fifteen minutes, I'm goin' to slam you in jail. You don't have to believe me. . . ."

They watched Ed-delman's blank face as he reholstered his deadly Bisleys and strolled out. Tedrick lifted a shoulder in sardonic shrug:

"He really done me an' the county a right good turn, when he downed Paul Johnson. I had figgered to lock horns with Paul, myself, real soon. This way, nobody was risked but them two an'—either way the cards fell, 't was all right."

"What about that bank-robbery yuh'd started to tell me about?" asked Steve, when they stood outside watching Ed-delman jog calmly out of Sunrise.

"Why, it— No use tellin' you, now! Here comes part o' the posse back. Jim Willacy an' Vanzandt—him that's actin' sheriff over at Alamito."

Up the street, riding like men on a fixed errand, a lank, yellow-haired young man straddled a sorrel beside that "half-pint" and boyish-seeming Jim Willacy, who had quit the Bridle-Bit and companionship with Steve to join the Rangers, then left state for federal service. Tedrick stepped off the

sidewalk to meet them and they reined in.

"Hi, the', Nothin'!" Steve greeted Jim Willacy affectionately. "Well, sir! If yuh ain't still got that ol' black goat yuh stole off the Mex' woman that time. The boys all 'lowed yuh never would get past the Bridle-Bit's nawth line with it, day he staggered off with yuh. How's the ol' billygoat, anyhow?"

"Goat!" howled Jim Willacy. "Why, the' ain't one o' you imitation riders see a real hawse since I rode Blackie off. I—"

"We come in to ask some help, Tedrick," Vanzandt said quietly. "Got a idee our men hightailed up thisaway. We covered all other directions."

"I'll slam the kak onto my hawse an' be plumb with you," Tedrick nodded, with drawl to match Vanzandt's own. "If they are up this way, it's likely in the wild country north. In the hills, you know. Up around the Circle Dot an' Open A an' Flyin' M ranges. You-all need fresh hawses? I got a corralful. Both my deputies are usin' the sheets right now—one's got a busted arm; other's got the gripe."

In twenty minutes the four of them were headed northward—for Steve came to be with Tedrick and with Jim Willacy. Tedrick had loaned them two fresh mounts. Steve on his gray brought up the rear with Jim Willacy. To Steve, it was a blind ride; he knew nothing more than he had gained from Tedrick's brief remark about robbers.

"Why, 't was five men," Jim Willacy explained. "You see, the whole town was outside o' Alamito—out where they was holdin' a *rodeo*. I was out the' with the rest. We was all a'waitin' to see Van, the' go up ag'inst a imported rope-slinger name o' Vernon Tommy Miller, at the tyin'."

"Seems the robbers 'loped in, three to the back, two at the front, o' the bank. They went through that place like Spring Love through a widdler woman. Killed the cashier; drilled a gal-clerk through the shoulder. Then cut stick out o' the' as calm as calm! First we knowed about it, out at the *rodeo*, was when Jim-Ham Edelman come a-splittin' the breeze. Reckon we're hopin' to cut their trail up this way. I reckon, too, ol' timer, the'll be some playin' o' the Funeral March on the Winchesters, if we run onto that bunch."

The trail brought them—ten miles or

more from Sunrise—to the crest of a ridge overlooking a broad and pleasant valley. A mile down the slope, where the level valley floor began, there was the silvery glint of water between mottes of cottonwood and ash and low undergrowth.

Mechanically, the posse drew rein on the crest. Tedrick slouched in the saddle with one brown hand loosely on the horn, the other combing short black beard. His Indian-like black eyes studied the Hermoso valley.

"Circle-Dot range—down there," he drawled. "House is five miles upcreek, on a hill. Might's well go on up an' ask if our men has been seen."

By a dim cattle-trail he led them to the bottom of the valley without necessity for exposing themselves on the main road. Tedrick was first across Hermoso Creek and as they turned upstream, he jerked in his horse suddenly. The others, crowding up, saw the traces of a camp that had been hidden by brush in a little hollow of the valley-wall. Dismounting, they looked sharply about.

"Well," Vanzandt said slowly, "if 't ain't our gang—there's two gangs . . ."

"Don't see but four men's tracks, though," objected Steve Claiborn. "If this is the robbers, one had lit a shuck from the rest. Hmmm. No sign o' grub—but beef."

"They'd likely been livin' off the country since the robbery," Jim Willacy surmised. "Killed a Circle-Dot steer an' et it. Bet they're right hungry for bread, about now. You reckon, Tedrick, that they would rob a ranch house?"

"It's the robbers, a' right!" Steve snapped suddenly. He had been poking about in the brush at the camp's edge. He held up a torn, soiled money wrapper, printed with the name of the Cattleman's Bank of Alamito.

One and all, they stared tensely at each other. Those murderous, girl-shooting robbers were abruptly very close indeed. Studying the soft earth, they found now the trail of four horses headed upstream toward the Circle-Dot ranch house. Steve and Tedrick, expert trailers of the group, agreed that the tracks were a day old.

A mile up the trail they met an excited boy. He sat his horse down on its tail and yelled shrilly that the Circle-Dot house

had been ransacked. Food and clothing had been cleaned out. He and his brothers had been on the range. Four good horses had been caught, and four worn animals had been left in their place.

THEY rode on to the house and verified the boy's story. The two-room log house was topsy-turvy. They went out and examined the four abandoned horses. These answered perfectly the general description given Vanzandt and Jim Willacy in Alamito, on the day of the robbery, by Jim-Ham Eddelman, who had noted the robbers' mounts: Two bays, a black and a tall gray.

"Let's hightail for the Open A," grunted Tedrick. "Our men's trail is headin' thataway. We can cut across the hills an' make it quicker'n they can."

By narrow tracks, up and down the hill-sides, they came out at the mountain-ranch of Big John McCulloch. Nothing had been seen, here, of the robbers. They ate and held a council of war.

"Steve," said Tedrick, "I wish you an' Big John an' Johnny Mac'd hit for the Flyin' M an' see what you can see. If you should run onto our men, let Johnny Mac come back to tell us. We'll amble over the hills lookin' for the trail they made out from the Circle-Dot. You-all could keep 'em rounded up till we got to you. Van an' Willacy an' me, we'll do the same—send to you if *we* run into 'em.

"The way this country's laid out, we got to split. The robbers've mebbe gone toward the Flyin' M. If they did, then they'll likely just ride on out o' the country thataway. But suppose they've cut through the mountains west—the way they was headed when we turned off from their trail at the Circle-Dot—that'll be their way."

Steve would have preferred Jim Willacy to Big John McCulloch. But Jim knew no more of this country than he did. McCulloch, on the other hand, could be trusted to know it as he knew his dooryard. And when the huge rancher got up from the table and wiped his mouth with his sleeve, then turned serenely toward where his cartridge belts and Colts hung on a deer's antlers, Steve had to grin. McCulloch might have been going out to tend stock, for all the emotion he displayed.

Following McCulloch, Steve and the boy, "Johnny Mac," turned up a cattle-trail beyond the house. Johnny Mac had an old Sharp's .50, a buffalo-gun so heavy that he could barely manage it. He carried three sticks tied together, to use as "rests" for the big rifle. Importantly, he tapped his pony's neck with these.

"Reckon Ted figgered his outfit'd gether in all the fun," grunted McCulloch. "He took the biggest bunch, you notice! Prob'ly right. Them fellas, they got grub an' fresh horses an' new clothes from the Circle-Dot. So what'd they want to pesticate around the Flyin' M for? Nothin' to steal there. Nothin' to collect but a chance o' bein' shot at—bein' seen, anyhow. Nah, likely they're hightailin' out west'ard now, aimin' to git clear o' the country with a couple thousand apiece."

"Can happen," nodded Steve. "But I'm wonderin' about that Number Five man. Jim-Ham Eddelman told Jim Willacy an' Van the' was five robbers."

"Do'no'," shrugged the rancher. "Jim-Ham see the robbers, huh? Say, but that's a curly wolf for you! Fastest thing Texas ever see, in his prime, before he downed that dep-ty marshal at El Paso an' went to Huntsville. How'd Paul Johnson stack up ag'inst Jim-Ham? Paul always figgered he was about as fast as they come. I been wonderin' if Jim-Ham's time in the penitentiary slowed him up."

"I never see Eddelman in the old days," shrugged Steve. "But I thought Paul Johnson was crippled—in his arms. Yuh figger Eddelman's plumb dead, huh? My stars! An' me doin' some prophesyin' today . . . Yeh, I prophesied to Jim-Ham that me or Jim Willacy'd comb him proper, if he come huntin' trouble with us."

"If I was you," McCulloch said thoughtfully, "I believe I would pray he never come. . . ."

A rifle whanged somewhere up the slope ahead of them. In the small breeze a puff of smoke eddied upward. As metallicly the rifle spoke again, the three of them were out of the saddles and diving for the shelter of boulders. Big John McCulloch pulled out a plug of tobacco, worried off a chew and studied the scene above them with narrowed, calm gray eyes. Then he turned to his son:

"Them's yo' powders, Johnny Mac. In-

jun down. Grab yo' pony. Light a shuck!"

But Johnny Mac had his big Sharp's on its tripod. Up the slope a man's shoulder-point showed flashingly as he tried to sight a rifle around a clump of brush. The old Sharp's bellowed like a bull-buffalo. The Winchester-artist sprang to his feet, dropping his weapon and clawing at his shoulder. Almost negligently Steve's .44 carbine came up. With its flat, vicious report, twice sounding, the man dropped shot through the face.

"Now, Johnny, you hightail!" snapped McCulloch. "You helped whittle 'em some. Tell Tedrick we got the robbers surrounded—kind o'. You see, Claiborn, the trail forks up on the li'l bitsy ridge they're on. Only way down from it, to cover, is open to our Colt-lightnin'. They can't sneak down the far side, 'cause it's too steep an' all loose rock. Horse'd bust his leg—neck, too, likely—tryin' it."

WHEN Johnny Mac had vanished, McCulloch went silently around to the left. Presently, Steve heard the voice of his Winchester. Then a shrill yell from the besieged. Followed quickly a torrent of profanity from the robbers. They cursed their besiegers; dared them to stand up and make a man's fight of it. Steve Claiborn grinned a little at the sound. But it was not a good-humored grin. He remembered the cashier killed in Alamito; the helpless, inoffensive girl shot down in the bank. Shot down for no reason, since she was standing, they said, with arms up-lifted.

He slipped cautiously forward, but as he shoved the carbine between a bush and a rock, bullets rained against his shelter. He ducked flat and splinters of the boulder stung his back.

"Wonder how educated them fellas happen to be?" he thought grimly. "A' right, li'l scholars. Examination-time has come. Le's see how much yuh-all know!"

With which he adjusted his .44, then lifted his hat so that the crown was a little above the boulder-top. Came an instant series of shots. Steve, letting go of his Stetson, drove two .44's in lightning succession through the man exposed. The sound of Big John's Winchester was like the drumming of a partridge on a log. Evidently, the huge rancher was one to

take the advantage of his opportunities.

The silence following this set-to was broken by a yell of surrender from the ridge. Steve frowned. Two of the four who should have been up there at the beginning of the fight were certainly accounted for. Perhaps three were down, if McCulloch's first shooting had registered any effective hit.

"How many fightin' men up the'?" he yelled to the would-be surrenderer.

"Jist me! Yuh downed my brother. Now I'm givin' up."

"Come on down, then—but come reach-in' for yo' ears!"

A slim cowboy stood up. Steve could see his hands upraised, his holster, empty. Steve came to his feet. McCulloch was not in sight.

"Gi' me a hand with my brother, will yuh?" the surrendering one begged. "He's hit bad and groanin' for water."

Steve moved up the slope with carbine across his left arm for easier carrying. He kept his hand on his Colt-butt. He was twenty yards from the dark-faced, hook-nosed cowboy when the latter reached swiftly behind him for a pistol which was evidently in his waist-band at the rear. Steve moved as instinctively as a wolf jumping. The Colt under his hand jumped out and he let go all five shots from the hip. A bullet whined viciously past him. Then the hook-nosed and treacherous one slumped to the ground.

Grimly, with carbine ready, Steve went forward. Then McCulloch's old .45-90 whanged! It was well over to the left somewhere. The rancher raised a wolf-howl:

"Got him! Tryin' to sneak off with the money, he was!"

Steve made no reply. He was watching the hook-nosed man. Behind him lay two others. One moved, and Steve went side-way like a cat. But the robber only groaned faintly, turned a little, revealing a stupid face in which opened pale, piggy blue eyes. The nose was flat; the mouth was loose-lipped cruel.

"Gi'me—drink!" he gasped. Steve saw a canteen hanging to a saddle over the ridge. He brought it back and gave the robber water.

"Piggy Hynes!" cried McCulloch pleasantly, coming up. "Well, well! Always

figgered them Hynes boys'd come to this kind o' end, but I never give 'em credit for nerve enough to stick up a bank. There's Alf, too. An' I just salivated Wirt. The whole good-for-nothin' three."

"That one I just downed—he a Hynes, too? He said I killed his brother."

"He was tryin' to git you in sight—an' done it. That's Jo Crimmet, a kind o' no-account puncher. Used to work for me. Lyin'est critter between this an' ary place you can think about. Piggy!" he cried suddenly. "Who else was with you, when you stuck up the bank? Come on! Spill the beans. You're hell-headed anyhow. So open up."

Piggy's pale eyes opened again. He had a .45-90 hole in him. Now, all the receding life in him seemed to be focused in the tiny eyes—preparatory to ebbing away forever.

"Like to know?" he wheezed. His thick lips curled: "Go—to—!"

"By grab!" cried McCulloch, staring down at the ugly, dead face. "Fella might almost think there was somethin' to him! Died game, he did."

THEY brought Wirt Hynes up out of the brush. With him they carried the tow sack of stolen currency. They whiled time away by counting the money.

"Eight thousand," said Steve slowly. "They say twelve thousand was took. . . ."

Tedrick, Vanzandt, Jim Willacy and an Open A puncher came clattering up over the rocks below. McCulloch called them up. Steve hunkered before the tow sack, smoking absently.

"A fi-ne specimen you are, Stephen Hennery Claiborn!" Jim Willacy cried indignantly. "Gobblin' up the fight this-away!"

"The three Hyneses an' Jo Crimmet," grunted Tedrick, staring at the dead men. "Wouldn't have put it past 'em an' yet—wouldn't have figgered 'em neither."

"Got back the money!" cried Vanzandt. "Well, that's shorely fine."

"Nah, not *fine*," Steve said slowly. *Funny!* Just eight thousand here. We're shy one bank-robber an' looks like he's the biggest one—the four-thousand-dollar man. Yeh, looks like we lost the *Jefe Grande*—the Big Boss. For he cut stick from these

others an' took twicet as much as they got, apiece."

"Can happen!" Tedrick and Vanzandt nodded together.

"Oh, Stephen, he has his li'l ol' idees!" Jim Willacy nodded owlishly. "Well, from what you-all say o' these hairpins, they'd follow a leader, but they never'd figger a robbery on their own. Not an' pick the time so neat, like was done. Time when ever'body was out at the *rodeo*. Reckon Steve's hit it—hell, too!"

They loaded the bodies on the robbers' own horses and headed back for the Open A. Supper was a quiet meal and all were willing to turn in early. The next morning, Tedrick rode back alone to Sunrise. For Steve had decided to join Jim Willacy and Vanzandt on the trail to Alamito.

It was late afternoon when they jogged into that county seat, with the sack of currency across Vanzandt's saddle. They stopped to tell bedridden Dad Crowley, the sheriff, of their luck. Crowley forgot his sciatica while he listened.

"Fine—far's you could go," he nodded. "But the Big Boss, Van, he got away. Ah! Figgered that, did you? Too bad. If only it had been one o' the others got away—But the *jefe*, now, he'll be up to somethin' else an' all to catch over ag'in."

"Have to try cuttin' his trail from this end," shrugged Vanzandt gloomily. "I reckon he divided up the money an' sent the rest on, while he holed up by himself."

Jim Willacy went down to the bank with Vanzandt, to return the money. Steve felt the need of time for thought—and a drink. In the Steer Saloon he leaned moodily at the bar's far end. While it was none of his affair, this robbery interested him a great deal. Too, that fellow who got away was the brains of the gang. He had merely used the others. If he were not caught, some other bank would surely be robbed; perhaps another girl would be shot down.

He wondered if Jim-Ham Eddelman could describe the fifth robber. Apparently, Eddelman had been the only man of Alamito to get a good look at the five. He had proved the value of that look, too, by accurate description of the robbers' horses.

And while Steve pondered, Jim-Ham Eddelman came into the Steer, in the van

of a half-dozen men. They were arguing loudly with him and he was trying to shout them down. The burden of their argument seemed to be that Vanzandt, the deputy sheriff, would certainly have beaten the imported Vernon Tommy Miller, had not the robbery interrupted the steer-roping.

"You're talking through your hats!" cried Eddelman angrily. "What's Vanzandt's best time? Seventeen and a fifth! And Miller has tied a steer in sixteen. Think I don't know his record? Why, when I planned the *rodeo* I thought of you gunies and how you think Vanzandt's unbeatable. I picked Miller to show you some real steer-tying."

They all crowded in to the bar. Argument continued bitterly while they were given their drinks. Eddelman, turning a little, saw Steve. His eyes hardened:

"Ah-h! The—prophet again! Young fellow, you gave me some sass, yesterday. You—perhaps—haven't heard that—Jim-Ham Eddelman takes no sass—at any time—from anybody. . . ."

Steve, brown face all unalarmed, right hand in overalls-pocket, walked down toward the famous killer. The bartender, with something between moan and groan, descended swiftly behind the bar. Stopping four feet from the narrow-eyed gunman, Steve called the drink-dispenser until that worthy's unwilling head appeared—slowly.

"Mr. Eddelman's takin' a drink with me," drawled Steve. "Sass-parilla . . . I reckon, Mr. Eddelman, yuh'll manage that much sass. . . ."

Eddelman's flashing dark eyes were hard upon that hidden hand of Steve's. Suddenly he threw back his head and laughed:

"I'll do that little thing. Will you have the same?"

"I shore will—not. Old Crow, bar-keep. I don't *ever* take sass—if I don't have to."

Over his drink, he regarded Eddelman soberly:

"Yuh got a right good look at them robbers, Mr. Eddelman. Leastways, their animals was just like yuh said. But we're shy a robber an' if yuh could help us out—"

"Well, I'd been to my office and came out to go back to the *rodeo*. Walked around the corner of the bank building to the main street, here, just in time to see

the five robbers riding away, fast. Moses, the drygoods man, was about the only merchant in town who hadn't closed up. He stuck his head out of the door of his store and yelled to me that the bank'd been robbed. Somebody killed. He'd heard shots."

He shrugged, dark eyes twinkling humorously:

"I was in a split stick! I hadn't lost any bank-robbers. But it wouldn't do for a man with my reputation to let 'em get clear without firing a shot. So I produced the cutters and blazed away. It was seventy-five yards and better. They turned and let drive at me. I saw a fellow on a paint horse getting out his rifle, so I skipped inside the bank and forgot my dignity. This man on the pinto was perhaps the fifth robber—the one that's missing. He was about my size; dressed in dark clothing."

Steve considered this. He slid his hand from the overalls-pocket and—the pocket collapsed. Jim-Ham Eddelman gasped. Then, obviously taken aback:

"I—why, I thought you'd a derringer in that pocket!"

"Huh? Oh, yes! I *figgered* yuh'd think that," Steve grinned.

He looked complacently down at the pocket, and at the hand which had been so deceptive. It slid along his belt until it cuddled the smooth bone grip of his Colt.

"Well, thanks for the tale, Mr. Eddelman. 'T ain't a heap to go on, but ever' li'l bit added to what yuh got—"

HE strolled out with mind perfectly at ease. Jim-Ham Eddelman would never shoot him in the back. As he sauntered along the street, he pondered the gunman. There was a hairpin with both nerve and brains. His quick, deft yielding to what he thought a disadvantage—an imaginary hide-out—proved his brains. Jim Willacy was slated to go up against that sort of proposition. Not so good.

"But it do begin to shape up," Steve grinned tightly, "that whatever grudge he can possibly hold against Jim Willacy ain't one-two-three on any ten-count, with the one he's beginnin' to have for a fella name' Steve Claiborn. . . ."

He saw Moses, the little drygoods man, standing solemnly in his store-door. On impulse, Steve crossed over and nodded.

Then desperately threw up both hands:

"Hey! Hey! Don't want no drygoods! Don't need nothin'—except some information. Tell me about them bank-robbers o' yo's."

"Dey vas none o' mine. Nuh, nuh! Dey rob der bank. Den dey ride off. Misder Eddelman, he shoot. Den dey shoot—at him. Den I skip inside mit me. All vas shooting. Der four vas shooting—rightd at me."

"Five," Steve corrected his tally. "'T was dangerouser than yuh figgered."

"Four! Dey vas joost four. I see dem ride off. Two vas on bay horses. One vas on a black horse. Den one, he vas on a gray horse."

"Yuh're plumb forgettin' the paint horse—an' the fifth man." Steve was watching the stubborn old face, with intent narrowing of hard, blue eyes.

"You don't see dem! I see dem. Dey vas joost four. And no paint horse!"

"Funny! Eddelman, he says the' was five. . . . An' a pinto horse. . . ."

"Ach, ach, ach! V'y you don't say so? Dey vas five and one, he vas on a pinto. I don't want no-o' troubles mit Misder Eddelman!"

"But I thought you were positive you only saw four" persisted Steve, "Now which was it, four or five?"

"I told you," wailed the little Jew, "dey was five."

"I think you're lying," said Steve. "He's got you and everybody else in this town so scared of him that you'll all cover him up rather than risk getting him sore at you."

"Please," begged Moses. "You forgive me, but I vas mixed up de first time. I got to go now. Excuse, please."

He bobbed inside and Steve frowned. Now, why had Eddelman spoken of five riders and of a paint horse, when this honest, observant old man had seen but four—and no paint horse—and had had a longer time to observe the robbers? Staring across the street, past the corner of the bank, Steve saw a small, one-story adobe. At its door hung a sign—Jim-Ham Eddelman, Lawyer.

Moving again on impulse, he went across and down the side-wall of the bank until he reached this office. The door was unlocked. He slid inside and looked quickly

about in the gloom. It was a bare and tidy single room, with a bed in one corner, neatly made. A pine desk. A soap-box cupboard on the wall, holding a half-dozen new-looking calf-bound lawbooks in one shelf and a bottle and glass in the other.

Swiftly—having heard no footsteps, no sounds, anywhere, Steve looked under the bed. A shabby valise was there. He went through it flashingly; nothing but clothing; nor had the bed anything concealed in it. The floor was solid under his stamping, the desk empty but a paper or two. He pulled down a couple of the lawbooks and peered behind them. Nothing there. As he moved to replace the heavy books, looking about for some other place that might hold something, the books slid from his hand. They flew open and—

One was merest shell. The center of all the pages had been cut out, so that the book-back was lid for a neat box. There was a thick sheaf of currency—all brand-new and all marked "Cattleman's Bank of Alamito." . . .

It was hardly surprising, now that he considered all the details. Eddelman, getting up this *rodeo*, which would draw everyone out of town. Eddelman, riding back on a pretext and joining the robbers in the holdup. Eddelman, thinking the cashier and girl-clerk had recognized him, shooting them down—that was the only reason Steve could see for the girl's shooting. Evidently, she had not known him.

Out of the back door he had run—Steve fancied. Tossed an old hat and perhaps a suit of overalls to one of his men. Into his own place, then, for his own hat and coat. Then out, to fire after his own gang.

Steve wrapped up the book in an old newspaper. He slipped hurriedly out and went to the sheriff's office. The little room was empty. Up and down the street, he searched for Vanzandt and Jim Willacy. Men shrugged. The pair had passed a few minutes before. So he came to the Owl Saloon and stared in. There, he faced what he felt to be impending tragedy.

Vanzandt, who might have stopped this, was not in sight. But Jim-Ham Eddelman stood with back to door. Over his square, black-coated shoulder, Steve saw Jim Willacy's grim set face. Eddelman's shoulders were rigid. He was on the very verge of going for his deadly Bisleys, Steve

thought. Poor Jim Willacy, nothing much with the hoglegs, was facing the fastest six-shooter artist Texas had ever known. . . .

Steve slid inside. He came up to them. Out of the corner of his eyes, Jim-Ham Eddelman glanced at him.

"Come to ask yuh about a point o' law," Steve drawled, as if he missed the significance of all this. "I ain't long on what yuh call book-education. Gi' me the book o' rules, even, an' I can't make out to do much with 'em. Looky here, will yuh. . . ."

The newspaper slid from the book in his left hand. Steve's forefinger was beneath the cover, so that it lifted enough to tell Jim-Ham Eddelman what volume it was. Steve's right hand had slid mechanically into his overalls-pocket. He let the book go and those who, from discreet distance, gaped at this play, gasped at sight of the hollowed center and the sheaf of bills which dropped from it. Jim-Ham Eddelman, with one glance at Steve's pocketed hand, snarled in malignant triumph.

For speed, he had perhaps never equaled the draw in which those much-notched Bisleys came flashing out of leather-lined hip-pockets. But Steve's hand was sliding out of his overalls—with a double-barreled Remington derringer. The little .41 roared twice, the reports seeming one continued

sound. Eddelman had both guns cocked, but he was swaying on his feet as the hammers dropped. The 44's splintered the floor at Steve's feet.

"Was a derringer in that pocket—this time," Steve said, very grimly.

Then he caught Eddelman and eased him to the floor. He studied the wounds and and looked up at Jim Willacy with crooked smile:

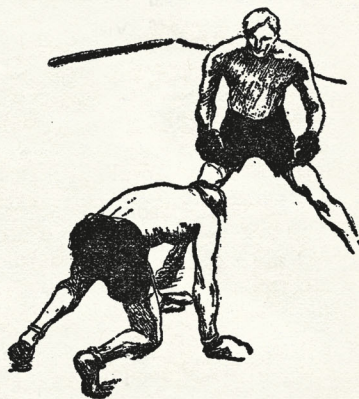
"He'll hang yet, boy! If he gets him a *dam*' good doctor. For murderin' that bank-cashier. He was Number Five—the *Jefe Grande*. I got this book-box o' money out o' his office-shelf. He knowed, minute he glimpsed it, that the jig was up an' the fiddlers gone. But he didn't know about the derringer."

Vanzandt came rushing in, with Colt out. To him, Steve handed over the improvised money-box. Briefly, he told his tale. Vanzandt stared down slowly—from the money to Eddelman. He shook his yellow head:

"Do'no' how you figgered it, Claiborn," he said wonderingly. "Reckon I never would have. But I'll shore take yo' word for it. Tedrick told me yesterday about yo' prophesyin' to Jim-Ham Eddelman an' we figgered you plumb loco. But 'twas Tedrick an' me that was the nitwits. I would climb a soapbox an' tell the cock-eyed world that when you prophesy—man! *you prophesy!*"

FIGHT STORIES

"A CHAMP ain't nevah finished till he dies!" But Mauler Clark only cursed old loyal shriveled Monk. Mauler Clark knew he was finished, through. A crimsoned, leather-marked story of the ring—**THE COMEBACK KID**—by that hard-hitting scribe T. W. Ford. Also articles, and novelets by Jack Kofoed, Tom Lewis, John Starr, all in the current issue of **Fight**—now on the newsstands.





TRAIL OF THE MAVERICKS

By GUY FOWLER

Into the prairie dusk they vanished, two grim-eyed killers, forking the fastest mounts in the Horse Heaven country. But the race is not always to the swift when a waddy like Chinook Jackson takes the trail of a horse he loves.



T was a rare event for white men to come into Camas Prairie. At first Chinook Jackson did not see them, but a sixth sense drew him to the door of his pine board shack. Sure enough, out yonder in the knee

high bunchgrass, he saw two men approaching.

More unusual than their coming, stranger even than the subtle instinct which had warned him, was the fact that they traveled on foot. Chinook leaned against

the door frame studying them with keen far-seeing eyes, accustomed to prairie distances. The strangers were making slow progress. One of them stumbled and his companion paused to help him rise.

The sultry heat of the day lingered over the early evening and, slowly as the men advanced, they yet kicked up little clouds of dust which trailed them on the motionless air.

Watching them, the lonely horse herder welcomed a break in the monotony of his existence and a natural curiosity expressed

itself in his lean young face, now glowing copper colored in the dying sunlight. Here in the horse-heaven country, where herds ran wild behind their savage stallion leaders, it was little wonder that Chinook marveled at the sight of these two men who were drawing near on lagging feet.

"Reckon maybe I'll sell a couple head unexpected like," he muttered in the manner of a man who is much alone. "Those hembres sure need hoss flesh b'tween them an' th' ground."

The sizzling bacon recalled him to the stove. Chinook's evening meal was a ritual not frequently interrupted. He would be visited occasionally by a band of roving Umatillas, or it might be a troupe of Walla Walla hunters. He was friendly with them all. It was, in fact, his knowledge of the Northwest tribes and their universal lingo, Chinook, which had given him his nickname. The Indians appropriately enough knew him as "Friend of Wild Horses."

Chinook sliced off liberal slabs from the bacon that hung suspended from a peg in the wall and dropped them into the pan. He then set about the task of peeling more potatoes and was engaged in this labor of hospitality when the two shadows fell across his hewn floor from the doorway.

"Howdy," said Chinook. "I saw yuh comin'. Yuh're in time for grub."

"Make it plenty," said the first man with a swift glance about the one-room shack. "Got a drink about yuh?"

Chinook studied him calmly and his lips quivered in a slow smile.

"Well now, stranger, I would have come t' that myself, d'rectly. I most always keep a snack handy like."

"My partner's all in an' I ain't much better."

He indicated the man beside him who was leaning against the door frame.

"Set down an' rest."

Chinook reached to a shelf and found a bottle which he passed to the man who limped. Drawing the cork with his teeth the newcomer drank and handed the flask to his partner, then sank to one of the straight back chairs.

"That's sure a life saver," he grunted.

Chinook continued to stir the potatoes in his pan. In that fork of country between the Yakima River and the Columbia,

men ask few questions. Chinook asked none. He worked silently at the stove and his guests stretched out in the two chairs watching him. Presently, he set the food on the table. He heaped a plate with thick slices of bread of his own baking and next filled heavy cups with hot black coffee.

"Come an' get it," he told them pleasantly. "There ain't much, but it's fillin'."

They dragged their chairs to the table and Chinook brought up a bench on which had reposed his water pail. As the strangers ate they ebbed into better mood.

"WE came up by the ferry at Umatilla," said the one who was obviously the leader in their partnership. His tone was explanatory, though he seldom raised his eyes from the plate.

"We was headin' for Harney County. 'Bout twelve miles back our hosses got away."

Chinook looked up inquiringly, mild curiosity in his eyes.

"We'd dismounted for a rest," the man continued. "Been ridin' considerable an' we both was saddle sore. We was stretched out on our backs smokin'. Over a ways south we heard a stallion whistle."

The crippled man nodded confirmation.

"An' I'm a son-of-a-gun if them wall eyes didn't up an' stampede," the speaker announced. "Saddles, blanket rolls an' all. Joe an' me up after 'em, but 'twarn't no use. They was plumb loco. That's how we come to be afoot."

Chinook had listened with attention. He nodded now in sympathy.

"It sure is queer th' way hosses acts," he agreed. "I've had 'em do that very thing, many's th' time. Yuh understand, hosses is my bus'ness."

His guests indicated that they had already gathered that.

"We saw th' paddock," said the cripple.

"Yeah." Chinook spoke with a touch of pride. "I got wire strung out yonder two mile long and a mile wide," he said. "Got close on to three hun'erd head runnin' wild."

"Yuh mean they're all wild?"

"Don't yuh break 'em?"

The questions came together from his visitors.

Chinook smiled gently. "Oh sure. I snag 'em for th' ranches down below. Fig-

gered I could make more'n forty dollars a month, so I quit ridin' for outfits. This here way, I'm my own boss."

He drew tobacco and papers from his shirt pocket and tossed them to the table. While they rolled cigarettes he explained.

"I sell a string now an' then," he went on. "Th' best hosses on earth are rangin' high, wide an' handsome right here in Camas Prairie."

He rolled a smoke for himself.

"Yuh'd be surprised to see some o' th' critters I took below."

He leaned forward in a sudden burst of enthusiasm.

"A year ago, one o' my bunch took honors at th' Pendleton round-up."

"Yuh got a couple o' good ones now?" demanded the man opposite him.

They looked at him sharply.

"Huh, more'n that, pardner. Come along an' I'll show yuh a sight for sore eyes."

He rose and hitched his belt. The visitors followed him to the door, settling their holsters more comfortably on their hips.

He led them across the baked yard before the shack to the gate of a barb-wire paddock that reached out east and west until it was lost in the bunchgrass on either side.

"What do yuh get for 'em?" asked the man with a limp.

"Well, that depends, o' course, on what a man wants," Chinook told him. "Some comes as low as thirty dollars. I got two that can't be touched for less'n a hun'erd apiece."

Half a mile out they could see the herd grazing. The sun was low over the horizon in the west.

"I'll get th' price, too," Chinook added; "come early fall, jest before th' Pendleton round-up. That pair cost me plenty o' work."

"Well," the uninjured man spoke now, in a tone of decision. "Yuh might as well snag out a couple for us. We got to have hosses."

Chinook nodded.

"I'll bring in a pair so's yuh can look 'em over."

He turned to his saddle horse, a roan that was grazing from the end of a hackamore rope near the gate. When he had

saddled, Chinook built his lariat and rode out into the long paddock.

AS he advanced across the prairie, sleek heads came up sharply and, in the soft glow of the setting sun, there was the flash of polished hide over rippling muscles. A few of the animals stood their ground, with their ears pointed ahead, alert, motionless as bronze statues. Others swung out and trotted away, their tails up, lifting their feet in high, dainty strokes that carried them over the ground at remarkable speed.

Two horses remained until he was nearly on them. Then, tossing their manes playfully, they circled in a wide maneuver and snorted as they ran. Chinook thrust two fingers into his mouth and whistled. The plunging blacks planted their unshod feet in the ground and slid to a halt, looking back at him curiously.

Chinook laughed and rode on after the herd. When he came to a point within throw's length, where the bunch paused before the wire, he whirled his rope and sent it snaking out like an aviating serpent. The coil settled over the neck of a chestnut. He rose instantly and reared, then dropped to his forefeet, whipping his body from side to side in a series of twisting contortions. Chinook worked his way up along the line.

"Steady boy," he called softly. "Steady."

The pony settled and braced himself, eying the rider as he came on. Chinook spoke again and the horse's head went up. "Steady."

In another moment Chinook was rubbing the gleaming shoulders and the horse nosed his faded flannel shirt.

"Gyppin' me, wasn't yuh?"

Chinook chuckled and led the animal back to his visitors.

"Here's a right good critter."

He swung the chestnut around in a half circle before them.

"I got another one out there that's his runnin' mate. Yuh can have the two o' them, boys, for forty-five dollars apiece."

The hard face of the one settled into a scowl. His crippled companion smiled with thin leering lips.

"He acts like a sunfisher t' me," said the first.

"Pshaw now, he's jest playful," Chinook

protested. "Wait'll I show yuh the other one."

He slipped a halter over the chestnut's head and tossed the line to the man on the ground. The two stood in silence and watched him repeat his trick. Directly he rode back to them with a second horse, also a chestnut whose actions worked him as being far from gentle.

"Yuh don't often see better hoss flesh," Chinook said proudly, stepping the animal in a wide circle.

Wide-eyed, snorting nervously, the horse gazed at the two men and sprang into the air, poised for a beautiful moment clear of the ground.

"Git down there," Chinook barked and shortened the line. After a brief struggle the chestnut settled and stood quivering.

"Hell."

The spokesman for the strangers spat disgustedly. "Yuh got one sunfisher an' a high poler. What we want is runnin' hosses, pardner. Turn them dawgs loose an' let's see th' rodeo critters yuh mentioned."

Chinook slowly shook his head.

"I ain't sellin' them two yet."

"No," said the other, and his blood-shot eyes gleamed evilly. "Yuh ain't. We're takin' 'em."

Chinook gazed down into the muzzle of a forty-five. His eyes wandered to the second man who was leaning against the gate grinning. His hand rested on the handle of the Colt's protruding from his scabbard. Chinook dropped the hackamore line.

"So that's it," he said slowly.

"Shut up an' git down."

From the corner of his mouth the man spoke to his crippled partner.

"Take his hogleg, Joe."

"All right, Nat."

Chinook slid obediently from his saddle as the limping man approached him. Half sheltered behind his horse, his hand dropped and he fired from the scabbard. Nat's shot barked simultaneously. Chinook sagged and, as he fell, saw the cripple clutch at his shoulder. He had intended to stop the cripple first, then get the other man from behind his mount. The limp had spoiled Chinook's aim. His slug had hit high, and he knew it before the prairie

went black in front of him as he struck the ground.

"Watch him," snarled the man called Nat. "I'll git them runners."

He had seized the lines of Chinook's roan. At the sound of the shots the free chestnut had bolted and the second, snapping its hackamore, sprang off into the gathering dusk. Nat mounted and not until then did he thrust his gun back into its scabbard. With a swift glance at his partner, who had sunk to his haunches beside Chinook, he galloped out into the paddock, building a lariat as he rode.

WHEN Chinook stirred, he opened his eyes to gaze up into the set face of his guard, flushed in the final light of evening. The prairie lay brown and purple in the dusk. In the east the sky was deeping into the indigo of night and a single star hung low over the end of the world. Westward the sky was smoky crimson, streaked with gold where the sun yet cast its laggard, slanting rays from below the horizon.

Chinook lay silently. His throat burned and his shoulder throbbed with the pain of a shattered bone. The plain was nearly in darkness when Nat rode in at a gallop. Trailing him on a double hackamore were two plunging horses. They were black as the prairie in the east and their heads rose proudly in silhouette against the fading light in the west.

He looked down at Chinook and his laugh rattled hoarsely.

"What do yuh think we are, huh? A hun'erd apiece!"

He dropped from the saddle.

"Tie them devils," he snapped at his partner, who rose painfully. "We'll hitch this hombre at th' shack."

Chinook tried to struggle to his feet as Nat drove a heavy boot into his ribs.

"It takes a hoss thief to bully a man without a gun."

Chinook ground the charge through clenched teeth. Again the boot caught him and he got up to his knees. The men seized his arms, one on each side, and half dragged him to the shack. They pushed him down on the cot.

"Where's yuhr money?" demanded Nat.

"In th' bank down at Umatilla."

"Yuh lie."

He turned and began to rip clothes from pegs, searching the pockets. Supplies were flung from the shelf and directly, he forced Chinook from the cot so as to tear at the bedclothing. He faced Chinook presently and his hand caressed his forty-five.

"Do you tell me, or do I plug yuh?"

Chinook remained stubbornly silent. Nat moved forward and, drawing his hand back, sent it crashing into Chinook's face. The wounded man slipped from the chair and sprawled on the floor.

"Hitch him," snarled Nat.

The man known as Joe gave a bandage around his leg a final tug and straightened painfully. Blood was on his shirt from the shoulder wound from Chinook's bullet. He took down a length of rope from a peg and began to bind Chinook in its coils, drawing them brutally tight. The room was in semi-darkness. He lit the oil lamp which shed a pale radiance over them, deepening the shadows. Nat was pushing his search, throwing boxes to the floor.

"I got it," he announced sharply. He held up a tin tobacco box that had been thrust between two upright posts in the corner. He counted out a packet of bills swiftly, and looked across at Chinook with a grin of triumph.

"Well, yuh rat," he said bitterly, "yuh ain't been doin' so poorly with them hosses at that. Eight hun'erd, Joe, an' sixty t' boot."

He thrust the bills into his shirt.

"Git some grub t'gether," he directed, indicating the heap of tin.

Joe took down a worn saddle bag from the wall and painfully went to work. Chinook watched as his supplies went into the bag. Bacon, flour and tinned goods disappeared rapidly.

"Yuh leavin' me any grub?" he demanded.

"Maybe yuh won't need none," Nat answered him. "I been thinkin' if yuh was dead, yuh couldn't be tellin' nothin' to the sheriff."

Chinook took the threat in silence. By lifting his head a trifle, he was able to watch their movements. He saw Joe pocket his forty-five and his rifle. Two boxes of cartridges were dumped into the saddle bag.

"Reckon that's all, Nat."

Joe faced his partner in the gloom.

"It'd likely be better to bore him an' have it done with," said Nat, looking down at the bound figure on the floor. He was fingering his Colt's suggestively.

"Ah, hell, Nat, what's the use? We got the jump now—with them hosses an' all."

"Yuh always was yellow." Nat spat the charge maliciously.

But he thrust the gun back into the scabbard and bent over Chinook.

"Adios," he grinned brutally. "We'll see that yore hosses git more grass. I'm aimin' to cut the wire out a way so's to give 'em more range."

He reached up to the oil lamp and turned the wick. The shack was left in darkness. Chinook, listening with straining ears, heard the hammering hoofs of his big roan as the animal responded to a slap on the rump and took to the range. He followed, too, the sounds of struggle as the two men mounted, then the pounding of unshod hoofs as they headed out into the night.

FOR a time Chinook fought against the rope which bound him, but his struggle was futile. He grumbled to himself and lay still. The wound in his shoulder throbbed as though a hot poker had been thrust into the muscle.

"I'm crowbait," he muttered presently. "If I'd had any sense I'd never have trusted them hombres. I should have known they was bad when I first sighted 'em."

Bitterly and long he reflected on the past. He recalled the days when he met strangers not necessarily with suspicion, but with a decent amount of precaution for any unusual moves they might make. He shifted his head uneasily. There was a dull ache in his temples, and his ribs felt as though they had been driven like splinters into his vitals.

Accustomed to the million-voiced silences of the range, Chinook suddenly caught the sound of galloping horses. Painfully he raised his head. Far out on the shadowy prairie he saw in his mind's eye the plunging herd as their stallion leader found the broken wire of his paddock.

But no. This was not the irregular beating of wild horses' feet upon the earth. The rhythm was steady. Men rode thus side by side, each horse falling into a sort

of harmony with the rising and falling shoulders of his mates.

In a moment there was proof of Chinook's unerring judgment. The clatter of equipment, the groan of leather and, indistinctly, the mumble of voices, came to his ears. Men flung themselves from the saddles out beyond the shack, and immediately, Chinook was blinking up blindly into the glare of a flashlight.

"They got Chinook."

He recognized the voice of Jerry Murdock, Sheriff of Umatilla County.

"Hi, Jerry," Chinook grinned eagerly in the light. "Unhitch me out of this damn rope, will yuh? I'm plumb stiff." Someone lit the oil lamp and the others pushed into the room. Murdock was cutting the rope with a claspknife.

"How long since they been here, Chinook?" he asked, huskily.

"'Bout an hour, I reckon, Jerry. They took my best hosses. An' they turned the herd loose, too, damn 'em."

"Yuh're hurt, too," said Jerry, hurriedly examining the wound. One of the posse brought a pan of water.

"It ain't serious," Chinook protested, gripping the edge of the cot, as the sheriff applied a dampened cloth.

"Well boys, are yuh willin' to go on night-ridin'?" Jerry Murdock looked around at his followers in the sickly light. "We're on the right trail so far."

"Sure, Jerry. Let's go."

Young Yakima Hall grinned in the dingy shadows, gently fingering the butt of his gun. There was a shout of approval.

"Hold on a minute, boys. I'm goin' too."

"Yuh better stay back, Chinook," suggested Murdock. "I'll leave a couple o' the boys here to tend to yuh. Yuh're pretty badly battered."

"Like hell," Chinook growled, rising. He went to the door and peered out into the night.

"We can ride my paddock wire an' pick up their trail," he said determinedly. "They was goin' to turn my herd loose. I'm goin', Jerry, if I have to ride double."

"Let him go, Dan," suggested Yakima. "He can ride with me. This ol' walrus o' mine will carry two."

Chinook climbed up behind Yakima directly and the posse was on its way, riding

at an easy lope. Murdock, beside the double riders, frequently turned his flashlight on the ground and along the wire of Chinook's prairie paddock. Chinook briefly described his experience.

"They ain't human," Murdock growled angrily.

"These buzzards rode into Nolin yesterday mornin'," he explained. "They stuck up the Planters' Bank an' killed young Jim Kohler. You recollect him, Chinook?"

Without waiting for a reply, he continued.

"Well, on the getaway their hosses was shot under 'em. They up an' got away agin on a pair of Ted Morton's ponies. They was all saddled and bridled in front of his feed store. I b'lieve you sold Ted them critters, Chinook?"

In the darkness behind Yakima, Chinook nodded.

"I 'lowed somethin' like that," he said quietly. "Them was wild colts. When they heard the stallion whistle out yonder they jest up an' took off back where they come from. Yeah, I thought o' that."

"Well," Dan resumed. "they got away. We been on their trail all day, but it didn't get hot till we came up the canyon. I'm hopin' they don't get too far back in the hills. It's too rocky to follow 'em long up there. There's five thousand reward out for 'em, too."

PRESENTLY, the posse came to the break in the paddock wire. The ground was pocked with the marks of hoofs.

"Yep, they done it," said Chinook, leaning over to peer at the scarred earth.

The men had become ominously silent. A flashlight ray now and then searched out the trail. It was easier to follow than most by reason of the long stride and the vicious hoofs of Chinook's two prized horses. The night wore on and the sky in the east turned gray, then delicate pink. In a little while the sun burst over the rim of the mesa. Farther along the plain trail a rider pointed to some freshly opened tins.

"They're slowin' their pace," remarked Chinook, studying the hoof marks.

"Yeah, there's blood, too." Yakima leaned low in the saddle. "Yuh hurt one of 'em, Chinook, bad."

"Yeah. He was hurt before I plugged

him though. He limped when they came to my place."

Murdock nodded quickly. "Kohler got him with one shot."

The cavalcade swung around a broad knoll at a weary trot. The sun was still right in the heavens. Suddenly, Murdock raised his hand. His voice barked out to his followers.

"There they go, boys."

He jerked his rifle from its boot in the saddle and fired quickly from the hip. Others opened fire, but the fleeing men were out of range.

"Them hosses," groaned Chinook, leaning over Yakima's back. "If they'd taken any others we'd have a chance."

Yakima was driving his tired horse beneath its double load, and bravely the animal was responding. Chinook reached far over to shout in his ear.

"Yakima—let me have him. Get down. I can git 'em."

"Yuh're crazy," Yakima flung back over his shoulder.

Chinook cupped his hands and repeated his plea as they rode. Yakima was shooting hopelessly at the fleeing figures far ahead. Something in Chinook's breathless words held him. Suddenly, he pulled up and slid from the saddle. From the ground he passed up his forty-five to Chinook.

"Go on," he bawled, "try it. Yuh got the best hoss in th' bunch."

Chinook lay low on the animal's neck. Little by little he skirted the other riders and gradually, one by one, he passed them. Directly, he was well out in advance. Yakima was left in the bunchgrass alone. The posse was spreading out, firing so as to

avoid Chinook, running on before them.

One of the bandits turned in his saddle and fired. A spurt of dust kicked up beside Chinook's horse. The rider fired again and the bullet whistled its song in Chinook's ear. Still he plunged ahead. He was in range now, but he did not shoot. His hand hung limply at his side, gripping Yakima's gun.

Suddenly, Chinook rose in his stirrups. He was a perfect mark for the horsemen ahead. He dropped the lines and thrust two fingers into his mouth. A penetrating whistle cut the air down the valley, sharp and clear above the rattle of gunfire. He repeated it and raced ahead.

The black horses carrying the fleeing renegades swerved sharply in their course and leaped out at wide angles in a curious half circle. Their riders slashed at them with spurred heels, but the animals only reared and plunged. Chinook whistled again and yet again. Then swiftly, he raised the Colt's and took quick aim. Yellow flame spat from the muzzle, a sharp report cracked its bitter note and one of the riders slumped in his saddle and was flung into the bunchgrass. His horse lifted its head and trotted back toward Chinook.

Again he raised Yakima's gun. The second rider threw up his hands, like his fallen mate, unable to control the careening horse beneath him. The posse galloped up with drawn guns. Murdock was in the lead.

"There they are," said Chinook, faintly, a weak smile lighting his pain-racked face. "I knew damn well I could get 'em—if only I could get in whistling range of my hosses."

LOVE ROMANCES

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GUN GAMBLER

By WALT COBURN

A Complete Western Action Novel



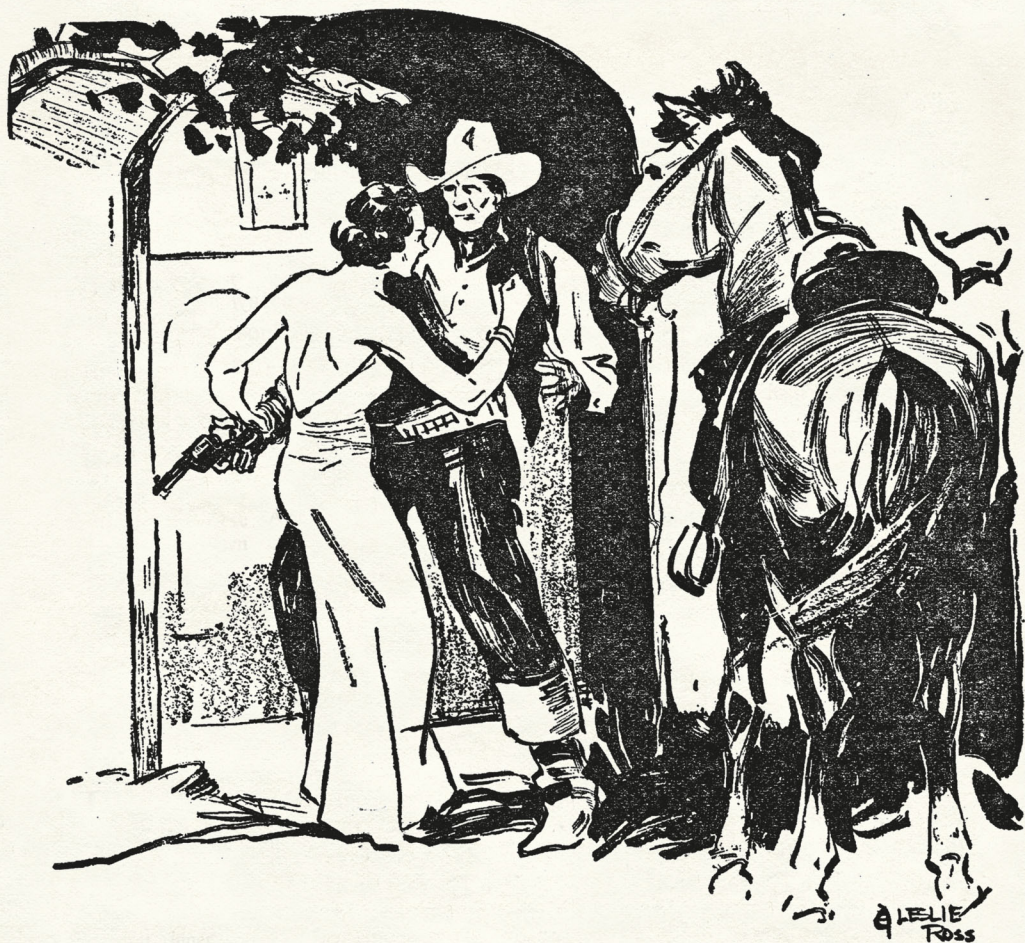
I'VE heard of the mail carrier who, on his afternoon off, went hiking. Then there's the one about the sailor on shore leave who hired a rowboat and put in the day on the lake. But, Dawson, my boy, you win the hand-embroidered hot-water bottle. A man of my border patrol spending his two weeks' leave down in the Corpus Christi Mountains! Wow!"

Jim Hardin, grizzled veteran of the United States border patrol, in charge of the troublesome strip both sides of Nogales, looked with puzzled amusement at Pete Dawson, whose six foot one and a half of brawn stood before his desk.

"Ever been there, Dawson?" asked Captain Hardin.

"Not exactly. But I've heard plenty about that country."

"Prospectors' lies," grinned Hardin.



Haunted hills, snarl of Yaqui guns, wrath of the dreaded Don—and Pete Dawson, border buckaroo, tears the secret of Aztec gold from the eyes of a living dead man.

"Mexican legends. Indian superstitions. Haunted Mesa, The Death House, and the ghost that has come back to avenge the death of somebody or another." Hardin's smile had just a hint of grimness. "Just fools' lies about fools' gold, Dawson."

"I wasn't aimin' to come back a millionaire, chief."

"Then what's calling you down into that damnable country, kid?"

For the fraction of a moment Pete Dawson hesitated. Then he replied with a feigned carelessness that in no way deceived Hardin, who knew men as well as he knew the Mexican border.

"I'm just curious to have a squint at the country, that's all, chief."

"Well, it's your vacation, not mine. Spend it drunk or sober, in the Arctic or along the Equator, if you choose. You're

free, white and over twenty-one." Hardin paused, sweeping the big fellow from head to foot with an appraising eye. "And not hard for a man or woman to look at, Dawson. Ever had much experience with women?"

Pete Dawson flushed crimson under the gray-eyed scrutiny of his superior.

"I—I wasn't goin' down there to—"

"Mebbe not kid. But you're bound to meet this mysterious Lady of the Corpus Christi Hills, if you go there. From what they say, she must be a mixture of Lorelei, Kipling's Vampire, and Mona Lisa. I don't want to lose a good man, Dawson. Frankly, I wish you'd go to Los Angeles or 'Frisco or Denver for your two weeks. Some good men have gone into those hills, from time to time. Some got back here; some never showed up again. Those that

return brought back some damn' queer tales, queer, Dawson, even for this country where we're accustomed to oddities and mysteries. The latest addition to the other ghosts and queens and so on is this night rider they call the Road Runner. The desert bird we call a road runner kills rattlesnakes by corralling the reptile with cactus. The snake's belly is too tender to climb across this cactus corral. So there he dies." Hardin scowled at the end of his long cigar. Then he went on, his eyes now on Dawson's clean-shaven face, reading whatever he might find written there.

"So this Night Rider, when he kills a man, leaves a little circle of cactus nearby as his mark. Or does he leave the cactus as a warning, then do his murdering?"

"He's not a murderer, chief," Dawson replied quickly. "He kills fair."

"I stand corrected, Dawson." Hardin smiled enigmatically. "Sort of Robin Hood, eh? Mex or a white man?"

Dawson shrugged his wide shoulders and his hands went out in a gesture that fitted his Mexican's reply.

"Quien sabe?"

"Who knows?" repeated Hardin. "Exactly. And since the other man is always found dead, who vouches for the fairness of this Road Runner who vanishes into the night?"

"The dead men have always been shot from in front. Always, in each case, there has been an empty shell in the dead man's gun."

"The gun could be planted," grunted Hardin, "the same as the circle of cactus. A man who has such good showmanship would be clever enough to plant a gun on his victim. Frankly, my opinion is this: The Road Runner and this Sheba of the Corpus Christi Hills are in cahoots. Running guns or hop or booze across our border. Perhaps running a few Chinks now and then. When someone gets in their way the Road Runner gent kills him and sprinkles his cactus to put fear in other inquisitive folks. Eh? Were you about to say something, Dawson?"

"Mmmmm. No, chief. No, nothing to say."

"My mistake. Thought you were on the verge of popping off. Well, as I say, I figure these two as a pair of blackbirds playing a neat game. Dawson, there's a

hell of a lot of stuff coming across the line in that region. A bad leak, and I'm damned if I can stop the leak. I've switched men there fifty times, so they're not being bribed, see? You were the last man to patrol there. Nichols takes your place. I had plenty of faith in your ability to locate that leak, but you didn't. Did you, Pete?" And Hardin leaned forward across his desk, his keen eyes glittering.

"No, sir." Dawson's reply was firm, and his eyes met the scrutiny of his chief's without flinching. Dawson had been expecting that very question. He met it now with studied calm. The grizzled chief leaned back and lit his cigar, apparently satisfied with what he read in the younger man's face. He waved a hand toward a chair.

"Hmm. Sit down, Dawson. Grab a cigar. I'm about to make you a little proposition."

Pete Dawson seated himself. From a desk drawer Hardin took a notebook. Again the eyes of the two men met and held in a duel of appraisal. Hardin's thin lips smiled coldly.

"Dawson?"

"Yes, sir?"

"What is your real name?"

Pete Dawson's jaw muscles tightened and his eyes glinted as he smiled grimly at his chief.

"If you have learned, somehow, that Pete Dawson is not my real name, then I reckon, chief, that I can't enlighten you much. If this is goin' to be a third degree, save your breath. Better men than you have tried it and got nothin'." Dawson's voice, though losing none of its Southern drawl, was hard.

"Army men, eh?"

"Army men, chief." Dawson's eyes smoldered with some bitter memory. "You were in the A. E. F., chief. Ever hear of the leather-neck outfit that got so much popularity when they were on M. P. duty? Yeah? Well, they gave me the works."

Hardin consulted his notebook. "You were Lieutenant Carter Brown, then, of the Rainbow Division, machine-gun officer. You were tried and convicted by a court-martial board for killing a Captain Stadler, your skipper. You were sent to Federal prison for life."

"I congratulate you, chief," said Daw-

son grimly, "upon your shrewd gum-shoe work. Would you mind telling me how you came by this bit of information?"

"Not at all. Fact is, Dawson, it's darn simple. Remember, it was an open court, there at Brest. I happened to see you when you were on trial. Black eyes, smashed nose, everything. Those Marines had mussed you up plenty. Then, when they asked for the complaining witness of that second charge of assaulting a Marine captain, and a sergeant up and blurted out that said captain was not out of the hospital yet, more than one colonel grinned. I heard them give you life sentence. Saw you take it without batting an eye. And I watched them take you away. I never thought I'd lay eyes on you again. Then, who should turn up from the San Diego patrol with a letter of high recommendation but you! Odd, ain't it, Dawson?"

"Reckon so, chief. You sure called my hole card. What you aim to do about it?"

"How come you were discharged from Leavenworth prison?" countered Hardin.

Dawson rolled and lit a cigarette and grinned. "It was proven, when all facts were brought to light at Washington, that this man Captain Stadler was a German spy and that he was endangering his company by issuing the orders which I, acting for myself and my men, refused to carry out. When he went for his gat, I shot him. Shot him, Hardin, *knowing that I was shooting a German spy.*" He pulled a match across his boot and held it toward Hardin.

"Your cigar's gone out, chief."

II

WHEN Pete Dawson had gone, Captain Hardin of the Border Patrol sat for a long time in deep thought. He glanced at the last notation against the record of Dawson's name:

"Discharged from Leavenworth. Pardon signed by President of U. S. Date of discharge from prison unavailable from prison records."

"Which last named item," Hardin mused, "is damn' queer—as queer as the rest of it all."

"The rest of it all" dated from the arrival of one Pete Dawson at Nogales. Hardin had recognized the ex-army of-

ficer, but, after his own peculiar code, he made no mention of it to anyone. Rather, he took great precaution that absolutely no one discovered any inkling of the new man's past. Instead, he gave Dawson a difficult strip of border to patrol, then set himself to the task of closely watching this man who called himself Pete Dawson. And what he had seen, from time to time, he made record of and kept in a strong-box in his vault. A strange record it was, too, as queer as—well, as the rest of it. For under various dates strung across a period of six months were the following cryptic items:

"Dawson captures three whiskey runners.

"Dawson captures load of Chinamen, five in all, and wounds the two men who are smuggling said Chinks.

"Dawson locates a dope cache and nabs the runners single-handed. One man against six. He don't know I'm backing the play from my hiding-place. Whatever the man may be, he's *not* a coward."

Then, in red ink, the following: "Followed D. across border toward Corpus Christi Hills. Lose him in deep canyon. About to return when a rider is skylighted. Moonlight shows a man on a pinto horse, in chaps and serape and Mexican sombrero. Rider vanishes as quickly as he appeared. Hunt for D., but no sign. Ride back at daylight to spot near D.'s camp. His horse grazing on picket line. D. cooking breakfast. Damn queer, for D. has no business across line in Mexican territory. What was he doing in Corpus Christi Hills? How did he slip me in a country I know by heart? Is this alias Dawson playing a two-handed game?"

Then continues the official record once more, the record whose duplicate is kept on file: Captures, arrests of suspects, etc., a record similar to the neatly written daily report turned in by Pete Dawson. Then again a notation in red ink:

"Lost Dawson again near the Corpus Christi. Third time, now. And for the second time I have seen the Mexican on the big pinto. This time I followed the pinto, but lost his trail in the rough hills. About to go back when I hear sound of shooting. Four shots. Three rifle shots. One revolver, near as I can make out. Perhaps half a mile away. Ride that di-

rection and catch short glimpse of pinto and rider dropping into canyon. Find a man at a Mexican adobe, dead. Shot through the heart. Beside the man is a rifle and three empty shells. Third shell in barrel. Beside dead man is a circle of cactus, which bears out truth of rumors regarding a killer they call The Road Runner. The dead man is white. Ugly looking brute called Scranton. War slacker and all-around bad egg. Good riddance. Rode back to spot near Dawson's camp. His horse in corral. Dawson back and apparently asleep. Laugh that off if you can."

Under a date a month later another red-inked report:

"Found Dawson gone. Waited till midnight near his camp. Fell asleep and was awakened by horse running. Saw a horse and rider tear past me on a run. Not ten feet from where I hide along the trail. Going like a bat out of hell. And so help me, it's a woman. Young, and I'd say darned beautiful, for her hat was off and the moon bright. Red-headed. White as a ghost. Headed for D.'s camp. And D. must have slipped home while I was napping, for there's a light in his cabin. Light goes out as I watch, and I hear him call out, '*Que pasa? Que hay?*'"

"'Friend!' she calls, speaking English. 'They follow! For the love you bear your mother, help me!' Speaking good English, but using a Mex expression. Right there I dope her out as the mysterious Lady of the Corpus Christi. Then Dawson sounds off like some Kentucky colonel. Polite and cool as a cucumber in cold storage.

"'Don't worry, ma'am,' says Dawson. I can see him now in the moonlight close by her winded horse. 'They won't follow you here.'

"'But they will! They are bad men, señor!'

"'Not so tough, lady. I'm just about to eat. May I ask you to join me?' And he's as calm as a preacher at an ice cream social.

"'Behind me, where the chapparal is thick and the trail twists like the gent that made it was drunk, I hear horses and men's voices. Some Mex, some white men, by the sound.

"'Game's up,' growls one. 'Stung again, boys; she's slipped us. That damn' gov-

ernment man saves her bacon. We ain't croakin' no U. S. patrol rider. Vamoose for home, boys.' And so help me, they ride away and leave Dawson in charge of the field. He and his lady friend are in the dark cabin. Eating, I suppose. I hear them chatting and laughing. Her horse in the corral eating U. S. hay. It's getting dawn now. They come out and D. saddles her horse, chatting along as he works. Then they shake hands and she rides away by another trail. By the way Dawson whistles as he washes up the dishes, I'd say he fell hard for the lady with the copper-colored hair. And damned if I blame him. Only, what's it all about?"

That was the last, save two brief notes, of the red-inked notations. The two short notes were cryptic and grim:

"Mexican rumor says Road Runner killed Rafael Gomez. Good riddance. Gomez a killer with dirty record." And below this, the second item:

"Road Runner shot smuggler known as 'Whitey.' Whitey known as one hard baby. Vote of thanks to this Road Runner."

Captain Hardin went over the record of Pete Dawson. He opened his vault and brought forth the more informal record with its red ink notes. And for a long time he pored over the two. Then he locked the records in the vault and composed a letter which he signed and put in a long envelope. He sealed the envelope with wax, stamped the government seal on it and pushed a button on his desk. An orderly appeared.

"Get Branson on the 'phone. Tell him I'm taking a trip and want him to look after the office for a week or so."

"Going to the coast, captain?"

"I didn't say." He dismissed the orderly with a look. Hardin, bluff, rough-spoken, could be military on occasions. He wrote across the envelope in a bold hand: "To be opened in the event that I do not return within ten days."

Then he began packing a few belongings in a pair of saddle-bags. He was filling the loops of a double-rowed cart-ridge-belt when Branson came in.

"What's up, chief?"

"*Quien sabe*, Branson? Tell you better when I come back. Put that letter in your safe. Don't open it unless I overstay

my leave. Then open it and get busy as hell."

"Where you bound for, chief?"

"I'm going to stop the leak at Corpus Christi or go out trying." And the grizzled border chief reached for his carbine in the gun-rack.

III

PETE DAWSON rode with his hand on his gun and his head in the stars, rode straight into the rough hills of the Corpus Christi Range, where a man's life was priced chiefly in Mexican or American money. And as he rode along dim, twisting trails, his thoughts were of a girl—the most beautiful girl he had ever laid eyes on, a girl with copper-hued hair whom he had met but once, and then only for a few brief hours. He did not even know her name, though she knew his.

Pete Dawson no longer wore the olive drab of the Border Patrol. Instead he wore the tough bullhide chaps and brush-jumper of a cowpuncher. Silvercrusted spurs adorned a pair of worn shop-made boots. His hat was the high-crowned Stetson of cowland. His outfit was a good one. Full-stamped Walker saddle, Navajo blanket, rawhide headstall and reins that were splendid examples of Mexican craftsmanship. His clothes and outfit had seen service. One would say that, at one time, Pete Dawson had been a cowboy.

His horse was a black steel-dust gelding, far above the average cowhorse in breeding, quick-moving, high-strung, combining the nerve and endurance of range stock with the speed and sensitive heart of the thoroughbred. A horse in a thousand, and Dawson sat the animal well. When he spoke, as he sometimes did, in a soft, drawling undertone, the black's velvet ears twitched in understanding. Man and horse seemed to understand one another perfectly.

Behind trailed a Spanish mule, mouse-colored, wise with that sagacity nature has given to mules. No hackamore or lead rope hampered the mule's freedom. Now and then it stopped to graze, then came on at a trot, muzzling the black gelding's rump by way of greeting. Plainly, the mule's private tin god was the black horse,

and the mouse-colored animal's devotion was evident in its every action. A tarp-covered bed and camp equipment covered the mule's middle, fastened securely with a diamond hitch. Pete Dawson would pass anywhere for a cowpuncher.

Ahead, the moonlit sky was notched by sharp peaks. Somewhere a creek murmured and gurgled over the rocks. Pete Dawson entered a black canyon, then vanished in its depths. He rode with caution, no longer dreaming, and his gun was naked and ready for instant use.

"*Quien es?*" challenged a voice out of the blackness.

"*Amigo,*" came Pete Dawson's reply as he halted.

"*Mexicano?*"

"No, hombre. *Americano.*"

"Ah! The Señor Dawson, no?"

"*Si.*"

"Per'aps. Per'aps no. Advance, señor, to be recognize'. Keep the han's from off the gun. I 'ave the order to shoot now an' make the question *mañana*. Sabe?"

"Who gives those orders, hombre?"

"*Her.*"

"*'Sta bueno!*" Dawson sheathed his gun, and the black horse minced forward. He had the uncomfortable sensation of being scrutinized by a dozen pairs of eyes. Both his horse and mule were whistling softly in alarm as they came along a trail flanked on either side by dense walls of brush. Ahead rose the sheer wall of the box canyon. To all appearances that wall was impassable, yet Dawson knew that somewhere there was a way of passing from the box canyon to the mesa above—Haunted Mesa, in the very center of which was supposed to stand a house. The House of Death, the Mexicans and Yaquis called it.

"Halt, there, Señor Dawson. There ees a word. A password. You know that word, señor?"

"*Bonita,*" came the prompt reply.

"*Pasar en silencio, señor.*" Dawson, obeying, rode on in silence. He was following someone whom he could not see. Only the faint, crunching noise of shod hoofs on gravel betrayed the presence of a rider ahead. Again that feeling of being watched as he passed along. Faint, barely audible sounds. The scraping of

brush against leather, the click of a gun lever. Sinister sounds. His mount shied and the furry ears twitched nervously. The mouse-colored mule followed close now.

The rider ahead had halted. Dawson made him out in the faint light that sifted through the brush onto the trail. Sombrero, serape, the glint of a gun-barrel. Then a voice from under the huge sombrero, a voice that set Dawson's heart thumping:

"Follow close, my friend."

"You!"

"Who else, my too-brave *caballero*. I warned you not to come."

"Yet I was expected, *señorita*."

"Because, *Señor Dawson*, when you promised you would stay away, your eyes gave lie to that promise. It is very hard, *amigo*, to fool a woman. Come." And Dawson heard the splash of water under the feet of her horse. The gurgling of the stream became a rumble as he splashed after her. The darkness enveloped them, and his horse snorted with fear and had to be coaxed onward. The mule trailed behind with protesting snorts. They were in a cave so low that Dawson could touch the roof with his upraised hand. And they still followed up the current of the stream. Water dripped from the roof of this cave which Dawson now knew to be the many centuries' work of nature, a tunnel made through limestone by the stream.

Minutes passed and still they kept on in the utter darkness. The man lost track of time. Then a ragged hole of starlit night showed somewhere. The girl halted. The roar of water was now almost deafening. She had to shout in his ear to make herself heard.

"It is perhaps best to blindfold the horse here. Otherwise, my friend, you may lose them. Also, you will dismount and lead the horse. Then, in case of the mistake, you shall not also go to the death."

Not at all understanding what she meant, Dawson obeyed. He blindfolded his horse and the mule, tailing in the mule to the horse. She now took his hand and, leaving her own horse, led the way on foot.

The roaring was terrific. Horse and mule were shaking with fright, but faithful in their obedience, loyal to the man who had never harmed them. Dawson sensed that they passed beneath a long

waterfall that plunged into a chasm of some underground river, far below. The creek up which they had come was but a tributary or overflow from the falls. Perhaps time had been when the full force of the falls had rushed through the tunnel. But decades or centuries of pounding water had beaten through layer after layer of strata formations until it had drilled through to the underground river hundreds of feet below. Now the bulk of the water dropped into that seemingly bottomless pit while a mere part of it followed the course of the rock-walled tunnel. Small wonder that he had been unable to locate the secret passway to Haunted Mesa.

The spray from the waterfalls drenched him as they passed along the narrow ledge between the chasm and the rock wall, where inches separated man and beast from instant death in that avalanche of water that fell like liquid thunder into a black maw below, echoing, crashing, thundering. A long minute of thundering terror, then they came out abruptly upon a grass-carpeted floor. Above were the stars and the white moon.

Dawson took a deep breath and slipped the blinders from his horse and mule, comforting them with crooning words as a mother might soothe a badly frightened child. The girl looked on, smiling softly.

"A man who so likes his horse cannot, then, be so bad as they say of him, *señor*," she said.

"Who is it that says so, *señorita*?"

"Those who call you enemy, *Señor Dawson*. Now I must go after that *caballo* of mine, that redbird." And she left him. Presently she rode up out of that cave of thundering death, and Dawson mounted. They rode on, stirrups touching. Presently the girl spoke again.

"Because you are brave and have once saved this life of mine, I give you your life tonight. Ah, my friend, you should not have come. More than one man of courage has come into the Black Canyon you rode into, but never again rode out. Knowing those things, why did you come?" There was a short silence.

"To see you, *señorita*," he replied, smiling into her searching eyes. "For what else should I come into the Black Canyon?"

"You shall search your conscience, *señor*,

for your reply to that last question. Eh, my friend?"

Pete Dawson's jaw muscles tightened a little. She spoke again.

"Because I do not wish to hear the lips of a good friend poisoned by black lies, I question you no more, señor. You will, perhaps, be as kind to a woman?"

Pete Dawson felt his face growing hot. The girl's eyes, eyes that seemed to match in hue the coppery bronze of her hair, were gazing with disconcerting steadiness into his.

"It would be very sweet indeed to any woman, señor, to know that a man has so risked his life for another glimpse of her. But such things are true only in the book stories, no? In the life, those things do not so happen. Only in the book stories, my friend, and in the dreams one has. Is it not too bad, señor, that we cannot live like the book stories and the dreams?"

Her voice was very soft and low, and her eyes, softer now, were lifted toward the star-filled sky. She looked young and wistful and very, very lovely, her face bathed in the moonlight, white save for the crimson of her lips. Then she turned to him, smiling whimsically.

"But I did ride to see you," he said a little huskily. "I swear it."

"Careful, my friend! Just now you are perhaps of an idea that you are in love, no? In love with one whose very name is to you unknown. That is a very brave compliment, my friend, to any woman. Perhaps, if I did not know too much of many other things, things that are ugly and very terrible, then I might be so very foolish and believe those pretty speeches which are so ready to come from your lips. It is very sad, sometimes, to know too much of life.

"But I am woman enough, señor, to know that you remembered that woman who rode one night to you for help. *Sí*. And because I am a woman and have my dreams, I hoped that you would come for one more look at me. You must have known that death rode with you when you came to the Corpus Christi, yet you came. So, my friend, because you are so brave a man, you shall be given this one short night here. Then you will leave and come back never again. You shall forget me, my friend. And I, I shall remember you

and think of you as a brave man who did not lie to me. I shall pray to Our Lady of Sorrows for your safety and your happiness, always."

"But I can't leave you and ride out of your life like that!" He leaned over and took her hand. She made no move to take it from him. "I love you."

"No, my friend. It is not love. It is, perhaps, that I am attractive in your eyes. Because you do not know me, who I am, or why I am here, that fascination is so the more colored with romance. So, because we ride thus, with the moon in our faces, you call it love. But love, señor, is not like that. No. So we shall speak no more, my friend, of love. Only friendship. Perhaps you shall tell me of your home. Your family, perhaps. A mother and perhaps a sister. You have a sister, Señor Dawson?"

"Yes. But I—"

"She is like you, no? With blue eyes like the sky when the sun shines. And hair that is bleached a little from the sun so that it shines like gold threads. She will be tall and plays tennis and swims and dances well. And some day she shall marry a doctor or an attorney who will be in your American Senate. And she will name her first boy for you. Tell me, my friend, do I draw her picture well, this sister of yours?"

"You couldn't do better if you knew her," grinned Dawson. "Are you gifted with some psychic powers?"

"So they say of me," she replied, smiling at him half mockingly. "Have you not heard of those tales of the Witch of Haunted Mesa?"

"Witch, my eyes!" snorted Dawson. "Witches are ugly."

"Inside, they are ugly. Like that one with golden hair who lured the sailors with her siren song. Then, when they have come to shore, she makes the pigs of them, no? So I warn you, my friend. Perhaps I shall make of you the pig or the burro with long ears. I think the burro should be better. I have the great fondness for burros. Always I hug them."

"Then make me a burro," suggested Dawson.

"What you in America call it 'make a donkey of you,' eh?" She laughed merrily. Dawson laughed with her. But the time

was coming when he recalled those words and did not laugh.

Even now his mirth was dampened by the approach of riders. There was something mysterious, sinister, about their appearance. For the miles of mesa ahead and about them was level as a table, carpeted with heavy grass. No tree or rock marred its surface. Yet these men appeared as if by magic out of the ground. Three of them, riding toward Dawson and the girl. Pete Dawson's hand dropped to his gun.

"You shall stay here, if you please, señor, while I ride to meet them."

"Who are they?"

"They are my friends. But not, señor, the friends of Señor Pete Dawson of the border patrol."

"Criminals?"

"Must one be a violator of your United States laws to be an enemy of Pete Dawson?" She gave him a swift, searching look.

"Food for the thoughts, eh, my friend? Wait here as I say. I shall be back." And she rode to meet the three mysterious riders.

Pete Dawson watched her, a puzzled scowl knitting his level brows.

"Damned fool," he muttered, addressing the ears of his horse. "Joker, old pony, this is getting spooky. Some girl, eh? I told you she'd knock your eye out. And clever, Joker. Too darned clever for us. Orders reads vamoose for good. Will we, boy? Not when we know how to get here, we won't stay away. Wonder do we get a squint at the Death House? This is the Haunted Mesa, and it's well named. Where'd those three gents come from? Tell us that, Joker. Now you see 'em, now you don't. Queer, eh? Here she comes back. Short pow-wow they had. And—cripes, pony, the three birds are gone"

For, as the girl rode back, not a trace of the men was to be seen. They had vanished before his eyes, as if by some trick of black magic. It was uncanny. His grin was forced as he greeted the girl.

"Where's your wand, witch?"

She smiled at him enigmatically. "You are not afraid, señor?"

"Just curious," he lied. But he was thinking that if those riders could pop up

in front like that, what prevented them from appearing from behind? He had visions of a shot or a thrown knife between his shoulder-blades.

"So long as you ride with me you are safe."

"But alone?"

"Alone, your life would be in very great danger, my friend."

"Is one of them, by any chance, the man known as the Road Runner?"

"The Chaparral Bird? The Cactus Man?" She looked at him gravely. For a long moment she was silent. Then her reply came.

"No, that killer of men is not here. Tell me, what do you know of that man who kills so swiftly and with such a sureness?"

"I would say," replied Dawson, wording his speech with care, "that this Road Runner had a reason for his actions."

"He is a very evil man." She smiled softly. "And a very brave man."

"And what of those men whom he killed? Gomez? Whitey? Scranton? What of them?"

"They, too, were perhaps very bad men. *Quien sabe?*"

"You have seen this Road Runner, then?" he asked.

"Once. The night I sought safety at your cabin. Those—those men who were after me had cut me off in a canyon. Escape seemed impossible. Then suddenly, as if he jumped out of the very ground, that man on the pinto horse appeared.

"*Pronto, señorita!*" he called. 'Follow me!' And he rode full at those men, who broke and ran when they saw that spotted horse and that masked rider coming at them, shooting. Maria, how he rode! A *caballero*, señor, with the manners of a Don. Then, when we had ridden clear, he lifted his sombrero and bowed. Then he spoke in Spanish to me.

"Ride hard for the camp of the gringo Dawson," he told me. 'There you shall be safe from the cowards who dare not follow there.'

"His hat was off, but his head was bound in a red silk scarf and his face covered with a tight, black mask so that one could not see him. His serape was the color of fresh blood and his clothes

were black. Then he whirled that splendid horse and was gone. So I rode for your camp and found safety, as he told me."

"And so," said Dawson, smiling amusedly, "because he saved your life, this Road Runner fellow is an evil man?"

"In that group of men who that night followed me so closely," she went on, "were Gomez, the Mexican, and one they call Whitey, a gringo. Señor Dawson, in less than ten days, the Road Runner had killed with his gun those two men. Is not that evil?"

Dawson shrugged. "Depends on the viewpoint, I reckon. I'd say the Road Runner had done Mexico and the United States a great favor in exterminating those two human snakes."

"You defend him, señor. Why?"

"Because the man has the courage of his convictions, señorita. Because he kills fairly and with a reason. A very strong reason."

"One would say, my friend," she said, watching him covertly, "that the Señor Dawson was acquainted with the Señor Road Runner."

"You guess shrewdly. I congratulate you."

"You know him, then?" Her voice was eager in spite of her effort to control it.

"We have met." Dawson seemed amused at her eagerness.

"Tell me of him, then. Who is he? Is he Mexican, Spanish or American? Why does he kill? What brings him here to Mexico?"

"That, señorita, is for him to say. Why, may I ask, are you so interested in this evil man?"

She blushed crimson, and her eyes gazed dreamily across the mesa. She had not told Pete Dawson quite all of her meeting with the mysterious rider, how, before he left her, he had crushed her in his arms for one long moment, his mouth beneath the silken mask, crushing her lips.

Then, laughing a little huskily, he had ridden away into the night, his reward the tingling warmth of her lips. For that kiss he had risked his life. He had asked for nothing more in return. Just a gay *caballero* with the manners of a Don. Romantic, fearless, gay. A lover to quicken the pulse of such a girl as this

copper-haired maid of Haunted Mesa.

Suddenly, on the still night air, sounded a rifle shot, far away. The girl halted, lifting her hand for silence. An interval of silence, another shot. Silence again. A third shot.

"A signal?" he asked.

"Si. I must leave you for a little while. Not long, I hope. As you value your life, señor, remain here at this spot until I return."

"Otherwise?"

"Otherwise, señor, they will surely kill you."

"Who will kill me?"

"Those who are my friends, but enemies of Pete Dawson of the Border Patrol." And so she left him, her warning ringing in his brain.

He watched her out of sight, then grinned and drew his gun.

"Now, Joker," he said softly, "we'll do some scouting." And he rode across the silvery mesa, hunting he knew not what.

Perhaps, had Pete Dawson known the meaning of that signal, his grin would have died swiftly. For it meant that Captain Hardin of the Border Patrol was now a prisoner in Black Canyon, unconscious, bound hand and foot.

IV

PETE DAWSON had been riding almost an hour and, save for a few side trips by way of investigating suspicious sounds, he had been traveling in a straight line. Yet he had met no one, nor had he come upon any sign of habitation. Yet he felt uneasy. That warning of the copper-haired girl, a warning not to be lightly taken, must have some foundation. Joker, the black gelding, and the mule that went by the name of the Pack Rat, seemed uneasy and suspicious. Yet the man saw or heard nothing whatsoever to cause him the slightest alarm.

Cattle grazed here and there. Now and then a little bunch of horses appeared, whirled in snorting surprise, and vanished, vanished as if by magic, invisible, as if some uncanny power hid them in a cloak of invisibility. Dawson could hear the pound of their flying hoofs, but could not see them. It was weird and unnatural. And the silvery light on the mesa had a

shimmering transparency that was eerie and beautiful.

If these enemies of his, men who were the girl's friends or followers, were so to be feared, why did they not appear? Or had she been merely trying to frighten him? Make a—make a donkey out of him? Had she purposely left him to try his faith and honesty of purpose? Did she know the real cause of his being there? Did she—

Joker's ears became twin velvet question points. The black horse stopped. The Pack Rat snorted softly and edged close to the horse. Pete Dawson's speculations were shattered. For ahead, within stone's throw of him, was a long, low adobe house, shimmering, ghastly white. Yet, by some inexplicable trick of nature or the devil or the moonlight, that house had been wholly invisible until he was almost upon it, within pistol range. Yet the mesa was level as a floor and bare of concealing knolls, trees or rocks. He pulled up short, gun ready, every faculty alert.

The house was built in the form of a hollow square, enclosing some sort of patio, silent, white-walled, the darkened windows covered by steel bars. Then Dawson's heart skipped a beat. For a light moved inside the house. A candle, perhaps, or a small lantern, casting a flickering light on the windows, a light such as might be made by someone moving stealthily about with a guttering candle. Joker stood snorting gently, tense and ready to whirl and bolt. The mule shrank close to his equine friend as if for protection. The House of Death!

Suddenly Dawson felt the shock of realization that he sat his horse out there in the open, a plain target for any enemy. And, save for the forbidding white walls of that House of Death, there was no available shelter.

Yet no shot shattered the unearthly stillness. No hissing knife-blade sped past his ear. No sound of any sort broke the quiet of the night. There was no movement save that stealthily moving, flickering light that threw grotesque shadows across black window-panes.

"Here goes nothing," gritted Dawson, and rode straight for the house with drawn gun. The light went out as if its owner were suddenly aware of the intruder's

approach. The house was plunged in darkness.

Dawson found a gate in the high adobe wall. He lifted its heavy wrought-iron latch without dismounting, swung it open on its noiseless hinges that were cushioned with tallowed rawhide, and rode into the huge patio. He saw some citrus trees, a shaded, home-made swing, a swimming-pool whose glass-like surface reflected the stars like a gigantic fairies' mirror. Shrubbery and flowers whose perfume was heavy on the still air. To the left of the gate was a hitch rack, the ground beside it hollowed by many shod hoofs of horses that had stood there impatiently awaiting their masters.

Joker jumped a little, and Dawson whirled in his saddle. But no one stood there. Not a thing moved. Then the man, with a sort of shudder, saw that the heavy gate had closed—closed without a sound. Whirling his horse, he rode back the few paces to the gate and tried it. The gate was locked from without.

"Trapped," muttered Dawson, and cursed his folly. Still no human appeared. No sound broke the silence.

"Well, damn it all," he called loudly, "why don't somebody show up?" But only the hollow echo of his own voice gave reply.

"I reckon," he spoke again, trying to make his voice calm and unafraid, "that this is part of the spook business. Now trot out your goblins."

Again the silence. Dawson made out several doors that opened onto the patio. A sort of arcade, roofed by vines, shaded the doors. He fastened his gaze on one door larger than the others and, dismounting, strode across the patio to its heavy iron latch. He gripped his gun a little tighter, cautiously lifted the latch with his left hand, then swiftly shoved open the door with his foot. He stepped into the shadow as the door swung open. A shaft of yellow light flooded the tiled walk of the arcade. But no shot, no noise of movement followed his action. Nothing inside moved. No challenge, no welcome. No anything. Just the light.

Summoning every ounce of courage he possessed, Dawson swung from the shadow into the lighted room, his gun swinging in a short arc, ready to roar its reply

to whatever danger dwelt therein. But nothing happened. Nothing moved. Nothing made a sound. But what he saw was far more unnerving than any active foe.

In that candle-lit room sat a man, a man in a huge, leather-backed, handsomely carved chair that must have come from Spain, a man with snow-white hair and parchment-colored face. His lower limbs were covered by a gay-colored serape. Above the serape showed a spotless white shirt, open at the throat. The hands of the man were hidden under the serape. That face, handsome after the fashion of the Castilian aristocrat, was absolutely without expression. A mask could have held more real expression, more life. Smooth-shaven, thin-lipped, hawk-nosed. The face of a man dead. Only the eyes, black, glittering, shadowed by bushy white brows, were alive. Those eyes were fixed on the intruder and Pete Dawson felt that their gaze pierced his very soul and laid it bare.

A swift survey of the handsomely furnished room told Dawson that he was alone with this living dead man. With an uneasy laugh that held no mirth, he lowered the weapon that had been covering the man in the chair. But he took the precaution of closing the door and leaning his back against it.

"If I intrude, sir," he said, a trace of ironic mockery in his voice, "I owe you an apology, of course. My visit was unpremeditated. But here I am, and that's that. I don't intend being murdered, bet on that. Your confounded gate was locked behind me. I reckon that makes me a sort of prisoner. But I warn you, sir, that the first funny move that's made, I'll shoot you where you sit. Get the idea?"

The black eyes glittered under the bushy brows, but the man neither moved nor spoke. The silence grew uncomfortable. Dawson, watching the man closely, ready for anything, groped with his left hand and found the bolt of the door. He slipped the bolt, then stepped forward toward the man in the chair. With a deft jerk, he pulled aside the serape.

But no weapon had been concealed there. He saw a pair of legs encased in black velvet trousers of Mexican tailoring, their flared bottoms splashed with crimson. A crimson sash was about the thin waist.

Folded in the man's lap were a pair of long, bony hands that might have been the hands of a dead man, they were so devoid of color and life.

As Dawson met the man's glance, the black eyes seemed to mock him with cynical bitterness, tinged with a terrible sadness. Dawson felt a flush of shame spread across his face. He realized now that this man of doubtful age was the victim of some sort of paralytic stroke that left alive only the black eyes, eyes that seemed to have taken on supernatural powers in payment of those other faculties that fate had taken from him. With some inarticulate apology, he replaced the serape. The man's eyes never left his face.

Dawson stepped back, ill at ease, uncertain as to his next move in this odd situation. The silence of the room was trying on one's nerves. It was the silence of the dwelling place of the dead.

"I'd as lief be out of here," he said, trying to smile. "It is damned uncomfortable. But your devilish gate is fastened. So now that I'm here, I'll make the best of it."

His gaze swept the room. It was furnished with antique Spanish trappings. Tapestries. Portraits by some master of his art. Books bound in morocco leather lined handsome shelves. Above the huge fireplace hung the life-sized painting of some Spaniard in full armor. On another wall was the portrait of a woman, a woman with hair the color of burnished copper, a lovely, beautiful, delicate face that Dawson knew must be the portrait of the mother of that girl whom he had met under such strange circumstances.

A feeling of uncouth boorishness came over him. It was as if he had unceremoniously, without invitation, entered the home of gentlefolks. Yet, coupled with that sense of intrusion was a fear, nameless and the more poignant for its very namelessness. His eyes went back to the man in the chair. Those black, piercing eyes held a glint of mockery, a light of triumphant, wicked victory, as if the dead man with the living eyes was master of the situation. Dawson had the feeling of being trapped.

"Enough of this," he muttered in an angry undertone, and turned to the door. Unbolting it, he stepped outside. There stood the faithful Joker and the Pack Rat.

Joker nickered soft greeting and Dawson, in passing, caressed the velvet muzzle that twitched and nibbled at his sleeves. Then he stepped to the next door that faced the patio and shoved it open. Darkness, faintly scented with some exotic perfume. A woman's room. *Her* room. He closed the door again gently and went to the next.

Darkness again. Then, with an inward curse at his forgetfulness, he recalled the flashlight he had brought. He found it and snapped the light on. Its white shaft probed the darkness.

A bed, some chairs, a writing desk. Immaculate and freshly dusted. The portrait of a Madonna. Beyond that, emptiness. He closed the door and went on. Joker was stirring restlessly and the Pack Rat was snorting uneasily. Dawson felt that someone was watching him from somewhere.

"Why the devil don't something happen?" he asked himself, fear and anger mingling in the question. But nothing happened. Room after room revealed nothing but emptiness. The kitchen was warm from the heat of last evening's meal. The odor of food hung in its air. But no human sound marred the tomb-like stillness.

The search completed, Dawson found himself back at the large door that led to the room where the man sat so horribly quiet. He had searched every room, every bush and corner of the patio. And save for the paralytic, he had encountered no human thing. Yet there had been that light that moved and went out at his approach, and he could have sworn that someone had watched as he searched.

He stood there, uncertainly, before the closed door that led to the lighted room.

"I trust, Señor Dawson, that your search has proved satisfactory!"

Dawson whirled about, feeling his face grow hot. He found himself facing the girl with the copper hair.

She no longer wore her Mexican riding garb. Instead she had on a gown of emerald green. She might have just stepped from some cosmopolitan ball room.

"You—I—"

"You failed me, Señor Dawson, even as I feared you would. Your studied speeches of love were only to cover your

real purpose. It was so foolish of me to think that you could be so trusted. Even that killer of men, that Señor Road Runner, is more of the chivalrous gentleman than the dashing *Americano* who represents the great country to the north. The keeper of the law, the punisher of the criminal. In that country of yours, my *Americano*, do you consider it the proper thing to so rudely break into the homes of strangers? In the night? Is that not what you call the burglar, the man of degeneracy and crime, who so enters the homes. Ah, señor, I am not so much angry as I am disappointed in one whom I thought to myself, 'There is a gentleman.'"

Shame and anger ran riot in the man's heart and brain. Never had he seen a woman more lovely. And this glorious creature was shaming him, making him feel that he had committed a most unwarranted and unmannerly breach of decency, that he was no more than a common sneak, a slinking creature of the night. Yet he had the feeling that she knew she would find him here, that she had expected him to disregard her warning, break an unspoken promise. His face set in grim lines; he bowed stiffly.

"I am sorry if I have violated your hospitality. If you are done, I'll rid your home of my unwelcome presence," and he turned to his horse.

"You are forgetting, señor," she said coldly, "that the gate is locked, no?"

"Meaning, then, that I am a sort of prisoner?" His voice was dangerously soft. From outside the walls he now heard sounds, sounds of saddle leather and the murmur of men's voices. Instinctively, he put his back to the wall, and waited, smiling a little.

"It would be very foolish of you, Señor *Americano*, to make the fight. You will be so badly outnumbered. Did I not warn you of danger? You are so very foolish, señor. Very, very foolhardy. Had you obeyed me, all would have been well. Now, my friend who betrayed that trust, your life and safety is no more in my hands. Your fate rests with . . ." Her hand pointed to the closed door beyond which sat the dead man with the living black eyes.

"With *him!*" she finished in a voice scarcely above a whisper. Then she raised

her voice and called toward the gate.

"In two minutes," she called in Spanish, "enter!" Then she turned again to Dawson.

"By the love I bear my dead mother, señor, your one chance of life is surrender. I do not lie. You will please to give to me your guns?"

"I prefer to go out fighting, thanks," Dawson jerked the carbine from his saddle boot. "Better get inside, for it's going to be hot here in a holy second. I'm taking a few of them with me before I go. Lady, odd as it may seem, I ain't in the habit of quitting without seeing the color of my enemy's cards." His jaw was set stubbornly and his eyes danced with excitement. This was action and Pete Dawson could understand this sort of danger.

"*Por Dios!* Please! I swear it, they will kill you. As other men have been so killed. There are fifty of them! You say that you love me! Then so prove that devotion by trusting me! I beg of you, surrender!" Tears sprang into her eyes. She made a pitiful, helpless little gesture. But Dawson, white-lipped, grim-eyed, shook his head.

Then the gate swung open and its wide opening swarmed with men.

But before Peter Dawson could shoot, before the swarm of men could shoot him down where he stood, the woman was in front of him, her body between him and the enemy. With the swiftness of some tiger, her arms went about him and clung to his shoulders. Pete Dawson, thus encumbered, swallowed the angry curse that stuck in his throat and laughed unpleasantly.

"You win," he grunted huskily, her hair in his eyes. "I lay 'em down." And his guns clattered to the tiled floor of the vine-covered arcade.

She stooped, picked up the weapons, and Dawson found himself staring into the black hole of his own six-shooter.

"So, Señor Gringo," she laughed. "You are now the prisoner."

The eyes behind the steady Colt's were no longer tearful or soft with entreaty. They were black, opaque, like the eyes of that dead man in the house. Inscrutable, searching, triumphant in their mockery.

"The hands in the air, if you please, señor."

"I see," Dawson smiled bitterly. "Tricked, eh?"

"By the pretty face, no? Like the sailors were tricked by the song of the siren señorita in the book-story. The both hands in the air, my friend. So. *Gracias*. Now, if you please, the Señor Gringo will be so good as to open the door and once more enter the room where once before he entered without the invitation. Jose! Jesus! Miguel! Bring the other gringo! Señor Dawson, of the Border Patrol, you will be so kind as to enter without the bullet in the back. *Pronto!*"

Again Pete Dawson came into the presence of the strange man with the black eyes. Then he got another shock. For, his arms bound behind his back, came a bruised and disheveled Captain Hardin, a grim smile on his thin-lipped mouth, a sardonic, mocking humor in his eyes.

"Chief!"

"Evening, Dawson. Or is it morning? Hell of a mess, eh? Hope you're enjoying your vacation. Who's the sphinx in the chair yonder?"

V

PETE DAWSON felt bitter, hurt, sick at heart. The black eyes of the white-haired paralytic mocked him. The girl's attitude was now one of contempt and hatred of greaser for gringo. He recalled her words: "What you in America call it 'make a donkey of you,' eh?"

Well, she had done just that and, moreover, had made a most excellent job of it. He glanced at Hardin, who was gazing about in frank astonishment at the furnishing of the room. No fear was written in the veteran's face. Dawson doubted if Captain Hardin knew the meaning of fear. He was one of that breed born without its taint, a Texan of the old type that had made Lone Star history, whose blood had made holy the Alamo, a man wholly without fear, blessed with a dry, cynical brand of humor.

The men who had shoved Hardin into the room had departed. They were Yaquis, Dawson had noticed. No white man or Mexican among them. Hardin told him later that the band of men were all Yaquis. Cruel, cunning, terrible enemies or loyal friends, those Yaquis.

The girl took her place beside the man in the chair, her hand resting on his shoulder. She looked like some sort of queen, proud, cold, wonderfully beautiful. Quite another person from the woman he had met out under the star-filled night. Yes, quite. Her eyes appraised Hardin with cold thoroughness. She smiled a little scornfully as she glanced at Dawson.

"Señores," she said in a well-modulated, vibrant voice, "you will be so good as to reply truthfully to the questions I shall ask. It is best for you both to tell the truth because I shall know, and Don Sebastian will know, when a lie twist the tongues of the two so brave *Americanos*. And the lie is very, very bad for the person so situated like you are. The Señor Dawson shall step forward, if you please, so that he stands five paces in front of Don Sebastian. Do not hesitate, señor. Surely you are not afraid of a woman and an elderly gentleman who is helpless? Thank you, Señor Dawson." For Dawson had stepped forward, inwardly annoyed but with an amused smile on his mouth.

"Atta boy, Dawson," grinned Hardin, as if enjoying the show, "speak your piece like a good boy. Don't fib to the lady."

"Well," drawled Dawson, trying to shake off the nameless fear that kept bothering him, "let's go. Shoot the questions."

"What brought you here, Señor Dawson?" she asked.

"A good horse, ma'am."

"Your attempt at humor, señor, is very much out of order. Your purpose in coming here, please?"

"Put it down to the fact that I was curious," replied Dawson. "Wanted to see the spooks ride across the Haunted Mesa. Wanted a look at the mysterious House of Death. The other reason, rather a strong reason at the time, is one I'd prefer not going into publicly." And his level gaze brought a faint tinge of color to the woman's ivory cheeks. The eyes of Don Sebastian were glittering ominously.

"You have been warned to keep away under penalty of death. Yet you have risked your life to come here. Men do not so risk their life to satisfy mere curiosity. You have lied, Señor Dawson. You had another purpose in wanting to come here. What is that purpose?"

"I decline to answer that question."

"Even though you face certain death? Death, señor, at the hands of Don Sebastian's Yaquis, who are skilled in ways of torture?"

"I'm not easily scared," said Dawson stiffly.

"Those Yaquis," she went on, "have a method of extracting the answers, señor. One method is to strip the victim and fasten him upon ground with his face to the sun. Above the head is an olla that drips, one drop at the time. The sun is very, very hot. The drops grow heavier to that tied man. Heavier each hour, until each drop is like the sharp hammer upon the naked, tortured brain. One becomes crazy loco and at last dies very slowly."

"So I've heard," came Dawson's grim reply. "Lady, you're wasting your breath. I'm not afraid to die, even like that."

"Then you refuse to say what real purpose brought you here?"

"Something of the sort," smiled Dawson.

"Then," replied the woman, "I can do no more to save you." Something of her queenly air seemed to give way to an emotion more humanly feminine and her voice was strained and barely audible as she spoke again.

"That is all, Señor Dawson. Señor Captain Hardin will now take your place."

"You'll just excuse me, lady," said Hardin. "I'm not used to being third-degreed. Count me out and stake me out alongside Dawson. Cat's got my tongue. I never could talk much under cross-examination. Your little act is well staged, but the actors forgot their lines. Fell a little flat, didn't it?"

"You are not helping your case, señor," came her cold reply. "There are ways of finding that tongue which the cat so has taken. Ways that are not so pleasant."

"I'm glad my missus hasn't been educated along the lines your schooling seems to have been mapped. Gosh, Dawson, imagine a wife that could put on an inquisition like that. Find out where you were till two o'clock this morning and how much you lost in the poker game. Not so good."

At some signal that neither man heard, the Yaqui guards stepped into the room.

"Take them away," she commanded them in Spanish. "Guard them well."

There was no doubting the attitude of the Yaquis. Their faces were cruel masks of hate and the prisoners saw the folly of any attempted escape. They were marched along the arcade and into a dark cell-like room whose one small window was barred with heavy steel strips embedded in adobe that was hard as cement. The heavy door swung shut and the two white men were left alone.

"I got you into this, chief," said Dawson bitterly.

"Not at all, son. My mistake. You know, I had a hunch you were somehow in cahoots with this Corpus Christi outfit. I'd been watching you, and your actions, old man, were rather odd. I was there the night that the lady with the red hair visited you. Other nights I followed you and always lost your trail near Black Canyon. I made a hundred out of two plus two, that's all. Followed you to see what your game was."

Dawson laughed shortly. "Knew you were watching me, chief. Once or twice I caught sight of you. In view of my past record, I can't blame you for your suspicions."

"Say," said Hardin suddenly, "if you aren't in cahoots with this bunch, what the devil *did* make you come here to this God-forsaken place, Dawson?"

"Sorry, chief, but I can't tell you that. By the way, were there any white gents among those Yaquis?"

"Nary a one. All Injuns. As wicked a gang of murderers as ever I laid eyes on. At least half a dozen of them are badly wanted in Arizona or Texas on murder charges. A couple of them have served time. Their captain speaks dam' good American English and looks plenty brainy. I'd say he's seen some real soldiering somewhere. He'd be a handsome looking Injun only that somebody, some time, has cut both his ears off."

"Hm-mm. And is his name Pablo by any chance?"

"It sure is," came the quick reply. "Know him?"

"Met him a few months ago. Ever see him in a strong light? No? Well, when you do, you'll never call him a Yaqui. For one thing, his eyes are blue. He's either deeply tanned or his face and hands are stained. His hair has a reddish tint in the

sunlight. His body is as white as yours or mine."

"Then he's a white man?"

"Nope. Injun. Pure Injun. One of the few remaining members of a vanishing race, chief. Gosh knows where those white Injuns come from, or what's their history. I reckon that the Smithsonian folks know. Some lost race. He's learned English somewhere down here in Mexico, I imagine. As for his soldiering, he most likely got it in Mexico City. The man is almost fifty, I'd guess. His handful of white-skinned Indians live somewhere near the city, back from civilization. I've heard of them many times."

"Where did you run across this Pablo, Dawson?"

"He was staked out on a huge anthill and his body smeared with wild honey. They'd cut off both ears and the damned ants were about driving him nuts when I found him."

"Who did it? Greasers or Yaquis?"

"Neither, chief. The men that thought out that little torture trick were renegade Americans."

"No?"

"Yeah. The lately lamented Whitey and the ingenious slacker Scranton were in the gang. A dozen or more in all."

Hardin whistled softly. "What was their idea, Dawson?"

"Dunno. Whatever it was, they were in dead earnest about it. Pablo wasn't the first man to so decorate a Mexican anthill. There were two more that I know of, chief. Only when I ran across them, it was far too late to be of any relief. They'd both been dead for weeks, perhaps months. Just bones left. Bones, the wooden pegs, and dried strips of hawhide thongs that had held 'em there."

"Good God! White men, too!"

"Exactly, chief. That accounts, in part, for the dirty looks the Yaquis give us. To their poor ignorant minds, a gringo is a gringo. They'd be plumb tickled to torture us plenty."

"But what of this Pablo gent, Dawson? Surely the man will recall that he owes his life to you? He'll not let us be killed or tortured?"

"Dunno. We'll see. He was out of his head when I turned him over to the man who brought him to his friends in Black

Canyon that night. He won't connect me with his rescue."

"You turned him over to someone? Who was the man that took him to Black Canyon?"

"The man we call the Road Runner."

"The devil!"

"Not quite."

"HMMMMMM! No use questioning you about this Road Runner gent?"

"No use whatsoever, chief. Only he's not the blackguard some like to make him out to be."

"Does he operate in conjunction with these people, Dawson?"

"No. He plays a lone hand. But these Yaquis are all for him. They ask him no questions and treat him with an awed respect. He goes and comes as he pleases into the forbidden Black Canyon. Perhaps they figure he's semisupernatural or something. They're a superstitious lot and the Road Runner is wise enough to play that angle well and with wisdom. They never see him except at night. No man has ever seen his face. The only men who ever pierced his disguise died within a few minutes after being enlightened. And there you have it."

"Wish he'd trot up and do his stuff, if he's a friend of yours."

"Perhaps he will," suggested Dawson, "if we can get word to him."

"The question is, how to get word to him," mused Hardin.

"You said it, chief."

"How about a note to him?" ventured Hardin.

"No chance. He might not show up for a week or a month in Black Canyon and nobody knows, not even I know, where a message might find him."

"And we may be getting that water treatment before a week is over."

"Exactly," said Dawson dryly.

"Devilish mess, old man. And the joke of it is, I can't explain to the Lady Beautiful why I'm here. Or rather, I won't be such a chump as to admit that I merely followed you here, thinking you were one of them. I figured it was a smuggling ring, that here was the leak through which the stream of contraband was flowing across our border."

"Is that all that brought you down here, chief?"

"That's the size of it, Dawson."

"Make 'em believe that and they may turn you loose."

"You mean that?"

"Sure do. The job is to make 'em believe it."

"Then there's something else queer about this place, not connected with smuggling?"

"That's my guess."

"What the devil is it, man?"

"That, chief, is what I'd give plenty to know."

Sounds outside the door interrupted all conversation. The door swung open and in the lantern light stood the earless leader of the Yaquis.

"The Señor Dawson is wanted," he said.

VI

ONCE more Pete Dawson was in that candle-lit room, facing the man in the chair and the girl who stood beside the man she had called Don Sebastian.

"When you rode into Black Canyon alone, señor," said the girl whose voice sounded tired and listless, "a guard challenged you. Is that not so?"

"I was halted, yes."

"You were asked to give a password, no?"

"I was."

"And you gave a word. What was that word?"

"Bonita," said Dawson stiffly.

The eyes of the girl met those of Don Sebastian, then she looked full at Pete Dawson. Her voice was low, steady, almost indifferent, as she voiced the next question.

"The Don Sebastian would know, Señor Gringo, how it is that you came to know that password."

Dawson, smiling quietly, looked squarely at the girl who seemed pale and under some strain.

"A friend gave me the password," he said evenly.

"You will tell Don Sebastian the name of that friend?"

"No."

"Why not, señor?"

"Because, señorita," came Dawson's cool reply, "the person, to me has no name."

The girl swayed a little and seemed to hold to the high-backed chair for support.

"He is known, however, as the Road Runner."

A hint of color came back into the girl's cheeks. As her eyes looked into those of Pete Dawson they seemed to convey some unspoken secret message. Dawson, his voice steady and calm, went on, anticipating the next question.

"The man known as the Road Runner and I have met. After a fashion, he is obligated to me for the reason that I, alone, know his real identity. Out of a sense of gratitude he gave me the password to be used in the event that I might be pressed by certain enemies and need aid or a hiding-place among your Yaquis."

"A very interesting explanation, señor. But how does it happen that this Señor Road Runner knows the password. Did he inform you of that?"

"Ask your Yaqui leader Pablo, señorita. Pablo owes his life to the Señor Road Runner. Your men, from Pablo to the lowest buck private in the rear rank, will tell you that I speak the truth. They will tell you that the Road Runner comes and goes as he chooses in Black Canyon."

"I have suspected as much," she replied. "You seem well informed, Señor Dawson. Too well informed, I am afraid, for the good of your health."

She hesitated a long moment, then spoke again.

"Señor Dawson, it is the command of Don Sebastian that you and the Señor Captain Hardin shall be allowed to live one more day. At sunrise of the following morning you will be shot while 'attempting to escape.'"

"That will be murder."

"Murder, señor, is a very evil word. You have had fair trial and both you and the Señor Captain Hardin refused to answer certain questions. Your silence condemned you both as guilty. Don Sebastian has passed upon you the sentence."

"One moment, please," said Dawson. "I speak not for myself, but for Captain Hardin. His only motive in coming here was to follow me. He suspected, for some certain reasons, that I was in partnership with you who live here in the Corpus Christi Hills. He had some sort of idea that we were smugglers. He had no other motive for coming to Black Canyon save that he wanted to catch me red-handed in

the smuggling business. Why should he suffer for my crime?"

"Ah, señor," came the swift question, "and just what is your crime?"

Dawson shrugged and grinned. "That was a fast one. You are very clever. I must decline to answer the question."

"Even if a plausible answer would save your life?"

"Or further condemn me?" smiled Dawson.

"What if the life of your friend depended upon your answer to that question, señor?"

Dawson's grin widened. "I refuse to be frightened. You're wasting time."

"You shall have tonight, tomorrow and tomorrow night to reconsider, señor. If by sunrise of the following morning your attitude has not changed, you shall make the attempt to escape and be shot while doing so."

As if at some signal the door opened and the earless Indian and a squad of men appeared.

"Put the Señor Dawson in the black cell, Pablo." Her manner was once more the queenly, imperious air, cold, unemotional. She was bending over the silent, black-eyed paralytic as Dawson was ushered out. Don Sebastian's glittering eyes followed him as he was taken away.

The black cell was nothing more nor less than a windowless room on the opposite side of the patio from where the luckless Hardin was kept prisoner. The air was clean and fresh enough, despite the fact that there was no apparent ventilation. And the place was dark to the point of opaqueness. Here, in the bare-walled, unfurnished cell, Pete Dawson was left alone with the bitterness of his thoughts.

They had not, for some reason, searched him. He still retained his flashlight, pocket-knife, matches, tobacco and cigaret papers. He still wore his spurs. His chaps had been discarded in Hardin's cell.

He snapped on the flashlight, and its shaft of light swept every foot of the cell. He now saw that ventilation was obtained from an inch-wide slit in the wall up next to the ceiling. Blankets and a mattress lay in a corner. There was no table or chair. Floor and ceiling and walls were solid enough, adobe walls that were probably three feet in thickness, a heavy-beamed

roof twelve feet above the floor that was of tile, reddish in color and some three feet square, closely laid and cemented. No prison cell could be more invulnerable—unless—

Dawson dropped on all fours, testing that cement with his knife, hoping against hope that he might be able thus to dislodge one of those thick red tiles. Inch by inch he crept along. He put out of his mind the impossibilities of his task.

Even if he dislodged a tile, it meant tunneling some distance out into the patio. Then there was the matter of the great locked gate, the guards, the lack of a horse to ride across the Haunted Mesa; then, escape either by the waterfall tunnel or by the well-guarded trail on the other side of the mesa. Added to this was the fact that Pete Dawson was not at all sure in which direction either trail or tunnel lay.

Yet he crept on across that solid floor, working in the dark because he might need the flashlight later, and its battery was good only for a limited number of hours.

He broke the blade of his knife, and opened another blade that, within an hour, suffered a like fate. He lost track of time. Sweat dripped from his laboring body in tiny rivulets. And when the last blade in the knife snapped he used his spurs.

When the gray dawn came through the slitted ventilator, a tiny pile of broken cement lay on the floor and one of the tiles was loosened so that he could almost lift it. Dawson pulled the mattress over the debris and loosened tile, lay down with a blanket over him, and was asleep when a guard came with breakfast.

Breakfast consisted of meat, bread and coffee. The ventilator shed a ghostly, shadowy light into the cell. Breakfast over, he lit a cigaret and waited for the removal of his breakfast dishes.

Presently the door opened. Framed in the opening stood the girl. She entered as Dawson rose and bowed mockingly. Then she closed the door behind her and faced him in the dim light.

"Sorry I can't offer you a chair," he said, "but it seems that there is a shortage of such little articles."

"Yes," came the calm reply, "chairs or benches make excellent weapons, señor."

"So they do," he answered.

"I have only a minute to stay, señor.

Let us not waste time. Last night, when I asked concerning the password, you lied like a gentleman. It was I who told you the password, thinking that perhaps you might come some night. Come, señor, not as an enemy, but as a *caballero* rides once more to glimpse the face of a woman.

"Don Sebastian learned somehow that you knew the password. I, as his mouthpiece, was commanded to cross-question you. For that lie, I thank you, for if he knew that I had, in a foolish woman's moment of confidence, so betrayed him, I should also be in such a cell as this."

"No?"

"But yes, my friend. You do not know Don Sebastian."

"If he's so paralyzed, how does he communicate his thoughts to you?"

"He and I have a system. But we waste time, my friend. I have come to help you. Because you once saved my life and because you lied so splendidly after I had so badly treated you, I come to help you. But first I must ask a question and get a truthful answer."

"Why am I here, eh?" smiled Dawson. "I am sorry, but that's the one question I'm not at liberty to answer."

Her hands went out in supplication and her eyes sought his imploringly. Dawson shook his head.

"Go back to your Don Sebastian and tell him for me that his game is too thin. I won't be kidded into talking any more than I can be scared into sounding off. Your methods are rather crude. Can't catch the fox twice in the same trap, you know."

The girl flushed. "I can't blame you for suspecting me, my friend. Nor can I explain in these short minutes. I risk much as it is in coming here. Won't you believe me?"

"Were I the gay *caballero*, I should no doubt fall at your feet and swear by the Seven Sutherland Sisters and the great horn spoon that I'd believe you, follow you unto death and so on. But I reckon I'm too much of a roughneck to love thus blindly. So I'll keep my yap shut. Sorry."

Her foot tapped an impatient tattoo on the floor. Chagrin, sorrow and resentment showed in her face and eyes.

"How can I prove my sincerity, señor?" she asked despairingly.

"By leaving that door unlocked and stak-

ing me to a six-shooter," he told her grimly. "Then I could at least die like a man instead of being shot like a mad dog."

"But *por Dios*, señor, I cannot do—"

"Then I reckon that settles that. Now, in the books, the beautiful heroine slips the handsome hero a gat and awaits without. Then they flee together into the night, to safety, there to live happily ever after."

"Please, my friend," she cried in a low, hurt tone, "do not mock me. You do not understand!" Her voice broke huskily. She seemed on the verge of tears.

"I beg your pardon if I've hurt you," he said contritely, puzzled at the actions of this strange, beautiful girl who seemed to be swayed by a dual personality. Soft one moment, regally cold the next! Which was her real side, which the pose? At any rate, the man concluded, she was a skilled actress.

"You do not understand. You cannot," she went on. "How can you, who have seen the world, know the value of dreams? How can you know the heart of a girl who, save on one occasion, has never been further than Black Canyon? Ah, but yes. For the Haunted Mesa has been even as my prison. A cage, señor. That night I came to you for help was the only time I have ever run away from it. For that one escape I paid dearly. You think I tell the lie? Then look!"

With a swift gesture she loosened her dress at one shoulder and turned. The girl's white back was criss-crossed with horrible black and purple welts. Whip welts! Dawson gasped.

"Good God!" he gasped, "Who did that?"

"Don Sebastian's Yaqui jailer. He dared not refuse, poor fellow. Only that I talked to him a very long time, he should have killed himself from grief of it."

"Who is this damnable Don Sebastian?"

"*Dios* forgive him, he is my father!"

A noise outside the door brought the girl to startled calm.

"I must go. *Adios*, my friend. Tonight, very late, I shall come once more, for the last time. I pray for you, señor. May *el Señor Dios* save you. And may He forgive that madman who is my father!"

And she was gone and the door again locked before Pete Dawson could gather his wits enough to speak.

VII

THROUGHOUT the morning no one came near. Dawson worked with covert desperation, covering the noise of his labors with a desultory whistling or singing. A Yaqui brought his noonday meal and departed in sullen silence.

The meal consisted of half a loaf of black bread, a tin mug of water, and stew. Inside the bread, carefully hidden, was a cylinder of note paper bearing a cryptic message in English.

"Beware the eyes of Don Sebastian. Destroy this."

A strange message. What was its meaning? Why beware the eyes of that paralytic? Dawson chewed the bit of paper to a pulp and swallowed it.

Undoubtedly the girl had written the message, warning him against some danger. The danger must be grave or she would not be warning him. Was he being watched here in his cell? Perhaps. If so, his one remote hope of escape was still-born. Or was there another meaning attached to the warning? The eyes of Don Sebastian? Meaning his watchful Yaquis were spying?

Further speculation was cut short by the entrance of the earless Pablo, who smiled enigmatically as he shut the door behind him.

"I am glad to see you, Pablo." Dawson lit a cigaret.

The blue-eyed Indian showed a set of white teeth. The smile was not a pleasant one.

"You have not long to live, Señor Dawson. Yet you seem not afraid. That is what you call the bluff, no?"

"I wonder? I am not the first man to occupy this death cell, I bet?"

"Nor perhaps the last, señor. Many have come to find the secret. Some were sent away after a little torture. One or two died."

"Americans?" asked Dawson, blowing a smoke ring.

"Americans." Pablo took a wide buckskin string from his pocket.

Dawson, seated cross-legged on his mattress, gathered himself for a swift spring. Perhaps this man had even now come to lead him to his death and the American was prepared to go our fighting. Pablo,

as if reading the other's intentions, smiled and shook his head.

"It is that you are going once more to Don Sebastian for the questioning, señor. It is his command that the hands be tied behind the back. It would be no good for you to kill me here. My men would then make terrible torture of your body. They are cruel, those Yaquis. Very cruel. But never so cruel, señor, as the Don Sebastian. I shall tie the hands behind the back now."

"If I resist?"

"Then may the *Señor Dios* have mercy on you, for you get no mercy from my Yaquis. I do not lie. Come, you may learn something—something that you came here to find out."

"What do you mean, Pablo?"

"I mean, señor, that I know why you have come."

Dawson laughed harshly. "Impossible, man."

"Then watch, señor. I shall make with my finger a sign upon the wall. Look, you."

Stepping to the wall, Pablo traced slowly an invisible sign, then faced the American with a peculiar smile.

"You win. Then you must know what became of a certain man, eh?"

"Yes."

"He died?"

"Like a soldier," nodded Pablo, watching Dawson closely. "*Dios*, how he fought! How he died! It was he, señor, who made that Don Sebastian like he is, the dead man alive. For me, I would much rather die than be as Don Sebastian. Now we must go or I, Pablo, must pay for my delay. Don Sebastian is not patient."

"If you know why I came here, why don't you tell Sebastian?"

"For two reasons, Señor Yanqui. First, one does not serve Don Sebastian from love or from loyalty. Second, those who make that sign I made on the wall tell nothing. Come, señor. Let me tie the hands."

Dawson rose and put his hands behind him. Pablo's thong fastened the wrists. As the thong was tied, a voice that was the faintest whisper came to Dawson's ears.

"Beware the eyes of Don Sebastian!"

Before the puzzled Dawson could question the man, Pablo had signaled and a guard swung open the great door.

Again Dawson stood before Don Sebastian.

The girl was nowhere in sight. Pablo pushed the American into a chair that faced the paralytic. A scant three feet separated the two chairs. Then Pablo stepped back.

"Nice day," said Dawson, grinning at the yellow face of the Don. "Nice day for a murder, eh?"

Don Sebastian's terrible eyes glittered ominously, the eyes of Satan, fallen from Paradise. Hate, sorrow, poisoned with bitterness that ate into the soul like acid, shone in those eyes.

The grin faded slowly from Dawson's lips. He found himself studying those eyes, trying to read the black soul of the man who sat there like a corpse. He could almost read the eyes as if they spoke. Those glittering black eyes were sending some message. Gripping and holding in their slitted, unblinking stare, the eyes of Don Sebastian were conveying the cripple's thoughts. Dawson was staring into their terrible depths, fascinated, held by their power. Then he remembered the message.

"Beware the eyes of Don Sebastian!"

With a hoarse, inarticulate cry, Dawson was on his feet.

"You damned, foul fiend!" he croaked. He would have struck that yellow face, only that his hands were tied.

"Hypnotize me, would you, you dirty, damned beast? That's why you had my hands tied, eh? God, I could choke the dirty soul from your inhuman body. Hypnotize me, then make me talk. Then torture me, I suppose. But, damn you, it didn't work, did it?"

Then Dawson suddenly realized that he was talking like a madman, that his self-control had slipped. He stood there, his forehead beaded with perspiration. Then, with a grim laugh, he again seated himself and looked once more squarely into the eyes of the terrible Don.

"Now, you fiend, try it. Do your stuff. Go ahead, you yellow-skinned devil. And see what luck you have." He was again himself, grinning derisively into those eyes that burned with a terrible hatred.

"You can't do it, can you? Almost had me, didn't you? But you can't put it over with me knowing your snake's game."

"Come, Señor Yanqui," cut in the voice of Pablo, "I take you back."

Dawson rose with a harsh laugh. "Sorry to disappoint you, you mummy-faced old

devil. *Adios!* May you live a long time. I can wish you nothing more damnable because I read enough in your eyes to know that, while your body is on earth, your soul's in hell. *Adios, Señor Don Satan!*"

And he preceded Pablo from the room. Pablo looked like a man who had gone through some sort of torture.

"Nothing, no one, señor, can now save you from torture. You do not know what you have done. The Don Sebastian is a devil. Yet, señor, had you come under the command of the eyes of that man, your end would be all the more terrible. So you were warned."

They were back in the cell now and Pablo was untying Dawson's hands.

"Tell me, Pablo, is the señorita so held by her father's eyes?"

"Since she was a child, yes. As was her mother who was the angel, señor, that señora who ran off in the night and jumped to her death in the waterfall you passed under when you came to the mesa. If Don Sebastian had stuck the knife in her heart, he could have been no more her murderer. She killed herself that terrible night when that *Americano* whom you seek fought with Don Sebastian, with the door locked and the key in Don Sebastian's pocket. She also was locked in the room. Watching, señor, as they fought. Fought for what, eh? For gold? For the great treasure that men have died for? No, señor. That brave Yanqui could have gotten away with gold and jewels enough to make wealthy a hundred men."

Pablo paused. Erect, his face white and drawn, his eyes blazing.

"No, señor. Those two, that Spaniard and that brave Yanqui fought for a woman. That woman was the wife of Don Sebastian. Not for her love. Do not mistake me. But for her freedom." Dim light glowed in Pablo's crafty eyes.

"*Dios*, what a night! I stood outside that terrible door, listening. She did not scream, señor. No, not once. Don Sebastian had a knife, the *Americano* his terrible fists and the skill of the boxer. And when all was still inside that awful door, señor, she took the key from the Don Sebastian who was a broken thing as you see him now—the Yanqui had broken his back with a wrestler's grip even as he died

from the Spaniard's knife in his back." Pablo paused, eyes glittering oddly, then continued.

"I shall never forget her face as she came from that terrible room. *Dios*. I did not then realize that her mind had broken and she was insane from it all. Straight past me, without a word, across the patio and into the night. The Yaqui on guard saw her leap into that black hole where the water drops into the center of the earth. Perhaps, señor, it was best that she so died, eh?" The Indian's voice was craftily querulous.

"God knows, perhaps," said Dawson huskily. "And where was the señorita all this time?"

"Locked in this very cell, señor. For many weeks I thought that she, too, would go loco."

"Why does she stay here?"

"Because she dares not leave."

"Why not?"

"So long as Don Sebastian lives, these Yaquis serve him as a god. His eyes, señor, have them under a spell. They obey his wishes. The Señorita Maria is also held by those eyes. But even if she should wake from that spell, as she sometimes partly does, the Yaquis watch and guard her. They are devils, those Yaquis."

"And you, you, too, are under his hypnotic power, Pablo?"

"I?" Pablo drew himself erect, a tall, stern, steel-muscled figure of dignity. "Not I. I stay to guard that which belongs to my people, that treasure for which men have died. I am the last of that line of kings—I, the lowly Pablo." And his voice was a trifle too heroic.

"I guessed as much," nodded Dawson. "Even as Don Sebastian is the last surviving descendant of that Spaniard who invaded your lands and devastated your cities, eh?"

"Some of those Spaniards escaped from Mexico," said Pablo, "and made their way back to Spain. They took with them what they could carry. Gold images, set with jewels. One of them, who had been to this spot and escaped, made a map. He was a forefather of Don Sebastian. This Don Sebastian, with another young Spanish nobleman of adventurous hearts, came to seek the great treasure known to be

hidden here. Some of them were killed, others died. Some returned home.

"But Don Sebastian, the leader, the bravest, the most cruel of them all, built this home and brought his unfortunate wife here to live until he had found that treasure. I think, señor, that his mind was not right. Always I have thought he was too brilliant, too cruel, too clever to be entirely sane. His power over these Yaquis is the terrible power of a crazy man. They fear him as they fear Diablo himself. Yet, señor, so clever as he is, he has never found that for which he came. And he has spent many years and a fortune in money searching."

The Indian's laugh jarred gratingly. Dawson almost shuddered.

"He knows that you hold the secret?"

"Yes." Pablo's glittering eyes watched Dawson covertly.

"Why is it that he does not torture it from you?"

"Because, señor, he knows that no torture can make me tell," came the quick reply. "It has been tried. But those who live under that sign I made upon the wall do not tell. You, who know even so little, must know that." Pablo leaned closer, leeringly. "Is it not so, eh?"

"And how do you know that I know of that sign you made?"

"Because that Yaqui who died fighting Don Sebastian told me that, if he did not return to his country, you would some day come, that only death would keep you from hunting him." Pablo smiled craftily.

"And how were you to know me?"

"By the sign tattooed on the palm of your right hand. So I have waited, señor. And when I thought that death had come to me, when they who had long tortured me had cut off my ears and the ants were driving me crazy, I saw that mark on the hand that freed me. I remember no more. I thought perhaps it was a dream. Then, when I saw you in the room of Don Sebastian, when you were captured here, I saw the sign on your hand and knew that it was the hand that had saved me that day, months ago."

Dawson looked at the mark on the palm of his right hand, a tiny, tattooed square within a circle that had been there since babyhood. Until he had come back from France and found a letter with certain

vague instructions waiting him, he had never known the meaning of that mark. Even until now he had been rather vague regarding its true value. It was the tribal mark of that vanished race to which this blue-eyed Indian belonged.

"Well, I'm here, amigo," Dawson smiled ruefully, "and tomorrow, if Don Sebastian's plans go through, I die. Before I kick off, I want to ask one question. Perhaps you can answer it."

"That question?"

"Who am I?"

"You mean, señor, that you do not know?"

"I know that I was born in Mexico, that I remember no father or mother, that I was raised by that man who died by Don Sebastian's knife. I was kept ignorant of my parentage for some strange reason. My check was good for any amount I wanted to write. I was taught to ride, shoot, fence, box and swim, tutored in Spanish, mathematics, and so on. Public schools in the United States, college. Now and then I spent a week or a month or six months with my guardian, who had a different name each time I met him, so it seemed. We rode together over half of Mexico, cruised the Mexican coast from port to port. He seemed to be hunting someone or something. But I'd been taught to ask no questions and I obeyed."

"So strong was that lesson of obedience I never asked, even when I was a man and the colonel, as I always called the man, was white-haired. Little as I saw of him, I loved him as a son loves his father. He was kind, generous, witty and the bravest man I ever knew. I was somehow given to understand that he was in the United States Intelligence Department, but how I got the idea, or whether it's true, I don't know."

"When we went to war against Germany, I went in. I was commissioned from Washington. Because I spoke and read German, Italian and French and because of some deeper reason unknown to myself, I was placed in the Intelligence Department. I held half a dozen commissions in as many branches of the service. I was with the French and Italian troops. I served with the British. I even held a second lieutenantcy in the Austrian army. And once I had command of a

German machine-gun company. Now and then I ran across my guardian, the colonel. Then came an unsigned note one day saying that he had gone to Mexico and, if I were alive at the close of the war, I should find a letter at Washington.

"Unfortunately, I was forced to shoot an American captain whom I knew to be a spy. Because of certain things, it was advisable that I be court-martialed and sent to Federal prison. When I was released, the armistice had been signed and I was ordered to report to Washington. There I received the letter from the man whom I knew as the colonel, the letter that caused me to be sent to the Border Patrol; and it was that letter that eventually brought me here."

"And now, señor, you are about to die, not knowing who you are or what it is all about?" A hint of mockery was in the question.

"That's it. It's damned annoying."

"It is," agreed Pablo. "But I can do nothing about it. I cannot save you. I cannot tell you who you are. That is according to the creed of the sign."

Pablo smiled thinly, bowed, and left Dawson alone in his cell.

"Well," said the prisoner to himself. "I'm getting warm on the trail, anyhow. If only I can dig out of this hencoop, I'll open my bag of tricks." And he again set to work.

VIII

"**W**HO am I?" Pete Dawson asked that question over and over as he dug with blunt spurs rowels at the hard cement—asked, even as he had asked all his life and found no answer!

What did that tattooed sign on his hand mean? That he, like Pablo, belonged to that vanishing race of Indians? Was he, Pete Dawson, an Indian? Possible, but hardly probable. Adopted into that tribe? That was a more likely solution. By whom? And why? And who were his real parents? Why all the mystery? Was it some black disgrace, some heritage of shame that was being kept from his knowledge?

Always came the same reply. *Quien sabe?* Who knows? *Quien sabe?*

Since coming with this strange girl whom

Pablo called the Señorita Maria to Haunted Mesa, Dawson had been obsessed with the vague but oddly persistent feeling that, some time or another, he had been here before, that the Corpus Christi Hills were in some manner familiar. More than once, while riding in that region, some subconscious instinct had guided him to hidden caves or obscure water holes, even as he had ridden straight across the Haunted Mesa to this dwelling that men called the House of Death.

Had he been here as a child, here in these strange places where white men were forbidden? Where the terrible Don Sebastian dwelt like some feudal king? In the hills of mystery where once a race of white Indians had dwelt until the Yaquis or Spaniards had destroyed them?

Where did Pete Dawson, Yankee, figure in this strange scheme of things? What was his part in the black mystery of the lost treasure of the vanished white Indians? For he knew and, for many years, had known in a vague way that somewhere in a region of Mexico known to few men was hidden a fabulous cache of jewels and pure gold, hammered by skilled artisans into images, vessels and ornaments. In his travels across Mexico with the colonel he had seen bits of that lost craftsmanship. And somehow he had come to know that they were but scattered bits from the lost wealth of the white Indians.

Now, as he dug at the floor of his death cell, Dawson felt that he stood on the brink of solution to many things, that he had almost touched the solution of his parentage, that he had almost found that for which the mysterious colonel had combed the seaports and interior of Mexico. And the key of the solution was that tattooed sign on the palm of his hand.

Had Don Sebastian seen that sign? Did the terrible Don know its meaning?

Questions and more questions. And Dawson worked with feverish haste. The square tile now lay hidden under the mattress and he dug at the soft earth below. Then almost a sob choked his dry throat. For under the dirt at a depth of about five or six feet, lay a stratum of rock.

His first plan had been to tunnel into the patio; then he had seen the folly of that and had planned to dig under the floor and outer wall, then upward to the

doubtful freedom of the mesa. He was chancing the risk of being caught at his labors in the cell, chancing that some suspecting guard might notice the dirt that bulged the mattress with its ever-increasing bulk as the hole became deeper, or that there would be a guard outside, and he would be caught even as he started on foot across the miles of moonlit mesa. Chancing these risks, he had still kept courage and shut his eyes to those odds. But now he had struck a rocky stratum.

To tunnel under the floor at such a shallow depth meant the almost certainty of a cave-in that would smother him. Buried alive there under the tiles and dirt was no welcome manner of death.

He stood there in the narrow hole that dropped him to shoulder-depth beneath the floor level. Sweating, cramped muscles aching, his hands torn and bleeding from clawing at the dirt, he stood in the hole, breathing heavily from his recent exertions, swallowing the dry lump of disappointment that stuck in his throat.

"Licked," he muttered dully. "Licked!" He pulled himself up out of the hole and constructed a cigarette. The smoke tasted sweet and gave him a little satisfaction. "Licked? Like hell, I'm licked! Must be almost mess time. I'll lay off till supper. Then when the Yaqui takes away the dishes, I'll tackle it again. Rip out the tiles between here and the wall and sink another shaft next to the outer wall. Under the wall and up. Under and out, and God have pity on the Injun that gets in my way, once I'm outside. Pete, old boy, you damn' near showed yellow. Almost quit. Darn near lost your guts, eh?" He grinned and wiped the sweat out of his eyes. Then he mentally mapped out his plan of labor.

The guard found him sitting on the mattress smoking a disconsolate cigarette. The evil-looking Yaqui shoved supper inside the door, then the door again closed. Dawson ate swiftly, then waited impatiently for the removal of the dishes. It seemed hours before the Yaqui took away the empty plate and cup. He had hardly closed the door before the prisoner was again at work.

He counted three tiles between the hole and the outer wall. By digging under the square tile, then dropping his weight upon

it, the tile would jar loose at the cement seams. He refilled the hole he had dug and replaced the tile. Then he would dig beneath the next tile and jar it loose. And each time he replaced the tile behind him so that his back trail was fairly well covered in case of intrusion. Always the mattress was within quick reach to cover the spot where he worked. At last he broke loose the tile next to the wall.

Night had fallen, and Stygian blackness filled the cell. When the last tile was lifted out and set carefully down on the floor, Dawson straightened with a weary sigh. His back muscles ached horribly and his hands were stiff and caked with dirt and oozing blood from the broken tips of fingers that had been used for shovels.

The task that now lay before him was to dig straight down under the foundation, then up under it to the surface of the mesa. A colossal task, with no tools save a pair of spurs and his bleeding hands.

"But, by the tin gods, it's worth trying!" he mused aloud.

"And what is that, señor, that is worth the trying?" came a whispered voice out of the darkness.

"*Quien es?*" Dawson hissed sharply, sliding the mattress across the scar of his labors. "*Quien es?*"

"Is it that you forget the promise I made to come once more?"

"You, señorita!"

"Who else, *amigo?*"

"But how did you get in without my seeing or hearing you?"

"The patio is in darkness. The door makes no noise. I am wearing moccasins. And you, my friend, were very busy, no?"

"How—how long have you been here, señorita?"

"For long enough, señor, to hear you swear three times when, perhaps, you cannot sleep upon the so hard bed? Or was it that you were praying the prayer of the Yaqui? For it is better to pray than to curse when but the few hours stand between life and death, no?"

"I'm afraid I was not praying," he admitted, grinning uneasily. Did the girl suspect that he was digging himself out? He had sworn heartily once or twice when he bruised his fingers in wrestling with the cemented tile. He recalled the dull cracking of the cement. Had she heard

that? She most certainly must have, if she had been there in the cell within the past few minutes.

"Señor Dawson?" came her whispered voice.

"Yes?"

"It is the command of Don Sebastian that you shall be put to torture at sunrise. First, however, you will stand by the wall and see your friend Captain Hardin shot. I think that Don Sebastian is quite insane. His eyes are the eyes of Diablo, Satan himself. What was it that you said, señor, that has so angered him?"

"He tried to hypnotize me, make me his tool, as he made you. You can't make me think you love him, even if he is your father!"

"Love? *Dios*, no! Does one love the wolf, the snake, the jackal? Even the pity for him is withered and dead. He is a madman. Only that he fears the consequences, he would have put Pablo to death this night because Pablo pleaded for your life."

"Pablo did that for me?"

"Yes. Even now Pablo is being watched. Don Sebastian fears Pablo plans your escape, even as he aided the gallant Señor O'Hara that dreadful night my mother killed herself. Pablo told you. He said he had told you. The patio is under double guard. Pablo is watched. Only that the Yaqui jailer who so lashed me is the one who guards your cell. I could not have come, for Don Sebastian suspects me.

"Señor, I would most gladly give my life to save you, but they guard the patio too well. It would be death to try. Your horse is outside one half a mile to the north by the Polar Star. You can travel by the stars, my friend?"

"Yes."

"The guard outside the wall eats in one hour. With his food is a jug of wine. In the wine is a sleeping powder. In case they capture you, señor, here is your revolver."

She stood near him now, so near that he heard her quick breathing. He groped for the revolver and their hands met. A little shudder seemed to sweep over her as she touched the man's hand that was sticky with dirt and blood. A shudder of pity, perhaps?

"The *Señor Dios* blesses the Yanqui with the courage that is so very splendid,

my friend. You do not give up. *Madre*, what a task, with only the hands for tools, no?"

"Then you know that—"

"That the Señor Dawson is to die by torture," she said quickly. "Beyond that, I must know nothing. I have not been here. No, señor, I must go before they suspect and all is ruined. May *Dios* protect you, my friend. Forgive, if you can, the foolish woman who, because she was a weakling, allowed you to come to the Haunted Mesa where death waits all visitors. The Señor Hardin must die. *Dios* forgive that madman of a Don Sebastian. And now, my friend, *adios!*"

"God protect you," said Dawson. "Keep your courage. I can't find the right words to thank you, Señorita Maria, for what you are doing for me. I am aware of the risks you take. I came here to learn the fate of that man you named as O'Hara. Pablo tells me he died here. More than that I cannot tell you. Pablo, if he would, could tell you more."

"*Dios* guard you!"

"And you, my Maria!" Dawson took her two hands, kissed them, and let her go. A moment later he was again alone.

The feel of his six-shooter was as the handgrip of an old friend. It gave him new courage as he worked. Also, there had been the caress of her fingertips as they brushed his lips.

Inch by inch, Pete Dawson clawed his way under the thick foundation, then up, digging like some animal, the dirt falling into his mouth and eyes and filling his clothes. He could only trust to fate that no one would enter his cell and catch him in the tunnel. He worked without pause, burrowing up toward freedom. He could have shouted for sheer joy when the earth above gave way and he saw the stars through the ragged hole in the crusted sod of the mesa.

Another minute and he was crawling out into the clean night air. Wasting not a single moment, he set off across the mesa, almost running in his haste to put distance between him and that house. Then he took his direction by the stars and hit a slow trot. North, by Polaris, half a mile. It seemed a hundred miles. Then the snort of a horse halted him.

"Joker, old son," he panted softly.

"Steady, old-timer. Quiet, you Pack Rat." For the mule was standing close to the picketed Joker.

The horse and mule nuzzled him with affectionate greeting that was touching in its muteness. Nearby was Dawson's saddle and carbine. He was mounted and on his way in a few moments.

The feel of his horse between his legs, the night air cooling his hot face, the grip of a gun butt. Freedom! Yet all about him lurked danger. He would fight to the finish now. And it would go badly with anyone who attempted to stop him.

To ride back in an attempt to rescue Hardin was worse than folly now. Pete Dawson would be riddled with bullets before he passed the gate of the patio. So he rode for the point where he had seen a trail mount the wall of the high mesa. A precipitous trail, a trail that Dawson knew would be guarded at the top and bottom by cold-eyed Yaqui killers.

"It's them or me," he decided, gripping his Colt's and peering ahead. "Can't be too squeamish. Not when time's short and it's for her and the chief."

As on the other evening, the light on the mesa was silvery, eerie, ghostly. He decided that the effect was due to the heavy dew and the peculiar nature of the coarse grass that grew to the height of a horse's knees. Sort of pampas grass, almost transparently silver in color, that rippled in the breeze like a lake of silver. The reflection of the moonlight on that metallic-hued sea of grass played odd tricks with man's vision. Hence the ghostly, weird appearance and disappearance of men and horses that seemed to vanish and appear as if by magic.

"*Quien es?*" ripped the challenge of a guard. A shot shattered the night's silence. Dawson's gun, belching hot reply, found its mark and the Yaqui guard went down, shot through the heart. Dawson was unhurt but the Yaqui's bullet had missed its target by inches.

Down the trail that led into yawning blackness below. Down! One misstep and death would reap its grim harvest. But Joker was as sure-footed as a goat. The Pack Rat followed closely, tiny hoofs clattering in the wake of his black friend.

"*Quien es?*" called the guard below. Dawson lay low across Joker's neck as the

Yaqui fired. The American's six-shooter spewed flame and the guard sank in a heap.

Dawson rode on at a run. Shots from other Yaquis were whining past his head as he jumped Joker along the twisting trail. Sounds of confused pursuit followed him in his flight. He laughed softly as Joker dodged, twisted and sped on. No Yaqui horse could follow the fleet-footed black gelding. And clattering close behind came the faithful Pack Rat, a badly frightened, mouse-colored streak that might have been the very shadow of the black horse, so closely he followed.

Sounds of pursuit became dimmer. Yet Dawson did not check the speed of his horse. Presently he was swallowed in the sheltering blackness of Black Canyon.

Somewhere in that blackness sounded the call of a quail.

"Who goes?" called a voice. It came from a cave in the rocks. A well-hidden cave screened by brush.

"Boche!" came the reply.

"Advance, Boche, and get a bellyfull of hot lead. Holy snakes, I bin worried green. You son of a gun, Pete! What's up?"

"Plenty, old horse thief. Hardin's caught up on the mesa. Due to get shot at sun-up."

"You was up there, Pete?"

"I was. And no man's land had nothing on the Haunted Mesa for putting the chill in a man's spine. *Que hora es?*"

"Eleven-fifteen."

"*Bueno*. Listen, Nicols, old boy. I appreciate what you did for me, leaving your post on the border. I'm giving you a tip that will get you promoted, sabe? Go back to your camp. There'll be a couple of Mexican wood haulers going across the line with a string of burros loaded with wood. Nab 'em. Then take a hand ax and open a few sticks of that wood. You'll find *poco* plenty narcotics. For the wood is hollowed out and filled with hop, then plugged. Hardin'll sure boost you for stopping the Corpus Christi leak. It'll be a big haul."

"When'd you get wise, skipper?"

"About a week ago. I was savin' it for you, Nicols, for old time's sake, for not sounding off what you knew concerning that Boche spy I killed that large evening

when he wanted to lead us into the Hun trap."

"But lissen, guy," burst out the grinning Nicols, "you said the chief was gonna get plugged at sunrise. Ain't we gonna charge them Yaqui gents an' get him loose?"

"Nicols, old cow servant, we'd get about as far as they wanted us to come, then they'd shoot us out of our saddles. I ran the guard coming down and by now they know I've escaped, see? And the two trails leading up there will be damn' well guarded. It's a case of outfoxin' 'em."

"How you goin' to do it?"

"I'm not. Only one man can ever get up there alive. That man is the Road Runner. These Injuns are plenty afraid of him. They won't stop him. If he can't do the trick, then Hardin's a goner."

"An' where are you gonna be, Pete?"

"Right where I can do some good with a six-gun if need be.

"An' Jim Nicols is gonna be right at your back, old hoss. To hell with the hop runners an' promotion. I'm stayin' with you."

"Listen, bonehead," said Dawson with affectionate gruffness, "you and I have punched cows together, soldieried together, and been in one or two tight squeaks, no? If you could do good by staying, I'd ask you to. But you can't.

"And, by the way, when you get those *paisanos* and their hop tied up, you might brew up some hot coffee and a little grub. You may have company for breakfast."

"Are you tryin' to kid the troops, Pete?"

"May be a lady in the party," Dawson went on.

"Now I know you're tryin' ta show me a good time. Come clean, skipper."

"A lady and Captain Hardin," Dawson added. "Better shave and put on your other shirt, sheepherder. And don't chew tobacco in front of the lady. Take your hat off in the house. Have the cabin swept nice. Tuck in your shirt tail and be military. When in doubt, salute. Now get to hell out of here on the double quick or that wood train will be across the line. *Pronto*, you flea-bitten son of a Texican scorpion. Rattle your hocks."

"Orders is orders," grumbled Nicols, whose Border Patrol uniform could never disguise the fact that the man was a cow-

puncher. "But I'm tellin' ya, Pete, I don't like it."

"You didn't like cooties, either, old kid," grinned Dawson, "but you had 'em. Vamoose, *amigo*. *Pronto!* Double *pronto!*"

As Nicols swung into his saddle, Dawson called after him.

"Don't forget about the lady for breakfast."

IX

A LONE horseman rode up the Black Canyon trail, a masked man cloaked in a scrape, astride a pinto horse. As he rode, he sang softly in a rich baritone. The words of the song were in the Mexican language and the tune was the lilting, swinging, marching tune of the notorious Pancho Villa. The words dealt with the career of one Road Runner, *El Cucillo de Tierra*, of how this *El Cucillo de Tierra* killed the rattlesnakes.

It was a braggart's song, more or less sprinkled with the spice of profanity. Bold, daring, fearless. It personified the rider with his scarlet serape and silver-cruised sombrero and saddle.

"*Quien es?*" barked the guard.

"*El Cucillo de Tierra.*"

"But, señor, you cannot pass," came from the awed Yaqui guard.

"Eh?" The masked rider laughed derisively and did not check the running walk of his horse.

"*El Diablo* himself cannot halt me," he called in Mexican. "I go to speak with that son of *Diablo*, your Don Sebastian. May the curse of the combined souls in purgatory haunt your sleep, hombre, if you cross the word of *El Cucillo de Tierra.*"

And the Road Runner kept on up the dread trail, softly singing his song. On, as the gaping Yaqui stood aside with lowered gun, his wide eyes filled with fright. For was not that the terrible avenging rider of the night? Who but one under the special protection of Lucifer could so ride unscathed into the dangers that Mexico held for one who had fought alone against the dwellers of the Corpus Christi Hills? Had not this *El Cucillo de Tierra* sent his death warning to men such as Scranton and Whitey and others? Had they not died? And now this masked rider was on his way to speak with that terrible Don

Sebastian, who also was of *Diablo's* kin.

The Yaqui watched the lone rider disappear into the tunnel that led upward to the mesa. From out of that black tunnel, above the grumbling roar of the waterfall beyond, came the words of the Road Runner's song, defiant, boastful, mildly profane.

There was a guard at the top of the mesa. The man's challenge died in his throat as he beheld the masked, scarlet-seraped man on the big pinto.

"Is it that you would die like the dog, hombre? With the knife in your belly, with the curse of the devil to keep you in hell forever? Then stand aside." The moonlight shone on the glittering blade in the hand of the masked rider. And when the Yaqui gave way, the man rode on, singing his song.

Great as was the man's fear of Don Sebastian, the sight of the Road Runner was more fearful. For here was a man who killed with his own hand, one who bore a charmed life. They had heard his song on nights when the moon shone, on other nights when the rain made Black Canyon a terrible torrent of thundering water. Between the crashes of echoing thunder, the song of *El Cucillo de Tierra* had challenged the Thunder Bird.

They had caught swift glimpses, when the lightning flashed, of his scarlet-clad figure as he sat his frightened horse. Always, when the Thunder God was angry, they had seen this red serape and the great pinto horse. The rider who came and went by night. Who killed those who crossed him.

Even now, thunder rolled up over the rim of the mesa. The drowsy guard had not noticed until now that the sky was blackening with a coming storm. To his superstitious mind, the masked rider had brought with him the Thunder Bird. He did not become rational enough to realize that this was the season of rains, when hardly a day or night passes without its brief thunderstorm.

Perhaps the Road Runner counted on this superstition, for he rode along slowly, while the black cloud crept across the sky above him. The silver sheen of the mesa was blotted out now. A wind sighed through the tall grass. The man rode enveloped in the blackness of the approaching

storm. Only when the lightning flashed was his silver and red and black form visible. Then, with a rush and a terrific roar, the storm burst in its fury and the Road Runner halted at the patio gate of the House of Death.

He sang no longer. The Yaqui alone on guard is one thing, but the several here in the patio under the terrible black-eyed gaze of Don Sebastian were quite another proposition. For Don Sebastian believed in no Thunder Bird nor Road Runners, no devils nor goblins, nor what not. There would be the domineering power of the Don's eyes, then a rifle volley that would be the end of *El Cucillo de Tierra*.

A stupid-eyed guard outside the gate woke as a gag was shoved into his gaping mouth. That powder in his wine had left him dazed but he was awake enough to see as the lightning flashed, who now bound his hands and feet. The gag silenced his cry of fright. Then darkness and terror for the bound fellow as he dimly saw the gate open and the Road Runner, now afoot, slip into the patio. The gate swung shut on its noiseless hinges. The Road Runner was now inside the patio.

Darkness hid his movements. He crouched low behind a bush or wooden bench. The rain was now a small cloud-burst. Guards huddled in doorways, serapes pulled across their heads. One stood guard before Don Sebastian's door from beneath which shone a sliver of light. One was on guard where Hardin was kept prisoner. One was before the door that led to the Señorita's room. Another stood in the doorway of a room that housed Pablo and his Yaquis. Four in all.

The intruder crept along the arcade, taking care to remain hidden in the bushes and vines. When the next lightning flash came, he crouched almost within arm's reach of the man on guard at Hardin's cell. Darkness again, all the blacker after the brilliant flash. Sounds of a brief scuffle were obliterated by the noise of the storm.

A few moments later, when again the lightning flashed, all was as it had been. Four guards, huddled in the inadequate shelter of the doorways. Only a close observer might have noticed that the man who guarded Hardin's door stood queerly, that, as a matter of fact, the man was hanging rather than standing—hanging by a

thin rawhide rope that was fastened to a beam of the arcade. The rope was fastened under the armpits of the Yaqui, whose arms and legs were bound and whose mouth was gagged. The huge hat and the serape covered the ropes. The man's rifle was shoved in the crook of his arm. And he was so hung that his bound feet were flat on the tiles of the patio.

Inside his dark cell, Captain Hardin of the Border Patrol woke from fitful sleep as a wet, cold hand brushed his face.

"Quiet, Señor Hardin. No noise."

"What the hell? Who speaks, eh?"

"*El Cucillo de Tierra*," came the hoarse whisper. Then the voice went on, speaking in the Mexican tongue. "I have come to save you, señor. Listen with care. Follow my instructions. In fifteen minutes—you have a watch? Good. In fifteen minutes, no more, no less, you will go out the door and lock it behind you. You will, of course, move only after the lightning has flashed. *Muy pronto, sabe*, before the next flash. You will pay no attention to the guard, for he is so fixed that he cannot halt you. Go quickly to the second door to the left. The guard there will also be fixed. Enter that door. The Señorita Maria will be in that room. Tell her I have sent you. Wait there another fifteen minutes.

"Then take the señorita, by force if necessary, and enter the cell of the Señor Dawson. You will find the cell empty. Go through the hole in the floor, through and under the wall by way of the tunnel to the mesa outside. My horse stands by the gate. He is broken to ride with the double burden. Ride, then, with all quickness possible, for the trail that leads off the mesa. The guard at the top is dead. Those below are following the Señor Dawson.

"If there should be guards at the foot of the trail, shoot to kill. Here is a revolver. There is a carbine on the saddle. Ride for the cabin of the Border Patrol. Stop for nothing till you reach there. Then wait. Do as I say, señor. To the smallest detail. Otherwise I risk my life for nothing."

A brilliant flash of lightning lit up the room. Hardin saw a drenched figure in a scarlet serape, a face covered by a black silk mask that covered the man's entire head.

"Who the devil are you?" asked Hardin.

"*El Cucillo de Tierra*," came the terse reply. "You will do as I say?"

"I sure will. You say Dawson's escaped? Where is he?"

"I left the Señor Dawson in Black Canyon. He will meet you at the patrol station. Perhaps he is there, even now. *Quien sabe?*" They were again in the darkness.

"Follow carefully the instructions. If the señorita refuses to accompany you, use what force you deem necessary. *Buenos noches, señor.*"

And the masked man was gone when the next flash came.

X

OF those five guards who huddled in separate doorways, two now were bound, gagged and suspended from the beams of the arcade. In the darkness the door of the Señorita Maria's room opened and closed.

A single candle burned in the girl's room, a candle whose flame guttered with the faint draft from the opened door, a candle set before a niche in the wall that, after the Spanish custom, held an image of the Blessed Virgin. Before this image knelt the daughter of Don Sebastian. Fully clothed, but with her mass of bronze hair loosened and covering her shoulders like a gorgeous mantilla, she was praying.

Her eyes, bearing traces of weeping turned in startled fright as she felt the draft of the opened door.

"Señorita," came in a soft Spanish from the Road Runner, "do not be frightened. I come but to help you. You pray to the Mother of Him for help. Is it not as if I were sent in answer to those prayers of yours?"

She rose, and when she stood facing him something of her accustomed poise returned and a tinge of color came into her cheeks.

"For the intrusion, I beg your apology, señorita. It was that I had no other recourse but to enter thus abruptly. The patio is well guarded."

"And what," asked the girl fearfully, "does *El Cucillo de Tierra* do here at the hacienda of Don Sebastian? You come to kill, señor?"

"If need be, *si*. I come to free the Señor

Hardin. Señor Dawson is already free and safe."

"Then the Señor *Dios* has heard my prayers!"

"And the Señor Dawson," added the man, "rode a good horse. Señorita, you must leave this house of murder and barbarity. Tonight, under the able protection of Señor Hardin, you will escape by the tunnel used by Señor Dawson. You will be taken to the convent across the border. There you shall be in safe hands."

"I cannot, señor! I dare not! They would follow me to the end of the earth and bring me back."

"But no, señorita. The power of Don Sebastian is not so strong as he would have you think. Señorita, by all that a man swears by, I vouch for your safety, once you cross the border. Señorita, you must leave this place of terror and murder. Were your mother alive, she would wish it. You will go?"

"Yes, señor." There was something compelling about this masked figure in dripping black and scarlet.

"*Bueno.*" He bowed formally. "The Señor Hardin will be here in a few minutes. He will protect you with his life. Go by way of Señor Dawson's cell. The guard there will be bound and helpless. No, not dead, señorita."

"What of you, señor? You will accompany us?"

"As swiftly as I can."

"You stay to kill Don Sebastian?"

"*El Cucillo de Tierra* does not fight helpless cripples, señorita."

"Then why do you stay behind?"

"Because there is but one horse outside. I follow on foot. I shall be quite unmolested. The Yaquis fear me. The Indian Pablo owes me his life. You had best make ready for the ride in the storm. Señorita, *adios.*"

He took her hand, bent and kissed it and, with the gallant swagger of the *caballero*, bowed his farewell. The next moment he was gone.

Once more he was hidden in the darkness of the storm. He crept toward the man who guarded Don Sebastian's room. A blinding flash of lightning revealed him, for one short instant, to the guard. The Yaqui, stark with fear, uttered a hoarse cry that was lost in the storm. In the black

interval that followed, the masked man was upon him like a tiger. When the lightning flashed again, the guard was bound, gagged and strung up by the rope under his armpits.

Fifteen minutes later the last two of the five guards were likewise trussed up. The Road Runner, crouched in the thick bushes, watched until he saw the blurred shadows of two persons slip into the unlocked cell that had been Dawson's. Then he locked the door and threw away the key. He moved toward the helpless figure of the man who guarded the barrack room where Pablo and his men slept. He searched the guard's pockets, hoping to find a key that would lock the barrack door. But after an unsuccessful search he moved on.

The lightning ripped and crashed. Blackness again. *El Cucillo de Tierra* opened the door that led to the room of Don Sebastian. He stepped into the candle-lit room and swiftly shut the door behind him, bolting it from the inside. Don Sebastian sat in his chair. An elaborate dressing-gown was about his wasted frame. A fire crackled in the grate. On the serape-covered lap was an open book. Beside him, on a table, stood a decanter of wine and a half-filled glass. The faint odor of cigaret smoke hung in the air.

The glittering eyes behind the Road Runner's mask swept the room, taking in each detail. Tense, suspicious, he stood there, a dripping yet mockingly gallant figure of silver and black and scarlet. Then his gaze fastened on the mantel. On the corner of that marble mantel was a silver ash-try and in the ash-tray was a half-smoked cigaret from which a tiny spiral of smoke drifted. Someone had put that half-smoked cigaret there but a few moments before. Not Don Sebastian. Not a servant, for no servant would be smoking in that room. The *mozo* of the Spanish is too well trained for that. Who, then? For the room was empty save for Don Sebastian and the Road Runner.

Don Sebastian's eyes were twin pools of opaque blackness, two spots of black hatred that told the masked intruder nothing.

The Road Runner crossed to the fireplace. There he halted. In front of the hearth was a damp spot and the imprint of muddy feet. Something wet and sodden

lay nearby. He picked it up and smoothed it out. The object was a chamois riding glove of expensive English make. Next he examined the cigaret, sniffing it and reading the brand. No one but an epicure of most fastidious taste used that brand of cigaret.

But that bit of tobacco seemed to have a peculiar effect upon the masked man. He stared at it, then at the glove. Then, tossing the cigaret into the fire, he strode over to Don Sebastian and stared into the Spaniard's terrible eyes.

He recoiled a little, then peered closer. He even reached out and touched the unblinking eyeballs. The eyes did not move. For they were slowly glazing. Don Sebastian was dead. Even the eyes, eyes of hate, were filming. Satan had at last claimed his own and the black soul of Don Sebastian had left the withered body.

Death had transformed the yellow face. Its skinny muscles were drawn in an expression of terror and even in death the eyes held a look of horrible fear. Fear of death? Rather it was fear of something or someone who had stood before him. The man who had poured the wine? The owner of the sodden glove and the cigaret? Who else?

The Road Runner seemed oddly wrought up, shaken from his swaggering insolence. Now he picked up a large reading-glass from the floor beside the dead man's chair. Why had it lain there? Who had used it? Then he saw that one of Don Sebastian's hands lay on the huge book. The book was a Spanish version of Dante's *Inferno*. But why the reading-glass? The print was large. And how had Don Sebastian, paralyzed, placed his hand there in that position, a long, skinny forefinger on the page as if marking a passage?

The Road Runner took the splendidly bound book and spread it upon the table. Then he scanned the page under the powerful reading-glass. Between the printed lines, tiny penciled words sprang into view, invisible save when magnified a hundred-fold by the lens of the reading-glass.

The Road Runner slipped off his mask that he might read better. Line after line of the penciled words he read. Now and then he muttered some ejaculation of surprise. He was bent over the book, deeply absorbed, when shots shattered the night

and a heavy pounding sounded on the door.

"Open!" called a loud voice in Mexican. "Open!"

Then shots splintered the heavy door. The Road Runner sprang erect and pulled on his mask.

"Who calls?" he shouted in Mexican.

"*Quien es?*" shouted the voice outside.

A voice harsh with some terrible emotion.

"*El Cuchillo de Tierra!*" shouted the Road Runner.

"Thou thief! Wolf! Snake of the night!" shrieked the voice, harshly hysterical with terrible wrath. "Viper! Thief of a gringo!" A mixture of Mexican, English, and some forgotten tongue mixed in a terrible, horrible cursing and raving. It was the voice of Pablo, the white Indian, last of his race, guardian of the lost treasure of his vanished people. And there were terror and insane wrath in the tremor of his cursing.

Shots, volley after volley, ripped the heavy door. A battering ram of some description pounded the reinforced oak barrier. Inside the room, the black-masked Road Runner brought forth a leather sack and from it took bits of cactus with which he made a circle in front of the dead Don Sebastian's chair. Then he rolled and lit a cigaret and leaning idly against the marble mantel, watched the creaking, splintering door that would give way in a few moments. The lower half of his mask was lifted, so that he might be able to smoke. He looked around him.

He had replaced the book in the dead man's lap. On the open book he had carefully laid the reading-glass. From outside came the crash of thunder and the insane cursing of Pablo, who seemed to have suddenly gone insane. The heavy door groaned and cracked under the blows of the battering ram.

The Road Runner's eyes scanned the room as if searching for a hiding-place or some means of escape.

The masked man glanced upward where huge square beams spanned the walls of the large living-room. Those beams were three feet in width. The Road Runner smiled, tossed his cigaret into the fire and, stepping upon a heavy carved Spanish chest, leaped and caught one of the beams. With a catlike twist he was astride a beam. Then he pulled his legs up and lay upon

its broad surface, hidden from the sight of anyone below.

"A bit hard, old chap," called a cautious voice, "but quite an adequate hiding-place, eh? At least *you* were deceived."

The voice, a mere husky whisper, came from another of those beams. The man was in the shadow. The firelight and candle-light below made the shadows above all the deeper and more deceptive.

The crash of the fallen door obliterated any answer that might have come from the Road Runner. The Yaquis, dripping wet, surged into the room, guns ready for instant use. At their head was a sodden, wild-eyed Pablo, a Colt's in one hand, an ugly knife in the other. The earless Indian's face was a study in puzzled, maniacal wrath. A diabolical hate had twisted the man's face until the innate cruelty of the barbarian stamped it, distorting the features horribly.

A Yaqui stumbled against him and Pablo stabbed the man with one swift blow. The Yaqui spun about, his shoulder reddening from the wound. Chance alone had sent Pablo's keen blade to the Yaqui's shoulder instead of the unfortunate fellow's heart.

Pablo stood before Don Sebastian. For the moment he did not perceive that the Spaniard was dead.

"Dog!" Pablo spat into the dead man's face. "Thou traitor! Thou thief!" And he drove his knife into the cold, skinny breast of the dead Don, cursing the while. And not until then did he realize that death had already taken the soul of the man in the huge chair. Not until then did he see the circle of cactus in front of the chair, the death warning of *El Cucillo de Tierra*.

Pablo straightened, wiping his knife-blade on the dead man's garish dressing-gown. Then he stared at the book and reading-glass. Now his slits of black eyes swept the room, searching for a trace of the vanished Road Runner. But of that one's presence, all that greeted Pablo was the lingering taint of cigaret smoke.

"To the passes, dogs of Yaquis!" he snarled. "Divide in two groups. One half to each trail. Kill anyone who tries to pass. Go, dogs!"

Pablo was left alone in the room—a room lighted by guttering candles and a dying fire. Shadows played like ghost

hands cross the dead face of the man in the chair, shadows that hid two men who lay motionless on the broad beams above.

Pablo stood there, staring at the dead Don Sebastian, at the open book where the dead finger seemed pointing to a certain paragraph. Pablo took the glass and, without moving the book, read the indicated paragraph and the minute penciling between its printed lines. A diabolical grin twisted Pablo's lips as he tossed aside the glass and stepped to the fireplace. His dark hand ran along the marble pillar of the fireplace and probed along the seam of an oak paneling that flanked the marble pillars.

His hand released some hidden spring and the narrow panel slid back, revealing a dark passageway, a tunnel that seemed to run the length of the wall, a secret passageway made in the four-foot adobe wall. Pablo slid into the black opening and closed the panel behind him. The two men hidden on the broad beams were alone in the room with the dead Don Sebastian.

The man who had spoken in English to the Road Runner slipped from his hiding-place and dropped lightly to the ground. A handsome, white-haired, white-mustached man, deeply tanned and clothed in tailored whipcord riding breeches and cavalry boots. A soft leather jacket, heavy cartridge belt, flannel shirt, and soft felt hat completed his raiment. He snapped open a cigaret case as the Road Runner dropped to the floor and faced him. The military-looking man saluted carelessly and held out the cigaret case.

"Smoke, old chap? Or is it to be bullets between you and me? I take it we're after the same thing. Brothers in crime and all that. You are a man of brave heart, señor, and likewise one of cold, shrewd judgment. You read what was written in the book. Directions for locating the hidden door. What made you choose the beam, rather than the secret passageway? How did you know I had not used that secret exit?"

"Because, señor," came the husky reply from behind the mask, "I saw dust and the old web of a spider on that panel. I knew that no one had gone that way. Also, I feared a trap. I'm not fond of tunnels."

"A trap, eh? Quite so. Our friend Pablo will find that the tunnel is no longer passable. It was blocked, several years

ago, by a man who used it to escape from this place. Myself, to be more explicit. It was I who broke the back of Don Sebastian. They saw me here in this room with a dozen knife slits in my carcass, the Don's knife in my back. The supersitious fools were afraid to enter the room. Panic-stricken. Even Pablo. I'd swooned from pain and loss of blood. Sebastian was apparently as dead as I seemed to be. The room was dark when I woke. I managed to crawl to the panel and open it. I supposed Sebastian was dead, that Pablo would see the Señora and her daughter safely out of the country.

"Sounds like a damn' fairy tale, but I lived in that tunnel for weeks. Crept out at night to steal food and clean linen for bandages. And because even Sebastian did not know of that secret passageway in his own house (one of my workmen built it without the Don's knowledge), I came and went unmolested.

"When I gained strength, I left. A ragged, dirty, long-haired, bearded scarecrow of a man, but strong enough to throttle the first damned Yaqui I met and thus procure a gun. I was, to all knowledge, dead. So I took care to remain dead.

"Tonight I returned. I had the great pleasure of enlightening Don Sebastian before that heart of his went bad and he died glowering his devilish hate into my face."

The speaker paused, smiling thinly at the masked man.

"Who you may be, señor of the mask," he went on, "I have no way of knowing. But I guess your reason for coming. It is the hidden treasure, eh? Look inside that chest by which you stand and you will see it."

The Road Runner crossed to the carved chest and lifted its massive lid. The candle-light fell on a mass of glittering metal and precious stones set in crude gold ornaments. When he had feasted his gaze on the dazzling wealth, he lowered the lid and found himself looking into the muzzle of a leveled Colt's.

The Road Runner laughed behind his mask and spoke in Mexican.

"You would murder me then, señor, for that treasure?"

"Oh, no," came the calm reply as the gun was lowered, "I was just guarding

myself against what possible reaction you might have.

"But then," he added a little grimly, "you have not devoted practically a lifetime in vain search for that same treasure."

For a moment the tall, white-haired soldier of fortune was shaken from his even composure. For a brief moment the years of suffering and hardships were stamped on his handsome face. Then he smiled and filled two glasses of wine and set them on the table.

"Memories, señor of the mask, are often specters of bitter mistakes, eh? Here are two glasses of most excellent wine. On the wall are two splendid rapiers of Damascus make. In that chest is a fabulous wealth of gold and jewels for which every conceivable crime has already been committed. I give you your choice, señor—the wine or the rapier." Crossing to the wall, he took down the two blades and laid them on the polished table that held the glasses of wine.

He bowed formally. The masked man bowed in return and stepped to the table that now separated them. Then he ungloved his right hand and reached for the wine.

XI

THE man of military bearing watched him, watched the hand that went across the table. Suddenly a sharp cry came from his grim-lipped mouth.

"God, man!" He pointed to the palm of the Road Runner's left hand, pointed to the tattooed mark there, a tiny square within a circle.

"Who the devil are you?"

"That," came from behind the mask, "is what I've been asking myself for a good many years." And he pulled off his mask.

"Peter!"

"Colonel!" For it was the face of Pete Dawson that showed in the flickering candle-light.

The older man's arms were about him, crushing him, shaking him.

"Gad, sir! Gad! You young devil! Keeping that silly mask on while I— You spalpeen with your shenanigans! The like av yer damned impudence. Makin' a monkey out of him that's bin father an' mother an' what all to ye! The devil take

yer impudence!" He held the younger man at arm's length.

There were tears in the tall man's deep blue eyes as he scanned Dawson's face.

"Peter, son, what the devil brings you here?"

"You, Colonel. I hadn't heard from you! That letter at Washington said to come here. Then, when I got here, they said you were dead."

"But the other letter, Peter? The one from Mexico City!"

"I got no other letter."

"Then my messenger was intercepted and murdered. And you, my boy, came here alone. Came to— Ah, friend Pablo has discovered that the tunnel is blocked and is now clawing like a trapped rat trying to get out. Like a rat that he is. A damned rat. Presently, Peter, you shall guard the door yonder while I have the pleasure of killing him."

"Killing Pablo? But the poor devil is just crazy because he thinks I've lifted his treasure. Why, he was planning my escape when Don Sebastian was for torturing me."

"Escape, eh? Even as he once planned mine, damn him. Escape, hell! You'd be shot down like a dog. Pablo would, himself, attend to the shooting, for fear I might have told you some secrets of this treasure; and Sebastian's damned torture rack would tear the secrets from you. Pablo is a treacherous snake. I, who once knew him as a friend, have cause to know. For there was a time, Peter, when I am ashamed to admit that I and Pablo and Don Sebastian were partners in a deal that smelt of crime. In other words, the three of us looted the Lost City of Pablo's ancestors. No one of us, or no two of us could do the job. So we combined. Pablo, the actual thief. I took care of the transportation. Don Sebastian furnished the Haunted Mesa and his damned Yaquis as a hiding place. It's not a pleasing tale, Peter. It reflects no credit on the name of Michael O'Hara. But then, 'twas not so terrible a crime to steal from the dead and cheat the greasers from wealth to which they had no legal right, more than I.

"Pablo had a claim to it. He's half Spanish. His mother ran off with a Spaniard who, along with Sebastian's ancestor and one or two other Spanish in-

vaders, escaped to Spain. There, in Spain, Pablo was educated. Later he was sent to an American or English university. He spent his vacations in Mexico. He and his father and Don Sebastian and one or two other Spaniards. Eventually they found the Lost City and its handful of white Indians. Pablo, marked with the sign of their race, was accepted rather dubiously. Incidentally, their coming knocked into a cocked hat the careful plot of a damnfool young Irishman who had appeared with the supposed 'lost prince of the forgotten race.'"

Colonel O'Hara cocked an ear toward the panel, shrugged at the faint sound of Pablo's pounding, and continued.

"This Irishman's name was, and sometimes is yet, Michael O'Hara. Born with the curse of the meanderin' foot, as they say, he wandered to every corner of God's earth. Talking his way out of jams with a blarneyed tongue, fighting when needs be, he went his way. When he was not yet of age he met and married the most beautiful, the sweetest girl that ever gave her heart to a worthless young rascal who lived by his wits and fists and his knack with a rapier. I was then fencing master in New York.

"For a few short years they were happy. They and their baby that came. And Michael O'Hara settled down and was commissioned as a cavalry officer, a hard-ridin', devil-may-care lieutenant who had just passed his examination for a captaincy. A born soldier and as happy as ever was a man who loved no woman but his wife.

"And when things seemed to be going right, when the world was all sunshine, she died. Smallpox, they called it. And Captain O'Hara was left alone with a wee bit of a baby and a heart that was so broken that it never was healed. Her relatives took the baby. Michael O'Hara resigned and disappeared.

"One night O'Hara gets this young Pablo out of a drunken brawl. And while sobering the young devil up, O'Hara listened to a yarn about a lost prince of a lost people. Pablo shows O'Hara the tattooed mark on his hand. Which sets the liquor-brightened brain of Michael O'Hara going. The next day this Irish officer of the Mexican army has disappeared. Gone.

"O'Hara has gone home. Home to New York, with a plan in his fool head. He's been gone five years and they think he's dead. And his wife's rich relatives who never liked the name O'Hara have had the baby's name changed to theirs, which was not, I may here add, Irish.

"The son is as handsome a young devil as a man wants to see, and shakes hands with the gentleman stranger who gives the nurse an Irish smile and a five-dollar bill. And in half an hour the lad is more than eager to go away with the man. When the nurse kicks up the devil's own row, O'Hara runs for it. He bashes a good honest cop, jumps a cab, and that night a steamer leaves for Mexico with two new passengers, a tall Irishman and his six-year-old son who is sufferin' from a bellyache from ice cream and candy.

"There's a sailor on the ship that's a tattoo artist, and O'Hara has the fellow decorate the palm of his son's hand with the same mark that he's seen on the hand of Pablo Dominguez, son of an Indian mother and a Spanish father. Pablo, the half-breed that the Spanish gents are going to foist on these ignoramuses of white Indians as soon as they locate the exact spot where the village is. Get that last, Peter. *When* they can find this village. The main city, ye understand, is lost these many years. Totally destroyed, ye might say. But the Injuns have saved a bulk of the gold trinkets.

"The hell of it is, Peter, Sebastian and his *compadres* don't know where the village is. But Michael O'Hara has been there and can find the place again. So while the Spaniards are educating their Pablo and combing Mexico for this village, O'Hara takes a pack train and shows up one day with this bit of a boy with the king's mark on his palm.

"*'Amigos,'* says O'Hara, for all the world like a New York ward leader introducin' his candidate for mayor, 'here's the boy that's heir to the golden throne. The one an' only livin' survivor with pure blood in his veins.' And a lot more to that effect, while he keeps his eye on the bow-an'-arrow boys an' puts his heart into the speech, keepin' his gat handy the while.

"They swallow his line of blarney an' take him into the family circle. They hold ceremonies that's awe-inspirin'. It looks

like O'Hara's puttin' it over successfully.

"Then up pops Don Sebastian an' Pablo. Pablo is in his early twenties and about the right age to be son of this queen. An' for all I know, perhaps his mother was a king's daughter. Anyhow, his credentials beat O'Hara's an' there's the devil to pay. There's talk of human sacrifice. So O'Hara takes his son and two six-shooters an' the fastest horse to be had, an' shoots his way out of the mess. In the ruckus Pablo's father, Dominguez, gets killed. So does another Spanish gent. An' perhaps an Injun or so. It's dark an' hard to count.

"O'Hara leaves the boy with some good, honest people in Texas. They have a cow outfit there and can be trusted to care for the boy an' ask an' answer no questions of nosey strangers. O'Hara's wife's folks are raisin' hell over the kidnagin', understand.

"Then O'Hara, like the true son of Cork that he is, goes back into Mexico to scrap for that which by now he imagines belongs to him, havin' gone to all that trouble an' what-not. So back he goes, nursin' his injured pride an' prepared to fight for what's his. An' the first man he meets in Guadalajara is none other than Don Sebastian Ignacio Bartholme y Chavez, which is his full name. An' O'Hara has the advantage of the drop. He takes away a gun and two knives from Sebastian and escorts him to a nice quiet place where the sound of a pistol will not be noticed.

"*'Now, friend Don,'* says O'Hara, 'we talk turkey, you and I. Perhaps, if you are nice-mannered and of generous nature, I shall be deprived of the pleasure of shooting you in the belly and leaving your carcass here. What's the latest in the way of news, just for the sake of chit-chat?' And O'Hara's Colt's tickles the son of Spain under the short ribs. Whereupon the Don waxed fluent.

"It seems that he barely escaped with his life from the village. Pablo, near as he can figure, has turned native and, with true native instinct, has double-crossed Don Sebastian, who seems to be the only one left of O'Hara's rivals in treasure-hunting business."

The speaker paused, smiling reminiscently. From behind the locked panel came Pablo's frantic scratching. Dawson waited in silence.

"Not a nice tale, eh, Peter?"

"Interesting, anyhow, Colonel. Hang it, I always wondered if you weren't my father. Why the devil did you keep it from me?"

"Who knew just when I'd be jailed or hung or what-not?" shrugged Colonel O'Hara. "No use saddling you with disgrace of your fool father. An' I didn't want you to care too much for me. My tomorrows were never certain. I was a wanderer. The only balm for the tear in this heart of mine was the thrill of danger. Then I could forget her who was the most wonderful woman God ever created. Amen to that, son. To continue:

"So, once convinced of the truth Sebastian was spilling into my ear, we pooled our bets and framed on this Pablo, who was either damned sincere or a double-damned rascal, or both.

"One night, some weeks later, Michael O'Hara met this Pablo, who was on a hill making peace with some heathen god or another. Naked, save for a breech-clout, chantin' to the moon like a bayin' dog. But he quit singin' when my gun tickled his spine.

"'It is a shame for one so young and handsome to die,' explained O'Hara. 'On such a nice night, too. But die you shall unless you let me in on this little deal. Anyhow, you can't swing the deal alone. While I ain't much older than you, I've kicked around more and can size up any proposition from highway robbery to piracy. I've had experience in both and I can prove it to you.'

"So was formed a partnership of three—Sebastian, Pablo and O'Hara. All hatin' the others an', as it turns out, each dependin' on each other. Sebastian an' his Yaquis; Pablo, who gets made king an' locates the loot; O'Hara keepin' off the Mexicans as we move the loot to Haunted Mesa. The last was no easy job. The greasers were watchin'. We had some sweet fights. An' there was the miles of blisterin' sand an' no water. The rations low, Mules dyin'. My men desertin' every night. Two or three festerin' bullet holes in my hide. Night after night, sleepin' with one eye open' an' my cocked gun in my hand. Guardin' the treasure. And in the end, mind you, after weeks of hell, to drop in my tracks with fever. To wake up lookin' into the leerin' face of Pablo.

He's sittin' beside me with a long knife in his hand.

"'My turn now, Señor O'Hara,' says he. 'I have trailed behind and waited for this moment to come. It is here. It is your turn to listen. Perhaps it is better to use discretion than to die, no?'

"'Always,' agrees O'Hara. 'But remember you're a long ways from home, so don't crow too loud, my rooster. Speak your piece.'

"'It is that you and I play a little joke on Don Sebastian. I shall fix it with the few men left to desert. You will go on alone. You will reach the Haunted Mesa with but one-third of the treasure. The rest will have been stolen. So you and I and Sebastian will share that third equally, while only you and I shall know where the remaining two-thirds is hidden. I do not like Sebastian. I hate all Spaniards. I am a king.'

"O'Hara was too sick, understand, to argue. Furthermore he bore Sebastian no love. As for the wily Pablo, there was *mañana* and *mañana* and *mañana*. We should see what we should see. But fool that I was, Peter, I forgot to consider that this Pablo might also slip me the double-cross. Which he did.

"Sebastian, the fool, had brought his wife to this damned place. Wife and daughter. And that wife was an angel. She saved my life, nursing me through the fever. But Sebastian, the dirty devil, had her under some devilish hypnotic spell and was already beginning to practice his powers on his own daughter.

"But he was clever, damn him. When I sought to leave my room I found I was a prisoner. Pablo, the crook, had planted his seed of suspicion. He had Sebastian thinking that I had cached part of the loot somewhere. It was the señora who tipped me off, poor woman. An' the damned Pablo listening at the door the while. Pablo carries the tale to Sebastian, who orders us both brought into this room.

"'I shall horsewhip this faithless wanton,' says Sebastian, and the look on his face is the look of one who believes evil—evil of her who was as pure as the saints. 'I shall whip her while the Señor Gringo looks on. Then, O'Hara, I shall cut you with the knife while you scream for mercy.

"And his language became vile as the

gutter. And as he talked I was working desperately at the rope about my wrists. The rope came free as Sebastian locked that door from the inside and pocketed the key.

"So we fought, Peter, he with his knife, I with my hands. Faith, had I wished, I could have snatched one of the rapiers from the wall and run the fool through. But I wanted to kill him with my hands. Moreover, I'd always feared a knife, and I wanted to cure that fear in me. I damn' near died in the proving. But I'd broken Don Sebastian, blast him. I'd made a living dead man of him that night. You know the rest.

"I dug the damn' stuff up on my way here. Brought it to show Don Sebastian. Pablo's discovered the theft, hence his unseemly anger. Now, Peter, son, guard the door while Pablo sees the ghost of Michael O'Hara. It will be a show worth the seeing, I'll wager. Guard the door, boy!"

XII

PABLO sprang from the dark tunnel, rage and fright stamped on his twitching face. Then he stood in his tracks, staring wide-eyed at O'Hara.

"*Valgame Dios!* Damn you, speak! Who are you? Man or devil? Speak, or I'll kill you!"

"You'd be dead before you could pull the trigger," said O'Hara coldly. "Look toward the door, my murdering *amigo*, and you'll find yourself well covered. Kill him, Peter, if he wiggles a finger. Pablo, drop that gun. You may keep the knife. And I'm going to break you as I broke Don Sebastian.

Michael O'Hara, with a catlike spring, was at Pablo's side. With a quick wrench he tore the Indian's gun from his hand and tossed it aside. Then he stepped back and rolled back his sleeves from bronzed, muscular forearms. Pablo, wetting dry lips with his tongue, stepped back, crouched like some animal, the long knife in his hand.

With a swift gesture, O'Hara knocked over the candelabra. Save for the dying fire in the big grate, the room was in darkness. The two men were blurred, swift-moving shadows. Dawson, tense, eyes

straining in the darkness, stood guard.

The crash of a broken chair. The grunt of men in straining embrace. A muttered curse and the thud of a fallen body.

"Come again, you damned dog!" gritted O'Hara's voice in the terrible darkness. A smothered oath. The thud of a fist, scuffling feet. A moan that thinned to a scream of terror. Then the sickening snap of a broken bone. A body staggered across the firelight moaning.

Pablo, the earless Indian, leaned against the table, one arm dangling limply. A knife sped across the red glow, stuck in the table alongside Pablo, quivering within a few inches of the dangling hand.

Pablo, with a maniacal scream, jerked the knife free and lunged. The blade slithered like a white streak. A fist thudded and Pablo staggered backward. O'Hara struck again. Then a white, blinding crash filled the room, a terrific white blast that blew red coals from the grate.

Dawson's brain snapped. White hot irons seared his whole being. He knew no more until he awoke in a black world that flickered with fire. For a moment he visioned Hades itself. Then he jerked himself to his feet.

The room was on fire. He saw O'Hara's form moving against the background of flames. He saw, spilled before the shattered fireplace, a scattered heap of gold and precious stones that blazed like multi-colored eyes. Propped in a chair facing that scattered wealth was Pablo. And in the other chair sat the dead Don Sebastian. And O'Hara was binding Pablo in the chair.

"Good Lord, Colonel!" cried Dawson. "You can't roast the man alive!"

"Alive? Hardly, Peter!" O'Hara's voice was a croaking, husky whisper. "Pablo's dead as a rock. Dead as his cursed treasure that I've gone through hell to get and now offer up as a sacrifice to—what'll we offer it to, Peter? To the green god that guides the destinies of men born with the curse of the meanderin' foot? Eh, Peter? Be a good chap and tie up this arm."

Michael O'Hara lifted the decanter of wine and drank deeply. Dawson, swiftly bandaging the wounded arm, saw that

Pablo's wicked blade had ripped it from shoulder to wrist. Tendons and muscles were laid open to the bone. No surgeon's skill could save it from being useless forever.

Pete Dawson pulled O'Hara out into the storm.

"A red-haired girl passed me as I was coming," he told Dawson as they found horses and the wounded man climbed into the saddle. "Hadn't we better find the young lady and escort her elsewhere?"

"She's already safe, God willing."

"Sebastian's daughter?"

"Yes."

"Her mother," said O'Hara softly, "was a saint, boy. I hope, for the sake of peace in your future life, that she don't take after her father. Faith, ye're blushin'. Hold the light for my cigaret. Peter. Another shot of brandy an' we'll charge the Yaquis. I can still shoot."

"Here they are, Colonel!" And without further waiting, the two men, father and son, rode into the line of spewing rifle fire, through it and down the trail into the shadow-filled canyon below.

A race to quicken the pulse of an iron man! Spitting guns, yells, the rattle of hoofbeats! Then the two white men vanished. From out of the maw of Black Canyon drifted the mocking song of *El Cucillo de Tierra*.

The two men halted at the mouth of a hidden cave. Pete Dawson gave a quail call. From the distance came an answer.

"Feel better, Colonel?" he asked, bathing O'Hara's face with cold water from a spring.

"Eh? Sure. Better, Peter. We rode 'em down, eh, boy? Where are we?"

"We're in the Road Runner's cave. One of the holes you hid me in once when you brought me into these hills."

A man with the build of a prize fighter and the face of an ape stepped into the cave.

"This is Colonel O'Hara, my father, Captain Guererra. Again, I thank you for the clothes. I'm sorry to say that I didn't learn much of the smuggling business on the Haunted Mesa. But I can assure you of this: If Don Sebastian was mixed up with the smugglers, they'll be missing from now on. For the Don is dead. So is Pablo. And my work here is ended.

Perhaps we'll be working together again some day. In behalf of my government, I thank you, señor."

"Tonight that *Cucillo de Tierra* dies," said Captain Guererra with a smile. "He shall never be seen again. His work is done. *Caramba*, one gets weary of killing, eh?"

They said farewell to the Mexican and rode off. Michael O'Hara's song faded in the distance.

"Peter," he voiced his one regret as father and son rode through the sunrise to the border patrol station, "they'll be makin' a damn' desk colonel out of me now. Me, Michael O'Hara, livin' fat-bellied in peace. But begad, I've lived, Peter. Lived, eh? Ye'll be married in Washington, Peter? In a new uniform with a major's gold leaves on yer shoulder? Me givin' away the bride an' so on? An' will ye be namin' the first boy after his grand-daddy, Peter?"

"But I haven't asked her to marry me," grinned Peter in embarrassment.

"But ye're goin' to?"

"At the first opportunity, Colonel." Peter looked worried. "I reckon she'll turn me down."

But when, half an hour later as they rode up to the patrol station, a girl ran to meet him, in her eyes was unspoken answer to the unspoken question in Pete O'Hara's glance.

INSIDE the cabin, Michael O'Hara lay back on a cot and winked at Nicols and Hardin.

While outside, Pete O'Hara and Maria were explaining away the little matter of a kiss stolen one night by that same Road Runner. The matter being adjusted in a satisfactory manner, they strolled toward the corral where Joker was rolling in the dust as if trying to rub out the blotches of white liquid chalk that had made him into a pinto. The Pack Rat was noisily voicing indignation or approval as he looked on.

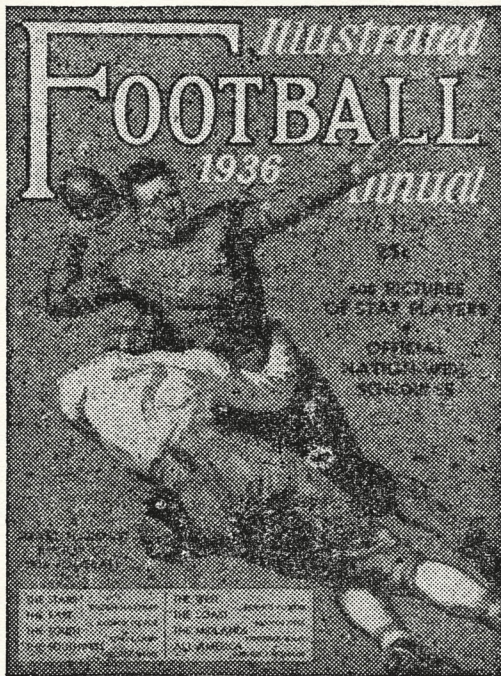
Pete glanced back toward the cabin.

"I hope," he said as they paused again in the shelter of a *manzanita* thicket, "that they won't be waiting breakfast for us."

"We should go back?" she asked, as he held her in his arms.

"Back? Sure," and he kissed her again. "Back for lunch!"

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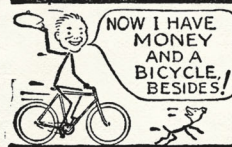


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BOYS, 12 to 16! Three hundred big prizes, including athletic equipment, movie machine, typewriter, musical instruments, printing press—and this aluminum streamlined bicycle! Bike comes fully equipped with electric horn, coaster brake, headlight, parking stand, wheel lock, etc. Low, bow-arch, streamlined frame; chromium plated; 20% lighter than most bikes. Swift, flashy, sturdy.

Earn this bike, or any of our other prizes, and make MONEY, besides. It's easy. Just obtain customers in your neighborhood and deliver our nationally known magazines to them. Need not interfere with school or play. Many boys earn a prize the first day. Perhaps you can, too. Mail the coupon and we'll start you right away.

Mr. Jim Thayer, Dept. 658
The Crowell Publishing Co., Springfield, Ohio

Dear Jim: I want to earn MONEY and PRIZES. Start me at once and send me a Prize Book.

Name.....Age.....
Address.....
City.....State.....



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EARN A BICYCLE • TYPEWRITER • MOVIE MACHINE • PRINTING PRESS • MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS



How This CHALLENGE Made Me "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man"

I WAS then a 97-pound weakling. He was heavier, stronger, plenty tough. But I just couldn't pass up his direct challenge. A crowd gathered around to watch the slaughter. *And what a trimming I got!* He put more smashing power behind that one hand of his than I had in my whole body. It was the most embarrassing thing that ever happened to me!

But, as it turned out, that beating changed my entire life. For I made up my mind then and there to DO SOMETHING about myself—to learn something about my body and find a way to build it up—to become a HE-MAN instead of a HALF-MAN. And here's what happened:—

And Then I Made a Discovery

I began to study the structure and play of all the muscles. Then I tested out ideas I had for building muscle power and endurance—through outside road work and also through indoor exercises. Then I compared my measurements, before and after. Checked the results carefully. Made other tests. Checked again. Time after time, for months, I did this.

And finally came the great day when I felt at last I had discovered the *natural* way to build powerful, rippling muscles—without any contraptions that

may strain the heart or other vital organs! I at once put this system to work. I called it *Dynamic Tension*!

Well, the whole world knows what happened—and how "Dynamic Tension" changed me from a 97-pound weakling to the man who is now holder of the title of "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man"!

This amazing method built me up—gave me the evenly developed body, the big muscles, and wonderful chest, that you see here.

Today I am devoting all of my time to passing the secret of "Dynamic Tension" along to others like yourself. And what "Dynamic Tension" has done for me—and for 52,000 other fellows—I am ready to prove it can do for YOU.

I'll Prove in the first 7 days that YOU can have a Body like Mine!

Just give me your measure—and I'll give you proof in just 7 days that I can make you a NEW MAN! Then I'll start new inches of massive power pushing out your chest—build up your shoulders to champion huskiness—put regular mountains of useful muscle on your biceps—give you a strong back—make those stomach muscles of yours hard ridges!

I'll whittle off waistline fat if you want me to. Slim down your hips and make your shoulders

look a mile wide. Put new pep into your thighs, get the calves of your legs bulging big, add weight if you need it. With a body like that you'll be so brimming-over with health *inside* that you'll feel on top of the world—free from constipation, poor digestion, bad breath, pimples, and similar weaknesses that are robbing you of the good things in life that can be yours. The ruddy glow of health will show on your face—you will be the outstanding fellow in your crowd.

CHARLES ATLAS

Twice winner and present holder of the title "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" won in open competition in the only national and international contests held in past 15 years. Another Physical Instructor in the World has ever DARED to make the offer he makes in this announcement.



Sterling Silver Cup Being Given Away

Made of solid sterling silver, stands 14 in. high on mahogany base.

I will award it to pupil who makes most improvement in development within next 3 months. No matter what your measurements are now, you have equal chance to win this cup... with YOUR name engraved on it!

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Now make me PROVE I can do it. Let me send you the FREE BOOK that opens the door to human living.

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Are you ready to learn my secrets—ready to learn how I can give YOU the kind of body you've always longed to have? Then tell me where to send your copy of my book. Fill in the coupon below, and mail TODAY to me personally. Address: CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 91, 115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.



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115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

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

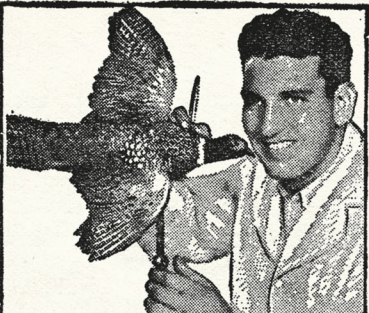
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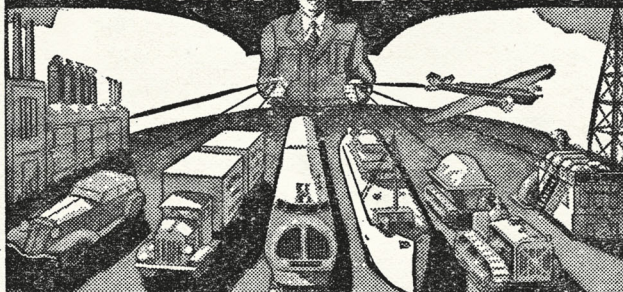
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Headlight; Horn; Tool Box; Coaster Brake. Yes, fully equipped. Chromium plated parts. A Colson make. What a Bike! A brand new sporty bike for every ambitious boy or girl!

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NEW PREMIUM! Fully equipped with alternating current electric motor. **FINISH:** Baked crystal enamel. Will accommodate 200 feet film, eight minute show—two 200 feet empty reels furnished. Tilting device for angle projection. Reverser—wind to top spool. **Framer. Reflector. Special concentrated filament bulb, cord and plug.** Size of picture 20 inches by 26 inches at a distance of ten feet from the screen. Weight 8½ pounds each. **A Jim Dandy! Get one now! FREE 25 feet of Film valued at 75¢ included if you remit in 10 days!** You can get this Projector easily by **SIMPLY GIVING AWAY FREE** Art Pictures with famous **WHITE CLOVERINE SALVE**, used for burns, chaps, etc., which you sell to friends at 25¢ a box (with picture **FREE**) and remit as per our premium plan catalog. **Send no money! We trust you!** Mail Coupon! **WILSON CHEM. CO., Inc., Dept. NG-81, Tyrone, Pa.**

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IVER JOHNSON 22 Cal. Bolt action self-cocking pistol grip patented Safety RIFLE or 5-tube AC-DC Superheterodyne Long and Short Wave **RADIO** picks up police calls, amateur and regular broadcasts. Dynamic speaker, airplane dial. Wonderful selectivity and sensitivity. Fine tone. Compact. Shielded chassis. **IT'S UNUSUAL. You can easily get one of these Radios or Rifles by SIMPLY GIVING AWAY FREE** beautifully colored art pictures suitable for framing with our well known **WHITE CLOVERINE SALVE**, used for cuts, burns, chaps, sores, etc., which you sell to friends at 25¢ a box (with picture **FREE**) and remit as per new big premium plan book! **Get started with this plan—people are buying now! Our 41st Year. Mail Coupon Now!**

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OR BIG CASH COMMISSION!

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GIVEN

BOYS & GIRLS 1937 MODEL

SEND NO MONEY! We Trust You!

Streamline WAGON with roll top, big hub caps, electric headlights, bumper, brakes and big roller-bearing disc wheels.

LINDY FLYER

This LINDY FLYER yours for SIMPLY GIVING AWAY FREE big colored pictures with our famous **WHITE CLOVERINE SALVE** used for cuts, burns, etc., easily sold to friends at 25¢ a box (with picture **FREE**) and remit per catalog. **Be first!**

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Girls STANDARD SIZE GUITAR. Regulated, fretted, ebonyized finger-board—pearl position dots. Just as shown. See Mickey Mouse on the dial of Wrist Watch! In colors, too! Mickey's also on the strap or link bracelet. **WHAT A WATCH! You can easily get either the Guitar or the Watch by SIMPLY GIVING AWAY FREE** beautifully colored Art Pictures with our famous **WHITE CLOVERINE SALVE**, used for cuts, burns, chaps, sores, etc., which you sell to your friends, relatives and neighbors at 25¢ a box (giving away picture **FREE**) and remitting as per our new premium catalog. Choice of many other valuable gifts. Easy to sell one or more boxes in most every home. Our 41st Anniversary Year. We are reliable. **Send No Money—We Trust You! BE FIRST IN YOUR HOME TOWN!** Our Easy Plans Keep Thousands Busy. **MAIL Coupon!**

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Name _____

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PRINT YOUR LAST NAME ONLY IN SPACE BELOW

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—yet Bob is the envy of his music-loving friends

You, too, can learn to play any instrument this amazingly simple way. No expensive teacher. No tiresome exercises or practicing. You learn at home, in your spare time. Yet almost before you know it you are playing real tunes! Then watch the invitations roll in—see how popular you become. Yet the cost is only a few cents a day.

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You don't have to be "talented." You can't be too young or too old. No teacher to make you nervous. Course is thorough, rapid, simple as A-B-C. First you are told what to do—then a picture shows you how to do it—then you do it yourself and hear it. In a short time you become the envy of your friends, the life of every party.



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Without Calomel—And You'll Jump Out of Bed in the Morning Rin' to Go

The liver should pour out two pounds of liquid bile into your bowels daily. If this bile is not flowing freely, your food doesn't digest. It just decays in the bowels. Gas bloats up your stomach. You get constipated. Your whole system is poisoned and you feel sour, sunk and the world looks punk.

Laxatives are only makeshifts. A mere bowel movement doesn't get at the cause. It takes those good, old Carter's Little Liver Pills to get these two pounds of bile flowing freely and make you feel "up and up." Harmless, gentle, yet amazing in making bile flow freely. Ask for Carter's Little Liver Pills by name. Stubbornly refuse anything else. 25c at all drug stores. © 1935, C. M. CO.



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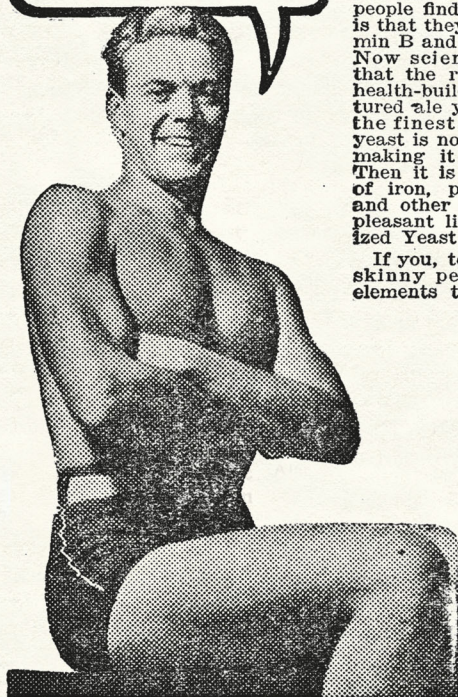
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Posed by professional models

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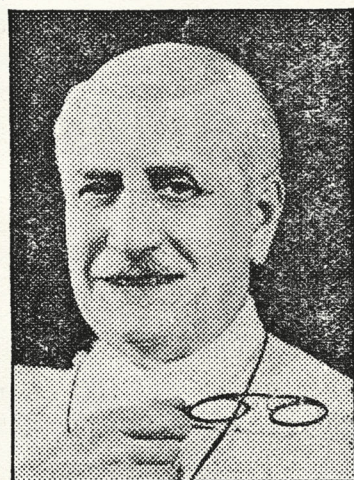
"Was in bad shape, bowels off, bad headaches, weak and tired. With Ironized Yeast I gained 11 lbs. in 4 weeks and feel strong as an ox."—Robert Thompson, Columbus, Georgia

15 lbs. in 5 weeks

"Had lost weight and strength. Nothing helped till I took Ironized Yeast. Gained 15 lbs. in 5 weeks, feel great."—Fred Wellmann, Brooklyn, N. Y.

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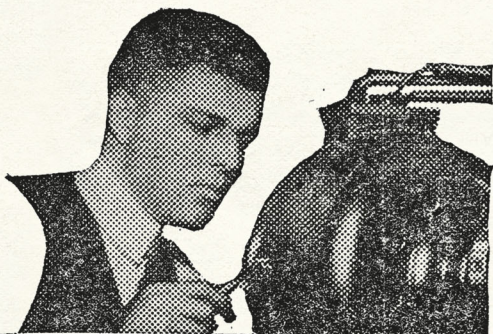
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When Poisons Clog **KIDNEYS** and Irritate Bladder

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Go to your druggist today and get this safe, swift and harmless diuretic and stimulant—ask for Gold Medal Haarlem Oil Capsules and start at once to flush kidneys of waste matter saturated with acids and poisons.

That's the way to bring about healthy kidney activity and stop that bladder irritation which often causes scanty passage with smarting and burning as well as restless nights.

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PROSTATE Gland Weakness

Nervous Debility, Frequent Night Rising, Leg Pains, Lame Back, Lumbago, Sexual Weakness, Kidney and Bladder Trouble, Chronic Constipation, Despondency, Restlessness at Night are only some of the ailments, differing in individuals, that can often be ascribed to lesion of the Prostate Gland.

THOUSANDS AFFLICTED

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MANY DOCTORS ENDORSE MASSAGE

Massaging for the alleviation of Prostate Trouble is as old as time, and some of the most outstanding authorities in the medical profession recommend massage as a safe effective treatment. (See Reference Book of the Medical Sciences, Vol. VII, 3rd Edition.)

USE "PROSAGER"

—a new invention which enables any man to massage his Prostate Gland in the privacy of his home.

It often brings relief with the first treatment and must help or it costs you nothing. No Drugs or Electricity.

UNSOLICITED LETTERS OF GRATITUDE

Each month we receive scores of unsolicited letters of gratitude and appreciation from users of the Prosager—having thousands of users we no doubt can refer Prostate Sufferers to someone in their own home town who is enthusiastic in their praise of the remarkable benefits received.

DR. W. D. SMITH
INVENTOR



The following are extracts from letters received, which are on file in our office: the complete letters and addresses will be sent to anyone who is interested in inquiring for them:

Mr. Henry Zitman, Auburn, Indiana, says: "I will say this much for the Prosager, it has saved me from an operation. The Doctor that treated me before I got it says it is a fine thing to use. If there is any one in this territory that wants to know about it, direct them to me." Mr. Judson Trefethan, New Castle, N. H., writes about the Prosager: "I think it is a great invention, my Doctor came to see it, and he said it was a good invention."

Mr. J. H. Harpster, Millersburg, Ohio, writes: "I have used your device for prostate trouble for almost a year. I now go from three to six hours and never get up nights more than once. I use it about once a week now. I am 78 years old. Will do all I can to help introduce the Prosager."

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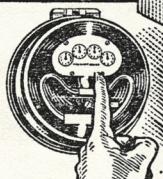
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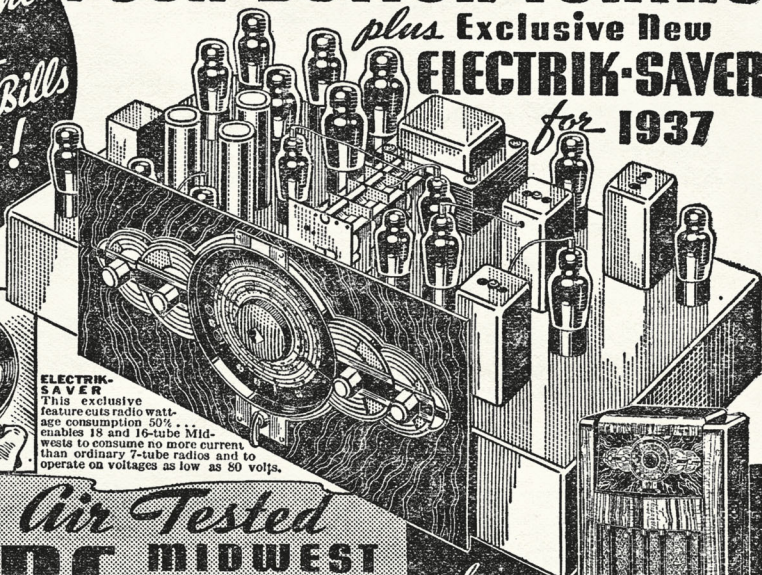


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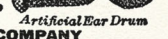
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31x4.50-26	3.10 1.15	44x4	4.00 1.45
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31x4.50-31	3.10 1.15	49x4	4.00 1.45
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31x4.50-67	3.10 1.15	85x4	4.00 1.45
31x4.50-68	3.10 1.15	86x4	4.00 1.45
31x4.50-69	3.10 1.15	87x4	4.00 1.45
31x4.50-70	3.10 1.15	88x4	4.00 1.45
31x4.50-71	3.10 1.15	89x4	4.00 1.45
31x4.50-72	3.10 1.15	90x4	4.00 1.45
31x4.50-73	3.10 1.15	91x4	4.00 1.45
31x4.50-74	3.10 1.15	92x4	4.00 1.45
31x4.50-75	3.10 1.15	93x4	4.00 1.45
31x4.50-76	3.10 1.15	94x4	4.00 1.45
31x4.50-77	3.10 1.15	95x4	4.00 1.45
31x4.50-78	3.10 1.15	96x4	4.00 1.45
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Just what you
want for a
hearty breakfast!

You'll never know how delicious
fish can be until you serve
some of my mackerel fil-
lets, prepared the Down
East way. It will be
the rarest treat you've
known in months.

Take one of my new,
meaty, Fall-caught mack-
erel fillets. Freshen it.
Broil it in its own juices
to a tempting brown, until
the rich, tender meat falls
apart at the touch of your
fork. Serve piping hot. Your
mouth will water at its ap-
peizing aroma. You'll smack your
lips over its wonderful flavor.

What Makes My Mackerel Fillets So Good?

But you must get the right kind of mackerel fillets—the
pick of the new Fall catch is what you want—to get this
real food joy. That's the secret of the tempting goodness
of my mackerel fillets. I send you the choicest fillets that
are carefully sliced from the fat, tender sides of the new
Fall-caught mackerel. Practically boneless, no waste parts
whatever, these mackerel fillets are so tender and full
bodied that they just flake into juicy mouthfuls.

Send No Money Now— unless you wish to

Just send the coupon below or write me a letter, and I'll
ship you a pail of 18 extra choice mackerel fillets—each
fillet suitable for an individual serving. My fillets come to you
all cleaned—no heads—no tails—no large
body bones—no waste whatever—just
meaty fillets packed in new brine in a
wax-lined wooden pail. Taste one—
broiled the Down East way. If not sat-
isfied it's the finest mackerel you ever
tasted, return the balance at my ex-
pense. Otherwise, send me only \$2 with-
in 10 days. 200,000 families get their
sea food from me this "prove-it-your-
self" way. I've been doing business this
way for 51 years and I must say that
this is the lowest price for this size pail
of mackerel fillets I've ever offered.
Send your coupon today for this real
Gloucester treat.

Frank E. Davis, The Gloucester Fisherman
123 Central Wharf, Gloucester, Mass.

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Extra
Choice
Mackerel
Fillets
Only
\$2.00**
Delivered
FREE!
Anywhere
in the
United States

**Mr. Frank E. Davis, The Gloucester Fisherman,
123 Central Wharf, Gloucester, Mass.**

My dear Mr. Davis: Please send me, all charges prepaid,
a pail containing 18 extra choice mackerel fillets, clear
fish, no heads, tails, or waste parts, and practically bone-
less. If, after trying a few fillets, I am not entirely satis-
fied, I will return the rest at your expense and will owe
you nothing. Otherwise, I'll send you \$2.00 within 10 days.*

Name.....

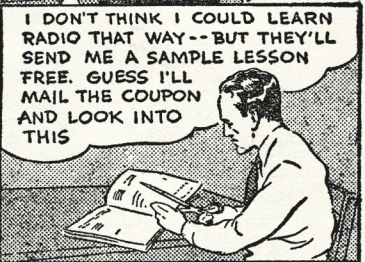
Address.....

City.....

Bank or other reference.....

*If you wish to send check for full amount now, I'll include
with your mackerel a copy of my 25c beautifully illustrated
cook book containing 136 delightful recipes. Your money will
be instantly refunded if you are not pleased in every way.

HOW A FREE LESSON STARTED BILL ON THE WAY TO A GOOD RADIO JOB



Yes, I will send my First Lesson FREE to show how easy it is to TRAIN AT HOME FOR A GOOD RADIO JOB

**J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute**

Do you want to make more money? I'm so sure that I can train you at home in your spare time for a good Radio Job that I'll send you my first lesson absolutely FREE. Examine it, read it, see for yourself how easy it is to understand even if you've never had any technical experience or training.

Many Radio Experts Make \$30, \$50, \$75 a Week

Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay up to \$5,000 a year. Spare time Radio set servicing pays as much as \$200 to \$500 a year. Full time Radio servicing jobs pay as much as \$30, \$50, \$75 a week. Many Radio Experts own and operate their own full time or part time Radio sales and service businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, paying up to \$6,000 a year. Radio operators on ships get good pay and see the world besides. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, and loud speaker systems offer good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises many good jobs soon. Men I have trained are holding good jobs in all these branches of Radio.

Many Make \$5, \$10, \$15 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

Practically every neighborhood needs a good spare time serviceman. The day you enroll I start sending you Extra Money Job Sheets. They show you how to do Radio Repair jobs that you can cash in on quickly. Throughout your training I send you plans and ideas that have made good spare time money—from \$200 to \$500 a year—for hundreds of fellows. I send you special Radio equipment and show you how to conduct experiments and build circuits which illustrate im-

portant Radio principles. My Training gives you practical Radio experience while learning.

Get My Lesson and 64-Page Book FREE

Mail Coupon

In addition to my Sample Lesson, I will send you my 64-page Book, "Rich Rewards in Radio." Both are free to any fellow over 16 years old. My book describes Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tells about my Training in Radio and Television; tells about my Money Back Agreement; shows you actual letters from men I have trained, telling what they are doing and earning. Find out what Radio offers YOU! MAIL THE COUPON in an envelope, or paste it on a penny postcard—NOW!

**J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute, Dept. 6MM,
Washington, D. C.**



YOU SURELY KNOW RADIO. MINE NEVER SOUNDED BETTER.



OH BILL, I'M SO GLAD YOU SENT FOR THAT FREE LESSON AND PROVED TO YOURSELF THAT YOU COULD LEARN RADIO AT HOME

SO AM I. I'M MAKING GOOD MONEY NOW AND WE HAVE A BRIGHT FUTURE AHEAD IN RADIO



**J. E. SMITH, President,
National Radio Institute, Dept. 6MM, Washington, D. C.**

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send "Rich Rewards in Radio," which points out the spare time and full time opportunities in Radio and explains your 50-50 method of training men at home in spare time to become Radio Experts. (Please Write Plainly.)

NAME.....AGE.....
ADDRESS.....
CITY.....STATE.....

MAIL THIS NOW



**A
BAD CASE
OF PIMPLES
MADE NAT
HATE TO GO
PLACES.**

A NICE CLUBBY GUY **YOU** ARE. WHAT'S THE IDEA - KEEPING YOURSELF ALL TO YOURSELF THIS WAY? FRAN'S PRETTY PEEVED AT YOU FOR TURNING DOWN HER INVITE

AW QUIT YELPING, STEVE - I'D GO FAST ENOUGH IF ONLY I DIDN'T HAVE **THIS FACE FULL OF HICKIES** - BUT GOSH - I LOOK SO **AWFUL - I**



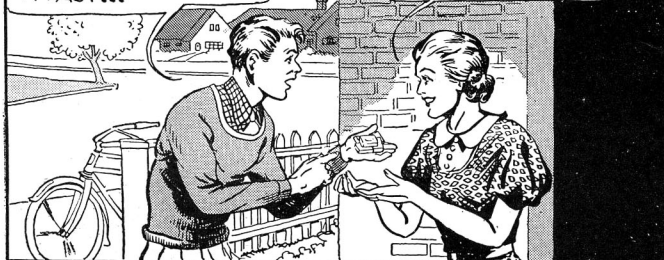
SAY, FRAN - I'VE FOUND OUT WHY NAT'S ACTING SO QUEER, AN' STICKS HOME SO MUCH - SEEMS HE'S **ALL WORKED UP** OVER THOSE **HICKIES** HE'S GOT

POOR KID - HE OUGHT TO EAT FLEISCHMANN'S YEAST - IT'S SIMPLY **MARVELOUS** HOW IT GETS RID OF PIMPLES - STEVE, WHY DON'T YOU TELL HIM ABOUT IT?



OH, ISN'T NAT IN, MRS. JONES? THEN WILL YOU GIVE HIM THESE? TELL HIM I'VE HEARD THIS YEAST JUST **WRECK'S PIMPLES** - AN' THAT'S A FACT...

THANK YOU, STEVE - I'LL TELL NAT ALL YOU SAID AND I'LL **MAKE SURE** HE EATS THESE YEAST CAKES **REGULARLY**



LATER HURRY, NAT - STEVE AND FRAN ARE DOWN HERE WAITING FOR YOU

O.K. BE RIGHT DOWN

GEE - I CAN'T BELIEVE IT'S REALLY **ME** I'M LOOKING AT!



PRETTY GOOD, ISN'T IT, WHAT **YOU** AN' ME AN' **FLEISCHMANN'S YEAST** DID FOR OLD NAT - HE'S ACTIN' LIKE A REGULAR GUY AGAIN SINCE THOSE PIMPLES DID A FADEOUT



Don't let Adolescent Pimples make YOU miss out on Good Times

NEARLY all boys and girls are subject to pimples after the start of adolescence—from about 13 to 25, or even longer.

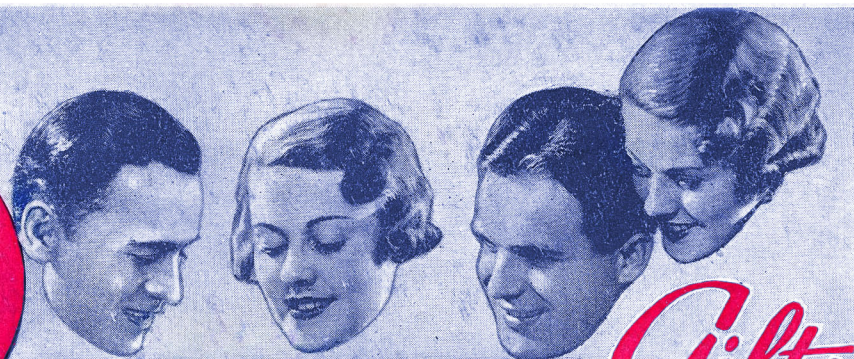
During these years important glands develop and final growth takes place. Disturbances occur throughout the body. The skin gets over-sensitive. Waste poisons in the blood irritate this sensitive skin. Pimples appear!

Fleischmann's fresh Yeast helps to give you back a good complexion by clearing these skin irritants out of the blood. Then—the pimples go! Eat 3 cakes daily—one cake about ½ hour before meals—plain, or in a little water—until your skin clears.



-clears the skin
**by clearing skin irritants
out of the blood**

\$1
BRINGS
YOUR
CHOICE



HAPPINESS
SO LOW IN PRICE - SO EASY TO BUY

10 DAYS FREE TRIAL

10 MONTHS TO PAY

MONEY BACK GUARANTEE

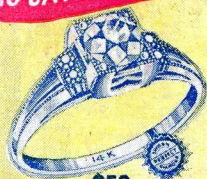
I want to bring happiness to everyone with these Diamond and Watch Gift Bargains

I want you to examine free of charge your choice of these new style Diamonds and Watches. I want you to prove to yourself that when you shop the Sweet way—you save. That's why I am going to send you your choice on my money back guarantee. It's simple—here's all you do. Simply put a \$1.00 bill in an envelope with your name, address, and number of article wanted. Tell me your age, (must be over 20), occupation, employer and a few other facts no direct inquiries will be made. This information will be held strictly confidential—

I'll open a 10-Month Charge Account for you and send your selection for approval and 10-day trial. If you are not convinced that you have effected a big saving—if you are not satisfied, send it back and your \$1.00 will be refunded immediately. If satisfied, you pay the balance in 10 small monthly payments you will never miss. Send your order Today—or send for our Catalog.

SHOP the SWEET WAY and SAVE

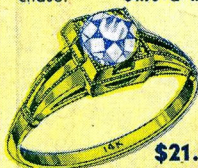
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\$50

Reg. U. S. Pat. Off.

A322—Sworn Perfect diamond; 4 other diamonds; 14K white gold ring. Affidavit of Perfection with purchase. **\$4.90 a month**



\$21.50

A25—Dainty prong ring with high quality diamond. 14K natural gold mounting. Splendid value **\$2.05 a mo.**



\$30

A118—Pretty floral designed engagement ring with 5 high quality diamonds. 14K natural gold. **\$2.90 a month**



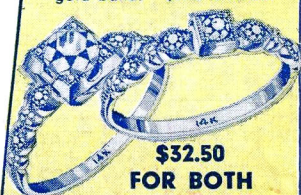
KENT
2-DIAMOND
BAGUETTE
Regularly **\$29.50**
Now **\$19.75**

P204—Slender, dainty Kent baguette with 2 high quality diamonds. This watch formerly sold for \$29.50. Look at my low price. Guaranteed 7 jewel movement. Give it a trial **\$1.88 a month**



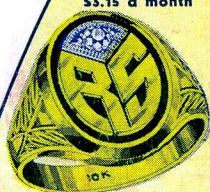
\$24.50

C24—New style all diamond wedding ring. 10 diamonds. completely encircle white gold band. **\$2.35 a month**



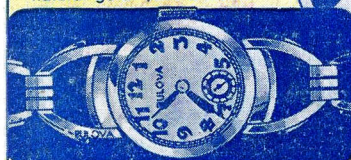
\$32.50
FOR BOTH

A150/C36—Matched Bridal Ensemble. Gorgeous flower design with attractive arrangement of 5 diamonds in each ring. Both rings 14K white gold. Amazing value at this low price. **\$3.15 a month**



\$16.75

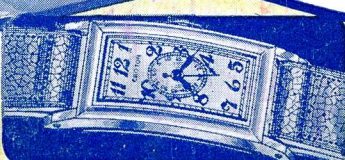
I-186—A good looking ring for men—heavy 10K yellow gold mounting with 2 initials and diamond on genuine black onyx. A real bargain. **\$1.58 a month**



BULOVA

\$24.75

M1—Bulova Commodore—15 jewels. Latest round style; Link Bracelet. **\$2.58 a month**



KENT—Kurve Watch for Men \$14.95

K10—Thin curved watch; fits snug to wrist. 7 jewels. Latest type dial with sweep second-hand. Leather strap. **\$1.40 a month**



\$29.75

17 JEWEL—BULOVA FEATURE

R117—The "Goddess of Time"—choice of white or natural rolled gold plate cases. Splendid value. **\$2.88 a month**

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