

Adventure  Western

ACTION STORIES

OCTOBER
20c



**WAR-BONNET
MAVERICKS**

HELL ON THE LOOSE—
KISS A DARING
RED-HEADED REBEL,
UNLEASH HIS FURY,
AND GUN!

by
WALT COBURN

**ANGEL
RIDES
TO
VICTORY**

HILL'S RACIENDA

by
JAE. P. OLSEN

JOHN STARR

GENE CUNNINGHAM

FRANKLIN P. MILLER

ALBERT RICHARD WELLS

**THREE GUNS
TO GO!**

THREE AGAINST THIRTY—HEAVY
ODDS! BUT A QUICK-THINKING
WADDIE FIGURED HE MIGHT
WHITTLE THEM DOWN—IF HE
DIDN'T STOP LEAD FIRST.

by

ROLLIN BROWN

This is a place
holder for the
inside front cover.

THIS IS A MAGAZINE OF FICTION. THE CHARACTERS
 NAMED AND INCIDENTS DESCRIBED DO NOT REFER TO ANY ACTUAL PERSON

Reg. U. S. Pat. Off.

ACTION STORIES



T. T. SCOTT, President and General Manager

MALCOLM REISS, Editor

THREE FAST WESTERN NOVELETS

- THREE GUNS TO GO!** Rollin Brown 3
 Three feud-fettered Colts against thirty land-hungry vultures—heavy odds! But that quick-trigger waddy aimed to whittle 'em down—if he didn't stop lead first.
- "LEAD FOR A LIAR"** John Starr 33
 Judge Tarp . . . From the muddy Pecos to Oregon's blue hills men feared his gun-justice. That hellion on horseback knew but one law—and that was, "Lead for a liar!"
- A RANGER RIDES TO RIMROCK** John G. Pearso 55
 Once the pride of Texas, Daunt had gone the renegade route. His name scratched from the Ranger roll. But the Ranger code—and Ranger courage—takes plenty killing.

A COMPLETE COWBOY NOVEL

- WAR-BONNET MAVERICKS** Walt Coburn 90
 Crooked cow kings laughed when that half-pint Marshal rode to War-Bonnet—but they didn't know the merciless death that slumbered in Johnny Green's hungry guns.

FOUR FAST-ACTION SHORT STORIES

- BLOOD DEBT OF THE LEGION** Franklin P. Miller 25
 Legionnaire Clay was doomed—but before he died he aimed to square hate-scores.
- HELL'S HACIENDA** James P. Olsen 50
 Tough on star-foters, Shotgun Town—'til Flick Burdett taught it six-gun manners.
- TERROR ISLAND** Albert Richard Wetjen 68
 On a blood-red isle they clashed—the Stinger, and the one foe in the world he feared.
- LONE STAR LAW** Eugene Cunningham 79
 Claiborn couldn't let trouble lie. To him, a hell-hungry bully was an invite to war.

October Issue, 1938
 Volume XV, Number 1



20c per copy
 1.25 per year

ACTION STORIES: Published Bi-Monthly by FICTION HOUSE, INC., 461 Eighth Ave., New York City. Re-entered as second class matter January 26, 1937, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Printed in U. S. A. The entire contents of this magazine are copyrighted, 1938, by Fiction House, Inc. All rights reserved. While due care is always exercised, the publishers will not be responsible for the return of unsolicited manuscripts. For advertising rates address THE NEWSSTAND FICTION UNIT, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York City.

LARIAT—the Big-Story Ace of Western fiction magazines—

A Complete Rangeland Novelet
SIXGUN STRANGER FROM CHEROKEE
By Rollin Brown

2 Big Cowboy Novels
HELL-CAT OF THE BITTER RIVER RANGE
By Walt Coburn

GUN-PLAY GAMBLE
By Eugene Cunningham

5 Long Western Short Stories
BULLETS FOR BREAKFAST
By Sam Carson

SATAN'S SEGUNDO
By Buck Stradleigh.

TINHORN!
By John Starr

GUN-ROOM FOR A HOLSTER HOPPER
By James P. Olsen

SADDLE-BUM
By Bart Cassidy



Lariat
STORY MAGAZINE

On Sale at All Newsstands

The Big Guns of '38 Baseball

the primest collection of horsehide artists on record—Hubbell, Dean, Gomez, Greenberg, DiMaggio, Gehrig, Gehringer, Medwick, Van Mungo. . . . Sportswriter Jimmy Kahn swings the circle from Florida incubators to major league ball lots. From behind the scenes he shows you the slug kings and the slab specialists at work and at play.



A Great Novelet of Coast League Ball
MISS HOLLYWOOD'S NINE....

by Lin Davies.

Also Two Diamond Novels

GAMBLER'S GAME
by Ted Winslow

SLUGGER!
by Harold M. Sherman

Five Smoke-ball Short Stories

MONEY PLAYER
by Joe Finley

BLEACHER BAIT
by Frank T. Blair

EX-BIG LEAGUER
by Mark Adam

TRADED DOWN THE RIVER
by Tarleton Collier

KILL THAT GUY!
by Edward L. Leamon

BASEBALL STORIES On Sale at All Newsstands



A Complete Cowland Novelet

THREE GUNS TO GO!

By ROLLIN BROWN

Killer Colts dry-gulched Solano Bob Creston. Bled his hundred-mile-square Quebrada range! And only three dared buck that vulture syndicate . . . Three feud-fettered Colts to block that Arizona Attila's empire scheme!

A CROSS that high stretch of land which marked the Colorado border dusk began to settle through spattered, dusty car windows, filling the interior of the swaying day coach. Briefly a door

opened; a trainman came through from the rear. There was a swell of sound, the rattle of undergear and the click of flanges over fishplates, the steady labored puffing of the big-stacked mountain engine ahead. The



trainman lit a swinging light in the rear of the coach.

"Tough! Last year was a mighty tough one on the cow industry," a husky-throated commission buyer continued. "From Powder River to the Pecos, it's struck the big range outfits—they harder than the little fellers. Texas worst of all!"

This coach was scantily filled with ranch owners and hands, business men and drummers for Santa Fé and the Arizona mining towns. No woman sat in here. Cigar and cigarette smoke coiled thickly against the car's ceiling. Boots stuck into the uncarpeted aisle where the trainman lit a second lamp, holding a paper envelope loosely between fingers of one hand. The trainman paused and looked again at the name on the envelope in the swelling light.

"Lingo," he bawled through the coach, "Sam Lingo! Anybody o' that name in here?"

There was momentary silence. The husky-voiced commission buyer turned around in his seat. A tall, lank-made young man got up forward, where he sat alone with a trail-stained canvas warbag at his feet, and moved up the aisle.

The commission buyer whispered throatily to his companion, "That means Solano Bob Creston's right-hand man at Wheel. Never seen him before. But I remember hearin' at Dodge City that this-here Lingo was drivin' two herds north to the Big Cheyenne for Wheel this year. Some reason he's back here—"

THE lank-made man stopped in the aisle. Under the glow of the new-lit lamp, his skin was dark-burned as mahogany, the gray of his eyes seeming almost colorless by contrast. His wide hat, cuffed back now, showed a rim of white across his forehead where the brim usually sat. He stood six-two in his boots. Not this commission buyer; but others familiar with the drover trails—the Jones and the Plummer, from the Panhandle to Montana; or the Good-night Trail, farther to the west—could have told more. How old Solano Bob Creston had once found a granger lad, no more than a button then, fourteen-fifteen years old, his folks both dead of sickness, where a sod shack stood on the bare prairie; and how old Solano Bob had held a herd there without water overnight to do the buryin'

and taken the youngster on with him, helper for the wagon cook.

That granger boy was Sam Lingo, grown to manhood; boss last year and this for Wheel herds on trail. Solano Bob had been denied a son of his own. The drive trail was young man's work. It took young bones to stand the wear and tear and knocks, young muscle and sinew to stand the strain of sixteen-twenty hours asaddle, day after day. And it took still more than any of this to boss a Wheel herd north for Solano Bob Creston!

"Tellygram," the trainman explained. "Operator back at Canadian Branch handed it in as we passed."

The young man said, "Thanks," and nothing more.

He walked back to his seat, tight-lipped. For a moment then Sam Lingo held the telegram in his hand unopened. Two wheel herds were tracking north of the Republican to meet delivery date at Indian agencies on the Big Cheyenne, no later than middle August, thirty-four hundred head of cattle in the brand, entrusted now to Red Murchison, Solano Bob's old segundo. Drouth and flood had alternately harried those herds. Stampedes had been too frequent. Luck had bucked against them all the way.

It would have been a hard thing to explain, what Wheel and Solano Bob Creston meant to Sam Lingo, after these years. His long, rope-calloused fingers ripped an end from the envelope suddenly. The sheet inside read:

CLIMB OFF AT CINCO SPRING
SIDING TONIGHT AND RIDE BACK
RANGE TO WHEEL HOMEQUARTERS
KEEP YOUR RETURN QUIET
CRESTON

For a long, steady moment Sam Lingo studied those words, trying to figure what lay behind them. Nothing showed on his face. He put a hand against the near window pane, and through the deepening dusk outside watched the land moving past. Thirty-four miles into Cinco Spring from here. Another hour. All this country within a hundred miles of Wheel headquarters he knew intimately. Wheel itself extended across two counties, owning something more than two hundred thousand acres along the Salt Fork and Solano Valley

Bottoms by deed, grant and filed script, grazing as many as a million acres by right of range and water claim. The wheel brand, a circle with five spokes, was known wherever trail cattle traveled.

Lingo turned, made a gesture to the trainman moving past. "Cinco Spring a scheduled stop tonight, or will you need to signal the engine?" His voice was slow, quiet.

"It ain't regular. Not unless some passenger wants aboard there," the trainman told him. He added, "Nothin' but a tank an' station room at Cinco Spring anyhow."

Lingo grinned. "Might be a sheriff wantin' me beyond. Y'never can tell. I want off at Cinco Spring."

The trainman shrugged. Sam Lingo bent over his warbag. Beneath a windbreaker jacket and a pair of spare pants, he could feel the lump his Colt's .45 and holster made. Lingo pulled the bone-handled gun from holster. There was a dead shell under hammer, as he always carried a weapon, five unexploded cartridges in the cylinder. He stuck the gun inside his belt, covered by his coat.

A YELLOW SQUARE of lighted window moved by slowly in the night. The train jolted, shuddering, and came to a grinding stop. Lingo stood braced on the platform between coaches, warbag over shoulder. The lamp-bright window of the siding operator's room was now fifty yards back-track. Through intervening darkness something moved. He saw a man's head and flat-crowned hat cut briefly across that square of window light.

Lingo turned, crossed the platform with an unhurried stride, and slid off the far side of the train. He stepped back rapidly across the strip of light thrown from the track. Steam cut loose ahead. Drive wheels moved and coupling jerked through the length of the train. Lighted car windows moved, passed, gathering speed. As the rear of the train came opposite, Lingo saw two figures standing to the left of the dim-blocked station room and the yellow lighted window.

Just then, a third man spoke behind him. "Lingo?" the voice asked.

Lingo partially turned, still without hurry, war-sack over his left shoulder. His right hand lifted slightly, and took hold

of the bone handles of the gun in his belt. Swift-fading lights from the rear of the train gave no illumination by which to identify the man.

"Creston sent me up here for you," the other continued. "Don't know what the idea is, but seems it ain't to be known you're back at Wheel at this time. Trouble. I left stock tied out in the mesquite."

"Sort of expectin' me to step off the wrong side of the train, huh?" Lingo asked pleasantly.

"Well, Creston got your wire from up-country an' sent a man into town with word that'd catch you on this train. Said he reckoned you'd savvy."

"Uh-huh," Lingo said. The operator hadn't left his key over in the station room. The train was a decreasing rumble, two red diminishing lamps, down track. But now his eyes were becoming more accustomed to the dark of this night. "Them two hands over at the station come along with you?" Lingo asked. "Or just a couple of bums hangin' around to watch the train come through."

"Yeah. Yeah, I reckon—"

But the sound that came to Lingo's ears was distinctly the small, metallic click of a gun hammer. The man stood within two short paces of him. Sam Lingo did two things at once, sudden as his lank, hard frame could move. He threw the warbag, following with the weight of his body. Simultaneously the Colt's from his belt was out, coming across with the swing of Lingo's right arm. The other's gun exploded within eighteen inches of his face. There wasn't any muzzle flash. The sweep of the Colt's in Lingo's hand struck solid flesh with a dull, yielding impact.

The other man went back, stumbled. Lingo struck again, a chopped down-stroke of the Colt's barrel. He had lost track of the other two, last standing somewhere over by the siding station.

Immediately a man yelled almost directly opposite, twenty yards or so away. He shouted, "Cree! Speak up, Cree!"

Lingo was feeling around underfoot for the gun that had been fired. The man he had slugged was out, sprawled half around on his face as he fell. Then, without answer, a gun across tracks began to explode with a fast, measured roar, searching the darkness. The third shot struck road-

bed rock just to the right, and went whining up again into space. Lingo came around, moving parallel with the track, and fired once at the point of muzzle flame. He dropped and crawled straight for the tracks.

The second gun cut in instantly, from an angle toward the station. There a door came open. The operator within had just had time to leave his board and cross the room. Unarmed, he stood outlined for a second, then turned and ducked out of the light. Steel came under Lingo's hand—he had reached the tracks. He stood up slowly now, a cold, hard fury whipping through him.

IT was not so much personal. He was thinking more of Solano Bob and Wheel, without trying to understand what had been behind this hoax. Wheel had always backed any hand on payroll with the power of forty steady riders in the saddle. A year ago few men would have dared attack the brand within range of Wheel's home country. Wheel had always had its enemies, any big outfit had; but more forcible now than any reasoning, this showed the lessening of strength, the decline of the brand and all that it meant. There was never any separating old Solano Bob Creston from the iron he had built. The two had risen side by side, and were one.

Lingo fired his second shot of the battle, trying only to draw return lead. It cut back at him immediately from two close points. He took the nearest spurt of flame. The recoil of the bone-handled Colt's kicked against the palm of his hand three times. A wicked hail of cross-fire ripped loose from the other side, the smash and echo of these shots running into one new violent burst of sound across the mesquite flats beyond. Just as suddenly, it stopped.

A man coughed chokingly in that following silence. Lingo heard an unsteady boot scrape across gravel. A body toppled and hit the ground with a dull, lifeless thud. Instantly the angled gun broke into it once more—two shots! The acrid smell of powder was heavy across the bare space of siding track at Cinco Spring. Lingo transferred the captured gun into his right hand.

Beyond the tracks, the other man was moving off, breaking into an uncertain, heavy-footed run. Again the silence was so complete that Lingo could hear the small

noise and snapping of mesquite stems as the man legged off the right-of-way and into the brush. At greater distance, presently a horse stamped. Another animal was cut loose, and started at a gallop running south. The man cursed in a harsh, startled voice.

"Huh! That you, Cree? Figured you was done!"

Other words were lost. A moment later two fast-ridden animals went out across the mesquite. Lingo still waited in the darkness, not stirring. At length he saw the siding operator move quickly back across the open, lighted door of the station room. He knew the man well. It was a lonely job he held down here at Cinco Spring. Often Sam Lingo had stopped by for an hour of talk and a cup of coffee with the operator, up this way from Wheel times past.

He said, "Johnny!"

"What's that? What's happened out there? Who's talkin'?" The operator was invisible now. "Sound of your voice. Is that Lingo? Sam Lingo!"

"That's right. Reckon it's safe now. Johnny, bring a light!"

The siding operator was small, stooped, with nervous, delicate fingers for a telegraph key, little older in years than Lingo himself. By the light of a railroad lantern they looked down on the man who had fallen on the station side of the tracks. Lingo dropped to one knee, studying the dead man's face briefly. He stood up, shoulders hunched. He shook his head.

"Know him, Johnny? It's a new face to me."

Johnny said, "Yeah, I seen him. Seen him up this way once with Ben Clanton an' Dode Jennings." Nervous reaction made the operator's voice shrill and shaky.

"How'd it happen? I seen Number Nine slowin' for a stop through my window. Some stuff was comin' in off the key, so I didn't step out. Then this shootin' started, just seconds after Nine pulled on. You, Lingo—you the man they wanted?"

Lingo had the folded telegram still stuck in one pocket. He nodded, "Reckon so."

He turned back across rails to where his warbag lay, a round hole scorched in the canvas by that first point-blank shot at him. The man he had dropped there had recovered enough to climb to his feet and make off into the brush. The man named Cree.

A YEAR ago Wheel would have had a dozen riders here at daybreak tomorrow, certain as the dawn, following what track those two ridden horses left across the mesquite, no matter where it led. By such means was the prestige, the power, of a big brand maintained, circled around by marauders and enemies, large and small. In no other way could Solano Bob Creston have built a brand on the lawless frontier and held it as he had, against the wolf pack of stock thieves, desperados and wanted men seeking solitude and loot among the Quebrada Hills. There was no quarter in such business.

Lingo pulled belt and holster from his warbag, strapping gun to hip. "How do I get on across to Wheel tonight, Johnny? No other train till mornin', I reckon. But you used to keep yourself a ridin' hoss."

"Yeah. Yeah, over in the corral," Johnny answered. "You're welcome."

"Might be best to get a wire ahead to Wheel through your key, Johnny. Put my name to it. Solano Bob will certainly want to know about this. Tell him I'm ridin' down tonight. You wire the Langford sheriff—"

Johnny had turned, holding the lantern in one hand, a strained, odd expression caught on his pinched face. "Then you—you ain't heard about it?" he said. "You don't know yet, Lingo?"

"Know what? Solano Bob wanted me back at Wheel, that's all I know. Word reached me north on the Republican five days ago, and it was a week old then. I been ridin' hide an' leather since to reach railhead. No, I don't know nothin', kid, except what's just happened here. But somebody else knew I'd be on this train."

The stooped, little operator looked away into the night. A breath of breeze rose across the mesquite, fanning gently on their faces. There was no hurry now.

"Solano Bob Creston is dead," the operator said finally. "Dead before you ever got his word to come, Lingo. Near a week ago. They found him up in the Salt Fork bottoms, where four-five riders had been brandin' a stray yearlin'. Seems they must have let him ride in close enough for a look, must have acted friendly. Then two of 'em opened on his back at once! Solano Bob was buried at Langford four days ago," the little operator added gently.

II

IT was just sunrise. Sam Lingo climbed slowly from saddle, and tied the mount he rode to a strip of picket railing. He walked slowly, loose-jointed, through a whitewashed gate and under the clump of young cottonwoods planted there. His dark-burned face was stiff as granite. He stumbled a little, like a man who could not see. He stopped, looking down at a fresh-piled mound of earth. A rough-cut headstone of rock, planted there, had the Wheel brand chipped upon its face, the years, and a name:

ROBERT CRESTON

That was all. For many moments Sam Lingo stood there, seeing Solano Bob as he had been in life, seeing Wheel in retrospect, the million acres of its rangeland here, beef and breeder stock moving north by trail each spring to shipping centers and delivery points. More than ever before, Sam Lingo realized the greatness of the man, and the bigness of the iron Solano Bob had built.

Solano Bob Creston lay under this small mound of new-turned earth, a cluster of flowers still fresh against the stone, but Wheel itself was the monument Solano Bob had left behind him, true measure of the man.

Sam Lingo stooped and touched one of the flowers; flowers a woman might have cut and left here. But he gave this no thought. The gray of his eyes was hard and bright. He knew certainly now what he was facing. He knew the fight Wheel had to make. Then he walked back to his mount.

Square-faced board fronts and the roofs of Langford town lifted from the land a mile away, a hazy-thin drift of morning smoke settling south. Lingo's eyes never turned from the town, once again he settled in the saddle. He had ridden better than forty miles last night from Cinco Spring siding, and the loaned horse under him jogged wearily between road ruts that straightened away, joined others, and came directly into the east end of the town's main street.

Saloons, gambling houses, supply and mercantile stores faced each other here

across the street, each fronted with a strip of lean-to over uneven walk planks and a hitch-rack rail. Beyond lay the open, gradual sweep of the Solano Valley, lifting finally, miles away, into the broken roughness of the Quebrada Hills.

Wheel had made this town in the beginning. Wheel still paid more tax money into its coffers than all other combined interests in the country.

Lingo passed the Clanton stable and wagon-yards at the east end of the street, clip-clopping through the hoof-pocked dust. To his right a sign over a board square structure read: "CLANTON'S GENERAL STORE." Two men saddling in the wagon-yards left horses suddenly and crossed to the edge of the stable and watched with rivetted eyes. Three doors beyond, across on the main side-street corner, stood the "KENO HOUSE & SALOON—Ben Clanton, Prop."

Lingo swung down here, without hesitation or hurry. A dusty horse, branded Double J, was standing at the far end of the rack. He looped reins over rail. His bootheels made a hollow, clicking sound across the front strip of walk planks. He shoved a swinging door with one shoulder, and without hesitation walked into the Keno House.

A florid, paunchy barkeep looked around from polishing the back-rack mirror. Across the room a thin, spidery man with a deep-lined face looked up across one of the covered gaming layouts. He sat relaxed there in one of the side-room chairs. His eyes watched Lingo with a steady, impassive stare. Except for these two, the gambling room and bar were deserted at this early hour.

Lingo said to the barkeep, "I'll step back and have a word with Clanton."

The barkeep dropped his rag. "Wait a minute, Mister Lingo. No, I don't know whether Ben's in right now or not. Wait here an' I'll see for you."

"Never mind."

The bar reached across the side of the room. At its far end was a door labeled "Office" in gilt letters. The steady stride of Lingo's boots did not slacken. He paid no further heed to either of these two men. One hand took hold of the office latch. He swung the door, still without hurry and no hesitation, and let it slam to behind him.

BEN CLANTON was sitting behind a square, flat-topped desk, his big, solid frame too large for the swivel arm chair under him. Usually Clanton slept here in the Keno House office. There was a bed in one corner, blankets thrown back. A large iron safe stood against the head of the wall. A shaft of early sunlight slanted through the high back-alley windows. Clanton's face was heavy, solid-muscled like the rest of the man. He had not shaved yet, and wiry red stubble showed along his thick, bulky jaw.

Clanton looked at Lingo with close-lidded eyes that still showed the puffy mark of sleep. He said without surprise, "Howdy, Lingo. The bad news bring you back?"

"Call it that," Lingo said. He walked across toward the desk.

The other man sitting here was dusty from saddle. His face was lean with high cheekbones and long, tight lips, darkly burned. He turned and half stood up. The lifting of tight lips showed the ends of blunt, square teeth, and he threw the end of a brown-paper cigarette into the brass cuspidor beside the desk, where it hit with a tiny hiss. His name was Jennings. He did not speak.

"Sit down," Clanton invited.

Jennings, the rider, was armed with a polished, holster-worn gun at hip. He slipped back into the chair he sat in, and it would have been hard to tell whether Clanton had meant the words for Jennings or Lingo. Clanton customarily carried a snub-nosed .44 in shoulder sling under his coat. The sling and gun now hung hooked over a leg-post of the bed. Coatless, the bulging, thick muscles of Clanton's biceps and his barrel-like chest showed the physical power in the man.

"Cup of coffee, Lingo?" Clanton added. "Or a drink?"

Lingo said, "Never mind." He stopped against the desk. "Let's have what you know!"

Ben Clanton studied him. The puffy look about his lids remained, but the eyes behind had the opaque hardness of flint.

"You know Solano Bob is dead, or you wouldn't be here," Clanton said. "And that's about all any of us know, Lingo. Sign left on the ground showed where four riders, maybe five, had been brandin' a

stray up Salt Fork when Solano Bob rode in to their fire. Two opened on his back. Sometime that night his horse showed up at Wheel, saddle empty, and a posse was got out at daybreak. Range stock had drifted in and out to water along Salt Fork meanwhile, cuttin' up the sign. Most of that posse is still out in the Quebradas somewhere, except for Jennings here. Jennings just rode in. But they never had a trail to follow. It's been almost a week gone by now." Clanton spread his thick, powerful hands. "Nothing, Lingo. Not a thing!"

"How about that stray? What brand?"

Jennings said, in a dust-husky voice, "We found the brand fire and enough track there to see what had happened. An' across the Fork, over in a gully, we come on a yearlin' that had been killed recent. Brand skinned off the hide!"

Sam Lingo looked from one man to the other. "Who do you reckon was on the inside deep enough to make a try for me at Cinco Spring siding last night?"

Clanton hunched heavy shoulders. "That so?" he said. He stared deliberately. "Wheel's through! As a brand, Wheel's done and finished. Swallow that in a lump or take it piecemeal, Lingo; but don't figure any other way. It might explain a lot. These past six months or a year, just one man has been holdin' Wheel together, and now that man is dead. Only Solano Bob Creston's name has kept the outfit in one piece since early spring a year ago. Last year's north-country drive only put Wheel deeper into debt. There'll be creditors in here all the way from Dodge City. It'll be what every man can get for himself inside a month, and the devil take them left outside after the smash. You got some interests of your own to look after, Lingo. An' I reckon I could use a man like you. I can always use a man with bottom in him. Think it over."

Lingo said nothing.

"Over at the store, Solano Bob stands in debt to me for almost a year's provision and supplies at Wheel," Clanton went on heavily. "Three months ago he had to borrow twenty thousand dollars cash to meet running expenses and get this spring's drive movin' north with the grass. There's been other things. Wheel's debt to me alone stands close to thirty thousand dollars on

the books. I've had to take what steps I could to protect myself. What's happened to the cow industry as a whole has hit the range everywhere, it's hit this town as well as Wheel. I'm in a place to know."

LINGO said slowly, "I remember the day you first come into Langford town four years ago, Clanton, cartin' a damaged stock of bottled goods and a broke-down roulette layout behind a worn-out team. The town ain't done so bad by you, includin' Wheel. The one-room 'dobe shack you first set up in has growed into the Keno House here, and on the side you've picked up the main general store, the livery stable and wagonyards. You've mixed a little in local politics, since the town has growed. The general impression is that the sheriff elected here last spring was your man. I reckon he's the same that's been headin' this posse in the hills!"

Clanton watched Lingo steadily. "What d'you mean by that?"

"What d'you think I mean?"

Lingo shifted slightly toward Dode Jennings. "You, Dode, come into the country about the same time. Wheel never bucked your start in cattle along the upper Salt Fork, although you took a likely piece of grass out of Wheel's range. I've eat Wheel beef with you and known it, stoppin' by that shack outfit of yours on the upper crick. Wheel never begrudged a man that needed it a piece of meat. But one time an' another, a heap of strays have moved from Wheel's lower country up across your ground. Most of that stock had a horse track or two followin' it. I'm namin' you, but you ain't the only one—There's been a dozen others like you in the Quebrada Hills."

Jennings' boot made a sudden, grating sound on the floor. His chair tilted back. One hand reached and stopped over his holster. "Wheel's been almighty high-handed in its day. You, Lingo, you can't talk to me like that!"

Without shifting his eyes, Clanton snapped, "Sit down, Dode! I'll tend to your share of the talkin' here."

Nothing about Lingo changed. "Wheel's always looked after itself," he said in the same slow voice. "It's done a good job of it up till now. It's took a heap of wolves ringed around to finally get into the brand

—the same way it took four-five men to shoot Solano Bob in the back. But you mentioned another thing, Clanton. Some steps you'd took to protect yourself!"

"Uh-huh." Clanton's heavy hands lay on the edge of the desk. Only bunched shoulder muscles showed the readiness in the man.

"Three days ago I sent Joe Parada out to Wheel," he said. "That was the day after Solano Bob was buried. Parada's out there to look after Wheel, to hold things together till stock and range can be lumped and sold to meet debts. You've talked a little strong, Lingo, but I said it once, and I'll repeat it; I can use a man like you. You ought to have sense enough to see on which side your bread will be buttered after this. Y'see, there's another thing you haven't taken into account. Glory Creston's back—"

The tightening line of Lingo's mouth turned the edges of his lips white. He saw a slender girl with yellow braids—hair yellow-golden as corn silk—standing on the rear platform of a train pulling out of Canadian Branch, waving to Solano Bob till the train was gone. Rails had reached no farther then; that was four years ago. Glory Creston's mother had died when she was a child, and Solano Bob had kept her with him at Wheel till she was sixteen, till finally the day could be delayed no longer and she had gone east to stay with friends of her mother's and attend a girl's school. She had her father's eyes, Sam Lingo remembered. He remembered other things.

He said softly, "When did that happen?"

"Might have been a week before Solano Bob's death," Clanton told him. "She's growed to a woman now, Lingo. A sensible girl. Maybe you been just a step ahead of yourself since you come in here. Because it's likely Solano Bob's daughter will have more to say about things at Wheel than Solano Bob's hired man. Think it over."

Lingo had turned. Dode Jennings, still with a hand close above his gun, studied a spot between Lingo's shoulder blades with a fixed, straining attention. Clanton did not move. His hard, close-lidded eyes watched Lingo reach the door, pull it open as he had entered, and go out into the gambling and bar-room.

Then Clanton noticed Jennings' look. He

said, "You've over-played your hand once. Don't do it again, Dode! Wheel's crumblin' granite, but still rock. It don't pay to underestimate Wheel's sort of power. Or a man!"

Jennings came around. "Lissen!" he said intensely. "I was just explainin' that. I couldn't help what happened up there at Cinco Spring last night. Cree Dawes had him dead by rights, when Lingo come off the wrong side of that train. I'm tellin' you, I couldn't help it! It don't change nothin'. I had a buddy once, workin' there in the Quebradas with me, when I first come here. Wheel caught him one day red-handed with a bunch of rustled stuff. Wheel tried an' hung him for it. Right here in Langford!" His blunt, square teeth were tight together. "I been waitin' my time ever since."

Clanton's big bulk stirred. He finished what was left in a coffee cup, walked across to the bed and put on the shoulder sling and gun. He pulled into a coat.

"You never got far alone, Dode. I'm handin' out what orders are to be given from now on. Remember it!"

A VARNISHED BUCKBOARD and fast-stepping team came in along the far end of the street. Lingo stood beside the droop-headed, tired animal that had brought him down from Cinco Spring, unlooping reins from the rack. His head was down. Wheels rattled, and as he looked around he had one clear image of Glory Creston on the near side of the buckboard seat. But not the girl that he remembered with long, yellow braids. It had been four years. But he thought if he had seen her anywhere else, with no knowledge that she was within a thousand miles, he still would have known her.

There was just that one sudden glance of her—she was looking the other way—and the buckboard passed. He saw Parada's dark, lean figure on the other side, driving team. He turned, still with reins in hand, and watched the fast rig swing around at the end of the street and enter the wide mouth of the Clanton stable.

Sam Lingo swung to saddle. His face was stiff and tight, without much expression, except for the compressed line of lips. His eyes looked stony-pale in the sunlight. He rode back along the street, that short

distance to the stable yards where two men had left horses suddenly a while ago, to watch as he came into town. He climbed down from saddle in front of the stable's mouth.

Parada had just helped the girl from her side of the buckboard seat. He heard her thank him, saying, "I'll do my shopping right away—there isn't much of it—and meet you here again in an hour, Mr. Parada. We can drive back to Wheel before the morning grows too warm."

Her deep blue eyes, turning, saw Sam Lingo then. He stood on the plank runway that inclined slightly into the stable, coming on a pace at a time. She knew him instantly. Her lips parted in a smile. She took a step forward, started to speak. His words cut past her.

"Never mind, Parada! You won't be needed to take Miss Creston back to Wheel. Don't show up again at Wheel," Lingo said. "You're through out there! Is that much plain, Parada?"

Joe Parada stood six-foot, muscled lithely. His past was checkered, little known. Three years past, at the height of the range boom which had ended in a broken market all across the grass, he had been behind the organization of the CXL Cattle Company in the Territory Strip, which had not waited for disaster to lose its Eastern investors three-quarters of a million dollars. Here in Langford, Clanton had hired him as a dealer in the Keno House for a time, and then found some other more valuable use for the man. Parada spoke Spanish fluently. He also knew stock.

He glanced at Glory Creston. Her face had suddenly lost all color. She put out a hand that touched Lingo's dusty shoulder, and slid off as he passed. Parada took a step backward, alongside the rig and inner wall of the stable.

He said then, "Has anybody told you Solano Bob is dead? I'm out at Wheel to look after Miss Creston's interests, at her request. Don't try to make a play here, Lingo! Watch yourself—!"

Parada half turned away. Lingo saw the motion of his elbow, hand grabbing for holstered gun. He never heard the scream from Glory Creston's throat. It was Solano Bob who had built Wheel. Wheel was more than a brand, more than a mere iron

and cross that could change hands, that could be bought and sold and disintegrated. Out of hardship, out of a lifetime of effort, driving, dogged, Wheel was what Solano Bob had left. Wheel had to fight as it had lived. And if Wheel perished, it had to be like this.

Parada's gun shot a splintered hole in the plank stable floor under the buckboard. His mouth was sagging open, where Lingo's left had hit. Blood pulsed from broken lips. At the same instant of time Lingo's right hand caught him by the shoulder, swinging Parada around into the side wall of the stable. He jammed one knee into the small of Parada's back, wrenching the gun sidewise, tearing fingers loose. Lingo threw the weapon toward the far end of the stable. The team had jumped along the runway at the shot, a hostler dragging at the bits. All his thoughts of that long night past, all the regret, sorrow, anguish, lashed into violence that he could not stay.

He knocked Parada across to the floor. Heaving, he waited for the man to get hands under him, rise and come up on staggering legs, and with a measured swing knocked him down again. Parada lay on the floor groaning.

Lingo said, "Don't ever come back to Wheel! And when you carry word to Clanton, tell him I'm in this to the finish—in case he doesn't know. Wheel pays its bills, and Wheel fights. It won't go under any other way!"

The hostler had the team under control at the end of the stable runway. A second man was coming through from the rear with a loose, shambling stride. Lingo motioned for the hostler to back the rig out. He turned.

III

GLORY CRESTON faced him with blazing eyes.

"I know what my father thought of you, Sam Lingo. He'd told me and he's written it a hundred times. I know what kind of a man I thought I'd see when you came back down-trail. You're not that man! You don't even look like him—not after this!"

"You don't understand," Lingo said slowly. "You don't know what they're doing here. You're a woman, Glory." But the eyes he looked into were Solano Bob's,

except Solano Bob's had never been so deep a blue. "Wheel's got to carry on!"

The buckboard was backed toward them. For a moment the girl stood defiantly, as though she were going to refuse to get into it with him. Then she stepped lightly on the running plate and moved across the seat. Lingo took the reins.

"Feed this horse I left in the street," he told the hostler. "First chance you get, send him up to Cinco Spring."

He backed the team, swung in the street, and sent the fast-stepping span through town toward Wheel. Clanton had just come out the doorway of the Keno House, where he stopped, watching motionless till the swirl of back-flung dust reached the far edge of town and dipped into the first flat swale of the valley land. Parada appeared, staggering slightly, from the stable mouth up-street.

Lingo drove with slack hands on the reins, letting the spirited span clip off its own pace. It was eight miles up the valley to Wheel's home ground. Wheel had fenced three sections of watered meadow bottom here for horse pasturage. It was the only strip of wire across its land, back into the Quebradas and Salt Fork, or north to the Topatona Buttes.

They had come five miles along the road before the girl at Lingo's side said, "I don't know why you acted as you did back in town. But we'll have to have an understanding; there are some things you should know. Wheel owes Mr. Clanton nearly thirty thousand dollars. There are other debts of more than twenty thousand at Dodge City. There's probably more. My father lived like that. He was a man of a single purpose. Every cent he made went back into Wheel. Every dollar he could borrow he put into the brand. I'm not a man, I can't manage Wheel. I can't continue as he did. Mr. Clanton understood all that, and offered what help he could. Certainly the money Wheel owes him gave him that right. Parada is a capable man."

"Too capable," Lingo said between tight teeth. "Two months from now Wheel would be stolen out. How many new hands did he put on at the ranch?"

"I—I don't know. I left that to Parada. But you had no right to order him off the way you did—"

"Is Jim Breck still there?"

She turned and faced him now. "I said we had to have an understanding between us. If it wasn't for my father and what I know he thought of you, you'd be the man to leave Wheel, Sam Lingo. You can't disregard me and handle things your own high-handed way. I'm Solano Bob's daughter. If necessary in the end, I'll sell Wheel. If there isn't any other way! I'll sell for whatever the brand will bring over and above its debts and go back east. . . ."

"No!" Sam Lingo said. "No, you're Solano Bob's flesh and blood. You know too well what Wheel means, what Wheel meant to him, what the brand stands for. Wheel might fail, yes. It might go under. But it stands till the last leg is chopped out from under it. And you'll stand with it, Glory!"

THEY drove into the wide, tree-shaded yards at Wheel in silence. The house had been built a dozen years ago, a long, low building of thick adobe walls and a wide gallery across its face. Lingo stopped and cramped the buckboard wheels, but before he could step around to help her, Glory slid out. She went directly into the house.

Half a dozen men were gathered across yards in front of the bunkhouse. Lingo drove to the corrals. He called to a man inside, "Put up this team!"

He crossed to the bunk shack. A wiry, sun-withered little man came from the bunkhouse door with a worn old warbag over shoulder. For a moment he stared at Lingo, a grin breaking wrinkles across his seamed countenance.

"Why, howdy, Sam!" he said. "Why, howdy! Now I'd been figurin' I'd most likely have to travel clear up to the Big Cheyenne, lookin' for you. Knew Solano Bob sent you word to come near two weeks ago, before any of this other. He'd read the sign, knew what it meant!"

"What else, Jim?" Lingo asked.

"Parada," Jim Breck muttered. "I been with Wheel an' Solano Bob—it's nine years now. Parada let me go this mornin'. Me an' these-hyar other boys. Bringin' a new crew out from town, he said—"

"Parada won't be back. Who's up in the Quebradas now, at the Rock Corral camp, Jim?"

"Reed an' Hob an' Clark. Two-three others of the old boys, Sam," Breck told

him. "Parada hadn't got around to them yet. It's been tough, Sam. Since you left stock has been leavin' Wheel through every gulch an' draw across the Quebradas, seems like. Remember Wade Cartwright? Wade got killed. The first time Wheel has ever seen it of recent years, brand artists been workin' across home range here, bold as wolves. We need a crew full-handed, forty men at the fewest, Sam. We need you, Red Murchison an' the eighteen boys north up-trail. It couldn't a-happened then, Sam. Not what has! Solano Bob was tryin' to do the work of three-four hands himself. That's how they got him off alone, no chance at all! Wheel needs saddle-power! Saddle strength!"

"I know. Wheel hasn't got it! You take these boys and get up to the Rock Corral camp, Jim. Do the best you can!"

Solano Bob's old office was a square, unpainted room at one end of the long bunkhouse, with a door of its own opening on the narrow porch outside. Lingo entered. How many head of Wheel calves and trail steers had been recorded here from the old brand and trail tally sheets, through the years, San Lingo did not know. Wheel had been known from north to south. How many riders had stood here, before Solano Bob's battered, old desk, and drawn wages, would have been hard to tell. He opened the upper right-hand drawer in the desk, after Solano Bob's dog-eared record books.

For an hour Sam Lingo sat there, heels on the desk. The books had not been tampered with, although no doubt Parada had made a copy of their contents. From time to time Lingo leaned sidewise to jot down figures. He searched the desk for other papers. When he rose and went across to the main house, he took a sheet of paper scrawled with his penciled figures, checked and rechecked. He left it on the round parlor table that had once been Glory's mother's, and went out again to the corrals without seeing her. He got a horse.

Wheel owed seventy-eight thousand dollars, two-thirds of it short-term money that would be due at early fall. Range trouble now cut off all hope of raising new loans to see the old ones paid. It was a plunger's business, cows and grass and drives. Wheel was in no shape to go into a prolonged range war now.

A GUN cut loose from rocks piled up against the canyon wall to the left, a spitting, red-yellow flash that spat five times against the night and filled all the hills above with the rolling sound of its thunder. Dust hung here in thick waves along the bottoms, the unshod running hoofs of stock ahead. Lingo reined in and drew his horse around. Just as he fired, he heard Jim Breck yell, "Couple of you boys get through ahead! Pronto!"

The weathered old Wheel man opened with two spaced, searching shots. The man in the rocks above reloaded. Again the flash of his six-gun sputtered, and lead whipped the brush on Lingo's left. Breck still fired deliberately. Three riders at a run hit through beyond, following the down-slope of the canyon. Lingo left his horse. He stopped beside Jim Breck.

"Hold it!" he said. "I'm goin' up after him!"

He started up through the rocks. There was only silence now, except for running animals still moving down the canyon. There, presently, a single shot broke dully, around some bend, and echoes flowed in from above. Lingo concentrated every sense on the movements of that man somewhere above. A pebble rattled, skipped and rolled, and lodged down the slope. A dim figure showed out against the thin starlight.

Lingo fired, and at the instant knew his shot had been high. The briefly outlined figure dropped. Again the man's gun sputtered. He was fanning, fast as shells could explode. The range was not more than twenty yards. Then once more silence, following Lingo's second shot at the flash. Lingo changed his position to one side before climbing higher. A horse struck out above.

A little bench sided the slope of canyon here. Lingo saw it dimly when he reached it, and then knew his man was gone. Mounted, the other had shoved back around the hill slope and was climbing at a run. This was a run, dodge and fighting game. Lingo scrambled down again to Breck.

Half a mile down the canyon the three Wheel riders had caught up and held a band of bellowing, hard-run stock. The only interest old Jim Breck showed was to question one of the boys, "Which of you fired down here? Any luck?"

"Two of 'em was drivin' the stuff, like we thought at first," a man replied. "One of 'em took a chance, climbin' back to open on us, hopin' we'd take to cover maybe long enough for his pal to keep on going an' maybe get away. This man give up an' run, quick as he heard us comin'."

"Some day," said Thomas, "it won't be that way. Some night we'll hit ambush, a dozen of 'em."

Lingo said, "Head the stock back for Wheel. Don't stop till you scatter it eight—ten miles out from the hills."

He struck a match quickly to see his watch, dropping it before a chance, waiting rifle along the walls above could get a bead. His watch showed half-past two o'clock. There were thirty-five or forty head of Wheel cattle in the band. For a week's time now this sort of continual harrying along Wheel's flanks had been going on. How many head of cattle had been moved across the Quebrada draws and passes in this same length of time and got away could not be reckoned. Three men who had been with the brand less time than others quit. It took the last cent of pocket money Lingo had to pay them off. There were fourteen hands left at Rock Corral and Nine-Mile camp, all the men Wheel had asaddle. There wasn't any let-up. Men were riding night and day.

"Comin', Sam?" Jim Breck asked.

"**D**AYLIGHT in a couple hours," Lingo said. "Reckon I'll wait here till then and see what track I get."

Lingo hadn't had three consecutive hours of sleep in the past week. He waited in the canyon darkness now, dozing fitfully, wondering what the end would be. In the low ebb of the night breaking into false dawn, all kinds of doubt flooded his mind. Except for Jim Breck here, and Red Murchison, who was still trailing herds north, he had sent the best man he knew, Clark Ames, back to Wheel headquarters. They couldn't spare another hand from the hills. The hacking and the fighting was out here.

He wondered if he had done right. He wondered if Parada, left in charge at Wheel, would have dared cut into the brand so deeply as what was now going on, which all the riding and the purpose in him and the fourteen men left was powerless to prevent. No help had come from the Lang-

ford sheriff, Clanton's man. It was Wheel's battle.

Sam Lingo wondered what chance Wheel had, surrounded here, facing the wall of its financial debt. Worn and bitter, he asked himself if there was any hope at all. Then memory, running through him strongly, saw Solano Bob. And Solano Bob was saying, "Git your head up, kid! You lost your folks, you got to leave what home they'd made here on the prairie. It's tough, kid, but you got to fight! You're old enough; it's time you learned."

Sam Lingo, that granger boy, had been fourteen then. Solano Bob Creston had been like a father to him ever since. Everything he had, and was, he owed to Solano Bob. And Wheel! And, in spite of herself, to Glory Creston.

The light came stronger now. Track was plain along the canyon side. A mile from the bench where the first shooting had occurred, the two riders had joined again in the night. The trail struck north across toplands, the men ahead pushing hard. They had two hours or more start. In the sunrise Lingo knew there was little chance of overtaking either unless it settled down to a steady, prolonged manhunt, and there was no time for that. He stayed with the track another hour, and finally quit it, swinging west to move back through Salt Fork to the Rock Corral camp.

Here, along the broken Quebrada crests, the head draws of three creeks came loosely together. Lingo had dropped a mile down Salt Fork when he hit new sign. Fifty or sixty head of cattle had been crossed through the roughs into Salt Fork and headed on up a dry rock-littered gulch to the north. Three riders had been behind the beasts. Lingo swung and went up the gulch. Climbing, the cattle had been drifted across into the head of Halfway Creek. On side ground, Lingo once more found shod-sign of the two riders he had been tracking earlier.

He came on a hoof-sore Wheel steer in the brush. Apparently a rendezvous of the two bands of rustled stock had been planned here about dawn. Lingo went on down Halfway Creek. He was carrying a long-barreled Winchester in a saddle boot. An hour later he heard the thin bawl of a cow. Then a wisp of dust blew up from bottom brush ahead.

Lingo quartered to the right, striking stunted bottom growth along the near slope of Halfway Creek. He heard a man's voice say, "Gee-long! Gee-long, there!"

The stock moved slowly, drifted. Lingo passed, cut in. A heavy Wheel steer jumped, and three or four head went out of a clump of brush, running twenty yards across a tiny space of clearing to swing around and study him. Just across that space of clearing, a rider paused. He must have noticed the movement of the stock before he saw Lingo. Whirling, he came around in saddle with a drawn six-gun. His face was scared and frozen, very young.

He fired. Lingo's gun spoke once and the slug struck the horse just back of the shoulder-bone; the animal reared and jumped forward with one spasmodic leap that broke and collapsed in mid-stride. The animal hit the ground, half a ton of lifeless weight. The rider lay thrown clear, his head against a rock. He did not move.

LINGO pulled his mount into the side brush, quitting saddle with the Winchester in one hand. Cattle in the near vicinity stampeded on along the creek. Lingo waited in the brush, motionless. Sounds died. The only noise was a gentle movement of brush top stems and twigs, fanned by a breeze coming up the creek. Four or five minutes passed. The rider began to stir. He groaned. Lingo walked across the open space toward him.

There was water just beyond. He picked up the man's gun and tossed it back toward the brush where he had left his horse. The rider was only a youngster—nineteen, twenty maybe. He had yellow hair and a beard that hadn't been shaved more than once or twice on his upper lip. Lingo dipped up water in the cupped brim of his hat, returned and threw it in his face.

The youngster sat up suddenly, clawing around him for his weapon. Lingo said, "It ain't there, kid! What you doin' here with Wheel cattle? Seems to me I seen you somewhere before. Reckon you tried to hire on at Wheel sometime last winter or this early spring?"

The youngster's face turned hard and sullen. "What if'n I did? Wheel couldn't use me."

Lingo studied him a while. "Kid," he

said, "if I was you, I'd talk! That way, you hang your saddle up here in the brush and you get clean walkin' papers out of the country. I don't reckon there's any other way in fact. An' I know enough myself to make a good start. Three of you picked out a little band of Wheel beef along the hill edge about sundown last night and started drivin'. Two others lifted near forty head farther south—but them two didn't come off so well. Plan was you'd meet at the head of Halfway Crick, dawn this mornin'. You, then others came without the stock they'd started with. You bein' the kid of the outfit, was give the job of driftin' these cattle on down crick, while the rest went ahead to get some sleep. How's it sound?"

"All right, you're tellin' the story," the youngster said.

"Parada wasn't with you. Neither was Jennings," Lingo continued. "Down in lower Halfway Crick, come dark tonight, you and the four others now with you pick up the drive again, shovin' hard across the roughs and cut-up country out ahead. About daylight tomorrow, you strike in along the Topatona Buttes. That's pay-off. Parada's waitin' there. There's about six other outfits like you, workin' the same way. Jennings circulates, keepin' track of things. There's the set-up!"

"Lissen," the youngster whispered huskily, "I ain't talkin' none. I ain't no squealer, no matter what I done." He bit chalky lips.

"You ain't never goin' back to the crowd you been with, kid," Lingo said. "Without no horse and no gun. They ain't goin' to believe your story. They're goin' to figure you had to talk, to get off like that. No, you're through. You ain't never goin' back to the outfit."

The youngster muttered doggedly, "I ain't talkin' no-how, mister."

"Kid, I reckon you don't need to!" Lingo said. He got up from his heels and walked over to his horse. He picked up the boy's gun, dropped it into saddle-pocket and took out some strips of dried jerky meat. He threw one leg over saddle, rode across and handed down the jerky meat.

"Reckon you'll need this, boy. It's a long walk, no matter how you tackle it. S'long!"

Lingo was four or five years older, hardly

more. But work, responsibility, had matured him early. He rode for the head of Halfway Creek again. He was at Nine-Mile camp shortly after noon, and moved on again with six men from there. At Rock Corral, Jim Breck waited anxiously, since Lingo had not come in earlier. Half the Rock Corral force was missing.

"Don't know where," Breck muttered. "They must have hit somethin' last night, same as we did."

"We'll wait till sundown," Lingo decided. "Get what rest you can. We're ridin' long tonight to reach the Topatona Buttes before daylight. With luck, with a fifty-fifty chance, we'll hit the first blow before another sunup. We'll need every man."

IV

A THIN drift of smoke seeped through the chill, dark night persistently. A waiting horse stamped. Eastward the morning star was yellow-bright above the horizon. From one moment to the next, a first gray rim of dawn appeared, outlining the chopped, rugged skyline. It crept along the sharp-sided roughness of the Topatona Buttes, leaving the land between, the swales and pocket-gulches extending into the buttes, all the darker. Jim Breck came up a ridge to the right.

"It's the only place four-five hundred head of cattle could be gathered and held at one time over here," Breck said. "A pocket meadow openin' just across ridge there. One time I'm rememberin' Wheel had to come in here after a band of hoss-thieves. It was a fight!"

Lingo passed word from rider to rider. Horses moved and spread. Despite all care, hoofs clicked among the bare ridge rocks. Dimly now in the dawn, vague blotches of cattle grazing the meadow bottom below could be seen. Daylight brightened momentarily. End riders reached and moved among the cattle. Lingo, Jim Breck and two others kept together, circling for the head of the meadow. All had been a-saddle since sundown that past night, riding the miles steadily across the Quebradas and intervening space of rough, cut-up country. The force was still four men short. Those they had waited for at Rock Corral had not come in last sundown. The

smell of smoldering wood smoke grew stronger.

The light was treacherous. Suddenly, where nothing showed before, a man stood up in the half-light. He reached and threw a handful of dry brush stems on the smoking old embers of a night fire. Plainly Lingo heard him say, "Daylight! Hey, all out!"

Then Lingo drove spurs in.

The man standing came around, yelled some half-word above the lifted pound of hoofs. He drove for the ground again, and a first gun opened. Men were rolling from under blanket tarps, grabbing weapons. Two guns followed, cutting loose at once. Then immediately the gray uncertain light was laced with points of flame. The rocketed roar of it rose in one swift, swelling volley that filled the pocket meadow. Horses jumped into that sudden run had not yet had time to cross some eighty yards of the open bottom. Lingo held his fire.

He drove straight for the camp as a horse could run. Breck had started firing just behind him with an habitual, spaced coolness, for Jim Breck came from the days when lead was never wasted. A man jumped out ahead, the muzzle streak of his weapon sharp, and the next instant Lingo rode him down.

The range was almost point-blank here. What judgment Lingo could make of the crew in camp was that it numbered perhaps fifty men. In the ten yards race through the camp itself, trampling tarps and beds, Lingo shot four times. He saw Jim Breck running his animal slightly to the left, just behind. He fired once more, swinging his mount to go back through again, and in that time Breck's horse passed him, wild and free-headed. Old Jim Breck was down.

That same wicked instant Lingo's mount collapsed in the hindquarters. He had time to grab the Winchester stock and rake the gun loose before the animal toppled, and Lingo's own legs hit free. He dropped his dead Colt's gun and crawled on his knees, pumping the Winchester fast as shells could be fired.

Five or six men from the camp were running in a loose knot for staked night horses, shooting over-shoulder. Closer, a single figure stopped, making a stand of it,

a gun in either hand. The Winchester kicked, knocking him down like a rabbit. Others crawled or bolted for an undercut of ground where the camp spring bubbled. Then fighting swelled up from the other hand like a new chorus, as the rest of Wheel's force came in.

Lingo dropped beside old Breck. He could see the man's leathery, lined old face up-turned, sharply ashen against the dawn. Old Breck was whispering broken words, "I keep rememberin' that other clean-up Wheel made in here. Sam, you fight like Solano Bob in younger days—"

GUNS were centering on the spring hole. The fight went on along a small, irregular gully that cut a shallow way along the meadow, offering knee-high cover. Perhaps six or eight riders from the camp, in the first bunched rush or singly, had reached night horses and now pounded across bottom land for the hills. Two or three others had worked through and made ridge brush afoot. Hardly a man of them had had time to pull on his boots, rolling out from blankets. Momentary silence came with an overpowering hush, leaving senses stunned and quivering.

But still it was not over. In the rising flush of dawn, two or three guns mixed at the mouth of the flats, where a guard had been left to hold the drift of cattle. Guns, blankets, packs and grub, loose clothing and hats lay strewed over the space of ground where the camp had been. Only now did the dry brush stems thrown on smoldering embers break into flame. Old Jim Breck was dead. Another Wheel hand had fallen across by the spring hole. Then, finally, the last gun was still.

Riders came in. They looked around, climbed slowly from saddles. Few had anything to say. Reed Clinton was the other man lost here. Reed had been a smiling man, able to crack some joke in the midst of any hardship. And Reed would never laugh again. Two others had been wounded; these were old valued companions, the cream of Wheel. They and old Jim Breck, whose body Lingo covered with a blanket. This had been victory, yes, but at what cost? What cost all of this?

A muscular, thick-set hand, named Hob Sansome, came across to Lingo. For a

moment he appeared to have forgotten what he had to say, then remembered it. "Parada," he said. "Parada's lyin' over there by the spring hole. He's the only one they left that I recognize. Most all the crew was strangers. Men from over in the Strip, I reckon, or from up Canadian Branch way."

Lingo said, "Parada would have been staying here as pay-off man. I'd hoped for Jennings, too—"

Hob Sansome's eyes had a dull, far-away look in them. He looked at Lingo. "You been hurt," he said.

The shirt along Lingo's left upper arm showed a patch of red. Lingo shook his head. "Nothing. A scratch. I reckon, Hob, you better be in charge of this stock. Don't waste time gettin' out of here, drivin' back across the roughs. No tellin' what reinforcements will be strayin' in here today. You've got just seven men—one you'll maybe have to carry. Get goin'!"

Hob nodded. "Yeah." His voice lifted. "Two of you boys run in them hosses yonder! We need fresh mounts. Get grub cookin'; we got to eat. Where will you be, Lingo?"

"Back at Wheel!"

HE came into Wheel at dark, covering more than sixty rough miles from the Topatona Buttes, across the Quebradas into Salt Fork and on across the Solano into the deep, tree-sheltered yards at Wheel headquarters. A single lamp burned in the bunk shack, and only the parlor window of the main house was yellow-bright. Sam Lingo pushed his stumbling tired animal across to the bunk shack. Suddenly the lamp within went dark.

Then he heard Clark Ames' voice from the door. "Speak up before you come any nearer, rider!" Ames said.

"It's me," Lingo said. "What's the word?"

The sound of Clark Ames' boots turned in the doorway. He went back into the big, bare bunkroom, lined with its rows of empty cots, and relighted the lamp on an old table. Lingo stood in the doorway when he turned. Ames had picked up a telegram in one bony-knuckled hand.

"This came," he said. "This don't say much—only Red Murchison had trouble on trail above the Platte. He lost close

to eight hundred head of critters from both herds. It's the last straw needed to break Wheel's back."

Lingo took the paper Ames held out. Those herds from Wheel breeding ground here had bucked hard luck all the way. There was no criticism in him for Red Murchison. These were loyal men: Red Murchison, who had taken Lingo's own place on the drive trail; Ames, who stood here, and Hob Sansome, bringing cattle back across the Quebradas. Wheel men! Lingo stood in the lamp light, swaying slightly, his face gaunted to the bone by so many hours of unending strain and fatigue.

Ames said, "Sam, you been hurt! I didn't notice. Wait, sit down—"

Lingo walked out onto the bunkhouse porch. He walked slowly, one step after another, across yards to the main house. He climbed old worn steps. Through the parlor window there, he saw Glory's bright head lifted, where she sat half across the room. The door latch under hand, he slowly opened it.

That first day in Langford, the first sight he had of her since Glory Creston had returned, he had known she was beautiful. Despite everything, he had seen her eyes in the fresh swell of each dawn across the Quebradas. He had seen her face in small sheltered night fires among the hills. He could not have told her in so many words, but if he could have saved Wheel, what he did would have been for her.

Sam Lingo stood in the doorway, the lamp-light within burning across the hard bitterness of his face. He said, "I reckon I played a fool, Glory. I reckon I made the moves Clanton and all the other of Wheel's enemies most hoped I would. Another wiser man would have known Wheel couldn't have won a war now, and never tried it. Go to Clanton tomorrow, and sell the brand for what you can get, over and above debts. Once Solano Bob could have taken out close to a million, in the flush years. It's different now. But that's what Clanton's wanted, that's all Clanton's ever wanted since he's growed to power in Langford—Wheel!"

He turned and went down the worn, old steps. Suddenly, swiftly, Glory Creston rose behind and came across the room. She saw his dim, lank figure going on across

the yards. She called, "Sam! Sam Lingo, come back here! There are some things I want to say—"

He neither heard, nor paused. Ames still stood on the bunkhouse porch. He watched Lingo pick up reins and start toward the corrals leading his spent, weary horse. Ames trotted down the steps.

"Here! I'll pull that saddle off for you, Lingo. Go back, go sit down a while. You're wore out, man! You're hurt!"

"Catch me out a fresh horse if you will, Clark."

"Huh? Where you goin' now? A man can't live a-saddle. He's got to rest sometimes. Don't you know when you're through? Wheel's licked! Take your lickin' the same way, Sam!"

"I know," Lingo said. "The other boys don't. Most of 'em will have to clear the country. I'll stop at Rock Corral. Then afterwards sometime I got a job of my own to do!"

V

GLORY CRESTON had waited in Langford since midnight, riding in with Ames from Wheel that night. Daylight outlined the square, wooden faces of buildings. An early rim of sunlight, striking walls, crept slowly down and filled the street. Three or four riders, traveling fast, beat in along the Solano road, swung down and congregated at the Clanton stable. Ben Clanton and the spidery, bleak-faced little man who was usually to be found near him came from the Keno House and turned that way, hurrying. Clark Ames watched this through a spattered street-end window.

He turned and crossed the small-spaced telegraph room behind to the girl's side. Ames said, "Somethin's buildin', Miss Creston. I don't know what, but some of them is riders that's been with Jennings in the hills. It don't look good!"

The round-faced operator's clock showed a few minutes after nine o'clock now. The instrument was clicking. The operator looked around under a green eyeshade, a limp cigarette hanging from the corner of thin lips. He spoke twistedly from the other side of his mouth.

"This is what you been waitin' for, Miss Creston."

He began scribbling. He finished the message, tore off the sheet from pad and handed it around to the girl. Ames could make nothing of her expression. He watched her draw a quick, deep breath, standing very straight, small in comparison with Ames' own tall, rawboned frame. Her voice sounded small.

"Solano Bob himself wouldn't have stood for this," she said presently. "I remember once when my mother wanted to do the same and he wouldn't let her. Wheel was threatened then. I can remember his words to her. 'Wheel's a man's spread,' he said. 'Cows, water, range right and grass—not woman's things. It isn't a woman's country. If Wheel lost you'd have nothing left—not even me, because I'd go down with Wheel. This other's your security, and security for our daughter. Don't ever offer it to me again!'"

Clark Ames said, "What—money?"

"Yes, and no," she told him. "In one way, something more than money. It's the old house that belonged to my mother, and was her mother's before that. There's also a little business property. That's back East where I went to school."

"This house that was your mother's . . . ?" Ames questioned.

"Will be sold," she said. "That's what is happening now; my order's been received at the other end. That money will go into Wheel. Lingo rode for Rock Corral last night. I want you to find him now and tell him this, as fast as a horse will carry you!"

Ames muttered, "First I'll take you back to Wheel."

"No, I can't leave yet. I've got to stay here till I learn more. How much can be raised on short notice. The property isn't very valuable. But every cent will help."

"Lissen!" Ames protested. "Lingo sent me in to stay at Wheel headquarters with orders not to let you out of my sight, no matter where you rode."

"I may be here all day!"

It was high noon when Glory Creston left the little telegraph office and crossed the dusty, hot strip of street. Twice during the morning, Clanton had been back and forth between the Keno House and the stable. An hour before, six riders accumulating at the wagonyards, had moved out of town in a close knot, striking dust up across the Solano. As Glory Creston passed

the mouth of the stable, Clanton stepped out.

"Lookin' for me, Miss Creston?" he asked.

The girl turned. "Yes, as a matter of fact, I was." She came directly to the point. "You'll remember our little business talk, the day after my father was buried, when Mr. Parada came out to Wheel to look after things there. You were worried about what money Wheel owed you, in loans and the bill at your store. I didn't know as much about you then, Mr. Clanton, as I know now, and what means might be used to break Wheel. But you'll be glad to know that a way of repaying your part of Wheel's debt immediately and in full has been arranged. Dodge City money has so far showed more confidence in the brand."

"Uh-huh." There was no expression on Clanton's solid, muscular face. "A kind of rumor about it got around town this mornin'. Back-range I hear there's been a lot of trouble."

The spidery, bleak-faced man stood behind Clanton in the stable. Clanton did not bother to turn his head.

"Send one of the boys down-street to bring Miss Creston's horse up here for her," he ordered over-shoulder. "Tell Jennings and Cree Dawes to ride along an' see she gets out to Wheel all right. Been a lot of range trouble lately, Miss Creston."

"Thank you. But that won't be necessary."

The girl walked on. She wore an old doeskin riding skirt that Solano Bob had had made for her, three years ago. Ames' horse was gone where they had left the animals at a side-street rack last night. Glory Creston untied reins, tightened cinch as expertly as a man and got into saddle. She took a back way around the end of the town, striking the Wheel road across open country. She pushed the pony to a gallop.

A quarter-mile behind, two men came up from the flat dip of land just out of town, riding side by side. They neither gained nor lost pace. The pony couldn't stand an eight-mile run up the gradually rising course of valley. The animal labored, breathing heavily, sweat lather streaking neck and flanks. Glory Creston had to slow up. She alternated trot and lope.

It was midway between Langford town

and Wheel, where the valley spread its wide grass off ten miles in either direction and there was no habitation within sight, that the two men behind caught up easily on leggy, strong horses. Jennings, with his long, flat lips pressed tight, simply reached out and pulled the reins from her grip. There was not even a pause. The two men left the road, cutting north, the pony led by the reins.

LINGO came down Salt Fork from top country in the late afternoon. There had been more trouble across the Quebradas. Three or four riders from the scattered force in the Topatonas had followed Sansome's return with the stock across that rough, hard land, sniping from the flanks. It was impossible to keep to open ground. Hob Sansome had had to scout and work out the ridges ahead, driving short-handed as he was. Once the herd had been scattered from the rear; two mounts had been shot under riders. Only some unnamable, dogged purpose drove these men on.

Once the Clanton-Jennings interests got the upper hand and complete control, every hand of them would be forced to flee the country, hunted out. A figurehead of a sheriff in Langford would swear out blanket warrants. Those were the wages. Here along Salt Fork, since Lingo had ridden through from Rock Corral that day-break, other hoofs had crossed his track. Three men had cut in from the north and moved down the Fork trail ahead of him. Another joined them at a break below. A mile above the shacks and outfit Jennings had established on the Fork, Lingo breasted the slope and struck into side gullies. There was a way he had often traveled through here.

Men were stringing back raggedly from that dawn battle over against the Topatona Buttes, to assemble and reorganize at Jennings' outfit, he guessed. He worked out along one of the higher gullies to headland that surveyed the place. A dozen or fifteen horses stood in the Jennings corral; men loafed along the shade of the house porch and about the sheds. Far off down the Fork, where land flattened away and joined the Solano, Lingo's eyes traced a little line of dust. Two dot-like specks showed there—two riders coming up from Langford or the Wheel road to add their

number to the others. No, three. He saw a third rider now, following just behind the two.

He swung back to the sheltered side-slope ravines, moving on for Rock Corral. Within five hundred yards he came on sign where another horse had been through this same way very recently. The rider had halted on the next brushy point, smoked two cigarettes, re-cinched saddle. Then turned his animal and gone back toward Rock Corral. He noticed the print of stub bootheels where the man had stood and pulled the slack from cinch. For no reason he could have named Lingo thought of Clark Ames—big Clark!

Wide of the Jennings outfit, Lingo sloped off with the land. Those distant riders had now moved up a space, hitting along the lower course of Salt Fork. The third horse still followed, always just an even distance behind the two ahead. Looked like that horse was being led. Smaller animal, the rider smaller in saddle. Lingo shifted weight in the stirrups, watching for a while.

Ten minutes passed. Fifteen. The three moved abreast him now half a mile distant, quartering up the lower bottoms. His range-bred eyes picked out details. The three were passing. Some slight shifting of the course, the strike of lowering, slant sunlight, momentarily showed another thing. The rider behind wore a fringed doeskin skirt, not a man's chaparajos. . . .

GLORY CRESTON had made no outcry, leaving the Wheel road. She might have slipped and swung from the pony's saddle as the two men struck off across land for the wide notch of Salt Fork, but such escape would have been only momentary. One of the two would as promptly have caught her afoot and tied her on the pony. The pace settled down to a steady jog that covered miles, easy on horseflesh.

Once Dode Jennings had turned in the saddle. "This is the boss's idea, not mine!" he said. "I'd bring a crew in here that would clean Wheel out inside a month, was I doin' it. And then clear out of the country with what stake I'd made. But he's different, Clanton is. He wants somethin' else. He's seen the day when

forty-fifty Wheel riders would troop into town on pay-nights, and whatever Solano Bob said was law as far as Wheel reached. It's left an idea Clanton can't forget. It's power he wants, and the whole of Wheel!"

The girl knew Jennings by hearsay. Once she had seen him in town. The other man, Cree Dawes, said nothing. Horses had jogged on without break of pace. By middle afternoon the wide, rising slopes of Salt Fork came up on either hand, and they took a well-traveled trail here, following the bottoms. Jennings' outfit lay nine miles up the Fork itself. Cree Dawes rolled and smoked continual cigarettes.

The gradual walls of the Fork narrowed in. Sunlight slanted now, forming shadow in the tumbled roll and creases of side draws, rims against western hills. The man called Cree Dawes had turned head briefly, to cup hands and light another smoke. Instead he threw one arm suddenly forward, reaching for the stock of rifle in saddleboot.

He said, "What's that rider want? You know him?"

Jennings swung around. He slipped lead reins from right hand to left, staring up the side of hills. Glory Creston had this chance. She pushed booted heels into the pony's flanks and the tired animal responded. Jennings caught the reins in time. But he was not near enough to grab and keep the girl in the saddle. She was quick as a man. She was dropping off, running.

Jennings jumped his horse around after her. The hard-eyed Dawes dismounted behind. "Watch it, Dode!" He fired, jacking lever. Just before Dawes' second shot, Jennings' animal wheeled and went down.

Jennings threw himself clear, as sound of the shot reached down from the hills and Cree Dawes fired again. Jennings got up. He started after her. The girl had gained twenty yards' lead. Dawes was firing his third shot, and the gun from the hills sent a slug whining past Jennings' ears. Jennings ran back half a dozen paces, tugging to pull rifle from under weight of the down horse. Dawes had dropped to offer less target.

"Up there, yonder!" Dawes yelled across the open space to Jennings. "It's bringin'

down a second rider. Y' see the dust!"

The sound of this shooting was a quick-spaced roar that hit slopes of the Fork, now volleyed and re-echoed, plainly audible at the Jennings outfit above, where men on the open porch or idling about the sheds cocked heads, listening for a moment, before a rush started for the corrals and saddles.

VI

FEW men, if any, among the wild gang, the gunmen, drifters and wanted clan Jennings and Clanton had brought in here would have fired deliberately on a woman under any circumstances. Making his run off that slope, Lingo had slid to stop at three or four hundred yards, where hill edge flattened into bottom. He had quit his saddle and started shooting. Glory Creston's move, splitting from the men, had given him this chance. But it wasn't such a good spot. The warped, slight figure of Dawes lay prone, practically invisible at the distance. Jennings, taking cover behind the down horse, exposed chest and shoulders as he worked his rifle lever.

The figure of the girl seemed hung suspended across the space of ground between. She did not seem to move at all across the distance. Time itself had stopped. Lingo had clipped out five shells. His horse had bolted, dragging reins.

Glory Creston must have covered half the distance when Lingo saw rifle-lead cut dust in line with the girl. He realized then that Jennings' last shot had been lined across at her. Every nerve and muscle in Lingo centered along sights and barrel. He fired. Jumped up and started forward, running three or four paces in the length of time it took to jack in a fresh shell, stopping while he fired, heading on once more. Jennings went down for cover. In twenty yards the rifle in Lingo's hands was empty.

He was carrying a belt of spare rifle ammunition, swung at hips with six-gun belt and holster. He yelled with all the strength in his lungs, "Down! Get down, Glory!" And saw her obey instantly.

He fell, twisting around to get at the rifle belt, jerking shells out and jamming them into magazine. Lingo's first knowl-

edge of another gun in this came while he lay there twisted, refilling the rifle magazine. The other man had stopped a little higher, off to the left, where he opened. Close enough for Lingo's gaze, lifting, to identify him. And this was not the time when Lingo asked himself how Ames happened to be there.

Ames had hit a fast pace out of town that morning, reaching Rock Corral a while after noon, where two Wheel men, just unsaddling, told him Lingo had cut out across the Quebradas at daylight by Salt Fork. Ames had headed on for Salt Fork, taking the side trail. Midway he had given it up, pondered, smoked a couple of cigarettes and decided word left at the Corral would find Lingo fast as any other way, heading back for Wheel or town as the case might be himself. Not a quarter-mile of distance had separated the two men at that time. It had lessened when Ames sighted Lingo on the slope and turned for a better look, watching the start of that hard down-hill run of Lingo's.

Now Ames had the vantage point from which he directed a cutting, steady flow of lead at the two men in the bottoms. Lingo came up with a freshly loaded gun. He fired two or three times. Dawes, who had no cover but the grass, started crawling jerkily across to shelter of the down horse where Jennings lay. Lingo dropped again, working on toward the spot where he had last seen Glory Creston.

She had come a long way, flattened like himself among the scant sage and grass. Till now she hadn't been sure the man was Lingo. She only knew there had been a chance in that space of seconds when the riders had stopped, and she had taken advantage of it. She looked into Lingo's deep-burned, dusty face, gaunt and hollow-eyed from the days passed.

"Keep on!" he said. "It's Ames, there against the hills. Don't stop till you reach him! I'll follow—"

He sat back, bracing his left elbow against his knee as he spoke. The smash of the gun cut off the words. For five everlasting minutes that spaced, long-range battle continued. Only the crown of a hat or an arm holding rifle barrel showed over the down horse. Lingo had used most of his belt of rifle ammunition. He

held fire, waiting. Ames had got his mount out of sight. He had worked aside into a flat gully where the hill slope rose. Suddenly Ames shouted.

IMMEDIATELY Lingo saw that first funnel of dust that broke around the bend of bottoms above, followed by a high-rising cloud running behind the main mass of riders from the Jennings outfit up the Fork. Fire over the down horse cut loose with a new ferocity. Lingo paused. He aimed one shot at Jennings, then started back toward the hills, crawling. A girl's handkerchief, a crumpled, lacy square, lay here, torn from Glory's pocket by brush stems. As he crawled, Lingo's rough, hard-calloused hand closed over it. Ames' voice took on a new insistency. The drum of hoofs was a dull, lifting pound, an undertone that rose over the racket of guns. Coming into rifle range, the force split, and five or six riders broke off in a mad scramble for high ground.

Lingo stood up. He took that last hundred yards at a zigzag, bent run. Glory Creston stood in the gully that Ames had been forced to pick. This was no place to fight off the force now swelled against them. Clark Ames had a smooth rip across the chest of his shirt where a ricochet had nipped him. Like Lingo, he had been forced to exhaust a large part of his rifle ammunition.

He grinned with a hard, speculative, mirthless look. "Two guns of us!" he said to Lingo.

They had Colt's at hip, not yet unlimbered at so long a range. There was this little interval of silence, whipped across with a noise of hoofs. Glory Creston reached for Ames' holstered weapon.

"Three guns to go!" she said. "For Wheel!"

They stood together, two men and a girl! Bound together by something stronger than bonds. By Solano Bob, who lay under sod marked by a stone with his name and the brand. By Reed Clinton, who had fallen over along the Topatona Buttes, and old Jim Breck. By all the past and all its deeds. . . .

The rush of riders delayed long enough for a shouted word with Dode Jennings. Jennings had run across for Dawes' standing mount. Men came on spurred horses,

VII

running neck to neck, with an enthusiasm bred of vengeance and memory of that defeat over against the Topatona walls. Lingo took it standing, throwing Colt's. Ames was a deadlier man with the rifle. Three guns! But men were going down.

A solid bombardment hit the gulch. Another man slipped sidewise and left an empty saddle. Some horseman reined in and struck off at an angle. Jennings came straight on, straight ahead. He rode heedlessly. There was always a smoldering venom, a treacherous, deadly hate and violence, waiting in the man. He had always hated Wheel. But in one leap of the animal under him, his features changed. A twitching slackness jerked at his long-lipped, tight mouth.

The rush had spread. Ames was down on one knee. Jennings' animal turned under him, following the other horses. Jennings lay over the saddle, holding on to leather with contracted muscles. He managed to keep his seat till the animal trotted beyond the gulch. Fallen, he worked around on one elbow, firing the two shells left in his six-gun, but with no aim. The last struck earth hardly a yard before his hand. His head slipped and he lay still.

The day lacked three-quarters of an hour till sundown. Lingo took one rim of the gully, Ames crawling across to the other. With a last flare of sunset riding high across the west, they fought back another concentrated attack, guns from above cutting down on them now. Moments later, in the half light between dark and day, a new burst of shooting higher on the slope of the Fork became audible. Evidently the two Wheel men at Rock Corral had heard the battle and come across. Dark settled with periodic firing.

It was an hour afterward that Lingo heard Sansome's heavy voice, sweeping down from the hill-slope above, "Come on. We whipped most of this outfit once! It can be done again—!"

Then hard, immediate firing. Hob Sansome, who had been a-saddle forty-eight hours without rest, driving, fighting his way back from the Topatona! Sansome with those other surviving Wheel hands beside him! Even with nothing but the memory of men like that, Wheel could not perish, no matter what happened to the brand.

IT was thin daylight when they came down the broad slope of the Solano into Wheel headquarters, Ames riding with one leg thickly bandaged, Sam Lingo riding at Glory Creston's other hand. All night there had been shooting up and down the Salt Fork. The hills above flared with the high, rising light of flimsy buildings burned at the Jennings outfit shortly after midnight. Sansome had left the stock he was driving in the head of Halfway Creek. Up there, across the Quebrada summits, the heavy rumble of gunfire in the Fork had been plainly audible before sundown, that day passed. Sansome and two men now followed into headquarters.

The move was to hold and gather every head of Wheel beef that would sell on the market, trimming the range down to breeder stock. Glory Creston had been able to realize little more than the Clanton debt in town. Yet this was less than half Wheel's obligations. More money had to be had somewhere. But Dodge City capital knew Sam Lingo, as Dodge City had known Solano Bob. Cattle were a gambling business, and Dodge City bet on the men behind the game. Wheel would carry on!

A pale strip of lamplight showed from the window of Solano Bob's old office, at one end of the Wheel bunkhouse. A driving span and rig from town stood at the corral hitch-rack. The day was coming without flare of color, a line like silver over the east, the rest all steely gray. It was light enough, entering the main yard gate, to distinguish a man or animal plainly as far away as the corrals. At half that distance, the man who stepped from the old end office door looked shifty, the glint of a sheriff's star told who he was. He muttered some sudden word over-shoulder. A shadow cut across the pale-lighted window from Solano Bob's old desk inside.

Behind the man, Ben Clanton's thick, powerful body filled the doorway. Clanton walked across the narrow space of bunkhouse porch outside with a deliberate stride. He halted on the steps an instant. No weapon was visible on his person. His face was solid and unreadable. That waspish, small man with the deep-lined features

and impassive stare, never to be found far from Clanton's side, heard hoofs at the same time and sat up in the seat of the rig. He turned, got down and started walking across the yard toward Clanton's side.

Sam Lingo swung from saddle. Ames stopped, pulling rifle from under his injured leg. Hob Sansome pushed up to his side. Forty paces across the open, hoof-marked dust of the yards separated them from Clanton and the spidery man angling across. Sansome pulled his Colt's.

"Keep out of this!" Lingo said. "This is mine!"

He began walking straight forward, one boot before the other, with an even slowness that did not vary.

The sheriff backed against the side of the bunkhouse. He started to say, "The law's got a right here. . . ."

The spidery little man had one hand suspended over his holster. No one paid heed to the sheriff's mumble. Nor did Clanton speak. He had no lack of blunt, cold courage. In his life Clanton had faced an even half dozen men like this. He turned a little on his boots, quartering, his left shoulder forward slightly. There was no question as to what was coming here. No staying the force and will of either of these men. Clanton's steady, close-lidded eyes judged time to a fraction of second in this gray dawn light, waiting till Lingo's coming step was in mid-stride. Less than ten yards separated them.

CLANTON'S right hand cut inside his coat for the snub-nosed .44 in a sling there. Lingo's left boot touched the dust-pocked ground. His arm struck for the

bone-handled Colt's. The smash of weapons was simultaneous. For seeming seconds Clanton stood, still solid, but without power to pull trigger. There was no second shot.

Then suddenly the little waspish man was standing with hands lifted, under Ames' and Sansome's guns. And Clanton's big frame lay buckled forward in the dust. What loyalty this man owed Clanton no one knew; but the sound of his voice in this pressed, after-silence was like a sob, and still unbelieving.

"You've killed him! You've killed Ben Clanton!"

"You and that Clanton hireling sheriff yonder had best get out of here," Lingo said without passion. "This is the finish! Pass the word along to any others from the hills. That goes for all the crowd! Don't ever cross Wheel ground again, no man of you! And the sheriff had best leave Langford without delay!"

There was an awful weariness in him. Something that had seemed unending and unbeatable was nearly finished, almost done. The Clanton-Jennings force scattered through the hills would dissolve to the shifting outlaw trails. Better law and organization and justice was coming throughout all the West. There was still work to do. Wheel still stood. Wheel was the force of the men behind it, the living and the dead.

And as Sam Lingo moved slowly across the yards, Glory Creston walked beside him, the touch of her hand gentle on his arm. Her words very soft, "We'll stand together, Sam. For always. It couldn't be any other way between us!"

MORE SHAVING MILEAGE IN THIS LOW-PRICE BLADE

10¢

8 SUPER-KEEN SHAVING EDGES FOR 10¢

Try PROBAK Juniors—and make your shaving money go further. Four blades for a dime—with eight of the keenest edges ever put on steel! No wonder thrifty buyers everywhere give Probak Juniors outstanding preference.

PROBAK JUNIOR



Outside that mud-walled fort, Bedouin torture-knives waited. Inside, a brute commandant broke men on the dread *crapaudine*. To Legionnaire Clay it was dead-end death—but before he kicked in, the Yank aimed to square his hate-score.

BLOOD DEBT OF THE LEGION

By FRANKLIN P. MILLER

SPREAD like the sticks of a giant fan, the Posts of the French Colonial army reach out into the desert. Behind each strategic interval is a main reserve, ready to be hurled north, south, east,

or west, wherever the green banner of the Prophet is raised. The fat corn lands along the rivers, and the brown mud towns along the coast must be protected, for Algeria is the granary of France.

At the big reserve posts the life is good—not too much drill, plenty of time for sleep, and fighting enough to keep the troops in condition. For war never ceases in the Legion. It's a good full life for a man anxious to forget, with the chance of battle, and the Street of the Ouled Nails not too far away. But the desert posts, the little line of outposts that guard the frontier and hold back the rush until the reserves can come—that is a different matter.

Forty kilos out from Adraar, across the twisted rock and glaring sand, the mud fort of Zandazul squatted beside a small oasis. A score of leaning palm trees and a couple acres of coarse grass around the water hole were all that gave excuse for its existence, and any Legionnaire would have cheerfully chosen a warm seat in hell before being ordered there.

The ugly mud fort was an oblong, set carefully two hundred yards this side of the oasis. It was a two-story building, with both floors loopholed for rifles. On the top was a scaffold where a sentry was always stationed. The tower was Keppel's idea. No sentry was liable to rest up there when a moment's inattention might mean a slug through the brain, for Keppel had provided no sort of breastworks; that was part of his plan.

Back in the days that no man asks about in the Legion, Keppel had been a trooper of the Death's Head Hussars—at least that was what he claimed. His bark of command, and his overbearing manner led some of the Legion to wonder. But who cares for simple Legionnaires? France asks no questions of the murderers, the broken officers, and the refugees that jam the Legion. Always it had been the refuge of the hounded men, where they could make their last desperate stand against the world. Any man that can go to his death with a joke in his teeth can find shelter in the Legion. Now Keppel was Adjutant at Zandazul and wore the chevrons of command. No man could catch the stench of raped Louvaine under the coarse French uniform.

It was hot in the mud fort, hot with the dull heat of the desert, that makes a man's brain sizzle under the red cloth of the Képi. The loopholes of the squad-rooms gave almost no air, and no man

could leave the fort to cross the bare level space of packed earth to the oasis without orders from Keppel.

Seated on the bare stretcher that served as table and chair by day and bed by night, Legionnaire of the First Class Clay watched Van Proont shining his boots. Desert or no desert, everything must be kept polished to the last rivet, or Keppel's heavy hand would fall—and Keppel was the Law at Zandazul. The big American looked up as Peroli entered, then turned his glance back to the stolid Dutchman as before.

THE gendarmes of Marseilles had heaved a sigh of relief when Peroli was claimed by the Legion. He was a slim and greasy Italian, with a chinless face and a gift for ripping upward with the Apache dagger that had made him an outlaw even among that wild crew that haunts the beach.

"Name-of-a-name, that ox-eyed son of a black bull will kill me yet! Three times I have cleaned this unmentionable stinkpot of mine, and still he finds dirt in the bore. Now I have an extra tour on that damned tower!"

Clay tapped the ash off his conical native cigaret, and blew a smoke ring. "You should be a good little boy like me, Peroli, and have three lowly dogs of the second class to clean your gun."

"Bah—you are new to the company. You have not yet angered Keppel. Wait until something goes wrong, my friend, and then see how long those sardines of yours last. You'll be shining brass with the rest of us in no time."

"Well, I've done it before and it didn't kill me. Besides, I haven't been busted yet, so why borrow trouble?"

The apache sat down on the low bench and spoke in a whisper, his eyes on the door. Van Proont went stolidly on with his polishing.

"*Sacre nom*, Clay, do you know what Keppel did to Steiner before you came? The pig stood us in the sun with rifles at the aim because someone had laughed at him. Steiner was young, and after a time his rifle drooped. Keppel ordered him to raise it, but *le pauvre garçon* could not. Then this fat swine called him all manner of names. It was all right until

he called the boy a drab's son. Then the young fool cursed him as he swayed on his feet. He stepped out of ranks, and Keppel put a Luger bullet in his belly—right here, where it would take hours to die. And what would you? He called it mutiny."

"Seems to be an interesting sort of commander, I should say, but he has never done anything to me."

"Name-of-a-name, will nothing move you? Do you want to carry sandbags from dawn to dark without water, walking back and forth from here to that stinking water hole? I tell you, one day in some dark passage it will be thus—" He drew his hand upward over his stomach, the old ripping stroke of the Apache. Then he sought out his cleaning kit and began anew on the rifle.

Van Proont finished cleaning the shoes and set them in the line at the head of Clay's bunk. He was a stolid, shifty-eyed Dutchman, and he wandered out of the squad-room with his head sunk. A sulky devil, but a good shot, Clay had never liked him from the first. Peroli finished cleaning his rifle and climbed to the tower for his watch in obedience to Keppel's call.

"TURN out here, you sons of swine—move! Fall in in order!"

The three squads off duty slid into jackets and grabbed their rifles. Adjutant Keppel would punish the last man to fall in, and no man wished to be last. They clumped out, Clay among them, and lined up before the mud walls. The glare of the sun on the packed earth struck them like a blow, and they blinked, half blinded.

"So, dogs, what is that I hear of talk among you? The walls have ears, remember, when threats are made against an officer. Swine—you heard this talk!" He halted in front of Clay as he spoke. "Why did you not tell me? Speak!"

"I do not know what the adjutant means," said Clay smoothly.

"You lie, son-of-a-pig. That misborn son of Satan on the tower threatened my life, and you did not strike him down! Do you know that I am the Legion here?"

"You have no need—" the Legionnaire began.

"No need! Now you threaten me! Take that, schweinhund—" The German's fist crashed into Clay's face. Instinctively he struck back, and a red welt appeared on the Adjutant's face.

"Ah!" The breath whistled between the Adjutant's teeth. "You have struck me—so! For that you shall have the *crapaudine*. Take him, you two, and bind him!"

Van Proont and Schwartz leaped upon the American and tore his rifle away. In an instant he was stripped of coat and shirt, and the cords drew his feet backward in the awful strain of the *crapaudine*. Back they went until the feet and hands met behind him and were lashed in place. Beads of sweat stood out on his face.

"Now, swine, Van Proont shall have this dog's chevrons to show you that it is wise to tell of threats. Van Proont and Schwartz, fall out, the others stand fast. We shall see whether a touch of sun will make you remember."

Motionless the Legionnaires stood at attention. There was not a breath stirring. Keppel seated himself and watched them grimly, his hand on the red butt of his Luger. The minutes ticked past. They could hear the pacing of Peroli on the tower above them, and envied him the chance to move. Here and there a man swayed, to gather himself as the Adjutant's tiny eyes glowed at him. On the packed ground Clay's head swam as the cords cut into his wrists and the tendons strained.

From the top of the tower Peroli shouted. His rifle cracked once, twice, and he pointed to the north. A bullet whipped from the sandhills and flattened on the iron of the door. Keppel roared a command. The ranks broke, and poured inside the fort. After them came the Adjutant, Clay's bound form dragging face down in the sand. Keppel would not waste a man in an attack! The Beni Jael were on the war trail.

THE Legionnaires leaped to their posts. Off came the jackets and shirts. They fought bare to the waist in the fearful heat. Keppel barred the boiler-plated door and ripped out his orders. Whatever they might think, the Legion admitted that Kep-

pel was a soldier. He cut the ropes on Clay's hands and set Martaine to chaffing the torn wrists. Every rifle counted in the defense. Bounding up the stairs, he faced Peroli.

"Dog, back on that tower. I did not tell you to come down!"

"But it is certain death up there!"

"And more certain death here—up the tower, I say!" He drew his pistol. The apache quailed at the fury in the Adjutant's eyes and surged up the ladder. A steel-jacketed bullet ripped a sliver from the rail, and the Italian ducked. Laying flat on his belly, he rolled into his sling and opened fire. There was no cover. He had been sentenced to death, and he knew it.

Crouched in the sand hills, the Bedouin marksmen kept up a dropping fire. Here and there a machine gun spanked the hot air, guns captured from the Spaniards far to the north, and often worked by renegades. From their loopholes the Legionnaires answered. Not a man of them but had been in action a dozen times before, and their aim was deadly. The acrid stench of powder made the rooms unbearable. Sweat ran in little rivulets down their naked backs, and the rifles blistered their hands.

Martaine finished his task, and Clay took his place at a loophole. His wrists were torn and every muscle badly wrenched, but he had one more rifle and a valued one.

"*Sacre nom*, but we shall pay dearly for that devil's pleasure," Martaine panted between shots.

"Keppel's, you mean? What brought on this attack?" Clay spoke without taking his eyes from the sun-baked plain that stretched to the oasis. As he finished, his piece cracked, and he jammed the bolt home again. That was one Arab that would raid no more, he reflected.

"These are the Beni Jael. I can tell them by their turbans," Martaine went on. "They want revenge for that woman Keppel took before you came. *Parbleu*—I scarcely blame him, she was a winsome wench. But it is best to leave these Bedouin women their virtue."

"He amused himself, eh?"

"*Mais oui*, before he sent her back, he enjoyed her company. She killed herself,

I understand. *Pauvre imbecile*, as if it mattered!"

"And that's the reason for this attack?"

"*Vraiment*, she was a chief's woman, you see, and he somewhat naturally objected to . . ."

There was a gasp, and Clay saw the Legionnaire slump forward, a blue-pencil hole between his eyes where the slug had entered. He held himself tightly and fired a clip as fast as he could jam the bolt. The Arabs were using dumdums, for the whole back of Martaine's head was gone.

"You, Clay—Legionnaire Clay!" It was the Adjutant calling from the head of the stairs. Clay turned to see what was wanted.

"Come here, swine, and work the radio. Get me Adraar at once and report this. Move when I speak to you, fool!"

The American slammed the iron shutter of his loophole and mounted the stairs. At the top was a wire hedge-hog, a mass of barbed wire wrapped around a nest of sharpened stakes. It could be rolled into place from above, and used to block the stairs. The beauty of it was that it could not be pulled out from below.

Crouched behind the parapets he found a squad of picked shots. They were firing slowly and deliberately, as the Legion had trained them to fire, at the little hummocks of sand that sheltered the tribesmen.

From the oasis a sharper burst of fire came. Keppel cursed and cut loose with a Chaut-chaut on the cloaked forms under the swaying trees. A spanging report rapped out. In front of the fort the earth heaved as the small shell exploded. It was a captured 37-mm. gun, and some Bedouin knew how to use it. They were aiming at the door, and they were out of rifle range. The bursts of the Chaut-chaut were harmless.

CLAY bent forward and hurried to the corner where the old field set was in place. Van Proont was slouched against the wall, his blue eyes fixed on the dials.

"Can't you work it? What seems to be wrong?"

Van Proont was silent, and Clay laid his hand on the Dutchman's shoulder. Stiffly, without changing his set expression, the man slid over sideways, his head

resting on the dials. An Arab bullet had found his heart. Clay pulled him away, and adjusted the headphones to his ears. He tapped the key gently, rapping out the dots and dashes. No answering buzz came from the batteries. He lifted the black lid and peered inside. The set was wrecked, someone had smashed it with a rifle butt.

"Ho, Adjutant, look at this! There is treason here! The set is smashed."

Keppel slid to his side instantly. There was no doubt about it, the set was useless. All the delicate connections had been crushed with one sweep of the butt. The tubes were ground to fragments.

Again the sharp crack of the 37 rang from the oasis. There was a flash of flame, and a thunder crash overhead. Long splinters of wood fell about them. A red spray spurted from the top. The gun had hit the tower on the second shot. Peroli thrashed in agony. Half of his breast was torn away. Rolling to the edge, he fell heavily, like a log. His arms were writhing over his shattered chest. Keppel bent over him, pistol drawn.

"You hell hound, did you wreck that set? I swear I'll kill you if you did!"

The Italian's face grinned in his agony. A gleam of devilish joy shot through his eyes. Panting for each breath he spoke, his voice rattling in his throat.

"Keppel, you filthy hound, you abomination of Huns! You should never have left me alone when you ordered me up on the tower to die! *Sacre*, this end is good! Who dreads to die when he has such company with him? I smashed your set, and now I'll wait in hell for you. No fear, Keppel, you cannot harm me now. I know I'm done for, but the whole peleton is a small price to pay for killing you. Help won't come, Keppel, I've seen to that—and now I go to wait, Keppel, to wait—until—you come!" He laughed, a hoarse, croaking laugh that held the rattle of bones. His head dropped back on the roof, and a slow, spreading pool of red gathered under him.

"God, what I'd have done to him if he had lived!" Keppel's red face was wet with sweat. He turned back to Clay.

"Can you fix that, or is it hopeless?" he asked.

The Legionnaire pointed to the crushed

tubes and the torn connections. That was answer enough; the radio was useless.

ONCE more the ugly bark of the light gun ripped viciously from the oasis. A clanging crash came from the floor below. Splinters of jagged steel spent themselves on the thick mud walls. The gun had opened fire on the iron doors. Against the walls it was powerless, but there was a jagged tear above the supporting bar of the center doors. A gun that was built to shatter armored tanks could rip the boiler iron of the door like a can-opener. It was just a matter of time until the lower floor was opened.

"Adjutant, the sun is bright; I have a plan!" Clay's face was lighted with the joy of battle.

"Spit it out, dog. Don't waste my time." Keppel was in a rage. Peroli's defiance had stung him to the raw, and he could not strike back at a dead man. Even the power of the Legion ended at the gates of death.

"Let me get the big mirror in the lower room, Adjutant, and I can signal with it from the tower. Perhaps they may see the helio from the towers of Adraar."

"Not a chance in a thousand, but get your mirror. Stay, I'll not let you out of my sight. Schwartz, bring me the mirror from the squad-room; move, you swine—be quick!"

Obediently the big German ran below, and Keppel waited. An idea came to him as he glanced over the roof.

"Here, you! Help me," he said, and Clay caught the idea at once. Together they propped the thing that had been Peroli against a loophole, his head bent over his rifle. Even the dead could not rest at Zandazul. He would make one more mark for the Arabs to waste shots on. As they finished, Schwartz was back.

"Now, up with you, Clay, and do your best." Keppel waved him to the tower. Schwartz handed him the mirror, and he swarmed up the ladder. For a moment the Arabs did not understand. Was this madness?

As he straightened up and raised his mirror, they comprehended. A scream of rage went up from the sand crests, and the rifles flamed in volleys. A storm of steel swept about the naked platform. Long

yellow splinters flew from the wooden supports. At the oasis the gun crew shifted their wheels, and the gray muzzle pointed skyward. At all costs this madman must be killed.

UPRIGHT on his platform, full in the flailing storm of steel, Clay of the Legion made his signals. The mirror flashed again and again as he turned it to catch the sun's rays. The message was short, but he must repeat it as long as he could live. There might possibly be someone who would understand.

At the oasis the gun-pointer veered grimly through his telescope. Twice he turned his wheels, then waved his hand. The grim gun barked as he raised his head. A brown cloud of smoke concealed the wooden tower. He had aimed well. When the cloud cleared away, he was satisfied. The shell had ripped the top of the tower away, and the madman was gone.

On the roof Keppel bent over the fallen Legionnaire. Unscrewing his canteen cover, he splashed water over the white face. A jagged furrow of red ploughed the American's scalp where a fragment had caught him. He opened his eyes and struggled to his knees.

"Stay still," said the Adjutant. "I knew that would happen, but it was worth trying. Hold still while I plaster this cut, then get back to your post."

He was a merciless man, Keppel. He drew the edges of the gash together, then plastered them down with bands of surgeon's tape. There was no use in wasting a rifle with fully a squad of men gone. His feud could wait.

"That's done, now back to your post below. And don't leave it until I tell you. Understand?"

Dazedly Clay staggered below and found his loophole. The door hung at a crazy angle. The deadly gunner of the oasis had made three direct hits. A push would send it from its hinges. From a crest of sand a Maxim opened on the shattered wreck. A wave of howling men sprang from their fox holes and started forward.

On the roof a Chaut-chaut caught them in its deadly rain. The Legionnaires snapped bullets into the roaring mass. Still they came on. The Sons of the Prophet

do not fear death. The desert was alive with turbaned warriors.

Their machine guns were masked by their own men; they could not fire. On the second floor another auto-rifle came into action with a ripping crash. This was no time to hold anything back. Keppel was using all he had.

The leading ranks fell cleanly, toppling like grain before a reaper, as the hail of steel struck them. Nothing could live in such a fire. The wave faltered, and Clay added his deadly rifle to the rest. A sheik tried to rally them. He fell, riddled with steel. They broke and ran. Only the windrows of twisted bodies marked where the charge had failed.

Again their machine guns opened, covering the retreat. Now they would worm forward farther before trying again. From the top of the stairs Keppel ordered the troopers back. Man by man he called them. They left and sought the second floor as the others covered their retreat. They could barricade the stairs and hold out on the second floor if the worst came to the worst. There would be no surrender. Better to die cleanly in the last assault than to bear the torment of the women. They had seen the blind, mouthing things that the women left alive. Far better to go quickly than be neither man nor woman, a helpless, sightless thing.

Grimly Clay watched them go. The Arabs were creeping closer. He fired at a moving shoulder. The Bedouin sprang upright, and swayed on his feet. A second bullet caught him in the breast, and he pitched forward on his face. Clay slammed his bolt on a fresh clip and looked around. He was alone. A grating crash from the stairs caught his ear. The barricade had crashed into place! He had been deliberately left out! Keppel would never forgive an enemy! He had been sentenced to death as Peroli had been!

"Allah il ullah, Allah Ahabar!" The war cry of the Bedouins rang from the hills. A mass of white-robed figures surged from the oasis and raced across the packed earth of the foreground. Desperately Clay pumped shot after shot into the wave. The two Chaut-chauts raved from the second floor. The front of the wave crumpled under the blast. For an instant it hung in the balance, then hurled itself over the

barricade of bodies and rushed on. From new positions the machine guns swept the paradocs of the roof. Peroli's body tumbled from its place, riddled with bullets. This was the real assault. The tribes had seen their blood.

A BLACK-ROBED mezzuin crashed through the crazy door. He fell dead across the threshold. Two more dropped in the passage as the rest stormed through. Clay met them with the bayonet. For an instant he held the shattered door alone! He lunged forward, then jerked up and back. The blade ripped a desert man from groin to breast. Up swept the point, slashing a bronzed face, then down in a straight lunge for the throat. They could not pass him. He had reached the lowest stair.

Above his head a Chaut-chaut opened fire, and the mob broke back. Until then the Legionnaires had not known that Clay was there. They could not open the barricade now. An Arab aimed at the Legionnaire. His rifle was stricken up by a bearded sheik. "Take him alive—he shall die on the stake! Take him alive, I say!" The sheik's voice carried above the crash of battle. Obedient, the desert men closed in upon him like wolves.

The mud fort rocked to its foundations. A crash like bursting shells stunned the Bedouins. Again came the thunder of bombs. Above the battle calls the drumming thunder of giant engines filled the air. The screaming thutter of Lewis guns bit through the sound. The airmen of the Legion were plunging to the rescue. The signals had been seen!

Diving in perfect formation, a group of bombers plunged down on the massed forces of the desert tribes. Out of the corner of his eye, Clay saw them come—then his hands were full with the fighting before him. The bearded sheik was urging the Arabs on. "*Allah il ullah, Allah Ahabar!*"

Again and again came the rending roars as the bombers jerked their levers. The attack planes screamed like demons as they dove to release their loads. The flailing steel cut down the Bedouins as they ran. There was no mercy. It was a Squadron of the Legion, and they had grim debts to pay in blood.

At the barricade the Chaut-chaut raved.

Through the torn door the few survivors plunged out, flying for their lives. As the barricade lifted, Clay leaped forward, leading the rush. He closed with the tall sheik, point to point.

The scimitar flashed like a streak of light. Clay took the blow on the rifle stock and swept it aside. In he stepped, the rifle sweeping through. He lunged under the sheik's guard, in and down. A set look of astonishment glazed the Arab's eyes. He swayed backward under the thrust. The bayonet spiked him to the wall.

Like ravening wolves the Legionnaires stormed out. They spread like a perfect machine and plunged to the pursuit. Overhead the gray planes of the Legion paid their debt. It was utter rout. No thought of defense was left, the Arabs fled for their lives. The bayonets of the Legion drank deep. The assault was ended.

Circling carefully, Flight-leader D'Aulnois brought his plane to earth. It was a hard field, that pitted stretch between the fort and the oasis, but he landed fair. Pushing back his helmet, he stepped out to take command.

"Adjutant Keppel, bring out your wounded. The oasis will be more comfortable for them."

D'Aulnois was a gentleman, the son of old Crusaders. He was proud of the Legion, as his soldier fathers had been proud of their Norman pikemen, and he looked after his men.

The few unwounded carried out orders. Keppel could not but obey. An officer of the Legion is all powerful. Clay was in the group now, working with the rest. He helped bear out Peroli. The Italian was fit for burial. In the desert the heat does not help to preserve dead men.

The wounded were placed in the comparative comfort of the oasis, and their wounds tended. The dead were prepared for burial. Then the French commander called Keppel to him, and required an account of the Arab attack.

"Why did you not use the radio, *mon Adjutant?* It was pure luck we caught your signal. By now the heavy troops will be marching here, but they would have been too late."

"Sir—the radio was smashed by a traitor. He is dead. Legionnaire Clay thought of

the helio, and he used the flash." Keppel was out to make the best of his command. He knew the French airman's word was iron law.

"So—Clay, I know of him. Call him to me."

Keppel shouted his command.

"Well, Legionnaire Clay, you were promoted, *n'est-ce pas?* I see where you will be promoted again—*mon Dieu*, what is this?" He had seen the torn wrists of the soldier.

"What is this, the *crapaudine?*"

"A little punishment for a disloyal dog, sir," Keppel broke in.

"Silence! I did not give you leave to speak. There is something wrong here. I do not understand—but I *will* understand. Ho, you men—come here and answer me." He called to a group of the Legion.

UNDER the steely eye of the officer, bit by bit the story came out. They held nothing back; this was a chance for revenge. The airman's eyes glittered as he heard. He strode to Keppel, threatening.

"So—you disobey orders, *hein?* You know that the Legion cannot be treated as your Potsdam swine. For that you will be tried, and for the matter of the woman that caused this raid. From now on you are under arrest!" He ripped the chevrons away and strode to the American.

"Legionnaire Clay, but for you these men would not be alive. You will take

command." He pinned the stripes on the soldier's shirt.

"Now to work," he said. "This place must be ready for the Legion's camp when they arrive."


Swiftly the machine guns were brought in and mounted on the fort. The gray gun of the oasis would be useful on the battered walls. In an hour the heavy columns of the relief poured onto the small plain. Wire was strung, and the men prepared to camp. D'Aulnois called Clay to the Commandant's tent, and the tall American reported.

"Legionnaire Clay, I have heard your story," began the grim old warrior. "I too, have fought in the ranks of the Legion, and I confirm your appointment. From this time on you will command at Zandazul. I shall report your action on the tower to the governor, and there is always chance in the Legion for commissions, remember, *mon fils*. Have you anything to ask?"

"Sir, could the Commandant tell me what is to become of Keppel?"

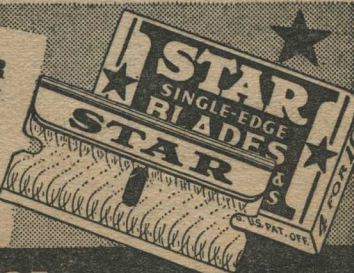
"*Mais oui*, this night he starts under guard for the yellow battalions. You need not ask for mercy on him. He will pay for the acts that brought on this raid, as well as for his treatment of the soldiers of France. They do not like broken men in the prison battalions. I have commanded them in the past. That is all, then? Step forward and take command, Adjutant Clay, and remember—good or bad, the Legion pays its debts."

AL SCHACHT
gives a Star Performance at ball parks—a laugh an inning for baseball fans.



FOR A STAR PERFORMANCE
on your face, switch to Star Single-edge Blades. Famous since 1880. 4 for 10¢.

Star Blade Division,
Brooklyn, N. Y.



STAR SINGLE-EDGE BLADES 4 FOR 10¢

FOR GEM AND EVER-READY RAZORS



Judge Tarp From the raw-brown Pecos to the moss-green meadows of Oregon men feared his Colt justice. That hellion on horseback knew but one law, obeyed but one creed—"Lead for a Liar!"

"LEAD FOR A LIAR"

By JOHN STARR

COMING up to the summit of Stinking Water Pass, Tarp feasted his blue eyes on Reservation Valley. First surprise, then astonishment lighted

their tired depths. Under the summer day's afternoon sun, the valley nestled like a green gem in the setting of hills, there on the North Fork of the Malheur.

"Water! Feed up to a steer's belly.

And peace—maybe," Tarp said to himself, leaning an elbow on the pommel.

He absorbed the quiet scene, seeing a cluster of ranch buildings, blurred in blue haze lifting from hills edging the valley's far end. Some lucky cowman's headquarters ranch. And as Tarp scanned that evidence of contentment, a wistfulness tugged at his footsore heart. It crept into the whole wide six-foot-three length of him, saddened his rugged features.

Then the peace went out of the scene at the spiteful explosion of a gun. It jerked Tarp's eyes, suddenly bright and cold, to the nearby shoulder of a hill. Over the brow he saw a cabin's rock chimney and part of a sod roof. He heard a man bellowing. Then, faintly, he heard a woman shriek. "Get going Chancellor!"

Jamming his black Stetson down tightly, Tarp reined around and gave the magnificent Palomino its head. His worn black coat flapped with his going, exposing the polished gun butt.

The road turned a rock wall, beyond that striking in a straight line through a little cove and dropping quickly to the valley floor. Chancellor picked up speed.

Then Tarp got his full view of the cabin. Before it two men struggled with a fair-haired girl. On the ground sat an elderly, stout woman, in her lap the head of a young puncher. Her upper body rocked back and forth, and her anguished wails, broken, sobbing now, ran up to Tarp.

He was skeptical of women, young or old. But an elderly woman in motherly grief was not a woman to Tarp. She was as near sainthood as he ever expected anyone to be, now or hereafter.

Yet it was the girl who arrested his attention. She broke from the two men, let out a feminine war-whoop, and sailed into the huge blond cowhand with clawing hands and flying boots.

So furious was her attack that the blond hulk, in chaps, leather vest, spurs, gave ground for a moment. Her golden hair streaming, she leaped to the attack. Her fist smashed his dogged, half-handsome face and brought a trickle of blood from his square turned nose.

"Damn'd she-devil!" he bellowed bringing over a looping right fist and knocked the girl a good five feet.

She made a broken little cry, tried to

get up, and went to her hands and knees. The blond brute strode toward her, his face a mask of fury.

"You damn'd vixen!" he bellowed. "I'll stretch your damn'd murderin' brother so high the vultures won't even find him."

"Not while I'm around you won't!" declared Tarp. He slid from the saddle, his blue eyes peering from their deep sockets with a cold wickedness that seemed to tighten his sun-coppered skin.

The bulky blond brute and his shorter, pudgy-faced companion wheeled about. The shorter one gasped at sight of Tarp.

"Damme! Judge Tarp!" His arm grabbed the blond hulk's already moving arm, locking it to him. "No, no, Gus! He'll blow you to hell!"

Gus hesitated. His gun hand fell, but his roaring guttural voice was filled with fury:

"Get the hell outa here, stranger!"

A thin smile struck across Tarp's long lips. His deep voice left no doubt of his intention:

"Unbuckle your belt—careful like—and let it fall. If you're not out of range in one minute by the watch I'll kill you."

As casually as if he intended to wind it, Tarp drew a silver watch, as large as a doorknob, from his vest pocket. But in the same motion his right hand disappeared inside his black coat. It flashed out again, holding a long-barreled Colt.

Wheezing words jumped from the pudgy-faced man: "You can't do that, Tarp! You're interferin' with the law! Reckon you've forgot me. Jake Weed! I'm deputy sheriff o' this county."

Tarp's vision didn't leave the now beet-red Gus, but it included deputy Weed with anything other than complimentary inspection. He asked:

"You arresting this big bag of wind?"

"Arrestin' Gus? Hell's fire no!" exploded Weed. "Me an' him's takin' Matt Parker in. He gunned one o' Gus's riders."

"Uh-huh," drawled Tarp. "Plain enough, Weed. I haven't forgotten either you or what you are. There's a rope waiting for you in Arizona. You'll get no chance to shoot this prisoner in the back." Tarp paused, held up the watch. "You'll stay here, Weed. But your pal's minute is ticking."

"Damn you!" bellowed Gus. "I ain't—"

He wheeled on Weed. "Arrest 'im! What'n hell you standin' there for?"

"Fifteen seconds are gone, blondie," Tarp said indifferently.

Gus, snarling oaths at all in general and Weed in particular, unbuckled his belt and his gun plunked in the dust. From a dead run he vaulted to the saddle and lit out down the road as though the Devil were after him. He was an excellent rider. He used the ability.

Tarp chuckled and pocketed his watch. Then, with a speed so swift that it almost defied sight, he whipped a second gun from his belt. He fired two shots straight upward. Another flip of his wrists and the guns were gone.

Gus threw his big hulk forward in the saddle and disappeared in a cloud of dust.

TARP turned and let his keen gaze run over Weed. "You take a walk for yourself. And don't come back until I call you. *You* will not take this boy in. *We* may. It all depends on what his mother says."

Weed opened his mouth to speak, thought better of silence. Gaping like a landed fish, he waddled across the little cove and squatted in the shade of a tree.

Tarp glanced at the girl. She was up now, her eyes settled upon him, in them a mixture of relief and doubt. He said:

"Is he shot?"

She shook her head. "No. Gus Laut, the dirty brute, tried to kill Matt. But Weed knocked his gun aside. Laut crowned Matt with the barrel." Her voice pitched a note. "Laut's been trying to drive us off here. He'll frame Matt if they try him for murder. He never killed Tex Sander! I know he—"

"Quiet, now, sister," Tarp said gently. He looked down to the elderly woman's up-turned and tear-stained face, seeing all the misery grief can bring gathered there. "It's all right, mother. Let me have the lad while you get some water. He'll be as good as new in a minute."

She showed a relief in her faded gray eyes that touched Tarp far more than words could have done. And when he stooped and lifted the unconscious lad in his arms, her wrinkled hand brushed his cheek with an affection he had not known for many years.

She rose with the daughter's aid, and in her voice was a hope and a belief that steeled all Tarp's resolve:

"You're the lawyer Tarp who defended William Giles over in Harney Valley two years ago? The time John Davane tried to send him to prison?"

"Yes. What's Gus Laut up to? Using the law to accomplish what he's afraid to do himself?"

"He's trying to run us out. We're among the last left in Reservation Valley. Timothy, my husband, was the leader of the settlers. He was killed on the way back from Three Rivers about two months ago. Maybe his horse threw him, maybe it didn't." She sighed and added, "He was the one settler Laut feared."

The girl came with a bucket of water and some towels. In a few minutes Matt Parker opened his eyes. He sat up, dazed a little and fingering a lump on his head. Finally his eyes focused on Tarp. They blinked. He rubbed them and looked again. A slow grin crawled over his healthy young face.

Tarp returned that grin. Not so much because the warmth it extended touched his heart, but because he knew this Matt Parker was no killer. This boy had no murderer's heart.

JOHAN MARSHALL TARP, wandering lawyer, was known as "Judge" throughout the cow country. Yet he had neither library nor domicile. All his thirty-odd years from the time he was twelve, he had ridden the trails from border to border. Both his law and office were under his hat. He knew more legal tricks than any other lawyer in the vast territory he traveled and had far more respect for even ignorant judges than any judge had for him. Yet they feared this tanned, square jawed man, knowing that his store of law was often the source from which he pulled the seemingly innocent motion, objection, or instruction that usually caused a reversal on appeal.

Air-tight alibis, witnesses for the defense, seemed to evolve from thin air at his command.

He fought court battles wherever and whenever he felt like it. He seldom lost. His record was just shy of one hundred per cent.

He fought gun battles anywhere and everywhere without any feeling at all. His record was an even one hundred per cent.

"Well, son, what's the story?" asked Tarp, smiling.

Matt Parker wobbled on his feet a bit, but his mother's arm circled his waist, steadied him. The boy looked at her. She smiled and said quietly:

"Matt, this is Judge Tarp, the lawyer who defended William Giles. Maybe he'll defend you."

Matt stared at her. "Why, mother! I'm not going to stand trial for killing Tex Sander. It's a frame-up! I didn't even know him!"

She shook her head slowly and, to Tarp's surprise, smiled cheerfully at the lad. "Yes, Matt," she said softly. "You'll stand trial if the law demands it. I know you didn't even know Tex Sander. But it's either trial or run away—become truly an outlaw. No son, you'll stay. Your father never ran from anything."

Matt Parker's arms lifted and drew Martha Parker to him. All color was gone from his face when he bowed his sandy head and kissed her with an affection and love that needed no words of expression.

A muffled little sob broke from the girl. She turned and ran into the cabin. Tarp turned away, his eyes looking far across the valley.

Suddenly he realized Martha Parker was speaking: "We haven't much, Judge Tarp. Not very much. But I hope you will defend my boy."

Tarp came about swiftly. In three long strides he had crossed and taken Matt Parker by the hand. But his blue eyes, a little misty, were on the mother. In a husky murmur, he said:

"When you pray for Matt, Missus Parker, say just a little prayer for me. I'll never receive a greater fee. There are spots in my life I'm not very proud of. I'll defend Matt, and I'll win. I'll be trying lots more than just another case. I'll win and get a little credit to sort of wipe out some of the black spots I've left on my trail."

Her hand touched his cheek in that affectionate way again. "Helen and I will take care of things here, Judge." Her smile was full of understanding. "I shall not pray for God to forgive when there is nothing to forgive. I shall pray that He gives

you strength. We are on the right side."

From the cabin doorway, Helen Parker said, "But, mother, I'm happy Judge Tarp came along, just the same. Aren't we all?"

"Why, Helen, that's not the way to—" Her gentle laughter broke the seriousness of her words. "Yes, dear, we are all very happy."

Tarp looked at Helen. He noticed for the first time that she was some four or five years older than Matt, a good-bodied girl with a wholesome vital quality about her. Her rather tawny eyes met his, held a moment and looked quickly away. He turned and called out:

"Come on, Weed. We're going in to Three Rivers with you."

II

TARP ordered Jake Weed to take the lead. The deputy sheriff grumbled a protest, but rode off nevertheless. When he was beyond earshot, Tarp and Matt Parker mounted.

Cheerfully the lawyer murmured, "Now don't you worry, Missus Parker. Matt'll come out all right," and looked past Martha Parker to Helen.

She stood with a hand on her mother's arm and her lips were sober and curved and as thoughtful as her tawny eyes. They observed Tarp and suddenly lowered, as though she was suddenly aware of some faint immodesty in her.

"You watch out for Gus Laut," Mrs. Parker cautioned Tarp. "He's a bad one. And he's got bad ones around him." Her eyes turned to Matt Parker. "You'd better ride on, son. We'll be in to see you tomorrow. One of us, anyhow."

Matt Parker neither touched her nor spoke. His face went pale and he wheeled his horse and rode slowly away, Tarp at his side.

They rode in silence for a while, Matt Parker thoughtful, Tarp reloading his guns. Now and then Weed glanced back, but he kept his distance. Out of the silence, Tarp asked:

"Just what's back of this?"

Matt Parker gave him a running account of the ruthless efforts employed by Laut to drive settlers from Reservation Valley, its far end owned by him, all of it once his range. He told how Laut and two of his

riders had found Tex Sander's dead body in Salt Lick Canyon the previous afternoon. "I was there hazing out some cows yesterday morning. They went to town and got Weed and picked up my pony's tracks and came to our place. I guess you know the rest."

Tarp nodded. "Where's your gun?"

"Laut took it off me. He covered me when they first rode up. I didn't know anything about Sander getting killed."

"Any fired shells in it?"

"No."

"Well, there will be when a jury sees it. You'll be surprised to learn how many riders saw you in Salt Lick Canyon. One or more of them actually saw you gun this Sander, too."

Matt Parker stiffened. "You mean they'll—"

"I mean you're in a tough spot. I might find some fellow who'd swear he was with you, but we don't know when Sander was killed. There's no way to get around your pony's tracks, either. But don't you worry. Laut's got tricks in his trade. I've got them in mine."

"Lord! Laut must want our place damn'd badly."

Tarp glanced at him, and asked pointedly, "Just your place?"

The increased pallor of Matt Parker's cheeks betrayed his thoughts. After a time he murmured, "He'll never get Helen. No matter what he does!"

Tarp remarked quietly. "Don't be too sure of that. More than one sister has sacrificed herself to save a brother."

"Hell! I should've lit out!" Matt Parker exploded. One hand reached up to his throat, dropping quickly back. Yet it had spoken the thought of a rope in his mind.

Tarp looked directly at him. "No, Matt. I've known men who ran. Your mother could stand it if you got hung—knowing you're innocent. If you took the owlhoot trail she'd die."

Matt Parker bent his head a little, buried in long thought; and all the solidness of his character showed through to Tarp.

Tarp smiled. "You're one hell of a long way from dead, fella. Don't forget one stubborn cuss can hang a jury. It takes twelve men to hang you. Just keep your chin up and your mouth shut."

THERE was almost nothing said between them, riding closer to Weed, as they took a low pass in the hills into a wider, less fertile valley. This high country's short twilight was gathered in pockets of the hills, sweeping up to distant dark blocks that were the Blue Mountains. Down there in the valley's trough the lights of Three Rivers shone, winking like clustered fireflies.

Dusk was deepening to night when they entered the county seat. From store and shop and saloon outshining glow striped the main street, turning its deep dust to a soft yellow. Matt Parker in a cell, Tarp made his estimate of the sheriff. A hireling of Laut's he possibly was, yet not one to let the lad be murdered while in jail.

Tarp stabled Chancellor in the Palace Livery and went on to the Cattle King. A porter showed him to his room, up front on the second floor. Washed, divested of both worn black coat and twin six-guns, he got Hill's Annotated Oregon Laws from his saddle bag and stretched upon the bed.

For an hour or more he studied section after section of the laws, finally concentrating on two sections. And as he read his eyes brightened and finally he leaped up.

Slipping on his coat over the guns' black butts, he left the room. All the way to the barroom a smile hovered around his mouth. He pushed through a swinging door into the hotel's grog-shop.

At sight of a bald, red-jowled barkeep he stopped. From the recesses of his memory sprang a long forgotten picture. He was again seeing a Nevada county courtroom and his red-jowled client who had abruptly put a period after the life of a popular gambler. He had forgotten about George Devoe. But there was no mistaking that bald head and those florid jowls. George had been such a skilful liar.

But even as he looked, warning slapped him. George Devoe went out of his mind for the moment. All his sharpened attention fixed on the lean, scarred face from which greenish eyes looked with open hostility. And, having his centered inspection, Tarp knew behind those greenish eyes was the queer brain of a killer and in that lithe body was a strength and the quickness of a cougar. There was a blackness and a wicked heat in the lanky one which Tarp

could feel. Notched guns' butts were trademarks of his profession. He stood in a slack-muscled posture at the street end of the bar.

George Devoe turned from the chubby, solemnly dressed customer with whom he had been talking. He saw Tarp. His bold eyes brightened. They grew round and almost pleased. Yet he rigidly withheld all other signs of recognition. For five years he had seen and heard much in the Cattle King's barroom, and saying nothing.

He said nothing now. Yet he saw and he heard. He heard something gathering, though it made no sound. He saw how Tarp had partly turned and how his blue eyes, brittle and cold, had touched Gus Laut and his three companions at a table. And he saw how Laut's and those three other faces had lifted to lay a straining attention on Tarp.

THE moment dragged out, with an enormous pressure growing all around. On tip-toe, as if he feared to arouse some fitfully sleeping beast, the solemnly dressed customer shoved his chubby prow through bat-wing doors into the street.

George Devoe could see no change, none of simmering explosion's sign, in Gus Laut's eyes. But he saw the awkward hang of Tarp's arms and the sudden loosening of his muscles as he sauntered up to the bar.

Laut rose from his chair, murmured to his companions. Two of them, in puncher's garb, lifted slowly, keeping their cautious gaze on Tarp. The third, lean of face and furtive of eye, with a close-cropped gray mustache, had his longer look. Then he got up, and Tarp saw the heavy gold chain across a fancy vest and the whiteness of his long fingers. Yet he knew this one did not belong in the gambler section of his rogue's gallery.

At a leisurely gait, Laut led the three others toward the doors, as he passed the killer slipping him a beckoning wink. From the doorway those furtive eyes of the mustached and white-fingered man stole a last look at Tarp. Then he followed Laut and the punchers to the street.

But the green-eyed gunman held his departure. Edges of his mouth metal hard, his blinkless eyes on Tarp, he said clearly:

"We've got all the lawyers we need in this town, Tarp."

George Devoe sent a sharp glance across. He said quietly: "I want no trouble in here, Alcorn," and laid a heavy and sawed-off shotgun on the bar.

Tarp divided his look between George Devoe and Alcorn, meanwhile moving easily toward the killer. "What's wrong with Three Rivers?"

Alcorn's thin grin etched at the corners of his blue lips like a warning. "Nothing. It's going to stay that way."

George Devoe's voice was sharp. "What's between you two can't be settled in here!"

Tarp said gently, "That's right. It can't be settled here," and, before he had finished speaking, smashed Alcorn's jaw with a big-knuckled fist that made a dull, pulpy sound in the room.

Alcorn's head snapped back and his hands jabbed for his guns and missed just as Tarp drove a terrific blow into his stomach, buckling him. Alcorn pitched forward and Tarp measured him and hit him twice on the jaw and knocked him flat on the floor.

Tarp stooped and caught the unconscious gunman by shoulder and crotch, and lifted him off the floor. He strode toward the bat-wing doors. Alcorn face downward. He swung him backward and forward and pitched him head first through the slatted screens.

Gus Laut heard that crash on the broad sidewalks, but for a moment his eyes failed to recognize his henchman's figure in the heap. Then he let out a wild howl and came running, his two punchers at his heels.

Tarp turned back to George Devoe and found the barkeep grinning. George Devoe said, "You ain't lost your nerve, Judge. If you stay here you're apt to need help. I ain't forgot you saved my hide."

"When you off shift?"

"Eight."

"I need help, George. But not the kind you think. I'm up in two-thirty-four. Knock three times. About eight-fifteen."

George Devoe's chuckle ran the room. "All right. I'll be there."

Tarp turned from the bar and went into the hotel lobby and on to his room. He stood at the window, not lighting the lamp,

and looked down to the street. He saw Gus Laut and his two punchers helping Alcorn walk across the dust. But he gave them no particular thought. He was thinking of Martha Parker and a tawny-eyed girl alone in Reservation Valley. Then they went out of his mind and all his concentration centered on Matt Parker, probably sleeping as only a healthy boy can sleep down there in the little jail.

Laut and his hirelings disappeared into a drugstore. Before it gathered a curious group. They were talking, now and then a long rail of a citizen pointing across toward the Cattle King.

Tarp looked at his watch and made out the time. Five minutes of eight. He got a chair and placed it so light from the hall could not strike him when the door was open. Yet a visitor would be clearly revealed.

He built a cigaret, cupped a match's flame in his hand. Silent as a statue he waited, tobacco smoke trickling from his nostrils and laying its odor in the room's blackness.

III

IN response to Tarp's call, George Devoe stepped into the room. He kicked the door shut with the heel of his shoe, and stood against it.

From the darkness, Tarp spoke. "Over to the window, George."

Dim moonlight made a silvery mist on the floor by the window. George Devoe crossed over and halted, his silhouette a black and bulky shape. Tarp took another drag on his cigaret, its glow shining against the pale blue surface of his eyes. Silence went on a little while. Then Tarp left his chair and stood by George Devoe.

"It's Matt Parker. I'm defending him. I suppose you've heard Laut's charged him with murder?"

"Yes," said George Devoe, a slow hardness creeping into his voice. "I heard plenty after you walloped Squint Alcorn. You ain't got a chance to get that Parker lad off, Judge."

"Why?"

"If you'd been here long you wouldn't ask why. If I was you I wouldn't try. That fellow with Laut, the one with the gray mustache, is Pete Blade. He's District

Attorney and crooked as an auger. Laut owns him body and soul."

"Uh-huh," murmured Tarp. He crossed to the window, hearing sudden sounds in the street. Gus Laut was in the saddle, with his punchers and Squint Alcorn swinging up. Pete Blade walked from a saloon and stopped by Laut's horse and said something. A moment later Laut whirled his pony into the darkness and his punchers followed. Squint Alcorn turned in the saddle to look at the Cattle King, his glance definitely seeking something. The impatient spurring of his horse told Tarp that there was a fitful temper in the gunman. Pete Blade turned to watch him ride away. He went back into the saloon.

Tarp brought his attention back to George Devoe. "How's the District Court judge? Laut got a mortgage on him?"

"No," replied George Devoe, a slow amusement in his voice. "Adolph Donner's honest enough. But he's dumber'n he is honest. That was him I was talking to when you came in, in the barroom. The chubby fellow. He wears patent leather shoes. You can figure him out from that."

Tarp drawled: "Dumb judges are necessary in my business, George. But I need help. I need one stubborn cuss on the jury. What can you do?"

"I got an idear. Maybe we can make a trade. My help for your help. There's a fellow named Swamp Rat Cushman on this term of court's venire. He serves on lots of juries. Sort of a professional, you might say. I owe him three hundred dollars. He's been pestering hell out of me 'bout it. I reckon if he saw I had cash to pay him he'd get damn'd stubborn any way I asked him to. If Blade lets him get on the jury what tries young Parker, I mean."

"They'll make it tough for Parker. He's innocent, but Laut'll have him framed tight. I want one juryman who'll vote for acquittal till hell freezes over. Is this Swamp Rat Cushman a sticker?"

"Stubborner'n an army mule. He'll stick like a burr to a sheep."

"All right, George. Here's three hundred," Tarp said, and pulled out a fat wallet. He counted off the bills, passed them to George Devoe. "I've got my reasons for just one man. But he's got to hang the jury!"

"Swamp Rat'd hang his mother for three

hundred. And it's ten to one that Blade'll see he gets on. He's voted Blade's way most times. Sheriff Ed Kelton owes lots to Swamp Rat for rounding up votes. He'll see Cushman gets summoned for duty. Three dollars a day for just sitting in a chair and listening is easy money to Swamp Rat."

"How about this Kelton? One of Laut's boys?"

George Devoe shook his head slowly. "Well, Ed is, but he ain't. Laut helped put him in office, and I reckon Ed sort of leans his way. But Ed's square—pretty near. He might jug a settler Laut wanted jugged. But he won't stand for plain killing. Not if he sees it." He paused, added: "Laut made him appoint Jake Weed deputy. Weed's a snake. But he's a sort of gopher snake. Looks mean, but ain't got any poison in him. Not unless he can get you from behind. The fellow you've got to keep watching for is Squint Alcorn. He's got a killing record long's a Hereford bull's pedigree. He don't do much of his shooting in daylight, neither."

Tarp smiled slowly. "That's all right. I've got him pegged. Now you fix up Cushman for me."

"Don't worry about Swamp Rat, nor how he'll vote," George Devoe assured the lawyer. "I reckon I'd better find him."

Tarp nodded. George Devoe crossed over and opened the door a notch. He watched the dimly lighted hall a moment and slipped out. Tarp heard him go down the creaking stairs.

After propping a chair under the door-knob, Tarp dragged the bed to an unexposed corner and turned in for the night.

AT breakfast he noticed Judge Adolph Donner. His meal finished, Tarp crossed to the judge and introduced himself. "I'm here to defend young Parker, Judge. When do you think we can go to trial?"

Judge Donner extended his hand. Tarp clasped it, and the portly judge said pompously:

"The court of justice is never closed in this county, Mister Tarp. District Attorney Peter Blade informed me but a few minutes ago that he was prepared for immediate trial. If that is your wish also I shall order Sheriff Kelton to summon a

jury at once. No doubt trial could commence tomorrow."

Tarp thought a moment; then he murmured, "I guess we're as near ready for trial as we ever will be, Your Honor. But tomorrow's Saturday. You don't want to sit on Saturday, do you?" Tarp smiled, quickly added: "Though I'd like to get this trial over as soon as possible. Fact of the matter is, we hav'n't much evidence to put on."

Judge Adolph Donner stuck his thumbs in the armholes of his vest and smiled graciously upon Tarp. "As I said, Mister Tarp, my court is never closed. It is my duty to serve justice, for in serving justice I serve the will of the voters of this county. I shall order Sheriff Kelton to summon a jury panel for ten o'clock tomorrow morning. Never will Adolph Donner have it said that he declined to hold court on Saturday."

"Well, that's fine, Your Honor. Ten o'clock tomorrow morning it is." Tarp patted Donner on the shoulder. "Judges like you are rare."

Donner bowed solemnly, and for that reason did not see the ironical smile on Tarp's long lips. For Tarp was thinking how fortunate it was that ignoramuses like Adolph Donner were rare. Yet it was such dunderheads as Adolph Donner who gave John Marshall Tarp opportunities to perform legal sleight-of-hand.

Tarp left the hotel and strolled down to the jail. He had a few words with Matt Parker, told him of the date for trial, and departed after a casual conversation with Sheriff Ed Kelton.

In the Cattle King barroom he found a weazened, whiskered citizen of uncertain age and cleanliness. Yet his curiosity was mild until George Devoe sauntered down the bar and murmured in passing:

"Swamp Rat Cushman. All fixed."

Tarp studied Cushman with shrewd eyes and concluded that George Devoe's estimate of the prospective jurymen's stubbornness was low by at least one army mule. After relishing two whiskies, Tarp went out to the street and on to the office of Three Rivers' leading attorney.

Half an hour later he returned to the hotel. When he reached his room, and after locking the door, he pulled a book from his saddle-bag. In a chair he sat, be-

fore him a sheepskin bound volume of the Pacific Reporter. All his attention was centered on Tice vs. Frazier, Sheriff, a most recent decision by the Oregon Supreme Court.

As he read he studied. As he studied he thought. As he thought he chuckled, now and then:

"One damn'd good man can hang a jury. And that Swamp Rat Cushman looks like an ace to me."

Later in the day he strolled along Three Rivers' main street. At the corner of the courthouse square, he stood a while. His blue eyes searched a group of riders loitering in a saloon doorway. One of them was a Laut puncher, Tarp was sure. Suddenly Squint Alcorn strolled out from the saloon and turned into the adjacent alley. To Tarp, this was like a hundred towns he had entered in his wanderings. The same dusty street between low buildings whose square fronts had shed their paint in constant battle with wind and rain and sun. Saddle horses stood here and there before hitch racks. And the smell of a forge fire lay heavy in the still, warm air.

Yet it was the same old picture he knew so well; the same searching inspection of eyes; the same lift and fall of voices, tightened a little now by the knowledge of his presence in the countyseat. He turned and crossed the street and passed the alley into which Squint Alcorn had disappeared. He partly expected gun-fire. But it did not come; and he went on to the jail, a feeling of slight disappointment stirring within him.

SHERIFF ED KELTON was pleasant and led him to Matt Parker's cell. But he failed to mention that Martha and Helen Parker were visiting.

Tarp told them of the trial on the morrow. Martha Parker said little, just sitting there on the cot beside Matt, his hand in hers. Yet it was Helen who arrested Tarp's attention.

She was silent in a way that disturbed Tarp, turned something in him cold. There was a determination in her tawny eyes he had not noticed before, and a certain quality of pride was gone from her body. Out of the silence, she murmured:

"I met Gus Laut outside the jail, after mother had gone in. I don't think there is

anything you can do, Mister Tarp. It's hopeless!"

Tarp's eyes brightened and ran over her from small booted feet to fair hair. He saw then that nothing held her upright but the pressure of her arms against the wall. He said:

"You have no faith in me?"

She answered, in a dispirited tone: "It'll take more than faith to clear Matt. What do you propose to do?" She stopped, and her words came out with faint heat: "Why did you rush the trial? You did! Why?"

His chin lifted, throwing his face into clearer light from the barred window. He snapped: "This is one hell of a time to ask questions?" and heeled about and strode from the cell.

His mouth ran a long thin streak across the sun-coppered hue of his skin, and a knife's scar was white where it marked his right cheek.

He slammed into the Cattle King bar-room. George Devoe gave him a curious look and placed a bottle and glass before him. Tarp drank whisky after whisky. It was dusk when he went to his room and staggered to the bed and sprawled. He slept.

IV

CATTLEMEN, punchers, a few settlers, women and children filled the little courtroom's benches. Matt sat by Tarp at the attorney's table nearest the jury box. On the front bench, directly behind them, were Martha and Helen. District Attorney Peter Blade had the near moral support of Gus Laut, who, with Squint Alcorn and three punchers, sprawled at ease in chairs to the left of the table at which Blade sat.

Tarp's heart sank as he looked at the talesmen. By their rope-marked hands, muscles whipped lean by riding, he picked out a full fifty per cent of cattlemen. Swamp Rat Cushman was among the twelve drawn to fill the box. He dropped into a chair in the front row. There was a quiet confidence in the manner in which he chewed tobacco.

That lifted Tarp's heart, brought an inner chuckle. George Devoe and three hundred dollars had done a fine job. Tarp concluded George had underestimated

Cushman's stubborn tenacity by at least two army mules.

Confidence strong in him, the lawyer turned his look to District Attorney Peter Blade. From under shaggy brows, Blade's eyes studied the jurymen shrewdly. Suddenly he was on his feet, and Tarp heard him saying:

"Your Honor, the people pass the jury with one exception. We request the dismissal of Swamp Rat Cushman on peremptory challenge."

Swamp Rat Cushman jerked erect; then he slumped; and rose from his chair. Glaring at Blade he left the jury box.

But his angry stare was mild compared with the fury which poured from Tarp's wide blue eyes. He felt a sudden weakness in the pit of his stomach and a sense of sinking, as though the last prop had been knocked from under him. Yet there was nothing he could do about it. Even His Honor had no discretion in the matter of a peremptory challenge. Tarp held his temper and ironed out his expression.

Another jurymen was called. Tarp passed him. Blade did the same. Tarp heard the clerk's monotonous voice, murmuring the familiar jury oath. Yet he wasn't thinking of that. He thought of the lad beside him. Matt Parker would die unless the seed of reasonable doubt was sown in some stout juror's mind.

"I've got to make the eagle scream. I've got to tangle some juror's judgment in his emotion," thought Tarp. "It's my only chance. And a damn'd thin one with that hard-boiled bunch of cowmen and merchants." He inspected the jury shrewdly.

The bull-necked foreman, with his veined red face and longhorn mustaches, was ready to convict already! But number 5—just a trace of sympathy there. He was not much older than Matt; a plump, good-natured-looking merchant of Three Rivers. By name Silas Mason.

JUDGE DONNER tapped with his gavel, and Blade arose to make his opening statement. The jury, giving him their strict attention, were manifestly impressed. Stone by stone, he built up the wall of evidence that was to surround a gallows for Matt Parker. Three punchers took the stand and more than substantiated Blade's declaration of what he intended to

prove. Two of them swore they had seen Matt Parker in Salt Lick Canyon shortly before the finding of Tex Sander's body. The third positively declared that he had seen Parker skulking in the brush; had met Sander farther down the canyon and talked to him; had ridden on and when some distance away had heard the report of a gun.

"I offer the gun in evidence," said Blade, holding it up for the inspection of the jury. "You will note, gentlemen, but one shell has been fired."

"I object to its admission," quickly countered Tarp, "without evidence that it belonged to my client."

Blade turned, snapped: "That is a matter for you, Mister Tarp. If the defense can prove that this is not Parker's gun, do so!"

"Now, now, Mister Blade," Tarp said gently. "If this gun belongs to Matt Parker it seems to me that it is up to you to prove it. I protest!"

His Honor flushed uncomfortably. "Have you any proof, Mister Blade?"

"Proof!" sneered Blade. "Plenty of it, Your Honor. The prosecution calls Mister Alcorn to the stand."

Squint Alcorn took the oath. He seemed perfectly at ease in the witness chair, though many in the room noticed the mottled purple and black along his jaw. His greenish eyes were partly shielded under lowered lids. They touched suddenly on Tarp and returned to Blade.

"You were in Salt Lick Canyon last Wednesday morning, Mister Alcorn?" asked Blade.

"I was."

"Kindly tell this court and jury just whom you saw there and what the parties you saw did. Just take your time and give us all you remember."

Judge Donner glanced at Tarp, as if he expected an objection.

Tarp sat indifferently in his chair, his attention casually on Alcorn. But now and then his inspection centered on the squinted eyes.

"Well," Alcorn began, "I was up in Salt Lick Canyon last Wednesday mornin' lookin' for some strays. Me and Tex Sander went up together, but got separated. Long 'bout mid-forenoon I seen Matt Parker slipping along in the brush with a gun in his hand. He was down gulch from me, but I figured he was up to somethin'. So

I sneaked 'round and got behind him. But he'd picketed his pony out, and climbed aboard and rode off down the canyon. That was just below the licks. I run after him, keeping him in sight. But I reckon he didn't see me, 'cause the brush is mighty thick down there."

Tarp sprang to his feet. "I object. That's a conclusion of the witness as to what Matt Parker saw."

"Strike it out," directed Donner, though he was far from sure his ruling was correct.

"Go on, Mister Alcorn," directed Blade. "What else did you see?"

"Well, I managed to keep right close to Parker. I reckon I wasn't more'n thirty feet from him when Tex Sander moseyed out from behind some scrub pine. Before I knew what'd happened Parker upped with his gun and shot Tex clean off his horse. Poor old Tex never had a chance. Never even seen Parker, I reckon."

"Same objection," Tarp said listlessly.

Donner hesitated, but finally made the same ruling.

"And this is the gun—this Colt here in my hand—that Parker used to fire the shot?" asked Blade confidently.

"Absolutely! I seen it plain as I do now!"

"The People rest," announced Blade. Smiling like an advertisement for tooth-paste, he sat down.

TARP lifted from his chair. He turned and sent his shrewd blue eyes over the crowded benches; let them rest on pictures of Washington and Lincoln above a rather large single-daily-sheet calendar on the room's rear wall. Then that quiet gaze came back to Alcorn.

"You saw both Sander and Parker just before the shooting, Mister Alcorn?" asked Tarp, in an easy tone.

"Yes."

"And you were about thirty feet—about the length of this room—from Parker?"

"Yes. 'Bout thirty feet." Alcorn paused, measured the distance from his seat to the pictures on the rear wall with calculating eyes. "Maybe thirty-one or two. More than the length of this room!"

"You sure it wasn't twenty feet?"

"More'n that. Twenty-five, anyhow," Alcorn replied, in a surly tone.

"May it not have been *ten* feet?"

"No!" snarled Alcorn. He fidgeted in the chair. "It was 'bout *thirty* feet!"

"And you had a clear view of the gun?"

"Plain as I see you right now."

"And you identify that gun there as the gun you testified Parker used?"

"That's it!"

"You're positive you saw that gun in Parker's hand? You couldn't be mistaken?"

"No—yes!" blurted Alcorn. He squirmed, and Blade came to his feet. Alcorn added: "I mean no I couldn't be mistaken. An' I mean yes I'm positive." Relieved, Blade sat down.

"And you could clearly see Parker shoot, see how he held the six-gun, and all about it? No brush or anything obstructed your view?"

"Yes! I told you so. I seen him kill Tex Sander!"

Tarp nodded. His voice lifted a little: "What day of the month was yesterday, Mister Alcorn?"

Startled, the witness stared at Tarp; then he stared at Blade.

On his feet, the District Attorney belatedly: "I object! Everybody knows yesterday was the fifteenth of May."

Tarp murmured: "Quite correct," and let his sly glance absorb the triumphant smile hovering on Alcorn's lips. He added: "I move the question be stricken out, Your Honor."

Donner seemed a little puzzled, but ruled according to Tarp's request. Suddenly Tarp asked Alcorn:

"You're positive you were more than twenty-five feet—about thirty feet—from that gun?"

"Lord! How many times do I have to tell you?"

Tarp smiled. "You were farther from Parker than the length of this room, weren't you?"

"Hell, yes!" snarled Alcorn.

"That's clear, Mister Alcorn. And of course you know now that yesterday was May fifteenth?"

"Certainly! I knowed it all the time!"

Tarp turned slowly toward the benches. His long arm raised. His big-knuckled finger pointed over the audience. He snapped:

"What number is that day on the calendar?"

Alcorn leaned slightly forward, squinted.

"Why, the *sixteenth*, o' course! Today!"

Blade sprang to his feet. "Object! Dates are not an issue in this case. It is immaterial what day this is."

Donner squirmed in his judicial seat. He was fuddled. The jury was puzzled, Blade was in a dither of rage. Alcorn still squinted at the large figure on the calendar.

Above the faint buzz of whispering in the audience, Tarp said firmly: "I submit, Your Honor, that dates are an issue in this case. A very important issue. The number on yonder calendar is *not* sixteen, as Mister Alcorn would have us believe. It is *fourteen*." He waved a long arm. "That's plain to everyone except a near-sighted man—or a *liar*!"

"Wait a moment!" roared Blade. "That's prejudicial! He's not impeaching this witness!" Juryman Silas Mason laughed. It was like barb to Blade. He snarled: "Your Honor has no right to let Tarp make speeches out of order, for their effect upon the jury! You've no right—"

Bang! went the gavel. "Sit down, Mister Blade!" snapped Donner. A judge had to protect the dignity of his court, didn't he? He couldn't let himself be insulted by a potential candidate for his robes, could he?

Spectators and jurymen were divided in their looks between the attorneys, judge, witness, and calendar. Though if eyes had been counted the black fourteen, with July and the preceding year number printed below it on the calendar, would have won by a handsome majority. Conversation ran through the room like the buzzing of bees.

"The defense rests, Your Honor," Tarp said loudly.

"The People rest," growled Blade.

"Go to the jury, gentlemen," ordered Donner, in an uncertain voice. His eyes were on Tarp, amazement high in them.

TARP walked slowly to the front of the jury box.

"Mr. Foreman and gentlemen of the jury," he began, in a quiet tone.

"It is not my purpose to bore you with lengthy comment on the testimony of the prosecution's chief witness, Mister Alcorn." He placed one hand on the jury rail, as though he was one of the jury.

"But I do wish to call your attention to a rather amazing physical fact. As late as

last Wednesday, the thirteenth of this month, Mister Alcorn swears that at a distance of more than thirty feet he clearly recognized a certain six-gun. Yet today, the sixteenth of the same month, his eyesight has so failed that he cannot identify the figure *fourteen* in yonder calendar."

Tarp paused, pointed a long finger. "Observe, gentlemen! That figure *fourteen* is more than a foot high. It is black on white. It is not the figure *sixteen*!" Tarp bowed. "Thank you, gentlemen."

No sooner was Tarp settled in his chair by Matt Parker than Blade was on his feet. He bellowed. He roared. He gave Matt Parker a character that must have made Billy the Kid turn over in his grave with envy. He flayed the air with his fists and Tarp with his tongue. He declared that a failure to convict would be a violation of their oaths by the jurymen; that they would have betrayed the confidence of their fellow citizens; that they would have stamped themselves as the laughing stock of the whole county.

Exhausted, Blade sank back into his chair. Instantly, Tarp's tall figure shot up.

"Your Honor, Mister Foreman and gentlemen of the jury, we rest our cause—the very life of this young man here—in your hands. I know our trust will not be misplaced. Thank you, gentlemen. I ask Your Honor to instruct the jury."

"Are there any requests?" Donner asked, when the charge was concluded.

Tarp smiled and shook his head. Blade growled a negative.

"Sheriff Kelton," said Donner. "The jury will retire in your charge."

V

"LORD, Judge!" exploded George Devoe, following Tarp across the courthouse lawn. "I'm damn'd sorry they picked off Swamp Rat that way. Just Blade's luck!"

Tarp's long lips drew into a wry smile. "No, George, more than luck. Blade's nobody's fool. He played a hunch, and happened to hit the right spot."

"Hell! They'll hang young Parker!"

Tarp shook his head. "Not that jury. They won't acquit him. But they won't convict either. That young Silas Mason told me all I wanted to know when he

laughed at Pete Blade. We'll get a hung jury."

"Then they'll try him again!"

"You can't try a man the second time until the first trial's over. And this one isn't yet, George." Tarp stopped at the corner of the square and waited until Martha and Helen Parker came to him. He doffed his hat, smiled slowly.

Mrs. Parker's words rushed out: "Oh, Judge, will they acquit Matt?"

"It's hard to tell what a jury will do. I'll bet even money that Matt'll get off."

Tarp turned his eyes to Helen, and found her considering him without friendliness. She said in an exhausted tone: "You'd win that bet, Mister Tarp. You'd better get it down. You won't have long to wait." She took her mother's arm and went on toward the Cattle King.

A thousand words could add nothing to what Tarp knew was in her mind at that exact moment. There was such a positive decision in her face, her whole bearing was so sure. He said to George:

"I need a drink."

They padded through the dust and pushed into the Beaver State Bar. At a table they drank slowly, and talked of old days in Nevada. Finally, at dusk, George left to go on shift at the Cattle King.

For an hour Tarp sat without touching his glass. His long legs stretched out before him and his face was constantly changing with the temper of his thoughts. It was almost eight o'clock when he rose and sauntered out to the street.

TARP crossed the street and stood with his back to the dark front of a printing shop, the shadows covering him. He built a cigaret and lighted it and stood there inhaling deeply. His eyes ran the street, once following Gus Laut as he cut through a bar of light outshined from a dusty window. Laut turned into the Palace Livery.

Laut, alone, was a warning to Tarp. He stepped down the board walk and under a plank awning and put a shoulder gently against a supporting post. He knew the voice of trouble, though it was little more than a whisper running in the cool breeze flowing down from the Blue Mountains. And there he was when Squint Alcorn came from a saloon, his spurs dragging the walk.

He passed Tarp on the opposite side of the street, cut over the dust and disappeared in shadows of a building beyond. The tiny clink of his spurs did not reach back to Tarp.

Tarp threw his cigaret into the street. He shrugged his broad shoulders and stepped to the edge of the dust and walked toward where Squint Alcorn had faded. Something was happening here and he did not yet have its course.

He went silently, slowly, eyes searching each spot of gloom. Then suddenly, without the least warning, a gun howled out of the shadows across the way. Two quick shots.

Tarp felt lead pluck his sleeve and the shrill sing of a high sent slug. Then his hands flashed and came out like snakes striking. His guns slammed hard sound in heavy gouts along the street.

A woman cried out and rushed from a shop; and the rumbling echoes settled over the town. It was then Tarp heard a violent cursing and the limping run of booted feet.

From behind him a rough voice bellowed: "Put 'em guns down, jasper!" and a huge man was plodding through a bar of yellow light and kicking up dust as he came.

Tarp said: "It's all right. The party's over—for a while." He saw light flash from a star on the huge man's vest, and patiently waited.

"We don't allow shootin' here on Saturday night, stranger," the marshal declared flatly. "Gimme 'em guns!"

"Not even if some hombre takes a pop at you?" Tarp asked quietly.

"Huh? Some jasper draw a bead on—You're the lawin' feller, Tarp, ain't you?"

"That's right."

"Well, that's different. I ain't seen you. But you'd better get where it's light. Might save trouble for both o' us. Things are sort o' restless here tonight. Apt to be that a-way long's that jury's out."

"Much interest?"

"Growin'. How hot it boils up depends on how much some o' the boys drink. You made friends for 'em Parkers today. But you picked out some enemies for yourself, too. I'd sort o' lay low. Not 'cause I think you can't take care o' yourself. But because you got lots dependin' on you."

"Makes sense. Guess I'll turn in," Tarp

stated and walked off toward the Cattle King.

"Goodnight," said the marshal, in a relieved tone.

"Goodnight. Hope there's no trouble."

"Won't be if I ketch it first," the marshal declared and walked away.

TARP entered the Cattle King's lobby. Immediately he saw Helen Parker coming down the stairs. At sight of him her face showed a quick surprise and she turned and ran back up the stairs. He considered her action a moment, his mouth tightening, and walked slowly up the stairs to the dimly lighted hall.

Light flushed a yellow strip beneath the door of a room. He could hear Helen Parker speaking in a low, rapid voice; and the quiet answer of her mother. Then both voices quit suddenly.

Tarp closed his door and walked to the window and looked down on Three Rivers' main street. Men came out of saloons and moved off in twos and threes, as though they had something to do. Gus Laut and one of his punchers shouldered out from the Beaver State Bar and disappeared in the darkness. In a little while Laut would make another move, and Tarp thought he knew what it would be. Yet his immediate worry was not in what Laut might do. It was centered around Helen Parker.

For a long moment he stood like this, his thoughts turning his features heavy and deepening the shadows in his eyes. Then he opened the door and stepped into the hall. He heard Helen Parker again break off from her talking. But the brief answer of a man followed. There was a long-drawn sigh, like a soul surrendering, and then somebody in there opened the door and Peter Blade stepped out to the hall.

Tarp said, "Hello, Blade."

Blade moved backward and attempted to close the door. But before he could do that Tarp had shoved him into the room and followed. Martha Parker lay on the bed. She was calling Helen's name in a soft, crying voice in a way that turned Tarp all cold.

Yet it was Helen who drew and held his attention. She leaned against the far wall, and all he could see for the moment was a sharpness in her tawny eyes and the grim set of her face.

She murmured: "Don't let him stay here."

Martha's head rolled on the pillow. Out of her despair, she sobbed: "Helen—Helen. We must tell Mister Tarp. He's been so kind."

Spinning on his heels, Tarp found Blade considering him with sly eyes. Tarp stood, silent, returning the scrutiny.

Blade broke the silence with his curt statement, "You tricked us today, Tarp. But it won't happen in a second trial. If there is a second trial. Laut's got his punchers worked up for a lynching."

Tarp said, in a casual tone: "I figured that was the game. What's your proposition?"

Blade's eyes showed him a faint surprise. He said bluntly: "There's just one way to save young Parker. Helen has to marry Laut."

Tarp turned, and instantly Helen said: "You don't need to look at me like that. I'm going to marry him."

Though Tarp was not surprised by all this, her definite statement held the shock of a bullet. He murmured:

"Keep your voice down. It's all right. But I'll make the deal."

He turned back to Blade. He said: "Here's *our* proposition. Tomorrow morning we'll all meet in Donner's court. Judge Donner'll marry Laut and Helen. Then you'll move for him to dismiss the jury."

Blade's eyebrows arched, and his glance came out slanting and sly. There was a quickness in his words: "Fair enough. Donner'll do that on the grounds the jury'll never agree. They won't, and he knows it. Nine o'clock's a good time. Before folks come into town for church."

"We'll be there at nine. You fix it up with Donner and the sheriff. But don't lose any time having Laut call off his lynchers."

Blade chuckled. "He'll stop all that in a hurry." He turned toward the door "He'll take care of that when I tell him about the deal I've made." His hand on the door-knob, he couldn't help adding: "You're not as tough as I thought, Tarp. Nor as smart, either," and went out into the hall.

Blade's hurrying footsteps went down the stairs. Tarp swung to the door, but he turned again to have a final look, not quite knowing why. Helen's eyes lifted

and met his smileless glance. She said:

"That last—that you aren't smart. What did he mean?"

Tarp said slowly: "You're too curious," and opened the door and strode swiftly to his room. There he lighted a lamp, being careful to see his shadow did not touch the drawn window shade. For an hour he read and re-read Hill's Oregon Laws and the borrowed copy of the Pacific Reporter. It was after ten o'clock when he blew out the lamp and went to bed.

VI

JUDGE ADOLPH DONNER stood beside the judicial bench, a long beam of morning sun laying golden behind him. He turned solemn eyes to Gus Laut. "You have a marriage license, Mister Laut?"

Laut stepped forward. "Right here, Adolph. Made the county clerk get out of bed and issue it less'n an hour ago."

Donner glanced at the license. He spoke to Helen Parker: "You will please stand by Mister Laut, Miss Parker."

Helen Parker rose from her chair. She crossed to Gus Laut and stood beside him, her chin lifted proudly, yet no color on her cheeks.

"Just a moment, Your Honor," Tarp said. "I wish all to understand the nature of this rather extraordinary proceeding. If I am incorrect in any particular Mister Blade will please set me right. My agreement with the District Attorney is that immediately upon the marriage of Gus Laut and Helen Parker, Mister Blade will move this court for a discharge of the jury. I fully realize that the discharge is entirely within the discretion of Your Honor. But in view of the circumstances I will appreciate Your Honor's views on the matter of discharging the jury. That is, if you feel at liberty to state them at this time."

Donner cleared his throat. "There seems little possibility of the jury reaching an agreement. If the District Attorney moves for a discharge of the jury I shall feel disposed to grant the motion. In contemplation of such action I order that the sheriff go and fetch the defendant from the jail. I assume, Mister Tarp, that you consent to a discharge of the jury."

"There will be no objection, Your Honor."

"All matters are clearly understood, Judge," agreed Blade. He turned, and his drawl crept dryly across the room. "Weed, you run down and tell Ed Kelton to bring young Parker."

Jake Weed hurried from the room, but as he passed through the doorway Squint Alcorn limped in. His right leg dragged across the floor as he made his slow way to a position beyond the little group before Donner.

Tarp's pale blue eyes went hard and followed the gunman. And in the background of his immediate memory were two shots from the dark of Three Rivers' main street and the limping run of booted feet after his own guns had replied.

Then Donner was saying: "And do you, Helen Parker, take this man, Gus Laut, for your lawfully wedded—"

But Tarp didn't hear more. The soft crying of Martha Parker struck on his ears, and for a second he struggled to restrain words that would relieve her grief.

And then Gus Laut was taking Helen Parker into his arms; and she was lifting her lips, under the lash of her will, to receive his kiss. His thick lips were parted a little and the look in his eyes was hungry and wild.

Sheriff Ed Kelton and Jake Weed came in with Matt Parker and went on to the prisoner's dock. The lad's eyes were wide-open and puzzled. They passed from Martha to Laut and finally settled on Helen. He said:

"I hope I live long enough to see you a widow!"

Her voice was strong, evenly rounding off the words: "There was no other way, Matt. I'll never be sorry."

He rolled his head toward Tarp. "And he let you do this?"

She didn't reply. But Tarp said quietly: "It's the best way, Matt. The only way."

Matt Parker's face went white, and the straining of his muscles beneath his cotton shirt told of the deadly anger in him. He murmured: "Maybe they'll try me again. But not for the death of Tex Sander. It'll be for killing the damn'd lawyer that sold us Parkers out!"

Blade got to his feet. His eyes were sharp and sly. There was a touch of hurry in his voice: "Your Honor, the People move to discharge the jury in the case of

State vs. Parker on the grounds that, no verdict having been reached, it is the judgment of this court this jury cannot agree."

Donner nodded solemnly. "The motion is granted."

BLADE was speaking again, a high note of triumph in his oily voice: "Your Honor, the People hereby give notice that it is the intention of the District Attorney of this county to proceed to a second trial of the defendant, Matt Parker. There has been no dismissal of the charge. The People agreed to a discharge of the present jury—and no more. The People have performed that agreement to the letter. I request that this court at this time set a date for a second trial of the defendant, Matt Parker."

Donner straightened in his judicial chair. Helen Laut wheeled on Tarp. Her voice cut at him:

"Oh! You fool!"

But it was Gus Laut's gloating laughter which smashed all the tension in the room. He threw back his head, roared: "Fooled us, eh, Tarp? An' you made the proposition! Hell! Me an' Blade couldn't believe it! Of all the damn'd fool suckers!"

Suddenly Tarp's voice was driving down Laut's triumph.

"Your Honor, the defendant, Matt Parker, moves this court for a discharge from custody. The motion is based on the legal ground that the discharge of the jury on Sunday is contrary to the laws of the State of Oregon and is equivalent to a verdict of acquittal."

Donner gasped and leaned across the bench. But Blade was on his feet yelling: "What's that? It's illegal to discharge a jury on Sunday?"

Tarp picked up a volume from the table before him. He opened it slowly and passed it to Donner.

"Your Honor, I refer you to Section nine-two-eight, Hill's Annotated Laws of Oregon. I demand, on their basis, that the defendant, Matthew Parker, be discharged from custody as a matter of legal right!"

"Huh!" snorted Blade. "What of it? We'll try Parker again!"

Tarp shook his head. "No you won't. A long line of decisions hold—it's a constitutional protection—that no person shall be put in jeopardy twice for the same offense. Matt Parker will walk from this

room a free man!"

Shoulders humped forward, eyes glued to the headnotes of the case, Donner read and gulped, and gulped and read. Presently his face lifted. In a nervous, but still determined, voice, he said:

"Counsellor Tarp, this case is decisive on all points. It is the order of this court that the defendant, Matthew Parker, be released from custody of the sheriff and discharged forthwith. Court is adjourned!" He bowed to Tarp and rose from his chair.

THERE was a dead quiet in the little courtroom, something sudden and unexpected.

Then the silence blew apart as Blade snarled an oath and whipped a hard fist at Tarp.

Tarp's left arm brushed Blade's blow aside. Yet in that same motion his right fist came up. It smashed the District Attorney full in the mouth and knocked him stumbling. Blade's skull cracked on the table's corner and he flopped on his back and lay as though dead.

With one sweep of his arm, Tarp shoved Helen Laut away. She went to her knees, coming up quickly, and fairly dragged Martha with her and outside the rail.

Squint Alcorn's right hand made a revolving motion. It came up and a terrific blast of gunfire smashed the walls of the courtroom. Blood spurted from Tarp's jaw. Then guns seemed to leap to his hands. Twice each they belched flame.

Squint Alcorn spun partly around. He made a single staggering step, lurched and slid down against the wall. His face was a ghastly sight.

Gun smoke rolled and made Gus Laut vague to Tarp for a second, but not so vague but that he saw Laut's fury-twisted mouth; and then the uplift of his gun muzzle.

There came those thundering blasts again. Three of them this time. So close they seemed like one gigantic explosion.

And then Tarp was standing there, a great satisfaction within him. His strength and weakness lay in strong love of action. And because it was his action that had coldly dumped Laut, in a lifeless heap, at the base of the judicial bench there was a feeling of satisfaction in his restless nerves.

His hands moved and the guns flicked

and disappeared. He looked up to where Judge Donner stood, hanging to his bench, his face still blanched with the fear in him.

"Your Honor," Tarp said quietly, "under the law you may act in ex parte matters—uncontested civil matters—on Sunday. On behalf of a friend I wish to present one more motion. The widow of the late Gus Laut was, as you know, never more than wife in name. I suggest that this court of its own motion, and because of the fraud on the part of the deceased husband in obtaining the wife's consent to marriage, annul said marriage. And, furthermore, restore to the widow her original unmarried status, including her maiden name, Helen Parker."

Donner's smile was sickly, but it was a smile. "Motion and annulment granted as requested." He paused, adding as an afterthought, "if Miss Parker will see me tomorrow I'll annul her marriage again. Not that I doubt your legal knowledge, counsellor Tarp, but I'll feel better if we fix everything as it should be on a week-day."

Blade moved and rolled. The District Attorney saw Tarp and snarled. Then he saw Gus Laut. He gasped, rose to unsteady feet and went on a wobbly run from the room.

Sheriff Ed Kelton called across to a pale-faced Weed, "Go get some men and a wagon, Jake. Tell 'em we're 'bout to bury all the cause o' trouble in this county."

Matt Parker crossed to Tarp and extended his hand. The lawyer clasped it. "It's all right, Matt. No need for you to apologize. I don't blame you for wanting to kill me. But I had to play my game that way. Not even your mother or sister knew."

Then Martha Parker was beside him. She was smiling through her tears. Her hand touched his cheek in that motherly, affectionate way. In a choked voice, she said: "I always had faith, Mister Tarp. Faith in God. And faith in you."

HIS blue eyes were a little misty. They found Helen Parker. She was facing the open window. He couldn't see the expression on her face until he was close in front of her. Then he saw that the shimmer of the morning light touched close-held tears in her eyes.

He said, so humbly, so faintly wistful, "Things will be all right now."

She turned her tawny eyes to him then and stood there a straight shape in the increasing morning sunlight. Her shoulders swayed gently. She said, almost in a whisper, "I'm sorry. I didn't understand. But it's all so clear now."

"That makes me happy. It's things like this, having memories of those who do understand, that keeps me from being lonely."

She drew a breath. "Do you have to be lonely? To always be riding on and on?"

His eyes were far away on the hazy blue mountains. He was seeing the trails he had ridden. But the trails he was to ride. . . . For the first time in his life he couldn't see the out-trails stretching in front of him, enticing him on. The girl at his side stilled some yearning that had been in him.

He turned his lean head and looked down at her. "I don't have to ride on if you don't want me to."

Helen Parker's eyes brightened. She met his gaze squarely.

"In that case you won't ride," she said softly.



You don't have to pay 5¢
for a fine long-filler cigar...

SMOKE **Cremono** NOW 3 FOR 10¢

Shotgun — toughest town in the Southwest! Within its 'dobe walls the dregs of the Border rioted in unholy glee—and star-toters were sent to hell with bullets for breakfast!



HELL'S HACIENDA

By JAMES P. OLSEN

IT started with the roar of six-guns. The sharp bark of automatics cut in. There was a loud clatter of heavy shoes and high-heeled boots on the board walk. Streaks of red and orange pierced the murky darkness. Shadowy forms dodged into narrow alleyways, threw themselves prone in the deep dust.

The heaviest fire came from the big adobe building—Jack's Place. The sombreroed, bow-legged men in the street were gathering for a rush on the gambling joint. Then, from a front window of the building, a new note crept into the din. And the cowmen fell back.

One long, continuous flash of fire cut the air, and the *ratatat* of a machine-gun drowned out the other guns. Three of the waddies in the street went down; another limped away. The rest, nearly a dozen in all, turned and ran.

In a few moments the battle was over. The remainder of the attackers rode out of town in a cloud of dust; the guns of the defenders were silenced.

Inside Jack's Place, Blackjack Ferris, gambler, booze runner, gang leader and owner of the joint, walked around amid the wreckage of the gambling room. Four men lay dead on the floor, three of his own

and one of the rangemen. Blackjack kicked the body of the latter.

He looked down at the dead bodies of his own men.

"Cripes," he snorted, "but those birds are hell on the draw!"

He walked to the door that led into the dance hall and bar.

"Everybody likker," he shouted, waving his arm above his head. "I'm still boss in Shotgun. Drink and be merry! Ain't no gang of hole-in-the-wall rustlers going to run a sandy on us."

Men in the greasy clothes of the oilfield worker, hop-heads, gamblers, killers, the women of the dives, the elements of a wide open Bordertown—all trouped up to the rough plank bar and downed big slugs of raw corn whiskey. Blackjack went back into the gambling room, folded his arms and leaned against the wall, smiling crookedly through the thick haze of smoke.

J RICHARD HARDMAN, head of the Syndicate Cattle and Land Company, trembled as he bit the end from a cigar and stuck the unlighted stogie in his mouth. There was a look of despair in his eyes—the look that haunts men who have seen their most cherished dreams blasted before their eyes.

"For years—" Hardman seemed to be looking into eternity—"I have tried to settle that country. The richest grazing land in the whole state of Texas; plenty of water and wood—a rancher's paradise.

"For years Rat Raines and his gang from the badlands have hampered my efforts. Raiding and killing the small ranchers that came in to settle, threatening the big outfits and stealing their cattle wholesale, killing their punchers—they raised hell with me.

"But, in spite of that, the country was settling. It looked like a great thing when a big oil company leased part of my land and drilled a well on it. I knew, if they struck oil, it would bring people in.

"Well—" There was a disgusted cynical look on Hardman's face. "—They got oil. But, instead of it helping, it has hurt. The only town in the new field is Shotgun. It was a hangout for Rat Raines and his gang before the boom—just a store and saloon then. Now, Shotgun is a roaring hive of the worst hijackers, booze and dope run-

ners, crooks and sharks this country has ever known.

"The decent element of the field won't stay there. 'Hell's Hacienda,' they call it. They've built a little town of their own, fifteen miles away, and go back and forth to the field. Only the toughest of the workers, pipeliners and boomers, will stay out there.

"And we'll never get it settled if we don't do something. The king pin of Shotgun, a crook called Blackjack, has told Rat Raines the town has changed, and that there is no place there for Rat and his gang. They've started a war—worse than any range war we've ever known.

"There is no law up there. Roving officers know better than to go into the place. It doesn't seem that the government gives a damn—or can send men in there."

HARDMAN looked appealingly at the little man before him. His last chance—Flick Burdett! Ranger, killer, outlaw, defender of the oppressed, each in turn, Flick Burdett was a man and a name in those back-border countries of the southwest that still defy the advance of civilization. More than one man, taking advantage of the other's size, had passed on because he had mistaken that advantage.

Hardman continued: "You're the only one that can do it. If you succeed, it means a ranch for you and enough money to stock it.

"Yes, you're the only one that could do it. And even you might fail!"

Flick Burdett creased his hat carefully. He flicked an imaginary speck of dust from the high crown. He arose from his chair, teetered on his high heels as he drew himself up to his full five feet four.

"I might fail—" There was a set look on his face. "—but, hell! A ranch an' stock of yuhr own. That's worth dyin' for."

Without another word, he hobbled from the office. Hardman shook his head slowly.

"There's hell there now," he sighed. "But I've an idea it's a rather cool hell, compared with what it's going to be."

A STRANGER in Shotgun was a man under suspicion until he had proved himself not an enemy of the Blackjack faction. A stranger who wore the garb of

the range rider was more under suspicion than ordinary.

Flick Burdett was under watchful eyes from the time he dismounted in front of Jack's Place. Hostile eyes, filled with the killing lust, followed his every move. Unconcerned, Flick walked into the gambling room, stood just inside the door and gazed around over the packed place. His eyes narrowed as he saw the snout of a machine-gun, commanding a sweep of the entire room, sticking through a slot cut in the wall.

Flick did not even turn his head as a heavy hand was laid on his shoulder.

"Got any special business here, runt?"

He looked slowly around; gave back black scowl for black scowl with Blackjack.

"Any of yuhr special business if I have or ain't—punk!"

"I get you," Blackjack sneered. "Hard. Want to come in here and start something. One of Rat Raines' little doggies. Well, you'll get the trouble you came after—and more, you skunk!"

Blackjack made a quick, sideways motion with his left hand. Flick saw the muzzle of the machine-gun move to cover him.

The little gunman barely moved. But the move he did make was too fast for eye to follow. A gun barrel jammed deep in Blackjack's stomach. With his other hand, Flick caught the gambler's belt, holding the bigger man so he was forced to act as a shield.

Blackjack paled as the barrel of the gun prodded at his very vitals. He raised both hands high above his head, cursing at the top of his voice.

"Tell that guy to come out of that cubby hole—an' bring that damn' gun with him," Flick commanded.

"Won't, heh?" he grated as Blackjack refused.

The hammer of Flick's six-gun clicked back.

"Bring it here, you coke-sniffer," Flick called to the man with the machine-gun. The gun was deposited at his feet.

"Hell of a smart bunch, ain't yuh?" His scorn was withering. "Yuh might be big tuh Rat Raines, an' he might be big tuh this gang of lousy bums. But yuh ain't so many tuh Flick Burdett!"

There was a long-drawn "ah-h-h" from all in the room. Blackjack's already

pale face seemed to turn a sickly green.

"Treat me better, next time I call on yuh," Flick advised.

He shoved his gun back in some hidden holster, so quick no one could see where it went. Deliberately, he turned his back on Blackjack.

FLICK BURDETT seemed to spin in mid-air in the manner of a pinwheel. He had a long-barreled gun in each hand; both guns were spouting fire. For, as soon as he had turned, Blackjack dropped to the floor beside the wall, and a dozen guns were pulled on the little gunman.

Flick knew it would be so. But he had hoped Blackjack would draw his gun. Instead, the gambler was out of the line of fire.

There was a roll of thunder and lead. Five men were crashing to the floor before they could draw their guns. Slugs sent splinters flying from the door facing around Flick, who stood, crouched low, peering through the fog of powder smoke.

A few seconds, chaos reigned. Then before the gang in Jack's Place fully realized what had happened, the lightning-like gunman had sprung through the door and ridden away into the night. Across the saddle in front of him he carried the machine-gun he had jerked up when he sprinted away.

Inside the gambling hall and barroom, men were dragging out the dead, binding up wounds and clearing up the wreckage.

"Josh! Did you notice how he worked them guns?" one man asked. "Like them real old-timers. He thumbed 'em!"

"He ain't fooled nobody though," one of the men close to Blackjack grunted. "He's in with Rat, all right."

Blackjack, groaning from the pain of a shattered arm, cursed agreement from between clenched teeth. Which was exactly the way Flick Burdett had figured they would figure.

JUST in the first breaks of the badlands, Flick stopped. He stripped the gear from his horse and set to work. Behind a huge limestone boulder, he set up the machine-gun. The position was well chosen, situated so it could not be surrounded, nor rushed upon from nearby cover. The gun in place, he flopped down, pillowed

his head on his saddle and dropped into a light, cat-like sleep.

He was up at the first faint streaks of dawn. He mounted his horse and rode slowly into the badlands. And as he rode, Flick Burdett was aware that he was being watched.

He reined in suddenly. From a rough cut that ran down to the faint trail he was following, three men had stepped, rifles leveled on the rider.

"Light and air yore seat," one of them commanded.

Flick slipped from the saddle. He looped his reins over his arm and grinned at the armed trio.

"Heard yuh guys was some big an' bad—" He deftly rolled a smoke. "— but I didn't figger yuh was so bad as tuh be right ornery 'bout it."

"Meanin' what?"

One of the three stepped forward, his chin thrust forward aggressively.

"An'," he added, "if I was you, I wouldn't say it. Little guys what ain't no bigger'n a tooth-full make right quick eatin'."

"An' damn' tough—sometimes," Flick drawled softly. He turned quickly. "What th' hell's this?"

Flick was sneering at the heavy-set, black-bearded giant that came striding up. He knew it was Rat Raines. Anyone would have known it. The man's face, covered by the unkempt, tangled beard, was nearly chinless. Black, beady eyes glittered in deep sockets. His very attitude was slinking, creepy and like a rat.

Flick was tightening the throat latch of his bridle, every muscle taut. He saw the three men who had held him up turn their heads toward their chief. Before they realized what had happened, Flick was in the saddle again. And his guns menaced the men on the ground.

"I brought along a little invite from Blackjack," Flick grinned down into the amazed faces of the four. "He says for me tuh tell yuh he's comin' out here an' smoke yuh rattlers out'n these rocks. Aim tuh help him some—I do."

Flick snapped both his guns back in the holsters, which he now wore low and tied down in plain sight. The three who had stopped him jerked up their rifles.

But not so Rat Raines. Raines was as

crafty as a lean rat, and he saw something in the little man's eyes that he had seen in others—supreme confidence. Rat dived behind a rock, just as Blackjack had dived behind a table.

Flick's guns roared four times. Three shots punctured the riflemen. One of them went down forever.

Flick wheeled his horse, jabbed him with the spurs and raced away in the direction he had come. Shortly, he looked back. A half dozen of Rat's gang were spurring after him, Rat in the lead.

Flick, staying tantalizingly near, kept just out of gun range of his pursuers. He reached the boulder where he had planted the machine-gun, leaped from his horse and prepared for action.

Raines and his gang drew up several hundred yards away. Before they knew what was happening, Flick opened fire on them. Horses went down, men with them. Two of the men did not rise to scramble to hiding places among the rocks.

Thumbing his nose in defiance, Flick mounted his horse again and streaked away. He left the machine-gun behind him. . . . Because Flick Burdett, using his head, wanted Rat Raines to have that gun.

Rat, after Flick had ridden out of sight, made his way back to his camp. His few remaining men carried the machine-gun, which they had found.

"It means we got to go git them buzzards before they git to us," Rat snarled. "An' that damn little—little killer first of all!"

FOR the next three days, Flick Burdett camped on a creek near Shotgun, after picking up a few supplies at the little oil town fifteen miles from the field. For three days he had watched, through a pair of strong glasses, the town of Shotgun and the country surrounding it.

Rat Raines, gathering up the entire band, nearly two dozen in all, had laid down a siege on Shotgun. The machine-gun was set up in a commanding position. His men hidden about the sage-covered sides of the canyon, Raines had forced Blackjack and the entire gang with him to barricade themselves in the town.

For the three days Flick watched, sniping from the town and the sage was carried on continually, with casualties small

on both sides. Then, the move Flick had been playing for came.

Out of food, the gang in the town, numbering about fifty, became desperate. It was now or never. In the false dawn of the third day, they charged the slopes of the canyon.

In five minutes, the one street of the little adobe town became a bloody, confused shambles. A withering rifle fire from the sage knocked men down like ten pins. But worst of all was the machine-gun that swept the street like hail.

Bullets whined through the sage. Knives flashed in the growing light. Men groaned and screamed in agony of death.

Flick smiled sardonically as he watched one of Blackjack's men crawl away to a safe distance, rise to his feet and start running across the prairie. The smile deepened as three of Rat's men, throwing away their guns to lighten themselves, followed suit.

Once started, the few that remained followed the steps of the first deserters.

TWO men rose from behind piles of rock, firing at the fleeing rustlers and gangsters. At the same time, their guns clicked on empty shells.

Flick had crept in close. He was watching the pair intently. Blackjack, throwing his gun down, cursed bitterly. Not fifteen yards from him, Rat Raines was fumbling with his empty cartridge belt and also cursing fluently. Slowly, they turned and faced each other.

"You're done." Blackjack grinned crazily at Rat.

"Not th' only one," Rat cursed.

"You want to finish this?" Blackjack eyed Rat nervously.

"Up to you." Rat was watching the other closely.

Then, the cowardly natures of the pair asserted themselves.

"I'm willing," Blackjack was speaking, "to call it off."

Rat nodded agreement, relief showing on his rat-like face.

Like a phantom, Flick Burdett arose from the sage close by.

"Nothin' doin'," he snapped, guns covering the two. "Yuh started this thing. Now, yuh'll finish her. Pick up yer guns!"

Dumbly, Blackjack and Rat obeyed. Flick tossed each of them shells to fill their guns, watching carefully as they did so. Wonder written large on their faces, they stood and stared at him.

"Yuh're going to keep on shootin'—tuh th' last man!" Flick announced. "Get back tuh back, march fifteen paces an' turn an' give each other hell! Nothin' doin'—" as both of the others started to speak. "—No beggin' off, yuh cowards! March out there and get set."

They read unswayable determination in Flick's cold eyes. Slowly, they gazed at each other, moved to obey.

Face grim, Flick saw Blackjack lower his eyes to the gun in his hand, move his eyes toward him. Rat nodded almost imperceptibly.

"Just a minute," Flick halted them. "I get yuh. Yuh aim tuh both turn on me. Well, all right. Only, I'll give yuh a chance—which yuh ain't got as long as my guns is out. Put yer irons in th' holsters."

Light of hope growing in their eyes, Blackjack and Rat complied. Flick snapped his own guns away, folded his arms and grinned at the two.

As if fighting against the impulse, Flick threw back his head, the corners of his eyes crinkled. He sneezed, his hat fell from his head and he stooped to pick it up. Blackjack and Rat, both swift on the draw, went into action.

Their guns were half-way out when death struck. On one knee, Flick was shooting from the hip. Blackjack swayed like a tree in a high wind. He coughed brokenly and fell forward on his face. Rat Raines stretched forth his hands, his gun falling to the ground. He sighed deeply, sat down and then slumped over sidewise.

Flick Burdett surveyed the awful scene about him. He closed his eyes. The scene changed. In its place were herds of white faces, fattening on the heavy grass.

"Mine," Flick sighed.

Again he looked at the ghastly ruins around him.

"Mine—an' I earned her."

Without a backward glance, he limped away. Flick Burdett knew that he, who loved the outposts beyond civilization's rim, had brought law and order to another frontier.



A RANGER RIDES TO RIMROCK

By JOHN G. PEARSON

Daunt, renegade-Ranger, six-gunned his past. But the Ranger code—and Ranger courage—takes plenty killing.

CAPTAIN DAUNT raised his crippled right hand and swore an oath by its missing third finger. His eyes were burning, flame-filled pools of jet.

But his voice was cold—dangerously cold.

“Nearly there,” he monotoned. “Nearly where your gold will do you no good, Kramer. Nearly where I can make you squirm, you dog.”

Daunt lowered his hand. He turned and, with even rhythmed strides, approached his horse, rein-tethered nearby.

His three-fingered hand brushed caressingly against a holstered gun at his hip as he walked. Eyes still afire from the setting sun which topped the Sierra Negras, straight-backed and easy in his saddle, Captain Perry Daunt, formerly of the Texas Rangers, clinked his silver spurs against the sides of his buckskin bronc. He joggled toward the cluster of 'dobe shacks which was Rimrock.

Rimrock that squalidly, brazenly, climbed the mountains far south of The River. Rimrock where Kramer, the evil one, squat,

sleepy-eyed, as indolently indifferent as the town to which he gave name, sat, smirked and gurgled delightedly as the gold from lost souls rolled in an unceasing stream into his bloody hands.

And toward Rimrock, hate in his heart, rode Captain Perry Daunt. Daunt the three-fingered, the gun-slick of the law. Daunt who used to be known as Daunt the courageous. But who was now called a traitor. Daunt, who used to rate the snappy salutes of lean, tanned, slim-fingered right hands, but who now rated a muttered curse, a blush of shame, or averted eyes.

Into the street end of the sun-blasted village, head up, back straight, rode Daunt, whom men called traitor. Eyes straight ahead, cold resolution in the set lines of his face, he rode past pock-marked, grinning *mestizos*, past double-gunned, hard-eyed killers, past tired-faced, alabaster skinned, shoulder-slumped women. Women with too-red lips and with circles under their eyes. On, past squatty, squalid 'dobes, the target of eyes that hated, eyes that wondered, and eyes that were masked with indifference, rode Daunt. He never once glanced aside.

He eased from his saddle seat. Careless confidence in his carriage, he strode into the yawning doorway of the *cantina* of Jose Aguilar—a doorway yawning seductively. From the clean sunshine he stepped into the dusky dampness of the place. And men of many nations watched him as he came in.

THE three lean fingers of his right hand brushed his holstered gun as Daunt strode forward. Glowing yellow in the dim light, a gold piece clinked on the bar. His back was turned to a score of unfriendly guns. There were those there who might have known that Captain Perry Daunt had killed many, many men of their kind. There were those who might have been waiting, hate in their hearts, for such a chance as this. Any man there might suddenly take it into his head to slap lead into the steel-muscle body of the Ranger outcast.

But Daunt's back was turned, indifferently, to them all. His thin lips grimly ironic, he looked at the fat, puffed face of Jose Aguilar.

"Whiskey," he ordered. "Whiskey—and Kramer!"

Like the indrawing breath of a sucking bellows they gasped, those men behind Daunt. Whiskey—and Kramer! That was something!

It caused a slit-eyed, two-gunned gent to step easily away from the group behind Captain Daunt. It caused the few who still were at the bar to edge carefully away. His spurs clinking softly in the tortured silence of the room, the man who had separated himself from the group strode toward Daunt. He stopped on wide-spread feet. Gently, with his left hand, he tapped the wide, dust-grimed shoulder of Captain Daunt. His eyes and his voice were cold-mocking.

"And who," he asked, as Daunt turned about, "are you—stranger?"

Daunt's answer came crisply from straight, unsmiling lips.

"You call me right," he said. "I'm just—a stranger."

"Stranger!" It was filled with venom, that voice from the group at the rear. "Stranger, hell! That's Daunt. *Captain* Daunt. That's th' John Law hairpin—a gun-slick on wheels—th' coyote gent what sold his Ranger gang for some o' Kramer's coin."

The fellow laughed raucously. Daunt's jaw muscles tightened. His face whitened beneath its heavy coating of tan. The speaker stepped from the group, grinned mockingly at Daunt.

"Yeah!" he growled. "Daunt, he sold out. And he did more than that. He let Kramer take . . ."

"Ah—" A sigh from Daunt.

A curse from the other.

Then there was lightning in Daunt's hand. And the hell in his eyes flamed with the flash of his own long-barreled gun. Death drilled into the chests of two—the two who had talked about something else besides a sell-out.

Daunt swayed forward, iron steady on the group before him.

"Whiskey and Kramer," he whispered. "That's all. Just whiskey and Kramer."

Slowly, cautiously, he squatted forward. Quickly, with a move of his wrist, he slid his gun out on the floor, then empty-handed, he stood before them, this jasper who had just killed two of their kind.

He was cold meat for the gun slicks of Rimrock. And they stood there, staring. They licked their lips hungrily. But they didn't shoot!

Daunt turned. Again his back was toward them, his face to the bar. "Whiskey," he said to Jose. "Whiskey, *spik!* And send for Kramer!"

Hand steady, Daunt raised a glass to his lips. But, in spite of his pose of indifference, cold fear tugged at his vitals. A fear that he would never live to see Kramer . . . !

II

RANGER Lieutenant Harry Tracy gazed truculently at the Brazos Kid.

"Listen, Kid," he said tightly, "this is so old it's got whiskers on it. But if you laugh at me, I'll—I'll—"

"I won't," said the Kid, "—not out loud." Tracy waved toward a chair and cocked his feet on the desk top. The Brazos Kid sat down, rolling himself a quirley. Lieutenant Tracy blew smoke at the ceiling.

There was pathos in his voice. "It was hell, Kid. You know it, even if it was before your time." Tracy shook his head slowly, and sighed. "Captain Perry Daunt," he said, "was the finest, the bravest, and the best Texas Ranger who ever slapped his seat in saddle leather."

The Kid's cool, blue eyes peered covertly at Tracy. But he said nothing.

The lieutenant breathed hard. "Crooked?" he asked softly. "Daunt crooked? Took money to let Kramer get away? No, Kid, he didn't do it!"

Tracy still stared at the wall. The Brazos Kid licked the loose edge of his quirley. "I ain't laughin'," he reminded.

The lieutenant nodded. "All right," he said softly, and settled himself in his chair. "Eighteen years ago a gent named Kramer was running dope—running everything he could run, for that matter. Trafficked in girls. Killed, murdered, rustled. Every thing that was damnable, Kramer did. And we caught him—caught him cold—Daunt and me. In the scrap Kramer shot a finger off Daunt's right hand. But we had Kramer in irons. We were going to move him next day. But next morning—he was gone."

Tracy stopped suddenly. He looked

sharply at the lean face of the Brazos Kid. But the Kid's eyes and face were expressionless.

Again Tracy sighed. "That's why you'll do," he muttered, as if to himself. "Poker face—poker eyes— Just a blank." He puffed at his dead cigarette and threw it from him.

"Daunt admitted it," continued Tracy slowly. "Said he took money to let Kramer make a getaway. Wrote it in a note he left behind him. There was merry hell about it. A stink you could smell clear to Austin. Rumors about this and that. Wild tales that no sensible man would believe. And to top it all off, there were stories about Daunt selling his wife and daughter to Kramer.

"But this much I do know. Daunt's wife and little girl left here when Kramer did. And Daunt's wife was *seen with Kramer in Mexico*. I can't explain that, but it's true.

"But, Kid, I know Daunt. I fought beside him in the days when saddle leather was the only way we had of going places. And a gent that earns his eighty bucks a month the way Daunt and I did in those days don't turn coyote for a few lousy dollars. When a man's a Texas Ranger, Kid, he'll be a Ranger till he dies."

The Brazos Kid puffed a little faster on his cigarette. But his eyes were the same. "Yeah," he said, "I reckon that's right."

TRACY nodded. "Dam' right," he said. "Daunt lied. I don't know why, but he did. He didn't take money from Kramer. He hated Kramer's guts. He hated everything that Kramer stood for. Of course, eventually it quieted down. Kramer must have made a lot of money and quit. He dropped out of the picture for about eighteen years. And so did Daunt.

"But now it's started again. From over yonder—" Tracy jerked his thumb in the direction of Mexico, "—we're getting the old rumors again. Kramer's back. The dope is getting through. Chinks, everything, coming across. And Daunt, say the rumors, he's back too—over there some place. Maybe there's nothing to it. But I've been wondering, Kid, if a gent with a good poker face and a slick gun hand might not be able to do some good—over

there. Somebody who's not a Ranger. Somebody who's just interested in Texas, in clean things."

Tracy stopped. He didn't look around.

The Brazos Kid studied the lieutenant's profile. Faint, almost imperceptible, there was a whimsical smile on the Kid's thin lips.

"Yeah," he said absently, "I reckon mebby they could."

The Kid stood up. He hitched his gun belts about his lithe hips. He reached under his vest and unpinned a badge. He extended it to Tracy. "Better keep this for me," he said. "Mebby, when I'm on furlough, I might get drunk, and somebody'd steal it."

Tracy grinned and accepted the badge. He opened a drawer of his desk and put the badge inside. His face sobered again as he did it. He studied the Kid and sighed.

"Well," said the Kid tonelessly, "I'll be seein' yuh."

He moved toward the door. Tracy's eyes followed him.

FOR many minutes Daunt stood alone at the deserted bar in the *cantina* of Jose Aguilar. The raspy, nervous shuffle of a booted foot, the high-pitched note of a woman's hysterical laugh, the deep mutter of a masculine undertone—only these sounds broke the silence. Daunt stood laxly between the prostrate forms of the two men he had killed, toyed absently with his glass, and waited. Waited for Kramer. . . .

And Daunt knew when he came. He knew it before he heard the soft "ah-h-h" of many indrawn breaths, the tinkle of approaching spurs, and the ponderous, confident tread behind him. With studied slowness he turned, his eyes masked. He stared at Kramer.

Kramer twisted his ugly face into a sardonic grin, squinted at the ex-lawman over a cocked gun.

"You're late, Daunt. I been expectin' you for eighteen years. 'Smatter—couldn't you find me?"

Daunt shrugged, and waved his left hand toward the gun lying in the center of the floor. "Cut th' heroics," he answered coldly. "There's my gun. I killed two of your men with it." He spread his arms expressively. "I don't give a damn,

Kramer—now. Shoot—go to hell—or give me a good job. I don't care which—not a bit." His voice was flat, void of expression.

Kramer peered shrewdly into Daunt's eyes. He chuckled throatily. It was a nasty, a triumphant chuckle. "I begin to *sabe*," he grinned. "You heard that *she* was gone, eh? You heard that th' kid was gone, too." He grunted contemptuously. "You fool. You sentimental dam' fool. . . ."

Kramer stopped talking, seemingly perplexed, as Daunt turned abruptly to the bar.

"Whiskey," Daunt said hoarsely to the Mexican barkeep.

Kramer grinned at Daunt's back. He raised his cocked gun a little higher, stepped close. Like the *hombre* who now lay dead on the floor, he tapped Daunt on the shoulder.

"Here," he said, extending the gun as Daunt turned, "here's a gun. You've got a job."

Carelessly Kramer turned away from the broken lawman. Gun in hand, Daunt studied Kramer's back. His eyes flashed then filmed.

"What—what kind of a job?"

"Particular, eh?" sneered Kramer. "Any kind of a job—anything I say! *That's* what kind of a job, *Captain* Daunt!"

Daunt was cold, while Kramer's breath came fast with passion. Slowly he shook his head.

"No go, Kramer," he said flatly. "That's what I'm tired of. Taking orders—running away—jumping when somebody yells."

Butt first, Daunt extended the gun toward Kramer. "Hell, no," he said feelingly. "I said a good job. I mean it. Next to you, I'm the *jefe grande*, or it's no bet. Either I'm th' big bull of th' woods, or I take a bullet in th' guts. That's flat, Kramer."

Puzzled, eyes uncertain, Kramer took the gun. He looked down at it. Then facing toward Daunt again, his eyes glowed.

"I'll be damned," he muttered. "I believe you mean it." But his voice was kindled with disbelief.

Daunt didn't speak. He stared straight at the big man, coldly, icily.

Kramer dropped his eyes again. Slowly, he opened the loading gate of the gun Daunt had returned to him. One click at a time, while he sardonically watched for a tell-tale expression on Daunt's face, Kramer punched the ejection rod through empty chambers. He stepped closer to the ex-Ranger.

"It wasn't loaded," he said. "But I expected you to try." He shook his massive head. "I don't *sabe* it, Daunt. I swear I don't." There was puzzlement in his voice.

Daunt shrugged, turned to the bar again. He poured himself still another drink. "I won't explain it to you," he said, glass in hand. "Take it or leave it. I don't care about that, either."

Kramer backed away. Suddenly his face flamed. His loaded gun swept on. "I've got it," he shouted. "I've got it now. You've got a conscience. You wouldn't shoot me till I made a play. You've got a hide-out gun and you want me to force th' issue. So your damn' puritanical soul could rest in peace if you killed me." Kramer's big face was livid. "All right, Daunt," he cried, "make your play. I'm going to kill you!"

Steadily, slowly, full glass still in his hand, Daunt turned. His face was white, but his voice was even. "Just a minute, Kramer," he said. "There's always time for one more drink."

Unshakingly, his hand carried the glass to his lips. He jerked his head back. "Ah-h-h," he sighed, as he finished drinking. "All right, Kramer," he breathed softly. "I'm ready. You're all wrong—tangled up in your own loop. But go ahead. Play your marbles!"

He set the whiskey glass on the bar. With a gesture of finality, he dropped his arms and awaited the searing smash of the bullet from Kramer's poised gun.

III

A HUNDRED times, the Brazos Kid had almost despaired of getting into Kramer's border hide-out. His month's leave of absence had passed. Two months had slipped by. And he had found neither Kramer nor Daunt.

Lean, gaunt, unshaven, wearied with the hopelessness of his task, he lounged de-

spondently against the crumbling 'dobe wall of a narrow gauge railroad terminal building.

Deserted it was, as it always had been, except for those few times when the Brazos Kid had seen the car whisk the loads away. Twice he had seen that. Twice in thirty days, that long, low, powerful car had purred silently to this deserted, eerie place. Twice, piloted by the same, clear-eyed, bronzed-faced, set-featured girl, it had taken aboard its load of boxes marked with strange, foreign characters. Once the load had been human. Chinese—slant-eyed, puzzled, bewildered creatures who had been bundled unceremoniously into the long tonneau by the hard-faced jasper who accompanied the girl driver. While behind the 'dobe wall, the Brazos Kid had watched and racked his tired brain for a plan whereby he could come to know this girl and her cold-eyed guard.

And then they came again, just after the train had gone. Gone wheezingly down the weaving narrow track, its short, squatty, wood-burning engine puffing snortingly through its flaring smoke-stack. This time the train had left two boxes with those strange characters painted on their sides—and two humans. A Chinaman—fat, sleek, resigned, who seated himself on one of the boxes. And a Russian—big, tall, massive-framed, whose eyes flamed boldly, as he paced ponderously back and forth, looking this way and that across the yucca-studded desert.

They spotted it simultaneously—the Russian and the Brazos Kid. The car, dust rising cyclone-like behind it, was speeding toward the station. Deep in his throat, the Russian grunted gutturally. The Chinaman stood up. High pitched was his voice as he jabbered excitedly. The Kid, behind his shielding 'dobe wall, chuckled to himself.

Then he sobered. The car, top down, came on, rumbled toward the hidden Kid and the waiting aliens. It stopped with a scream of tortured brakes. The granite-faced guard stepped out, two guns on his hips. The Kid wondered, racked his brain again. What could he do? Were these really Kramer's agents?

The guard stepped quickly to the two aliens. They jabbered at him in their respective tongues. He grabbed them both

by their arms and pushed them toward the waiting car.

"Shut yore traps," he rasped at them. "Shut up an' git in there."

The girl remained behind the wheel of the car. She grinned a little at the aliens as they climbed into the back seat. The guard started back for the boxes. The girl made a sibilant noise with her mouth. Then she called softly to the guard. The soft purr of the motor didn't drown her voice.

"We have company," she called. There was veiled sarcasm in her voice.

The hard-faced guard whirled, hands streaking toward his holsters. The Brazos Kid jerked involuntarily, then relaxed. His glance followed the gaze of the girl.

TALL, lithe, white teeth showing between slightly parted lips, a swarthy Mexican rode toward the car. He had just come from a clump of mesquite across the narrow-gauge track. The girl's eyes were hard as she watched him ride up.

"Our friend Parada," she said ironically.

The guard relaxed, walked to one of the queerly marked boxes and picked it up. "T' hell with Parada," he grunted as he carried the box toward the car.

The mounted Mexican reached the car first. He swept off his gaudily decorated *sombrero* with an exaggerated flourish. "*Querida mia*," he smirked. "A nice day, eh? Ees eet not?" His black eyes shone with sardonic humor.

The girl took papers and tobacco from a shirt pocket. She deftly rolled a cigarette and licked it with her tongue. Then she looked up. Her eyes were cold.

"Go to hell," she said flatly.

The guard chuckled and grinned mockingly at the Mexican, Parada. He set the box in the bottom of the car and started back for the other one. He grunted in a pleased fashion as he strode.

"That," he said to Parada, "from Kitty Kramer, oughta hold yuh for a while, I guess."

The Mexican sat stiffly in his saddle. His black eyes shot hate at the guard's back.

The Brazos Kid, in his place of concealment, stiffened too. Kitty Kramer. Kramer! He was right.

Tensely he watched the Mexican's eyes

dart furtively toward the clump of mesquite from which he had just ridden. The Kid, catching that glance, eased his guns in their holsters . . .

The guard reached the second box. Parada looked at him. There was a light of triumph in the Mexican's gleaming eyes. He raised his right hand high—straight up. The girl, Kitty Kramer, glanced up at him from lighting her cigarette. Her eyes flashed wide open as she saw his pose.

A crackle of rifle fire came from the mesquite clump. The guard crumpled forward on his face beside the queerly marked box. The girl screamed as the Mexican leaned forward, hand outstretched to grab her. The deep voice of the Russian and the high-pitched squeal of the Chinaman in the back seat of the car blended inharmoniously with the sharp bark of Kitty's pistol as she shot upward at the Mexican above her.

The Brazos Kid leaped forward. Parada cursed. His hand clutched his right shoulder. The motor roared under the long hood of the car. Horsemen, yelling, shooting aimlessly, spurred from the mesquite. The Brazos Kid reached the car as it started forward. Both guns out, he leaped on the running board.

"Git goin'," he shouted to the girl.

Bullets from the Mexican horsemen sang about the car. The Kid climbed into the back seat. The Chinaman huddled down in a corner. But the Russian, eyes shining, turned, knees on the seat, and watched. The Brazos Kid, beside him, thumbed leaden fury at the *banditos* behind them.

Like thunder, stuttering, rumbling, reverberating, sounded the Kid's twin guns as they shook jerkily under the recoils of his shots. The car gained momentum, roared, rocked dizzily as it swept along, speeding easily away from the pursuing horsemen.

The Russian sighed deeply and sat back in his seat. His eyes glowed approvingly as he looked at the Brazos Kid. The Chinaman got up from his corner. His round, yellow face was placid again.

MILES down the trail, the girl stopped the car and slid out of the seat. She stepped to the ground and faced the Kid in the car. In her hand was a gun. Her

clear blue eyes were hard-filled with suspicion.

"Just who are you?" There was no friendliness in her tone.

The Kid stepped out of the car. He rubbed his right hand meditatively across the beard stubble on his lean chin. His eyes dropped to survey his torn boots, his faded, tattered jeans. He snorted slightly through his nose as he looked up at her. He tipped back his worn, lopsided Stetson. Then he dropped his hands to his hips.

"Th' governor uh Texas," he said disgustedly. "Who are you?" His tone was as hard as hers had been. Without waiting for a reply, he turned and started tramping back the way the car had just come. The girl watched him a moment. There was a slight sneer on her lips.

"*Tonto*," she muttered to herself. Then she called out to the Kid, irony in her voice. "Where you going, mister?"

The Brazos Kid stopped and turned. There was contempt in his eyes and voice. "I left a dam' good saddle back there," he said. "They cost money. I'm gonna get it."

He turned and started walking again. Speculatively, Kitty Kramer watched him go—watched him until he was nearly out of sight. Her eyes changed from suspicion to uncertainty as the Kid tramped on and on. She looked at the placid-faced Chinaman and the huge Russian in the back seat of the car. The Russian growled something at her. His eyes were flaming, and he nodded his head up and down violently as he gestured back toward the disappearing Kid. His voice rumbled like drum beats.

The girl chuckled and her eyes twinkled. She nodded her head at the Russian. "I don't *sabe* that lingo, mister," she said solemnly, "but I bet, by dam', that you're right."

She slid under the steering wheel again. The motor purred more loudly. The girl whirled the car about and sped back in pursuit of the Brazos Kid. She wheeled the long car up beside him. The Kid stopped and stared without expression at her. Her own face was serious now.

"A saddle?" she asked.

The Kid nodded. "Yeah," he said. "A good kak."

The girl studied him thoughtfully. "Working?" she asked.

The Kid shook his head sidewise.

"Want a job?"

"Doin' what?"

"Riding." The girl patted the leather seat beside her. "Here."

"How much?"

"Plenty."

The Kid shot his jaw at her. "You're th' *jefe*?" he asked. "You hire an' fire, mebby?" There was disbelief in his tone.

The girl grinned slightly. "They don't know it," she said. "But I do—on this job."

The Brazos Kid paced around the front of the car. He opened the door and sat himself on the seat beside her. He looked out of the windshield in front of him. He crossed his legs.

"Cut 'er loose," he said. "I'll ride in yore rodeo."

IV

THE Brazos Kid made his brag. But before he finished that ride with the Stetson-hatted, overall-clad, booted girl beside him, he wished many times for the comforting feel of a frenzied, pitching buckner beneath him. Shrieking, whistling, plucking at him, the wind rushed past the car as they whizzed across northern Mexico.

Rocking, rolling like a barrel in a sea wash, the huge car rocketed on with terrific speed. Up—around curves sickeningly—careening wildly—down stomach-lifting dips—they rushed on. Whimpering complainingly, the high pitched voice of the Oriental mingled with the deep toned rumbling ejaculations of the Russian.

The sun capped the day, sank. Twilight came. And amid a squeal of brakes the Brazos Kid took breath again in Rimrock.

The car stopped. The girl got out. She pointed to a sign over the door of a 'dobe. "Cantina—Jose Aguilar," it said.

"Wait there for me," she told him.

She took the aliens by the arm and piloted them away. The Brazos Kid stalked stiffly toward the *cantina*. He stopped at the doorway and looked inside.

A fat man, squat and massive, was aiming a pistol at another gent against the bar. The fat man's face was livid with fury.

"All right, Daunt," he cried, "make your play. I'm going to kill you—now!"

The Kid froze, watched. The other man turned. He was tall, bronzed. His face was tired. And, as he tilted his head back and drank from a glass in his hand, the Brazos Kid saw that a finger was missing from his right hand. Daunt! Daunt, here with the *contrabandistas*.

Daunt set down his glass and smiled at the fat man. "All right, Kramer," he breathed softly. "I'm ready. You're all wrong—tangled up in your own loop. But go ahead. Play your marbles!"

Kramer! That was he! Kramer and Daunt! The Brazos Kid was cold—icy cold. Indecision, puzzlement, even fear came to him, paralyzed him with the suddenness of this appearance of the two for whom he searched. Unseen, unnoticed, he stood at the doorway.

Kramer's finger whitened where the edges of the trigger pressed. Curses, half inarticulate, came from his throat. Mottled places, white under the swart of his skin, appeared on his face.

But Daunt smiled—a cold, icy smile of complete indifference.

Doubt appeared in Kramer's pig-like eyes. Indecision swayed him. His gun hand wavered, lowered. Daunt smiled coldly, triumph tingling the mockery in his eyes.

"Well, Kramer," he breathed, "what do I get—job or bullet?"

Kramer sheathed his gun. Eyes steady on Daunt's, he cat-footed forward. Close to Daunt, he peered into the captain's eyes. There was amazement in his stare.

"Dam'," he wheezed, "I wonder if you do mean it."

Daunt spread his hands and smiled. Kramer snapped to sudden decision. With a straight finger, he tapped nervously on the broad chest of Captain Perry Daunt.

"I'll bet with you," snapped Kramer. "Outside of me, you're th' big bull of th' woods. I run th' shipments. I handle th' cash. You keep peace around here. Handle th' men." Kramer straightened and peered searchingly into Daunt's eyes. "That a bet?" he asked nervously. "Is that a bet?"

Daunt inclined his head. There was a peculiar smile on his firm lips. He strode to the center of the room, stooped, picked

his discarded gun from the floor. Holstering it, he straightened. There was power, personalty, leadership in his poise as he looked at Kramer. And there was satisfaction in his voice.

"That's a bet," he agreed.

The Brazos Kid sighed. What a man—that Daunt!

RUSTLING softly, growing in volume, rumbling, bursting into a full throated roar, a half hundred husky throats bellowed at once. One wild, high-pitched cry of approval was drowned by the mighty blast of dissent. Turmoil. Confusion. The heavy scuffle of booted feet. The shrill screams of women. Deep throated curses of men.

"T' hell with Daunt!"

"Hurrah for th' new jefe."

The smack of flesh on flesh. The glitter of slithering knife blades. The swift, sweeping flash of guns. Fighting, cursing, the throng surged forward.

Back to the bar, crouching, gun in hand, Daunt waited. Kramer, teeth bared, lanced three swift shots into the seething mass. The Brazos Kid leaped forward, while above the inferno of sound, Kramer's voice boomed out:

"This way! Smoky! Gunner! Pinto! Beside us!"

A powerful black hand clutched the Kid's throat. He smashed—once, twice—with his gun barrel. The hand relaxed. A shining black face grinned horribly as its owner slumped toward the floor. Then on—shooting, slashing, striking fiercely. Behind him, the Kid heard the spiteful crack of a .38—heard the cold, hard voice of the girl who had driven him to Rimrock. She was shooting coldly with a man's venom. Gun hot, she came on in the wake of the Brazos Kid.

Fired by the love of battle, the Kid fought toward Daunt and Kramer, beside whom were lined up three slit-eyed gunmen.

"Yippee . . . Chihuahua!" Age old, the battle cry of the Rangers, shrilled from the lips of the Kid.

Then he reached those at the bar. Lined himself beside Daunt, Kramer and the three gun hands. And the girl ranged herself there too. More loyal gunmen gained the bar. The charging crowd hesi-

tated, stopped, cowered back. Guns clattered to the floor. Arms raised submissively.

Quiet came broken only by the muttered cursing of Kramer. Ponderously, he stepped forward. A sneer on his face, he looked at the whipped legion of the damned. Scorn was in his voice.

"Fools! *Pendajos!*" He leered at them and swept his huge arm in a swift circle—a circle that took in the whole of the room. "Th' boss," he spat, contempt in his voice. "Th' boss, who *is* th' boss!" His body swayed forward. Massive head thrust toward them, he surveyed the pack and sneered again. "Daunt!" he spat. "That's who. I said so! Now clean up th' place and get th' hell outa here!"

Once more he waved his arm in that sweeping circle. Then he turned, and his eyes found the Kid. Eyes ringy, he swaggered toward him. Daunt, too, looked at the Kid—looked curiously, with calculation in his eyes. The girl stepped forward. Daunt paled as he saw her.

Kramer stopped in front of the Kid. His eyes were filled with suspicion. "Who are you?" he snapped.

The Kid's eyes said nothing. But he shook his head, as though in sorrow. "Dam'," he sighed. "This is sure an inquisitive bunch."

Kramer started a curse. The girl touched Kramer on the arm. He didn't turn—but he listened.

"PADDY'S dead," she said calmly. "Parada killed him. Tried to stick us up. This gent gummed his play. I hired him to take Paddy's place." She took her hand from Kramer's arm. "That's all," she said.

Kramer nodded, ever so slightly. "All right," he said. "But watch him."

The Kid's mouth turned down at the corners, and a light flamed in his eyes. But the girl was already striding toward the door.

"Come on," she said to the Kid. "I'll show you where to bunk."

The Kid followed her. He didn't look at Daunt. But he felt Daunt's eyes burning into his back. And he wondered just why Captain Daunt had tied up with Kramer. He wondered why Daunt had paled when he saw the girl. Had Daunt

heard, above the turmoil of the saloon fight, that shrill battle cry of the Rangers? And, if he had heard, what would he do?

Back in the *cantina*, Daunt stepped before Kramer. Eyes burning, he leaned forward.

"Th' girl, Kramer," he asked hollowly, "who is she?"

Kramer chuckled evilly, then shrugged. His face paled, and flushed. "Not who you think she is," he said.

Daunt tensed. For an instant it seemed as though he would spring upon the heavy man. Then he slumped and turned abruptly to the bar. "You're a dirty beast, Kramer," he said. "I don't know whether to believe you or not."

Then, to the Mexican behind the bar: "Whiskey!"

Kramer sneered behind Daunt's back. "Whiskey," he mocked. "Well, I guess you're entitled to some."

V

MANY and conflicting are the tales of the end of Rimrock. Some piously relate that Kramer and his wicked crew were lured to oblivion by *El Diablo* himself. Others say that the spirit of the Holy Virgin, outraged, her infinite patience exhausted at last, drove Kramer and his killer crew before her, straight into the guns of destruction.

But the Brazos Kid, at this time would have said that it was Lieutenant Harry Tracy—Tracy of the Rangers—who loyally believed, and backed his faith that once a Texas Ranger, always a Texas Ranger.

The Kid knew it when he saw the old Chinaman plodding patiently behind a decrepit burro, shambling wearily down the street of Rimrock. And his heart sang within him, burst into a song of gladness. The Rangers!

The Kid was glad because, in these few days he had spent at Rimrock, he had come to know this tall, bronzed *hombre* who used to be a captain of the Rangers. In these few days he had looked beneath the set, stern features, and the jet-black, film-masked eyes of Perry Daunt. And there he had seen something more than mere reckless courage. He had seen honesty, purpose, and manhood. Ranger manhood

—the kind of manhood that stays with a man until he dies.

Bland, placid, resignation in his yellow face, Ah Lee, the old cook at the Ranger station at Los Ventres, plodded down the street. Dust in little clouds trailed up from behind his flat-soled sandals.

Nonchalantly, striving to keep from his face the surging emotions in his breast, the Brazos Kid left the doorway of the *cantina*. He stalked across the street. Passing Ah Lee in the center of the narrow, dusty roadway, he looked the Chinaman squarely in the eye. No sign of recognition came into the slant eyes of the Oriental. But then, no wonder at that. The Kid, still unshaven, ragged, unkempt, was a very different Kid than the one Ah Lee knew at the Ranger camp.

The Kid stopped, turned at the other side of the street. Leaving his burro outside, Ah Lee shuffled into the *cantina*. The Kid strode impatiently into his own shack. He paced back and forth, frowning.

Disquieting thoughts raced through his mind. What if he was wrong? Perhaps Ah Lee had not been sent by Tracy, after all. What if Ah Lee had been sent to the Ranger camp—by Kramer? Kramer seemed always to know the Rangers' movements. He had evaded every net they'd ever spread for him. Suppose Ah Lee . . .

The Kid whirled, started for the door of his shack. He'd see! There was ice in his eyes, and his lips were straight as he entered the *cantina*.

KRAMER was there. Daunt was there. And—Ah, Lee! The Kid strode past the three. Kramer's eyes shone as he listened to the Chinaman. Daunt listened with expectancy, calculation in his face.

"Velly much money," sing-songed the Chinaman. "I sabe lot. . ."

The Kid lost the finish as he strode past. But he'd heard enough. So Ah Lee sabied where there was "velly much money," did he? There was a new, crackly note in the Kid's voice as he asked for his drink. And as he looked at the Mexican behind the bar, there was a strange mixture of fire and ice in his eyes.

"Whiskey," he snapped.

Daunt and Kramer turned to look at him as he said it. The Kid jerked back his head to down his drink.

Kramer grunted. "What's th' matter with you?"

The Brazos Kid turned and met Kramer's stare, saw Daunt's squinted eyes. "Nothin'." The Kid's voice was surly. "I'm jes tired—tired of ridin' padded cushions. I want a bronc an' somethin' t' do."

Kramer grinned. Daunt looked at the fat man and jerked his head toward the Kid. "Good youngster," he said. "Mebby he'd be handy."

Kramer nodded. "All right," he agreed. "He rides."

Daunt's lips turned down a bit. "All right, fella," he said to the Kid. "Don't ride any more cushions. Get yourself a bronc. It won't be long before you'll get plenty of action. Plenty."

The Kid nodded curtly.

There was a snappy click to the Kid's boot heels as he strode out. What had Daunt meant by "Plenty?" Did Daunt know that the Kid was a Ranger? Was he trying to tell the Kid something? Or was it irony behind the accentuation of that last word? Was Daunt just baiting the Brazos Kid?

ACROSS the street again, the Kid found the girl sitting on his doorstep.

"Howdy," she said. There was a new hint of friendliness in her voice.

"Howdy." The Kid grinned back. But his voice was hard and smacked of mockery. "Git yoreself a new pardner for th' joy rides," he said. "I'm takin' a new job."

The girl's eyes widened. There seemed to be a bit of disappointment in them. Then they hardened again. "Yeah?" she drawled ironically. "Just what job are you taking, mister?" But her voice had lost the chill edge that it used to have.

"A regular job," said the Kid.

The faintest hint of wistfulness in her eyes, the girl watched the Kid enter the shack after she had moved aside.

The Brazos Kid placed his hands on his hips and looked about the room. He strode to the table and, from a stock of odds and ends, took a pair of spurs. They were made of silver.

The girl stood in the doorway and watched. The Kid looked up at her from

his bent-over position, fastening his spurs on his boots.

"Now," he said, "I need a saddle."

The girl placed both hands out, one on each side of the door. "Listen," she said, "for that rig you lost, I'm going to give you the best saddle you ever threw a leg over."

As she leaned forward, there was a new something in her blue eyes. They had lost their former hardness. "Will that square us?" she asked.

She looked a lot different without that assumed hardness about her lips. The Kid noticed it. He didn't answer her. He just nodded.

"I'm glad," the girl said with studied emphasis, "that you've got a regular job. There's not many of 'em here."

Involuntarily, inwardly cursing himself for it, the Brazos Kid blushed. As she watched him, the girl smiled. "I believe I've got you spotted," she said softly. She waved an arm toward the horse corrals. "The rig you can have," she said quickly, "is hanging on this end in the shed. And the pinto bronc. Both yours. And I hope you like your new job."

It seemed to the Brazos Kid that the girl hurried as she turned and strode away. He watched her cross the street and enter the *cantina*. Then he strode up the slope toward the bronc pens.

VI

THE girl, Kitty Kramer, strode purposefully into the *cantina*. She had a little piece of pigging string in her hand. As she walked, she struck it angrily against her overall-clad leg.

"Men," she muttered scoffingly to herself as she strode. "Men!"

Kramer, Daunt and the aged Ah Lee were still there. The girl stepped smartly past them and stopped at the end of the bar. Daunt and the Chinaman had their backs to her. They didn't see her. But Kramer glanced at her frowningly.

She listened while the three talked. Finished, Daunt strode toward the door. "After chow," he said.

Kramer nodded. The Chinaman, Ah Lee, sing-songed as he followed Daunt. "Plenty glad," he said, "you likee this.

Velly much money flo me." He wagged his yellow head as he shuffled out.

Kramer's eyes glittered as he watched Ah Lee leave. "Yeah?" he muttered. "Plenty much money flo you—like hell!"

He turned and padded to the girl's side. Hard-eyed again, she watched him come.

"Well," he snapped at her, "what you hangin' around here for?"

She gave a quirk to her lips and didn't answer the question. "Getting ready to double-cross somebody else?"

Kramer's eyes glittered. He smiled coldly, straight lipped. Closer he stepped to her. Coolly, measuring his blow, he struck her sharply across the face. The girl's head rocked back under the blow. But otherwise she didn't move.

"Fine," she applauded coldly. She thrust her jaw forward. There was a tigerishness in her smile. "Kramer," she said icily, "that's the last time you'll ever lay a hand on me. I'm leaving—leaving right now. Try to stop me, and I'll kill you."

For a fierce instant she stared at him. Kramer didn't speak. The girl looked as if she meant what she said.

She strode out through the door. Kramer padded quickly to a door at the rear. "Wall-eye!" he called. "Come here."

Quickly, as the flat-faced *hombre* appeared, Kramer piloted him to the front door of the saloon. He pointed a shaking hand toward the girl.

"Her," he said to Wall-eye. "Don't let her leave." He looked up, long and meaningfully into the other's eyes. "If she gets wild," he breathed, "too wild, fix her clock, Wall-eye. But fix it quiet. She knows an awful lot, Wall-eye. And she hates me plenty."

UP at the bronc pens, the Brazos Kid raised his head and listened to the roar of an automobile motor. He grinned to himself. This was one trip on which the Kid wouldn't ride the padded cushions. His smile was whimsical.

The motor accelerated, died, sped up again. The Kid pictured the gear shifting operation. Then he stiffened, tense. A hoarse cry rose above the motor's roar. A shrill voice—a girl's. The Kid ran around the saddle shed. He heard a shot—heavy, reverberating.

Then came another, a sharper, more staccato sound. And the roar of the motor anew. Rounding the corner of the shed, the Brazos Kid saw the car speeding out of Rimrock. And a short, squat-bodied figure lay in its wake, dead in the rocky street.

Kramer waved the gathering crowd aside. "Forget it," he snapped. "It's my business. Bury him."

He took a piece of paper in his hand and called out some names in a loud voice. Then his eyes found the Kid. "And you too," he said. "All be there. Right after chow. Rifles and plenty ammunition. We're takin' a ride."

EXPECTANCY, a fierce, ominous expectancy, pervaded the outlaw camp. Somber-eyed, watchful, the Brazos Kid paced in and out of the *cantina* of Jose Aguilar. Watching for Daunt, for Ah Lee. Hoping for a clue as to whether these two were or were not Kramer's allies.

But he didn't see them, didn't find a clue that told him anything. And, as the sun sank behind the Negras range, somber shadows played upon the set faces of fifteen mounted men. Behind them rode the Brazos Kid, down the narrow canyon, at the end of which he knew lay the Big River. The river which, legally, Texas Rangers might not cross. The river that made a haven of Rimrock.

At the head of the cavalcade rode Daunt. Straight-backed, jet-eyed, three-fingered Daunt. Then Kramer—huge, hunched spider-like in his swaying kak, long arms flopping loosely.

And as he watched these two and the hard-eyed killers behind them, the Brazos Kid cursed savagely to himself.

Shod hoofs clicking sharply on rock-strewn sand. They came to the Rio Grande and crossed. Shallow water cascaded, foam-topped, about the limbs of daintily stepping broncs.

They splashed out on the other side, entering the land of the Ranger patrols. The Brazos Kid longed for his badge. He wanted to face this gang, badge on his shirt, guns out.

Slowly Daunt reined in his bronc, dropped back beside Kramer. In a low voice he spoke to the fat man. Kramer

nodded, but turned in his saddle and, while he rode, watched Daunt, reined in motionless beside the trail, giving low-voiced instructions to the riders as they filed past him. Satisfied, Kramer looked front again.

"About a mile more," Daunt was saying. "Rifles out."

There was the swish of steel against leather as they filed past the straight-backed Daunt. Then they had passed, and Daunt fell in beside the Kid.

"About a mile more," he said to the Kid. "Rifles out." Then, in a lower voice: "Ah Lee and Tracy. We planned it. We know about you."

Then he rode to the head of the cavalcade. Fierce exultation flamed in the Kid's breast. Lieutenant Tracy had been right. Once a Ranger, always a Ranger. And Daunt had hidden up front again, back beside Kramer. In the front rank where the Kid knew a snapped command of "Halt! Hands up!" would cause gun hands to flash into flaming, violent action. And that action would bring the retaliation of bursting, crackling rifle fire from Ranger guns—guns which would endanger the lives of Daunt and the Kid as well as those of the others:

Then it came!

"Halt!"

A curse from Kramer. Daunt whirled, gun flashing, and called the battle cry of the rimrock Rangers. An answer burst from the lips of the Brazos Kid, from the bushes beside the trail, from a dozen loyal Ranger throats.

THEN confusion. Rifles and pistols flamed and roared. Screams and curses. And, mingled with that mad mixture of sound, came to the ears of the Kid the sharp crack of a small-calibered .38. And high-pitched, courageous and oft-repeated, there came to the Kid's ears the throaty cry of a girl in battle.

And so it was that Kramer and his killer crew met and fought with the forces of Texas law. Fought with the ferocious courage of cornered beasts. And the poker face of the Brazos Kid wreathed into a mirthless smile as his guns flamed death. He was fighting on the side of the Texas law—for the honor of Captain Daunt.

Blood stained the yellow sands. Bullets

pocked the rocks. Acrid smoke filled the air. Men who had lived giving no quarter, died asking none—died with hate in their eyes, a snarl of fury on their lips, and smoking guns in their hands.

Then, out of the bloody action, the swirling smoke and dust, emerged the Brazos Kid and Captain Perry Daunt. Triumphant, heads up, they marched to the waiting Ranger line. And out of puzzled eyes, the Kid saw Captain Daunt fold tenderly into his arms the girl who had been at Rimrock.

Hardly understanding, he heard her tearfully tell of her knowledge. She told them of her mother's discovery, years before, that she was a bigamist. She had married Daunt thinking that her first husband, Kramer, was dead. She told them of Kramer's devilish threat to tell the tale to the world, to disgrace Daunt, and of a woman's weakness to save the name of the one she loved. It had been a futile sacrifice.

Swiftly, beseechingly, the girl turned to Tracy. "Mother released Kramer that night when you and Captain Daunt captured him. She was still legally Kramer's wife and, to save Captain Daunt from disgrace, she went with Kramer that night. She took me with her. Captain Daunt is my own daddy.

"Captain Daunt—Daddy—didn't do it. Mother did. Kramer made her do it. She thought she was doing right. She was good—much too good for the beast she thought was dead. Daddy discovered what she had done, and to save her he took the blame on his own shoulders."

In sudden mental exhaustion, Kitty

swayed against her father's breast. Gently he stroked her head with a tender hand.

Lieutenant Tracy stepped forward. There was a smile of satisfaction on his lips. Comfortingly he placed a hand on Kitty's shaking shoulder. Then his lithe figure straightened. Level-eyed, soldier-like, he looked at the assembled Rangers. At Captain Daunt. His hand flashed to salute.

"Captain Daunt," he said, "—Texas Ranger."

Blood on his arm, dripping from the wound in his shoulder, the Brazos Kid straightened, joined in the salute. Then he slumped, groaned, slid to the ground.

Kitty ran swiftly toward him, bent over him. There was nothing hard about her face now. It was shining with sympathy and tenderness.

The Kid looked up at her and grinned weakly. "You can shoot," he said, "and fight, and ride." His eyes were a study. "I wonder," he went on softly, "how you'd like t' learn t' cook—for a Ranger?"

Kitty studied him, her eyes as expressionless as his. "You," she said softly, repeating his own words when she had hired him, "You are the boss? You hire and fire, I suppose? A cook, for a Ranger?"

The Kid nodded. Kitty seated herself beside him, mimicked his own previous words. "All right," she said. "I'll ride in your rodeo."

Then, snuggled to his breast, blood from his forgotten wound stained to brown the blue of her shirt. A dozen Ranger hands lifted to smart salute—a salute to a Texas Ranger who had risked all to clear the name of another.

PATENTS and TRADE MARKS

Protect Your Most
Valuable Assets...

Expert Service Write today

LESTER L. SARGENT

Registered Patent Attorney

1115 K Street

Washington, D. C.

The Tops in Sport Fiction

A magazine written exclusively for the baseball fan, by men who know their game.

BASEBALL STORIES

On Sale at All Newsstands

TERROR ISLAND

By ALBERT RICHARD WETJEN

On a massacre island, these two end-of-the-earth enemies clashed. . . . Stinger Seave, quick-trigger lord of the South Sea trade routes, and the bleeding, gray stranger—the one man in the world that the Stinger feared!

THERE can be no doubt that Stinger Seave was a cold and ruthless killer. He had no nerves and no sense of humor. There must have been something warm in his make-up, however, because of his few but iron-hard friendships, and because of the affection and money and time he lavished upon Betty Stevens, she whom the Stinger adopted and who fell heir to all his immense fortune when he was killed on Manoa by Big Bill Gunther, his best friend and the father of young Gunther, whom Betty married.

The story of the coming together of Betty Stevens and Stinger Seave is one of the few in all the annals of the Stinger that reflects entirely to his credit. And it is one of the rare exploits that came to him out of his past, that mysterious dim past of which no man knew; those twenty-odd years of life at least that were his before he landed at Apia in the Islands, friendless, frail, unknown and broke. This is the tale:

It was some eight months after an affair at Sangata when the Stinger had rescued his three friends, Cassidy, Chang and Gunther, from the stockaded village of Suliman the raja. Cassidy had gone south to Apia and his business. Chang was in a Batavian hospital recovering from terrible hardships and tortures. Big Bill Gunther was with the Stinger and they had been on a six months' trading cruise through the Java Sea.

The Stinger's ship was foul with weed and barnacles, so he put in to the little island of Kebato, south of the Carimata Strait, for careening and overhaul, not caring to return to Batavia or Singapore until Sangata was forgotten. The Stinger had wiped out a tribe and a village at that place and he had heard rumors that the Administration was looking for him to ask him certain questions. So he chose out-of-the-way Kebato for his careening and beached

his ship there one hot December day.

They had been there nearly a week when Gunther and Seave decided on a hunting trip into the interior of the little island, leaving the work to go forward under the eyes of Seave's mate, a man named Severn. They started on the trip, spent a successful day and, returning to the little bay where the schooner was beached, they halted on the edge of the jungle with exclamations of surprise.

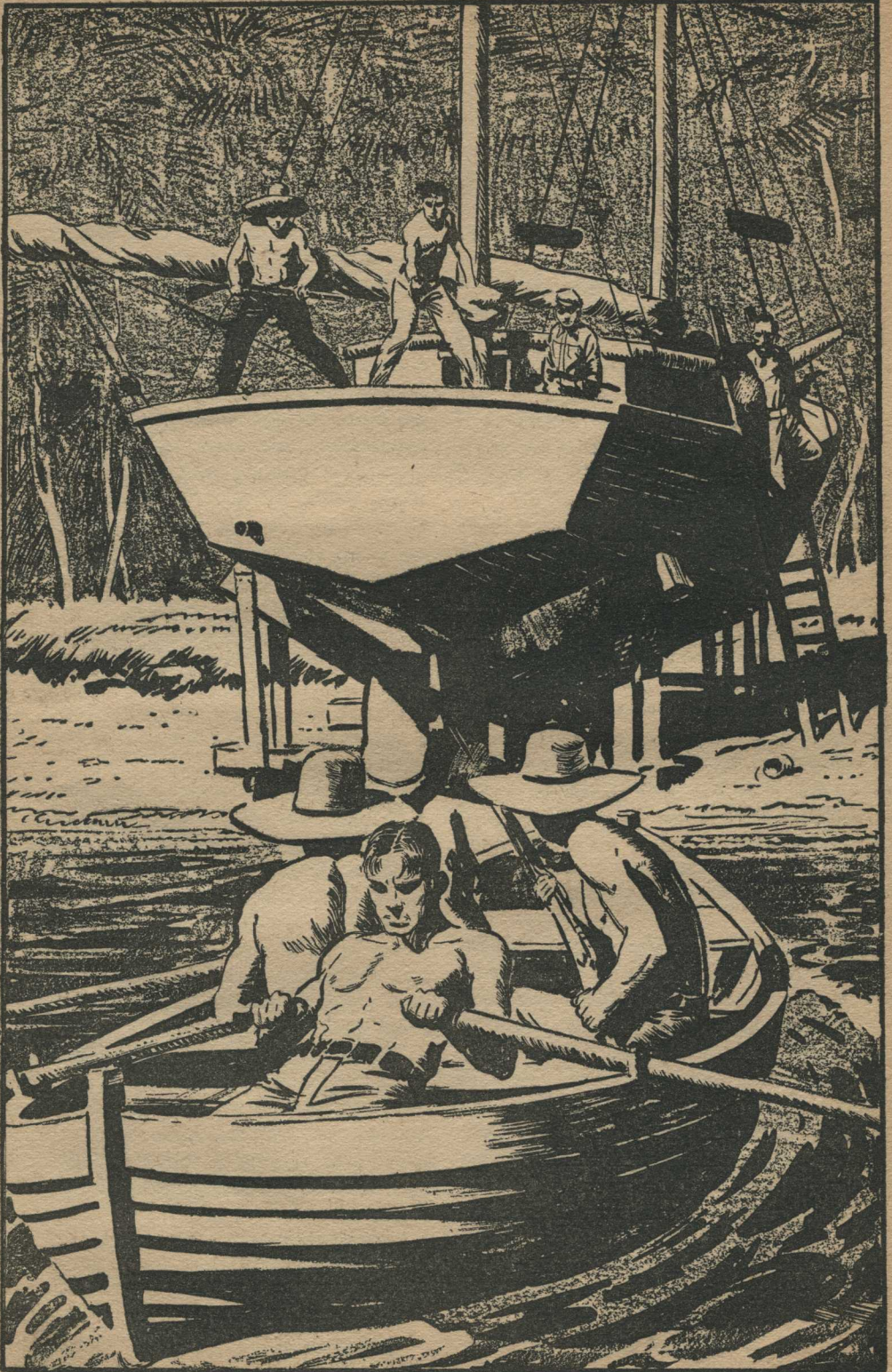
Coming in from seaward, badly water-logged, under jury masts and with decks littered with spars and canvas, was a small gray-painted schooner. Perhaps half a mile astern surged a big three-masted bark, under full canvas and overhauling the schooner by leaps and bounds. From the stern of the schooner eddied puffs of smoke and the two watchers on the jungle edge could hear the faint and far-away reports of rifles.

"Well," said Gunther, hitching up his belt, "that looks like trouble. Wonder who it is?"

"Strange ships to me," said the Stinger quietly, shading his eyes with his hand. "And, anyway, it's none of our business."

Gunther spat and grunted as they started down the sand for their own beached vessel. He knew the Stinger's iron-clad rule never to interfere in anything that did not directly concern him. Gunther was differently made. If there was any slight trace of a prospective fight or excitement going on, he wanted to be in on it.

But when with the Stinger he kept such feelings under control. One could not argue with Seave, could not plead with him or persuade him, and he ruled always with an iron hand on his own vessel, so there was no prospect of Gunther's wandering off alone to see what was happening. In a somewhat surly frame of mind, then, Big Bill tramped behind the Stinger.



Firing commenced almost at once. Lead whined through the rigging, spattered against the stout wooden hull. . . .

THEY reached their vessel, boarded her and started for the main cabin.

Seave's mate, Severn, asked the Stinger as he reached the poop, "Any orders, sir?"

"About what?" the Stinger wanted to know. Severn scratched his unshaven jaw and looked uncertain. Then he jerked his head toward the fighting ships, now well in the bay.

"I thought maybe we'd better arm the men, sir."

"It's none of our business," said the Stinger coldly. "Trouble comes soon enough without looking for it." He strode on past the mate, who grunted and went midships.

Gunther said, "Well, say, Seave, you never know now. It might be someone we wouldn't want to be caught unawares by. . . ."

The Stinger turned and stared at him, his eyes a little icy. Big Bill licked his lips and looked away.

The Stinger washed and changed. He sat down to the table and looked surprised to find no dinner ready. He struck the gong and the steward came bustling out of one of the cabins where he had been staring through a port.

"What's the matter with you?" snarled the Stinger with a spasm of anger.

"Well, that first packet's beached and her crew's running up to the jungle, sir, and firing back," answered the steward nervously. "Looks like a woman with 'em, too."

"Dinner!" snapped the Stinger coldly. "And let me hear no more of it. Women have no business in the Pacific, anyway."

The steward fled. Big Bill Gunther lighted a cigar and grinned.

"You're sure tough, Stinger," he said at last. "Damned if you don't give me the creeps at times. How you can sit there and talk about eating when there's bloody murder abroad, I don't know."

The Stinger shrugged but did not answer. The steward was a long time coming with the food, and when he did return the Stinger's eyes were beginning to grow cold.

"I suppose the cook was too busy looking at the play-acting to get on with his work?" he asked icily. The steward nodded and licked his lips. Just then Severn, the mate, came below to eat and the

Stinger halted him with a crisp word.

"Does the whole routine of my ship have to be thrown out because a lot of fools are running along the beach?" he demanded. "If this crew can't mind its own business, I'll have to take it in hand."

"I can manage 'em, sir," stammered the mate. "'Cause they're interested an' . . ."

"That will be all!" said the Stinger. "Sit down."

They ate in silence. Occasionally through the open ports and the skylight they could hear the whiplike crack of rifles and the shouts of men. Gunther and Severn moved uneasily in their chairs and ate little. Stinger Seave ate tranquilly and apparently quite oblivious to the fact that men were fighting and dying not a mile from where he sat. It was none of his business and he had no intention of making it his business.

As soon as they could reasonably get away, Gunther and Severn went up on the poop, Gunther rather shamefacedly buckling on his cartridge belt and revolver. The Stinger finished his meal, drank his coffee, lighted a cigar and settled back with a sigh to complete a book he had half read.

NEARLY an hour later, just after darkness had fallen and the firing and shouting had died away, Severn, the mate, came below and halted uncertainly at the foot of the companion.

"Sir," he commenced nervously. Stinger Seave lifted his eyes from his book. "Sir," said the mate, "there's a man wants t' see you. Got a woman with him. They're from that ship."

"What ship?" asked the Stinger, as if the news there was even another ship was completely a surprise to him. Severn nodded toward an open port through which was coming a vague, red flickering light against the background of the velvet darkness.

"She's afire, sir. The schooner. The bark looted and burned her. This man's wounded."

The Stinger shrugged.

"It's none of my business," he said irritably. "Will you never understand that I do not choose to be drawn into some trouble that is none of my concern whatever?"

"But the woman, sir?" pleaded Severn,

his face pale because it was dangerous to argue with the Stinger. "There's a party of men coming down from the jungle now with torches, looking for her and the man."

Shoes sounded on the companion and Gunther appeared. The big man was visibly distressed.

"For God's sake, Seave," he choked, "don't act like a cold-blooded snake! There's a man on the beach wounded and there's a woman with him. He wants to come aboard. This is your ship, Seave, and it's for you to give orders, but if you don't do something for the woman at least, I'll quit you and join them."

For a moment there was a tense silence except for the heavy breathing of Severn and Gunther. Stinger Seave stared at them both and blinked. At last he sighed, and lifted his brows in a manner that for any other man would have been slightly humorous.

"Gunther," he said gently, "the way you run around looking for trouble, you should have been killed long ago. I'll come and see what's the matter."

He rose languidly, yawning, and stretching his arms, the book still held between the fingers of his left hand. He seemed very gentle then, very patient. Reserved and distant as he often was with Big Bill Gunther, sharply as at times he spoke to him, he yet held for him a very real affection. Seave knew that Gunther was quite capable of going down on the beach and protecting the wounded man and the woman from the party that was obviously looking for them. Big Bill was a fool that way. He went more than halfway to find trouble and excitement.

"By the way," said the Stinger absently, as he turned to look for his cap and to lay down the book, "by the way, did you find out who the man is?"

"Carsen, sir," blurted Severn. "Says he's Captain Carsen of the schooner *Arabelle!*"

There was a crash as the Stinger's book dropped to the main cabin deck. The Stinger whirled, his lips drawn back from his teeth, his face gray in the lamplight, his eyes icy with something very close to terror. Gunther and the mate fell back a pace as the Stinger's hand flashed to his coat.

"Liar!" choked the Stinger, his voice

thick. "You liar! I shot Carsen in Dawson City. . . ." He seemed abruptly to recover his self-control, to realize what he was saying. He straightened, took his hand from his coat and wiped the sudden sweat beads from his forehead.

"My heavens, Seave," choked Big Bill Gunther, alarmed, "are you ill?"

With a tremendous effort the Stinger smiled. He stood rigid for a moment, then crossing to the locker did something he had never before done to Gunther's knowledge—he took a stiff three fingers of whisky before meeting a problem.

"All right," said the Stinger, gently, when he had done. "Get up on deck."

He pushed by the other two men and went up the companion. Severn and Gunther, after a puzzled look at each other, stumbled up after him.

The stars were bright above. There was a cool, soft wind blowing from seaward. For'ard on the schooner's fo'c's'le-head some of the men were holding lanterns over the side and peering down. Quite close to the ship and advancing down from the jungle were red splotches of torches, sending flickering inky shadows before and behind a group of armed men.

Far to port of the beached schooner, right at the water's edge, the schooner that had been fleeing from the bark glowed with tongues of flame leaping around her stumps of masts. Astern of her showed the lights of the anchored bark and a few boats seemed to be pulling back and forth.

With a slight straightening of his shoulders, Stinger Seave went down from the poop and along the main deck until he reached the pilot ladder swung overside near the foremast. Taking a lantern from one of the seamen, he dropped down the rungs until he stood on the sand, the water washing about his shins. He looked up, before advancing, to peer at the two dim figures nearby, and he said to the anxious, puzzled Gunther, who was looking down at him, "Arm the men, Gunther." Just that; no more. Gunther was old in the Islands and would know what to do.

EXACTLY what happened between Stinger Seave and the badly wounded and dying Captain Carsen and the woman will never be fully known. The woman—she was really only a girl of seventeen—

was too hysterical to remember. Carsen never told and what few comments the Stinger made only reached the ears of Cassidy, Chang and Gunther.

Watchers say that when the Stinger approached the two drooping figures he held high the lantern so that the light fell on his face and the big, burly, gray-bearded man who was Captain Carsen took his hand away from his bloody side to flash it to a gun at his hip.

"They just seemed to stand there and snarl at each other," said Gunther afterward. "I tell you the Stinger was as near to being afraid as ever I've seen him. He had the lantern held up in one hand and his other inside his coat. This Captain Carsen had his gun half out of his holster and was leaning forward, just like a killer. All his left side was running with blood and he could hardly stand, but he had the Stinger bluffed, I do believe. I heard him say, 'So it's you, eh? You always did turn up at the wrong time. If you draw I'll kill you!' Seave said something about, 'Once being enough,' and then Captain Carsen collapsed, pitched sideways to the sand. The girl flopped over and started to cry. Seave knelt down and I could hear him talking, but what about I don't know. After a bit he yelled for some men to come and take the captain aboard and he helped the girl up himself. Captain Carsen died about an hour later."

Once he had seen the two castaways safely on his ship, Seave turned to face the oncoming band of armed men with torches. He had Gunther by his side this time and about four of his own seamen, so what happened was plain. The leader of the band was a big fat man with drooping black mustaches and evil black eyes. He wore a cartridge belt and holster, carried a Winchester and was dressed only in a singlet and old duck pants.

"Well," he said throatily when the torches revealed Stinger Seave, "who have we here? I'm Cap'n Maul and I'm looking for a girl that belongs to me and a man she got away with. Seen 'em?"

"No," said the Stinger coldly.

"Liar!" The fat man became convulsed with sudden rage. "We've been chasing 'em through the jungle all the afternoon and we saw 'em make a break for your ship."

"That's too bad," said the Stinger, blinking.

"Are you trying to be funny?" snarled the other.

"I'm never funny," answered the Stinger. "And I think you'd better go."

The other laughed at that and ran a contemptuous eye over the Stinger and his small band. He had with him about eight men and they were all rough, surly-looking characters and ready for trouble.

"Get out of my way!" snapped Captain Maul, thrusting out a fat hand and taking a step forward.

Stinger Seave did not move but he whispered icily, "Stand still!" His blue eyes were frosty in the torchlight and the fat man, gazing into them, shivered for no accountable reason and reached for his gun.

It was as if the Stinger was glad of the chance to go into action, as if some terrific shock had left him tingling and he rejoiced in this chance to let off steam. He was all the cold, cool killer. His hand was inside his jacket before the fat man's gun was clear of the holster. Then there were six explosions—first one, then a slight pause, then a rapid tattoo of five.

The fat man's gun thudded to the sand and he gripped a bleeding hand with a yelp and backed off. Two of his men who had lifted their rifles dropped in their tracks. Another staggered sideways and almost fell, but managed to regain his equilibrium and nurse a shattered arm. The other two shots nicked a fourth man because the wavering torchlight was deceptive in the Stinger's eyes.

THE untouched survivors backed off and fled, dragging their dead and wounded companions, their flight hastened by two six-guns roaring in Big Bill Gunther's hands as that bearded adventurer went into action with the excited shouting of a boy. One or two of Seave's seamen started to fire their rifles but the Stinger turned on his heel and snarled, "That'll do!" as he reloaded his smoking gun.

He jammed it into the holster, then jerked upright as the fat man, halting perhaps fifty yards away in the darkness, roared back something about cleaning them out after a bit. The Stinger merely shrugged at that and walked calmly back to the ship despite a few bullets that came

whizzing back from the retreating party.

"Set a watch, Gunther," said Seave as he went below. "Keep flares ready as usual for night fighting. We can't launch the ship with the tide ebbing, so we'll have to stay and wait a better opportunity."

It was more than an hour before Gunther tramped below, curious now to find out what it was all about. He discovered the main cabin untenanted except for Stinger, who was moodily standing by the table and staring at a piece of washleather holding a large pile of drab, gray-looking stones. Of Captain Carsen's body and the girl there was no sign.

"Well," said Gunther, breathing heavily and mopping his forehead, "that was quite a scrap."

"Sit down," said the Stinger somberly, without looking up. "I want to tell you something."

Gunther sat down, uncorked the gin bottle, slopped out a drink, tossed it down and remarked, "I've got a strong watch out. . . . Go ahead!"

"I'm a hard man," said the Stinger slowly, fingering the drab stones. "I've led a hard life and I was raised in a hard country. It doesn't matter where. Captain Carsen I knew . . . a long time ago. . . . He's dead now, so we won't discuss him much. From what I can gather, he was coming down from his usual haunts in the North Pacific to try the South when he ran across some clue to a diamond mine. These things are diamonds." The Stinger dribbled the stones through his fingers. "Worth a fortune, Gunther. More than you'd dream. . . ."

"Anyway, Captain Maul got wind of the mine or the stones, I haven't learned which, except it was when Carsen was drunk. That was in some Chink port where Carsen was trying to sell some of the stones. Maul was a beachcomber there. He went and told a Jap named Hiroto, who owns that big bark yonder, and they agreed to loot Carsen's ship. . . . The girl told me most of this before I got her to sleep. . . . She learned a lot from the Jap, who wanted her.

"Carsen got away . . . somehow." The Stinger paused for a moment to look at Gunther and the big man shivered because of the icy eyes. "He always did get away somehow!" the Stinger snarled.

Then, recovering himself, he went on. "Maul and the Jap chased them clear south to here, losing them sometimes and then picking them up again. Carsen was in trouble too much with the law to ask for aid. He had only a few men with him and did not dare chance a fight. But he kept ahead of the bark by some miracle and good seamanship and was trying to make Batavia, where he had friends, when he ran into a hurricane and was dismayed. You saw the schooner. She was sinking, and this island was the first land he'd sighted since the hurricane. He had to make it and chance a fight at last.

"Maul and Hiroto had too many men. They took the schooner and looted her and then burned her. There was a lot of diamonds hidden in her main cabin, so I understand, but all Maul got away with was these . . . a fortune, at that. He was desperate, and wounded by a rifle bullet. He took the girl with him, intending to shoot her at the last for fear of the Jap.

"That's about all of it, Gunther. We've got to save the girl and stones. They'll be hers now. Maul won't go back without taking another crack at them after the long chase, and Hiroto, if the girl's telling the truth, is too crazy for her to quit. We'll fight until we can get launched and then we'll make a break for the sea."

BIG BILL GUNTHER sat and blinked and wondered.

"You seemed to know this Carsen chap," he ventured at last. The Stinger smiled his little frosty smile.

"Yes. He's dead now—kicked in just before you came. I knew him quite well. Too well. He taught me how to shoot. He is the only man I knew who was a better shot than I am, and as fast. If he had not been wounded he would have killed me."

"Don't talk about it if you'd rather not," protested Gunther, who was burning up with curiosity but trying hard to remember the old Island tradition not to ask of another's past. Stinger Seave shrugged and lines appeared in his face that Gunther had never seen there before.

"I never have talked of it," he said slowly, and somewhat bitterly. "It's an ugly tale. Carsen fell in love with the girl I was to have married. He was bad,

bad as I am, and quite as much a killer. He took everything he wanted. He carried the girl away. I followed him. I found him in Alaska many years later. He had never married her, and she was dead, but he had a little daughter she had given him. I shot him in a saloon in Dawson City. It was the first time and the only time I ever took advantage of a man to draw first. He was a better shot and would have got me. I thought I killed him. I had no regrets, but it was like a ghost to see him tonight, here of all places, so far away from the North. The girl is Betty Stevens. She was named after her mother."

Gunther whistled and stared at the Stinger. Eventually he said, "Carsen must have been a notorious character, all right, if he was better with guns than you."

The Stinger smiled again.

"I told you he taught me. He was my father!"

"What?" cried Gunther, startled and shocked.

The Stinger looked at him and held him motionless with his icy eyes.

"That's all, Gunther. You will never speak of it again. Neither shall I. Betty believes her mother was married to her father. I shall adopt her and the Islands must not know."

"No," said Gunther, when at last he could speak again. "The Islands must never know. You can trust me." He got up and for the first and last time during their long friendship he gave a sign of his affection. He put his arm around the Stinger's shoulders, squeezed him for a second, then walked for the companion to the poop.

Stinger Seave dropped to a chair and Gunther said afterward that he spent the rest of the night staring blankly at the pile of diamonds.

Neither the Stinger nor Gunther knew that Severn, the mate, had overheard most of the story through the open skylight as he kept watch on the poop, and though Severn did not talk much he let fall enough in the years that followed to give the Islands some idea of the whole story. The real truth did not come out until Gunther killed the Stinger on Manoa, only to die himself of his wounds a few years later, when his son read his secret diary.

THERE was no attack that night, but when the dawn came it disclosed two boatloads of armed men grimly lying astern of the beached schooner and another party of men gathered on the beach so that the schooner was surrounded. Stinger Seave came on the poop when Gunther informed him of this and examined his foes through the glasses. Those to seaward were commanded by a Jap, evidently Hiroto. Captain Maul was with those ashore, his hand bandaged and a scowl creasing his fat face. The men were of mixed nationalities, Japs, Chinks, Latins and Anglo-Saxons, too evidently the scum of the Chinese waterfronts.

The Stinger's position looked precarious. He had only ten men, all tough and used to fighting, it was true, but a pitifully small number against Maul and Hiroto's thirty or forty. Gunther and the Stinger himself made an even dozen, or perhaps it should be said this made the odds even, for the Stinger alone was an army with his uncanny shooting and his unshakable nerve. Perhaps Captain Maul remembered that uncanny shooting from the night before, for as soon as the light was strong he waved a white flag and came down to the water's edge to bargain.

"We don't want no trouble with you," he called to the Stinger, who stood near the main deck rail looking down at him. "You jest hand over the girl and the stones the old man's got and you can beat it. The old man you can have."

"He's dead," answered the Stinger coldly. "And I'm keeping the girl and the stones."

"Don't be a fool," Maul urged. "I can wipe you out in a day. I can wreck your ship with dynamite so you'll never get to sea, and pick your men off one by one. Better be reasonable."

The Stinger smiled his little wintry smile, then made an offer that caused Gunther to rock back and gape. It was the first and the last time the Stinger ever offered to compromise, ever gave way before a foe. But, as Gunther afterward realized, it was for the girl's sake and not for his own that the Stinger did this, which in itself was remarkable, for the Stinger never considered anyone else's safety or feelings. As he admitted himself, he was cold and ruthless, a killer to the core.

"I'll make you a bargain," said the Stinger to Captain Maul. "I've got two thousand pounds in gold in my safe below. I'll give you that and my draft on Burns, Philp for three thousand more if you beat it. The stones belong to the girl."

"Five thousand quid!" choked Captain Maul, his jaw dropping. "Say, who are you, anyway? There ain't many traders got that much."

"I'm Stinger Seave," said the Stinger gently. "You may have heard of me."

"Oh," said Captain Maul and stared, unable to speak for a moment and wiping sudden beads of cold sweat from his brow. "So you're Stinger Seave," he whispered. He realized then how close he had been to death the previous night. Stinger Seave's reputation ran north and south and at this period it was something to conjure with. Five governments wanted the Stinger for crimes running from manslaughter to piracy, and Kanaka mothers scared their babies with his name. Even Maul, from the coast of China, knew of the man.

He licked his lips and backed off slowly with a hoarse, "I'll see my partner about it. I didn't know you were the Stinger."

Gunther chuckled at Seave's elbow. "I wish I had a rep like that. Turn 'em white and make 'em shake when they talk to you."

The Stinger kept grimly silent.

Captain Maul walked along the beach and hailed one of the boats. It circled around out of pistol shot, landed near where Maul stood and a short, stocky figure that was evidently Hiroto scrambled to the sand. Captain Maul and he talked a long time, Maul evidently urging something and Hiroto disagreeing.

"It's a lot of cash," Gunther said to the Stinger as they waited. "I'm surprised at you making the offer. Do you think they'll accept?"

"They may," answered Seave, unperturbed. "I don't care particularly if they don't. Hiroto wants the girl and he'll hate like hell to give her up. Maul may persuade him."

AFTER perhaps an hour Captain Maul returned down the beach and the boat pushed off and took up its old position.

"Nothing doing," Maul shouted. "We want the stones and the girl, Stinger." It

was noticeable that this time he kept well out of range and seemed very nervous. The Stinger laughed softly, lifted his hand to show him he understood, then walked aft to his poop.

Firing commenced almost at once. Lead whined through the rigging, splattered against the stout wooden hull. Gunther got the men well hidden behind bulwarks made by raising hatches against the rails, and the fight was on. Stinger Seave quite coolly went below and Gunther for a moment wondered if he was mad enough to go on reading or sleeping at this time. He should have known better, of course, but the Stinger had broken so many precedents in the last day that no one could tell what he was going to do next.

Once in the main cabin the Stinger coolly loaded half a dozen repeating Winchesters, carried them to a spot near a port that overlooked the stern and, picking up one, commenced firing slowly and steadily.

It was nothing but a slaughter, of course. The morning was bright and sunny, with the light in the eyes of the boat crews and the Stinger was completely hidden. He riddled one boat so that it began to founder, then riddled the other. He picked off four men before the rest jumped into the water and swam frantically for the shore. Two others he killed as they swam. He might have wiped them out completely but for the fact his Winchesters now were empty.

He reloaded them, giving the swimmers time to get out of sight, and turning to go on deck he discovered Betty Stevens standing beside him, pale and wan and drawn. He had decided to call her Betty Stevens after her mother, though she believed she was Betty Carsen. She had not the faintest idea who the Stinger was, but as she hated her father she later grew quite willing to accede to the change of name as proposed by one of the first men to be kind to her. Eventually, of course, she became Betty Seave when the Stinger legally adopted her.

"Oh," she cried now. "Are they fighting again?"

"It's nothing," said the Stinger gently, his eyes softening because she looked so much like the girl he had known long ago.

"Stay in your room and you'll be all right. We're all friends."

He spent several minutes calming her and persuading her to lie down again, then he went up on deck to discover Gunther jubilant and the men laughing and chuckling and watching the survivors of the attacking party drag themselves from the surf and join Maul's retreating men.

"Nothing to it," declared Gunther, slapping the Stinger on the back. "If we could all shoot like you we'd lick any nation under the sun."

"I was in good trim this morning," the Stinger admitted gently. "Now what's this?"

Captain Maul was coming toward the ship waving a white flag again and moving with extreme caution. Seave laid aside the gun he held and went down to the sand to meet him.

"I guess we'll take the gold and drift," he said as the Stinger drew near. "You're a wizard with guns all right."

"I don't see why I should pay now," said the Stinger coolly, "seeing I've got you licked."

Captain Maul ventured to sneer a little.

"I wouldn't say that, Stinger. We can stop you kedging off your ship and we can dynamite the channel from the outside so you won't be able to get to sea."

THE Stinger was silent for a moment, weighing the chances. At any other time he would not have even considered the proposition, but now he had with him a girl he wanted to keep from harm.

"All right," he said at last. "You get your men on board and keep them there. I'll sail this afternoon with high tide. But I warn you I'm paying under protest and I'm a very impatient man when I'm threatened."

Captain Maul grinned.

"Oh, you're tough all right. But you won't worry us once we've got the gold. You whipped us this time because you're a wizard with guns and because you were under cover. It ain't so easy to attack in the open. We've got enough men t' stop that."

The Stinger shrugged.

"All right. Go and tell your men to get aboard. I'll have the stuff on the beach here for you to take away in an hour."

Captain Maul nodded and wiped his lips with the back of his uninjured hand.

"Fair enough. I'd have taken it in the first place if it hadn't been fer Hiroto. He's nuts on the girl. But you winged him pretty bad in the boats there and he's flopped out from loss of blood. I expect I'll be leaving him here." He winked and backed off.

The Stinger returned to the schooner.

"Maul's taking the cash," said the Stinger quietly. "We'll be able to get to sea without much trouble, I think. From what I gathered he intends double-crossing the Jap and taking his ship. A fine bunch of robbers."

That afternoon the schooner was kedged off and stood out for the sea. The money and the draft had been handed over, Maul quite confident about the latter, for he could reach a port before the slower-sailing schooner. As the Stinger cleared the bay he saw through the glasses what looked like some sort of scuffle going on on the bark's deck and eventually a boatload of men went ashore, landed and ran up into the jungle, followed by a scattering rifle fire. One man, evidently Hiroto, crawled on his hands and knees up the sand, the lead spurting around him. Whether he reached safety or not the Stinger did not then learn.

The Stinger went first to Batavia, changing trouble with the authorities over the old Sangata affair, and he discovered that Maul had outsailed him there, cashing the draft and departing up the China Sea for his old haunts. In Batavia the Stinger left Gunther and Betty with instructions for Gunther to take her to Ponape to the Catholic mission for education and safety.

"I'm going north," explained Seave gently. "There's a little business I have to attend to."

"I didn't know you had any business in those waters," said Gunther, a little puzzled. The Stinger smiled frostily.

"Well, our friend Captain Maul sailed north with five thousand pounds of mine. As it happens to be about all I have at present, apart from this ship, I expect to need it."

"I see," said Gunther, tugging at his black beard and laughing. "I had a hunch you wouldn't give up five thousand to Maul without figuring on getting it back."

TWO months later Captain Maul sat in the main cabin of his stolen bark as she lay anchored in an obscure river far up the Chinese coast. He was dressed in new whites and wore a diamond ring. In spite of the fact that he looked bleary-eyed and unshaven, he looked also contented. A Chinese girl was perched on the table near him, smoking a cheroot and holding a glass for him to sip from. Another girl leaned against his chair and fanned him.

There were two or three other men present, one a Mandarin, the others white companions of Maul whom he had won over while on the venture with Hiroto and whom he had made his officers. They were all more or less drunk and chatting with women, for the bark had just returned from a successful raid upon a rich village to the south and the loot was enough to make a man's mouth water. The rest of the crew were carousing ashore and Maul and his friends had settled down for a night-long revel.

Along toward midnight there was a light step on the companion that led to the poop and there appeared in the brightly lighted cabin a frail, little figure with icy eyes and one hand gently rubbing his throat as if an insect had bitten him there. For a while no one noticed Stinger Seave, but presently a woman, giggling, turned her face from Maul and saw him standing there motionless.

Then she cried out sharply and pointed. There was a tense silence. The men in the cabin stared at the Stinger. Maul tried to get up from his chair, his jaw slack with terror, but he was too drunk and could only weakly paw the air.

"Sit still, gentlemen," said the Stinger gently as the others endeavored to rise also. His icy eyes dropped them motionless to their seats again while a strange, chill fear crept about their hearts.

"What in hell do you want?" choked Captain Maul thickly, the sweat running down his fat face and his left hand caressing a livid scar that ran across his right, a memento of that red night on Kebato.

"Five thousand pounds," replied the Stinger, still gently and still rubbing his throat. "I believe that was the amount you took from me."

"You offered it," choked Maul, sobering abruptly. "I let you go because you paid it."

"I'm afraid you don't understand," murmured the Stinger, as if apologizing. "I'm a very strange man. I paid under protest because of reasons which do not concern you. You threatened and I paid, but you should understand that I do not allow men to threaten me and get away with it. I need five thousand pounds before I go."

"You cheap double-crosser!" snarled Maul, getting to his feet at last and brushing aside the frightened women. "I haven't got that much, anyway."

"That's too bad," sighed the Stinger. "I was hoping you had the money. I'll have to take your ship, then."

With a furious oath, Captain Maul forgot himself. He snatched for his gun. There was a sharp explosion, and his gun struck the table. Maul screamed and clutched at his shattered right arm and fell back in his chair. The Stinger still stood motionless, rubbing his throat, and except that there was a small spiral of smoke lifting before him there was nothing to tell it was he who had fired.

With a guttural exclamation the Mandarin shot a knife from his sleeve and at the same moment one of the white men flung himself sideways from his chair, ripped a gun from under his armpit and fired upward.

They all saw the Stinger draw now, for they were all watching him. His hand snaked from his throat to his jacket and steel glittered in the light. There were three spurts of orange flame. The Mandarin fell forward with a neat hole between his eyes. His knife stuck upright and quivered in the table. The white man who had fired cried out abruptly and dropped to the deck with a holed shoulder and a crimson ripping streak where his right ear had been. His own shot splintered the woodwork in the companion behind the coldly smiling Stinger.

The icy eyes ran around the main cabin but there was no further attempt at fight. Everyone shrank back. Maul huddled in his chair and groaned.

"Five thousand," said the Stinger at last, his voice like a whiplash. "I'll give you two minutes to get it, Maul!"

THE fat captain groaned out something to one of the women and she turned, after a frightened hesitation, and returned from a side cabin with a black japanned box. Maul groped somewhere in his clothes for the key, unlocked the box, took from it another key and a thick bundle of banknotes. These he pushed on the table toward Seave, who did not move.

Then Maul spoke again to the girl, who took the key the box had yielded and knelt before an old-fashioned heavy iron safe that stood against one bulkhead. Maul groaned out some instructions to her and she turned the knob as he ordered, then inserting the key unlocked and swung back the thick door. From the safe she brought Maul another box, which he opened to disclose more banknotes and some gold. All this he placed on the table.

"Bring it here, to this end," snapped the Stinger and one of the women obeyed. Seave stepped close and riffled the notes with the fingers of one hand. His eyes seemed intent on them, but no man dared to make an overt move. Finished with the notes, Seave counted the gold.

"You're short close to a thousand," he snapped. "Give me that ring!"

Maul weakly tore off his ring and it joined the notes and gold.

"Still short," snapped the Stinger. His icy eyes roamed the cabin. He did not particularly care how or from whom he collected. He made each man there unburden himself of jewelry, made them turn out their pockets. The dead Mandarin was wearing a magnificent pearl in the front of his brocaded jacket and this the Stinger took also.

When he was satisfied he swept up the loot in his pockets, smiled his little wintry smile and backed up the companion.

"Don't bother me again, Captain Maul," he said gently as he went. "Next time I shall kill you."

THEN he was gone, and so great had been the shock of his presence and his icy eyes that it was fully five minutes before anyone there dared to move or even speak. Once the tension was broken, the main cabin was pandemonium. The women ran hither and thither; the men still unwounded wrenched out their guns and ran

up on deck. And on deck they met, not Stinger Seave, but a little band of savage, determined men that had just boarded the bark from a whaleboat which had been launched by a Chinese junk which, in its turn, had been anchored in the river from the south for just one hour.

There was a fusillade of shots that brought the sick and wounded Maul to his feet again. Shoes and bare feet scuffled on the deck above.

"They got him," said Maul thickly. "They stopped him and got him!"

Then he went rigid and a groan escaped his lips. Coming down the companion, a press of men behind him, was not Stinger Seave, shot and captured, but a deadly, smiling Hiroto, a revolver in each hand.

"So," he purred. "Was someone before me, Captain Maul?"

"Hiroto," choked Maul, then glanced stupidly down at his shattered, dripping arm.

"You took my ship and the gold," purred the Jap, coming forward quietly as a cat. "But I have returned. Who was that I passed in a boat as my boat came alongside? The crew, I hope. I should dislike to kill such men as I can use them to work."

"No, damn you!" snarled Maul, with a sudden access of rage and courage. "That was Stinger Seave! He came for his gold and he took it."

The Jap laughed bitterly.

"So I lose both the woman, the stones and the gold, eh? Through your attentions. I am very sorry for you, Captain Maul."

Maul commenced to cry out because of what he saw in the Jap's eyes, but a spasm of sheer rage crossed the little brown man's face and he lifted his guns and began firing. When he had finished the main cabin was a shambles and Captain Maul had ceased to worry about the affairs of this world. Every man was dead and the women were screaming and huddled in one corner.

"Clean up this," said Hiroto to the men who crowded behind him. "We will go south and redeem the treasure—the gold or the stones or the woman. And when I meet this Seave again I shall take payment for the wound he gave me."



LONE STAR LAW

By EUGENE CUNNINGHAM

Rambler was one tough town. Dynamite in the ticklish trigger fingers of a crew of six-gun slickers. But Steve Claiborn wasn't the breed to let sleeping trouble lie. To him, a quick-draw, hell-hungry bully was the same as an invite to a war.

THE dead Mexican came sliding out of the wagon. The body thudded into the dust of Rambler's main street almost at the feet of Steve Claiborn and Tom Badger, who had just swung stiffly down before the Pronghorn Saloon.

Steve was used to rough places and rougher people, but this was a trifle more than even he was accustomed to seeing. He looked at the Mexican, then up at the man who had so calmly dumped him there.

The yellowish light from the saloon

showed him a six-footer in dark clothing. His clean-shaven face had the pallor and the stillness of carven stone.

Steve was a stranger in the county-seat; in Caprock County; in all that particular section of west Texas. But Tom Badger was a native. Steve had met the boy that afternoon, out on the B-8. They had jogged into town together.

Tom Badger bent over the body, then straightened to stare at the silent man, who was regarding them both so calmly.

"That's old Diego Martinez—a good Mex'!" Tom said in amazement. "How'd he get killed, Jim Orp?"

"Sure, he's a good Mex'. He's dead, ain't he? . . . How'd he get killed? I killed him!"

"What for?" Tom Badger snapped.

"You're forgetting somethin'—sonny," Jim Orp drawled, grimness creeping into his silky, lazy voice. "You was fired out from behind that deputy's star you used to strut. So you're just like any other nosey kid to me. None o' your dam' nosey business is the answer!"

Orp turned, ducked under the hitch-rack and entered the saloon. Tom Badger stood staring after him with face white as a sheet. His mouth was half-open, his hands clenched.

Steve felt sorry for the kid. He had heard his life's history that afternoon, and it seemed to him that Tom Badger was a good kid, one who would amount to a good deal eventually. But, as deputy sheriff, he had been hooked up to a load too heavy for a colt.

"Civil sort o' hairpin, that," Steve said. "Le's go in, Tom. An' keep yo' *camisa* on, boy I do'no' why—no more'n I know how I know—but that gunnie is expectin' trouble. An' if I got him sized right, yuh oughtn't never to scare that fella. For he'll bite yuh like a cornered hydrophoby cat if he's scared. So le' me do some watchin'. I'm backin' yo' play."

"He murdered Diego!" Tom Badger muttered. "He just plain bodaciously murdered him. I know it as well as if I saw him. He's that kind, Steve. He's been in Caprock County six-seven months, now. Buyin' a little stuff; tradin' some."

"But he downed a wild-eyed old quicksilver miner from the Bend, four months back. Old Pop Loomis. They'd quarreled over a card game. He shot Pop three times. Down yonder in front o' Giddings' poolroom. It was dark. Nobody saw it. He claimed Pop went for his hip, though I couldn't find a gun on Pop. Never knew him to carry one, here in town."

He grunted scornfully, staring down at Diego Martinez.

"Orp claimed somebody must've taken Pop's gun after he was killed. Even hinted I might have done it. The grand jury had a lot o' his friends on it. They didn't even

indict him. Hell! Even Tate Smith—the sheriff, you know—took Orp's side. Told me some Mexican likely stole Pop's pistol."

STEVE ducked under the hitch-rack. Tom Badger paused, to pick up Diego Martinez by the shoulders and half-carry, half-drag, him to the gallery. He laid him down, then followed Steve to the swinging doors of the Pronghorn.

Jim Orp stood at the street-end of the bar, talking to a short, tremendously fat, red-faced man with sheriff's badge on his buttonless vest. As Steve came through the door, the sheriff shook his head slowly, tugging at his ropey mustache.

"Well, all the same, I wish you hadn't had to kill him," he wheezed. "Diego had the name for bein' a good man. The Mexicans ain't goin' to like this a bit."

"To hell with 'em!" Jim Orp said carelessly. "An' what was I s'posed to do? Let him kill me? Boly's got the hide. The son-of-a-dog has been beefin' his stock ever since Boly took the ranch. Boly never could catch up with him. But I found the fresh hide hid out in a barrel in the cookshack. He's been sellin' beef to the other Mexicans."

"I give him all the chance in the world! I could've got his tail feathers right then, when I throwed down on him. But, instead, I took him out o' that whole dam' little Mexico, takin' chances o' bein' shot in the back by his people."

"An' he fooled me! He was so meek on the way to town. I started to get down to open the gate, out here at the edge o' Town pasture, an' he snatched at my gun. I wrestled with him, got the muzzle turned to him an' let her go an'—he's out yonder."

Tom Badger made a scornful sound, half-way between grunt and sniff. The sheriff's watery little eyes turned toward him, but stopped at Steve. Not so, Jim Orp's cold, light blue eyes. They bored into the young ex-deputy's contemptuous face.

Then Jim Orp stepped toward Tom. A handsome man, his movements had the easy grace of a big cat.

Then Steve Claiborn moved with seeming negligence, yet almost colliding with Orp. The tall man recoiled with an oath. He observed this middle-sized cowboy with the new, black Boss Stetson set on the

back of his yellow head; with the neat blue flannel shirt and clean waist-overalls and polished shopmade boots; with—most important, just then, to Jim Orp's way of thinking—the devil-may-care play of light in his narrowing blue eyes. He was a salty-looking hombre, Steve Claiborn.

"What the devil you—" Orp began.

"Fella," Steve grinned at him, "this is mebbe yo' barroom, but these are my feet. If yuh was to go trompin' on my feet in yo' barroom, I'd likely give my feet room—by throwin' yuh clean out o' yo' barroom!"

"The hell you would!" Jim Orp replied slowly.

The barroom seemed to catch its breath. All the drinkers, crowded up to hear how Diego had been killed, stared tensely at this cocky, yellow-haired puncher.

Steve waited, still grinning, eyes narrow slits. His hand had been forced. But forced, or not, it was his hand. He would play it to the showdown!

"Yuh know," he said with thoughtful tone, "I was wonderin' how-come—yuh shootin' the fella the way yuh said yuh done—then how-come that big gash on his head?"

THE sheriff's watery, worried, little eyes slid sideways to Orp's stony face. The gunman turned a little, seeming to feel Tate Smith's expectant stare. He shrugged contemptuously.

"He bumped the wagon-wheel an' cut his head. What difference does it make?"

"None." Steve grinned. "Not a li'l bit. . . . Now, I'm wonderin' if he *has* got a cut on his head. I never looked at him."

The sheriff seemed to feel that an explosion was entirely too imminent. He tapped Orp on the arm, and guided him toward the door. Some of the men followed them outside. Others stayed to look at the second curiosity, the gently smiling Steve.

"Shore, he murdered him," Steve informed the staring men. "But yuh couldn't prove it."

Then, as he regarded a number of very, very hard and unfriendly faces, he added softly: "Even if yuh really wanted to prove anything on him."

"Friend," a square-faced, middle-aged

man remarked, "d' you mind tellin' where you tangled ropes with Jim Orp, that you're so down on him?"

"I never tangled with him, not any. I just met him ten minutes ago, when we rode up behind the wagon in time to have Martinez dumped on our toes. I just looked him over kind o' careless, yuh know. An' decided I never liked his kind. So I told him li'l things that popped into my mind, yuh know. Just for—oh, I do'no." Just for fun, I reckon yuh might say."

"Friend," said the square-faced man very earnestly, "you have got what you might call the funniest idee o' fun in Caprock County, if not in all west Texas. It comes right close to bein' weird, it does! Take a drink on me, everybody! An' then, stranger, if you'll walk down the street with me a way, I would like to kind o' inquire into what kind o' in'ards you got. I am mighty interested in what makes you go 'round."

There was something earnest and compelling about this square-faced man's regard of Steve that impressed the dare-devil young man. He sensed something under the remarks. So he nodded and took his drink. Then, with Tom Badger, he and the man went out.

THE wagon was gone, the body too. Steve looked inquiringly at the square-faced citizen. Tom Badger pushed forward.

"Steve, meet Lou Ellis, one o' the county commissioners. You can trust Ellis the whole way. Ellis, this-here's Steve Claiborn. He goes as far back as the B-8, to my knowledge, an' back to some salty country somewheres, by my guess."

"We'll go over to Frances' place," said Ellis. "I reckon you boys won't kick if I buy the nosebags? You haven't eat, yet?"

They crossed the main street, down which ran the railroad tracks. There was a neat restaurant on the other side, several doors above the Pronghorn's location.

A nice-looking girl was behind the counter. An amazingly pretty girl was busy with pencil and a pile of papers at the far end of the counter. She got up, smiling. Steve grinned at the way her blue eyes went affectionately to Tom Badger.

"Well, sir!" he told himself. "The old sher'fs in Caprock certainly raised lovely

families, if Sher'f Paine's girl is fair sample. An' she wants a man with iron in his back. . . . An' pore Tommy Badger, he got his gun took off him in a saloon row, an' throwed out on his ear, an' lost his star, because he was ganged. An' now, Young Wild West can't marry Arietta because she says he ain't growed up! An', anyway, he couldn't support a wife. But she's certainly easy on the eyes."

"Howdy, Frances," Ellis said absently to the girl. "I reckon these boys are hollow. Le' me make you used to Mr. Steve Claiborn. He will be givin' Tommy—That is, he'll be one o' your admirers, time he's eat here once."

"What was the excitement at the Pronghorn?" Frances asked, after a quick nod and smile at Steve. "I saw Tate Smith and that killer Orp ride past the restaurant on a wagon. Has Jim Orp killed somebody else?"

Steve thought she looked somewhat oddly, sidelong, at Tom Badger. She was not only pretty as any girl he had ever seen in the wide and sovereign state of Texas, but she looked capable. He grinned inwardly. Tom Badger would be taking on a partner, if he tried double-harness with this girl!

“WHY didn't that useless little white rabbit, Boly, come into town with Orp and the body—and the hide Orp says was found in Diego's cook-shack? Why did Boly stay behind, with the all-important evidence of the hide? I can tell you why. There wasn't any hide there! Boly stayed behind to skin a beef! That's why! I don't know why Orp and Boly wanted Diego killed. But they had some reason!"

"You an' Claiborn ought to get married up to each other," Ellis said solemnly. "Why? My goodness! Well, to answer all the three o' you, because you certainly do feel alike toward Orp in this business. But now that I think about it, that ain't the whole reason. You think about it, Claiborn; you, too, Frances! You know, it'd be a good thing, for both o' you. Why, here's Frances, prettiest girl in west Texas. Smart girl, too. Runs her own outfit here an' shows folks a girl can make money where men go broke, restyrawntin'.

"An'," he seemed to be warming to his subject, "here's a might' nice boy, Frances!

I tell you, I can size up men like a snap. I liked this boy's looks right off. When he made a blame' fool out o' Jim Orp—same's told him to bring his fight over an' put it in the pot—I made up my mind, right then, here was the kind o' chief deputy sheriff we been needin', an' I'd give him the job. So if you an' him . . ."

"Just—a—minute!" cried Steve Claiborn, staring bewilderedly at this amazing matchmaker. "Yuh spin the biggest loop o' any county commissioner ever I hear tell about! Just anything that goes on in the county is yo' business, now, ain't it? An' I bet yuh, if the's somethin' needs fixin' a couple counties outside yo' bailiwick, yuh'd never bother a minute about that. Not you! Yuh'd take a couple li'l' runnin' steps an' flap yo' wings an' be down on it like a hawk on a banty hen. An' yuh'd have her all slicked up, an' be home in good time for dinner. Now, yuh haul in yo' twine an' put her back on the tree! I've always done all my marryin' without too much help."

"Beats four of a kind, how non-appreciatin' young folks is," sighed Lou Ellis mournfully. "Seems like my advice ain't appreciated a-tall. . . ."

"It certainly isn't!" Frances snapped, with a bright red spot on each cheek. She was staring at Tom Badger's bewildered face, which mirrored a very Duke's Mixture of emotions.

“WELL, anyhow!" the amazing Mr. Ellis hurried on. "I want you to take the chief deputy's star, Claiborn. Our fix is this: Tate Smith has got to go clean to Fo't Worth, tomorrow. His wife is in the hospital, there. I do'no' when Tate'll come back. But if he keeps on drinkin' the way he has been doin', it'll maybe be no time. Well, when he goes, it'll leave nobody but a triffin' cowboy, Ike Mays, for sheriff. An' that ain't good enough. It ain't nothin' like good enough!

"We have had lots o' trouble in our sheriff's office. I don't want to hurt your feelin's, Tommy. But you know that we had to let you out after that tough crowd made a fool out o' you. I said at the beginnin' you was too young for deputy. An' I was right, like I usually am.

"Now, we got some o' the toughest cases in west Texas usin' Caprock County. We

got to have a sheriff with lots o' sense an' lots o' sand."

Steve was discussing the T-bone steak set before him. If his face were calm, it was no index to his racing thoughts. He summed up the situation:

Jim Orp was going to kill Tom Badger as sure as little green apples spell belly-ache. It was down on the cards. The boy would try to fight him; he had that kind of pride. It was not going to be a nice business. Jim Orp was not the kind of gun competition a kid like Tom ought to have to buck.

If he went on out, heading for Lincoln as he had intended, that would leave Orp just about the big bull in the pasture. Steve didn't like the idea, somehow. He didn't care for Mr. Orp. The idea of sticking around and getting better acquainted with him was very appealing. And the glimmering of an idea came. . . .

"I would take the job—on one condition," he said slowly. "That yuh give Tom Badger back his star an' let him work with me! Now, now! Yuh're so good at arrangin' things, yuh oughtn't to kick about somebody else arrangin' once in a while. Yuh tell me yuh want me to ride herd on yo' county. Yuh tell me the's nobody but a worthless cowboy to help. An' then yuh kick about my wantin' to pick help I can trust!"

LOU ELLIS protested. The other commissioners wouldn't stand giving Tom his job back. Even the girl—some-what to Steve's surprise—frowned disapproval.

But, Steve had his own idea and he was a stubborn young man. He ate calmly. When he had finished his steak, he stirred his coffee with sphinx-like inscrutability.

"Thought yuh was offerin' me this job," he said. "I never understood yuh would have to recommend me to the other commissioners, an' have 'em look at my teeth an' all."

"A' right!" Lou Ellis surrendered. "It's you an' Tom. I'll fix it up with the rest o' the commissioners. Tate'll take the mornin' train an' we'll swear you-all in after breakfast. Tom! You tie a string to your pistol, this time."

After he had gone, Steve grinned at Tom Badger, and waved aside his thanks. Sud-

denly, he became serious. He looked at Frances Paine very steadily.

"When I was sixteen," he grunted, "it was handed to me to boss a right sizable spread o' mighty salty boys, down on the Bawdeh. I had me a rustler-war on, too! Well, I made plenty missteps, o' course. But from what I learned, I knowed this:

"A fella that's worth a whoopinell is better after somebody has smacked him one, than a fella that ain't never been smacked. For he is on the watch-out after that. I'd rather have Tom, here, backin' my play, than somebody else. He ain't goin' to be ganged again!

"If them commissioners had a lick o' sense, they'd have knowed he was twice the man after that row that he was before!"

He sauntered out, leaving them alone. On the sidewalk he turned a little. Frances was standing close to the boy, turning one of the buttons on Tom's shirt. She smiled up at him abruptly. Even that single-track Lou Ellis could have seen that she had her own plans about marriage. Whatever she might think of Tom Badger's lack of the full height of a man, he was hers, and she was his.

"It's your chance, Tommy!" she was saying. "And, I'm glad. . . ."

STEVE watched the morning train pull out with Tate Smith. He stood behind the honor and the glory and the dignity of a chief deputy sheriff's badge. He hummed gently to himself and considered.

Jess Boly had come in before daylight. He was a squat, dark, young cowboy. His three outstanding characteristics were a mop of curly black hair, a stupid face, and doglike subjection to Jim Orp.

He had brought in the hide of that cow which Orp had claimed had been hidden in Diego Martinez's little cookshack. At the coroner's inquest and to all questions, he had said that he and Orp had found the hide in the cookshack. He had gone back to his little ranch, adjoining that of Martinez, to take care of some stock.

The coroner's jury found that Martinez had come to his death at the hands of James Orp, while acting in defense of his own life.

"An' once more, an' again, Jim Orp's friends are sittin' on the jury!" Tom Bad-

ger had grunted scornfully in Steve's ear.

Steve, rather at loose ends, wandered past Frances Paine's neat restaurant, collected a smile, then crossed the street. He went into the Pronghorn.

Boly and Orp with four cowboys were playing poker in the rear of the room. Both ignored Steve. He noted mechanically that they handled their cards rather expertly. But there was nothing of interest there. He went out.

Two hours or so later, he came back. Two of the cowboys had quit the poker game.

Their places had been taken by a tough-looking citizen, and a dandified drummer who had been at Frances' counter at break-fast time. It seemed to be a piffing sort of game. The drummer said he didn't care much for poker, cowtown poker.

Steve went out again, this time to the office of the sheriff. Tom Badger came in. With Tom was a slender Mexican boy, red-eyed, and still a little tearful.

"There was no hide!" he cried to Steve. "I am Diego Martinez, now head of my house. I say that the men Orp and Boly came to my father's door, and told him that Sheriff Smith wished him to come to town. My father came. There was no hide. No talk of any hide. My mother heard, but she speaks little English. I heard, though. It was talk about the line fence between my father's land and that of Boly."

"Anybody else the' when Orp an' Boly come?"

"None but my father, my mother and I. My younger brothers were out on the range. But my father was murdered!"

"I knowed last night that he was," Steve nodded grimly. "But provin' it—that's the thing."

"Tom! Step down to the Pronghorn, will yuh, an' ask Orp an' Boly to come here a minute. Now, I don't want a fuss with 'em. We ain't arrestin' 'em. So, no matter what they say, yuh come on back. Act like 'twas a message that meant nothin' to yuh."

HE sat talking to young Diego until Tom Badger came back inside with a furious oath. He glared at Steve.

"Orp says he ain't got time to monkey with kid deputies. He says if you want to see him, come huntin' him. An' if you

don't want to do that, go to hell, an' it'll be all right with him."

Steve grinned and got up. His Colt hung in tied-down holster on his thigh. He glanced down at the weapon.

"Yuh stay here with the boy, Tommy. The's goin' to be no trouble. Else I'd take yuh-all along."

He loafed down the street to the Pronghorn. As he moved along the bar, he heard the drummer cursing bitterly. The salesman sat with back to the door at the poker-table.

Orp, Boly, and the tough-looking citizen, were with him. The man of grips seemed more than a little exhilarated. All of them were staring at four dice which lay near the drummer's whiskey glass in the table's center.

Steve came quietly up, taking in the situation at a glance. Orp was pulling in a small stack of gold pieces. The drummer continued his profane lament:

"I'm not saying there's anything out of the way. But I'd like to see you guess with *my* dice, not yours."

"Oh, he could guess, just as easy," Steve spoke up airily. "Because," his eyes went contemptuously to Orp's suddenly lifted face, "this is one o' the oldest tricks known to the tinhorn. Every twenty-two caliber petit-larceny thief that ever robbed a sick Mexican knows it, an' practices it. Yuh pore blame' innocent! Look at one o' them dice! Six is opposite ace—total seven! Five's opposite deuce—total seven, again! Four's opposite three—still seven! O' course he can tell yuh what'll be the sum o' the tops an' bottoms—an' let yuh roll the dice yo'self!"

"Is this your business, fella?" Orp inquired with deadly evenness. "I'd kind o' advise you . . ."

"Yuh wouldn't advise me about anything, yuh dam' tinhorn! Yuh're mebbe brave enough to shoot a Mexican—in the back. Or an old man that's unarmed, in the dark. But yuh could no more look a man in the eye, an' try slappin' leather against him, than yuh could deal a honest hand o' cards!"

STEVE turned back to the drummer. But not so far that he could not watch Orp, Boly, and the tough-looking citizen who hadn't opened his mouth so far.

"How much they take off yuh, on Tops an' Bottoms? Two hundred! Two—hundred! Oh, my Aunt's ol' cat! Somebody ought to write the house yuh work for, an' arrange to have a guardeen make yo' territory with yuh. Anybody ever sell yuh the capitol down at Austin, to start a boardin' house with? A' right, they had yuh up against a string-game; a shore thing.

"D'yuh want yo' money back? It was yo' own fault. I ain't got a bit o' sympathy for yuh. But if yuh want it, I'll take this fella by the heels, an' hold him upside down, an' shake it out o' his pockets for yuh. Simply because I don't like cheatin' tinhorns. D'yuh want it?"

There was a silence in the Pronghorn thick enough to cut. The morning drinkers—idlers about the county-seat, mostly, with some drifting men of the range, waited for a shooting.

It was quite plain. Steve, for all he seemed concentrated on the question he put to the drummer, knew his cow-country too well to be in doubt about what they expected—and the probabilities of their order being filled.

"If I was up against a brace-game," the drummer said sullenly, with an uneasy glance at Orp, "then I'm entitled to recover my money."

"Uh-uh! Yuh mean—have me recover it. A' right. Shell out, Orp! Two hundred to the innocent pilgrim. Come on, I said! Shell out."

"I will like hell!" Orp said grimly. "An more than that . . ."

"The' won't be any more'n that!" Steve Claiborn grinned.

His ready, poised knee moved flashingly. Over went the poker table, taking with it Boly, the hard-case, the silent man, and the sulky drummer. Orp alone sat in his chair—for a moment—taken aback for a split second by the volcanic suddenness with which the table and the others had gone to the floor.

STEVE CLAIBORN pounced on Orp as his hand went to hip. Steve caught the taller man in fingers like steel hooks. He held his gun-wrist with his left hand. His right elbow jolted Orp twice. Smashingly. To the bridge of the nose between Orp's cold, light-blue eyes, and to the

point of the chin—short, terrific snaps.

His right hand went darting down Orp's back, jerked up the skirt of his coat, and flicked a white-handled pistol out of a patent-leather holster. He flipped the gun to the floor ten feet away.

Then Steve took a quick backward step, jerking the half-dazed tinhorn with him. He let him go and ducked. He caught both of Orp's ankles and straightened.

Down came the tall man on the back of his head. Steve pivoted, then, to face the others.

The complete rout of Orp had taken so little time that Boly and the hard-looking man were just trying to crawl out from under the heavy pine table when Steve faced them. His own gun had jumped into his hand, though nobody in the barroom had seen him draw it.

Boly's hand was moving suspiciously.

"One o' yuh slaps leather, an' he dies!" Steve said grimly. "He'll hit them Pearly Gates Ajar so dam' quick it'll give him nose-bleed! Stand up! Both o' yuh! Elevate yo' paws. That's just fine. That's the way to play a joke on the undertaker. Either one o' yuh packin' a gun?"

With one eye cornered on Orp, who was just sitting up and staring glassily about—quite obviously in the barroom only in the flesh—Steve stepped briskly over to investigate the two.

Boly had a pistol in his coat-pocket, a real "stingy gun." For the barrel had been sawed off back of the ejector-end. That was his only weapon.

But the hard-looking citizen of the blank face—who in Steve's hearing had not opened his mouth—had four guns! His hip pockets were buckskin-lined, and there was a .45 double-action in each. He had another self-cocker in a shoulder holster, and a .41 double-barreled derringer in the watch pocket of his pants.

"My goodness!" breathed Steve, when he had removed the arsenal. "Are yuh-all Mister Smith? Or Mister Wesson?"

Orp came scrambling to his feet. Steve regarded him with bright and inquiring blue eyes, head a trifle on one side. Orp had not lost his stony calm. But no man in Steve's somewhat hectic life had ever looked at him with more of simon-pure murder than glared out of Orp's strange, light eyes.

"YUP! Yup!" Steve barked at the drummer, who was coming painfully out from under the chair and table-side. "The's some o' yo' gold on the floor. Pick her up. Then we'll find how much we got to ask Ol' Tinhorn over here to make up."

"You— You—" Orp began. Then he seemed to give over all attempt at handling the situation with words. His thin mouth clamped shut in a bluish line. He merely glared at Steve.

"There's a hundred and sixty here I can find," the drummer reported from hands and knees on the floor.

"Pass him out a couple more yellow boys, Orp," Steve commanded. "An' rattle yo' hocks doin' it. Yuh know, if yuh ain't careful, yuh're goin' to make me impatient with yuh. Then somethin' will happen to yuh. I never did love tinhorns!"

Orp took two twenties from his pocket, throwing them at the drummer without altering the direction of his glare.

"Now, the three o' yuh!" Steve grunted cheerfully. "All together. Le's go. To jail! Packin' concealed weapons. Come on!"

He herded them through the gaping crowd in the barroom, and out upon the street. There, he holstered his pistol, and merely trailed behind them.

But men turned on the sidewalks to stare. A burly man before Frances Paine's restaurant seemed about to faint. He gaped at the little procession with mouth sagging ludicrously, with big, shaggy head out-thrust.

In the sheriff's office, Tom Badger was pacing the floor.

Diego Martinez jumped up from his squatting posture by the wall to snarl at Orp and Boly like a young wolf.

"Liars! Murderers!" He gritted at them. "You know that you found no hide in our house. You know that you did not come into our house. You know that you called my father to the door saying that the Sheriff wished to see him. You . . ."

"My goodness!" Steve grinned at Orp. Yet, somehow, there was no mirth in his lip-stretching. "Not only a cheap tinhorn gambler, a lousy two-for-a-nickel crook, but a liar an' a murderer to boot! Well, well! We're kind o' catchin' up with yuh!"

"That lyin' Mex' kid!" Orp said contemptuously. "You needn't think a jury'll

take his word against mine an' Boly's. As for you, my swell-up young fella, you won't last too long!"

TWO men hurried through the street door. One was that burly fellow who had seemed so aghast at sight of the prisoners. The other was a wisp of an ancient, with toothless mouth and bird-like black eyes. He wore a greenish-black frock coat, and his bare head shone like a billiard ball.

"Hizzoner!" Tom Badger said, then spat. "Justice o' the Peace—if you want to call it justice!"

Justice Pheegan ignored the quite audible comments. He desired to know what the charge might be against Deputy Constables Orp, Boly, and Kathright.

"Oh!" exclaimed Steve, with perfect understanding. For he had seen the look of surprise on Boly with Pheegan's pronouncement of the title of "Deputy Constable."

"Like that, huh? An' I reckon this here fella is Constable Shonnie. The charge? Oh, the's no charge. I wanted 'em up here so's this boy could speak to 'em. So I brought 'em along."

"They got a right to pack guns!" Constable Shonnie rumbled. "An' I'm tellin' you that if you figure to come hellin' into town, runnin' sharpshod over ever'body—"

"Take 'em an' git out!" Steve said sharply. "When I want 'em—yo' just-made-to-let-'em-pack-artillery dep'ties—don't yuh worry to bring 'em back, or anything. Don't bother a mite. For I'll find 'em, an' I'll herd 'em in!"

When the five men had disappeared, Steve looked thoughtfully at Tom Badger. Significantly, Tom hitched up his pistol. Steve grinned faintly, nodded.

He did not tell the young man that part of his belligerent treatment of Jim Orp had been intended to stir in the gambler so hot a rage toward himself that Tom Badger would seem unimportant. So wild a fury that nothing but killing Steve Clai-born would be of any moment to Orp!

"If the' was a chance in the world o' doin' anything," Steve told Diego Martinez, "I'd say swear out a warrant for Orp an' Boly. But they'd just get turned loose at their hearin'. So the best thing yuh can do, boy, is hightail for home.

"An', watch yo' step! Don't let anybody call yuh out o' the house after dark. Watch where yuh ride. They'll try to kill yuh."

THE town was very quiet that afternoon. Steve thought that, if he had been a superstitious or unduly sensitive soul, he could have thought it ominously so.

Orp, Boly, Kathright, and the burly constable, Shonnie, played an endless game of poker in the Pronghorn. Steve saw them there several times as he moved aimlessly about the town.

Supper time came. At the restaurant Frances was plainly worried. The furtive, curious stares of the others, in the restaurant, at Steve and Tom in no way relieved the girl.

Steve scowled. He hoped her attitude wouldn't arouse in Tom either nervousness or an impulse to bite off more than he could comfortably chew. He feared one of the two alternatives.

Darkness brought lights to make a ragged, yellow tunnel of the main street, with the railroad tracks shining in the center. It brought, also, Diego Martinez back to town.

Not alone, either. He had with him a Mexican of about the same age as Diego's dead father. A stolid-faced, chocolate-brown man in peon clothing. They came up to Steve where he stood at a corner of the pool hall, looking up and down the main street.

"This man," Diego said excitedly, "he was told by my father of seeing Boly and Orp running off cattle from the range of the B-8. My father recognized them and did not know whether they recognized him, or not. For he galloped away from there, knowing that they would not hesitate to kill him if they could catch him. He told Simon here, of what he had seen. He intended to ride to the B-8, rather than to town and the sheriff."

"So they did recognize yo' father!" Steve nodded. "Well, we'd still never make a murder charge stick. Because the only witness to yo' father's killin' is Orp—an' mebbe Boly. But I'll see the manager at the B-8, an' see if he wants to do anythin on the cattle-stealin' charge. Meanwhile . . ."

He turned suddenly and took a step to the corner of the building. Out of the darkness, came the burly constable. Shonnie looked carelessly at Steve, then sauntered on.

"Yuh take this fella out o' town, quick's yuh can git!" Steve snapped to the boy. "Orp an' Boly an' that Kathright'll know all about this in five minutes! An' yo' lives wouldn't be worth a pinch o' *tobacco negro*, if they run onto yuh. Git!"

FOR himself, he thought he would like to see Shonnie when the constable met the others. For that matter, it seemed good strategy, to keep an eye on all of them, tonight.

Steve started with the Pronghorn, for it was into that door that Shonnie had turned. But none of the trio he sought was there. He waved the bartender's offer of a drink aside. He tried the next saloon, looked into a store, still did not locate them.

At the far end of the main street he glanced sidewise at the sheriff's office in the flimsy court house. It was dark. Steve went on, walking softly, hand swinging close to Colt-butt.

He passed the office-door, and stumbled on a plank of the sidewalk. He half-ran for three crouching steps, to keep from falling, making a lot of clatter.

Dimly seen in the light from a little store across the street, three men jumped out, opening fire on him.

Steve was still half-crouching on the sidewalk's edge. He heard what he could easily believe to be a hail of lead going over him. He whipped out his pistol, dropping to a knee. He could skyline his assailants against the pale glow from the store's door.

Steve shot with deadly concentration—not trying to shoot particularly fast—but with grim intent to land every bullet, and he was a good shot.

Someone else was blazing away, over on his left, close to the door of the sheriff's office, if not from within it. But the men were down.

Steve crouched there, on hands and knees, for a moment. The firing stopped. A voice yelled his name. Tom Badger's voice.

Steve got up cautiously and sprinted for the door. Tom stood at one side of it, a pistol in each hand.

"They hit you?" he gasped at Steve. "I heard you, on the sidewalk. I'd just sneaked in the back door, to listen before I made a light. Then they started shoot-in'. I guessed it was Orp an' the others bushwhackin' you. So I lit into 'em!"

"Could yuh see 'em?" Steve inquired. A glimmering of an idea was coming.

"**N**O. Not much. Just as shapes. But they was so close, all I had to do was shoot in their direction. Could you see 'em?"

"Nothin' but the flashes o' the guns," Steve lied calmly. He was reloading his pistol.

"Let's go see what yuh did to 'em. Yuh sounded like a blame' army. Yuh see, I'd stumbled. When they heard me, they opened up. I blazed away, to keep 'em from runnin' up on me."

It was Orp, Boly, and the hard-faced Kathright, all with guns beneath or very near their hands. Orp and Boly were dead, each with two bullets in him. Kathright was dying, shot once.

To the crowd which gathered, Steve explained glibly, elaborating on the story he had told Tom Badger. He told it, with even more fulness of detail, to Lou Ellis in the office, over the bodies.

"You—you mean you missed 'em all? An' Tommy landed five out o' ten shots?" Ellis demanded.

"I told yuh, I'd stumbled an' might' near bust' my nose. I wasn't in position to do target-shootin'. An' I told yuh, too, that Tom Badger was twice the fella he was before they made a fool out o' him.

"Mr. Ellis, I got some business to attend to, over Lincoln-way. I never aimed to stick here, long. Now, I reckon yuh got a good enough chief dep'ty to do yo' work. So, why'n't yuh give him this badge I'm wearin', an' I'll drift?"

"I reckon the's a good deal in what you said. About him bein' a better man, because they hoorawed him. An' this business, tonight, will stiffen his backbone plenty. Yes, sir! He's plumb growed-up! So—if you feel you want to go, I reckon Tom's our bet, all right."

Steve looked around the crowd. He made out two figures he thought must be Tom Badger's and Frances Paine's. No other two would stand so close together,

surely. Inwardly, he grinned, while Lou Ellis went to break the news of Tom's promotion.

"He'll act like the man that smoked up three tough cases, now," Steve told himself. "I never was one to go cuttin' notches in a six-shooter, so this is a fine place for me to back off out o' the light, an' let somebody that needs it have the name. An' it don't cost a thing!"

HE was still grinning a little when, somewhat later, he looked into the restaurant. Tom Badger and Frances were openly holding hands, down at the far end of the counter. But not alone, for there were townsmen around who listened with a respect that must have been very strange to Tom Badger, as he told calmly of the gun-fight and of his position as acting sheriff.

Steve sauntered in and was received with a warm smile by the girl. He sat with them for a little while, contributing his quota to Tom Badger's story. A boy came in with a yellow sheet in his hand. For the sheriff, he said. Steve waved him to Tom.

Tom Badger swallowed with difficulty, glaring at the telegram. Steve got up, looked over his shoulder, and batted his eyes rapidly:

"Bid Harris and Curly Ball, indicted by El Paso County Grand Jury for three murders, may come your way. Left this county six months ago for Temple but did not arrive that point. Probably using other names. Families of murdered men here offer two thousand dollars reward for Harris, seven hundred fifty for Ball dead or alive. Take all precautions in making arrest. These are very dangerous men."

There followed brief, but plain, descriptions of "Jim Orp" and "Jess Boly."

"Well!" Steve thought with inward grin at himself. "It did cost a li'l' somethin'."

"Half the reward's yours," Tom Badger told him.

"Uh-huh! Yuh can buy me a new Stetson, to mend the hole they put in this one. But that's all! What's a saddle-tramp want o' money—unless he aims to settle down an' be a blam' fool hoe-man. An' I ain't aimin' to bust the sod any, whatever. I'd like to see somebody try hookin' up that sixteen-branded Gray Eagle outlaw-hawse o' mine, to a plow!"

LET THIS TEST LEAD YOU TO MORE PIPE-PLEASURE!



1 If you think you enjoy tobacco flavor chiefly through your sense of *taste*...make this simple test. While you're smoking, pinch your nostrils shut. Note that your tobacco smoke tastes flat...*flavorless*.



2 Now let go. The flavor returns immediately, proving that you enjoy tobacco flavor chiefly through your sense of *smell*. That's why HALF & HALF'S distinctive *aroma*, added to its finer *taste*, gives you richer, fuller tobacco flavor. This exclusive quality is called FLAVOROMA.

Why you get FLAVOROMA only from Half & Half

As the test shows, you enjoy flavor partly through your sense of taste, largely through your sense of smell.

Knowing this, we set out to blend a tobacco appealing partly to your tongue, but especially to the keen nerves at the back of your nose.

In HALF & HALF, we got a blend that does just that. A blend with a special quality which we call FLAVOROMA...a perfect combination of AROMA and TASTE that produces finer tobacco flavor.

It is this exclusive quality of FLAVOROMA in Half & Half that gives you more pipe-smoking pleasure.

Try HALF & HALF yourself. Learn why FLAVOROMA is switching so many pipe-smokers to this tobacco every day.

Copyright 1938, The American Tobacco Company

THE TIN TELESCOPES!

JUST PUSH IT TOGETHER...

AS YOU USE UP THE TOBACCO...

THE TELESCOPE TIN gets smaller and smaller as you use it, makes tobacco easy to get at all the way down. No scraped fingers as you reach down for the last load. (Patent No. 1,770,920.)

Enjoy the FLAVOROMA of

HALF AND HALF

FOR PIPE OR CIGARETTE

WAR-BONNET MAVERICKS

By WALT COBURN

A STRANGER had come to War Bonnet. The bartender at the Lodge saloon told Sheriff Jim Willetts that the stranger got in on Number Three from Helena. Then, being a lover of horse flesh, he started in to tell of the stranger's big line-backed buckskin that had arrived in a special horse car such as they use to transport racing stock or show horses. Yet the big buckskin, said the stout barkeep,

looked like any common cow horse. He'd had a black mane and tail, and a black line down his back, and—

"Never mind the hoss, Fat. What kind of a lookin' specimen is this stranger?" The sheriff was impatient.

"Just ordinary, Jim. Smallish and wiry. So many freckles that he looks like a cow had blowed bran in his face. Green eyes and a nose that ain't big enough tuh hardly

A
Western Range
Novel



Johnny Green—U. S. Marshal! Crooked cow kings laughed when that pint-sized lawman rode into War Bonnet. But they didn't know the raging devil that lurked behind his smooth-checked face—the merciless death that slumbered in his judgment guns!

notice. Kinda reddish hair. Grins a lot and packs a white-handled gun. Dressed like a dang dude. Coat an' tie on, and his boots polished. He asked where was the sheriff's office. When he finished his pint of beer, he went out. I watched him go into the Mercantile. Then he come out with a package and went into the hotel. Who is he, Jim?"

"If I knowed," scowled Sheriff Willetts, "I wouldn't be askin'. Funny he never come near the office."

Sheriff Willetts went over to the War Bonnet Mercantile. Caleb Smith, who managed the store, welcomed the sheriff with a wan smile.

"He come in here, Jim. Bought hisself two boxes of thirty-forty cartridges and a box of forty-fives. Asked where the sheriff's house was, which I told him. Then he went out. He's over at the hotel now, in his room. I went over and made sure. Who is he, Jim?"

"Dang it all, how do I know? Everybody's bin askin' me who is he. What's the idee? Has the feller made any queer cracks?"

"Nary a one, Jim. But he looks kinda different from most folks. Acts like he wanted to know things. And he's got a horse that"

But Sheriff Jim Willetts was already on



his way across to the hotel. Just as he was about to enter, by way of the barroom that adjoined the small lobby, he halted. Three riders came down the street. Jim Willetts turned and walked quickly down toward his office. He was standing in its doorway when the three riders drew up. One of them dismounted and walked past Jim into the office. As the man dropped into a chair, the sheriff looked up and down the street, then carefully closed the door.

"Well, Anse?" A forced smile was on the worried face of War Bonnet's sheriff. "What fetches you boys into town?"

Anse Cartright rolled a cigaret and lit it. A big man, Anse Cartright, with black eyes and coarse iron gray hair and mustache. Large-featured, he was, and dark of skin—probably an eighth-blood Indian. His mouth was wide, lipless, and a scar at one corner gave his face a cruel, leering expression.

"I killed Bill Taylor last evenin'. Rode up on him while he was butcherin' a Bar U Bar beef. He showed fight, an' I dropped him. I got two witnesses that'll swear to it—Brant an' Dufresne. You better git a-holt of the coroner and go on out. He's a-layin' there at the big cottonwood at the forks of Medicine Crick. I left the Jones kid tuh watch his carcass an' see that the coyotes didn't bother the beef."

Anse grinned crookedly. "Yuh look sick, Jim. Better take a drink."

Jim Willetts did look sick. His face was sort of mottled beneath its tan. His eyes shifted nervously. He reached in a drawer of the table that served as a desk, and pulled out a bottle and a glass. Anse reached for the glass, wiped it out with a silk neckscarf, and brazenly took the bottle from the sheriff's hand. He filled the glass and drank. He filled it again and was lifting it to his crooked mouth for the second time when the door opened and a man stepped in. The newcomer was a medium-sized man of wiry build, with a good-natured face that was spotted with large freckles.

ANSE CARTRIGHT set down his drink untouched and scowled at the intruder. "We're busy, Speckles," he growled. "Shut the door as yuh go out."

"My name don't happen to be Speckles," grinned the stranger, "and my business

happens to be with Sheriff Willetts." He kicked the door shut and advanced, ignoring the glowering cowman.

"I'm Johnny Green, United States Marshal, Willetts. From Helena. Didn't know you were so busy. I'll drop back in half an hour. It's rather important and I want to get started for the Indian Agency this afternoon. I reckon you know what fetches me here."

Jim Willetts got to his feet. He took Johnny Green's proffered hand and winced a little as the freckled fingers gripped. There was a queer look on his rotund face—a look that was half fear, half relief.

"Shake hands with Anse Cartright, Marshal. Anse owns the Bar U Bar, just south of the Indian reserve, below the sub-agency."

Anse Cartright, the scowl gone from his swarthy face, grinned crookedly and held out his hand. But Marshal Johnny Green apparently did not notice the hand. He nodded curtly and went on talking to the sheriff.

"I dropped in at War Bonnet to investigate those cattle rustling cases on the Bar U Bar. Heard the Indian boys had been killing Cartright's beef."

"You're damned right they have," cut in the cowman.

"—and that Cartright's cowpunchers had been fogging up the Indians," Johnny Green finished. He turned now to face the big cattle owner.

"If those Indians are in the wrong, Cartright, they'll go to the Federal prison in a hurry. But the United States Government has not declared open season on its Indian wards."

"What yuh gittin' at, mister?"

"I'm getting at this, Cartright: That I draw pay to look into things like this. If the boys from the War Bonnet reserve have been stealing beef, I'll find out which ones did it and I'll send 'em over the road. And if I find out that the cowmen are doing the rustling and using the Indians as an excuse to cover their own thefts, then I'm going to make things mighty damned tough for those same cowmen. Is that clear, Cartright?"

"I reckon. Yuh speak plenty plain, Mister Marshal. So do I. And I'll tell yuh here and now that I won't stand for any monkey work on the Bar U Bar range.

My boys is legally deputized to arrest any man they ketch stealin' my beef. If the thief shows fight, he's due to have some hard luck. And I don't allow strangers ridin' on my land. I got notices posted tuh that effect. Them as is found ridin' my range must be there tuh steal. And since they don't know you, it might be kinda unhealthy tuh git strayed onto Bar U Bar range."

"I'm carrying papers to prove my authority, Cartright. It gives me the right to search any man's premises at any time."

"My men is better shots than they are readers." Anse Cartridge eyed the smaller man with open contempt.

"Shucks, now, Anse," said Sheriff Willetts, "the marshal is here tuh he'p stomp out the cattle rustlin'. Don't you go gittin' snuffy about him ridin' around your place. You men had orter git along together. Yuh both got off to a kinda bad sart. Take a drink an' bury the tommyhawk. And directly I git back from Medicine Crick, I'll take the marshal out, personal."

"If you're going to Medicine Creek," said the freckled U. S. Marshal, "I'll saddle up and ride that far, then cut across to the sub-agency. I want to stop at the Block Y ranch and see Bill Taylor, anyhow. Bill and I worked together ten years ago for the Turkey Track. I spent my money, but Bill salted his and bought the Block Y iron. They say he's doing good."

"He was," leered Anse Cartright, "till his eyesight went bad on him. Seems like he couldn't read brands as good as a honest cowman had ought to. He had some hard luck yesterday evenin'." The lanky cowman tossed off his untouched drink and shoved the glass to Willetts. The sheriff squirmed uneasily and reached for the bottle.

"You mean Bill Taylor was arrested for rustling?" Johnny Green asked the sheriff.

"No. He wasn't arrested, Marshal. He was ketched red-handed. Went fer his iron an' Anse, here, killed him. He just rode in tuh git me an' the coroner. Jack Brant an' Joe Dufresne was with Anse at the time."

neath. He still smiled, but his grayish green eyes were like green ice.

"Then Cartright is under arrest, Willetts?"

"Uh? Yeah. Sort uh technical arrest. With two witnesses, he's plumb in the clear, yuh might say. It ain't the fust time Bill Taylor was ketched that-a-way. But because he was a man with a wife an' a family, he got off. Juries is kinda soft when there's a couple uh wimmen settin' there in the courtroom—especially when one is as good lookin' as Anne Taylor."

Willetts's hand shook a little as he filled his glass and lifted it to his mouth. The drink seemed to warm him. He offered the bottle to Johnny Green.

"Never drink on the job, thanks. And I'll advise you to put Anse Cartright in jail. Murder is a serious charge, Willetts, even if the case does seem to be one of plain self-defense and Cartright is a special deputy or something of the sort. To an outsider, Sheriff, it might look like you were afraid to arrest Cartright because he's a power here in the cow country. Yes, if I were you, I'd place him under arrest and keep him in jail. And for the sake of Anse Cartright's good health, as well as for the sake of your duty as a Montana peace officer, I'd keep him there for a while."

Johnny Green turned abruptly and went out. Back in his hotel room he eyed his worn traveling bag. Someone had carefully searched it, then replaced his things.

"Looks like the Anse Cartright hombre ain't short of help. Owns the town, hotel, saloon, store—even the jail and the sheriff." He pulled on a pair of overalls and replaced his white shirt with a flannel one. Next he buckled a heavy cartridge belt about his middle and slid the white-handled gun into its worn holster. When he came downstairs into the hotel lobby he carried a Winchester carbine in the crook of his arm. He handed his bag to the sallow-faced clerk.

"I'll be gone several days, mister. That'll give you plenty of time to get a better look at the stuff in my bag."

"Why, what do you . . ."

"There is a certain little black and white animal that roams the prairie," said Johnny Green. "It gives off a bad odor. But I reckon it must have its use in life. So

THE freckles on Johnny Green's face seemed to stand out like warts against the skin that had gone a little white under-

it may be that you have some good in you, somewhere. Otherwise I'd shoot you and collect the bounty on yuh."

And he walked out, his spurs jingling. He almost collided with a girl who was coming in.

The girl was dressed in overalls and a man's flannel shirt. She wore high-heeled boots and a man's Stetson. But she had, so Johnny told himself, the prettiest face he had ever seen. Curly black hair that was cut short, good features, and a pair of slate-gray eyes that just now were hard and bitter from grief.

"Are you Anne Taylor?" Johnny asked her.

"Yes. Please let me pass."

"I'm Johnny Green. The friend your dad sent for. Before you talk to anybody, I'd like to see you alone. Outside somewhere, beyond earshot of that chinless hotel gent." And he guided her back outside.

"You are Johnny Green?" Her voice was husky and strained.

"Yes. I came as soon as I could."

Anne Taylor nodded. "I know. But you're too late. They killed Dad yesterday. There is nothing more to do."

"Except to see that the man who killed him gets hung."

The girl laughed bitterly. "Hung? Anse Cartright hang? He won't even be arrested."

JOHNNY GREEN reached out quickly and lifted a .38 gun from the holster under Anne Taylor's left armpit.

"It won't do you any good, Anne," he said gently, "to go gunnin' for Anse Cartright. They'd send you to the pen, and your mother would be left alone."

"My mother died this morning," said the girl in a voice that was terrible because it was calm. "She's been ill a long time. Worry and fear killed her. Her heart could not stand the shock. One of the boys brought word late last night that dad was dead. . . . He didn't mean to be abrupt about breaking the news, poor fellow. . . . Mother was dead in just a few hours—and Anse Cartright is her murderer. Will you please give me back my gun?"

"Better that we go on out to the forks of Medicine Creek. There are things to be done. A funeral. Later, after Bill and

your mother are buried, if you still want the gun. . . ."

Anne Taylor nodded. "I'm afraid I'm not quite sane today. Of course you're—you're right." And tears suddenly welled to her gray eyes, melting the terrible hardness in them. Johnny put an arm about her slim shoulders and led her to the feed barn. He seated her on a box there and patted her shoulder.

"I'll get the horses and we'll ride out to Medicine Creek. You just sit here a little while."

He saddled his horse and brought out the horse she had ridden to town. A few minutes later they were on their way. Johnny thought to himself that he had never seen anyone so utterly alone, so badly in need of a friend as was this girl who had suddenly been orphaned by the guns of Anse Cartright.

A young man on a sweat-streaked horse was coming toward them. A tall, darkly handsome youth, he pulled up suddenly, his face pale under its heavy tan. There was a terribly pathetic look in his dark eyes as he looked at Anne ignoring Johnny completely.

"I came by the ranch, Anne. They told me that. . . ."

"That Anse Cartright had murdered my father." Her voice was bitter and terrible. She reined her horse to one side, but he reached out and grabbed her bridle rein. The next second the heavy braided quirt in her hand struck the young cowpuncher full across the mouth. Slowly, his face white, save for the trickle of blood that came from his bruised lips, he let go her bridle rein. She rode on. Johnny saw the cowboy staring after her, dumb misery in his eyes.

Johnny caught up with her. He voiced no comment on what had happened. It was Anne Taylor who broke the heavy silence.

"That was Buck Cartright, Anse's son."

II

AT the Block Y ranch, Johnny left the girl in the care of a crippled old cowpuncher called Uncle Jake. The old fellow was doing his best to comfort her when Johnny left.

A nasal voice halted him at the big cottonwood where lay the dead body of

Bill Taylor, cowman. The voice came from the brush.

"Git away from here, dang ye—er I'll plug ye!"

Johnny grinned. He pulled back his jumper and the sunshine lit on his badge. "Now, whoever you are, trot out into sight or I'll shoot. That brush ain't so thick but what I can sight you. Trot out, kid."

An awkwardly moving youth of perhaps seventeen came out from behind the brush, a shotgun in his hands. At a sharp command from Johnny, he dropped the gun. Fear was stamped on his weak looking face. He was an unwashed replica of the sallow-faced hotel clerk. Brothers, no doubt.

"Now make tracks, kid, and make 'em fast or you'll go to jail, and the jailer will throw the key away. Go home and wash your neck. Then stay there."

"The old man'll hide me," whined the youth. "He'll take a blacksnake to me—er Anse will, when he gits thar. You don't know how ornery paw is when he's drunk, an' he's awful drunk. Bin that-away fer a month. Don't make me go!"

His whining ended in a moist snuffle. Johnny told him to sit down and shut up. He could not help feeling sorry for the boy, and it occurred to him that he might later learn something from him.

Without touching the dead man or the beef that lay, partly skinned, a few feet from the corpse, Johnny Green made a thorough examination of everything.

Beside the dead man lay a six-shooter from which two shots had been fired. It was lying in the right hand of the dead man. The one shot that had killed Bill Taylor had struck just above the abdomen, under the breast bone, had ranged upwards, and the slug now lodged in the muscle above the shoulder blade. The body lay sprawled unnaturally, on its side, the left arm doubled back under.

Careful not to disturb anything, Johnny circled the beef carcass. It lay on its back, head doubled back underneath to hold it in place. One side of the beef had been skinned. A bloody butcher knife and ax lay on the ground beside it. Johnny walked slowly up the sloping bank that led down to the creek. He walked around there on the top of the knoll. Now and then he would squat down and examine the

ground. Then he sat down and rolled a cigaret. From below the tow-headed youth watched him fearfully. Before Johnny had finished his smoke, a group of riders came up. With them rode Sheriff Willetts and Buck Cartright—also Brant and Joe Dufresne. Brant was a light complexioned, cold-eyed fellow with a thick neck and heavy shoulders. A bully, from his crooked grin and the way he handled himself. Dufresne was slight, dark, quick of movement, with slitted black eyes and dandified in his dress. Johnny was introduced to a half drunken man of unkempt appearance.

"Doc Tanner, the coroner." There were twelve others. These nondescript men, the hotel clerk and the proprietor of the Mercantile numbered among them, made up the coroner's jury. Johnny guessed that these same men, judging from their manner, had acted before in the same capacity.

They got down from their horses. Someone pulled out a bottle, and it went the rounds. They talked among themselves, banteringly and carelessly. The coroner seemed to be trying to sober up. Apart from them stood Buck Cartright, his lean, clean-cut face grim and unsmiling and a little contemptuous. All of them eyed Johnny Green with suspicion and defiant unfriendliness. Willetts seemed nervous. The coroner kept glancing uneasily from the sheriff to the United States Marshal who stood there by the dead body.

"Willetts," said Johnny, "I don't want to butt into this business, but I'm going to, and I'm not overstepping my authority when I do so. Your coroner is in no fit condition to conduct a fair inquest, so I'll take the job—providing your jury wants to throw away their licker and lend their cooperation. If they don't want to be here in the capacity of jurymen, let 'em say so."

"Doc Tanner's the coroner," growled the proprietor of the Mercantile. "And he's as sober as I am. I won't be bumfuzzled by any man, just because he's wearin' a tin star."

JOHNNY grinned widely. "Then fork your pony and get out."

"The Marshal is right," said Jim Willetts stoutly. "This is gonna be done right. Caleb, you shut yore gab. That goes fer all of yuh. Doc, go on down the crick an'

soak yore head in the cold water. Do yuh good."

"Our Sheriff," leered Brant, "is gittin' kinda a-gile. Showin' off like a circus show. Ain't you a-gittin' kinda previous, Jim?"

"No, Brant. Just gittin' some sense. From now on, you'll answer questions instead uh askin' 'em."

Brant leaned his weight in one stirrup and whistled soundlessly. He and Joe Dufresne exchanged a look that was heavy with meaning. Johnny watched amusedly. In spite of himself he liked the fleshy sheriff with his silver hair and red-apple cheeks. He guessed that, once he started, Jim Willetts would fight. Anne had told Johnny that Willetts was Anse Cartright's father-in-law. He wondered what the old fellow's daughter was like—the mother of the grim-lipped Buck who said no word to anyone and missed nothing.

The boy seemed visibly under a terrific strain of some kind. It had been easy to guess that Buck Cartright loved Anne Taylor. And that the love was not as smooth running as might be, for obvious reasons. All in all, it was a messed-up situation. Johnny pinched out the coal of his cigaret and faced Brant and Dufresne.

"Before we go further, I want you— you two men who were, or claim to be eye-witnesses—to step down and tell us what happened, and just how it happened."

The two men swung off their horses. The jury, at Johnny's direction, sat down on the ground a short way from the dead man.

"You first, Brant. Bear in mind that what you say will be used. That you are to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you, God."

And he swore Brant in. Not exactly legal and binding, but he knew these men knew little of legal procedure. The coroner was asleep somewhere down the creek.

"Tell your story, Brant."

"Me an' Joe Dufresne an' Anse Cartright was huntin' horses. We tops that little knoll yonder. We sights Bill Taylor here, butcherin' that beef. Anse yells at him tuh ask what he's a-doin'. Taylor grabs his six-gun an' shoots twicet. Then Anse cuts down with his Winchester an' drops Taylor. That's all there was to it. Any man kin see the evidence that's here.

Taylor's a-layin' just as he dropped."

"Positive of that, Brant?"

After a moment's hesitation. "Positive as hell, Mister Marshal. An' there's his gun in his hand."

"Remember you're under oath. That gun was in his hand, just like that, when he dropped?"

"Yuh heard me—just that-a-way. Nobody's touched Taylor since he fell. Ain't that right, Joe?"

"Right," nodded Dufresne. "Just like that. Nobody has touched him."

Dufresne was sworn in and told the same story, almost word for word. Johnny had taken it all down in shorthand. Now he turned to the sheriff.

"Go down and bring up the coroner. Wet him down in the creek first. Then trot him up here."

WILLETTS obeyed. In a few minutes he was back with the coroner—a dripping, angry coroner, but fairly sober.

"Look at the body, there as it lies," snapped Johnny. "Tell me where the bullet struck the deceased, its approximate course, and the distance, regarding such things as powder marks on the clothes, and so on."

Doc Tanner accurately described the course of the bullet. Johnny again turned to Brant.

"You three were up on the hill when Anse Cartright fired the one and only shot that killed Bill Taylor?"

"Right up on that knoll. How many times yuh need tuh be told a thing?"

Dufresne corroborated Brant's statement.

"It looks to me like a plain enough case of justified homicide, Green," said Sheriff Willetts. "Bill Taylor was here butcherin' a Bar U Bar beef. He gits ketched at it, opens up with his gun, and Anse shoots him. Looks to me like an open and shut case uh justified killin'."

"Then," said Johnny Green sharply, "I'd suggest that you get your eyes examined. Bill Taylor was murdered in cold blood. I'll prove it here and now. Anse Cartright murdered an innocent man."

"That's a damned broad statement, mister," said Buck Cartright, speaking for the first time, "and I'll ask you to sure prove it before any of us ride away from here."

The young cowpuncher's tone was cold and unfriendly.

"And what if I prove to your satisfaction that your father killed Anne Taylor's father?" snapped the marshal.

"We'll leave Anne Taylor out of this, mister."

"Yeh? I'm not so damned sure of that, Cartright. But we'll get on with this business. Now, according to testimony given by the two eye-witnesses, Bill Taylor was down here butchering, when Anse Cartright and they topped that ridge. They claim Bill jerked his gun and opened up the argument—and that Anse Cartright, returning the shots from up yonder, dropped Bill Taylor here. They both stuck to that story.

"You heard the coroner's statement regarding the course of the bullet. You can see for yourselves that Bill Taylor was on higher ground than the ground where Anse Cartright stood, because the bullet went in below Bill's ribs and ranged upward, not downward. That's one point.

"Secondly, if Bill was butchering the beef, why aren't his hands and shirt sleeves covered with blood? There are bootprints there in the bloody soil by the beef carcass, yet Bill's boots are clean. Bill Taylor was not butchering that beef. As a matter of fact, the beef was killed after Bill Taylor's dead body had been carried here and dumped on the ground."

"**P**ROVE it," growled Buck Cartright.

"How long has Bill Taylor been dead, by spoken evidence of the two eye-witnesses? Since yesterday evenin' about sundown. The coroner estimates about that many hours. And yet you'll find that that beef carcass is still soft. The blood on it is less than six hours old."

Sheriff Willetts and Cartright's two men exchanged swift, startled glances. Johnny Green smiled grimly.

"Thirdly," he snapped, "that gun is in Bill Taylor's right hand. And Bill is left-handed! There's your proof, Buck Cartright. I don't expect a conviction right now—not in this county where Anse Cartright owns nine-tenths of the land and you couldn't get a jury that would dare convict him. I need more evidence, any-

how, before I get a change of venue and bring Anse up for trial in another county. You men of this coroner's jury don't dare be truthful in your verdict. I don't expect it of you—nor do I expect Sheriff Willetts to keep Anse Cartright in jail. Cartright put you in office, Sheriff, and you can't call your mind your own. This is plain talk, but no man of you can tell me I lie.

"Bill Taylor was my friend. So I tell you now, and you're welcome to pass the news on to Anse Cartright, that before I'm done here at War Bonnet, I'll square Bill's account with Anse Cartright. And while I'm gathering evidence that will hang Anse Cartright, you'll all be wise in letting me alone."

"Fer a runt," grinned Brant, "he shore talks big. I never thought Willetts would stand fer a thing like that."

The sheriff reddened. "That kinda talk ain't doin' you ner Anse no good, Brant."

"There'll be a wagon over from the Block Y," said Johnny Green, "to take Bill Taylor's murdered body home. Willetts, gather in your drunks and start 'em back to town." He turned to Buck Cartright.

"I've had some reports from the sub-agency that ain't exactly in your favor. So I'll ask you to stay off the reservation from now on. Until you prove different, I'm classing you with Brant, Dufresne, your father, and every other man that works for the Bar U Bar outfit."

"Afraid some of yore lousy, stinkin' Injuns will git contaminated?"

"Not exactly. But I'd hate to see any of those Gros Ventres and Assiniboine boys get in bad because they lifted a few Bar U Bar scalps. Three young bucks have bin found killed during the past two years. Nobody has ever bin convicted for those crimes. So you couldn't blame 'em much if the friends of those young bucks went on the warpath and fought back."

"Why don't you keep yore gut-eaters home, then, if they're so righteous? Mebby if they stayed on their reserve, they wouldn't git hurt. There's Bar U Bar beef in every squaw camp west of Medicine Crick. Their pot bellies are always full of white man's beef. Keep yore Injuns at home, and they'll be safe. Yo're so stuck on the noble redman, why don't yuh put

on moccasins and a breech-clout and paint yore face and turn Injun right?"

"A man could do worse," said the marshal. "I was brought up by the Blackfeet. And what I learned from them, Cartright, makes me ashamed of some of the white men I meet in my work. Now I think you'd better be movin' along. I'm not in a very good humor today."

"Neither am I," said Buck Cartright sullenly. "And you wear a nice shiny badge that gives you the best of the argument. I've learned it's wiser to never argue with a cop."

"I can always unpin my badge, Cartright," said Johnny Green. "The last time I shed it, I took a sweet lickin'."

"AND later on, I suppose," sneered a young Cartright, "you pinched the poor sucker. A cop is never anything but a cop. That's why he's a cop. He travels on a tin badge and thinks he's better than the men that pay his cheap little salary. Be careful, Mister Marshal, some gent don't mistake that badge for a rifle target."

"Is that supposed to be a threat, Cartright?"

"Just a warning to an over-ambitious copper."

Buck Cartright stepped up on his horse and rode away with Willetts and the loud-talking men who composed the coroner's jury. Johnny Green smiled wryly and rolled a cigaret. He was lighting it when a tall, handsome young Indian in the blue uniform of an Indian Policeman rode up on a spotted horse.

"Tom!" grinned the marshal. "Tom Water, you big son-of-a-gun!"

"How, Johnny!" The somber face of the Indian broke into a smile. "Long time no see."

"Not since last session of the grand jury at Helena. How's tricks?"

Tom Water, graduate of Carlisle, one time All-American football hero, shook hands solemnly—with the same dignity that was his father's on that day when Eyes In The Water, Assiniboine chief, had shaken hands with the Great White Father at Washington.

"My heart is on the ground, friend," he spoke in Sioux. "We stand beside the dead body of a friend. He was killed by ene-

mies of my people. He was a brave man. His heart was good. In Sioux language, his name was White Man Who Talks Straight. He is dead, but my people do not forget that he was their friend. If white man law does not act, then the friends of White Man Who Talks Straight will make their medicine."

"Was that what you learned at Carlisle, Tom?"

"That is what I learned in the lodge of Eyes In The Water, my Father, when I was a small boy."

"Did he teach you that your law is a bigger law than that of the White Chief at Washington?" Johnny Green was quick to see the gravity of the situation. He saw the black, threatening cloud of tragedy on the horizon.

"In the lodge of my father," spoke the tall young Indian with that finality of his people, "I was taught to be true to a friendship. This dead man was the friend of my father. He has smoked my father's pipe. My father has sat with him in his house. I have eaten at his table and shaken his hand before it was cold in death. This morning at sunrise I stood alone on top of Red Butte and promised the spirit of my dead father that his son would not forget that White Man Who Talks Straight was the friend of Eye In The Water."

A lifetime of white man's teachings could not blot out the teachings of that old Assiniboine chief. Johnny Green, who had spent his early youth among the Blackfoot people, could picture the naked, bronzed young warrior standing straight as an arrow on top of Red Butte, there in the first light of a sunrise, making his vow to the spirit of the dead chief whose teachings remained in the heart of his son—a son whose blood was the blood of great warriors, whose heart would always be the heart of an Indian.

There was nothing that Johnny Green or any other man could say that would change the purpose of Tom Water.

"I will give the White Chief until the next change of the moon to punish Anse Cartright," spoke Tom Water simply.

"Can I call on you to help me, Tom?" Johnny asked.

"Are we not friends?" replied the young Assiniboine simply.

III

BILL TAYLOR and his wife were buried there at the Block Y ranch. A large gathering of white people attended. More than two hundred Indians stood about, hiding their sorrow behind a grave silence. With them stood Tom Water, Indian policeman, son of their dead chief. Tom's face was a graven image. He shook hands solemnly with Johnny Green.

"Nobody but Anne Taylor and you know that I understand or speak your language," he said to Johnny. "Do not give me away, friend."

Anne, brave and splendidly calm, leaned on Johnny's arm. Her gray eyes hardened as she returned the gaze of Buck Cartright, who was among the white people. Young Cartright stood beside Sheriff Willetts. Mrs. Willetts and a small, harassed, timid-mannered little woman whom Johnny guessed was Anse Cartright's wife, clung to one another. Johnny felt a qualm of pity for that nervous little woman who looked so appealingly at Anne. And he was glad when Anne walked straight up to Anse's wife and kissed her white cheek, patting her hand as if it were the older woman, not herself, who suffered most.

"That was a mighty splendid thing to do, Anne," said Johnny.

"She is a good woman. She was the first to offer sympathy."

"Young Cartright is here."

"There is no law to prevent him coming."

A circuit rider preacher officiated. It was a nasal, tiresome, rather insipid sermon. Johnny felt that it was one that had been used countless times.

Anne showed the strain of the long ordeal and was exhausted by the time the last of the buggies had gone and the Indians had left for their reservation, their wagons rattling along the dusty, bumpy road homeward. One incident marked the drab day. Johnny had been watching for it and had prevented bloodshed. It was the meeting between Buck Cartright and Tom Water, there at the corral behind the barn.

Not a word passed between the two enemies—just two swift hands reaching for holstered guns.

"Stop it, you fools!" snapped Johnny

Green, stepping between them. "Cartright, I want your gun."

"I'll see you in hell first, tin star."

"Don't be a damn' fool, Buck," growled Willetts. "If yuh don't want Green tuh have yore gun, give it to me."

"And let these blanket-bellied, gut-eatin' Injuns kill me?" snarled Buck Cartright. "Not much."

Johnny stole a quick glance at Tom Water. But the young Indian betrayed no understanding of the white cowboy's insulting words. Johnny spoke to the young policeman in the Sioux tongue, and Tom turned and stalked away, erect, contemptuous of Buck's gun.

"**N**OW," said Johnny, smiling grimly, "give Willetts that gun or I'll ride over into a coulee with you somewhere, and directly I'll ride back alone. I might add that I'd sure enjoy saving that young policeman the trouble of ridding this range of a menace to its peace."

"Cop," sneered Buck, and handed his six-shooter to Willetts.

Johnny grinned widely. "There's worse vocations than that of being a cop. Rustlers and bushwhackers and so on. I don't know what fetches you here, but if you've come trouble-huntin', you may find it—more trouble than you're dickerin' for."

"Buck means all right," Willetts tried to explain. "You kin take it from me, Green, Buck never had a hand in that killin'. Believe me, he shore didn't."

"Just now," replied Johnny a little hotly, nettled at the sheriff's eagerness to defend Anse Cartright's son, "I can't think of any strong reason I should believe anything you tell me, Willetts. If you're a friend of this gun-totin' feller, send him home or keep him in tow. This is a funeral, not a shooting gallery. And your job is to keep order, not to make excuses for any son of Anse Cartright's. I'll hold you responsible for his behavior."

Johnny Green turned away and strode back to the Indians.

"Don't make trouble, Tom."

Tom Water nodded. "I am sorry, Johnny. You are right. I have told the old men and the young men that you are good friend. The old men ask you to visit."

"I will be glad to smoke and talk with them."

"Do that," nodded Tom Water, "and you might learn many things—things you come here to learn about."

Johnny Green, United States Marshal, did not make the mistake of asking what the tall young Indian policeman meant. Raised in a Blackfoot lodge, brought up among the Indians, he understood them as very few white men have ever been able to know the hearts of that conquered race. When the old men and the young bucks of the Assiniboine and Gros Ventres were ready to talk, they would talk. Until then, their lips would remain closed. Even Tom Waters, whom Johnny had known more or less intimately for a dozen years, Tom, with a college degree and an understanding of white men's ways, would not talk until the time was ripe for talking.

Johnny Green knew, by a hundred meaningless little signs, that the trouble between the Bar U Bar and the Indians was more serious than the white men surmised. Now, before he left Tom Water and the Indians to rejoin Anne Taylor, he asked but one question.

"How is the heart of wachpacta?" Translated, this question asked of the policeman what sort of a man was the Indian Agent at the War Bonnet Agency.

"That last foolish order from the wachpamannie tepee," said Tom Water, "was that the old men be made to cut their hair and wear agency shoes instead of moc-casins."

"Is the man crazy, Tom?"

"He comes from Washington, this Major Rader. The only kind of Indian he knows is the wooden Indian in front of the white man's cigar store. He has given the Bar U Bar outfit permit to run five hundred head of cattle on the reservation."

"That's inviting calamity, Tom."

"The Cartridges hate us. They are rustlers. When the wachpacta would not listen to me, and after he refused to hear the words of our old men, we came to Bill Taylor for advice. He promised to do his best to have the Cartridge permit canceled. And today we are here to pay our last respects to the man who was murdered because he was our friend."

"This is more serious than I reckoned when Bill wrote to me to come here."

"Walk slow, Johnny," said the young policeman, "or you may catch a bullet from the gun that killed Bill Taylor."

"Thanks, Tom. I'll walk slow."

IV

JOHNNY GREEN was kept waiting more than an hour in the little room adjoining the office of Major Rader, Indian Agent at War Bonnet. In that room with him sat half a dozen Indians, all of whom were old men who had been young when their chief, Eyes In The Water, had signed the white man's peace treaty. Now they were men who lived in their memories.

No man of their people had broken any clause of that great treaty. And it was beyond their understanding why the white chiefs had not kept faith; though Johnny Green had explained to them, as best he could, that those white treaty-signers were as bitter as men and soldiers have ever been because certain crooked politicians had robbed the Indians. It was not the soldiers of the Indian wars who had lied. It was the political blacklegs, the petty office holders who worked for the white-vested money grabbers, who juggled issue contracts for grub and blankets and ranching machinery and beef.

The few old soldiers left had waged many a heated battle in behalf of the Indians who had buried the tomahawk and gone to live inside the barbed wire enclosure that marked the reservation limits. The white heads of those gallant old troopers bowed with shame when the Indians, with a childlike faith, asked why the Great White Chief had not kept his word.

Shamed, bitter, defiant, those white men who had endured the grueling privations and dangers of the Indian wars, now must fight the greedy-handed politicians. It was a losing battle, for men of war are not trained to fight with the ugly weapons of peace-time lobbyists.

All this, and more, Johnny Green, speaking the language of the Sioux people, had told these old men at the big council the night before. Because they trusted this white man, those old men had listened. And now they accompanied this little red-haired,

freckled-faced firebrand on his errand of justice—to be kept waiting while Major Rader, representative of white man's law and justice, finished his after-dinner cigar. Johnny Green and the old Indians had not yet eaten and it was two hours past noon.

The door of the wachpacta's office opened, and a pasty-faced orderly smiled in an oily fashion.

"When the major has finished his mail that just came in, he'll be able to give you a few minutes of his time."

"The hell he will!" exploded Johnny. "He'll see us now. We have a long ride to make this afternoon. These men are old men. They've ridden horseback thirty miles to talk to the wachpacta. And by God, young feller, they'll see him if I have to use something besides words to get past that door. Stand to one side, you slimy idiot, and let some real men pass."

Johnny shoved the gaping orderly to one side and strode into the office of the wachpacta, his spur rowels jingling.

Major Rader was a large, red-faced man with mustache and goatee trimmed after the Buffalo Bill fashion. He was dressed in eastern-cut riding breeches, English boots, and an army shirt. A huge diamond ring adorned one soft, well-kept hand that now waved imperiously at the hot-headed intruder.

"What the devil do you mean, shouting and charging about in this manner? We've a brick jail for drunks."

"Then fill it with some of these Bar U Bar men that are bringing in that issue beef." Johnny pulled back his coat, revealing the gold badge pinned to his flannel shirt. Major Rader dropped back into his chair, a shifting, uneasy light in his puffy eyes.

"SIT down, Marshal," he said in a tone meant to be hearty. "Why didn't you send in your name? My orderly said a crowd of these eternally complaining old bucks and some cowpuncher were waiting. If I opened my door every time these old beggars paid me a visit, I'd be driven frantic."

"It's my understanding of an agent's duties, Major Rader, that he's here to guard the welfare of his government wards. That he is bound by the oath of his office to listen to their voices in all

matters concerning their rights, as set down in black on paper bearing the United States Government seal. In other words, their treaty rights." Johnny stepped to the doorway and spoke a few words in the Sioux language. Solemnly, the old Indians filed in to stand gravely in a row, just as Johnny closed the door in the wrathful face of the orderly.

"Isn't this a little high-handed, Marshal? Aren't you overstepping your line of duty?"

"If I am, I'll stand responsible to my chief, Major. We've been cooling our heels for an hour and a half. And while these people are patient waiters, I'm not."

"Well, what's your troubles? I take it you're interpreter for these old beggars?"

"I'm interpreter for these old men who represent a council of the Assiniboine and Gros Ventres Sioux people. And I'll ask that you don't repeat the title 'beggars.' Speaking for them, I demand the cancellation of orders demanding that these old men cut their hair and discard their moccasins for shoes they'd be forced to buy at your privately owned trading store. Your posted orders conflict with certain clauses in the treaty. Those orders are unjust and mercenary. I demand their cancellation."

"You forget that I'm Agent here, young man."

"On the contrary, I'm only too aware of the fact. There are limits to your powers here. And when you go so far as to post such asinine orders, you certainly are going a long way past those limits. Will you cancel those orders, or am I forced to take the matter up with the Indian Department?"

"Are you trying to threaten me, Marshal?"

"Name it what you like, Major. I'm here to defend the rights of these treaty Indians."

"And I'm trying to decently clothe them and get the nits out of their hair. They're a lousy lot."

"Then they got that way from the contamination of the white scum they come in contact with. I'm not here to waste words. I want those orders canceled."

"Very well, Marshal. Consider the matter dropped. I'll bid you good day."

"Not yet, you won't. We're not finished. There are one or two other matters. First, Major Rader, I want a look at the Cart-right beef contract. Cartright has had, for about two years, a contract to furnish beef to the Indian school and the general mess here at the Agency. I've had quite a lot of experience in such matters. The beef contract is supposed to go to the lowest bidder. I'll ask you to show me the written bids of the various cow outfits."

IMPOSSIBLE, my man. Those bids go to Washington for filing."

"And a copy is to be kept here on file. I've been in the Indian Department for fifteen years and know what I'm talking about. I've been on many an inspection trip with government inspectors. I'm familiar with all Indian Department laws. Trot out those contracts."

"It will take time to find the right files. We've been repairing the old office and this is temporary quarters."

"Then I'll ask that you locate those files within a week. I'll be back in five or six days, and I'll expect to see a copy of every bid. And meanwhile, I'll get authority from you to turn back that beef herd that Anse Cartright and his men are now putting into the stockyards for formal inspection."

"I'll see you damned first!" The major banged a fist on his desk.

"I wonder if you will, Major," grinned Johnny. "I just wonder. All such beef contracts are form contracts. Such a contract calls for steers that are free from disease. No scab, no hoof and mouth symptoms, no blackleg, tuberculosis or lump-jaw. And yet Cartright, for the past year and a half, has been delivering beef unfit for human consumption. He culls his range and sells those condemned steers to the Indian Department for prime-beef prices.

"I passed that herd this morning. The sorriest-looking bunch of cattle I've ever seen outside of a boneyard. Cripples, culls, diseased beef. Stuff that wouldn't stand a chance at an honest sanitary inspection. And I also interviewed your veterinary who acts as sanitary inspector. He was drunker than a boiled owl and looked like he'd been that way for a year. The sot couldn't even talk intelligently. He be-

longs in jail or some psychopathic ward. Major Rader, you're laying yourself open to mighty grave criminal charges. Neglect of duty is the least of those charges. Do I get an order from you to turn back that beef?"

"You'll get no such order from me! No man can come here and tell me how to run my affairs."

"Then that's that." With a wide grin, Johnny turned to the old Indians and spoke to them rapidly in their own tongue. One or two of them grinned. The others looked grave. As quietly as they had entered the office, they filed out and through the waiting-room into the afternoon sunshine to the hitch-rack where their horses waited. Johnny, without another word to the glowering major, followed the Indians. He mounted his lined-backed dun horse and with a few words of farewell to the Indians, rode away toward the stock-yards where the beef cattle were being penned.

He had gone some distance when Tom Water met him. Johnny grinned crookedly.

"He's worse than I thought, Tom. A swelled-headed, greedy-handed grafter. He couldn't or wouldn't, show the competitive bids for the beef contract. And he refused to condemn those cattle. He's plumb scared of Anse Cartright, if you ask me. He don't dare do anything but accept what the Bar U Bar delivers. But he's digging his own political grave with his money-grabbing hands. It'll be a tough and a dangerous job that we've laid out for ourselves, Tom. But if we don't get bumped off some dark night, we'll sew Cartright and Rader in a sack. Let's go down and look over that mess of scrub beef that makes I.D. stew."

V

DOWN at the yards, Anse Cartright and his cowpunchers met Johnny and Tom Water with ugly scowls. Johnny climbed up on the whitewashed corral, and Tom Water followed suit. Johnny took out a tally book and a stubby pencil.

Anse Cartright and his men, dust-powdered, sweaty, profane, a little drunk, were hazing the cattle through the formality of inspection. The bleary-eyed inspector sat on the top rail of the wide chute, jabber-

ing to a Bar U Bar man whom Johnny recognized as Brant. Now and then Brant and the inspector took a pull at a bottle of whiskey. A few Indians sat around on the corral like solemn-visaged images carved from painted wood. There were two Indian policemen there. Both, so Tom explained, were sons of Squaw-men. By their swagger and loose tongues, Johnny knew they had been hitting the whiskey that Anse Cartright passed out so freely in spite of the Federal law forbidding intoxicating liquor on an Indian reservation.

"The two policemen," said Tom Water bitterly, "are Doc Smith's assistants. Andrew Blake and Louie La Bois. 'Breeds that like to be tough. Andrew is a bronc rider and Louie tries to be. They make plenty trouble on the reservation."

"Bad medicine, eh?"

"Andrew's old man works for Cartright. He's got two white boys by another wife. One clerks at the hotel in town and the other works at the ranch."

"I've met 'em," grinned Johnny. "Is Louie any kin to Phil La Bois?"

"Louie's his son."

"I sent old Phil up ten years ago for whiskey peddling. A tough old Frenchman, renegade from the Sarcee reserve in Canada, where the Mounties ran him out. Is he back in the whiskey racket?"

"Sure. But he's too foxy to catch. And even if I did grab him off, the wachpacta would turn him loose."

"It's a sticky mess, Tom. Here comes Anse and Dufresne and Brant. Watch your step. They're drunk enough to start a row, so you follow whatever lead I make."

THE three Bar U Bar men rode up. Anse leered up at the two men on the corral.

"Heard you made the crack you was gonna hang me fer killin' Bill Taylor. Yuh kinda lost yore bet, didn't yuh, Green?"

"Depends on how you look at it, Cartright," replied Johnny Green easily.

"You' also gimme orders tuh stay off the reserve. Why in hell don't yuh play yore hand out?"

"I hadn't met Major Rader when I said that," grinned Johnny, "so I didn't know that you had him so badly buffaloeed. But

I'll have a lot of Government red tape before many days. So get what you can while the getting's safe. Because this is the last walking-glue factory you'll ever deliver here under the name of issue beef."

"Green," snarled Anse Cartright, "yo're just too damned high an' mighty tuh last long." Anse's right hand dropped to his gun, just as Johnny quit the corral with a catlike leap that landed him on top of Anse.

The startled horse leaped forward. Johnny bore the big man to the ground. There was a puff of dust as their struggling bodies landed.

Before Brant and Dufresne gathered their wits, Johnny was standing over Anse's unconscious form. In his hand was Anse Cartright's gun, and it covered the two Bar U Bar men. Tom Water's gun was also trained on the two cowpunchers.

"I don't figure that either of these two polecats will show fight, Tom, but if they do, shoot tuh kill. I bent this gun across Cartright's skull, but I'm afraid I didn't hit hard enough to kill him."

"No savvy." Tom's dark eyes were glittering.

Johnny threw some Sioux words at the young policeman that all but upset Tom's gravity. Some other Bar U Bar men rode up. Johnny shoved Anse Cartright's six-shooter into his chaps pocket and thumbed the hammer of his own .45.

"Any of you men that want to pick up Cartright's hand where he dropped it, kin do so. I'll do my best to give you a game. Brant? Dufresne? Don't tromp one another in the mad rush to swap bullets with me."

None of the Bar U Bar men seemed anxious to fight. The two half-breed policemen came up on a run. But when they saw Johnny's badge, their eagerness wilted. Anse Cartright groaned and opened his eyes. Johnny kicked the big man to his feet.

"Cartright, you and your men begin traveling. Hit a lope and don't pull up till you're off the reservation. I'll have the I.D. boys shove this mess of crippled cattle back on your range. You've violated your government contract, and it is automatically canceled. I'm putting a wire through tonight to the Indian Department at Washington that will cancel your beef

contract and also your permit to run cattle on the War Bonnet reserve. Any Bar U Bar stuff found by the I.D. round-up will be impounded and will cost you ten dollars a head to get out of the pound. You're all through here."

"You can't cut 'er, you speckle-faced meddler!"

"Mebby not, Cartright, but I'm making a try at it. You can't bluff me worth a damn. You didn't elect me, as you elected Willetts. I want to see you git started."

"I GOT witnesses tuh prove I delivered these cattle," snarled Anse.

"Well," grinned Johnny, "you git them same witnesses lined up at the reservation gate tomorrow evenin' and they'll swear you got them same cull cattle back."

"Here comes Major Rader," leered Brant. "Now we'll see how far this sorrel-topped jasper kin travel on his tin star."

"Look again, Brant, and you'll see this badge uh mine is solid gold. Gift of the Indians of the Flathead Reserve. I rid their lands of a bunch of such yellow-bellied coyotes as you."

Major Rader, mounted on a fat pacer, pulled up. He looked a little frightened, and tried to get over a mute signal to Anse Cartright. But the cowman was too angry to heed the communication.

"Here's yore beef, Major. And I want my money. And I want to know by what authority this damn' coyote can butt in here."

"Just a minute, Cartright," gritted the hot-headed marshal, "what was that you called me?"

"I called you a damn' coyote!"

"If I'm man enough, I'll make you take it back. Put up your dukes!"

With a quick jerk, Johnny ripped off his badge and tossed his own gun and the one he'd taken from Anse, into his hat.

Anse was a big man, hard muscled and strong as a bull. He winked broadly at his grinning cowboys as he came at Johnny slowly, his big fists knotted. Johnny squared off, his face white and tense. He looked pitifully small—a small terrier pitted against a great dane.

Major Rader smiled. What chance had this gabby marshal against Anse Cartright? Anse was rated as a mighty hard man to whip. Anse would whip a man, even if

he was forced to use foul tactics to do it.

The Bar U Bar men formed a circle. Even if Johnny should happen to be winning, one of them could trip him or push him.

Tom Water stepped down off the corral. He took off his blue coat and folding it carefully, laid it with his gun on the catwalk of the corral. Then he shoved his way through the circle and smiled faintly.

"I watch 'em, Johnny," he said quietly.

Anse came on slowly, step after step. Johnny held his ground. Now they stood almost toe to toe. With a quick snarl, Anse swung a terrific left. Johnny ducked, ripped a short uppercut into Anse's mid-section, and stepped away. Anse grunted, swung right and left like flails, missing Johnny's bobbing head by inches. Now the smaller man came under a swing, and his fist crashed again into the soft muscles of the big man's stomach. Anse's face showed pain. Another hook into the paunch, and Anse's two hands dropped to guard his mid-section.

Johnny fainted, shot a left into Anse's unprotected face, and danced back. Blood gushed from the big man's nose. With an angry roar, Anse charged, swinging wildly. Johnny grinned and sidestepped. As he pedaled backward, Brant stepped forward. Brant had a rope in his hands and a small loop built.

TOM WATER'S long arm shot out. His hand gripped Brant's collar. His other hand grabbed an overalled leg. With a quick, easy heave, Tom threw the man in the air, and Brant lit on the heads of his companions. Dufresne stepped in, and Tom's quick hands twisted the cowpuncher down to his knees.

He had thrown Brant with a wrestling hold known as a flying mare. Now a simple hammerlock sent Dufresne to the ground, whimpering with pain. Tom had both their guns. He lifted Dufresne and threw him roughly against the corral. Then he shoved the two captured guns into the waistband of his blue pants.

"I watch 'em, Johnny."

"Good work, Tom. *Neena washtay. Nokot.*"

Anse crouched now, cautious, creeping along on braced legs. A wrestler's posture. Now he rushed, and Johnny was

almost caught in the sweep of the big arms. He landed a blow that hadn't much steam behind it, but enough to further madden the big man.

"Fight, you damned jumpin'-jack!" panted Anse.

Johnny grinned and backed away before the heavy advance. Anse lunged forward. Johnny stepped quickly back. The marshal's spur caught, and he staggered, off balance, as Anse crashed into him. They went down with a threshing thud—into the dust, the smaller man underneath. Anse's big fist smashed into the freckled face.

Blood and dust. . . . Muffled grunts. . . . Snarling, cursing in his moment of victory, Anse Cartright's bulk held down the man underneath. A wild cheering burst from the Bar U Bar punchers. Tom Water was slapping them back from the two combatants.

Now Anse's thumbs were gouging at Johnny's eyes. Through the smear of blood and dirt, Anse grinned. Now Johnny's two hands grabbed the dirt, flinging it into the big man's eyes. Then, as Anse, half blinded, bent to avoid a second dose of corral dirt, Johnny's sinewy arms went up and around the red neck. They jerked Anse forward, and then, as the big man put all his strength in a pull to release his head, Johnny suddenly let go. Anse toppled backward as Johnny's upper body snapped erect. A catlike scramble, and Johnny was on his feet. Anse was after him, bellowing in baffled rage, still partially blinded by the dirt in his eyes.

Johnny stood his ground. Legs braced, poised, his left cocked. And as big Anse Cartright rushed blindly, Johnny's punishing left fist sank wrist deep in the pit of the big man's stomach, just under the breast bone. Anse, his face contorted with agony, sank down in the dirt. Eyes rolled back, jaw sagging, Anse Cartright was out.

Johnny pushed through the circle of dazed looking cowpunchers and picked up his badge and gun and hat. Then he walked over to where Major Rader stood, a worried look on his mottled face.

"Cartright and his men are pulling out, Major. And they're not coming back, understand? I have witnesses to prove they have whiskey here and have given some to the Indians. You'll see that my orders

are carried out, or I'll have you placed under immediate arrest and I'll prefer charges. These cattle go back."

He walked over to the half-sobered inspector.

"You're all through here, you drunken idiot. Be off the reserve in two hours or you'll go to the guard house—and your two 'breed policemen will be there with you."

"Look here," blustered the major, "you can't . . ."

Johnny handed him a letter bearing the government seal. "That's my authority as inspector, and it gives me full power to use my own judgment when it is necessary. So walk slow, Major Rader, walk slow."

Johnny Green and Tom Water mounted their horses and rode away.

"Well, Tom," grinned Johnny, wiping away the blood and dirt from his battered face, "what do you think of the situation now?"

"A football game is never over till the last minute of play. Don't forget what happened to Bill Taylor. You have learned much—too much. It is you, not Major Rader, who should walk slow."

VI

AT the Red Butte ranch, Anne Taylor was courageously trying to lose sorrow in working. The Block Y cowboys did their awkward best to comfort their girl boss. They clowned and hoorawed one another, and Anne forced herself to smile and laugh. But their efforts were so clumsily patent that they but merely served to remind her the more of her poignant loss.

Sometimes she rode off alone, into the hills. And it was on one of these lonely rides that Buck Cartright met her.

"Anne, we used tuh be friends. I'd give anything in the world if Bill Taylor hadn't bin killed. You know that. I'll do anything yuh ask me to do to make you happy."

"You can't bring back the dead."

"But I kin see that the guilty man gits punished. If Anse Cartright is guilty, I won't stand between him and justice."

"He's your father. Your blood is Cartright blood. And Cartright blood is tainted

blood. Now let me go along my way, please."

"We can't be friends, Anne?"

"Friends with a Cartright?" The bitterness of her laugh whitened Buck's cheeks. Without another word, the handsome young cowpuncher rode away.

For a long time Anne sat her horse, fighting back the tears, watching through their blur as Buck Cartright rode away alone.

To Anne it seemed that Buck had always ridden alone. He and Anse had always quarreled. Anse used to whip the boy with a heavy blacksnake whenever Buck would not obey him. Anne had heard that Buck, when he was too old and too big to be thrashed, had told his father that if ever he tried it again, or if ever Anse again abused his mother, he would kill him.

And while Buck Cartright was the best rider and roper and all around cowman in the country, he was not allowed to run his father's round-up. Anse kept his son riding broncs and doing such work as none of the cowboys would do. Such as building fence, shoveling hay, and putting up ice in the winter. He taunted Buck whenever chance offered, calling him a yellow coward and a quitter and a traitor to his own father.

"Yuh don't look like a Cartright," he snarled at the boy one day, "ner yuh don't act like a Cartright. By God, I don't think you're my own son. Yore mother musta . . ."

Anse Cartright took that back. Buck's gun was shoved into the surly parent's belly, and Buck was shaking like a man with a chill.

"Skin 'er back, dad, er so help me God, I'll kill yuh right here in the house with ma lookin' on. Skin 'er back."

That tale had been carried to the Block Y by a cowboy from the Bar U Bar. The Bar U men didn't like Buck. They took their orders from Anse and were paid top wages by Anse—fighting wages, rustler wages. They called Buck a coward because he wouldn't steal for the Bar U Bar. They accused Buck behind his back of being too friendly with the Taylors. They said he was stuck on Anne Taylor and had been since Anne and Buck were kids—that Buck aimed to marry Anne some day.

Anse swore that if Buck married Anne

Taylor he'd go to the boy's wedding with a shotgun loaded with slugs.

BUCK had never spoken bitterly of Anse to Anne. That wasn't Buck Cartright's way. Those years of beatings and verbal abuse had made Buck close mouthed—too close mouthed. A man can't go on forever, bottling up things, never taking anybody into his confidence. Some accused Buck of being surly and high headed. He never joined in their rough fun and harsh-worded banter. Men had learned not to josh Buck Cartright. He'd all but killed a man or two that had got rough with his joshin'.

They got so they let Buck plumb alone. When he came into a saloon, or into camp where the cowboys were hoorawing and gossiping, they were apt to fall silent. They shut him out of their conversation in that final manner of the cowboy. So Buck Cartright rode alone. Burying his hurts behind lips that took on a grim sort of line.

Even Anne Taylor had never quite understood Buck Cartright. She had never been able to unlock the door to his innermost heart. She had seen Buck fight a Block Y cowboy who called Anse a damned coyote of a thief. And news had spread that Buck now stood beside Anse in the matter of Bill Taylor's killing. She did not know that Buck hoped against hope, with a stubborn, wistful, desperate persistence, that Bill Taylor had been killed in fair fight.

Buck hated Johnny Green for tearing away Anse's story of self-defense. He felt that Johnny was trying to horn in. There was a streak of crazy jealousy in Buck that made him suspect every man of loving Anne. It was that jealous streak that led to a discovery that was unknown to Anne—the discovery that Tom Water, full blood Assiniboine Sioux, was in love with the white girl.

That had been ten years before. Buck had beaten the Indian boy almost to death that day he caught Tom Water squatting by a creek bank, staring enrapt at a photograph of Anne that he had stolen from the photographer's waiting-room in town.

That day marked the beginning of the bitter hatred between Tom Water and Buck Cartright. And no person alive save

Tom and Buck knew what bred that fierce hate. For Tom was no more talkative than Buck. White men who had known Tom since he was a kid never suspected that the Indian could read, write and talk excellent English. Only to Anne did Tom account for those years when he had been gone from the reservation—years spent in the Indian schools, learning white man's books and customs. But never, never learning their ways. Because he was all Indian he would never be anything but the true son of Eyes In The Water, Sioux chief, of the Assiniboine tribe of that great people. His love would never be spoken.

Now Anne Taylor sat her horse, watching until Buck Cartright had ridden from sight. Buck had never once glanced back. Straight backed, high chimed, more alone than he had ever been. And Anne knew that, until she called him, he would never again come back to her.

"And may God in His heaven forgive me," she whispered, "because I love him."

ON her way back to the ranch, she met Johnny Green. Johnny had an ingenious way of making her forget things. If he purposely tried to make her forget sorrow, then he cloaked his purpose well.

"I knew a hot-headed cuss once," he began without the formality of greeting, "that used to jerk off his hat and tromp on it when he got mad. And here I am with a brand new Stetson that set me back half a month's pay. Could I borrow yours? No? Thanks, anyhow. But if this sombrero was just halfway old, I'd tromp it, so help me, Christmas! Because of all the dirty slaps across the face a hard-workin', underpaid, well-meanin' chump that's foolish enough to be in this service ever got, I got it. Nothin' more or less than a plain-worded, straight-from-the-shoulder reprimand for interfering in the affairs and duties of one Major Rader, wachpacta. Right from Washington.

"Rader musta had a brother in Congress or somewhere high up. Me and my two-bit ante gits swept off the table. I get bawled out. My boss will get bawled out for hiring such a bonehead as I am. And during all this dirt-pawin', Rader gives me the good old hoss laugh and keeps on buyin' beef from Anse Cartright. Lady, will you take this gun and shoot me where I'll

die slow? No? And you still hold back that hat on me? And you call me friend, eh? Kin I cuss, then?"

"Till you run out of breath, Johnny. You mean they don't back you up in this deal?"

"Nary a back. Ain't it hell? And after me goin' to all that trouble, too. Now my Injun friends will turn into a tribe of doubting Thomases, and I'll have to talk myself down to a shredded whisper trying to hold 'em back. For two-bits in Confederate money, they'd lift that snooty major's scalp. Even Tom Water is fed up on my smooth line of gab. Of course, I kin get about a pound of strychnine and feed it to the high-chinned major in his waffles or his bourbon licker. That seems like the only good bet left me.

"The chief may order me home any day, and I'll have to either obey orders or quit my job. The chief savvies, but gosh, he'll be takin' orders from some desk rider. Heard the latest dirt? No? Lend me that hat for two seconds, then, and when I'm done trampin' I'll dish it out? Still holdin' back? Well, lady, I'll make you a bet. I bet my horse against yore hat that when I give you this bit of news you'll hand me your hat."

"Call the bet, Johnny Green," smiled Anne.

"Hat against horse?"

"Hat against horse. Spill your dirt, cowboy."

"Anse Cartright is trying to get a county named for him. Mebbysso, this time next year, you'll be living in Cartright County."

Anne Taylor solemnly took off her hat and held it out to the grinning marshal.

"Sold," she said with a queer smile, "to the gent in the soiled shirt, for a plugged dime. Tromp it, pardner."

JOHNNY took off his own brand new black Stetson and tried on Anne's white one that had seen better days. Her hat fitted him exactly. He handed the black hat to the girl.

"We'll swap, just for luck. I'll tramp this 'un when I git time."

"Tell me about this Cartright County deal."

"Not much tuh tell. This county is too big, so the State plans to split it. The bill goes before the house next term. Cart-

right's attorney is already busy with Anse's money, trying to get it named for Anse. It ain't every man that has the honor of bein' hung in his own county that bears his name."

"If he hangs at all," said Anne skeptically.

"Anse will hang or get killed by a bullet. I've located an eye-witness—a man that saw the whole play from start to finish."

"He won't dare testify, Johnny. Any man that gives damning testimony in this county is simply voicing his own death warrant."

"Mebby. But I think he'll get on the stand and talk straight, just the same."

"He must be a brave man."

"On the contrary, Anne, the fellow is a rank coward. He has his own reason for wanting to testify."

"Who is this man?"

"I can't tell you his name."

"Why not? Don't forget that Bill Taylor was my dad."

"Lady," said Johnny Green, and his eyes were hard as ice, "on a case such as this, I'm sometimes forced to use queer methods to gain my ends. These methods are none too open and aboveboard. I won't use that witness unless I'm forced to use him. As you say, he'll be babbling his own death warrant. And his reason for talking will be none too honorable. I'm to meet him in town tonight, and before I'm done with him, I'll have his written testimony, all signed and sworn to. With that weapon, I can send Anse Cartright up those thirteen steps to the rope. And I'll put his ugly-tempered son behind the prison bars for a long stretch."

"Buck isn't mixed up in this killing, Johnny. Buck's decent."

"Buck Cartright is just as dangerous as his father, Anne. If he's innocent, he'll go free. But if he's guilty, he'll take his rap in the big house."

It was Johnny Green, U. S. Marshal, speaking—Johnny Green, whose man-hunting prowess had sent more than a few tough men to prison. The blunt line of his jaw was hard. His eyes had in them no spark of softness. Even his voice was brittle.

Anne recalled a remark her father had once made to her. "May God have mercy on the man that Johnny Green goes after,

for he'll get none from that little gunthrower."

Anne and Johnny rode on in silence. Presently they came to where the trail forked.

"Look for me when I git back, Anne. Tom Water will be over this evenin', to stay at the ranch till I come back from town. He'll be out for mischief at the Block Y. And he'll be around to see that none of the Cartright outfit comes a-prowlin'. So-long."

"Take care of yourself, Johnny."

FOR as long as she remained within sight of the town-bound marshal, Anne Taylor rode along the trail to the Block Y ranch. But once out of Johnny's sight, the girl swung her horse back up a long draw toward the Bar U Bar home ranch. She rode hard in the hopes of catching up with Buck Cartright. Twilight found her still traveling. She wanted to warn Buck that his liberty was in grave danger. She'd tell him that Johnny Green had marked him for prison.

Unwittingly, the girl was riding into sinister danger; because black hats are scarce in the cow country. And in the uncertain light that is the forerunner of darkness, a man lying in ambush might easily mistake this rider in cowboy clothes for Johnny Green, whose taste in headgear ran to black-colored Stetsons.

Her gray horse with black mane and tail might easily be mistaken for Johnny's line-backed dun. And she was headed for a creek crossing where Brant and Dufresne squatted in the willow thickets, a bottle between them, Winchesters across their knees—while Anse and the Bar U Bar cowhands butchered stolen beef. Beef that wore the Block Y iron. Beef to be delivered dressed instead of on the hoof, to the War Bonnet agency. This was in keeping with terms of the new contract Major Rader and Anse had drawn up after the fracas at the reservation stockyards.

While the butchers labored, Brant and Dufresne stood guard. With orders to shoot and ask questions later. And coming at a trot toward their ambush, Anne rode through the dusk, wearing the only black hat in that part of the range—Johnny Green's hat.

VII

IT was well past dark when Johnny Green stabled his horse and walked up the street to the Lodge Saloon. Sheriff Jim Willetts and Caleb Smith sat with the coroner and a Bar U Bar cowboy, playing sluff. Fat, the bartender, leaned across the bar, talking to Phil LaBois and a lanky, shifty-eyed, lantern-jawed man whom Johnny rightfully guessed was the squawman Blake, father of the dudish hotel clerk, the whiny voiced kid who had watched over Bill Taylor's murdered body, and a third son who was part Injun—the son who wore a policeman's uniform. Phil LaBois, renegade whiskey peddler and father of Louie LaBois, policeman, started at Johnny's entrance and whispered something to his tall, raw-boned companion.

"By gar, she's Johnny Green," the renegade held out a dirty, clawlike hand which Johnny ignored.

"Out again, are yuh, Phil? And back at your old line of work, I reckon."

"My frien' Johnny Green mak' de beeg joke," leered the squaw man.

"But the joke's mostly on you, Phil. Better walk slow or you'll be in the dallyhouse at War Bonnet. You'll draw the limit next time."

"I'm de hones' man, now, Johnny Green. I cut de dry 'ood stick to sell to de white man. No more peddle de whiskee. Ain't dat right, Blake?"

"Right as hell, Phil. Drinkin', Marshal?"

"Not in here." Johnny grinned to Fat, who was uncertain whether to scowl or smile. He walked over to the card table. Willetts smiled uneasily. The other sluff players scowled.

"When you git time, Sheriff, I want a few words with yuh. No hurry."

Sheriff Willetts finished playing his hand and rose to follow Johnny outside. They walked a little way down the street.

"Sheriff," said Johnny Green abruptly, "it's about time you stepped down off the fence. Either you play with me or you play with Cartright. It don't make a hell of a lot of difference to me which you decide. I just want to give you a chance to declare yoreself. I understand how you're situated here. It will take plenty guts to turn on Anse Cartright. But there'll come

the big showdown before long, and when the smoke clears away, the Cartright spread is goin' to be no more. I'm out to get Anse and his son. You'll have to fight with me or against me."

"I got a wife and a daughter to protect, Marshal. My sister is married to Anse. Buck's my nephew. Anse put me in office. If I double-cross him, I'll be killed or else busted. Can't yuh see what a hell of a fix I'm in?"

"Then you'll side with the Cartridges?" said Johnny coldly.

"I can't do anything else. I wish you'd pull out, Green."

"I'm pullin' out before long, Willetts. But before I go, I'll do my job here. If I didn't feel sorry for you, I wouldn't give you this chance to come clean."

"I'll talk it over with the missus tonight, and I'll let yuh know in the mornin'. That's the best I kin do."

"All right. See you in the mornin', then. Is there any mail for me at your office?"

"Some letters and a wire."

THEY went into the sheriff's office, and Johnny opened his mail. One of the letters was a formal notice from his chief, recalling him to the office at Helena. A second letter was a personal note from his chief, telling Johnny that his application for two weeks' vacation was filed and that the hotheaded little marshal was now on two weeks' absence from active duty. "*I don't know what the devil you've been up to,*" wrote the chief in his informal note, "*but you've certainly kicked up a stink at War Bonnet. Rader has a big pull somewhere, you bonehead, and he's after your hide. I hope you don't get canned, but unless you pull a fast one somehow, Rader will have your sorrel hide hung on the political fence.*"

"*Am wiring you this in code. My advice is to put your badge in your hind pocket and don't use anything but your fists and maybe your pet gun. Good luck, you hair-triggered, Irish-headed, damn' fool. I'd give a pretty to be with you, win, lose or draw. If you see a good homestead there, file on it. You may be needing it if Rader does his stuff. But if he gets you, son, I'll get his ticket punched, even if my throne topples from under me*

and we both go back punching cows where we mebbysso belong.

"Good luck, idiot. Hang and rattle. Keep your shirt tail tucked in. When you need anything, holler, but make it un-official."

"Good news, Green?"

"Lovely news, Willetts." Johnny unpinned his badge and handed it to the sheriff. "Keep it till I ask for it, if ever. I'm suspended for offending one polecat named Major Rader. If he's a major, then Anse Cartright should be made a general. Do you happen to have a bottle of decent whiskey handy, Sheriff? I feel like lifting a stiff one."

"I've got a bottle of real Monogram, Green. And it'll be a pleasure to join yuh. You may have some faults, but yo're a real man."

"Don't make me blush, Sheriff. It shows up my freckles."

Sheriff Willetts poured out two good drinks.

"Here's luck to yuh, Green."

"The same to you, Sheriff. And I hope yuh decide tuh join me."

"I've done decided," smiled Willetts. "I'm with yuh, hook, line and sinker. The missus will feel the same way about it. She hates Anse."

"That's fine. See you when we meet again. Got some letters tuh write and some things tuh tend to, down at the hotel."

JOHNNY walked down to the hotel and signed the register. The dressed-up clerk leered unpleasantly. The lobby was empty, save for a couple of drunken ranch hands that dozed in big armchairs.

"I'll take my bag, mister. And when yuh git time, fetch me up a bottle of Old Crow with the Government stamp unbroken—and a pitcher of ice water, just whenever you get around to it. I saw that old man of yours down at the Lodge—him and Phil LaBois."

"My old man?" The pasty clerk's hand shook a little as he handed Johnny the key to his room. "You—you never told—"

"I don't know what you're talkin' about."

"Was Andrew, that half-brother of mine, with him?"

"No. Better take a drink, Rollo."

"My name is Oscar."

"So it is, Rollo, I done forgot. Don't

forget to bring that whiskey up to my room."

"I didn't know you drank."

"Periodically. When I drink, Rollo, I do nothing else but. Better make it two quarts of Old Crow—sealed bottles."

Johnny thought he saw one of the dozing drunks open an eye; in fact, he was quite positive. He clumped up the stairs, lugging his battered bag.

Some ten minutes later, Oscar Blake brought up the two quarts of whiskey and the ice water. His manner was timidly furtive as he bent to whisper something to Johnny who sat at the table writing.

"Andrew's in town—Andrew and Louis LaBois. Maybe the old man suspects."

"Not unless you got silly and talked too much."

"I told Fat I bet Buck wouldn't never get Anne Taylor. I was kinda tight, I guess. But me and Fat is chums. Fat's a good egg." The leering grin came back to Oscar Blake's loose lips. "Did you see Anne?"

"Sure."

"You told her I was doin' this on her account?"

"You haven't done it yet, Rollo. When it's on paper, then you'll have something to yap about."

Oscar Blake slid a thick sealed envelope into Johnny's pocket. "That's it, Marshal—just as I seen it while I was waitin' to meet Fern."

"Who is Fern?"

"A Gros Ventres girl I know."

"You doggoned rascal," grinned Johnny, hardly unable to hide his contempt for the pasty-faced, pimply hotel clerk. "Regular devil with the women, eh?"

"They seem to fall for me," bragged Oscar, reddening. "I'm the best dressed guy in town. Get my suits from Chicago. And the snappiest little roadster in War Bonnet. I'd motored out to Medicine Crick to show it to Fern and maybe take her for a ride in the country. And while I was waiting, I saw what happened to Bill Taylor. It's here on paper. You got it."

The young fool was half drunk. Johnny's trained ears had caught a faint scuffling sound outside the door. He heard somebody retreating with hurried, furtive step down the hall.

"IF I were you, Rollo," he said carelessly, "I'd take a little trip. Butte or Great Falls or Helena. Do yuh a lot of good. I'd leave tonight on Number One."

"I'm waiting for some new duds," admitted Oscar Blake. "A snappy suit I got coming. And two sets of socks, ties and handkerchiefs to match. And a nifty derby."

"I bet it's a brown one."

"Wrong. Pearl gray with a black ribbon."

"Checked suit?"

"Right. Black and white. Niftiest number in the catalog."

"You'll need a cane. And a song or two and a buck-and-wing finale. You should be in vaudeville instead of clerking in a dump like this. I bet you're a singin' kid."

"Tenor," admitted Oscar grandly. "Shall I pull the cork on one of these crocks, Marshal?"

"Why not?" grinned Johnny. "You won't be missed downstairs?"

"Oh, no. The bartender handles the desk if anybody wants a room, which ain't likely except at train time. I often spend the evening up here in some drummer's room, tilting the glass and inhaling the weed. We play poker or shoot craps. And I pick up all the latest stories and smart cracks. They all tell me I'm buryin' myself here. I can make a pile of jack, once I find my proper niche."

"I just bet you could, Rollo. Fill 'em up. You sure are a hot sport."

Oscar handed Johnny a filled glass. He draped his gangling frame in a chair, sitting backward on it, elbows across the back. He could see himself in the mirror.

"Here's how, Rollo."

"Cheerio, old chap, as they say in old London," smirked Oscar.

Johnny almost choked over his drink.

"With a few thousand berries and Anne for my bride, I'd knock little old New Yawk for a series of gasps, eh, what?"

"You said something, old sport. But take my tip and hook the first rattler leaving town. I'll deliver your messages to Anne Taylor. Andrew and Louie LaBois may suspect you. Fat may have talked."

"Fat's my pal. Anyhow, I ain't scared of them damn' 'breeds. I pack a gat."

"Just the same," advised Johnny, "I'd leave town for a while."

Oscar Blake lit another of his cheap cigarets and helped himself to the whiskey. "I'm doin' this for Anne," he said, trying to look the part of a fearless martyr.

"Sure thing, Rollo."

"Why do you keep on callin' me Rollo? That ain't my name."

"But it fits you like a kid glove. It's historical."

"I always fancied Oscar for a name, but Rollo ain't bad, once you get used to it. Mebby Anne will like it better."

"Have a cigar?" Johnny was getting his fill of cigaret smoke that smelled of cheap perfume. But Oscar declined.

"You're a sport, Marshal, but I like my own brand of the weed. Say, you won't fall down on your end of this job, will you? You'll slam Anse and Brant and Dufresne in the can? And you'll pick Buck up on that charge of helpin' frame the murder? I want to see Buck Cartright go to the pen."

"So I reckoned, Rollo."

OSCAR filled the glasses again. He was evidently preparing to stay the evening, which was not at all to Johnny's craving. He wished Oscar would decide to catch the next train. But Oscar had no such intention. He gulped down his drink and forthwith launched into a lewd and lurid recital of his conquests among the fairer sex.

"Believe me, Marshal, I know my women, and how! I'm the candy kid over at the Bungalow behind the Lodge Saloon. Know little Mexico Rose? No? She's a hot tamale, and I don't mean maybe. She'll own her own joint some day. She gimme this ruby ring and cuff links to match. Nice, eh, what? I'm her big moment, no less, see? Dough in it, but no future, see? I got ambitions. Like I says to Fern, I says, 'Kiddo, I ain't got the time to waste stallin' around holdin' hands. Either you fall for me or ya don't. I got town dames that's nuts about me, so why should I drive half the night gettin' here and the other half of the night gettin' back, just to hold your hand and look into your eyes, see?"

"But them squaws is tricky. She tells me she likes this big Injun cop, Tom Water. Makin' a jealous play, see? But I don't fall for that line of salve. I glaums

her, but she scratches hell outa me and beats it. Hopin' I'll follow her, get me? But I steps into my sport model auto and leaves that little squaw flat. I get me a late date with the redhead at the telephone office who finishes her trick at midnight. We hit the Chinks for chop suey and a little smoke. Then I hops over to the Bungalow and tangoes with my hot señorita. Ever smoke, Marshal?"

"I roll my own."

"You don't get me," leered the pasty-faced youth, "I mean the old pipe. Dream smoke. The red-head wises me to the yen shee racket. She's from Chi and wise as an ex-con. Knows the ropes."

Johnny could hardly resist throwing the smutty little whelp out the window. He could vision Oscar Blake's finished career. A slinking, drug-racked, petty criminal of the rat type. He was already well on the road to that parasite life of professional panderer for such houses as the Bungalow.

Lucky for Oscar Blake that the clean name of Anne Taylor did not again pass his tainted lips. Disgusted to the point of nausea, Johnny listened to the youth's putrid chatter. Then Oscar was reminded of a heavy date with the red-headed phone operator from Chi. He spent a long ten minutes primping before the dresser mirror, helped himself to two more drinks, polished his ruby ring, and eased the flat automatic in the armpit holster under his wasp-waisted coat.

"See you later, Marshal. Some night, we'll take in the sights."

"Better hop the first rattler passing through, Rollo. I think your pal Fat has double-crossed you."

"Fat? Hell, no. Anyhow, them 'breeds is scared of me. I got my rod with me, see?" He swaggered out, leaving behind an odor of cheap cigarets and perfume.

ALONE, Johnny moved swiftly. He slipped the inadequate bolt on the flimsy door. Next he worked skilfully, fashioning a dummy which he covered with the bed clothes. Then he emptied the contents of the two whiskey bottles on the bed covering. He moved noisily about the room, whistling and singing in a drunken manner. The room reeked of whiskey.

Turning the lamp low, Johnny cautiously

opened a window. It was a twenty-foot drop to the alley below. The marshal maneuvered to balance himself on the narrow ledge below the window while he slid it closed behind him. Then he dropped lightly to the ground. Behind him in the room he had left his battered bag, some spare clothes strewn about, and just enough light so that a man in the hallway, peering through the transom that was left open, would make out the bulging shape under the bed clothes and the general disarray of the room. There was the strong reek of whiskey to carry out the idea that Johnny Green was dead drunk.

Johnny crouched in the black shadows of the alley. Half an hour went by. An hour. Johnny was getting impatient. Then, from upstairs, came the muffled report of a shotgun. Five times the repeating pump gun crashed. Then silence, broken only by cautious voices and shuffling feet.

"That," sounded the rasping voice of elder Blake, "settles that damn' spy. Go in and take a look at him, Phil."

"De door, she's lock'. By gar, somebody a-comin'."

"Then lét's drag it fer the Lodge."

Their boot heels sounded a hurried departure. As Johnny had surmised, they had used the transom and a shotgun. Johnny glanced up at the window. Through the cracked windowshade he saw a dull red glow. Then the old shade suddenly burst into flame. In their attempted murder, the charge of slugs had exploded the lamp, setting fire to the alcohol-saturated bedding.

Now, up in the hallways, harsh shouts filled the silence. "Fire! Fire! Fire!"

That old frame building was dry as tinder. Flames crackled. Men were running with futile pitchers and buckets. The closest water tap was in the saloon below.

Now a heavy figure came charging down the alley. Sheriff Willetts. Johnny stepped in front of him. "Hold on a second, Sheriff."

"Green! God, man, I was afraid they'd killed yuh!"

"I'm hard to get rid of as the proverbial unwanted cat. Unless some overzealous idiot breaks into that room, they'll all think I've burned. Listen. That's old Blake's voice. He's telling 'em to get more

water, that there's no use trying to get into the room, because it's a hell of hot flames. Sheriff, we're witnessing the cremation of Marshal Johnny Green. He got drunk and bedded down, and Blake shot him through the transom. Now he's got a lucky break, because the fire will burn poor Johnny's body to a crisp. Blake's crime is covered. He'll now report to Anse that he's done his job. Still of a mind to help me, Sheriff?"

"I am."

"**T**HEN take this sealed envelope and put it where nobody will find it. Then git my horse out of the barn and fetch him around to your place. But whatever you do, hide this envelope because it holds the detailed story of Bill Taylor's killing, as seen by an eye-witness who might meet up with hard luck before mornin'. I glanced through it before I quit my room. And it holds a story that will hang Anse Cartright and mebbly Brant and Dufresne to boot. I'm afraid the rat that wrote it is already dead. He put too much faith in friend Fat, at the Lodge. Andrew Blake and Louie LaBois were trailing him. The poor, hop-smokin', hat. I'm speakin' of Oscar Blake, Sheriff. He knew too much, and he trusted Fat. A crook should never trust any man, even himself."

"Oscar saw Bill Taylor killed?"

"He did."

"It'll be his deposition against the word of three Bar U Bar men."

"I'm betting there was at least one other eye-witness. That's why I want to get moving. I think an Injun girl called Fern can shed some light on it."

"Fern White? Old White Horse's girl that works at the sub-agency post office?"

"Same girl, I reckon. I'm heading for Medicine Crick and the sub-agency just as quick as I kin make a getaway."

"Meet me at my barn. Fifteen minutes."

"Good. And before I forget, get bench warrants for Anse and Buck Cartright and for Brant and Dufresne. But don't serve 'em till I say so."

"Okay, Green. You sure work fast."

"The quick mover is harder to kill, Willetts."

"If he looks good before he jumps," added Willetts skeptically.

"Something in that," grinned Johnny, and moved away as some fire fighters came running down the alley. Willetts joined them.

"Hotel's a goner, Sheriff!" called an excited voice. "She's firewood. They say that United States Marshal burned to death afore they could git to him. Went tuh bed drunk, so the bartender says. Two quarts. Knocked over his lamp and set the hotel afire. . . ."

Johnny legged it for the Willetts place below town, taking care to avoid anyone he saw running toward the fire. He was hidden in the Willetts barn when the sheriff showed up with his saddled horse.

"Anybody see you, Sheriff, with my horse?"

"Not a soul. Everybody's at the fire. All they was tryin' tuh save was the booze outa the saloon. Every man was gittin' his share uh bottles and jugs. It'll be a drunken mess in an hour."

"I'll get word to yuh in a few days. Lay low and play in with the Cartright gang so they won't get wise to us."

"You bet. By the way, I heard a rumor that the Injuns had gathered and was dancin' and raisin' hell. I called the agency, but Major Rader was gone. His orderly was scared green. Said the guard-house prisoners was gone, and he was afraid they'd killed Rader. Rader had arrested Tom Water and slung him in the dally-house. Tom's the one that's leadin' the war-dance. It may be all a lot uh nonsense—or it may be damn' serious."

"What did he jail Tom Water for?" asked Johnny tensely.

"Insubordination an' bein' a friend of Johnny Green's, near as I could make out. Rader threwed Tom in jail and took away his badge and uniform."

"The damned tenderfoot idiot. Tom's appointed direct from Washington. Rader can't bust him without a Federal jury trial. Well, I'll look into it. Sounds bad. So-long, Sheriff."

So Johnny Green rode through the night with trouble dogging him.

VIII

WITHIN a mile of the brush where Brant and Dufresne stood guard, Anne Taylor was halted abruptly by a slen-

der Indian girl sitting a pinto horse.

"Why, Fern," gasped Anne, "what are you doing here?"

"I watch you come this way," said the Indian girl who had spent most of her life at the agency schools.

Perhaps, in years to come, Fern White would grow fat and shapeless and spend her days drying jerked meat and pounding pemmican and sewing bright-colored beads on buckskin. But now, in her prime of young womanhood, she was slender and lithe and duskily beautiful for a full-blood. Proud, her black eyes ablaze, she faced the white girl.

"All day, for many days, I watch with my field glasses, because I hate you. You try to steal something that can never be of value to you. You want to take the love of Tom Water and when you have it, you tramp it in the dust. Anne Taylor would not marry an Indian. I know that. But because it is the way of white woman to play with the love of many men, you make Tom sick with love that can never be good love that brings marriage at the mission and babies. You are a thief, you white woman.

"I see you meet Buck Cartright and then another white man whose name is Johnny Green. You trade hats with him which is a sign of making love. You are a bad woman. It would not be wrong to kill you, because then Tom Water would forget you and would make his love to a woman of his own color. We would marry at the mission and have babies and be happy. But so long as your white woman's eyes look at him, Tom Water will love you."

"What nonsense, Fern. You are talking like a crazy person. I do not make eyes at Tom Water. He does not speak to me of love. I like Tom to be my friend, as he was my father's friend, no more than that. You should be ashamed to talk to me like that."

"I am not ashamed. I am not even ashamed because I meet that coyote of an Oscar Blake to fool him into talking too much. I hear him talk about how he will marry you when he gets ready. I let him hold onto my hand and listen to his bad words. I am not ashamed. I even am not ashamed that I lie to him about giving him kisses when he takes you away from Tom

Water. So he promise to take you."

"Fern, have you lost your wits. I know you've never liked me, but I couldn't understand why you've always refused my friendship. I did not know that you would do such a despicable thing as to conspire with that loathesome Oscar Blake. How did the self-fancied Beau Brummel of War Bonnet plan to take me? By force?"

"No. Oscar Blake knows enough about your father's killing to send Anse Cart-right and that ugly-tempered Buck to the prison. He will testify and put Buck Cart-right in the pen. Then when Buck is in prison or hung, maybe, you will be grateful to Oscar, and go away with him and be married."

"How utterly ridiculous, Fern. It's so silly that I can't even be as angry as I should be. You're such a child."

"I am not too much of a child to kill you."

"And be hung?"

"If I cannot have Tom's love, I would not be afraid to be hung. And I will kill you before you get Tom." A six-shooter glittered dully in the Indian girl's hand. Anne, unarmed, knew that she was very close to death.

"**F**ERN," she said calmly, though her heart beat swiftly, "do you dare to go with me to Tom Water and listen to me tell him that I have never even dreamed that he loved me, and that I could not possibly return his love? Not because of the color of his skin; not because he is Indian and I am a white woman—but because I do not love him. I will tell you, Fern, and I will tell Tom Water, that I love another man. That man is Buck Cartright."

"You love Buck Cartright?" asked Fern tensely.

"I love Buck, yes. God knows how I've fought against loving him, and I can never tell him that I love him and no other man. Don't you see that I must drive love from my heart? I could not marry the son of the man who murdered my father. Anse killed dad. And when I've sent Anse Cart-right to the gallows, I'm going away from the Block Y and I'll never return. Only you know my secret and you must never tell. Tom Water must never tell. I understand now how you have hated me. I'm more sorry than I can tell you in words.

But, Fern, dear child, I'll do everything I can to help you."

"You love Buck Cartright, then, as much as I love Tom?"

"Yes. Only my love and Buck's love is so barrenly hopeless. His father killed my father. And you say that Buck is mixed up in that murder."

"Oscar Blake says that about Buck Cartright. Perhaps that Oscar speaks with a snake's tongue. The Indians call Buck Cartright 'The Cowboy Who Rides Alone.' He was not there when Anse Cartright killed Bill Taylor. He come more than an hour afterward."

"How do you know that, Fern?"

"Because I was hiding in the brush and saw. Your father ride along the ridge above Medicine Creek. Three men wait in the brush below. One is Anse Cartright, one is Brant, the third man is Dufresne. A shot comes from the brush. Your father fall out of his saddle, dead. They go up there and carry the dead body down. I see all that. So does Oscar Blake. Oscar tell me that if I talk, then he will give you to Tom. And he will see I get killed."

"Will you tell that story to a jury, Fern?"

"Yes. I talk. I tell that and much more that Oscar tells me when he sniffs a white powder and brags much. Things about Anse Cartright and Major Rader robbing the Indians. I would not dare tell my people now, or they would kill that wachpacta and the Cartrights and burn the Bar U Bar ranch. Even now the old men and the young braves are gone from their tepees. They go to the medicine lodge on Red Butte to dance the Sun Dance that is forbidden by the government. The young men will dance the tortures of the Sun Dance. Unless soldiers come, they will burn the wachpacta at the stake. He is a prisoner tonight, hidden where no white man can find him.

"The old men try to stop the young bucks, but their words are too weak. A Bar U Bar cowboy got drunk and killed a policeman and wounded another Assiniboine young man. Tom Water arrested the cowboy, and the wachpacta turns him loose again and puts Tom in the dally-house. Tonight he gets out and joins the other young men in the Sun Dance. And

the old men say that the wachpacta will die by fire."

"Then we'll have to do something. Fern, ride to the Bar U Bar ranch and tell Buck Cartright I need his help. I'm going into town to get the only man who can check this mad thing and save Tom's life. Johnny Green is the only white man who can prevent a massacre. And if the dance goes on, even he will be unable to stop this terrible mistake Tom is making. Ride, girl. Ride hard. Go to the Cartright ranch."

"I go now. But nobody can stop my people now. The policeman who was killed is son of Watch His Walking, Assiniboine medicine man. Tom Water has killed that cowboy and taken his scalp to the dance."

"We can try. Tell Buck to come to the Block Y and to come alone. Say that his pardner needs him. He will understand."

"That his pardner needs him," repeated Fern. "That is good medicine for Buck Cartright."

IX

"WELL, Dufresne," said Brant in a growling undertone, "here comes our target. I'll aim fer the head. You line yore sights on his briskit."

"Let 'im come clost, Brant."

"Exactly, Frog Legs." Brant's voice had an ugly tone.

"I've told you before, Brant, to lay off that frog laig stuff. I don't want tuh warn you another time."

"No?"

"No."

"Ain't you kinda drunk, Frog Laigs?" sneered Brant, his gritted words a challenge.

Dufresne laid down the pair of night glasses he had been focusing on the horseback rider who was coming their way. He had recognized the spotted pony and the Indian girl who rode it. There was a peculiar smile twitching at the thin-lipped mouth beneath his tiny black mustache.

"This ain't the time to quarrel, Brant. Our target is comin'. Pass the bottle."

"You always had a yaller streak, Frog Laigs," chuckled Brant, passing the whiskey bottle.

Dufresne's gun hand reached out for the bottle. His white teeth flashed in a grim-

ace that was half smile, half snarl. There was the flash of thin-bladed steel. A surprised grunt from Brant as the thin blade struck through cloth and flesh into his heart. Brant, a look of startled horror stamped on his face, slid forward with a rattling cough.

Dufresne pulled the dripping blade free and wiped it clean on Brant's shirt. Then he took a drink and corking the bottle; shoved it into his chaps pocket. He rolled a cigaret and pulled the head of a match across the sole of his dead partner's boot. The cupped flame threw his face into bold silhouette.

A range dandy, Dufresne, from the high crown of his white beaver hat to the polished toes of his shop-made alligator boots. Black coat, black chaps, white shirt. Silver and black. Sleek and quick as a black cat. He swung up on his horse and rode to meet the Indian girl, dangerously drunk—handsome as Satan.

"Well, bless my eyes if it ain't little Fern. Ridin' lonesome. Which way, little lady?"

Dufresne rode close, his white teeth smiling. As their stirrups touched, Dufresne's swift arms lifted the girl from her saddle. He twisted the gun from her hand, laughed as she fought him with desperate fury. His kisses bruised the Indian girl's lips. Then he swung his horse toward some ragged hills covered with scrub pines, his taunting voice mocking her terrified struggles.

His arms were steel bands. His whiskey-fumed breath made her faint with fright, as his big black horse loped into the night. His goal was a deserted log cabin up on the fringe of the Bar U Bar range. A cabin that was used, from time to time, by Anse Cartright and his men when they met to plan their rustling forays. The cabin was stocked with canned stuff and bacon and a jug of whiskey from Phil LaBois' still. Inside its four log walls men had died by gun and knife. It was called Lost Cabin, and the spot was shunned by honest men because of its evil history.

Brant was dead. Anse Cartright was busy with his butchering crew. There was no one to follow him as Dufresne headed for that hidden refuge with the kidnapped Indian girl.

WHILE up on the top of Red Butte a huge fire flamed against the night sky. Around that campfire danced the bronze, painted braves of the Assiniboine and Gros Ventres Sioux, chanting their war song, working themselves into frenzied ardor. Back against the flickering shadows sat the old men whose hearts were burdened with grief and foreboding.

Straining against thongs of deerhide threaded through their shoulder muscles, the young braves, smeared with red and yellow paint, their splendid brown bodies dripping sweat and blood from the torture of the Sun Dance, chanted through pain-twisted lips. The firelight threw the tortured bodies into red relief. The deerhide thongs were soggy with blood. The war drums beat like a fevered pulse. The pulse of a proud race that was dying. Dying without a trace of cowardice. Their god the great Manitou; their chanted song the song of a great people, as old as time is old; their sagas sounding deeds of bravery.

And from the squaw camps below came the wailing of the women who mourned the death of the son of the old medicine man named Watch His Walking.

Dufresne frowned at the glow of the fire on Red Butte. The night wind carried the whispered echo of the war song—the beat of the war drums. He shivered a little and took a drink from his bottle. His face was bleeding from the marks of the hands of the captive girl who had fought until she became weak from exhaustion.

"My people will kill you, Dufresne!" she panted fiercely.

"Your people?" He laughed and held her tighter. "I'm not afraid of your lousy people. Behave, you little devil, or I'll knock you quiet with a rap over your pretty head."

On up the trail to the Lost Cabin, while back on Medicine Creek, a spotted G Dot pony swung obliquely toward the Indian camps, taking a straight course that brought him to a barbed wire gate. Beyond that gate was a horse whose rider had dismounted to drink from a waterhole. The spotted pony caught the scent of the other horse and nickered. The other horse gave reply. Buck Cartright jerked erect, his gun in his hand, a hard glitter in his brood-

ing eyes. The nicker of a horse meant the presence of a rider. Buck mounted and rode cautiously back along the trail to the gate.

He knew that black and white pinto pony. He had seen Fern on that pony many times. Buck had always wondered at the Indian girl's loneliness. Something of a kindred spirit made him pity her. He had known her since she was a tiny, startled-eyed little youngster who played with the other Indian children that scattered like frightened fawns at the approach of a cowboy.

Buck had known her father. He had often ridden to the Indian camps and had liked to sit and talk with the old men who called him The Cowboy Who Rides Alone. Those old men had known him from childhood. Because they had been blessed with a great tolerance, they understood something of the stark loneliness of his boyhood. They asked no questions. They let him sit with them and smoke. Until late years, Buck had been a friend of Tom Water.

Now they were enemies. Tom's mother had made Buck's first pair of moccasins. In the grave of Eyes In The Water was a Winchester carbine, gift from Buck Cartright. Though the sinister shadow of Anse had crept between the young cowpuncher and the younger Indians, Buck knew that the grave, solemn faces of the old men were never turned from him.

A man who rides alone learns many things that are not given to most men. Buck could "read sign" like an Indian. And the empty saddle on the paint pony spelled tragedy.

Buck opened the wire gate and examined the spotted pony. The knotted bridle reins, dropped behind the saddle horn, told him that Fern had not dismounted of her own accord. Because no rider who savvies a range horse ever neglects to ground his bridle reins. A broke horse will stand all day if the reins are dropped. If not, he will start for home.

BACK trailing the pinto was not hard, for the trail was plain. There, at the creek crossing, Buck found Brant's dead body. He picked up Dufresne's sign. Plain as a printed page was the story of Fern's kidnapping. Dufresne would head

for the Lost Cabin. A foregone conclusion!

That cabin with its sinister history, its secrecy, its unmarked graves in the scrub pines, was known to Buck Cartright. He had, upon several occasions, ridden there to prowl about, seeking he knew not what, brooding over the indisputable evidence that Anse was a murderer and thief. He had discovered those several concealed graves that marked the fate of enemies of Anse Cartright, who were lured there and killed—because they knew too much.

Dufresne would take the Indian girl to that cabin. Buck spun the cylinder of his six-shooter and shoved a cartridge into the chamber that he customarily kept empty under the hammer of the single action .45. Then he spurred his horse to a lope. He was going to the Lost Cabin to kill Dufresne. That killing would set his gunhand forever against his father. This would be the declaration of feud. Father against son. A move long contemplated, now to materialize.

Buck Cartright rode alone. He could hope for no reward. Bill Taylor murdered by Anse. Anne Taylor refusing Buck's friendship. He was Anse Cartright's son. He was a Cartright. And Cartright blood was tainted blood. This would be the beginning of the end. Buck would ride alone. Dark brooding rode with him, heavy in his heart as the lead in his gun. There would be no turning back, no compromise. Across yonder Anse and his cowboys butchered their rustled beef steers. Brant was dead. Dufresne would be at Lost Cabin, armed, sneering, ready to kill—Dufresne, the most dangerous man of the Bar U Bar.

Buck pushed his horse hard. The line of his mouth was grim. His eyes smoldered with dark fire. Buck Cartright rode alone.

X

LOST CABIN bathed in the white light of a rising moon that was a lopsided disc of cold white. The stars looked like ragged white holes shot in black velvet. The peaceful silence of the night ripped apart by the tortured scream of a woman—the pound of shod hoofs.

Dufresne flung the fighting girl roughly

against the log wall and leaped through a window, his silver-mounted six-shooter glittering in his hand.

Crimson flame stabbed the shadows. Blood spurted from Buck's ripped cheek as he flung himself from the saddle and lit running. Dodging, running, shooting, he flung himself against the shelter of the cabin. Now he slipped along the outside wall. Dufresne crouched on the opposite side of the cabin, gun ready. Death mocked the men in the dying echoes of their guns.

Now they stood clear of the shelter. Split seconds. . . Spitting guns. . . A gasping curse flung from behind gritted teeth.

Dufresne sagged to his knees, thumbing his gun hammer, dying hard. He slid to the ground, his white shirt stained red, his gun spewing flame. Blinded by death, he lay face down in the dry pine needles, his stiffening fingers gripped around the pearl-handled gun that had sent men to eternity—jerking the trigger.

Buck Cartright stood on wide-spread legs. His gun was empty. Blood streamed from his wounded cheek. Grim, silent, tight-lipped, his slitted gaze fixed on the dying man.

"You've—killed me—Buck Cartright. I never did—have much—luck—in love. Killed—over a damned—squaw!"

Buck Cartright made no reply. He had never killed a man before. He stood there, dazed. The night wind carried the broken echoes of the Sioux war drums, down from the top of Red Butte, from where red fire stabbed the night sky. From inside the cabin came the racked sobs of the Indian girl. Like a man in a nightmare, Buck turned and walked to the cabin door. He opened it and went inside. Pitch black in there.

"Are you all right, Fern?" he asked in a toneless voice.

"I am all right. Just scared. You came just in time—friend."

"I killed Dufresne," Buck said dully. "Dufresne is dead. You're not afraid of me, are you? I came to help you, that's all."

"I understand." Fern got to her feet as Buck lit a candle. One of her arms hung limply.

"You're hurt," said Buck.

"I'm all right. He threw me against the

wall. I think he broke my arm." She sat down dizzily on a chair. "You are a good man, Buck Cartright. I feel bad because I have hated you."

"We won't talk about that. It don't matter, anyhow. Let's take a look at your arm."

He examined the injured arm with hands that shook a little. "It's dislocated. Shut your eyes and sit tight—while I—There!" A deft twist, and the dislocated shoulder snapped into place. Fern had fainted from the sudden pain. When she regained consciousness, Buck was holding a dipper of water to her lips.

"YOU'LL be okay in a little while. I found a jug of whisky. Think you could take a swallow?"

"I'll try it."

"That's the stuff. I'll try a snort of it myself. Killing that damn skunk kind of upset me."

"You're hurt."

"Just a nick in my cheek. Close call." He grinned wanly as Fern choked on the whisky.

"You ain't much of a drinker, Fern. Me either. That jolt I took has made me kinda foolish. If you don't mind my askin', what took you over on the Bar U Bar range?"

Haltingly, Fern told of her meeting with Anne Taylor. "Anne said to tell you to get to the Block Y ranch as quick as you could. She said to say to you that your pardner needed you."

"Gosh," said Buck, "you don't know how much that means to me."

"I think I do, though. I'm an Indian, but I'm also a woman. And the difference in the color of my skin don't change the fact that my heart is a woman's heart."

"You bet it don't, Fern. You're ace high and you're plumb game. Now tell me some more about Tom Water goin' on the warpath. We have to bust up that war party, or there'll be hell to pay. Excuse me for cussin'."

"You can hear the drums," said the Indian girl. "They're pounding louder than ever. That means that the young men are getting more excited. They're pulling loose from the buckskin strings. They're dancing now. In a little while they'll be coming down the butte. They'll get the

wachpacta and burn him at the stake."

"Where have they got Rader cached?"

"Near here—in an old cave. They'll kill me for taking you there, but I'll do it."

"Is it that old bear hole above the birch grove?"

"You know where that cave is, then?"

"Tom and I used to play there when we were kids. I'll go on to the cave."

"They'll kill you!"

"Not if I can put across the trick I have in mind."

"A trick?"

Buck grinned grimly. "An Injun trick. I'm goin' to steal this Rader polecat and before I'm finished with him, he'll mebbyso wish he was back among the Assiniboine braves, dancin' the cakewalk on hot coals. I've always wanted to have a heart-to-heart talk with that wachpacta."

"You're going to kill him?"

"If he don't tell me everything I want to find out, I might beat it out of him. But I don't aim to kill him unless I have to. Can you take Dufresne's horse and make it to the Block Y ranch?"

"Of course."

"Good. I want you to tell Johnny Green that I'm holding Major Rader here at this cabin. Tell him that the man who killed Bill Taylor is dead—that I killed him here, and I can prove that Dufresne, not Anse Cartright, fired the shot that killed Anne's father."

"You can prove that?"

"Not right now, I can't, but before I'm done with Major Rader, I have a hunch I can prove it. Dufresne always packed a .303 calibre saddle gun, and dad used a .30-40 Winchester carbine. I managed to get hold of the bullet that killed Bill Taylor, and that bullet was a .303. And I have a strong hunch that it was Major Rader who engineered that murder."

"But tell Green to arrest Anse Cartright for putting over the deal. He's just as guilty as Dufresne, so far as that goes. I'm not trying to shield my father in this. I'm simply laying out the facts. Tell Green he'd better stop that Sun Dance if he can. Now I better be shoving along before it's too late—because this promises to be some night."

Fern pointed to the fire on Red Butte, from whence came a hush, then a great rumbling war cry. "The wachpacta has

been taken up the Red Butte. He is already tied to the stake!" she cried.

XI

ANDREW BLAKE and Louie LaBois had followed the half-drunk Oscar Blake from the hotel room of Johnny Green. Keeping always just out of sight, they dogged the dandified clerk from the hotel to the telephone office. Oscar's sporty looking flivver was parked there, and the two half-breed Indian policemen exchanged knowing grins as Oscar fouled the air with his cursing. All four tires of the little car were flat, casings and tubes ruined by long knife gashes. Also, the motor had been tampered with. The spark plugs were smashed, the wires broken, and sand had been poured into the crankcase.

Whining, snarling, cursing, Oscar wept over the ruined car that had been his great pride, hallmark of his fancied elegance. His car the object of dastardly vandalism! The pasty hotel clerk stumbled along the street, vowing vengeance on his enemies. Anger and grief drove the whisky fumes from his weak brain. As he made his way toward the Chink's, the customary swagger gone from his gait, he was almost sober—almost sober and more than a little dangerous.

The damaged car was a warning. He knew who had done that piece of vandalism. Tears burned his red-lidded eyes. His tongue flicked across dry lips. His weak chin quivered—even as his right hand crept up under his coat to feel the flat automatic in the armpit holster.

Even rats will fight. Oscar was a rat, but a dangerous rat just now as he slipped into the Chink's. He passed through the front part that was a lunch counter, back through a narrow hallway to a heavy plank door. He rapped furtively, in a peculiar signal. A peephole shutter slid open. A pair of slanted eyes looked him over. Then the door was opened, and Oscar was admitted to a dimly lit room bare of furnishings except some wooden bunks. The heavy odor of opium smoke hung in the dead air.

"Smoke, Oscah?" cackled the wily Chinaman.

"No. It's snow I want." He passed over a banknote. "Make it snappy."

Five minutes later Oscar stepped back

onto the sidewalk. His step was bold, swaggering, his pale eyes bright from the powerful effect of the drug he had taken.

Two blots moved in the shadow of a log wall. The blots followed Oscar Blake up the street. Suddenly the dapper hotel clerk spun around. Andrew Blake and Louis LaBois were plainly visible as they passed across a lighted space under a dingy street lamp.

The crack of Oscar Blake's .38 automatic. *Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat!* An electric drill might make such a noise. Andrew Blake went down, clawing at his stomach. Louie LaBois reeled drunkenly, his heavy .45 thudding its big slugs wildly. Then the gun slid from his fingers and he stumbled heavily and fell. Oscar Blake stood over the two dying policemen. His sallow face was livid and distorted.

“WHO set you after me, Louie?” he snarled, slipping a fresh clip of cartridges into his smoking gun.

“Fat. Fat said you was throwing in with that Marshal Green. We was to get you.”

“Yeah. Fat squealed, did he? Well, the joke's on you two bums, ain't it?”

Oscar turned his dying half-brother over. Andrew's abdomen was soggy with blood. His dark face twisted with pain. With a twisted grin, Oscar jerked the trigger of his gun and Andrew Blake's head fell back, a black hole between the glazing eyes.

Oscar turned back to Louie.

“Good-bye, Louie.”

The .38 cracked a second time. Louie's forehead under the damp, black hair was marred by a black hole that oozed thick blood.

The automatic slid back into its holster. Oscar swaggered on down the street. Flames now showed from the upper floor of the hotel. Oscar gave a startled, thin-voiced cry of horror as he visioned the ruin of all his resplendent clothes.

“Oh, cripes—cripes!” He broke into a run.

Men were pouring into the street, all running toward the fire. Shouts, hoarse with that crazy terror that fire strikes into men's hearts.

From his doorway at the Lodge, Fat saw Oscar Blake coming on a run. He stepped back inside, appeared again, his right hand hidden under his soiled bar apron. Fat

was alone, his customers all having fled. A grim smile flickered across his beefy face as he stood back of a pile of empty beer kegs. Oscar passed the door, running, his thin voice whining.

“Cripes, oh, cripes! Cripes!”

Fat stepped from behind the beer kegs. His right hand slid from under the apron. Blue steel glittered. The sound of the gun was blurred by the shouts of fire-fighters. The running Oscar lost his balance, pitched against the side of a building, spun crazily and somersaulted. He lay in the dirt of the street, an awkward lump of a thing dressed in gaudy clothes, a bullet hole between his thin shoulders.

OLD Blake and Phil LaBois came in by way of the back door. Fat set out the bar bottle and three glasses.

“Green's just pulled out fer hell,” leered Blake, drinking from the bottle in gulps that sent his Adam's apple up and down like a bobbing cork.

“Yeah?” Fat showed little surprise. “Hotel's on fire, ain't it?”

“I'll tell a man she's afire.” Blake's voice dropped to a cautious whisper. “Seen Andrew and Louie?”

“They ain't bin in here.”

“Seen Oscar around?”

“Oscar ain't bin in here since noon.”

“Andrew and Louie was to start out with the lick. It's still there in the back shed. And Oscar was to take a note over tuh Major Rader, so as tuh tip him off the booze was goin' through. Rader was tuh see Tom Water didn't stop the load goin' to Phil's place fer doctorin'.”

“Yeah?” Fat continued polishing glasses.

“Come on, Phil,” said Blake. “Fat's dumb as a post. Danged if I see why Anse keeps him here at the Lodge. We better start that wagon load uh booze, er Anse'll skin us alive fer not 'tendin' to it. Andrew and Louie most likely got drunk. Oscar's chasin' some woman. Fat's drunk as a owl. It's up to you and me, Phil, tuh keep the ball a-rollin'. Fat, I've a mind tuh gun-whup yuh all over the place. Speakin' uh guns, where's my six-shooter I left here? The one the gunsmith was workin' on fer me? It's got a cedar butt with my name on it.”

Fat nodded and opened a drawer. There were several guns in the drawer but none

that answered Blake's description of his pet gun.

"I'd uh swore it was here, Blake. I musta bin wrong. I ain't got much of a memory, though."

"Why don't yuh sober up once?" growled Blake. "Let's go, Phil. I ain't fussy about hangin' around town."

"Better take a drink before yuh go, boys."

They had a drink and stomped out. Fat washed and polished their glasses. He chuckled to himself as he thought of the gun that he had used to kill Oscar—the gun that lay in the street where someone would find it in the morning. The gun with cedar grip that had old man Blake's name carved on it.

"Drunk as a owl, am I?" he mused. "Dumb, am I?" He spun the combination of the safe and from it he took several sheafs of banknotes which he shoved in his pockets. From a distance came the whistle of a locomotive. Fat removed his soiled bar apron and put on his coat and hat. He walked out the front door and over to the depot. As the Eastbound train stopped for water, Fat climbed the steps of the smoking car. The platform was deserted. Everybody but the depot master was at the fire, and the depot master was too busy to notice that the bartender from the Lodge had boarded the train.

XII

HALFWAY to town, Anne Taylor met a Block Y cowboy.

"Johnny Green?" he gave reply to her question. "He's dead. Burned to death in the big hotel fire. And that ain't the half of it, neither. The Blakes had a big gun fight. Oscar killed Andrew Blake and Louie LaBois. Then old man Blake gits Oscar. Willetts picked up old man Blake's gun outa the street where he dropped it.

"Fat has skipped out with all the money from the Lodge, and the hotel money that was kept there at the Lodge is likewise gone. Every drinkin' man in town is tighter than a drum. There's a hot time in the old town tonight. Willetts has the jail filled a'ready, and him and five deputies is shore busy. Willetts slung three Bar U Bar men in jail, and says that Anse ain't gonna spring 'em out."

"Are you positive about Johnny Green being dead?"

"Plumb positive, Miss Anne. Willetts hints that Green was murdered, but there's no proof. Gosh, the whole town's gone haywire."

Stunned by this load of bad news, Anne and the cowboy headed for the Block Y ranch. There they found Fern waiting. The Indian girl told her dramatic story of Dufresne's death and Buck's declaration that Dufresne, not Anse, had killed Bill Taylor. That Buck was now making a desperate attempt to steal Major Rader away from the Indians.

"There's nothing for us to do," said Anne hopelessly, "but to sit tight and pray that things will not turn out as badly as they now look. Somehow, I just won't believe that Johnny is dead. He's too good at his trade to be outsmarted by those drunken Blakes. He went to see Oscar, of course. And he's made Oscar talk. No, I just won't believe that Johnny is dead."

At about that same hour, Anse Cartright was expressing almost that exact opinion as he listened to the story spilled from the coarse lips of the elder Blake.

"But I tell yuh, Anse, I emptied that pump gun into him five times. Five ten-gauge shells loaded with buckshot at twelve-foot range. Hell, I could see him kinda twitch under the bed covers. A few stray shots bust the lamp, and the works goes up in smoke. Andrew and Louie was tuh git Oscar. They was tuh croak that double-crossin' little rat. With our own ears, Anse, we hear that loose-tongued little fool say you killed Bill Taylor from the brush. He watched yuh. Well, his damn' affidavit went up in the same fire that toasted Green."

"The hell yuh say, Blake," sneered Anse. "Then who killed Brant? And what's become uh Dufresne? Brant's deader'n a rock, and Dufresne has plumb disappeared. And not more than an hour ago, one uh my boys sights a rider forkin a big line-backed buckskin hoss, a-ridin' like hell fer Red Butte, where the Injuns is havin' a pow-wow uh some kind. And where's Major Rader? He was tuh receive them dressed beef I sent by wagon to the agency. There's a fool story out that the Injuns is on the prod and has killed Rader. What do you and Phil make uh that?"

Blake swore softly. The cold grip of fear was reaching out of the night clutching at Anse and Blake and Phil LaBois. From the direction of Red Butte came the boom of the Sioux war drums, the sound of rifle shots—hushed by the distance, yet promising sinister things.

WHILE Johnny Green pushed hard for the Indian dance, there on top of Red Butte, the big buckskin carried him up the steep trail. Red firelight showed above the stunted pines, its flames licking at the night sky. Hoarse throats chanted the war song. The drums pounded out their blood-chilling cadence. Rifles cracked as the frenzied dancers emptied their guns at the pale moon. Johnny quit his horse and climbed on afoot; on up the rocky trail; on toward that pulse-quickenning scene. That awful, spectacular scene of the Sioux Sun Dance. Bronze bodies painted, blood smeared, sweating as the young men danced and chanted their war song. Others, their shoulders and chest muscles pulled apart by threaded thongs, strained back against their cruel tethers, striving to rip free their muscles. Fire and blood and smoke and blood. That chanted war song. That eternal pulse of drums—the war-like pulse beat of the Sioux Sun Dance, fierce, terrible.

Inside that ring of old men, inside the war bonnets of eagle feathers, two men, naked save for the breech clouts about their loins, wrestled and fought. The dark body of Tom Water dripped with blood and sweat. The man who fought him was Buck Cartright. Buck, his clothes discarded for loin cloth and moccasins, Buck who had challenged that most valiant of dancers to fight for the scalp of a jibbering, terrified white man in soiled riding breeches and English boots who was bound to a tree at the foot of which was piled dry wood.

So had Buck Cartright moved to save the life of Major Rader. Buck had suddenly appeared there at the war dance. His shouted challenge had been immediately taken up by Tom Water.

"We fight for the scalp of wachpacta?"

"For the lousy scalp of the wachpacta. No holts barred."

"You are the wachpacta's friend?" questioned Tom.

"Friend to that skunk? Hell, no. But I want the truth out of him."

"Then get it now, before we fight. Because whether I win or lose, the life of the wachpacta belongs to these people of the Gros Ventres and Assiniboine Sioux. I do not fight for the life of Major Rader. I fight you because I hate you—because your name is Cartright and your father killed Bill Taylor."

"That's a lie!" flared Buck.

Tom pointed to the terrified man tied to the tree. "Ask him."

Buck stepped up to Rader. His hard eyes gazed burningly into the wachpacta's frightened face.

"Whose gun killed Bill Taylor?" gritted Buck.

"Dufresne's gun."

Buck whirled to face Tom. The young policeman smiled enigmatically.

"Who held the gun that killed Taylor?" asked Tom. "Who did the shooting?"

"Anse Cartright. Anse's gun sight was broken. He borrowed Dufresne's rifle. Dufresne was the man who paid me and paid Anse. Dufresne's uncle put me into this infernal job. Dufresne was the power behind all that I've done, and all that Anse has done. I admit my juggling of beef contracts and crooked dealings with the Indians. Anse was the killer. God, Buck, save me!"

"Buck can't save you," said Tom Water. "No man can save you. Die like a man, if you have the nerve." He turned to Buck.

"Fight, Buck Cartright, till one of us is dead—till the best man wins, and the weak man dies. Fight, you son of Anse Cartright!"

WITH a snarl, Buck rushed. Their bodies thudded together. In silence—a silence made more terrible by the thud of blows and their labored breathing—these two young athletes fought. Their moccasins slipping in puddled blood and sweat. The drum still pounded. The warriors of War Bonnet still chanted in frenzied ardor.

Foot by foot, keeping to the shadows, Johnny Green crept forward. Every Indian, save a few of the old men, stared at the two fighters whose naked bodies, smeared with blood and dirt and sweat,

locked in fearful embrace, braced and staggered and came apart—only to crash again in terrific impact.

A jack-knife clicked open in Johnny Green's hand. His whispered words went only to the ears of a few old men. Now the knife blade slithered. A moment later Johnny Green dragged the terrified Wachpacta into the deep shadows. Fern White waited there, a gun in her hand.

"Take him to Sheriff Willetts, as hard as you can push the horses, little friend."

Johnny now slipped back to the rim of the firelight. There was a naked gun in the little Marshal's hand as he stood with the few old men.

Tom and Buck were fighting like two maddened animals. So fought the son of Anse Cartright and the son of Eyes in The Water, neither using a foul blow, neither giving way. Toe to toe, bloody fists smashing, hard-muscled bodies swaying in steel grips. It was a fight to remember, that fight between Tom Water and Buck Cartright. Equally matched for skill and strength and endurance and courage, they gave no quarter, asked no mercy.

Now a shrill cry racked the throats of the painted warriors. They had discovered Rader's escape.

As they forgot the fighters who, in turn, ceased fighting, one man faced them. That man was Johnny Green, United States Marshal. Behind him were grouped a few old men.

Johnny's white-handled .45 swung in his hand. A twisted smile spread across his freckled face. For a tense moment, a moment during which the little Marshal's life was hanging by a slim thread, his eyes held the eyes of that band of Indians.

"Tom Water," said Johnny quietly, "you are under arrest. So is Buck Cartright. You'll both face what punishment is coming to you. There's six bullets in this gun and I'm ready to use 'em all."

JOHNNY'S voice took up his next words in the language of the Sioux.

"I represent the Great White Chief at Washington. If one word of a lie passes my mouth, tie me to that stake you have made ready for your wachpacta. I come here to act as your friend. Listen to my talk. I have taken your wachpacta and sent him away to be punished. He will

go to the Federal prison. Before another passing of the sun, Anse Cartright will be under arrest. Sheriff Willetts has a paper that tells much that will be said in court. No white man who is guilty will go unpunished. Ask Tom Water when Johnny Green has lied to the Indians. Tom Water, have I lied?"

"No." Tom's voice was low-pitched, vibrant. "This *wasegee kuzee*—this white man—is my friend. He is a friend to my people. I have acted in anger and with too much haste. I am wrong."

A grunt of approval from the old men. A murmur of agreement from the young warriors. Tom Water again spoke.

"We go back to our tepees. The law of the Great White Chief holds strong. I am under arrest."

"Now," said Johnny, speaking English, "we're getting somewhere, Tom. But before you go, know this—that Johnny Green is dead. He did not come here. And now, Tom, shake hands with Buck Cartright. I've sure made a big mistake in sizing up that cowboy. Buck, regardless of everything, you've acted like a white man."

"Not exactly, Green. I wanted to clear Anse Cartright. Not because I owe him any allegiance, but because he's my father and I hoped to prove that Cartright blood is not bad blood. I've failed. My father killed Bill Taylor."

"The hell he did!" Johnny grinned. "I happened tuh have a talk with your mother and Sheriff Willetts' wife. Anse Cartright ain't your father. So when Willetts goes to pinch Anse, you go along with him. You'll find Anse at the home ranch. I can't go into details, but Anse will be there.

"But I'm under arrest now?" said Buck.

"You and Tom. Sure thing. I like to forgot. I'm takin' you both to the Block Y ranch. I reckon Willetts will be there by the time we arrive. Tom, before the Indians leave for their own tepees, tell them to remember that Johnny Green is dead. Nobody here has seen me. Even Major Rader didn't know me with a handkerchief across my face. And now let's get goin'. I promised a lady I'd see that you both went along with me. . . . Tom, you big bonehead, did you ever marry that Indian girl you told me about? No? Why not?"

"Because she did not love me. She wanted white man."

"Yeh? A man in love is the dumbest thing alive. I'll prove it when we get to the Block Y. Let's go, you two plumb idiots. You're a fine-lookin' pair of ladies' men, I'll say. I was as bad, till I got married. Come on!"

IT was dawn of another day when Sheriff Willetts rode boldly through the gate at the Bar U Bar ranch. His right hand never strayed from the butt of his gun. In the inside pocket of his coat was a warrant for the arrest of Anse Cartright. That warrant was for grand theft and murder of an Indian policeman, killed the year before near the Bar U Bar ranch.

With Sheriff Willetts rode Buck Cartright, special deputy. Buck's face was battered, but his bruised lips smiled grimly.

Anse Cartright stepped to his bunkhouse door. His ugly face was twisted in a leering grin. His big hands were folded across his buttoned coat.

"Heard you was a-comin', Willetts. So I got ready. You kin take me tuh town. Heard about Buck turnin' deputy, too. He'll make a good cop. God knows he was never no good tuh me. Have yuh got warrants fer old Blake and Phil LaBois?"

"I'll take 'em along," said Willetts grimly. "Are they here?"

"Both of 'em are here inside the bunkhouse. Seen yore maw, Buck?"

"She's at the Taylor ranch, her and Mrs. Willetts."

Anse Cartright nodded. "Figgered so. Did she tell yuh who yuh was? That you wasn't our own brat? That we got yuh from some Ioway immigrant pilgrims? Did she tell yuh that?"

"No. My mother told me the truth—that I was her own son by her first husband, who was killed fighting Indians. And that you made her tell folks I was your son. You'd hated my father, and you tried to make me turn crooked to shame her and shame my father's memory. I was aimin' to kill you, but the sheriff talked me out of it. But I'll see you hung, you dirty skunk."

"You'll never see Anse Cartright hung, yuh young whelp. So yore maw told yuh, huh? When?"

"Last night. When Anne Taylor and I was married."

"Yo're married tuh Bill Taylor's gal, huh? Ain't that just too sweet?"

"Double weddin'," added the sheriff. "Tom Water married the Fern White gal."

"I reckon that dirty snake of a Johnny Green was there?"

"Johnny Green's dead—burned tuh death."

"So Blake and Phil tried tuh tell me. They lied. You lie. He'll be workin' again under another name before long. You ner Green can't fool me. I don't savvy how Green put 'er over on Blake and Phil, but he did, er else they got paid fer lyin'. We talked 'er out last night. Had quite a argument that got right hot. They thought they was tough, Blake an' Phil. But they wasn't tough enough tuh down ol' Anse. I got both the skunks. They're laid out on the floor, so full uh lead it'll take six men tuh lift 'em. But while ol' Anse was gittin' a meal, they taken a bite er two. Hang me? Hang ol' Anse Cartright? Take another guess."

His big hands unfolded, jerking at his coat. His shirt underneath was red with blood. With a rattling, mocking laugh, Anse Cartright sat down on the doorstep. Before Willetts and Buck could reach him, the old renegade toppled against the door jamb, dead.

So ended the range war at War Bonnet. So the troubles of the Gros Ventres and Assiniboine Sioux were finally settled when a real man was made Agent at War Bonnet. Another blood-spattered page was added to the history of that cow country.

And a small-statured, wiry-built, red-haired, freckled man took back his gold badge from Sheriff Willetts and pinned it on his flannel shirt. He forked his line-backed buckskin horse and rode away. From a distant town, a telegram went to Johnny Green's chief. It read as follows:

Will be reporting when my vacation is up. Had plenty of fun and didn't have to spend all my money, either. Will have sufficient evidence to send Rader over the road without making personal appearance. Tom is handling all details.

Say, I bet you was never best man at a double wedding. Sorry to hear Johnny Green is dead. But it'll save some folks around the country a few dollars they'd be spending on cartridges. Am signing this Number Thirteen—my lucky number.

So-long. Don't take any wooden nickels.

WHO next? What unsung scion of sock will rise to blast the crown from the Champ's mighty brow? Read **AFTER SCHMELING—WHO?** in the current issue. Also three big ring novelets and four fast short stories.

FIGHT STORIES

THREE eagles, bound together by ties stronger than blood or duty. Two were doomed to die, while one must watch their hell-bound flight with duty-silenced guns. **DOGWATCH FOR THE LIVING DEAD** by George Bruce.

WINGS



Along with the usual semi-book-length novel, the current issue of **DETECTIVE BOOK MAGAZINE** stars two breath-takingly swift novelets by Franklin H. Martin and Ted Tinsley. Also numerous short stories and another of **DETECTIVE BOOK'S** true killer cases, the grim story of **THE MORPHINE MURDERESS**.

DETECTIVE BOOK MAGAZINE



Frontier Stories features a great novel of Frémont's day by J. Allan Dunn. The story of John Clayborne, blue-blood of Old Louisiana, who blazed the uncharted trail of Pacific Empire to forget a Southern Jezebel's pale white hands. Also numerous novelets, short stories and true-fact articles of the Old West.

FRONTIER STORIES

NORTH•WEST ROMANCES mirrors the struggle for fur-and-gold empire. Across its pages march bearded voyageurs, reckless sourdoughs, women weak and strong, and the tall scarlet-tunicked Men of the Mounted.

NORTH•WEST ROMANCES

BEAUTY—the kind you buy—wasn't enough for that South Sea Attila. He swore he'd steal the fairest woman in all that island Paradise . . . **ISLE OF BONDAGE**, a big novelet in the current

LOVE ROMANCES

On Sale at all Newsstands

SNUBBED BECAUSE OF "ADOLESCENT SKIN"?

Act now to help keep your blood free of pimple-making poisons

Don't go on being cursed by loathsome pimples. Don't make others feel ashamed of you or shun you. Find out what's the matter and correct it.

During the period of adolescence, in the years between 13 and 25, important glands are developing. This causes disturbances throughout your body. Waste poisons from the intestines often find their way into the blood . . . and may break out in ugly skin eruptions. You must help free your system of these intestinal poisons.

Thousands of young people have solved this problem—simply by eating Fleischmann's Yeast. Each cake of this fresh food contains millions of tiny, living plants that act to help you eliminate waste poisons from the body—before they can get into the blood. Your skin becomes clearer and fresher again. Many get remarkable results in 30 days or less. Don't lose time. Start eating Fleischmann's Yeast now . . . 3 cakes daily, one before each meal.

CLOSING OUT AUTOMATICS

10 SHOT 32 CAL.

Military Model F-129. Extra large frame, fine blued finish; extra long barrel to give balance to large magazine. Hard shooting; new; imported; accurate; safety; length overall 6 1/2"; weight 30 oz., special \$8.95; 32 cal. Pocket size, 8 shot—\$7.95.
Automatics—25 cal. 7 shot; finest German; vest pocket models—"Zehna"—\$9.95; "Schmeisser," \$10.95.
Open Holsters Auto.—75c; Revolver 95c; Shoulder—\$1.75. Ammunition, 25 cal. 65c; 32 cal. 75c per box of 25.
\$2 Deposit required on C. O. D.'s. None sold to minors. Bargain Catalog; S&W, Colts, Rifles, Air Guns, Telescopes, Knives, Police Goods, Badges, etc. Send 3c stamp.



LEE SALES CO. (Dept. FN) 35 W. 32nd St., N. Y. C.



A single application on plates—even lowers—brings all-day comfort. One application lasts up to 48 hours. A new adhesive in cream paste form. *Nothing else like it!* More economical than powders. Recommended by dentists. Made by the makers of Stera-Kleen. Money back if not delighted.

FOR FREE SAMPLE write The Phillips & Benjamin Co.; Dept. 86, Waterbury, Conn.

FREE! PHOTO ENLARGEMENT

Hand Tinted in Natural Colors or TWO Beautiful Enlargements or 8 duplicate prints given free with PHOTO FINISHING order for ROLL DEVELOPED WITH 8 HIGH GLOSS LIFETIME PRINTS Reprints 3c each. Studio-to-you service makes quality work at real savings possible. Nation's most modern plant, individual professional supervision, fine grade materials. Satisfaction or money back guaranteed. (Candid camera rolls developed free with order for 3 1/2" enlargements at 4c each or contact prints at 2c each.)

25c COIN

SUNSET SERVICE, 206 Sunset Bldg., St. Paul, Minn.

Enjoy **BEAUTIFUL NATURAL-LOOKING FALSE TEETH** LOW PRICES **60 DAYS' TRIAL**

SEND NO MONEY

Made to order by FIT-RITE Improved method BY MAIL, all over world. Finest Quality. MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE YOU WILL BE SATISFIED. We take your word, Catalog and Impression material FREE. Write NOW!

UNITED STATES DENTAL COMPANY,
Dept. 813 1555 Milwaukee Avenue Chicago, Ill.

SONG POEMS WANTED AT ONCE

Mother, Home, Love, Patriotic, Sacred, Comic or any subject. Don't delay—send best poem today for immediate consideration.
RICHARD BROS., 27 Woods Bldg., Chicago, Ill.

Start a **BIG PAY BUSINESS** OF YOUR OWN WITHOUT CASH!

SELL WHOLESALE TO STORES

DID YOU make \$50 last week? Does your job offer you real future? If not, why not place line 200 nationally advertised products with stores. Sold new way. Bigger profits for merchants. Big earnings for you every week. Start without investment. Get FREE book giving FACTS!

WORLD'S PRODUCTS COMPANY
Dept. 8855 Spencer, Indiana

LAW STUDY AT HOME

Legally trained men win higher positions and bigger success in business and public life. Greater opportunities now than ever before. Big corporations are headed by men with legal training.

More Ability! More Money! More Prestige!

We guide you step by step. You can train at home during spare time. Degree of LL. B. conferred.

Successful graduates in every section of the United States. We furnish all text material, including fourteen-volume Law Library. Low cost, easy terms. Get our valuable 64-page "Law Training for Leadership" and "Evidence" books FREE. Send for them NOW.

LaSalle Extension—adult business training 875-L Chicago

BE A PASSENGER TRAFFIC INSPECTOR

Specialize . . . We Have Jobs Ready

MEN—19 to 50— trained as Railway and Bus Passenger Traffic Inspectors earn good pay to start and advance quickly with experience. Complete our few weeks' home-study course and we place you at up to \$135 per month, plus expenses to start, or refund tuition. Write for Free Booklet.

Standard Business Training Institute
Div. 1308 Buffalo, N. Y.

WILL YOU WEAR THIS SUIT and Make up to \$12 in a Day!

Let me send you a fine all-wool union tailored suit FREE OF ONE PENNY COST. Just follow my easy plan and show the suit to your friends. Make up to \$12 in a day easily. No experience — no house-to-house canvassing necessary.

Send for Samples—FREE OF COST

Write today for FREE details. ACTUAL SAMPLES and "sure-fire" money-making plans. Send no money.

H. J. Collin, PROGRESS TAILORING CO., Dept. H-204, 500 South Throop Street, Chicago, Illinois.

THE TRUTH ABOUT Stomach Ulcers

Caused by Gastric Hyperacidity

FREE Booklet on simple home treatment. Many report they were saved from expensive operations. Learn all about this amazing inexpensive home treatment. Pain relieved from the start. No rigid or liquid diet. This valuable booklet sent FREE with information as to guaranteed trial offer. **TWIN CITY VON CO., Dept. 203, Saint Paul, Minnesota.—Adv.**

SONG POEMS WANTED

TO BE SET TO MUSIC

Free Examination. Send Your Poems to

J. CHAS. McNEIL
BACHELOR OF MUSIC

4153-NF, South Van Ness Los Angeles, Calif.

NO JOKE TO BE DEAF

—Every deaf person knows that—

Mr. Way made himself hear his watch tick after being deaf for twenty-five years, with his Artificial Ear Drums. He wore them day and night. They stopped his head noises. They are invisible and comfortable, no wires or batteries. Write for TRUE STORY. Also booklet on Deafness.

Artificial Ear Drum

THE WAY COMPANY
737 McKerchey Bldg. Detroit, Michigan

FOREST JOBS

available at \$125-\$175 per month, steady. Cabin, Hunt, trap, patrol. Qualify at once. Get details immediately.

RAYSON SERVICE BUREAU,
B-52, Denver, Colo.



Read This Free Offer!

and know how such Pimples, Blackheads, Freckles and superficial Blemishes are wholly in outer skin are now quickly removed. When your old outer layer of skin is flaked away, you have a new, fresh surface skin. Large pores and fine lines diminish and you look younger, more lovable.

DO IT YOURSELF AT HOME—QUICKLY!

This new home method is all explained and free Treatise is being mailed absolutely free to readers of this magazine. So, worry no more over your humiliating, superficial blemishes or signs of aging in your outer skin. Get this new Treatise now. Simply send post card or letter to WITOL BEAUTY LABORATORIES, INC., Dept. 68, No. 170 Broadway, New York, and you will receive it in plain wrapper, postpaid and absolutely FREE. If pleased tell friends.

ANY PHOTO ENLARGED

Size 8 x 10 inches or smaller if desired. Same price for full length or bust form, groups, landscapes, pet animals, etc., or enlargements of any part of group picture. Safe return of original photo guaranteed.

47¢
3 for \$1.00



SEND NO MONEY Just mail photo or snapshot (any size) and within a week you will receive your beautiful enlargement, guaranteed fadeless. Pay postman 47¢ plus postage—or send 49¢ with order and we pay postage. Big 16x20-inch enlargement sent O. O. D. 78¢ plus postage or send 80¢ and we pay postage. Take advantage of this amazing offer now. Send your photos today. Specify size wanted. Standard Art Studios, 113 S. Jefferson St., Dept. 598-K, Chicago.

SELL SUITS ON OUR EASY CREDIT PLAN

FREE SUITS and Pants given as Bonus Besides Large Cash Profits, Premiums and Gifts

Sell only (5) suits to get a FREE SUIT. No limit to number of FREE garments you may earn. Wholesale prices, \$17.95 and up. Sample line FREE. No experience needed to make easy sales. All garments individually cut and tailored to measure. Satisfaction or money back guarantee.

★★★ THREE STAR CLOTHES, INC. ★★★
330 SOUTH FRANKLIN ST., Dept. CM-1, CHICAGO, ILL.

Used HOME-STUDY COURSES BOUGHT and SOLD

SENSATIONAL BARGAINS FOR YOU !!

Educational books and used correspondence courses of every kind bought, sold, rented, exchanged. Old established concern guarantees 100 per cent satisfaction on every transaction. Write for FREE illustrated catalogues and full details. Send no money. Mail penny postcard today!

NELSON-HALL COMPANY, 755 Manhattan Bldg., CHICAGO

WANTED ORIGINAL POEMS SONGS

FOR IMMEDIATE CONSIDERATION SEND POEMS TO

Columbian Music Publishers, Ltd.

Dept. 17, Toronto, Can.

ELECTRICITY

"LEARN BY DOING" 12 weeks training

TRAIN NOW FOR A BETTER JOB!



My Big Free Book tells you how we train you in 12 weeks—to start in the growing field of Electricity by actual shopwork on real electrical machinery in the Big Chicago Coyne Shops—not by books or correspondence. Expert instructors guide you every step of the way. Experience or advanced education not needed. **Many Earn While Learning.** Free lifetime employment service. Diesel Engine, Electrical Refrigeration and Air Conditioning instructions included. Mail

Coupon for FREE BOOK and All Facts.
H. C. LEWIS, Pres., COYNE ELECTRICAL SCHOOL
500 S. Paulina St., Dept. C8-66, Chicago, Illinois
Send Big Free Book with facts on Coyne training and tell me about your "Plans" to help me.

NAME _____ AGE _____
ADDRESS _____
CITY _____ STATE _____

FALSE TEETH

SAVE 90 DAYS' TRIAL

HALF If you need teeth, but do not care to spend much money, my

OR

MORE what you want. My guarantee plan gives you three months' trial to see how they fit and look.



Your money back if not perfectly satisfied any time during 90 days' trial. I have thousands of satisfied customers wearing my dental plates made by mail. My Special Method is founded on 30 YEARS' EXPERIENCE.

Write TODAY for FREE impression material and instructions.
DR. CLEVELAND 503-05 Missouri Ave.
Dental Laboratory Dept. 60-L E. St. Louis, Ill.

One Year From Today What Will You Be Earning?

This may be the most important year in your life! Your whole future is apt to depend on how you take advantage of present business changes.

Returning prosperity is opening up new jobs, and creating unusual opportunities. But that does not insure prosperity for you. Only you can insure that.

For months—maybe years—employers will be able to pick and choose out of the millions now unemployed or dissatisfied with their work and pay. Naturally they will pick the men with most preparation and ability.

You should—you must—make yourself quickly more valuable—to protect what you have and to insure getting your share of the promotions and pay raises. It is being done by OTHERS—it can be done by YOU!

Ask us to send you full details about our new spare time training, and to explain how it prepares you to better meet today's demands and opportunities. If you really are in earnest, you should investigate at once. Check your field below, write your name and address, and mail.

LASALLE EXTENSION Dept. 875-R Chicago

Send me, free, the facts about the demands and opportunities in the business field I have checked—about your training for that field.

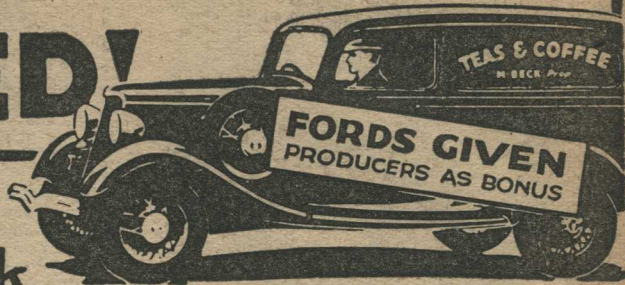
- Higher Accountancy
- Expert Bookkeeping
- Business Management
- Traffic Management
- C. P. A. Coaching
- Modern Salesmanship
- Office Management
- Industrial Management
- Modern Foremanship
- Business English
- Law—LL. B. Degree
- Commercial Law
- Stenotypy
- Effective Speaking

Name.....

Present Position.....

Address.....

FOOD DISTRIBUTORS WANTED!



Routes pay up to \$60.00 in a week

If you are out of work or on part time and need cash at once to pay your bills and live on, you are just the person I am looking for. Send your name at once for complete free facts about my plan. I have an unusual offer for you right now—a wonderful chance to start right in making up to \$10.00 in a day.

Earnings Start at Once

Wonderful Food Distributor Plan making a tremendous "hit" throughout the nation. I must appoint more men and women at once. Don't delay. Send for my plan now—no cost or obligation. Start at once to make money according to simple, proved instructions. Distribute circulars, pick up orders, pocket a big part of every dollar you take in. Producers are given a brand-new, latest model Ford Tudor Sedan as a bonus in addition to cash earnings.

I Send Everything

Previous experience not necessary. I send you positively everything you need to make good money your very first day. No money risk. But you must act fast. Simply send your name and address on the coupon or on a penny postcard. By return mail I'll rush to you the complete

marvelous facts about this astoundingly simple cash producing idea. Won't cost you a penny. You decide if the earning possibilities are big enough for you. You have everything to gain. Send coupon or penny postcard at once.

ALBERT MILLS

4960 Monmouth Ave.

Cincinnati, Ohio

PLAN SENT Free!

ALBERT MILLS, President,
4960 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio.

Rush me your marvelous Food Distributor plan—free and without obligation. Tell me how to make good money at once and get a new Ford car as bonus.

Name.....

Address.....

(Please Print or Write Plainly.)

GAMBLERS SECRETS EXPOSED

Cards 4 new ways to read 'em. X-ray Ceethru know 1st, 2nd, and 3rd without taking card off top. Dice Missers Passers. Quit losing. Send \$1.00 for new book "BEAT THE CHEAT." Invisible card ink. Slot machine. Punchboard exposes. Add 25 cents for 1938 catalog. Send \$1.25 to SPECIALTY EXPOSE, Box 2488, Kansas City, Mo.

BE A RADIO EXPERT

Learn at Home—Make Good Money

Many men I trained at home in spare time make \$30, \$50, \$75 a week. Many make \$5, \$10, \$15 a week extra in spare time while learning. Illustrated 64-page book points out Radio's opportunities, also how you can learn to be a Radio Expert through my practical 50-50 method of training. Television training is included. Money Back Agreement given. Mail coupon today. Get book FREE.

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 8HM,
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Send me, without obligation, your 64-page book "Rich Rewards in Radio" FREE. (Please write plainly.) AGE.....

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY..... STATE.....

LOWEST TIRE PRICES \$1.90 \$2.20
29-440-21 28-415-19

GOODYEAR-FIRESTONE-GOODRICH-U.S. & OTHERS

All Other Brands
You Get More for Your Money
Save 1/4 buying from us under a positive LEGAL AGREEMENT to replace any tires that do not give 12 mos. service at 1/4 purchase price. We can do this because STANDARD BRAND tires when reconditioned with Boyd's expert workmanship, finest material and new methods do the work, as proven by thousands of satisfied users, all over the U.S.A. Convince yourself. Order Now.

12 Months REG'D WARRANTY with Each Tire

BALLOON TIRES		REG. CORD TIRES	
Size	Tires Tubes	Size	Tires Tubes
28x4-40-21	\$1.90 \$1.05	30x3 1/2	\$2.10 \$1.05
28x4-50-20	2.10 1.05	31x4	2.70 1.25
30x4-50-21	2.15 1.15	32x4	3.70 1.25
28x4-75-19	2.00 1.25	32x4	3.70 1.25
29x4-75-20	2.25 1.25	34x4	3.30 1.35
29x4-90-19	2.60 1.25	32x4 1/2	3.10 1.45
30x4-90-19	3.00 1.45	32x4 1/2	3.25 1.45
5-25-17	2.65 1.35	34x4 1/2	3.20 1.45
28x4-35-18	2.65 1.35	30x5	3.40 1.55
28x4-35-19	2.65 1.35	30x5	3.40 1.55
30x4-35-20	2.65 1.35	30x5	3.40 1.55
31x4-35-21	2.95 1.35	32x5	4.00 2.25
6-50-17	2.00 1.40	32x5-8P	6.70 2.35
29x4-50-18	3.00 1.40	32x5-10P	7.70 2.35
29x4-50-19	3.00 1.45	34x7	10.25 4.65
6-00-16	3.00 1.45		
8-00-17	3.15 1.40		
30x4-90-18	3.15 1.40	H. D. Truck Balloon	6.00-20 \$3.45 \$1.65
31x4-90-19	3.15 1.45		6.50-20 4.10 2.95
32x4-90-20	3.15 1.65		7.00-20 5.45 2.95
33x4-90-21	3.40 1.55		7.50-20 6.25 3.75
32x4-50-20	3.50 1.75		8.25-20 8.45 3.95

All Tubes Guaranteed New—All Other Sizes

DEALERS WANTED

Send \$1.00 Deposit on each Tire ordered. (\$3.00 Deposit on each Truck Tire) Balance C. O. D. If you send cash in full deduct 2%. If brand ordered is out of stock we ship equal value.
BOYD TIRE & RUBBER CO., Dept. 808
4521-23 Cottage Grove Ave., CHICAGO, ILL.



START

\$1260 to \$2100 Year

Get Ready Immediately. / FRANKLIN INSTITUTE, Dept. T-242, Rochester, N. Y.
Men—Women / Sirs: Rush to me without charge (1) 32-page book with list of U. S. Government jobs. (2) Tell me how to qualify for one of these jobs.
Sufficient. / Name.....
Mail Coupon today sure. / Address.....

This is a place
holder for the
inside back cover.

This is a place
holder for the back
cover.