



ACTION

SUMMER
20c

TRADE MARK REG.

A STORIES

THE
WORLD'S BEST
FAST-MOVING FICTION

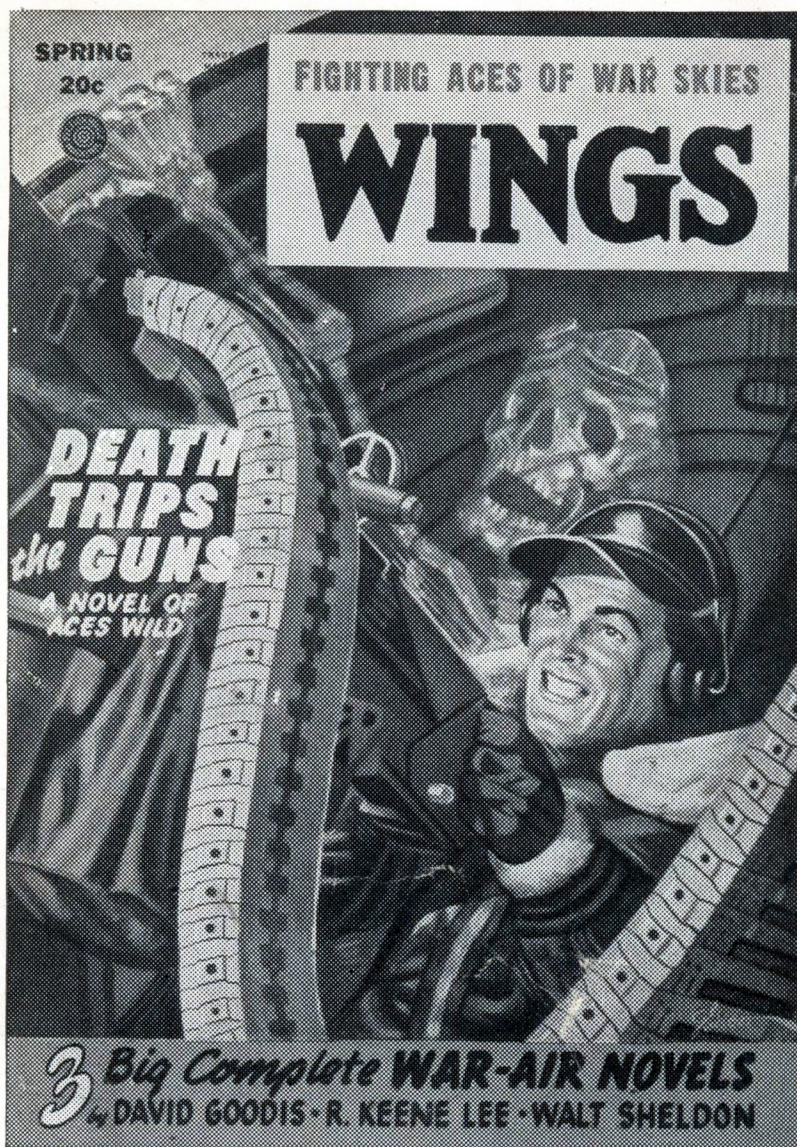
THOMPSON
GILES
CUSHMAN



GUN-ANGEL OF HELL'S HIDEOUT

A galloping Novelet of the Untamed West

by **ROLLIN BROWN**



**TAKE
WINGS**

It will carry you back to England's flying fields, the frosty dawns, the final cup of coffee, rumbling B-24's warming up, the take-off . . . Then the Channel. Corkscrewing Messerschmitts and the hell of flak!

Back to Burma's dragon-peaks. The jungle-choked Me-kong. The P-40's playing tag with tumbling lead-chucking Zeros, while Death, the grinning referee, looked on!

WINGS brings back the never-to-be-forgotten thrill of air action, the romance and the horror and the glory of mile-high combat—a lifetime in 30 seconds!

On sale at all newsstands, get your copy today! **WINGS**

SUMMER—1947

May—July

20c per copy

\$0.80 per year

Vol. XVIII  **52 No. 8**

Reg. U. S. Pat. Off.

ACTION STORIES

T. T. SCOTT, President

MALCOLM REISS, Gen'l Mgr. & Editor

GUN-ANGEL OF HELL'S HIDEOUT Rollin Brown 2

A complete Western novel

Ward Yarbo's Rafter J hardcases held a tight loop on Nuevo Springs. And the one man who could cut their lead-backed dally was clamped in a murder frame, his guns jail-hobbled.

SHOWDOWN COLTS Ben Frank 24

Who in all that fear-frozen crowd would challenge Curly Red's killer rep? Who but a ragged, barefoot button named Ronny.

BLIND SIXES C. Hall Thompson 31

When ambush death struck Kinkaid, Willie Maw was the only witness. But the killers weren't worried—Willie Maw was blind.

SPOILSMEN OF ELDORADO John Starr 44

A smashing Northland novelet

The strongest fist north of Chilkoot belonged to King Hardesty, and Alaska was his kingdom—until the day his luck went cold.

DEAD MEN DON'T DRAW Giles A. Lutz 68

Grimly, Deputy Ben Keiper laid his trap—a two-way death noose for the vacant-eyed giant and the girl with the bush-wack guns.

THE FORGOTTEN OF ALLAH Dan Cushman 78

A novelet of darkest Africa

The ways of fate are devious in Africa's vast, mysterious land. Sometimes, as Kellar learned at Tahoula, it is easier to escape three deaths than one.

LEAD-BRANDED Hascal Giles 96

McKay was safe. Nobody believed that story the Indians told at Raton Pass—until Matt Stone rode in with a five-year-old bullet, and the gun to sling it.

SHADOW OF A LOBO Wayne D. Overholser 106

A novel of Colt retribution

Armfield's toll road was life itself to the mountain-locked valley. To keep it open, even peaceful citizens might turn to murder.



THIS IS A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE



ACTION STORIES: Published quarterly by FICTION HOUSE, INC., 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y. Registered as second class matter January 26, 1937, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. This is a magazine of fiction. The characters named and incidents described do not refer to any actual person. The entire contents of this magazine are copyrighted, 1947, 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: Advertising Director, Fiction House, Inc., 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y.
Printed in U.S.A.

The bull took another run on the rope. Ernie's horse toppled backward.



GUN-ANGEL OF HELL'S HIDEOUT

By Rollin Brown

Ward Yarbo's Rafter J hardcases held a tight loop on Nuevo Springs. And the one man who could cut their lead-backed dally was clamped in a murder frame, his guns jail-hobbled.

ERNIE HEWITT climbed Mill Creek in the early morning, reached the upper flats while shadow still lingered on the mountainside and started his search for the brindle bull where he had left off yesterday. This was rough country and a lot of cattle that didn't belong here were ranging the draws and ravines, so it was no use tracking. But Ernie was a hard

worker and had a stubborn streak in him.

Noontime found him sitting atop a bare, burnt-over ridge with the sorrel colt tied nearby and a pair of binoculars glued to his eyes. The binoculars weren't much good, but through them Ernie could see only too plainly the thirty or forty head of big Rafter J and Triangle Hook steers crowded around the little spring on the flats

below, and he muttered to himself. For a long while he studied a couple of old cows and a spotted calf grazing along an edge of the brush half a mile away, but the brindle maverick wasn't with them.

"High-tailed it clean out of the country, I reckon," Ernie said to the sorrel colt.

The sorrel colt fretted and stamped. A thread of dust showed through the notch eight miles away to the west — freight wagons hauling along the road to Nuevo Springs, finally striking the downgrade there. Ernie turned his attention to the

south, moving the glasses out across that stretch of dry gullies, scrub pinon and brush which began way off in hazy distance and ended in the ridge at his feet.

If the brindle bull had gone that way, finding a needle in a haystack would be easy by comparison. But about twenty minutes later Ernie Hewitt noticed something else, and focused the binoculars on it.

The something else turned out to be a rider astride a line-back dun horse that was moving along at a steady jog toward the ridge where Ernie sat. The rider wore



a dark slouch hat, a faded shirt and overalls, and followed no trail. But a man who knew the country and didn't mind having a few ounces of skin scraped off in the brush could save six-eight miles by cutting through this way to Nuevo Springs.

Then ahead of the man a brindle shape slipped through the thickets, stirred out by the rider; and in Ernie's glasses this became the sleek, two-year-old maverick bull he'd been looking for. The maverick trotted out into plain view, and disappeared in one of the gulches below. By that time Ernie had the glasses rammed into the case, cinch yanked tight and was in the saddle.

"Now, Fiddler," Ernie said, "this is the time to show me some of that speed."

Fiddler was the sorrel colt's name, and he was fast. Fiddler came down the side of the ridge like a buck deer, jumping snags and rocks, and Ernie unlimbered his thirty-five foot rope. Ernie was a tie-hard-and-fast man. He owned sixty-seven head of cattle by last spring's count, and a registered brand of his own; and since his loop had missed the brindle maverick's horns by a scant few inches yesterday, it was not in the law of averages that as good a roper as Ernie would miss again.

The brindle bull seemed to hold the same idea. He was tough and well-fed and active enough to jump any five-foot fence, and he wanted to remain a maverick to the end of his days. He heard the sorrel colt tearing down the ridge, slashing through the brush below. The maverick bull turned away from that noise, put his horns down and moved through the undergrowth quiet as a big cat. He climbed the far side of the gulch and broke away across open ground.

Ernie caught the flash of sunlight on brindle flanks through the brush, yelled and doubled the colt around, and Fiddler stretched out. In the next four or five hundred yards the colt had headed the bull away from one thicket, followed him through another and was right on the maverick's heels with the stony cut-bank of a wash dead ahead.

Ernie's noose hissed through the air. The brindle bull jumped the bank, but Ernie had counted on that. The bull bawled and Ernie sat Fiddler back on his heels with the end of his rope tied hard-and-fast to saddlehorn. But there was the bank, and while Fiddler's faults as a colt were

not many, he was no trained rope horse.

Fiddler tried to climb the bank just as the bull hit the other end of the rope. Fiddler was jerked to his knees, forelegs over the edge of the bank, and fell backward when the strain on the rope ceased. The bull took another run on the rope and that completed the disorganization of Fiddler's foot-work. The green colt toppled against the stony bank with a grunt, legs sprawled, pinning Ernie's knee underneath with the rope caught across his chest and under one arm. Then the bull charged with the length of that thirty-five foot rope looped about a sapling on the bank above.

ERNIE struggled to pull himself free of the saddle, fought desperately to reach the gun at his hip, but couldn't. Ernie was in a spot and in that instant he mentally saw young Billy Storey, broken and crippled for life by a similar accident; and old Cal Dailey lying dead on the ground with his rope still wrapped around him. He'd helped pack old Cal's body down from the Aquila one daybreak, two years ago.

He'd forgotten all about the traveling rider who'd stirred the maverick out of the brush till the roar of a gun from across the wash smacked against his eardrums. For a second he was puzzled.

But the shot accomplished two things at once. It parted the rope six inches above Ernie's right shoulder and scared the bull into full retreat, bellowing and kicking at the long end of the rope which followed along and lashed at his heels. The rope released, Fiddler lunged to his feet with Ernie still in the saddle.

Ernie wasn't hurt. But it had been a near thing and he was as mad, suddenly, as he had ever been before in his twenty-six years and just twice as determined to have that maverick bull. The stranger across the banks was a slight man, not more than five-foot nine or ten, but wiry in build. His face was burned dark as Ernie's by sun and weather, and his eyes were a pale and innocent blue. Little crowsfoot wrinkles showed at the corners and lines ran down to the sides of his mouth as though this man found much in life amusing.

His hair under the slouch hat was a sort of sorrel red with brows bleached almost colorless by the sun, and he was

laughing silently to himself now as he looked after the stampeding bull and holstered a worn .45 gun at his hip. But the thing Ernie noticed first of all was the rope coiled neatly at the stranger's saddlehorn.

"Just lend me your rope for a minute, mister. Just for one throw," Ernie pleaded.

Chuckling softly, the stranger handed over his rope and watched Ernie charge away after the brindle maverick once more, driving the sorrel colt mercilessly with the spurs. But this time Ernie was taking no chances, and by the time the stranger caught up, the dazed bull was down in a bare clearing, Ernie had the legs tied with the end of his own stranded rope and was smashing up dry brush for a fire to heat his running iron.

"How does a man go about thankin' another for saving his life, friend?" Ernie asked.

"Well, now," the stranger considered, climbing from saddle, "I don't suppose it was no way so serious as that."

Ernie stuck out a hard, calloused palm. "Hewitt's the name—Ernie Hewitt. Debtor to you, is all I can say."

"Sam Bates," the other said. "But what I never could understand is why a rider is willing to cripple his hoss, risk his saddle and his own neck or an eye gouged out in the brush just for the sake of one scrub maverick. Although I admit I've done the same myself."

"Yeah, I know." Ernie shook his head, touched a match to his fire. "But to me that maverick means one more prime steer to sell next year."

"Your own outfit, eh?"

"A start. Sixty-seven head—sixty-eight now," Ernie said, glancing at the maverick. "A good corral already built. Logs cut and peeled and stacked handy for the barn and cabin I plan to put up just as soon as bad weather gives me a little spare time on my hands. Right over across this ridge on the flats. Homestead claim holds the land."

"NICE spot," Sam Bates agreed. "I remember it. But I notice tracks of a heap more cattle than sixty-some head out in this brush."

Ernie's lips tightened. He put his running iron in the fire. "Right."

"I've knowed big outfits to crowd a small man out," Sam Bates remarked. "Could it be like that?"

"No, that's only incidental," Ernie said, and flushed. "But if you've been around here before, I reckon you've heard of Rafter J and old Mart Le Jeune. Well, the old pirate up and died some three-four months back. There's an heir to the property around somewhere, but as yet he ain't appeared. So nobody knows what kind of a stand he'll take or what he'll do. That leaves certain citizens I could name in a first-class quandary. So they have taken it upon themselves to hedge their bets and play entirely safe."

"Is that so?"

With a twig Ernie drew the peaked line of a *rafter* on the ground and below it the letter J, forming the Le Jeune brand. Then with a single straight line, he connected the top of the J and the two ends of the *rafter* and made quite a different brand of it.

"Triangle Hook, just as simple as that," he said, and erased his drawing from the ground.

"But that's illegal," Sam Bates murmured. "Ain't there a sheriff nowhere about?"

"The best," Ernie explained. "But who is going to make the charge and try to prove it? These citizens I mentioned or the heir who ain't yet come for his property? What's more, the sheriff is down abed with a broken hip, and his single deputy who is sworn to uphold the law takes his orders from other quarters. But on the second point you're right. All this stock is going to eat me out of grass if something don't happen pretty soon . . . What's the good news from over south? Here it's all bad."

Sam Bates inclined his head and thought. "Well, no news of importance, I guess."

"Last night in town," Ernie said, "I heard the outlaw, Trulesen, had been cornered over in Elkon County by the sheriff there—what's his name?"

"Rufe Wilkins."

"Yeah. The report I heard claimed Wilkins had this Trulesen holed up in somebody's old stone shack, surrounded by fifty-sixty possemen and sewed up tight in a bag without a chance of escape. They was plannin' to dynamite him out."

Sam Bates nodded. "By now, no doubt,

Trulesen is dead," he said. "A bad man from start to finish. 'Twill be quite a feather in Rufe Wilkins' cap, not to mention a few paltry dollars in reward money."

"That's a fact, Sam," Ernie said, and rose to take his hot iron from the fire.

II

TWO big, lumbering wagons rolled down the grade into Nuevo Springs around four in the afternoon, the long mule teams swinging wide into the shady street, past the few stores, the saloons and hotel and the brick bank building which had *Le Jeune*—1887 carved on a granite key-stone in its face. This was a one man town. Old Mart Le Jeune had built it, pampered and nourished it from the acres of Rafter J and commanded what he wished from the town until the day of his death.

A hard man, domineering, violent, crafty and generous by turns, never brooking any opposition to his own plans and desires—that had been Mart Le Jeune. From his warehouse and Rafter J herds, he'd fed half the populace during two years of drought; and during those same two years he cunningly pinched out his partner with nothing at all, because each wanted a different thing. And now that Mart Le Jeune was dead, the town whispered and waited and wondered what kind of man Mart Le Jeune's grandson and sole heir would prove himself to be.

From the sheriff's office in the front room of the jail, Deputy Al Fenton watched the freight wagons roll past along the street and took his heels down from the cluttered desk. Al Fenton was a young man, nephew of Lucius P. Tatum who had run old Mart Le Jeune's bank for him for six years. This gave Al considerable pull. He had already ordered posters for the fall election which he hoped would boost him into the boots of Sheriff Buck McLaren who now lay abed with a broken hip.

Deputy Fenton crossed the street to the wagonyard where the freighters and teams had come to a halt. The deputy was a skinny man—tall, hook-nosed and yellow-haired. To bolster his reputation for the coming election, he wore a gun at either hip and practiced a grim expression.

"What's the word from Elkon County?"

the deputy called to the nearest skinner.

The skinner grinned. "Trulesen is loose again."

"Huh? But—" Deputy Fenton forgot to grimace, and his mouth fell open. "'Tain't possible!" he said.

"Read for yourself," the skinner said, tossing him a crumpled newspaper. "They should have had you there, Al."

The deputy's shoulders straightened. "Sure. I coulda done better'n that," he agreed.

The newspaper was the *Elkon Sentinel*, published the day before. Al Fenton, reading it while he recrossed the street, stumbled over a hound dog at the curb and kicked viciously at the beast. From force of habit he started to turn back into the jail building; then changed his mind and hurried on along the street to the bank corner, entering the bank by the side door.

Two men were seated in the back room of the bank, and at sight of the look on his nephew's face Lucius P. Tatum struggled to his feet. It was a comfortable room with a sizable oak table in the center of the floor and round-backed easy chairs placed about it. The chair from which Lucius P. Tatum rose was the one which, during past years, old Mart Le Jeune had occupied by unquestionable right and no other ever used.

"Well, what is it, Albert?" Tatum snapped at his nephew.

Al Fenton waved the newspaper. "Trulesen has escaped again."

The tense expression on the banker's heavy-jowled face changed to a look of thinly veiled disgust. "Is that any reason to come busting in here like the place was on fire?"

The other man sitting in the room leaned back in his chair and blew a puff of cigar smoke at the ceiling. "You're jumpy, Lucius," he said. "Let's see the paper, Al."

Deputy Fenton spread yesterday's *Sentinel* open on the table before him, pointing. "Right there, Ward."

WARD YARBO rolled the cigar in his mouth and read the account with deep interest, the banker standing and looking over his shoulder now. Yarbo was a compact, muscular man in his early forties. Ten years ago he had hired on as a puncher at Rafter J at roundup time

and remained on the ranch, rising to a position of power as Mart Le Jeune's right-hand man in the end. He was able and tough, and knew the cattle business.

When he had finished, Yarbo glanced at the banker's fleshy face. "An interesting piece of information," he said "Perhaps useful."

Lucius Tatum sat down heavily in his chair again. "I don't see how."

"Three days back this outlaw Trulesen walked into a trap over in Elkon County," Yarbo said. "Trulesen's hoss gets shot down under him first blast. The outlaw fights his way into some old stone shack, abandoned long ago, but good cover. There he holes up. He's got a Winchester and his .45 gun and a few spare rounds of ammunition for each. Rufe Wilkins, the sheriff over there, is takin' no chances. He sends into the county seat after help, and before sundown, surrounds the place with fifty-sixty possemen. That's dangerous. Under such conditions, somebody is just about sure to get killed besides the outlaw. Rufe Wilkins realizes this when the moon comes up.

"By midnight," Yarbo continued, "he has three possemen laid out in the brush. One, seein' a shadow, fired on it and the shadow fired back. Another, attemptin' to hurl a homemade dynamite bomb into the shack, has his arm blown off. Trulesen's gun evidently accounted for the third, although no mention is made of that. But Sheriff Wilkins has to do something to stop this carnage and bring the issue to a head, and so he stoops to low trickery. He bandages his right arm to the elbow like he's been hit, and passes word among his men."

"It don't say that in the newspaper," Al Fenton interrupted. "It says Wilkins' arm was in a sling."

"And in the hand in the sling was a gun," Yarbo said. "It don't make no difference. When everything is all set, the sheriff mounts his fine dapple gray hoss which nobody can mistake in the moonlight, and calls across to Trulesen that he wants to parley. The outlaw tell him to come ahead. All watch Sheriff Wilkins ride over to the shack, dismount and step inside. They wait for the shot. Pretty soon it comes. The sheriff steps out once more into the moonlight, shouts and waves his posse in with his bandaged arm. The posse

rushes like one man, and somehow in this confusion the sheriff and his mount seem to disappear.

"Presently somebody strikes a match. But it ain't Trulesen lyin' dead there on the floor of the shack—it's Sheriff Wilkins, bound hand an' foot with a gag in his mouth." Ward Yarbo paused and waved his cigar. "Trulesen is ridin' off into distance on the sheriff's fine dapple gray . . . An entertaining story, perhaps helpful to us."

"Why don't Bat Neves get here?" the banker muttered. He banged his soft fists up and down on the board table. "The stage is already four hours late. Where is Bat?"

Al Fenton stared at his uncle. "Bat often don't show up in town from one week to the next," he said. "What's he done?"

Yarbo shook his head. "Better you don't know nothin' about it, son. That way your conscience will be clean."

"I'm the law here," Fenton stated.

That failed to impress either. Banker Tatum banged his fists again, and turned to Yarbo. "What's so useful about Trulesen's escape? An outlaw, a gunman and bandit with a record a yard long. What good is Trulesen to us?"

"Trulesen," Yarbo said, "had to run one way or the other after his escape."

THE BANKER was thinking this over when the side door to the bank's back-room office opened again, and a little hatchet-faced, bowlegged man walked in. The little man took off his very broad hat, pounded dust from it against his knee, and grinned with white teeth toward his friends.

"Hot today," he remarked.

Lucius Tatum was across the room, standing over him by this time, fleshy cheeks quivering. "What—?" Tatum demanded in a voice that broke and became a raw, squeaky whisper in his throat. "What happened, Bat?"

The little man spread his hands in surprise. "Everything is finished, don't fear. The job, it is done. Here I am. Now for the money you owe me."

Banker Tatum steadied himself with a hand against the wall. "Where did it take place, Bat?"

"At Kimberly's stagehouse on the road. Last night. One shot," Bat Neves said

without pride. "Remember the promise was for \$500 when all finished."

Deputy Fenton closed his sagging jaw. "Wait a minute," Deputy Fenton said. "What is all this? Who fired what shot and what is the money for, Bat?"

Bat Neves grinned at him apologetically. "Sorry. But my mouth, it is sealed up tight." He nudged the banker with an elbow. "Go get the \$500, please."

"All right."

"Not so fast," Ward Yarbo put in. "How do we know you got the right man, Bat?"

"How do you know?" Bat Neves' tiny eyes narrowed a bit. "Could there be a mistake? Is it possible two men look exactly alike an' fool me, you think? This man gets from the train at Elkon Junction yesterday, takes the stage for Nuevo Springs that same afternoon. He is the only passenger on the stage going all the way to Nuevo Springs. Think I am crazy? He signs his name D. L. Le Jeune, Jr., on a check he writes. No common name here—bouts, I remind you."

"Is that who's been shot?" Fenton gasped. "Good Lord!"

"You didn't have to stick your nose into this," Yarbo growled at him. "Shut up!"

"But Le Jeune, the old man's grandson," Fenton said.

Yarbo whirled about. "Okay, here's the rest of it. Le Jeune was due to arrive here on today's stage. Your esteemed uncle and I had this information from him last week. Young Le Jeune was very business-like about it. His correspondence stated that he didn't have much time to spare and wanted everything prepared—papers ready, accounts in order, cattle estimates verified and old Judge Hardesty at hand to go over all assets with him. We didn't know his plan, but he meant what he said."

Ward Yarbo, once Mart Le Jeune's trusted right-hand man, drew a deep breath into his lungs and sighed. "That simply wasn't possible, Al. Your uncle and I and most probably Bat Neves as well would all have gone to jail. Things here at the bank couldn't be fixed up on such short notice. Any kind of check on the ranch papers or cattle count would have meant disaster. There was only one way to stop him. We need more time. Bat Neves appears to have gained us the needed time."

He turned back to Neves. "Any chance you were seen?"

"Not last night," Neves said. "One shot through the stagehouse window from outside. When it is done, I ride."

"Who else was inside with Le Jeune?"

"A Mexican hostler and his wife, the cook. But both were in the kitchen at the time. That's all. After dark Kimberly and the stage driver had gone back down the road to the CT ranch, because of a dapple gray horse the stage driver had noticed at a distance early that evening."

"A dapple gray?"

"Very hard ridden, very tired. But a fine animal."

Tatum muttered, "Rufe Wilkins' horse!"

"Trulesen," Ward Yarbo said, nodding at the banker, "had to run one way or the other. Get Bat his money, Lucius."

A distant clatter of hooves and noise of wheels and rattle of undergear grew into a sudden racket and passed along the street in front of the bank. Al Fenton and Yarbo had both jumped to the side window.

"That was the stage," Fenton said.

Yarbo paused to relight his cigar, and pointed the stem of his match at the deputy. "Now get this and no mistakes, Al," he said with emphasis on each word. "There'll be more newspapers tellin' about Trulesen's escape on the stage. Start organizing a posse right away. Send men into the Aquila to block the pass, and more out into the rough strip over west. It's perfectly plain what happened last night. Trulesen was in the vicinity—broke, desperate, the hoss he'd rode that far played out under him. He killed Le Jeune, of course."

Al Fenton's prominent eyes opened wide. "Could be. Why not? Jumpin', leapin' creepers!" The deputy squared skinny shoulders. "What if we did capture Trulesen! How much reward money d'you suppose there is on his head?"

III

THE TRAIL down Mill Creek crossed and recrossed the tumbling little stream. Alders and cottonwoods formed a leafy green screen overhead. The stream gushed and splashed among smooth-worn boulders with a music of its own, and Sam Bates' mount and the sorrel colt waded the crossings leisurely, dipping nostrils to the

water's coolness. Such water in this high, dry land was a jewel without price.

"That anyhow is the way the Judge puts it," Ernie Hewitt explained. "He's a poetic sort, a man of dreams. Right down below here where the walls narrow in is the spot he picked for his dam, drillin' to bedrock with test holes. That's how old Mart Le Jeune got him in the drought years. It cost a lot of money, y'see, even though the Judge failed; and Le Jeune gladly put up the money against the Judge's share of Rafter J. They'd been partners before that, but old Mart always had the devil's own luck in a deal. Judge Hardesty lost mighty near everything."

"Except for his dreams?" Sam Bates asked.

"Except for his dreams," Ernie said. "That much is left. The Judge still plans his dam, filled to the brim with flood water each spring, his irrigation ditches and laterals below. You know what he told me? 'Ernie,' he says, 'if it's the cow business you have your heart set on pick the hills. There's range south and west for fifty miles. But this valley should raise corn and grain and orchards and gardens from water below the dam. It's not cow land.'"

"So you took his advice?"

"So I picked the hills. Do I need to tell you old Mart Le Jeune long ago acquired title to the whole valley?"

"Somewhere in all this, Ernie," Sam Bates decided, "is something you have not mentioned yet. What is her name?"

"Tracy," Ernie confessed. "Tracy Hardesty. The Judge had the name picked out before she was born, expecting a son. She's his daughter, y'see."

"Pretty, no doubt?"

"Beautiful," said Ernie. "Sweet as the first wild flowers in spring. True as the diamond I put on her finger which my own mother once wore. But you'll meet Tracy and the Judge, Sam. They live in town."

Side walls of rock showed through the leafy green. The stream hurried here, dashing downward with waters foamy white. The trail climbed out along a bouldered ledge where time had leveled away old dumps of earth and the broken granite from test holes tunneled back to solid bedrock. The horses scrambled.

"Now that," Ernie said, pointing ahead, "is a peculiar thing. Back-trail, no sign

covered mine since I rode up creek this mornin'. Where did this rider come from, Sam?"

Hoofmarks, heading townward, were plain in the rubble. Sam Bates looked up at the wall above and was thoughtful.

"Where does the ridge lead, Ernie?"

"Anywhere—south or west. But a rider would have to be born plumb reckless to come down through them rocks by choice. Or else mighty anxious no one will learn where he's been."

Sam reached from his saddle and plucked a couple of long red hairs from the brush, squinting as he held them up to the light. "Don't quite match the sorrel's tail," he said. "Too red. For a guess, I'd say this rider mounted a strawberry roan."

Ernie frowned. "It's a color Bat Neves favors."

"Bat Neves?"

"A little squint-eyed, hawk-faced fellow. Once worked for Rafter J, but since old Mart Le Jeune's demise he's branched out for himself. I won't say *all* them Triangle Hook branded cattle in the hills are the work of Neves. He's had some help."

"He calls Triangle Hook his brand?"

"No one owns it on the face of things. No one would dare claim ownership yet. That comes later."

"It's a curious situation," Sam Bates ruminated as they rode on. "Here a man who took and owned everything in sight is dead, but his heir has not appeared. There are numbers of Triangle Hook cattle in the hills, but no one claims the iron yet. Money, property, mortgages, deeds, the town itself belonged to old Mart Le Jeune. It takes time to steal so much, I suppose."

"Why don't young Le Jeune come?" Ernie said.

THE VALLEY opened out before them. Under their feet was the town. The tree-lined main street and brick bank building, the Le Jeune warehouse and wagonyards beyond, the roofs of houses, stores and saloons forming a hodgepodge pattern in the evening smoke beginning to rise from occasional chimney pipes. Already shadow from the hills reached out over the town, although an hour or more of daylight remained.

The horses turned down a last steep

pitch and clopped along the dust of a street. Ernie looked about him. "Sam," he complained, "it's too quiet. Something is wrong here."

A rider turned the corner from the main street just then, and came toward them with a boiling funnel of dust at his heels. The rider recognized Ernie, and shouted without slacking pace, "Down at the sheriff's office, Ernie. Posse organizing there!"

Ernie jumped the sorrel around in front of the rider to halt him. "What posse, Casey? *Why*—?"

"Le Jeune—young Le Jeune—has been killed," the rider answered. "They brung his body in on the stage three-quarters of an hour ago. Tracy's down there now, seein' if she can identify him."

"Where's that?"

"Sewalt's barber shop. Back room. Lemme past."

He spurred on and Ernie turned to Sam Bates, face white as the rider's dust.

There were two crowds of people on the main street. One in front of Sewalt's barber shop; the other, composed of horses and armed men, augmented by the continual arrival of newcomers, gathered outside the 'dobe-walled jail building and the sheriff's small front office there. At the curb stood a skinny, hook-nosed man, looking grim, with a gun at either hip and a deputy's star prominent on his bony chest.

Sam Bates stopped his horse across the street and sat slack in the saddle, watching this. The deputy was calling out names, indicating each rider as he spoke. "The eight of you head for the Aquila," he ordered. "Four up in the rocks on either side of the pass. Don't let nobody cross. Cut dirt!"

Eight men rode away. On the other side the crowd in front of the barber's shop parted and a girl came through. Her hair was chestnut and her eyes brown, and she walked very straight. Sam Bates knew immediately who she must be. Ernie hadn't lied, she was a pretty thing.

Ernie shoved through the crowd to meet her. "Tracy, is it—?"

"Yes, Ernie," she said. The strained, taut look on her face broke and suddenly she was sobbing bitterly, face buried on Ernie's shirt.

Sam Bates turned away, not wishing to

intrude. He hooked his reins over a tie-rail and walked slowly along the street. Around the bank corner, a squint-eyed, hatchet-faced little man appeared, leading a red roan horse across the street to a livery stable. Sam Bates looked at him once and increased his pace a bit, so he was passing behind as the little man entered the stable.

"How d'you do, Mr. Neves," Sam said.

"Huh?" Bat Neves wheeled about, puzzled, and finally returned the stranger's greeting, "Hullo."

Sam walked on. He turned at the corner and strolled leisurely back along the opposite side of the street. He paused and glanced at the display in the window of a saddlery. He stopped in front of the post office and stepped inside, emerging presently. He stood on the plank-board walk outside and watched more riders clatter past, headed the other way. Ernie found him here.

"Not ridin' with one of the posses, Ernie?" Sam said.

Ernie scowled blackly. "No reason for Trulesen to have murdered him, Sam?"

"Trulesen!"

"That's the talk. It don't make sense. Everybody rushin' out of town to block the Aquila, and guard waterholes over west. Buck McLaren would have handled things differently. Come along."

BUCK McLAREN looked at them from his bed, gravely nodded his graying head. "Pleased to meet any friend of Ernie's, Sam," Buck said.

His handshake was strong. But the mahogany weather-burn of his skin had faded some in the five weeks Buck McLaren had lain abed with his broken hip in a cast. He had flinty gray eyes, which turned from Sam back to Ernie again.

"Tracy's sure about it?" he asked.

"Plumb sure," Ernie said. "She lived out at Rafter J with the Judge as a child, y'know, the summer young Le Jeune visited his grandpa there. Like kids do, they got into all sorts of mischief. The boy slipped from the roof of a shed one day and cut his shoulder bad on a mower. It left a scar. Yes, Tracy's sure."

"What," Buck McLaren asked, "has that yappin' deputy of mine done? I ain't been informed."

Ernie told him, "Practically every able-bodied man in town has left—except for your deputy himself. He remains at headquarters at the jail, waitin' for word that a fresh trail's been found or the shootin' begun. He don't aim to be caught nappin' in the Aquila if Trulesen turns up over west or vice versa. He aims to be in on the kill. Why did you ever appoint him, Buck?"

"Without the right backin' I'd never have been sheriff, son. Lucius Tatum asked it through old Mart Le Jeune."

"What about Trulesen?"

"He's a wanted man with money on his head," Buck McLaren said. "He's robbed and he's stole. He's a gunman, yes. But a murderer, no. I mind one time I had a tip-off about Trulesen, three years back. Posse over east was crowdin' him hard. So I headed for the Aquila and sat down there. To keep from freezin' to death, I built a small fire. I didn't fall asleep. But next mornin' from the tracks I could see where Trulesen had walked up within fifty feet of me. All he had to do was shoot and shove my body off into the canyon, and ride on through."

"Instead, Trulesen tried to climb around through the rocks above. The posse from east come swarmin' through the pass at daybreak, a dozen men strong. We figured then that we had Trulesen. He'd reached the flats below, but his hoss was lame from the rocks and had lost a shoe. We trailed him past Pedro Gonzales' cabin in the brush. The track of the lame hoss with one bare hoof went on. Late afternoon we finally caught up."

Buck shook his head. "Pedro Gonzales was ridin' the lame hoss."

"You mean Pedro had led you off one way while Trulesen rode in the opposite direction?"

"No proof. Pedro claimed we'd misread the sign." Buck grinned tightly. "Oh, the Mexicans will lie, steal or risk their necks for him. They call Trulesen *muy hombre*—much man. Or as we'd say, quite a guy. Person'ly I agree, although my duty is plain if we ever meet."

"And the two lone witnesses at Kimberly's stagehouse where young Le Jeune was killed last night were both Mexicans," Ernie considered. "Manuel Flores and his wife, who is a first cousin to Eduardo

Ramirez who is a stepson of Yemo Gonzales and all the Gonzales are kin, right?"

"The place to look is much closer home. Don't let that fool deputy throw sand in your eyes, Ernie."

"No," Ernie said, "I won't."

"Now just who does benefit, Ernie?" Sam asked as they left Sheriff McLaren's modest home. "Murder oft times has the habit of strikin' twice."

Ernie swung to the saddle. "Lucius Tatum, for one. The fat, sanctimonious hypocrite! Sure, since old Mart Le Jeune's death he's been makin' hay at the bank while the sun shines."

"But no way to get at him?"

"None. There's another," Ernie pointed out as they walked their horses through the cool dusk. "Ward Yarbo, foreman out at Rafter J. What's been happenin' to the cattle couldn't take place without his connivance."

SAM studied the muscular, solid figure striding into the streak of doorway light at the Double Eagle Saloon.

"But Tracy will be waitin' supper," Ernie said. "We'd best jog along. There's a stall in the shed for your horse, Sam."

They passed a scurrying, ragged figure who averted his dark-skinned face, studying something at the roadside with a great show of interest, so his features were turned away. When Sam glanced back, the smallish figure followed at a lengtheneing distance.

Tracy was waiting at the picket-fence gate.

"This is Sam," Ernie told her, and took the reins as Sam stepped down. "You thank him for saving my neck, Tracy. I didn't do much of a job of it."

"I will," Tracy stated. Before Sam could brace himself she had her arms about him and kissed him on the mouth. She kissed him again. "Sam, you're the second man I've ever kissed in my life, except for dad," she said. "Ernie is the other. Does it show you how I feel?"

Sam rubbed a finger along his lips. "I've missed a great deal."

"Now come right in," Tracy invited, as Ernie led the horses away. "If there'd been more time, I'd have had something special for supper. Tomorrow we will have. I hope what has happened this afternoon

hasn't given you a bad impression of Nuevo Springs. I hope you'll want to stay, Sam." She paused. "Oh, just a minute."

She turned back at the gate. "Francisco, is that you?" Tracy called across the street.

The scurrying figure Sam Bates had noticed on the road ducked and halted, but after a moment answered, "Si, it is me."

"Francisco, come here this instant," Tracy commanded. "I hear you were drunk again last night and caused much trouble. Is that true, Francisco?"

"Si," the voice answered reluctantly.

"Come here," Tracy ordered. "Francisco, I understand that you broke a store window, quarreled with your friends, frightened poor Senora Gonzales nearly to death and stole one of her goats."

"Only for a barbecue," Francisco said. "To mend my quarrel with my good friends."

"Francisco, you should be in jail. Did Deputy Fenton release you—?" Tracy's voice stopped.

The noise of two shots, one right on the heels of the other, slammed through the early night. Sam Bates cocked his head, listening intently. Ernie came running around the Judge's house from the shed in the rear, bootheels clattering on flagstones. Francisco had vanished like a frightened quail.

"Where was it, Sam?"

"Couldn't be sure."

"Ernie, don't go," Tracy pleaded.

"Be right back, honey," Ernie called over shoulder.

He led the way at a run. A horse was racing along an alley ahead. The hoofbeats faded. Ernie vaulted a 'dobe yard wall with Sam at his heels and somebody shouted at them. They jumped another wall and turned into the alley, a hazy strip of lantern light visible beyond. That would be the back of the stable across street from the bank with a barn lantern inside, Sam Bates decided. Ernie slid to a halt beside him.

"Here's something, Sam!"

Sam, instead, watched a muscular, compact figure come from the rear of the stable, turning toward them along the alley. But now the dim strip of light from inside the stable was not nearly so hazy. Ernie, down on his knees in the alley dust,

grunted something softly and climbed to his feet again.

"Twice like you said, Sam," Ernie muttered. "This time it's Bat Neves!"

IV

LUCIUS TATUM had finished supper and was leaving the door of a little restaurant down street when he heard the shots. Never a man with a stomach for violence, Tatum stepped back inside. Two other customers of the restaurant hurried out to the street. Tatum saw his nephew run past. There was quiet after that. Several minutes elapsed before the banker ventured forth.

An elderly puncher from over Burnt Hills way was crossing the street, coming back to a drink he'd paid for but hadn't finished in the Double Eagle. "Bat Neves has been shot," the puncher said. "Now he never will need to be hung."

"Bat—Bat Neves?" Tatum asked. "Shot dead?"

"With two holes in the side of his chest. Blowed right out of his saddle. They ain't found his hoss yet."

Several men could be seen under the light of the barn lantern inside the stable's mouth. Tatum hurried past, around the bank corner and with his key entered the back-room office which was now dark. He had a bad moment crossing the room, feeling around overhead for the lamp that hung over the board table and applying a match to its wick. The lamp flared, Tatum looked all around him and then sank down in one of the chairs, breathing hard through his mouth.

"Bat," he muttered. "Bat Neves!"

No one knew a lot about Bat. He'd spent most of his time in the hills. Perhaps Bat had enemies. He's also had money on him tonight. But in a way this simplified everything. The murderer of young Le Jeune was dead; no possibility now of tracing that crime back through Bat to the men who'd hired him for the job. No chance now that under stress or in an unguarded moment Bat would ever talk.

Tatum felt better. He crossed the back room to the private safe, fingered the combination and opened it. He was looking over some papers at the table when he heard the knock on the side door. Tatum

had locked the door behind him. He was cautious.

"Who is it?"

Ward Yarbo's voice answered from outside. The banker pushed the bolt back. Yarbo stepped into the room's light, quietly closed the door behind him and leveled a cocked .45 at Lucius Tatum. The Rafter J foreman's face was bleak, hard and expressionless as something carved of wood.

"Where did Bat Neves get his information, Lucius?" Ward Yarbo asked.

The banker's fat cheeks quivered. His voice shook. "What information, Ward? Where? How? I don't understand you. Put—put that gun away!"

"I'd just as soon kill you if I have to, Lucius," Yarbo said, and meant every word of it. "Where did Bat Neves get that information about me—about the past before I came here? You knew about it. You knew what kind of a hold old Mart Le Jeune had over me. He gave me to understand you'd use it if anything ever happened to him sudden. That was his threat to me. Lucius, you gave those papers to Bat Neves."

The banker clutched at his fat throat. "Upon my word, I didn't. I don't know what you mean. Ward, put up the gun. Let's talk this over sensibly, like the friends we always been."

"You go ahead and talk," Yarbo ordered.

But a new idea had entered Lucius Tatum's head. His eyes, prominent like his nephew's, stared from the sockets, and he had to swallow three or four times before he could get the words out. "It was you who just shot Bat Neves across in the alley there," he whispered. "You did it, Ward!"

"Without regret," Yarbo answered. "Something had to be done quick. Why did you give him that evidence against me, Lucius? Go ahead and talk."

Tatum's knees quaked. "I didn't. I swear I ain't seen it since years before old Mart passed on. It's true he told me about it, but I never learned where he kept such things. It didn't turn up in none of his private papers that I looked through."

"Just to refresh your memory." Yarbo drew an envelope from pocket. There was a smear of blood on the envelope. Tatum

couldn't touch it. "Enough to hang me," Yarbo snarled. "It's all there! What was Bat supposed to do with it?"

"I didn't—" Tatum choked.

"Then who got hold of this evidence after Mart's death? Not Bat. Bat couldn't have kept quiet half an hour without showin' me what power was his. That's what he did. That's why I had to kill him, Lucius."

There was no color at all in the banker's flabby face. "It could have happened another way. Yes, I remember. Tracy—Tracy Hardesty—was out there at the ranch while old Mart lay on his death bed. He'd sent for her—I don't know why. But she came. She carried something away with her which she mailed to young Le Jeune at old Mart's request. I drove her back to town, and it worried me a good deal at the time. It's possible, Ward, that Le Jeune had the evidence with him."

"Is it?" Yarbo said. "Bat stood outside at Kimberly's stagehouse last night, fired his one shot at Le Jeune through the window. Le Jeune was locked in his room. The Mexican hostler and his wife, alone in the kitchen at the time, had to break the door to get to him. Le Jeune lived about half an hour after that. The stage driver and Kimberly were back then. If Le Jeune had these papers with him, Bat still had no way to get near him or his luggage in that room. See what I mean?"

"Then how—?"

"Look at the postmark on this envelope," Yarbo ordered. "Bat picked it up here in town this afternoon. Not more than an hour ago. The post office closed at six o'clock."

ERNIE HEWITT stood under the barn lantern in the stable, chin thrust out. "There ain't a handful of men left in town tonight who could have done it," Ernie said. "Bat Neves' horse—that red roan he rides—was here in the stable. He mounted and rode out the back with another rider beside him or was met in the alley. The other rider shot twice from one saddle to the other—so close Neves' vest was scorched. You goin' to try and find out who did it, Fenton?"

Bat Neves' body had been carried over to the back room of the barbershop. "I'm the law, ain't I?" Fenton said. "Sure, I'm

investigatin'. Don't bother me. Come here, George."

George was a towheaded fifteen-year-old, barefooted and freckle-faced. He'd been tending the stable while his father, who owned the place, went home for supper.

"You see Bat Neves come in to get his hoss?" Fenton asked.

"Yep," the boy said.

"See him ride away?"

"Nope. Mr. Yarbo come in about that time and asked me to run an errand for him," George explained. "He wanted to know what his stable bill was and asked me to run home and find out from paw. He give me a quarter."

Deputy Fenton turned and spread his hands. "There you are. That backs up Ward Yarbo's story one hundred percent. Yarbo was here in the stable, waitin' for the boy to return. Bat rode out the back way. The next Yarbo heard was the shots in the alley. It's all he knows. Ain't he said so?"

"When we come on the scene," Sam Bates remarked, "it looked to me like there was dust in the alley. Down this way."

Fenton stepped back and took a stance, displaying the two guns he wore. The lids drew down over his eyes; this was his grim expression. He towered lankly three or four inches over Sam Bates. "And just who are you?" Fenton demanded.

"My friend," Ernie said fiercely. "His name is Sam Bates."

"Where were you when the shots were fired, Bates?"

Sam thought. "I'd just been kissed," he said, "by a beautiful young lady. Or did I dream that, Ernie?"

"No," Ernie said. "Sam and me were together at the Judge's house, deputy."

"Stranger in town, ain't you?"

"Here'bouts, yes," Sam answered.

"Don't leave town, Bates, till I tell you you can go," Fenton snapped. "I'll question you later. Now I got business at my office."

"At *his* office," Ernie muttered disgustedly as the deputy walked off. "No, he can't get away with it, Sam. He's covering up for Yarbo who's covering up for somebody else, or—"

"Or possibly himself," Sam Bates said softly. "Mr. Yarbo, however, would have needed a handy saddled hoss."

Ernie walked back through the stable, looking into each stall. He stopped. "Who owns this animal, George?" he asked of the boy who tagged along.

"Belongs to old Clint Evans, from over Burnt Hills way."

Ernie stepped into the stall and led the horse out. "Been saddled all evenin'?"

"Yep. Old Clint didn't know how long he'd stay in town."

Ernie rubbed at a smear on cantle of the saddle. The smear left a dirty, discolored red on his fingers at which Ernie stared.

"Blood! This is the hoss the murderer rode," Ernie cried. "Blood was on his hand when he jumped back into saddle and rode into the barn. Now what about Ward Yarbo's story? Come along, Sam."

Deputy Fenton, however, was not to be found in the sheriff's small street-front office. A lamp burned inside. Ernie led the way through to the jail in the rear. Here, behind bars, crouched a solitary prisoner. Sam Bates looked over Ernie's shoulder at the prisoner and blinked in mild surprise.

"Francisco," Ernie said, "where is the deputy?"

"How would I know?" Francisco asked. "Free men walk the streets outside. Not me. This time my sentence is for thirty days. What will my friends do without me?"

"Let's try the Double Eagle," Ernie said.

THEY found Al Fenton there with glass in hand. Business was poor in the Double Eagle tonight with two posses out in the hills. The barman was conversing with a knotty old puncher and a younger hand who leaned on crutches at the bar.

Two townsmen sat at one of the tables and idly played cribbage. Fenton stood alone, waiting no doubt for a messenger to inform him Trulesen's trail had been found in one direction or the other. He was ready to ride.

Ernie stopped beside the deputy and talked to him low-voiced. Sam leaned elbows back against the bar. Finally Fenton turned to the knotty old puncher, and said, "Clint, where were you tonight when those shots were fired?"

"Where was I, Charlie?" the old puncher asked the barkeep.

"Right here," the barman answered. "You'd just bought a drink, I remember. I set it aside till you returned."

"That's not the point," Ernie protested. "What I'm tellin' you, deputy, is that the murderer used Clint Evans' horse. Not that Clint rode it. Now are you going to question Yarbo again?"

"Ward Yarbo's word is plenty good with me," Fenton said. "He don't have to repeat what he's already said. Forget it!"

Sam Bates looked at Deputy Fenton with interest, and slowly shook his head from side to side.

"Is this the man, Ernie," Sam said, "that you told me was plannin' to run next election against Buck McLaren?"

Ernie nodded. "Yeah."

"Now that's too bad, ain't it?" Sam said.

Fenton swiveled around. "What d'you mean by that, Bates?"

"You just don't strike me as the right type is all," Sam said. "Oh, I grant you may win with Sheriff McLaren down abed and a little money sprinkled around in the right places."

"You accuse me of attemptin' to buy votes?"

"No—no. I don't know anything about it. But suppose you win?"

"That's what I aim to do. So what?"

"Somebody," Sam said, "is sure to make a monkey of you."

"Say that again!"

Ernie got hurriedly between them. "Come along, Sam. We got plenty to do tonight. I'm ridin' for the Aquila after help. Some of that posse is needed back here in town."

"Sorry if I spoke out of turn," Sam said. "It's only my private opinion. Set up drinks all around, bartender."

The bartender got busy. Fenton's face flushed.

"I suppose you think you can make a monkey of me, Bates?"

"Now I didn't say that," Sam told him. "Forget it. I just said somebody was sure to. Your eyes don't match."

"I can see plenty good through a gun-sight with either."

"Is that so?" Sam looked about the saloon. "See that fly yonder on the ceiling,

deputy? A fair shot could hit within an inch of him, I reckon."

"Ten dollars I come nearer than you can," Fenton snapped.

"I never bet money."

"For the drinks then."

"All right," Sam said.

Deputy Fenton steadied himself, back against the bar. He drew his right gun, leveled it and took aim. The sound of the shot was a roar inside the saloon. His bullet hit within an inch of the fly and satisfaction showed in Fenton's smile.

"Where did the fly go?" Sam asked.

Old Clint Evans pointed. "Flew over in that far corner."

"Oh, yes," Sam said.

Another sharp explosion filled the room. This time the fly didn't buzz away. The fly was no more.

"Just luck," Fenton muttered.

Sam smiled at him. "But you see what I mean."

"You're a heap too smart, stranger."

"A plenty men—fine shots—have been cut down before they could even pull their guns," Sam said. "That's the truth."

Deputy Fenton finished his drink with a gulp. "Think you can draw against me? A twenty says you can't."

"I never bet money," Sam reminded him.

Old Clint Evans dug down in pocket. "I do. Your twenty is covered, Al."

"All set. What's the signal to be?" Fenton asked.

"A man drawin' for his life," Sam considered, "don't often have a signal. Just go ahead when you're ready, deputy."

TWO NEWCOMERS entered the saloon breathlessly—an elderly merchant and a waiter from the restaurant with his white apron flapping. They stopped in the swinging doors. Fenton stood a pace distant from Sam now, eyes narrowed. The deputy's boots were spread a little on the floor, weight on the balls of his feet. His hands hung over the two guns at his hips—taut claws.

He reached.

Sam's draw was like the lash of a whip. His gun barrel caught Deputy Fenton's right wrist with a sharp whack. The deputy's right gun jumped from opening fingers as it cleared holster, flipping over like a

cart wheel in mid-air and hit the floor. Fenton gasped. His left gun slipped back into holster undrawn. Sam's muzzle prodded the deputy's belt buckle.

"It's all right," Sam said to the newcomers. "All just in fun. Come on in." He reached to the floor, picked up Deputy Fenton's gun and gave it back. "See what I mean?"

Old Clint Evans was cackling with an uncontrolled laughter as he pocketed his own money and Fenton's twenty from the bar. Fenton nursed his right wrist, and the color of anger was a dark hue on his skin. His eyes were bitter and vengeful. Ernie pushed in beside Sam again.

"Come along, Sam," Ernie urged. "We got things to do elsewhere. Don't start no trouble here."

"Trouble? Trouble is farthest from my mind," Sam said. "But there's other times when a man don't even have a gun on him and is jumped sudden. I'd like to complete the deputy's education in this respect for whatever good it will do him."

Sam took off his gunbelt and holster, shoving the weapon beyond reach along the bar and turned to Fenton again.

"Care to compete once more?"

"For how much?" Fenton asked.

"Forty," old Clint said. "If you can match it, Al."

Anger overrode a caution forming in Al Fenton. "The idea is you don't have no weapon near you and try to disarm me when I draw, that it?"

"That's it," Sam said.

Slowly Al Fenton pulled money from pocket and matched old Clint's forty on the bar. Anger burned with a sullen flame in his eyes. Warily he stepped away from Sam, well beyond arm's reach. He took his stance again. Sam toyed with his half-finished drink, glass in hand, and his nod of encouragement infuriated the deputy.

"Now!" Fenton yelled, and drew.

Sam's move was a sharp flick of the wrist that shot the contents of his half-filled glass into Fenton's face. Sam followed almost as fast. Both Fenton's guns cleared their holsters this time. The right exploded harmlessly into the floor as Sam's fist drove into the deputy's stomach. It wrenched a hollow groan from Fenton and he folded up in the middle like a jack knife. With a twist of the barrels, Sam

held both of the deputy's guns.

"See what I mean? It's plumb foolish of you to want to become sheriff," Sam explained patiently. "It's also dangerous. In fact, if you pursue the course you've been following, I'm afraid you will get killed, deputy."

Fenton wiped stinging liquor from his eyes.

"Lemme have them guns!"

Sam handed them back to him, butts first. Fenton climbed to his feet, holding one. He reached back to hip pocket with his other hand and yanked out a pair of handcuffs, gun leveled and cocked now.

"There's one thing I bet you can't do," Fenton snarled. "That's pull your wrists out of these handcuffs."

"You mean I'm under arrest?" Sam asked.

"Held on suspicion," Fenton growled. "You're a heap too smart for any honest man, stranger. In jail you can think it over."

V

AL FENTON stood in front of the jail building and watched Ernie Hewitt depart toward the Judge's residence at a run. Old Clint Evans was legging it up the street toward the livery stable. Both had friends.

"Them posses left here under my orders," Fenton shouted after Ernie. "I'll arrest any man that quits his post. I'll jail you, Hewitt, as ringleader of a conspiracy."

Ernie didn't even pause. Deputy Fenton didn't know exactly what to do. Sam Bates had goaded him into what had happened at the Double Eagle. He'd got his neck caught in a wringer and couldn't pull it out in time. But it was satisfying to know he had Sam locked behind bars. The only point that worried him about that was the docile way Sam had submitted to arrest. Deputy Fenton needed advice.

Ward Yarbo had been gone some time when the deputy rapped on the side door and Tatum admitted him to the back room of the bank. There were signs that the banker had been busily engaged in the interval. Papers of one sort and another, bonds and securities, mortgages and bank stock, were sorted into loose piles on the board table. The inner door to the front part of the bank stood open a crack.

Lucius Tatum breathed heavily. "What is it, Albert?" he asked.

Al Fenton told him. "Sure, Ward Yarbo did it," the deputy said. "He followed Bat Neves into the stable and got rid of the kid who was lookin' after things by an excuse. Bat and he must have talked for a while; then Bat rode out the back way. Ward jumped on the first saddled hoss he could grab, rode after Bat, shot him in the alley and raced back into the stable. He used ol' Clint Evans' hoss and left a smear of blood on the saddle. It's plain as the nose on your face. But I don't know why."

Lucius Tatum rubbed his nose. "I know why, Albert," he said. "Bat had somehow obtained information vital to Yarbo. It concerns the past—a long while ago. The evidence Bat held would hang Ward Yarbo. Old Mart always held it over him."

Fenton's eyes opened wide. "That so? Well, I've done my best. I've tried every way to cover up for Ward. But he acted like a crazy man—and it just ain't goin' to be possible to cover up for him, Uncle Lucius. Ernie Hewitt and old Clint have both left town now in search of the posses. They're sure to bring men back with 'em—friends of theirs. They'll demand the arrest of Yarbo. Where does that leave me—out on the end of what kind of a limb? Do I arrest Ward Yarbo?"

The banker took time to think, tiny beads of sweat gathering on his forehead. "There's no other way," he decided. "Ward Yarbo put his head back in that old noose when he acted so rashly this evening. There's only one thing you can do. You'll have to arrest him, Albert."

Al Fenton looked doubtful.

"But in a way that will be a credit to you," Lucius Tatum continued. "If you wait till public opinion forces you to act, it will be too late. But if you act immediately with knowledge of the old evidence which explains why Yarbo murdered Bat Neves, you will have solved the crime yourself. You will have captured a dangerous criminal, a murderer living in our midst undetected all these years. It will show how capable you are, Albert. It will assure your election as sheriff."

"But," Al Fenton stuttered, "once Yarbo is in jail ain't he likely to talk?"

"Exactly," Tatum said, wiping his brow. "That's why you must act at once, immediately. That's why it is so important. If Yarbo is jailed for his crimes, he'll spill everything and drag me down with him. You, too, Albert. Remember he is a dangerous man. Remember he has killed once tonight. You must fire first—don't give him a chance."

"But—"

"There are no two ways about it, Albert, if we are to save our own skins. It's either Yarbo now—or us! He's already threatened me. But after Ward Yarbo has fallen, it might be advisable to draw his gun and fire it once or twice where bullet holes will show. This will make it plain you were forced to shoot—and incidently you were the better man."

Fenton licked his lips. "That's right."

SAM BATES sat in the jail and looked about him, rubbing his wrists gently. He'd hated the feel of those handcuffs Fenton had unnecessarily used to bring him here. The adobe walls of the jail were three feet thick and stout iron rods sunk in the walls barred the single tiny window. Hard-baked tile, set in mortar, formed the floor underfoot. There was a round, pot-bellied stove in the far corner with a big woodbox beside it. A double tier of bunks with straw ticks stood along the side wall.

With a pick or chisel or metal saw a man might escape with no more than a long, tedious night's work. Sam gazed at his fellow prisoner, the tattered Francisco. Sam needed information, and had no time to waste. He offered tobacco to Francisco.

"Once tonight," Sam remarked, "I noticed you on the street, Francisco. A free man. But not half an hour later here you were in the jail, most speedily. How could it be, *amigo*?"

Francisco looked scared and spilled tobacco. "A mistake, *senor*, certainly."

"No mistake," Sam said. "The walls are stout, the bars strong. But it is a comfortable place. You like this jail Francisco?"

"Si, well enough. In winter it is snug and warm," Francisco explained, not meeting Sam's eyes. "Often my good friends Rodriquez and Pablo are here with me and we play cards all night long, keeping a fine blaze in the stove. Others cut the wood

which the sheriff supplies."

"But what is a card game without red vino?"

"How true!" Francisco sighed. "But a bottle passes easily between window bars. My friend Pablo's eldest son is entrusted with that task."

"I see. And the food is good?"

"The best. Three times each day meals are brought to us from the restaurant. Could one ask for more?"

"I perceive," Sam said, "that you have found a sanctuary away from the cares of the world where food is plentiful and no necessity to chop firewood. Admission, one misdemeanor. But what if a man wishes to stretch his legs. Or visit his sweetheart. That is the fly in the ointment."

"*Senor*, let us not speak of such things."

"I don't know how it works," Sam said. "But I need out, Francisco. Right away."

"Impossible! Have not Rodriquez and Pablo and I sworn each other to secrecy on that point?"

Sam grinned. "Your secret will be safe with me. That I promise. Time presses now."

"But the light, *senor*."

"We will blow out the light and each go to bed. A mound of the straw tick will indicate where I sleep."

"But for a week, each night I and my friends Pablo and Rodriquez toiled," Francisco said. "One on the inside, one without, and Pablo's wagon in the alley to cart away each shovel full of dirt so no sign would show. Suppose you do not return, *senor*?"

Sam blew out the light. "I'll be back before daybreak."

THE BOTTOM of the woodbox raised easily. Below were no hard tiles. The hole was small, but Sam, not a large man, was able to crawl in.

"At the other end is a barrel that holds trash and under it a board that must be replaced," Francisco warned. "Do not fail me, *senor*. It would mean disgrace."

"I won't," Sam answered. "*Mil gracias*."

The hole dropped down three feet, passed under the thick adobe wall and immediately rose to the board Francisco had mentioned and the barrel above. Sam climbed out, brushed dirt from his clothes

and replaced the barrel. A round rising moon was silvering the ridges south of town. Sam looked around and followed the alley to his right.

This brought him out in the rear of the bank. A window light glowed in the side street from the back room of the bank. Sam walked past, but could not see in. From the corner he looked down the deserted main street — not even a single horse stood droop-hipped at the rail in front of the Double Eagle. Sam wondered if too much time had passed. He wondered what Deputy Fenton had done with his gun. Sam disliked being unarmed.

The side door of the bank opened behind him, throwing a streak of light outside. Sam stepped on around corner into the dark front entryway to the bank. From here he watched Deputy Fenton come into view, striding across street to the livery stable. Through the front glass Sam noticed a strip of lamplight in the back of the bank. That strip of light widened and Sam pressed into shadow, watching Lucius Tatum's bulky figure enter the front part of the bank. He could dimly discern Tatum moving about inside.

Then Fenton rode from the stable across the street on a chunky bay, heading north, and Sam cursed mildly under his breath. He wanted to observe Lucius Tatum's movements within the bank and at the same time follow the banker's nephew. He could not do both. Sam ducked and stepped back to the corner, deciding Lucius Tatum could wait. Now he needed a mount. But no animal that could be borrowed stood at any of the hitch rails along the street, a fact already verified. Sam struck out for the Hardesty home.

He found the dun with no difficulty in a slant-roofed shed back of the house. Ernie's sorrel was gone. Sam saddled in the dark and glanced back at the Judge's residence, remembering how hungry he was and the meal he had missed. A light burned in an upstairs window. Tracy's room, he guessed. Tracy sitting up, worried about Ernie. The watching and the waiting always fell to the women.

Moonlight touched the roofs of the town, spread across the stretch of fertile valley land beyond. Sam hurried the dun along, making up for time he had lost. Ahead, dust showed its hazy fog along the

road. Sam slowed and sniffed it like a hound. He stopped and listened once. One rider up ahead, clopping along the road. Sam followed at a cat-trot.

Presently that rider turned from the road and passed under the crossbar between sturdy gate posts. The gate remained open behind him. Trees mushroomed over the ranchyards here, patterned with moonlight. Two big barns, an acre of more of corrals. Sam slid from saddle, tied the dun. His need for a gun was acute; he felt helpless without one. Overhead cottonwood leaves rustled with a faint, pleasant sound in the breeze. The rider had left his chunky bay at a hitch rail in front of the big ranch house.

Sam heard his boots on the steps, crossing the veranda there. Nothing stealthy about this rider. He approached in the open, walked boldly with spurs tinkling. Sam heard his rap on the door. The rider called, "Ward! Ward, you here?"

He was answered immediately from inside the house: "What is it, Al? What's wrong?"

"Got to talk to you, Ward. Trouble in town. Come let me in. Hurry up!"

A match was ignited, touched to wick. Lamplight grew into a steady brightness inside the house...

WARD YARBO did not pull on his boots. In stocking feet and hip overalls, his broad chest bare, Yarbo reached for his holstered six-gun hanging by the belt from the head of his bed. His face was dark with a deep scowl set on it. Then he moved the lamp across the bedroom.

"Just a minute, Al," he called.

His stockinged feet were entirely noiseless as he turned to the window. Yarbo slid over the sill, dropped softly to the ground below. He moved with long, swift strides, close to the wall of the house. He slipped through shrubbery and stepped up on the far end of the veranda, and hugged the shadow as he moved on. When he stopped, Yarbo stood within three or four paces of Deputy Al Fenton.

Fenton wore a denim brush jumper. The deputy was standing in a peculiar position, partly turned away with his head tilted tensely toward the door, shoulders hunched. Thus the left wing of his brush

jumper hid the gun in Al Fenton's hand which he held with muzzle trained on the door.

Yarbo said, "So that's it, huh?"

Fenton whirled and Yarbo's .45 flamed brightly in the darkness. Yarbo fired again into the deputy's body as Fenton sprawled. It was all perfectly plain to Yarbo.

"So you and your fat uncle just couldn't pass up such a good chance to get rid of me?" he addressed the dead man. "That way the two of you could have everything. Greedy fools, bah!"

Calmly Yarbo went back into the house and pulled on his boots. But he knew he had to move fast. Some stray rider might have heard the shots; also, there was no telling when Rafter J punchers, out now with one posse or the other, would return. It was essential to hide the deputy's body and his chunky bay horse. No, not the horse—better to snap reins off at the bit and turn the bay loose. That way it would appear Fenton had met with an accident, perhaps far away. That might add hours to the time he had. Yarbo paused and picked up his keys.

At the hitch rail he slapped the chunky bay in the face and waved his arms. The animal sat back hard and broke the reins, and stampeded away. Yarbo tied the two broken ends of reins together and passed them under the dead man's armpits. The gun Fenton had held lay under him. With the ends of the reins for purchase, Yarbo dragged the deputy along the veranda, through the shrubbery and around corner. There was a rocky bank at the rear of the house into which a roomy cool cave had been tunneled as an outside cellar and storeroom.

Masonry and plank door with padlock sealed the mouth of the storeroom. Yarbo always kept the keys, measuring out a sack of spuds or cases of canned goods to the line camps and bunkhouse as needed. It was an ideal spot in which to conceal the body of a dead man. Yarbo fitted the key into the padlock and swung the door wide. Fenton's left gun slipped from its holster as he was dragging the dead man inside.

Stooped over, Yarbo saw the door swinging shut behind him. The wind, he thought—and swift as thought, knew there was no wind tonight. He jumped over Fenton's body, leaping back toward the door.

It swung to in his face. He heard the padlock being slipped into place as he threw his weight at the door. He grabbed for his gun and fired twice through cracks in the planks. He used a third shot, blindly hoping to cut through and smash the padlock.

"Might be best," Sam advised him from outside, "to save the last shot for yourself."

Sam picked up the deputy's gun—needing a weapon bad, but handling this one with distaste. He searched about the yards and found a dilapidated shed at a safe distance from other buildings. Sam scraped up a mound of trash against the side of the shed lighted a match to it, before stepping into saddle and heading the dun back toward town.

VI

LUCIUS TATUM was taking precautions, playing safe. He'd sorted out bonds and negotiable securities into a neat pile on the board table. He'd gone through cash drawers and extracted funds on hand from the front room vault. It was a one-man bank and since old Mart Le Jeune's death Tatum had run it single-handed with the help of a clerk. The clerk did what he was told, and didn't count. Tatum had only to replace cash in the drawers and the bank would open as usual in the morning.

But if things went wrong, he was prepared. He was ready. From a closet in the back room, the banker brought to light a small, battered valise into which he packed the pile of negotiable paper and the cash. The cash disappointed him—a bare \$700. The day after tomorrow, when receipts on certain cattle sales were due, the sum would be nearer \$20,000. But all this was small pickings when compared with old Mart Le Jeune's wide holdings—the Le Jeune warehouse and freight line, the mortgages and town property, cattle and the fertile acres of Rafter J.

Lucius Tatum hungered for more of it. He had seen great possibilities here when he first arrived in Nuevo Springs, six years ago, to go to work in Le Jeune's bank. Leading citizen, financial pillar, Tatum had always enjoyed the respect of the town. But he'd kept his eyes open and made plans. During the days of old Mart Le Jeune's last illness, his plans had ripened. He'd been forced then to join hands with

Ward Yarbo and Bat Neves, since their aims were the same.

Now Bat Neves was dead. Tonight Ward Yarbo had misplayed his hand, and unless Albert failed would no longer demand his share. All that Lucius Tatum needed was more time. Desperately the banker hoped his preparations to flee with what loot could be carried in one small, battered valise would prove unnecessary.

"But just in case," he mumbled, placing the valise ready in the back-room safe.

There were a few private possessions at the rented house he shared with his nephew here in town that he would need, if forced to go. That would not take long. Tatum cleaned up the rest of the papers on the board table, glancing frequently at his heavy gold watch on a heavy-linked chain. It was a short three miles out to Rafter J and as far back; give Albert ten-fifteen minutes out there to accomplish his duty as a sworn officer of the law, and an hour, all told, should see the deputy's return. Tatum did not dwell on the details of his nephew's mission; violence had always nauseated him.

But the moments dragged unbearably. "Tatum!" a voice outside yelled. "Tatum, come hyar!"

The speaker was the livery stable owner, whose son had been left in charge this evening at the time of Bat's death. Tatum recognized the man's Texas drawl.

"What is it, Williams?" he called.

"Don't rightly know. But yuh nephew's hoss has just come in at the barn without him," the stableman replied. "Might be Al has met with accident. They's somethin' else peculiah, suh. Come out hyar an' look at it."

Tatum came from the side door and locked it behind him. The stableman led him to the corner and pointed to a flame that burned brightly out across the moonlit valley, two or three miles distant. Out front of the Double Eagle, the bartender and a cowboy on crutches stood and watched.

"What d'yuh make of it?" Williams called to them.

"Fire at Rafter J all right," the bartender answered. "But nothin' serious. Blaze is dyin' down some now."

By an effort of will Tatum kept his voice steady. "I'll need my team and a light

rig, Williams," he ordered. "Harness it for me immediately. I'll be right back."

"Yes, suh."

THE BANKER had no idea why a fire had been lighted at Rafter J, but a signal blaze was no part of his nephew's chore. Something had gone wrong. A chain was no stronger than its weakest link, and Albert had always been weak. Breath puffed in and out between the banker's lips as he hurried homeward to the rented house. Time to get going now. But he was ready, he was prepared. With luck it would be opening time at the bank tomorrow morning before he was definitely missed and the town started after him.

He dug into a desk at the house. A few letters of importance—important because he might be traced by them. A few dollars of cash hidden in a drawer. He'd need every cent he could lay hands on before it became safe to start converting stolen securities into money. He found an address book he needed to establish proper contacts later. He stuffed a bar of soap, razor and a jeweled stickpin into his pockets. Every minute counted.

Williams had left the team and light buggy standing in the runway of the stable. Tatum climbed in, drove around the corner and into a side street. There were more people out on the main street now, he noticed. He heard a shout and the sounds of a rider coming into town fast along the Rafter J road. A curious man would have paused to learn more, a loyal one to shed a tear for his departed nephew. But the details of Albert's failure did not matter to Lucius Tatum. The important part now was how many miles a fast team could put behind them before daybreak.

He realized he ought to have a weapon to protect what he carried with him. There was a sawed-off shotgun always handy in a corner by the back-room safe. Tatum scrambled off the seat, ran back to the bank and opened the safe. He grabbed the battered valise in one hand and the shotgun in the other. He was emerging from the side door, hands full and trying to close the door behind him, when a gun muzzle prodded into his spine.

"Now where," inquired an interested voice, "would you be going with the satchel, banker? For a pleasant week-end

visit with friends, perhaps—or a much longer journey? And a gun in your other hand, for shame! Drop it!"

Tatum's vocal cords constricted and failed him. A hollow developed in his paunchy middle. His knees turned to jelly. But he clung desperately to the valise and the gun.

"Come, come," said the man behind him. "This will never do. Allow me." He reached past Tatum's shoulder and deftly wrenched the sawed-off shotgun from his grasp. "A vicious weapon, loaded with buckshot no doubt. Suitable only for murder and hardly safe in your hands. Now the satchel, please."

"No," Tatum whispered from his choked throat.

"What's this?" The voice of the man behind grew firm. "Is it then as I first suspected and there are valuables within? Possibly funds from this bank—is that it?"

"Listen," Tatum squeaked. "I'll buy you off, whoever you are. I'll pay your price. I'll split with you."

"You mean I may have a share of the widows' savings and the orphans' dimes?" the stranger asked. "The quarters and dollars old men have entrusted to your care, the pennies children have saved, no doubt, many a citizen's hard-earned funds, kept for an emergency. Is that your proposition, banker? Beside you I'm a squeamish man, it seems. And what is this talk of price? Is there a price for the life of a fine, upstanding lad like young Le Jeune?"

"I didn't—!"

"But your hireling did. Back into your hole, you fat crawling thing! Drop your loot. Be quick! The third shot will be meant for you."

Sam fired twice into the night overhead. The battered valise fell at his feet, and Lucius Tatum catapulted head first into the bank, moving faster than either believed possible. The side door slammed behind him. Sam fired his third shot into the door frame and spat on the ground. Sam looked back and tossed Al Fenton's six-gun into the gutter, hurrying his retreat as bootheels clattered around corner.

"DANG'DEST thing you ever heard of," Ernie said, getting the jail door open. "Sam, you sure missed it!"

"What's that?" Sam asked.

"Last night, Lucius Tatum tried to rob his own bank. Some shots were heard. Right outside door was a valise crammed full of everything in the bank of value to him. His team waitin' there, ready for a getaway. But Tatum was inside, tryin' to hide in the back-room closet when the crowd found him. He was pleadin' he hadn't done it—none of it, but particularly that he'd had no part in the murder of young Le Jeune. Claimed some other person—quite unknown—had robbed the bank. But the clerk found all that was stole inside Tatum's valise."

"A strange thing," Sam said.

"You ain't heard nothin' yet," Ernie told him. "Deputy Fenton has been killed. Remember last night, Sam you warned him if he didn't mend his ways that was likely? Well, a little later Fenton rode out to Rafter J after Yarbo on account of the Neves' shootin'. But Yarbo beat him at gunplay. Yarbo tried to hide the body in a cellar back of the house and somehow got locked in with the dead deputy. There was a fire at Rafter J after that. I'd started for the Aquila after help, but met a couple of punchers on the road. We hurried over to Rafter J and found Yarbo yellin' himself hoarse to be let out. One of the punchers noticed Fenton's body when we got the door open. Yarbo could offer no satisfactory explanation. We have him."

"I tell you, Sam, this town has never seen such a night. Seems Yarbo blames Lucius Tatum for his troubles. Tatum blames Yarbo—except for the unknown robber who took nothin' that he keeps mutterin' about. But they're one man against the other now, each seein' who can spill the most information to swing the other. Ward Yarbo is wanted on old charges which Neves learned about. That's why Neves died. All of 'em were back of the murder of young Le Jeune which Bat Neves did. This town is a volcano, ready to explode underfoot. Come along, Sam ... No, not you, Francisco, you're in for thirty days."

"But, *senor*," Francisco protested. "I will be a lamb among wolves when you bring those other two in here."

"Can't help it," Ernie grunted.

Thin daylight filtered into the sheriff's little street-front office. Saddled horses,

dusty and sweat-streaked from last night's riding, lined the rails at the Double Eagle and restaurant. The saloon had not closed its doors all night.

"Couldn't find Fenton's keys to the jail," Ernie explained, "or I'd have had you out sooner, Sam. Here's your belt and gun. Everybody with the posse over west seems to have noticed the blaze at Rafter J and took it for a signal to hurry back. But there's another thing you can do for me if you will."

"Anything to help out, Ernie."

"There's still eight men sittin' up in Aquila Pass, hungry and ignorant of what has happened. I no more'n got well started on the road last night. Be a big favor, Sam, if you would carry word over to the pass this mornin'."

"Be glad to," Sam agreed. "But none of 'em will know me, Ernie. They'll be sittin' there in the pass with fingers itchy on triggers, waitin' for this outlaw Trulesen to come along."

"I'll fix you up," Ernie said. "Here's a deputy star for your shirt front. Buck McLaren swore me in from his bed two hours ago. Get some breakfast first, Sam."

"All right. I might just stop in for a minute to see the sheriff on my way. Won't take long. But be sure to express my regrets to your Tracy for the supper I missed last night. Now don't you forget that, Ernie."

Ernie grinned. "Get along with you. You'll be stealin' my girl with your winnin' manners next thing I know."

SAM HAD his breakfast in the restaurant, climbed on the dun in the chill gray before sunrise and turned across town. A pleasant place, this Nuevo Springs, Sam thought. He'd have liked to linger here a while, except for certain urgent matters that pressed elsewhere. When he knocked on the sheriff's door, Buck McLaren's booming voice bade him enter.

"Oh, it's you, Sam," Buck said. He sat propped up in bed with early morning at the windows and his big-knuckled hands working fretfully.

"What is all this? I wish you could tell me. I ain't a fool. Since the hour of old Mart Le Jeune's death, I've knowed what the wolves wanted—they wanted to strip the carcass clean. I've done what I could

from this bed. But, Sam, what's happened now just don't make sense—not all at once, anyhow."

"Or maybe it does, sheriff," Sam replied. "Maybe that's the only way it could have happened. I've come here to tell you what I know. Y'see, I was travelin' this way from over south and happened to stop for some needed rest at Kimberly's stagehouse, night before last. I had one fleeting look at the murderer—it was only a glance. Upstairs young Le Jeune had fallen, mortally wounded. I stayed to do what I could for him. He could talk only with great difficulty. But what he had to say I wrote down for him in the form of a will. Here it is."

From his pocket Sam took a crumpled sheet of paper, smoothing it between fingers, and handed the paper to Buck McLaren. "A fine lad, Buck—dyin' bravely as he could. Quite a different sort from his grandpa, I guess, but with some of the same steel in him. With him he had old Judge Hardesty's plans for the dam and irrigation project the Judge has spent half a lifetime workin' on. The Judge's plan had fired young Le Jeune's imagination. He'd spent weeks smoothin' out engineering details before startin' the journey to claim his birthright. He was in a hurry, then."

"But this will?" said Buck McLaren, reading it.

"Is plumb legal," Sam said. "Signed by two witnesses—Manuel Flores, who is hostler at Kimberly's roadhouse, and his wife who made her cross. Both are available, both will swear to the truth of what I put down. Young Le Jeune signed while I held the pen in his hand. What his desire was is plain beyond dispute. Judge Hardesty, who once owned half of Rafter J, now owns all of it, funds and proceeds of the estate to be used to carry out his irrigation plans. A fitting monument to a good lad they murdered, Buck."

"You're right."

"Why it had happened, I didn't know at the time," Sam continued. "But among Le Jeune's possessions I found information that concerned a man named Ward Yarbo. A safeguard old Mart had wished his grandson to have, no doubt. I took this. I'd had my glimpse of the murderer. And

last evenin' in town I saw him again. I spoke to him by name—Bat Neves. So far, it would only have been my word against his. That wasn't enough. So I stepped into the post office and addressed my information on Yarbo to this petty, sneak-thief killer on the theory that one coyote will always gladly turn on another. That is what happened with only a small amount of help from me."

Buck McLaren raised his head. "Wait a minute, Sam—"

"Sorry," Sam said. "Gotta go. It's a pleasure to have met you, Buck S'long."

Buck McLaren lay on his bed and stared at the will and a long time passed. Then Buck remembered the .45 gun that he always kept within reach of his hand.

"Now why," Buck said, "didn't I think of that before?"

But, plainly, he couldn't get from his bed with his broken hip still in its cast. He might have shouted from the window to some passing neighbor. He might have yelled to the Mexican woman who kept house for him. Buck could raise the roof with his yell. But he didn't.

So the long morning passed. It was noon—a little after—before Ernie came in.

"Buck, you know what I just discovered?" Ernie said. "There's a hole in the jail some human badger dug. That Francisco and some others have been livin' there on the county whenever the notion hit 'em free to come and go at will. Can you beat it?"

"I can," Buck said. "Have them possemen come home from the Aquila yet?"

"Yeah, just rode in. Sam, however, went on across on some little scout of his own. Quite a guy, that Sam!"

"Uh-huh. The Mexicans call him *muy hombre*. But means the same thing."

"Huh! What?" Ernie sputtered.

Buck nodded. "You've met Trulesen, son. Think about it a minute, you'll see what I mean. He'd been hard-pressed. He was hidin' there at Kimberly's when the shot was fired. Take a look at this paper . . . Did he ask you for the star?"

"No, I give it to him. Buck, what we gonna do?"

Buck grinned. "I dunno. He's got six hours start."

Ernie grinned. "I dunno either."

SHOWDOWN COLTS

By Ben Frank

**Who in all that fear-frozen crowd would challenge
Curly Red's killer rep? Who but a ragged, barefoot
button named Ronny.**

RONNY PHILLIPS was his name, but everybody in Salty Flats, except his Pop, called him Ronny Fingers. Or just Old Man Fingers' Kid.

He stood outside the batwing door of the Palace Saloon, a barefooted, skinny kid with a thick sprinkle of freckles across his thin face. His eyes were fixed on a poster tacked on the peeling wall of the building. The poster said, *Elect Abraham Lincoln President!*

Although Mr. Lincoln had been president now for some time, Big Hoop, the barkeep, hadn't taken down the poster. Big Hoop admired Mr. Lincoln. He said he reckoned that Abe was about the greatest man living.

But Ronny Phillips wasn't thinking of that. He wasn't even seeing the poster. He wasn't seeing anything, because his eyes were too full of tears for seeing. He could still hear the kids down the street yelling, "Ronny Fingers is a bum! Ronny's a bum!"

And Ronny didn't want to be a bum, or to be called one. He wanted to be like the other kids, but when you were old man Fingers' kid and didn't have a mother or a decent place to live, there wasn't much you could do about this "bum" business.

Ronny sighed and blinked the water out of his eyes. He wished his Mom were alive. Maybe then his Pop wouldn't be just old man Fingers. Maybe...

A covered wagon came creaking along, and the kid, his small fists thrust deeply into the pockets of his ragged pants, watched the wagon pull into the evening shadows flung across the dusty street. A family of settlers, he reckoned, on their way to the little settlement over in Paradise Valley.

And thinking about Paradise Valley, he thought of new log cabins with mothers and dads and their kids living in them.

He guessed he'd never have a home like that. A real home.

From inside the Palace Saloon came a raggy whirl of music. That was Ronny's Pop playing on the old piano. His Pop, the town drunk, picking up a few pennies with his music. Old Fingers, the Salty Flats people called him, although he wasn't as old as he looked.

A big man on a sleek sorrel came riding through the gray dust kicked up by the covered wagon. He rode up to the splintery board walk in front of the Palace and slid to the ground. His big spurs jungled like silver bells.

Ronny sidled toward him.

"Hold your horse, Mister?" he asked.

The stranger's curly whiskers matched the color of his sorrel horse. He looked at Ronny out of eyes that reminded the boy of thin ice reflecting a fading sky, and he gave Ronny a flat-handed shove that sent him sprawling on the edge of the walk.

"Mind your own business, kid," he growled, and went tramping heavily into the Palace.

Ronny sat up and rubbed at a skinned elbow. He was used to being pushed around. He didn't feel any particular resentment at the big, red-whiskered man. But he did feel a little scared when he remembered the blue icy eyes.

The man driving the covered wagon leaned out and asked, "Did he hurt you, kid?"

Ronny looked up at him sitting there on the old spring seat. The man looked like the kind who wouldn't be pushing small boys around. His bony face was kind and a little sad. Ronny was reminded of the pictures he'd seen of Mr. Lincoln.

"No," he answered. "He didn't hurt me."

Then he saw the woman in the wagon.

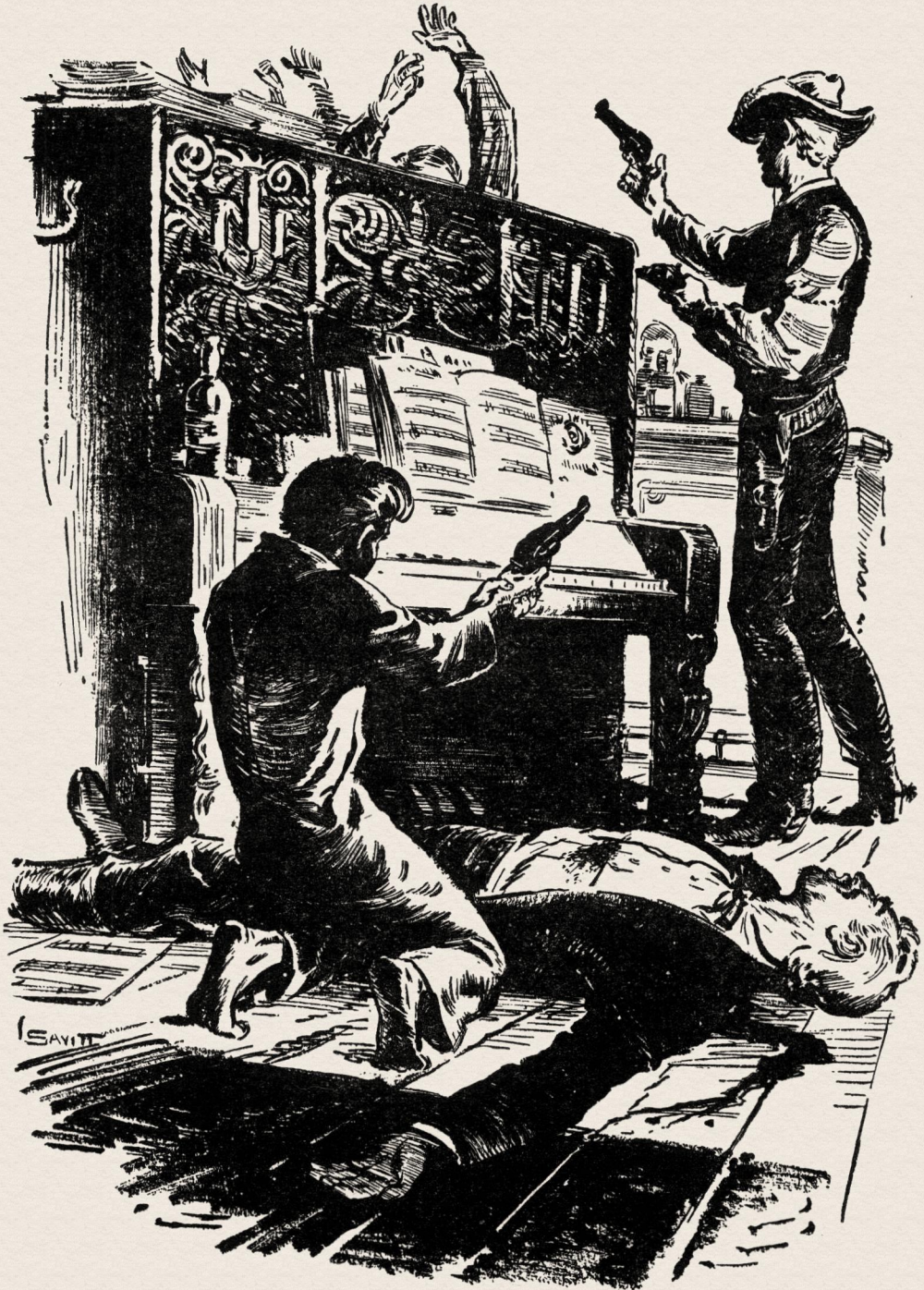
SHOWDOWN COLTS

She was young and pretty and had nice clean hands that a boy would like to feel through his hair. She smiled at Ronny, and he felt all warm inside. He guessed that his own mother, if she were living, would look a good deal like this woman before him.

"Hello, son," she said, her voice low and soft.

Ronny swallowed hard. She'd called him son. If a kid had a mother like her, the other kids wouldn't be calling him a bum. He felt sure of that.

"H'lo, ma'm," he managed.



Ronny lifted the old sixgun with shaking hands. He pulled back the hammer.

"Is there a place where we could camp for the night?" the man asked.

Ronny pointed down the street.

"People camp on that vacant lot sometimes," he answered.

And all the time he kept remembering that the woman had called him son. Tonight he'd go to sleep, thinking about that. Maybe he'd dream. Dream he was living in one of the new cabins in Paradise Valley with this woman sort of looking after him.

THE WAGON creaked on, and for the first time Ronny noticed that something was wrong with Pop's music. It had lost its ripple. It was muddy and scary. It sent a shiver over the boy. It made him forget the woman and think of driving wind and sleet—and death. He turned toward the batwing door just as the big, red-whiskered man pushed out.

The man's face was as tight as a drum-head, and he didn't notice Ronny at all. He leaped on the sorrel and drove his big silver spurs into the animal and rode out of town in a swirl of gray dust.

The music began again. Now it was the kind that made the kid feel that something terrible was about to happen. It frightened him, yet at the same time it made him feel like crying.

He couldn't stand it. He turned and ran blindly along the street.

Someone yelled, "Ronny Fingers is a bum!"

He kept right on going. He reached the little shack where he and his Pop lived, hurried inside and dropped down on the lumpy, sagging bed. His breath came hard and fast, and inside he felt cold and trembly.

He hadn't quite recovered from his fright when his Pop came staggering into the shack. The man's sunken, bleary eyes had a look in them that Ronny had never seen before. A look of stark terror.

"We've got to get out of town, son!" he chattered. "Curly Red's found me! Help me pack, son! Curly Red'll get us both!"

His Pop pulled an old suitcase from under the bed, gathered up a few odds and ends and threw them into it.

Ronny swallowed down a rising lump of fear.

"Who's Curly Red?" he asked.

"He's a killer, son. He's..."

"Where're we goin', Pop?"

"It don't make any difference just so's it's away from here. Help me, son."

"Maybe we could go to Paradise Valley," Ronny suggested hopefully. "Maybe the people in the covered wagon would let us ride with them."

"No, that ain't far enough. Or fast enough. We've gotta go a long way in a hurry."

"Pop," Ronny wondered, "how're we goin'?"

The man straightened a little and looked at his small son. His face softened, and some of his terror seemed to melt away.

"Why, son," he said, his voice steady-ing, "come to think of it, we don't have any way to go except walk. And you don't have any shoes. I guess we wouldn't get very far walking, would we?"

He dropped down on the bed and put an arm about the boy's shoulders.

"I guess seeing Curly Red scared all the sense out of me for a time, son. Running away is no good. Never run away from things the way I do, son."

Ronny snuggled against his Pop's shoulder. Sometimes his Pop was mighty good to him. Othertimes...

"Why don't we go to Sheriff Bill?" he asked suddenly. "He won't let anybody hurt us."

The man shook his head, got up and walked to the window.

"Sheriff Bill has gone over to Paradise Valley. But even if he was here, I don't think he'd be able to—Ronny, I'm no good. Never will be any good..."

His voice trailed off, and he smiled at Ronny.

"Come to think of it, I guess we don't need to worry much about Curly Red," he went on. "I reckon the reason he didn't bother me this afternoon was because there were people in the saloon. He knew that if he started anything, he wouldn't be apt to get away. Ronny, I guess we'll be safe in the Palace."

"Sure, Pop," Ronny agreed, feeling the tension going out of him. "Sure—Big Hoop an' Charley an' the others are our friends. Curly Red wouldn't dare do anything there."

"That's right, son." The man laughed a

little. "Curly Red's the kind who looks out for his own skin." He sobered suddenly. "Safe, unless he'd come back with some of his gang," he added under his breath.

FINGERS moved across the room to the cupboard and dug a bottle from a shelf.

"We'll go to the Palace and stay until Sheriff Bill gets back," he said. "Maybe longer. We'll see."

"Maybe then we could go to Paradise Valley," Ronny said.

The man shook his head and drank from the bottle. He put the bottle back into the cupboard and walked a little unsteadily to a small table by the window.

"We'll go to the Palace as soon as I write a letter," he murmured.

Ronny watched the man as he wrote. He loved his Pop, even if the man was all washed up and sometimes didn't know exactly what he was doing. He knew that his Pop, whom the Salty Flats people called old Fingers, hadn't always been this way. One time he'd been Harrison Phillips, the great pianist. Ronny had learned that the time he'd found the scrap books stuffed into the bottom of an old trunk. These books were filled with clippings of pictures and little stories about Harrison Phillips. They showed his Pop sitting at a huge shiny piano with a big orchestra in back of him.

And reading through these clippings had awakened in Ronny hazy memories of crowds of well-dressed people and bright lights and great music. Memories hazy like those of an almost forgotten dream.

That same day, his Pop had come reeling home and had found him looking at the scrap books. He had talked incoherently about the past, and from the jumble of words, Ronny realized vaguely that his mother's sudden death had had something to do with his Pop's cracking up. The next morning, the books were gone. Ronny had never seen them since.

Ronny was jerked up out of his memories by his Pop shoving back from the table. The man held a sealed envelope in his unsteady hands.

"Son," he said, folding the envelope and handing it to Ronny, "stick this into your pocket. If something happens to me, give it to Sheriff Bill when he gets back. Of

course," he added with a quick smile, "nothing's going to happen to me."

The man went to the cupboard again and took another drink from the bottle. Then he dug an old sixgun from under the lumpy mattress and slid it into an inside pocket of his worn coat. He saw Ronny watching him, and winked.

"Just in case I want to take a shot at a rabbit," he said.

But Ronny knew better, and a tug of fear pulled at him.

"Pop," he choked, "I'm scared!"

The man gave him a little pat on the head.

"Nothing to be afraid of, son," he said. "Let's go."

He staggered to the door and stood weaving back and forth there, studying the street. Seeming satisfied, he went out into the evening shadows. Ronny followed closely. There weren't any kids around to yell, "Ronny Fingers is a bum!"

He was glad of that, because things like that sometimes upset his Pop.

They came to the vacant lot where the farmer and his wife were cooking supper over a small camp fire. The smell of coffee and bacon made Ronny remember how hungry he was. The woman saw him and smiled, and he smiled back at her. The bony-faced man, who looked like Mr. Lincoln's pictures, grinned and waved in a friendly way.

There wasn't anyone else around. The couple looked sort of lonely, and Ronny had an uneasy feeling that the woman had been crying. He would have liked to stop for a minute, but his Pop kept right on, and remembering Curly Red, he didn't want to be left behind.

It didn't take them long to reach the Palace. Big Hoop, the barkeep, had the ceiling lights going, and it looked pretty cheerful inside with the mirrors reflecting the brightness and the brass rail gleaming like a long, golden pole.

Old Fingers stopped at the bar.

"Give the boy something to eat," he said.

"Come on, kid," Big Hoop grinned.

RONNY followed Big Hoop to the lunch counter. He saw old Charley Mason's whiskers move and knew that underneath them was a friendly grin. Old

Charley panned gold out of the gravel bank along Salty River and he always carried an old .44 Navy pistol. Sometimes he'd let Ronny shoot the gun.

Matt Mosley, another miner, gave Ronny a friendly poke in the ribs as he went by, and Ronny had the comfortable feeling of being safe among friends.

Big Hoop fashioned a sandwich. Back of the fat man stood the old iron safe, the only safe in Salty Flats. In it, Ronny knew, were a number of leather pokes heavy with gold. They belonged to Charley and Matt and the other miners.

He took a bite of the sandwich. It had a thick chunk of ham in it, smeared over with a lot of butter, and the sweet goodness of it squashed around his teeth. He took another bite and forgot all about the red-whiskered man with the icy eyes.

Just as he finished the sandwich, old Fingers moved from the bar to the piano in the back of the room. Ronny liked to watch his Pop play, his long white fingers moving over the keys so fast you could hardly see them.

His Pop always sat very straight when he played, and his face would look younger and less haggard. And sometimes something would come into his eyes that made you feel like crying. Not the kind of crying you do when the kids call you a bum. It was the kind of crying you do when you look at something so beautiful that it hurts you deep inside.

Fingers' thin shoulders straightened a little, and he struck a chord that made the old piano jump. Then he was off in a merry little tune that made Ronny want to skip all over the place.

Old Charley Mason moved his chair closer to the piano. Ronny liked old Charley next to his Pop.

Just then the swinging door opened, and a tall, thin stranger sauntered into the room and edged up to the bar. Ronny didn't pay much attention to him except to notice that his face didn't seem meant for smiling and that he had a long-barreled sixgun stuck under his belt.

The music rippled on, and old Charley got out an old black comb and a piece of paper. He folded the paper over the comb and began humming through it, patting his foot in time to the music.

The thin stranger moved from the bar

to a chair at the side of the room and sat down. He didn't seem to go much for the music. He frowned and pulled his hat down until it hid his smoky eyes.

Matt Mosley couldn't sit still any longer. He got a couple of spoons and began to drum with them on the table top. About everybody in the room was patting his feet by then except the tall stranger.

The door opened again and let in the man who had camped in the vacant lot. He looked more than ever like Mr. Lincoln with the lights and shadows playing on his face. He smiled at everyone in a friendly way, and Ronny could tell that he liked the music by the way his eyes twinkled.

Right behind the settler came a short, dark-faced man with a little black mustache under his short nose. He walked to the bar and stood there, looking around like a curious, hunched-shouldered bear.

The music stopped for a moment, and the man from the covered wagon said to Big Hoop, "My name's Curtis. Andy Curtis. Me an' the wife have bought a little place over in Paradise Valley."

Big Hoop's answer was lost in another swirl of music. Even the hanging lamps seemed to sway in time with this tune. Ronny leaned back against the lunch counter, feeling all happy and warm inside. Like when the woman, Mrs. Curtis, had smiled at him.

And right into the middle of everything came the big, red-whiskered man with the icy blue eyes—Curly Red!

RONNY'S Pop saw him come in, and Ronny heard the music jumble up like the falling of a pile of blocks. It seemed to him that his Pop's and the man's eyes got fastened together on each other and couldn't break apart. The kid felt his legs go weak and he had to hold on to the lunch counter to keep from falling. He tried to cry out, but his voice was frozen tight down inside someplace. And then he realized with a sickening shock that the thin man on the chair against the wall and the short man at the bar were Curly Red's men. That Curly Red had brought two of his gang and had come to get his Pop.

The music kept on, but it wasn't the same. It was different from anything Ronny had ever heard before except, maybe,

in that vague dreamy childhood memory that the scrap books had brought to him when he'd first seen them. It wasn't old Charley's or Matt's kind of music. They dropped out at the first ringing chord, looking startled.

The room seemed to change. It was like being out in a new world where everything was so beautiful that it hurt way down inside you. Or, maybe, like having a home and a mother to look after you.

Ronny saw Big Hoop brush a fat hand across his wet eyes. Matt Mosley sat leaning forward, his mouth gaping. The kind-faced settler's lips quivered strangely, and his eyes got a far-away look in them. The paper and comb had slipped unnoticed from Charley's hands. Everyone in the room seemed to stop breathing for fear he'd miss some of this music. Everyone that is, except Curly Red and his two men.

Ronny suddenly realized that his Pop was talking to him with the music. Telling him that no matter what happened now, he must keep his chin up. Telling him to be a good kid and to grow into a good man, not to let disappointments and sorrows break him like they had broken Harrison Phillips. And the lump in the kid's throat got so big he had to fight for breath.

Then the music stopped, and old Fingers staggered to his feet.

"You'd better go for that gun!" he said in a ringing voice.

His hand slid under his coat, groping for the gun in his inside pocket.

Of course, Ronny's Pop didn't have a chance. His hand didn't even get close to the pocket before Curly Red's gun came up, making the room rock with two quick blasts.

Fingers fell back against the piano, and his arm dropped across the keys, sending out a jumble of tones over the room right on top of the shots.

Ronny choked back a sob and ran to where his Pop lay. He got down on his knees beside the man and took his head in his small arms.

"Pop!" he choked. "Pop!"

He was blinded for a moment by the flood of scalding tears and couldn't see a thing. When he got his eyes working, he saw that Curly Red and the two strangers had the room covered with their sixguns.

He heard Curly Red say, "All right, gents, take it easy."

No one moved, and Curly Red's lips curled at the corners.

"Now, gents," he went on, "just a simple little question. Who can open that safe?"

No one answered.

Curly Red's face tightened, and his gun moved slowly until it centered on the settler's middle.

"All right, mister," the outlaw said quietly. "Who can open that safe?"

The settler kept his shoulders up, but his bony face lost its color.

"I'm a stranger in this town," he said huskily. "I'm just passin' through. I don't know nothin' about that safe."

Curly Red laughed shortly.

"Yeah?" he sneered.

A thick stifling silence filled the room. Ronny suddenly remembered the woman by the covered wagon. If something happened to her husband, she'd be left alone. Ronny knew what it was to be alone against the world. His thin shoulders straightened.

"Honest," he gasped, "he don't know about the safe!"

"That's right," old Charley spoke up. "He don't know."

The big gun in the outlaw's hand moved until it centered on Charley.

"Maybe you can tell me who can open the safe?" Curly Red rasped.

"Maybe," Charley gritted.

"Talk, mister!" Curly Red barked.

Old Charley had a bag of gold in that safe. And so did a number of his friends. His face turned stony.

"Go to hell!" he ground out between his teeth.

THE RED-WHISKERED man's icy eyes narrowed dangerously. He thumbed back the hammer on his gun. Ronny heard it click, and his heart seemed to freeze up and stand still.

Then Big Hoop cried hoarsely, "I can open the safe!"

"Get busy!" the outlaw said.

Big Hoop waddled around the lunch counter and squatted down on his fat knees in front of the safe. His hands shook as it reached for the dial.

Gently Ronny lowered his Pop's head to the floor. His Pop was dead. He was sure of that. There wasn't anything he

could do for him now, but maybe he could do something for old Charley and Matt. And for the man whose wife was waiting for him at the covered wagon. She'd smiled at Ronny, even if he had been ragged and not very clean. She'd called him son. He couldn't forget that.

He glanced about. No one was paying any attention to him. The men in that room had forgotten that he even existed. Slowly his hand stole under his Pop's faded old coat.

His fingers touched the gun. It felt cold against his skin. Cold and heavy. He drew it out carefully. Nobody was watching him. He could hear Big Hoop breathing hard as he worked at the safe. Old Charley sat there with his hands shoulder high, mumbling into his whiskers. The settler, who looked like Mr. Lincoln, had regained his composure, but his face was still white. And Matt Mosley sat like a block of granite, his hairy fists clenched and held high.

Ronny lifted his Pop's old sixgun with both hands. He pulled back the hammer. He tried to center the sights on Curly Red's left ear, but his hands shook so he couldn't.

Then something happened. He was never sure what. But his finger tightened on the trigger, and the gun came alive before he was ready.

Curly Red's big hat went sailing into the air, the man swung around wildly, trying to locate the source of that shot. For a dozen seconds, he forgot he was covering the room.

Things happened fast then. Old Charley was up and whamming away with his old .44 Navy. Big Hoop had leaped behind the safe and had come up with a shotgun. Matt Mosley didn't have a gun, but he sent his chair splintering against the thin man's head.

Almost as soon as it had begun, it was over, with Curly Red clutching a broken arm and his two men crumpled heaps on the floor. And before the smoke had cleared, Big Hoop, Charley, Matt and the settler were crowding around Ronny.

Old Charley kept saying proudly, "I showed the kid how to shoot. I reckon I did a right good job of it, too!"

And the bony-faced settler said, "Was that piano player the little feller's Pa? Does the little feller have anyone left to look after him?"

Then Sheriff Bill shouldered his way into the circle, and Ronny remembered his Pop's letter and gave it to the man, all the time fighting to hold back the tears that kept squeezing out of his eyes.

Sheriff Bill opened the letter.

"Five years ago," he read, "I saw a bank robbery in Lawton. One of the bandits shot the cashier. It was my testimony that put the man and his brother behind bars. This man, Curly Red Bragg, said he would get me if he ever had the chance. Today he came into the Palace and recognized me. If anything happens to me, you'll know why. And, please, somebody look out for my boy. Harrison Phillips."

Sheriff Bill folded the letter.

OLD CHARLEY wiped a hand across his whiskers and mumbled something that might have been a curse or a prayer.

Big Hoop said crossly, "This ain't no town for a kid to grow up in without nobody to look after him."

The bony-faced settler stepped up. He was very tall—as tall as Mr. Lincoln, Ronny guessed. Gently he helped Ronny to his feet.

"Sarah an' me lost our boy back in Indiana," he said huskily. "He was about this lad's age and size. Had freckles, too."

The break in the man's voice made Ronny glance up. He suddenly realized what the man had in mind and he knew that the man's way was the right and only way. He took one last look at his Pop's still white face and snuggled his fist into the big hand stretched toward him.

Together Ronny and the settler walked out into the still darkness, and down the vacant street to where the woman waited before the campfire.

The man said huskily, "Here's a young'n, Sarah, who needs lovin' an' carin' for."

She held her arms toward him, and he ran straight into them, knowing in a vague childish way that if his Pop were looking on, he'd be happy about this and would be thinking out a little tune to match the new light in the woman's eyes.

BLIND SIXES

By C. Hall Thompson

When ambush death struck Kinkaid, Willie Maw was the only witness. But the killers weren't worried—Willie Maw was blind.

WILLIE MAW'S hand groped momentarily, then caught Kinkaid's sleeve. Kinkaid paused on the doorsill as the bony fingers clamped on his wrist. Willie's face was close to his. Kinkaid stared into cool blue eyes that looked almost worried. Sometimes, he thought, it was hard to believe Willie Maw was blind.

"Why don't you take it easy, Jud?" Willie frowned anxiously. "Won't do no good to go off half-cocked..."

Kinkaid shook his head; brackets tightened around his mouth. A tic jumped in his cheek. Dusty sunlight, slanting through the doorway of the Sheriff's Office, winked on his reddish-gray hair. His gaze was hard and steady.

"I've waited too long already, kid," he said tonelessly. "I should've had it out with Atlee long ago..."

"Yeah, but..." Willie's thin, scarred face warped with excitement. "You been away to Powder City the last two weeks; you don't know what's been brewin' here in Sioux Wells. Atlee's stirred up a hell of a lot of trouble. He's been tellin' everybody we need a new sheriff...saying you're too old for the job..."

Willie stopped short. Kinkaid's arm had stiffened under his hand. None of what he was feeling got into Kinkaid's voice; it stayed level. "I turn in my badge when the people want me to; but not when they been talked into it by Atlee..."

The tic in Kinkaid's cheek twitched tautly. "I know his kind. They're vultures; they get their claws into a town and pick the meat off its bones. Up north, in Powder City, a gang like Atlee's tried to take over. They damn near won. Seems like they had a pretty slick leader. Only their plans went haywire; him and his gang had to drift..."

Kinkaid's eyes narrowed, studying the

sunbright dust of the street. "That's how it'll be with Atlee's crowd, I promise you. They'll vacate Sioux Wells—and fast..." One veined hand caressed the butt of a low-slung Colt. "Atlee'll find a man ain't always as old as he looks..."

Willie blinked staring sightlessly at some point beyond Kinkaid. Concern made his voice harsh and thick. "Atlee's a damn good shot, Jud. He's fast and he's..." Willie broke off, sensing the sharpness of Kinkaid's gaze.

"He's younger. Is that it, kid?"

Willie's mouth worked dryly; he wanted to say, no, he hadn't meant that. The words wouldn't come. His hand fell limply from Kinkaid's arm.

"The kid's right, Jud..."

Hopefully, Willie turned to the sound of Laredo Smith's voice. Kinkaid didn't move. He kept fingering the glinting gun-butt. Slowly, Laredo Smith took his feet off the battered desk; the swivel-chair creaked as he sat forward. He scratched the silver stubble of his jaw with one thumbnail.

"Better take it a mite slower, Jud," he said gently. "We been sidekicks quite a spell. I seen you take better men than Atlee with one hand behind you. But, we ain't the greased lightnin' we used to be, Jud..."

Kinkaid smiled. It was nothing but a slight curving of the lips. "I can still handle a spavin coyote when I have to..." His eyes returned to Willie's anxious face and the smile became the real thing. It grew gentle, like his hand on Willie's arm. "Stay here with 'Redo, kid. I won't be long. Just long enough to tell Atlee to be out of Sioux Wells by sun-up..."

Willie felt the hand press his arm reassuringly; then, it was gone. Kinkaid's familiar tread moved off through the door, dying away along the echoing wooden side-

walk. For a moment, motionless, Willie only stared into his private darkness. Smith creaked back in the chair, propping his boots on the desk again. "Dad-blamed stubbornest man this side o' Purgatory," he muttered fretfully.

The Big Horn Saloon was Atlee's hang-out. Jud would go down there, now, and face Atlee. Willie shook his head numbly. Suppose Atlee made a gun-sling out of it? Jud still had guts, sure, but his gun-arm was rusty. Sioux Wells had been peaceful for a good many years before Atlee and his mob rode in, dust-caked from the trail, with trouble in the wind that tailed them. Kinkaid hadn't slung a gun in too long a spell. If he stood up to Atlee...

Abruptly, Willie bolted through the door. He turned right and didn't stop when Smith barked, "Hey, git back here!" At a half-run, he groped along the sunbaked wooden walk, brushing against the buildings. His lips worked mechanically. "Jud... Where are you? Jud..."

Fingers closed on his arm, bringing him up short. Kinkaid's voice was edged with anger. "I told you to stay..."

"Jud, you can't risk your neck this way; you can't..."

The vice tightened on his arm. Kinkaid spoke quietly. "This is my job, kid..."

WILLIE'S frown wavered and slowly dissolved. A faintly-sheepish grin softened the scarred tension of his face. "Yeah... Sure, Jud. Only, maybe I could help you, hunh?"

Laughter rumbled warmly in Kinkaid's chest. His big fist brushed Willie's jaw gruffly. "Who you kiddin', Mister? As if I could do anything without your help..."

Pride brightened the blank clarity of Willie Maw's eyes. Half-smiling, his slight frame erect, he walked silently beside Kinkaid. Sioux Wells' main street was shrouded in afternoon stillness. The sun wasn't warm. A snappish wind shuttled a tattered poster along the dusty street. The two men passed the warm, musty smell of the general store, the faint clicking of the telegraph in the land office, the hay-clean odor of the livery stable. A horse nickered nervously.

Willie's smile faded when they stopped outside the Big Horn. Doubt twitched at

his mouth corners again. Sound slithered through the rickety batwings. The pianola wrangled brassily, almost in tune with Miss Stella's shrill falsetto. An undercurrent of talk mumbled from the mahogany bar. Kinkaid said: "Wait here..."

"But..."

"It's all right, kid. I'll call when I need you..."

The short nod of assent was dubious. Brows knitted over pale, blind eyes. Willie heard the squeal of the batwings as Kinkaid went into the saloon. He waited, the fingers of one hand opening and closing anxiously. Nothing happened. High and unmelodious, the music bawled on. A hearty voice rumbled,

"Howdy, Jud. When'd you get back from Powder City?" Kinkaid's reply was unruffled and smiling.

A slow sigh escaped Willie's tight lips. So, Atlee wasn't in there. Then, maybe all this fretting had been causeless. Maybe Atlee had already hit the trail. Sure. Maybe he'd got wind Jud was coming back. After all, Jud still had his reputation as the man who cleaned up Sioux Wells in the wild years following the War between the States. He'd done it then; he could do it, now...

The slight frame relaxed imperceptibly. Willie idled to the sidewalk edge, and sat down, leaning against a hitching-post. Wind sifted coldly, close to the dry-packed street dust. Willie shivered and told himself the air felt like one of those sudden blizzards; maybe even before nightfall. Miss Stella's harsh whining persisted:

"...Whoopie-to-yi-yo, git along little dogie, You know that Wyomin' will be your new home..."

From his right hip-pocket, Willie drew a jack-knife and a tiny, half-finished figurine of soft wood. The knife-blade was thin and needlepointed. Slowly, patiently, Willie's hands worked with it. A minute pile of shavings gathered on the ground between his feet. Two women passed along the sidewalk behind him. A feminine voice said, "Hello, Willie." He nodded, smiling vaguely into space.

The women trotted on. The stout one shook her head sadly. "Always feel sorry for that poor boy. Must lead a awful lonesome life, bein' blind that way..." She chuckled sympathetically. "Often won-



The blizzard cut into his face and, suddenly, fear closed on his throat. He was lost!

der what woulda become of him if it hadna been for Jud..."

Everyone in Sioux Wells knew the story that went with Willie Maw's sightless eyes and friendly, puppydog grin. It wasn't pretty. When Willie was ten, his father had owned a spread a few miles north of Sioux Wells. It had been a rich spread; rich enough to catch the eye of a band of renegades passing through Sioux Wells on their way to Robber's Roost Country. Somehow, they had learned of the cash Willie's father kept in an old-fashioned safe at the ranch.

They had taken the place by night and Willie's father had been knifed in the back. They had rifled the safe, got hold of a keg of gun-powder from the stable and, to cover their tracks, they had blown up the ranch. It happened when Willie tore free of the man who held him, making for the one who lit the fuse. The kid got a gun-barrel across the jaw and was left for dead. His eyes blinking back to consciousness, he was scant yards from the powder-keg when it exploded in blinding thunder.

For weeks after they found him wandering, sightless and powderburnt, amid the rubble of his home, Willie had lain in a lifeless coma. It had been the sheriff of Sioux Wells, a middle-aged bachelor, who took care of the boy. Jud Kinkaid had run down the renegades and seen them dangling from a gallows tree before he was satisfied. He had known Willie's father well, and in the twelve years that followed, he had become more than a substitute—a companion and protector to the kid. And, when the folks of Sioux Wells talked of real friendship, someone always mentioned the look of grateful devotion that touched Willie Maw's face when Kinkaid was near.

SENSITIVE fingers caressed the intricately carved figurine. The knife-point chipped a tiny wood-flake from the statuette's eye-socket. Willie smiled. Jud would be pleased with this one. It was the best he'd done yet, a delicate, perfect copy of that little statue he'd handled last week at the general store. Tenderly, he dusted the figurine on his sleeve.

People knew about the whittling, too. Only they never knew why Willie stuck to it so painstakingly, practicing ceaselessly

with that needle-point blade, until, blind as he was, he could reproduce a striking likeness of any object whose contours his skillful fingers had gauged for only a few minutes. No one knew that the whittling was Willie Maw's way of repaying Kinkaid.

The carving, the intricate statuettes that resulted, amused Jud, made him proud of Willie's craftsmanship. For Willie, they became a partial-payment on his debt of gratitude to the older man. His blind eyes kept him from being the agile, self-assured sidekick Kinkaid might have liked for a foster-son. But the art of his bony fingers could at least entertain and, some day, the hands might do something really important for Jud. Some day . . .

The thought broke off sharply and Willie's fingers froze on the knife-hilt. Cold sunlight winked on the blade; his hand was trembling. His nose quivered like that of a wild animal catching the hunter's scent on the wind. Behind him, sidewalk boards shrieked under a heavy tread. Footsteps paused. The smell was very near, now; a musky odor of tobacco and bay-rum. Willie heard thick breathing, and felt Atlee's small black eyes eating into him.

He forced his hands to relax. Slowly, he resumed his whittling. He seemed completely unaware of Atlee's presence. Big feet shifted and turned from him, moving deliberately across the boards. Swinging doors squawked. Willie sat very still. Miss Stella's caterwalling snapped clean in mid-note. The pianola rattled to silence. Conversation at the bar went on for a moment, paused questioningly, then, became part of the stillness. Only the sound of a rising wind whispered along the street.

Doubt twisted Willie's mouth. He stumbled to his feet and one bootheel caught in the boards. He all but fell through the batwings. Hot, liquor-stinking air slapped him in the face. He stopped short and tensed, listening.

Atlee wound slowly through a maze of empty tables. His spurs clinked brazenly in the silence. He leaned his elbows on the bar, pushing back his sombrero with one thumb, looking at nothing but his own dark-jowled reflection in the bar-mirror.

Uneasy feet shuffled. Shoulders brushed timidly as men drew away from the bar,

stepped back in a wide circle, and waited. At the far end of the bar, behind Kinkaid, a tall lean-faced man didn't move. He stood with his arm about Miss Stella's waist, unblinking eyes shifting from Kinkaid to Atlee and back again. Miss Stella, watching his face anxiously, started at the tink of glass and bottle.

Atlee poured himself a whisky. He drank it slowly, arching his head back to swallow. His hand didn't shake. A few yards from him, Kinkaid stood staring into his end of the mirror. His fingers turned a half-empty beer-glass idly. His voice was calm.

"I been looking for you . . ."

Atlee refilled his glass and some whisky slopped over on the bar. Donnegan, the barkeep, made as if to wipe it away, then changed his mind and stayed in his distant corner.

"So I heard," Atlee said tonelessly.

"They tell you why?"

Atlee only looked at the small pool of spilt liquor. Kinkaid went on levelly. "Just thought I'd tell you. We want you out of Sioux Wells by sunup, tomorrow . . ."

A muttering gasp hissed through the room. Dipping one finger in the whisky-puddle, Atlee drew a wavering wet line along the bar. "You don't always get what you want."

"Not always . . . But, mostly."

Beady eyes flashed up, glaring at Kinkaid in the mirror. The words were harsh and thick in Atlee's mouth. "Who the hell do you think you are? Think you own the town? Well, you got another think coming." He twisted sharply to face Kinkaid. The sheriff's calm fingers went on twirling the beer-glass.

"Get this, Gran'pa," Atlee husked. "Sioux Wells is gettin' too big for you. It's about time you hung up your guns, either of your own free will, or . . ." The self-assurance returned and Atlee's heavy lips bent in a smirk. "Or, by popular request." He spaced the words for emphasis.

Kinkaid's fingers froze, he stared straight into the mirror and said, "One way or the other, I step out?"

"That's the general idea."

"And leave the town to you?"

"To a man that can really do something for it."

THE SCHOONER made a dull noise when Kinkaid set it down. He turned slowly, until his eyes met Atlee's full on. The tall man at the end of the bar whispered in Miss Stella's ear and the girl's eyes widened in a pasty, rouge-spotted face. Slowly, she backed away from him until she stood on the fringe of the tense on-looking mob. The lean-faced stranger's right hand sank out of sight behind the bar. His eyes never left Kinkaid.

"Do something for it?" the sheriff repeated flatly. "I know what you'd do for Sioux Wells, Atlee. You'd tear it wide open, turn it into a guntown, a jumping-off place—a gold-mine for you and your boys." The humorless smile twitched at Kinkaid's mouth. "Well, 'Gran'pa' don't cotton to your idea of doing something, Mister. This is a decent town where folks can lead normal lives. It's going to stay that way."

Purplish veins swelled in Atlee's bull neck; sweat-beads glistened on his upper lip. Deliberately, Kinkaid turned back to the bar, and looked into the calm pool of his stale beer.

"You got till sun-up, tomorrow," he said levelly.

"The hell you say!" Atlee jolted clear of the bar, his mouth twisted with rage. "Why, you old son-of-a . . ." The thick-fingered fist darted downward. There was the hiss of a gun being freed of leather. Kinkaid spun, his veined hand making for the thigh-thonged Colt. One of Miss Stella's girls squealed like a trapped mouse.

"Jud!" Willie Maw's croak was drowned in the thunder of twin gun blasts. Miss Stella screamed. The pianola's chords vibrated shrilly. Willie's head swung toward the guttural howl of pain that cut through all other sound. Cordite fumes bit his nostrils. Very close to him, the pain-cry dwindled into a curse. Deep and emotionless, a distant, unfamiliar voice came.

"Never liked a fella who'd draw bead on another man's back."

Atlee's cursing got louder. He nursed his bullet-nicked gun-hand, and growled, "You'll pay for this, stranger." The distant voice put a taut smile into the reply.

"Let me know when you're ready to collect."

The man whirled and a massive shoulder jolted Willie as Atlee careened through

the batwings. A nervous murmur ran through the crowd. Someone said, "That was a damn fine shot." Willie's head swivelled to and fro bewilderedly. His lips quivered. Fumbling forward, he banged into a table, upset a chair. His voice was raw. "Jud. You all right, Jud?"

His ankle turned and he lurched blindly. Strong gentle hands caught him. Kinkaid put an arm around the bony shoulders.

"Easy, Willie. I'm all right."

Willie swayed, clutching the bar-edge. His breath snagged between a relieved laugh and a sob. "I was all mixed up, Jud. I was no help at all."

"Forget it," Kinkaid said quietly. He poured a whisky and put it between Willie's shaking fingers. "Drink it, kid. Everything's all right, now."

The stuff was warm and steadying in Willie's chest. The crowd's mumbling grew louder as Laredo Smith swung into the saloon, elbowing his way to the bar. The worry in his face changed to anger when he came up short, facing Kinkaid.

"Consarn it! I told you not to tackle Atlee on your own!"

Shoving a glass toward Smith, Kinkaid grinned. His cool gaze swung to the far end of the bar. The grin widened. "Seems like I wasn't on my own, 'Redo."

"What's 'at?" Smith wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. Kinkaid's voice went up a notch. It wasn't directed at 'Redo; it was meant for the lean-jawed man who was settling his .45 in a low-slung holster. Now, other slightly-awed eyes glanced at the stranger, recalling the swift ease of that bronzed gunhand, the steeliness of slate-grey eyes levelled against Atlee's glare.

Kinkaid said: "Think I owe you a drink, partner."

The tall man bared white teeth and a smile narrowed his eyes. He rounded the bar-end slowly, not making much noise on the wooden floor. Willie Maw waited. The flat, unfamiliar voice he'd heard just after the shooting was only a few feet from him.

"Like I said," it drawled. "I don't like men that . . ."

"Gun other men in the back," Kinkaid finished.

They laughed. The stranger's laugh was dry and muted. Willie's lips curved in a

watery grin. He felt a grateful warmth toward this man he couldn't see. Laredo Smith hailed the barkeep.

"Another glass, Donnegan. And some of the good stuff! Can't feed rot-gut to a fella that just saved Jud's hide."

The glass came and the poured rye made a gargling noise. The tall man said, "Here's how . . ." Smith wiped his mouth.

"New in Sioux Wells?" he asked the stranger.

"Passing through." Lean fingers drummed on the glass-edge. "The name's Cantrell." He didn't offer his hand. The smile still pasted on his mouth, Kinkaid refilled Cantrell's glass. His eyes raked the lean face.

"Seems like I seen you before," he said slowly. "Maybe on the trail? Couple day's back?"

Cantrell looked at the second drink as though he wasn't sure he wanted it. "Maybe," he said.

"Where you from?" Smith asked.

"North," Cantrell decided. He downed the double-finger of rye and for a while nobody spoke. The pianola got going again. Miss Stella bemoaned love, oh love, oh careless love. Kinkaid grinned vaguely at his half-finished drink, and said, "You made an enemy of Atlee . . ."

Cantrell flashed the white teeth again. His edged voice was louder than necessary.

"Hombres like that make natural enemies. You got the right idea, sheriff. Kick him out of Sioux Wells. It's a decent town." The lips drew into a straight line. "We could use more like it."

A mutter of smiling, admiring approval ran through the room. Kinkaid nodded slowly and his grin deepened. He pushed the bottle toward the tall man.

"Have another one on me, Mister Cantrell."

WHITE FLAKES knifed the night in wind-driven sheets, making drifts against gray shells of buildings on the east side of the main street. The lights of the Big Horn were jaundiced splotches on the hardening snow-surface. Hoof-jumbled slush made a muddy ribbon down the street's center.

Willie pulled the collar of a sheepskin coat closer about his neck as snow

whipped his raw face, clinging and melting on his lashes. He held tight to the reins of the two horses. The gelding shied, whinneying nervously. Willie clucked gentle reassurance. Kinkaid's voice sliced across the darkness. "Willie. Over here."

Willie led the ponies carefully toward the voice. A hand caught his arm and Kinkaid said, "Stay here with the horses, kid. Be out in a minute."

Before Willie could speak the crunch of Kinkaid's tread retreated through the snow. Kinkaid's bootheels sounded on wood and a breath of warmth billowed from somewhere nearby. A metallic tick-tick-tack-tick drummed in Willie's ears.

Land Office, he thought. Why had Jud gone into the Land Office? Vague puzzlement knitted the scarred brows. One of the ponies nickered and pawed the packed snow. The doors of the saloon opened and three barflies reeled out and wandered off up the street. The pianola's haggling was distant and crisp. Willie, head bent against the wind, was still frowning thoughtfully, when Kinkaid spoke at his elbow.

"All right, kid. Let's ride."

Willie heard the crackle of paper being folded and stuffed into a pocket. He got a foot into the stirrup and sat the gelding. In the saddle, he felt surer of himself.

"Where to?" Willie yelled into the wind.

"'Redo's place.'"

The puzzled frown deepened and Willie shifted the gelding, coming alongside Kinkaid. A question kept nagging at his mind as they hit out along the main street and turned west into the storm. Why go all the way out to 'Redo's spread, over five miles west of town, on a night like this? But, he didn't voice the query.

He had known Kinkaid in these taciturn moods before. Jud was onto something big. Something he had to figure out that was tied in with that visit to the Land Office. Willie kept his peace.

The horses cleared town, slow against the onslaught of snow and wind. They topped the rise of the old cemetery and rode on the icy wind abated as they navigated a drift-clotted gulch, then lashed out again when they hit the frosted blanket of the flatlands. The ponies snuffled angrily at the cold. The storm was getting worse.

Willie shook his head. What was this all

about? This ride. That business at the Land Office. His brows knotted over blank staring eyes. Jud should be concentrating on getting shucked of Atlee. That was the big thing, now. Suppose Atlee didn't high-tail by sunrise, as ordered? Curiosity won. "Jud!"

"Yeah?" The flank of Kinkaid's horse brushed Willie's leg. Willie bent forward in the saddle. "How come you don't lock up Atlee and his men?"

"That's what I figure to do," Kinkaid shouted over the wind.

"How's that?"

"We're going to throw Atlee and his whole mob in the calaboose, come morning. That's why we're riding for 'Redo's place. Atlee's got a sizable gang holed up in the foothills, waiting to take over Sioux Wells. We'll need a posse of 'Redo's men.'"

A slow, comprehensive grin wreathed Willie's face. This was more like it. This was the old Jud, acting the way he should act. Willie bawled: "Don't see why you didn't do it long ago."

"A hunch. I figured all along there was a bigger brain behind the move to take over Sioux Wells—a man higher-up than Atlee." Kinkaid smiled without humor. "Now, I know."

The horses clopped across the hollow-sounding planks of the bridge that spanned Shoshonee Creek. Taut excitement quivered in Willie's belly. This was the McCoy. The showdown. "Jud . . ."

"Yup?"

"You think maybe I could sort of . . . help?"

Kinkaid's gentle laughter barely reached Willie. The big fist jolted the sheepskinned shoulder, jokingly. "Sure, kid. Sure, you can hel—"

The snarl of a rifle sliced across the driving wind and the last word died in Kinkaid's throat. Willie felt the horse beside his rear and buck crazily. He reined in and spun the gelding to keep footing. Sick fear made a numb mask of his face.

"Jud!" he croaked. "Jud, what is it?"

HE SLID out of the saddle, stumbling to his knees. Crusted snow scraped his out-thrust hands. He lurched to his feet, floundering helplessly.

"Jud! Where are you? What happened?"

One snow-caked boot thumped against

solidity. Breath snagged in Willie's throat as he fell to his knees again. Kinkaid's rough mackinaw was under his hand. Sensitive fingers fumbled across the chest, searching, afraid of what they would find.

"It's me, Jud. Me—Willie . . ."

His hand moved up to the face and a thick cry ripped from his chest. Sticky warm wetness gummed his fingers. His blind eyes staring into terrifying, lonely darkness, Willie muttered the name over and over, as if somehow the bloody lips must answer. Only they didn't. There was nothing but the keening of the storm, and . . .

Willie tensed. Hooves! Vibrating hoofbeats, thickened and jumbled. Nearby, a harsh voice commanded, "Whoa!" Two horses, Willie thought, the stomping and nickering of two horses—and two riders. Willie scrambled to his feet.

"Who is it? Help . . . I need help. Jud's been shot."

Vice-like fingers clutched his arms, twisting them back and up. Surprised pain warped his mouth. Out of the blackness, something familiar thrummed against his bewildered senses. Heavy breathing was close behind him and the hands didn't relax their grip. Willie's nostrils quavered tautly. The familiar something became concrete. Sharp and clear on the whining air, came the stench of tobacco and bay-rum. Abruptly, Willie was still.

"That's better," Atlee growled into his ear. "No more rough stuff, kid. Unless you'd like to keep Kinkaid company."

Other steps crunched the snow a few feet away. Atlee's voice came over Willie's shoulder. "You get him, Boss?"

Willie stopped breathing. The answer came flatly, coldly, in a voice he could hardly hear. "Right through the head."

* Breath tore Willie's lips apart, pushed out by the fury that knotted his lungs. They were talking about Jud like he was an animal. He struggled maniacally against the powerful hands but Atlee's grip tightened with brutal ease.

"I said no rough stuff!" Atlee's breathing calmed. "Hey, Boss . . ."

"Yeah?"

"What do we do with bright-eyes, here?"

The snow-chewing footsteps came nearer. Something was between Willie and the wind. For a moment the snow's sting was

softened. Then, the purposely-muffled voice moved to his right.

"I'll take care of him," it told Atlee. "You search Kinkaid."

Atlee's fingers unclamped and Willie started to let his numb arms fall to his sides. A cold hard circle of pressure at the nape of his neck changed his mind. The voice said,

"That's a gun-muzzle you feel, kid. Don't move, or it might bite."

Willie didn't move. Vaguely, under the railing of the wind, he heard Atlee's grunt, and a whispering of snow, as if Kinkaid had been rolled over. The flat, muted voice called: "Find it?"

"Yeah." A complacent grin tinged Atlee's words. "Had it hid away in his tobacco-sack." A faint crackling reached Willie—the crackle of paper being unfolded.

"Burn it," the voice ordered.

Atlee didn't answer. There was a sharp hiss, and then, the acrid stench of burning paper. Atlee chuckled with satisfaction. The gurgling, humorless noise echoed in Willie's brain, mingling with his angry, confused thoughts. But, he wasn't thinking of Atlee.

Do something, his mind rasped. You always wanted to do something for Jud. What're you waiting for? Behind you, holding a Colt against your neck, is the man who put a slug through Jud's head. You can't let him get away with it. You got to do something—for Jud. This is the last chance you'll get. Do something. For Jud . . .

Suddenly, wildly, Willie doubled forward and whirled. A shot blasted, inches from his ear. The muffled voice swore viciously, as Willie's fists pounded into the lean, hard body. Stunning knuckles crushed Willie's mouth and he tasted blood.

His clawed fingers clung to rough coat-lapels and his left arm circled the other's head, locking. A gun-filled paw descended in a murderous arc, grazing his shoulder. Willie freed his right hand and thrust it upward, clawing, searching the unknown, raw-boned face.

"Atlee!" the voice roared. The stink of bay rum closed in. Atlee caught the right arm, twisting it back violently. Agony blanched Willie's face; his headlock relaxed. Atlee swung him in a whirling cir-

cle and let go. Willie floundered in thick drifts, stumbling to his knees. The second shot was a knife-edged pain slicing across his temple and he slumped forward, his private night reeling crazily and congealing into the icy nothingness of the snowdrift that swallowed his face . . .

HIS LIPS were gummed with something warm and salty. Wind drove pricking snow-needles into his face. Limbs half-paralyzed with cold, Willie fumbled to a kneeling position. One hand searched his throbbing head and he winced at his own touch. The forehead wound wasn't deep, but there was a lot of blood. It was caked in sticky rivulets along his jaw, clotted in the lashes of his right eye. Willie pressed a handful of soft under-snow to the wound.

Unsteadily, he jolted to his feet, and stood still with his head cocked to one side. Nothing. Only the loco howl of the wind, like a chanting, soundless voice in his head that kept asking: *How long? How long have you been out?*

There was no way of telling. His blank eyes blinked bewilderedly. No way at all. They could be gone by now, out of reach for good. Jud's murderer—escaped. Willie shook his head doggedly. That couldn't happen. There might still be time. Don't just stand there, he thought. Do something. Do it for Jud. His head nodded dully. Yeah, for Jud . . .

The whirlpool in his brain subsided into a stagnant puddle of pain. If only he had help—someone with eyes. His muttering lips grew still and some of the confusion left his face. 'Redo. He needed 'Redo. If he could just get to Smith's place . . . He plunged forward excitedly, then stopped.

Wait a minute. Sudden fear closed his throat. Direction! He'd lost all sense of direction! The terror welled into his mouth, dribbling out in a lost, frightened plea. "Jud . . ." The only answer was the mocking bellow of the storm.

Willie's fists clenched. Easy, he thought. Quit pitying yourself. Use your head. Think. For Jud. Think! Direction. Direction . . .

Freezing wind gnawed the headwound, and Willie's jaw tensed. That was it. The wind! It had been coming from the west,

smacking them in the teeth as they rode. If he headed into the wind, now, he'd be aimed at 'Redo's place. Sure . . . No, wait. Hope faded from the scarred face. The wind wouldn't do. Winds had a habit of shifting. It had to be something surer. Think, he told himself furiously. Think, damn you! Go back to the beginning. Remember it, step by step. You'd just crossed the bridge when the shot came . . .

Willie sucked in air harshly. The bridge that spanned Shoshonee Creek! If he found that, he could make a beeline from it, and come somewhere near Smith's spread. He pivoted slowly. The bridge couldn't be more than fifty yards away. But, in which direction? Determination hardened Willie's face. There was only one thing to do. Try every angle.

Slowly, counting each pace, he moved ahead through wearying drifts. The temple throbbed; time and again he lurched, righting himself only with a painful effort. Forty-eight, forty-nine, fifty. Thin hands groped in the surrounding air, and found nothing. No. The bridge couldn't be near here. There was no slope in the ground and there should be a grade leading down to the creekbed. He about-faced and retraced his steps to the starting point. Facing in another direction, the wind at his back, he began again.

" . . . thirty-four, thirty-five, thirty-six . . ." Packed snow groaned under his boots. He could make it. He had to. The bridge was somewhere nearby . . . *But suppose you never find it, the snow croaked. You could wander in circles till doomsday. Till you freeze to death . . .*

A wracking breath snagged in Willie's chest. The blind face was suddenly alert. Slowly, Willie took four long strides. With each step, he sank deeper into the snow. He stood still and a nervous little laugh parted his lips. There was a slope in the ground. The bridge *had* to be near here . . .

His eager, air-pawing right hand grazed a hard, snow-coated surface; anxious fingers explored a rough-hewn strip, and breath whistled out of him in a shuddering sigh. The guard-rail of the bridge! He'd done it. And the wind was still at his back. It hadn't shifted. It still blew from the west. Willie twisted to face it, welcoming the sleet's blistering cold bite. The excited laughter trembled in him again, as

he lunged ahead into the storm. *Straight, his mind chanted, straight into the wind.*

It wasn't as easy as it sounded. The snow dragged heavily with each step, clogging his feet, pitching him to his knees. Icy crust ripped the raw meat of his hands; warm blood-ribbons gummed his palms. The head-pain had begun again. He walked for what seemed like hours and gradually, his assurance wilted, draining out of the frail face.

You'll be too late, the wind mocked. You'll never catch up with Jud's killer. Even this, you can't do for Jud. Even now, you're useless, lost.

He blinked back desperate angry tears and stumbled on. Lost. The word hummed in his head. Maybe he *was* lost. Maybe he'd already passed Smith's ranch, and was headed out into the frozen, dead stretches of the wastelands.

At first, he thought he imagined the sound. It was soft, familiar, unreal, whining on the wind's crest. Willie fought to quiet the rasping of his lungs. Then, clearer than before, the sound came again: the nervous whinney and stomp of horses. Willie's lips quivered. Horses. Somewhere near. Off to the left a mite. The left.

Reluctantly, his numbed feet obeyed the command. He swung left, staggering into deeper drifts—drifts piled up against something that was just ahead. The angry nickering of the ponies got louder. Willie's outstretched hands thumped into the slick cold wood of a building wall.

"'Redo's stable," he gasped. It had to be. There wasn't another spread in these parts. Willie shuffled forward, probing his memory. The house lay to the right as you left the stable door . . . Shaking fingers searched the wall as he went along. He rounded a corner, stooped against the wind. A raised wood-ledge scraped his knuckles. The door. Now. To the right.

He fell four times before stumbling into the lee of the ranchhouse porch. His breath came in retching sobs. His mouth worked thickly. A single hoarse cry slit the dark.

"'Redo!" Then he let go of the porch railing, twisting toward the sound of an opening door and the good-natured bellow of Smith's voice.

"What the hell goes on out . . . Willie!" Smith dove forward, catching the

frail, battered body as it crumpled.

RUM and black coffee had dulled the agonied pulsing in his head. Sitting on the cot's edge, wrapped in an Indian blanket, Willie breathed more evenly. Smith didn't talk. He worked quickly, with deft, gentle hands. Once the blood was washed away, the headwound wasn't hard to dress. As Smith worked, words spilled like stampeded mavericks from Willie's lips. When the kid had finished, Smith's gray-stubbed jaw was hard and his eyes glinted with cold fury.

"They left me there in the snow; prob'ly saw the blood on my head and figured that shot did for me." Wringing red-raw hands, Willie turned blind eyes up to Smith.

"We can't let them get away with it, 'Redo. Right through the head, they got him . . . blood all over his face . . ." He clutched Smith's arm. "We gotta hurry. They might get out o' town."

Smith said levelly, "Jud was dead? You sure of that?"

"Through the head. They got him right through . . ."

Smith's fingers closed on the thin shoulder. "Who got him?"

"The two of them. Atlee and . . ."

Willie winced at the suddenly tightened clamp of the old deputy's grasp. Smith's voice was harsh. "Don't worry, kid. This is one time Atlee'll pay the fiddler."

"No. You got it wrong, 'Redo. It was the other fella that shot Jud. Atlee said, 'You get him, Boss?' and the other said, 'Right through . . .'"

"Who, kid? Who said that?" Both hands clutched Willie's shoulders, now. Very close to his face, he felt the old man's baited breathing. Willie's mouth worked dryly, and then his little body sagged. He shook his head. "I don't know. I can't be sure . . ."

Smith groaned. His fingers bit into Willie. "But, you gotta know, kid!"

"Yeah, but . . ." Willie's hands stilled abruptly. His blank eyes stared down at the long fingers as if he could actually see them. The fingers that had gouged that unknown face hours before. If the fingers could remember . . . A faint, cold smile touched his lips. He spoke quietly.

"'Redo. Get me a block of soft wood."

"What!" Surprise jolted the old man upright. He let go of Willie's shoulders.

"Wood," the kid said flatly. "Get it, 'Redo.'"

For an instant Smith stared at the oddly calm face, then, grumbling bewilderedly, he strode to the fireside woodpile. When he got back to the cot, the winking, needle-pointed knife was in Willie's right hand. Slowly, puzzlement gave way to understanding, and the old deputy's eyes narrowed expectantly as he placed the wooden block between Willie's steady fingers.

It didn't take long. Neither man spoke. With a splutter and crack, a log sagged in the fireplace and the flames leapt higher, throwing Willie's grimly-amused face into relief. His fingers worked swiftly and the only sound was the whisper of the knife-blade against wood. Gradually the smooth impersonal block in Willie's hands took on form. There was the lean hardness of a jawbone, the blade of a nose, deepset eye-sockets, the narrow line of a mouth.

A guttural oath slit Smith's lips. He gaped at the crudely finished head. The name he spoke echoed like distant thunder in the kid's ears. The fragile body tensed. Fingers ate into Smith's wrist. "You're sure, 'Redo? You ain't makin' a mistake?"

"Mistake, hell! That's his face. Every damn' feature of it!"

Willie's grip relaxed. For a long time he sat silent, his brows knotted over expressionless eyes. Finally, he nodded slowly, and murmured:

"It makes sense. Now it begins to make sense . . ."

Swaying slightly, Willie rose. Smith took an anxious step toward him, then saw he wasn't needed. The thin, angular frame stood very straight. Helpless doubt had gone out of Willie's face. "What's the time?" he asked.

Smith fished out an ancient turnip and squinted. "Little past midnight."

Willie nodded. Decisively, he snapped shut the jack-knife and poked it into his hip-pocket. Smith frowned. "Willie, what you plannin' to . . .?"

"Got an extra gunbelt, 'Redo?"

The old man scratched his jaw. "Reckon so . . ."

"And a Colt?"

"Yeah . . . I . . ." Smith's eyes popped wide. "Hey, wait a minute . . ."

"Get 'em for me."

"But . . ."

The look on Willie's face stopped him. The full lips had drawn into a hard line. The blind eyes seemed colder than they'd ever been before. Smith held his tongue. He got the Colt and belt, and watched wordlessly as Willie strapped it on, lashing the holster to his thigh. Willie fingered the gun-barrel.

"It's loaded full," the deputy said. "Look, kid . . ."

"I know what I'm doing, 'Redo." Willie dropped the gun into leather, cinched the belt a notch tighter. "Saddle me a horse."

THE BARTENDER'S smile went watery as he stared into the stoniness of Willie Maw's face. A moment before, when the kid had entered the Big Horn, the gunbelt had looked ludicrous on his knobby hips. But, now, there was nothing funny in the way his hand caressed the Colt-butt.

"Well?" Willie said flatly. "Is he here?"

The barkeep's flabby mouth worked soundlessly. In its corner, the pianola tinkled out a dying tune. A wondering mutter ran through the small bar-crowd. A dance-dolly stopped giggling and stared and at one round green table men who's been engrossed in Faro turned to see the cause of the sudden silence. The barkeep found his voice.

"Yeah, he's here, Willie. Come in a time back. Looked like he'd been ridin' hard."

"Where is he?"

"Where? Well . . . He's upstairs. Him and Miss Stella. But, you can't . . . Hey! Hold on! That room's private! You can't . . ."

Willie didn't stop. Using the bar as a guide-rail, he walked the length of the quiet room. At the bar-end, he turned on an angle and made the foot of the wide staircase. He went up slowly, spurs jangling at each step, and moved left along the hall until his hand found the recess of a doorway. The knob twisted under the light pressure. He stepped into the room.

The startled rustle of clothes came first and a whiff of stale cologne stung Willie's nostrils. Miss Stella gave a small mousy scream. A man's voice swore. "I told you

I didn't want to be dis . . ."

The word petered out weakly. Willie stood, his back against the door, his humorless smile facing the voices.

"You didn't figure on seein' me ever again, did you, Cantrell?" Each syllable had a sharp cold sound. The sudden pallor of the lean face, the tenseness of the gun-hand, the slow menace of Cantrell's eyes—all were mirrored in his thick voice. "What the hell are you doin' here?"

Willie heard the faint tinkle of Miss Stella's skirt-bangles as she drew away from Cantrell. Behind him, his hand turned the doorknob and he moved further into the room, opening the door a little.

"You best go downstairs, Miss Stella. Me and Cantrell got things to talk over."

"Whatever you say, kid . . ." The anxious tinkling brushed past him. As the door closed softly behind her, a vague rustle muttered from the shadows of the room. Willie's hand slid down and came up, steady and full of Colt.

"Wouldn't move hasty if I was you, Cantrell. We got talkin' to do, and talkin' to a dead man's pretty one-sided." Willie's mouth stiffened. "I know. I talked to one, tonight. Got no answers. He was shot through the head."

The .45's muzzle levelled on Cantrell's chest. Willie took two steps toward the tall man. Cantrell's voice was rigidly controlled. "If you aim to talk, make sense."

The imitation smile bent Willie's lips again but the rest of his face stayed hard. "Cold-blooded, wasn't it? Courtin' Miss Stella, right after killing Jud."

"What? You're loco! I been right here all night."

"That ain't what the barkeep says."

"He's lyin'! I tell you I been right . . ."

"Maybe I better map it out for you, Cantrell." The edged tone cut across the tall man's words. "It's real simple when you map it out. Goes back to when you tried to take over Powder City. You used the strong-arm there and it didn't work. So, when you got set on takin' Sioux Wells, you figured to use a different method."

Willie grinned at Cantrell's raucous breathing. The Colt didn't waver.

"You sent Atlee into town ahead of you. He paved the way, made trouble, stirred up fight-talk. Then, today, at the right time

you showed and staged your little 'rescue' of Jud. That made you look fine in the eyes of the Sioux Wells folks. It made you a good man, on the side of the law."

Cantrell smiled thinly. "You got it all worked out, ain't you?"

"Told you it was simple," Willie said coolly. "After the gunplay in the bar, you thought you'd be set. But there was a hitch. Jud smelled a rat and you knew it. So you had him watched. You knew when he played his hunch and sent a wire to Powder City, and got an answer that proved he was right. He musta written it down as it came through. Prob'ly a description of you."

Cantrell sucked in air. Willie's grin widened. "Then, that *was* it. I figured it that way. Somebody ratted about the wire. Maybe the telegrapher, if you paid him enough. Anyway, you found out. You knew that Jud had too much on you; too much to live . . ."

The smile faded and the Colt's hammer clicked gently as Willie's thumb cocked it. "You trailed us out of town tonight. You shot Jud, burnt the wire, and left me for dead. It was all set. When the bodies were found, you'd take over and run down the 'killer'—some innocent sidewinder you could frame. From then on, Sioux Wells would be in your hip pocket."

IN PIN-DROP silence, the rasping of Cantrell's lungs slowly calmed. He spoke clearly, flatly. "You're a smart boy. Maybe a shade too smart for your own good." Harshness cracked the voice again. "All right. You know all the answers. So what? You ain't got a lick of real proof!" Cruel laughter escaped clenched teeth. "You didn't even *see* what happened!"

Willie's cheek twitched. "No. I didn't see anything. But, I was there. I tangled with Jud's killer. I touched his face . . ."

One hand poked into the pocket of the fleece-lined jacket. The round object that Willie tossed to the floor at Cantrell's feet rolled momentarily, then lay still, leering up at its living image. Cantrell's mouth gaped. "What the hell . . .?"

Willie extended his hands, the .45 still focused on a spot over the tall man's heart. "Take a look at those hands, Cantrell. Folks in Sioux Wells know about them. They know what they can do. And

those folks'll be on the jury that tries you for murder." Willie laughed thickly. "Take a good look, Cantrell! Take a look at the hands that're goin' to hang you!"

Pulling himself together, Cantrell ripped his gaze from the wooden head at his feet. His slaty eyes narrowed and his right hand inched toward the holster. "You're wrong," he husked.

His gun-hand clutching iron, Cantrell slid forward and down. Willie triggered the .45, lurching instinctively to the left. Twin explosions shuddered deafeningly. Willie scrambled, trying to right himself. A chair tangled his legs and he tumbled behind the table in the center of the floor.

The tall man's gun belched flame and a whiskey-glass shattered, one winking sliver raking Willie's jaw. Cantrell's shot had come from the right. Willie swung his Colt around. He didn't get a chance to fire.

Close-by, a third gun thundered. He heard the agonized curse that ripped from Cantrell, then iron clattered against the wooden floor. Cool and sure, Laredo Smith's voice came from the doorway.

"Figured you'd want a witness to that confession, Willie." Smith stepped into the room quickly. His gun-filled hand gestured at Cantrell. "Quit bellerin' like a branded maverick! You ain't got nothing but a flesh-wound . . ."

Willie was standing now. A slow grin wreathed his face. In one corner, Cantrell rose unsteadily, using the wall for support.

"You got nothin' on me . . ."

Smith's taut laugh cut him short. His back to Willie, the old deputy stood watching Cantrell closely. Behind him, a door opened noiselessly. He didn't hear the shadowy hulk that shifted into the room. He didn't see the kid's smile go stiff.

The small body froze. Willie hadn't heard anything, either. But, his nostril-wings quivered as the massive figure advanced. The odor of tobacco and bay-rum bit into his senses. Atlee . . .

"We got plenty on you, Cantrell," Smith husked. "Enough to invite you to a necktie party." His rough chuckle drowned the swish of Atlee's gun-arm rising.

"Redo! Look out!" Willie spun to the left and dove. Wind gushed from his lungs as he pounded into Atlee. Atlee's .45 spat viciously and seering pain needled Willie's

upper arm. The tangled figures crashed into one wall, then twisted back into the center of the room. The table spilled with a splintering groan.

The grappling fingers of Willie's good hand caught a hairy right wrist. He lunged against Atlee, twisting the big man's gun-arm down and in. The Colt's brutal hardness squirmed between them. Atlee's curse rasped in his ear and Willie felt the white-hot sting against his chest as the gun went off.

Atlee's massive frame jolted, and air shivered out of his lungs. The .45 rattled to the floor-boards. Slowly, hands clawing at Willie for support, Atlee slumped until he lay still, face down. Blood, dribbling from his gaping mouth, made a small red pool on the floor.

"All right, kid?" Smith's voice was quiet. "Better let me tie up that arm."

"Yeah." A faint satisfied smile bent Willie's lips. "I'm all right," he murmured to the shadows of the room. "Everything's all right, now . . ."

THEY BURIED Kinkaid at sunset. The snow-blanketed hill of the Sioux Wells cemetery was marred by groups of somberly dressed men and women. Some of the mourners puzzled over the way Willie acted at the grave. Others merely gazed at the dark pit and the dying flowers that wreathed a plain black coffin. Their faces were stiff with sympathy and grief.

Willie didn't once look at the grave. As the wizened minister intoned: "I shall lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my salvation," Willie's raw-boned face turned to the glow of the setting sun and his scarred lips smiled.

For a long time Laredo Smith stared at the strangely happy calm of those sightless eyes, and watching the kid's face, he knew how it was. He knew that Willie wasn't looking at death. He was looking into a sunburnt, grinning face, and his frail shoulders straightened proudly as an imaginary fist jogged him gently on the chin. He was hearing a gruff, laughing voice that kept saying, "You see, kid. I told you you could help me . . ."

A quiet smile creased Smith's weather-lined visage, and he wondered why folks thought Willie Maw was blind.

SPOILSMEN OF ELDORADO

By John Starr

Hardesty was King of Eldorado. His blasting fists, his Irish luck and his booming laughter, had wrenched an empire from the wilderness. Then came the day when he found his luck was gone—and another sitting on his throne.

THERE was gold in the earth and men came to seek it. . . . Dim ages past had sown the seed, the throes of time had nourished it, and now the precious yellow crop veined the barebone rock, flowed the watercourses, grew with the wilderness grassroots. From the rims of the world came the harvesters.

They were men of many climes and creeds, a mix of many races. The big and small, the strong and weak, the good and evil—there were some of each and many sorts between. They followed a lure that man has followed since his history began, and by tradition they followed it roughshod, ruthlessly.

Their country of quest was far and lorn, big and raw and wild, and its creature code became their common law. They reverted to the prime emotions, fear and lust and greed, and the might of right was their wolfpack rule. They dwelt in danger, fed on it, and from working cheek by jowl with death they learned life's scorn and death's bravado.

Gold in the earth and finders keepers! Fortunes waiting—help yourselves—for the strong, the crafty, the bold, the die-hard! Yesterday a starvation bum and tomorrow an Eldorado millionaire!

Gambling was the land's religion—nothing ventured, nothing gained. Lady Luck was the native goddess, nakedly adored. Bet your chips on the cards, bet your poke on the wheel, stake your life on the frozen trail to rainbow's ending. Tomorrow we die or there's pie in the sky, so bet another thousand and down another snifter!

In such a topsy-turvy world strange

verities weighed the scales. Happiness came by the bottle, love was the sweat of a night, charity was the freehand urge that bought the drinks for the house. The best man was the richest man, the toughest man, the luckiest. Honesty and worth were proved by fist or pistol shot.

Such was the realm then, and so ran its customs. Each man was a king unto himself in those tremendous days, but the king of kings—until he fell—was a fool named Hardesty.

He is this story. . . .

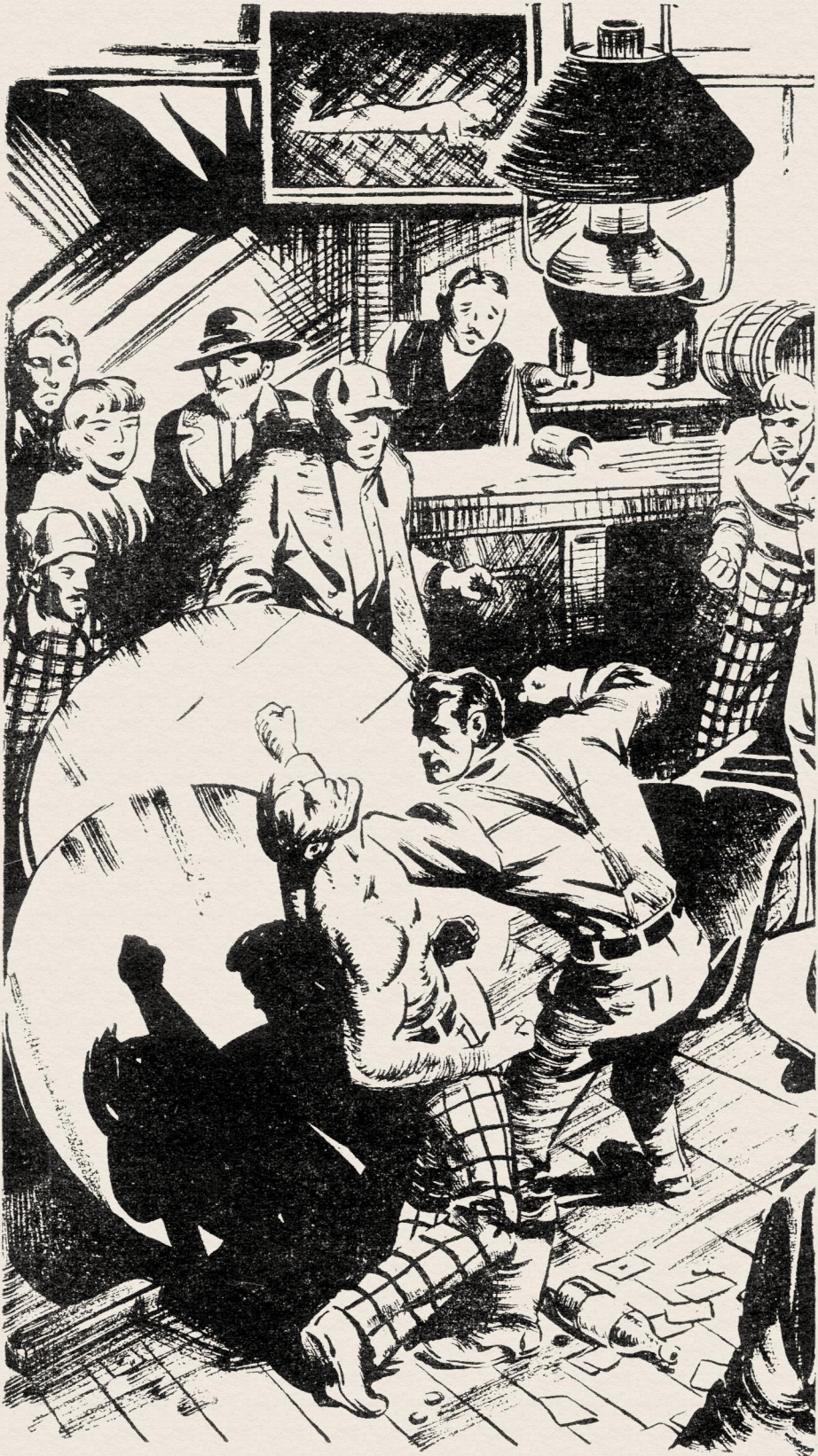
IT was toward the end of winter, and for three days a storm had blown out of the gray wastes of the Bering north, down from the white wastes of the Circle barrens. Then a lull, a pale peek of sun, and through the tailings of the weather King Hardesty came riding.

He came blustering down the river route, the danger trail, and snowy banks re-echoed the crack of his whip, the boom of his jovial profanity. His string of Siberians buckled the traces, the wind-swept ice fled beneath them, and now the town ahead seemed to wake to his uproar.

Figures spewed into the streets, shouting. Men bundled their collars as they ran, and a score were straggling the bluff above the steamer landing when the fanfare sledge came gliding.

"It's Hardesty!" they yelled. "Hi-yah, you ringneck Siwash! Hey, King, you seacock son!"

He drew in with a flourish, a twirl of whip, beyond the ice-sheathed wharf. His scurrying team charged the side drift, plowing a smoky spume past up-bottomed



Hardesty's third blow caught the Ripper behind the ear, and sent him rolling like a pinwheel.

boats and faceless shacks, the winter-shrouded shambles of the waterfront. At the top of the climb a dozen cheerful maniacs beset him.

"What's the time?" he asked.

Somebody announced it.

"Keep the record, Baldy," he called through the babble. "I've a dollar bet with Turk McCray that I beat his punch in by an hour."

For a dollar's bet he had risked ten miles of rampage river, the airhole traps and the skim-roof swifts and the rubber-ice undercuts. For speed that gained an empty hour he had skirted the perils that the average musher would only dare for desperation's sake. The deed was typical of Hardesty.

They were pumping his hand, mauling him, abusing him with fond obscenities. There were ten or more whom he called by name, stampedeers of his own meat-eater breed, and another twenty he vaguely recalled as faces of the streets, the dives, the companions of his sprees. The increasing crowd had a hundred welcoming voices and he widened his smile to include them all. It was good to be back. It was good to be greeted so. It was grand to be King Hardesty who had a thousand friends for every enemy.

"Hardesty!" cried a sourdough. "What's the word from the Skillet? How does she pan?"

Hardesty rolled his eyes, drew his face expressively. "A bust, boys," he proclaimed. "Poor Turk—it petered out on him. It's kink your back for swamper's wages and I've thawed my last shovel-ful."

They might have doubted another man, but Hardesty's word was his bond. If he said that Skillet Creek was skimpy diggings then the wiseacres scratched that prospect pronto. There were no half-ways about Hardesty—he either spoke the truth or clamped his jaw.

"I'm back to collect for a wasted winter," he told them, smiling. "That is if there's any gambling blood or easy money left in town."

He released his lead dog from the traces. This was the famous Terror dog, fawn and white, that had cleaned the best in the country last fall. The green-eyed brute stood stiff-legged, softly growling,

as Hardesty buckled his ornate collar.

Terror was no docile Siberian. He was a magnificent mongrel, warrior-bred from haphazard matings of the ancient Northland strains. There was Spitz in his head, in his cruel-fanged jaw. There was Chow and Samoyed in his ruff-necked coat, his muscled chest, his flaring temper. And there was primordial wolf in him, too, an ingrained savagery.

"You've kept him in the pink, King," somebody said.

"He's rusty," said Hardesty. "He needs a go to sharpen him."

"There's this Dutchman's got a dog—"

"Oho!" cried Hardesty. "He has, has he? Then that's another item on the docket!"

HARDESTY was feeling good. After the humdrum of Skillet Creek, the confinement of an outlands camp, the sight of people was livening. There was music in the sound of voices, and thought of the merriment ahead was bubbly wine in his nostrils.

When he emerged on the main street bend, he halted for a smiling look. The clustering well-wishers saw his eyes feast up and down. A trampled roadway, huddled structures—it wasn't much to see, perhaps, but to Hardesty it was a milestone symbol.

He could remember the yesterday when a hundred yards of hovels had been the total town. He could remember the pitiful shack that was hotel and saloon and eating house and supply station all in one, could recall when Indian shagbarks stood all along the stretch now known as Millionaire's Row.

He stretched his arms and breathed. "It somehow does my eyes good, boys," he said. "It always feels like comin' home."

Baldy gave him a dig in the ribs. "Like comin' home to Frenchy, that's what he means!" He chuckled. "There was this prizefighter, King, that I almost thought might beat your time with her—"

Hardesty mimicked rage. "What!" he roared. "My own true Frenchy?"

"But his money ran short," said Baldy, "and she gave him the air when he came down to bein' a common bouncer."

"I knew she'd never desert me," said Hardesty, laughing with the rest. "Tell

her I'll be around, Baldy. Sorry I can't join you, boys, but step across with Baldy there and name your poison. Tell Jumpo Swann you'll take the best he's got in his lousy house, and that I'll be by directly to match him double or quits for the bar bill."

He waved a salute, striding off with Terror; and as he went he eyed the signs, the mushroom buildings elbowing. The Tivoli, the Birdcage, the Golden Horn, Big Bertha's. The Congress Hotel, the Travelers' House, the new Great Northern. Again he remembered the street as he first had seen it in those thrilling, long-gone days.

He was plain Jim Hardesty then, green as they come, a seafaring tenderfoot who had drifted far from Boston. It was dumb luck and no brains—he admitted it freely—that had chased him north with the early flurry of gold-rush Argonauts. With no outfit to mention, no skill of the trail, he had bull-blundered through the barriers that rebuffed the fainthearts, the weaklings and half the other fools.

The White Horse rapids, the Whirlpool Rocks, the craggy Chilkoot—by such grim tests he had proved his luck. That first night in town, with his pockets and his belly empty, he had trudged the frontier street with awe and humility in his tenderfoot boots. A wind blew out of the blue-cold dark, and with it the threat of the blank beyond.

He sensed the inexorable might of the Northland spaces yonder—the bleak earth, the lonely sky, the gnaw-bone deaths inhabiting—and his lacks were a sag-leg weight that rode him. And then, staring out in dismay, he saw the single beckoning star.

It was the steadfast star of the North—Polaris, the sailor's guide—and it told him that his luck was there, high-riding.

It warmed the strength in his clenching fists and gave his heart a tune to hum. It gleamed his shining destiny. It revealed the dingy gulch of street as his gateway to a world of giants, and Jim Hardesty not the least among them. It was a glory he had followed through the two mad years of triumphs since, never doubting. . . .

"Watch out, you fools!" a voice roared suddenly.

HE sidestepped to the gruff command. He was striding the drift-lined walk, the present sunk in the past, and for an addled instant his bearings were helter-skelter. Terror's throaty warning, a figure ahead, a bump—

It was a clumsy accident. He veered from the shout, as any man would, and mischance lurched him against the girl who was passing. The bobble jostled her into the bank of snow, floundering, and bundles squirting, and in the same breath Hardesty was speaking an order to Terror and cussing the joking face of Buckshot Vance.

"Sorry, ma'am," he said. "I hopped when he yelled, the dunce, and never seen you."

He reached for her arm, yanked her clear, waded forth to collect her packages. Buckshot and a couple more, on the steps outside the Hunchback's, were hiding laughter behind most solemn visages:

"No harm, I hope," said Hardesty meekly. "I didn't mean—"

She wore a shabby sealskin parka, and the wolverine trim of the hood framed a saucy, snap-eyed picture. She was rubbing the mittened wrist where his grip had clamped.

"Never mind," she told him, snippety. "Here—let me have them."

He unloaded the bundles. His admiring eyes would know her again when he saw her. "If there's more I could do," he suggested, "outside of beggin' your pardon—"

Common politeness was his intent. There was not a hint in his tone to make her flare up so. Yet the glare she gave would shiver a walrus.

"Don't think of it!" she cried. "It's my fault, of course, not clearing the way. Everybody knows—or should—that the king can do no wrong."

He stood gawking after her, dumbstruck. He turned on Buckshot then, but the sound of heehaws unballooned his fist. He spat in the snow, and shrugged, and wagged a sheepish head.

"You should see your phiz," Buckshot chuckled. "You gone blind or deaf or what, King, that you didn't spot us waitin'?"

"Walkin' in my sleep, I guess," said Hardesty. He gave Buckshot's hand a squeeze. "Damn you, how you been?"

What's new around? Come on across to the Eagle and help scrub off the barnacles."

The Eagle was pleased to see him. The proprietor's welcome ignored the fact that his last little visit had practically wrecked the place. He cleared a newcomer's baggage from Hardesty's favorite room, even stole the water that was heating for a Gaiety primadonna. The bottle he sent up soon scoured Hardesty's throat of the curious taste that girl on the street had left there.

Or almost, anyhow. What he couldn't forget was that glint in her look, disdainful, as if she was the somebody standing there and he the dirt beneath her.

II

THERE were men along the Yukon, not a few, who stood taller in their mukluks than Hardesty's six foot three. There were plenty who outweighed the whipcord of his lean two hundred pounds and some. There were thicker muscles than his perhaps, hoisting at a lift, and any number of feathery lads could shake a faster foot in the sprinter's distances.

But Hardesty, in his manhood's prime, was still looking for the single buck who combined the size and strength and speed to best him in an even test of prowess.

Coordination was one of his secrets. At fourteen years, lunking tall even then, he had learned the monkey tricks of balance that the upper rig of a tall-mast ship can teach. Another knack was concentration, the ability to blinker his mind so that every ounce of him flowed in calculated unity. Take four good men and let each one fasten a grip on leg or arm. Then time the seconds, bartender, while a tempest hits and shakes King Hardesty free.

Most important, of course, was his spirit, the inner flame that damned the impossible. He had his younger ups and downs. He had taken his beatings, swallowed defeats—had cringed and quailed and fawned in his growing—but those phases were behind him. He had found his star, his tide of luck, and now there was no daunting him.

So thus he was and there he was—in the Eagle Hotel, scrubbed pink from his bath—when Baldy rollicked in upon the bawdy song they were trolling.

"They're here, King!" he cried. "Turk's around the corner!"

"What time?"

"Fifty-eight minutes behind. He takes your dollar."

"That red-necked turtle," Hardesty said. "He's got a jinx on me. Two minutes, eh?"

For an instant's breath he felt a tiny prickle of irritation. To be bested in anything, however small, rubbed against his grain. But then he grinned and swacked a fist against his palm. "Give him the credit," he said. "The overland passage, mind you, and Turk's dogs not much account. That's mushin'!"

He grabbed at Baldy to give him a whiskey shampoo, and the following hour was loud with pranks and roughhouse that had the Gaiety primadonna bolstering her door and wailing for law and order. Hardesty's mood was rosy when the fading light announced it was suppertime.

They trooped into the Chink's, a merry company, and there on a stool sat Turk McCray. Hardesty gave his back a wallop, started to waltz him in a bearhug.

"Leggo!" Turk grated. "Cut it out!"

"You skinny buzzard!" Hardesty whooped. "You licked me, huh? All right, here's your dirty dollar."

Turk glanced at the coin, glanced up at him. "I wouldn't take a thousand," he said, "for what I slogged into my team today. What made you do it, Hardesty?"

"Do what, you loon?"

"Cut out on the river ice like that, yellin' back a bet. What was all the hurry?"

"Why, I—" Hardesty was bewildered. He'd known Turk McCray for two good years, shared blankets with him many a time. His chief reason for joining the late adventure at Skillet Creek was the friendly hope of helping to boom Turk's discovery there.

"I ain't the only one," said Turk, "who's had his craw full of suchlike stunts. Maybe your idea wasn't to show the rest of us up as slowpokes, scared to take the chances, but I'm tellin' you now that I've sawed my last on your second fiddle."

He shouldered out, unfinished meal abandoned. Hardesty started after him but Buckshot blocked the path.

"Sit down, King. Don't let him rile

you. He's taken it hard, I reckon, that his prospect's such a washout. Let 'im go; let 'im drink it off. He'll be all right tomorrow."

Hardesty shrugged unwillingly. "But the bonehead fool," he muttered, "what guff was he spoutin' off? Don't he know I'd give him the shirt from my back?"

"Don't let 'im cramp your style," soothed Baldy. "Come on—let's get our grub in us and get on with the evenin'."

THE town had been quiet for weeks on end, sleeping out the winter, but the noise that followed Hardesty would have waked a graveyard. There was fun and frolic wherever he went, songs and laughs and good fellowship, and the drinks flowed as fast and free as the merriment.

There he was in Jumbo Swann's, starting the parade, with the peerless Frenchy hiked to his shoulder and din enough arising to shake the smoky roof. Frenchy was of the Creole blood, her tawny face like a pouting angel and her body curved to tempt a saint, and she was King Hardesty's standby because she had fought two other hussies—claw and yank and strip 'em—for that honorarium.

"What's my bar bill, Jumbo?" he said.

"Make it five hundred even," said Jumbo.

"Then name the fall for a thousand or square!" said Hardesty, and a dollar spun to his thumbflick.

"Heads!" cried Jumbo, and heads it settled upon the bar. Little Jumbo's twitchy mouth laughed as shrill as if he had won the Kohinoor.

"Beat you!" he exulted. "I broke your streak of luck, King, and now I'll keep you on the run."

"We'll see," said Hardesty, laughing. He shifted Frenchy to the bar. "We'll see who's broke, you rabbit, when our poker siege is finished." He gave Frenchy a pat and a fondle. "You're the beauty of them all," he muttered. "I'll see you in a while."

She kicked at him angrily. "Bot, Keeng, you promise me—"

"Later," he said. "I got some business, sweetheart."

"Non-non! Stay weeth Franchy. Othair places, othair woman—sure, you

come back dronk!"

"I never been drunk," he said. "We've got a call or two to make, to see what's goin' on, and Terror's booked to trounce some Dutchman's poodle. Outside of that, and winnin' Jumbo's shirt, the night's our own, you beautiful. It'll take long hours and hours, Frenchy, to tell how much I missed you."

He led his throng from bar to bar and good cheer met him everywhere. Yells and handshakes hailed him at the Queen, the Igloo, at Rannigan's and Shanghai Mike's. Old friends and new friends—name your poison, boys! Music and companionship and the pretty ladies smiling. King Hardesty dancing with this one and that, swinging them dizzy, while glasses swigged his health and prosperity.

It was indeed a night of nights, long to be remembered.

Minor incidents, now and again, harped at an offish note, but in the flubdub they passed unnoticed. At Shanghai Mike's, for instance, was a lop-nose fighting man. He was lately come to the North, and because of the fame of his fists they ushered him forward.

"The pair of you got a lot in common," said rum-happy Baldy, smirking.

"Ah," said Hardesty, "it's a pleasure! So you're the buck who put the kibosh on Kodiak Jensen, eh? Now I wonder—just for sport—if you'd wish to try a little bout with me?"

He cleared a space, planked elbow to the bar, spread his open hand invitingly. He was offering a favorite test—a simple matter of clasping hands, palm to palm and fingers locked, and the object being to force the rival fist to kiss the counter.

The fighter—Ripper Stuss was what they called him, or sometimes Kid the Rip—eyed Hardesty's meathook. The ring had given him a stupid mask of face, gnarled ears and scarred brows and puffy eyes with a cast of ingrown meanness, and he seemed to ponder slow-wittedly.

At length he dumbly shook his head, moving away. There was a chuckle or two, a derisive hoot, and then the gay procession went on. . . .

THE other incident came about on the way to the dogfight. They were marching the sidewalk, no more than a

staggery two or three any the worse for wear, when Hardesty spied the girl he had bumped by accident. She was standing on the steps of the Travelers' House, and Hardesty's notion of a harmless joke was to clear a crossing for her.

He flung at the figures behind him, upsetting them left and right. "Make way," he boomed. "Passage for the lady!"

Then up he stepped, politely smiling, with a motion of sweeping a hat from his bare brown head. "At your service, Miss Mary! Call on me anytime, do, when you're in need. I might even take on one of your jobs if the pay is right and you asked me pretty!"

He'd learned her name from Buckshot. She was Mary Morrow, old Benjy's girl, from up along the Staghorn. Her father had some lowgrade claims, scramble for a penny stuff, and her notion to start working them had spread a general laugh. For two days she'd been trying to hire help, bums or any whatnot, to ready things for the thaw.

She stood in the gleam of the entry lamp and he saw the curl of her lip that damned him and all his ilk.

"Can't you make me an offer?" he insisted. "How much could you afford to pay a steady hard-workin' man?"

"I'm paying a hundred and found," she said, "but I'll make an exception for you. You being what you are, the cheapest scum, I'll give you a dollar a day!"

Her tone cut through his whiskey fog, erased his grin. Without another look or word he led his stragglers on. . . .

A block beyond, at the turnoff, he waved the others ahead. He backed to the shadow of a wall and pressed his eyes with the heels of his hands. His drinks were suddenly turning over, all the whiskey lightness draining out of him, and such a thing had never happened before.

He had a queasy taste in his throat but he knew it wasn't the redeye slowing him down. It was something more—a nag in his mind that had been growing with the hours, a something that hit him like a slap when Mary Morrow named him scum.

And what was it? What was wrong? It wasn't the girl or what she said.

How could a nobody snip like her affect him? It wasn't that bushwa of Turk McCray's, shooting off his spleen, for Turk would most likely apologize next time they got together. No, it was just a kind of hunch!

Maybe there was his answer above. The night was crisp, the moon sailed clear, the borealis luminance was distantly afire but the shimmer of the star he sought was clouded over. A lazy mass, the spume of space, was hovering between King Hardesty and his polar shine of destiny. Maybe Jumbo Swann had called the turn—maybe the vex in his marrow was his luck gone blind on him!

"King," they were yelling, "where are you, boy? What's holdin' you?"

He clawed a hand before his eyes, as if to rip that cloud apart, and roared an answer as he came. Roaring, running—like the kingly lion, poor brute, who charges headlong into the hunter's net of downfall.

III

THE pit was a boarded shaft sunk into the warehouse floor. The big ship's lamp, dangling from a rafter, cast a yellow haze on the rimming tiers of faces. A roustabout was spreading sawdust on the arena floor below, blotting the bloody scrawls of the previous set-to, and voices echoed hollowly in the barnlike dimness.

Three to one on Terror. Even money the Dutchman's yap wouldn't last the limit. Plenty of offers singing out, but few inclined to take them.

"What you bettin', King?" the upper voices called. "What odds?"

"Do I bet a cinch?" he retorted.

He was rubbing his wrists with snow. He washed his face with cold handfuls, opened his shirt to spread the tingle to the hairy arch of his chest. He cocked an eye to the upward sky and a quick shiver went through him.

He was sober, icy sober. The something that hit him back there on the street had cleared his brain of whiskey fumes. It left a numbness, though, that slowed his thoughts and made his fingers fumbly.

The Dutchman's Blue was nothing much. Some outland cross, with an aire-

dale muzzle and the rangy lines of a deerhound. Dimwit eyes, no spirit in them, and a sluggish hangtail pose. Terror's speed should slash him to ribbons, and yet—

Yet there was something Hardesty mistrusted in that Blue-brute's jib. He hadn't liked the sneaky air of the mumble-mouth blockhead who owned him. Maybe Terror had spent too much of his freshness on the trail? Maybe he'd better speak up now—any wild excuse—and stall it off another day?

He hunkered in the runway, Terror between his knees and waited the timer's yell. He was whispering words with no heart in them. His awkward hands felt the tremors beneath the mongrel hide, and he briefly shared the sensation of animal electricity.

Terror knew that conflict waited. Twitch of muzzle, flat of ears, the rumble growl that filled him—from tip to tail he was eagerness. Then suddenly, and queerly, Hardesty's touch could register a slackening.

It was as if King Hardesty's doubts, his squeamish doldrums, had passed into Terror. The slant-eyed head was turning as if to ask what was wrong. Perhaps Terror missed the loving curses, the fierce paw of fingers that had keyed him into other fights, or perhaps the animal quick of him had a shuddery warning?

His warrior growl thinned to a nervous snarl.

"Time!" came a yell. "Loose 'em!"

Buckshot opened the slatted gate. Terror's snarl was deep again as he jumped the entry space. The gate slammed back and the fight was on.

IT was a bad fight, bad to watch. It was almost comic at the start, outrageous in the middle, and the finish was sheer insanity. It was an ugliness to all who watched—bar the stolid Dutchman—and Hardesty must have seen it as the fiend's foul nightmare.

The big Blue didn't want to scrap. They prodded him in, as Terror pounced, and sight of the charging enemy bowed his back into a cat-hump. He cringed the gateboards, one paw lifted baring his fangs in a drool-mouth spasm.

He looked like some creature that never

was, and no wonder Terror skidded to a halt.

So they posed, the seconds passing. Terror's body was flattened, neck extended, and his head was swaying in snarl-lipped feints. In twenty other battles he had never acted thus. His style was rush and rip, knock 'em down and plow 'em under, but now he was a cautious stalker.

Snickers from the rim above. Hoots and blared derision.

To the watchers, the Dutchman's Blue looked licked before he started. He was tremble-legged fear, a craven, and they laughed to see Hardesty's champion stalled by such a faker. They could not smell what Terror smelled—the strangeness in this foe. They could not see that behind the glaze of big Blue's eyes was a kindling flame uncanny.

Savage instinct, brute-blood warning, held Terror briefly leashed. Then the din of scorn poured down and he answered to its lash. He was a bellying wolf creeping forward. He was coiling muscles, a furry rush!

His weight rammed Blue against the boards. His fangs slashed a shoulder, and with the taste of blood he became a warring automaton. The fling of impetus staggered him wide, but he seemed to turn and spring again in one flow of motion.

Blue ran. The taller dog, looking dazed and stunned, turned tail and fled. Snarling back, jaws slaverling, he chased a lumbering circuit while Terror harried his rump. Laughter poured into the pit, but that was the end of the comedy.

For abruptly big Blue began to fight. He was whirling back on Terror now, fang to furious fang, and his guise of fear was changed into a smouldering frenzy.

Two minutes of rip-roll tanglement proved that the Dutchman's dog knew the fighting tricks. He seemed to shed his awkwardness like a coat, and his tactics of defense were gauged to offset the speed of Terror's darts and swerves and rushes.

Terror's attack was the wolf attack, and the key to it was the shoulder-ram that spilled the foe for the throat-gash kill or the hamstring. Time and again

he launched himself, but Blue was an ever-shifting target. When Terror tried to counter-move—the faking charge that developed into a downward lurch to snap the foreleg—big Blue would turn it with a pounce of jaw for scruff or backbone.

Uproar deepened as the battle raged. The combat was a ceaseless swirl with Terror relentlessly forcing, and Hardesty's champion had it won—up to the crucial point of accident.

He had scored the telling blows. Blue's shoulders were a bloody mat, one ear a rag; and with one hindleg sliced to the bone, he was slowing in the turnarounds. The pace was beginning to tell on Blue, though the hellfire gleam of his eyes was undiminished.

Then with one spring, a thrash of bodies, fate turned the tables.

Terror was maneuvering, pouncing in and out with hacking threats for the throat, and now he suddenly reverted to his knockdown leap. His bulleting drive caught Blue unbalanced, and the taller dog was upended. Terror was twisting to sink his fangs into the tender belly, and catlike slashings of the outlander's hindpaws caused the upset accident.

Stiff claws raking Terror's head, a clumsy thrust that found an eye, deep gouging—

The pain bit into Terror as his teeth bit into Blue. They rolled together, spun apart; and the double hurt was a goad that redoubled their furies. Terror half-blinded, Blue's belly a bloody gush—and after that the delirium.

Delirium of savagery, nightmare of rage, and the watchers swept along on the red tide of brutality. Pandemonium storming the pit, and Hardesty's bellows lost in the furor.

Terror was lurching in again, and the Dutchman's dog was a terror that met him. Big Blue was a pink-frothed mouth, a crazy glare; and a strength beyond all nature drove him. Straight for the throat, the pair of them! Gnash and crunch and snap of bone! And all of the time, King Hardesty yelling:

"For cripe's sake, stop it!" But none could hear in the rush of sound.

The end found Blue on three shaky legs, still fighting. Terror, with a broken

spine, was snarling at the death above. When Hardesty clambered into the pit, a blubbing maniac, three-legged Blue came at him wild. Then the Dutchman cast his dog-net down; and in a while the tumult dwindled to Hardesty's deep-chest heavings.

"Get out of my way," he said to the silent crowd. "Let me have your pistol, Buckshot."

Terror was a bleating huddle, bloody in his arms. The tears were shameless on King Hardesty's cheeks, and he walked alone into the night to shoot the mercy bullet.

IV

THEY said it was the defeat of Terror that put the crusher on Hardesty. The sight of his champion mangled and maimed, so the whispers told, was the jolt that unbalanced him. He was never again the roaring bullyboy of old.

He rallied from the first effects, of course. Baldy had a bottle, and Hardesty downed a dollop that would have floored a jackass. He shuddered to the reek of it, rubbed his face between his hands; and in a while he was nodding to the consolations.

"Can't win 'em all—that's right," he agreed.

But his voice didn't have the King Hardesty tone. His laugh was strained, they would later recall, and his trend of talk was absent-minded. They went along toward Jumbo Swann's; and it might have been a funeral procession.

Outside of Jumbo's, he came to a halt. Light from the window painted his features bleakly, and scowling puzzlement furrowed his brow. He hesitated queerly. His hand swept out in refusing gesture, and he made a long step, as if to stalk away.

With an angry shake of head, he gave a look above. He mumbled something under his breath, the jargon of a scornful growl.

"What is it, King?" asked Buckshot. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," grunted Hardesty, and he opened Jumbo's door with a slamming jolt that rattled the front of the building.

The news of defeat had preceded him.

Frenchy and the other belles raised a mournful babble, and even crocodile Jumbo put on a woebegone expression. "Tough luck, boy," he said. "It's a bloody shame!"

"I wouldn't have minded so much," said Hardesty, "if a decent dog licked him. But a bonehead thing like that one—"

"I know," said Jumbo calculatingly. "Like I told the bunch, I was half afraid it might spoil you for our game. I thought you might not have the heart for poker tonight, your luck turning sour on you like that?"

"Whose luck is sour?" Hardesty demanded. "You should've long since learned, monkey-face, that the harder somebody knocks me down the quicker I get up. Come on!"

He went to the high-stakes table where the cards were already in play. He stripped off his coat, spat in his hand, ordered wine for the dancing ladies. For a little while, chaffing back and forth, he gave a fair imitation of the usual King Hardesty.

Studhorse poker was the game, seven players in it; and the ring of observers clustered thick. The cards ran slow, the luck uneven, the early pots were smallish. Midnight found the man from Sitka in the winner's seat, ten-twelve thousand to the good; and then it was Red Yeager's turn to scoop three fat jackpots in succession. Hardesty was playing slowly, after his opening flurry of bluffs, and his stack was no taller than when he started.

"He's slow tonight," the watchers muttered. "Playin' 'em close to his vest!"

"He'd better," others answered. "Look at the blood in Jumbo's eye. He's always said that the night would come when he'd catch the King out on a limb. That's what he's layin' back for."

And thus it ran for another hour, play slow and cautious. The spectators had dwindled, the queue at the bar had thinned, and the game seemed dying out, when he jumped the one big deal that sealed the fate of King Hardesty.

SEVEN hole cards flipped around, then another seven faced atop them. Hardesty was the dealer, and Jumbo was high with the ace of diamonds.

"Let's warm it up?" said Jumbo. "Ace bets a couple blueboys!"

Hardesty sat in his favorite chair, with Baldy and Buckshot and other faithfuls behind him. Frenchy perched on a stool at his right, wedged between himself and Jumbo, and her mood was sometimes languid, sometimes kittenish. Now she would bite his ear for luck, or rumple his hair with a squeal, and now she would lean on him, sleepy-like, and whisper nonsense.

Hardesty's show card was the king of hearts. He cupped his hand to peek at the edge of the matching queen beneath. Queen of hearts in the hole, his lucky card, and suddenly the hunch in his blood that she'd be the winning lady.

"And up a few," he said when the bet came 'round. "King tilts it."

"What's this!" exclaimed Jumbo. "Who let this stranger in? He must have 'em back to back, boys, I'm calling anyhow!"

Jumbo's voice had a knife in it. The mockery in his tone had sharpened with the passing hours, and Hardesty didn't like its piping. His hide was usually thick enough to stand a friendly goading, but tonight—tonight his nerves were raw. The back of his hand was itching for a swipe at Jumbo's pasty face. Frenchy lolling over him, a pack of fools breathing down his neck, bugeyed gawks in a staring ring—oh, damn the lot of 'em!

He had no heart for poker, no heart for anything. His thoughts were a jumble, his emotions as lifeless as Terror was—poor luckless Terror, whose whimpers had begged the release of pity's bullet. A part of King Hardesty had been humbled with Terror in that nightmare pit, had died with him.

"Do we get another card, Yer 'Ighness?" little Jumbo prodded. "Any time at all, of course—no 'urry!"

Hardesty dealt another round. The deck had no feel to his fist, none of that crackle in the cards that told his fingers subtly when their luck was due. The nameless doubts that his hands had stroked into Terror were still persistent. He knew he was playing like a clown, like a scarecrow of himself, but he couldn't help it.

A seven for Jumbo, a nine, a deuce; a jack for the man from Sitka. A five that paired Red Yeager, and the queen of clubs to Hardesty.

Yeager bet his fives with a stack of reds, four hundred dollars' worth. Hardesty, a tingle in him, kicked it another five hundred.

"Ah!" said Jumbo, rubbing his hands. "I wondered when the betting would begin!"

The little saloonman was weazened and gray, no wider than a stick, and poker was his pride. He had a muscular twitch that intermittently quirked his cheek, giving the effect of a leering wink, and this made his face unreadable. Hardesty was the only man who had trimmed Jumbo Swann consistently.

"Nine hundred to me, eh?" Jumbo pondered. "Well—here's the nine and a thousand up!"

Three players met the raise. Hardesty hesitated, measuring his stacks of chips, then called. The real King Hardesty, as Jumbo's snicker implied, would have roared a laugh and upped the possible aces, the unlikely three fives, with another thousand for the fun of it.

Cards slapped down. Another seven for Jumbo; an ace, a king, an eight. For Hardesty the diamond queen—three ladies in his hand now, and a lock on the board unless somebody outdrew him!

"The ladies say a thousand." His yellow chips rattled into the pot, and through him a surge of confidence ran. He was back in stride, King Hardesty of yore, for here was proof that his tide of luck had turned. He knew in his bones that their last cards wouldn't beat him.

His mind could see their holdings. Aces and sevens for Jumbo, a four-card flush for the Sitka man. Red Yeager and the other one hadn't helped themselves, and they would fold when Jumbo hiked it.

And Jumbo hiked it fast. "Five thousand more on the top," he said, "to protect you from that coming flush there, Hardesty!"

The Sitka man, not anxious to be whip-sawed, debated momentarily before he called. The others tossed their hands in. A hush surrounded the table now, for this was the lock-horn climax that had been building.

King Hardesty and Jumbo Swann, betting them hammer and tongs. A fortune in the pot, and one more fall would win or lose it. From the bar, from the tables,

came a flow of onlookers. Croupiers and percentage girls, bartenders and drunks—they flocked in a whispery huddle to the showdown.

"And five again," said Hardesty calmly. "Make it easy on yourself, Jumbo. I've no desire to beggar you."

Jumbo's cheek and lip gave a wiggle. He had Hardesty tabbed for kings over queens, and his air was cocky. He was banker of the game, and his fingers were unhurried as he counted yellow chips from the rack.

"YOUR five," he announced, "and ten thousand besides." He surveyed the scatter of Hardesty's chips. "Your credit's good if you feel inclined to boost it."

The Sitka man, with a grunted curse, pushed in his gleanings. By the rules of table stakes he would still play for a share of the pot. The overage rode between Jumbo and Hardesty.

Hardesty eyed the little saloonman. He had no wish to strip Jumbo clean, yet he could not refuse the open challenge. "How much would you say I'm worth?" he asked.

Jumbo wet his fidgeting lip. "As much as I am, just about."

"Then that's my bet," said Hardesty. "All or any part of it."

He had his thousands in the bank. There were promising claims staked in his name, and he owned fat shares in other workings. He staked the kit and kaboodle; and Jumbo Swann's quick nod accepted the wager.

"My holdings against yours," he said. "Deal 'em!"

The cards slapped down. A ten to Jumbo. A club that ruined the diamond hopes of the Sitka man. A meaningless trey for Hardesty.

He tabled the deck. His blood was singing victory as he flipped his hole card. "Three ladies," he said. "A lock on the board. You should've known you couldn't beat me, Jumbo!"

A stifled gasp came from a watcher. Frenchy squealed out shrill delight, and the fling of her arms clasped Hardesty's neck as he reached to scoop the pot in.

"Hold it!" Jumbo shouted.

He was leaning forward, half erect, and his cheek was twitching ten a minute.

"What you tryin' to pull?" he demanded. "How many cards did you deal yourself?"

"Are you crazy?" said Hardesty. He leaned back in his chair and spread the layout. "You can see for yourself—"

His voice broke off. There beneath his fingers were his three winning queens, a trey—and a *pair* of kings!

"Six cards," said Jumbo shrilly. "Your hand is dead! I claim the pot on two good pair—aces over sevens."

V

BEWILDERMENT was a storm in Hardesty's brain. He peered at Jumbo, at speechless Frenchy, at the blobs of faces circling, and numbness was gripping the pit of his stomach again.

"Five was all I had," he said. "A discard must've got mixed in."

"You gathered the discards yourself," said Jumbo. "I'll leave it to the table if the pot ain't mine."

"Like hell!" croaked Hardesty. "Ain't my word enough? What kind of monkeyshine goes on here?"

"If there's any monkeyshine goes on," said little Jumbo, sharp and clear, "it wasn't me behind it."

"Why, damn your shriveled soul—" Rage seeped into Hardesty's face and he reached a hand for Jumbo's windpipe.

A grip on his shoulder yanked him aside. "Pick a man your size, tinhorn!" a flat voice growled, and a fist from nowhere smashed his jawbone.

It caught him unawares, unbalanced; and dynamiting force sprawled him side-wise. He lurched against the skidding table, toppling, and landed on his hip. He came up with a furious bellow, shaking his head, and lop-nosed Ripper Stuss was the man who faced him.

Why the bouncer from Shanghai's should mix in the affair, Hardesty didn't know or care. He launched himself instinctively at the sneak-attacker, his body bent from the waist and a bludgeon fist cocked at either hip. The Ripper stood with right extended, his left hugged to his chest, but that fact meant nothing to Hardesty. He had fought all kinds, the scientific and the rough-and-tumble, and what difference was a southpaw?

He found out in the first exchange.

He learned his lesson swack and thud, and never quite recovered from it.

The reaching right dabbled his face just hard enough to slow him, and his swinging left fell short. His right drove for the bouncer's head, but Stuss neatly ducked inside it. And as he ducked his left torpedoed into Hardesty's washboard midriff.

He was never hit so hard before, nor so cruelly. The knuckles seemed to sear into his flesh and wrench the tender vitals. Shocking impact deadened him, hammered weakness through his frame. His knees sagged, his shoulders drooped, his muscles turned to fat.

But he didn't go down. He was Hardesty of the whalebone breed, and not for bloody minutes yet would his mind admit that a single blow could carry so much punishment.

Ripper Stuss had glided aside, cannily circling, and Hardesty bored at him so fast, striking out so swiftly, that the bouncer's stabbing right could not withhold him. Hardesty bobbed inside his guard, and the might of his clubbing punches swayed the Ripper left and right. If he could have only stayed in close there.

But the lop-nose man was too fighting wise. His ramrod left kicked Hardesty under the heart, and he squirmed away with a pepper of rights that welted Hardesty's cheek with crimson.

He wouldn't let Hardesty catch up with him again. From then until the finish, he kept backing, sidling, ripping in and out with wicked flurries. He was the butcher, the rest of the way, and Hardesty was the bull for slaughter.

They fought in flusters that rocked the tables and bumped the walls and skittered fallen chairs. When a missed swing stumbled Hardesty down, hands and knees, he thought it was accident. He lumbered up still thinking he had a chance. His heart kept saying that any minute would rally his strength, would pump the winning second wind into him.

But the following knockdown, that left hand projectile into his middle once more, smashed the realization home. He was hammered flat, like an earthquake snatching his foothold, and his face was plastered to a floor that heaved like a deck in the storms off the Horn.

HE knew he was licked then. There was nothing left inside him but a weary ache. His legs were robbed of power, his arms were weighted with lead, and he had no will to rudder him.

Lord knows what pushed him up again, what lurched him back at Ripper Stuss. Fear shook him with its tremors and defeat was a shadow giant bestriding. His star was blind, his luck was lost, black destiny had bound him helpless.

Baldy, Buckshot — where were they, all his friends and strong companions? Why didn't they stop it? There was a smear of faces somewhere around, but wherever he turned it was the bloated face of Shanghai's bouncer he saw. Waves of sound washed over him, but the voices were meaningless. They were the rumble of doom to him, the boom of waves on his derelict shore.

Fists hacked and pelted him, and now he knew what Terror endured in that nightmare pit with the Dutchman's Blue. The time came on when those slashing blows lost the power to hurt him more. Ripper Stuss faded from his sight, and he waded a murk unreal. He teetered the brink of oblivion, and his curse was that some feeble spark of life still held him upright there.

Ripper Stuss said later that he'd never fought so tough a man. Those who saw the brutal business, though they shook their heads at Hardesty's pitiful showing, were forced to admit that he stood his punishment well.

The lop-nose bouncer, cruelly adept, battered his face into a slab of meat. He drove King Hardesty at will before him, sinking home the body blasts that would have sapped a bullock's stamina. The finish saw him walloping a reeling hulk along the length of the bar, still unable to land the knockout.

Hardesty's eyes were slits in a swollen red blanket and he breathed like a gasping fish. He could barely lift his arms and his legs had the palsy. He weaved and stumbled backwards, sometimes without a blow, but punch after punch couldn't floor him.

At the end of the bar Ripper Stuss changed tactics. He gave a yank at Hardesty's arm, turned him with a push, and then he had him in the bum's rush

hold. Somebody opened the door, and a thrust did the rest. Hardesty hit the walk with a drunken stumble, sprawled into the pile of snow, rolled on to the trampled roadway.

Half a dozen came from Jumbo's place to see him wallow up like a clumsy bear. For an awkward moment he wavered there, slapping feebly at the night, and then he turned away. He went on crazy tiptoe up the street, and the dim spark in him knew where he was and what he was doing.

He zigzagged, he fell, he yawed on again. He plunged along into the dark, into the cold and the quiet, and nothing could stop his desperate trek, his flight from shame, this side of blank oblivion.

VI

SOME Tlingit Indians, fishing through the ice, saw a crazy man try to cross Lake Bandamere next noonday. He was such a devil's sight that they fled at his approach. They drew near again, when he collapsed, and he began to crawl. He babbled at them senselessly.

He had shawled himself with a caribou hide, had bandaged his hurts with tatters. His eyes were swollen shut, his lips were liver lumps, and he fought them weakly as they tried to lead him. They put him on a handsled, and it must have been fate that cut them across Mary Morrow's homeward trail a little later.

She didn't recognize Hardesty, not at first. She was telling the Tlingits to take him on to the trader's store, and suddenly some tone of his idiot words chimed her ear. She bundled him into her carriole, not exactly knowing why, and sundown found him bedded in her cabin out at Staghorn.

For weeks he wandered the valley of shadows. Pneumonia fever had him, a hellish siege, and there were nights on end when Mary Morrow could hear the wings of death that rustled for him. It was her nursing that pulled him through. He had no will to live, no brain at all — just stretched there like a mottled mummy.

He was out of his head, and that was a stroke of mercy. The first pale suns of spring were licking at the snows before he remembered who he was or knew

where he was. Six weeks had passed before he could be propped in an invalid's chair.

The illness had wasted him to skin and bones. He was a pale and shag-haired scarecrow, sunken eyes and hollow cheeks and the scars of the Ripper's beating turned livid. He looked at the skinny claw of his hand, then covered his eyes with it.

"Why couldn't you let me be?" he said. "What made you bring me back from where I started?"

"Where was that?" said Mary Morrow.

"I dunno. To hell, I guess. What was the difference?"

In another ten days, when he could walk a bit, he asked for his clothes. "I'm obliged for what you done," he said, "but I got to be on my way now."

"Which way?" she asked.

He worried his lip. "The coast — outside — I'll find a ship. I know the sailor's ropes all right."

She looked at him one way, softly, and then a glint came in her eye. "With no outfit at all, this kind of footing, the puny shape you're in—" She held her arms akimbo. "Are you that much a fool, man? Don't you know how far you'd get?"

"That ain't the point," he muttered. "I got to go. I won't be found here."

She knew what he meant. In his babble of delirium he had blurted out his woes. He had clung to Mary Morrow's hand, sobbing and moaning, now maundering through his boyhood and now embroiled with Ripper Stuss again. His illness had confessed to her a hundred secret truths, and sometimes tears had filled her eyes as she listened.

She knew the childishness in his heart. His world had collapsed upon him, that night of defeat, and he could not face that world again. In weakness and despair all he could think was flight from the shame behind him.

There were words of sympathy on her lips but she did not speak them. Instead she eyed him with whiplash scorn. "And all the time," she said, "I thought it was a *man* I was nursing."

Next night, in the moonlight he tried to make a break. He was sneaking out, half dressed in her father's misfits, when she came after him. Her hair was a tangle, a long coat bundled her sleeping

flannels, and she was a galumphing witch as she ran the sunken drifts to head him.

"Get back," she ordered. "Back, you hear!"

"I'm clearin' out," he said, "and you or nobody else can stop me."

"I can't? Take another step, you fool, and see."

They were close to the shack where her men were quartered, and he didn't want to raise a sorry scene there. He dragged on back, and she lit a lamp to look at him.

"Go on to bed," she commanded. "Your legs are shaking already."

"I know what I'm doin'," he told her. "What's it to you where I go, or when? Why can't you lay off me?"

"How long did I nurse you, Hardesty?" she asked. "How many nights did I take my sleep in a chair beside your bed? I've fed and housed you and doctored you too long to have you throw all my efforts away on a trail that would lick you in an hour."

"Suppose it did," he growled. "Whose business is it?"

"It's my business, in a way. Who'll pay me for all I've done, the time and trouble spent on you, if you happen to fall through an ice hole?"

A gleam came into his lacklustre eyes, just the ghost of a something she'd been waiting for. "Why, damn you," he muttered, "I'll pay you back. If that's the way you feel—"

"Very well," she said briskly. "We'll settle it in the morning."

BUT she kept him dangling four more days before she'd listen to him. Wait till he could walk like a man again, she told him sharply. Wait till he could trot to the creek without puffing like a grampus. He could have struck her in the face—that's how pitiful he'd become—when she finally refused pointblank to stake him to a traveler's necessities.

"We're short on supplies as it is," she said. "I can't be outfitting every passing straggler."

He bit down on his temper. "Sum up what I owe you," he said, "and I'll send back every penny. I'll pay it if I have to steal it."

"I'm different from some people,

Hardesty," she said. "I'm particular what money I accept. There's clean money and dirty money, good money and bad—did you ever think of that?"

"All right, all right! You'll get your honest money. Name the amount, whatever you say, and I'll send you double it."

"You will? My services come high, you know. As doctor and nurse and boarding-house mistress I've got a whacking bill against you. How can I tell you don't intend to skip the country on me?"

"Damn it," he said, "ain't my word enough?"

She faced him calmly. "Not with me. Who are you, exactly, that your word should be good? What security can you put up? How many friends can you name to guarantee you?"

She was trampling his deep-down hurt, and his futile rage boiled over. He flung around, started away, then shook a skinny fist.

"Then how do you want it paid?" he roared. "What is it, in the devil's name, that you want of me?"

"I want what's mine," she said. "If you're getting so stout and frisky, as you claim, why can't you work out what you owe? You wouldn't be worth full wages, not as you stand, but I'll treat you fairly."

"Who wouldn't be worth full wages? Why, you—you—I'll out-work them specimens you got with one hand behind me."

"At wind work maybe. But how about the other kind?"

"All right," he raged. "I'll show you! I'll work it out! You'll be eating sour words before I'm through here."

SHE had tricked him, as he later realized, but once the promise was made he couldn't renege. He'd been using her father's bunk in the main cabin while mild and cheerful Benjy Morrow spread his blankets in the help-shack, and his first prompt move was to change quarters. For weeks thereafter he refused to admit, by word or deed, that Mary Morrow existed.

He worked. The going was tough, and he soon learned what a toll his sickness had extracted. He puffed and grunted over tasks a boy could handle. His hands blistered, his muscles groaned the nights, and there were daybreaks when utter weariness chained him to his bunk.

But somehow he got up, somehow he struggled through those days, and no matter what his suffering was he stood it grim-jawed.

It was galling to work with two scrawny Indians and a ruffraff halfbreed and to be the least man of the crew. It was ashes in his mouth to live as one of them, reading contempt in their liquid glances, hearing mockery's tone in their jabberwock lingo. The outcast's loneliness beset him, and that was his purgatory.

Surviving it was bad enough, even when his strength began to bud again, but the biggest deviltry of all was the way Mary Morrow kept after him.

She wouldn't let a man alone. She kept pestering like a gadfly. Let him flop down for a minute's rest, tucked out completely, and there she'd appear with an eyebrow cocked and a shoulder shrugging, as much as to call him a quitter. Let him be wrestling a balky boulder, a stubborn stump, and her laugh would cut through his panted curses.

Nights when his heart was too weary for sleep, when the longing for some cheerful word or some breath of companionship was wormwood through his system, she'd manage to cross the patch of his restless paces. She'd stand and watch him, saying nothing, until his skin began to prickle and he had to veer from her presence.

"Where you going, Hardesty?" she'd call after him. "What else are you running away from?"

She had a dozen woman's ways of sinking the knife into him, and another dozen ways of rubbing salt into the wounds. He hated her as he never had hated any natural thing. The more his vigor returned to him, the more his sinews toughened, the more his fingers ached to throttle her.

He damned and despised her so completely that when the halfbreed muttered a remark behind her back he flung the skunk-mouth scoundrel into the creek. The Indians didn't like it, so he served them a dose of the same. After that he took charge of the work, driving them as relentlessly as he drove himself, and he gloated inwardly to see how this simple assertion of leadership toned down her taunts and gibing glances.

It was score one against her, and now

he could hold his shoulders straighter.

VII

THERE was work to be done, and Hardesty strove to lose himself in doing it. They built a drum-and-bucket housing atop the chosen slope. They sank a shaft and boarded a chute and threw up a diversion dam to harness the creek for sluicing. They sloshed through the slush and muck of the thaws, and then the warming suns stirred life in the earth. The winds blew mild and the barren white wastelands were transformed in greenery.

The trees and grasses and hills awoke. The hum of creation pervaded the land—wings in the air and paws through the brush and the insect chorus droning. Vitality was a taste and a scent and a sightliness abroad, and Hardesty swept along with its current until the brink of summer.

Here was the turn of his life again, though it came so gradually he was unaware of it. His chief awareness through those weeks was Mary Morrow.

He didn't hate her any longer. Time brought a realization of how much she had done for him, and now and then there were periods when they talked and acted almost like friends. But every time, just as things were getting comfortable, she'd sink some quick harpoon in his heart.

She'd take some stray remark and twist it, like the time he grumbled at spending so much labor upon such a lowgrade proposition. "What do you know about mining?" she challenged. "What makes you an expert?"

He shrugged. He knew what she was driving at—the fact that her father was always spouting theories on quartz formation or glacial drift or terminal moraine, jawbreak stuff from his row of books.

"I'm no snoop-nose professor, if that's what you mean," he said, "but I can smell the paydirt. I could lead you any of three directions to better color than you show here."

"Sure," she said. "Surface color. That's all you know, Hardesty. That's the trouble with you and your kind. Do you think the golden goose will keep on laying eggs in your lap forever?"

He eyed her uneasily.

"You pack of fools rush in," she said, "and because the ore is plentiful you're bound to stumble over it. You follow each other, you trample each other, you scramble hit or miss, and because you hit on a strike or two you act as if the creeks were paved with nuggets. A strong back and a weak mind—that's all you need—and you set yourselves up like royalty. Every hill you sink your pick in is supposed to shower down a fortune."

The beard he'd grown was tinged with red and he tried to finger some reply from it, frowning.

"It's easy to skim the cream," she said. "It's easy to be a millionaire when the money grows on bushes. But that time is passing, Hardesty. There's a new day coming up when we'll go back to the good old rules and the earth will pay a man according to the labor he expends on it."

"Why, the country's hardly touched," he said. "Everybody knows we haven't begun to tap the real vein here."

"That's what the spoilers hope," she answered. "They've built their flimflams on the notion that the present craziness will last till doomsday. But sensible people know that discovery's on the wane. Instead of chasing new will-o'-the-wisps they're digging into what they've got."

"Spoilers, huh?" he muttered. "So that's what you think of me?"

"They're trying new methods of fighting the rocks for the deep lodes underneath," she went on, unheeding. "They're thinking honest wages for honest work instead of Eldorado. They're planning transportation, the details of development, and looking toward a country fit to live in. Did you ever think of a time, Hardesty, when there'd be homes and schools and churches here? Can you picture the towns as centers of honest business, depots for supply, instead of a warren of honky-tonks? What would you think if a different breed of people ruled the roost here—people who considered not only how much they could take from the land but also how much they put into it?"

He studied the tips of his moccasins. "That's why you scorned me in town, eh?" he said. "Is that why you hated me?"

"Hate you? Why should I hate you?"

"Don't you ride me roughshod all the time? The only reason you brought me

here was to sharpen your claws on me
"Was it?"

"It was either that or pity."

"You talk like a fool," she said sharply. "You look like a fool, hiding your face in that brush. Why don't you shave? Why don't you clear out, if you want to? I'll call our debt square whenever you want to go. You don't intend to hang around forever, do you?"

"Why no," he said slowly. "No, I—" His throat worked queerly. He glanced at her quickly, almost fearfully, then hastily turned away.

HE shaved himself that evening. In a glimmering pool he studied his reflection, and with dumb surprise he saw himself as he had always been. He felt his jaw, the slant of his nose, and as he stood his fingers prodded the flesh of his naked torso.

Flat muscles layered his bones again. The months had restored his lean-flanked weight, and he doubled a fist as tough and destructive as ever it had been. Daily toil and simple living, good plain grub and not a drop of redeye—yes, through his body, toe to topknot, he could feel the olden power tingle.

He was cured—except for one small detail.

He sat beside the sunset creek and let the midges swarm him. His time had come, the judgment hour, to confront the blind spot in his brain that haunted him since he woke in Benjy Morrow's bunk and knew his name was Hardesty.

Through his sickness, through the helplessness of recovery, his soul had admitted the bitter fact that his courage was cracked, his spirit gone. His heart was the heart of a badly beaten dog that shivered to every whine of wind and cringed to every shadow-flick. His one impulse, night and day, was to slink his head and drag his tail and belly off to hell's unknown.

But Mary Morrow had curbed him there. She had wangled and bullied him into the shape of a man again. She had given him his body back, but what about his manhood?

It was another doubt in him like the doubt fumbling all his efforts that night when his luck turned renegade. It was

the same unnatural cramp that had rubbed defeat into Terror's hide, that had dealt two sticky cards as one to rob him of his poker winnings, that had floundered him like an ox into the Ripper's massacre.

It was a kind of doom hanging over him—a doom that had crushed and humbled him once—but today had shown him suddenly that he had to meet it again. Talking there with Mary Morrow he'd felt that desperate push impelling, blank destiny urging him back to town.

It was in town he'd lost his luck, or whatever else it was, and town was where he'd have to seek if he ever hoped to find it.

Other times when he thought of town the sweat came out on him. His mind's eye saw his street of shame, the faces of the friends he'd had, and he'd hear the mocking whispers. Buckshot and Baldy and Frenchy and fifty more—they'd seen him branded a cardsharp crook, seen him whipped like a cur. How could he answer Jumbo Swann's accusations? Suppose he bucked up to Ripper Stuss and all at once knew that he hadn't the guts to risk another beating?

So he thought of it other times, but now his deep necessity dulled all such imaginings. He sat on the creek bank, a lump on a log, until darkness was velvet in the sky. His star was there, beyond his shoulder, but his purpose storing up was more than starshine. It was something warmer, brighter—

"Hardesty!" the clear call rang. "Where are you, Hardesty?"

He was springing up, he was answering, he was traveling toward the sound at a halfway run. Mary Morrow's voice, and why should it raise such a jangle in him? Why was he trotting to it like an eager pup?

The truth hit him a landslide wallop. That's why he had to go to town—why he had to be a man once more or nothing! Like the lackbrain lout he always was, he'd fallen daft in love with her!

He couldn't face her, not right then. He turned off into the scrub, a silly moon-calf, and bushed himself until her voice drew away. He hunkered in the dimness and the hundred different looks she had, the way she walked and the way she stood and all of that, came to his

mind unbidden. He remembered all she'd said to him, and now he didn't mind a dab that most of it was bitter.

The realization, all at once, that he wanted her so tenderly, that he needed her so completely, that he'd be an empty ghost without her—yes, it was crazy but there it was. He knew he stood no chance with her, not in a thousand years. He wasn't fit to touch her finger. He'd spoiled himself in every way—spent his lusts like what he was, a grogeyed sailor—and maybe this was his penance, ordained from above, to eat his heart out evermore for a girl too good to spit on him. . . .

He sneaked into the bunkhouse, later on, and stretched himself among the snores. Tomorrow, then. Tomorrow bright and early. Into town, the stares and the whispers and challenges, and if they had killed Jim Hardesty's nerve they might as well kill the worthless rest of him.

VIII

THE decision gave him a sense of peace, a feel of comfort, that knitted his mind and body in the oneness of other days. He had the impression, lying there, that he could run with amazing speed, jump incredible distances, lift a mountain's weight. He slept as he used to sleep, like a child, and when he woke the dawn was past.

He hurried into his clothes, hoping to keep from Mary Morrow's sight, but she waylaid him on the offshoot path to the workings. She was bubbling with some idea, and at first she didn't notice his peculiarity.

"Where were you last night, Hardesty?"

"I dunno. I wandered off somewheres."

"A man stopped by, a crony of Dad's. He's a friend we can trust, and recently I asked him to check on some rumors I heard at the trading post. He's fresh back from a week in town, and I wanted you to hear for yourself—"

She checked herself. It seemed to hit her all at once that his face was shaved, his hair shagged off, his moccasins were toed for travel.

"You're going, Hardesty?"

He nodded. He halfway expected to see some grimace, to hear some farewell

slur, but instead she turned as blank and dumb as a totempole.

"Going where?" she said softly, after a moment.

"To find my luck."

Her eyes seemed somehow to understand. "Will you—do you think you'll be passing back this way?"

"It all depends. I can't quite say."

She stood aside, and that was that. He lifted his head for one quick look, a memory to take along, and he thought there was a pallor in her face, a set to her lips and her nostrils pinched. She held her body in the same taut pose of that night on the porch of the Travelers' House, and what was it that she possessed too deep for any words he had?

She was tall for a woman, too strongly made for prettiness. Her features, straight and cleanly cut, were not a whit unusual, and her hair was no especial color. Yet his new sight saw her now—with a kind of choke in his throat—in a beauty as wild as this land she loved, as wonderful as the stuff that dreams are made of.

"So long," he said, and he strode up the patch without knowing if she answered.

Mary Morrow watched until the branches hid him. Then she ran back to the cabin where old Benjy was pottering on some outlandish grooving for a rattle device.

"Did you tell him?" he asked.

"No—no, it wasn't the time. He was clearing out. He's gone, dad!"

"Gone where?"

"I don't know. That's what I've got to see. If he's headed off for the barrens, still running away, then it's just as well that he never knows. But if he's bound for town, if he's steamed himself to a comeback, then I've got to warn him what he's up against."

Her father glanced at her shrewdly. "It's dangerous business, Mary," he said, "to pull at the strings inside a man the way you've done with him. But you know what you're after, I guess."

"I'm glad I didn't tell him," she said. "It's better this way—letting him call the turn himself. Even if he veers off north—"

"You'll know where's he going," her father said, "when he hits the cutoff at Bandamere. If you expect to tag him you'd better hit the trail. They tell me

Hardesty used to be a fast traveler when he traveled."

HARDESTY followed the water levels, plugging it steadily, and he'd scarcely have known if a chanking regiment marched the vales behind.

His sights were set on his journeying course and his thoughts were tuned to stolid heartbeats. His toes felt a sort of balance in the earth's firm security, and that became a part of him. His steps took their rhythm from the spring of the soil as the tumbled miles flowed on.

He had no shadow of concern for what might wait ahead, for it seemed that every forward pace reduced the town to less importance. It was as if—so ran his thoughts—that by the simple resolve to face it, to settle his question once for all, he had gained the lion's share of the victory. The winning or losing of what remained became an incidental detail.

Yesterday and the days before, battling within himself, he had viewed the main street promenade as a gauntlet of shame with Hardesty scuttling it like a one-time wolf changed into rabbit. Jumbo and Ripper Stuss, Frenchy and Buck and Baldy—they had loomed like treetop ogres.

But now the scene was altered in his mind. Jig-mouth Jumbo—what was he but a weaseling scut who lived by trading cards and whiskey and women for the gold of his betters? What mightiness was in Ripper Stuss, except for a lop-nose skill of fists, that made him invincible? As for the rest of them his hailing friends and drunken-dawn companions—why should he care what such a rabble pack might think of him?

He remembered other times he'd come to town, whipping his team into a flourish or rearing a lathered horse for the cluttered walks to see. Swaggering and bellying, King Hardesty the Great, and showing off his antics like some fine lord of creation. Him and his pride, his boasted honor, his challenges to bravery!

And why? What was it, for hell's sake, that gave him need to act that way?

Mary Morrow's cure had shown him what King Hardesty had been in truth. She had opened his eyes to the meanness, the cheapness, the depravity of him and his rakehell kind. By the same token she

had given shape to the purpose that pushed him onward now.

For gradually he was coming to a better realization of what must be proved in town. He wasn't marching back there to regain King Hardesty's gimrack crown. He wasn't coming, do or die, to recoup what he'd lost to Ripper Stuss and Jumbo. It wasn't for the town's applause, the cheers and backslaps, nor to wipe the stains from a tawdry reputation.

The town, the street—what good did they hold, what decency, what worthy respects to strive for? What value was a reputation mirrored in the eyes of louts and loafers, of bullies and harpies and sotted fools?

He breathed a giant breath, quickening his pace. For a senseless little while he almost ran. Ten miles to go, and now the pull upon him was a reason shining clear. He was bound for town to ask himself one question, that was all. All he wanted was the answer that would brand him man enough to go on loving Mary Morrow.

He slowed down presently—no need to waste himself. The midday scorch found him eased on a leeward bank to watch the sky and eat the grub he'd brought. He stretched there until the sun was milder, and it was five o'clock or later when he came to the slope outside of town where Mary Morrow waited.

SHE had borrowed a horse for part of the way, beating him here by hours, and worry sharpened her greeting cry. He started back from her.

"You—how—what you doin' here?"

"I followed you, Hardesty," she said. "There's something you've got to know. The man last night, the friend of dad's—"

He shook his head. "Don't clutter me now. I—I just don't want to talk. I got some things to do ahead and now's no time to mix me."

"I don't intend to." Her voice was unlike her usual voice, and her look was confused. "I know how I've hurt you, Hardesty. I picked and haggled until I sometimes wondered you didn't wring my neck. But I only did it—"

"Yeah, sure—" His feet kept edging sidewise and his gaze was turned away.

"Wait!" she said. "Listen a minute!

The gossip started a month ago, when everybody thought you were either dead or skipped outside, and you're probably the one white man in the Yukon who hasn't heard it yet. Do you know what happened your last big night here?"

"Who'd know it better?" he asked.

"They were laying for you, Hardesty," she said. "They hooked you like a sucker. Jumbo Swann had that poker game rigged for one big hand when the cards would fall just so and you'd bet your pile against him."

"But he couldn't! I shuffled the deck myself and dealt it. I had him beat, three queens against his pairs, when we shoved our stacks in."

"You never had him beat. Jumbo had a joker up his sleeve, and her name was Frenchy. He might have helped himself on the final fall, filling a full house to top you, but when that honest chance passed by he trumped your winners with a crooked trick. Frenchy held an extra card that she slipped among your others to void the holding."

Hardesty splayed thick fingers across his mouth. Frenchy—pretty pouting Frenchy! Perched at the table beside him, her powders and perfumes. Hugging him and nuzzling him and helping him to stack his chips or gather in the discards. She might have palmed an extra, none the wiser, or maybe Jumbo passed her one beneath the table. When she flung herself upon his neck, at the showdown climax, her body would have hidden the sly flick that ruined him.

"And Ripper Stuss was one of a crew that was posted to jump you when you raised your uproar," said Mary Morrow. "They expected to gang you, Hardesty, half a dozen thugs, but the rest held back when Ripper's sneak punch floored you. that he beat you so badly, man to man, was an unexpected break for Jumbo. It meant he'd be able to discount any protests you might make as the welshing whines of a fourflush loser."

"Ah," said Hardesty, breathing deep. "He's a clever one, that Jumbo. Maybe he counted all along on the fact I'd sooner lose my shirt than be shown up for a bleating sucker."

"There's no proof for this, of course," Mary Morrow said. "Jumbo Swann denies

it, but with his tongue in his twitchy cheek. He's taken over two of your claims but the bank refuses to release your other holdings unless he can show the proper papers. He'll probably produce some forged deed or assignment as soon as he knows for sure what happened to you.

"Frenchy and Ripper Stuss," she went on, "pooled up to buy a share in Shanghai Mike's. Where would they find any such amount of money unless it's their split of Jumbo's pluckings? They're ruling the roost right now, the talk of town, and Stuss has posted a ten-thousand-dollar challenge to any fighter in the country. Jumbo is taking it easier. For a while he had three gunmen trailing with him day and night, fearing some friend of yours might come back at him. He's relaxed a little since, but he never strays far, even now, without a couple of handy lads to shadow him."

Hardesty's hands dangled stiffly. His body was momentarily slumped, but as his glance traveled up the sloping road his chin jutted out and his shoulders straightened.

"I had to warn you," said Mary Morrow. "It wasn't your luck that ran out, Hardesty. No kind of luck can win against the kind of deck they stacked. It isn't common sense to bull alone in there again and risk the same long odds. There's no telling what deadfall traps they've set. They're full of all such devil's tricks as the one that whipped your Terror dog."

"What?" he said sharply. "What's that again?"

"They claim the Dutchman dopes his fighters. He doctors something into them that drives them crazy for a while. He filled his Blue with so much of it—as the story goes—that he had to shoot the poor brute next day to stop his hydrophobia howling."

For the first time he looked at her directly. His mouth screwed into a slant of rage and his eyes filmed with some devil's sheen. His hand lifted, half reached toward her, but she could not guess if the gesture was repulsion or appeal. Then he was past her, swinging into the climb of the hill, and the downing sun cast his shadow into the shape of a ghosting giant, more tremendous with each step, who raced him.

"Hardesty!" she called. "Come back—come back to me, Hardesty!" But her hand clapped to her mouth as she spoke and the words were no more than the echo of a whisper.

IX

HARDESTY came to the head of the street, his one-time starry street of fortune, and he traveled halfway down its ruts unrecognized. Perhaps it was the patchwork clothes that gave him unfamiliar guise, or perhaps it was his patchwork face, with its upper part burned brown in the sun and the freshly shaven sections blushing pinkly.

It was the dullish hour anyhow, the lag between day's dalliance and night's carouse, and a scanty sprinkle peopled the walks and entrances. At the Golden Horn he turned into a narrow crosswise passage, moving as straight and purposefully as a prairie locomotive.

He had no settled plans. His arms swung loose, his chest was arched, and his scissoring legs steered a course unbidden. There was a freedom in him, a quick and easy limberness, and he would go where his winds blew. He would take what came, without worrying the consequence.

He reached the waterside clutter, the jumbled housings of the river bank, and yonder was the dog-pit warehouse. In its shadow huddled some slabside shacks, a wired yard, a refuse strew of junk—the Dutchman's layout. A trio of loafers, strangers all, watched Hardesty's approach.

"Where's the Dutchman?"

"You lookin' for some good dogs, mister? I got some beauties here."

"The Dutchman's who I'm after."

"He ain't around right now—can't say when he'll be back. You want to leave some word for him?"

"Why, yes," said Hardesty. "Tell him there's a man in town who's jumpin' him on sight. Tell him there's a man who aims to gouge an eye out of his head and then to break his damned back for him. Tell him that his soul's in hell as soon as I can find him."

The three stood awkwardly, goggling. They saw a big, wild stud of a man who eyed them with a kind of hot anxiety, who

spoke in the hard, flat tones of dooms-day judgment.

"These dogs belong to the Dutchman?" asked Hardesty, after a pause.

"Why—uh—yeah." The spokesman backed a step. "Most of 'em is his. He's breakin' some and treatin' some and a few's been left to sell on shares."

"A man like him," said Hardesty, "ain't fit to touch an animal." There were forty-five dogs in the exercise enclosure, a Noah's ark assortment, and another dozen odd penned in slatted cages near. He strolled to the nearest cage, gave the catch a kick, shooed his arms as a proud-coated sheepdog jumped forth with a snarl and whirled in streaking runaway.

"Hey—here—you can't do that!"

"Who says I can't?" asked Hardesty. "Maybe you're friends of the Dutchman, huh? Maybe you'd like to stop me?"

But they weren't that kind of fools. They stood like sticks and watched him kick the cages open. A storm of howls and barks and yaps raised a shattering din as the brutes in the yard milled and pranced to the outer excitement. They exploded into furor as Hardesty yanked at the entry gate.

"Hyah, yah, yah! Hyah, you huskies! Everybody out!"

He held the gate wide, shouting in a thunder voice, and a multicolor stream of bodies raced for freedom. They scattered wide, and some of them would wag their tails for new masters in the morning. Some of them would travel on, into the wild hills, the rolling tundras, where their savage brothers roamed. A bewildered few would slink back to the yard again, to the last place that fed them, but the Dutchman wouldn't greet them there.

The Dutchman, like his cronies, wasn't any fool. He didn't waste an hour's time, once he heard the news, in making hasty tracks out of the country.

A BIG Canuck, half tipsy, was the first to sing out Hardesty's name. This was near the two-story eminence of the Crown & Colony Bank as Hardesty turned into the street and headed down for Jumbo's.

"Hey! Hey, you—"

The Canuck was a noted musher who hadn't forgotten the times his team had

finished in the stampede ruck of Hardesty's Siberians. He had heard the grogshop recitals of the downfall events—how Hardesty had been exposed as a cardsharp bluff, how pitifully he had knuckled under to the first good fighting man who refused to be awed by his blow-hard reputation, how he either had killed himself in disgrace or was bushed in the trackless muskegs north like a wound-licking lobo—and he had fed on those tales with relish.

Hardesty moved to pass him by, but a hairy Canuck paw reached out.

"Where you goin', hah? By gar, she's Hardesty—Keeng Hardesty!"

Hardesty turned, moving so abruptly that grasping fingers faltered. A long step closed him, face to face, with the bearded musher.

"Don't call me that again," he said. "Hardesty's the name—Jim to my friends and to hell with the rest. You savvy, Whiskers?"

The grimness in the two-tone face, the sting behind the level words, bit through the Canuck's whiskey-haze. "Sure," he mumbled. "*Qui, m'sieu—*"

He backed a clumsy step, another. His heel struck the rise of the walk and he sat down thuddingly. He sat and stared as Hardesty wheeled and marched across for Jumbo's. . . .

The shadows were dim in Jumbo's place. fading daylight dinged the empty tables, the wallside booths, the gambling layouts and dancing space, the narrow back balcony that fronted the private rooms upstairs. Eight or ten figures strung along the bar, and two bartenders to serve them.

"Where's the boss?" asked Hardesty.

A barman jerked a rearward thumb. Many a night King Hardesty had grandly told this man to keep the change, but now he passed unrecognized.

The roulette wheels and the chuckaluck cage and the faro boards were waiting lonely for the lamps to light the evening's harvest. The painted ladies were resting themselves, and only a single table at the back was occupied. Three men sat there, and their listless talk suspended as Hardesty walked up.

"Jumbo's in his office, boys?"

One of the three was a croupier and

his head loomed around suspiciously with the question. The others were hard-face strangers.

"He's busy now," said one of them. "They got the day's receipts to check. Who wants to see 'im?"

"So you're the bodyguards, huh?" said Hardesty. "Well, now! I wonder if you'd be so kind as to tell Mr. Jumbo—"

The croupier gave a squeaky gasp, bending as if to shrink beneath the table. "It's him!" he yelled. "It's Hard—"

Hardesty swatted the side of his head, an effortless left-hand swipe that knocked him sprawling six feet distant. He saved his right for the nearest gunman, springing up, and the steam of it smacked between the eyes with the sound of a pole-ax. A lunge of hip upended the table upon the gun-grabbing third man, pinning him an instant, and that was time enough for Hardesty to capture his hand, wrench the pistol loose, plop the barrel of it above the owner's ear.

Three men limp upon the floor before the barflies knew what the ruckus was. Hardesty turned one forward glance, brandishing the pistol, and then he drove his shoulder at the middle door beyond.

The solid boards seemed to melt with his ramming force. The hinges buckled, the latch screeched, and a splintering sag of wood lurched him into the lighted inner room.

Coins and currency, hide-sacked dust, upon the table there. A tall assistant flinging frightened arms as Hardesty piled in, staggering, and Jumbo Swann diving sidewise for the revolver on his desk. . . . Jumbo's face was frozen twitchless and the best he could yell was a sobbing mew. He clawed the revolver, wheeled with it, blasted out a frantic shot—

But the slug gashed the ceiling. Hardesty's rush swept upon him, a clamp paralyzed his wrist, and suddenly little Jumbo was a shape in the air. Hardesty gave him a giant fling that flopped him against the partition wall, a spread-legged toad, and collapsed him to the flooring.

The assistant squatted pathetically, arms fending his head, and Hardesty's fingers hooked the slack of Jumbo's collar. A warning bullet behind him quelled the curiosity rescue surge of the outer saloon, and then he was unlatching Jumbo's door.

He stepped into the alleyway, dragging Jumbo like a sack, and the sound of his breath was a humming song as he went at a jog for final showdown.

X

THE street had wakened with a gasp. A wildfire whisper ran a hundred tremors forth— "He's back in town—King Hardesty—loaded for bear and hellbent on the rampage!"

Figures popped from the buildings along and an anthill scurry dotted the walks and the roadway. A toneless murmur echoed the canyon murk, and fervid voices began to cry the havoc.

He'd killed the Dutchman, slaughtered his dogs, maimed half a dozen men down at the warehouse! He'd busted in on Jumbo Swann, shot both his bodyguards, and set the place afire! Killed poor Jumbo—murder—fire—call the Vigilantes!

So the tocsin drums were pounding, blubbing the dusk, when Hardesty dragged his grimy load through the narrow back entrance to Shanghai Mike's.

The lamps along the beams were already lighted here, for Shanghai's was the popular resort these days and evenings. They'd stretched the bar another twenty feet, hung the walls with added paintings of plump blond nymphs and raven houris. Frenchy's roulette table drew the busiest trade in town, and the place was usually jammed to see Ripper Stuss display his prize-ring footwork and the famous southpaw crossfire that laid King Hardesty with the daisies.

Hardesty came along a passage lined with whiskey kegs, and his greeting was a tinkle of chords from the blind old man at the piano. The rest of them were crowded forward, drawn by the turmoil of the street. A murmuring huddle of backs confronted him.

He gave Jumbo's collar a terrier shake, then abandoned him to the sawdust. He chose a middle space and cleared it for the action. The first chair he tossed crashed the backbar mirror, and the throng in the doorway turned to see an upheaved table land on a fancy bottle pile. Left hand, right hand, chairs outwhirling, and the tables tumbling with his shoves.

"Stuss—" roared Hardesty. "Step out

and get it, Lop-nose!"

Muddled figures heaved and spread, shrank back and then pushed in again, and Ripper Stuss came wading through with Frenchy at his coattails.

If the sight of Hardesty surprised him he gave no show of it. He was dressed in a dandy's garb, choker collar and silk cravat and a vest to dim the rainbow, but otherwise he was the same grim ghost that had haunted Hardesty's sickly sweating nightmares. Rosebud ears and off-skewed nose and dull eyes expressionless beneath the scar-ridged brows. Sloping shoulders and loose-hung arms and his flat-foot glide advancing.

He muttered chokily, that was all, and yanked his waistcoat open. He shed his garments, flinging them at Frenchy, and stalked for Hardesty with his head turtled into his shoulder-blades and his fists deceptively weaving.

Hardesty stood motionless. His hands were dangling open and he watched the creep of Ripper Stuss with his mouth slightly slanted and one eyebrow cocked, the picture of a man bemused by some strange form of insect. When Ripper's right flicked for his face he waved it aside. He stepped in as he did so, and his belt-line was open target for the dynamite crossfire launching.

HE made no move to avoid the blow. That was his flaunt—to stand the punch deliberately, to cord his muscles and steel himself and take the best that Ripper Stuss could throw.

The shock whammed into him, stinging deep, but this time he was armored for it. This time resistance met it, toil-tough sinews cushioned it, and this time it was Ripper Stuss who recoiled.

He stepped aside, bobbing, and his hard little eyes pinched together, his lip sagged flabbily. Hardesty's grunt of laughter must have been the ugliest sound that Kid the Rip ever heard.

Ripper Stuss had the leads and feints, the ringwise parries and counters, but what were all such artful tricks against an attack that swarmed and smothered them, that battered the defenses with a storm of fists unceasing, that swacked and smashed and hammered defeat into flesh and bone and muscle.

Rush and nail him, swirl and pound him—tempest blow the totter down! Three minutes was the time it lasted, and though Hardesty landed uncounted times the victory was won with three solid larp-ups. The first broke Ripper's forearm, the second unskiltered his jaw, and the third caught him beside the ear with a downing bash that rolled him like a pin-wheel.

He lay on his face at Frenchy's slippers, his legs feebly kicking and shaky hands spread to raise himself. His back humped briefly, and then he went flat.

"Take him, Frenchy," Hardesty said. "Take him and get out of here."

HE glared at the bay of witness faces, challenging, but none of Ripper's friends stepped out to dispute him. The watchers stood uneasily silent, and the chief sound was a growling buzz from the hundreds outside, a mass that jammed the street from walk to walk.

The closer ones saw Hardesty turn then, saw him lift a muddled bundle from the floor. Not until he had perched it on the bar could they recognize the loll-headed shape as Jumbo Swann.

Hardesty held him upright with a grip at the front of his coat, and a couple of neck-snapping shakes opened Jumbo's bulgy eyes. When he saw what had him he gave a groan, and his St. Vitus face, mucked and bloody, was a horrid gargoyle gimble.

"A flip of the coin for you, Jumbo," Hardesty said. "Call it, you scut, and what you stole from me with your cheating cards, with Frenchy's Judas business, is yours to keep. Call the right turn and I'll make your robbery legal. Is that a square shake, Jumbo?"

"No—Leggo me!"

"Call the coin," said Hardesty, "and we'll let the same toss settle the other little debt between us. Win it, Blubber-Face, and I'll not lay a finger on you."

His free hand hooked Jumbo's watch-chain. He twisted free the goldpiece that dangled from it, Jumbo's own token of luck, and a high flip spun it, clattered it to the floor behind them.

"Name it, Jumbo," he said.

The saloonman stared from between his

fingers. He made a glittering sound. "Heads—" he mawked, squeaking shrilly. "No, tails I means! No, no—it's heads, heads, *heads!*" His voice trailed away.

"What does it lay?" called Hardesty to the shuffling, filtering crowd.

"It's tails," said Mary Morrow. . . .

Hardesty's hand gave Jumbo a shove that spilled him behind the bar. He turned slowly, wiping his hands down his shirt, and there she stood with a shotgun held in the crook of her arm.

There she was, looking queerly at him, and now he could see the other armed figures, rifles and pistols showing bold, sprinkled through the throng. They were gray men mostly, storemen and rivermen and such, and none of them a name or face he had counted among his friends.

Yet at Mary Morrow's call, at her beck of need, they'd enlisted in Hardesty's war. They were the unsuspected factor that had policed the streets, patrolled the alleys, mingled with the sidewalk push to hold the Ripper's tillicums in line, to spike the guns of Jumbo's thugs and hirelings.

Mary Morrow held out the coin to him. "Tails," she repeated. "You did it, Hardesty. You've found your luck again."

But he shook his head. "No," he said, "I found I never lost it. It was my biggest stroke of luck that chased me out of here half dead, and set the furies on me. What else but luck made you come along—"

She had long since learned to read his mind, so he swore, and now—like the snap of fingers—he could see what her mind and heart were answering. The tilt of her head and the line of her throat and the quivery little smile of her mouth—Ah! The depths of her eyes looking into his, and the wet of tears could not dim the happiness shining. . . .

"Quick," she said. "Quick, Hardesty—out the back!"

She reached a hand toward him, her sign of trust and loyalty and the countless other wonders that the years would prove, but instead he took her in his arms. He lifted her into his big embrace and carried her as he ran.

He ran until the evening hushed and the town was lost behind them. He ran the roadway of his luck, and she would be the kingdom of it, she would be its glory.

DEAD MEN DON'T DRAW

By Giles A. Lutz

Grimly, Deputy Ben Keiper laid his trap—a two-way death noose for the vacant-eyed giant and the girl with the bushwack guns.



Ben hit the big man over the ear, using all his force.

BEN KEIPER slowly drove his wagon down the shack and tent-lined street. He reached an intersection, where the buildings had a more permanent look, halted his team, and tied down the reins to the brake handle.

He stood up and yelled, "Fancy peaches. Fancy peaches. A dollar a can." A raw-

boned smile went with his words.

Men stopped, listened, then hurried over. Beans and bacon were the monotonous diet of the mining camp, due to the expense and difficulty of freighting in supplies, and any kind of a change was welcome.

A crowd collected around his wagon, and

Ben handed the peaches down, accepting coin and dust in payment.

In the early excitement, no one had looked in the bed of the wagon, but now someone did. "What's that?" the man asked hoarsely.

"Fancy peaches," Ben said soberly. "And a dead man."

They crowded around the wagon, looking over one another's shoulder, stretching to see better. Ben thought gravely, it is funny how something like this draws people. They are as bad as flies when it comes to blood.

"Shot clear through the head," he heard a man say. He did not look around. From temple to temple he could have added, and little lines of tension thinned his lips.

Someone yelled, "Here comes Sheriff Brady," and a lane opened up through the crowd.

"What's this?" Brady asked, as he stopped at the wagon's side.

Ben looked at him slowly. "A dead man," he drawled. He saw the flush of exasperation touch Brady's cheeks, saw the bright touch of anger in his eyes.

"It's Ollie Dodson, Sheriff," someone said.

"I can see that," Brady said testily. His words were really in answer to Ben's statement. He was a small man with harassed eyes, a scraggly mustache and a soft, round face.

A little man for a big job, Ben thought, and waited.

"Where'd you find him?" Brady asked sharply.

"In his cabin. Lying on the floor." Ben shifted his weight on the wagon seat as he reached for the makings. He was tall and lean with a square homeliness about his face that was somehow appealing. Now, his eyes were carefully blank as he put his attention on the cigarette he was building.

His seeming indifference irritated Brady. "Go on, go on," he said impatiently.

Ben cast him a surprised look. "That's all. He was dead when I got there. I brought him on to town."

"Why did you stop at his cabin?"

"I was thirsty," Ben said mildly. "And my horses needed water."

"You can't see his cabin from the road. And there are other cabins in sight of it. Why did you pick Ollie Dodson's cabin?"

Ben felt the hostility spread through the crowd as Brady scored his point. He looked at Brady with new interest. Perhaps the little man wasn't as dull as he seemed.

"Did you kill him?" Brady demanded point-blank.

Ben pondered the question several moments. "Why, no," he said, and his voice was still mild. "I didn't. I don't even pack a gun."

"You could have thrown it away."

Anger came into Ben's face, swift and violent. Brady recoiled a little before the blazing eyes. "I brought him in, didn't I?" Ben demanded. "Would I have done that, if I killed him? Are you holding me for the killing?"

The directness of his words confused Brady, and Ben thought again, a little man, not knowing what to do when a situation gets away from him.

"No," Brady muttered. "Not for the present." He looked up belligerently into Ben's eyes. "But don't try to leave town. I'm not satisfied with this."

"I'LL BE around," Ben said, and stood up in the wagon. He wasn't satisfied with this, either, and a helpless fury built up within him. He started to climb down from the wagon, then stopped and stared.

He saw the girl first, standing at the fringe of the crowd. Her hair was red-gold, and the high-lights sparkled and danced in it. He thought her eyes were green, but at this distance he could not be sure. Her features were perfectly chisled—like marble, he thought suddenly, and with no more warmth than the stone itself. He looked again at her eyes and saw the hardness there, perhaps even a little cruelty.

She did not take her eyes from his stare, but gazed steadily back at him, and it was Ben who looked away first. He picked up his war-bag, climbed down from the wagon and walked through the crowd, passing with a few feet of the girl. He looked at her again and decided her eyes were a green-gray. He saw bitterness in them and a malevolence directed at him.

Ben stared until the big man standing beside her took an angry step forward. The girl checked him with a little move of her hand. Ben's eyes went up the full length of the man. He towered a head

above anyone in the crowd. His shoulders were broad enough to fill a door, and huge hands dangled at the ends of long, powerful arms. The man's face was slow and stupid, and the eyes were dull.

Ben thought, there's nothing inside directing him but animal feeling, but with that much size and strength the man could still be a terrible power.

Ben looked at the girl again, and grinned as he saw the angry coloring in her cheeks. He went down the street, grinning, but inside he was sober enough. He had left several dozen cans of peaches in his wagon, and he supposed when he returned they would be gone. Not that he gave a damn, and he grimaced. Ben Keiper selling fancy peaches. How they would chortle back home, if they heard that one.

The letter from Ollie Dodson rustled a little in his shirt pocket as he walked. He walked on down the street and registered at a hotel. Its accommodations were poor and crude, for this was a new town with no time to grow slowly and properly.

He went up to his room and sat down on the hard mattress and creaky springs. From the very start this trip had been a bad idea. And now Ollie was dead.

He pulled the letter out of his shirt pocket and read it over again slowly. These were written words, not having the use of tonal inflections, but they still told of Ollie's fears and dreams.

Dear Ben, the letter said, I finally struck a pocket. And I think they know it. I feel they are watching everything I do. Will you come up here awhile and help me get the stuff out? Don't come as the man who broke up the Bannock gang. I'd suggest coming as a trader or something. I'm only thinking of Sarah, Ben. If I can get this out, it'll make up to her for the lonesome years.

Ben sat drawing the sheet of paper through his fingers. He had shown the letter to his sister, and she had insisted on his following Ollie's request. Ben had gotten permission from the sheriff, put away his deputy star and driven up here. Ollie was all right, except he had the gold fever. And now Sarah's waiting was over.

"I didn't get here in time, Ben said

aloud. "Sarah, I guess I'd better stay and finish the job."

He started to put the letter back in his pocket, then on sudden impulse thrust it under the mattress. He opened his war-bag, pulled out a coat, and the weight in the pocket was comforting. He rolled up his coat, put it under his arm, and went down to the street.

HE WALKED along, noticing the bustling activity of this town. It was new and growing tremendously, but it was built on gold and he knew it would not last. He had seen too many sad, deserted towns after the gold was gone, their streets and buildings still seeming to re-echo hollowly to the tread of long-gone feet.

He suddenly remembered the team and wagon he had left standing in the street and hurried on. That team needed feed and stabling, and he swore at himself for almost forgetting them. He was a horse-man, not a teamster, he told himself, but he couldn't make the excuse stick.

As he went down the street at a rapid pace, the lights of the town were beginning to come on, making feeble thrusts at the encroaching darkness. Miners were swarming into the saloons and dance-halls, seeking diversion and revelry after long, hard hours over a pan or sluice box.

His team and wagon were still standing where he had left them. The intersection was quiet and deserted now, the miners drawn to a gayer section of town. He looked in the wagon bed, and the peaches were gone. He grinned and said to himself, "That cuts your profits. You'd make a fine trader."

He put his rolled-up coat on the wagon seat and started to climb up onto it. A hard hand clamped on his shoulder and pulled him back to the ground.

He whirled, trying to wriggle out of the grip, but it was like trying to shake off the grip of a bear trap.

"Search him, Tiny," he heard a girl's voice say.

Ben recognized the girl and the huge man he had seen on the fringe of the crowd when he stopped his wagon. His anger at the manhandling came swift and hard, and even the size of the man didn't deter him. He slugged his fist upward into

Tiny's face, getting his shoulder and weight behind it.

Tiny took the blow, grunted, and cuffed Ben across the head. The blow rattled Ben's teeth. His eyes filled with tears, and his head swam.

Tiny cuffed him again, and the girl said, "That's enough, Tiny." Her tone was clipped and hard.

"Are you satisfied now?" she asked.

Ben subsided then, feeling Tiny's hand go through his pockets. He heard Tiny's hoarse ejaculation as he found Ollie's big, old-fashioned watch. Ben had taken that to bring back to Sarah.

Tiny let go of him and handed the watch to the girl. Ben staggered back against the wagon. He heard her quick inrush of breath as she bent her head to look at the watch. He reached up, felt the roll of his coat, fumbled in it swiftly, and the gun was in his hand.

"What else did you find, you..." She faced Ben, and her fury was a little shocking.

Tiny's head was swinging around, following her movements, when Ben struck with the pistol barrel. He hit the big man over the ear, using all his force, and he did not worry about breaking the man's skull. Tiny's cry was animal-like in pain. He lurched backward, his hands half raised, then he fell on his face.

"Next time," Ben said savagely, "keep him close-reined, or I'll kill him."

She was still holding the watch, and he reached out and jerked it from her hand. Her cold, hard mask was back in place, only her eyes showing anger. She said levelly, "This is not finished."

"No," Ben agreed, and he felt a queer regret that he and girl were on opposite sides.

TINY stirred and groaned, and the girl bent swiftly to help him. Ben caught a glimpse of her face, and he thought he saw compassion for the big man there.

He drove the team and wagon to the livery stable, his head still ringing from Tiny's blows. A hard, dangerous pair, those two, and he wondered what their interest in Ollie Dodson was. He remembered how Ollie's cabin had been torn up, as though impatient hands had been searching for something. But the watch had still

been on Ollie's person. Whoever searched the cabin wasn't interested in something as small as a watch.

It could be the girl and Tiny who had killed Ollie, then failed to find what they were seeking. Else why would they stop Ben on the street and search him? His lips thinned into a cruel line. If the girl had a hand in Ollie's death, Ben would hold her as responsible as any man.

He left the livery stable, and once or twice, he had the impression he was being followed. He looked back, and not seeing anyone, said aloud, "Nerves. The big gent has me jumpy."

He would not want to face Tiny unarmed again. Tiny had the vitality of an ox. An ordinary man would have been lucky to ever have recovered from that pistoling, and Tiny had come to in the space of seconds.

Ben walked into a saloon and ordered a drink. He stood toying with his glass, his mind busy with his thoughts. He could not get the picture of the girl out of his mind. He wondered what she would be like if she smiled. That one, he thought grimly, didn't have a smile in her.

A hand touched him on the shoulder, and Ben whirled. He faced a smiling man and felt a little anger and chagrin. He was jumpy tonight.

"I'd like to talk to you," the man said. "I'm Jack Leonard. I own this lay-out." He waved a hand about the saloon. "Come into my office where we can be alone."

Ben hesitated, and Leonard said softly, "I saw that little encounter down the street."

Ben's face hardened. So he hadn't been wrong about feeling someone was following him.

Leonard saw his frown and said, "I had a run-in with Tiny once. I didn't come out as well as you did. I didn't have a gun. I was afraid to say anything to you until you came in here. You had a gun, and you were edgy."

Ben found himself nodding. Leonard's words made sense. Ben knew he would have reacted violently to anyone stopping him on the street after that meeting with Tiny.

Leonard turned away, and Ben followed him. It seemed there were a great many people interested in Ben's doings.

Leonard shut the office door and motioned to a chair. He offered Ben a cigar, shrugged when Ben refused, and set the box back on the desk.

"You're wondering about my interest in you," he said.

"Yes," Ben said flatly.

"Ollie Dodson was reported to have struck it rich," Leonard said slowly, watching Ben's reaction. "And you bring him in dead."

Ben tensed in his chair. "Meaning what?"

Leonard said hastily, "I think it happened just as you told Brady."

Ben's eyes never left Leonard's face. So Leonard had been in that crowd and heard Brady questioning him about Ollie's murder. "Go on," he said harshly.

"There have been too many miners killed in this town," Leonard continued. "Brady is a little man with an inability to do anything about it. I'm interested in a safe town for the miners. I get my money out of my saloon. But as long as a miner is not safe— You can see where that leaves me." He smiled, and it had a frank, wide-open quality about it.

Ben said flatly, "I'm not getting the drift of this."

Leonard leaned forward. "Delia Sherman and Tiny had a great deal of interest in Ollie Dodson's affairs. You were stopped by them because of your bringing him in. I saw you handle Tiny. You're the only man in town who wouldn't be afraid to go against him."

The compliment wasn't true. Ben could have walked down the street and found a half dozen men who wouldn't be afraid of Tiny. Leonard was buttering him, and Ben knew it. Still, he rather liked the taste. The girl's name was Delia Sherman. Leonard was putting out a great deal of information. Ben felt an inner voice cautioning him. Leonard must dislike Tiny and the girl intensely. He was sicing Ben onto them. Ben said:

"I'm still in the dark."

LEONARD said slowly, "Road-agents have stopped the last three shipments of gold out of here. Somebody is tipping them off when shipments are expected. Delia owns a saloon and dance-hall next door to the express agency.

A sardonic grin touched Ben's lips.

Leonard saw it and shook his head quickly. He said with a certain amount of dignity,

"I'm not afraid of the competition. But I don't like the way she treats the miners. And her place is next door to the express agency. Information is leaking out somehow."

Ben put his feet under him. "Thanks for the talk. I still don't see where I fit in."

Leonard followed him across the room. "Ollie was a good friend," he said gravely. "And I think you have more interest in him than you've shown. If you have any plans, talk them over with me."

Ben didn't miss the note of urgency in Leonard's voice. He nodded and walked out of the room. Every word Leonard had uttered seemed above board, yet Ben found himself trying to analyze Leonard's motives. He growled to himself,

"I'm in the wrong kind of business. I'm getting suspicious of everyone."

He had spotted the express agency earlier in the afternoon, and now he walked down the street toward it. He passed the darkened, silent building. He passed the lighted saloon, with its big sign, *Delia's*. He stopped and looked back at the two buildings, one dark, one light. Knowing when a miner had gold ready for shipment would be of prime importance to someone interested in stealing it.

He retraced his steps suddenly and started to push through the swinging doors. He told himself he was going in here because of Leonard's words, that here might be the starting point in digging out Ollie's murderer. But there was something else, he reluctantly admitted. A curiosity, an attraction that was almost as powerful as the other reason.

The swinging doors flew open almost in his face. A man's body came flying out through them, and Ben got out of the way just in time. The man lit heavily in the street, lay there stunned a moment, then broke into savage swearing.

Tiny came through the doors, and the man quit swearing hastily. He got to his feet and staggered up the street.

Ben grimaced. That was a big man, and Tiny had bounced him with ease.

Tiny saw Ben and scowled. He took a step toward him, then Delia came up hur-

riedly and put a restraining hand on his arm.

Ben said, "You play rough here."

Her eyes were cool and appraising. Ben thought some of the hostility was gone from them, but he couldn't be sure of anything he read in those veiled eyes.

She said, "Yes. Tiny threw him out when he forgot his manners."

Ben grinned. "Is that a warning?"

Her eyes swept over him without expression. She turned away without speaking.

Ben said, "Wait a minute. I want to talk to..." and started after her.

Tiny stepped in front of him and growled.

Ben said hastily, "I'm not following her. Is it all right if I get a drink?"

TINY stepped out of the way, and Ben walked up to the bar, and ordered his drink. His eyes widened a little at the price. Delia was charging everything the trade would bear. The liquor was good, the music wasn't bad, and the miners must have put those two facts against the high prices and liked it. The place was well-filled.

Delia constantly watched the miners as they danced with the girls. Her face was cold and alert, and the miners seemed in awe of her. Twice in the space of an hour miners grew too boisterous, and at a sign from Delia, Tiny threw them out.

Leonard had objected to Delia's treatment of miners. Ben could see nothing wrong with it. She only acted when a man got out of line.

His face was admiring as he watched her. It was odd to see a girl in so complete control of hard, unrestricted men. Tiny was better than a right hand, he was a huge club, which she used mercilessly. She could be behind the stealing and the killing, Ben thought. She is hard and ruthless enough. He turned to go and almost tripped over a broom a bleary-eyed, shabby individual was wielding. The swamper ducked his head, mumbled an apology, and hurried away.

Ben shuddered a little as he watched the man scurry through the crowd. Once, that swamper had been a man, with a man's hopes and dreams. Now, he was taking orders from a woman, living on the piti-

ful sums he could eke out with a broom. A thought struck Ben, and his eyes narrowed. Swampers usually worked in the mornings before the place was opened. It was unusual to see them plying their trade when the place was crowded. A swamper could pick up a lot of talk from drunken miners.

Ben turned at the door, his eyes going to Delia. She was watching him, her stare unwavering out of that cold, hard mask of her face.

He looked at her a long moment, then walked out of the place. As much as he hated to admit it, Leonard's words seemed to fit, and Ben felt a deep and heavy regret. He had never met a woman who could stir his senses as this one did. There were hidden fires in her, deep and unrevealed shadings of character that caught at his breath. He thought of Ollie and his waiting sister.

"If she is in it—" he said savagely and crushed his hand into a tight, hard ball.

He walked back to his hotel and up the steps to his room. He stepped inside and cast a startled look about him. Someone had searched his room. It had been deft, careful work, for the room was still orderly, but he noticed little things. His war-bag was not exactly in the position he had left it, and an extra pair of boots had been moved. He flipped back the mattress and Ollie's letter was still there. The page was unfolded now, and Ben could have sworn he had folded it before he thrust it under the mattress.

He suddenly crumpled the letter, then touched a match to it. He should have done that at first, but he had kept it with a thought it might come in handy later on to prove his connection with Ollie. A cold hand touched him. The person who had killed Ollie wouldn't hesitate to kill again if they thought Ben menaced them. And he didn't know from what direction danger might come.

He strapped on his gun and went out onto the street. He asked directions and found the sheriff's office. Brady looked up as he entered.

He saw the gun, and his eyes narrowed. "You're the gent who didn't pack a gun," he said sourly.

"I was," Ben corrected. "Some things have happened that made me change my

mind. Do you still think I had a hand in Ollie's murder?"

"Just interested in it," Brady said. He opened his desk drawer, picked a letter out of it, and shoved it across the desk to Ben.

BEN READ rapidly. It was from his boss, Sheriff Dunleavy, and it advised Brady that Ben was on his way. *Give him all the help you can, the letter said. He's a hot-head and liable to rush into trouble. I'm kinda fond of him and want him back.*

Ben swore and handed the letter back. "Then all that talk at the wagon . . ."

Brady said, "I didn't want to tip your hand. I recognized you from this letter. If the guilty party was listening, I wanted them to think you were under suspicion."

Ben looked at him with new respect in his eyes. Brady was a harassed little man, but he had a thinking head under that hat.

"Have you any ideas?" he asked softly.

Brady wearily shook his head. "None. There's been several of these kind of murders. I don't know where to turn."

Ben felt a kindred sympathy for this little man. He knew the box canyons a man could sometimes ride into. He asked, "What do you know about Leonard?"

"Nothing more than he seems," Brady said.

"Delia Sherman and Tiny?"

Brady shook his head again. "Nothing other than there's bad feeling between them and Leonard. I don't know the cause. Tiny did beat up Leonard. Delia's mother started that place a couple of years ago. When she died, Delia took over. She's hard, but she seems to run a fair place." He finished glumly, "So does Leonard."

"Then you don't think either of them . . ." Ben was disappointed. Both parties had shown a great deal of interest in his connection with Ollie.

"Hell," Brady burst forth savagely, "It could be anyone. It could be you—or even me."

Ben said, "I think I can eliminate you and me. I'll see you, Brady," and walked out of the office. He was convinced Brady was honest. If he wasn't, he could have acted on Dunleavy's letter without Ben ever being the wiser.

He slept restlessly and awakened in the morning, slow of mind. The more he

thought about this, the more confused he became. He ate a scanty breakfast and walked down to the express office.

He shook his head at the clerk behind the counter, meaning he wanted nothing, and leaned against a wall. He watched miners come and go, watched them deposit their gold for safe-keeping, for sending out on the next shipment. He saw how easy it would be for a man to hang around this office and learn a great deal.

Delia's swamper came shuffling in, and Ben started. The man cast a covert glance at Ben, then went about his work of sweeping out the express office. He worked listlessly, and it took him a considerable amount of time to finish his job.

He finally finished and shuffled out. Ben walked up to the clerk and casually asked, "Does he clean up in here every morning?"

He saw the none-of-your-business frostiness in the clerk's eyes and for a moment thought the man was going to refuse the information.

"Yes," the clerk finally said. He didn't like this stranger hanging around his office, and it showed plainly on his face.

Ben thanked him and walked out of the office. The last piece of the puzzle had fallen into place. The swamper could hear and bring Delia interesting bits of information. Ben remembered her words when Tiny found Ollie's watch. His heart was a little sick as he grimly admitted,

"She's the one. She and Tiny tore up Ollie's cabin trying to find his cache and didn't. She was afraid I had it, and was trying to find out."

He turned a corner. Delia's swamper was a few rods down the street talking earnestly to Leonard. Leonard placed a hand on the swamper's shoulder, pulled something out of his pocket, handed it to the man, then came down the street to meet Ben.

His voice was filled with indignation. "Delia won't pay him enough to live on. If some of us didn't help him . . ." He shook his head.

"I've offered him a job. But he's loyal, or afraid." He shrugged, as if trying to slip the matter from his shoulders. "I'll buy a drink."

"Later," Ben said, and went on down the street. Maybe the swamper let everyone think he was afraid of Delia. It was a

good cloak under which to work.

BEN'S jaw set grimly. He was convinced, but he couldn't walk in and accuse Delia and Tiny; he knew how little it would stick without proof. They had to be smoked out some way, had to be forced into a move that would condemn them.

He went to the livery stable and got his team and wagon. He drove out of town slowly, and he had the feeling interested eyes were watching him. He drove to Ollie's cabin and spent the afternoon and night. And all the time he was there, his skin felt like something cold and clammy was crawling over it.

He half expected to hear the crashing report of a rifle, to feel the ripping, tearing hurt of the bullet. He was sweating with relief when the long night was finally over. He hitched up his team the following morning and drove back to town.

He took the gold-dust he had gotten from the sale of his fancy peaches and poured it into a buckskin bag. He hefted the bag, and he thought it would be enough. He needed a considerable amount to make a display. A man who had suddenly found a cache of gold would have a great deal to throw around.

By mid-afternoon Ben was very drunk. He lolled against the bar in Delia's saloon buying drinks for the house. "Plenty more where this came from," he kept saying, his eyes rolling owlshly. He was causing quite a sensation in the room. He could see men whispering together, their eyes on him. He thought he caught a startled flash in Delia's eyes, but he couldn't be sure. He couldn't be sure of ever reading emotion on her face. He hated her with a fierce intensity, and the necessity of hating her carried a bitter hurt.

He spent a couple of hours in the place, buying drinks repeatedly. Anyone who saw him should know here was a man who had suddenly struck it rich. He reeled toward the door and fell over the swamper's broom. He cursed the man and staggered out. He went down the street with an unsteady pace, got his team and wagon from the livery stable, and drove out of town.

When he passed the outskirts, his drunkenness slipped from him. He said aloud, "Ollie, I think they'll come out of their hole now."

He drove out to Ollie's cabin, unhitched and fed his team. By the time he fixed and ate supper it was almost dark. He took an old coat and hat, wrapped a blanket around a stick, stuffed it inside the coat and hat and propped the dummy up on a chair. He set the lamp behind the figure and slipped out of the cabin.

The stream cut off one approach to the cabin, a low hill dominated another. Ben thought a moment. If he were going to bushwack a man in the cabin, he would pick the hill. He moved to it, looked down at the cabin, and the silhouetted figure stood out distinctly. It looked like a man sitting at the table, and Ben hoped it would bring the results he wanted.

He waited an hour, and the time dragged interminably. He changed his position, moving silently. He thought he saw someone ahead of him and stiffened. Then he saw the darker blob move, and he was sure. He crept up on the figure. Its attention was riveted on the lighted window. He reached out, and even before his fingers seized the soft slowness of her, he knew who it was.

He had been hoping against hope he was wrong about Delia, but she was here. His ruse had drawn her out, and his fury rose strong and unbridled. He hated her because of what she had done to Ollie and because of the hurt she had given his own heart.

He heard her startled gasp and said savagely, "You had to come back. You thought I'd found Ollie's cache."

He shook her roughly, not wanting to hear her voice. For there was nothing she could say that would change things.

She managed, "But I didn't . . ." then a cruel weight fell on Ben's head, blotting out the rest of her words.

OPENING his eyes was like swimming against a dark tide, and the effort sent stabbing pain through his throbbing head. He closed his eyes tightly, waiting for the pain to subside. He had been a damn fool; he had forgotten about Tiny. And wherever Delia was, he knew he could expect to find the big man.

He opened his eyes again, looked up, and in the dim light, he could see Delia's face bending over his. She was holding his head in her lap, and the wonder of it made him forget his pulsing head.

"For awhile I thought Tiny had hit you

too hard." Her voice was queer and jerky, and he thought he saw moisture glistening on her cheeks. That couldn't be right. That would mean she had been crying, crying over him. Delia wouldn't cry over anyone. She didn't have a soft spot in her.

"You fool," she said, and her voice was still choked. "I knew what you were doing when you made a display of that dust this afternoon. Tiny and I came out here to help you. When Tiny saw you grab me, he hit you. Tiny doesn't think very well. He just goes mad if he thinks I'm harmed."

Ben sat up, and his suspicions came back sharply. His voice was harsh as he said, "Are you sure it wasn't Ollie's cache drawing you here?"

Her face froze at the suspicion in his tone. She said scornfully,

"Ollie told me where I could find his cache, if anything happened to him. I came out here the night you brought Ollie in. I found his cache then."

The bald admission of it shook Ben. He said hoarsely, "That belongs to my . . ."

"Sister," Delia finished. "I searched your room before I came out here. I found Ollie's letter. Until then, I thought you might have killed him and found his gold."

He stared at her in wonder. She was a capable and daring woman.

The hardness was back in her voice. "Ollie and Tiny are the only two men I have ever trusted. My father deserted my mother. She taught me to treat men hard and get everything I could out of them. Tiny had always looked after her. After she died, he transferred his affection to me.

"Ollie saved my place about a year ago. A fire burned me out, and he lent me money to get started again. He never asked anything in return. He used to sit and talk long hours about his wife. I was holding his gold until I could send it safely out to her." Her voice was emotionless as she finished.

Ben's face was stricken as he stood up. He could understand a lot of things now. He said, "Delia, couldn't we take the gold to Sarah? Ollie would like that. This business is no place for you. You'll love my country. You'll . . ." He reached for her, and she said in low, vibrant tones, "Don't touch me."

Tiny growled at him, and Ben hastily dropped his arms.

Ben said, "Delia, I've been a fool about a lot of things. Leonard told me . . ."

"Leonard," she said in that flat voice, "tried to make advances. Tiny didn't like it any better than I did."

Ben started to say something, and a flat, booming report ripped through the night. He threw Delia to the ground and dropped beside her. He had been careless and unwise. He had been so sure it was Delia and Tiny that he had figured on no other parties being involved. Now, that party was shooting at them.

He heard another shot, saw the streak of orange flame lance through the night. The bushwacker wasn't shooting at them; he was shooting at the cabin. Ben saw the stuffed figure slowly topple.

DELIA started to move, and Ben put a hand on her arm. "Wait," he said softly. "He'll sit a spell waiting to see what happens. When he moves in on the cabin, I'll go in after him."

"No," she said, and the emotion in her tone left a queer hollow place inside him. "Let Tiny."

He said gravely, "It's my job, Delia. I couldn't give it to another man." He reached out and found her hand. He remembered her tear-streaked face when she thought Tiny had hit him too hard, and now there was concern in her voice.

"Delia," he asked, "Have you found another man you can trust?"

Her voice was ragged. "I'm all mixed up. Sometimes I wish I had never seen you."

He saw two figures slip around the corner of the cabin. He had to follow them quickly, for the moment they saw that dummy they would be alerted. He had figured on Delia and Tiny. He still had only two to handle.

He started to move off, and she said, "Ben."

He caught the fear and longing in her voice. "I'll be back, Delia," he said, and went down the hill.

The two figures had stepped inside the cabin, and Ben moved rapidly. He wanted to capitalize on that moment of surprise when they found they had blasted a dummy.

He ducked under the lighted window, then he was in the doorway, gun in hand. Leonard and Brady were bending over the dummy, cursing viciously.

The shock of seeing Brady here hit Ben hard. He had been wrong about everyone.

"Leonard, Brady," he snapped. "Don't turn around."

He saw Leonard and Brady stiffen, saw that preliminary tensing that indicated the coming of violent action. "Hold it," he warned.

They eased a little, and Leonard said, "Keiper, we came out here thinking you might need help. We were afraid . . ."

"So afraid you pumped in rifle shots through a lighted window," Ben jeered. "You almost sold me, Leonard. I thought the swamper was working for Delia. Even after I saw you talking to him, I couldn't put it together. Maybe things were getting too warm, and you figured it would be wise to let someone else take the blame. Brady told you about the letter from Dunleavy."

Ben stopped a moment. He thought sourly, Dunleavy and his habit of writing letters.

"You knew I was looking for Ollie's killer. You hated Delia because she would have nothing to do with you. If you could make me think she did it, you'd gain all around. You killed Ollie, after you learned he had hid it, but you didn't find his cache. Then when I showed that gold this afternoon, you thought I had found it. So you came out here tonight to take it away from me."

"Jack," Brady cried hoarsely, and the two acted together.

They were fast and good. Even with the warning cry, Ben had his hands full. He snapped a shot at Brady as he whirled, saw him stagger but still stay on his feet. He threw another shot, heard Brady's

hoarse cough, and still he didn't go down. The cabin reverberated with the roaring guns and powder smoke filled the air with acrid fumes. A slug whistled by his cheek. Another one ticked his shoulder, dragging a fiery burn across it. He shot again, and Brady buckled at the knees. He took a lurching step, his gun dropped from his loosening hand, and he fell.

Ben whipped his attention to Leonard. He saw the mask of hate on Leonard's face, saw the tongue of flame from Leonard's gun reach out for him. Something heavy slammed into his hip, digging a bloody furrow. He staggered under the impact, steadied himself, and pulled the trigger. A hole appeared in Leonard's throat and spurted red. Leonard dropped his gun, half raised his hands to the hurt, spun in a tight little circle, then fell on his face. His scream as he fell was suddenly cut off.

BEN leaned against the wall, spent and dizzy. He examined his hip dully and saw that Leonard's bullet had hit his cartridge belt, tearing away a few shells, forcing another into his hip. Leonard had almost won this fight. Ben trembled as he thought of what that shot would have done an inch or two to the right.

He remembered Delia would be waiting in fear and walked unsteadily to the door.

"Delia," he called into the night. "It's me. Ben."

This mess was cleaned up. Only the swamper was left, and he wouldn't be much to handle. He started up the hill, and he was grinning. Dunleavy wasn't going to like this. For Ben was staying here awhile. How much longer he didn't know. It depended on how long it took Delia to trust another man.

He had a feeling it wouldn't take too long.



THE FORGOTTEN OF ALLAH

By Dan Cushman

The ways of fate are devious in Africa's vast, mysterious land. Sometimes, as Kellar learned at Tahoula, it is easier to escape three deaths than one.

THE WHITE MAN had come far. He wore a sun helmet of a type sold by the Belge Nationale, although this was north Congo, and French. His blouse and shorts had been frayed by thorns. His baggage, stamped with the name "D. Kellar," and carried on the heads of two native porters, showed splotches of caked mud, although here it had long been dry season, and even the swamps of Zengala had hardened so the camel caravans could cross from Lake Tchad and the Sultinate of Wadeti.

He was thirty-five, somewhat over average height. Hard-eyed, mahogany-skinned, tired.

He paused at a crest where the waxy leaves of wild coffee shook in the wind, and by habit hitched the shoulder holster where his American made .38 calibre revolver rode. Down below, an area of yellow-cured sudan grass stretched away for many miles. Trails, like winding lines, passed through it. In the distance he could see the toadstool thatch roofs of a native village, the skin huts of a hill tribesmen's encampment, the rectangle of a French military compound.

The man's eyes were habitually cynical and distrustful, but today there was satisfaction riding in them, too, for at last, after many days, his goal was in sight.

"Is it here, *bwana* Kellar?" asked the taller of the porters.





Bahkee lunged with the short sword. Kellar leaped aside, pistol swinging.

Kellar nodded. "Yes—that is Tahoula."

It had been many years since Kellar had visited Tahoula, but apparently nothing had changed. He saw the same mud-brick and bamboo government buildings in need of whitewash, the same crumbling compound walls, and apparently the same tri-color flapping in shreds from the flagpole. The only additions were those hundred-odd moveable skin huts of the wild hill tribesmen which formed a semi-circle just beyond rifle range of the compound.

The porter, Motala, lowered the bundle from his head and spoke in a Bantu tongue,

"Is it true, *bwana*, that one white man will sometimes sit in judgment on another white man?"

"It is true."

"And that sometimes the one white man puts a rope around the other white man's neck and strangles him, all the while reading from the black book of the missionaries?"

"The rope is only for the English. These French shoot at sunrise."

Motala waited for his *bwana* to go on and say something about Nick Tragaskas, now that the subject was on executions, but Kellar merely stared at the buildings of the post with hard, expressionless eyes.

Eight days had passed since Kellar heard that Tragaskas was being held here, convicted of murder, sentenced to die. He knew nothing more than that. Nothing of his guilt, nothing of the circumstances of his trial, nor the day of his execution.

But Nick Tragaskas had saved Kellar's life once down in Uganda. Guilty or innocent, Kellar must do what he could. A debt was a debt.

"Maybe they shoot him already," said Motala. "And what then?"

Kellar shrugged, wondering if the black man expected him to bring Tragaskas to life through some white man's voodoo.

He signaled with his fly-switch and led the way through sudan grass coming to his shoulders. Hill tribesmen, Madiguris, judging by the tribal welts covering their high-boned faces, gathered on both sides of the footpath, staring truculently. They carried assagais, bows and arrows, rifles, but none of them made a move to attack. He wondered why they were here rather than hunting heads from their favorite

retreats hidden far to the north.

THE IRONWOOD gate of the compound was closed, and two Senegalese colonial troopers stood guard with oil plugs removed from their Lebel's, ready to shoot.

Kellar paused outside and shouted up at the Senegalese a couple of times before one of them came down to unbar the gate. A negro noncom wearing white shorts and puttees but no shoes came from a barracks building. He drew his bare heels together when he saw that Kellar was a white man.

"I'm looking for Nick Tragaskas. Is he still alive?"

"Today he is alive," answered the noncom with a twist of his strong lips.

Kellar breathed deeply, but none of the relief which flooded through him showed on his face. He asked,

"When is he to die?"

"Perhaps tonight. Perhaps tomorrow, Or next week."

"They haven't set the hour of his execution?"

"*Monsieur* does not know? Tragaskas will die of the blackwater fever,"

"He is sick?"

"For these four weeks, *Monsieur*. Otherwise he would already have faced the firing squad."

"Who is your commandant?"

"The administrator is *Monsieur Tonneau*."

"Paul Tonneau?"

"Yes."

"Where will I find him?"

"*Monsieur*-the-Administrator is at siesta—but you have every citizen's right to ask for him at the palace."

Kellar crossed the baked yard of the compound and climbed three steps to the long, low-roofed verandah of the Administrator's "palace."

He looked around. The verandah was deserted. An okume table with bamboo legs stood at one side, cluttered with empty cognac glasses. Beyond it was a semi-circle of red-brindle blankets of the kind imported by Arab traders from Dar es Salaam. The blankets had been soaked and hung there to catch the fine, cutting sand carried by the harmattan wind that forever blew during that season. But the

moisture was nearly gone from them now, and by that Kellar guessed the administrator had been at siesta for an hour or more.

"Boy!" he cried sharply through the insect-net door.

He waited. After two or three minutes there was a reluctant thud of naked feet on woven palm mattings, and a flat-headed boy of one of the Ubangi tribes came blinking the fog of siesta from his eyes.

"Tell Tonneau that Dave Kellar wants to speak to him."

The houseboy seemed reluctant to either obey or refuse. Finally he bowed after the solemn Moslem manner, and disappeared into the shady interior of the building. He was gone a considerable time, then he came out carrying a bottle of cognac and a freshly polished glass.

"Monsieur Administrator, he send," the boy said, bowing.

"Is he coming?"

"Soon."

Kellar waited the better part of an hour. He decided the boy had brought him the cognac merely to stall him. No doubt it was Tonneau's regular habit with visitors. These jungle administrators were all alike—no treasure as dear to them as siesta.

The boy came, removed the blankets one by one, dipped them in water from the wells, and hung them again. Their evaporation took some of the blister away from the sand-filled trade winds that rolled down across sudan and jungle from the illimitable Sahara.

At last the insect-proof door scraped open, and Tonneau appeared.

They had known each other long ago at Brazzaville. Tonneau a man of medium height, bony and beaked like a vulture, walked with a quiet slap-slap of his rope-soled shoes, and extended a hand burned black as an Arab's.

"Kellar! My friend. I had heard you were coming."

"You have good ears."

"Ha! We French learn some of the native's tricks given time enough. The talking drums told us when you forded the 'Teke, and again when you stopped at Azande village."

He seated himself in one of the reed chairs and poured himself a drink.

"You have come to see Tragaskas?"

"Yes."

"Poor Nick! He is about done for. The blackwater."

"And if not that — then the firing squad?"

TONNEAU nodded, and his long Adam's apple rolled grotesquely as he gulped cognac. He lowered the glass and wiped his lips with the back of his skinny hand without taking his eyes off Kellar's face,

"You understand, my friend, the firing squad was not of my choosing. I am bound by regulations, not friendship. In this case the fever was a blessing. But so slow. So very slow! Those hill tribesmen—the Madiguri. You saw them. They've hated Tragaskas since the *compagnie* sent him on a private war against them to keep the trade lanes open. Now they have come down to see him shot. And each day they grow a trifle bolder, a trifle more demanding. That is why you found the gate of the compound closed."

"What was the accusation against Tragaskas?"

"Accusation? There was none. It was a confession—so you see my helplessness. Knew he was dying of the blackwater, poor devil, and wanted to go over the sands with the best conscience he could. He confessed to murdering Jean Grandin, the trader."

"Grandin who used to be with the *societe*?"

"The same."

Grandin had been a decent fellow. Honest, slow to anger. What circumstances could bring Nick Tragaskas to murder a man like Grandin, Kellar could not imagine. Tonneau, watching Kellar with singular intentness, seemed to guess the effect of the information.

"It is beyond your understanding, *Monsieur* Kellar? Two men so fine, so loyal—as you Americans say, 'the salt of the earth'?"

Kellar nodded. Tonneau went on, squeaking back in his reed chair, lighting a bluish-papered Moroccan cigarette.

"It is peculiar, the things a man will do for the love of a woman, eh, Kellar?"

"You say Tragaskas confessed when he found out he was dying of the fever."

Then I take it there were no witnesses to the murder."

"Only the woman. She was Grandin's wife."

"They fought over her?"

"No. Grandin was killed by a dagger—in the back."

"Do you mind if I see him?"

"Tragaskas? I will take you to Doctor DeMotte. I assure you, Kellar, any objection will be for purely medical reasons, though one can never tell what DeMotte will do. But first, another cognac. It is not often I receive visitors, save for those flea-scratching camel drivers from Tchad."

Kellar sat through another wetting of the blankets. He drank cognac in slow sips, and seemed to be satisfied as things had been explained. Instinct told him that Tonneau had given only half-truths, but there was no hint of that on his face. It was deep-cut, expressionless bronze.

Kellar knew that Tragaskas was not the kind of man who stabbed in the back—not even for the love of a woman.

II

DR. DeMOTTE was lying in his hammock, blowing cigarette smoke at the ceiling, when Tonneau rapped.

"Come in!" he called, sitting up, making a habitual movement of rubbing his close-clipped moustache.

DeMotte was a small, nervous man. He was colonial-born and Austrian educated, and these facts, more than lack of skill in his profession, had led the army aristocrats of Brazzaville to ship him to the deep interior and forget him, while bright young fellows more adept with a salad fork than a scalpel were tossed the plums of military advancement.

Kellar decided he had a touch of Egyptian or Arabian. It showed in his eyes, in the smoky pigment of his skin.

Tonneau said, "Doctor, may I introduce my old friend, *Monsieur* Kellar?"

"Good evening." DeMotte did not lie and say he was glad to be disturbed. Kellar liked him anyway. At least he was sincere.

Tonneau went on, "*Monsieur* Kellar has traveled a great distance to see his old friend, Tragaskas. May he have visitors?"

"Why not?" shrugged DeMotte, making

no move to go. Then he said, obviously for Tonneau's benefit, "I regret, Kellar, that my supply of cognac is not so plentiful as the administrator's. Otherwise, I would treat you in a manner befitting a guest."

Tonneau snapped, "If you want liquor, you need only ask for it!"

He stepped to the door and shouted for his houseboy to bring over a bottle.

DeMotte said, "Someday I shall place the good Administrator on a ration of medicines so he may better sympathize with my empty cellar."

Tonneau answered with ill temper, "You get all the liquor you want, and considerably more than is good for your health."

"May I say the same about paracodine?"

Tonneau fastened him with his pointed eyeballs. "Isn't it against a doctor's ethics to advertise the drugs his patients find it necessary to use? Or do you not have ethics?"

"I have none. I left them behind, with my pride, when I took this post. Now stop bickering, Tonneau, and open the bottle before I tell this gentleman something about the state of your liver."

They drank cognac, Tonneau like a brooding vulture, the Doctor with a little, musing smile. When his glass was empty, Tonneau rose abruptly.

"Is my prescription ready?" he asked with a hint of challenge in his voice.

Dr. DeMotte handed him a small bottle filled with pills.

"Paracodine," he explained when Tonneau was out the door. "Each of those pills contains three milligrams of the pure morphine alkaloid. He consoles himself with them like a dowager with bon-bons. I dole them out like that, a day's supply at a time, and hide the rest, otherwise he would go on one magnificent Ali Baba spree, and when it was over he'd likely have Bahkee, his native knife man, assassinate me."

"You're joking," said Kellar.

"Oh, *am* I, *Monsieur*?" DeMotte stroked his close moustache and stood up. "He said you were a friend of Tragaskas."

"Yes. I am his friend."

"He has confessed to murder, you know."

Kellar noticed that DeMotte had not actually called him a murderer—only that

he had *confessed*. He waited, sensing more to come.

"Nick Tragaskas is not the type who slips up behind men and stabs them in the back with Egyptian daggers, do you agree, Kellar?"

"Otherwise I would not be here."

"But still, he confessed on what he believed was his deathbed. And now I will tell you a strange fact, *Monsieur*—provided you will make no mention of it to Tonneau."

"Yes?"

"This—our friend, Tragaskas, has an excellent chance of living."

KELLAR started as the words hit him. Tragaskas to live, and he had been resigned to his death.

"Doctor! That's first rate!"

"Of course, there is still the firing squad."

"Damn the firing squad!"

DeMotte motioned, and led the way through a door and down a whitewashed hall.

"Why did you warn me not to tell Tonneau?" asked Kellar.

"It might be, *Monsieur*, that Tonneau would already have ordered Tragaskas to the post, and tied up, and shot, were it not for the paracodine."

"Why?"

"You saw the Madiguri camped out there. They have been outside the compound for four weeks waiting to see Tragaskas die. When they see his body they will go back to their hills."

"Are the Madiguri his only reason?"

"Why, there may be another, but you will have to discover that for yourself."

DeMotte led him to a little cubicle smelling of ether and disinfectant. Nick Tragaskas lay on a stretched-canvas cot, his eyes closed, a bottle and tube suspended and slowly running solution into the veins of his left arm. He was a man of forty or forty-five, large once, but now hollowed from sickness. He was breathing with strong regularity.

A native boy who should have been working the palm-leaf punkahs was asleep in his chair. DeMotte booted the chair from under him, and the boy scrambled up from the floor to creak the fans back and forth with frightened seriousness.

"Get out!" DeMotte barked in Manda dialect.

The commotion roused Tragaskas. He opened his eyes. It took a long time for them to focus on Kellar. Then a smile found its way to his lips.

"You! Kellar! Are you dead, too? And I thought you would go to heaven."

"You're alive!" Kellar grinned, squeezing his bony hand.

"Sure, but for how long?"

"Worse men than you have licked the blackwater."

"But not this time. Right, Doc?" he asked, rolling his head to look at DeMotte.

DeMotte brushed his close moustache. The question seemed to have made him nervous. He laid his dark fingers on the sick man's brow, looked at his eyeballs, fooled around with a stethoscope in the region of his heart. It never before occurred to Kellar that sometimes it is hard to tell a man that he is going to recover.

DeMotte said, "Maybe you'll live a lot longer than you think."

"What do you mean?" Tragaskas demanded, stirring himself.

"Just that. Maybe you'll live for—"

"For the firing squad?"

"If you want to put it that way, yes."

There was a new light in Tragaskas' eyes. He tried to rise, but the effort tired him, and he fell back, droplets of perspiration showing along the edge of his stiff, blonde hair.

"Doc, do you mean that now—"

DeMotte cried defensively, "For heaven's sake, man, you should be glad you're going to live."

"You told me I was going to die. Do you think I'd have confessed that thing if . . ."

"By all the cards, you should have died. It was the sulfa, I suppose. I gave you enough to kill an elephant." DeMotte turned to Kellar, smiling. "Being a doctor is a thankless profession in the tropics where men prefer death to the climate."

"I don't prefer death to the climate," said Tragaskas in a tired voice. "I don't prefer death to anything. I want to live. But I'm a murderer. Confessed."

"You didn't stab Grandin in the back," said Kellar flatly.

"Don't be too damned sure. I put my name on a confession, you know."

"You didn't kill him."

"I'll not try to crawl out of it now, Davie."

Kellar said to DeMotte, "Maybe if I could talk to him alone . . ."

"As you wish."

Tragaskas lifted a hand wearily. "No, Doc, you might as well stay. The confession stands. I never take back a bet after the cards are dealt. Kellar, you sit here and tell me about things down on the Congo. They tell me Van Hult got killed in—"

"What about that woman—that Mekha?"

"Why, you know me. Every variety of damned fool I've ever made of myself has been over a woman."

"It was Mekha—Grandin's wife?"

"Sure. Do you blame me?"

"I've never seen her."

"Mekha—the face of Venus and the soul of a leopard. Grandin's wife, and I murdered him on account of her. The confession is signed, and stored in Tonneau's locked cabinet. And now about the Congo—"

"Nick, listen to me . . ."

DeMotte plucked the sleeve of Kellar's blouse. "No more today. He's still pretty weak. The sulfa burns the devil out of a man's blood."

Tragaskas saw Kellar start for the door. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to prove you're a damned liar!"

Tragaskas shook the cot with noiseless laughter. He closed his eyes, and resumed his deep breathing.

"**W**HERE is this woman—Mekha?"

Kellar asked as he walked down the hall with DeMotte,

"You'll meet her if you manage to have dinner with Tonneau."

Kellar took a shower from a sun-heated tank. He shaved and borrowed a freshly starched blouse and knee-length shorts from DeMotte. A Yato lad was squatting before him, polishing his shoes with a goat's hair duster when Tonneau's house-boy ran over from the palace, inviting both of them to dinner.

"An invitation from Tonneau!" muttered DeMotte, stroking his close mous-

tache. "Why, he'll be expecting an extra fifty paracodine tablets for *that*!"

The sun was beyond the horizon, but the wind still had the scorched smell of afternoon when they crossed the compound. With blankets still hanging, and bamboo jalousies half closed, the verandah of the palace was in deep shadow. A petrol lamp was burning inside, casting a white light on the table already set for dinner.

Kellar started through the door, then he caught a slight odor of perfume and turned. He saw her, leaning at ease in one of the rattan chairs—Mekha.

He knew she was Mekha without asking. She was beautiful, as Tragaskas had indicated. Beautiful—with that cruel, leopard quality in her eyes. Her muscles had an animal perfection and smoothness beneath her tawny skin. She was twenty, or twenty-two, certainly no more, for such women, with a strong mixture of Oriental blood, quickly droop into lines of middle-aged ugliness. She wore shorts and a halter; on her feet were dancing slippers decorated with web-of-gold like one sees in the bazaars of Khartoum. It must have been that the slippers were new, probably one of the treasures brought her by the caravans from Tchad, for she raised one graceful leg, and tilted her toe down like a European ballerina so Kellar could admire it.

Kellar stared at her—then came to with a jerk, realizing that DeMotte was looking at him with his amused, philosophical smile.

"You are *Monsieur* Kellar!" breathed Mekha, speaking French with a peculiar, dulcet twist of accent. "And I am Mekha. I have heard much of you."

"And I of you!" Kellar responded, once more the master of himself,

"You will join me in wine?" she asked, indicating a bottle with a languid gesture.

The bottle bore one of those totally undecipherable Turkish labels. He dashed some in the bottom of a glass, tasted it. It had sticky-sweet lack of character. Mekha, however, seemed to enjoy it. She drained one portion, and held her glass out to be refilled.

"You are a friend of Tragaskas?"

"Yes."

"He will die tomorrow?"

"Perhaps."

She might as well have been talking about the weather. Her mouth spoke only words. Flat, meaningless. The real meaning lay deep in her velvet eyes, and there was no thought of Tragaskas there.

She went on. "I hate him, for he killed my dear husband. Do you blame me for hating him, *Monsieur*?"

"Not at all."

HE KNEW she did not hate Tragaskas. The drama had amused her—was still amusing her. Two men had paid her the supreme compliment. One of them had died, another had confessed to murder—both for her. She glanced beyond him at the door. Probably checking on Tonneau. He was not in sight. She reached with a languid arm, and the henna-dyed palm of her hand brushed Kellar's sleeve.

"I think you are ver' handsome, Sidi Kellar," she said, changing to the Arabian form of address.

"Thank you."

"The men here—they are so dull. I hope you will stay for long. Do you enjoy dancing?"

"I never dance."

"You mean like fox-trot, as on wireless? No. Do you enjoy the dances of Egypt?"

"I would enjoy seeing *you* do the dances Egypt."

"Perhaps—but no. Sidi Tonneau has been so kind to me. I must not make him jealous."

Kellar had considered himself immune from the charms of this woman—but now he knew he wasn't. A man lived in the jungle seeing none but natives with their glistening scalps, and mission women, middle-aged, bleached and enervated by sun and quinine—then, unexpectedly, you met someone like Mekha. Yes, such a woman could make a man do strange things. She could even, perhaps, make him drive a dagger into the heart of his best friend.

She said, "Some night, perhaps, I will dance for you alone."

Dr. DeMotte had overheard all this. He sniffed the Turkish wine and made a wry face. He lighted a cigarette and growled to Kellar,

"Don't forget, *you* have no supply of paracodine."

"What does he mean?" asked Mekha. "That was an English joke."

Kellar heard the slap of Tonneau's shoes on the matting, and he had assumed a manner of indifference to the woman by the time the man appeared.

Tonneau must have taken a good jolt of the narcotic, for his eyes were quick, and there was a sharpness in his movements that was lacking that afternoon.

"I see you have met my lovely Mekha!" he cried. "Then I need not apologize for having failed to entertain you." He then bowed in an effusive French manner toward the door. "*Monsieurs!*—my humble dinner."

They went inside. Dinner consisted of loin of okapi antelope, cooked after the Arabian manner and seasoned highly with cummin and whole peppercorns, French biscuits and canned stringbeans from the commissary at Brazzaville, a salad of plantains and bananas. In the center of the table stood an earthenware pot of Egyptian design containing a sort of marmelade made of pomegranate juice, honey and pulverized almonds to be spread on millet wafers.

Tonneau was a perfect host—genial, witty. When the meal was finished he led them to a tiny patio at the middle of the house where they sat beneath potted rubber trees, and listened to three mongrel Arab-blacks playing unfathomable music on a rebab with goat-hair strings, a European fiddle, and a balafron.

"Will you dance for us?" Tonneau asked Mekha.

Mekha rose languidly, and executed some of the slow movements of an Egyptian dance. She was extremely graceful, her movements reminding Kellar of a stalking leopardess. She suddenly became dissatisfied with the rhythm maintained by the balafron player and stopped.

"Tonight, I am tired," she said.

She perched herself on the table, one graceful leg dangling. She poured cognac. She was so close to Kellar he could feel the warmth of her, could breathe the heady musk and rose petal perfume of her glossy hair. The musicians had paused for a while—then the fiddle player exchanged his instrument for a *ratta* pipe and led out on a wailing melody. It was so abominable that Tonneau strode over

to stop it, and while he was gone, Mekha leaned so her breath was against Kellar's ear,

"You do not bar your door?"

"I'll not bar my door tonight!" he answered.

III

THE REST HOUSE was a hundred paces distant from the administrator's, partly hidden from its view by a clump of nut palms. Kellar chose a bedroom on the second floor, connecting with the front verandah. It was stale smelling and close inside the mosquito nettings, so he draped them back and lay on his cot, smoking, watching the cigarette coal brighten and fade as he puffed. He was tired, but sleep was impossible. He was sure that Mekha would come. He wondered what she would say. Somehow, he couldn't believe it was his masculine charm that would bring her. It would be something about Tragaskas. If not, he'd have to force the truth of the whole business out of her.

He listened for the sound of her footsteps. He heard an occasional hail from the sentries, the distant beatings of tomtoms and the peculiar, high-pitched "ke-ke-ke" chant of those savage, head-hunting Madiguris who still waited outside the walls. And always, rising and falling with vast cadence, was the sound of the harmattan wind, rushing around the thatch roof of the house, bending the long fronds of the palm trees.

He went to sleep in spite of himself, and woke suddenly. Someone was climbing the stairs to the second-story verandah of the rest house. He lay still, conscious of the weight of his pistol resting against his chest in its shoulder holster.

The door was only rat wire and net. Through it he could see the pattern of vines and jalousies which covered the front of the verandah. No sound on the stairs now. Only a slight whisper of silken fabric swinging against a woman's body as she walked, and suddenly she appeared, silhouetted in the doorway.

Mekha. He sat there, quite still, looking at her. Starlight filtered through the vines, vaguely illuminating her. She was barefoot, her young body wrapped in a dark, silk sarong. Coins in her hair made

a slight tinkling sound as she slid inside. "*Monsieur Kellar!*"

The sound of her half-whisper voice was like an electric impulse. He stood, and she saw him in the room's deep shadow. She came close, her hands reaching to touch his shoulders.

"You see—I have come," she said.

He would have kissed her, but she moved away with a little, tantalizing laugh.

"A woman wants to hear words, *Monsieur Kellar.*"

"What words?"

"That you love. Or do not the English have the words for love?"

"I'm American."

"Americans, then. You are so cold, so stern. Maybe you, too, want the little, white pill."

"I do not need them." He wanted to tell Mekha that he loved her, but the words would not come. It would be a lie. She only appealed to him in the ancient way of a woman for a man—and love, he had always believed, was something more.

"I should hate you," he said.

The words made her stop. "Why do you say that?"

"Because of my friend—Tragaskas."

"Ah, but he killed my husband."

"You know he did not."

Her voice made a low, musical sound when she laughed. "*Do I, Monsieur?*"

"Tell me the truth of it, Mekha."

"Aai! You Americans! I come to dance for you by moonlight, and what do you do? You give me the cross-questions; you talk to me of dead men."

He seized her by the shoulders. He could sense the feline strength of her body, see the velvet cruelty in her eyes.

"Why do you not talk to me of love like other men?" she asked.

"I will—after you tell me who killed Grandin."

"**V**ER' WELL! He was making love to me, that Tragaskas. Grandin was on a trip to the Ubangi for ivory, and Tragaskas did not expect him back. Then, suddenly, he came in. They fought, and Grandin knocked him down. He turned to say some words to me—I do not know what. Then up from the floor I saw Tragaskas, a dagger in his hand. I screamed, but it was too late. My Grandin was a

dead man, stabbed through the heart. I did not know what to do. I sat there, until morning, telling my prayer beads and weeping to Allah. Then the houseboy saw through the window, and soon the soldiers came. I did not tell the truth. You see, I still cared for that Tragaskas. But that morning he was taken down with fever, and soon he confessed. What more is there to tell, *Monsieur*?"

"There is still the truth."

She was about to flare back—then she stopped, listening. In a second Kellar heard it, too—the sound of Tonneau's rope shoes on the verandah stairs.

"You'll have to go," whispered Kellar,

She did not move. Her shoulder was against him, and he could feel the soft warmth of her body through the thin sarong of Egyptian silk she wore. She was making no move to leave.

"Damn it all—"

"Are you afraid of Tonneau, *Monsieur*? Are you afraid to fight him for me?"

"I don't want trouble—right now, Get out of here, Mekha—"

"But I like it here, *Monsieur*. I like it ver' much."

She would have reveled in seeing more blood spilled for her. Perhaps she realized Tonneau would follow her when she came. Kellar thrust her away from him, loosening the .38 calibre revolver so it would not bind in the holster.

Tonneau was coming along the verandah. He paused at the door, stood there, trying to pierce the inner gloom.

"Mekha!" he said in a rasping voice. She did not answer, and he could not see her in her dark sarong, but he could make out Kellar from the whites he wore. "So, Kellar, you lured her to your room. You have thought to take her away from me!"

"I did not *bring* anyone here! Keep your hand away from your gun, Tonneau!"

But Tonneau was already drawing his automatic from the pocket of his white coat. It tangled there, and he had to rip it free of the fabric. Kellar could have shot him down. He didn't. Instead he took two long strides, and smashed Tonneau in the jaw.

It was a swinging blow with the power of whiplash muscles behind it. Tonneau's head snapped, and the gun fell from his

fingers to thud on the woven palm mattings of the floor. He reeled and struck the flimsy wall of plaster and bamboo, rebounded, went to hands and knees.

Kellar could hear him spitting curses, patting his hands across the floor, trying to locate the gun.

"Don't make me kill you, Tonneau!"

Kellar took a step backward, half drawing his revolver from the shoulder holster, trying to keep back of Tonneau in the darkness. The man unexpectedly came lunging from the floor. There was a bluish glimmer of knife steel in his hand. He had drawn and opened a long-bladed clasp knife.

Tonneau held the blade with its keen edge forward. Kellar saw the danger and tried to pivot free, but the cot and mosquito net tangled him. His gun was out, but using it would be a last resort. It would practically be suicide to kill a French administrator inside the walls of his own compound. They rammed the wall, and Tonneau ripped up with the blade to disembowel him. The point nicked the front of Kellar's shirt. Tonneau tried to slash again, but Kellar seized his wrist.

They struggled. He never imagined the Administrator could be so strong. Tonneau's muscles felt like wire rope beneath his skin, and he moved with the unexpected rapidity of a cobra.

The netting fell in a filmy mass, they trampled it, and staggered to the middle of the room. With a series of rapid movements, Tonneau twisted his knife hand free. He swung the point for the heart, but Kellar hurled him away, and smashed him with his fist.

Tonneau hit the floor so hard the flimsy building vibrated. He made no sound for a few seconds. Kellar tried to locate him. He caught sight of him crawling outside the door. The man got to his feet on the verandah, and half fell down the stairs. A little later he could be seen reeling toward the palace.

Kellar looked for Mekha. She was no longer in the room. She wasn't on the verandah, either. He returned to the room, closed the screen doors, latched them, and stretched out on the cot.

The fever of battle ran out of his veins, and he got to wondering what would come next. Tonneau, of course, would

arrest him and shoot him if he dared, but a French administrator, even in this remote, jungle post is not all-powerful. And Kellar was a United States citizen. That was a solid-gold, diamond-studded fact that could not be overlooked. Tonneau wouldn't want to stir up the hornets at Brazzaville. So, while there was certain to be retaliation, it would not be in the open. No marching feet of black militiamen, no one-man court of military justice, no firing squad at sunrise. Rather the false smile, the polite word, the knife between the ribs.

HE WENT to sleep, and awoke with the sun making a bright, yellow pattern through the open jalousies. He dressed, and joined DeMotte at breakfast. Afterward, he talked with Tragaskas who was slowly recovering. When he went outside, Tonneau called.

"Ah, good morning! I was expecting you for breakfast!" Tonneau sat on the verandah, apparently with no recollection of the night before, although a large, purple bruise marked the spot on his jaw where one of Kellar's punches had landed.

"DeMotte invited me to breakfast with him," said Kellar.

"Perhaps you will have a brandy?"

"Too early, thank you."

"Mint tea?"

"If you wish."

"Ah—about last night. Let me assure you, I am not a man who holds grudges. It was just jealousy, and it all seems ridiculous with the daylight. The jealousy of a middle-aged man for a young, and very beautiful woman. Mekha—she means a great deal to me. I thought she had gone to you, but when I returned, here she was, on the verandah. So I was wrong."

"You weren't wrong. She visited me." Kellar knew it would be useless to lie, Tonneau had followed her. "But her reason for coming was quite innocent."

"So?"

"She thought perhaps DeMotte had confided in me in regards to Tragaskas' condition. She thought he might recover after all."

"Ah!" Tonneau was interested. "And will he recover, *Monsieur*?"

"Tragaskas will die."

"But when—does DeMotte have an opinion on that?"

"He grows steadily weaker," Kellar lied. "I have seen many men with the black-water. It is my guess he will live no longer than five or six days."

He did not know whether Tonneau believed this or not. There was no way of reading the man's face. He was too accomplished a hypocrite. The talk drifted to small things, and a houseboy came to hang the wet blankets for it was mid-morning, and scorching hot.

Kellar watched a very large Senegalese approach across the yard. He had long, apelike arms, and deep scars where his ears should have been. He paused at the bottom step and made a series of finger signals which Tonneau answered.

"That is Bahkee," Tonneau remarked. "When he was young, the Sultan of Wadei pierced his eardrums and cut off his ears and tongue for hearing and repeating gossip about the government. I keep him around here as sort of a—gardener."

Kellar knew that Bahkee was the kind of gardener who planted things six feet underground with the knowledge that they would not rise until the hour of the Prophet.

Bahkee walked away, huge and apelike, a long piece of toweling twisted around his head for a turban, his loose, white djellaba gown blowing in the wind, intermittently revealing the French service pistol and short-sword he carried strapped next to his charcoal-black skin.

Kellar finished his mint tea, and excused himself. When he returned to the hospital, DeMotte was resting back in his reed chair, a pair of binoculars in his lap. He made the usual movement of stroking his short moustache and remarked,

"I was born in Fez, of a Moorish mother and a French father. One learns much in Morocco, including the sign languages of the Senegalese. For instance, I know what Bahkee just signaled to Tonneau. He asked if you were the man, and Tonneau answered that you were. In other words, I don't doubt that you have been selected to be Bahkee's special task. Marked, my friend, for death."

"We are all marked for death in this rotten country."

"But why hurry it, eh, Kellar? Why, indeed?"

KELLAR slept that night with his doors latched, and his revolver slung on the edge of his cot. There was no visit from Bahkee. Nor was there the next night, or the next. Five days passed. Tragaskas continued to improve, and a rumor of that fact made the rounds of the compound. On the sixth day, Tonneau sent three of his native soldiers to DeMotte's office. Kellar was sitting with him when they came through the door.

The noncom who headed the trio saluted with his bare heels together.

"*Bwana*, we have come to escort *Monsieur* Tragaskas to the prison."

"Tragaskas is in my charge," DeMotte snapped. "You know the regulations. You may stand guard outside his window with as many men as you wish, but nobody enters this hospital without my express permission."

"But *bwana*, we have here an order from the Administrator, who holds the rank of—"

"I don't care if he holds the rank of general and wears solid gold epaulettes, if you contradict my authority inside this building, I'll report you to Bangui and have the chevrons ripped off your shirt before the next monsoon comes. Now leave!"

The noncom withdrew, leading his two militiamen with the best dignity he could. Ten minutes passed, and Tonneau strode over, his face hawklike and vicious.

"Did you countermand my orders for the removal of Tragaskas?" he barked.

"I did," DeMotte answered, idly smoothing his moustache.

"Do you deny that Tragaskas is well enough to walk? Perhaps to escape into the bush if he took the notion?"

"I do."

"Nevertheless, he is going to a cell, and tomorrow morning he is going to the post to be shot."

"And as the officer in charge of this hospital, I say he cannot be moved."

Tonneau stood for a while, undecided. Finally he forced a smile to his face and said in a voice designed to be conciliatory,

"Doctor, I know how you feel, but we cannot delay the execution forever."

"Why are you so anxious to get Tragaskas buried?"

"The regulations, you must know that, seeing you are so familiar with them in regards to hospitals. A murderer—"

"I doubt that he is a murderer."

"You seem to forget—there is a confession, signed by—"

"I am prepared to make a deposition to the effect that his confession was made while he was irrational and under the effect of a hypodermic."

An expression of black fury spread across Tonneau's face. He lunged forward as though to seize DeMotte and strangle him. He stopped at the last second and snarled down at him,

"You wouldn't dare—"

"Oh, wouldn't I?"

Tonneau cursed, spitting the oaths like a cobra spits venom. His fund of vile French, Arabian and Bantu expended, he spun around and stamped out of the room.

"Tonneau!" DeMotte called.

Tonneau stopped, and DeMotte held up his daily bottle of pills. Sight of it seemed to mollify the angry Administrator just a little.

"By the way, Tonneau, I would like to show you something else." DeMotte stepped into his drug dispensary, tinkled among some bottles, and came out holding a little, white pill, apparently identical with the ones in Tonneau's bottle. "This is potassium cyanide. It would kill a hippo."

"Why are you showing me that?"

"Just to warn you of the danger of *guessing* about which bottle contains the paracodine in the event of my assassination."

HE WATCHED as Tonneau walked across the level yard of the compound. Then he laughed, laid the pill on his tongue, swallowed it.

"Aspirin," he said.

Kellar went in to see Tragaskas. He was sitting on the edge of his cot, shaky after having walked a few times around the room.

"Tonneau is thinking about shooting you tomorrow," Kellar remarked.

"Why, that's fine, cheerful news for a sick man." Tragaskas grinned.

"DeMotte spiked it, temporarily. Do

you think you could make a run for it tonight?"

Tragaskas shook his head. "You'd have to have me carried in a *tepoi*. The soldiers would catch us before we made a dozen kilometers. No, Kellar, I'll have to face the music."

"Tell me how Grandin really got killed."

"Sure. I was nuts about that dancing girl—Mekha. Still am. Grandin brought her here from the Blue Nile country during the last monsoons. Understand he traded eight hundred pounds of grade-A billiard ball tusk for her. Hell of a price for one woman, wasn't it?"

In Kellar's opinion, Mekha was something more than just "one woman," but he let Tragaskas go on with his story.

"Everything was fine as long as Grandin was here, but he left on an ivory hunt, and Tonneau, DeMotte, and myself couldn't let the girl get lonesome. She played us one against the other, with me just a little bit the winner, until Grandin got back. He saw what was going on and decided to take her away. She was his, bought and paid for, and it was his right. But Mekha didn't want to go. Came to me and said that she loved me. Said she'd never go away with Grandin. I never found out just what did happen. Anyway, next morning, Grandin was dead—stabbed in the back.

"Tonneau would probably have overlooked it, but the Chief of Territory was here, and Grandin was a citizen with friends at Bangui. He arrested Mekha with an ace-high case against her. Then I came down with the blackwater, and DeMotte said it was my finish, I figured it was a good part my fault, so I confessed."

"DeMotte is willing to report that you signed the confession while in delirium."

"No, Davie. Tonneau has all the excuse he needs, no matter what DeMotte says, though it is decent of the little Moslem to help me out. Damned decent."

Kellar drew an automatic and an extra clip of shells from under his blouse and tossed them on Tragaskas' chest.

"Here, I bought this from one of the soldiers. Put 'em under your pillow, and maybe you'll sleep better."

Tragaskas found a hiding place for gun and clip beneath the cot.

"It's not so bad to be shot at sunrise," he grinned, "provided a man can shoot back."

IV

TONNEAU made no other attempt to take Tragaskas from the hospital that day, but he posted two armed guards outside his window. On the following day, a notice was tacked up, stating that one Nicholas Tragaskas, foreign civilian, would be executed at the hour of sunrise, six days hence. Kellar first viewed the notice with a feeling of relief, and then with suspicion.

"Is it the custom here at Tahoula to post notices giving the hour of execution?" he asked DeMotte.

"This is the first such notice I have ever seen. I wouldn't be surprised if Tonneau were singing us a lullabye."

"What exactly do you mean?"

"That Tonneau will come down here and take him by force, perhaps this very night."

Darkness came, and Kellar climbed the verandah stairs to his room. He wanted to be alone for a while—and think. He walked warily across the deeply shadowed verandah, paused at the door. Someone was in there. The perfume—Mekha.

"What do you want?" he asked, pausing in the door.

She came to him through the heat-filled darkness of the room, placing her hands on his shoulders,

"Why have you stayed from me?"

"Because I'm in enough trouble already,"

"But I care for you, *Monsieur Kellar*. I care for you ver' much."

"You care for all men."

"But those men—they are old. And you are young."

"Why did you come here tonight?"

"To tell you that. To tell you I love. And to ask you to take me away from here. May we go away together? To the deeper jungle, to the pleasures of Khartoum?"

"And when shall we leave?"

"Tonight! We must go tonight!"

"Why?"

"I fear Tonneau. He will kill me. Already he has tried to kill me. I will show you . . ."

She opened the front of her sarong as

though to show a wound, but the room was too dark. She seized his hand, and drew him toward the door. He could see no wound there, either. She whispered urgently,

"Come. I must show you. I will show you in the moonlight so you will not think I lie. A dagger wound, close to the heart."

He allowed her to lead him out on the verandah. She paused near the vines, tightly grasping his arm. There was no sound, save for the silky rustle of her sarong, but Kellar could feel the verandah tremble in response to some movement.

He knew what it was. A heavy man—Bahkee. The assassin had been lurking in the deep shadow. Now he was stealthily creeping forward.

Kellar tried to spin around and meet the attack. Mekha muttered something, and flung her arms around him. She was like a young tigress in strength. Bahkee was in the open, his short-sword swinging high over his head. For an instant Kellar's back was towards him, unprotected. Then he broke Mekha's hold, pivoted, and flung her against Bahkee.

Her unexpected weight made the big assassin stagger back. He rammed a bamboo pillar, splitting it. With a sweep of his massive left arm he hurled her to the floor, roared from his voiceless throat, and trampled her as he charged back.

HE SEIZED Kellar by the blouse, and the two men struggled over to the wall. Bahkee was inhuman in strength. He thrust Kellar to arm's length and swung the half-scimitar sword. The blow would have severed Kellar's neck like a guillotine, but he anticipated it, tore free, and bent double, feeling the wind of the blade as it whisked over him. He came up with a smash beneath the big man's heart.

Bahkee staggered, momentarily paralyzed. He tripped over Mekha who was on hands and knees. He came up, drawing a pistol. Kellar could have killed him, but he knew that a gunshot would have brought the soldiers, and a dead man would be enough excuse for Tonneau to execute him. So instead, he swung the heavy barrel of his .38 across Bahkee's skull.

Bahkee dropped his gun and went down, shaking the verandah beneath him. He staggered to his feet, apeline arms dangle-

ing, and Kellar struck him a second time. He crawled away, made it to the stairs, fell crashing to the bottom taking a section of the handrail with him.

Mekha tried to slip away unseen, but Kellar grasped her wrist and flung her inside the room. He latched the door.

"Tonneau sent you!"

She picked herself up from the matting where she had fallen, smoothed her sarong around her tawny body, backed away from him. It was dark, but enough moonlight reflected from the verandah to reveal her eyes, shifty, and filled with fear.

"You will not kill me, *Monsieur*?"

He laughed, and the tone of his laugh did not reassure her.

"Are you *sure* I won't?"

"*Sidi* Kellar! I am a poor, weak girl. He made me come. That Tonneau. He said I would die according to French justice unless Tragaskas was executed. He said I must come and help Bahkee kill you. You must believe me, *Sidi*. I weep with shame—"

"When does he intend to execute Tragaskas?"

"How would I know, *Monsieur*—"

He grasped her wrist, twisting her so she knelt before him.

"You know, all right. When does he plan to execute Tragaskas?"

"It is tomorrow. They would take him from the cell tonight, after you were dead. They would keep him in the prison, and at sunrise . . ."

He released her, reached behind him, unlatched the door. Vaguely, through the palms, he could see a light burning at the administrator's. Bahkee would be on his way over there. Kellar had no time to lose.

"Won't you kiss your little Mekha?" the woman asked, recovering her coquetry as fear of death vanished.

He did not seem to hear her. He hurried down the stairs, and across the compound yard to the hospital. The two guards were still on duty. One of them squatted on his heels near the corner, wiggling his toes in the dust, the other was at the window, indolent over the barrel of his rifle.

They were so accustomed to seeing Kellar visit the hospital that no thought of challenging him entered their minds.

Kellar quickly appraised the situation. Until that moment, he had no plan. He merely knew he had to get Tragaskas away. He had so little time that only the boldest course could succeed. He glanced at the administrator's house, at the barracks building. No one appeared to be coming.

Slowly, with a movement so casual neither of the militiamen realized what he was doing, Kellar drew the .38 from its shoulder holster.

"The first man who speaks will die!" he said in a voice that was soft, but deadly.

THE SOLDIER who was squatting on the ground sprang to his feet, reaching behind him for his rifle, but he met Kellar's eyes, and their expression froze his action. He stood still while Kellar booted the rifle out of reach and plucked the service pistol from his waist. The other soldier merely stood flat against the wall, making no sound.

Kellar kept his eyes on both of them as he backed to the window, reached behind him, and whisked the mosquito netting away. He heard Tragaskas getting out of bed.

"Bring your sheet!" Kellar said over his shoulder.

Tragaskas could see Kellar silhouetted there, so he guessed what was going on. He moved around in the dark for a while, then slid through the window, holding the sheet, and the gun that Kellar had given him.

If there was any fight in the militiamen, one look at that second gun stilled it. They stood close against the bamboo and mud wall, eyeballs showing white.

Kellar smiled a little and said to Tragaskas, "You're dead. Lie down and let them roll you in the sheet."

Tragaskas did not argue. He was still too shaky to travel far. He spread the sheet, and lay full length while the soldiers hurried to roll it around him.

"Carry!" Kellar commanded in a half-whisper.

They lifted Tragaskas rolled like a corpse in the sheet, and started in the direction Kellar indicated—toward the front gate of the compound.

Petrol lamps burned brightly in the

front room of the palace, but Kellar could see that the room was empty. He had no way of telling if Tonneau was on the verandah. The two soldiers looked straight ahead, seeming to hold their breaths from fear of the revolver held in Kellar's hand.

They walked close to the barracks with its open door. A black soldier sat there, naked except for his shorts, breathing very quietly into a native flute. He lowered the flute when he saw the corpse-bundle. He stood, and reached to lift the corner of the sheeting to see who had died, but Kellar halted him with two words—

"Rat fever!"

This native term of the bubonic sent him backing to the doorway, holding hands before his face.

The gate was a hundred paces further. Clouds drifted like pieces of crepe across the large, tropic moon. Kellar heard the insect-proof door of the administrator's house slap shut. He did not look around, but he could sense a man standing on the steps, watching. The two soldiers plodded with their burden, and their pace seemed miserably slow. A lone sentry walked along the wall. He paused, rifle stock resting between his feet, watching them come toward him.

"Open up!" barked Kellar.

IT WAS A white man's command, and the sentry climbed down the five-runged ladder with no thought of refusing. He lifted the bar of the ironwood gate, not once taking his eyes off the mysterious bundle.

"Rat fever!" said Kellar, and the words worked their old magic. The sentry hurried to open the heavy gate. It caught, and he jerked it back and forth, trying to loosen it.

"Halt!" cried a voice behind them.

It was the noncom who had tried to take Tragaskas from the hospital. Kellar saw him running from the barracks. The sentry ceased his attempts to open the gate.

"Open!" Kellar commanded.

"But *bwana*—"

The sentry blinked into the muzzle of the revolver. With a little tremble of muscle he lifted the gate and commenced forcing it open.

The noncom was running now. Another man was on his way from the direction of the administrator's. The would be Bahkee.

Kellar's back was momentarily turned to the gate; one of the soldiers allowed Tragaskas' feet to drop and plunged face foremost into the shadow of a clump of summer-dry jasmine bushes growing near the wall.

Tragaskas sprawled on the ground, tearing the sheet away. The noncom came to a sudden stop, whipped out his pistol, and sent a bullet tearing into the gate not a foot from Kellar's cheek.

Kellar's gun answered at almost the same instant. He fired by instinct, without use of sights. The heavy .38 slug smashed the noncom in the right shoulder, driving him into the dust. He lay there, stupefied by the impact.

Bahkee, who was deaf, could not hear the shooting, but he could see the powder flames. He lumbered to a stop, drawing a Luger-type pistol from beneath his kaffitan.

Tragaskas rose to his knees, the army pistol in his hand. He fired three times, rapidly. Once he had been a deadly shot, but sickness had interfered with coordination between eye and hand, and the bullets kicked dirt and fanned air. However, they were close enough to send Bahkee sprawling face down on the earth for protection.

Bahkee propped himself on one hand, fired twice, the bullets chewing splinters from the big gate. He came to a half-sitting position, propped the pistol across his left forearm to bear down through the sights.

Kellar had started through the gate. He turned, centered Bahkee, and pulled the trigger. Bahkee reeled under the impact of the bullet, firing wildly. He struggled forward to his feet, and shot again, this bullet digging dust midway between himself and the gate. He tried to steady himself and aim. He was like that when Kellar's second bullet thudded home. He went down like a stricken gorilla, gasping a last few lungs of air, while a fold of his kaffitan flapped above him in the harmattan like a grisly signal of farewell.

Kellar went on through the gate, half dragging Tragaskas.

V

BEHIND THEM the compound was awake and shouting. Ahead for a half-kilometer lay level ground with grass burned off to prevent surprise attacks. The moon was behind clouds, and it took time for the soldiers to get the ancient, carbide spotlight to working. When its white rays swept the ground, Kellar and Tragaskas were a hundred meters away, and beyond its range.

Tragaskas staggered and fell to his knees, ready to pass out from exertion. He was so weak he could barely hold on when Kellar boosted him to his back.

The Madiguris had been doing their evening dance, with drums throbbing a savage rhythm. The excitement in the fort drew them, and Kellar could see them as moving shadows, creeping along the edge of the sudan grass.

He started on a wide circle with his goal a jungle of baobab and parasitic vines which made a dense thicket to the east.

"Let me walk," said Tragaskas, but Kellar kept on carrying him.

"Those damned Madiguris," muttered Tragaskas, fumbling to insert the full clip in his automatic. "I'll shoot right from your back if they get any closer."

"Forget the Madiguris!"

They reached rough ground overgrown by ochilla where yams had once been cultivated. The jungle was less than a hundred meters away. Kellar leaned over a trifle beneath his burden, and commenced to run.

Tragaskas made a sudden movement, and Kellar stopped. He sensed someone ahead of him. The light of the half-hidden moon glimmered on the bronze head of an assagai. A warrior had risen from among the ochilla, and was facing him, assagai held breast high. Others appeared, rising from every side. Nine of them—skinny, undersized men with high-boned, half-negroid, half-fulbe faces, scarred with tribal marks, tattooed in gray and yellow. These were the savage, head-hunting Madiguris—members of a tribe the legions of France had never conquered.

"Hide your gun!" Kellar muttered from the side of his mouth as he stopped and placed Tragaskas on the ground.

Kellar stood with folded arms, looking contemptuously at the leader of the warriors who was advancing with his needle-sharp assagai.

"Fool!" he sneered in the Senga jargon. "We come here to battle your old enemies, those dogs from France, and you point assagais at our hearts. Put them down so we can pass."

The warrior did not answer. He said something in the harsh Madiguri tongue, jabbing with the assagai so its point pricked the skin of Kellar's chest, bringing blood that sponged through the front of his linen blouse.

"Go!" commanded the warrior.

Kellar could see it was useless to resist. He turned, Tragaskas following, and started across the rough earth toward the high sudan grass beyond.

"Ride?" he asked Tragaskas in English.

"I'll make it."

"Do they know you?"

"Ikoro will know me."

"Is he their chief?"

"Yes. I mounted his son's head on a pike three seasons ago. That was when the *compagnie* sent me on an expedition into their hills, after they took to raiding the motor caravans from the Camaroons. I'll wish I'd died of the blackwater if that Ikoro ever gets hold of me."

Kellar carried him the final two hundred meters to the Madiguri camp.

IT LAY in an area of trampled grass. The huts were of skins, supported on bamboo poles, set to lean with the wind. One of them, a large, circular wall of skins, looked like a council chamber. A fire burned, reflecting from the oiled bodies of many warriors, on the tips of their assagais and arrows, and the steel of French rifles that a few carried. Beyond the fire, four men beat a never-ending rhythm on tom-toms.

A witch-doctor with a grotesque mask made of a lion's skull and monkey skins pranced up, marking time with his knee-rattles. He carried a slim, poisoned "witch assagai" in his hand, and as he came close he made a symbolic gesture as though to plunge it into Kellar's throat.

With a sharp, unexpected movement, Kellar leaped forward, twisted the assagai from his fingers, and lashed it around

the witch-doctor's masked head. The assagai, made of split and bound bamboo rather than the usual wood, wrapped itself like the lash of a whip before breaking, and the witch-doctor fell screaming.

The warriors looked at him with awe. Never had anyone done such a thing to a witch-doctor. They waited for lightning to come from the sky and cleave this *mon-dele's* skull, but no lightning came. Instead, the witch-doctor actually retreated.

"Take us to your chief, Ikoro!" commanded Kellar, knowing they would take him there anyway.

An old, hunch-backed slave of the tribe scurried ahead and opened the flap leading inside the circular wall of skins. They entered the enclosure, half roofed over, half open to the sky. A fire of tulip wood burned in the center, reflecting on a grotesquely carved voodoo pole, and on the ancient face of a man who sat crosslegged in a heap of leopard skins.

"Ikoro!" Tragaskas whispered.

Ikoro was very old, his skin withered, hanging too large on his pointed bones and stringy muscles. His hair was grayish, and half covered with gold spangles and dingle-bobs of cowrie shells that jiggled and flashed in the firelight.

For a while, as the two men advanced, Ikoro sat still as a mummy excavated from some ancient tomb. Only his eyes were alive, glittering vindictively.

He said nothing until a dozen men came and arrayed themselves around him.

"Who are you?" he asked.

Kellar answered, "We are enemies of the French. We came from Belgian territory to kill that dog, Tragaskas. We stabbed him, and wet our fingers in his blood, and then escaped. Why have your men stopped us? Are you now in service with the army of France?"

There was no way of telling what went on behind the deathlike mask of Ikoro's face. No telling if he recognized the skinny, fever-ridden man who stood before him as his enemy, Tragaskas,

"Then Tragaskas is dead?"

"Yes."

"Where is his body?"

"On his bed at the post hospital."

"Then this man I see before me is only his ghost who has followed you into the camp of the Madiguri?"

THE LIGHT in Ikoro's eyes, rather than his actual words, was Kellar's warning that the ruse had not succeeded. He saw a signal given by Ikoro's left hand, saw the movement of a warrior as the final words were spoken.

Kellar drove his shoulder into Tragaskas, spilling him to the earth as an assagai flashed past. Ikoro sprang to his feet, cackling like an enraged rooster. He drew a French service pistol from among the leopard skins. His bony thumb clicked off the safety just as Kellar fired. Ikoro went down, struck through the heart.

A warrior rushed with an upraised native scimitar. Kellar fired again, the heavy .38 slug driving him back like a sledgehammer between the eyes. Tragaskas was on one elbow, firing rapidly.

Kellar tore through the skin barrier, and Tragaskas followed.

The Madiguri were in full pursuit. No order—just a mass of warriors, screaming and waving primitive weapons. Kellar tripped and fell in a shallow depression where the French had once built breastworks. He crawled to the top of the heaped dirt, saw the Madiguri closing in. He waited until there could be no mistake, loading fresh cartridges from the supply in his pocket. Then, with methodical accuracy, he downed three of them.

The rest of the Madiguris rolled back. Answering shots came from here and there, and a dozen arrows whisked past.

"How many shells?" he asked Tragaskas. "Four."

"I'd rather battle off Tonneau," he said.

"We'll fall back to the edge of the compound. Those Senegalese may not shoot."

It was a rotten chance, and Kellar knew it. They crawled back from the breastwork and made their way toward the fort.

One of the militiamen leveled his rifle. Kellar sensed when he was going to shoot, and pitched to the ground, dragging Tragaskas with him, but the bullet was a dozen feet wide. Two more guns whanged out, but they, too, were wide.

Tonneau was cursing. Suddenly he came in sight on the catwalk near the gate, a high-velocity rifle in the crook of his arm. He located Kellar and Tragaskas, tossed the gun to his shoulder.

There was a crack of a rifle—but not

Tonneau's. Tonneau was struck from behind. His knees buckled. He balanced at the edge a moment, and pitched head foremost outside the compound wall.

Had the forked lightning of the voodooos suddenly struck the man down, Kellar could not have been more amazed. There was a moment of gasping silence as the Senegalese stared down at the fallen administrator, then Dr. DeMotte's voice came, issuing commands.

The gate swung open. DeMotte walked towards them, a rifle under his arm.

"It was necessary," he said, enunciating clearly, and evidently for the record. "He was a hopeless drug addict. Temporarily insane. When a man is adjudged insane by the chief medical officer, it is the duty of the commandant to imprison him." DeMotte smoothed his close moustache and smiled. "Was it my fault," he said in English, "if Tonneau did not see fit to imprison himself?"

NEXT NIGHT, at dinner, DeMotte sat at the head of the table, with Mekha at his right.

"Perhaps it is my duty to execute this woman," DeMotte said. "I suppose she stabbed Grandin, although she has now signed a statement saying Tonneau did it. But beauty is such a rare thing here in the jungle. The execution will be delayed."

DeMotte lifted Mekha's hand, kissed her fingers. He turned to the two men.

"And what of you, *Monsieurs*? I will tell you. You will leave. Now, before the footpaths turn to liquid beneath the monsoons. You will go, leaving Mekha behind. And after you are gone, then I shall pass judgment on her—as she pleases me. And thus, to you gentlemen, *adieu*. *Adieu* from Dr. DeMotte, ranking French officer between Wadei and the Egyptian sudan."

Dr. DeMotte poured cognac and smoothed his moustache.

"We are the forgotten of Allah here, it is true, but the post of medical officer in the jungles is not without recompenses."

Next morning they left. At the crest, where the footpath plunged into the jungle, Kellar paused to look back at Tahoula.

"Isn't it a shame to leave him at the mercy of that woman?" asked Tragaskas.

"The poor devil!" said Kellar enviously.

LEAD-BRANDED

By Hascal Giles

McKay was safe. Nobody believed that story the Indians told at Raton Pass—until Matt Stone rode in with a five-year-old bullet, and the gun to sling it.

They sent their horses slipping and sliding down the gulch, guns ready.



THE RIDER might have been an Indian or a breed. His face was that dark—mahogany brown with the underlying tone of old gold that only the burning sun of the Cimarron could put

into a man's skin. His clothes were of buckskin, worn thin and shiny after a long time on the trail. The blue eyes, stern and pale against the richness of his color, identified him as a white man and furnished the

contrast needed to make him handsome.

He came into Franklin at the end of the trading season. His eyes noticed the listless inactivity of the town and he saw that the only boat at the river dock was turned downstream. He had not met a single mule train on the way out and that meant that the rich prairie port would cater mostly to passenger trade until spring opened the trails to Santa Fe again. It also meant that Harve McKay would still be in Franklin, and there would be plenty of time through the tiring winter to make the trader tell all he knew about the story the Indians told at Raton Pass.

Few people noticed the dusty rider as he rode down the red-clay street, listening to the familiar lapping of the Big Muddy against its soft banks. He did not have a great many friends here, and most of the loungers and traders had come since he had gone. There was nothing stable since the gold of Santa Fe had finally begun to leak through to the outside world. Freighters came and went, growing richer or poorer, but always moving. Two men would know him though. Jobe Atkins and George Barnett also had had an interest in Harve McKay's last haul down to Santa Fe.

Before he reached the docks, he turned left at Malloy's Rolling River Saloon and stopped his mustang in front of the saddle shop around the corner. There was no eagerness in his movements as he swung to the ground; only the terrible tiredness that comes from a long time in the saddle and too much thought about one thing.

A man came out of the saddle shop to meet him—a big, sandy-haired man with blacksmith arms and a fighter's shoulders. The rider smiled briefly then, as they shook hands, and the sandy-haired man clapped him fondly on the shoulders.

"Matt Stone!" he boomed. "It's good to see you, it is. I was beginnin' to fear the Pawnees had done served you up at one of their dog feasts!"

"You know me better than that, George," Matt Stone grinned, and the big man nodded proudly.

George Barnett's words had been more of humor than concern. He did know Matt Stone; he knew him as the kind of man who would ride a thousand miles to make

sure he was right before he killed a man. That was what Matt had just done, only there had been more miles than a thousand and he had not yet fired the shot he had wanted to fire so long.

Matt got the poncho and pack from behind the mustang's saddle and followed George Barnett into the shop. He sat down in a chair by the workbench and looked around at the increased stock and the new supplies. George had cared for his business well since he had been gone; Matt's bank account would be much larger.

He said, "I appreciate you keepin' the place goin' for me, George."

The big man shrugged his thanks aside. "What did you find out about Steve and Hank and Will?"

Matt had known that the man would ask that question soon. George had waited many months for the answer. Matt sighed deeply and reached into his buckskin pocket and withdrew a battered six-gun slug. The lead was old and black and shiny. He held it between his thumb and forefinger and looked at George Barnett.

"I got my bullet back, George," he said quietly.

George Barnett's broad face settled into lines of fury and then softened with sadness. "Then the Spaniards didn't throw 'em in prison for bustin' into their cussed sacred city of Santa Fe like McKay said. They're dead."

MATT STONE did not have to reply. Those who knew them, knew the full story of the feuding Stone brothers, Matt and Steve. They knew of the fights they used to have—over women, over horses, over a new hat in a store window. Matt and Steve Stone had always seemed to want the same things, and when the object in question could not be divided, they had fought for the prize. That's how the gunfight had finally come about, and it had ended the feud. Matt and Steve had each put a slug in the other, and both had been too stubborn to have the bullet removed.

The bullets were like a binding tie of friendship. Realizing how close they had come to killing each other, Matt and Steve had sworn a lasting truce. They had gone into business at the Saddle shop and there had been companionship and understanding

between them such as was seldom found in two brothers. Steve—short, stocky and jovial had joked about the slug Matt had put in his hip, making it a little difficult for him to bend quickly or to turn without moving his whole body. Matt—tall, stringy and taciturn—never mentioned Steve's bullet which had lodged deep in his left shoulder, for it gave him no trouble after the wound healed.

When a few traders began to get through to the fabulous city of Santa Fe in 1820, the riches which had been jealously guarded by Spain in its great American colony for nearly a century, beckoned to Matt and Steve Stone. The brothers watched enviously for a while as men left Franklin with a hundred dollars worth of goods and returned with a thousand in Spanish gold. But all of them did not come back. The trackless wastes and marauding Indians of the Great Plains and foreboding Rockies claimed their toll. Others were caught in the forbidden city of the vigilant Spaniards, their wagons confiscated and the men imprisoned by orders of the mother country.

All this did not daunt the adventurous. When Harve McKay spread the news around that he was going to tackle the trail, Steve and Matt Stone invested their savings in goods to be traded, and Steve went along to handle the business. George Barnett staked Hank Barber and sent him along. Jobe Atkins had sent his younger brother, Will. McKay had taken some of his own friends.

It had been a small train, eight men and sixteen pack mules. Six months ago, Harve McKay had returned with only four men—the men he'd chosen himself. They had been driving a high-wheeled Spanish wagon which they had managed to steal from a courtyard as all of them were on their way to a Santa Fe prison. That had been the trader's story, but Matt knew now that it was a lie.

McKay had been bearded, ragged and down-hearted. He had put the wagon on display in the big front window of his general store and had left it there as a token to his disastrous journey. He had not mentioned returning to the mysterious city again.

"Go fetch Jobe, George," Matt Stone said quietly, "and I'll tell him what hap-

pened. I'll rub up a bit while you're gone."

George Barnett stood up and patted the big Colt .45 in his hip holster. "I reckon we was right at the start, Matt. McKay let 'em all get in and make their trade and then he killed 'em on the trail and kept all the gold hisself. McKay and his hired help probably got 'em in their sleep. But what did he do with the money? He'd be scairt to put it in the bank, and there wasn't a sign of a bag with him when he come drivin' that fancy rig in off the trail. Claimed he just had time to grab the reins and run. I reckon it'll be up to me to plug McKay!"

Matt Stone shook his head. "I'll handle McKay. Before he dies we want what's comin' to us. You fetch Jobe."

Matt sat as he was until George Barnett stepped out into the gloom of the street and pulled the door shut behind him. Then he stood up and walked toward the door which led to the living quarters at the rear of the little shop.

There was an empty spot inside of Matt's chest like part of him had withered and wasted away. Though he and Steve had spent half their lives fighting each other, Steve had been Matt's only blood kin, and now he knew how others felt when their last family tie was broken. He had known the truth before he left Franklin, and there had been no surprise when he found Steve was dead. But there was an ache inside him now for which there was no cure.

He pushed the door open and stepped into the darkness of the back room. A chill went through him the moment he entered, for he walked straight into the cold barrel of a gun which a man rammed hard into his mid-section.

EVEN in the dim light, Matt recognized the cold, emotionless face which stared at him from behind the Colt. It was Ray Topper, the pale, gray-eyed teamster whom Harve McKay had selected as one of his helpers on the trip to Santa Fe.

"Stand as you are, Stone," Topper ground out tonelessly, "and listen hard. In a minute you'll hear the shot that's goin' to blast the life out of George Barnett!"

Matt's stoic calm was unmoved to the eye, but his heart jumped into his throat and tightened his breathing. McKay had seen him! McKay had guessed the truth

and the sly trader was already on the move! It would be like McKay, Matt reflected, to hold a man helpless while he listened for the shot that would burn the heart out of his best friend.

Matt took a half step forward, his skin growing clammy from the tenseness which strained like a bent bow inside him. The gun hammer rolled back beneath Ray Topper's thumb and the slim teamster grunted a warning: "Stay put."

"McKay's signin' his death warrant," Matt said tightly. "You better think twice, Topper. It's Harve McKay we're after first."

Ray Topper grinned crookedly and reached out to unsnap Matt's gunbelt. The heavy weapon dropped to the floor and Topper chuckled hollowly. "Who's McKay?"

Talk was useless and Matt Stone did not argue with the man. He was too busy listening, his eardrums echoing the beating of his own pulse and trying to filter out the incongruous noise of the street while they groped for the sound of a shot.

McKay had moved fast, and he had caught Matt off-guard. It angered him to think that three months of riding and planning were to end like this. Thoughts raced madly through his mind, but they offered no solution to his predicament. That gun in his belly spelled death—now or later. If he moved, it would be now; if he did not it would be later. In the meantime, George Barnett was walking unsuspectingly to his grave.

There was not time for all that had to be done and Matt knew it. He could not escape Ray Topper and reach George Barnett in time. Sweat grew hot and sticky under the brim of his low-crowned hat. The palms of his hands, held shoulder high at Topper's command, were filled with moisture.

Matt could stand it no longer. He slammed his hands straight down and there was nearly two hundred pounds of trail-hardened bone and muscle bunched behind his arm. He hit Topper so hard on the shoulders that the man's knees buckled and he cried out in surprise as he went down. The gun in his fist roared at the same moment.

Powder and pain and fire were a series of mixed sensations in the stuffy air of the

room. Matt knew he was shot, but it was only a stinging gash along his ribs.

All he could see was the dim form of Ray Topper on the floor below him, and the spiteful mask of the man's white face. Matt was like a madman. He stomped on Topper as he would a snake. He sent his boot forward hard, heard the brittle crunch of teeth as his heel hit Topper's face. He was meeting the man on his own grounds, fighting as Topper would have fought in Matt's place. The gunman squealed in terror and dropped the gun.

Topper was more beast than man. Matt's blow had been painful and stunning, but it did not put him out of the fight. Grabbing Matt's leg, Topper pulled him to the floor. Matt fell hard, and Topper was on him in a moment, spitting blood and broken teeth as he fought. Matt felt the man's fist in his face, but fury was like a protecting shield and there was no instant pain in the blow. He pushed Topper aside and sprang to his feet as the gunman also stood up.

It took only one blow to finish him, for Matt's fist had the power of a thunderbolt as it whammed into Topper's chin and stretched him out straight and limp.

Getting his gun from the floor, Matt stepped over the bloody figure of Ray Topper and darted through the back door which the gunman had left ajar when he had slipped in to listen while Matt was talking to George Barnett. He was still listening for the cowardly shot which had been planned for George Barnett.

IT CAME the moment Matt stepped into the dark alley behind the saddle shop. Just one shot—the insignificant sounding pop of a rifle—but it signified the end of a life. Matt broke into a run toward the street, remorse knifing through him as he realized he was too late. George Barnett was dead, now. He knew it before he turned the corner and saw the little knot of people gathering in a milling circle down the street near Jobe Atkins' livery stable.

Matt stopped running when he saw the crowd. He laid one hand on the bone handle of his gun and walked slowly toward the spot. His face was like an Indian's, both in color and expression. His blue eyes were as flat as flint, but they missed nothing as he scanned every roof and alleyway in

search of a movement that would show him the drygulcher.

He saw nothing, but a list of names came into his mind. He knew the killer was among them. McKay had taken four men with him. Ray Topper was in the saddle shop; that left Star Delmer, Moss Gibson and Tate Johnson.

Suddenly a new fear touched Matt Stone's thoughts. He had underestimated Harve McKay. He had thought the trader would wait for him to make the first move, but McKay had seen him return, and had dispatched his gun-crew immediately. McKay had only three men to fear and one of them was already dead. That meant the same fate was planned for Matt Stone and Jobe Atkins!

Men moved aside at the touch of the tall, brownskinned man in buckskin. Matt came through the crowd and found the giant figure of George Barnett lying face down in the dirt, one leg drawn pitifully beneath him as if his last move had been a determined effort to rise again. But George Barnett would never stand again. The tiny, blood-circled hole was just at the right spot beneath his left shoulder blade.

Without speaking to anyone, Matt stooped, straightened George's bent leg, and turned his head to one side to remove some of the grotesqueness of death. Just then the crowd gave way again and a stocky, dark-haired man with a thin mustache over his firm lips and a star on his vest stepped through to look at the corpse. Matt saw that it was Marshal Alan Craft.

"What happened here?" Craft asked gruffly of no one in particular.

"I heard the shot and saw him fall," a man said from the crowd. "The shot came from somewhere up the street, but I didn't see nobody."

Marshal Alan Craft nodded and bent for a closer inspection of the form on the ground. "It's George Barnett, ain't it?"

He answered his own question with another nod, and then he saw Matt Stone for the first time. His sharp black eyes widened and he said:

"Well, Matt Stone! When did you get back into town? Heard some time ago that you was headed down Santa Fe way."

"I've been back less than an hour," Matt said quietly.

"What do you know about this?" Craft

asked. "George was workin' for you, I believe."

Matt Stone straightened and looked steadily at the marshal. Craft was a man who did not like accusations without tangible evidence to support them, and Matt expected little help from him. Still he said:

"I don't know who killed him, Alan. But I know who paid for the lead and why he was killed. It was Harve McKay."

Marshal Alan Craft's square face showed signs of anger. "Don't go makin' public charges, Matt, and get everybody ridin' my back to arrest a man you can't prove nothin' on. I know you blame McKay for your brother's trouble in Santa Fe, but I was sittin' in Malloy's saloon right beside Harve McKay when I heard this yellin' down here."

"There's a lot of things you don't know that George Barnett did, Alan," Matt replied sternly. "That's why he's dead and you're alive. Steve ain't in no trouble at Santa Fe; Steve's dead. And I'm layin' you two to one Star Delmer, Moss Gibson and Tate Johnson wasn't with McKay when you left him. One of 'em shot George, and Ray Topper came for me at the same time."

Alan Craft looked at Matt Stone and said: "If you know what you're talkin' about, come see me later at the jail."

THE MARSHAL started dispersing the crowd, and sent a man for the undertaker. Matt scanned the faces around him for the first time, then, and his heart thumped a note of despair as the men melted away. During his concern over George Barnett, he had completely forgotten Jobe Atkins, the old gray-haired liveryman. Surely Jobe must have heard the noise outside. Where was he?

The livery stable was scarcely thirty yards away, and Matt glanced fearfully in that direction. He could see the dim glimmer of a lamp through the double doors which stood half open at the end of the weathered building. He gave George Barnett's lifeless figure a final lingering glance and walked away.

A man came running out of the livery stable before Matt got there and he could read the look on his face. Matt stopped in his tracks, feeling helpless and futile. For forty miles along the trail outside of Franklin, Matt Stone had laid his traps for

Harve McKay on his return ride. He had counted on George Barnett and Jobe Atkins to help him force McKay to the bait, but the trader had not waited. McKay had struck first and the revenge Matt had planned to satisfy himself and his partners had backfired in his face.

Matt watched the man run forward and his mind had already formed the words which the man uttered.

"Marshal! Marshal Craft! There's—there's a man in the barn with a knife in him. Dead! Somebody has killed Jobe Atkins!"

The picture was a hazy one, as Matt remembered it afterward. He heard Alan Craft's startled curse, saw the lawman run to the stable. Matt walked out of the way and leaned against the corner of a building and unconsciously smoked a cigarette while the strength seemed to drain out of his arms and legs and leave him weak and wobbly. Only he had escaped Harve McKay's three-way noose of death.

After a moment he turned to see where he was and found that he was standing in front of Harve McKay's general store. He stared fiercely at the fancy Spanish wagon on display in the big front window. It was an admirable vehicle with its tall, slim-spoked yellow wheels and its high green bed with gilt trimming on the sides. It was a town wagon, its appearance characteristic of the riches of Santa Fe which were forcing the lawless West into a new era of trade.

The wagon always reminded him painfully of Steve, bringing a lump to his throat and an uncomfortable constriction to his chest. Now it also served as an omen of death for George Barnett and Jobe Atkins. The certain knowledge that McKay would kill him next did not disturb Matt Stone. His own determination made it practically an accomplished fact that McKay would never get that chance.

Finally, Matt went to the livery stable and looked at Jobe Atkins. It had been a long time since he had seen the old liveryman and he had even forgotten the sound of Jobe's voice. He would never be able to remember it now, for Jobe would not talk anymore. He lay humped over a bale of hay and there was blood all over the back of his rusty black coat where it had run out from around the blade of the

bowie in his back. Matt did not look at his face.

He stayed at the stable until the undertaker came and hauled the body away. Marshal Alan Craft was busy with the formalities of an investigation and Matt said nothing until the lawman shrugged his shoulders and turned his hands up in perplexity.

"I know he was a friend of yours, Matt," Craft said worriedly, as if he needed some excuse, "and I'm sorry about it. But you know how it is in Franklin these days. George and Jobe ain't the first two men who have been killed without the killers bein' caught. It's too much for one man, and I'm only human."

Matt studied the marshal's face a moment and said: "You asked me to talk to you later about Harve McKay. I reckon he's still at Malloy's. I'm goin' to see him, and I'd like for you to come along. What I've got to say is just goin' to be said once."

Alan Craft nodded and shoved his gun forward in the waistband of his worn Oregon pants. "I ain't wantin' no trouble, Matt. Not between you and McKay until you're sure. You go slingin' lead and you'll stand trial for it if I'm still here. You'd better be sure."

"I'm sure," Matt said. "You comin'?"

The marshal nodded and they went outside together.

MATT STONE led the way through the swinging doors of the saloon, and saw Harve McKay sitting at a table along the wall to the left of the long, crowded bar. McKay had a bottle of whisky in front of him and there was a slender, kinky-haired blonde girl sitting across from him.

Harve McKay was long and thin, with black piercing eyes set deep in his slim, chiseled face. He was dressed in a dark, expensive suit and a white silk shirt. A diamond-studded stickpin on his black tie glittered in the orange lamplight. There was a twisted, appealing grin on his thin lips as he leaned toward the blonde girl and talked earnestly.

"He ain't wearin' the rags he was wearin' the last time I saw him," Matt commented. "His pards ain't with him, neither."

His eyes slid to the side of the table where he could see the ivory butt of McKay's gun. It was the same. McKay had

come from the down-river cattle country where men learned to use a gun fast. Franklin knew little about him. McKay had first tried his luck at trapping, and later put up a store which barely made him a living. His failure to make big money at the store was responsible for his organizing the train to Santa Fe, where yellow gold awaited those with the nerve and cunning necessary to obtain it.

"Funny thing," Alan Craft grunted. "Few people trust McKay enough to trade with him. His business ain't no better."

"He's got the money that belonged to Steve and the others," Matt Stone declared coolly, "and I aim to make him show it."

Without glancing at the other men in the room, Matt Stone and Marshal Alan Craft walked straight to Harve McKay's table. The slim trader did not notice them until they were directly in front of him, staring him straight in the face. McKay's thin face paled as he saw the two men so close to him. But the dark-eyed trader had nerves of ice, and they froze quickly.

He stared arrogantly into the face of into place.

Matt Stone, his gaze trying to penetrate the flatness of the man's blue eyes, searching for some warning emotion beneath the rich gold of his face. He ran his tongue over his hard lips and said:

"I thought you'd left Franklin, Stone. I see you've just been on the trail. Trapping again?"

"Get rid of the floozy," Matt Stone said sternly, nodding toward the girl who had turned and was smiling up at him in a strained manner. "I want to talk to you."

McKay nodded to the girl and she scurried away. He let his eyes rove over the belted guns of Matt and the marshal. The trader unbuttoned his coat carelessly and let his slim hand dangle beside his own ivory-handled Colt as Matt and Craft drew up chairs and sat down.

"All right men," Harve McKay said evenly. "What's behind this sudden visit?"

Matt Stone did not waste time. He looked Harve McKay hard in the face and said, "I never did believe that story about Steve and the others goin' to a Spanish jail and you gettin' away. Now I know it's a lie."

McKay's thin smile disappeared and his oily skin began to look hot. "Now watch

what you're sayin,' Stone. I know you was broke up by Steve's bad luck. It's hard for boys as close as you two was to be apart, and I can see how you'd blame me a little since I was in charge of the pack train. You lost money, but so did I."

Matt Stone's lean face did not change expression, and the fierceness of it started Harve McKay perspiring above his thin black eyebrows. But there was a brittle quality in Matt's voice when he spoke, and his companions knew he was reliving his experience.

"One of the hardest thing a man can do, McKay," he said, "is to squat beside three unmarked graves and scoop out sand until you feel the dry bones of the skeletons. It's even worse when you recognize one of 'em as your own brother!"

HARVE MCKAY came almost out of his chair, his black eyes dilating sharply. Then he settled back at once, drew out a slim black cigar from his coat pocket and calmly set a match to it. He puffed at it and said:

"The Santa Fe trail is paved with the bones of men who didn't make it. There's no way of telling one from the other, or whether they was killed by Injuns or died of starvation."

Shifting his chair closer, Matt Stone put his elbows on the table and stared across his tightly clasped hands at Harve McKay.

"You're wrong both ways. Steve and me trapped this country for years before we put up the saddle shop. We met a lot of Injuns and learned how to palaver with 'em and how to keep our hair. Injuns never learn names, but they always peg a man in a way that you can't miss. They called me Man-With-Rock-In-His-Eyes and nicknamed Steve Man-With-Laughing-Lips. When we'd meet an Injun we'd never seen, he'd know us because they had passed the word around."

Apparently Harve McKay was not impressed by Matt Stone's Indian lore. He leaned back in his chair and continued to enjoy his cigar. But he recognized the significance of the visit when Matt said: "They call you Man-With-Chinquapin-Eyes, McKay. It fits."

"So the Injuns along the trail got my number on that trip," McKay said irri-

tably. "That gives you no right to come bustin' in here callin' me a liar."

Matt Stone continued in the same steady tone, and his eyes were as the Indians said—hard and impersonal. "I met a little party of Pawnee forty-fifty miles this side of Raton Pass, McKay. They told me about Man-With-Laughing-Lips and Chinquapin-Eyes coming out of the pass seven-eight moons ago. You was ridin' that fancy rig then, McKay, and Steve and Hank Barber and Will Atkins was with you, and they was ridin' horses. So were your four pards. That means you got into Santa Fe and got out. You killed the others and kept the gold. The Pawnees showed me the graves they found later."

Harve McKay always did the unexpected. He leaned back in his chair and laughed hoarsely. "You've swallowed an Injun medicine yarn, Stone. You can't bring a Pawnee in here and have him tell a jury I killed them men. There's no way in the world to tell who them skeletons belonged to."

"He's right about that, Matt," Alan Craft said uneasily.

Matt did not look at the marshal. He fumbled in his pocket and laid the battered six-gun slug on the table. "In one of them skeletons, this bullet was just barely wedged into the hip bone. All I had to do was lift it out with my finger. I knowed where to find it, because I put it there five years ago when I shot Steve. That's some-thin' you forgot, McKay."

Without giving the trader time to reply, Matt Stone stood up and motioned to the marshal. Craft stared curiously at him, but obeyed his signal. Matt cast a final look at Harve McKay's perspiring face and said:

"I'm givin' you until mornin' to give yourself up, McKay. Then I'm goin' to handle you personally. I just wanted Craft here so he'd know what to expect."

Matt Stone did not look back at Harve McKay as he walked swiftly toward the door, his long legs gliding out before him with the easy grace of a panther. But Marshal Alan Craft glanced over his shoulder several times and kept his hand near his gun. He knew McKay's speed with that ivory-handled gun, and he knew the dangerous position in which Matt Stone had just placed himself.

Outside, Matt walked along the boardwalk and the lawman matched his stride for a while, a frown on his aging face. Craft's big hand on his shoulder slowed Matt's long steps and he stopped in the shadows of the darkened side street as they turned toward the saddle shop.

"I thought we was havin' a showdown in there, Matt," he said curiously. "You built McKay up to the breakin' point and then walked out on him. That's gettin' us nowhere, except maybe a shot in the back for you. There's no proof that will let me arrest McKay, but you made him look guilty as hell."

Matt pursed his lips thoughtfully and shoved his big hands into his buckskin pockets. "I reckon if you hadn't been with me McKay would have called for a shoot-out. But he's already half-whipped. He's scared."

"Sure he's scared," Alan Craft cut in. "You've got quite a reputation on the trails, Matt, and some say you pow-wow'd with the Injuns so much you fight like 'em. That's what makes McKay dangerous now. What are you up to?"

"He'll run," Matt Stone said quietly. "He'll run tonight rather than worry about what I'll do. It's too risky for him to drygulch me after you heard the talk. When Steve didn't come back it almost broke me. Nearly everything I had was in that train, and I figure McKay owes me a lot. He's got gold cached away somewhere and he won't leave without it."

A SLOW, understanding smile spread over Marshall Alan Craft's face. "He fell for the whole bait, Matt, and if you're right I'll back you to the limit. That's the only way you could get McKay to bring that money into the open if he's got it. But I was here when he come in and he didn't even have a pack. You're takin' a big gamble. What comes next?"

Matt moved on toward the saddle shop. "You better come along and get Ray Topper out of the back room. I think he's dead. You can bandage up my ribs and maybe see that it was self-defense. Then you can hunt up McKay's pards, Star Delmer, Moss Gibson and Tate Johnson. Get them three in jail on suspicion and I'll guarantee you'll get your killer before mornin'."

The marshal followed the tall buckskin-clad man into the shop. "I hope you're right, Matt. Unless I do somethin' they'll run me out of town. McKay's only got three men left, though. If Topper's dead he's only got two. McKay and Star Delmer had a fight a month ago and McKay killed him during a row at the store one night. McKay claimed self-defense and went free."

Matt did not reply. He wasn't concerned with odds right now. If things worked out right they would be McKay's odds—not his. They found Ray Topper as Matt had left him, battered and bruised and dead from a broken neck. Marshal Alan Craft looked over the scene in the back room and inspected Topper's gun which lay where he had dropped it. The room told its own story, and he bandaged the wound along Matt's ribs without commenting on Topper's death. But Matt could see that the lawman was worried. Craft did not want to tangle with McKay unless he was certain he could convict him. He had always been like that and it had kept him alive.

"You won't back down on me, will you, Alan?" Matt asked earnestly as the marshal arose to go after the undertaker.

Alan frowned dubiously. "You ain't told me much, Matt. I don't know what I'm gettin' in to. McKay will get me in a week unless you put a noose around his neck. What am I goin' to do with Moss Gibson and Tate Johnson after I get 'em in jail?"

"Get Moss and Tate on suspicion of murder," Matt said slowly. "They're the men that killed George and Jobe. Hold 'em until McKay gets away. Then turn 'em loose and come after me."

The marshal made an impatient gesture with his hands. "You talk like the sun has boiled your brains away, Matt. What are you up to?"

Matt Stone's firm lips relaxed in a slight grin. "It's the old fox and hound game, Alan. The Injuns call it good medicine."

Alan Craft's blocky face showed some relief. "It might work unless McKay out-smarts you. I don't want to find you dead when I come for you."

"You won't," Matt said firmly. "McKay will run."

After the marshal was gone, Matt put out the lamp and sat in the darkness until he heard the undertaker come in the back

door and remove the corpse. Then he went in and stretched out on the bunk, fully clothed.

THE RUSTLING sound at the back door was a faint note of discord in Matt's sleep at first. Then he heard it again, and sat up to listen. He came quickly out of the bunk as he recognized the hissing voice of Marshal Alan Craft.

When Matt opened the door, Craft stepped quickly inside, his dark eyes flashing with eagerness. "McKay's gone, Matt, like you said. I kept Tate Johnson and Moss Gibson locked up until midnight and turned them out with my apologies."

"Good," Matt said. "You got horses?"

The marshal nodded. "You'd never guess how McKay left. He—"

"He took the Spanish wagon," Matt finished, and the lawman frowned.

Matt said: "I figured a long time ago that the wagon had a false bottom in it, and that McKay was usin' it like a safe. He slipped in the store at night and got what money he needed."

Lighting a lamp, Matt sat down in a chair by the bunk and took out the battered slug which he had pried from the skeleton of his brother. Then he took a cartridge from his gunbelt and started working the lead loose with a pen-knife.

Marshal Alan Craft stared at him. "They're gettin' away, Matt. Let's go."

The face of the tall man in buckskin mirrored a strange peacefulness. He fished out the lead from the loaded cartridge and inserted the battered slug which he'd brought back from Raton Pass.

"The fox is running," he said, "and the hounds are after him. We'll get there in plenty of time to take the pelt."

Matt stood up and shoved the newly-fashioned cartridge in his gun. "Let's go, Alan. I aim to put this slug where it belongs."

They hit their saddles on the run, and Matt sent his mustang galloping at full speed through the dark, silent streets of Franklin. He picked up the thin tracks of a wagon on the south trail and after that he did not inspect the ground again. There was only one route the vehicle could have travelled, and Matt wasted no time.

Once he stopped at a fork in the trail and pointed at a set of fresh hoof marks,

He looked at Marshal Alan Craft and squinted thoughtfully.

"Here's where Tate Johnson and Moss Gibson picked him up. They'll get him, and we'll get 'em all."

Matt was right. It was almost dawn when they came to the rocky gorge where Harve McKay had made the first move to cover his trail. But it was a simple trick to a man with Matt Stone's knowledge of the plains. When the wheel marks disappeared, the gorge was the only answer.

A gunshot disturbed the eerie stillness and then several rolled together.

Matt was no longer cautious. He sent the mustang slipping and sliding to the bottom of the gulch, his own gun in his hand now. Craft followed close behind, his face aglow with excitement.

As he rounded a sharp shoulder of rock, Matt saw exactly what he had expected to see. A hundred yards below him he picked out the graceful silhouette of the dainty Spanish wagon. A gunflash blossomed behind the wagon, and Matt caught a glimpse of Harve McKay's steeple-crowned hat. In the rocks above McKay two guns boomed in return and Matt saw white chips fly from the wagon bed.

At that moment a man shifted position in the rocks, a big slope-shouldered man in a bull-hide vest. It was Moss Gibson. The moment the man moved, Harve McKay's gun flashed beside the wagon and Moss Gibson fell heavily to the ground.

Choosing a moment when the guns were silent, Matt Stone cupped his hands to his mouth and yelled down the gorge: "I'm here, too, McKay!"

HARVEY MCKAY'S answer was an unintelligible curse flung to the winds, and then two guns swerved toward Matt and the marshal. Hot, buzzing slugs split the air around him as Tate fired from the rocks and McKay shot from the wagon.

"Take cover, Matt," Craft yelled, diving out of the saddle.

Matt Stone had waited too long, already. He stayed aboard the mustang and held firmly to his bone-handled six-gun. "You blast Johnson, Alan. I'm takin' McKay."

Before the marshal could object, Matt Stone was gone. He kicked the pony's ribs and galloped straight toward the Spanish

wagon. Matt knew he could not ride down that bullet-blazed lane without getting shot, but he was gambling on the speed of his horse to make him hard to hit. Harve McKay saw him coming and triggered wildly. Bullets came in a steady stream and Matt felt that he could reach out and touch one at any moment. Then the first shock came. He had expected it, and he was braced for it. A slug ripped into his shoulder, burning like a branding iron and almost knocking him from the saddle.

Matt set his teeth together and kept going. Behind him he heard the steady rattle of the marshal's gun as Craft kept Tate Johnson busy. Then Matt was at the wagon and Harve McKay's scared face was in front of him.

McKay came to his feet when his protection was no longer effective. He raised his gun for a killing shot, and then Matt dropped the hammer on his own cocked gun. Harve McKay wilted down in his tracks, his mouth working soundlessly.

Matt saw the slim-faced trader go down, and then he stopped fighting the dizziness that had come with the shoulder wound. He slipped slowly out of the saddle and passed out.

The same pain which had hurled him into oblivion, revived him. Marshal Alan Craft was washing the blood away from the wound and making a bandage for it when Matt opened his eyes a few minutes later. Matt was stretched out in the wagon bed now, and the first thing he noticed was that one of the floor boards had been removed. In a little trough beneath the bed, the early rays of the sun were dancing on a pile of strange golden coins.

"Must be fifteen-twenty thousand there for you, Matt," the lawman said when he saw him looking at the gold. "McKay and Moss Gibson are dead. Moss killed George Barnett and Tate Johnson got Jobe Atkins. Johnson told me that before he died."

Matt nodded with satisfaction. "When the doc fishes McKay's slug out of my shoulder, Alan, tell him to get the other one, too. The one Steve put there."

The marshal understood. "Sure, Matt," he said. "We'll get 'em both."

The marshal knew Matt was thinking of a day five years ago. The bullet tie was broken.



SHADOW OF A LOBO

By Wayne D. Overholser

Armfield's toll road was life itself to the mountain-locked valley. To keep it open, even peaceful citizens might turn to murder.

IT WAS not yet noon, but Cliff Jenson had worn a path behind the counter to the front of his store looking for Shortcake Hogan's freight outfit. Hogan should have been on his way hours ago, Cliff finished with a customer, looked at the barren shelves and returned again to his street door, eyes on the gray lane that ran northward. There was only dusty emptiness, bright now in the midday sun.

Bill Trent came along the boardwalk from the bank, his thin face holding a quiet malice. He owned the Mercantile, the only other store in Palisade, and he had never forgiven Cliff for starting a rival business. He drawled a lazy "Howdy," and stopped in front of Cliff, the thumb of his left hand hooked into the arm hole of his vest within inches of his star. He was Palisade's marshal for



Cliff was close enough to see Harl's narrowed, muddy eyes. And suddenly the roar of guns beat into the street quiet.

no better reason than he was the only man in town who would take the job for the small salary that it paid.

"Howdy, Bill," Cliff said, his eyes on the street.

"Shortcake ain't started yet, has he?" Trent asked, grinning.

"No."

"Shortcake ain't one to start at noon, now is he?" Trent's voice was filled with mock solicitude.

Trent's words fanned the long smoldering rage in Cliff close to flames. He pinned his gray eyes on Trent. "Bill, one of these days you're gonna talk me into beating hell out of you."

"And I'll have you eating county grub in jail." Trent tapped his star. "I'd be plumb happy to lock you up for a spell. If you hadn't started a price war, my business would have stood up fine. I ain't sold nothing but a pair of shoestrings for a month."

"I didn't start a price war," Cliff said sharply.

Trent's face was ugly. "The hell you didn't." He wagged a bony finger at Cliff. "But you ain't staying in business long. Meldrum wants to see you."

Cliff knew what Meldrum wanted, and judging by the pleased look on Trent's face, he knew, too.

"So you're running errands for the banker, are you?" Cliff asked contemptuously.

"It's a chore I'm happy to do." Trent was grinning again. "Wouldn't surprise me none if my competition just died a natural death."

It was then that Cliff heard the jingle of bells, the signal that Shortcake Hogan's outfit was approaching. Cliff pushed past Trent and started up the boardwalk as Hogan's six horse team made the turn at the end of the block and straightened out into Main Street. The wagon stopped in front of the store.

"What's wrong with you that you've got to stay in bed till noon?" Cliff belted.

Then Cliff had a look at Hogan's red face, and he knew he shouldn't have said it. Hogan, mounted on the near wheel horse, cuffed back his hat, his sun-puckered eyes filled with more anger than Cliff had ever seen in them. He yelled,

"I ain't been in bed. I've been chasing these ornery devils."

"Why didn't you put 'em up last night?"

"I did, damn it," Hogan howled. "Somebody let 'em out."

Cliff, thinking about what Bill Trent had said, felt the rising pressure of his anger. He handed the freighter a sheet of paper. "There's the order. Keep 'em rolling."

"You bet."

Cliff, stepping back on the walk as the freight wagon rolled by, saw that Trent was no longer on the street. There was a streak of wildness in Cliff Jenson that made people who knew him wonder why he had taken a prosaic job like running a store. Now that wildness was pressing him. If a man ever deserved a licking, Trent did. He started toward the Mercantile, his hands fisted, when Vance Meldrum called from the bank door, "Cliff, will you step in here a minute?"

Cliff paused, not wanting to talk to Meldrum, but knowing it was foolish to slap him in the face. Now that he took a moment to think, he knew it was foolish to give Trent a licking. He said, "All right, Vance," and stepped into the bank.

"We'll go on back," Meldrum said, and led the way to his office.

Vance Meldrum had come to Palisade less than six months ago just after the old banker, Abel Smith, had died. He'd bought the bank from Smith's widow, and already the basin was beginning to feel the difference.

Meldrum closed his office door behind Cliff, and motioning to a chair, stepped around his desk and sat down. He gave Cliff a cigar and took one for himself.

"Old Abel ran the bank with his heart and I'm trying to use my head, Cliff. The way I see it a banker has to look at things from the standpoint of the whole community."

MELDRUM touched a match to his cigar and pulled on it for a moment. Cliff, watching him, said nothing. Vance Meldrum was a bigger man than Cliff with cool green eyes and an overlapping lower lip that gave his face a bulldog appearance. He wore an expensive tailored gray suit, and affected a broad-brimmed Stetson and riding boots. Despite his ef-

forts to become a part of this community, he had somehow failed to achieve it. Cliff, measuring him now, felt the cold driving quality of the man, and wondered as he had so many times why Meldrum had come to this isolated cowtown.

"This basin will be a great country," Meldrum said as if sensing the question in Cliff. "I'd like to grow up with it, but now we're in chains, held back by Sam Dunning's tollgate in Tentrock Pass and Ben Armfield's gate at the Narrows."

He paused, and then added as if suddenly thinking of it, "By the way, Cliff, Armfield is in the country. Apparently he's disappeared and his daughter Bonnie is coming to look for him."

"Plenty of folks around who'd like to take a shot at Armfield," Cliff said dryly.

"Including Cliff Jenson?"

Cliff shrugged. "I've got reason enough."

"That's what I've heard." Meldrum nodded soberly. "As I was saying, we're slaves and we'll stay slaves as long as those tollgates guard the only entrances into the basin. But the railroad will end Armfield's and Dunning's domination." Meldrum puffed hard for a moment. "I'm saying this because I want you to stay in this basin. You belong on a ranch and not in a store. We can't afford to lose men like you."

"You're running your rabbit around the bush mighty hard," Cliff said.

"Then I'll run him into the field. Your shelves are practically bare, Cliff. You're a failure as a storekeeper. You don't have the capital to hire enough freighters, your prices are too low, and Hogan can't keep you supplied. Why don't you get out, Cliff?"

"I guess you'd want me to walk out and leave the business to you," Cliff said sourly.

"I'll buy it from you." Meldrum was carefully reluctant. "I'll put somebody to running it who can charge the prices necessary to show a profit."

"Like Bill Trent."

Meldrum shook his head. "Between you and me, Trent is so tight he squeaks every time he sits down. No, my man wouldn't be like Trent but he wouldn't be a generous open-handed fool like you, either."

"You'll have to take the store if you want it."

"But you're a good buckaroo," Meldrum pressed.

"I'll hang on and rattle."

"Then I'll have to call in your loan the first of the month." The banker's face was grimly sober. "You are a fool, Cliff. I'm showing you the way out, but you're too, well, let's say proud to take it."

Cliff rose. "I'll try to raise the money."

"Think this over. I've been in business since I was a kid, and the principles are the same whether it's here in southeastern Oregon or San Francisco."

"Ben Armfield's principles," Cliff said bitterly.

"No. There is such a thing as having a sense of human values." Meldrum got to his feet, a genial mask on his face. "Anything that's good for the community is good for us."

Vance Meldrum didn't mean what he was saying. Cliff was sure of that, but he didn't know what the man was after. He said, "So long," and went out of the bank.

CLIFF found a rancher waiting to buy barbed wire. After he had supplied the man, he stepped into the Bon Ton Cafe for his dinner. If Shortcake Hogan had good luck, he could make two trips to Winnemucca by the first of the month, but even with good luck, Cliff's chances of meeting the bank's note was next to nothing. The shoestring he'd started with was still a shoestring.

Cliff could lay most of the Jenson bad luck to Ben Armfield. He was not one to hate another man, but it was hard not to hate Armfield. A dozen years before when there had been no bank in Palisade, Armfield had gone through the country offering loans to cattlemen who wanted to expand. And as if nature had been allied with Armfield, drouth years had followed. A dozen ranches had fallen into Armfield's hands including Cliff's father's J Bar. With it had gone the Narrows, a short swift stream carrying the overflow of Blue Lake into Palisade Lake.

Armfield had rocked a few miles of the road and set up a tollgate. It had been a gold mine to him because eighty percent of the travel into the basin came through it, and Ben Armfield became the most hated man in that section of Oregon. He was,

Cliff thought, cut from the same cloth as Bill Trent, but the bolt was longer.

His meal done, Cliff idled for a time under the wooden awning of the hotel, keeping an eye on the store and wondering how much difference the half day Shortcake Hogan had lost would make. He was still standing there when the stage from The Dalles made the turn at the north end of Main Street and rolled to a dust-billowing stop in front of the hotel.

More often than not the south-bound was empty, but today there were three passengers. The first to get down was a girl, fashionably attired in a dark blue dress, a bright parasol in her hand. The other two were men, one tall, skinny, and buck-toothed, the other short, freckled, and clad in black range garb that was expensive and new. Both wore two guns, something Cliff had never seen in Palisade. It took the one glance for Cliff to read their brands. They were hardcases, their guns for hire.

The girl waited patiently for her luggage, the early afternoon sun hard upon her, bringing out the gray coating of dust that the hours of travel had given her. The short gunman said something to her and anger stirred in Cliff. She was pretty and fine and decent. It was as plain to read in her as was the evil in the other.

"No," the girl said and drew back,

"You don't need to be so damned uppity," the gunman snarled. "Why, for all your fine duds, you ain't no better'n the girls . . ."

Cliff took two long steps, grabbed the short man by the shoulder and whirled him around. His right came through in a short explosive punch that snapped the gunman's head back on his shoulders and took the starch out of his knees. He fell loosely against a wheel and slid off into the dust.

"You don't do that to Dan Harl, mister," the skinny one squalled, and grabbed for his gun.

Cliff, straightening up, felt panic crawl through him. His gun was in his desk at the store.

AFTER HIS father had died, Cliff Jensen had drifted south. He'd tarried in Arizona border towns, then worked eastward into New Mexico and Texas. He had

been thrown against gunmen like these, and in self-defense had developed his own gun speed. But the lake basin had always been a peaceful land where men were willing to live and let live, and there had been no need of guns.

Both Dan Harl and his skinny mate, typical of their breed, had arrogantly assumed that a man's limitations were decreed by his gun skill. Well aware of this, Cliff knew he had never been closer to death than he was now. He tensed his muscles to spring, fully conscious of the futility of it.

He heard the girl scream. Then the gun, coming up smoothly and swiftly, stopped, and the skinny man swung around. Vance Meldrum, running along the walk, called shrilly, "Don't, Kim. Put that gun away."

Cliff didn't know why Meldrum's voice had stopped the gunman, but his own reaction had gone too far. He dived at Connors, a shoulder point smashing into the man's middle and doubling him over. The gun went off and the wild shot splintered the boards of the walk. Then Cliff caught Connors on the jaw with the impact of an upswinging sledge. The gunman came up on his toes, straightened out by the force of the blow, and went down like a tall thin aspen before an ax.

Cliff scooped up Connor's gun and stepped back. He heard the girl's long drawn sigh, saw relief break across Meldrum's face. Other men crowded around them, wanting to know what had happened. By the time Cliff told them, Harl was on his feet, a long-fingered hand feeling gingerly of his jaw, muddy eyes mirroring the fury that was in him.

"Get into the stage," Meldrum commanded sourly. "We don't need men of your caliber in this town."

"You're damned right we don't," Bill Trent echoed, a finger tip caressing his star. "You show up here again and I'll lock you up."

Men grabbed the still unconscious Connors and heaved him into the coach. Harl paused, eyes on Cliff. He said thickly, "I'll see you again, mister." Then he stepped up, the door was slammed shut, and a moment later the stage clattered out of town south-bound to Winnemucca.

Not until the crowd had drifted away did Meldrum come up to the girl. He said

softly, "I'm sorry you had to be subjected to this indignity and I'm equally sorry I wasn't here to take the brunt of it for you." He motioned to Cliff. "Miss Armfield, meet Cliff Jensen. He's one of our storemen."

This, then, was Bonnie Armfield. Cliff, taking her outstretched hand, had his first good look at the girl. She was not at all the sort of person he had pictured Ben Armfield's daughter to be. Her eyes were deep brown, friendly eyes reflecting the smile which her scarlet lips held. She murmured, "I could have managed, Mr. Jensen, but thank you."

She did not know how close to death he had been, but Vance Meldrum did. Cliff saw that, sensed the edgy temper that was in the banker, and he wondered at it. He said thoughtfully, "Gunslicks like those two are always dangerous, ma'am. We've never had men like them in Palisade, and I'm wondering why they came."

"I don't know anything about them," the girl said, "except that they got on at The Dalles."

Meldrum picked up her bags. "Thanks, Cliff, for doing a job that should have been mine."

"I guess the thanks are going the other way," Cliff said.

II

BONNIE crossed the lobby to the desk, but Meldrum paused at the door, looking at Cliff, indecision on his wide face as if there was something he wanted to say and wasn't sure he should. Then, making up his mind, he said softly, "Bonnie and I are engaged, Cliff. I hope you'll remember that."

Turning Meldrum walked swiftly across the lobby to where Bonnie was signing the register. Cliff watched them until they disappeared up the stairs, a small grin on his lips. So Meldrum thought Cliff Jensen might be interested in Ben Armfield's daughter. Then Mr. Meldrum had another guess coming.

But later, when he was back in the cool gloom of his store, Cliff found himself picturing Bonnie—her black hair that ran richly away from her temples, her dark friendly eyes that held none of her father's cold arrogance. Then the jangle

of bells broke into his reverie and brought him out of the store on the run. Shortcake Hogan's outfit was back.

A sense of failure beat at Cliff. Hogan had been half a day late getting started. Now, in the middle of the afternoon, he was in Palisade again, empty. Cliff could not doubt Hogan's loyalty. So he stood waiting, a sense of final disaster washing through him.

Other men had come to stand along the street, staring at Hogan and not understanding his being here any better than Cliff. One yelled, "Quick trip to Winnemucca, wasn't it, Shortcake?"

Hogan didn't answer. He stared straight ahead at Cliff, his mouth a thin line across his broad Irish face. Bill Trent, watching from his store, suddenly darted into the street. He called, "What's wrong, Cliff?"

"Maybe you scattered his horses again," Cliff said sourly.

Trent drew in a sucking breath. "No."

Hogan stopped in front of Cliff, climbed down, and slowly walked around the wagon. He stopped before Cliff, his feet still in the dust. "All right, son. Give me hell. I should have been way past the Narrows."

"Let's have it," Cliff said.

"It's Ben Armfield. He's raised the ante. They put up a new sign at the tollgate. Fifty dollars a horse when they're hitched to a vehicle." Hogan shook his fist at his string. "Think of it. Three hundred dollars to get through and another three hundred to get back. It's hell, boy."

Cliff wheeled on Trent, grabbing the man by the shirt front and shaking him the way a terrier shakes a rat. "How'd you fix it with Armfield?"

"So help me, Cliff, I didn't," Trent spluttered. "This hurts me just like it does you. I've got a ten horse wagon-trailer outfit coming north."

"He ain't lying," Hogan said dourly. "His outfit's on the other side of the Narrows and Job White is cussing to beat hell."

"I told Job to hurry," Trent said eagerly, "'cause I figgered Meldrum would be taking your place over and I wanted a good stock of merchandise to grab the trade back before he got started. Now I'm into the same trouble you are, Cliff. If I can't get my goods, I'm busted."

Cliff, looking at Trent, was forced to believe him. He said thoughtfully, "Maybe Meldrum fixed this to bust both of us."

"It's Armfield," a rancher said. "Ain't he done everything he can to milk the basin dry?"

"That's right," Trent agreed. "Armfield runs the gate. Nobody else does."

"Galtry was there," Hogan growled. "Said he'd just got his orders from Armfield."

"Fifty dollars a horse," Cliff murmured. "It ain't legal."

"You think the county court is gonna worry," the rancher demanded, "when they're plumb on the other side of the Palisades? We're just country cousins, Cliff."

Cliff nodded. "Sure, but Armfield can't make it stick. Besides, he won't have any business. No sense to it."

"He'll tie us up and starve us out," the rancher said with deep rancor. "He knows we can't bring in enough stuff over Tentrock Pass before snow flies to run us till spring."

"Maybe Dunning's got the same notion," Cliff said.

Trent shook his head. "Dunning will take what he can get."

"Shortcake, put your outfit up and saddle a bronc," Cliff said in sudden decision.

"Buzz, throw a saddle on my paint. I'll be over in a minute."

"You ain't going out there alone," the rancher said. "This is everybody's business. We'll throw Galtry into the Narrows."

"That ain't the way," Cliff said quickly. "It'd put us outside the law which maybe is what Armfield's after. I just want to palaver with Galtry. I've got a hunch there's a rat in the wood pile, and I aim to smoke him out."

CLIFF, wheeling into the store, strode along the counter to his desk. He was taking his gun and belt out of a drawer when he felt Bill Trent's presence. He asked sharply, "What's biting you, Bill?"

"I've got some turkey to eat," Trent said humbly. "I've pulled off some dirty tricks, Cliff. I've kept my prices too high, but I never let a man go hungry."

Cliff buckled the belt around him, eyes

pinned on the storeman. This wasn't like Trent. He said bluntly, "I don't trust you, Bill. You've done everything you could to fry my hide since I started this store. What's got into you now?"

Trent ran his tongue over dry lips. "I'm scared," he blurted. "This Armfield business don't smell good."

"You know more than you're letting on," Cliff said.

Trent looked away. "I'm guessing like I reckon you are. Maybe it is Armfield, I don't know, but I know one thing. If you and me work together, we can keep our noses above water. If we don't, there'll be hell to pay."

"It would be kind of hard for us to work together," Cliff said dryly. "There's a little thing called a dollar you and me don't see alike."

"I know, but I'm a piker alongside a pirate like Ben Armfield," Trent came close to the desk, his black eyes brightly eager. "Look, Cliff. I've got a lot of grub in my store: sugar, flour, molasses. Stuff like that. You got some odds and ends that'll add up." He ran a quick eye over the shelves. "And you've got good will. Let's throw in together. We'll call it Jenson an Trent. You can figure the prices yourself."

There was a tight grin on Cliff's face as he reached for his hat. "I guess I've seen all there is to see except a horse with wings, and I wouldn't be more surprised if one flew by." He went out. Scowling, Trent followed.

Cliff locked the store and slanted across the street to the stable. His paint was saddled. Stepping up, he swung north to Hogan's place. The Irishman was throwing gear on his roan as Cliff reined into the yard. He called, "All ready, son."

Neither spoke until the town was behind them. Then Hogan said, "What's in your head, Cliff? You ain't packed an iron for a coon's age."

Motioning westward to where the rimrock made a long line against the sky, Cliff said, "You couldn't get a wagon down there with a rope, could you?"

"Hell, no," Hogan said.

Cliff pointed north to where Tentrock Canyon ran like a giant knife slash through the rugged Palisades. "And you'd have quite a time getting a road through them

mountains anywhere except by way of the pass."

"I ain't augering."

"And we're blocked the same way east of here with the lakes running plumb to the rimrock. It gives anybody owning the Narrows a pat hand."

"Sure, but this here geography ain't changed since you and me was born. Why would Armfield come up with a big boost now?"

"That's what I'm aiming to find out, and I've got a hunch. There's a lot of land here open for homesteading, Shortcake. When the sodbusters hear about it, they'll come in like locusts."

"This is range country," Hogan said irritably. "Ain't fit for farming."

"Ever know that to keep 'em from trying?"

"No," Hogan admitted, "but this basin is a long ways from anywhere. What would bring 'em in?"

"A railroad."

Hogan let out a gusty sigh. "Now who is gonna build a railroad?"

"Meldrum allows it's the reason for him coming here. If it is, a man who had the only store in Palisade would have a fortune. And something scared Trent so bad he wants to throw in with me."

"Bill scares easy," Hogan grunted, and spat into the sagebrush.

THEY rode in silence for a time, and presently came to the ridge that formed a peninsula between the lakes. Blue lake lay eastward, stretching to the barren hills that formed a distant brown horizon, the wind raising white caps that caught the sun and sparkled in eye-blinding brilliance. Palisade lake was on the west. Having no outlet, it held the mineral residue the Narrows had poured into it for centuries. It lay a barren gray, without life.

The road followed the ridge top, tules high along the marshy shore. Ahead of them a rickety bridge that Cliff's father had built fifteen years ago spanned the Narrows. As Cliff and Hogan rode up, Ron Galtry stepped from a log tollhouse that stood snug against the north end of the bridge.

"You've got a name for being a tough

hand," Galtry called in a belligerent tone, "but don't try shoving me around, Jenson. See?"

There was no reason for Galtry taking that attitude unless he expected trouble and wanted to beat Cliff to it. Galtry was big of body and long of tongue with meaty lips, a bulbous nose, and colorless eyes set so close that folks in Palisade said a cigarette paper wouldn't slide between them edgewise. Cliff had never liked the man, and now, with Galtry standing on the bridge, thumbs hooked in gun belt, big head rolled forward on his shoulders, Cliff liked him less.

Stepping down, Cliff handed the reins to Hogan. He asked mildly, "What makes you think I'm aiming to shove you around?"

"Armfield raised the ante. See?" Galtry jerked a hand at the newly painted sign. "Said he was tired of getting peanuts from this gate. Quoted me the toll I had to charge. Just got the letter yesterday. See?"

Cliff glanced at the frame structure set on the south shore of Blue lake which had once been his home. He asked, "Where is Armfield?"

Galtry jumped as if he'd been prodded by a knife blade. "How the hell would I know?"

"Meldrum said he'd disappeared around here." Cliff paused, closely watching the big man. "I was wondering if he was in that house."

"Hell no. Now get out of here if you ain't going through. Go on now. I said you couldn't bulldoze me about those rates. See?"

"You're right proddy today," Cliff murmured.

Galtry waved a hand at the tollhouse. "Let him see your arguments, Dan."

Then Cliff understood why Ron Galtry had acted so tough. Dan Harl stepped out of the tollhouse, both guns fisted, his freckled face split by a wide grin. "I said we'd meet again, mister. Now you can go for that smoke pole you're packing."

Ben Armfield was being held in the house on the south shore! That thought ran through Cliff's mind with the explosive force of lightning.

"You look a mite peaked," Harl sneered. "Maybe you're a little sick, mister."

It went against Cliff's grain to back up in front of a man like Dan Harl, but he hadn't expected to find Harl here with a brace of guns in his hands. He shot a glance at the tollhouse. He couldn't be sure, but he thought Kim Connors was standing behind the sun-brightened glass of the window. Even, if by some miracle of speed, he got his gun clear of leather before Harl cut him down, Connors would shoot him down from the protection of the tollhouse.

"You ain't tough at all now, are you, Jenson?" Galtry was grinning. "You'd better mount up and git. See?"

"Funny you need a hardcase like Harl to back up your sign," Cliff said as he stepped into the saddle.

"Armfield sent him along," Galtry said quickly.

"You're smart, mister," Harl jeered. "Smart men live a long time. You'd be real smart if you got out of the basin 'cause I'm fixing to stay."

"It takes a bigger man than you to make me run," Cliff said contemptuously. "Next time we meet maybe you won't have a pair of irons in your fists,"

Swinging his paint, Cliff and Hogan set a fast pace toward Palisade, but not until they were out of gun range did the freighter take a deep breath. "You know, Cliff, that freckled-faced runt was a trigger-happy slug-slammer if I ever saw one."

"Did you notice how proddy Galtry got when I asked him if Armfield was in the house?" Cliff asked.

Hogan nodded. "Don't make no sense, though."

"It would if Armfield was in the house. Looks to me like we've got our noses into a bigger game than we guessed. Want to play it out?"

"Sure I'll play it out, but it ain't no big game. Armfield just decided to make a lot of dinero fast."

"More than that," Cliff said grimly, and nodded at a juniper-clad ridge running parallel to the north shore of Palisade lake. "They can't see us from the tollhouse now. You belly down on top. I'll be back after dark."

Hogan swore sadly. "Gonna be damned lonesome, but I'll do it. Can't do no freighting now. That's sure."

III

THE SUN was low over the western rim when Cliff rode into town. He had supper in the Bon Ton. Bonnie Armfield was in the back booth with Vance Mel-drum and Sam Dunning. He caught Bonnie's quick smile before he turned to give the order to the waitress. Then a new thought raced through his mind. Sam Dunning might well be the man who was behind this pattern of high prices and starvation that was being woven for the people of the basin.

As Cliff ate, he turned this thought over in his mind. Sam Dunning had come to the basin before Cliff's father had. He'd taken land along the north shore of Blue lake and was making a good start when Ben Armfield had come with his offer of a big loan and low interest. Dunning, like so many more, had taken the offer and lost his ranch.

Dunning had disappeared for several years. Then he'd come back, filed on a quarter section atop Tentrock Pass, and had approached the county court with a proposition of building a tollroad down the canyon. The court, realizing the basin's need for more than one outlet, had consented. Now that the fantastic rates that Galtry had posted would practically close the Narrows, the travel down Tentrock Canyon would increase four or five times, and Dunning's tolls would mount correspondingly.

Cliff paid for his meal, and returning to his store, began to pace along the counter, thinking about this and how it would affect him. Shortcake Hogan might be able to make one trip to The Dalles before snow blocked the pass, but no more, and in one trip he couldn't bring more than a fraction of what Cliff would need for his winter stock.

"You busy, Jenson?"

Sam Dunning was standing in the doorway, tall bony frame almost filling it. A wariness came into Cliff. He had never liked nor trusted Dunning, nor had his father when they were ranching. He said, "Come in, Sam."

Dunning strode along the counter, reached the cracker barrel and dipped into it. He filled his mouth and began to chomp noisily, dark eyes fixed on Cliff. He was

a sullen barren-faced man who had, so rumor ran, a couple of killings to his credit in the mines around Baker City. Cliff, waiting for Dunning to speak, remembered he had never seen the man smile.

"You and me have got no reason to love Ben Armfield." Dunning reached for another handful of crackers. "He fixed your dad same as he did me."

Cliff nodded, filled his pipe, and held a match flame to it. Dunning opened his mouth and shoved the crackers in. He swallowed with effort.

"Your dad wasn't tough. I'm remembering he lived along the lake shore in a covered wagon watching Armfield run his old J Bar. Reckon he died of a broken heart. Now I'm wondering if you're as tough as some folks claim, or whether you're soft like your dad was."

Anger stirred in Cliff. He asked, "What are you driving at, Sam?"

"When Hogan got back from the Narrows with news about Armfield's new rates, you said maybe I had the same idea." The tall man paused, eyes slitted. "I ain't raising a nickel, just because Armfield aims to skim the milk off with the cream, and I don't like that talk. Savvy?"

"That's good, Sam. It'd be tough on the basin if you raised."

"Then see you don't get off no more gab like that." Dunning rocked back on his heels. "Reckon you'll be pulling out soon as you lose your store."

There could be no doubt about the veiled threat in Dunning's words. Cliff bit hard against his pipestem, holding his temper back, letting Dunning talk himself out. He said, "Didn't figure on it."

Dunning swung a bony hand toward the shelves. "Hell, man, you'll be busted flat before Hogan gets to The Dalles and back. Tell you what I'll do, Jenson. I'll buy you out. I always wanted to run a store."

"I ain't selling."

"I'll give you a job running my gate. Name your own figger."

IT WAS CRAZY. Not many hours before, Meldrum had wanted to buy the store. Then Trent had asked to come in as a partner. Now Sam Dunning, who had about as much business with a store as a

hungry cow would have with a manger full of moonbeams, wanted to buy.

"No thanks, Sam."

Dunning cursed fiercely. "Jenson, you're a damned fool bent on buying yourself a chunk of ground six feet deep if . . ." He checked himself, and wheeling, stalked out.

Cliff watched Dunning disappear into the Silver Dollar. Smiling grimly, he thought that one thing was coming clear. Cliff Jenson and his store were slated to play a major role in this mysterious drama.

Twilight had come, the last scarlet streamers flaming above the western rim. The gloom deepened in the store to near darkness. Cliff picked up a flour sack and began filling it with supplies. He had finished dumping coffee into the grinder when a slim figure slipped through the door. Bonnie Armfield called, "Mr. Jenson?"

"Here," he said, and turned the crank. He was both surprised and puzzled at her coming, and he didn't want to talk to her.

Bonnie came along the counter and stood beside him until he was done. Then she said, "Please don't light a lamp."

He finished with the supplies, knotted the sack, and laid it on the counter. "What can I do for you?"

"Can you close the store for a few days? Or get someone to tend it?"

"Reckon so, but I don't figger on doing it."

He heard her catch her breath. "Mr. Jenson, I know my father's been kidnapped. Or killed. I've got to have somebody's help, and I'm hoping it will be yours. Would you consider one hundred dollars a day fighting wages?"

"Ben Armfield's daughter can buy almost anything she wants," he said bitterly. "Only I'm the gent who keeps the 'almost' in there."

"Ben Armfield is rich because he's squeezed blood out of every pound of flesh he could get his hands on," the girl cried, "but that doesn't make his daughter rich enough to buy the things she wants."

There had been as much bitterness in her tone as his. He said slowly, "I never thought I'd hear that from you."

"I know. Most people don't know how I feel."

"What do you want to buy?"

"Happiness and good will and all the fine things that can't be bought. I know what money can buy. So does Dad. It doesn't include happiness." She laid a hand on his arm. "But I'm going to try to find Ben Armfield because he is my father. Will you help me?"

There was nothing Cliff Jenson could say in the face of this girl's confession. "What do you want me to do."

"My father may be dead, but if he is being held prisoner in the basin, I want you to help find him."

"Why pick on me?"

She stepped back, withdrawing her hand. "Because of what happened this afternoon, and because Vance recommended you for the job."

"I didn't know Meldrum thought that much of me," Cliff murmured.

"He says you're a poor business man, but you'd be perfect for this job."

"Does he know what you're planning?"

"Yes."

Cliff filled his pipe, amused by the irony of Ben Armfield's daughter coming to him for help. He asked, "How do we start?"

"Get two horses and bring them to the alley behind the store. I have my riding clothes here in a bundle. I'll change into them."

He moved toward the door, thinking that this girl was nothing like he had imagined Bonnie Armfield. Turning back, he asked, "Why do you want this to be kept a secret?"

"I don't know who our enemies are."

"Nobody knows but Meldrum?"

"That's right."

He went out then, locking the door behind him, and stood in front of it long enough to light his pipe, his eyes sweeping the street. Buzz, the stableman, coming out of the Silver Dollar, saw him and paused. "What happened up at the Narrows?"

Cliff told him, inwardly restless at the delay but not wanting to appear hurried. Buzz listened, and when Cliff was done, he said, "There's talk going around that Armfield raised them rates just to bust you so he can get the store for a song, and you're gonna kill him if he does."

"Who says?"

"Nobody knows where the talk started.

Sam Dunning says he heard it, but he can't remember where."

"I didn't put out any such talk," Cliff said angrily, and pushed past Buzz. "I want a couple of horses. I'll take my paint and that bay mare of yours."

"What do you want two horses for?"

"I might be gone a long time."

When the horses were saddled and Cliff had stepped up, Buzz asked, "I don't figger you'd quit. You ain't, are you?"

"No," Cliff said, and leading the bay mare, headed south.

AS SOON as he was out of sight from the town, Cliff circled and rode back into Palisade from the east. Reining up in the alley behind his store, he dismounted, and tapped on the back door. Bonnie opened it. She asked, "Aren't you taking the grub?"

"You bet. I forgot all about it."

Cliff threaded his way through the crates and boxes, found the sack, and returned to the back door. Bonnie whispered, "Somebody's out there."

Hand on gun butt, Cliff stepped into the alley and saw Bill Trent standing beside the paint. Trent asked, "That you, Cliff?"

"Sure is." Cliff tied the sack behind his saddle. "Making your nightly prow, Bill?"

"That's right." Trent came closer. "You changed your mind about taking me in?"

"No."

Trent sighed. "I wish you would. I tell you I'm scared, Cliff. Reckon I'll turn my star in. I just ain't man enough to rod this town if she gets hot."

"You know something you ain't telling me," Cliff said angrily.

"No, I don't." He motioned to the bay. "Cliff, what are you taking two horses for? You ain't forked anything but that paint for a year."

"Figger I might be gone a spell."

Trent turned away, but before he'd gone ten feet, Bonnie sneezed. Trent whirled and came back, his gun in his hand. "Somebody's in there," he said hoarsely.

Trent lunged toward the door, showing more courage than Cliff thought he had. For an instant Cliff wavered in indecision, then he brought his gun barrel down across

Trent's head, sending him into a loose-jointed fall.

"Let's ride," Cliff called, and pulled the door open. He closed it behind Bonnie, and a moment later they were riding south, the lights of Palisade fading into pin points in the sage.

It was a still and far-reaching land, the distant rimrock losing itself against a nearly black sky. The sea of sage stretched to the horizon on both sides of them, and somewhere it had rained, the wind bringing the clean smell of it across the great emptiness. A coyote called from some nearby butte, weird and spine-chilling.

Bonnie, riding close to Cliff, shivered. She said, "It's too big a country to find a man who's hidden."

"Not if you know where to look. What makes you think your father was kidnapped?"

"He only intended to be gone a couple of days. He's the kind of a man who keeps a schedule, Cliff."

"Who knew he was coming to the basin?"

"Galtry."

"That all?"

She hesitated. Then she said, "Vance knew. And Cliff, those new rates aren't Dad's."

"How do you know?"

"Would a smart business man try to get more milk from a cow by drying her up?"

"I guess not," Cliff agreed. "Who do you think is holding your dad and what's the reason. Ransom?"

"I don't think so," she said thoughtfully. "I'd have heard from them by now, wouldn't I?"

Cliff groaned. "It strikes me we travel a long ways to get nowhere."

THEY FELL into silence again, and presently the lights of Palisade were gone and ahead of them the windows of the big house at the Narrows made a bright shine on the water. They reached the butte where Cliff had left Hogan and turned from the road toward it. Hogan appeared out of the darkness, calling cautiously, "That you, Cliff?"

"It's me and Miss Armfield."

Hogan reined in close and leaned forward in his saddle trying to see the girl.

"What in blazes is she doing here?" he demanded.

"Looking for her dad," Cliff said. "See anything?"

"I sure did. Galtry and that freckle-faced trigger tripper and a tall skinny gent augered quite a spell after you left. Stood out there on the bridge and swung their arms. Galtry and Freckles went back into the tollhouse still augering. 'Bout dusk Galtry, Skinny, and another jasper rode out. Galtry went into town. The other two swung left."

"You know Armfield, don't you?"

"Yeah, I've seen him. The light was getting too thin to see right good, but I figured it was him with Skinny,"

"What does it mean?" Bonnie cried.

Cliff told her what had happened at the gate that afternoon, and added, "My guess is that Galtry got scared enough to want your dad moved. Chances are he's gone to town to talk it over with whoever else is in the deal with him."

"Another thing happened that's plumb interesting," Hogan said. "Just after you left a wagon train rolled in from the south. Biggest outfit I ever seen. Two hundred wagons or more. Sodbusters, I reckon."

"They want across?"

"They sure did. Shook their fists at Galtry, but he just stood there pointing to the sign. Purty soon they went back to camp."

"You go back to town, Shortcake," Cliff said. "Keep your eyes peeled. Me and Miss Armfield are gonna look for her dad."

"You can't find a man in the dark," Hogan remonstrated.

"We'll find him, Shortcake, unless I've forgotten how to add."

Hogan took the road to town. Cliff and Bonnie, swinging left, followed a trail through the sagebrush. A mile from where they left Hogan they reined up. Cliff dismounted and held a match to the ground in front of the horses. Stepping back into the saddle, he said with satisfaction, "They're ahead of us all right."

It was after midnight when they reached the foothills of the Palisades. An hour later they were in the pines, climbing steadily, and the air grew thinner and colder and the mountain wildness pressed in around them.

"Is this Dunning's toll road?" Bonnie asked.

"No. It's an old Indian trail. Dunning ran his road up the other side of the canyon. Easier grade."

"What are you going to do, Cliff?"

"I think Dunning is into this up to his neck," Cliff answered. "Chances are Galtry sent your dad to Dunning, but if I was Dunning, I wouldn't want to keep him in the tollhouse. I'd keep him around close though, maybe in a miner's shack a mile or so away. If I'm guessing right, we'll get your dad about dawn."

An hour later they swung away from the trail, circling up grade into the timber. Presently Cliff said, "Hungry?"

"A little."

"We'll stop and risk a fire."

CLIFF picketed the horses, found pieces of deadfall pine, and made a fire. He brought water from a spring, fried bacon and boiled coffee, and when they had eaten, he leaned on an elbow, smoking, his eyes on the girl. If anyone had told him a dozen hours ago that he'd be here in the Palisades with Bonnie Armfield hunting her father, he'd have said that person was completely crazy. Yet here he was, confident that Armfield was not far away, and he wasn't sorry he had come.

Bonnie, meeting his eyes, smiled as if guessing what was in his mind. "I'm thankful for a moment like this," she said. "The present is enough." She sobered, the low flame throwing a bright shine on her black hair. "But the present always points to a future. I hope you'll never regret this, Cliff."

"I won't."

"I'm hoping this experience will change Dad," she said thoughtfully. "Whether it does or not, I'm trying to make my life into something worthwhile. People have told me I'm like my mother. She always wanted to live differently than Dad would let her, and she died unhappy. I'm not going to die that way. Dad can keep me from getting his money, but he can't take away my hands."

Again the thought came to Cliff Jenson, "This can't be Ben Armfield's girl."

She was studying him now, smiling again. She asked, "Why are you running a store?"

"Abel Smith wished it on me. He was an old friend of Dad's. Had the bank until

he died. I got tired of drifting and wanted him to set me up ranching. He staked me to a store instead. Said folks in the basin had a right to buy things at a fair price instead of having Bill Trent rob them."

She lay back, her head on her saddle, and presently dropped off to sleep. Cliff covered her with a blanket and let the fire die down until there was only the dull glow of the coals. An hour passed and then another and the chill of the high altitude crept into him. Suddenly he sat up, ears keening the wind. The run of a horse had come to him. Down grade on the trail he and Bonnie had followed. He woke the girl, cautioned her to silence, and drew her back into the shadows. Then he threw more wood on the fire, and waited.

The horse had stopped. Not far away. Cliff knew he was being watched. He filled his pipe and began to smoke. Another five minutes passed. Presently he heard the horse passing along the trail below him. When the sound had died, Bonnie whispered, "What did it mean?"

"I don't know, but I'm guessing he'll be back. With help."

"You think it was Dunning?"

"Dunning would have stayed on the toll-road. It was someone who didn't want to be seen."

Cliff let the fire die down again. There was silence except for the wind that made a high howl in the pines. Yonder a tree creaked dismally. It seemed hours later that a limb snapped under foot. Somewhere above them.

"Get around to the other side of the fire and stay back," Cliff breathed. "Don't make any noise or you'll get a slug."

She slipped into the darkness. He heard her once, a brushing sound as if she'd rubbed against a pine trunk. Instantly a gun roared not more than ten feet from Cliff, its tongue of flame rushing into the blackness. Cliff pulled trigger, raking the man's position with his fire, laying his bullets a foot apart. He heard a shrill cry, high and thin, heard a moment of hard breathing, and then nothing.

Cliff rolled away. There would be two of them, the man who had come up the trail and Kim Connors. He reloaded his gun and waited. A gray light filtered through the timber. Tension built in Cliff. He had heard nothing of Bonnie since the

man had first fired. The need to end this grew in him. He tossed a rock against the dead fire, heard it hit a tree trunk and bounce off into the brush. Hard on that sound came the quick sharp breath of a man.

IV

MORNING came slowly, each minute drawing out far beyond its sixty seconds. Silently it spread a thin light across the land. The quiet lay all about, unbroken and heavy, and death waited.

"It's Dunning," Bonnie screamed, and began firing a small pistol, the reports coming closely together like dry twigs being sharply snapped.

Dunning, flushed out of his hiding place by Bonnie's fire, reared up into Cliff's view, a shadowy figure in the dawn light, and began to curse as he fired at Bonnie. Fury and greed and lust were embodied there in Sam Dunning. Cliff, lying belly flat, fired upward, his bullet catching Dunning in the chest and slamming him back against a pine. He propped his weakening body there as he tried to lift his gun to fire at Cliff.

"Who came up the trail tonight?" Cliff called.

"I'm damned to hell," Dunning flung back, "and you'll be there with me as soon as you get to Palisade. Meldrum knows you've got the girl with you." Then breath stopped in Sam Dunning, and he crashed earthward.

"Bonnie, you all right?"

"All right, Cliff." She came around the ashes of the fire, pale and shaky, and clung to him for a moment.

"We can go looking for your dad now," Cliff motioned to the first man who had died. "That's Connors. Chances are your dad ain't guarded."

It was full daylight when they topped a ridge that broke steeply off into Tentrock canyon and looked down upon a log cabin, a faint pencil of smoke rising upward from its chimney.

"Looks safe enough," Cliff murmured, "but the gent who came up the trail last night might still be there." He fell silent a moment, studying the cabin. "Can you use a Winchester?"

"Yes."

He pulled his rifle from the boot and

handed it to her. "Give me fifteen minutes. Then cut loose. Shoot high. Into the roof or the upper part of the window."

Cliff rode around the edge of the cuplike depression in which the cabin was set, reaching the other side in the fifteen minutes he had given the girl. He dismounted, and when he heard her first shot, slid down the slope, bringing a small avalanche of rocks and earth with him. Reaching the door, he flung it open, gun palmed.

Ben Armfield was there, crouched against the wall at the head of the bed. His shoulders stooped, a week's white stubble on his face, he resembled but little the arrogant millionaire Cliff had seen on Palisade's streets.

For a moment Armfield stared at Cliff. Then recognition came to him. "You're Cliff Jensen, aren't you? You've been trying to kill me." Armfield gripped the head of the bed and pulling himself upright, leveled a long-barreled Colt at Cliff. "But you aren't going to kill me, Jensen, because I'm going to kill you first."

Cliff had time to shoot Armfield, but he couldn't do it. Not now that he knew Bonnie. He leaped sideways as Armfield's gun thundered, the bullet screaming through the doorway. He slammed the door shut, and moving to the corner of the cabin, waved his hat.

"Come on down," he called, and waited until Bonnie reached the bottom. Then he opened the door a crack. "Your daughter's here, Armfield. You understand, your girl Bonnie?"

Cliff had a bad moment, not knowing what Armfield would do. Then the old man croaked, "Bonnie? What's Bonnie doing here?"

"Trying to save your life if you had sense enough to see it. Throw your gun away, You won't need it now."

Armfield ran into the clearing, gun still clutched at his side. "Bonnie! Bonnie girl."

She came to him, and the old man put his arms around her, the gun dropping from his hand. He was crying then, his gaunt body shaking. He repeated over and over, "Bonnie. Bonnie girl, how did you find me?"

SHE LED her father back to the cabin, Cliff keeping behind them. When they were inside, Bonnie said, "Cliff Jensen

found you, Dad. He saved your life."

"Jenson?" He saw Cliff standing in the doorway and pointed a trembling finger at him. "That man wouldn't save my life, Bonnie. He's the one who wants to kill me."

"Who told you that?" Cliff asked, coming into the cabin.

"All of them. Galtry and Dunning and all of them. Galtry's been keeping me at the Narrows ever since you tried to kill me the day I came in."

"I didn't try to kill you, Armfield,"

"Lying won't do you any good," Armfield said heatedly. "Galtry ran you and your killers off. He told me all about it, how you'd been making a lot of threats. Said you'd get me because I took your father's ranch. That wasn't my fault, Jenson. Just business. That's all. Just business."

"Why did they fetch you here?"

"Galtry said you knew I was at the Narrows. He said you'd bring all the men who lost their ranches and murder me."

"Has Vance Meldrum been to see you?"

Armfield was silent for a moment, a sly cunning creeping into his eyes. Then he said, "No. Meldrum hasn't been here."

Bonnie, standing at her father's side and a little behind him, caught Cliff's eyes and nodded at the door.

"Will you get us some wood, Cliff. We'll all feel better if we have breakfast."

"Sure," Cliff said, and left the cabin.

Bonnie cooked breakfast, but there was little appetite in either her or Cliff. For a time they sat watching Armfield eat hungrily. Then Cliff rose and kicked back his chair. "Guess I'll slope along to town."

Armfield raised his eyes. "You won't get another chance to kill me," he said shrilly. "As soon as I can get to the sheriff, you'll be in the jug."

Bonnie followed Cliff outside. She said bitterly, "He believes all they've told him. He thinks Galtry has been protecting him."

"I've got a pretty good idea what happened. Galtry would know just about when your father was coming in, wouldn't he?" When she nodded, he went on. "I'd say Galtry and some of the rest cornered him and did a lot of shooting. They scared him so bad he's probably been a little loco."

"Then Galtry rode up, said he'd chased you off, and promised to hide Dad out."

She shook her head. "I never trusted Ron Galtry, but I didn't think he'd do a thing like that."

Cliff stepped into the saddle. "If you start telling the truth now to your dad, he might believe it by night."

"He'll believe me. It's a funny thing about Dad, Cliff. He hasn't been any happier than he's made the rest of us. Maybe it's his conscience, or maybe he's physically afraid of men he's hurt." Her eyes locked with Cliff's gray ones. "What are you going to do?"

He made no answer for a time, remembering that Vance Meldrum had said he and Bonnie were engaged. Agony was in Cliff then. He knew what he had to do, and he knew how Bonnie would feel when the truth about Meldrum came out. At this moment she thought well of Cliff Jenson, but before this was finished she would hate him.

"I don't know till the time comes," he said evasively. "Get your dad to town as soon as you can. You'll be safer there."

Turning his horse toward the east side of the canyon, Cliff angled up the steep slope until he reached the tollroad and then set a fast pace to town. There was much he didn't know and couldn't guess, but he was convinced of one thing. Vance Meldrum's shrewd brain was behind the scheming that had brought this trouble to the basin. Cliff aimed to face him the instant he reached Palisade; yet with this slow burning rage was the tempering knowledge that he had little real evidence against the banker.

When Cliff reached Palisade he found the biggest crowd he had ever seen in it jamming the short main street. Puzzling about it, he turned into the stable. Buzz came out of the gloom, swearing fiercely when he saw who it was.

"I thought you'd keep on riding," the stableman said. "You're a bigger damned fool than I thought you were. Where's that mare you took?"

"She'll be along." Cliff stepped down, seeing something on the other's face he could not read. "I don't take to being called a damned fool without some reason."

"You'll be called worse than that before this is over," Buzz said darkly. "Threatening to kill Armfield is one thing. Stealing a girl is something else."

CLIFF grabbed a handful of the man's shirt. "Who says I stole the girl?" "Everybody," Buzz snarled and tried to jerk free.

Cliff hit him then, a quick-swinging blow to the side of the head that knocked the stableman flat into the barn litter. "Who says?" Cliff demanded.

Buzz lay staring up at Cliff, one hand gingerly rubbing the side of his face. "Bill Trent says so," he muttered. "Says he heard a girl sneeze last night. When he headed for your back room, you slugged him. This morning the hotel people said she was gone. Meldrum saw her go into your store last night." Buzz pulled himself up and stood against the wall, eyes narrowed and ugly. "You're in a hell of a fix, mister. They found her clothes in your back room. How do you aim to get out of that?"

Without answering, Cliff pulled his gun, checked the loads, and wheeled into the street. Buzz had called it right when he'd said Cliff was in a hell of a fix. A combination of half truths and Meldrum's lies were forming a noose that would fit Cliff Jenson's neck perfectly.

The walks were crowded. Then a strange fact broke through Cliff's thoughts. These men were not basin ranchers. They were farmers. Strangers. Men he had never seen before. There were, he guessed, more than one hundred along the street, gathered in tight little knots here and there, and the snatches of talk that came to him were about Armfield and how he had a hanging coming.

Then a ringing voice broke along the street. "I'm coming after you, Jenson. I'm gonna kill you, slow-like so you can tell what you did with Bonnie Armfield."

Dan Harl stood in front of the Silver Dollar, short legs spread apart, his face evil and without mercy. Within a matter of seconds the crowd cleared away, the scuff of shoes on boards as men dived for shelter coming clearly to Cliff. Harl stepped into the dust and angled toward Cliff, his face a cold killer's mask. Cliff knew his breed—gunmen who earned their pay with as little distress to their consciences as an ordinary butcher would have in slaughtering a beef.

Cliff moved into the street and paced slowly toward Harl. They were in the

middle of the dust strip, facing each other, both watchful and neither walking fast. Thoughts ran in a swift stream through Cliff's mind, a multitude of them in these seconds into which was telescoped a lifetime of living. One thought towered giant-like over the others: he had to kill this man before he could get at Vance Meldrum.

They were close enough now for Cliff to see Harl's freckles, his yellow teeth as his lips pulled away from them, the narrowed muddy eyes. Cliff said, "You're going to hell with Connors and Dunning, Harl."

The words hurried Harl, pressed him into action before his mind was ready, and the mental confusion slowed his draw. His hand whipped downward, fingers closed over gun butt, and came up swiftly—a draw faster than most men's, but not faster than Cliff Jenson's. The roar of the guns beat into the street quiet, struck the false fronts and were flung back in a rolling wave of echoes. There was the familiar kick of the walnut butt against Cliff's palm, the burst of powderflame, the spread of smoke. Then Harl was on his face in the dust, dropped gun within inches of outstretched fingers.

Cliff stood motionless, Colt held in his hand, a trickle of smoke lifting from its barrel as his eyes scanned the street. Men rushed out of doorways, and stopped when they saw him standing there. Blurred talk came to him, sound without meaning.

Bill Trent stood in front of his store, uncertainty stamped upon his knife-thin face. Galtry was there under the wooden awning of the Silver Dollar. Shortcake Hogan came into the street, and hesitated when he saw Cliff holster his gun and stride past Harl's body toward the bank. It was then that Meldrum came to stand on the boardwalk. He was in his shirtsleeves, his bulldog face set and wicked.

"Take off your gun belt, Jenson," Meldrum said coldly. "I make no pretense of being good with a gun, but I'm going to kill you with my hands. I told you Bonnie and I were engaged, but you couldn't let her alone."

VANCE MELDRUM knew that Bonnie was going to ask Cliff to work for her, but the men along the street didn't. Not knowing it, they couldn't understand

how Meldrum was cunningly manipulating the facts to make a pariah out of Cliff. It was a bold public challenge that Cliff could not escape, nor did he want to. Yet there was little he would gain. He could batter Meldrum into the dust, but public sentiment would still back the banker.

Cliff stripped off his belt and handed it to Hogan. He stood there, a slim raging figure, and waited while Meldrum swung around the tie rail and advanced upon him.

Meldrum had asked for trouble. He was braced for it, but he didn't expect the kind of trouble that exploded before him. There was no more waiting in Cliff Jensen. He drove at Meldrum, fury incarnate. He parried Meldrum's first looping blow, and then he was on the banker, swinging hard with both fists and paying no attention to his own defense. He cracked Meldrum on the cheek, rocked his head with a savage right, closed an eye, and knocked loose a mouthful of teeth. Then he caught the banker in the belly, and wind rushed out of him.

Half-blinded and sucking painfully for air, Meldrum retreated. Cliff was after him, cruelly stalking him, battering down his defense. He slashed Meldrum full on the nose and felt it flatten under his knuckles. He hooked a left to the pit of Meldrum's stomach, sledged him on the cheek. Rubber-like, Meldrum's joints gave way, and he went down, belly flat.

Meldrum pulled himself up to his hands and knees. The power to rise further was not in him. He held that position for a moment, dust and blood on his face, head bowed. He raised it as he strained to gain his feet, his one good eye staring at Cliff. Then he dropped down.

Cliff stepped back as Hogan jeered, "Thought you was gonna kill him with your hands, Meldrum."

"What are you aiming to do, marshal?" Galtry called to Trent. "You can't let a man go who's kidnapped a girl."

Cliff, eyes sweeping the crowd, saw the farmers nod their agreement. He wondered why these strangers who had only come to the basin the day before would be completely behind Vance Meldrum.

Trent, needled into action, pulled his gun and lined it on Cliff. He said, "I'm arresting you for kidnapping Bonnie Armfield. Got anything to say?"

"Go on," Hogan called. "Tell 'em what's going on."

Cliff shook his head. Without Bonnie here to back his talk, his defense would be a waste of words. He said, "Not now."

"All right, mister," Trent said coldly. "Head for the jug."

Jangled nerves and the crack Cliff had given Trent on the head the night before had brought the marshal to the place where any quick action on Cliff's part would bring a bullet. Cliff shook his head when Hogan called, "That hairpin ain't man enough for this job, son."

"We'll show him that later when the sign's right," Cliff said, and turned toward the jail.

The crowd fell back. As Cliff moved along the street, he met Ron Galtry's eyes. There was no weakness in them. Only a feral hatred. Now, even with Dan Harl dead, Galtry was not quitting.

Trent gave a relieved sigh when the cell door clanged shut behind Cliff. "Want to tell me about this girl stealing?" he asked.

Bill Trent was still scared. Cliff, watching him now in the thin light of the jail's interior, was as uncertain of him as he had been the day before. He said,

"You know what's going on, Bill, and you know I'm not the kind of a polecat who'd steal a girl. I'm sorry I slugged you, but I didn't have no choice. Now you'll have to decide which way you're going. If you play on Meldrum's side, you'll wind up with a stretched neck just like he will."

Trent sucked at his lower lip, eyes suddenly thoughtful. "I ain't sure about that. He's smart, Meldrum is, and right now you're playing a lone hand except for Hogan. I've got a notion you'll be dead before your friends in the basin hear about this and get to town. Either way, I've got to keep you here till I know the girl's all right."

Trent walked away, his steps echoing hollowly along the corridor.

V

TRENT brought Cliff's supper at six. The worry lines in his forehead had deepened. He said, "The sodbusters are getting liquored up and they're laying all their troubles on Armfield. He won't last long if he shows up."

"What have they got against Armfield?"

"They're sore because they can't get their outfits into the basin. They ain't got the dinero it takes to pay Armfield's toll at the Narrows."

"How'd they get into town?"

"Horseback. Galtry didn't charge 'em no more than the old toll. Fifty cents, wasn't it?"

Cliff nodded. "Seems to me the new sign had raised all the tolls."

"It did. Five dollars for a horsebacker."

"Then Galtry wanted these men in tow. He figgers Armfield will show up."

Trent shifted uneasily. "I'm sizing it up the same way. Galtry and Harl and even Meldrum have done a lot of talking about how the basin is paradise for the farmers, but Armfield is gonna raise hell to keep 'em out. They say that's why he raised the ante."

"Where did the sodbusters come from?"

"It's a colony from Iowa."

"How'd they hear about the basin?"

Trent scowled. "I couldn't prove it, but Meldrum wrote to 'em that they'd find what they wanted here. About the time he got the bank they wrote a lot of letters to bankers all over the country."

"Are you gonna protect Armfield if he gets to town?"

"Hell, I can't protect him," Trent groaned. "How can I?"

Cliff told him what had happened on the old Indian trail. He gripped the bars then, his eyes locking with Trent's. "Let me out of here, Bill. I'll meet them before they get to town."

"Can't do it," Trent muttered. "Mebbe you're lying."

"You're thinking maybe Meldrum'll come out on top, and you want to be in good with the winner. That it, Bill?" Cliff asked contemptuously.

Trent didn't answer. He walked back along the corridor and slammed the door to his office.

Sitting there in the evening gloom, Cliff pulled on his pipe and thought sourly that even now there was no proof against Vance Meldrum. Nobody could say he'd broken a law in encouraging the farmers to come to the basin, nor could he have been jailed if Connors had brought Armfield to town and turned him loose while the colonists

MEN! **COMIC PRINTED POCKET FUN NOVELTIES**

- 40 Comic Pocket Cards
- 12 Illustrated Booklets
- 6 Comic Love Letters
- 6 Laughable Diplomas
- 4 Printed Pocket Laughs

Everything \$1.00
Postpaid Sealed.

Fun Shop, 2463 Kensington Ave., Phila. 25, Pa.

AMAZING MAGIC TRICK

Vanishing Card

Show it—then pitch it up into the air—its now completely disappeared, yet when you reach into a spectator's pocket you produce the same card—it's complete, ready to perform, easy to do, price only

— **"THE MAGICIAN"** — **25c**

2463 KENSINGTON AVE. PHILA. 25, PA.

WHY WEAR DIAMONDS

When diamond-dazzling Zircrons from the mines of far-away mystic Siam are so effective and inexpensive! Thrilling beauty, stand acid, true backs, full of FIRE! Exquisite mountings. See before you buy. Write for FREE catalog.

National Zircon Co., Dept. 25, Wheeling, W. Va. **Catalog FREE!**

LAW

STUDY AT HOME for Personal Success and Larger Earnings. 33 years expert instruction—over 108,000 students enrolled. LL.B. Degree awarded. All text material furnished. Easy payment plan. Send for FREE BOOK—"Law and Executive Guidance." NOW!

AMERICAN EXTENSION SCHOOL OF LAW
Dept. 75FE, 646 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 11, Ill.

DETECTIVES

TRAINING—SECRET INVESTIGATIONS—FINGERPRINTS—Easy method—Short Time Rewards, Home—Travel—Secret Code, Booklet FREE—WRITE.

INTERNATIONAL DETECTIVE SYSTEM
1701-5 MONROE ST., N.E., WASHINGTON 18, D. C.

BIG MONEY NOW IN LIQUID MARBLE

THREE wonderful new opportunities for your own big money-making business—regardless of your age, sex, or previous experience!

1. LIQUID MARBLE. Make beautiful artificial Marble Slabs. Pour from liquid state. Glazed or unglazed. This marble may be mottled, veined, multi-colored or left in original snow-white state. The color is actually a part of the marble! Does not fade or wear away. Liquid Marble is unsurpassed on kitchen or bathroom walls. Easy to make and install.

2. PLASTIC FLOORING. May be made in any color or combination of colors. Gives a lifetime of wear. Dustproof, Soundproof, Verminproof. Resilient to the tread. Lay out solid from wall to wall or in pattern design of various shaped blocks.

3. FLEXIBLE MOLDS. For plaster casting. Make your own moulds for few cents each. \$1.00 in raw materials will make up to \$25.00 worth of finished goods. We furnish names of buyers. Write now for FREE information about our BIG THREE money-making opportunities! Get in on busy season just starting. Send penny postcard or letter. No obligation.

COMPO-TEX, Box 786-SG, ST. LOUIS 1, MO.

were at the peak of their drinking. Now the plan might work exactly as Meldrum had schemed it. If Bonnie followed Cliff's advice, she'd bring her father to town.

Dusk came and full darkness and the threatening rumble of the crowd rode the air to Cliff. Meldrum, not knowing that Connors was dead, would be expecting the gunman to bring Armfield to town and would be carefully staying out of sight. And all the time Cliff Jenson was penned up like a chicken in a hen coop.

Then it happened, and Cliff froze. The crowd rumble became a bloodthirsty roar. Through it a dozen voices cried for Ben Armfield's life.

"Trent," Cliff yelled, and rattled the cell door. "Trent."

But when Trent came along the corridor, it was not in answer to Cliff's call. Shortcake Hogan was behind him, a six-gun prodding him in the back.

"You've got the one huckleberry locked up who can save old Armfield's life," Hogan raged, "and by hell you're gonna let him go. You saw the girl yourself. You know you ain't got nothing to hold Cliff for."

"Who cares anything about Armfield?" Trent said sourly as he unlocked the cell door.

"Mebbe he ain't worth saving, but it's a hell of a thing for a lawman to stand around while they hang a man." He tossed Cliff's gun belt on him. "Strap her on, boy. I'm with you."

"All right, Bill." Cliff buckled the belt on. "Make up your mind. If you decide wrong, I'm coming after you soon as this is over."

For a moment the mental struggle went on in Trent's mind. "All right, Cliff. I'm on your side."

"What's the game they're playing?" Cliff asked as he strode into the corridor.

"I overheard Dunning and Meldrum talking about it yesterday," Trent told him hurriedly. "Meldrum figgered on promoting the valley so a lot of farmers would come. Him and Dunning and Galtry had fixed it so they'd have a syndicate controlling both tollgates. They aimed to get our stores. Then with the bank, they'd be in shape to milk the basin dry."

"The railroad?"

"Honey to get the farmers in."

THEY WERE running along the street now, Trent on one side of Cliff, Hogan on the other. Ahead of them the crowd was milling in front of the Silver Dollar, the smoky flames from their torches throwing a lurid light across the street. Someone had tossed a rope over the big sign in front of the saloon. Two men held Armfield while a third dropped a loop over the old man's neck and tightened it.

Then the earth seemed to rise up and explode behind Cliff in a wind-whipping roar and a burst of flames. Splintered boards and stones and twisted metal rained into the street.

The blast knocked Cliff off his feet. He lay there, half-stunned. Hogan and Trent were on the ground beside him, and for a moment the crowd had scattered. Cliff, coming to his feet, fought off a wave of nausea and saw what had happened. The jail had been dynamited.

Hogan and Trent were standing now, staring at what was left of the jail, Hogan cursing and Trent shouting in a high terrible rage, "The dirty son. The dirty damned son. He aimed to get both of us, Cliff."

Cliff wheeled and ran on toward the Silver Dollar. Ben Armfield was still in front of it, the rope around his neck. Bonnie was beside him, trying to free him from the loop. Then the crowd rolled back around them. A man pinned Bonnie's hands and dragged her away.

Cliff hit the edge of the crowd, a charging bolt of fury, gun barrel swinging like a war club in his hand. Hogan and Trent were behind him, Trent still muttering, "The dirty murdering son."

Cliff reached Armfield, tore the rope from his neck as a man yelled, "Stay out of this, Jenson. We've got nothing against you."

"I've got something against you," Cliff yelled back. "You've been guzzling Meldrum's and Galtry's whiskey till you're ready to swing a man they want killed. Tomorrow you'll wake up with a headache and a conscience that'll give you hell."

"You'll be in hell mighty quick if you don't clear out," the farmer bellowed.

The crowd rolled in again. Cliff, Hogan, and Trent pressed in close around Armfield, guns in their hands. "Stand pat," Cliff yelled, and when they didn't stop, he

squeezed trigger. A man screamed and grabbed his arm. Again Cliff's gun thundered, a red flash dancing from its muzzle. A hat flew from a bald head and the man dropped with a bloody furrow along his skull.

They stopped then and stared in sullen silence. They'd seen Dan Harl die. Drunk as they were, those shots reminded them what this man could do.

"Why do you want to hang Armfield?" Cliff shouted.

"He's keeping us out of the basin," a man answered. "We've got a right to settle here. It's government land."

"Same old story of cattlemen hanging together," a second shouted. "We aim to hang 'em separately."

"Then you'd murder a man who had nothing to do with your troubles," Cliff thundered. "The high tolls are Meldrum's and Galtry's doings."

"You're lying," a farmer shrilled. "Meldrum's our friend."

"The hell he is," Trent cried. "He's pretending to be now, but when the sign's right, he'll take everything you have."

Cliff held up his hand. "Listen. Armfield had owned the Narrows for years and he never raised the toll before. Legally he couldn't charge the rates Galtry has posted, but the country seat is a long ways from here. Might be weeks before the county court acted, but he'd wind up by losing his franchise. It's Meldrum's and Galtry's doings, I tell you. They've got their own crooked ax to grind."

"Tomorrow morning," Armfield said, his voice even and distinct, "I'll post a new sign at the gate quoting the same tolls I've always charged."

"Go back to camp and sleep on it," Cliff urged. "In the morning you can bring your wagons across the bridge and pick out the quarter section you want." He swung his gun to cover the man who held Bonnie. "Let her go."

The man released his grip and Bonnie came quickly to them.

"We're leaving," Cliff said. "I'll gut shoot the first man who tries to stop us."

LYNCH LUST had gone out of these men. They stood in silence while Cliff, still holding his gun, walked quickly

BE A DETECTIVE

Make Secret Investigations

Earn Big Money. Work home or travel. Fascinating work. Experience Unnecessary. **DETECTIVE** Particulars FREE. Write to **GEO. F. H. WAGNER** 125 W. 86th St., N. Y.

MAKE THIS SUIT YOURS NEW PLAN



EARN CASH SHOWING TO FRIENDS! Write at once if you want this fine made-to-measure suit! You can get it by taking a few orders from friends, and earn up to \$10, \$12 in a day. Your bonus suit helps you take more orders with latest style, made-to-measure guaranteed suits at amazingly low prices. Also complete line of Ladies' Tailored Suits. No experience, no money needed. Write TODAY for FREE SAMPLES—telling about yourself—age, etc. No obligation! **PIONEER TAILORING CO.** Congress and Throop Streets, Dept. R-1170, Chicago 7, Ill.



BUILDING HUMAN STATURE

"I grew 6 inches in a year through following instructions given in 'BUILDING HUMAN STATURE,'" says the younger man at left. "Now I am a head taller than my father!" If you wonder why you are short send for FREE outline of this remarkable book loaded with practical information.

CARILLON BOOKS, Dept. 90, Boerne, Texas



RHEUMATISM

ARTHRITIS-NEURITIS-SCIATICA

If you suffer the agonizing pains of these diseases when the usual remedies have failed, learn about a new trustworthy, modern, non-surgical treatment method. This marvelous treatment is completely explained in the Ball Clinic's FREE Book. Write today. No obligation. **BALL CLINIC** - Dept. 576 Excelsior Springs, Mo.

INVENTORS

HAVE PATENT PROTECTION first. Remember the details of your invention do not have to be 100% perfect before you can obtain patent. Patent laws favor the inventor who acts promptly. First step is to have us conduct search of the prior U.S. Patents and render a report as to your invention's patentability. Send at once for further particulars on how to protect your invention. Request does not obligate you.

McMORROW, BERMAN & DAVIDSON

Registered Patent Attorneys

280-A Victor Building

Washington 1, D. C.

PLAY GUITAR LIKE THE **COWBOYS** DO... **8** LESSONS

Just out—very latest guaranteed, simple, easy method. Play cowboy songs the Western way in a few minutes by ear. Surprise and amaze your friends. Be in big demand at parties, camps, public entertainments, on the radio, etc. 12 Complete Lessons. **SEND NO MONEY.** Pay postman only \$1.00 plus postage and C.O.D. charges, or send \$1.00 and get EXTRA SONGS all postpaid. (Canada, \$1.25 money order only.) Nothing else to buy. Positive money back guarantee. Rush order today.

WESTERN RANGER STUDIOS, Dept. 534, Hutchinson, Kans.

along the street behind Bonnie and her father.

At the end of the block Cliff said, "Shortcake, you and Bill stay here and watch that bunch."

"Where are you taking us?" Armfield demanded as they moved away.

"Do you want to go back there?" Cliff asked.

"No. I'm beholden to you," Armfield said grudgingly. "I've tried to understand why you've done what you have, but I can't. I don't even know why you're blackening Vance Meldrum's name. It's hard to believe Galtry has had a hand in this, but I have no choice after what you did tonight. You would not have risked your life if you had really wanted to kill me like Galtry said."

"You've pulled off some raw deals, Armfield," Cliff said. "I have no reason to risk my life for you. I've done what I have for one reason—because your daughter asked me to."

"Then you must be in love with her," Armfield said arrogantly. "I'm telling you now to forget any ideas you've got. She's engaged to Vance."

"You made the engagement," Bonnie said. "From now on I'm living my life the way I see it. Your threats about leaving your money to Vance won't make me marry him."

Bonnie whirled and walked rapidly away toward the hotel.

"Bonnie," Armfield cried after her. "Bonnie girl."

Armfield would have followed if Cliff hadn't caught him by the arm. He called, "Send Trent to Meldrum's house." He propelled Armfield along the walk beside him. "You're going to learn something now whether you want to or not. Did you stake Meldrum to the bank?"

"Yes. He wouldn't double cross me. He had a good business and he knew I was behind him."

"He double crossed you all right," Cliff said grimly, "so he must have had a reason. Was there a will?"

"Of course there was a will. All of my money goes to Bonnie except..." Armfield's voice trailed off as if a new thought had struck him.

"Except what?" Cliff prodded.

"Vance has been like a son to me,"

Armfield said defensively. "There was plenty for Bonnie."

"What did you leave him?"

Armfield cleared his throat. "Your father's old J Bar. That's all."

"Which included the Narrows. There's your answer. You've always been money crazy, Armfield, but this man you say was like a son to you was a damned sight crazier."

"I don't believe it."

"You'll believe it all right if you'll listen. This is Meldrum's place. All I want you to do is to stay outside and keep your ears open. Don't let him know that you're here."

They turned up the path that led to Meldrum's house and moved across the porch. When they reached the door, Cliff whispered, "You stay here." He twisted the knob, shoved the door open, and went in fast. Meldrum and Ron Galtry were both there in the big living room. Galtry had his back to the door. Meldrum was seated facing Cliff, one hand on a carved oak table, a short-barreled gun lying on the table top within a scant foot of his fingers.

Galtry came up out of his chair, and whirling, saw Cliff and began to curse. Meldrum rose slowly, his bruised face paling.

"You missed by a few feet, Meldrum," Cliff said. "Disappointed?"

"What are you talking about?" the banker snapped.

"You couldn't even guess, could you?" Cliff laughed softly. He motioned to the gun on the table.

"Trent talked, Meldrum. Want to wind this up permanent?"

"I told you I was no hand with a gun," Meldrum snarled.

Trent had come in behind Cliff. "Don't believe him, Cliff. Maybe he ain't much on the draw, but he's the best damned shot in the basin."

Meldrum's lower lip was pulled hard against his upper one, his good eye glittering like green ice.

"I told you what I'd do to you if you talked, Trent. Remember?"

"Yeah, I remember," Trent snarled, "but you made a mistake when you tried to get me with that dynamite. I've taken the last one of your kicks I'm gonna take. I scat-

tered Hogan's horses like you told me. I prodded Cliff and tried to scare him and tried to get him to take me into his store so I could bust him. What did I get? A ticket to hell that damned near took me there."

"You sure worked hard on getting me out of the way, Meldrum," Cliff said coldly. "You didn't want Connors shooting an unarmed man yesterday when the stage pulled in because that would have put a stop to his usefulness, but you recommended me to Bonnie so Connors would have a chance of beefing me from the brush. Then last night you went up the trail to see if everything was fixed so Dunning would turn Armfield loose for the mob. You watched us awhile, and decided you'd send Dunning and Connors back to get us."

Meldrum laughed, self-assurance pouring back into him. "That's about it, Jensen."

"You had it working both ways," Cliff went on. "You started the lie about me threatening Armfield. If the mob didn't get him, you'd have shot him and framed me."

"I knew you were smart," Meldrum taunted. "That's one reason I wanted you out of the way. Now what's it got you, Jensen? You can't take a bunch of guesses into court."


"But you'd be doing fine with the J Bar and the Narrows."

"I'll still do fine, my smart friend," Meldrum grinned.

"I don't think so, Meldrum. The mob didn't do the job you talked and whiskied them up to. You can come in now, Armfield."

MELDRUM'S gaze whipped to the door, glimpsed Armfield, and color washed out of his face. An incoherent cry was jolted out of him. He looked at Galtry, an unspoken message passing between them. Then, driven by his words that had been spoken within Ben Armfield's hearing, Meldrum grabbed the gun from the table and dropped hammer.

Cliff drew his Colt a split second ahead of Galtry and fired, blasting life from the tollkeeper with a single shot. He heard Meldrum's gun thunder, felt Trent wilt




DO YOU WANT TO STOP TOBACCO?

Banish the craving for tobacco as thousands have with Tobacco Redeemer. Write for free booklet telling of ingenious effect of tobacco and of a treatment which has relieved many men. Caution: Use only as directed. 30 Years in Business.

FREE BOOK

THE NEWELL COMPANY
293 Clayton, Sta., St. Louis 5, Mo.



ILLUSTRATED COMIC BOOKLETS
THE KIND MEN LIKE!
(VEST POCKET SIZE)

They are loaded with rare cartoons. Full of Fun and Humor. 20 DIFFERENT booklets sent prepaid for \$1 in plain wrapper.

GRAYCO, Dept. AB-971
Box 520, G. P. O., New York 1


MAGAZINES 5¢ AND UP
(BACK-DATED)

Magazines of all publishers. Bargain prices. Western—Romantic—Movie—Detective—Sports—Comics—Aviation—Radio—Photography—Physical Culture—Snappy—Art—Foreign—Technical—etc. Also books, booklets, subscriptions, pin-up photos, etc. Before ordering send 10¢ for catalogs to cover mailing charges. Dime refunded on first order.

CICERONE'S MAGAZINE CENTER
863 First Avenue Dept. BB New York 17 N. Y.

HORSE MASTERY!
A FINE HOBBY—A GREAT VOCATION!

"The EXPERT HORSEMAN"



FREE BOOK—Tells how you can learn to: BREAK COLTS, GAIT SHOW HORSES, TRAIN RODEO, STOCK AND RACE HORSES, BREAK BAD HABITS, HANDLE ANY HORSE, TRAIN CIRCUS TRICK HORSES. WRITE TODAY!

ANIMAL LOVERS ASSOCIATION
BOX H-157 TARZANA, CALIFORNIA

SUBSCRIBE TODAY!

50¢

One Year

PHOTO FINISH KIT

Develop and print your own snapshots. Now easy, simple, quick, inexpensive. It's lots of fun. You'll get a thrill when you see the perfect, professional pictures you can do. Make as many as you want of those you like best. Earn money doing films for others.

Kit includes complete directions that make it easy for anyone to do perfect pictures the very first time. For all makes roll films from 127 up to postal card size.

SPECIAL introductory offer. FREE beautiful Akurate thermometer to those who order at once. Everything ONLY \$2.98 or send \$ dollar bills and we pay postage.

ACELL PRODUCTS CO., Dept. 44, Box 921, Pittsburgh 30, Pa.

WATCHES WANTED
Broken or Usable

All kinds. Highest Prices paid for jewelry, rings, spectacles, gold teeth, diamonds, Sterling Silver, etc. Cash mailed promptly. Write for free shipping container.

LOWE'S, Dept. FHG
Holland Building, St. Louis 1, Mo.

"GAME SUPPLIES"

Write for our list on rings, strippers, liquids, tops, flats, bevels, ink and trimmed readers, books and novelties. Satisfaction guaranteed, magical supplies our specialty since 1882.

VINE, HILL & CO., Dept. H., Swanton, Ohio

WARNER BRUSH Electroplater



Easy to Plate GOLD, SILVER, NICKEL, COPPER, CADMIUM, etc.
WHATEVER your Hobby or Business, you need this new Warner Electroplater! At the stroke of an Electrified Brush, you can electroplate models and projects—replate worn articles, jewelry, fixtures, tools, silverware, etc. with a durable, sparkling coat of Gold, Silver, Copper, Cadmium, Nickel, and with practice, CHROME! Method is easy, simple, quick. No workshop needed. Everything furnished; equipment complete, ready to use! WRITE for FREE DETAILS! WARNER ELECTRIC CO., DEPT. M-61 1512 Jarvis Ave., Chicago 26, Illinois



New—Exciting! AAF Pictorial of your stay in the ETO. You'll thrill to over 250 pictures of air combat—fighters—bombers—flak—London—Norwich—Ipswich and many others.

Postpaid \$3.00. Send check, money order or C.O.D. Now to Dept. K-3.



AAF PUBLICATIONS
6015 West Third Street,
Los Angeles 36, California

Don't Miss FIGHT STORIES'

Summer Issue!

Read nine hard-hitting epics of the prize ring; novels, novelets and short stories, including two big feature articles . . .

The RING BATTLES OF LUTHER McCARTHY

By **GEORGE LEMMER**

the saga of a smiling young giant who promised to become the ring's man of destiny,

and

FAMOUS FIGHTS . . . when Wilde and Villa staged an unforgettable ring battle.

beside him. He swung his gun to Meldrum and squeezed trigger. Two ribbons of flame lashed out at each other across the table, Cliff's shot coming ahead of the banker's and jarring his aim. His bullet caught Meldrum squarely on the second button of his vest.

The banker swayed there a moment, his mouth springing open, then he took a toe-dragging step and spilled forward in a curling drop.

Bill Trent had been shot squarely between the eyes. Shortcake Hogan thundered in, and came to an abrupt stop. "Hell's bells, I got here too late."

Cliff nodded at Trent. "Funny thing how some men live one way and die another. He had guts, Shortcake."

Hogan nodded soberly. "More guts than I figured he had."

Cliff stepped around Armfield and went out of the house.

"I've been wrong about a lot of things, Jenson," Armfield called. "Hold on and I'll . . ."

But Cliff didn't hold on. He ran along the walk and into the hotel. He asked for Bonnie's room number at the desk and raced up the stairs. She opened the door to his knock and for a moment they stood facing each other.

"I guess I'm broke, Bonnie," Cliff blurted. "Your dad'll take the bank and he'll call in the loan, but...but...I love you. Is that enough?"

"I'll have my two hands and my heart, Cliff. Is that enough?"

"It's all I'd want from you," he said, and kissed her.

"Jenson, I said if you'd wait I'd tell you. . . " Armfield, coming along the hall, stopped, panting. Then, after a moment, he tried again.

"I'm obliged for what you've done. If you and Bonnie want... Jenson, are you listening?"

Cliff lifted his head and looked at Armfield. "No. I'm not listening. If you ain't blind you can see I'm busy." And turning back to Bonnie, he became busy once again.

"... the most entertaining volume
you can offer a bachelor, or a
boniface, providing his wife
isn't looking."

... how fast morning Telegraph

SELECTED FROM MAN'S
BEST PRIVATE LIBRARIES
FOR A REALLY MASCULINE, DE-
LIGHTFUL, NIGHTSFUL ENJOYMENT!

TALES for MALES

Edited by Ed Fitzgerald

Thousands of men already made the eye-opening discovery that once started, "TALES FOR MALES" can't be put down until read from cover to cover. From the first word to the last you are swept along on an irresistible tidal wave of rollicking, he-man, spicelike entertainment. "TALES FOR MALES" contains the kind of vivid, exciting reading that prompted the Houston Post to say: "If there is a milligram of male hormone in you, you should keep a copy of this collection about in some private place..." You can enjoy "TALES FOR MALES" for 10 DAYS FREE! Simply fill out and mail coupon shown below. Don't delay—the books are going fast!

You'll Enjoy Meeting the Many Bewitching Women in "Tales for Males"

Meet "Muzio"—the Havana waterfront songstress. Sailors from every corner of the globe came to spend a few unforgettable hours of shore-leave with her.



Meet "Joan Merry"—tantalizing, voluptuous burlesque queen. Captivates her wide-eyed audience and two watchful guardians of the law, who never miss Joan's artful strip act.



Meet "Suzy"—exotic South Sea beauty of Tongatabu. Until this day the eyes of sailor Samish take on a mischievous gleam at the mention of Suzy's name. And there are many more luscious lovelies in "Tales for Males."

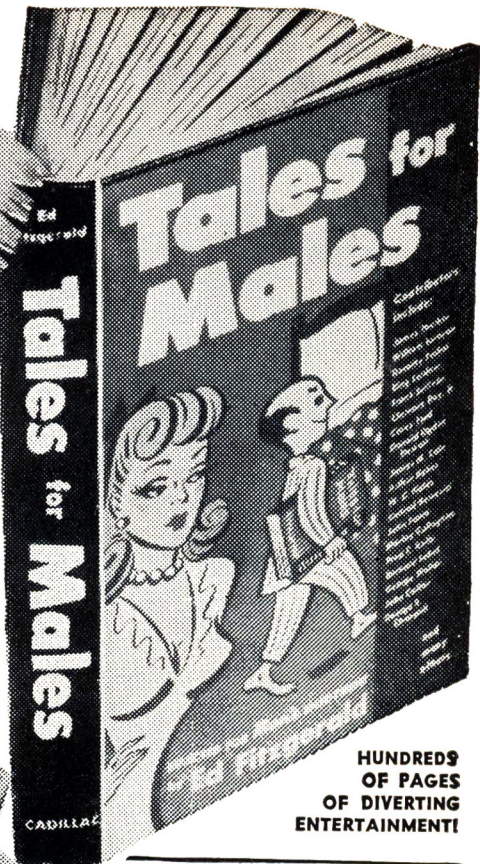
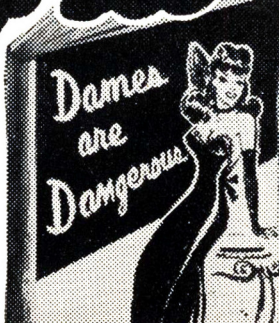
While supply lasts—with your request for TALES for MALES

"TALES FOR MALES" CONTENTS SUIT EVERY MAN'S TASTE

- THE LOVE KICK William Saroyan
- MY VIEWS ON MARRIAGE W. C. Fields
- FASHIONS IN LOVE Clarence Day Jr.
- HE WAS SO GOOD TO HER Frank Sullivan
- WHAT EVERY YOUNG WIFE SHOULD KNOW James Thurber
- BUNDLING: AN OLD YANKEE CUSTOM George S. Chappell
- LOVE, OR HOW TO WOO AND WIN A WOMAN J. Goodman and A. Green
- WHAT GOES ON IN LADIES' REST ROOMS C. A. Hamilton
- I LEARN SOMETHING ABOUT SEX Corey Ford
- LOVE LETTERS OF SMITH H. C. Bunner
- STRIP TEASE George Waller

... plus many more unusual exhilarating tales!

Free



HUNDREDS
OF PAGES
OF DIVERTING
ENTERTAINMENT!

Just a Few of the Rave Reviews!

- "... it's lusty reading..." —Variety
- "... grand book for chilly nights..." —Baltimore News Post
- "... great book to have at your bedside..." —Raleigh News & Observer

SEND NO MONEY!

Don't send a cent! We invite you to read this book for 10 nights... and days, too, at our expense. Just fill in and mail the coupon to receive one of the few joys available to the male sex. Just deposit with postman on delivery \$2.98 plus postage. After 10 days of impartial appraisal, you must decide this book is worth not \$2.98 but \$298.00 in fun and thrills or your MONEY BACK GUARANTEED! Mail coupon now!

"DAMES are DANGEROUS"

What Every Man Should Really Know About Women! For a short time only, this divulging book "DAMES ARE DANGEROUS" will be given absolutely free of extra charge with your order of "TALES FOR MALES." Just off the press! This book of hilarious intimate revelations is now released to the public for the first time! These enlightening views on the dangerous, enchanting side of women will open your eyes! It rips the mask off their fair faces! Yes, you'll wonder why they were known as the modest, weaker sex. Remember, men—forewarned is forearmed! While our limited supply holds out, we advise you to grab this added treat immediately!

CADILLAC PUB. CO., Inc.
Dept. F-300, 220 5th Ave., New York 1, N. Y.

FREE GIFT AND 10 DAY EXAMINATION

CADILLAC PUBLISHING CO., Inc., Dept. F-300
220 Fifth Ave., New York 1, N. Y.
Rush to me "TALES FOR MALES" plus the FREE BOOK "DAMES ARE DANGEROUS" in plain wrapper. I will deposit with postman on delivery \$2.98 plus postage. If after 10 days, I am not completely delighted my money will be refunded.

NAME

ADDRESS

CITY & ZONE.....STATE.....

If you wish to save postage, enclose with coupon only \$2.98. Same money back guarantee. Canada Orders—No C.O.D.—Send \$3.50.

Thank GOD... FOR THE ATOMIC BOMB!

IT HAS
BROUGHT TO
THE HUMAN RACE
THE FIRST SCIENTIFIC
PROOF OF THE RADIO-
ACTIVE, ATOMIC POWER
OF THE SPIRIT OF GOD
IN US—FOR WE TOO ARE
COMPOSED OF ATOMS.

For 20 years we have been teaching that
all the power of the universe exists, not
only for us, but IN US. It is the Spirit of God.
The most flashingly brilliant, dynamic, electri-
fying power this world will ever know.

**POWER!
POWER!
POWER!**

Direct From God Into YOUR Life

Power to achieve every good thing you need in this life.
Power to make you well, both in body and spirit. **Power**
to produce a super-abundance of material and spirit-
ual wealth awaits you because the LAW GOVERNING
THESE THINGS ACTUALLY EXISTS IN YOU—NOW.
We teach you how to intelligently find and use this
actual and literal power of the invisible God.

"PSYCHIANA"

Dept. X-29, MOSCOW, IDAHO

FREE

Send us your name
and address and
we will send you
so much proof of the
existence of this scien-
tific, spiritual Power
of God that you may
gasp in amazement.

When the full significance of
what wondrous things await
you thru the Power of God,
you will bless the day you
saw this announcement. Re-
member, you do not send
any money—just your name
and address and we will send
you full and complete infor-
mation—such vital infor-
mation that it may change the
whole course of your future
life. Don't wait another day.
Send your name and address
today to Psychiana, Dept.
X-29, Moscow, Idaho and we
will mail you FREE particu-
lars.

Copyright 1946—"Psychiana"