

DELL
MAGAZINE

ALL Western MAGAZINE

10¢

FEBRUARY



RENEGADE'S RANSOM

Thrilling Border Novel

by

L. L. FOREMAN

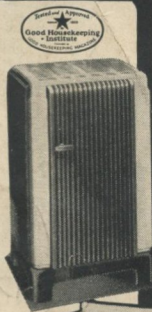
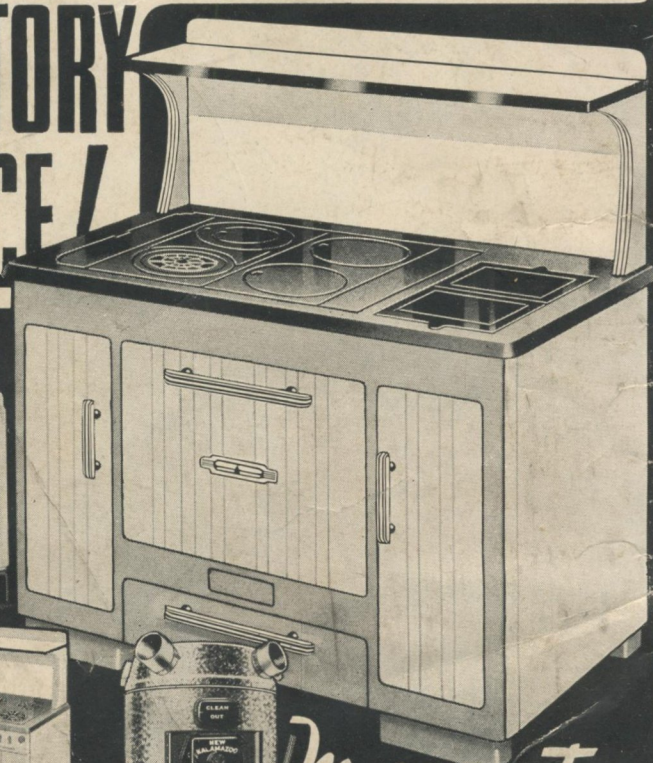
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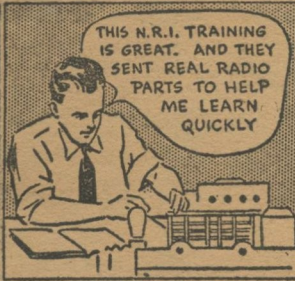


YES- I'M CONVINCED THAT I CAN MAKE GOOD MONEY IN RADIO. I'M GOING TO START TRAINING FOR RADIO RIGHT NOW.



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

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

THANKS



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



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



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



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

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

I WILL TRAIN YOU AT HOME *in Spare Time* FOR A GOOD RADIO JOB



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Back Agreement. MAIL THE COUPON in an envelope or paste it on a penny postcard—NOW!

J. E. SMITH, President National Radio Institute, Dept. 8BF Washington, D. C.



IT'S NOT TOO LATE. TAKE MY TIP AND MAIL THAT COUPON TO N.R.I. TONIGHT



J. E. SMITH, President National Radio Institute, Dept. 8BF Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send "Rich Rewards in Radio," which points out the spare time and full time opportunities in Radio and explains your 50-50 method of training men at home in spare time to become Radio Experts. (Please Write Plainly.)

NAME.....AGE.....
 ADDRESS.....
 CITY.....STATE.....

W *ALL* Western MAGAZINE

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ARTHUR LAWSON, Editor

JAMES McLEAN, Assistant Editor

A THRILLING BORDER COUNTRY NOVEL

RENEGADE'S RANSOM.....L. L. Foreman 10

Would those two renegades' gun-play end in an owlhoot pack of friendship—or sudden, double-cross death—when they fought for that kidnap ransom and a girl?

TWO BIG NOVELETTES

MAD MEDICINE.....Bennett Foster 50

Presenting the great Dr. Archimedes Copernicus Botts, whose famous Elixir is guaranteed to cure ANYTHING!

BUFFALO LAW.....William F. Bragg 70

Death and love stalk two tough frontiersmen when they meet a homesteader outfit rodded by a pair of gun-totin' women.

SHORT STORIES AND FEATURES

CROOKED LOOP.....Edgar L. Cooper 38

Modoc Bill showed two killers that a crooked loop can hang the gent who throws it.

THE EMPTY BUNK.....S. Omar Barker 49

Two make a crowd but three are company.

COMING!The Editor 66

Announcing the new giant All Western.

SHERIFFS ARE HARD HOMBRES.....Jack Sterrett 67

But sometimes tough gents don't live up to their reputations—

CACTUS CITY GAZETTE.....Bronco Blynn, Editor 80

The newspaper whose news bites like a rattler.

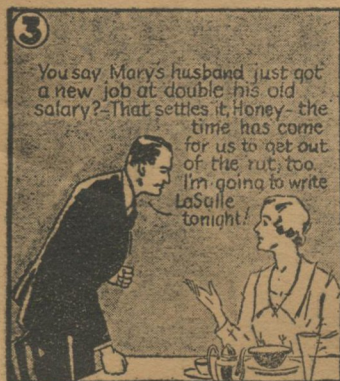
THROWIN' LEAD.....Phil Sharpe 82

A gun editor's vacation.

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MARCH ALL WESTERN ON SALE JANUARY 25

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..... NOW IS THE TIME!

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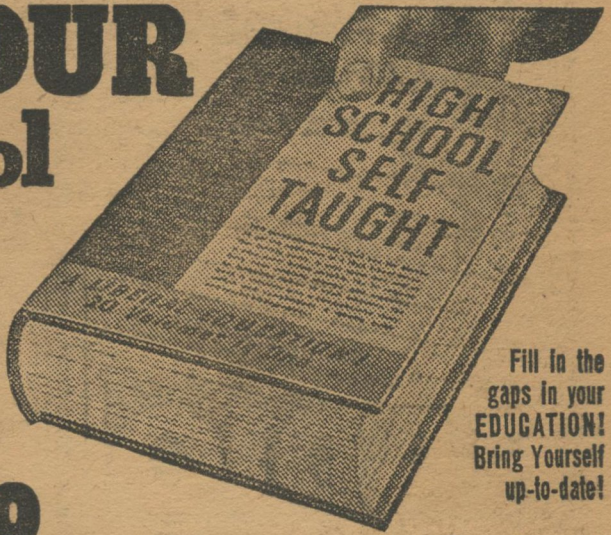
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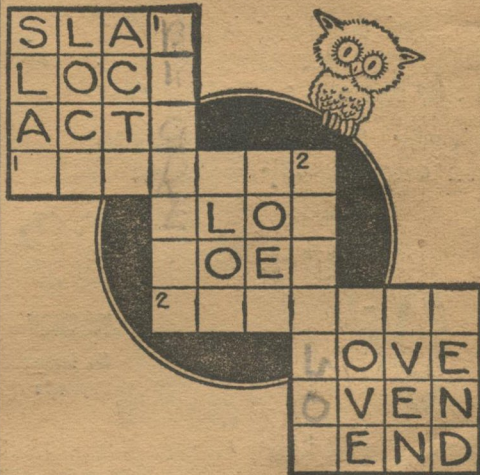
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CHAPTER I Held For Ransom!

RED CARRADINE stretched his long legs in the sun, cocked a reflective gray eye at his patched and broken boots.

"No, Smiley," he said, "I don't ride your kind o' trail. I haven't come to that. Not yet, anyway," he added, and his wry grin was for a memory of the

past, and a blacker vision of the future.

"But you will, Red." Smiley Durang accurately spat his stub at an inquisitive lizard. His dark, restless eyes lightly touched the broken boots, swept up the ragged Levis and shirt to the gaunt, hunger-etched face. "You'll come to it. You'll have to, sooner or later."

Carradine shrugged. "Mebby so," he admitted. "If the time comes, I'll let

Ransom

A Border Novel
by
L. L. Foreman



Carradine kicked his horse, and they
raced their mounts up the alley.

you know. Thanks for the invite, anyway."

Smiley Durang's voice was a murmur, soft and insinuating. "You got a rep, Red. Folks know you for a slick-iron hombre. Might's well have the game as the name. C'mon, *amigo*, throw in with me. You an' me always got along. Be like old times, eh?"

"It wouldn't." Carradine shook his head, eyes farseeing and somber. "We

rode for forty a month in the old days. Now your name's plastered up in ev'ry lawman's office on the border. And I—well, I'm what I am. A gun-slick hombre. No, Smiley, it wouldn't be like old times."

Durang quirked his thin, curving lips.

"You always was a hard cuss to savvy, Red. Here you are, busted. Still you won't hook up with me."

He shoved back his silver-studded sombrero. His black hair, with its devil's peak, shone sleek and glossy in the hot sunlight.

"You got a horse an' two guns. That's all's needed in my business," he continued, and his fleeting smile came and went, leaving cynicism in its wake.

Carradine said nothing. He threw a look over the lonely mission, its crumbling adobe walls glistening under the high sun. The scene epitomized Mexico, land of contrasts. The mission was built for monks, then abandoned, to become the headquarters for outlaws.

He glanced at Durang, lounging beside him in the shade. Durang looked at home here. He had gone Mexican. Dressed like one, had the dark stamp of one. Keen, intelligent, dangerous. The wild years had done things to Durang, but he had always possessed that subtle, slightly sinister look about him.

Riders were coming, the hammering of hoofs sounding flat and dull in the still air. Carradine lifted his long-boned frame up on one elbow, and peered around the nearest corner. Durang was up on his feet in a single lithe bound. Both men, by instinct, touched holsters.

"'Sall right. Some o' my bunch." Durang made a signalling sweep of one hand, and squatted again on his heels.

Carradine remained leaning on his elbow, watching the band of riders coming up from the west. High-crowned sombreros bobbed against the polished sky, and crossed bandoleers flashed brassy glints. They thundered across his vision, and the mission's walls hid them. He heard them halt and dismount at the rear.

"'Member the old Double Peak outfit, Red?" murmured Durang. "'Member the way we—"

"Yeah." Carradine turned, found the black eyes on him. "Your spics brought ina wounded man, Smiley.

And another feller was tied to his saddle. Gringoes, both of 'em."

"So?" Durang raised a dark eyebrow.

Carradine nodded. "Two gringoes. Prisoners. What's it add up to?"

Durang traced a pattern in the sand, eyes veiled. "It adds up," he murmured, "to two thousand dollars. Forget it, Red."

Carradine rose to his tall, ragged height, casually hitched his double belts, and stared down at the man he had once called his best friend.

"Who are they, Smiley?"

"Just a couple fellers." Durang looked up, met Carradine's steady gray eyes, and got idly to his feet. "Couple fellers somebody wants out o' the way. Desert rats. Both named Dyal. Nobody you know, Red."

"So you sell murder, eh?" Carradine put a bite to the words.

"Feller must live," drawled Durang, unruffled. "Hombre who called himself Smith, came down yest'day an' made his wants known. Paid half. I don't know what he's got against these Dyals. Old grudge, mebby. He's comin' back in another month to see the job's done, an' to pay the rest. He don't know it, but it's goin' to cost him another five thousand. Easy *dinero*, eh?"

"If you like that kind," nodded Carradine. His wide-set eyes were hard, condemning, with a still glint that hinted of coming action.

Durang gazed off. "The old Double Peak," he sighed, and tapped tapering fingers on his broad belts. "That's where you an' me first met, Red. 'Member that fight we had? They took our guns away, an' we slugged it out. Then after the boys patched us up, we swore solemn it'd be the last—"

"I reckon," said Carradine, "I'll go take a look at 'em."

Durang's bland black eyes came back. "Good thing they took our guns away, eh? We was both fast. Still are. Sho', *amigo*, go take a look at them two if you want. But—"

He spread his hands, Mexican fashion, and left the rest unsaid.

"But what, Smiley?" Carradine asked gently. His gaunt brown face held nothing but a mild query, and his eyes were very still.

Durang gazed off again. "Nothin'. Nothin' at all, Red."

CARRADINE stepped out of the shade, and paced around the long mission building, his sharp-outlined shadow moving with him along the saffron buff of the adobe wall. He glanced at the shadow, and it brought the thought that it somehow symbolized himself. It was grotesque, all out of proportion, yet it bore his outline, just as he still bore the outline of the Carradine he once had been.

The years had distorted him, played tricks with him, as the sun played tricks with his shadow. A gift of quick hands and steel-strong nerves had ruined him. Had ruined Durang, too. The only difference was that Durang had shucked off his scruples, had become a cold-blooded killer and outlaw who followed no cause but his own.

Carradine turned his eyes from the shadow, and tried not to think of the future. Perhaps he, too, would become a Durang, in time. It was a brief step from fighting for what one thought a good cause, to fighting for loot, when hunger drove out scruples.

He paused at the mission's rear door, and ran his eyes over the dark figures moving about in the inner gloom.

"Where are the two gringos?" he asked quietly, and his cold, calm eyes stopped a Mexican who slapped a startled hand to a carbine.

Swarthy faces swung toward him, standing tall and lean-bodied against the framed sunlight. Eyes, somber and dull, studied his lounging pose. They were like wolves of the pack, deliberating the size and strength of a sudden intruder, before deciding to attack or give trail.

One grunted, motioned. "The Jefe Durang—his permission?"

Carradine stepped in without answer, and shoved open the sagging door of a cell. One small window, high and barred, gave the only light. He went in sidewise, not showing his back.

Lying on the bare floor, the wounded prisoner, gray and gnarled, had his teeth clenched against pain. The other, a slim stripling, was trying to fashion a bandage with a bandana. Both raised quick heads as the door scraped open.

Carradine knew a flame of inner anger as he regarded them, a broken old man and a boy. He silently cursed Durang as he turned back to the open doorway.

"Hey, there!" he growled. "One o' you hombres—you with the fancy blanket—get some water an' a few clean rags."

Again the sullen stares. The Mexican in the bright serape shifted, scowled. "The Jefe Durang—"

"Some water," repeated Carradine, "and some clean rags."

The Mexican muttered, slowly shuffling out. Carradine squatted beside the wounded man, and took the bandana. The hands holding it held on. Carradine noticed that they were small. Just a boy. He looked into the face, shaded by a hat that was oversized. It was altogether too young and sensitive for this kind of thing.

"Let go," he said quietly. "I'll tend to him."

The rounded chin quivered a little. The clear, youthful eyes lost some of their blazing defiance. The bandana slipped from the small hands. Carradine ducked his head and went to work. He didn't want to see the youngster break down. It didn't do to shame a kid; made him swing from decent human feelings to the other bitter extreme.

The wounded man stared, flint-faced. "You in with these damn scum, Mister?" he snapped. "If y'are, you

can leave me be. Kerry'll tend to me."

Carradine curtly shook his head. "I'm not. I'm just a friend o' Durang. Was," he amended grimly. "He's been paid to do this. You're worth a thousand each, dead, to a feller who calls himself Smith. Durang aims to up the ante, which is why you're not dead yet."

The old man squinted. "The hell! Smith? Don't know him. Must be some mistake. I been tryin' to figger out why—uh!" He grunted, pain rippling over his leathery face. "Damn 'em! They shot me down as I reached for my rifle."

A tin basin scraped on the floor. Carradine caught a few bits of rags. The Mexican who brought them gave him a glowering look as he backed out.

"Helluva mess, Kerry," muttered the wounded man. He shot a look up at Carradine, a probing, searching look. "Kerry's my kid. My name's Dyal—Simon Dyal. You reckon this Durang could be bought off?"

"It'd be considerable hard," commented Carradine, "to think o' anything Durang wouldn't do for cash. You got the cash?"

"Uh-uh." Simon Dyal shook his gray head. "They stripped me o' my bit o' dust. But listen—Kerry'll be rich some day. Meby is right now, f'rall I know."

Carradine wrung out a wet rag. "I wouldn't advise trying to fool Durang," he remarked.

"But I ain't!" Dyal struggled half up. "Kerry'll inherit one o' the biggest cow-spreads in Arizona. Fact!"

Carradine again poked his head out the doorway. "Hey, Flash-blanket," he drawled. "Tell Durang the gringos talk ransom."

"Ransom?" The word was a bright talisman that swept all sullenness aside. The Mexicans broke for the outside, chattering.

"I hope," said Carradine as he bound Dyal's leg, "you've got more'n a bluff, Dyal. If not—" He shrugged,

calling to mind Durang's rare outbursts of cold temper.

DURANG came in, heeling the door shut in the eager faces of his Mexicans. "What's this about ransom, Red? Who'll pay it? Him?" He stuck a toe at Simon Dyal. His short laugh held contempt. "Hell, does he look like he's got *dinero*? He's got my boys all excited, an'—"

"Ever hear o' the Arrowhead outfit, up Black River way?" cut in Dyal.

Durang looked blank. "Sho—who hasn't? Owned by old Waldo Hollinger. Tough old son. Some o' the first cows I pushed over the line was Arrowhead stock. Well?"

"Nigh on twenty years ago," said Dyal simply, "I married his daughter, Anne. He hated my insides. Said I was nothin' but a drifter. He was right, at that, but we ran off an' got married."

He smiled a grim, reminiscent smile.

"Ran is right! We left Arizona. Hollinger sent word he'd shoot me on sight. Anne died soon after Kerry was born. 'Bout three months back I wrote to Hollinger, told him 'bout Kerry. I asked him to give Kerry a decent home. He didn't answer. Meby he's dead. Kerry is old Hollinger's only blood kin, so—"

"So he ought to inherit everything," put in Carradine. "An' there's your ransom, Smiley." He was studying Kerry Dyal, and he felt something of a tingling shock, as the clear, hazel eyes lifted to meet his own in a fleeting look.

Durang's lips curved in a smile that lighted up his dark face and lent him a sinister charm.

"Got papers, Dyal?" he queried.

Dyal slowly hauled a crumpled oil-skin wallet from under his faded shirt. "Birth record an' ev'rything," he nodded. "'Sides, Kerry's the spit image of Anne."

Carradine got his hand to the wal-

let before Durang. "I'll take care of it till we get there," he said casually.

Durang pursed his lips. "We? I didn't figger—"

"We," nodded Carradine. "Mind?"

"N-no, guess not." Durang flicked a look at Carradine's eyes. What he saw wiped away his beginning smile.

"That's fine," said Carradine pleasantly, and let his big hands hang relaxed. He knew Durang's swift ways.

"Sho'." Durang's smile came again, brilliant and false. "Glad to have you, Red. My spics—"

"Will stay here," cut in Carradine, with a nod. "Be askin' for trouble, takin' that lobo pack up into cow country. 'Sides, I got a notion they don't like me, any more'n I like them."

"You're a queer cuss, Red." Durang frowned slightly, his gaze on Carradine's hands. "You don't like my spics nor my ways. But you're cuttin' in on this deal, just the same. Y'know, I got a funny answer to that. Damn funny. H'm, just the two of us go, eh?"

"An' the boy."

"Sho'—the boy. The old'n stays here. Y'see, Red, he'll be my hostage, just in case somethin' goes wrong. Sabe?"

Durang slid a glance at Kerry Dyal, who was bent over the wounded man. "You hear that, kid? Keep it in mind."

Kerry Dyal's head nodded.

Carradine weighed the low voice, tried to weigh it for something more than fear. He looked at Simon Dyal, at the keen old eyes. Fear in them, too.

Deep fear. He kept his hands where they were, knowing Durang was watching them with oblique eyes.

"Let's start right now, Smiley," he suggested, and let Durang keep two steps ahead of him.

CHAPTER II

Surprise!

THEY made camp an hour before sundown, at a shallow arroyo that offered the only water in miles. Carradine stretched out and smoked. His gray eyes, far-focused, went back along the trail, watching a tiny dust cloud that lifted far back against the sun's dying red glare.

Riders. They were following this trail, and he guessed who they were: Durang's Mexicans. Durang must have given them a sign before getting away from the mission. He was playing a careful hand, guarding against any open break while stacking the cards for a coup.

The tiny cloud passed into the low-lying hills.

Carradine threw a glance at Durang, and knew that he too had seen it. Durang shifted his eyes, let them wander until they came to idle rest on Kerry Dyal. His expression altered, grew suddenly keen. He frowned, rose smoothly to his feet. Carradine stiffened slightly, watching, and knew that Durang had noticed something.

Kerry Dyal, fully dressed and hat-

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ted, was washing in the creek, back turned. There was something about the slim, rounded body that was not boyish. It was well formed, graceful of line.

Durang's breath made a tiny hiss. His eyes glowed, startled and incredulous. He stepped forward, quick and sinuous, and his right hand swooped. There was a sharp cry, a brief struggle.

"By—!" Durang's mouth opened.

He was staring at thick, tumbled hair, soft and coppery; at a pale, frightened face and wide hazel eyes.

"Well, burn me for a blind monkey! A girl!"

"Yeah, a girl," said Carradine, and rose to his feet. "I was wondering when you'd notice. Her dad sure tried hard to make her a boy. Wise, at that."

"You knew, eh?" Durang sent him a stare. "Smart hombre, Red!" He swore again, laughed, and pulled the girl to him. "I sho' do like—"

"Smiley," said Carradine softly, "would you want to die?"

No passion stirred the rugged cast of his face, but his gray eyes were silver bright and hard. He stood loosely, hands empty and hanging low.

Durang froze at the soft tone. He twisted his head. One hand slithered down, stopped an inch from a bone gunbutt. His eyes, black pools dredged of all laughter, regarded Carradine.

"So!" he breathed. "Is it that way, Red?"

"Anyway you want it, Smiley," said Carradine. "Name the play. We let the girl alone, an' we ride out this Black River trail. We touch her, an' we ride no farther. Meanin' we both draw, an' die. We're even matched. Name it, Smiley."

He kept all threat from his dead flat tone. It was as though the old friendship still held, as though it was not shattered.

Durang deliberately pondered. The girl, released, backed away. He swung his glance at her, at Carradine, and his

twist of a smile lifted one corner of his mouth.

"We'll let it lie, Red," he almost whispered. "Some other time, eh? Too much *dinero* in the ante to spoil the game. Sho', *amigo*, we'll ride out this Black River trail. We're friends, Red."

"Sure," said Carradine, "we're friends, Smiley." He cast a look at the far line of hills. They would be making camp over there, Durang's men.

He unrolled his blanket, tossed it to the girl. "It's all right, Kerry." He spoke to her as though still regarding her as a boy. "Roll up an' get some sleep."

"Sho'," drawled Durang. "You're safe as money in a bank with us. Be passin' through Mesa Verde t'morrow. Buy you some real clothes there. H'm—you still a light sleeper, Red?"

"Very," said Carradine. "Least sound wakes me up, durn it."

Durang stretched, yawned. "Too bad. Same here."

THE keeper of the Mesa Verde Emporium had a prim, disapproving look about him. With careful modesty he kept his eyes from the dark rear of the store. His manner said this was the first time his store had been used as a lady's dressing room.

"I'll bet," said Durang as he settled the bill, "you're a deacon."

"I don't bet." The storekeeper compressed his lips, counted the money with care and suspicion, and the look in his eyes hinted that he thought it was probably stolen. Ill-gotten, anyway. The wearing of two guns branded a man. Two such men, riding up from the border . . . and a pretty girl dressed in men's clothes. . . . Very, very suspicious.

"Sho', now, Deacon, ain't you got no gamblin' spirit?"

Durang spread his elbows on the counter, winked at Carradine. "Tell you what. I bet you don't know the best trail to Salso Bluffs."

"So that's where you're bound." The storekeeper swept the money into his till, slammed the till quickly shut and fastened it with its bent nail lock.

"Salso Bluffs. Huh. You'll be too late. They say the Arrowhead's got more'n it needs o'—huh—your kind. Lettin' some of 'em go. The little outfits've come to terms 'bout those water rights. Had to, or git crowded out."

Carradine and Durang exchanged a look. "That's downright int'restin'," murmured Carradine. "So the Arrowhead's a gun outfit, eh?"

The storekeeper gave him a stare. "Has been for years," he grunted, "ever since Jarret took it over. Everbody knows that. Everbody in the Black River country, anyway."

"And who in hell," queried Durang, "might Jarret be?"

The storekeeper sniffed, muttered something about some gents' thinking it cute to play innocent.

"Phin Jarret," he said distinctly. "Mr. Phinias Jarret. Never heard of him, huh? Humph! He's the feller who ain't goin' to hire you on the Arrowhead 'cause they got more gunhands than they need. They already got more—"

"So you said before," interrupted Carradine. "Twice. Is old Waldo Hollinger dead?"

"No, he ain't," snapped the storekeeper testily. "A wise Providence has for some durn strange reason kept him out o' hell's fires, up to now. He sits up there in his big house, an' tells Jarret what to do. Jarret's his stepson. No blood kin, but they're two of a kind. Graspin'—greedy—"

"You sho' got your opinions, Deacon," commented Durang.

"I had a brother killed last year by Arrowhead riders," was the terse, acid reply. "He had a little spread up there, an' he joined in the fight for water rights."

"Too bad," remarked Durang without visible grief. "You still ain't told us the best trail to Salso Bluffs."

"The right fork, north o' town.

Twenty-odd miles. You can save yourselves the ride, though. Jarret's right here in Mesa Verde, with four-five of his Arrowhead riders. Came in 'smornin'. I saw him go in the post office down the—h'm."

The storekeeper broke off, blinking at Kerry Dyal, coming from the dark rear of the store, dressed in her new clothes.

Carradine blinked, too. "Good Lord!" he muttered. "She's—she's—"

"She sure is," breathed Durang. "Kinda dazzlin', h'm? Did you ever see such—such a—a—"

"I never did," said Carradine, and tried not to stare as the girl flushed.

He felt vaguely troubled, and sort of embarrassed. He had been treating her with casual ease, an impersonal regard that had fixed her status in his mind as practically a boy.

That was all swept away now. Her new clothes made her altogether too feminine. He wondered that he could ever have treated her with that casual ease. She was neither boy nor girl. She was a grown young woman. She had a new quiet dignity, a natural grace of movement that made him feel suddenly big and awkward.

"A beauty!" murmured Durang. He seemed to be having trouble in catching his breath. "I figgered she was kinda pretty, but—hell's foundation! Who'd have thought—"

A heavy tread on the wooden steps, and a sudden-startled oath, made Carradine turn sharply around. Blocking the doorway, poised rigid, a tall man in black coat and hat stood staring in at the girl. His square, heavy face looked frozen. Dull eyes, the color of lead, opened wide, narrowed again to straight slits.

The leaden eyes slid from side to side, stabbed first at Carradine, then at Durang. The oath came again, this time in a sighing hiss. A swift turn, and the big man stepped back into the street and was gone.

The room was deathly still for a moment after the man left.

"WHAT the devil?" muttered Carradine, and moved to the doorway.

He stared after the black coat and hat, going rapidly across the street. The head twisted around, the dull eyes peered back at him. Five men drifted out from the opposite sidewalk to meet the man.

Behind him, in the store, Carradine heard the storekeeper's dry comment. "That was Jarret, if you gents want to see him."

"Jarret?" Durang came up behind Carradine. "Sho', now. So that's Mr. Phineas Jarret, stepson o' Hollinger an' gun-boss o' the Arrowhead. So? Y'know, Red, it's funny. When that gent came down an' said he wanted two parties name o' Dyal put out o' the way, his name was Smith! Yup, Red—same hombre. How's your brain workin', *amigo*?"

"Eh?" Carradine looked over his shoulder. "How's yours?"

"Still workin'," said Durang softly. "But right now is no time for puzzles. Look. Jarret's talkin' to those hombres. They're peekin' across at us, an' tryin' to 'pear like they ain't. Trouble, Red—trouble! Mr. Jarret knows he's been double-crossed. Mr. Jarret is sore. Mr. Jarret is tellin' his boys to amble over an' do things."

"Get the horses, Smiley." Carradine backed into the store. "Go out the back an' bring 'em round from the livery. I'll head 'em off from the alley, if they start."

"*Bueno.*" Durang slipped through the store, vanished silently in the rear. A reflected crack of light showed as he sidled out of the back door.

"Kerry." Carradine touched the waiting girl's arm. "You go stand near the back door. Duck if there's shootin', but stand pat till I give the word."

She looked up into his browned face, studied the cold stillness in his gray eyes. "What's the matter?"

"The feller who wanted you an' your dad killed—he's out there." Car-

radine jerked his chin toward the sun-glared street. "He's got men with him. He's seen you. He's your grandfather's range boss. His stepson, too. That makes him your—heck, I don't know. Kinda step-uncle o' yours, reckon. Don't ask me what it adds up to. I don't quite know that, either. Just do like I say, eh?"

The girl hesitated, slowly backed along the length of the store, still gazing at him. The storekeeper came out from behind his counter.

"Say, mister!" He waved a skinny hand. "Git outside, if there's gonna be any fightin'. I got breakable goods in here."

"You got a breakable head, too," growled Carradine. "Get back behind your counter an' be ready to flop."

He flung a glance at the street. Across the patch of it that he could see through the open front doorway, two men sauntered, trying to look disinterested in everything but their saloon cigars. Another man strolled after them, paused as though idly changing his mind, and came on over to the near sidewalk. His figure loomed up against the window and dropped out of sight as he seated himself under it in the shade.

Carradine stepped to the doorway. The two sauntering men, heading for the back alley, sent quick, sidelong looks at him. The man sitting under the window jerked up his head. Two more men, standing beside a saloon hitchrack farther down the street, moved indolently toward the batwing doors. There was no sign of Jarret's black coat and hat.

Carradine waited, eyes swinging from left to right, until the two sauntering men almost reached the mouth of the short alleyway. He sent his quiet voice across the slumbering silence.

"Where you goin', fellers?"

They stopped. Both made the half turn slowly, and laid deliberate eyes on him. One, thin and droopy, gazed steadily at Carradine's hands.

The other, red-faced and jaunty, took his cigar from his mouth and sent twin spears of blue smoke through his nostrils. "Any business o' yours, mister?" he dragged out.

"Might be," murmured Carradine, and shifted slightly to keep the squatting man partly in his view; the fellow was close to him, a bare ten feet from his right.

"Well, now—" The red-faced one took another puff from his cigar, seemed to be meditating. "Don't see how could be. No, sir. Don't see how. We're jest—"

A shot thudded its echoing note into the still air, coming from the saloon.

Carradine dropped to one knee, and his plain-butted guns cut upward, roaring their double report.

The red-faced one, who had in a split second exchanged his cigar for a gun, stumbled back, coughing. The droopy one, weaving his thin body like a snake standing on its tail, struck for his holster and fired from the hip.

Carradine pitched another shot, saw the weaving figure falter, and whirled on his knee. The batwing doors of the saloon formed an arch over two faces and two guns that were lined in the wide gap below, hugging the floor.

But it was the squatting man, ten

feet away, who had the drop. The blue flash of metal in his hand shrank to a pinpoint as the gunbarrel leveled out, front sight twinkling. Carradine slashed around with his right-hand gun, knowing he had neglected that fellow too long; the man was already squeezing trigger, rising—

A shattering crash rang out. The store window burst outward. Broken glass showered down on the gunman, and something bounced off his head and smashed on the sidewalk. He rocked back, partly lost balance, and his shot snarled by Carradine's face.

Durang's voice, loud but cool, sounded from the back alley. "C'mon, Red! Quit foolin' round out there, an' let's ride!"

Carradine threw one more shot, and rolled back into the doorway. He bounded up, and found Kerry Dyal halfway down the store.

"Told you to wait in the rear!" he snapped, and caught her arm.

They raced through the store. The back door, open, gave a glimpse of the alley. Durang, with the three saddled horses, was laughing as he peered in.

"Hey, you!" The storekeeper bobbed his head up over the counter. "Come back here! You gotta pay me for that window an' that bottle o' fly-killer! You can't—"

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"Be durned!" snapped Carradine, and loped on, the girl running beside him. They bolted out into the alley, jumped on the horses. Somebody, somewhere, was firing wild.

"Gotta pay me!" The storekeeper was still shouting. "You gotta pay me for that window an' that fly-killer! I'll have the law—!"

"What the heck's he yammerin' about?" growled Carradine as he grabbed up his reins. "Fly-killer! I didn't drink anything."

"Nor me." Durang was chuckling. "It was her." He nodded his head at Kerry Dyal. "Yeah, she busted it. I saw her. Picked up that bottle o' fly-killer off the counter an' slammed it bang through the window at that feller what had the drop on you, Red. Never saw anythin' so damn funny in my life."

"Well, I be—!" Carradine kicked his horse, and they raced their mounts up the alley.

"So that's what happened. I kinda wondered. You saw it, eh, Smiley? You just stood there at the back door an' watched. Didn't have a chance to pitch a shot at that feller, I s'pose, or did you?"

"Sho', *amigo*—sho'," drawled Durang. "I had plenty chance. But you seemed to be doin' all right. Why would I butt in an' spoil your good time? There's blood on your neck, Red. Or mebbly it's fly-killer."

Carradine touched it. "Bullet skinned me," he grunted.

A rifle spanged its high, whining note as they passed a break in the alley on the gallop. The bullet whirred low overhead.

Durang, bent over, looked back as they passed the break.

"Up on a roof, he was," he remarked. "Huh. The Arrowhead sho' knows how to put on a welcome party!"

"I'm wonderin'," said Carradine, grimly musing, "what kind o' welcome they'll have for us in Salso Bluffs."

CHAPTER III
Callin' the Dealer

SALSO BLUFFS was quiet. Deep night, a blue-black sky, and a yellow crescent of moon enhanced its surface note of tranquil peace. Its one street, straddling the trail, was marked here and there, along its short course, by a few lighted windows that once in awhile showed a passing figure.

"Looks dead," observed Durang. "That big window is a saloon, reckon. Mebby they don't know 'bout us yet. Mebby we beat Jarret here."

"Mebby." Carradine edged his horse between Durang and the girl, and Durang grudgingly made room.

They sat their mounts on a high knoll beside the trail, and stared down at the spotty-lighted little town.

"It's a mite too quiet," said Carradine, and wondered if his nose for trouble had become too sharp. It did seem as though there was some sort of undercurrent down there.

"Here it is the end o' the month. Payday. Place ought to be crowded. I don't like it, somehow."

"Nerves, Red?" Durang sent him a look, mockery glimmering in his black eyes. "Hell, you need a drink. Let's go down an' tip a couple."

Carradine shook his head, his gaze thoughtful. "I don't need it that bad. We ought to go on to the Arrowhead, an' have a showdown with old Hollinger. You know where 'tis, don't you?"

"Yeah, I know." Durang looked back over the dark trail, and Carradine knew what he was looking for. There had been no sign of the following Mexicans for some time.

"Well—?" Carradine let the rest of the question hang.

"I'm against it," said Durang. "Fact is, I'm changin' my mind 'bout this whole set-up."

"Nerves, Smiley?" murmured Carradine.

"No. Just sense." Durang leaned on his saddle horn. "Old Hollinger ain't goin' to come through with any *dinero*. We're on a fool's trail, Red. The old mossback's ready to kill Dyal an' Kerry, both. An' me. An' you. Him an' Jarret an' their gunhands rule these parts, seems like. You heard what that Mesa Verde storekeeper said."

"Let's give it all up." The sudden plea came from Kerry, who seldom spoke. It made both men turn sharp and stare at her. She was white-faced in the moonlight.

"Can't," said Carradine gruffly, and wished he could explain what he meant without Durang's cynical eyes to mock him. He wanted to see her settled in a permanent home, safe from men like Durang. He had an idea that if old Waldo Hollinger could see his granddaughter, he would turn human and take her in, no matter how tough he was.

"We can," contradicted Durang. "Why can't we? Hell, we don't stand a chance. Two men against a gun spread. My idea was, we'd fix old Hollinger an' Kerry'd claim the spread as next kin. Then I—er—we'd cut in on it. But it don't pan out that way. I'm ready to drift back to Mexico."

"Go right ahead, Smiley," said Carradine. "As for me, I'm playin' the hand out."

"You ain't got a hand," drawled Durang. "There ain't no game left. Kerry goes back to Mexico with me."

"The hell she does! I'll—"

"You'll do nothin', Red." Durang straightened up, and his smile was a taunt. "You forgot something. But Kerry ain't forgot. Her dad's down there in my hangout. He'll stay there till I get back. *Sabe, amigo?* This little gal's gonna do just what I tell her. Eh, Kerry?"

The girl bowed her head. Her answer, low and almost inaudible, barely reached them. "Yes."

"Sho' you will." Durang nodded cheerfully. "So what can you do, Red?"

No use lookin' tough like that, *amigo*. You can't do a damn—ah!" His teeth clicked shut, and his right hand stopped its swift downward stroke.

Carradine already had a gun out, cocked and aimed.

"Do?" he breathed. His gray eyes stabbed savage, naked menace. "I can cripple you, Smiley. I can drag you back to that hole o' yours, an' carry Dyal out o' there. I can do that, Smiley!"

For a moment they glared into each other's eyes across the girl's head.

"Sho', now, Red, you're crazy!" purred Durang. "Always was. That's a damn tall order. You don't know how tall. What's wrong with you, anyway? Is it the girl, here? Never thought you cared much for women. You—"

"Do we play out the hand, Smiley?" cut in Carradine. "Or do we cash chips right here?"

Durang pulled a sack of makings from his vest pocket, began carefully building a smoke. His hands were steady, unhurried. With the string in his teeth he glanced up at Carradine.

"You're dealin', *amigo*," he murmured, and dropped his eyes to the gun. "Let's amble down an' get that drink. It's me needs it now. C'mon, Kerry." He nudged his horse forward down the slope.

He looked back over his shoulder as his mount took the downgrade. "You're dealin'," he repeated tonelessly. "But if you take my advice you'll throw in your cards."

"I'm stickin'," said Carradine, and holstered his gun.

Durang flung his right arm high, made a cutting sweep with his hand.

"All right, Red," he called back, and gave a dry, brittle laugh. "It's just too damn bad, is all."

THEY cantered down the long slope into the quiet, drowsing Salso Bluffs, and their hoofbeat echoes seemed to ring out loud behind the high knoll they were leaving. Car-

radine half turned his head, cocked an ear to listen.

Echoes? Seemed too distant for that. He turned front in time to catch a glimpse of Durang's face, peering back at him. He did not look to the rear again.

They walked their mounts into Salso Bluffs' single street, and found it empty. Even the lighted windows showed no shadows behind them. A few ponies stood with drooping heads at the hitchracks, most of them outside the town's one saloon.

Carradine found an eerie tinge in the unnatural hush. It was as though the whole town were listening, holding breath. He tried to shake it off, told himself his senses were too fine-drawn. It was no more dangerous here in Salso Bluffs than out there in the open country. Not as much, perhaps.

Durang's Mexicans were somewhere behind. Those echoes; they had seemed very loud and distinct, beyond the knoll.

He thought of Durang's queer gesture—the upflung arm and quick sweep of hand. A signal to men in the rear? Likely enough. And Durang's insistence on getting a drink; that gave an excuse for riding, with the beat of their hoofs muffling sounds of other riders coming up behind the knoll.

It added up.

Carradine dismounted, led his horse alongside the lighted saloon and hitched it to a broken fence post. Durang left his at the hitchrack, and motioned for Kerry to do the same.

"It's too quiet," said Carradine again. "If this isn't a trap, I never saw one. You're a fool, Smiley. I got notions o' what you're fixin' to do."

"Nerves, Red—nerves," drawled Durang. "I'm fixin' to have a drink. C'mon, Kerry. Mebby he ain't thirsty."

"Takin' her in there?" Carradine closed a hand on the girl's shoulder. "No you don't, Smiley!"

Durang did not look at him. "C'mon, Kerry," he said again, commandingly.

Kerry moved her shoulder under Carradine's grip.

"Let me go—please." Her voice was strained, shaky. "I—I've got to. Don't you see?"

Carradine let his hand fall, forced down his wave of black anger.

"I should've shot you, Smiley, up there on the knoll," he said huskily. "You know damn well this is a trap. You're riskin' her life, just in the hope I'll get dropped. You damn fool—what about yourself?"

"I've lived this long, *amigo*," murmured Durang. He darted a quick glance at the high bulk of the knoll, overhanging the town. "I got cards to beat all hands, Red. Yeah, it's you's the damn fool. You had the drop on me. Too late now. Hell's front an' back o' you, *amigo*."

"We'll be lucky," ground out Carradine, "if any of us get out o' this alive."

"I'm lucky," said Durang. "Always was. Let's get that drink, eh? I hanker to give these two-bit Arrowhead gunnies a s'prise, if they're waitin' for us." He sauntered on up the saloon steps, the girl beside him.

Carradine followed. He sent a look at the knoll, and was not surprised to see figures shifting down its dark face, coming into Salso Bluffs.

"Y'know"—Durang paused at the saloon doors—"I always play for all the stakes, Red. I was willin' to cut you in on this, though. But there ain't nothin' in it any more, 'cept Kerry, an' now you got notions 'bout her. You're just too damn meddlin', *amigo*. Too apt to go off half-cocked. Too downright dangerous."

He shoved open the saloon doors.

"So we'll have that drink," he finished, and gave his brittle laugh again.

They stepped into the barroom. Quiet here, too. Behind the bar, under the hanging oil lamps, stood the bartender. Bald and fat, he rested beefy arms on the bar. His sleepy, slow-moving eyes lifted, regarded the incoming three, dropped again.

Durang led the way to the bar, put a foot on the brass rail, and stared blandly at the fat bartender.

"Whisky for mine," he ordered. "What's yours, Red? You drink, Kerry?"

The girl shook her head.

"Make mine a beer," said Carradine, and ran his eyes over the barroom. Empty. A few half-finished drinks stood on the scattered tables. A cigarette still burned, its thin spiral of smoke curling upward in the stale, motionless air. He could feel the presence of men, of watching eyes.

THERE was a door off to the left, open. A room set apart for the gambling games, probably. Nothing going on in there now, though. It wasn't even lighted. The hanging oil lamps above the bar sent a long triangle of dim yellow through the doorway and across the floor of the room.

"Kinda slow night, eh, barkeep?" remarked Durang affably, and turned to sweep an idle glance over the big front window. Its lower part had been painted a once-bright red.

The bartender grunted something, and withdrew along the bar, wiping its scarred surface with his dirty apron.

Carradine poured his beer, his eyes on the triangle of light. He, too, turned so that he had a view of the front window. He shot a swift look at it, wondering if Durang's Mexicans were yet behind that faded strip of red paint. When he looked again at the triangle, its outline was broken.

He finished pouring his beer, put the bottle behind him on the bar, and eyed the man who slowly stepped out of the darkened gambling room. Bony, cadaverous, the man looked like a half-starved lion. Yellow hair hung down under his stiff hat. Yellow skin, like tanned leather stretched tight on a frame, seemed to keep his narrow bloodless lips from closing over his teeth. It gave him the appearance of constantly sneering.

Carradine shifted slightly, hooked a thumb in his belt, and sipped his beer. Beside him he caught Durang's faint whisper.

"Know him, Red? That's Launt. Ace trigger man. If the Arrowhead's got more like him—huh!"

Launt moved deliberately over to a table, sat down facing the bar, and kept his chair pushed well back. Other men came drifting out of the darkened room, hard-eyed and lounging, and stood silently staring at nothing in particular.

Durang, whispering, named those he knew as they came out. "Choppy Reed. Hard Harrison. Jay Dekker. That'n looks like Ding-dong George. Lawdy me, what a crew. Y'know, Red, mebbly you're right. I'll be damn lucky to get out. Didn't figger on a crew like this." He cast another searching look at the front window. He still wore his meaningless smile, but his eyes were tense, urgent.

Carradine took a deep breath.

"I hope you liked your drink, Smiley," he muttered. "I hope you get dropped. I hope your damn spics get wiped out. Kerry, walk over to the door. Walk slow an' easy. Smiley, we're goin' to cover her while she gets out. Go ahead, girl. We'll follow."

"Sho'," breathed Durang. "We'll follow. Just a short walk, is all. Just a short walk 'cross hell's burnin' bottom!"

The girl hesitated, looking at both of them. Slowly she moved away from the bar, started across the floor. Carradine found time to admire her self control. She walked easily, naturally.

Launt rose from his chair.

"Say, gal." His light eyes bored at her. His voice held a dangerous purr. "C'mon over here to me, if yo're tired o' them two fiddle-heads."

The girl walked on, not turning her eyes. The lounging men stiffened, hands restless. Launt stepped fast around his table, as if to head her off from the door.

"Don't do it, hombre!" Carradine snapped the command, stepped away from the bar, hands hanging loose. He was aware that Durang had moved, too, was walking forward after Kerry.

Launt swung his bony body to an abrupt halt, facing Carradine across the dozen yards that separated them. Like a stage magician drawing attention away from a deft bit of palming, he flirted his right hand outward, stroked fast with his left to the cut-away holster on his hip.

The flirt of the hand was a signal. Other hands slapped down, hit butts. Eyes mocked Carradine. Bodies froze, half crouched.

Launt, left arm crooked and fingers closed on his gun, sidled forward another step.

"Stop, gal!" he barked. "Yuh too, Durang." His light eyes never left Carradine. "Did yuh say somethin', yuh sorrel-topped—"

"I did," said Carradine, and saw Durang had halted with the girl, a bare two steps from the door. His hands were hooked, ready for their swift clutch at his plain guns.

"I *sabe* the set-up, Launt. Let the girl go. Durang an' me, we'll—"

"Yo're Carradine," broke in Launt softly. "Red Carradine. We never met, down in that Hondo range war. I was on the other side. Always wanted to meet yuh. Fast, huh? Fast as Durang? C'mon, yuh benighted pair o' gun pilgrims—draw!"

Durang gave a sudden high yell, and his shoulder hit the girl, sending her reeling through the double swing doors. The doors remained open after she hurtled through, brown hands grasping their edges from the outside. Swarthy faces, tilted over the sights of short carbines.

Carradine ducked, snatched at his gunbutts as the carbines roared red streaks into the barroom. Above his head an oil lamp exploded with a crash of burst glass, and a ragged sheet of flame dropped from its wreckage. The other lamp, down at the far

end of the bar, dissolved and winked out.

In the flickering red flare of the spilled oil's flame, Carradine got a glimpse of the Arrowhead gunmen lunging forward. Launt's gun spat three times, fast, as the double doors swung shut. With his third shot, an outburst of thudding reports made an ear-splitting din inside the barroom.

Carradine whirled, made a flying leap for the bar and glasses crunched under his worn boots as he landed on top of it. For an instant he stood poised, cut off from the burning oil's glare, and looked to the front doors.

No chance of getting out that way. He could see them shaking to the ripping impact of bullets that struck them from both inside and out. Durang's Mexicans were blazing at them, stopping pursuit.

Carradine jumped down behind the bar as a bullet tugged his hair and plowed a patch through shelved bottles. He landed hard on the bartender, who let out a howl and dropped something that clattered on the floor.

Outside in the street, Durang's voice called out above the gunfire, and reached inside the smoke-filled barroom. "S'long, Red! We'll miss you, Kerry an' me! *Adios, amigo!*"

HOOFBEATS and the softer patter of feet withdrew down the street, but the doors still shook to the echoing reports of the carbines.

Men were cursing, shouting, stumbling about among upturned tables and chairs. A face bobbed up over the bar.

"Hey, Beefy!" rapped a brittle voice. "Did that red-haired son—"

Carradine fired, and the face dropped. He hit the squirming bartender, who went limp, and ran crouching along behind the bar. A spot of weak light suddenly speared from the woodwork beside him. A tiny splinter jabbed into his arm. Other ragged little spots appeared. They knew he was behind the bar. They

were searching him out with their guns.

He kept on along the bar until he reached the end, and paused under the flap to take quick stock. The flaming patch of spilled oil gave poor light. All he could see were tables and chairs tipped over, some shifting figures, and here and there the snapping stab of a triggered gun.

A short distance off, along to the left of the wall that blocked him, was the doorway of the gambling room. He measured the distance. He was thinking of Durang, as he made his stooping run; thinking how much he wanted to put a bullet into Durang.

Somebody sighted his stooping figure, fired, and yelled.

Carradine said, "Hell!" and rolled the rest of the way. He was hit. The ribs along his left side felt as if they had been punched in.

He dragged himself up on hands and knees, fumbled a gun into his palm, and backed across the floor of the gambling room. Shadows flitted across the threshold, came crowding up to the doorway. Carradine spent two shots, circled around a roulette layout, and squatted behind it, breathing hard.

"I got him with that'n," said somebody. "Look there. Blood on the floor. Hard cuss to down, ain't he? How yuh feel, sorrel-top?"

"Can still pitch a slug," said Carradine, and sent one high.

The brim of a hat jerked back abruptly from the doorpost, and the same voice swore aggrievedly about a ruined Stetson.

Launt's purry voice came. "If some of us could git out thet damn door—git round to the winder— Who'll try it with me? Durang's bunch is backin' out. Sounds like jest one or two still coverin' the front."

Carradine looked behind him, picked out the dim sheen of a small window. He crawled backward to it, keeping the roulette layout between himself and the door. His side hurt

more when he straightened up. The throbbing pain made him a little sick and giddy.

He heard a faint creak in the bar-room, as somebody carefully eased open the front doors. A carbine spat viciously along the street, followed on the instant by the heavier boom of a six-gun inside the saloon. A sharp cry lifted, wailed off.

Launt said, "Got him! Only one more out there. Rest've *vamosed*. Stamp out thet blaze, some o' yuh. We'll git that'n next. Blase thet tricky Durang! The boss is gonna be sore as hell."

Carradine tried the grimy little side window. It slid up an inch, stuck, and he had to pry it with a gunbarrel. It rasped badly as he levered it past the sticking point. He covered the sound with a fit of loud coughing that made his ribs take fire.

"Cough it up, Red!" sneered somebody in the barroom. "We got plenty more pills fer yuh."

Carradine eased his long, pain-racked frame over the window-sill. He fell when half through, and landed on hard earth. His horse, standing tethered to the broken fence post, snorted and nervously pawed the ground.

Two more shots rang out down the street. All lights were out now. A six-gun blared close by. From far off, a voice sent a hail through the night. Footsteps, faint and rapid, beat a retreat along the boarded walk. The front doors of the saloon creaked again.

Carradine scrambled up into his saddle, tore the reins free, and heeled hard. With the hammering of his mount's hoofs, a man let out a shout. Again a gun barked. He hipped around in the saddle, chopped a fast shot that sent a murky figure lunging back to cover, and slapped his slithering horse with the smoking barrel.

Broken ground and scattered trash behind the saloon made the horse trip and stumble a half-dozen times before

clearing it. Carradine, legs wrapped tight around the animal's middle, held on and gasped as the jolting sent fresh pain through him. He reined over toward the high knoll, skirting the rest of town in a wide arc.

It still was dark in Salso Bluffs when he looked back, and the gunfire had ceased. The sounds of men running and shouting came plainly up to him, as he beat his horse to more speed up the slope of the knoll. All was quiet and deserted here. Under the moonlight the trail showed bare and empty.

He strained his eyes, trying to see the farther skyline, as he topped the crest of the knoll. The uneven line of it was vague, blurred, but one small bit of it seemed to move, seemed to be rising and falling in jerky motions.

"Headin' for home," he said aloud, and swore. "Damn sidewinder!" He jammed fresh shells into his guns as he rode on, and tried to ignore the tearing pain in his ribs.

CHAPTER IV When Friends Meet

THE morning sun greeted Carradine with cheerful mockery, as he forced his laboring mount on through loose, drifting sand. The glare of it, intensified by the reflected shimmer of the great rolling dunes, hurt his eyes. He kept closing them, partly to shield them, partly from weariness.

His side had stopped smarting. It had stopped bleeding, too, and the shabby shirt had stuck to it. It ached now, like a huge bruise. He peered, squinting, along the trail he was following. The night winds had done their best to fill in the hoofmarks, but they still showed up clearly enough when sighted along their straight length toward the southwest.

"They didn't make camp, reckon," he muttered, and found his voice was an unfamiliar dry croak. He blew gathered dust from his lips, fumbled

instinctively for his canteen, and remembered it was empty.

"Damn," he said, and patiently kicked his tired horse.

He tipped a hand against the sand's blinding shimmer, and squinted again along the line of near-filled tracks. Durang must have forced the pace and kept going all through the night. That meant tired horses ahead, too. They'd have to make camp some time.

Carradine sighed. If he could manage to keep his own horse going—and manage to stay in the saddle. . . . His short sigh changed to a grunt. His reddened eyes grew intent. There was another long dune ahead. The tracks marked its near bank, but did not extend beyond it, where the desert lifted to the sharp horizon.

He drew steadily closer to the low-lying dune, running his narrowed glance along it. A glint appeared, then others. One of them puffed a wispy ball of smoke. The crack of the report sounded flat and tiny against the lowering silence.

Feeling dully emotionless, Carradine listened to the thin whine of the bullet. It struck sand just ahead of his plodding mount. He looked with incurious eyes at the mark as he passed it, and rode on.

A head rose up from behind the dune. Another figure rose beside it. Durang and Kerry. The metallic glints remained, motionless and menacing. Durang came walking down the bank, the girl following. The polished bone handles of Durang's guns made little white flickers as they moved rhythmically back and forth in their hand-tooled holsters.

Carradine rode up to them, pulled his horse to a grateful halt, and stared down at Durang.

"You lack guts, Smiley," he said tonelessly. He felt strangely calm, but there was a tight ball inside of him that wanted to burst.

"So?" Durang's eyes, too, grew intent. "I wouldn't say that 'bout you, Red. Fool for luck, you are. An' a

fool for crazy nerve. I'da sworn you was—"

"You lack guts," said Carradine again.

The intentness in Durang's black eyes deepened. His dark face did not change expression, but seemed to stiffen. "How you figger that, Red?"

"You lack the guts to shoot it out with me."

Durang tapped fingers against his thighs.

"I'm ready when you are, a *migo*," he breathed, and his eyes took on the glitter of gunman's pride. "I'm ready to die if you are."

"Big talk," said Carradine. "Your spics are ready to shoot, soon's I make a move. Walk with me

out o' range—both you an' Kerry."

"Uh-uh," Durang slowly shook his head. "Too tired. Been in the saddle all night."

"Yellow!" spat Carradine. "I wonder you didn't stay skulked down with your spics an' plug me as I came up, 'stead of just sendin' that warnin' shot."

A vein stood out and quivered on Durang's high forehead.

"That wasn't a warnin' shot." His lips barely opened. "I hit Mateo's arm as he fired. That's why he missed. I figgered to give you one last chance to git off my trail. All night I been feelin' kinda bad 'bout leavin' you in that trap. I did it deliberate. I wanted to git shet o' you."

His shifting glance slid to Kerry.

"I did it deliberate," he repeated. "It wasn't I turned yeller. I got you into it, an' left you there. But when I saw you ridin' down just now, damned if I didn't feel glad. Yeah, Red, I aimed to give you one last chance. But I'm changin' my mind."

"Then signal your spics to shoot." Carradine let his gray, bloodshot eyes shine hard contempt. "But I'll get one shot off before I drop. One'll be enough. It'll be enough to finish a yellow, woman-fightin' quitter!"

Durang's hands moved. His lean head jerked forward.

"You're pushin' me, Red!" he rasped. "You know I ain't yeller, nor—"

"I'll push you more," said Carradine, and dismounted stiffly from his drooping horse. "You're a woman-fighter. You—"

"Kerry's goin' back to Mexico with me of her own accord." Durang took a stance, breathing hard. "Don't say the rest, Red!"

"She'd go back, to save her dad," nodded Carradine. "Here's the rest. You're a quitter—you quit the Arrowhead set-up 'cause it looked tough. Things have to be easy to suit you, or you quit cold. Adds up, don't it?"

"No!" rapped Durang. His face was pale, twitching. "I was goin' to warn you, Red. I was goin' to tell you to ride on your way an' forget all this. That's why I came out an' met you. That's why I brought Kerry over with



Durang was backed by his cut-throat crew.

me, so's you'd know she's actin' on her own free will. But you've gone too far, damn you!"

He began a swift signal with his left hand, halted it when Carradine's palm smacked on a gunbutt.

"Go on, Smiley—finish it," said Carradine gently. "Finish it, an' we'll go to hell together. But you'll still be a yellow quitter!"

Slowly, Durang dropped his hand. He shuddered as though cold, trying to reach self-control through the wild red haze of his fury.

"Me—yeller!" he choked. "Damn you, Red, I'll show you! I'll show you how far I can go! I'll—"

Carradine laughed a short, hard laugh of sneering irony.

"Big talk. Never knew a yellow dog yet that couldn't bark its head off, tryin' to prove how tough it is. But it stays a yellow dog, just the same. Takes more'n barkin', Smiley. Y'got to bite."

"I can bite." Durang seemed to have difficulty in swallowing something. "I can bite, Red! I'll ride a trail you won't have guts to follow. We'll go back. We'll go to that Arrowhead spread, an' take it! Take it, *sabe*? I got five men left. They got mebbly two dozen. But I'll take it!"

Carradine uttered his hard laugh again. "Still barkin'!"

Durang bared his teeth. "I bite plenty hard. I'll take that Arrowhead outfit. I'll strip it. I'll wipe out ev'ry son in it. You don't know me, Red. Yeller? Damn! If you're still round when the smoke clears, I'll make you eat that!"

"It's a bet," said Carradine, and his tired mind knew a moment of triumph.

Durang swung on his heel, stalked back toward the dune, his every movement betraying blind rage. Kerry stood undecided, looking first at one, then at the other. Her eyes fell on Carradine's bloodstained shirt. She made a step toward him.

Carradine looped reins over his arm,

gestured, and both walked slowly after the striding Durang.

"Yeah, he can bite," he muttered. "He bit hard on that. Lord, he's a bigger fool than I am."

"Please—whatever happens—don't kill him." Kerry caught his arm, was looking up into his haggard face. "Will you?"

"No," said Carradine wryly. "Chances are he'll kill me. But mebbly by that time we'll have you settled, somehow. Your dad, too. Mebbly Hollinger will pay that ransom."

"But—he's trying to have me killed!"

"Jarret is," corrected Carradine. "I'm kind of short on brains, but I think I got this thing figgered out. Jarret wants you dead. He's old Hollinger's stepson. Be his heir, if it wasn't for you. He saw that letter, reckon—the one your dad sent to Hollinger 'bout you. That's the way things shape up in my mind. But then, my mind ain't first class. Mebbly I'm wrong."

The girl gave him a long, queer look. "You're a—a strange kind of man," she said slowly. "I thought at first you were like Durang, but—"

"I am," he said somberly. "I get more like him every day, but he keeps ahead of me. Don't fool yourself 'bout me, Kerry. An' don't feel bad if anything happens. The world's a better place without the likes o' Durang an' me."

"Durang," she nodded. "But not you."

Durang beat them to the dune. When they climbed over it, he was standing with his five Mexicans, talking in quick, jerky whispers. He stopped as Carradine and Kerry got within hearing distance, and walked over to the bunched horses. The Mexicans stood silent and staring, fingering their carbines, their dull eyes only partly comprehending.

"We can't start right away." Durang flung the words over his shoulder at Carradine. "Horses are tuckered out.

Have to rest 'em. We'll start out this afternoon. That'll get us to the Arrowhead late tonight, when they're mebbe sleepin'."

Carradine nodded.

"There's a storm comin' up, anyway." He gestured toward the north, where the sky had taken on a sullen mauve. "Can't travel till it blows over. One thing, it'll wipe out our tracks, if they're trailin' us."

CHAPTER V
Blindman's Bluff

THE moonlight made a great, ghostly white cube of the Arrowhead ranch house. Around its high square block squatted the long bunkhouse and outbuildings, like satellites crouched at its feet. With distance and darkness tricking the eye, the whole place looked huge, grim, forbidding.

Carradine pinched on the nose of his horse as the animal began a snort.

The silent-footed Mateo was coming back, slipping down the long, gradual slope with the easy quietness of a born prowler. The Mexican passed Carradine without a word or sign, and went to Durang. They whispered together. Durang's tone sounded sharp, eager. Mateo repeated something in his whining, guttural speech, and shook his head.

"What's he say?" asked Carradine.

Durang raised his head.

"Nobody there," he said softly. "Nobody. Bunkhouses empty. Not many saddles, either. Must be they're still out tryin' to trail us. The big house is quiet, too. I'm wonderin' how many are out night-hawkin' the herds. Mebby not many. Plenty good stock on this Arrowhead range."

"Still lookin' for what's easy, eh, Smiley?" murmured Carradine. "Where's your nerve?"

Durang swore under his breath. He motioned to his five Mexicans, muttered a word. The party moved up the

long grade, leading the horses. Carradine maneuvered himself next to Kerry. He and the girl walked together.

They entered the wide, well-kept yard, paused a moment to listen, and went on around to the back of the big house. Durang was first to push open a door and step over the threshold. He led the way through a kitchen and into a long living room. Square beams of moonlight streamed through the windows along one side, and the pale radiance added a note of eerie gloom to the silence.

"Like a damn graveyard," muttered Durang, and irritably cursed one of his men. "Keep your thievin' fingers offa things, Chico. This is more'n just a loot hunt. We gotta—what was that?"

They stood like images, listening to a slow, measured thump-thump overhead. It ceased. Stairs squeaked to a heavy, deliberate tread. The thumping came again, louder with nearness. Something rattled sharply on a door. The door, barely visible in the shadowed half of the living room, swung open.

"Who's there?" The query came in a rumbling growl. "That you, Phin? Where y'been? I wanta know, y'hear? Too much goin' on round here that I don't understand. Don't like it. Is it more trouble?"

The rising inflection of the deep voice brought faint echoes from the hanging pots and pans in the rear kitchen, but no reply from the group.

"Dammit, answer me!" A shape moved forward into the room. Big, lumbering, like a great bear, it stood with head slowly turning from side to side. "I heard you all come in. I can hear your breathin'. Tryin' to fool me, Phin?"

Durang dipped a match from his vest pocket and thumbed it. His right hand rested on his holster. In the sputtering flare of the small flame, the group stared at the owner of the voice.

Huge, bowed-shouldered, the man

stood with shaggy gray head thrust forward, frowning. Gnarled as a weathered oak, he bore the crude dignity of strength, age and authority. The deep lines in his face gave its rugged features sharp prominence. Under the jutting brows, his wide-set blue eyes looked blank, without focus.

The light of the match seemed to give the man no further knowledge. He came forward another step, his frown deepening. He looked at nobody, but stared straight ahead. Impatiently, he tapped the floor with a heavy blackthorn stick, the thump of it as imperious as the bang of a judge's gavel.

"He's blind," whispered Carradine.

"'Course I'm blind!" The ears of the out-thrust head had caught the whisper. "But I can—who're you? I don't know that voice. Who is he, Phin? New hand?"

"Phin ain't here," drawled Durang, and lighted a brass lamp on the table. His black eyes were keen, alive to opportunity. "He's out ridin', him an' the bunch, lookin' for us. I'm Smiley Durang. This other fellow is Red Carradine. Five other hombres here too, but they ain't important. I figger you're old man Hollinger, eh?"

"Durang? Why, you—!" The blackthorn, thick as a club, swished through the air.

Durang nimbly ducked. "Never mind the compliments, Hollinger, ol' hoss," he remarked. "An' go easy with that stick. I'm li'ble to—"

"There's somebody else here, too, Hollinger," put in Carradine. He watched the lined old face. "Your granddaughter."

"My—what?" Old Waldo Hollinger stood with the blackthorn poised. "Granddaughter? What the flamin' gates you talkin' about?"

"Sho'—your granddaughter," purred Durang. "Dyal's kid, the one he wrote you about."

"He doesn't know," said Carradine. "He doesn't know, Smiley. Phin Jarret must've stopped Dyal's letter.

Yeah, dumb as I am, I figgered that. He kept that letter from Hollinger. He learned about Dyal an' Kerry. That's why he hired you to put 'em out o' the way. That's why he's been—"

"What're you talkin' about?" roared Hollinger again. "Dyal? Where is he? Where's Anne? You mean they got a daughter?"

"Dyal's on his back, with a bullet in his leg, down in Durang's hangout," said Carradine. "His wife—Anne—died years ago. Yeah, they had a daughter. Kerry Dyal. She's right here. Go on over to him, Kerry. You tell him."

He moved to the lamp, let his body cut its light from Hollinger and the girl as they met, and turned his back on them. He heard Kerry's halting murmur, and old Hollinger's gasp of shock.

DURANG stood gazing, bold and unabashed. His five Mexicans stared, dark faces impassive.

"Right touchin' little scene, Red," murmured Durang, eyes deliberately cynical. "You're missin' somethin'."

He turned away, walked down the length of the room, and came back again.

"Gotta hurry this," he muttered. "Damn! Makes it sort o' queer, him bein' blind an' all."

Carradine gazed at him over the lamp. "Sure does, Smiley."

Durang swung to face him. His eyes went hard.

"But it makes no diff'rence, *sabe?*" he snapped harshly. "You know what I set out to do, Red. Kerry's next kin to Hollinger. With him dead, she gets ev'rything. The law'll back her."

"Yeah," nodded Carradine. "The law won't know you're waitin' to strip her of it all. You got her father. That's a card you'll play for all it's worth. Likely enough you aim to double-cross her in the end, an' take her too. But first, Smiley, you got to murder a blind man."

"You think I won't?" Durang's mouth set tight and straight. "You think I'd go soft first? Hell! One man 'tween me an' all this." He slid his gaze to Kerry and Hollinger.

The girl was looking at him with horror-filled eyes. The old man, bristling, was rearing up his shaggy head and gripping his blackthorn stick.

"No, Smiley." Carradine shook his head, stepped back from the lamp and the table. "You won't go soft. Nine years ago I'd have knocked down any gent who'd say you'd kill a blind man. But that was then. It's different now. Yeah, you'd kill a blind man. But you won't, Smiley."

His hands sliced in the fastest draw of his life, so fast that his fingers stung with the slapping impact.

"You won't, Smiley," he said again, and swung one gun to cover the Mexicans.

Durang had snapped into movement at the first flick of the draw. His right hand struck, started up with its hard, compact load. He halted it, stood glaring stonily into the round muzzle that covered him. His Mexicans remained, taut and motionless, like molded statues, only their eyes alive.

Old Hollinger, one powerful arm around Kerry, stood like a mastiff sniffing the air. Sounds and instinct had told him what had happened. His face revealed nothing but a calm weighing of events.

For what seemed a long time, Durang stared at the covering gun, studying it, studying his chances of completing his draw. His thoughts showed in his eyes. He did not relax.

"What now, Red?" he breathed finally.

"I think I'll have to kill you." Carradine said it simply, without heat. "I think I'll have to, Smiley. Dyal would say yes to that, if he knew, an' take his chances of gettin' out of your hangout alive. The Smiley Durang I knew nine years ago was fair to middlin' decent. But now—it's no

use, Smiley. Don't pull that on me."

"Behind you!" Durang was hissing. "Behind you, man! The windows—!"

"Don't move, red-head! Don't move a hair!" The dry, purry voice fell across Durang's whisper. "Jest open yore hands an' let the irons drop. Stand hitched, the rest o' yuh. There's 'nough guns lined on yuh to fill hell twice over!"

Very slowly, Carradine turned his head. The open windows were crowded with men, faces, guns. The pale eyes of Launt met his own. The gunman smiled a lazy, dangerous smile.

"Drop 'em, Red."

Carradine looked beyond, into the leaden eyes of Jarret, one narrowed, the other sighted over a rifle. He sighed, let his guns fall.

"Here's your stepson, Hollinger," he said quietly.

Hollinger started to talk, rapped his stick on the floor for attention.

"Shut up!" cut in Jarret. "Shut up, you damned old fool!" His cold eyes played over Kerry. "So you did get to find out, eh? You did get to meet her. That just leaves one thing that's got to be done—and done right now. I didn't scheme and sweat to build up this spread to what it is, just to have you leave it all to somebody else."

"Eh? What's that?" Old Hollinger jerked his face in the direction of the voice. "Are you drunk, Phin? What d'you mean? I'll draw up a will, of course. You'll get a fair share—"

"Share?" Jarret snorted a laugh. "It's mine, all of it! There'll be no will, and no nearer kin than me. I'll make sure of that!"

Hollinger sucked in his breath.

"They were right!" he muttered. "Dyal's letter—you kept it from me. You tried to—"

"Shut up!" Jarret rapped again. "Launt—some of you—get their guns."

Launt and others were coming through the doors. Carradine heard Durang's hissing oath as his guns were plucked away. "Red, you blasted,

bull-headed—! You got us all killed.”

Jarret came in, black-coated and commanding. He and his men were dusty, sweat-streaked, from long riding. He stopped before Carradine, looked him up and down, and uttered his humorless laugh. “So you and Durang had a fall-out, eh? Fighting over the loot? I hoped for something like that. It most always happens.”

“Funny, eh?” Launt strolled up, twirling a gun by its trigger guard. “We look for ’em all over hell, then come back an’ find ’em right here to home, stagin’ a private fight. What yuh want done, Jarret?” He stuck a thumb at the five Mexicans, huddled together disarmed, dully fatalistic.

Jarret gave him a look. “You have to ask?”

Launt shrugged, jerked his bony head at two or three men. The Mexicans were herded out, shuffling, fears awakening in their wooden faces. The tramp of feet and jingle of spurs ceased outside in the yard.

“It’s murder,” said Carradine. “Plain murder.” He stared at Jarret, trying to find a sign of weakness in the flat, sallow face, the lead-colored eyes. “You can’t do that, Jarret. You can’t get away with it. There’s still enough law—”

Five shots crashed together outside, followed by five soft thuds. Carradine caught his lip in his teeth, looked at the men around him. They were hard-faced, grim, sinister with the knowledge of sudden death outside. Durang paled a little, stared unseeingly at the floor, and his restless fingers played with his empty holsters.

“Can’t?” Jarret let the word slip out through closed teeth. “Can’t, Carradine? You’re next—you and Durang. Then—”

“You can do that, yeah.” Carradine forced his voice to an even pitch. “A wanted cow-thief, five spics, an’ a gunslinger who rode with ’em. You can kill such, an’ few questions to answer. But when you kill a girl, an’

a man like Hollinger—uh-uh. Bound to leak out, the whole thing.”

“He’s right,” put in Durang. “I hate his insides, but he’s right this time. You could frame it all you want—make it look like we did it—or make it out an accident. But it’ll catch up on you. You got gunhands. You trust ’em now, mebbly. But what ’bout later on? They’d talk.”

“Who’d talk?” The query came from Launt, who had returned and stood in the doorway.

“You wouldn’t,” answered Durang. “You’re wise. You’d keep quiet—for cash. Plenty cash. Yeah, you’re wise, Launt.”

Jarret’s eyes went sharp. “Launt,” he drawled, “take ’em out. All four. Yes, you, Launt. You and the others. Make it look—” He paused.

LAUNT was slowly shaking his head. “Not me, Jarret. I’ll take out Red and Durang. Sure—pleasure. But not the old man, nor the gal. A gent’d spend the rest’ve his life runnin’ from more lawmen than he could count. ’Sides, the county marshal’s in Salso Bluffs. Came up ’smornin’, I hear, to look into that gun-frolic we had yest’day.”

Ding-dong George, a short and chunky gunman, nodded a confirmation to that.

“I saw him.” He had a high, wavering, treble voice. “Saw him talkin’ to certain citizens. They all gimme a hard look as I rode past. He’d like to git somethin’ on us. So would some o’ them same citizens. Gotta go easy whilst he’s nosin’ round, boss.”

“There y’are.” Durang folded his arms, leaned easily against the wall. Carradine, glancing at him, saw the old, cool confidence come back into the black eyes. “What’d I tell you, Jarret? You can’t hire this job done, an’ you don’t dare do it y’self. What you need is a goat—a gent who’s wanted so bad he don’t give a damn.”

The remark seeped in. The subtle set of Jarret’s face showed that he

got its meaning. He looked at Durang, at Carradine. "A goat, h'm? Launt, you and the rest clear out. Wait outside, but keep watch on 'em through the windows."

He slid his own gun out again from under his coat, held it in his hand while the gunhands clumped out of the house.

With them gone, he lowered his voice. "One of you is going to be the goat. I don't care which one. One of you is going to do this job. After, he'll get his horse and a clear trail."

"Promises," said Carradine, "come kinda cheap."

Jarret slid out another gun from under his armpit, broke it open and shook out the shells. "The one who does this job rides back to that Mexico hangout. I want old Dyal out o' the way, too. When I get proof he's dead, I'll pay a thousand dollars. Why would I double-cross the goat? I want him to get clear, an' take all blame with him."

He placed the emptied gun on the table, put three shells beside it. "Well, which one? You, Carradine?"

Carradine looked at the gun, at the three shining brass shells. "No," he said shortly. "I don't want to live that much. It's a job for a snake."

Durang sent him a long, narrowed look. His shallow smile flickered out.

"*Gracias, amigo,*" he murmured, silky-smooth. "Sho' 'preciate that. All right, Jarret, gimme the gun."

"Take it." Jarret backed from the table, moved to the door. "Don't pick it up till I get out. An' remember—no tricks. We'll be in the yard, all round the house. Some of us'll be watching."

"Witnesses," nodded Durang, and smiled again. "Witnesses to prove I did it—not you. Eh, Jarret?"

Carradine shifted over to Kerry and Hollinger, stood with them, waiting. He heard the old man's hard breathing, saw the tremble that shook the girl. He touched her arm, closed his hard fingers over it, and the trem-

ble ceased at the firm pressure.

He watched Durang pick up the gun, watched him slip the shells into the chambers with steady hands.

"Your turn now, Smiley, eh?" he remarked, and found he did not have to force his calmness.

"Uh-huh, my turn, Red." Durang snapped shut the gun with a flirt of his wrist, spun the cylinder. "Y'know, I gotta hand it to you. You got guts. You got the guts to die. But you couldn't do what I'm gonna do. You called me yeller. I'm aimin' to prove you a damn liar."

A dry cough sounded outside in the night. Durang flicked a glance at the windows, quirked his thin lips. "Gettin' impatient, Jarret is."

He lowered his tone to a mutter, shuffled his feet to drown the sound of it. "I'm gonna shoot slow, one-two-three. You first, Red. Then you, Hollinger. Then you, Kerry. Fall hard, an' lay still. 'Cause, y'see, I'm gonna miss. *Sabe?* That damned Jarret—what kind o' dirty woman-killer does he think I am, anyway!"

The gun roared once, the driven blast of heated air spurting close across the lamp's glass chimney and fanning the flame to a smoky flicker. Carradine contracted his face muscles, went limp in his body, and fell headlong to the floor. He uttered a muffled grunt as the fall hurt his blood-caked side.

Again the report, made loud by the enclosing walls. For a tense second Carradine thought Hollinger had muffed his cue. Then the blackthorn stick slapped on the floor, and the weight of the old man shook the boards as it landed beside him. A third shot, and a soft body rolled against Carradine as Kerry crumpled and fell.

In the stunning silence after the echoes, Durang's whisper barely reached Carradine's ears. "The rest is up to you, Red, but I'm still playin' my end. If I don't see you again—"

"S'long, Smiley," whispered Carra-

dine, his face on the floor. "I take it back, what I said. Some of it, anyway."

"S'long, you big ornery red-head!" The light went out. Durang's light step sounded in retreat, and the door closed behind him with a soft slam.

"What the hell did you douse the lamp for?" Jarret's voice demanded outside.

"Just in case," came Durang's drawling reply. "Just in case Launt got itchy-fingered." Saddle leather creaked faintly. "I just drilled the three of 'em. Hear that, you gunnies? Tell that to the law. I shot 'em 'cause I didn't like 'em. Me—Smiley Durang."

CHAPTER VI Revenge

HOOFs dug earth, thudded off into the distance. Carradine rolled over in the dark, nudged Hollinger. "They're comin' in," he muttered. "Let me have that stick."

"Like hell!" mumbled Hollinger, and his great frame reared up. "I got use for it m'self. Don't need eyes. Got ears. Stay where y'are, Kerry-gal."

He moved, with Carradine, along the darkened living room, threaded his way past the heavy furniture without accident, and paused within three feet of the closed door.

They could hear the approach of feet, and Jarret's dry tone as he said something. Then Launt's reply, purry and mocking. "Yeah, too bad. Shot 'em an' got clear away, he did."

The door was shoved open. Jarret, first to enter, came in three steps before some subtle sense of danger made him whirl half around. A bar of moonlight, streaking across his face, gave a ghastly radiance to the sudden spasm of terror that leaped into his leaden eyes as Hollinger lunged.

Hollinger, guided by ears alone, struck, and his private world of darkness did not allow him to know whom

he hit. The heavy blackthorn whistled like a striking sword, and cracked hard and solid at the end of its swift arc. Jarret sank down without a moan.

Carradine darted past the falling body. Just inside the doorway, where the moonlight did not reach, he caught a glimpse of Launt. The gunman, alert by nature and instinct, was already back-stepping, one hand low, the other thrust into his shirt.

The low hand swept up. Carradine struck at the flash of steel. His fingers whipped around a gunbarrel. It exploded as the force of his savage swipe tore it from Launt's grasp, and the spurt of it seared along his arm. He swung it up, made a jabbing blow with the butt that caught Launt high in the chest.

It spoiled Launt's second draw, broke the smooth action of it. He fumbled, left hand dragging inside his shirt, and ripped cloth as he cleared his hideaway gun. Carradine changed his grip and fired point-blank before he ducked.

There was no need to duck. Gunshock knocked Launt backward, sent him reeling on his heels into the kitchen. His legs hit something, buckled, and he sat down on the floor. His gun made a scraping sound on the wooden boards as he tried to brace himself with both arms.

"Yuh — damned — tricky —!" His hoarse, faltering curse broke off in the middle, and he slumped over.

Outside the house, men were running, shouting to each other, calling questions. Carradine bent over Launt's sprawled body, unbuckled the gunbelt and jumped back into the living room with it swinging in his hand. He collided with Hollinger, and dodged as the blackthorn sang past his head.

"You murderin' scum!" The old man's bellowing roar topped all other noises. "I'll—"

"Hold it, man!" Carradine drove him back with a hard shoulder. "Flatten out—they're comin'!" He heeled the door shut behind him, jammed the

table against it, and ran crouching across the room to Kerry.

"Strip Jarret of his guns an' shells—keep 'em loaded an' chuck 'em to me as I need 'em! Stay clear o' the windows, an' hug the floor. These hombres are li'ble to—"

Somebody emptied a six-gun through a window, blazing wild and yelling for Jarret and Launt.

"—li'ble to shoot," ended Carradine, and sent one shot back at the flashes.

The shrill treble of Ding-dong George struck an incongruous note in the uproar. "Hey, Launt! Where's yuh an' the boss? What in tarnation's wrong? Who's doin' all the shootin'?"

Carradine raised his voice. "Launt's dead, an' Jarret looks like he'll be sick a long time. Hollinger's boss again. You hombres better take a think an' high-tail off this spread."

"Well, fer—!" Ding-dong George piped an oath. "Hear that, fellers? Hey, Hard, y'hear thet? He got Launt!"

"I heard." Hard Harrison's harsh rasp followed the spat of his gun, and a window-pane shattered to pieces. "Yeh, we'll breeze out, Carradine. But we ain't gonna leave much behind! Yuh sorrel-topped twister—Launt was my side-kick!"

Carradine flattened out as a renewed burst of gunfire made wreckage of the remaining windows. He could only lie crouched and fling shots at the shifting figures that rose up beyond the sills. He called to Kerry, and she slid a loaded gun over the floor to him. He picked it up and sent his emptied weapon sliding in exchange.

SMOKE gathered and hung low, swirling lazily in the faint night wind. The firing died to an occasional shot. Men were arguing outside in the yard. Carradine could hear them.

"Aw, let's grab what we can an' light out o' here!"

"Thet's what I say, Reed. Fifty thousand dollars in cattle on this

range. What's a use foolin' round like this, when—"

"Me, I ain't quittin'," snarled somebody. "Not till we even up. Hard's down. Yeah, dyin'."

"Thet blasted, grinnin' Durang—he musta double-crossed the boss, huh?"

"Ain't yuh smart!"

The argument went on, voices getting louder, angrier, more insistent. Carradine hoped they'd start a fight among themselves, and was grateful for the respite. It lasted a long time, before it was settled by somebody's crawling up to a window and firing blindly into the room.

Carradine whipped a shot at the stabbing licks, and softly swore as the racket began all over again. They were stamping around in the kitchen now, and slamming a dead weight against the barricaded door. The table groaned as it was pushed back a few inches, and a splintered piece of panel fell from the door.

Carradine thought of Durang as he sent two bullets at the ragged hole. Durang had probably foreseen all this, when he missed with his three shots. He had known he was only postponing the inevitable. But his distorted pride was assuaged, and his queer code of conscience was clear as he rode back down to his border hangout. He would be well on the way by now.

A sullen undertone crept through the racket. Dull, heavy, insistent, it grew to a steady rumble. It swelled until the gunfire no longer drowned it out. The firing slackened again. In the lull, the rumble came more distinct.

"Riders," growled Hollinger, hauling himself over to Carradine. "Mebby it's the rest, comin' in from the range. Heard the shootin'. No—too many. Damn army, sounds like."

The drumming resolved into a confused beating of hoofs, came rapidly closer, and thundered into the yard. "What's goin' on round here?" barked a steel-hard voice as the hoofbeats changed to a creaking of saddles,

jingle of metal, and the noises of men dismounting.

Feet came tramping on to the house. "Show a light, yuh there inside!" Heads and shoulders appeared at the smashed windows. "What's goin' on, huh?"

Carradine rose, lighted the lamp. The room was filling with men. They were climbing through the windows, shoving in past the wrecked door. A man with drooping mustaches, cold blue eyes and a small gold badge faced him. "Speak up, mister. Fast, 'fore I—ah, 'lo, Hollinger. Looks like hell's come home to roost on the Arrowhead!"

Carradine was not looking at the county marshal. He was looking over the lawman's shoulder at Durang, who stood absently scratching his jaw. Durang met his eyes, nodded, and flicked on his surface smile.

"You did a good job, Red," he murmured. "Knew you would. Got guts, you have. Like me. 'Magine me ridin' with a posse! Ain't a reg'lar posse, though. Townies from Salso Bluffs. The marshal rounded 'em up in a hurry when I told him things was poppin' out here."

He slid a glance at the marshal's back, began edging toward the door. "I better be goin'. Just wanted to see how you came out. Dunno why I did it. Was gonna pass by town, but somethin' got into me, so I hunted up the marshal. Mebby it was 'cause I got to thinkin' of the old Double Peaks days, an' that fight we had. Sho' was a—"

"Say, marshal!" A man poked his head in. "They're slopin' off, them Arrowhead jaspers. Yuh want 'em stopped?"

"No." It was old Hollinger who answered. "Let 'em go. They're fired. So's Jarret. This was a private party, marshal. Glad you came, though. It was gettin' a mite rough."

"Jarret?" The marshal took a look over his shoulder. "Yuh can't fire him, Hollinger. He's dead. Skull's—"

"He stopped a bullet," broke in Carradine, and sent a message with his eyes.

"Bullet?" The lawman frowned. "I don't see no sign of—"

"He stopped a bullet," said Carradine again.

"Oh." The marshal looked at the heavy blackthorn in Hollinger's hand. "Uh-huh, that's right. See it now. Right slam in the chest. Sure got a mess round here. When that Jones gent came in an' told me—where is he, anyway? Ah, there y'are, Jones. Stranger round here, ain't yuh? I've never seen—"

HE STOPPED short, stared hard and long at Durang, who was backing for the door. "Or have I?" he muttered aloud. "First I've seen yuh in a good light, Jones. Y'look kinda familiar, some way. H'm." Recognition leaped into his studying eyes. "Hold on, there!" he snapped, and his right hand dropped. "You're—"

Carradine took a swift step, moved his body between them. "Hold on, y'self, Marshal," he cut in. He still held his guns in his hands. "Jones is a friend o' mine. Old friend. I know him from way back. We rode together for the old Double Peak outfit, down in Texas."

"Yeah?" The marshal dropped his bright gaze to Carradine's guns. His leathery face grew speculative. "Old friend, eh? Well, I still think he looks like—"

"The light's tricky, Marshal," purred Durang. He was unarmed, except for the empty gun stuck in his waistband. "An' mebby your eyes ain't so good. The name's Jones. It'll still be Jones when I get back to Texas, where I'm goin'."

"But first," said Carradine quietly, "you're makin' a trip to Mexico, eh, Jones?"

"Mexico, first," agreed Durang. "Sho', Red. Got a sick friend down there."

Old Hollinger tapped with his

stick. "I'd pay good money," he rumbled, "to tell that no-good son-in-law o' mine he's got a home here. Wanted to tell him that for years. I'd pay mebbly high as two thousand dollars."

"You'll get to tell him, mister," said Durang promptly. He looked at Kerry as he backed out. "S'long, gal. Wouldn't want to go to Texas with me, would you? No, thought not. Oh, well. Two thousand you said, Hollinger? *Bueno*. Send it to me care o' the Double Peak spread, Hondo, Texas. Say, Red—er—?"

Carradine nodded, walked backwards with him through the kitchen. Outside, Durang swung up onto his horse. "Y'know, Red," he muttered, eyes drifting everywhere. "I might do that. Go back to the old Double Peak, I mean. Might buy an int'rest in it. We had good times there, didn't we? 'Specially after we slugged it out an' got to understand each other."

Carradine handed him up the two guns. "We sure did, Jones. 'Member me to the old bunch."

Durang grinned. "Sho', *amigo*. The old bunch. Hell, won't they be s'prised to see me! Throw a big doin's, they will, an' kid me—" He wagged his head, grinned again, shook the reins.

"S'long," he ended abruptly, and was gone in a flurry of hoofs and kicked-up dust.

Carradine walked slowly back into the house. The marshal would be sore. He looked tough enough to beat the ears off any stray gunless drifter who got between him and his duty which he would do faithfully.

Hollinger was talking to the marshal as Carradine entered. He was prodding the blackthorn against the marshal's chest for emphasis, and the marshal, looking slightly bewildered, was trying to back away from it. An interested crowd was listening in, grinning.

"—An' we'll fix up that water-rights trouble, too. That damn Phin! Ain't no wonder my neighbors quit visitin' me, way he's been treatin' 'em. Had me fooled, he did. But no more."

"What's more, this Carradine feller's all right. He's all right, y'hear? You leave him be. Don't want trouble with me, do you, Ed? Him an' me get along. He's my kind o' man, an' be damned what you say. My spread, ain't it? Can make any man range boss I want, can't I? Hump! He's my kind o' man."

Carradine started to lean against a doorpost, changed his mind as he looked over the heads of the crowd and saw Kerry's eyes on him. She was nodding agreement with the old man, and coming through the crowd toward him.

THE END

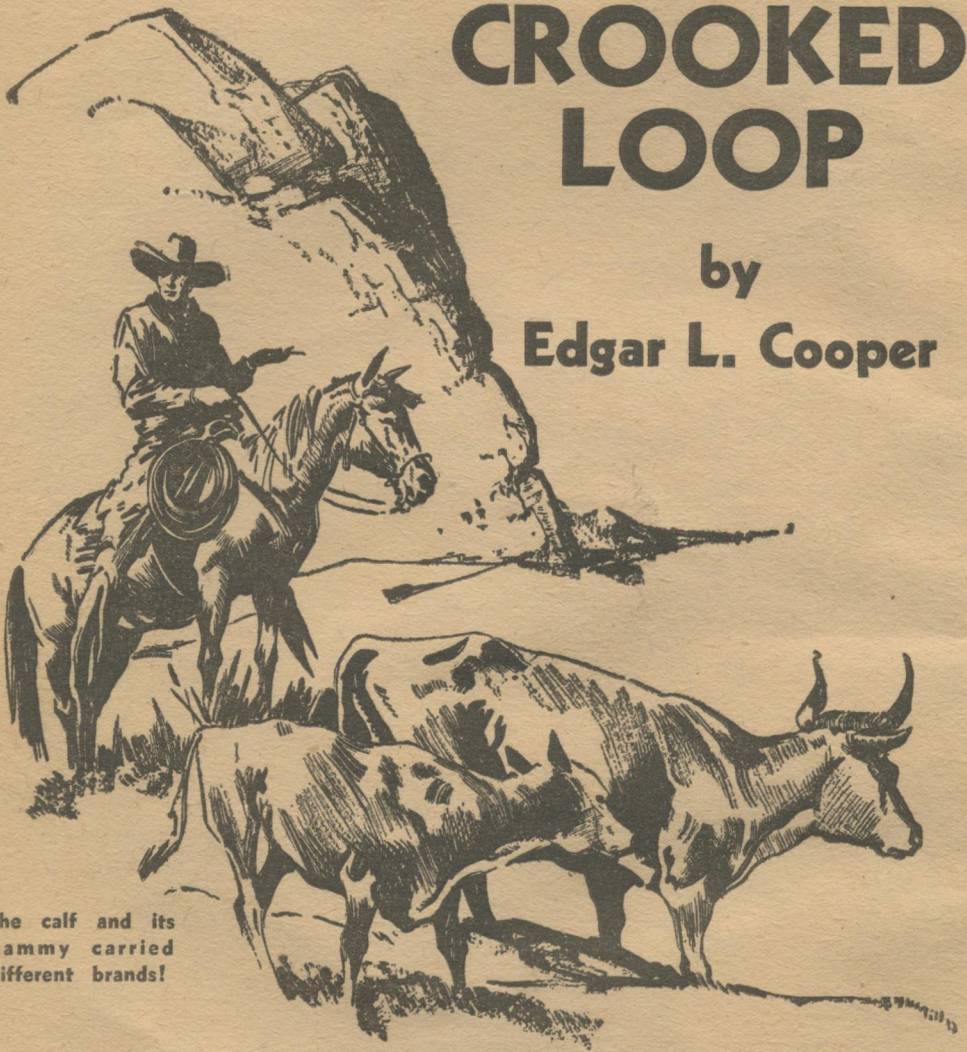


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Cremo
 CREAM O'THEM ALL

CROOKED LOOP

by
Edgar L. Cooper



The calf and its
mammy carried
different brands!

**Modoc Bill was just a cowpuncher jinglin' on his way—
but he stopped off long enough in Buena Vista to show
two crooked hombres that a crooked loop can hang the
gent who throws it!**

THE man, covered on the brushy slope and muzzling his horses' nostrils, watched with wise, narrowed eyes the play going on in the swale below. A rider was herding a cow and two-week old calf toward a tiny pole corral at the far end.

Modoc Bill grinned wryly as the

horseman dismounted, opened the wire gate, and penned the cow and her offspring. Then, after closing the gap and rolling a smoke, the wrangler hit leather and rode away in the direction of Buena Vista, five miles distant.

Modoc got a good look at him as he

passed beneath. Chubby sort of jigger, red faced and thick necked, sandy moustached. He was working a white-stocked dun pony, with a saddle gung on his Brazos-tree kak.

The chubby man was grinning widely, as if at some secret joke.

Being of curious disposition, as well as a total stranger to Pocono County, Modoc rode down for a look-see at the two critters after their herder had disappeared.

He hadn't missed hearing the bawls of a cow and calf a short while before, as he loafed in the shade by a small hill spring, inhaling a quirly. As he had cut across country from that little bench ranch around noon, all cow range, Modoc paid scant attention to the sound.

But after looking at the corraled animals a moment, Modoc dropped his split-reins and swung down. At a glance he knew what had been done.

A job of mavericking before weaning. And any damned fool would know a calf of that age wasn't weaned—unless he was locoed or orey-eyed drunk.

With a grunt, Modoc Bill felt for the makin's. The maverick was branded JB connected—on its right haunch—the brand of that two-bit spread on the bench where he'd eaten dinner. Mollie Barlow, the attractive young woman of the house, told him her name was—Mrs. Mollie Barlow. She had a three month old kid, and she said her husband was Jack Barlow, who had gone to town that morning.

The cow was ironed large, on her left ribs, Circle J. Very large and very visible. Circle J cow and a JB calf, yeah.

The brownie slid from one corner of Modoc Bill's mouth to the other. The Barlow missus had let slip several hints as how "certain things" were bothering them out at the shanty, and the range-wise leather pounder hadn't missed their unspoken drift. Modoc ironically reckoned this was one of

those "things." Somebody had discovered those queer brands, coralled cow and calf for evidence, then lit a shuck for town and the high sheriff.

"Hell," said Modoc. He opened a saddle pocket, took out a short steel ramrod, tore a strip of cedar bark off a corral pole.

"Crooked loops sometimes has a habit of tanglin' builders in their own laigs," he reflected grimly. "Yessir—shaggin' 'em plumb web-footed . . ."

He knew that cow-hazer hadn't been Barlow—else he would have headed for town.

Ten minutes later Modoc was riding on toward Buena Vista, giving his lank sorrel its head. He was lean, dark as an Indian; with Injun cheek bones and thin lips and hooded black eyes. His hair and the stubble on his scarred jaw were crow black. His shirt and jeans were faded, his half-boots scuffed and worn, his J. B. battered and smoke stained.

Nobody would have called him handsome or picturesque. But many would have wisely noted that the slick holster on his gunbelt was quite short, leaving a lot of .45 showing. From which, some might have guessed that the hammer was minus its cocking-notch.

Plumb filed off. When Modoc Bill Peters brought 'er home, full or half back, and turned her loose, folks who knew him said the trigger was useless as a currycomb on a baldheaded pilgrim.

He was within a mile of Buena Vista when he spotted four riders approaching, following a stock trail toward the scrub corral. Swinging Jerky into the 'squite and chaparral, Modoc drew up and watched the cavalcade pass not a hundred feet from him.

One horseman showed the glint of a metal badge on his vest, a big man, powerfully built. Another was lank, hook-nosed, prominent of teeth. A third was the red faced, sandy moustached jigger on the stockinged dun,

who'd brought the information about the misbranded maverick.

The fourth was a young fellow of clean cut, belligerent features and roan colored hair, his blue eyes sullen and angry. And the holster on his right hip hung empty.

JACK BARLOW was no fool. He knew he was in a spot, no matter if it had been dealt from a cold deck. Old Theo Jernigan, big man of the county and owner of the Circle J, had for a long time been trying to trip him up on something. Coveting that hard-worked little strip of Barlow's over on Sweet Grass Creek, which Jack was gambling with Uncle Sam he could hold and prove up.

That—and something else—

For Russ Sager, lawman owner of the Tincup spread, knew he could be high sheriff as long as "Thee" Jernigan ruled the Pocono roost. Likewise, young Barlow knew Russ and Thee picked their teeth with the same quill.

"You done spread your easy loop too careless, this time," said Sheriff Sager. "If you've tried to maverick a slickear like Dave Sloan here says yuh have, you'll damned sure go the pen. And you oughta!"

"Stealin' one little bitty calf thataway!" Sloan added maliciously, with a grin. "One not even weaned, looked like!"

Barlow looked savagely at the Circle J straw-boss, and Sloan laughed. So did Bud Harkey, the buck-toothed deputy. But young Barlow, with an effort, haltered his angry answer; merely spat sidewise, eloquently. Words would avail him little, now.

Modoc watched them out of view, a cryptic smile skewing his lips. Then, shaking his head shortly, he rode on. But he didn't ride into town—not just then.

Locating a shady spot off the track, he staked out his sorrel and sprawled for a nap, hat low over his eyes. He

wanted to see that crowd when they jingled back. . . .

Sheriff Sager opened the wire gap of the tiny pen, and the quartet rode inside, the cow and calf huddling against the back poles nervously. Sloan chuckled, "Robbin' the cradle, wasn't he, boys?"

Sager snapped his quirt, the calf jerked sideways, and Sager sat quite still for a moment, staring unbelievably. Deputy Harkey snickered.

"What the sam-hell!" exploded Sager. "You tryin' to get funny, Dave? If so—yuh damn well ain't!"

The brand on the calf was unmistakably Box-S, curlycued, better known as the Tincup on Pocono range. The brand of high-sheriff Russ Sager, rancher-lawman of Copperas Creek.

Dave Sloan of the Circle J was staring at cow and calf, his jaw sagging considerable. Jack Barlow also stared with growing amazement—at the two critters, then at Dave Sloan. "You don't savvy a JB from a Tincup, looks like," he remarked wickedly. "Gettin' old, Dave?"

The cow-boss snarled wordlessly. What the hell kind of shenanigan was this, anyhow? What had changed a JB brand into a Box S Tincup so mysteriously? A rough job of running iron venting, clear "maverick," but plainly readable. Not much over an hour ago, he himself had marked that slickear. . . .

"It's kinda funny," grinned Jack Barlow. "Yeah. Gonna jail yoreself for this, sheriff?"

"Go to hell!" snapped Sager, his beefy face red as a turkey's wattles. "Show me the son that changed—"

He stopped suddenly, glowering at the discomfited and bewildered Sloan. Young Barlow, scarcely less puzzled, yet highly elated, went on.

"Could be done, all right. I never noticed before just how easy yuh can build a Box S curly from a JB. I'll have to remember that. Mebbe it ex-

plains the short calf crop over Sweet Grass way. . . ."

"By God," choked Sager. "Somebody's gonna pay for this—"

Dave Sloan scratched his head, swallowed gulpily. He knew Jack Barlow couldn't have made the alteration, because Sloan had ridden the spurs to Buena Vista, and found Barlow there. It was too much for the Jernigan straw-boss to savvy; he gave it up, albeit uneasily.

"Best thing for you to do, looks like, sheriff," grinned Jack, "is to take that calf out in the bushes an' make young veal outa it. And—I'll trouble you for that cutter of mine back."

Holstering his pistol, Barlow watched the two lawmen haze cow and calf from the corral, then rode away, laughing. He was overdue at home, so made dust that way, anxious to tell his wife the joke. And he was wondering—wondering what the answer was.

Dave Sloan, he knew, had not made the mistake. Knew that the Circle J straw-boss would never have put Sager into such a predicament. Nor did Jack Barlow have the slightest idea who would have. It was all over his head, way over.

But somebody's slick scheme shore as hell backfired, he exulted.

THEO JERNIGAN and Sheriff Sager sat in the latter's office, talking over the affair. The hour was almost sundown. Buena Vista was peaceful. In the back of the room was an iron-barred door, which led to the four jail cells in the rear. All were empty.

"I had hoped," said T. Jernigan, "to see young Barlow occupying one of them, tonight."

Medium sized and neatly dressed was Jernigan. Thin faced and slightly gray. His mouth was firm, jaw square, eyes gray and alert. His moustache and thinnish hair were mouse-hued,

gray sprinkled. His fingers toyed absently with a small gold horseshoe fob on his watch chain—a doodad which folks whispered he treated almost reverently, as a lucky talisman.

"I wonder what could have slipped up?" he finished gently.

"Don't know," growled Russ Sager. "But something shore as hell did. An' it put my tail plumb in a nasty crack. If Barlow peddles that dung around—which he will—well, figger it yoreself, Thee!"

"Unfortunate, yes. Hmm. I fear something will have to be done about this, Russ." Jernigan flicked ash off his cigar carefully, his thoughtful glance straying upstreet, where a horseman hove into view.

A lank, angular horseman, forking a gaunt sorrel. The last rays of sunset glinted on the metal disks of his hatband, lighting his swarthy face plainly. An Indian face, with left cheek marked by a long white scar, and sooty eyes hooded as a cobra's, deep sunken. No spring chicken was this stranger, but a range-burned rider who looked as if he'd seen the elephant, and heard the owl. . . .

Sheriff Sager, big, burly, hard eyed, his thick mop of grizzled hair standing ruffled on his head like an angry comb, likewise was staring at the approaching horseman. And silence hung heavy in the sheriff's dusking office as the rider shacked past, continued on, looking neither to right nor left.

But his passing left the blood drained from the faces of two men who gazed after him. Two men who looked like they had beheld a ghost . . . a ghost come back to square an old account, twenty years overdue. . . .

"It—it's *him*, Alf!" Sager's voice cracked queerly, as he slumped back in his chair, beefy visage chalk-hued. "*Harley Doon!* God! . . ."

Thee Jernigan's face suddenly looked very old, very tired. His hand trembled as he discarded the cigar,

staring sightlessly at the yellowed, fly-specked reward dodgers on the wall.

"He said he would come back," muttered Jernigan. "Twelve years. . ."

"Out of the pen—pardoned—escaped—something. Come back to settle with us," Sager mumbled thickly. "It's Doon—shore as shootin'—"

"No, he hasn't escaped—he's too open," said Jernigan. "He's come back, Van—like I always knew he would! And I kidded myself that nothing more could happen to us—this far away—from *everything*. But it seems there has, Van."

Twelve years . . . and the minds of the powers in Pocono County known as Thee Jernigan and Russ Sager turned about face, along their back-trail, to the fate that had befallen Harley Doon, their one-time partner in some shady affairs. . .

Harley Doon, had been left holding the sack, railroaded to a Wyoming pen. They had robbed him, absconded with his share of loot, thrown him to the lions and a twenty years sentence. And Doon had kept shut lips, save denying that he'd killed the cashier. Even after they had fled with his share, and theirs, leaving him penniless and defenseless. . .

But Harley Doon hadn't forgotten. And now he was out—and *here*—

"Van," Jernigan whispered harshly, "it isn't twenty years!"

"It ain't over twelve," croaked Sager. "But *he's here*, Alf—damn his Injun face! And he never wore that devil's map for nothing! Alf, we're ruined, plumb ruined, unless—"

"Yes, unless?" Jernigan looked quickly at Sager. But the sheriff was staring out the window, and a nerve twitched in his face. Jernigan wiped his glistening forehead with a silk handkerchief, coughed.

"All he has to do is open his mouth," Jernigan pointed out tonelessly, "and we're through, Van. Wyoming—penitentiary—stark ruin

. . . the work of twelve years destroyed in one black swoop! He knows we got away with *his* ten thousand—as well as our shares . . . it won't take him long to find out how the original stake has grown. . .

"I'm a married man," he finished hoarsely, fingers working. "With kids, Van. Three kids . . . it would kill my wife and daughters to find out. God! To even think of it! . . . It don't seem reasonable, that he could find us—way down here. My name wasn't Jernigan, nor yours Sager, in those days. . ."

"Names won't mean nothin' to that devil," the sheriff burst out. "Alf, we got to *do* something—do it damned quick! We've got too much at stake for him to tell what he knows. He won't just kill us, and call the account closed. God knows, you've got more to lose than me, but mine's a plenty! Even if that damned Barlow kid did beat my time with Molly Andrews, an' marry her. But that's little potatoes, now! So's his hen-yard spread, now to you, Alf. . ."

Russ Sager hunched, leaned close to the pallid, big boss of far-flung Pocono County. His voice was a hoarse husk as he whispered:

"We put him away once, fellow. An' we'll do it again—only this time we won't leave it to any judge an' jury to decide!"

Jernigan looked at the sheriff. His meaning was unmistakable, and his beefy, jowly face was dark with his intention. The "tall hombre" of Buena Vista slowly stiffened, straightened in his chair.

"I've got the man to pull it off," husked Sager. "Mace Keeley. He's wanted—North—and tonight. . ."

"Yes." Thee Jernigan nodded, slowly. "Tonight. . . Yes, Van—that's the answer. You'll handle that end of it—I'll take care of—the expense. . . Yes."

Sager got to his feet. "I'll have the answer waitin' for you tonight, Alf! The *last* answer . . . to *everything* . . ."

MODOC BILL had watched the disgruntled and puzzled trio ride back to town; saw Sager and Jernigan go to the sheriff's office. And he grinned inwardly at the thought of what the sheriff likely would be figuring, just then. Modoc's branding of the calf with the Box S sign had been purely spur-of-the-moment inspiration—he'd heard the lady at JB mention Sager's iron that noon, and when he saw Dave Sloan punching the breeze for town and the law, he faked lawman Sager's brand on the slick-ear, just for the hell of it.

Stabling his pony at the livery barn, Modoc ate a meagre supper at the Chinks, then made for the Green Tree Saloon, Buena Vista's top oasis on main drag. His finances were running low, his luck at cards of late had been lousy. So he contented himself with one drink, and idly watched the games, hoarding his slim capital.

Except for his scarred Injun face, and cut-out holster, his presence attracted little attention. Wandering, down-at-heel waddies were not uncommon around town, with cold weather coming on.

Modoc saw the young fellow Jack Barlow come in, some time after dark. He seemed secretly amused about something. Dave Sloan also was present, the two men barely nodding to each other.

Modoc saw Sloan take several drinks, and pay for none of them. He didn't know, then, that Thee Jernigan owned the Green Tree, with bartender Lafe Riggins as his front. Or that Sloan was Jernigan's straw-boss.

Modoc likewise saw Mace Keeley enter the resort. A swaggery sort, with long, narrow face and slaty eyes. His small thin mouth was vicious. His sneer disclosed quite a lot of dental gold, his eyes were staring in insolent intensity. One of those hombres who would kill, just to prove himself double-tough, or for the damn deviltry of it. Snake blood.

Modoc, watching lazy-lidded, wasn't long in catching the play. Keeley and Dave Sloan drank together, engaged in earnest and low-toned confab a few minutes. Once, Sloan half-turned to look square at Modoc, saw the lank stranger regarding him, and tried to pass it off as a "natural," which failed as far as Modoc was concerned.

His acute sixth sense was buzzing its rattles. Some funny business was coming up here, with him on the loose end of it. So he played 'em close to his vest, seeming to half doze in his chair, the stub of a burned-out brownie pasted to a lower, lip corner. But Modoc Bill Peters was no more napping than a wolf does.

The men in the Tree were glancing at Keeley more frequently, as his imbibings seemed to make him increasingly ugly. Sloan started away from the bar, but Keeley grabbed his sleeve, tearing it as he hauled the straw-boss back. Sloan merely grinned good-naturedly, but Modoc saw Jack Barlow watching the pair with sober, questioning eyes; once he looked curiously at Bill Peters, warning in his eyes.

Finally, Modoc rose, yawned and stretched, apparently ready to leave. It was then that Mace Keeley seemed to see him for the first time. But Keeley was a very poor actor, both in his feigned surprise and surly drunkenness. Bill Peters knew that Keeley was neither.

"B'God," Keeley sneered with a warped grin. "When did the circus git here? Ain't yuh chargin' no admission, Lafe?"

The barman mumbled something, moved away. Modoc looked at Keeley. "Speakin' to me, brother?" he asked lazily.

"B'God," said Keeley again. "Can yuh imagine! The dam' thing can talk!"

Modoc's face didn't change expression. The room was suddenly silent. A man sitting at a table behind Modoc

got up and changed position. Jack Barlow started to say something, his eyes glinting, and lips tight, then changed his mind as he squinted at Modoc's low-cut holster.

"Talk," drawled Modoc succinctly, "is sometimes plenty costly."

Mace Keeley sneered insolently, hands on hips. "Yuh damned whistlin' it is, feller! This is one of them times. Take off yore hat, an' le's see what yore head looks like."

"I reckon not. Not whatever." Modoc almost smiled as he spoke.

"Who the hell are you tuh be doin' any reckonin' around here? Shuck it off, I said!"

"I never yet," said Modoc Bill with silky softness, "took off my hat to airy second-rate, short-grass son of a slut that ever snuk dung piles. Yuh'r totin' a *man's* cutter, *mucha-chito*. . . . Git it out, damn yuh, an' le's see if it'll *smoke!*"

Too late—too fatally late—Mace Keeley saw his mistake. This was no wandering waddie set-up for his gun-play, but a battle-burned hard case—a trigger wolf primed for his kill.

"Little boy"—he'd called him—him, Mace Keeley, ten-minute egg who rated several notches on his cutter!

Keeley was fast with a gun. No doubt of that—the fact that he was alive proved it. Now it was up to him. This angly stranger had tagged him fighting names before everybody—with almost a sob in his breath Keeley went for his six, throwing himself sideways.

He had no alibi this time. He had picked the scrap, his hand was ready over his gun. He'd made the first move. He cleared leather and fired, all in one smooth motion, but his slug smashed a mirror on the side wall of the Green Tree, instead of cutting down Modoc Bill.

The stranger's first shot had slammed life from his carcass, drove him hard against the bar. And even as Keeley staggered, Modoc dropped hammer again, making a mess of what

a second before had been Mace Keeley's distorted visage, then quick as a cat leapt against the wall, facing the crowd with gun held hip high.

"They say it's seven years bad luck tuh bust a lookin' glass," Modoc remarked cuttingly. "Mebbe the's some-thin' to the sayin'. Reckon you boys saw the play?" he finished impersonally.

"I let him write his own ticket, make the first deal. . . ."

"Plumb right," came a chorus of voices. "You give him more than an even break, stranger. He had it plumb coming—"

Dave Sloan, his ruddy face rather pale, licked his lips and stared at the crumpled, unlovely heap that was Keeley. Young Jack Barlow swore softly, awesomely, to himself. Lafe Riggins leaned over the hardwood barrier, staring down at the thing sprawled against it, his mouth working soundlessly, then managing a croaky,

"Gawd on the mountain! I never see nothin' like it, nawsir—"

Russ Sager and Thee Jernigan, seated in the sheriff's office catty-cornered across the street, looked at each other as the crash of gunfire shattered the quiet. Jernigan patted his forehead with a silk handkerchief, fingers toying with his golden horse-shoe.

"Reckon that's that," said Sager, getting up with a triumphant grin. "Wait here till I get the straight of things."

"I hope," murmured Jernigan, "that things *are* straight—finally—"

"Trust Keeley," said the sheriff. "He knows his okra—that way. . . ."

But Sheriff Sager stopped short as he shoved through the green swing doors of Lafe Riggins' resort. Stopping abruptly, he stared down at Keeley, then shifted his eyes to Dave Sloan. The Box J straw-boss swallowed heavily, shifting his look away from Sager and inquired uncertainly:

"What—what's come off here?"

"Nothing for you to do anything about," replied a gambler. "Mace picked a row with this man, and got his ears knocked down, that's all. He give Mace all the breaks—then busted him wide open. We all saw it."

Again Sager looked at Sloan. And the Box J man nodded reluctantly. "That's right, Russ," he said huskily. "Keeley had all the best of it."

"He jest committed suicide," added Riggins. "Nawthin' else but!"

"Thank yuh all, kindly," said Modoc Bill. For a long moment, he stared full at Sheriff Russ Sager—and every man jack of them saw the blood drain from the sheriff's face, leaving it mottled and pinched.

Then, Modoc Bill Peters strode from the Green Tree into the night, the batwings flapping behind him. And, almost unnoted in the babel of voices which instantly arose, young Jack Barlow followed him, flicking a sharp, sidewise glance at the pallid lawman as he passed.

The crowd in Riggins' corral didn't seem at all sympathetic toward the deceased, as a quartet of them removed the remains to Doc Naylor's office. Patently, Mace Keeley had been highly unpopular around town, so the gunslinging ability of Modoc Bill was much more highly appreciated.

"I'm gunna quit packin' a weepion," orated one cow-nurse earnestly. "Keeley was s'posed tuh be hot hell with a cutter, but his hoss is bein' led now! Betcha that high-pocket ranny could git a gun outa his war-bag quicker'n airy of us could yank one out of a holster. . . ."

"Man, he shucked that six an' slammed Mace quicker'n I could spit with both lips wet, by hell!"

MAYBE the denizens of Riggins' oasis appreciated Modoc's gunslinging ability, but the two men, hunkered together in the sheriff's office, felt unquestionably different. Gloom and fear hung so thick in the

lamplit room, it could be carved with a knife.

"No chance to stick him for Keeley's killing?" asked Jernigan, knowing full well what the answer was before asking. He didn't take his head from his hands as he spoke.

"Hell, what chance?" rasped Sager. "More than a dozen fellers saw it—they swear that Mace started it, got all the breaks. Harley killed Mace as cold-blooded as he'd gun a snake; he never did have any feelings—you know that. He ain't got any now. . . ."

"Also, Alf," the sheriff finished, "Harley went off with Jack Barlow. God knows what *that'll* mean—"

"I can guess," Jernigan replied strainedly. "Very well guess. He certainly picked the right place for—information— . . . I wonder, Van—likely Doon doctored that calf today. You suppose?"

"Shore he did. I wouldn't put anything by him, the devil! Look how he found us. What can we do, Alf? I admit I'm scared—bad scared."

"Not but one thing left to do," answered Jernigan. "Buy him off. He came here to settle with us—we've got to pay. He might be willing to drift along—if we make it worth his while."

"You—you mean—pay him to keep shut-mouth about?"

"We've got to do something, and blasted quick, Van. When a killer like Mace Keeley couldn't—"

"No," agreed Sager hastily, "no use trying that any more. I don't know any other man, and we're not gunmen, Alf—you and me. . . ."

"That's out," clipped Jernigan. "A pay-off is the only answer left, Van. And the quicker we do it, and get rid of Doon, the better. . . ."

"Reckon you're right," sighed Sager. "Want me to see if I can find him, now? Maybe he hasn't left the livery stable."

"Yes," nodded Jernigan wearily. "Do that. I won't be able to sleep, anyhow, just thinking. . . ."

"I might send a telegram up to Montana," Sager suggested doubtfully, as he rose to go. "To the pen warden at—"

"No time now," said Jernigan. "Later, if you like. The idea at present is to settle this thing as quickly and quietly as possible."

"Yeah." Sager's tone was flat. "I'll go look for him, Alf. . . ."

SAGER found him at the livery barn, playing dominoes in the tack room with the night hostler. Young Barlow was nowhere about.

Modoc regarded the officer calculatingly, as Sager nodded a bit awkwardly, seeming no little ill at ease.

"Like a few words with you, private," he said. "Up at the office."

"Ain't satisfied about the shootin', huh?" Bill Peters got up lazily, hitching his belt, as he put the query.

"That's as good a reason as any," Sager replied, leading the way out. "Where did your friend Barlow go?"

"Home, I reckon." Modoc's reply was short. "I'm waitin', fella."

"Yeh, I know. Me and Jernigan want to talk to you, Harley."

"Jernigan?"

"Well—Alf Ramsey."

"Oh, yeah."

They walked side by side toward the blur of light in Sager's office, where the bogus Thee Jernigan slumped wearily in his chair waiting.

"When did you get out, Harley?" Sager's voice was hoarse.

Modoc Bill turned his head; looked squarely at the officer a moment. "What difference does that make?"

"None, Harley . . . except you ain't due out for some time."

Bill Peters grunted a laugh. "Peculiar things happen sometimes, er—Sager. An' back shadows catch up, yuh know. . . ."

"Yeh, I know. Well, here's Alf."

Jernigan stared dully at Modoc as he entered the room, and the lines on his face deepened. For once he wasn't

toying with the watch fob talisman—his hands lay limp on his knees.

"Howdy, Harley," he nodded thickly. "How are you?"

"Just as yuh see me," Modoc said. "It's been some time, Alf."

"Yes—some time. Sit down, Doon."

"I'll talk standin' up, if yuh don't mind."

Modoc leaned against the wall, every muscle alert for any play. He aimed to let the precious pair lay their cards on the table, so he just smiled slightly, his eyes bleak, hard, and satyric.

That's what made Bill Peters such a dangerous opponent—his uncanny ability to sense the thoughts of others, to feel and interpret the cross currents playing about him. So he let the two build their own loop in the lamplit office, with the faces of wanted men staring down sardonically from sheriffs' dodgers.

"How did you get out, Harley?" asked Jernigan. "Paroled?"

"That seems to be yore prime worry, Alf," Modoc said shortly. "Yore's—an' Senor Sagers. . . ."

"Van Swigart, once," said Ramsey. "Well, let's talk business."

"I'm listenin'."

"All right, Harley." Jernigan straightened, brought both palms down on his knees, hard. "Here's our proposition. If we pay you your cut of that old deal—ten thousand—with, say, a fair rate of interest, will you drift out of here and keep a tight lip?"

Modoc's lip moved wolfishly, his narrowed eyes glinted.

"Just ten thousand, boys," his voice came soft, "after you hired a gunnie to sand me tonight? After what you done, before—"

"Never mind about that!" burst out Sager. "What we're offerin'—"

"Two guys who hired a dawg to do their barkin'! Long gun feller with a long holster! Hell! Man like him oughta carry life insurance!"

Modoc laughed scornfully. "An' yuh sicced him on *me!*"

"Wait a minute, Harley!" burst out Jernigan. "We admit you got a dirty deal. You've got us—got us right by the short hairs. I've got a wife and kids—a respectable family, Harley! Money can't make up to you for those years in prison, but it can secure your future.

"You can send me back there; you can send Swigart there. And let the folks of Pocono know that they have been harboring snakes in their midst in the persons of Thee Jernigan and Russ Sager. You can have that satisfaction, Harley—or you can have FIFTEEN THOUSAND DOLLARS, in cold, barrel-head cash!

"That's all I can raise, all Van can raise, between us. And it's every penny yours, Harley Doon—if you'll take it, keep your mouth shut, and ride out of here before morning."

"And not come back!" added Sager explosively. "We're strapping ourselves to bedrock, to do this, Harley."

"I c'n imagine," Modoc said dryly. "However, fifteen thousand from you two road runners, barrel-head, well—reckon I'll deal with yuh. With one more little thing, tacked on."

"What's that?" asked Jernigan and Sager together.

"The's a friend of mine out on Sweet Grass Crick, that's been bothered some lately. Bothered with little, bitty things, yuh know. Got a wife an' young kid, too. Well, I wouldn't like to see him made the goat of any more slick-brandin' schemes like to-day's. *Sabe?* Or anything else worrisome, boys. Reckon you understand . . .

"His name is Barlow. Jack Barlow."

Sager swallowed gulpily. "So you did change that brand—"

"Never mind that," said Jernigan. "Young Barlow is safe as if he lived in church, from now on. You wait here with Van, Harley. I'll have the money in apple-pie order—you'll have the night to ride."

Twenty minutes later, the trio arose from the sheriff's table. Modoc's pocket bulged with a roll of currency; sweat beaded the faces of Jernigan and Sager. Sweat, which alone, wasn't caused by the heat in the little room with blinds drawn and door locked.

"That squares us, Harley," whispered Jernigan. "We're even now."

"All even." Modoc nodded soberly. "You got out cheap, boys."

"Cheap!" exploded Sager. "My God! It'll take me years to—"

"Never mind, Van," said Ramsey. "It's cheap—at any price. You swear this is the end of it, Harley Doon? That you'll never return?"

"As long as I live, Alf," Modoc said solemnly. He put on his battered hat, hitched up his pants.

"Adios, boys," he added softly. "Good luck to yuh both."

Russ Sager and Thee Jernigan, watching from the window, saw him ride away from the stable and out of town, a gaunt figure in the night—lone wolf of the long trail.

"Thank God!" they said in unison. And very thankfully, with gusty sighs, shook hands at the laying of an old ghost—so cheaply—

BUT next morning, the placid expressions of Russ Sager and Thee Jernigan were replaced by other changes of countenance. Closeted in Jernigan's private office at the bank, the two men stared at one another, then at the slip of paper in Sager's shaking hand.

It was a reply to the night wire which Sheriff Sager sent to the warden of a Wyoming pen, asking for information concerning Harley Doon. Sager, crooked to the last, figured in terms of a reward for escape, or broken parole.

The telegram read:

Harley Doon sentenced twenty years from Bald Butte still inmate Release on parole end of this year Your identification mistake

A sheet of paper, with Warden signed to its message. . . .

Wordlessly, Jernigan and Sager stared at each other, wetting dry lips with a dryer tongue. "I—I don't understand!" whispered Jernigan. "He—he was Harley Doon, Van! I wasn't mistaken. . . ."

"I'd have sworn it, too!" husked the sheriff. "But, hell, Alf—he can't be Harley. Harley's still in the penitentiary."

"He never told us he was him!" Jernigan said at last. "By God, Van, he didn't! Like scared idiots, we *told him* he was Harley Doon—played right into his hands! Played to the tune of fifteen thousand dollars. . . ."

Russ Sager groaned like he'd been knifed. "Fools—fools! Taken over the chutes . . . *and Harley gets out this year—*"

"Out this year!" Jernigan echoed dully.

OUT on Sweet Grass range, Modoc Bill Peters watched the sun clip the cedars, as he and young Jack Barlow sat their horses beside an out-

trail, talking a moment after meeting up.

Modoc was bound yonderly, and seemed to be chuckling at some very secret joke.

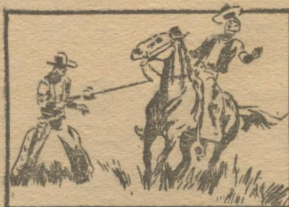
"You didn't linger long," young Jack was saying, "but you sure saved my bacon by doctoring that planted slick. I won't forget you—neither will Buena Vista, for ridding it of Mace Keeley. And, it's funny, but Sheriff Sager seemed to sorta know you, Modoc. . . ."

Modoc Bill laughed mirthlessly. "Reckon maybe I could've saved the sheriff some trouble an' telegraph expense. Yuh see, kid, I was once mistaken for Harley Doon, up Wyoming way. . . ."

"Later, I was one of the posse that brought him in. . . ."

Young Jack Barlow, eyes wide and mouth agape, stared after the jingling rider. Stared, until a crook of the trail hid Modoc Bill Peters from view.

Then, with a crackling oath, Jack Barlow threw back his head and let his laughter roar up to the Pocono sky.



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THE EMPTY BUNK

By S. OMAR BARKER

OL' CHARLEY'S boots with saggin' heels stand empty by his bunk,
An' yonder hangs his ol' guitar—we shore do miss its plunk.

WE'VE done rolled up his soogans from the bunk he'll use no more.
We couldn't hardly sleep last night for missin' Charley's snore.
This bunkhouse on the ol' Bar G, it somehow ain't the same
With Charley's chuckle missin' from the ol' casino game.
His hawleg shore looks lonesome in its holster on the wall,
For a gun without its wearer, why, it ain't no gun at all!

BUD claims ol' Charley got his dues—he rode too much at night.
There's danger in such doin's when the moon is shinin' bright,
But me an' Spike, we both agree, whoever was to blame,
We shore will miss ol' Charley, an' 'twill never be the same
As when he used to cuss the cook for callin' us at dawn,
Yet roll out with a grin on. Why, we cain't believe he's gone!

OL' saggin' boots that's empty an' an ol' hat on a nail,
While out acrost the valley you can hear the kiotes wail
As if they too was grievin' for the sound of Charley's song
That kinder cheered the bunkhouse when the winter nights was long.

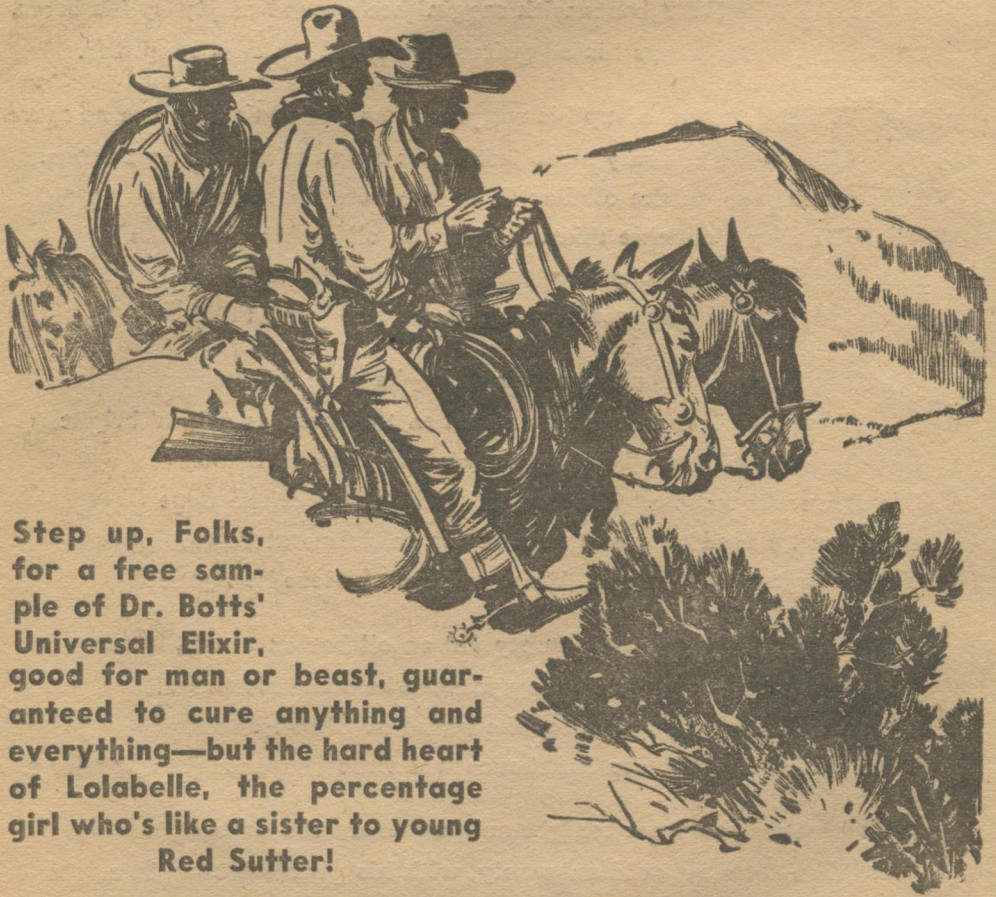
SO here we sadly set tonight an' ponder on the days
When Charley, wild an' wooly, with his pistols both ablaze,
Rode squawlin' into town with us, a-shootin' in the air,
To show the world we're curly wolves with cactus in our hair.

BUT Charley's saddle's cold tonight, he'll gallyhoot no more,
For yonder hangs his pistol on a nail behind the door.
He's done forsook the Boar's Nest, with a grin upon his face,
An' left his puncher plunder here to clutter up the place.

IT'S kinder sad to view it, where he left it, dang his hide,
To travel off to Texas, honeymoonin' with his bride!

MAD MEDICINE

By BENNETT FOSTER



Step up, Folks,
for a free sam-
ple of Dr. Botts'
Universal Elixir,
good for man or beast, guar-
anteed to cure anything and
everything—but the hard heart
of Lolabelle, the percentage
girl who's like a sister to young
Red Sutter!

CHAPTER I Fugitive!

DR. ARCHIMEDES COPERNICUS BOTTTS skinned and dressed the cottontail. The cottontail, shot through the head, was small and young and, so Dr. Botts hoped, would be tender.

Tenderness was an absolute essen-

tial. For three days Dr. Botts had subsisted on rabbit and he was thoroughly tired of the diet. However, if the cottontail was tender he could tolerate its meat. He bent down, belt claspings his rotund little belly, and with plump, white hands shucked the rabbit out of its skin.

Close beside Dr. Botts stood his wagon, his dwelling house on wheels, gaudy with red, black and gilt. Across

"Good evening gentlemen. Might I suggest a bottle of the Botts' Universal Solvent."



its sides were the blazing emblems of his profession:

DR. A. C. BOTTS
 Botts' Universal Elixir and Solvent
 Botts' Balsam Balm
 Botts' Boluses
The Friend of Man and Beast,
 Teeth Extracted . . . Horses Medicated
 . . . Wells Witched

Beyond the wagon, the two small mules, Stomach and Bowels, grazed

peacefully, each attached by a drag rope to a loose rock. Still further away Helen of Troy, the doctor's racing mare, lifted her hammer head and twisting her thin ewe neck, looked reproachfully at her owner with large and pensive eyes. Helen was missing her oats. Grama grass, even in abundance, is no substitute for oats and good timothy hay.

Having dressed the rabbit, Dr. Botts washed the small, limp carcass

in the sparkling stream which flowed nearby. Then he kindled a fire and fell to dividing the body with his knife.

At the moment, Dr. Botts was in an extremity. Fresh supplies for his medicines recently purchased in Denver, had depleted his pocketbook. Juan, the small Mexican boy who customarily rode Helen in such races as Dr. Botts was able to arrange, had suffered a severe attack of nostalgia and was even now riding a train en route to El Paso. To complete Dr. Botts' ill fortune, the Law in the last town, personified by a tobacco-chewing personage wearing a star and gun, had told the good doctor to keep rolling.

Still, Dr. Botts hummed a little song as he disjoined the rabbit, a contented minor buzz such as comes from a honey bee, deep in a red clover blossom. Five miles beyond his present camp site lay the town of Cisco. Cisco was booming; Cisco was filled with people, brought in by a recent gold strike. In Cisco there was money and where there was money Dr. Botts was content. He could, he believed, get his share of that commodity. At least he always had.

With the rabbit sizzling in the hot grease of a frying pan, Dr. Botts straightened, smoothed his figured silk vest, adjusted the tails of his frock coat, and stepping forth, strode along the shingle of sand and gravel that spread beside the river, strode as though he stepped the boards of the Old Globe or the Auditorium. Hamlet was indicated here, or Macbeth or King Lear. Five-feet-four the doctor stood, and his figure was that of a man carrying a watermelon; still he had dignity and stage presence. At one time he had indeed trod the boards, not in the Globe or the Auditorium, but in other theatres. Dr. Botts had not played Hamlet or King Lear—his act having been advertised as Sleight of Hand and Ventriloquism.

"Tomorrow," stated the doctor, his voice deep and ringing, "is another day. Tomorrow we meet and conquer Cisco. Tomorrow. . . And I sincerely hope that there are no damned rabbits in that town."

HE turned back to the fire where the despised bunny was now in need of turning. Suddenly he halted and cocked his head. Across the river, coming through the pines, was a horse, hard pressed and driving. The muffled pound of hoofs was plain. Dr. Botts pausing, adjusted the 32-20 beneath the tails of his coat.

The horse came on, with neck outstretched, feet bunching and reaching, and rider bent low and forward in the saddle. Across the stream the horse reached the bank and was swung to the left.

With a plump hand uplifted, Dr. Botts called: "Hold! Enough!"

The rider straightened, reined in, and at a hand gallop came on once more.

The rider was a small man, young, red haired, and frightened. The freckles on his face stood out against its whiteness, and the blue eyes were swift and searching.

"Friend," said Dr. Botts, "do you ride for help, for succor? Are you in need of a man of medicine? If you are, search no further. Dr. Botts is here! Dr. Botts. . ."

"They're after me!" exclaimed the redheaded boy. "Sam Polzer is right on my tail. I. . ."

"Ah hah, a fugitive!" Dr. Botts advanced a step. "Dismount, my friend. You. . ."

"To hell with you!" snapped the redhead. "They'll hang me. They. . ." He swung the heaving horse.

Miraculously the 32-20 appeared in the plump left hand of Dr. Botts. "Light down!" he commanded coldly. "Mebbe there's a reward on you!"

Under the undeviating snout of the blue gun the redhead dismounted. He had lost some of his fright in accept-

ing the inevitable, for the freckles no longer shown so plainly. The horse stood and so did the rider.

"There's a reward all right," said the redhead. "A thousand dollars. But you'll have to shoot to get it. They only pay off on dead bank robbers."

"Ah, yes," replied the doctor pleasantly, "but live bank robbers also pay off. Take that sack from your saddle, shuck your gun, and get into the wagon. Unless I'm mistaken there's company coming."

The blue eyes looked incredulously at the little man. Dr. Botts gestured with the gun. "Get at it," he ordered.

In rotation the redhead obeyed the commands. He untied the heavy canvas sack from behind his saddle, unlatched his gunbelt and dropped it, and still incredulous, carried the sack to the wagon and got inside. Dr. Botts, with a speed of movement uncanny in so short and fat a body, scooped up the gun, lapped the belt about his middle, and tying the reins of the panting roan horse to the saddle, unlooped the rope from the rope strap, carried it around the roan and jerked it up under his tail. The roan promptly clamped the rope with his tail and departed. Dr. Botts strolled back to the fire and turned the rabbit with his long handled fork.

He was so engaged when, again across the stream, horses appeared. There were five of these, all driving hard. The horses came splashing across the creek. The riders reined in beside Dr. Botts. The doctor looked up from his rabbitry.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he said pleasantly.

The leader of the riders, a big, black haired man with a broken nose and a lip that perpetually sneered, disregarded the greeting. "Did you see a redheaded thief come past here?" rasped the broken nosed man.

"Redheaded?" Dr. Botts lifted bushy gray eyebrows. "No. No redheaded thief has passed."

"Have you saw a roan horse arun-

nin'?" demanded Broken Nose, shifting so that the star on his vest twinkled.

"Certainly," Dr. Botts was glad to oblige. "A roan horse came almost through my camp. He went on into the timber. You gentlemen seem to be distressed. Might I suggest a bottle of the Botts' Universal Solvent? It allays fatigue, it soothes pain, it solves the problem of what to do with that tired feeling. It . . ."

"Are you a plumb damn' fool?" demanded the broken nosed man. "Which way did that roan horse go?"

"Beyond," Dr. Botts indicated the whole western slope with his waving hand. "He went ah—rapidly."

"The trail goes right on into the timber, Sim," announced a rider behind Broken Nose. "You can see the horse went right through camp."

"You are a plumb damn' fool!" stated Sim positively. "Come on, boys! He'll get clear away!" Again gravel was scattered as horses lunged ahead. With Broken Nose in the lead, the posse went on.

DR. BOTTS turned the rabbit again. A little of it had burned and the doctor shook his head. The sound of the running horses died away, and lifting the frying pan from the fire Dr. Botts produced the 32-20 and advanced to the wagon.

"Come out," he commanded briefly.

The redhead appeared and was followed by the slight body. Alighting from the wagon, the redheaded man put the canvas sack on the ground.

"Ah!" said Dr. Botts. "Divvy!"

"What?" said the redhead.

"Divvy! The Chinese pay their physicians for preventing rather than curing illness. I have just saved you from what would certainly have been a fatal attack of lead poisoning. The physician is worthy of his hire. Open that sack and split it up!"

"You mean . . .?"

"I mean I want my cut," said Dr. Botts impatiently.

The redheaded man squatted, and after an uncertain glance at Dr. Botts, he bent forward and opened the canvas sack. Dr. Botts also leaned toward the sack. There, showing through the open canvas was rusty iron, and washers with holes gaping in their centers. Cut bundles of newspapers supplemented the washers. Dr. Botts put his gun away.

"What sort of bank did you rob?" he asked, looking at the redhead.

The redhead turned unbelieving eyes toward his questioner. "I got the Little Bird payroll," he said. "It was right there in the teller's cage. I stuck my gun on him an' said, 'Hand it over,' an' . . ."

"And he handed you this." Dr. Botts snorted through his pudgy nose. "My friend, as a bank robber you would make an excellent plowboy. You're entirely too gullible."

"But they said. . . ."

"Who said?"

The redhead shook his fiery thatch. "No use gettin' anybody else mixed up in it," he announced. "She. . . ."

"Now," commented Dr. Botts, "we come to the hub of the matter. '*Cherchez la femme.*' In other words, there's a woman at the bottom of every woodpile. Who is '*She*'?"

Again the redhead was shaken stubbornly.

Dr. Botts pushed back the tall beaver hat he wore. His voice was friendly. "Red," said Dr. Botts, "you've been played for a sucker. You've sold your birthright for—ah—a mess of washers, as it were. Tell me all about it. After all, a physician, you know. . . ."

CHAPTER II

A Diagnosis

THE blue eyes of the man Dr. Botts had nicknamed, "Red," searched the rotund, benign countenance that smiled down at him.

"All right," he said, "I'll spill it."

For a moment Dr. Botts paused in thought, then he shook his head. "In a moment I will receive your confidences," stated the doctor. "But now. . . well, those fello's might come back."

Red's blue eyes were frightened once more. Dr. Botts walked purposefully toward his wagon, stopped at the tail gate, already lowered, and reached inside. "Come here," he commanded, "you are about to become a Maori. Take off that shirt!"

"What?" demanded Red, who had followed the doctor.

"Take off your shirt, I said," commanded Dr. Botts. "The boots and the pants, too. I've never heard of a blue-eyed Maori but there is going to be one now."

There was some hesitation on the part of Red, but the doctor's silver tongue, combined with a few threats as to the probable return of the posse, overcame the arguments. Red stripped. Having bared his lean, white skinned body, he followed directions. The white became brown, as dye was applied. The red hair was covered with a black wig from which a braid trailed. A loin cloth took the place of discarded Levi's, and fringes of hair were placed on the bowed legs, just below the knee. Dr. Botts brought forth a pair of moccasins and looked at them distastefully.

"These are Sioux moccasins," he stated. "I got them at Pine Ridge. Ah well, beggars can't be choosers, and the Sioux will never know the difference. Put them on!"

Red put on the moccasins and shivered. "I'm cold," he complained. "I ain't used to goin' around half naked, an' there ain't no warmth in this dye you put on me."

"No more warmth in a grave," reminded Dr. Botts. "Here's a blanket. We'll warm up that dad-gummed rabbit and you can tell me while we eat. What's your name?"

"Tom Sutter. They call me Red Sutter. I . . ."

"Your name is Amok. That's Malay or something. Amok will do you for now until I can think of a better name."

Tom Sutter grunted. "They'll see through this rig if they come back," he observed. "I'd a heap rather have a gun an' a horse under me. I . . ."

"Have some rabbit instead," said Dr. Botts. "Now, tell me about this bank business."

Red Sutter, or Amok as the good doctor insisted, helped himself to the rabbit. He chewed on a hind leg and between bites told his story.

He was a puncher. He had worked around Casper most of his life, had indeed never been out of the county of his birth. The gold strike at Cisco had tolled him forth. There was a little place near Casper that Red coveted. With some cash he could own it, and so, like many another he had set forth to dig his fortune from a gold mine.

In Cisco he hadn't done so well. Cowpunchers were a dime a dozen, and cowpunchers seeking their fortune were cheaper than that. In Cisco, Red had spent his roll.

Dr. Botts ate daintily of his piece of rabbit and nodded occasionally as the tale rolled forth.

Having gone broke in Cisco, Red Sutter was ready to go to work. There was no work and so he had gravitated from one place to another. "Them miners ain't like cow people," complained Red. "Cow people will feed a man an' give him a place to sleep. Them miners are so crazy over gold that they don't think of nothin' else."

Dr. Botts agreed with Red as to the comparative merits of cow persons and miners, and urged that he return to his tale. Red went on.

THREE times during Red's short stay in Cisco, the pay roll for the Little Bird Mine had come up missing. Once it had been taken from the

bank, and once from the mine office. Once, also, it had been taken from the stage. The miners at the Little Bird were ugly. They wanted their money on time so they could spend it. Poke Schubert, owner of the Little Bird, had done everything possible to prevent such losses but had failed. Finally, he had placed a thousand dollar's reward for the delivery of the dead robber.

"He had to do somethin'," Red explained. "Them miners was nasty an' old Poke Schubert was sure het up."

Continuing, with a fresh piece of rabbit to help him, Red explained further. During his lean days, he had one friend in the town, a girl named Lolabelle who worked at the Tanner Dance Hall. Lolabelle had sympathized with Red in his days of depression. She had helped him out. Dr. Botts gathered that Lolabelle had been an influence.

"Twice she got me a job at the restaurant when the dishwasher was drunk," said Red, "an' she'd dance with me when I come in, whether I had money for drinks or not. She's a percentage girl an' that cost her money."

"Ah yes," said Dr. Botts.

"Well then," Red went on, "this Sim Polzer come to town. I didn't know him but Lolabelle introduced me. Sim an' a fellow named Jack Wyoming helped me out. They staked me so I had a little money. It was Wyoming that talked to me about the bank. He kept sayin' how easy it was to get a little spare change an' how the bank kept it on tap, an' what a fool Clay Meserve was. Then Lolabelle got sick.

"Last night, I was in Tanner's an' she got me off in a booth an' talked to me. She's goin' to die, I reckon. She's mighty sick. She couldn't get out of town to Denver where she'd have a chance. . . ."

"What was the matter with her?" asked Dr. Botts, professionally. "What were her symptoms?"

"Somethin' the matter with her insides," Red answered. "She's goin' to have to get a first class whittler to cut on her. She didn't have no money so I said I'd get it for her. I went out an' hunted up Jack an' told him I was ready for the bank deal. We worked it out. Today's Friday an' the Little Bird gets paid on Saturday so we knowed the payroll would be in. Jack was goin' to hold my horse an' I was to walk in after the guards was gone an' take the money. We had it all fixed. We waited 'til the money was delivered an' the stage had gone on to the station, an' I went in. Meserve handed over the sack without no argument, but when I come out Jack had went. If Ol' Jug hadn't stood they'd of downed me right there, but he was standin' in the street an' I forked him an' left. Polzer an' some more was shootin' at me. That damn' Polzer was a deputy all the time an' I didn't know it. Lolabelle didn't neither or she'd of. . . ."

Dr. Botts shook his round head. "She knew it," he stated. "My friend, they made a picture of you."

"Huh?" said Red.

"You've been framed," the doctor made the announcement placidly. "It is an old, old story. There is a reward set up for a dead bank robber. A crooked deputy and a few of his friends take some homeless, friendless wandered like yourself, and rib him up to rob the bank. He goes in and comes out, and they kill him and collect the reward. It's old as the hills."

"But Lolabelle. . . ."

"Was in on the deal. I'll stake my professional reputation on that." Wisely the doctor risked nothing valuable. "Lolabelle was the man behind the gun, as it were."

Red shook his head. "Lolabelle. . . ." he began stubbornly, "is sick. She's goin' to die unless she gets to Denver."

Dr. Botts smiled as one does who

humors a small child. "Lolabelle won't die," he assured, and then quoting from his favorite authority: "What fools these mortals be . . ."

"If yo're meanin' me . . ." Red got up from beside the now empty frying pan.

"Not you, Amok," said Dr. Botts. "Not you, just mortals in general. The only thing that puzzles me is the washers in the sack."

"What do you mean?"

"He could so easily have used scrap iron," mused the doctor. "Ah, well . . . tomorrow, in Cisco. . . ."

"I ain't goin' to Cisco. I. . . ."

"I can say with certainty that you never were more mistaken in your life." The doctor's voice hardened. "You're going to Cisco, and furthermore, you're going to like it. Dump the grease back into the can, Amok, and then come and help me. We're going to mix up a little of the Solvent for tomorrow's trade."

Unwillingly, Red obeyed the command. Dr. Botts brought a case of empty bottles, a keg of alcohol, and a small can from the wagon. He added a bottle and an empty keg to these commodities, and gave further directions as Red finished with the frying pan.

"Fill the keg with water," he directed, "and bring it back here. A little water, a little alcohol and a little licorice flavoring added to coloring matter go a long ways toward healing the human aches and pains. We'll even make up a special bottle or two, largely alcohol, and as a favor, my friend, you can lick the labels. I've had them made especially for me. They're peppermint flavored."

IN THE morning strolling out from camp, Dr. Botts shot two cottontails. He carried his trophies back, gave them to Red, and ate, somewhat disdainfully, the meal Red prepared. Red cooked both rabbits and would have eaten all that was left, had not

the doctor reminded him that lunch was just around the corner.

Stomach and Bowels were hooked to the wagon, Helen of Troy was tied behind, and with the doctor driving and Red sitting beside him, they set out for Cisco. Enroute, Dr. Botts explained the duties of a medicine man's assistant. On only one subject was there any grief. Dr. Botts, believing that even a Maori should have a language, tried to instruct Red in the intricacies of Pig Latin. The attempt failed.

"A Maori can't talk English," said Dr. Botts peevisly when, for the third time, Red did not respond to, "'Alkta igpa atinla enwha ouya eakspa.' You'll have to be a dumb Maori, Amok."

"Well," answered Red reasonably, "It sounds plumb foolish to me. You say take the first letter of a word an' add it to the end with a 'a.' That'ud be all right mebbe, only I cain't spell."

Dr. Botts snorted.

CHAPTER III

Painless Surgery

CISCO, when they reached the place, was not much different from a lot of other towns that lay behind Dr. Botts. Cisco consisted of three canyons joined together, with the Little Bird mine perched on a mountain above them. Streets ran through the canyons, and houses, tents and shacks banked the sides. A man could stand on his own front porch in Cisco and spit down his grandfather's chimney, always providing that he had a front porch, a grandfather, and was not too drunk to spit. One of the streets was named Whisky Alley, another got along with the title, Hell's Delight; and the third staggered under the burden of Bunkhouse. Dr. Botts found a place to put the wagon, a comparatively flat spot between the bank and a

saloon on Whisky Alley. He helped Red unhook the mules and water them and Helen, and then leaving his blue eyed Maori to hold down the camp, sallied out to see what he could see, and do those that could be done. There had been two dollars in a pocket of Red's pants. Dr. Botts now had two dollars.

His first port of call was the Little Bird. Dr. Botts climbed the mountain, puffing like a wood burner on a switchback. At the mine office he waited until his breathing was normal and then went in. A citizen, who the doctor at first mistook for a grizzly, was seated behind the desk in the office.

"Well?" roared the grizzly, "what do you want?"

Appraised of the mistake he had made, Dr. Botts advanced. He had never yet, not even in his most liquid moments, met a grizzly that could talk. "Are you Mr. Poke Schubert?" he asked.

"Yeah. Now what do you want?"

Dr. Botts smiled. "How much would it be worth to you to recover your payroll?" he began without preliminary.

"Not a damned cent!" The grizzly pounded the desk. "But you can have the payroll, if you'll get me that red-headed so-and-such that stole it."

Dr. Botts winced. The thump of that big, hairy fist pounding the desk made his own plump hands ache. "How much was in the payroll?" he asked.

"Fifteen hundred dollars. Say. . . who are you anyhow? How come yo're nosin' around? Do you know what happened to that payroll?"

"I am Dr. Archimedes C. Botts," the doctor introduced himself. "I don't know what happened to the payroll, but I have ideas. You agree then that I can have the money if I recover it?"

"I don't neither! I agree that you can have the cash if you turn over

that red-headed thief that's taken it!"

Dr. Botts pursed his lips and shook his head. "The thief is not red-headed," he stated. "I can have the money if I turn over the thief and prove that he took it. Is that it?"

"Yo're dang' right that's it. If you. . ."

"I will give a performance at my wagon this evening," interrupted the doctor. "If you will be there after the show you may learn something to your advantage. I will expect you."

"I'll be there," again the grizzly thumped the desk by way of emphasis, "an' if you ain't got somethin' for me you'd better light out. Poke Schubert runs this town, hear me? If you don't mean business, haul yore freight!"

Dr. Botts backed away from that disturbing presence. He walked down the hill and was a little sorry he had called on Mr Schubert. He could, he believed, have recovered the payroll anyhow, and now he knew for a certainty that he had to get it. If he didn't, Poke Schubert would be on his trail. Dr. Botts did not underestimate Poke at all. He knew the breed.

RETURNING to camp, he found the wagon surrounded by small boys, and Red Sutter squatting under the vehicle, fighting flies. Dr. Botts entered the wagon and came out with a handful of little lead whistles. Judiciously he distributed these. The boys gathered around. They blew the whistles shrilly; they made a lot of noise and they answered questions. The average small boy knows more about what is going on than a local quilting society or a Ladies' Aid. Dr. Botts heard scandal, he heard conjecture and he heard about the bank robbery.

The posse had come back empty handed. The money was gone. Poke Schubert was raving and Clay Meserve was hibernating in the bank. The doctor learned all this and more.

During the time the boys stayed, there were several local celebrities pointed out: Sim Polzer, Jack Wyoming who drove the stage, and Clay Meserve when he stuck his head out of the Bank. In fact, quite a number of the inhabitants of Cisco were named for the doctor, and their peculiarities described. When the supply of whistles played out the boys departed shrilly, and Dr. Botts, bidding Red stay with the wagon, also sallied forth.

The doctor spent a busy afternoon. By judiciously palming cards in the stud game at Tanner's dance hall, he ran the two dollars up to fifteen. He bought a drink, a pocketful of cigars, and circulated generally, visiting the hardware store, the offices of the Cisco Gazette—the town's weekly newspaper—and various other points of interest. In Tanner's, following the stud game, he watched with interest while Sim Polzer talked to a blond man who had been pointed out as Jack Wyoming, and to a flashing eyed, dark-haired percentage girl. That would be Lolabelle, the doctor surmised.

At supper, Dr. Botts ate ham and eggs in the restaurant. Then, puffing a cigar, he went back to the wagon. He carried back a second portion of ham and eggs for Red and gave that hungry man a meal. Stomach, Bowels, and Helen of Troy were already munching grain and working on a little pile of hay the doctor had sent. Dusk came down on Cisco while Red ate, and with dusk, the Doctor prepared for business.

THE tailgate of the wagon, supported by posts, made a stage. A collapsible flight of steps led up to the rostrum, and two kerosene flares, placed on either side, supplied light. Dr. Botts got out his banjo. Red Sutter's only musical accomplishment being, "Buffalo Gals," played on a harmonica, Dr. Botts had decided to

forgo that as coming from a Maori. Soon, the banjo attracted a crowd, and when the crowd formed, Dr. Botts went to work.

With his cajoling and easy voice, Dr. Botts told a story or two, stories that were well suited to Cisco's humor. The crowd roared as each dubious point was reached. Dr. Botts lit a cigar, puffed it, laid it down, and crossing the little stage, produced another lighted cigar from thin air. That brought a hand, and Red, crosslegged on the stage, picked up the discarded smoke and struggled with it. That also brought applause. Reaching into his pocket for his trained deck of cards, Dr. Botts caught sight of the thin-faced gambler from Tanner's stud game. Hastily, the doctor removed his hand, and declared a taboo on any card tricks.

With his banjo, he played weird chords while Red indulged in the the shuffling steps of what Dr. Botts described as: "The blood dance of the Maoris. This is the dance the wild savages perform just before they dip their hands into the reeking blood of their victims and lift out the smoking hearts of their enemies to eat."

Red didn't get much of a hand, and putting aside the banjo, Dr. Botts began to sell Solvent.

He sold quite a lot of Solvent, a little Balsam Balm, and a few Boluses. The Solvent was fifty per cent straight alcohol; the Balm contained lard, Capsicum, musk, and pine oil and had an odor all its own; as for the Boluses . . . Dr. Botts sometimes gave them to horses suffering with digestive ailments, always with results.

His heart was in his work and only the sight of Poke Schubert, standing balefully at the edge of the crowd, recalled to him that there was other and larger game afoot. With Schubert was the furtive eyed Meserve, and behind them Dr. Botts discerned Lolabelle escorted by the blond Wyoming, and Sim Polzer

Sales slackening, Dr. Botts left the rostrum and circulated in the crowd with his supplies. Stopping before Meserve, Dr. Botts addressed the crowd.

"Here, my friends," he said, "is an unusual case. Here is a man, well and happy, it seems; but Fate hovers over him. His eyes are clear, his head erect, his chest swells, but tomorrow . . . ah, who can tell about tomorrow?" As he spoke, the doctor's pudgy hands played over Meserve's body, tapping him here and there, on the chest, at the neck . . .

"See?" the doctor exclaimed triumphantly, "there is a rash here, a rash appearing already. Have no fear, my friend. Dr. Botts is here and one application of the Balsam Balm will cure you." The doctor smeared Clay Meserve's hands with one sweeping stroke.

"Get out, you faker," snarled Meserve. "Get out!"

Dr. Botts stepped back. His eyes were sorrowful. "He calls me a faker," said Dr. Botts, "and I have just saved his life."

For an instant Dr. Botts looked at Clay Meserve, and to those watching it appeared that the doctor was motionless. They could not even see his lips move, but in Clay Meserve's ear a voice whispered, "Poke's wise. Meet me in the Bank at midnight."

Meserve shifted suddenly. Poke Schubert was staring balefully at him. "Move off from me," snapped Schubert. "You smell like a skunk!"

Dr. Botts passed on. Sim Polzer was standing just behind Meserve and beside Sim was Lolabelle. It seemed to Lolabelle that Sim spoke to her. "Schubert's wise," Sim seemed to say. Lolabelle blanched. Dr. Botts confronted her.

"And here is a lady," he said, "The bloom of youth lies upon her cheeks. Raven night is in her hair. How soon will that bloom fade? How soon will white supplant those raven tresses?"

Do you feel well, my dear? Have you not confessed recently to some friend that you were sick?" The doctor's eyes were piercing and keen. Lolabelle shrank from them.

"Have no fear," Dr. Botts resumed. "Take this bottle of Solvent. I give it to you freely. Drink it before you retire, and be assured that it will help you to avoid your fate." A bottle, a very special bottle of Solvent, was thrust into Lolabelle's lax hand.

"And you," the doctor turned to Sim Polzer, "you have been having spots before your eyes. You do not sleep. You are jaundiced. Here, take these as a free gift from Dr. Botts."

Sim's jaws opened as, surprised by the little man, he recoiled a step. Dr. Botts was on him like a flash. Two Boluses, two big, round pills, he popped into Sim's open mouth. Sim swallowed convulsively and reached out a hand for the doctor. But Dr. Botts was gone, wending his way back to the wagon. He mounted his rostrum and smiling benignly, addressed his audience.

"And so we conclude," said Dr. Botts. "Each evening, at the end of my performance, I offer you that boon of mankind, Botts' Universal Elixir and Solvent. Each evening I pass among my people, aiding them, helping them, lifting their woes and healing their ills. And so good night, as the poet has said, sweet dreams and peaceful slumber. Anyone wishing to see me for a private consultation can come up after the show."

The doctor reached out and extinguished a flare. Before he had put out the other flare, the crowd was beginning to drift away. Dr. Botts bent down. "You follow Meserve," he ordered Red. "See where he goes."

Red made no objection. He was beginning to obey the doctor from force of habit. To Red's none too brilliant brain, any man who could save him from a posse and then disguise him so that Sim Polzer would walk right

past with never a second look, was something in the nature of a deity. Wrapping his gaudy blanket about him, Red Sutter left the wagon.

CHAPTER IV Recovery

THE crowd was gone now and Dr. Botts went into the wagon to wash his hands in alcohol. Alcohol removed the Balm. Back on the platform again the doctor lit another cigar and methodically adjusted the 32-20. He might need it. Looming up from the shadow of the wagon came Poke Schubert.

"Well?" rumbled Schubert. "I'm here. Show me how."

"Come in," directed Dr. Botts.

Schubert followed him through the curtains that screened the rear of the wagon when the tail gate was lowered. Within the wagon was an example of neatness and order. There was a long locker on one side, a locker that made a bed. Another crossed the end of the wagon. Dr. Botts, stooping, drew out a canvas sack from the locker. Schubert stared at it.

"So," rumbled Poke Schubert, "you had it all the time. Where's yore red-headed pardner?"

Without answering, Dr. Botts undid the top of the sack. Pulling back the canvas he disclosed the washers and the cut newspaper. Poke Schubert craned his neck to look.

"You will see," said Dr. Botts, "that there isn't any money here."

"Where'd you put it?"

"This is the sack that was taken from the bank," Dr. Botts drove the words home. "I'll not say how I acquired the sack, that isn't necessary, but I will say that it hasn't been touched."

Schubert grunted his unbelief.

"I'll prove it," continued Dr. Botts. "I came to Cisco today. If you will look at those newspapers you will find

that they are Cisco Gazettes of the last month or so."

Schubert dipped a big hand into the sack and bringing out a bundle of folded newsprint, looked at it. "That's so," he rumbled.

"And here is an item of interest." Dr. Botts brought a folded letter from his pocket. "I acquired this from Mr. Meserve this evening." He extended the letter. Schubert took it, opened the sheet and scowled at the contents.

The big man read slowly. When he finished he crumpled the sheet of paper. "So that was it?" he said slowly. "Clay Meserve, huh? The bank at Centennial shipped him the payroll Monday so nobody'd know it was on the

stage. He took it an' put them washers an' the newspapers in the sack. When I get hold of Clay Meserve . . ."

"I thought the letter would interest you," Dr. Botts was bland. "But Clay Meserve is not the only one. There are others."

"That redhead . . ." began Schubert hopefully.

Moccasins shuffled on the platform and Red Sutter stuck his head through the curtains. "He went to the bank an' then home," said Red.

"Not the redheaded man," Dr. Botts refuted, nodding to Red to show that he had heard the announcement. "The redhead is innocent. He was preyed upon. Sim Polzer and Jack Wyoming and a woman combined with Meserve. The plot was to take your money, lay the blame to the redheaded man, and satisfy you with a dead bank robber. I understand that you have put up a thousand dollars

reward for a dead bandit. They were going to collect that, too."

"I never would of done it if Lola-belle hadn't of been sick," said Red, coming in and sitting down beside Poke Schubert. "No, sir, I wouldn't of."

"What?" snapped Schubert.

"Shut up!" warned Dr. Botts.

Red, unconcerned, pulled off the black wig and scratched his head. The wig made his head itch.

Schubert stared at him.

"You . . .," he began.

"An unwitting tool," interposed Dr. Botts, hastily. "Dumb, too!"

Schubert turned back to Dr. Botts. "How do you figger to get that payroll back an' hook them fello's?" he demanded. "Tell me that! You ain't got no proof. You . . ."

"But I have," Dr. Botts said cheerfully. "If you'll

come with me . . ."

"Where?"

"To the bank," said Dr. Botts, and stooping, picked up the sack.

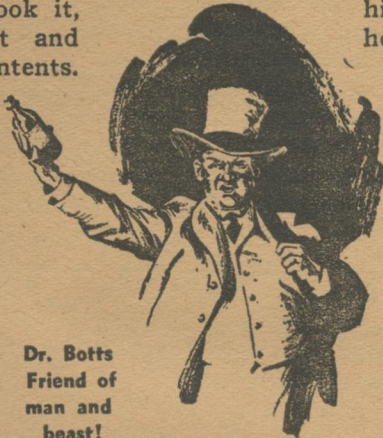
From the locker Red arose. He sorted a large and brown snouted gun from out the folds of his loin cloth and examined it fondly.

Dr. Botts sighed. "I suppose so," he said, consenting to Red's ambition. "I was going to have you . . . Well, never mind."

Poke Schubert also arose. Poke produced a miniature cannon and looked it over. He thrust the cannon back in its holster. "Let's go," rumbled Schubert.

Dr. Botts smiled. "Lay on, Mac-Duff," he quoted, "and damned be he who first cries, 'Hold, enough!'"

THE back door of the little bank presented no particular difficulties to Dr. Botts' experienced hands.



Dr. Botts
Friend of
man and
beast!

There was a short time while Poke Schubert waited nervously, and while Red stood first upon one moccasined foot and then the other. Then the door opened and the doctor led the way inside. Once they were in, he closed the door, locked it, and leading the way unerringly through the blackness, made for the safe. The safe, disclosed by the light of a match, was a large iron affair. Dr. Botts smiled when he saw it. Carefully he sniffed at the combination knob and the handle, and then shook his head. "Not there," he said.

"What ain't there?" demanded Schubert.

"Your money." Nose working like a pointer dog's, Dr. Botts continued to sniff his way about the bank. Before a cupboard he paused, sniffed again, and then in the light of Schubert's match, smiled.

"Here!" announced Dr. Botts.

The cupboard opened readily. The interior was bare. Dr. Botts looked at it, tapped gently with knowing fingers, and pushed on a board in the back. The board was loose. It gave way. Schubert struck another match. There behind the loose board were three canvas sacks and a pile of currency. Dr. Botts lifted the money, sniffed at it and held it out to Schubert.

"Botts' Balsam Balm," he said proudly. "I would know the odor anywhere."

Schubert also sniffed. "Smells like hell!" he complained. "What's the idea?"

"The idea," Dr. Botts expounded slowly, "is that I smeared Balsam Balm over Meserve's hands this evening. I also spoke in his ear, telling him that you were wise and that he was to be at the bank at midnight. He came straight here to see if the money he had stolen was intact, and when he looked at it he unwittingly applied the balm."

"I'll be damned!" Schubert swore

his astonishment. "Did Meserve believe you?"

"He thought it was Polzer speaking," the doctor said modestly. "I am capable of the feat of ventriloquism. See . . . ?"

"Poke's wise," said Sim Polzer's voice in Poke Schubert's ear. Schubert, dropping his match, jerked out his gun.

"What?" he roared.

"Just a trifle," Dr. Botts said deprecatingly.

Schubert, after some calming, put his gun away. "Now what do we do?" he asked.

Dr. Botts lit another match, and carefully removed the sacks and the currency from the cupboard. "I ought to have a bonus," he remarked. "After all, I contracted for only one payroll and here are the four you lost."

"I'm payin' off on dead robbers," growled Schubert. "Not on nothin' else."

Dr. Botts sighed. "We'll wait a while," he said. "I wish I had sent word to Polzer. . . Ah, well, perhaps he will come. I feel sure that he will come. There are certain forces at work. If you gentlemen will sit down now, we'll wait."

Schubert chose a corner and squatted on his payroll sacks. Red hunkered down near Schubert. Dr. Botts placed the canvas sack he carried, the sack with the washers and the newspaper, behind the board in the locker, replaced the board, and closing the cupboard door, took up his position.

"I must insist," he informed Schubert, "that you let me handle this. If there is to be shooting, I'll do it, and if there is talking, I'll do that, too."

"An' I'm to sit an' suck my thumb?" growled Schubert.

"Exactly!" snapped Dr. Botts.

Time wore on. The bank was pitch-black, now that the last match had flamed. Red Sutter shifted position, and Poke Schubert growled occasionally. Dr. Botts held his peace.

"They'll come," he assured. "I know they will come."

Silence reigned after that statement. Again Red Sutter shifted and then, gratefully, a key was thrust into the lock of the front door.

CHAPTER V
Relapse

WHEN the medicine show had finished, Lolabelle insisted that Sim Polzer and Wyoming accompany her back to Tanner's dance hall. Lolabelle was scared. She herded her escort into a booth at the back of the long room, pulled the curtains in front of the booth, and planked the bottle of Solvent down on the rickety table.

"Open that, Jack," she commanded. "Open it quick. Now, what was you telling me, Sim? What was it you said about Schubert being wise?"

"I never said a thing." Polzer looked his astonishment. "What's got into you, Lolabelle?"

Lolabelle picked up the opened bottle and drank deeply. A surprised expression crossed her face. Dr. Botts had fixed up a little something extra in the way of Solvent for Lolabelle. It was about three-quarters pure alcohol. "Gosh!" gasped the lady, putting the bottle down.

"Don't drink that stuff," warned Wyoming. "You'll . . ."

"Lissen, Jack," Lolabelle was very earnest, "lissen: That doctor said that I'd told somebody I was sick. I did. I told Red Sutter. By gosh, I am sick, an' I'm goin' to do like the Doctor said an' drink that bottle!" Determinedly Lolabelle took another drink.

"What did you say about me sayin' somethin'?" demanded Polzer.

Lolabelle removed the bottle long enough to answer. "You said Schubert was wise," she snapped. "What was he wise to?"

Polzer shifted uneasily. There was

something stirring within him. His stomach had a queasy, uncomfortable feeling. "What could Schubert be wise to?" he said. "Schubert's sore about Sutter gettin' away with his payroll, that's all. It's Jack's fault. Jack missed him. . . ."

"You didn't do so good yourself," spoke Wyoming, quietly. "What you scrapin' around in yore chair for?"

Sim was finding it impossible to sit still. He knew why he had missed Red Sutter. He had wanted to miss. Sim knew that Clay Meserve had substituted washers and newspapers for the money in the Little Bird payroll sack, but Lolabelle and Wyoming were not aware of the fact. That payroll was a little, private rake-off between Polzer and Meserve. Polzer caught the bandits if any were caught, but the payroll was always missing.

Lolabelle put down the empty bottle. "Yeah," said Lolabelle, "what you . . .," she was interrupted by a most unmaidenly hiccough . . . "squirmin' around for, Sim?"

"I don't feel good," answered Sim Polzer in a thin voice.

"There's somethin' damn' funny about this," announced Wyoming. "You . . . here, where you goin'?" Sim Polzer had risen and was leaving hastily.

"Come on Lolabelle," ordered Wyoming. "Come on. . . ."

Lolabelle got up. She took a step, crossed her feet and sat down on the floor. A foolish smile covered her face.

"Drink before y' schleep," said Lolabelle. "Schick peoplesh . . ." Wyoming did not stop to hear the rest of it. He knew what was the matter with Lolabelle. She was drunk.

Polzer was out of sight when Wyoming reached the door of Tanner's dance hall. The blond man swore and set out down the street, looking for his partner. If Sim Polzer had double-crossed him, Jack Wyoming, then there would be an accounting.

Wyoming was plain poison when he was mad. Still snarling at Polzer, Wyoming followed down the street.

As for Polzer, he held his head with his hands and let the Botts' Boluses have their way with him. He was a weak and shaken man when the Boluses finished, and he was worried, too. Lolabelle had told him that someone had said that Schubert was wise. There could be only one thing that Schubert was wise about and that was the payroll. Sim Polzer decided to see Meserve. He headed for the banker's house.

Meserve was not at home. Polzer knocked and called, but received no response. Sim had an idea. Suppose Meserve knew that Schubert was wise? What would he do? He would get those payrolls and pull out, that's what he would do. Sim left the house and headed for the bank. As he rounded a corner the light from a saloon fell full upon him. A block or more away, up the twisting path of Whisky Alley, Jack Wyoming saw the big man. Wyoming felt the gun that was in his coat pocket and hurried toward the spot where Sim had appeared.

IN THE bank, when the key rasped, three men held their breaths. The door opened cautiously, and across the gray opening a figure appeared. The men that waited, over against the wall, heard cautious footsteps cross the floor, and then a chair creaked. The door remained open.

Presently the door filled. Again footsteps creaked on the floor and a voice spoke cautiously. "Sim?"

"Yeah. What you doin' here, Meserve?"

"You told me to meet you here at midnight, that Poke was wise."

"That's a lie! I never said a word to you. You come here to get the cash an' pull out. Somebody told Lolabelle that Poke was on to us. You heard 'em."

"I didn't. . . ." The words broke off in a frightened squawk. "Don't, Sim! Don't. . . ."

"I'll teach you to cross me!" rasped Polzer.

Meserve's voice was choking. "The money's all here, Sim. Look. I'll show you. We'll split it. . . ."

Again there was the sound of feet. A match flamed. Sim Polzer had Meserve by the arm. He held a match in his free hand. "We'll split! Yo're damned right, we'll split!" he rasped.

Meserve bent before the cupboard. He opened it, reached in and brought out a canvas sack. "Here . . .," he began.

Polzer was bent down. "Where's the rest?" rasped Polzer. "You thiev-in' devil. You've . . . !"

Dr. Botts was rising. Dr. Botts held the 32-20 and was all prepared for a little business. Dr. Botts used his voice. The tones of Poke Schubert rumbled from the door.

"Now I've caught you!"

In his corner, the real Poke Schubert suppressed an oath. He knew he hadn't said a word, but that was certainly his voice. The match in Polzer's hand went out. A gun roared and lead spattered at the door. The roar was echoed by a second, muffled report.

"Damn you," shrielled Clay Meserve, "I'll show you!"

There was a heavy thud as a man struck the floor. Dr. Botts poised, tense. Powder smoke was sharp in his nostrils. Again there were steps, a man moving. The doorway suddenly was blotted out. A strange voice spoke sharply: "Sim?" Then a match flamed, lighting a thin face and blond hair. Jack Wyoming had found his partner.

In the center of the floor, illuminated by that match, stood Clay Meserve, at his feet a canvas sack. The gun in Wyoming's hand gleamed dully as he advanced. He stopped in front of Meserve, and now Sim Pol-

zer's feet shown in the circle of light from the match.

"What's this?" snapped Wyoming, and kicked the sack.

Dr. Botts had not tied the sack. From it spilled rusty washers and a bundle of cut newspapers. Jack Wyoming, startled, looked down incredulously. The feeble flame of the match reached his fingers and he dropped it.

"Damn you, Meserve," shrilled Wyoming. His gun smacked into the blackness.

Again the explosion was echoed. Clay Meserve had dodged back. Flame stabbed and then there was quiet. Voices were calling in the street but no one came. Cisco knew enough to let each and all kill their own snakes.

In the bank there was a stalemate. Neither Meserve nor Wyoming dared fire. Neither knew the location of the other, and a shot risked would betray the man who fired it. The bank was quiet, breathless. Beside Dr. Botts Red Sutter began to twitch. The powder smoke was burning Red's nostrils. He wanted to sneeze, had to sneeze.

Dr. Botts felt that twitching and knew what was coming. He had to do something, and do it quick.

"All right," said a voice from a corner. "All right."

Dr. Botts had done that something. He had thrown his voice.

Instantly, there was a shot and then another. Then, from where old Poke Schubert sat a cannon bellowed. Dr. Botts snapped with the 32-20. There was a cannonade in the bank. Red Sutter fired, too, and whooped shrilly. Even as he fired, Dr. Botts was thrilled by that yell. What a Maori Red would make if he ever let loose!

The firing ceased abruptly. Poke Schubert spoke heavily out of the quiet. "I reckon that's got it," said Poke. "Light a match."

He obeyed his own command, striking a match and striding out like a giant colossus. Dr. Botts, also equipped with a match, found a lamp

and lit it. In the light of the lamp, the three took account of things.

Polzer was dead, killed by Meserve. Jack Wyoming was riddled, and Clay Meserve was in no better condition. If Poke Schubert wanted dead bandits here they were. Plenty of them!

"Ahem," spoke Dr. Botts, "you said something of turning over a payroll if the bandits were killed. I hope you are satisfied, Mr. Schubert?"

With wonder in his eyes, Poke Schubert looked at the speaker. "I reckon," he said slowly, "that I'm satisfied. Help yoreself," and with a gesture he indicated the currency and money sacks that had formed his seat.

"I'm a little bashful," replied Doctor Botts. "I would rather that you gave it to me."

At the door a lantern appeared, and a wondering townsman thrust in his head. Behind him were others. "What happened, Poke?" asked the lantern bearer. "What . . . ?"

Poke Schubert interrupted. "Them fello's," said Schubert, with a gesture toward the men on the floor, "was caught robbin' a bank. That's what happened."

AND that was the verdict of the coroner's jury on the following morning. Poke Schubert ran Cisco and Poke told the coroner what to say. Dr. Botts offered his professional services, suggesting that he could do a splendid autopsy, but his offer was rejected. Poke saw no use of an autopsy.

The inquest closed at noon. The verdict was brought in and the jury discharged. Poke Schubert drew Dr. Botts aside.

"I ain't one to talk," he said gruffly to the good doctor, "but you done me a favor. Now I'll do one for you: Get out of Cisco. Clay an' Sim had friends. They'll be lookin' for you. I give you yore money an' there ain't a thing to keep you."

Dr. Botts nodded blandly. "I was

about to suggest that I depart," he agreed. "After all, I have done my work and I find that the field of medicine in Cisco is limited. I shall be glad to go." He shook hands with Poke Schubert and turning, strode away to his wagon.

"Hook up the mules, Amok," directed Dr. Botts. "We're leaving."

Later, perhaps ten miles out of the little town, Dr. Botts looked at the man beside him on the seat. Red Sutter was smoking a cigarette. He was dressed in a loin cloth and fringes about his knees, and he had his blanket wrapped about his shoulders. As a concession from Dr. Botts, Red had laid aside the black wig. After all, the doctor had said, there might be red-headed Maoris as well as blue-eyed

ones. Red stared placidly at the backs of Stomach and Bowels and puffed his smoke.

"Red," said Dr. Botts curiously, "what are you going to do now? Are you going back to Casper and buy that little ranch?"

Red threw away the butt of his smoke. "What with?" he asked.

"I gave you five hundred dollars out of what Schubert paid," rasped the doctor. "Have you forgotten that?"

Red shook his head. "Nope," he drawled. "I ain't forgot it, Doc, but I ain't got it neither."

"What happened?" demanded Dr. Botts.

"Well," said Red, "I give it to Lola-belle. She was sick."

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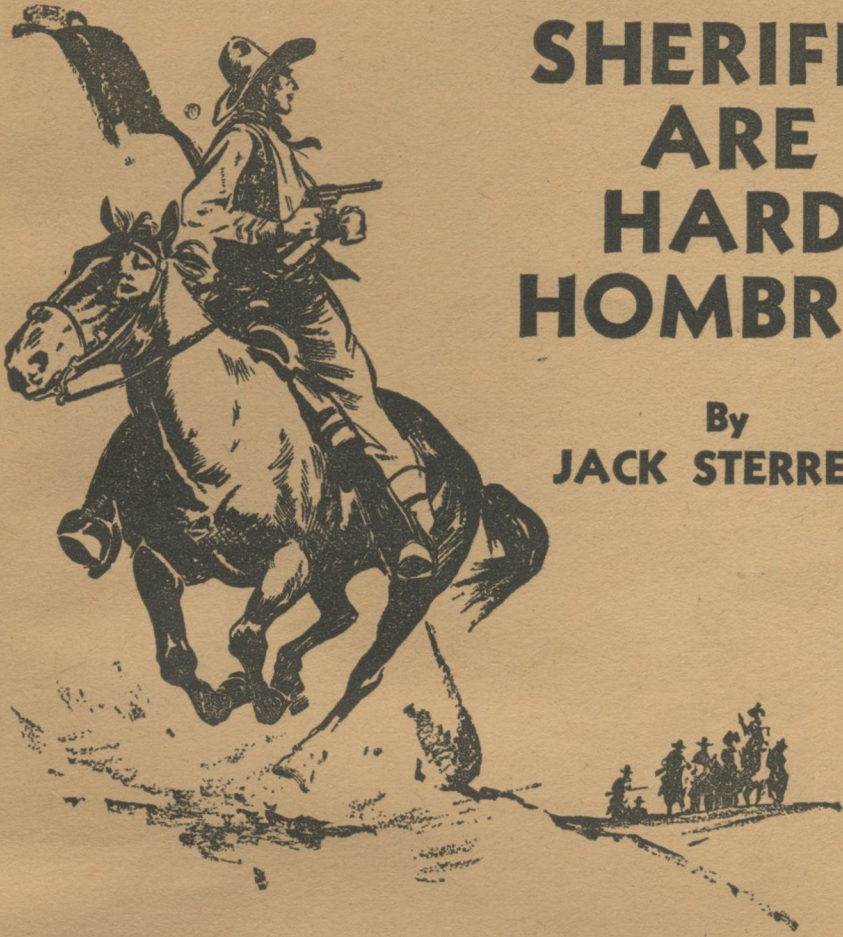
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By
JACK STERRETT



Sam Hart could leave a man to die and get away from the posse on his trail, or he could save the stranger and face a hangman's noose . . .

SAM HART ran his horse up the side of the small butte. On the flat top of the hill, he jumped down, loosened the cinches and rubbed the sweat from the animal's laboring flanks. Dropping the bridle, he walked to the edge of the butte and climbed a boulder.

Sam was young, tall and powerfully built. His eyes were blue and steady, his nose short, his jaw square and his mouth pleasant in his well-tanned face. Although near exhaustion, there was a bright gleam of satisfaction in

his eyes as he surveyed the country about him. He pushed back his hat with a rope-calloused hand and ran his fingers through his light, sweat-curl'd hair.

Swiftly he surveyed the countryside. A half-mile further on there was a slot in the canyons. Once through there and he would be in the badlands with the million gulches, canyons and draws which were interwoven in a completely crazy puzzle. He was as good as free!

For a little while, Sam rested. His

eyes, bright and clear with the sureness of escape, roamed back across the barren plains over which he had come. Far in the distance, he saw a tiny cloud of dust and chuckled.

That posse, coming fast, would be here in less than an hour. But that was plenty of time. He'd rest ten minutes, take another short run and be lost forever! To hell with the lawmen from Red Clay . . .

As he thought this, he looked again at the slot that formed the only natural entrance down to the badlands. He stiffened to sudden attention. What was that? A flock of buzzards!

An ordinary gathering of the birds would have caused Sam no wonder. But these carrion-eaters didn't act as though they had sighted a dead cow or a coyote. They seemed to be gathering courage to swoop down and approach an object that was still alive—a tiny object that struggled and hung, head down.

Sam jumped to his feet with a sudden oath. It was a man—a man who had slipped on the rocks across the canyon and who hung and fought feebly thus, his knee apparently caught in a viselike crevice of stone.

Even as he started for his horse, Sam hesitated and looked back at the distant dustcloud, growing nearer. He looked again, at that helpless man and the great birds that hovered over him. Helplessly, he cursed. It would take time to reach that man and rescue him, probably more time than it would be safe for him to spare.

Sam's blue eyes were troubled. He scowled and his mouth went thin and white. He could do one of two things—make good his escape while there was time, and go free—or save that helpless man's life and be captured to face a trial that might end in his own death.

Sam instantly made his choice. Grimly he snatched up his bridle reins, tightened the saddle, leaped in and slanted down the side of the

butte. Then he headed across the canyon.

Obeying a final instinct to make the most of his chances, Sam carefully hid and tied his horse behind a jumble of big rocks that had fallen from the cliffs. He then began the slow and laborious climb toward the helpless man. He had made sure that the struggling figure was invisible from the trail and that it was, indeed, up to him to make the rescue.

He carried his rope over his shoulder. When he had finally reached the man and looked for an instant into the purpled face, he knew there was no time to lose. Caught by a knee in the cleft of a towering boulder and hung there helpless, the man was now unconscious.

SAM reached the top of the boulder, lowered his rope and looped it around the man's body. Putting the power of his big shoulders and back into the awkward task, he lifted the helpless body upright in the crevice. Gradually, he worked the imprisoned knee loose from the grip of the rock and gently hauled the unconscious man to safety on the top beside him.

Sam, fanning the man's grim hawk-like face with his hat, saw that he was of middle age. He looked around in search of the posse and cursed when he saw how close they were. And this man's leg was broken . . .

Sam sighed and fingered his gun. He gazed longingly toward the badlands, then shrugged his shoulders. He glanced down at the man's face again and caught his breath.

Gray eyes, keen and penetrating, were staring up at him fixedly, measuring him with shrewd understanding. The hawklike man nodded, winced slightly at a twitch to his leg, then grinned thinly. "Reckon I'm a heap obliged to you, young-un. The buzzards would sure as hell had me, if you hadn't come." An odd expression twitched at his grim features.

"Why did you come? Must be you ain't got any too much time. You're Sam Hart."

"How'd you know?" Sam demanded. His lips twisted as he went on without waiting for explanation. "But, hell, I reckon you're a posseman. I was told that Sheriff Carter had sent men ahead to guard every entrance to the badlands. But—I reckoned I was free when I got here an' nobody was ahead of me."

The grim man nodded, his face gray with pain and exhaustion, his hard eyes unwavering. "Guess you got it right, boy. Reckon I'd ha' stopped you—or shot you, if you had refused to halt. So—why did you rescue me?"

Sam breathed hard. His lips moved as though to answer, then clamped tightly. Suddenly, he broke into wild cursing. "Why should I be on the owlhoot trail! Damn the sheriff! Damn him to hell! I'm innocent!"

The injured man looked at him oddly, his gray gaze widened. "You're innocent? You got proof of that?"

"Hell—no!" Sam grunted hoarsely. "But I never killed Lon Marrows. It was that dirty gang of gamblers got 'im. But I was drunk, dead drunk, an' they left me there in the saloon with 'im after they'd shot up the place, left me with the murder-gun in my fingers. The deputies found me that way. They took me to jail to wait until Sheriff Carter could come up from the county seat. Sheriff Carter! He's hard as iron an' has the reputation of hangin' men fast. I broke jail. I got away afore he come, hid with friends a few days an' then made a break. I got this far," he ended grimly, "an' now, I'm caught!"

The gray-faced man had been watching Sam closely. He jerked quickly to an elbow. "What do you mean—you're caught?"

"The posse," Sam grunted. "It's right below us. They're searchin' the slot, I reckon, an' they'll be comin' back, knowin' I didn't get—"

Sam's hopeless words were broken off as the gray-faced man snatched a gun from his hip. Sam stumbled to his feet, fist slapping for his own gun.

"Look!" barked the man with swift savagery, "get behind them rocks over there. Hide! Hurry up—do as I say! I'm gonna signal the posse."

"But—but what the hell?" Sam stammered.

The man waved his gun impatiently. "You're innocent, you say? But you can't prove it? An' Sheriff Carter's a hard man! Well, I'm savin' you, boy—as you saved me. Hurry an' hide!"

IN FIFTEEN minutes, by repeated shots and shouted directions, the man had summoned the posse to his side.

"By hell, how'd you get in a fix like this?"

"I climbed up here so's I could see that outlaw in the distance if he come this way. I slipped an' broke my knee." It was the gray-faced man. He cursed sharply. "Hell, figger out some way to get me down from here! Think I want to set here an' fry all day?"

"But how about that young killer? He come this way, I reckon."

"Sure," the gray-faced man was snarling, "he come this way, all right, an' me helpless to stop 'im! But that was an hour ago—two hours ago!"

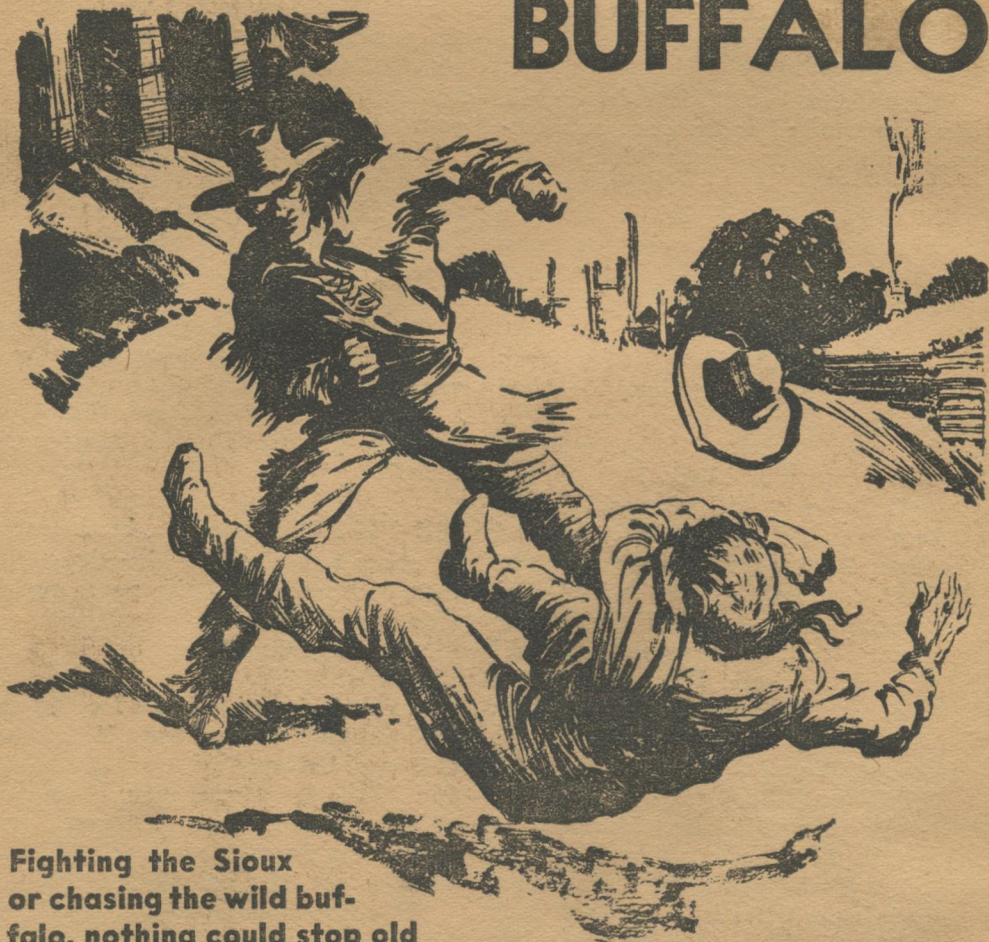
"But, hell—"

"Shut up an' get me down before I lose my temper. I got a busted leg that needs takin' to a doctor an' we're through with chasin' that young whelp today! You hear me?"

"We-el, just as you say, Sheriff Carter. But shucks, we thought—"

"To hell with your thoughts!" The voices were dwindling and Sam knew by the sounds that the men were struggling down through the rocks with their growling burden. "To hell with your thoughts," were the last words Sam heard.

BUFFALO



Fighting the Sioux or chasing the wild buffalo, nothing could stop old Absoraky and young Andy, his saddle-pard. But they found themselves boogered for fair and ready to run when they met up with that pioneer homesteader outfit rodded by a pair of gun-toting women!

CHAPTER I Where the Antelope Play

THE cavalcade came jogging down the eastern flank of the shining Bighorn Mountains. It consisted of two rawboned men in greasy buckskins and knee-high moccasins with long rifles strapped to their saddles, and a hundred head of Indian ponies to their front.

For three months, their lonely trail had led across the Basin, into the remote Idaho wilderness. Horses in their band had been foaled on Bannock and Shoshone ranges, six hundred miles away.

Now, the traders were nearing what passed for their winter home, old Fort Defiance, an abandoned cavalry post on the bank of Mad Woman Creek. Here they would break their horses leisurely, then, in the spring,

LAW

By
WILLIAM F.
BRAGG



Absoraky was intent on the duel in the ditch. Even his sharp ears failed to hear the soft tread of moccasins.

sell them to mining camps across the Powder River country in the Black Hills.

The last, low ridge between the riders and the fort buildings loomed. But as the blue leader of the herd turned the trail, old Absoraky Bill Tutt, and his young partner, Andy Hudson, did not quicken their pace. They were in no hurry, as they relaxed and enjoyed the scenery.

Why hurry in a broad land where

the nearest railroad was four hundred miles to the south, where wild meat ran near at hand on the hoof within easy rifle-shot of a man's camp, where streams were filled with trout? Where grass grew knee-high to a tired saddle horse.

Occasionally, they regretted, while sitting around their camp-fires in the mountains, that the buffalo were gone, the Sioux and the Cheyennes penned up on reservations, the troop-

ers pulled from the Powder River ranges, and the beaver gone from the meadows of the highlands at the headwaters of the mighty river.

But there remained the easy life of trading calico and vermilion paint to the red men for ponies; sales of horse-flesh to Black Hills gold hunters for money to buy coffee, sugar, and salt, the few staples required by mountaineers.

Nevertheless, in this range, with beaver skins and buffalo robes gone as currency, horses meant hard money. And four hundred miles from the law, clever thieves often lay along the trails to take tribute from long riders like Absoraky and Andy Hudson.

So, as the lead of their herd cantered around a bend in the trail, unshod hoofs clicking on the beaten ground which for hundreds of years had been worn down by the passing of buffalo herds going down to water on Mad Woman; painted war parties heading south in search of horses and squaws; or unwary detachments of the great white father's troopers, old Absoraky and Andy didn't worry but remained alert.

But suddenly, a roaring gun crash, disturbing the peaceful silence of that vast land, brought them upright in their rawhide-covered saddles. Brown, ungloved hands reached swiftly for the shiny stocks of their rifles.

"Injuns," snarled Absoraky, hard blue eyes narrowing in his leathery, bearded face.

"Injuns nuthin'," Andy rapped out, a blaze in his smoky grey eyes. "Injuns been peaceful for ten years. Come on!"

Presently, the venturesome lead of the pony herd thundered back, around the curve in the trail. It was a motley array of pintos, blacks, hump-backed greys, swift as deer and almost as wild. They had never tasted oats or corn, nor felt a blacksmith's nail driven into their iron-like hoofs.

"Stampeded 'em!" shouted the old

mountaineer, and he slashed the hind-quarters of his blaze-faced black with an Indian quirt of braided rawhide that could cut like steel wire.

While Absoraky headed to the lower flank to check the backward rush of the frightened ponies, Andy whipped his buckskin mount to the top of the ridge.

He had twisted his reins around his low, broad saddle horn. He galloped with rifle balanced in his left hand, right hand clasped around the small of the stock for a quick throw to his shoulder.

He noted, as he quartered up through the sagebrush, that a blue cayuse he had secured from the Bannocks at Fort Hall for a bolt of calico and ten bars of bullet lead, was limping, and that a stream of bright red, like barn paint, ran from a crease across its heaving chest. Andy had looked often enough on gun wounds. His blue herd leader had galloped head-on against whistling lead, been slightly injured, whirled back to spread fear among its fellows.

Mountain men shot deer, elk, buffalo, any animal they required for food. But they didn't shoot horses. The poorest Indian cayuse often meant the difference to them between life and death, of being set afoot in a hostile starvation country or riding out. No, mountain men didn't shoot horses. And red wrath flared in the free heart of Andy Hudson, as he turned the blue back into the herd that Absoraky had by now bunched and crowded against the slope.

Andy carried one of the new model Winchesters just introduced to the mountains, a lever action Winchester .30—.30 carbine. Absoraky scoffed at this weapon, because it required fixed ammunition which cost big money and was not plentiful. Absoraky preferred a single-shot Ballard which had gone through the Civil War and would fire ammunition that the old trapper moulded and loaded from the powder, lead, and spare brass shells

he carried in his copious pack sacks.

Andy, being younger and more interested in modern ways, preferred the gun with spare shells in the magazine. And, topping the hogback, which overlooked the old fort, it was his earnest intention to commence throwing lead the moment he sighted the man or men who had attempted to stampede and run off his horses by shooting the herd leader.

WHAT he saw below checked the buckskin-clad rider. Six months before, as the first snowbanks were melting in the mountain passes, he had ridden away with his whiskered partner from this snug nook on the Mad Woman. They had said their laconic farewells to the half dozen other mountaineers who wintered there, and to old Sergeant Peak, retired from the cavalry for ten years, and whose squadron had built the post.

Peak had been given homestead rights to it when the troops withdrew, as a reward for thirty years' faithful service with his regiment. He had preferred the frontier to the easy delights of army life in garrisons adjoining crowded cities.

But now Andy saw, with a dismay that cooled his anger, that the bend in the Mad Woman was crowded. The words of an old mountaineer song about home on the range flashed into his mind. But no longer did the deer and the antelope play in the grasslands around old Fort Defiance. No longer did the white brushes of the pronghorns flash like signals under the bright, Wyoming sun.

Cultivated fields, like green and yellow squares of a checkerboard, surrounded the fort's huddle of adobe buildings and pole corrals on the creek bank. Andy sighted rude, newly-built cabins, daubed with white gypsum plaster.

He saw too, just below his hill, an angry man attired in faded blue jeans, low-heeled cowhide boots, flat wool

hat crammed down on a mop of shaggy red hair. The man stood guard on the rim of a deeply plowed ditch that surrounded a small field. He cradled a shotgun in his stout arms. His gaze was on the trail which Andy's horses had recently followed.

Anger burned within Andy as he galloped down the slope. But the wilderness had schooled this youth to conceal emotion like an Indian, hold his rage in check until the moment arrived to strike. And then, strike, as does the mountain lion crouching on a rock above a deer run.

The red-haired man, hearing the clatter of hoofs, whirled, presented his shotgun.

"Another damn mountain tramp!" he shouted furiously. "Ridin' around as though he owned the whole country. Lettin' his hosses spoil a valyble grain crop."

Andy's grey eyes gleamed with a cold light, like that of the shine from a bowie blade, as he reined his pony to a walk and slowly approached the red-haired man. Now his carbine lay across his saddle-fork, but his trigger finger was inside the guard.

"Don't come a foot nearer!" the shotgun bearer cried. "I warn you, this is private property! Yo're trespassin' like yore broomtailed hosses. And I got the right to keep yuh off!"

Andy spoke then, a slow icy drawl. "Put up that gun, you fool. My pard's had yuh covered for the last five minutes from the flank of the hill."

These rangers of the hills understood the strategy of combatting perils of desert and mountain, so they worked in a deadly silence, seemed to understand without words, the quickest course to follow in a tight corner. Andy had not looked backward toward Absoraky as he crossed the ridge, but he felt certain the older man had checked the frightened ponies, then speeded along the side of the hill to ascertain the cause of the stampede, and sighting the angry

man with the shotgun, had prudently taken cover and covered the human target.

"What yuh givin' me, yuh bush-whacker? Nobody in sight but them Injun ponies that started to tromp down a crop of oats, the fust crop, By Gosh, on the Mad Woman. Wuth ten cents a pound or ten dollars fer a seamless sack full, if I ever git 'em failed out."

"Listen," snapped Andy, "that blue hoss you shot is wuth as much to me as yore oats. I traded for that pony clear over in Idaho. I drove him six hundred miles this summer. I figure he'll sell for an easy sixty dollars around Deadwood or Lead. That is, he would have brought that, if you hadn' marked him up with careless buckshot."

The farmer pointed to the ditch on which he stood. His heavy broad-nosed face, covered with a wiry growth of brindle whiskers, was mottled now with a stormy anger.

"We couldn't haul spools of wire," he said, "nor take time to split out rails fer fencin' when we trailed in here—"

"We?"

"Yeah. The land-seekin' party I organized early this spring near St. Joe, when the government threw this range open to homesteadin'. I brought in the wagon train, told my folks how to put in their crops, oats to drive out the buffalo grass which is stubborn stuff. But lackin' wire and fence rails, we plowed and dug ditches around our fields to show our lines and keep out the deer and the antelope. And then you come along with yore hosses, and they jump the ditch an' start lunchin' on my young oats. I tell yuh—"

He tilted the shotgun. Andy reckoned it as an eight gauge Greener, loaded with nine buckshot to each barrel, enough lead at this close range to tear a hole in a man's chest big enough to throw a small-sized dog.

Blam!

From an innocent-appearing patch of greenish sagebrush a hundred yards up the slope, a gun roared like a cannon. A slug plunged into the muddy ditch bank, spattered the homesteader with gobs of sticky gumbo. He flinched, pulled off the triggers of his gun in his fear.

Buckshot whistled over Andy's hat as he slid from his seat, dropped his reins to anchor his trembling pony, ducked under the rising cloud of choking black powdersmoke, grabbed the hot barrels of the shotgun, wrested it from the grip of the owner.

Absoraky stood up in the sagebrush, buckskin fringe on his knee-sagging leggins, fluttering in the wind. He calmly blew the smoke from the barrel of the old Ballard, then came sidling down the hill in his elkskin-soled moccasins, a dry glint of laughter in his hard blue eyes, the barest trace of a grin on his sunbaked lips, and the fire alight in his old, stone, Indian pipe.

Absoraky grinned. His partner had put the homesteader on his broad back in the muddy ditch, and was straddling him, as a sinewy Sioux youth tops a bucking pony.

"Shoot a hoss, would yuh?" Andy panted. "I'll git pay fer that in satisfaction if not in money."

He seized the homesteader by his hair, thrusting lean fingers into the shaggy red locks, then dashed the rolling head back again into the greasy slime.

"Wagh!" grunted Absoraky, and sat down on a rock with pipe going strong and rifle balanced easily across his baggy knees.

"I was here," rasped Andy, "years before you ever come in to plow up the natcheral feed and drive out the game. Damn you, I was *here*. Me an' my pard. But you put a two-bit ditch around a piece of open land and shoot my hosses when they step over, unknowin', an' grab a bite of this funny-lookin' grass they never see'd before."

"Let me up, by Gawd!" bellowed

the homesteader. "I'm the law around here. Shore as my name's Hod Ruggins."

"Law, Hell," rapped Andy, and slapped a gob of gumbo into Hod's big mouth. "Nearest law's Cheyenne an' damn little thar'."

Hod spat mud, blinked his red-flecked brown eyes, freed his right hand by a sudden jerk, buried it inside his huck shirt. He flung his huge body to the side, momentarily disturbed Andy's balance. As the rangy trapper struggled to regain his seat, Hod snaked out a long sharp knife, struck upward, would have driven the keen blade through Andy's lower body, if the mountaineer hadn't reeled backwards, arching his back like an angry bobcat.

At that, the blade grazed skin. Furious, in a killing rage, Andy shouted to old Absoraky who had swiftly raised his rifle.

"Hold yore fire! He's my meat!"

He jumped off Hod, whipped the bowie, swung from his belt in rawhide sheath, dug his moccasins deeply into the mud for surer footing, waited hot-eyed and alert for the grain grower to stand up.

Hod was clumsy, a clod-footed man, but he didn't lack courage. He had drawn steel in a rough and tumble fist fight. That had touched off Andy's rage, because the mountain code ruled that men didn't go for bowies in ordinary fights. They gave notice of death duels beforehand, took no treacherous advantage of their opponent. They waited, even as Andy waited now for Hod Ruggins to clear his eyes, and set himself for the swift, flashing play of razor-sharp steel.

"I aim," Andy stated coldly, "to cut off yore whiskers an' take yore red scalp an' braid me tassels for my bridle."

Absoraky, on his long legs now, was intent on the duel in the ditch. Even his sharp ears failed to hear

the soft tread of moccasins on the damp ground.

"You'll not scalp anybody today," a sharp, clear voice commanded. "You'll put up your knife and turn around with your hands up. Or die in that ditch."

Hod Ruggins' muddy face broke into a broad smile, exposing a line of tobacco-stained teeth.

"By Gum, Malviny," he cried. "Yo're a sight for sore eyes. Yuh shore come to the front for yore friend, ol' Hod. These two tramps jumped me, wanted to scalp me."

Andy, turning slowly, but not with his hands up, looked with amazement on a slight, brown-haired girl in a fluttering, blue gown—a clear-eyed, calm-faced girl who carried a rifle with which she was covering him at ten feet range.

"I'm not your friend, Hod Ruggins," Malviny answered calmly. "I know well enough that two men didn't jump you. But I won't stand back and see a white man scalped by another white," she looked with cool distaste on Andy in his muddy, saggy buckskins.

"That," she went on, "is a throw-back to the Indians. The Indians are gone, and the law has come to this country."

Andy stood easily on his saddle-warped legs, lips curled, eyes scornful. Then, slowly, he wiped off his knife, holstered the blade, scanned the trim, pretty girl whose gaze was as straight as a rifle barrel. He didn't miss an item of her attire, rounded curves, bright eyes, and fluttering curls, bronze-colored by the sun.

"Come on, pard," he drawled to old Absoraky who stood there open-mouthed, thunderstruck at sight of this female who had broken up what might have become a very neat, little knife-fight.

"Come on, pard," Andy went on. "The law's come to the Powder River range. In skirts, By the Livin'!"

CHAPTER II
Rum For Warriors

LATER, they sat at their hard-won ease in Sergeant Peak's trading post in the old mud fort. Here they had passed many winters while the blizzard winds whistled around the squat building, roasting buffalo bones in the fire-place to get at the marrow, smoking Indian tobacco in their pipes, heating their cups of raw rum by inserting ram-rods taken from the embers. Their horses were penned in the sergeant's corral, tallow rubbed on the bullet crease across the blue's chest to ward off mosquitoes and buffalo gnats.

"The hoss won't show no marks," said Andy. "But just the same, I wish I could have parted that sodbuster's hair with my steel."

Absoraky's eyes twinkled.

"Dang near wuth the price of the hoss," he drawled, "to see that female—Malviny's what he called her—blaze up an' bend a gun on you. Fust time, Andy, I ever see yuh back down so pronto. Agin' a man, yuh could have slung that bowie from belt level, an' put a shot in the cross afore he could jerk a trigger. But agin' a gal, yuh softened down. I've seen that happen before, Andy ol' boy. Yo're still young an full of sap. In yore prime. When she told yuh the law had come to this here antelope heaven, yuh shore pulled in yore horns."

"Yuh wouldn't expect me to fight off a woman," grunted Andy, red as a prairie fire. "Hell, how *could* a man fight a woman?"

Absoraky said sadly, "Don't ask me. A woman fight is what sent me up the Missouri with Bridger 'way back afore the war. Betsy was her name. As purty a gal as ever come out of the canebrakes along the Ol' Mississip'. It was at a roof-raisin' that I fust kissed Betsy, an' laid plans to git out logs for our own

clearin' soon. But that roof-raisin' was a merry ol' whirl with a jug of corn whiskey off in the brush. And Betsy an' the other gals dancin' on the green when the moon come up. Another black-eyed beauty thar' named Mary Jane. I mixed my sights an' fust thing yuh know I was kissin' Mary Jane. Jest as Betsy sailed up, mad as a wet hen. She flang the jug at me, dang near brained me. She screeched and started to pull my hair. Somehow I got free, galloped down to the landin', spotted a raft goin' up to St. Louis. Within a week, I was signed as a hand for the fur company an' headin' for the Yallerstone. An' I rode a wide trail around the gals since that moonlight night Betsy broke a demijohn over my head."

Old Peak walked in then from the back room where he kept his valuable stocks of fur, gunpowder, and gold dust and nuggets in rawhide pokes, traded to him by occasional miners from the Montana camps heading south for the Bozeman Trail and civilization. He wore a flaring gray mustache, a faded pair of blue cavalry pants, with the yellow stripes of a sergeant, stuffed into his boots, and a gay, red, calico shirt. The shirt had been cut by his own hands, from his stock of goods. It was sewed too, for the old non-com was handy, like any campaigner, at patching or mending.

The partners hadn't seen their old friend. They had watered and penned their stock before taking their own rest. Now, visioning the rum he hadn't tasted for months, old Absoraky lumbered up, spread wide his arms, boomed out: "Wagh! Sergeant! Long time no seeum! Bring out the red likker an' we'll drink tuh yore future prosperity."

Andy, who had been taught marksmanship by this grizzled veteran of plains warfare, jumped up too, hand outstretched, eyes eager. Two men, travelling for months on the long wilderness trail, became weary of each other. They welcome, as a man dying

of thirst longs for cool water, the talk, the face of a third friend.

Old Peak sadly shook his head as he clasped Andy's hand, then swung to face Absoraky.

"No liquor in the place," he groaned. "The law's come to the Mad Woman."

Absoraky grunted, jaw agape. "Wha—what yuh givin' us?"

"I mean it. When these homesteaders under that hotheaded fool, Ruggins, moved in on me an' crowded the country, I sold out my store. I'm packin' now to head west fer new country where things ain't all cluttered up with females, plows, crops of oats, an' sich truck. She's sold, boys," he indicated, with melancholy gesture, the room filled with provisions.

There were kegs of salt pork, vinegar, salt, sugar, coffee; a stock of flour raised on logs to prevent dampness from spoiling the goods; boxes of rare dried fruit; racks of lead bars for the moulding of bullets; canisters of black powder; tanned leather from the Indian camps for saddle and pack repairs; supplies behind the long counter which was greasy from the thousands of buffalo robes that had been spread out on it in years past; calico; red Hudson Bay blankets, thickly woven to ward off forty below cold; rough woolen shirts; linsy-woolsey pants; felt hats; plugs of tobacco.

"No rum," gasped Absoraky, "No rum on the Mad Woman. An' me with alkali so thick in my gullet yuh could cut it with Andy's knife. No rum, Sergeant. What's come over yuh? Yuh picked up some loco weed on the flats?"

"Not locoed, Absoraky. But when I sold out, the new owner, fust thing, got a broad-axe an' caved in the heads of my kegs. An' busted the jugs. Good rum too, that was hauled by a bull whacker fer four hundred miles from Cheyenne agin' a hard winter, Absoraky, an' yore comin'."

Absoraky, angry now, hefted his old gun, growled in his beard, swearing he would take his vengeance on his new store-keeper who had been locoed enough to waste good liquor on the fertile prairie soil. He would cut out that owner's heart, Begad, and feed his livers and lights to the coyotes.

Peak interrupted sadly. "It ain't a he, Absoraky. It's a female. An up-standin' one too, by all her earmarks. Arms on her like a blacksmith, voice like a cavalry bugle. She and this here Hod Ruggins fight all the time over who's boss of these settlers. Seems her husband was captain, but he died sudden-like on the trail from a renegade bullet, an' she took over. Druv her own wagon here. Then dug up her savings, and bluffed me into sellin' this store."

Peak shook his head. "Didn't figger ary man atween the Missouri an' the Mojave could bluff me. But this female turned the trick."

Andy smiled, secretly glad that Absoraky must forego the delights of rum. Forty rod liquor, taken in large quantities after months of hard work in the wilderness, was his old pard's failing. Now, since law had come to the Mad Woman, the nearest liquor was far away in Deadwood and Lead.

"I forgot to say," Sergeant Peak drawled on, "that this female has a right purty daughter who's gone to prune clerkin' here for her maw. A brown-haired gal she call's Malviny."

"What's the widder's name?" rasped old Absoraky.

"Miz' Clemons."

"A dang good Missouri name," growled the old mountaineer.

"That's whar' she hails from."

He turned toward Andy, but his young friend wasn't listening. He was watching the rear door of the store, eyes intent on the slim girl in blue gown who came hurrying in. She stepped behind the counter, the merest spot of color high in her cheeks, as she saw the two men in

buckskins talking to Peak. Then she turned her back, and began to busy herself checking over the stock of blankets.

HOOPS rang outside on the hard-beaten ground. There were loud whoops. A wild crew surged into the place. A half dozen men, clad in all the varied attire of the frontier, followed a rangy sharp-faced man whose long, black locks rolled to the collar of his buckskin shirt, whose lean legs were covered by leggins of finest buckskin caught at the knees by riding moccasins showing porcupine quill and bead decorations sewed on by careful Crow squaws.

"Blacky Vicente," growled Absoraky. "That trap robber I tried hard to kill up in the Yallerstone country a year gone. A no-good thief and renegade. Ten years ago he was makin' his stake sellin' ammunition and guns to Injuns on the war path."

Andy had met Blacky Vicente here and there on the plains, heard of his bad reputation, knew that men who followed him were probably of similar caliber.

So the two mountaineers and the sergeant stood quietly, while Vicente and his crew lined up along the counter.

"Rum!" shouted Blacky. "Set out a keg! The drinks are on me."

And he rang gold money on the counter. His followers cheered, and one man rumbled. "Somethin' to cheer up the honest workingman!"

Andy turned sharply, saw that big Hod Ruggins was here with Vicente's bunch of mountain freebooters, wondered why they allowed that, because settlers were generally disdained by such types.

The girl—Malviny Clemons—turned briskly, placed her hands on the counter, answered evenly and pleasantly.

"I'm sorry, but my mother destroyed all the liquor after she bought this stock of goods."

Hod Ruggins growled angrily, "Always showin' her authority. Supposin' I was to git bit by a rattle-snake? What would happen to me without rum?"

"I'm sure," Malviny answered, "that I don't know, Mister Ruggins. Nor do I—"

Blacky Vicente roared with laughter, slapped his buckskin-clad thigh.

"By Gar!" he crowed, "she figured to say she didn't care. Why should she care fer a hunk like you, Ruggins? But me—" he tapped his arching chest, "I am Blacky Vicente, the man who piloted yore train up from the Dry Fork of Powder River. And nevaire—" he grinned across the counter at Malviny, "nevaire have I collected my fee from this sweet lady."

He flung out his long arms suddenly, caught the girl before she could evade his rude grasp.

"Bettaire," he yelled, "the flavor of a kiss from such red lips than bad whiskey from a buffalo horn."

Hod Ruggins roared, and laid a huge hand on Blacky's shoulder. "That gal's same as engaged to me. You fergit that kissin', Blacky."

From the opposite side of the store, a cold, young voice interrupted.

"If he don't forget it pronto, he'll pilot no more trains up the Powder River."

The Vicente crew and Ruggins whirled around. Blacky, for the moment, held the girl in his arms, but now his laughter died away. Slowly, he released her, swung around, dropped his right hand toward the buckhorn haft of his bowie.

Andy Hudson stood easily, facing them, lean back braced against a counter. His right thumb was tucked down behind his beaded belt, his hat pushed back, his grey eyes cool and level.

Absoraky, smoke curling from his pipe, had moved a few paces back toward the rear of the store where light entered from a low window.

Sergeant Peak, right hand buried inside his calico shirt, had taken position at Andy's left.

Vicente drawled slowly, dark eyes lidding over, like those of an angry snake, and long, black mustache twisting upward in a sneer.

"So you would interfere, my young friend, with the man who can lead a hundred wagains through the Injun countree. You would tell me, Blacky Vicente," he tapped his chest with his left forefinger, "That when the rum is gone, thrown away by a foolish old woman, I can not cut the grit with a kiss from fresh, red lips. You would tell me—"

"I'm tellin' you, yuh black-muzzled trap robber," Andy drawled, "That since law has come to the Mad Woman, rum an' kissin' ain't allowed. Nor hosses lunchin' on new oats."

"You are then, this new law?" quizzed Vicente. "I do not see the star, the big gun. All I see is the knife that a mountaineer carries. An' if he is a man like Vicente, not a bald-faced kid, knows how to use."

"I am not the law," Andy said, "but since everybody else is dishin' out law on Mad Woman, I'm sittin' into the game. My law is as stated previous. No kissin' around here without the gal's consent. And if you don't like my law, Vicente, cut loose with whatever yuh got."

VICENTE bent swiftly. His steel flashed from leather, whizzed toward Andy. The move was a treacherous one, against the mountain code of the duello. But Andy Hudson, breaking at the knees, grinned as the blade passed over the tip of his hat and plunged, point first, into a sack of beans.

From belt level, Andy flung his bowie. The point drove through the slack of Vicente's right sleeve, pinned the bucksin to the counter.

Hod Ruggins, veering away from the startled Vicente gang, drew from under his faded vest a long pistol—

an old cap and ball gun that roared as Andy darted across the room to seize Vicente before the cursing trap robber could free his sleeve.

Sergeant Peak, snaking his hand from beneath his calico shirt, lined a Remington cavalry pistol on Ruggins, shouted for the farmer to throw his hands high, and hold his fire.

The remainder of Vicente's gang heard the whoop of Absoraky, whirled to look into the black barrel of the old man's Ballard.

"Wagh!" yelled Absoraky. "One load, boys, but the fust gent that tries to sp'ile a fair fight, gits it right in his stummick!"

Every man there knew the skill of this old man with the Ballard. None wished to stop a slug large enough to drop a buffalo bull in his tracks at five hundred yards range. They pulled away from their angry chief, from Andy Hudson, as the latter took Vicente by his greasy collar, and dragged him clear of the counter.

Unarmed, Vicente twisted a toe behind Andy's right leg and attempted to throw him. His talon-like fingers reached for Andy's brown throat.

But Andy stepped back, relentlessly dragging the treacherous knifer to the center of the room, and swung his right fist from the hip. Struck on the point of his blue-black chin, Vicente went over backwards, rolled the length of the store, brought up with a crash against the huge stove that Sergeant Peak had fashioned in his spare time from steel powder cans. The stove collapsed with a crash upon Vicente.

Andy stood grinning, blowing on his hot fist.

"Wagh!" whooped Absoraky. "Boy—that punch give me as much of a cheerful feelin' as a shot of rum! When he gits from under that pile of cans, hit him agin! Wagh!"

All eyes, except Malviny Clemons', were turned toward Vicente, feebly groaning under the ruins of the stove.

(Continued on Page 94)



The Cactus City Gazette

BRONCO BLYNN, EDITOR



VOL. 23

No. 70

DT's OK'd PDQ

Queer Quadraped Ambles Anywhere

AT LEAST one hundred percent of the male population of our Fair City thought they had suddenly developed DT's last Monday morning. (That's about forty percent more than the number which actually has same.)

The reason for this sudden suspicion of sanity by all and sundry citizens was on account of a camel come wandering into town.

Yeah, a real genuine camel! No wonder everybody (except yours truly, Bronco Blynn) figured that whiskey had whipped them, because nobody ever saw a camel come ambling into town. In fact, nobody had ever saw a camel ambling anywheres.

However, the presence of this genuine live camel was explained when somebody remembered that some years ago the Army had used camels in place of pack mules, so the one which wandered into town must be a survivor of that old Army pack train.

Of course, everybody was relieved to have a explanation, as it is very frightening indeed to have a camel come wandering into town without no explanation. And as soon as folks got relieved and relaxed they fell to wondering what in hell to do with this old she-critter. Some gents wanted to keep it for a pet. Others wanted to butcher it up and have a barbecue.

But it was Professor Hoenshell who finally came up with a bright idea. He suggested that the camel be crossed with a Hereford bull, to start a new species of beef cattle, and his suggestion was received with

(Continued next column)

BAND DISBANDED

WELL, it looks like Cactus City ain't going to have no Cowboy Band after all, on account of all the volunteers for same has got out of the notion for some reason or other. Jay Roark, for instance, found out that he couldn't play a harmonica and chew tobacco at the same time, so of course he had to give up the harmonica. Then Solo Seton's wife busted his guitar over his head, in a moment of Vexation, so Solo hasn't got anything to play in the band. And the next one to withdraw was Tequila Tonkins, who used up his trombone to make a extension on his whiskey still.

But the thing that really ruined the band was Hefty Heffner selling his accordion. This is a very important instrument, you know, and Hefty said he was mighty sorry but he just couldn't stand the pain no longer, not even for the sake of Art. Being sort of round in the middle, you see, Hefty couldn't manage a tune on his accordeen without pinching his belly.

copious enthusiasm by all the stockmen.

Well now, that does seem like a good idea off hand, because a beef critter which can do without water is the answer to the stockmen's prayer (if they prayed, I mean.) But personally, I have decided not to get too enthusiastic about the business. After all, it will take more than a Scientist's Bright Idea, and Stockmen's Enthusiasm to get results. In a case of this kind, success depends upon the approval and cooperation of all parties concerned—and if a self-respecting Hereford bull don't approve of a long-legged critter with a hump on its back, then I don't blame him.

WEAK WATER

Flat Flavor Finds No Favor

A LOT of citizens has been complaining that the drinking water has been plumb flat and tasteless lately. Now, I ain't got much sympathy for folks who waste water for drinking purposes, but I will explain that the reason for the water tasting so flat is that Big Springs, our chief water supply, has just had its annual cleaning out. All the drowned packrats, owls, lizards and Gila monsters and other small varmints have been removed.

So if you citizens (those of you who is loco enough to use water for quenching your thirst) will just be patient, it won't be long before the water again has that there rich, full-flavored taste for which it is famous.

TALL TALK

I KNEW it! I knew that if you folks talked enough about the weather that Forty Niner Finnegan would remember back to the Year of The Big Snow again. Yesterday he just chanced to remember that that was the year he got snow-bound in his cabin for three weeks. At the end of that time, both his hands and feet was froze. Also he was plumb out of firewood, so he went out to rustle some. Wood was mighty scarce, he allows, but he finally found a likely looking limb and started hacking away at it.

And it wasn't until he had cut off two stove-lengths that he discovered it wasn't firewood he was cutting. It was his left leg, which was so numb he couldn't feel in it until he got to cutting close to his hip.

And then, says Finnegan, it took him all the rest of the winter to fit the chips back in place so's his leg would thaw together as good as ever in the spring.

PUBLIC NOTICE

ATENTION Housewives and other Womenfolks: I am very sorry to announce that I ain't going to have a Special Sale of American cheese at my store, like I promised. Instead I am going to be having a Special Sale of SWISS cheese, which is the best I can do.

Now, you needn't get on the prod about it, because it ain't my fault. It is the fault of them dang mice. After they got through making tunnels in my stock of cheese, said cheese can no longer be rightfully called American cheese, but it will make very nice Swiss cheese I am sure.

Yours resp'y,
Short-weight Weston.

CHAMPION CHUMP

IT AIN'T no secret that this here town is full of bull-headed people, but I nominate Stubborn Stebbins as the Grand Champion. He is one of them rannies who has always believed that a rattle-snake won't cross a horsehair rope. And he still believes so, even after a couple of rattlers crawled over his rope and into bed with him.

Stubborn allows that that don't prove rattlers can cross a rope. He says it only proves that the rope he had wasn't a Genuine Horsehair, but a dang imitation.

TESTIMONIAL

A Recommendation With Reservations

HARMLESS HOGAN was the only citizen who was loco enough to buy one of them self-haircutting machines from the Great Southwest Traveling Medicine Show which was in town last week. And being loco enough to buy one, he was loco enough to use it too.

When asked how the contraction worked, Harmless allowed,

"Well now, it is sort of like wipin' yore nose on a pine cone—it does the trick, but it's a trifle rough."

EDITORIAL

CITIZENS, we are insulted! There is a State Brand Inspector at large in our community, and you know what that means. It is a very broad hint that the State Officials think you citizens are a bunch of thieves and rustlers, who would butcher somebody else's beef—instead of your own.

Sure, that is a nasty and suspicious attitude, and a outrage to our Civic Pride! Also it is ridiculous and absurd! Besides being insulting!

Nevertheless, maybe you folks better eat bacon instead of beef for a while, until this dang Brand Inspector gets out—or gets shot. (That is, unless you are so hungry for beef that you'd eat your own.)

CUSTOMER QUIRTED

THERE has been a lot of whispering and twittering going on among the ladies of Cactus City to the effect that Cactus Kate, mistress of the Mare's Nest, conducted herself in a boisterous and unladylike manner when she threw that sheepherder out of her place and worked him over with a quirt.

However, I personally don't think Kate ought to be criticised, because her indignation was plumb justified. After all, the Mare's Nest is a decent respectable honky tonk, not a menagerie.

IGNORANCE IS BLISS

CURIOSITY killed the cat, they say, but it didn't kill Cross-eye Cronin. Curiosity only cured him.

The thing Cronin was curious about was how the world looks to a normal man, so he ordered hisself a pair of spectacles which was guaranteed to straighten out his X-eyes. When he tried them on, he was very pleased indeed at how things looked—until he got a look at his wife. Then he promptly jerked the cheaters off and threw them out'n the window. From now on, says Cross-eye, he is a firm believer in Letting Well Enough Alone.

ALGY IN AGONY

Mechanical Breakdown Cause of Painful Embarrassment

WELL now, I knew it was going to happen sometime, and now it has! Something went wrong with the machinery in that inside out-house of Algy Twombly-Twombly's, and the entire household is pretty well upset.

Of course it would happen when Algy had a houseful of guests, which same are all Englishers. And being Englishers they wouldn't think of doing what you or I would do under the circumstances, because it wouldn't be cricket. (I don't know what crickets have to do with the situation, I am only telling you what Algy says.)

Anyways, Algy is very embarrassed over the situation, and he is waiting for a new set of machinery very impatiently. In fact, you might say he is fit to bust with impatience. And the rest of the Englishers are the same, I reckon.

LESSON LEARNED

ALMOST always a man can avoid a lot of trouble if'n he just keeps his mouth shut at the right time. And the same rule goes for kids, too, as little Bobby McGonigle now realizes.

Last Saturday evening, you see, Bobby's old man appeared for supper with half of one ear cut off, and a slice missing from his nose. He explained these discrepancies as the result of trying to shave with a dull razor.

"Dull?" pipes up Bobby, who hadn't yet learned to keep his mouth shut at certain times. "Gosh, I can't understand that. Yore razor seemed sharp enough this mornin' when I was whittlin' with it."

And right then is when McGonigle up and worked over his young son in the woodshed, with the result that Bobby will be very careful how he sets down for a while, if'n he sets at all.

THROWIN' LEAD



CONDUCTED
BY

PHIL SHARPE

Noted Firearms Technician and Expert

Here each month you will find an authentic picture of old guns and old gunmen—makers of Western history. You will be kept posted on the most recent developments in modern firearms—rifles, revolvers, shotguns and automatics. A personal answer to all readers' questions will be given, provided return postage is enclosed. This is your department. We urge you to enjoy it and send your problems and comments to Mr. Sharpe, care of ALL WESTERN MAGAZINE, 149 Madison Ave., New York City.

A Gun Editor's Vacation

WHEN your firearms editor starts his annual vacation, it is usually similar to that of the postman who went for a long hike. Instead of getting away from the routine work of the firearms business, he steps into it more heavily than ever.

Each year when we return from the major tour of the firearms industries, which serves as a vacation for your firearms editor, he gets lengthy letters from his readers who desire to know the intimate details of the trip. So in self-defense here you are.

As usual, the objective was the National Matches at Camp Perry, Ohio, on the shores of beautiful Lake Erie

about 78 miles west of Cleveland.

Appointments for visits along the road were made weeks in advance, as per usual custom. Luggage containing firearms, ammunition, various shooting accessories, and camera equipment including both still and movie machines were packed in the car three days in advance of starting and was driven around the city in routine calls just to determine "how it rode." It is extremely annoying to have to stop along the road and repack luggage due to shifting. The usual clothing accessories were packed at the last minute as per custom.

Then, on Saturday morning before dawn, we started out, the car radio

entertaining with a bit of music from one of the "owl" stations.

A 200-mile drive took us to Middlebury, Vermont. The day was spent with J. Bushnell Smith, noted custom ammunition loader, whose articles have appeared in various sporting magazines, and whose handloaded ammunition is used from coast to coast and on a great many big game expeditions to foreign countries. As usual, we had a great time with Smitty, and did a bit of shooting with some of his experimental guns as well as spending long hours discussing problems of the day.

Late that afternoon, with another 200 miles drive ahead of us we started for Little Falls, New York, where we spent the night with our old friend H. A. Donaldson, prominent author and experimenter. Harvey is one of these lads who can sit up all night talking guns. That's just about what we did do. We had company as usual with a number of other gun bugs dropping in during the evening.

On Sunday morning, Harvey and myself drove to Hubbardville, New York, for a visit with M. S. Risley whose handmade rifle barrels are more or less unequalled in the realm of customs gunsmiths. We spent four hours at Risley's home and in his workshop. Then we started the homeward trek to Harvey's house where we spent the evening again talking guns with a few other visitors who dropped in, some of them coming from more than 100 miles away.

Monday morning came. After breakfast at Harvey's, I started for the big Remington factory at Illion, 15 miles away, and spent an enjoyable few hours with A. L. Lowe, operating superintendent of the factory. I only see Mr. Lowe about once a year and he always has something new to show us or to discuss.

From Remington we took another short trip to Utica where we visited the Savage-Foxe factory, and talked with our old friends, W. D. Higgins

and Major Johnson Morgan. Many new items not ready for discussion were revealed to us, and we had an opportunity of examining the pilot models of some of these developments. They will be discussed as soon as information can be released in this department.

From there we drove to Buffalo where, car and all, we boarded the night boat for Cleveland.

Arriving in Cleveland the next morning, the car was unloaded and we drove to Camp Perry.

Camp Perry is rather a hectic spot during the National Rifle and Pistol Matches. Although the camp officially opened Monday morning and I arrived Tuesday, there were, at that time, over 5,000 persons quartered within the camp.

Our quarters, up in the Squaw camp, had been reserved for more than 8 months. The tent was already taken over by my good friend, Arthur D. Potter of Syracuse, maker of that excellent loading tool, who shared the quarters with me this year.

Down on Commercial Row, we found that many of our old friends had already arrived, and were waiting for me with a highball of salutations. It's an annual custom.

After luncheon in nearby Port Clinton, we started down the Row with a delegation from the trade, looking up old friends. As hundreds of shooters always come up for a lot of information, your firearms editor never "officially" arrives until after the first day, and therefore doesn't remove the usual street clothing and don the typical shooting regalia.

Despite the disguise, dozens of old friends spotted us. When I started out on an appointment a half a block away, I was never quite certain just when I would arrive.

Camp Perry was much hotter than usual this year. During the two weeks we spent at Camp, the heat wave, which smothered the country did the same to us.

The National Matches were bigger this year than ever before, with 126 teams of 12 members each registered in camp—7 more than the previous high record of 119 established in 1936. At one time, more than 10,000 persons were in camp.

During the week we saw old friends of the trade including Captain Charlie Hopkins and Roy Riggs of the Western Cartridge Co.; Major John W. Hession and a half dozen assistants from the Winchester factory; Roy Walker, Sam Whitehouse, George Tschune, and Otto Trautmann of the Bausch and Lomb Optical Co.; Phil Johnstone and his assistants from Griffin and Howe and Abercrombie and Fitch; A. B. Petit and a staff of assistants from the Zeppelin Arms Co.; and George Schnerring of R. F. Sedgley.

Others we saw included, L. W. Jordan of the Union Auto Specialties Co., makers of Jordan loading tools; C. V. Schmidt, loading tool maker; E. M. Farris of the National Muzzle Loading Rifle Association; Captain John W. G. Dillin, author and authority on Kentucky rifles; Colonel Harold B. Sheldon, firearms editor of the *Sportsman*; Fred Ness and his assistant Barr, firearms editor of the *American Rifleman*.

Also on deck were my old friends Frank Kahrs and Captain W. G. Richards of Remington; Colonel W. A. Tewes of Peters; L. C. Weldin, Ballistic Engineer of the Hercules Powder Co., and his assistant, P. W. Stalcup; Russ Lents and his staff from the Lyman Gunsight Corporation; Russ Wiles, Jr., noted small bore shooter and manufacturer of RIG gun grease; Wallace H. Coxe, Ballistic Engineer and an assistant from the Du Pont Burnside Laboratory; Colonel D. B. Wesson of Smith and Wesson, and his assistants M. H. Bingham and Cy Bassett; Steve Dimmick, Len Davis, J. H. Fitzgerald and Harold Kline of the Colt factory; Paddy O'Hare, who has designed and

sold more shooting supplies than any other individual in this country; Thurman Randall of Texas, also a designer of shooters' accessories, prominent shooter and dealer in riflemen's supplies; and Lew Bulgrin and Wes Hansche, the Wisconsin boys from the Badger Shooters' Supply Company, together with dozens of others.

We did have quite a fine time visiting with Bill Higgins, Jack Leahy, and Willis Ellis of Savage; Captain E. C. Crossman, noted firearms writer, Major N. H. Roberts, designer of the .257 Roberts cartridge, and General A. B. Critchfield, the man who made the country's largest rifle ranges at Camp Perry possible.

Among the highlights of the Matches were the consumption of more than 1,500,000 rounds of National Match .30 caliber ammunition, approximately 500,000 rounds of .45 caliber automatic pistol ammunition in both pistols and machine guns, 75,000 rounds of small bore ammunition, and an undetermined amount of special handloads and factory grades of rifle and revolver ammunition.

More women than ever before attended this year, and took active part in shooting activities. Many a man has had to bow to the shooting skill of a woman in recent years, because in this game, the weaker sex asks for and receives no handicap.

The highlights of the big shoot included at least a dozen hours spent with Harry Pope, 76-year-old maker of rifle barrels, who came over to my hang-out one evening and revealed many interesting facts concerning the methods of making rifle barrels, of various old time shooting matches he had attended, and interesting highlights of his career. Harry told us a few yarns which will be used later on in this department as space permits.

(The story on Harry Pope appeared in this department in the September, 1935 issue of *All Western*—Editor.)

We enjoyed watching the National Matches being broadcast for the first

time over a special NBC coast-to-coast hook-up through Station WLW in Cincinnati. The WLW boys brought their mobile Number One unit along, and broadcast interviews with various shooters and officials direct from the firing lines. Perhaps you heard it.

All too soon our vacation ended, and on Saturday the time came for taking leave of our many good friends. The better part of the day was taken up visiting around to say goodbye so late that afternoon in the company of Otto Trautmann, designing engineer of Bausch and Lomb, we started on the homeward trek.

We arrived in Rochester where I left Otto and drove across town to the home of Andy Wollensak, of the Wollensak Optical Company. Andy was waiting for me ready to do battle, and a battle royal it turned out to be, with his charming wife and sister refereeing the verbal scuffle. It had been seven months since I last saw Andy, and in the meantime, we had both thought up a great many new names to call each other. The session lasted until 2 A. M.

After the hectic sessions at Camp Perry, the peace and quiet of Andy's home was exceedingly welcome.

Labor Day was spent with the Wollensaks doing absolutely nothing but resting. We took a few short drives, ate heartily, shot some still and moving pictures and generally enjoyed a life of ease until it was time for me to leave at 10:30 P. M. for a 100-mile drive into Ithaca where I had an appointment the following morning.

Early Tuesday morning I drove over to the Ithaca Gun Company where Ithaca Lefever and Western Shotguns are manufactured. I stopped but a few moments, made my excuses and then drove up for my appointment with my very good friend Professor E. M. Chamot, in the chemical laboratory at Cornell University. Professor Chamot has, in past years, contributed a great deal of firearms

information and conducted numerous tests which have been reported in this department. The entire forenoon was spent in renewing our friendship.

Then back to the Ithaca plant for a luncheon engagement with Shelly Smith, Secretary of the firm. After a bounteous meal, we returned to the plant for a few moments, and then set forth on a tour of the city armed with movie camera loaded with both black and white, and color films.

Your firearm's editor has visited extensively from coast to coast and doesn't recall any city as beautiful as Ithaca in its natural scenery. We shot about 200 feet of color film of the scenic beauty in and around Cornell University and various parts of the city.

We adjourned to the airport where Shelly rounded up a big Stinson and flew me over town to get a few air shots of various interesting points.

This airplane tour of Ithaca is an annual event. Last year, I shot quite a few still pictures but didn't get perfect angles since I was trying to handle a little bug plane and the camera at the same time. This year Shelly handled the controls, which gave me ample opportunity to make my selections of scenes.

And then back to the factory for a couple hours' visit with Lou Smith, vice-president of the firm; Paul Livermore, treasurer; Harry Howland, works superintendent; and my old friend Charlie Goodrich, general sales manager. The evening was spent in entertainment under the capable direction of Shelly.

The following morning I went back to the factory again for another visit, followed by luncheon at the Rotary Club with Lou Smith. I regretfully took leave of the boys and started on another leg of the homeward journey, reaching Little Falls in time for a few hours visit with friend Donaldson again.

As time was drawing short, I didn't stay all night, but pressed on to Sara-

toga Springs, arriving in the wee, small hours and checking in at a hotel for the night.

The next day, with a 300-mile drive ahead of me, I started out early in the forenoon, arriving at home by early afternoon and stared with awe at the 300-odd pieces of mail piled all over my desk.

My vacation had ended. Despite the fact that this vacation like all others during the past six years, was more or less of a business nature it invariably proves enjoyable. I see my old friends in the trade, make new acquaintances with hundreds of shooter friends, and gather information for your identification and entertainment in this department during the long winter months.

So we get back to work. Taking stock of finances, we found we were broke as usual, and had very fortunately only ordered three new guns during the tour.

Being a firearms editor may not be a direct route to wealth—but it certainly is a happy and enjoyable life.

Newsy Notes

A LETTER from C. L. Smith of Grand Ledge, Michigan, ends as follows:

"Like most readers, I read *All Western* with regularity, and also study your column.

I notice that you are rated as an expert in your line, which your column proves.

The point is—behind this knowledge must be a life story that *must* be interesting. Why not let us read it some time?"

Mr. Smith's letter happens to be the straw which breaks the camel's back. Everybody wants to know about me. O. K. here is my life story.

I was born at a very tender age and records fail to reveal that any birthday balls are held in commemoration of the event.

I did no shooting for several years and cannot recall that I was even interested in guns of any kind for some time to come. I attribute my great health, strength and enormous size (no snickers from those of you who have met me) to my pure and innocent life as I did not drink, smoke, chew tobacco, run around with women or shoot a .45 until I was darn near 4 years old.

My first gun present from Dad was a toy popgun. In a serious vein he warned me never to point that gun at anyone. One day I disobeyed him and popped it off at my younger brother. I'll never forget the day. Dad gave me a lecture instead of a spanking. He then took the 10-cent store weapon, folded the metal up over his knee, dropped it on the floor and completed 100 percent destruction by stepping on it.

It broke my heart. My mother said it was a cruel thing to do. Dad disagreed, by remarking:

"If I spank him he'll forget it in a couple of days. If I hide the gun he'll also forget it as soon as he gets it back. If I destroy this gun he'll never forget it." And I didn't.

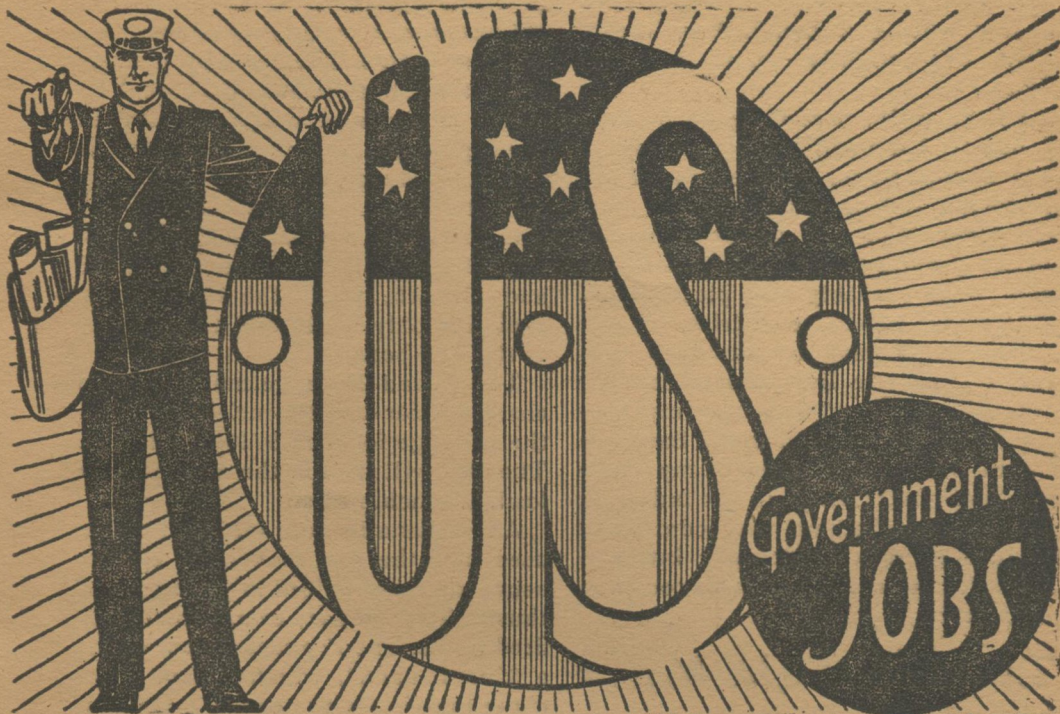
My next gun was a genuine .22, a Stevens Little Scout which Dad bought for me at the age of 9. I'd give ten times the original cost of that old gun, just to have it back for sentimental reasons.

My third gun was a Marlin Model 1897 (now known as the Marlin Model 39) which cost me about \$26.00. I worked hard to earn that money.

My fourth gun was a Smith and Wesson .38 M. and P. revolver, and my fifth was a Springfield.

In the cabinet built into my office, and within six feet of my desk, I can count nine shotguns, twenty rifles, thirteen revolvers and seven automatic pistols.

In 1936, the ammunition I consumed in routine test work and pleasure shooting was but a few dollars short of a retail value of \$1500.



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Clerks and carriers now get \$1,700 the first year regular and automatically increase \$100 a year to \$2,100 and \$2,300. Open to men—women, 18 to 45.



Railway Postal Clerks get \$1,900 the first year regular, being paid on the first and fifteenth of each month. (\$79.17 each pay day.) Their pay is automatically increased yearly to \$2,450. Advance may be had to Chief Clerk at \$2,700 a year. (\$112.50 each pay day.) Open to men, 18 to 35.

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Many other positions are obtainable. Experience is usually unnecessary and political influence is not permitted. Let us show you how to get a government job.

Free List of Positions

Fill out the following coupon. Tear it off and mail it today—now, at once. This investment may result in your getting a big-paid government job.

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 Gentlemen: Rush to me, FREE of charge, list of U. S. Government big pay jobs. Send me FREE 32-page book describing salaries, "vacations" hours, work, and full particulars telling how to qualify for one of these jobs.

Name.....
 Address.....

The 1937 total cannot be determined at this writing, although it will probably fall slightly short of that figure.

I work at this firearms game because I like it. I am not in the employ of any manufacturer of firearms or accessories, and in fact have little time for other than my routine work. In 1936, my office handled 8,578 pieces of mail with probably 500 pieces from the various foreign countries.

Unless my past sins catch up with me, I expect to live to a reasonably ripe old age—and continue my firearms writing. What success I have had in the past is attributed to my thousands of good friends in the industry, and among shooters who contribute various forms of extremely interesting information. May you all continue to do this.

Telescope Sight Mount

EARLE R. GILBERT, 428 Woodland Street, Houston, Texas, recently brought out a very excellent telescope sight mount for the better grades of hunting rifles, and at a price anyone can afford. He is supplying this for practically all hunting guns which can use scopes, particularly of the bolt action variety, and will supply a Weaver 29 scope together with the mount at \$11.90. This is but 20 cents for the mount. The mount alone will sell for \$4.00 and he plans a somewhat lighter type for .22's at \$3.75. All prices delivered. Write him direct if you have a scope and desire a mount, mentioning the make and model of your rifle.

Savage Releases New Shotgun Model

SAVAGE has just released a new single barrel hammerless shotgun known as the Model .220.

This new Savage shotgun is the lowest priced shotgun in their line of merchandise but is excellently built.

It is a hammerless single shot with automatic ejector and take-down type of construction. The new gun is made 12, 16 and 20 gauge and .410 bore. The barrel is made of forged steel with the lug forged in one piece with the barrel. These guns are supplied only in full choke and in the 12 gauge are available in 28, 30 and 32-inch lengths. The 16 gauge is available only in 28 and 30 inch, while the 20 gauge is available only in 26 and 28 inch, as is the .410 bore.

The 12 and 20 gauge numbers have chambers for the 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch shells and the 16 gauge for the 2 9/16-inch shells. The .410 will handle the new heavily loaded 3-inch shells.

An automatic top tang safety is used and the gun is cocked by the usual top lever before breaking down thus making for easy extraction of the fired shells. The 12 guage number with a 30-inch barrel, which I have been experimenting with, weighs 6 pounds.

A LETTER from Bill Weaver, maker of those excellent telescope sights, sends through the long-ordered, improved model 330 unit. This is about as excellent a scope as we have seen in many a moon. This 330 and its companion the 440 are intended for all types of rifles and is in the medium priced class, being the most expensive numbers of the Weaver line. The 330 is 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ power. The 440 runs 4 power.

Both types are available with either cross hairs or flat top tapered posts and weigh between 10 and 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ ounces. The 330 is 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches long; the 440 11 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches. The 330 has a 35-foot field at 100 yards which is ample for all hunting purposes, with long eye relief running from 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ to 5 inches. All adjustments are internal with $\frac{1}{4}$ minute click. The 330 sells for \$27.50 and the 440 for \$32.50, making excellent topnotch companion numbers for the medium and low priced units in the Weaver line.

Another letter from Weaver indi-

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These Special How-to-Do-It HANDBOOKS Are Packed with "Inside Dope," Money-Saving Ideas, Handy Short-Cuts—Rare and Secret FORMULAS—How to Make HOME REPAIRS—HOME WORKSHOP Pieces—MICROSCOPE and CHEMISTRY Experiments—How to Fix Your CAR—How to Make SHIP and RAILWAY MODELS—CABINS and BUNGALOWS You Can Build—Etc., Etc.!

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cates that for a period of three weeks during the middle of the past summer, they used a special lens seal which proved to be defective, although it was purchased as a standard quality. This material, after a few weeks or months, turned a few of the lenses milky, and a great many of these units went out in all models except the 333 and the 355. All of the defective units were called back from the dealers and individuals, in so far as was possible, but a number of these have not as yet been traced. If you have one of these defective Weaver's, the factory will be glad to replace it for you by writing direct to W. R. Weaver, El Paso, Texas, and returning the instrument for inspection.

The same trouble happened with another maker of telescopes selling in the \$75.00 class a few years ago. Weaver has asked that we aid him in locating the defective scopes so that he can give a satisfactory replacement to those customers who purchased them.



IN the October issue of All Western there appeared an article in this department entitled "Handguns of the Civil War." Following publication of this, we were very pleased to receive the following letter from Edwin Pugsley, Vice-President of Winchester.

"I have just seen your article on Handguns of the Civil War in All Western, and wish to congratulate you on the amount of information you have put into this small space. I do not know of any source where you

can get the same amount of information concerning Civil War manufacturers.

"There is one phase of the situation which you did not cover and which I have always understood was one of the controlling items in the Colt line; namely, Colt's patent covering the frame with *no top strap*. If you have ever shot these percussion revolvers much, you will find that the cap many times tends to blow its skirts out, thereby jamming the cylinder with the top strap if there happens to be one on the gun you are shooting. This lack of a top strap made the Colt gun much less liable to jam than competitive arms. They were very jealous of the patent and saw to it that all guns without a top strap were promptly put off the market.

"Another reputation which Colt developed was in connection with their early knowledge of heat treating revolver nipples. The nipple in any percussion arm literally takes a terrible beating. The hammers are very heavy and have a long throw and if the nipple is not tempered just right it will rivet over if too soft or crumble if too hard. Observant shooters of the percussion days always pinned their faith to a Colt nipple."

A short time later another letter came through from Ed as follows:

"I sent your article to my good friend Mr. Breuil on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, who, in my opinion, has more information on old guns and pistols than anyone I know of. His comments are as follows:

"He refers to the Butterfield revolver as using the Maynard tape primer. In this he is in error. The revolver has a priming device but it is for the Sharps pellet primer and not the tape primer. He has also missed the B. F. Joslyn Army revolver, caliber .44, that has the side hammer and the cylinder pin coming out



I got mighty lonesome last year. An occasional game of pool or basket-ball was the only pleasure I was getting out of life.



But when it came to parties—I was a "wash-out." No wonder I wasn't popular with the other sex.



Until I read how a fellow became popular by learning to play music through a new way. I wrote to investigate.



Say, when that demonstration lesson came I knew that here was a way to learn to play that was quick, easy and sure-fire. I sent for the course.



The next time I went to a party I offered to play. The crowd thought I was kidding—but when I sat down at the piano and really played music, they were amazed.



Never feel lonesome, now. Thanks to the U. S. School of Music I'm not a "stay-at-home." And I've found Janet, and we've set the date.

Friends.... Good Times.... Popularity

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THINK of the most popular men and women that you know. What is there about them that makes them welcome wherever they go? Why are they always the center of attraction?

Isn't it because they can *entertain* and make people happy? You bet it is! There's no question about it—the man or woman who can entertain is always popular. And being able to play a musical instrument is one of the finest and most appreciated forms of entertainment.

Learn at Home—without a teacher

And now the fun and popularity of being a good musician is no longer within the reach of only a few who can afford private instruction or have the time and patience to practice day after day for long, tedious hours. At last you can learn to play your favorite musical instrument—simply, and easily at the cost of only a few pennies a day.

The whole secret is in the wonderful simplified method perfected by the U. S. School of Music. This "at-home" method

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You simply can't make a mistake. First you are *told* how a thing is done—then an illustration *graphically shows* you how, and then when you play, you *hear* it.

These remarkable lessons come to you by mail. They consist of complete printed instructions, diagrams, all the music you need, and music paper for writing out test exercises. And if anything comes up which is not entirely plain, you can write to your instructor and get a full, prompt, personal reply!

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| Piccolo | Clarinet |
| Flute | 'Cello |
| Hawaiian Steel Guitar | |
| Trumpet | |
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| Accordion | |
| Voice and Speech Culture | |
| Harmony and Composition | |
| Drums and Traps | |
| Banjo (Plectrum, 5-String or Tenor) | |

from the rear. This was patented in May, 1856, and a quantity was bought by the U. S. Government. It also has the solid frame and, as far as I know, quite an unique device to revolve the cylinder.'

"I thought you might be interested in adding this to your notes in case you wished to use them again."

This information is sufficiently practical to pass along to our readers. We sincerely thank Mr. Pugsley for this additional data.



To F. R. K. Honolulu, Hawaii—In years past Colt made lever action and slide action rifles, double shotguns and other items in addition to revolvers. . . The Bisley model was a target version of the single action Colt. I do not know of a Sibley model. . . The .455 Eley cartridge should not be fired in the .45 Colt New Service. They will chamber but the rim is too thin and might burst.

To F. C. S. Clarksburg, West Va.—I would suggest you get a copy of Eugene Cunningham's book "Triggernometry" through your book store. This gives a great deal of information concerning old time Western gun fighters and gunmen.

To C. H. R. Utica, N. Y.—The Enfield rifle can be purchased from the War Department only by members of the National Rifle Association at \$7.50 for a serviceable used gun and \$12.50 for a new one. New barrels can also be obtained from the government and fitted at Springfield Armory at a price of \$3.93 for the barrel and \$1.85 fitting charges.

To J. R. C. Columbus, Ga.—The Evans rifle was made at Mechanics Falls, Maine from 1871 to 1874. Two models were built each in rifle and carbine style. The old model handling .44 Evans short and the new model handling the .44 Evans long. Cartridges were not interchangeable and none have been manufactured for 20 years.

To R. V. L. Tampa, Fla.—New England Westinghouse Co. was a subsidiary of Remington and made rifles during the World War for foreign governments until the United States entered the conflict whereupon they made model 1917 rifles for

the government. Your gun was made in 1915 for the Russian Government and is chambered for the 7.62mm Russian cartridge still manufactured in hunting loads by Remington.

To W. W. Berkeley, Cal.—I do not recommend the Texas Ranger or any other cheap Spanish imitation of a real revolver. This trash is a waste of money and very definitely unsafe to use.

To A. M. B., Camden, Maine: The rifle you describe is one of the low-priced Belgian .22's imported into this country in the early 1920's. They were cheaply made and are not intended for high speed ammunition—this particular cartridge had not made its appearance at that time.

To K. P. J., Stephen, Minnesota: A great many rifles have turned up in this country recently marked "P. Stevens, Maastricht." This is not an American gun, but was built in Maastricht, Holland, about fifty years ago and is chambered for the .43 Dutch Beaumont cartridge. No ammunition is available for it in this country.

To L.D., Litne, New Hampshire: The Model 1917 Enfield rifle sold by the United States Government to members of the National Rifle Association is a very satisfactory hunting rifle. These take a standard .30/06 cartridge. The used gun sells for \$7.50 and is serviceable but not guaranteed. The brand new rifle sells for \$12.00. I would recommend that you buy the new gun.

To R. C., Louisville, Kentucky: As far as I know there is no manufacturer who makes a charge for his spare parts catalog. Not all gun makers have these catalogs available to other than dealers, however. Colt's is located at Hartford, Conn.; Smith & Wesson at Springfield, Mass.; Iver-Johnson at Fitchburg, Mass.; Harrington & Richardson at Worcester, Mass.; Winchester is at New Haven, Conn.; and Stevens at Chicopee Falls, Mass.

WILL YOU SWAP

SELL—Double barrel Syracuse shotgun, checkered pistol grip and forearm. \$10.00, W. L. Staittmater, LaCrosse, Wis.

WANT—.22 revolver with 4-inch barrel or over. Will pay cash. J. Mahler, 708 Garfield Ave., Bay City, Mich.

WANT—Colt .22 Target revolver, A. E. Levriett, Box 3542 Sta. F., Jacksonville, Fla.

SWAP—Colored Obsidian for garnets, jasper, agates or other semi-precious stones, Edward Gotchy, 507 River Front St., Bend, Oregon.

SELL—.22 Long rifle bolt action; 12 gauge shotgun worth \$18. **WANT**—Peacemaker and .32 or .38 revolver. Paul Edlund, Burdett, Alberta, Canada, Box 68.

WANT—Sharps carbine .45/70/405. Will pay \$5.00 Leroy D. Butterworth, 1805 E. Fairmount Ave., Baltimore, Md.

SELL OR TRADE—Model 14A .25 cal. high power Remington repeating rifle, 34 cartridges \$22.50; 20 or .410 Ga. Winchester or Remington repeating shotgun; .22 cal. repeating rifle; .22 caliber revolver; .32 Side Swing S. & W. Revolver, 4 1/4-inch barrel, \$10.00 .22 caliber repeating rifle, Dr. S. W. Ruff, Dover, Ark.

TRADE—.32 Colt automatic pistol, blued finish, nice condition. **WANT**—.22 Long Rifle Bolt Action Repeater. C. Moore, 211 East 108 St., Los Angeles, Calif.

SELL OR TRADE—Model 95 Winchester Carbine .30/06 new condition. **WANT**—.25/20 rifle or high power prism binoculars. C. J. Hostler, 407 South Third St., Bellwood, Pa.

WANT—Good cap and ball revolver. Write giving make, model, conditions and price. Thomas Rhoads, 1401 Madison Ave., Indianapolis, Ind.

TRADE—Russian Army rifle made in U. S. by New England Westinghouse Co. in 1915—has never been fired. **WANT**—.32 Smith and Wesson or .32 Colt Revolver or Automatic, R. B. Lovett, 4208 15th Street, Tampa, Fla.

SELL—An old Muzzle Loader and one .40/70 caliber gun. Francis Merkling, Forks, Wash.

SELL OR TRADE—Cartridge belt and holster for .44/40 or .38 Special, \$2.95, Michele Maiolo, R. D. No. 2, Solomon, St. Johnstown, Pa.

TRADE—Genuine German Luger and Holster, cal. 9 m/m. **WANT**—.22 Colt Woodsman; .38 Super Colt Auto; .45 Colt auto; .38 Special S. A. Frontier or any .38 Special Smith & Wesson or Colt target revolver. Al Swabb, 336 W. Cherry St., Shenandoah, Pennsylvania.



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Then you spend many miserable days. You can't eat. You can't sleep. Your stomach is sour. You feel tired out, grouchy and miserable.

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30x4.50-21	2.40	1.10	32x4 1/2	3.95	30x5	3.65
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30x5.25-20	2.95	1.35	36x5.25	4.25	38x5.25	5.45
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.35	38x5.25	4.95	40x5.25	6.45
32x5.25-21	3.25	1.40	40x5.25	5.95	42x5.25	7.45

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Size	Tires	Size	Tires
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31x6.00-19	3.40	1.45	38x6.00-20
32x6.00-20	3.45	1.55	40x6.00-20
33x6.00-21	3.65	1.55	42x6.00-20
34x6.00-20	3.75	1.75	44x6.00-20

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(Continued from Page 79)

She, forgotten until now by these rough men who gloried in any sort of a fight, screamed: "Look out!"

Andy Hudson dropped flat on his stomach. As he fell, a gun crashed. A huge, leaden ball bored the adobe wall in the rear of the store.

Then Hod Ruggins, who had sought revenge on Andy, whirled and fought through the crowd of staring men in the front entrance. He battered his way out with the old cap and ball pistol.

Sergeant Peak, leaping nimbly upon the counter, lined his pistol, but scurrying bodies of Vicente's crew prevented him from putting a bullet into Ruggins' broad back as the man vanished through the door.

Absoraky, seeing his partner fall, believing the boy might be killed, flourished his rifle, cocked it, moved toward the center of the room.

"Nary a man moves!" he yelled. "Or I take his hair!"

A furious woman bustled through the rear doorway. She wore a black, bombazine dress with a wide hem, a tight bodice that set off her ample matronly curves. Iron-rimmed spectacles flashed before her eyes.

She carried a long-barreled, muzzle-loading, squirrel rifle. She flipped the stock to her shoulder, shut both her eyes, and pulled the trigger.

The load of buckshot knocked adobe plaster from the front wall of the store.

A howling crew of men fought their way from the place.

Malviny Clemons cried. "Maw! Don't shoot that man on the floor!" "What man?" bellowed Maw.

She had failed to note Andy flat on the ground. Not another man was in sight.

Old Absoraky, taking one long look at Maw, had dropped his Ballard for the first time in thirty years, and dived through the low window. Sergeant Peak had fallen behind the

counter and hidden under the overhang. The stove covered Vicente.

Then Maw Clemons saw Andy.

She commanded sharply, "Stand up, you young spriggins, afore I bust this gunstock over yore ugly head. Stand up an' tell why yuh come in here tryin' to break up a widder woman's business."

But Malviny, slipping around the end of the counter, put her arms around the old woman, whispered that Andy was a friend, that he had defended her against a brutal attack.

"Hump," sniffed Maw, examining the sheepish Andy through her glasses as he arose, and stood before her with flushed face and bent head, "I can take keer of my own flesh and blood, young man."

Sergeant Peak stuck a cautious head above the counter. Maw sighted him.

"Come out," she cried furiously, "come out! I suppose you and your useless mountain friends held out a keg of that rum and got drunk again. Come out an' explain these goin's on. And fast—"

Peak came fast, apologizing at every step as he rounded the counter, seeking to mollify the widow, bidding her smell his breath, if she didn't take his word that he was as sober as a recruit mounting guard for the first time.

"Rum," Maw grated, "busted up my life onct. An' I'm dead sot agin' it. I paid full price for it, Peak, and if I empty the kags it's my loss. No square man would hold out on me."

"I didn't hold out."

Maw frowned. "I been checkin' over the inventory you give me. I busted in the heads of ten kegs. But yore list show you sold me fifteen. That means somebody has stole five of that vicious stuff, likker that would make a rabbit chase a coyote across the flats. Where's them five kegs, Peak?"

The sergeant said. "Ask your



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friend, Hod Ruggins. He was hangin' around the store yesterday while I was shiftin' goods for you to check over. Rum's like money out here, Ma'am, an' Hod needs somethin' to beat you to the punch as boss of the settlers. Fellers like that Vicente and his gang, they'd do most anything for rum when they git right thirsty. Yeah—they'd do most anything."

Maw brushed past the speaker, heading for the doorway.

"I aim," she snapped, "to run down that Vicente, and ask him if Ruggins has been bribin' him with stolen rum."

Andy grinned. "No use runnin' far, ma'am. Vicente is over thar."

CHAPTER III

Partners Fall Out

ANDY and Peak knew well enough that five kegs of rum would be worth its weight, almost in gold, to wild mountaineers like Vicente and his men in for their annual spree. The widow woman meant well, but she could not foresee that the hope of winning this rum, of getting wildly drunk, would turn these men into beasts, a menace to all the peaceful settlers. Especially the women of the Missouri train. Tender women like the girl, Malviny.

The widow appeared capable of caring for herself. A determined pioneer type, but so stubborn that by her insistence on too much law on the Mad Woman, she might bring disaster crashing down upon her people.

"Ma'am," stuttered the sergeant, "I told yuh not to waste all the liquor. You could have kept it cached, dished out reasonable sized jugs. Made a good stake too from Vicente an' the rest. In fact, a dang good stake. More than you'll ever git from a crop of oats or tradin' calico cloth to Injun squaws for beaver skins."

Widow Clemons said grimly. "A

rum jug is never reasonable in size. It was a jug that busted my heart when I was a gal. I swore then to fight Demon Rum an' I been doin' it since. I'd rather starve sellin' goods sich as calico an' oats than tuh make easy money from red likker. I paid you for that stock, Peak, an' it's up to you as a man to fill the bill by diggin' up the missin' five kegs."

Peak blinked his eyes miserably, whispered, "Yes Ma'am," and stalked out the door, searching perhaps for comfort from his old friend.

Andy stood by the counter, alert gaze on the shifting body of Vicente under the powder can stove. The widow might deem herself very reliant, but her rifle lacked a load, and here also stood a girl who didn't understand such renegades as Blacky Vicente.

"I'll bet," the widow said to Andy, "that Hod Ruggins knows somethin' about that missin' rum. That man has been like a case of smallpox in the camp, since some dirty renegade dry-gulched my old man three hundred miles back on the trail."

Briefly, she recounted the mishaps of the wagon train which had been organized by her husband, Captain Clemons. Each of the settlers had paid small sums of money, which went for hire of guides, land settlement. They also agreed to sign over extra acreage to Captain Clemons for taking them to the Mad Woman safely.

Then Ruggins had arisen to dispute Clemons' authority after the latter had forbade the man to bother Malviny. Death came one night to the bold captain, when he stole out toward the herd of work-horses which had shown alarm, as though some prairie thief might be attempting to stampede them. The captain had been found at daybreak, empty rifle gripped in his hands, a slug in his back.

His grim widow, without tears in



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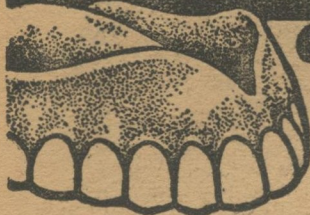
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her eyes, had assumed his duties, and despite the criticism of Hod Ruggins, brought her people safely to the free range.

Now she was owner of this humble store, and a plow had marked the limits around the land awarded her by the settlers, a thousand acres of buffalo grass where she hoped to fatten cattle, and carry horses for the market.

Andy frowned. "I hate to see the free range goin'," he told her. "But seems like we got to bargain with you, ma'am. We got a hundred unbroke Injun ponies in the corral that need pasture. How about us turnin' 'em on yore pasture?"

He named a generous sum which startled the widow. She smiled. Not so grimly now.

"We'll cut that in two, young man," she reproved. "Yuh shouldn't be reckless with yore hard-earned money. Save it, git married, settle the country."

She glanced at her daughter. Malviny turned a bright red that outrivalled the calico, and turned hurriedly to mark up stock. Andy took off his hat and scratched his head, then put it on backwards.

He had never thought of helping to civilize a country by getting married and settling down. All he saw was the smiling face of the widow, and somewhere far away in the rosy haze, the rawboned form of Blacky Vicente finally emerging from under the stove like a sore-headed grizzly bear crawling from a snowbank in early spring.

"Ma'am," stuttered Andy, "I had never thought of settlin' down. Me an' Absoraky—"

"Who's that?"

"My ol' pardner, Bill Tutt, a Missourian like yoreself, Ma'am, and a square-shooter."

The widow's eyes flashed. Her jaw gaped. She was startled, breathless. Then she gasped. "Bill Tutt—"

ABRUPTLY she sat down on an elkskin covered chair.

"So that," she murmured, "is why my husband headed for the Mad Woman. I knew he had a friend up here, a westerner who served a few years with him in the War. But the cap'tin wasn't one to talk much. Not with me around to do it for him. He didn't mention Bill Tutt."

Andy, amazed at the widow's curiosity regarding Absoraky, that hater of women, failed to note that Blacky Vicente had slipped to the rear door of the store. The man seized an axe from a nearby rack.

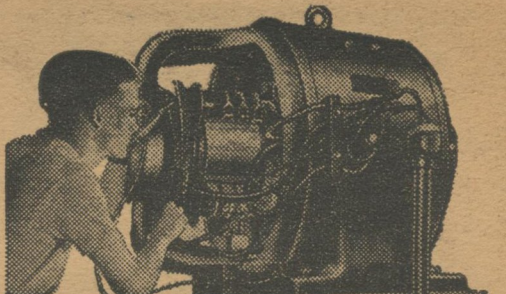
Malviny's shrill scream aroused Andy. He lunged forward, flung his body forward to shield the widow from the whizzing steel. The chair went down with a crash. The axe crashed against the front wall.

The girl, pale but determined, had seized her mother's rifle, although she knew it was not loaded. She was menacing Blacky Vicente, who was unaware of the weapon's uselessness because he had lain unconscious under the stove.

"I hear you say you bust in zee rum!" Blacky shouted angrily. "I go now! But I come back! My men, they will want zee rum an' Blacky will get it for them if he mus' burn down this whole damn place!"

Andy leaped up, whipped out the knife which he had earlier restored to his sheath. Vicente, unarmed, fled. Andy was in hot pursuit. The trap robber ducked around a corner of the adobe fort, raced with a coyote's swiftness toward the fringe of brush below the corrals. There, free-ranging trappers were wont to camp by the water in the shade while they bought and bartered with the sergent.

But racing past the corral, Andy checked in amazement. Dust rose above it. He heard the drum of hoofbeats as a hundred ponies circled. Then he saw a mounted man ride out



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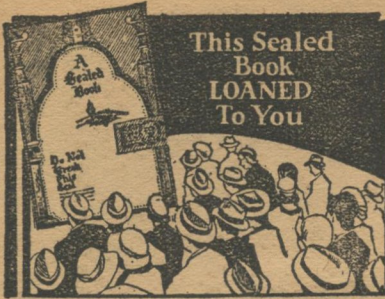
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of the haze, and whip off the buckskin loops that closed the big gate.

Andy believed some of Vicente's gang were attempting to steal the horses as an act of revenge. But when he reached the rider, just as the latter swung down to drag wide the heavy gate built of lodge-pine poles, he saw that it was his old partner, Absoraky.

Absoraky's war sack was tied to his saddle. His hat was jammed down. He lacked his pet rifle, but otherwise he appeared ready to hit the trail.

"Absoraky!" Andy cried. "You loco? Why yuh ridin' away without tellin' me? Ridin' off and forgettin' yore rifle?"

Absoraky turned, a wild look in his eyes, such a look as Andy had never seen there before. He had lain with this old man in the darkness of a hostile Indian country, when at any moment, the dread scalp yell might ring out indicating a fight for life. And never before had he seen fear so nakedly revealed in Absoraky's eyes. The old mountaineer wasn't crazy. He was afraid. Andy couldn't believe it.

"Pard," Andy groaned. "Hold yore hosses! If I've treated yuh bad, tell me the reason so I can squar' myself? Don't quit me cold this way. Absoraky—you been like a dad to me since you picked me up as a wetnosed kid sellin' papers in Omaha."

Absoraky shook his head.

"Boy," he shouted, "don't stand in my way! Me an' the sergeant—we're headin' east for Deadwood. Immejute—pronto—right now!"

"The sergeant?"

"Thar' he rides, roundin' up the hosses, in the dust—"

"But you two can't go—"

"You foller when you git ready. You can stand her off, you bein' young like. But me an' the sergeant, we're old, not spry an' fast on our feet. That widder woman—she's got us plumb stamped. We're leavin'

here. You look us up in Deadwood."

The blue leader, with black grease covering the bullet welt on its chest, sighted the opened gate, swung that way. With a resounding whoop, Andy sprang into the opening, emitted another Shoshone war cry that sent the startled ponies thundering back toward Sergeant Peak, half blinded in the yellow alkali haze.

Absoraky, in a rage, grabbed Andy by the shoulders.

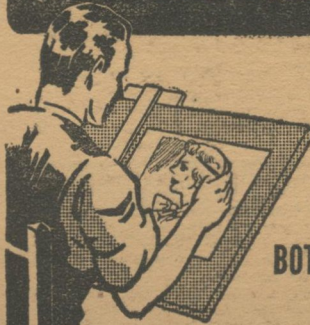
"That widder," he snarled, "she's the one who flang the jug at me in the early days! Betsy! I reckernized her when she come in the store. That's why I dropped my rifle an' jumped out the winder. She'll make life a hell fer me, Andy, if she finds me. Gosh—didn't I run five miles once, in the nighttime, to catch a river raft an' git away from her?"

Andy wouldn't resist his old partner. Now Sergeant Peak, wrathful because the horses had been turned back, galloped up to the gate. He too fumed, cursing the young man for holding him here in a country that had become crowded with loceod women.

"That widder!" Peak shouted, "will snatch me bald-headed if I don't perdooce that stolen rum! How do I know who stole it? Likely that Hod Ruggins. He knows its value here. It would help him to bust up this widder woman's plans, if he could git the settler menfolks on a big spree, an' put crazy notions into their brains. Ruggins would like that thousand acres of pasture they give the widder. He'd like to see her busted an' beggin' for mercy. Then mebbe he could strike a deal with her to git the gal, Malviny."

Andy barked, grey eyes flashing. "And you two would run away from women who are up against it, an' need yore help? Two old men who stood up against the Cheyennes, who laughed at Crazy Hoss an' his best warriors. You'd run away?"

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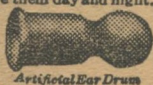
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Absoraky groaned. "Betsy is hell on wheels."

And Sergeant Peak snapped. "You softened up, Andy, when Malviny gave you a flash of her purty eyes. Yo're young. We're old. We're head-in' fer range that ain't crowded, where the law ain't reached yet."

Andy stepped back. Coldly he eyed old Absoraky. He gestured toward the horses that represented his present stake in life, his winter money in a land where money was scarce.

"Take 'em," he said, "an' keep 'em. I owe you that much."

Absoraky growled. His pipe was cold. He extended a shaking hand. There was a pleading look now in his eyes. A parting, between tried friends of the frontier, was like death.

"Won't yuh shake with me, boy?"

Andy blinked his eyes. To think that he must part in anger with Absoraky. Pictures flashed before him of the day when the old man had saved him from a tough life on the river front in Omaha, when he was a snippy orphan newsboy selling his papers in a wild town. Of that later time, when Absoraky had turned back and held off a pursuing bunch of Sioux up in the Sun River country while Andy desperately tied up an artery opened in his right arm by a speeding war arrow. If Absoraky had quit him then, he would now be a bleached pile of bones on the prairie, and his hair would be decorating some veteran brave's lodge. No, Absoraky hadn't quit him when hostile warriors threatened. But he had gone down the deserter's trail when his jilted sweetheart of the old Missouri days appeared.

"You brought this on yore own head," Andy growled. "You wrote to a friend named Capt'in Clemons tellin' him what a fine country this was."

"He was in the army with me. Come from my own country. I never knew he had married Betsy. I

thought Cap would like the free range like you an' me. Didn't know he had settled down an' become a much married man an' a deacon in the church. But I know now—an' I'm runnin' like a scart wolf!"

"Me too," rasped Sergeant Peak.

A gun crashed. Splinters flew. The haze hid the attack from the men in the corral gateway, but they heard the bullet thud into a soft pine pole. Then the ball, which had barely grazed the rounded side of the rail, fell into the dust.

Andy, dropping to the ground beside old Absoraky who automatically went for the grit when a bullet whined, saw the leaden pellet almost under his nose. His right hand closed over it. The ball might offer a clue to the man who attempted to ambush him as he stood there off guard.

"That Ruggins," he muttered, "carried a cap an' ball pistol. Might fire such a slug as this. Ruggins—"

From the brush where Vicente was camped, there arose a howling, like that of a pack of wolves pulling down a wounded buffalo on the prairie. It was the dread war cries of the raiding Indians, adopted by Vicente and his renegades to strike terror to their foes.

There was another volley which drove the Indian ponies into a huddle in the corral at the far end. Peak hit the ground as a bullet dropped his mount. He raked his army carbine—a Sharps—from its leather boot, whirled around on his flat stomach, drove an answering slug into the patch of willow and buffalo berry brush that concealed the ambushers.

"We will have zee rum!" the threat of Blacky Vicente rang out. "Or we will burn down this locoed woman's place!"

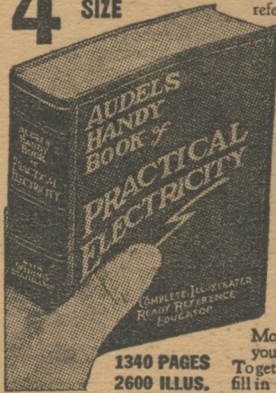
From the direction of the store, the old squirrel rifle barked. Not one of the three men mistook that familiar sound, because all had carried

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such weapons in the early days.

"The widow," whispered Andy, "is not layin' down to anybody."

He jumped up, bent his lean body, started on a dodging run toward the fort.

"Whar' yuh headin'?" cried Absoraky.

Peak snarled. "Whar' do you suppose? Tuh put up a fight fer tha gal, Malviny." He peered into the corral, whispered. "Mebbe we could ride out of here bare-backed, hang down on our hosses like Injuns so they wouldn't spot us. Live on the country until we reached Deadwood. Let's go."

Absoraky groaned. "I would rather face a hundred wild Injuns led by Vicente than my ol' sweetheart, Betsy, but I'm not goin'. I'm stayin', Peak. So long. I couldn't quit that boy who I raised like a son. So long, ol' friend."

Peak snapped. "So long, nuthin', you ol' mush-rat. What would they say in the ol' cavalry squadron if they knew an honorably discharged sergeant had run off an' quit two helpless women?"

"One helpless woman, sarge. That widder was never helpless."

CHAPTER IV

Defense of the Fort

ANDY was hidden by the rolling haze kicked up from the corral by frightened horses, as he made his wild dash for the rear door of the fort. Gunmen in the brush sighted his lean figure as he flung himself flat before the door, which had been barred by Widow Clemons as Vicente launched his attack.

With a yell, they opened fire. Andy, carrying only a knife for defense, could not swing and check the hot fire with bullets. His rifle was in the store, leaning in the corner where he had placed it when he first entered

with Absoraky to greet the sergeant.

Six fast shots from the carbine would have driven Vicente's men into cover, hurried their fire. Now, he thought grimly, as he squirmed behind a huge keg for shelter, he would end up here on the ground, a victim to men who resented the coming of the law to the Mad Woman.

A man was a fool to run such risks. Doubtless his partner and the sergeant, by this time, had found mounts, escaped toward the Black Hills. They were mountain rovers and they didn't like crowded ranges.

The soldiers who built the post had provided for defense against wily redskins. It had been the warriors' tricky custom to crawl up to the walls of an outpost, crouch on the ground where bullets couldn't reach them, set fire to the building, tomahawk the occupants as they rushed forth to escape the flames. Veteran troopers of Peak's squadron had drilled diamond-shaped port-holes above the doors, and high in the walls. Rifles could be inserted at a downward angle, and the low ground covered by bullets.

A chunk of mud daubing struck Andy on the back. It stung.

Then, above his head, he heard the roar of a gun, a deafening report. He looked up, saw a gun barrel jutting from a port-hole and spouting smoke. The mud, used to cork the opening and close out cold wind in these days of peace, had been knocked out. The crash of the gun, spinning hot lead into the brush down by the creek, momentarily silenced hostile fire.

In that short pace, the back door opened, and the slim arms of Malviny guided the reeling Andy Hudson into the store. He was half blinded by dust and smoke, deafened by the gunfire.

The place was choked with the fumes of black powder. He saw Widow Clemons standing on a stool which had been placed under the port-hole. She was handling Andy's carbine.

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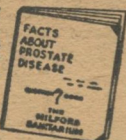
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"I've run outa ammunition!" she cried. "You young spriggins, can't you find some spares?"

Andy, blissful in the soothing arms of Malviny, roused sharply, rushed around the counter. Peak ordered a box of ammunition each spring for Andy's pet carbine. It came up the trail with the first bull team heading for the Black Hills. It was here now, ready for the defense of the old fort on the Mad Woman.

Malviny, spurred on by her mother, was scurrying around the room. With the front sight of the squirrel rifle she knocked the mud daubing from the port-holes.

Andy smashed open the ammunition box with the axe Vicente had thrown at him. He passed a half dozen brass shells up to the eager widow. But in her hurry, and unfamiliar with this new type of gun, she jammed a cartridge.

"They're coming out of the brush!" she cried to Andy. "Here, take this fool gun! I can ram a load quicker into the squirrel rifle."

Andy shouted as he jumped up on the stool. "Tell yore gal to lay flat on the floor!"

He was fearful of Malviny's safety as bullets were entering through the rear window and snapping into the adobe plaster.

"My gal don't lay on no floor!" barked Widow Clemons. "She'll reload fer me."

Andy jerked out his bowie, dug the jammed shell from his rifle, fed cartridges into the magazine. He peered from his port-hole. Behind him, he heard the rasp of a ramrod as Malviny loaded the squirrel gun, while her valiant old mother rolled kegs against the doors to bar out Vicente's men.

Andy saw them coming up the steep slope that ran from the store to the river brush. A slope clear of rocks, because of the buffalo herds that in the old days had bedded there.

Vicente led, shouting his battle cry that he would have rum.

Andy slanted his carbine when the skirmish line was not fifty horse jumps away. His first bullet, fired for range, kicked up dust in front of Vicente. The man veered like a startled rabbit. Andy, hurrying to check the attack, losing his first target, swung his front sight, picked up the man next to Vicente, pressed the hair trigger. He felt the slap of the carbine stock against his braced shoulder, grinned through the powder grime as he saw Vicente's man fling up his arms and fall flat on his face, as though he had tripped over a rock. But he hadn't tripped.

"He'll not get up," growled Andy, "until they pick him up, feet first."

Checked by the fall of their comrade, Vicente's crew swung around, retreated to their camp in the brush. They had hoped to capture the store, and its suspected stock of rum by a bold charge. They hadn't believed Andy would come so swiftly.

Now they retreated to plot at leisure, this warfare against two women and one lone man.

Andy ripped open another paper box of cartridges, laid the shining shells out in a line on a shelf beneath his port-hole. The widow had completed her job of barricading the doors with the kegs.

The mountaineer, swinging to inspect the store, anxious for the girl, Malviny, shook his head. "Ma'am," he protested, "those kegs are filled with gun powder. If they set fire to the wooden doors, they'll blow us up."

"They'll never get near enough," the widow said grimly.

But Andy, familiar with tricks picked up from the Indians by rovers like Vicente, shook his head. They might resort to fire arrows, blazing shafts fired from buffalo bows. The arrows would drive into soft pine wood and allow fire to catch from the pine sap.

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Vicente had sworn to burn out this place, and such a plan would be heavy on the man's mind.

Fire was often the means of defense and attack on the frontier. Indians burned rival tribes' grass to drive away game, and thus starve their enemies when winter came. They slipped into sleeping camps and set fire to the leather-covered lodges.

This old fort, with a portion of its walls built of sun-dried pine logs, would flare up like a tinder box. Andy and the women would be forced into the open, an easy prey.

"If I could tell 'em," Andy said, "that there's no rum in this place—"

The widow growled. "But we don't know. It may be hidden here—"

"If yore settler friends hear this shootin' they'll come to help us."

"They're scattered out. Hod Ruggins lives nearest. But he'll never help us or call for help. Not since I told him to keep his bold eyes off Malviny."

THIS was the end, Andy believed.

Grimly he set himself to wage a finish fight. He would retain two shells in his hot gun at the end. Malviny and the widow would not be captured alive by human wolves like Vicente and his men.

There was no spare supply of water in the store. If fire started, then they must stay here watching the red flames roar around the walls of Fort Defiance, count the moments until death.

Andy said grimly to the widow. "They may not have the front door covered, ma'am. If you could slip out with the girl—"

The widow smiled. She wasn't so brusque now.

"The first bullets come from that direction," she said. "That's why I knew Hod Ruggins wouldn't help us. He's out there slappin' lead at us with his cap and ball gun."

And Hod had opened the attack on

the men in the corral gateway. Andy dug the leaden ball, which had almost killed him, from his pouch, compared it with the newer type of ammunition designed for his carbine.

"What you doin'?" the widow demanded.

He told her, that since the Vicente gunmen were silent, a man must do something to keep his thoughts off other things.

"Such as—" she asked.

"The last two slugs, ma'am. What we always saved for ourselves in the old days."

Courage briefly deserted this strong old woman as she looked toward her daughter. Tears came into her eyes.

"The last bullet," she whispered.

She stood beside Andy now. And her dim eyes passed over the misshapen slug in the palm of his hand. From a fold in her skirt she drew a similar missile.

"I'm not surprised," she whispered.

"Surprised?"

She placed the bullet beside the one that lay on Andy's palm. They matched.

"Hod Ruggins," she explained. "I believed he arranged that stampede on the trail and got my husband out where he could kill him. He wanted to run that train. And he's still tryin'."

"There's a hundred cap and ball pistols in Wyomin', ma'am. Because these bullets match, it's no proof Hod killed the capt'in."

"No proof, but a dead sartainty," she whispered. "And," she looked again toward Malviny, busily cutting muslin up into patches for the muzzle loading squirrel rifle, "too late now. Hod will try to save the gal. But us two—" she shrugged.

"He won't get her," Andy said.

"Shake on that," said the widow.

Then a man stepped from the brush. His shaggy red hair gleamed under the sun. He held up his hand in the sign of peace. It was Ruggins.

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"Send the girl out here," he shouted, "and we'll call this off! Otherwise—"

Malviny could hear that hoarse demand in the silence that had followed the sharp gun battle. She dropped work of fashioning rifle patches. She looked first at Andy then at her mother. Then she moved swiftly, determinedly, toward the rear door.

"Malviny!" the widow cried. "Where you goin'?"

The girl, savagely clearing the door of its powder keg barricade, swung around. Tears glistened in her eyes.

"I'm no coward to stay here," she said, "and let you two die, I'll go out to Ruggins. It's what I should do."

Andy leaped from his perch by the port-hole, and reached Malviny as the gallant girl cleared the doorway. The widow, cast aside by her daughter, rushed in a second time, pleading with her daughter to stay and die, rather than submit to Hod Ruggins.

"It's you two!" wept Malviny, struggling in Andy's arms. "I would do anything to save you—two—"

In the struggle, the bar fell from its slot. The door swung open. The three were outlined there. Hod Ruggins yelled in triumph, started on a run toward the doorway.

The leaping forms of Vicente's men appeared in the brush. They were not interested in Hod's love affair. They thought of the rum he had promised them.

"Get the rum!" shouted Vicente.

They dared not fire, fearing a low bullet would drop this wild redhead who alone knew where the rum was hidden.

So Ruggins reached a spot twenty feet from the rear of the store. He flung up his pistol as Andy Hudson leaped out on the beaten ground. Andy carried no gun. Ruggins grinned, seeing in this lean man, the last obstacle between himself and the desirable Malviny.

Andy bent at the knees, swept his

bowie from its holster. The blade flashed through the air as Ruggins fired. A huge ball cut the point of Andy's uplifted right arm at the shoulder, knocked him flat. As he lay there, he heard the shrill scream of the girl, felt the soft touch of her body as she brushed aside her mother and rushed forth to offer her slim grace as a living shield between Andy and the guns of Blacky Vicente.

RUGGINS was out of the fight. He lay there with the blade of Andy's bowie driven deeply into his hairy throat.

A gun blazed, as the widow stood above her daughter, defending the girl and Andy with the latter's carbine.

Vicente's men, laughing, taking their time at this killing, dropped into the brush. But they had barely reached cover when a line of fire came racing through the dried brush in the teeth of a brisk wind from the mountains. Above the crackle of flames, Andy, even in his pain, heard the high-pitched "Wagh" of Absoraky, and the sharp bark of the sergeant's carbine.

The old frontiersmen, lacking sufficient weapons, had resorted to Indian tactics, slipped down into the valley, set fire to the dry brush. They hoped to uncover the foe to bullets from the fort.

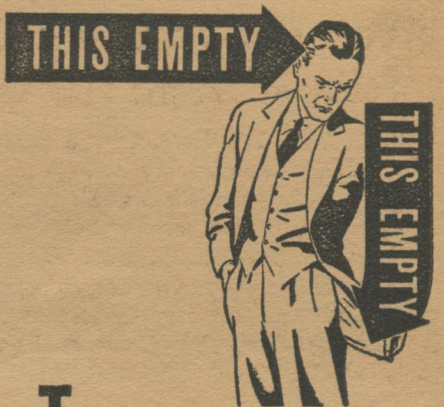
The widow dropped Andy's carbine. She rushed back to the door of the fort.

Even as Andy sat up groggily supported by Malviny's arms, something trundled past him. Then another. He heard the widow's voice above the crackle of leaping flames.

"Kegs for you hellions! But not rum! *Gunpowder!*"

Quick-witted, she had started rolling round kegs of powder down the slope toward the blazing brush.

Vicente cried furiously to his men to hold their ground, stop the kegs,



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then rush the locoed old woman. He was brave enough to offer an example. He came forth on the run, seeking to seize the first keg before it rolled into the fire. But he fell over a sagebrush. And while he lay flat on the ground, the keg reached the fire.

It exploded with a mighty roar. Vicente's men were in flight. Black smoke hid the hole in the ground where their leader had fallen. Another keg reached fire, blew up in a shattering flash of red and green. Then a third.

"That's enough," quoth Widow Clemons, wiping off her spectacles on the tattered hem of her linsey-woolsey gown. "I can't afford to waste no more merchandise."

A half hour later, the first of the settlers, alarmed by the sounds of battle, clustered around the powder-marked occupants of the store. Hod Ruggins lay under a canvas wagon sheet, and a frontier jury had met and gravely thanked Andy for sending Hod over the Big Divide. The youth lay quietly on a bunk on the floor while anxious Malviny ministered to him. A broken shoulder was worth that to Andy.

Two grimy old men entered. They were singing like boys who whistle

for courage going through a cemetery after dark. Both were filled to the guards with rich rum. It required more than natural courage to face the widow, more courage than it had required to set fire to Blacky Vicente's camp.

"You'll never change," Widow Clemons said grimly to old Absoraky. "You'll never change, Bill. You could always smell a jug or a keg a mile away. But just the same, Bill, I—I always was fond of you," and the widow's eyes softened.

Absoraky grinned. "Betsy," he drawled, "I've took on my last drink. A dang big one. Me an' you are old. We'll settle here an' ride herd on our two kids, an' watch 'em make a home in the buffalo grass."

The widow smiled, turned to Peak. "Yo're an honest man. You filled yore contract. You stayed until you had found the rum Ruggins stole to bribe Vicente."

"I didn't find it," he explained. "Ruggins hid it in a hole in the coral. The ponies, stampedin' around, dug up his cache. And now if you'll pass me that axe, I'll go out an' bust in the heads."

"Save one keg," the widow laughed, "for a weddin' dance."



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Some of the Savings
You Can Show

You walk into an office and put down before your prospect a letter from a sales organization showing that they did work in their own office for \$11 which formerly could have cost them over \$200. A building supply corporation pays our man \$70, whereas the bill could have been for \$1,600! An automobile dealer pays our representative \$15, whereas the expense could have been over \$1,000. A department store has expense of \$88.60, possible cost if done outside the business being well over \$2,000. And so on. We could not possibly list all cases here. These are just a few of the many actual cases which we place in your hands to work with. Practically every line of business and every section of the country is represented by these field reports which hammer across dazzling, convincing money-saving opportunities which hardly any business man can fail to understand.

Profits Typical of
the Young, Growing Industry

Going into this business is not like selling something offered in every grocery, drug or department store. For instance, when you take a \$7.50 order, as much as \$5.83 may be your share. On \$1,500 worth of business, your share may be \$1,167.00. The very least you get as your part of every dollar's worth of business you do is 67 cents—on ten dollar's worth \$6.70, on a hundred dollars' worth \$67.00—in other words two thirds of every order you get is yours. Not only on the first order—but on repeat orders—and you have the opportunity of earning an even larger percentage.

This Business Has
Nothing to Do With
House to House Canvassing

Nor do you have to know anything about high-pressure selling. "Selling" is unnecessary in the ordinary sense of the word. Instead of hammering away at the customer and trying to "force" a sale, you make a dignified, business-like call, leave the installation—whatever size the customer says he will accept—at our risk, let the customer sell himself after the device is in and working. This does away with the need for pressure on the customer—it eliminates the handicap of trying to get t'e money before the customer has really convinced himself 100%. You simply tell what you offer, showing proof of success in that customer's particular line of business. Then leave the invention without a dollar down. It starts working at once. In a few short days, the installation has actually produced enough cash money to pay for the deal, with profits above the investment coming in at the same time. You then call back, collect your money. Nothing is so convincing as our offer to let results speak for themselves without risk to the customer! While others fail to get even a hearing, our men are making sales running into the hundreds. They have received the attention of the largest firms in the country, and sold to the smallest businesses by the thousand!

EARNINGS

One man in California earned over \$1,600 per month for three months—close to \$5,000 in 90 days' time. Another writes from Delaware—"Since I have been operating (just a little less than a month of actual selling) and not the full day at that, because I have been getting organized and had to spend at least half the day in the office; counting what I have sold outright and on trial, I have made just a little in excess of one thousand dollars profit for one month." A Georgia man made \$802.50 his first two weeks. A Connecticut man writes he has made \$55.00 in a single day's time. Texas man nets over \$300 in less than a week's time. Space does not permit mentioning here more than these few random cases. However, they are sufficient to indicate that the worthwhile future in this business is coupled with immediate earnings for the right kind of man. One man with us has already made over a thousand sales on which his earnings ran from \$5 to \$60 per sale and more. A great deal of this business was repeat business. Yet he had never done anything like this before coming with us. That is the kind of opportunity this business offers. The fact that this business has attracted to it such business men as former bankers, executives of businesses—men who demand only the highest type of opportunity and income—gives a fairly good picture of the kind of business this is. Our door is open, however, to the young man looking for the right field in which to make his start and develop his future.

No Money Need Be Risked

in trying this business out. You can measure the possibilities and not be out a dollar. If you are looking for a business that is not overworked—a business that is just coming into its own—on the upgrade, instead of the downgrade—a business that offers the buyer relief from a burdensome, but unavoidable expense—a business that has a prospect practically in every office, store, or factory into which you can set foot—regardless of size—that is a necessity but does not have any price cutting to contend with as other necessities do—that because you control the sales in exclusive territory is your own business—that pays more on some individual sales than many men make in a week and sometimes in a month's time—if such a business looks as if it is worth investigating, get in touch with us at once for the rights in your territory—don't delay—because the chances are that if you do wait, someone else will have written to us in the meantime—and if it turns out that you were the better man—we'd both be sorry. So for convenience, use the coupon below—but send it right away—no wire if you wish. But do it now. Address

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