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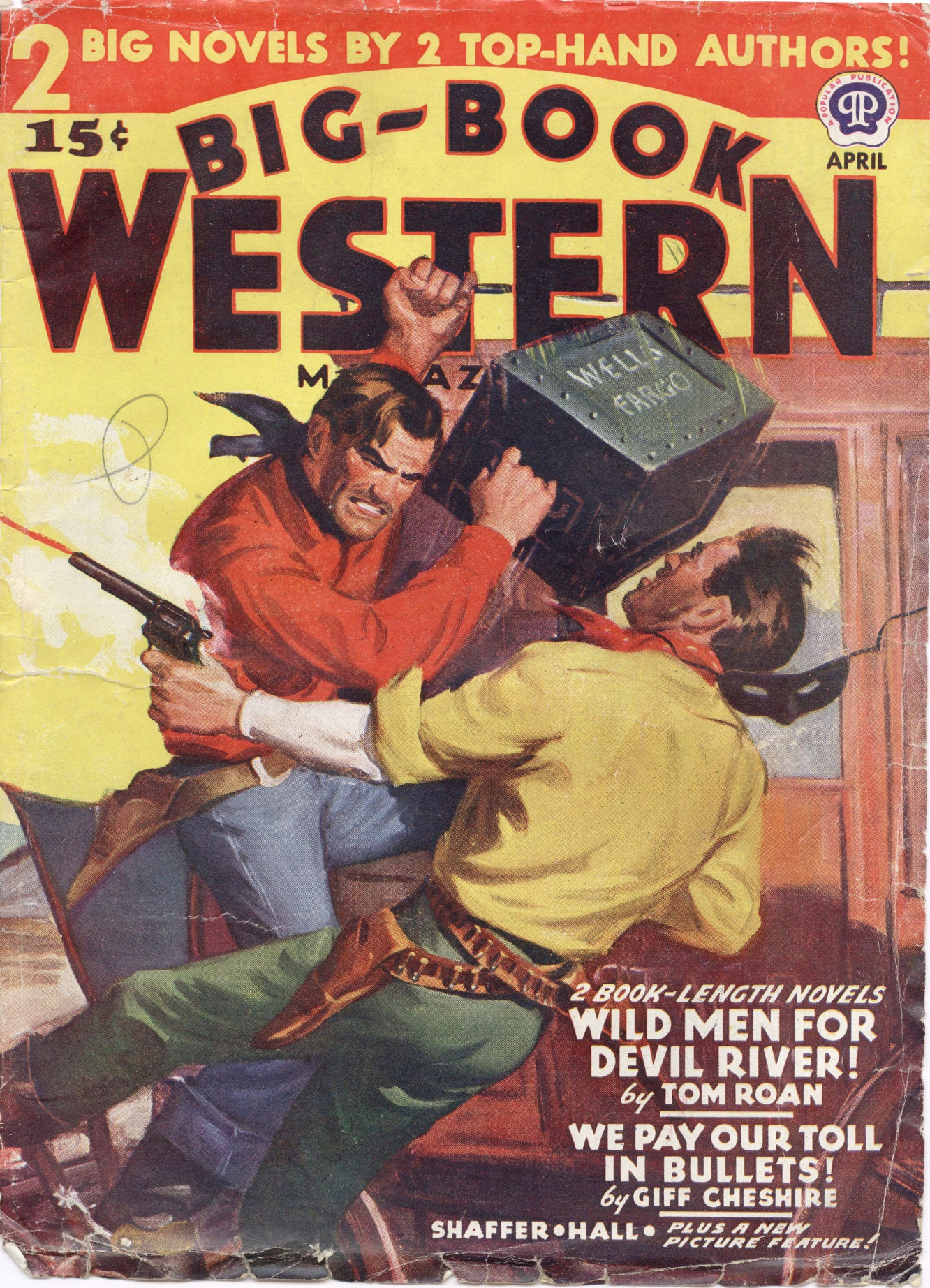

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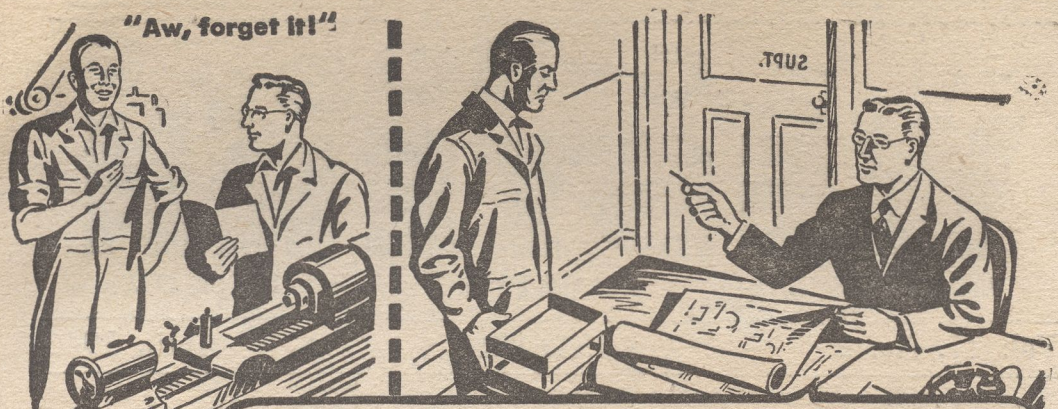

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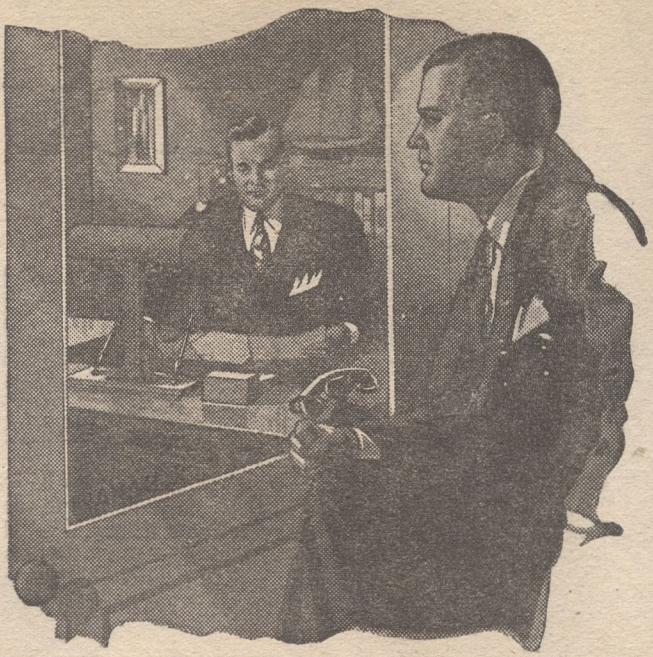
"What's he got that I haven't got?"



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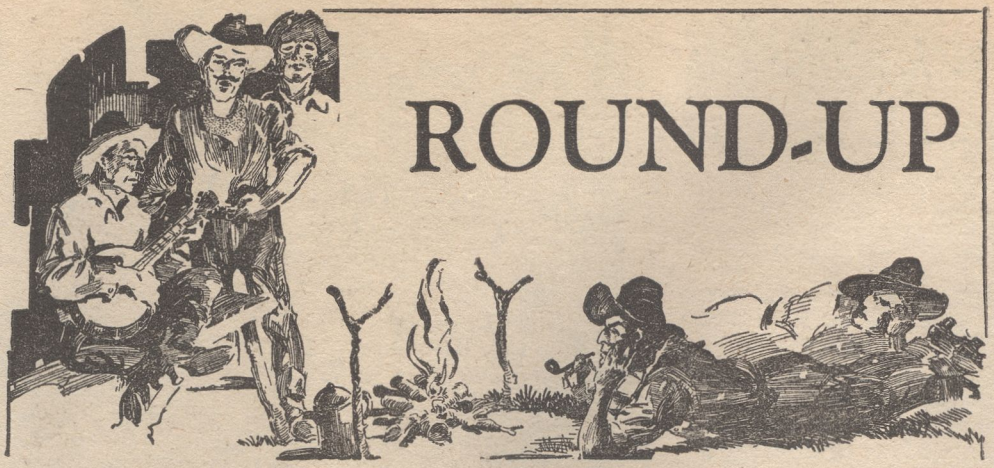


ROUND-UP

RECENTLY an Eastern newspaper editor, who had never seen a cracker barrel nor sat on anything harder than a plush cushion, wrote that the cracker barrel in the general store is the focal point of grass-roots democracy. This gentleman belonged to that peculiar-thinking bunch of high-toned dudes who think there is something automatically right and and virtuous in being uncomfortable. We always held to the idea that grass-roots democracy would get along a lot better if it had some comfortable chairs.

Be that as it may, we dropped into Hank's General and Saddlery in the whistle-stop town of Bellair, up near the Montana border, not so long ago and found our friend Wade Tompkins balancing himself cross-legged on the focal point of democracy.

Wade was shaking his head sadly and reading a newspaper headline that screamed, "Veterans Ask More Social Security." Wade was still wearing his khaki pants and sported a service button on his lapel, but it was clear that he was entirely out of sympathy with his ex-brothers-in-arms.

"All the time running to the government for help," he muttered. "First it was housing, then money to start farming. Now, by golly, free medico service! Where's the old pioneer, do-or-die spirit?"

"Well," we put in mildly, "when the pioneers got in a situation where they couldn't help themselves and had to do or die, you'll notice that a mighty lot of them died!"

Wade shut up then and settled back glumly on his focal point, but it started us to thinking. A lot of Westerners, like Wade, fourth generation descendants of the original settlers, have some mighty funny ideas that they defend in the name of their pioneer ancestors.

Social security, for instance. Wade scorns a vet who'd ask the government to help him build a house. "My grandpappy built his own house," he'd say.

But did he?

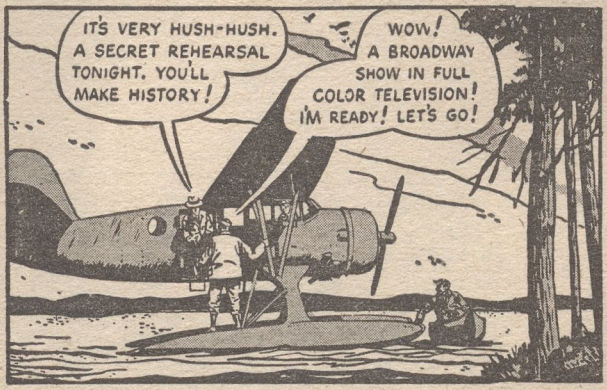
Who put on the roof, Wade? Didn't Rancher Jones and Farmer Smith and the storekeeper and even the Reverend rally round to help nail that roof on? Sure they did! And didn't grandpappy help them in turn? Well, Wade, we're not so good with a hammer, but we still would like to help you put in a lick on your new roof. So, instead, pay a few extra dollars in taxes and let the government pass the money on to you, so you can hire some good carpenters. And when we need a new roof, we'll draw in turn on the tax money you and the rest have paid in, and we find that grandpappy's system and modern government housing add up to just about the same thing.

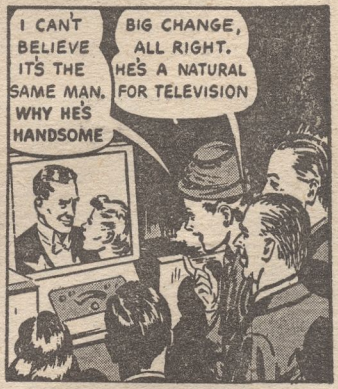
And medical insurance? That's not so newfangled and un-American, Wade. The docs who rode West with the wagon trains collected $25 from each family in the expectation of the day they crossed the Missouri—that fee covered treatment throughout the whole trip for whatever befell them and everyone agreed then that it was a fair and square way to handle it.

The pioneers who built the West have been slandered by historians who picture them as men who scorned security; who braved the dangers of the West because they liked being shot full of arrows. Facts show that most of the men who went West operated on the courage of sheer desperation. The rich men stayed home. The poor dirt farmer whose crop had failed and the little business men who went broke were the ones who undertook the long trail. And on the frontier, each man loyally helped and generously shared with the other, for pioneer society learned early a hard arithmetic lesson which we sometimes are apt to forget—that a nation is only as great as the sum of the people who live in it!

—THE EDITOR

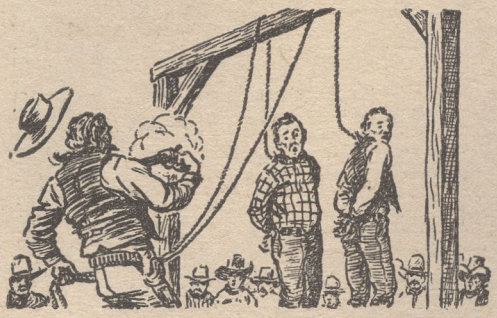
Bob Got Out Of The Woods In A Hurry When...





FRONTIER ODDITIES

by WAGGENER and ROBBINS



In 1843, when the Lone Star State was still going it alone, frequent raiding parties made cattle ranching both dangerous and unprofitable. Thus when two masked rustlers cleaned out what little stock was left around El Paso, rancher Edward Whiteman posted a $500 reward for the bandits and publicly swore that he himself would put the noose around their necks when they were caught. Eventually the rustlers were nabbed redhanded. Unmasked, they proved to be Whiteman's two sons. Unflinchingly, the father lived up to his oath: he dropped the hangman's rope around the necks of the two thieves, then drew his sixgun and shot himself through the heart.

Truly a Heaven-sent gold strike was the Wilkerson mine staked out near Rhyolite in 1904. Boothill was full to bursting when saloonkeeper Billy Wilkerson died of lead poisoning, and the burial detail lowered him into his six-by-three in a hitherto untouched spot of ground. The imported sky pilot had just launched a powerful prayer when the funeral was abruptly halted by cries of "Pay dirt! Pay dirt!" from a sharp-eyed miner. When it was discovered that the new cemetery assayed $5000 per ton, Wilkerson's coffin was promptly hauled up, cast aside and, for all we know, is still unburied. But his million dollar monument remains: the so-called Holy Bible Bonanza.

Too many pigs' knuckles once saved the life of Arizona's Sheriff Bucky O'Neill. Two gunslicks followed him to the Last Chance Saloon in Tucson and closed in outside the door, planning to ambush him in crossfire when he emerged. Bucky dined on knuckles and 'kraut, drained down two quarts of chilled beer and rose to leave. Just as he put his foot on the doorsill he was seized with violent indigestion. Clutching his middle, he staggered. The killers' guns crashed, and three men lay in agony in the road: The two gunmen, felled by each others' bullets, and Bucky—downed by a severe stomach ache.

Familiar to Western chroniclers are instances wherein an abandoned white baby is reared by the Indians who massacred its parents. Thomas (Wind-On-A-Horse) MacWilliams was the single known case in reverse: a Cherokee papoose, he survived a U.S. Army raid in 1846 which wiped out 300 of his tribe and was adopted by Major Snider MacWilliams. Educated at an Eastern college, he never suspected his Indian origin until his dying foster father told him the truth. He then let out an exultant warwhoop and lit out for the stamping grounds of the Cherokees. A year later, riding with Indian raiders, the renegade redskin burned to the ground the Oklahoma ranch where he had grown up as a white child.

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By
Tom Roan

— WILD MEN FOR — — DEVIL RIVER! —

It wasn't that Mike Reno and the Texas Kid were ornery, but when a passel of quick-trigger lawdogs insisted that the two "peace-loving" punchers break in a brand-new hemp rope with their necks—that pair of hombres decided it was high time to open up with their own special brand of hell-on-the-loose!

With a furious jerk, Mike brought the gunslick out of his saddle.

Chapter I

TURKEY TALK

NIGHT wind roared in great gusts down the canyon, and the river, raking and tearing at the foot of the tall west wall had become a spouting and snorting flood filled with driftwood, treetops and occasional logs. The wind reached even the little fire deep inside a monstrous cavern stretching far back under one of the gigantic overhangs of the cliffs. It sent the sparks flying, making the tall white horse and a wall-eyed bay, stamp their feet and snort.

Mike Reno kept adding bits of wood and slowly turning the four big sage hens on sticks above a bed of red coals. The coffee had already boiled in its smoke-blackened little pot and a pile of flapjacks lay on a flat stone pushed into the edge of the fire to keep them hot. Squatting on his run-over heels, Mike turned many time and looked into the darkness toward the mouth of the cavern, and now that the meal was ready he arose and walked back to the sleeping figure of a much slighter and

far younger man behind him. Danged if he could tell himself yet why he was going to such all-fired trouble to help the Texas Kid out of another one of his mean jams. He poked him in the stomach with his toe and growled:

"It's ready, Tex. Drag up an' fill yore belly!"

"What—what time is it, Mike?"

"Don't know exact." Reno turned back to the fire to give the sage hens one more turn. "Watch stopped an' I'll have to wait until the sun comes up to set it. Must be 'round two o'clock."

"Two o'clock!" The Kid sat up with a start. "Hell, we've got to make the line before daylight!"

"Well," Mike scowled, "it was close to midnight when we worked our way into the dry here. Must be 'round two now, but," he shrugged, "I guess we'll make that Montana line, anyhow. Damn it, Tex, how comes it that yo're allus in trouble?"

"Maybe I'm like you once said." The Kid grinned as he rubbed sleep from his eyes. "One side sort of hankers for it, an' t'other side leans with t'other.' You can cut loose and still go on to Poker City if you want to."

"Oh, go to hell!" Mike reached for a sage hen and a couple of flapjacks. "Yuh known damn well I can't believe yuh stole that hoss."

"It's easy enough to call it that." The Kid was falling upon the food like a hungry wolf. "I had six months pay coming from Anse Larsen, Anse wouldn't pay me—"

"An' yuh just took yoreself the hoss!" Reno nodded. "Sort of reminds me of old Heck Hanson back in Missouri years ago. Heck allus tells the story on others, but I know better. He worked three years for a fella an' never got paid. In the end he run off with the fella's wife—an' his hoss an' buggy. Don't be surprised if we run into him when we get to Devil River. Last time I saw 'im he was stompin' his hat an' swearin' he'd shoot me on sight at the next meetin'. All I done was to put a couple of harmless little blacksnakes in his last half-gallon jug of whiskey to pull 'im off a drunk. Gawd A'mighty, did Heck hit the rafters! Wildest I ever saw 'im. Good thing I took all the shells outa his guns."

STRANGERS looking at this pair would have never suspected that there was anything in common between them. The Texas Kid was one of those men who would never grow old. His face was boyish, almost beardless and as fair as a woman's. His eyes were blue, his hair curly. He had a nice smile, and even on a hard trail he somehow managed to look as if he had just stepped out of a bandbox.

In contrast Mike Reno was often described as looking like hell-before-daylight. He was big and old, shy only when it came to a little soap and water. He was never without his 20-foot blacksnake whip that he kept coiled on his shoulder. Danger was written all over him, yet he was rarely boisterous, not the one to pick a fight but surely the kind of hombre to settle it.

Heading southward on his old Gabriel's Trumpet late in the afternoon, he had come upon the Texas Kid down near the canyon mouth just before sunset, the gunfire in the distance telling him that a right smart war was going on. The Kid was there in the rocks, using two Winchesters to keep a mob of at least twenty horsemen at bay.

Mike had been given no chance to show which side he was going to take. Bullets from the distance beyond the Kid—and even before he had known that it was the Texas Kid—had started making the air whistle and pop all around him the moment he had come into sight. He had had no choice other than to hit the rocks and brush. The horsemen didn't bother finding who he was or where he was going, they let a volley of hot lead speak for them.

A wildly rising river and a furious wind coming with the darkness had given them a chance to make a sneak for it along the ledges in the west wall of the canyon. At midnight—having to sometimes work their way along at a snail's pace, afoot and leading their horses—the wind had still been howling like ice straight down the canyon out of Montana and off the snow-capped ranges and peaks in the distance.

"Bein' sorter part groundhawg an' badger," Mike had grinned as they came to the cavern, "I never forget me a good hole when the goin' gets a mite too rough for my blood."

"But," the Texas Kid had grinned back at him, "we've given them the slip and left them to wonder what happened to us."

"That's maybe where yo're foolish, Tex." Mike had scowled. "I reckon there ain't no rule agin' a few of them lyin' low down there to watch the mouth of the canyon while the others hit the rims to shove on an' come down 'way ahead of us."

Having shot the sage hens just a mile or so before running head-on into trouble, Reno finished his second one, washing it down with the stout black coffee, and then moved out to the mouth of the cavern to have a look-see.

The wind was still blowing to beat the band, playing havoc with the clouds. Greater holes were in them now, and the moon was stronger. It was straight overhead, the light pouring down for a minute or two at a time, making the canyon as bright as new gold. It seemed to take particular pains to light the ledges and

cliffs, and the sight of the river now would have been unbelievable to men who had not seen such floods many times before.

It was more like a big creek down there, the banks still dripping and spilling. The water had gone down and down until it was almost normal in its original bed. The tops of trees, logs and piles of driftwood lay and clustered where they had been tossed, some of them driven like enormous bullets into cracks in the sides of the rocky banks. Mike turned back inside, knowing that it was time to go.

"We gotta still hug the river," he warned, "an' as the old sayin' goes, keep yore eyeballs skint an' yore powder dry."

They rode out a few minutes later, Mike stealing the lead on the big, tombstone-like Gabriel's Trumpet, his old rifle now across his lap. Hugging a ledge they made it down to easier traveling along the bank where the swollen river had swept everything clean, leaving only a shallow coating of mud behind. At the end of a couple of miles they had just about decided that no one was watching from the rims, and then it came to them, the furious slap and splatter of bullet on the rocks a yard above Mike's head and the far-shattering report of a rifle somewhere across the canyon.

"There they go!" The voice rolled from the distance and right behind the dying report of the rifle. "Drop that white horse!"

"That's been tried before!" Mike grunted as another bullet whistled overhead. "Lay to 'er, Tex! They're talkin' turkey talk now—an' we still got miles to go!"

OLD HECK HANSON heard the roll and throb of the gunfire coming up the canyon just before dawn, but he was in no mood yet to let it bother him. He had been waiting since long before midnight, armed with a double-barreled shotgun loaded with No. 1 Buck, a cracker-jack rifle and his old .45's slopping his belts cockeyed at either hip, his flea-bitten gray mare hidden in the rocks and bushes behind him.

Telegraph lines were wonderful things—if a man was not on the wrong side of the fence and apt to be tricked up by them. A message had come through to Devil River from Poker City a couple of hours after suppertime to tell the whole town that a hard-riding posse was pushing a horsethief straight for the Montana line—and there were already enough horsethieves, cow-rustlers and plain bad men in the Devil River country to make it sick and double-sick for a man who had allowed them to pin a sheriff's star on his chest in a weak moment the morning after one hell-roaring big drunk.

Knowing his Montana-Wyoming line, he sat now in the mouth of Gooseneck Bend. The canyon here was no more than eighty yards wide, the walls towering above, the river a whistling streak in a knife-narrow chasm over under the opposite east wall. One man with a shotgun and a rifle could head off old Billy Hell, himself, and keep him from crossing the line at this point.

He had his feet in Wyoming here, his tailbone in Montana. The marker—left there by a federal surveyor—was right there under the bend of his knees. Gumming his chaw on evil-fitting store teeth, he was chawin' in Montana and spitting in Wyoming, seeing no need to mess up good old Montana ground when Wyoming was so handy.

The darkness had been kinder to him than the light now beginning to show on the distant peaks. Despite the big and glittering star pinned upside-down on the left side of his old calfskin vest, Heck Hanson was a man who would never change. Every inch of him seemed to rest in a squashed bundle under the wide and upflaring brim of a big old black hat. The face looked squashed, reddish eyes, Mongoloid. An old knife scar marred him, running from above the left eye and down across the bridge of a bulbous, pock-marked nose, the rest of the face either red or smeared with a week-old pinkish beard. Old Billy Hell would have outshined him all to thunder in looks.

He looked meaner as the shots grew closer, and then, the light growing, he could see some of the battle being fought down the canyon. For a few moments it looked as if all the horsethieves in Wyoming were trying to fight their way toward the Montana line.

"An' I reckon it ain't that either," he told himself with a growl, dragging his feet out of Wyoming and reaching for the shotgun. "Seems like only a couple of plugs gettin' the fireworks put to 'em—an' both loaded on one white hoss."

He might have known that old white horse at a glance if it had not been for the poor light and all the rest of it. The horse was like a white cloud rolling and rocking, the man in the saddle whipping him in and out of the rocks and brush, trying to take advantage of the slightest shelter, and the man behind the saddle shooting first to the right and then to the left with a rifle.

An' comin' like hell." Hanson nodded. "Kinda reminds me of the time I held up the ol' No'thern Pacific an' had to make hot tracks for it. Get along, white hoss, get along!"

He was already taking sides without realizing it. But it was not fair in any sense. Down the canyon two men were riding for their lives, and behind them, on the sides and trying to flank and cut them off, were more than twenty against the two. Without even thinking of what he was doing Hanson eased

the shotgun to one side and reached for the rifle, the mean old eyes beginning to glow, the star on his chest forgotten.

"It ain't right," he muttered. "I'm damned if it's right. Reminds me of times I've had to reach an' pull for 'er. I—"

He broke off quickly, staring now at only that rolling and rocking white cloud of a horse. Suddenly the law of Devil River, Montana, was back-firing. He was on his feet, snatching off his old hat and waving it, his voice a long-drawn wail stretching far down the canyon:

"Come on, Mike!"

SHERIFF HECHT HEIT of Poker City was soon calling a halt to it by waving a big white handkerchief and yelling at the top of his voice. Gooseneck Bend had suddenly become splintering and crashing hell ahead. Horses were being shot from under possemen. Heit had heard a bullet slap into the bulge of his saddle just below the horn, the bits of leather flying. He could not tell how many men were up there in the Gooseneck, but the fire was fast and deadly, and once he heard the far-wailing voice.

"Come on, Mike!"

Mike was evidently the old devil on that near-flying white horse. Heit had never heard of anybody calling the Texas Kid such a name. A cold sweat popping out all over him now, he had a feeling that he was running into an entire nestful of the Kid's friends—just like the old squirt had come into it the afternoon before. White handkerchief still dangling between finger and thumb, he cupped his hands to his mouth and yelled an order.

"Take cover!"

There was little need for such an order. Addled, half of them already scared out of their wits by the unexpected rifleman suddenly entering the fight, men were piling off their horses and flinging themselves behind the nearest shelter. The white horse and his two riders were pounding on, and almost suddenly the horse was out of sight in the Gooseneck. Heit swore, himself so surprised he still sat his big iron-gray in the little opening in the brush.

"I knew we'd never get them if they got this far! Hold your fire, men! Hold your fire!"

He had seen something, a flash in the ever-growing light, and now he could see the man up there, hidden by a rock from the hips downward, a bulbous figure with a rifle on the crook of his arm.

"There's some mistake!" Heit was yelling again. "That's an officer up there, men! Must be the new sheriff of Devil River!"

It took nerve for one lone man to ride on, but Hecht Heit had to do it with all eyes upon him. Keeping that handkerchief waving, he was like a big, sandy-bearded stick in his saddle, smoky-gray eyes as hard as glass. If the man ahead had moved a foot, Hecht Heit would have flopped from his saddle and jumped for cover. By an effort that seemed to strain every muscle in his jaw he kept his voice steady when he pulled up at the foot of a little rise of rocks.

"Good morning!"

"Yeah." The man above him nodded. "Nice an' cool."

The silence that followed for the next forty seconds seemed an ungodly time. Heit opened his mouth several times to break it, but words refused to come. The dumpy figure above him finally broke it.

"Yuh been havin' some sort of trouble, ain't yuh?"

"Damn it, yes!" Some of the bully was beginning to stir in the sheriff of Poker City now. "If you're the new sheriff of Devil River, you know damned well I wired you! We were after the Texas Kid for stealing a horse. Pushed him so hard yesterday he had to stop in the mouth of the canyon to give the horse a rest, and then the old buzzard on the white horse came into it. A short time before dawn we shot the horse from under the Kid, and the old devil took him up behind him, and —and now," he was beginning to yell, "you come into it. What in the hell's wrong with you? Haven't you got any damned sense?"

"Hawg-sense, maybe." There was a little leer on Hanson's face now. "Yuh ever hear of Montana? Really!" He grinned when Heit nodded. "Well, this is it, the line. Yuh may be boss buzzard down yore way, an' I'm boss buzzard up here. Lawyers are gonna have it one day so yuh can cross lines as yuh please, but it ain't like that now. Them birds are now in Montana. Maybe yuh oughta go see the President of the United States an' tell 'im yore troubles."

"From what I've heard," Heit was looking at him intently, "you're Hanson, all right. Who in hell would ever think of making you an officer must have lost his mind! I'm going to have those men—if," Heit was so mad now he was beginning to slobber, "if I have to shoot my way right on through Gooseneck Bend!"

"Mr. Heit," Hanson chuckled, "I've heard a whole heap about you, an' the most ain't been too good. Yuh ain't crossin' this line. Montana ain't takin' no bullyin from Wyomin'. I was shootin' a little while ago only to stop hosses. If I open up on yuh now I'll pass so much lead through yore belly, they'll have to stretch fence 'way down yonder on the Colorado line to keep guts from blowin' all over 'em."

"I'll go all the way to the governor of Montana!"

"Go ahead." Hanson shrugged and picked

up his shotgun. "He ain't hard to see these days. Election time's just 'round the corner an' he'll have a big, fat hand to poke out an' greet yuh. But dont try no more stuff this mornin'. Montana ain't healthy this time of the year."

"Wait a minute!" Heit threw up his hand and yelled as Hanson stepped back in the rocks. He might have saved his breath. Hanson was gone, and all the sheriff of Poker City could do was to sit and stare—and finally turn angrily back down the canyon. A man could not make any headway at all standing and cursing at a pile of rocks!

Chapter II

"MONTANA AIN'T —HEALTHY"

HAVING recognized Heck Hanson up there in the rocks above them, Mike and the Texas Kid had ridden on until they were certain that old Gabriel's Trumpet would be in the clear, and then they had pulled up, hit ground and wheeled back with their rifles. Each had expected nothing except that the fight would go on, and they found places in the rocks that were to be ideal for the showdown. Hanson was grinning when they saw

him coming back toward them. At the sight of Reno the grin faded and a mean glint filled his eyes.

Had I even thought it was yuh," he growled as he lied, "I never woulda wasted one shell on 'em. What'n hell yuh doin' in my territory? I told yuh the last time I saw yuh I aimed to kill yuh. Well?"

"Yuh read better'n me, Tex?" Mike was staring at the big star on Hanson's vest. "Whut'n hell does it say?"

"He's got it upside-down." The Kid was bending far over to his right side and staring. "Hold still a minute, Heck!"

"Oh, this, huh?" Hanson scowled. "Thought most any damn fool—'specially Mike Reno—would know a sheriff's badge. At times past he's been knowed to smell one ten miles off in the dark of the moon."

"That's a fact." Mike nodded, still staring. "Where'n hell didja find it, Heck?"

"I'm the eemortal law of Devil River." Hanson half-smiled. "An' miles an' many miles of the country 'round it. I've just got through tellin' Wyomin' what to do. When they pinned this thing on me they said the law was eemortal, that it would live forever, justice over bigamy. What'n hell yuh squirts been into?"

"Yuh askin'," Mike looked up quickly, "man to man or from behind that shinin' star on yore belly?"

"Both!" Hanson stood the rifle and the shotgun down against a rock. "It's my rights an' bounden duty from now on. Who are yuh an' who was yuh? Where was yuh born an' why? Who was yore daddy—an' mammy if any? As the law I've got full right to ask even to see the marryin' papers of yore gran'pa an' gran'mammy. Ain't nothin' I can't ask."

"I've seen it all, I've heard it all now." Mike slumped back against a rock and hooked beads of perspiration from his forehead. "Don't tell us yo've quit drinkin' an' gone to preachin'!"

"It's a long tale—an' this time it ain't sad." Hanson really grinned now. "Remember, though, all this is just 'twix us three. I got drunk one night in Peaceful Sam's. Seems as how I went to sleep under a table an' stayed there all night. 'Round eight in the mornin' some fellas came in, an' I overheard 'em whisperin' somethin' about it bein' time to rob the bank.

"To make a long story short," he shrugged, "I got the fool notion I was in on it, though I was kinda slow staggerin' out to help. By the time I hit the street the big job had already been pulled an' four fellas was hitting their saddles with the loot. They mistook me. First thing I know they're shootin' at me, at ever'body, an' the damndest pistol fight yuh ever saw was in full bloom. When it was over I was lyin' on the sidewalk, an' the four bank experts were lyin' acrost the street, one of 'em danged nigh wropped clean around the hitchrack. Atter that it was the old folks a-shoutin', the children cryin', an' the wimmin huggin' an' kissin' Mr. Hector Harry Hanson until it was damn awful. Seems as how they needed a sheriff bad, an' I was it. Texas," he mocked one eye, "yuh ain't yet said why yuh stole that hoss?" He slapped the Kid on the chest. "Open up an' confess—an' maybe the court will go gentle!"

They laughed now, all three of them rocking back on their heels, a trio who had been through hell with each other many times in the past, and who were due to go through more and more of it until they died. Old Heck Hanson and Mike Reno had fought each other dozens of times, never getting quite down to the stage of actually passing lead. They lied about each other, for, against and just for the plain cussedness of it, each rarely admitting it a good policy to trust the other unless spitted on the barrel of a good six-shooter and both eyeballs held as security. Here, once more, it looked as if the Texas Kid was out of place, but he was generally known to be none too particular about the company in which others might find him.

"An' now," Mike Reno could not get over it, "yo're the big, hootin' an' unhan'ome sheriff of Devil River."

"Big, hootin' an' Hanson!" corrected Heck, turning to look back into the Gooseneck. "'Bout time we got outa here. Six miles yet to Devil River proper, an' I guess yuh two can string along for a mile or two before swingin' off for the tall an' uncut timber. Yuh see, Mike," he swung back, "I never forget favors. I'm givin' yuh a four-hour start like yuh give me that time over in the Funnybone country when yuh claimed I was on the wrong side of the fight. Don't let the sun go down on yuh in my diggin's. If yuh do I'll shoot yuh quick as I'd stave in a fat politicker's belly.

"I kinda like yuh, Texas." He glowered at the Kid. "It's the company yuh keep that I hate. I've turned over a new leaf, no more drinkin', no more rippin' an' rearin'. I ain't cussin as much as I used to. Don't pay for a man in high office to be allus clutterin' up the whole damn place with what's known in the upper circles as profanity, if yuh two have got brains enough to know what I mean."

"We ain't." Reno was staring wickedly. "If we had we'd be drawin' the line somewhere on who we talk to, present company not to be excepted by a damn sight! Larrondo Lassiter, over in Smoky River Canyon," he jerked his head toward the northwest, "has sent for Tex—"

"An' I know all about it!" cut in Hanson. "Them towns of Peace Pipe an' Lawless over there are havin' trouble agin, an' we're catchin' the brunt of it in Devil River. No matter," he shrugged, "we've got more'n enough damn hossthieves in this country without yuh two comin' in to add to the mess. Yuh ain't wanted—What the hell!"

A shriek had cut him off, a bullet passing between them and landing with a *smack!* in the bole of a squat little pine a few yards beyond them. Before Hanson could wheel another and another was coming, pouring down on them from from the towering east rim.

"Hunt a hole for yorselves!" Hanson dived into the bushes. "That damn Wyomin' sheriff musta got mad about somethin' I said!"

NO OLD ignorant tomcat like Heck Hanson was going to pull such a deal on Hecht Heit—not these days with so many irons in the fire and playing back and forth across this Wyoming-Montana border. He had tried to stop the Texas Kid mainly because he was afraid that he knew too much and had made the remark that he was tired of punching stolen cows and breaking hot ponies for old man Anse Larsen of the Silver Bugle in the hills and valleys forty miles southwest of Poker City. Such a man going north could mean trouble, and it had been Heit, himself, who had brought up the horse-stealing charge when old Anse was willing to forget about it. It would have been forgotten if the Kid had only gone southward, keeping his mouth closed. The young fool had to be stopped.

And Hecht Heit was not long in making up his mind after turning back from the mouth of Gooseneck Bend. Four of his best men were still up there on the east rim. In no time at all Heit was sending others back down the canyon to a place where they could work their way up in the face of the cliffs and finally join the four above the Gooseneck. He took four more and headed for the west rim, leaving the others in the canyon to make the push on through the bend when the proper time came.

Ben Hyde, Clark Seller, Hunt Pardon and Jinx Roundtree had started the fight all over again, and they held the advantage, having a commanding view of the entire bend from their high perches, and all four deadly men when it came to rifles in their hands and the law behind them to cover any mistake that might be made.

First to reach the top after a long, hard climb, so dangerous in places they had to dismount and lead their snorting horses, Heit was there in time to see Clark Seller die on the opposite rim. A pale-haired, lean and pop-eyed man, Seller had leaned over in his eagerness for a quick shot, and a bullet from down in the bend caught him in the mouth, bits of his old gray hat flying as it came out the back of his head.

Mouth open, staring as if unable to believe his own eyes, Heit had dropped out of his saddle, several rods yet ahead of the others laboring up the dangerous rocks behind him. A voice, cold and matter-of-fact, jarred through him as an ache in every bone.

"Tex was allus a mighty fine hand with a smoke-stick."

Heit turned his head without moving a muscle in his body, eyes becoming big and wide. Old Heck Hanson, shotgun on the crook of his arm, rifle hanging by a strap to his back, stood there with a wicked little grin on his ugly face and a well-worn Colt cradled in his right hand. Beyond him, just coming out of the rocks, was the big old ghost of a thing with a bullwhip in his hand.

"Kinda figured yuh would do this, Poker City." Hanson was still grinning. "Heap easier'n quicker to get up from my side than yores. Damnit, don't yuh know yo're standin' on Montana ground?"

Heit opened his mouth to say something, then snapped it closed, eyes now on that big old ghost with the shining blacksnake whip. Bull Kelly, one of his regular deputies, had been at Heit's heels when they started their climb. The top of Kelly's head was just now appearing, and the old buzzard with the whip was going into action. It was without effort, it seemed, that the long whip was licking forward, coil after coil unwinding exactly like a striking snake. There was a furious *plop!* as a silver *peso* on the end of the rawhide lash struck, catching Kelly above the right eye just as he looked up.

Kelly let out just one grunt, and then, limber as a rag, he was pitching out of his saddle, a sliding, plunging and rolling thing going back down the slope. His horse wheeled. He might have made a complete whirl, but the whip caught him on the rump, and with a snort he plunged back down the steep trail, men below yelling and cursing, trying to get out of the way, their horses sliding and pawing for footing as Kelly's lunged into them, a wall-eyed and pawing fool himself.

"Sorter keep yore eye on this squirt, Mike." Hanson was speaking again. "I'm kinda wipin' off the rim over yonder."

Down dropped the six-shooter, going back into its shabby old holster, and up came the shotgun. It was easy range here for such a long-barreled weapon loaded with buckshot, and the three men on the opposite rim were right at the moment like quail in a huddle. The shotgun's first roaring blast changed all that, but even as Hanson fired Hecht Heit saw that he was not shooting to kill. The buckshot

simply spattered the rocks at their feet, chips of the rocks and spouting puffs of dust flying with the scattering lead.

There was little need of the second shot. Snarling like maddened cats, cut by bits of rock and lead, the dust blinding them, the three on the rim wheeled, pawing and knocking, rifles dropping. The second shot only hurried them on, yelling and cursing as though they did not know what was happening to them.

"They'll maybe blame it on yuh." Hanson grinned, squirted tobacco juice, and slipped two shells into the shotgun to replace the hot and smoking empties ejected and lying on the ground at his feet. "Purty shore they could see yuh standin' over here. Take his shootin' tools away from 'im, Mike, an' slip his own handcuffs on 'im. I've been told that he's a joker who allus carries at least three pair."

"What—what," Heit was finally finding his voice, "do you think you're going to do to me!"

"Arrest yuh."

"Whut for, yuh say?" Hanson scratched his jaw thoughtfully. "Arson, maybe."

"Arson!" The sheriff of Poker City glowered as Mike Reno took his weapons and felt for his handcuffs. "Damn it, that's for burning down a house, a barn or—or something like that!"

"Somethin', yeah." Hanson grinned. "I got arrested for it once down in the Choctaw Nation. Just shot my gun off in a saloon. Seems how there was some kind of oil in the sawdust on the floor. It tuck on fire an' burned down the whole damn house. Maybe," he looked up as he snapped the breech of the shotgun, "yuh would like bigamy better."

"That's for having two wives, you damned old fool!"

"I know 'bout that one, too." Hanson's grin widened as he fished in a chap's pocket for a fresh chaw. "I still pay alleymoney when I'm caught here an' yon. In Arizona I just go to jail an' lay 'er out until they get tired of feedin' me. Let's get goin'!"

"Now wait!" Heit was sawing back as Mike finished clicking a pair of handcuffs on his wrists. "Try to get some sense into your thick head! I'm a sheriff, you're a sheriff—at least you think you are! We'll let this thing drop and—"

"Look, now." Hanson stepped forward and tapped him on the chest with a stubby forefinger. "I'm arrestin' yuh. Fact is, yo're done arrested, an' yo're goin' to jail. Bigamy, yuh say, is for havin' two wives. I didn't know until now they could catch yuh up for just that many. Nobody bothered me until it got to be five or six, eegitimate an' un, but I do know yo've got a wife in Devil River, an' I've heard it fairly straight that yo've got another'n in Poker City. The one in my diggin's went down there to have them do somethin' about it not so powerful long ago, an' yuh had a gang of yore deppities poke her into a stage an' escort her outa the country.

"Git on yore hoss!" He gave him a push. "Yo'll find that I spend my feedin' money on grub at my jail instead of pokin' it in my pocket—"

Chapter III

TWO DESERTERS

HE WAS the maddest man they ever saw by the time they got him to Devil River—and he was due to get even madder than that. His men could not do a thing to help him. Those left in the canyon below Gooseneck Bend were like hounds watching a hole in the end of a hollow log while the game fled through the other end of it; and just beyond the bend the canyon widened. With all four riders kept close together, it was impossible for anybody to take a shot without running the risk of hitting Hecht Heit instead of the others.

Devil River turned out to stare, to grin, and then to roar up and down the crooked board walks all the way to the flat-roofed and lopsided jail. The roar ended when a woman and a baby entered the picture. She was mounted on a big, white-faced horse, coming down the street at a gallop, the gurgling baby in the crook of her right arm, rising and falling with the galloping horse. The woman was tall, loose-jointed and red-headed, the daughter of an up-country cattleman known for breeding even scrawny cattle and horses.

"Yore wife an' baby, Poker City." Hanson nodded grimly. "Musta smelt yuh comin'. Look at the devil on her arm—he ain't missin' a thing."

"Him!" The woman pulled up ahead of them when they were still a dozen rods from the crazily leaning old porch of the jail. "What's he doing in Devil River!"

"I—I want no fuss with you, Judy!" Heit was beginning to yell. "We're through and you know it!"

"Somebody hold my baby!" Judy Heit was getting ready to fight. "Oh, God, let me at him!"

"It's been said," Hanson spoke from the side of his mouth, "yuh have a sort of a houn'-dawg stompin' way with 'em, Poker City. Damn if yuh hadn't better get ready to show it."

"Keep her away from me!" White-faced now from sudden fear, Heit tried to wheel his horse, but Mike Reno grabbed the cheek of the bridle and held him. "She'll murder me!"

"Please! *please!"* The woman had left the

saddle, dropping her reins. "Somebody hold the baby!"

"Hyar, Judy!" An old woman in a buckboard on the west side of the street was whisking herself down over the right front wheel. "Fetch me the little trigger an' take my buggywhip! I know Hecht Heit, the pizen droolin' coyote!"

"Hold now, Ma Tuckett!" Hanson yelled back at her. "We've got troubles enough without yuh stickin' yore two cents in!"

"Gimme that young un, Judy!" There was no stopping to the old woman now, for she was coming forward with a rush, her whip in her hand. "Just beat the low down hell out of him!"

"I'll sue you for this, Hanson!" yelled Heit. "I'll sue you and make your bondsmen pay!"

If Hanson heard him he did not bother to answer. They were at the jail porch by this time. Heith flung himself out of the saddle so quickly he tripped and fell. Before he could get up the red-headed woman was on him, the buggywhip slashing him from the back of the neck to the seat of his pants. He got up, and she promptly swapped ends with the whip and knocked him down with the butt of it. Up once more he made it with a rush, the whip hammering him on the back.

"Let me in jail quick!" he bawled, "she's got a temper hell can't cool!"

"Shore looks like it, Poker City!" Hanson had to yell back at him as he struggled to get the corridor door open. "Get in!"

HEIT got inside, handcuffs still on him, and his wife got in with him, still beating with the butt of the whip. Kilada slammed the door on them and turned the key in the lock just in time. Baby on her arm, Ma Tuckett was there by this time.

"Now you hold the young un!" She shoved the blubbering and cooing child into the startled Hanson's arms and snatched for the keys. "I'm goin' in there an' help Judy Sprewer!"

Stop 'er!" Keys gone, Hanson tried to thrust the child into Mike Reno's arms, but Mike wheeled away. He lunged toward the Texas Kid, and the Kid wheeled, stretching his hands high up on the wall. By that time Ma Tuckett had the door open and was inside, leaving the keys in the lock. Helpless for once in his life, only half knowing what he was doing, Hanson again slammed the door and locked it.

"All I can do, I reckon!" He turned, glowering at Reno and the Kid, and now at a grinning crowd beginning to fill the doorway to the porch. "Guess I'll have to charge 'em all with drunk an' disorderly. Damn it, Mike, why didn't yuh take the little un?"

"Ain't never tried my hand at wet nursin'." Mike kept his big hands tightly clasped behind him. "An' more'n that, I ain't never been damn fool enough to let 'em make me a sheriff."

"Help! H-e-l-p!" Hecht Heit's voice back there in the jail was like the sound of a hound baying into a barrel. "This is murder!"

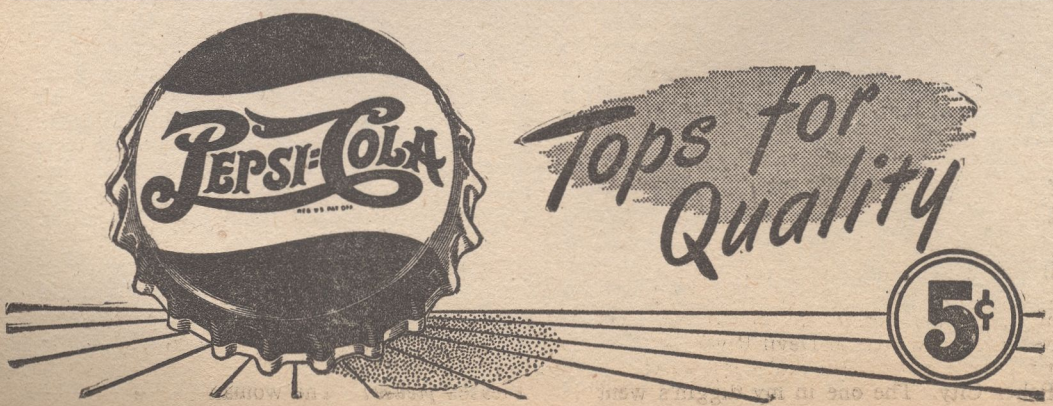
"Sounds like it, I swear." Mike cocked himself up on one leg against the side of the desk. "Whut would yuh do in a case like this, Mike?"

"Leave town."

"Yuh ain't got no sympathy!" Old Heck arose and again tried to thrust the baby into his arms, and Mike quickly reclasped his hands behind him. Daunted here, Hanson pushed on for the doorway, and the grinning mob there only backed away. A woman at the foot of the steps saved him by suddenly thrusting out her arms.

"You're holding it upside-down!" she screamed as she grabbed the baby. "Look at it! It's still laughing!"

"Kinda wet." Hanson turned back, slinging his hands, the crowd roaring with laughter. Tex, what'n hell would yuh do with a mess like this on yore shoulders?"



"Go in and talk to 'em!" grinned the Kid.

"Talk to 'em?" Hanson's eyes popped. "Hell, Tex, yuh couldn't hear a gun go off back in that dump! They're beatin' the wax clear outa him. Good thing old Pence Sprewer, the gal's daddy, didn't come along with her. I got it." He glanced quickly to the right and left, his voice low. "Yuh take the keys an' slip 'round to the back door an' unlock it. He'll run an' they'll follow. Yuh go with im, Mike!"

"Shore!" Reno took the keys and slipped them in his pocket. It was done all too readily, but Hanson was too excited to notice it. "Come on, Kid. All that hell back there is sorter givin' me a headache." He led the way outside, then grinned from the side of his mouth. "Let's go get a drink somewhere. I'm dry."

"And leave Heck in this mess?"

"Hell," Mike's eyes widened with surprise, "yuh don't aim to say he'd fit well in anything but a mess, do yuh?"

They took the horses and Hanson's old mare on around to the corral and stables behind the jail and turned them into a haystack, the noise inside the jail still a lamming, yelling and howling bedlam, the crowd outside jamming the windows and cheering for the women mauling the big sheriff of Poker City. No one wanted to see anybody help Hecht Heit end his troubles.

Mike was humming some dinky tune as they headed down the street. He dropped the jail keys into the first rain barrel they came to. With no break in their strides they were a pair perfectly well satisfied with themselves as they headed for the nearest saloon.

Neither Mike nor the Texas Kid noticed the cloud of dust boiling down the slopes from the northwest like an approaching Kansas cyclone. Another cloud was coming up from southward, but it was yet hidden by the timber along the river.

HANSON was busy with both hands and feet when Larrondo Lassiter, two-gun king of Smoky River Canyon, rode in to add to the troubles. Hecht Heit had managed to get himself into a cell at last where he could close the door and fasten it with one of the steel and chains of a bunk. Seeing him so near and yet so untouchable now, Judy started screaming as if being murdered. Ma Tuckett beat out some of her rage on the door with the broken handle of a broom. Hanson at first thought that Heit had been allowed to escape by the back door, and then he saw Reno and the Texas Kid just turning into Peaceful Sam's on the west side of the street.

"An' me still with this mess on my hands!" he groaned. "Mighta saw that Mike took them keys too awful quick! Shut up back there, damn it! The jailhouse has tuck on fire!"

That was a mistake, and he wished that he had never said it. Now Ma and Judy wheeled and wanted out—and Mike had gone off with the keys! It took him a minute to remember that there was a second set, and then another minute to remember what the hell he had done with them. They were in a gun-locker on the wall, and that danged thing was locked, its door hard-seasoned oak planks bound with strap-iron. He broke the padlock off with the stout fire-poker from the stove and got the keys—and then was sorry for that. When he opened the corridor door Ma Tuckett promptly whanged him over the head with her broken broom handle, and then marched sturdily right on out the front door, the weeping Judy behind her.

"You ol' men-devils all stick together!" Ma howled that back at him. "The idea of lockin' up that coyote just to protect him!"

Given a chance to at least catch wind, Hanson flopped weakly down in the wobbly old chair behind the desk, the crowd still grinning at him from the doorway and windows. Devil Riverites had not had so much fun since the day the women, led by Ma Tuckett, had ridden the patent medicine drummer out of town on a pole.

"Only one thing to do," Hanson told himself whisperingly. "That's to open the back door myself an' let that Poker City squirt leave town before Ma an' Judy decide to come back—maybe with a whole danged gang of wimmin behind 'em."

He arose and reached for the keys, but his troubles were only beginning. At that moment there was a thunder of hoofs outside, a swirl of dust, the crowd scattering wildly, and Larrondo Lassiter rode up, backed by seven of his rowdy Wishbone riders.

LARRONDO LASSITER would have instantly commanded attention anywhere. A tall man on a wall-eyed, snow-white stallion, he was as straight as a trooper, his face sharp, eyes big, fierce and black. His hair was as white as his horse and topped by a big white hat. Six-shooters rocking at either hip, spurs ringing bells as he hit ground, one might have expected him to speak like thunder when he stalked in. It was queer, Hanson had always reckoned, that those big black eyes could boil hell all over creation and Larondo could speak so softly.

"Howdy, Heck."

"Hi, Larrondo." Hanson stood staring at him with the jail keys in his hand. "Where'd the bees sting yuh or the rattlesnakes bite yuh this time? You're mad as hell about somethin'."

"Maybe I am." Lassiter took off his hat

and carefully wiped huge beads from his forehead with a spotless white handkerchief. "Last night the last of my steel-dust string took wings and flew down the river."

"An'," Hanson nodded, "if yuh know it flew down the river—Smoky River, I take it—why'n hell didn't yuh sprout yoreself some wings an' follow it? I ain't sheriff of Smoky River Canyon an' Devil River too, yuh know. I'm supposed to be just sheriff here. 'Twix us two, Larrondo, I reckon yuh can say I'm purty sick of that."

"You were never cut out for a sheriff, Heck."

"Just what I tried to tell the damn fools!" Hanson lammed the desk with his fist. "They wouldn't lis'en to me!"

"And you'll never be." Lassiter pulled up a chair, then glowered at the now sober and staring faces at the windows. "But it does look as if we might have a chance to talk without every damned ear in town outstretched. Clear out!"

Even Hanson jumped when Larrondo Lassiter started shooting. He did not get out of his chair. Long old Peacemakers simply jumped into his hands, one shot thundering to the left, another to the right, bullets smashing into the wall just above the window, the crowd falling back and wheeling to flee down the street. In a matter of seconds only Wishbone riders were left at the jail. Larrondo Lassiter was in town!

"Coulda used yuh a little while ago." Hanson flopped back in his chair and pulled open a lower drawer. He sat a big, square-faced bottle on the desk. "Have a drink!"

"Thought you'd quit?" Lassiter was staring. "Knew it was a lie, of course— Say, what the hell is this? It ain't whiskey!" He had pulled the cork and taken a smell. "That's hair tonic—it says!"

"Wonder Tonic, yeah," Hanson nodded. "Good for above an' below. It makes yore breath smell powerful sweet."

"It would." Lassiter pushed the bottle away and took one of his own from his bosom. "Smells just like a honky-tonk. Have a shot of whiskey!"

"Ain't touchin' a drop—livin' square at the foot of the cross an' wropped in the wool of the lamb." Hanson reached for his own bottle and took two big, gulping drinks. "This is only ninety two parts alcohol. Whut'n hell yuh come to Devil River for, think I've got yore steel-dust hosses?"

"Wouldn't put it past you." Lassiter took a drink and returned his bottle to his bosom. "Jail just isn't big enough to hold thirty-six head. I'm heading for Wyoming to see the sheriff of Poker City. I'm damned tired of my stuff being run across the line! I'm going to see Hecht Heit and have it out with him!"

"How much yuh gimme to save yuh the ride?" Kilada grinned. "I've got Hecht Heit back there in jail—an' I'd already give two bottles of this mighty fine Wonder Tonic to get him off my hands. Reminds me of the time I was—"

"Did you say Hecht Heit's in this jail!" Larrondo Lassiter arose slowly and seemed to tower above the desk. "By God, Heck, if you've got that murdering horsethief rat here—"

"Reach for it, Lassiter!" In all the excitement, Hanson had forgotten to lock the corridor door when he let Ma Tuckett and Judy out. It had swung open. Handcuffs off from a key in his watch pocket, the sheriff of Poker City stood there, a double-barreled little pistol in each hand, his eyes blazing. "Reach, *Hanson!* When you're sheriff a little while longer you may learn that it pays to carry a couple of small pistols hidden in your boot legs. *Reach!*"

"Well, I'll be damned!" Hanson's hands came up slowly. "An' here I was beginnin' to feel sorry for 'im just a litle while ago, Larrondo! Sympathy jest don't pay."

Chapter IV

TOMCATS YOWL

SHOTS tumbling their echo and re-echoing reports down the street from the jail and two Wishbone riders jerking to their feet and falling dead in front of the lopsided porch was enough to stand Devil River on its ear. Given authority, even when he grabbed it in a quick steal, and Hecht Heit had always been a wild fool. The Wishbone riders had not known what was going on inside. They never had to look out for Larrondo Lassiter. Larrondo Lassiter was fully capable of taking care of himself. Cowboy fashion, the men had dropped out of their saddles and were squatting on their heels, their backs to the porch when the sudden damnation was turned loose upon them without warning.

Heit had had no crazy notion of playing the great fighting man and shooting his way out of the jail and Devil River at the start. Old at the business of making men prisoners, he had moved quietly, each of his little pistols cocked, until he had Hanson and Lassiter back inside the corridor to disarm them. An expert at searching men, he had taken their weapons quickly, made them take off their boots, and then, marching them ahead of him, he had knocked them both into unconscious bundles on the floor with one of Hanson's old six-shooters before throwing them into a cell and locking the door with the captured keys.

Even then Hecht Heit had not intended to

stir all Devil River into a gun-fight. His own fine six-shooters were out there in the office, and he had gone back for them, moving quietly. In a few minutes he might have eased out the rear door and on to his horse, but he had looked down the street, and the sight in the distance had again made him the bold, bad sheriff of Poker City, Wyoming—afraid of neither hell nor high water.

His men had not deserted him after all. Jinx Roundtree in the lead, they were pounding up the canyon, rifle barrels glistening. It looked, also, as if about a dozen more Poker City friends had joined the party. Heit had left word the day before for old Pop Warden, one of his part-time deputies, to round-up what men he could and follow him. Old Anse Larsen and several of his Silver Bugle riders were soon appearing behind the others. With that sight to greet him Heit had gone wild.

With the five remaining Wishbone riders leaping, ducking and yelling as they tried to find sudden shelter, Heit kept shooting, intending to kill the last one of them if he could. The two who had died were still sprawled there on their faces, and now another was going down, caught with a bullet Heit fired through the window.

Up and at them, and take them with a rush! It had always been Heit's way of fighting. Darting to the west window he closed the iron shutters, then the others, one after another. The front door was last, and then he was ripping more weapons from the gun-locker—shotguns, six-shooters and rifles, hell going into business!

Merely to show himself to men from Poker City just beginning to hit the foot of the street, he stepped out on the porch. The last Wishbone cowboy to go down had rolled over on his side and was dazedly trying to lift a six-shooter. Hecht Heit sent two thundering streaks of fire and lead tearing into him, and leaped back inside. Before closing the door again he sent a long call down the street:

"Come on, Poker City! Come on, boys!"

"DAMN to hell, Tex!" Mike Reno and the Texas Kid had jerked away from the bar and rushed to the front door. "Heit's pulled a fast un on Heck an' Larrondo somehow!"

"Duck, Mike!" The Texas Kid snatched him back just in time, roaring shots now filling the street, horses lunging back from hitch-racks and turning in all directions to flee just as they had done a few moments before from the porch of the jail. "Bullets don't have eyes!"

All Devil River seemed to be into it now, but the town had been taken almost completely by surprise. The wild gang of horsemen pouring up the street were shooting into every window and doorway, the people of the town grabbing for weapons and blazing back in such a crazy pitch of excitement they might have been shooting at the moon.

"Here comes Anse Larsen, stormin' right up the sidewalk!" Mike had rolled his long whip from his shoulder. "Let me take the cuss, Tex! Maybe better livin' than dead in the end!"

"Take him and to hell with him!" Colt blazing in each hand as he rocked back and forth in the doorway, the Kid now whipped to a window to his right to give Mike room. "I'm killing without wasting lead!"

And then, a second later, the whip was flying. A gaunt old man on a flea-bitten sorrel—drunk as a hat as Mike could see an instant before he let that long blacksnake go uncoiling out—was suddenly throwing up his hands and trying to cry out. A furious jerk brought him out of his saddle like a kicking bullfrog, the end of the whip wrapped around his neck and landing him in the doorway. Mike gave him just one more pull to land him inside, and then whammed him down across the head with the butt of the whip to flatten him into a limp lizard on the floor and keep him quiet.

"Now let 'em have 'er!" An evil grin on his bearded face, tobacco juice drooling down through the stubble on his chin from the corners of his mouth, Mike Reno dropped his wicked blacksnake and sawed for his old .45's, and was into it with both hands spouting fire and lead. "Let the tomcats yowl an' the jaybirds sing, Tex. Somethin' tells me I'm goin' to like this damned town yonder better'n the last time I was here. It maybe needed old Heck to put some life into it."

"Come on, Poker City!" The yell seemed to answer him from the jail, the long wail somehow living above the din. "Swing around back and in at the back door! We'll whip hell out of this damned town!"

"Yeah," Mike nodded, and shot another flying rider out there in the swirling dust, "but yo're gonna put up one hell of a fight before yuh do. We've got to work our way out the back, Tex." He kicked the door closed, old .45's empty. "Heck, the damned ol' fool, never could settle a real good fight without us around."

The Texas Kid did not hear him. No one could hear anything but the fierce pound of those hoofs, now sweeping the last man past Peaceful Sam's, the Poker City men yelling their heads off, a man dropping here and there as Devil River really awoke to the fight.

"Yuh watch this squirt, Peaceful!" Mike dragged the now unarmed Larsen forward to handcuff him to the footrail of the bar. "Got these 'cuffs off Heit, an' they'll hold this bird. If he ain't here when we come back for

'im," he looked across the bar, glowering at the big, white-faced Peaceful Sam, "yore name will only be a memory 'round these diggin's. Come on, Tex!"

HECK HANSON was a long time coming out of it. Struck with that one furious blow and thrown into one of the old west side cells, he sprawled there on his stomach, feeling as if forty horses had been walking on the back of his head. The only noise that came to him at first was a wlid singing in his ears, sounding as if thousands of crickets were chirping right up close at either side of him. He turned his face to the left, saw Larrondo Lassiter, and then remembered.

Lassiter was lying on his back, just as he had dropped when hurled limply into the cell, and Larondo looked as if he was dead.

The singing and chirping crickets were dying from Hanson's ears by this time. The noise of guns, scurrying feet and outbursts of cursing now came to take the place of everything else, and he realized that one big hell of a fight was going on inside and outside of the jail.

"Wake up, Larrondo!" He twisted over on his side and gave the cattleman a poke in the stomach with his knee. "Seems as how there's a war on. It won't be complete without yuh."

Lassiter grunted, smacked his lips, and that was all. Hansen was trying to get to his feet after that, but it was like pulling one's own teeth. He fell back several times before he was able to drag himself up beside a bunk and drunkenly rock to the window where the air was better. Holding to the bars he stood swaying and blinking, the gunfire from all around ringing into his ears.

"We've got to get the hell out of here, I tell you!" That voice was inside the jail, sounding somewhere beyond the cell door. "Damn it, you fools should have had better sense than to let them surround us!"

"But we didn't let 'em do it!" another voice was defending. "Yuh kept yellin' for us to come on an' swing 'round back, an' we just about got back of the jail when we saw that gang ridin' in from the north. Ike says it's ol' Pence Sprewer an' his crowd."

"Damn!" That was Hecht Heit's voice and no mistaking it now. "Old Pence is the worst enemy I've got, and all on account of his damned Judy! This is much worse than I ever thought!"

"Stop it!" That was from a window somewhere to Hanson's right. "I tell yuh, we've got to stop that damn thing!"

And then, looking straight out the window, Hansen saw the strange cart slowly edging

forward. He had to stare at it from almost thirty seconds before he could tell what it was—and then he saw that it was a two-wheeled old road scraper that had been sitting under a shed in rear of Peaceful Sam's saloon.

"Somebody's behind it pushin'," he muttered, thickly. "Keepin' the scraper down to turn bullets. Ain't but one damn fool in the world who'd try that, an' that's Mike Reno. He'd try kissin' a rattlesnake at least once, the ol' buzzard!"

JUST what Mike was trying to do was more that he could tell, but the old scraper was certainly working its way closer and closer to the jail. One hail of bullets after another were splattering against the heavy steel pan, but not one of them had yet been able to pierce it or make it turn aside.

"Tex's behind that thing with 'im." Hanson was finally able to see that. "One man just couldn't push that thing. Yep," he ducked, "an' up an' over comes a scatter-gun muzzle. Tex an' Mike musta stopped at Pete Smith's hardware store just above Peaceful Sam's."

A double-roaring blast seemed to jar the jail, raking a window toward the rear. Another shot followed it, meaning that there were two shotguns behind that old scraper. Mike and the Texas Kid were not trying to take much aim. Unable to lift their heads they were merely shoving the muzzles up and over, and letting drive the best they could in hopes of sending their roaring charges through windows.

"An' me, now," Hanson grunted, "they think if I ain't got sense enough to keep down I oughta get shot. Hello, Larrondo." Lassiter was stirring at last. "Damn it, ain't I never goin' to get to go to yore funeral?"

"What—what's happening, Heck?" Lassiter's voice was thick. "It seems that I hear a lot of noise."

"It just seems that way." Hanson was getting to where he could grin again. "Like that summer night when yuh rid yore hoss into some bee hives up near Lawless an' he throwed yuh in the middle of 'em after knockin' over about a dozen of 'em. Maybe it's angels singin' that yuh hear."

"Is that a fact!" Hanson's grin widened. "Strange that I ain't been hearin' about it."

"They're both coming out of it!" Hecht Heit's voice bawled at that moment just beyond the door. "We'll take them out of here between us as a shield! Here, let me unlock the door!"

"The old devil! The old devil!" The wail came from the direction of the barn and corrals behind the jail. "He's going up on the roof on a whip! Kill 'im, boys!"

"Kill 'im, hell!" another wail answered the first. "He's hugged too damn close to the wall between the windows—an' the Texas Kid's shootin' to beat hell to hold us back!"

"If anything happens to me, Hecht Heit was yelling as he swung open the door, "I'll kill you and Lassiter both, Hanson!"

"Oh, no, Mr. Heit, that would plum ruin us!" Hanson's voice was a thin whine. "Please don't hurt me an' pore ol' Larrondo no more!"

Anybody not really knowing him would have thought that the yellow streak was showing in Hanson. Lassiter must have set himself. Hanson was on his knees, hands up. Heit took a long pace toward him, right foot suddenly coming forward to kick him in the face, and like a diamond-backed rattlesnake going into a strike, Heck Hanson dodged, grabbed with both hands, and the sheriff of Poker City was snatched off his feet and crashed to the steel floor. Lassiter, still bootless, kicked him in the jaw with his socked heel, and was grabbing for the sixshooter in the nearest holster and swinging it up to kill another man diving into the doorway.

"Damn it," a voice gulped in the corridor, "they've got Hecht!"

"Come in an' j'in the party!" yelled Hanson. "Powder River's only a mile wide an' an inch deep! Kick 'im agin, Larrondo! He's got one spur hooked in my bellybutton an' t'other'n pawin' for my eyeballs!"

They had Heit, all right, and a dying man lying in the narrow doorway, but they were not yet out of it. Another man scurrying past down the corridor fired almost point-blank at Hanson's bobbing head, the bullet missing by only a fraction of an inch to go on and splatter into the wall behind him.

Lassiter fired again, and the man running down the corridor grunted and staggered, smashing into the opposite wall. He turned completely around, and then pitched loosely forward on his face. Colt cocked for another, Lassiter suddenly swung it to one side and brought it down on the struggling and cursing Heit's head, and all the fight was taken out of the sheriff of Poker City for the moment.

"Now up with 'im!" snarled Hanson, getting his hand on Heit's second six-shooter at last. "Talkin' 'bout usin' fellas for a shield kinda gives me notions." He was coming up, both arms around Heit and trying to swing him in front of him. "Gimme a hand, damn it! He eats too much an' feels like a ton of lead!"

But even now all the fight was not gone from Hecht Heit. The daze came out of his eyes, the limpness suddenly leaving him. A fighting man up or down, his arms were swinging furiously around Hanson, a booted foot kicking, the heel of it catching the rising Lassiter on the cheek and sending him driving back, his head striking the iron rim of a bunk.

"Help, boys, help!" Heit's voice was a sudden baying filling the jail, going out the windows and all around. "Rush the old devil!"

And then they were piling to the floor, Hanson unable to shoot in fear of hitting Lassiter—looking limp again. Before a cat could lick its whiskers men from the corridor were jamming up in the doorway, and Heit and Hanson rolling, clawing and fighting on the floor.

"Help! Help!" Heit was still baying. "We've got him, damn it!"

Chapter V

MORE HELLIONS RIDE IN

"KEEP down, Tex, 'cause bullets ain't got eyes!" It had been a fight mostly all the way to the jail. Getting the old scraper up beside the west wall at last, Mike had sent his bullwhip streaking upward several times before the end of it had caught and held firmly. Then, the Texas Kid shooting right and left to hold the Poker City crowd at bay, Mike had gone up hand over hand. Once on the roof with a new shotgun on his back and his bosom full of shells, he had started to shooting, holding them off while the Texas Kid came up. Now, bullets hailing around them from the distance, they were lying flat on their stomachs and unable to move without stopping lead.

"It's that crazy Pence Sprewer crowd!" Mike swore huskily. "We only worked ourselves into a mess here, Tex."

"Unless somebody can stop them!"

"Yeah, that'd be fine!" Mike swore as a bullet plowed a long groove in the roof no more than a yard away. "Ol' Pence allus was a damn fool an' wouldn't hire a man unless he was just like 'im." He winced as another bullet ripped along the roof, no more than a foot away this time. "Scrawny wimmin, scrawny cattle an' hosses—an' scrawny men in head an' body to ride for him! They see the fight's up an' started, free for all, an' that crowd'll take anything what's free!"

The Sprewer crowd was like a gang of jaybirds. They had the advantage of a little rise beyond the barn, and some in their eagerness were taking to the low trees. Shotguns would not reach them, and in a matter of a few moments more it might have been the end for Mike Reno and the Texas Kid, but now the Poker City men in the barn were jumping into it, seeing good targets to shoot at up there on the rise.

Yells came from the rise as rifles crashed from the north end of the barn. Two long-legged men up there in the trees were suddenly letting go, the limbs cracking, the pair spilling back to the ground, their rifles falling with them. By the time they struck the ground others—just as bug-eyed and breathlessly eager to fight—were running forward to take their places. They might have been shot as quickly as the others if it had not been for a yell from a Wishbone cowboy in a little dry wash below the rise.

"Cut it, yuh damn fools! Them fellas on the roof are on our side! That's Hecht Heit an' his crowd from Poker City inside the jail an' the barn! They're tryin' to whip Devil River!"

"Hecht Heit, yuh say!" That was Pence Sprewer now, cursing his men into a sudden stop and rising, long and lean and shabby—another target for the men in the barn. "I'll tear 'im tooth an' fang—"

"An' now yuh won't tear anybody!" Mike almost grinned as he saw the cattleman fall back, bullets kicking up the dust all around him. "Maybe they'll keep down a spell an' let us alone. We've got to get down inside, Tex. If we don't this fool fight can go on all day."

Keeping low, they wormed on to what had once been a skylight in the center of the roof. It was covered now with planks and tar-paper solidly nailed in place. Mike flew into a fit of cursing after they had made several futile attempts to lift it.

"Just the way they do ever'thing in this damn town!" he sputtered. "Hailstorm maybe knocks all the glass out, an' after bein' half-drowned a dozen or two times they finally get around to coverin' it up. Looks about like a job Heck would do. What's the matter?"

The Texas Kid had turned away and was staring to southward. In the distance another big cloud of dust was rising as a string of horses came into sight, herded along at a trot by eight men with rifles across their saddles. The Kid spoke from the side of his mouth:

"Looks like Wishbone stuff!"

"An' it is!" Mike nodded. "Steel-dust! Looks like them fellas have been makin' a long ride of it. Hope they don't start shootin' at us, too. Come on, let's get at this thing. I think I can shoot that corner off with a double blast or two of buck."

THE coming of eight more Wishbone riders—this time with thirty-six head of fine horses—was like more wind to already troubled waters. They let the horses go clattering on up a little draw on the southwest side of town, and then galloped on to the back door of Peaceful Sam's to find out what the fight was about. Old Deal Jackson, one of Larrondo Lassiter's best men, led the way inside and came to a slow, long-legged halt as he stared at Anse Larsen, lying there cursing, still handcuffed to the footrail of the bar.

Larsen quit cursing when he saw Deal Jackson, long, lean and shaggy, big .45's at his hips and his rifle now balanced on the crook of his left arm. Peaceful Sam held on to the drain-trough, ready to drop into a squat behind the bar in case sudden hell started breaking loose. He all but dropped when old Deal Jackson glowered at him and spoke:

"What'n hell's that damn thing doin' lyin' there like that—an' what's all this fight goin' on about? "

"Don't—don't start nothin', Deal!" Peaceful Sam lifted his hands. "Ol' Mike Reno left 'im here like that. Yuh know Mike Reno—"

"An' who'n hell don't!"

"Well—well, Mike done it," finished Peaceful Sam, helplessly. "I—I ain't takin' sides, Deal!"

"Yuh never do!" Jackson spat the words at him from the side of his mouth, pale old eyes on Larsen. "Maybe yuh can finish it, Anse. We got yore son Jon this mornin' just at the crack of daylight. Some more of the boys behind us are bringin' back his lead-filled body."

"The body!" Anse Larsen shook the bar as he surged back on his side with his eyes suddenly widening. "Vass this you sace, Yackson?"

"We got Jon." Jackson was as cold-blooded as hell about it. "Some of the boys are arguin' about it, but I feel kinda shore that it was my ball that knocked one of them mean blue eyes outa his head after we'd jammed him an' his bunch up a blind canyon below the line."

"Oh God!" Larsen gasped. "My Yon!"

"It's too late to pray." Jackson leered. "Maybe I sort of forgot to mention that we trapped the whole damn gang—six of 'em, an' yore Olaf was among 'em, too."

"Olaf! Mine Olaf!"

"Ja!" Jackson mocked him, the gunfire up the street rising into another bitter rolling and tumbling. "It may interest yuh to know that Olaf went down fightin' like a man beside Jon while the rest of the rats waved their undershirts."

"By—by golly!" Larsen managed to sit up in a crouch. "I'll kill hail out of somebody for this!"

"Maybe better start on the sheriff of Poker City an' his crowd!" Again the cold-blooded Jackson was leering. "Yuh was a purty square fella until yuh let yoreself get mixed up with him." Jackson now glowered again at Peaceful Sam. "I'm givin' yuh just one second, Sam, to start tellin' me what this fight's about—an' if yuh ain't started by then I'm cuttin' yore ears off an' have the boys take yore joint apart."

"Don't do it, Deal, I—I'll tell yuh what I can." And then they had never seen Peaceful Sam so excited and talking so rapidly. Everybody knew him as a timid soul, always the peace-maker if he could make it with soothing words from behind the bar, but now—faced by that hawk-eyed old Deal Jackson, a fighting man first, last and forever—he was telling all he knew, what he had heard, and even some he had only guessed.

"So—so that's the little I know," he was finally winding up. "I don't know exact why Hanson brought Heit in, but Heit seems to have taken over the jail, more of his men ridin' in, Larsen bein' one of 'em."

"An 'the best part," Jackson grinned, "is that Heit's in town an' we don't have to go after 'im. Set out a bottle of yore best whiskey, Peaceful—an', by Gawd, this time the drinks are on the house! Belly up, boys! I ain't felt so good since my Mammy shot my Daddy!"

LASSITER knocked cold for a second time by the furious kick that sent his head smashing back into the iron rim of the bunk, Heck Hanson could not possibly win with a mob flinging in and upon him. The last thing he remembered was Hecht Heit's right ear and the side of his face. In such a fight, the odds so heavily against him, anything was fair. He had tried to fire one more shot, and the hammer of the Colt he had grabbed from Heit had caught in the Poker City sheriff's belt and jammed; and then Heck Hanson had found the sheriff's ear and a hunk of his cheek, coming down on it with his store teeth and beginning to chew like a bulldog gripping and grinding, Heit yelling bloody murder until somebody came in to deliver a quick blow with a six-shooter to the side of Hanson's head. After that they must have put their boots to him from one end to the other.

His face looked as if wildcats had been clawing him when he came back to his senses the second time and found himself again in the front room and securely handcuffed to the stout but wobbly chair behind the old desk. His left eye was closed, mouth twisted around to the right, red lumps all over his head, body and face, the most of them dripping blood, and he could not lift a hand to wipe it away.

The jail and the barn had been compeltely surrounded by this time, and yet Hecht Heit was not licked. Some of his men had tried to break away and run for it, and they had either died or been captured for all the good it had done them. But Heit still had these heavy walls around him and enough guns and ammunition to fight a young army, and he was fighting, sometimes cool, sometimes raging like a terrorized wild animal in a trap and at bay.

Hanson still sat in a slump. He had not moved. One eye had simply cracked open, the other doomed to be closed for a week. The room was full of men at one moment, empty at the next, Heit's voice coming in fits of raging. Looking out of the corner of his eye to the right, it seemed a devil of a time before Hanson saw Lassiter.

Larrondo Lassiter sat at a cocked slump flat on the floor over in the corner, right wrist handcuffed to the handle of the rusty iron safe. Larrondo was still out cold or playing possum. One could never tell about him. He was a smart old coon, especially in a fight; and now Heit was coming back, raging.

"Hit the back and the rear sides, all of you!" he snarled. "One of the damned fools in the hay loft has set the barn afire with his crazy shooting! We've got to hold the crowd off while they can make a run for the back door of the jail!"

The room was cleared again, front door closed and barred, shutters drawn over the windows. The gunfire that now came from the rear end and sides of the jail sounded as though an entire herd of wild horses were hammering across an iron roof. Heit's voice came out of it, coaxing, bullying and driving:

"Come for it, boys! Make your run! It's your last chance! Come while you can, you damned yellow bellies!"

"They can't come, Hecht!" Another voice wailed into it. "There's somebody on the roof above us an' they're pourin' buckshot into the front door of the barn ever'time a man starts to run for it!"

"It's the damned Texas Kid!" That voice sounded faint and far in the din and must have come from the barn. "He just pokes the muzzle of the gun over an' let's drive!"

"Kill him!" roared Heit. "Blow hell out of him!"

"But we can't see 'im!" wailed back the distant voice. "He just pokes over the gun an' lets drive!"

"You'll burn to a crisp if you stay there!"

Hanson started to work his chair toward the open corridor door, and stopped trying when he found that it would not budge. He looked down and saw that it had been fastened to the desk with a pair of old leg-irons left by some former sheriff long before his time. He swore in a whisper and glanced back at Lassiter.

Still tilted to one side, Lassiter's big, luminous eyes were open and staring, but they were not staring at Hanson. They were looking on past the desk toward the big old fireplace in the opposite end of the room. Like a drunk waggling his head, Hanson screwed himself around to look. He saw nothing but old papers and rubbish at first, and then a pair of long legs and booted feet took shape, a cloud of soot spilling down around them.

"Whut'n hell now." Hanson whispered, voice thick, mind still a trifle hazy. "Then feet an' legs now—"

He left the rest unsaid and continued to stare. The feet were working outward, the body of a man following, and then—as black from soot as a man could be—the rest of old Mike Reno appeared. He swore whisperingly as he wiped his eyes.

"Who'n hell," he growled, "nailed up the skylight?"

"Skylight?" Hanson blinked his eye. "Whut skylight?"

"On the damn roof!" Mike arose, soot spilling from him in a mushrooming cloud. "Where'n hell do they usually put such things, in yore tailbone pocket? I wasted damn nigh a box of shells, an' then hit only a sheet of thick steel. Where's the crowd? Yuh quit entertainin' our Wyomin' dudes?"

"Look out!" Hanson hissed just in time. "Heit's comin'!"

Mike dropped, a sixshooter coming out of his holster. A yell came from the corridor, then a wild shot and feet scrambling backward.

"We're trapped, men!" Heit's voice was another one of those wild wails. "The old

devil who was with the Texas Kid is in the office!"

"An' gonna stay, I reckon!" yelled Mike, coming up shooting and heading for the corridor door to slam it closed. "Good thing I thought to get me these keys back outa the rain barrel. Shut 'er down!"

He lunged on to the broken gun-locker and snatched down an old muzzle-loader shotgun. Cocking it and shoving the muzzle through one of the little openings in the door he yelled again:

"Shut 'er down, Heit! Once I pull these triggers yo'll all start goin' to hell back there! Shut 'er down!"

"Into the cells, you damned fools!" Heit was not even thinking of quitting. "Quick!"

Mike Reno pulled both triggers. A three-inch army field piece could not have made more smoke and noise, the wails and howls of terror filling the jail.

HECHT HEIT was robbed of the right to know exactly how it ended. He never knew which one of his own men it was who suddenly turned on him, knocking him cold with the blow of a six-shooter hard against the back of his head. Never had any one seen him fight better and with more determination to see it through to the bitter end, even after the trapped men in the barn waved shirts and handkerchiefs to surrender and were afterwards set to work at the old pump in a rear corral to put out the fire.

With men in the cells hugging the floor and the walls, it had been hell back there in the jail. Calmly chawin' his chaw, loading, shooting, re-loading and shooting, Mike Reno had never let up on them, the buckshot raining against the ceiling of the corridor to splatter and scatter, bits slithering through the doorways of the cells and finding men in a peppering hail no matter where they were cowering and hiding. And then, a stab of pain, all-blinding darkness, and then light, a sputtering cough and an oath—and Hecht Heit was sitting in a chair at the east end of the old desk, the jail jammed with Wishbone riders, Devil River men, and old Pence Sprewer and his crowd cursing and still wanting to fight outside.

"They broke mine," Larrondo Lassiter was saying, "when they kicked me in the stomach. "Damn it, I could stand it, Heck, if it wasn't for that honky-tonk smell!"

"Powerful pleasin' to the breath." Hanson was trying to grin on one side, the other so swollen and lumped it looked to Heit as if the hornets had been working him over. "That's uh fact. Good for the head an' nobody can call yuh a whiskey sot."

And then somebody brought in a real bottle of whiskey. With it they staggered in old Anse Larsen, and Larsen yelled and rushed for Heit, both hands clawing for his throat.

"Mine Yon, mine Olaf!" he wailed. "Killed because of you!"

They knew everything. Heit could see that after they had pulled the crying and wailing Larsen off of him. For months on end horses and cattle had been stolen and slipped across the line. Unable to fight back without involving his sons, Larsen had been forced into the most of it. Heit listened, telling himself over and over that he did not give a damn for anything now. He changed his mind when Hanson arose, tenderly wiping his swollen lips on the back of his hand.

"An so," he was saying, "I reckon it's up to Judy an' the baby. Maybe the baby. For some fool reason she maybe still loves the critter." He looked at Heit, holding back a smile. "They might yet hit it off together as man an' wife—"

"No!" Heit tried to spring to his feet. The Texas Kid and Mike Reno were right behind him and yanked him back. "Don't—don't let that woman near me!"

"Anyhow," Hanson was going on, "she won't let her pa an' his crowd hang 'im. Three of his men promise to go back to Wyomin' an' bring back the stolen stock or the money to pay for 'em to get the rest of their friends outa hock. When they've all told their little tale to the judge, then I reckon I'll have to hang 'im.

"Yuh may have to he'p me out a little, Heit." Hanson oozed back in his chair with a grimace from his knots and aches. "I ain't never hanged a fella, not legal. Wanta be nice an' talk to us?" He tried to grin again. "Tellin' us about how yuh got to stealin'—"

"Yes, I'll talk!" Heit glowered, a crooked smile warping his lips. "I've got three words to say to all you damned yokels. *Go to hell!*"

"All right, Utah," Hanson reached for his Wonder Tonic, "call in Judy an' the baby!"

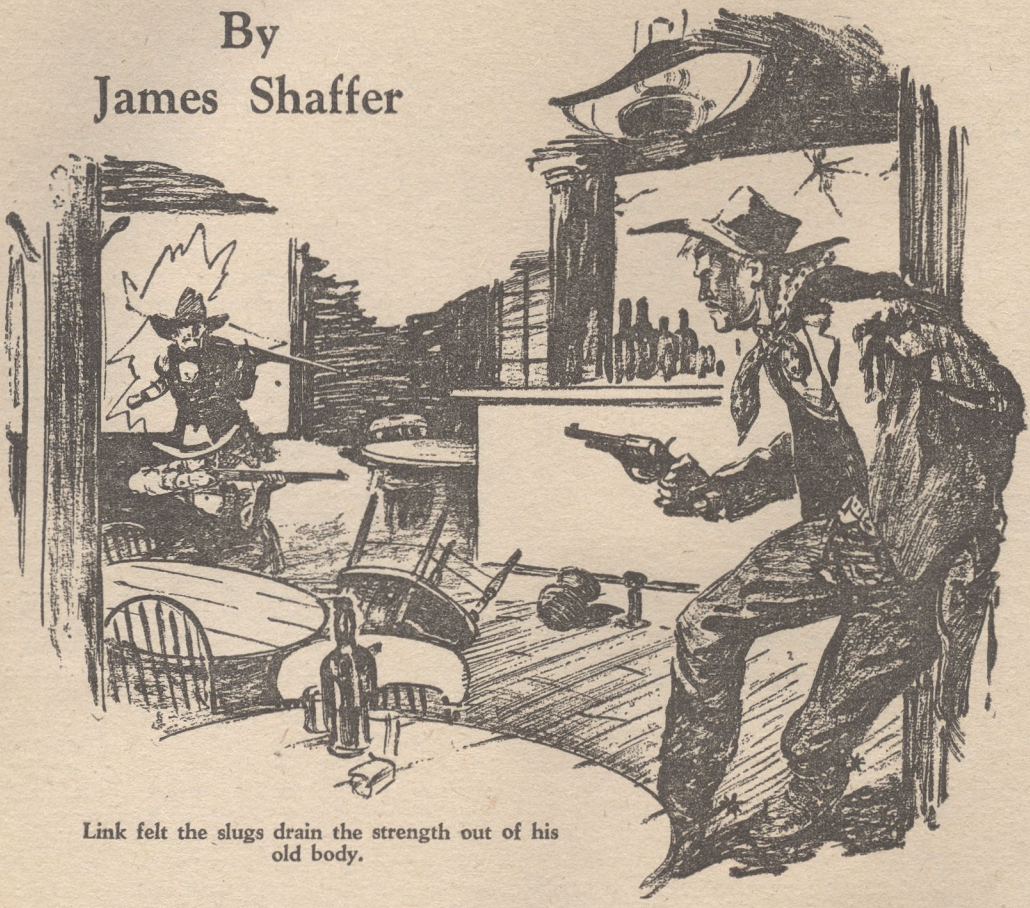
"No, damn it, no!" White-faced on an instant, fear taking place of arrogance, Heit tried once more to leap from his chair and was yanked back. "Don't let her near me! I— I'll *talk.*"

Nobody bothered to tell him that Judy and her baby were already galloping homeward a mile north of town on the white-faced black horse.

THE END

THE KILLING OF LINK TATUM

By James Shaffer



Link felt the slugs drain the strength out of his old body.

"Link Tatum will sure drag his carcass outta them hills when he hears we framed his kid for murder!"

"THE KID'S been in jail three days, charged with murder," Smiling Sam Hepburn said.

A worried look replaced the smile that had won him his nickname. "Do you think he'll come?" he asked. "After all, he might not even hear about it."

"He'll come all right," Todd Roary said. They were big men, both of them, and their bulk seemed to fill the little back office of the saloon. Smiling Sam Hepburn was dressed in the height of fashion, with a big gold chain dangling across his brocaded vest. Todd Roary's clothes were much more somber.

Todd glanced now at the misshapen thing that had once been his right hand, before Link Tatum's lead had smashed it. His left hand closed over the butt of a hide-out gun.

"He's got ways of keeping track of that son of his," he went on. "And when he hears the kid's in jail for murder—he'll drag his carcass outta them hills, where we can git our guns at him."

Smiling Sam clamped a cigar in his teeth and his eyes flashed with a murderous light.

"I hope so," he said softly. "Ten years in a stinking prison—on account of him. Ten years of my life—just waiting for the day I'd gun that damned hellion down!"

Todd Roary growled deep in his throat, and

he waved his shattered hand. "Ten years," he snapped. "And I have to carry this hand for the rest of my life."

"How'll you know 'im?" Smiling Sam asked. "Neither of us has ever seen him—and there's no description of him."

"We'll know 'im when he makes his play to get that son of his out of jail," Todd said cunningly.

Smiling Sam nodded thoughtfully and looked at his brother. Few people knew that Todd Roary, bounty collecting manhunter, and Smiling Sam Hepburn, genial saloonman, were brothers. It wasn't good for their business to have it generally known. In fact it could ruin their business. And their particular kind of business was good in this roaring town of Concho.

Concho was booming right now, with the coming of the railroad, and any boom town attracted men who carried a price on their head. Wanted men—that was their business, and they preferred gunhung men who were wanted—dead!

"Oh yeah," Smiling Sam said, suddenly remembering. "A gent just walked in. Looked like he might be on the dodge. Maybe you know him."

Todd nodded and walked over to the door. It was his business to know wanted men—and to know how much they were wanted for. There was a hole cut in the door, so a man could look out in the saloon proper. Todd spotted the thin, dark man at the bar who was doing some heavy drinking in a jerky, nervous way.

"Spider McCray," Todd said. He thought a moment. "Wanted in Texas—dead or alive. Five hundred dollars."

"I've heard he's faster'n hell with a gun," Smiling Sam said.

"When it comes time to collect, I won't take chances," Todd said meaningly. He studied Spider a moment. "He looks nervous. If he gets scary, he might shag outta town before I can collect. Go out and make 'im feel at home."

But neither man's mind was on Spider McCray right then. They were both thinking of the hombre that would soon be coming down out of the hills to a sure death.

Todd nursed his twisted hand. Eleven years he'd carried that hand, now. Eleven years since Link Tatum's lead had smashed that hand, and had sent Smiling Sam to prison.

THAT fight had been Link Tatum's last gun ruckus. He'd given up the outlaw trails and had burrowed himself deep in the hills. It was rumored that old Link had a son, and that the son was a fine, upstanding citizen. Old Link, the rumor whispered, lived back in the hills near his son's ranch, and his son prospered, because rustlers learned swift death followed a raid on the boy's ranch. Link saw to that, even though the son never saw Link, and never knew who his daddy was.

During the years Smiling Sam was in prison, Todd Roary had checked the truth of that rumor. The son lived near Concho, and called himself Ted Owens. He owned a prosperous ranch, and had a fine family.

"When you serve your time," Todd wrote Smiling Cam, "head for Concho. That old hellion must live back in the hill from Concho, and I got a plan to make him leave the hills and come down in gun range. . ."

Well, the plan had worked, up till now, Todd thought, and if he knew Link Tatum, the old hell-raiser would leave the hills the first faint whisper he heard about his son.

Smiling Sam Hepburn went out into his saloon and go to talking to Spider McRay. It didn't take Smiling Sam long to plant the idea in Spider's head that Concho was a fairly safe town for gents on the dodge. Smiling Sam kept talking and smiling at Spider. It was old stuff to Smiling Sam, and his mind was only half on his talk with Spider.

The other half of his mind was busy with his thoughts. Ten years of his life wasted in a stinking cell, he thought. And all because Link Tatum had been just a little too foxy.

Well, they'd see how foxy he was this time, Smiling Sam thought. They'd see how foxy he was when hot lead took him in the brisket. . .

Todd watched Smiling Sam talk to Spider a few minutes, then picked up his hat and left the office by the side door. He threaded his way through the busy street to the hotel. On the second floor of the rickety structure, he knocked at a door, then stepped inside.

The man sprawled on the bed was half drunk. Todd eyed him with distaste. Deucy Malone drank too much. After this job was over, Todd thought, it would be wise to see that Deucey couldn't do any more drinking—or talking!

"Have a snort," Deucey invited. He roused his small body up, his narrow face aglow with drunken hospitality.

"No," Todd snapped, "and you let the stuff alone until after the trial. You got your story straight?"

Deucey nodded with drunken gravity. "On Tuesday night," he quoted, parrot-like, "I was riding into town and I seen Ted Owens shoot Amos Winant in the back. It was bright moonlight and I couldn't been mistaken—I recognized Ted Owens, and also his horse." Deucey paused. "Say! Was it really a bright moonlight night Tuesday night?"

"Yes, you damn fool!" Todd snapped. "Ted Owens will probably get a lawyer and you'll be cross-examined on the witness stand. Make

sure you don't get your stories twisted up."

"Don't worry—know it perfect'," Deucey said nonchalantly, then he frowned with alcoholic concentration. "Say—whatcha got against this Ted Owens—when you come to town a month ago, you didn't even know 'm. I hadda point him out to you. What's he done to you?"

"That's no damned concern of yours," Todd said coldly.

"Oh, I ain't trying to pry," Deucey said with a sly giggle. He lolled back on the bed. "I'm plenty satisfied. Five hundred for plugging Amos Winant—then five hundred more for packing the blame onto somebody else." He cackled drunkenly at the humor of the situation.

"And a six-by-three plot in Boothill if you let your tongue slip," Todd reminded him in a soft voice. Deucey sat up straight. He was a small man, and he made up with slyness and cunning, what he lacked in physical courage. Fear washed his cruel little face a pasty white.

"You ain't got no call to worry, Todd," he said half whining. "I been in on deals like this before."

Todd laughed, seeing the cowardice in the man. "I'm not worrying," he said. "For the first time in eleven years, I'm happy."

He left the room, and was walking down the corridor when Smiling Sam hurried up the hotel stairs.

"It's Spider," Smiling Sam said soberly. "He seen a coupla people in town that might recognize him—he's getting ready to pull outta town."

"He still in your place?"

"Yeah, but having a last drink."

Todd Roary nodded and walked briskly down the stairs. Smiling Sam hung back a ways; it wasn't their policy to be seen together too much. Todd's left hand reached for his armpit and he slipped the hide-out gun free and checked its loads.

As he stepped on the front porch of the hotel, Spider McCray stepped out of the saloon across and up the street a ways. Spider wiped the dampness of his last drink from his lips, hitched his belt a trifle and started for the hitchrack for his horse. Todd Roary cut swiftly through the heavy street traffic.

Spider reached his horse, and shoved his boot in the stirrup. Todd Roary was close now—barely fifty feet, and Spider McCray had his back to him, starting to climb into the saddle.

Now, Todd thought, and the hide-out gun leaped free. . .

"Spider!" Todd Roary shouted.

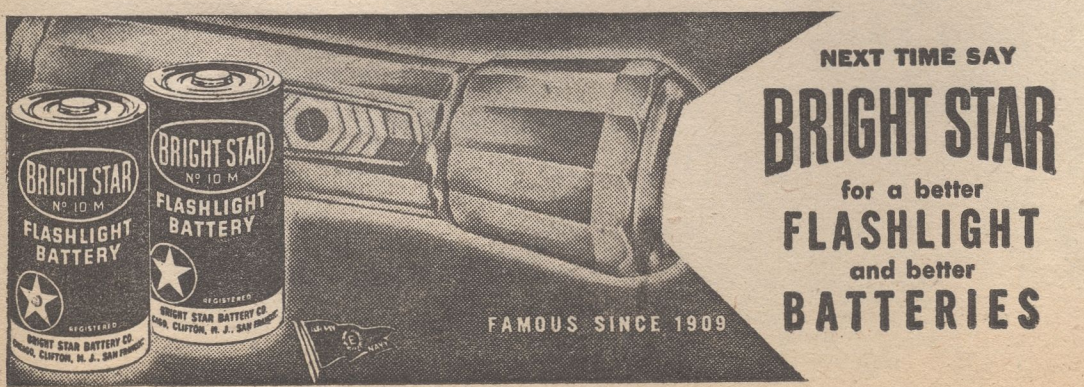
Two shots roared in the street. Spider's horse leaped forward, and the slim outlaw grabbed desperately at the saddlehorn and hauled himself aboard. For a moment, Todd Roary stood stock still, mouth agape, wondering where those two shots had come from. Then he jerked out of his trance. He'd yelled at Spider a second before those shots—expecting to get Spider before the man could turn and fire. But now. . .

The leaping horse had spoiled his aim, and Spider was twisted in the saddle, now, his own gun coming into view. Todd Roary felt a moment of panic—then his gun was blasting at Spider. He saw his shots take effect; knew that his shots had spoiled Spider's aim. But the outlaw was leaving town at a gallop, still in the saddle. Todd watched him out of sight, then jammed the hideout back in its holster. He snarled and pushed his way through the crowd that had scattered, then formed again, and entered Smiling Sam's saloon, going on back to the office.

"What happened?" Smiling Sam asked a few minutes later.

"Did you see what fool fired those shots?" Todd snarled. Smiling Sam hadn't—the street was crowded. Todd cursed and growled.

"Those shots came at just the right second," he growled. "Almost as if somebody knew what I was up to—and did it to save McCray."



Smiling Sam poured himself a drink. "Five hundred dollars gone up the spout," he said philosophically.

There was a knock on the door. At Smiling Sam's yell, a man slid into the room; a hard-eyed, hard-featured man, whose hand was draped with nonchalant thoughtfulness on his gun butt. A cigarette was dangling from his lips, and he spoke around it.

"He's left the hills," he said.

Both men jerked eagerly. "How'd you know?" they demanded. "Didja see him?"

The newcomer shook his head. "I didn't see 'im—and I ain't *never* seen 'im." He grinned tightly. "I stole a few of Ted Owens' cows once—so I stay out of Link Tatum's way."

Todd cursed softly. He'd been hoping the man could give them a description of Link Tatum.

"Then how do you know he's left the hills?" Smiling Sam said.

"There's a dim trail that leads up to his hideout," the man said. "There's a few people that know it—and even fewer that ever try to travel it." He paused. "There were fresh hoof tracks on it when I rode by it—and they were coming down out of the hills. Now about that money I was promised."

"Pay 'im, Sam," Todd said with a laugh. "I just lost five hundred dollars."

"How old were the tracks?" Smiling Sam asked, as he peeled off some bills and passed them over.

"Couldn't say for sure," the man replied, "but offhand, I'd say that if he didn't stop along the way, he's had plenty of time to get here."

FAR back in the deep hills, at the end of a trail few men could follow, and even fewer men would dare follow, Link Tatum was getting ready to travel.

First, he shucked the buckskins he'd been wearing. They would be conspicuous in Concho. In his long underwear, he prowled through his cabin, collecting his store bought duds.

Link Tatum's appearance didn't match his reputation. His rep was that of a curly wolf, with fangs bared, but his appearance was that of a small time rancher, with mild blue eyes and a certain serenity in his tan cheeks and grin-puckered mouth. He pulled on worn levis, blue shirt, and finished it off with a battered Stetson and scuffed boots.

He unlocked a small, horsehide bound trunk and drew out a holstered sixgun with a cartridge belt wrapped around it. He got oil and cleaning rags and started to work.

His son was in trouble. That thought was uppermost in Old Link's mind, as his supple old fingers worked oil into every part of the sixgun. The day before he'd been restless and nervous, and he'd known that it was the strange sixth sense that a man develops when he lives alone, warning him that something was wrong.

So Link had taken a ride, and at the end of that ride, had sent a call down the mysterious grapevine. Then with a jug of liquor, he'd waited for the answer. And the answer had set him moving.

Ted Owens was in trouble; bad trouble. That was all that Link had waited to hear. The details, he wasn't interested in. What kind of trouble, how his son had gotten in it—they didn't interest Link. He'd find those out later.

And because he didn't know what he'd run into, or what he'd have to get his boy out of, he packed his dusty old saddlebags till they bulged. An extra sixgun, extra ammunition for the sixgun and the rifle in his saddle boot, and as an afterthought, a few sticks of dynamite, in case he had to blast open a jail.

He left the hills at night, and no man saw him until he'd reached a well traveled trail near Concho, where travelers were many, and strangers not uncommon.

From a hilltop, he surveyed Concho for an hour, before venturing into town. He saw the two shiny ribbons of steel that carried the railroad, the brawling saloon, and the surging crowds on the street.

"Boom town," he muttered, with the knowledge that anything could happen in a hell hole like that. With a patience born of years, and a knowledge of other boom towns, he waited till midafternoon before entering Concho. By then, the town had thrown off its hangover from last night, and was now brawling, drinking and carousing the new day away.

He left his horse at the livery, and lost himself in the milling crowd. Up the street a ways, he saw a big, gaudy saloon, the Concho Palace. A moment later, he eased through the batwing doors and lounged against the bar. He ordered beer, and passed a few bantering remarks with the bartender.

But old Link was listening. There were many topics of conversation along the bar, but every now and then, Link caught the name of Ted Owens. And bit by bit he began to piece the thing together.

Ted Owens was in jail. Yep, the sheriff had jugged him three days ago—after a three day chase. Owens had killed a neighboring rancher named Winant—they'd been disputing over a boundary, Link gathered. The conversation shifted to other things, and Link engaged the bartender in conversation.

"This gent, Owens," he remarked casually, "sounds like they got him dead to rights."

The bartender drew a beer and slid it up the mahogany. "Yep. He plugged this Winant

hombre in the back. Somewhere along the trail, a few nights ago."

That, thought Link, was a damn lie. His boy wouldn't plug nobody in the back.

"Reckon they got proof, huh?"

The bartender laughed shortly. "Guess Owens figured nobody saw him, but some gent was riding the same trail that night. Saw the whole thing." The bartender shrugged. "It'll be a cut and dried affair—the trial, I mean. Reckon Concho'll have itself a hanging in a few days."

Link drained his glass and slid it over for a refill. He reckoned Concho wouldn't be having itself no hanging, either. He'd noticed the jail as he'd walked along. A sturdy enough structure—he was glad he'd thought of dropping that dynamite in his saddlebags. The bartender got busy all of a sudden, and Link waited for him to catch a moment for more conversation.

This witness to the shooting—Link Tatum wanted to know more about him. . .

"Howdy, stranger," a genial voice spoke at Link's elbow. "You look like you've been long on the trail—have a drink with me on the house."

Link Tatum nearly dropped his beer mug. It'd been ten—no, nearly eleven years since he'd heard that voice, but there it was, the same oily, genial voice he remembered.

Smiling Sam Hepburn!

Link finished his beer and moved away from the bar. Keeping his back to Smiling Sam, he eased across the saloon, then from amidst a crowd around a card table, he turned for a look.

It was Smiling Sam Hepburn, all right. Smiling and genial as ever. A little older looking maybe, a little gray around the temples, but the same man that Link Tatum had sent to prison ten years before.

The years rolled back, and Link Tatum was reliving a night almost eleven years before. He and some other night riders had ridden into town for a few drinks at Smiling Sam's saloon. Link had been reluctant, but the other boys had argued that Smiling Sam's place was safe for wanted gents—that the law didn't bother it.

But something had smelled, and Link hadn't gone in the saloon. One of the boys had brought him a pint outside, and he stayed there, drinking.

There'd been a robbery that night. A bank robbery that was supposed to have been blamed on the outlaws who'd come to town with Link. And it would have, too, if Link hadn't been outside and seen it all. His guns had changed the picture right quick, and Smiling Sam Hepburn had been caught, red-handed.

Link watched Sam closely now. The saloon owner was talking to a thin, dark gent that Link spotted instantly as an owlhooter. When Sam's back was turned, Link slipped out of the saloon and started down the street. He got another shock. A man strode from an alley, cut across the street and headed for the hotel.

Todd Roary. Link's eyes narrowed as he noticed Todd's smashed right hand, and the bulge under his coat the hide-out gun made. He remembered the night he'd smashed that hand, the same night Smiling Sam had gone to jail. Link had heard how Todd Roary made his living; back shooting men with prices on their heads, and he'd taunted Todd Roary with that knowledge, and dared him to come after him.

Todd hadn't come after him, so Link had gone after Todd, yelling his threat to smash Todd's gun hand forever. . . .

It'd been dark that night, Link remembered, and he wasn't sure whether either Sam or Todd had seen his face. They might have, though, in the light of his gun flashes.

Todd disappeared into the hotel, and Link leaned against a building, his thoughts boiling. He glanced at the squat, ugly jail down the street, and the thoughts in his mind began to fit together like pieces in a puzzle.

He knew that Todd Roary had sworn to get him; to wipe out the humiliation of his smashed hand, with hot lead in Link Tatum's heart. And Smiling Sam Hepburn had been carried off to prison vowing to hunt Link Tatum down, if it took the rest of his life.

AND NOW, after eleven years, the three of them were again in the same town. And in the town where Link Tatum's son was being held for murder. Link's eyes narrowed. There were few people that knew he had a son.

But Todd Roary was a manhunter, with ways of finding out things; and Smiling Sam had been in prison, where he could have met outlaws that knew something of Link Tatum's life. . . .

Smiling Sam left the Concho Palace and headed for the hotel. The big man with the false smile of geniality seemed to be hurrying. And after a few minutes, Todd Roary came out of the hotel.

It was then that Link noticed the dark, thin gent leave the Concho Palace. The man glanced up and down the street, then walked toward the hitchrack. Todd Roary cut across the street, coming up behind the man. Link moved up the street. He saw Todd Roary's left hand snake for the hide-out gun; saw the unsuspecting outlaw turn his back to Roary and start to mount; saw Todd's mouth open to yell.

Link Tatum's gun blasted two slugs into

the sidewalk; then Link was moving down the street in the confused crowd, a faint smile on his lips as he saw the wounded outlaw ride out of town and heard the blasting of the shots from Todd's gun.

Link spent the rest of the afternoon on the prowl. He covered the town thoroughly, every bar and every saloon. He asked questions; he listened in on conversations, and he bought drinks for talkative gents, then listened to their gossip. By dark, his worst suspicions had been confirmed.

The murder charge against his boy was a frame-up. And it was a frame-up that would send him to the gallows. The name of Deucey Malone kept running through his mind. Deucey Malone who had a room in the hotel. Link hunkered on his heels near the livery and waited for full darkness; waited until Concho was at its brawling, drinking, fighting, cursing loudest. . .

Deucey Malone rolled restlessly on his bed. He kept dreaming he heard someone calling his name, and that the sun was shining in his eyes. He rolled over and sat up.

Someone was holding the lamp close to the bed. The reflector was on the lamp, and he couldn't see beyond the brilliance of the reflector. He started to slide off the bed, when a sixgun moved out of the darkness behind the lamp; its black maw gaping at his face.

A violent fit of shaking seized Deucey. Heavy drinking had rotted his cowardly nerves; and now this . . . this big glaring, bright light staring at him; and the sixgun in the circle of light, held by a gnarled old hand.

There was not a sound in the room, and Deucey couldn't see the man behind the lamp any more than if he'd been in another world. A dry sob of fear shook Deucey's slight frame.

"What—whatcha want?" he blubbered.

"Not too loud, Deucey," the voice behind the lamp cautioned him gently. The voice was a hoarse, bodyless whisper, and it caused Deucey to shake some more.

"You'n me's gonna have a little talk—all cozy-like. Come on over to the table." The light moved back, and Deucey followed it like a rabbit that's been staring too long into a snake's eyes. "Sit down."

"This fellow that you saw shoot another in the back—this Ted Owens—I wanta know something about that case," the voice behind the lamp said.

"I don't know—I mean—go 'way and lemme alone," Deucey whined.

The big sixgun moved back into the darkness. It reappeared a second later on the table top, its black muzzle shoving paper and pencil. Deucey watched it like a rabbit watches a snake come closer.

"I think you made a little mistake about who you saw that night, Deucey," the voice went on gently. "I want the truth—in your handwriting. The names of the men that are back of this thing—a full confession."

"They'll k-kill me," Deucey whimpered.

"Not if you hurry. Soon's that paper is writ, you can light out—by morning you can be miles from Concho." The sixgun was looking at him again, and Deucey saw the muscles in the gnarled old hand tighten, but the gun never quivered. When it went off, Deucey thought, the slug would go clean through his right eye. It would tear out the back of his head. . . .

Sweat dripped on the paper, as Deucey worked the pencil. A half sheet was filled with writing, then a whole sheet and part of another. He let the pencil slip from his limp fingers. The sixgun raked the paper back into the darkness.

"Get back in bed and cover your face with the blanket," the voice said. "Keep your face covered a few minutes—then get outta town fast!"

TODD ROARY was jumpy and nervous, and he jerked around as Smiling Sam came into the office. Smiling Sam wasn't smiling.

"Somebody saw Deucey Malone leave the hotel and head for the stable," Smiling Sam said. "Where'd he be going this time o' night?"

Todd scowled. "I don't know. C'mon, we'll find out."

Deucey kept his horse in the stables behind the hotel. The two brothers moved softly through the shadows until they were within a few feet of Deucey.

They could hear the little man's heavy breathing and the creak of leather as he saddled his mount. The two brothers waited until Deucey led his horse out of the shadow of the stable.

"Where you going, Deucey?" Todd asked. Deucey jumped and whirled around, a sob ripping his throat.

"Just—gittin' some air," he said lamely. Todd stepped closer and cuffed him across the face.

"The truth—damn you!"

Deucey's breathing became heavier. He waited until he saw Todd's hand lift again, then the words tumbled out.

"We better all git outta town," he blurted. "That Owens job—somebody's onto us." He blabbed out the whole story; about the lamp in his eyes, the sixgun that came out of the darkness. About the man behind the lamp that he never saw—and the paper he'd written—

"No!—Todd! No!—I'll find that gent—I'll get that paper back—"

A single blast of Todd's hide-out cut his words short. The shot went unnoticed in

Concho's bedlam of merriment. The two brothers waited until Deucey had quit kicking, then went back to the saloon. Todd pounded his stump of a hand on the office desk in fury.

"He's got us licked," Smiling Sam said. "He'll turn that paper over to Owens' lawyer, and Owens'll go free."

Todd wasn't a drinking man, but now he turned a bottle up and let it pour down his throat in big, gurgling gulps.

"Could we work up a lynch mob?" he asked.

A gleam of hope flashed in Smiling Sam's eyes. "Might be," he said.

Todd pounded the desk again. "We got to," he growled. "Men fulla liquor will do anything—once the talk gets started. Go out and start passing out free liquor to all the bums and sots that ain't got the price of a good drunk! Pass out some money to men you c'n trust and send 'em to other saloons to do the same thing. Then get the talk started. Git 'em talking about hanging Owens to the lamppost in front of the hotel."

Smiling Sam was smiling again. "When that old hellion sees 'em fitting a noose around his brat's neck—he's bound to make a break to save his hide."

"We'll stay in the saloon," Todd nodded, "with rifles. . . ."

IT TOOK Link Tatum an hour or two to find out the name of the lawyer his son had hired to defend him. He found the man asleep in his room behind his office and turned the paper Deucey had written over to him.

The lawyer was full of questions, but then remembering the rumors he'd heard about Ted Owens having an outlaw father, kept his questions to himself.

"The case against Owens was shaky to begin with," he told Link. "This'll knock it sky-high and might help to clean up the town, too."

Link was satisfied. He left the office and started down the street to the livery, his mind made up to leave town.

Deucey Malone had written the names of Todd Roary and Smiling Sam Hepburn in that confession, and Link's first impulse was to go gunning for the two.

But to do that would bring the law baying on his trail again, and he'd spent plenty years of happiness in his hideout in the hills; knowing that his son wasn't far away, and was prospering. Peaceful years, they'd been.

He knew without a doubt that the two brothers had engineered the frame-up of his son, and he shrewdly guessed the reason was to drag him out of the hills, where they could wreak their vengeance on him.

He sighed. In his younger days, he would have already been gunning for them, but the serenity of age had dulled his desire for vengeance.

He had weighed the possibility of further trouble the two might make for his son. In a few months, the boom would be over in Concho, and Todd Roary and Smiling Sam would be leaving. They could thrive only in boom towns.

So Link was going back to the hills. . .

He noticed a new undertone in Concho's merriment as he moved toward the livery, an ugly rumble under the sound of the town's forced laughter and gaiety. He shrugged and went on; there was always some kind of trouble brewing in a boom town.

He was riding out of town by a side-street, when a milling, drunken crowd spilled out of a saloon. Hoarse shouts split the night, and Link saw a man waving a rope. He reined in and listened.

". . . hang the back-shooting killer. . ."

". . . string 'im up. . ."

Link started to lift the reins, when he suddenly froze. He'd caught a name in the bedlam of that noise.

Ted Owens!

Link drifted on, but the bony old knuckles on his sixgun butt were white with tension. Stop the mob? How? Low curses spilled out of his mouth. He thought wildly of racing to the steps of the jail and gunning down the front men of the mob.

Then he shook his head. He'd be gunned down before he could fire a shot. Then his old shoulders straightened. He could go in and turn his gun over to Todd Roary and Smiling Sam. Give himself up to them, and tell 'em to call off their dogs; to leave his son alone.

But could they stop the mob they'd started? Old Link didn't think so.

The next few minutes were a nightmare to Link Tatum. He saw the mob rush the jail; saw the sheriff and his jailer fire a few ineffectual shots over its head, then the mob broke the doors down and poured inside.

A sob tore at Link's throat when he saw them dragging his son out. His son! The thought jerked him from his reverie, and the next instant, he was running toward his horse. Frenziedly, he dug into the saddlebags, and hauled out the dynamite.

The mob was dragging his body up the main street now, and he could see him struggling to get loose. It nearly tore old Link's heart out to see his son twisting and jerking to free himself, but being hauled steadily along to his death. He turned and raced up an alley, to get ahead of the crowd.

He'd throw that dynamite at the fringes of the crowd. He'd blow that damn mob sky high. He'd shoot that stuff off till there was no one standing in this hell town, but his son

and him. He was cursing and sobbing aloud as he ran along the alley.

THEN something stopped him like he'd hit a stone wall. It slammed him down to his knees. He was passing the back of the open-doored saloon—the Concho Palace. And there were two men in the place. Two men hunkered down by the front windows, with rifles. They'd turned now, and were facing old Link.

They'd heard old Link cussing and crying as he ran up the alley, and they'd turned in time to see the light from the doorway splash on him; in time to send a rifle slug ripping into his old body.

"Roary! Hepburn!" He croaked the names out through the pain that was twisting his body. "Waiting for me, was you?"

"Waiting for you is right!" Roary's yell was triumphant.

Link's gun was bucking in his hand. He was still down on his knees, and there were tears in his eyes. The tears made his shots go wild. There were no tears in Roary or Hepburn's eyes, and their slugs went true. Link felt them slam into him; felt them drain the strength out of his old body; batter it back to the ground, and send him sprawling in the alley.

He got up on one elbow, but Todd Roary and Smiling Sam saw him and scuttled for safety behind the bar.

"I think I got 'im!" Smiling Sam yelled.

"He ain't dead yet!" Todd Roary shouted. "Keep your head down. Yell to somebody in the street to circle around and get 'im from behind. . . ."

"That's the way you fight, Todd—git 'em from behind!" Link jeered. "You yaller-belly—where's your guts—I'll stand up at the same time you do. . ."

But Todd Roary was yelling at somebody in the street, telling them to run around the alley and pump some lead into that old hellion out there.

Link raised up. The strength was going out of him fast. He was going to have to finish this job, while there was still time, and strength to do it. He gently threw one of the dynamite sticks with an underhand throw. It hit the floor of the saloon and rolled down toward the end of the bar. Then he rested his gun barrel on the doorsill.

"Look out, Todd!"

Smiling Sam's scream was cut short by a thunderous roar, as Link Tatum sent a slug at the dynamite. Wreckage rained down on Link; pounding his tired old body. But he flung another stick in the saloon; saw bloody-faced Smiling Sam try to grab it and throw it back, and hit it dead center while Sam still had it in his hand. The explosion blew Todd Roary out from behind the bar. Todd was crazy from concussion, and Link Tatum put him out of his misery with a slug at the belt line.

Link still had more dynamite. He gathered it up and got to his feet. His head reeled and things turned black, but there was still that mob; there was still his son being dragged to his death.

He reeled through the shattered saloon like a drunk; he staggered into the street, vaguely aware that the mob had slowed down. The mob had heard that dynamite go off, and it was curious to know what was going on. Well, by hell, Link would show 'em what was going on. He flung a stick into the street. It was a pitifully short throw, and the stick rolled to a stop twenty feet from the crowd.

Link steadied himself and fired at it. It took two shots to hit it, but when he did hit it, the explosion knocked a half dozen of the mob down. It jarred Link back, and he hit the street in a sitting position. He flung another stick, and raised his gun.

But the mob was breaking up. The sight of a bloody old man flinging dynamite at them jarred a lot of the mob to their senses, and Link saw his son shake himself loose and start pushing his way toward him. Link sighed and let the darkness he'd been fighting, close in around him.

Link Tatum fought his way through waves of nausea that tried to keep the darkness wrapped tight around him. But he fought 'em back; he shoved the darkness back until a glimmer of light peeped through.

"He's going pretty fast," old Link heard a man say, as he succeeded in getting back to a world of light. There was a worried looking man bending over him. That would be the doctor, Link was thinking, and the doctor was saying that Link Tatum was dying.

Link didn't need any doctor to tell him that. He knew how bad he was hit, and he knew he didn't have much longer. He got his eyes in focus. He was in the shambles of the Concho Palace—on what had been a pool table. A good looking young fellow was bending over him.

"Hiya, Ted Owens," Link mumbled.

"Not Ted Owens—Ted Tatum," the young man said. "I've combed the hill for years—trying to find your hideout. And waiting for you to come down and visit me, Dad."

Link had been fighting to hold the darkness back, but now he let go. He saw the doctor bend over him quickly, but Link knew it was no use. He wanted to wrap up in the darkness again. There wasn't a whole lot to go on living for. He'd gotten about all out of life a man could want.

His son had called him 'Dad.'

"When they left, I dragged you out of the marshes."

THE COLD HEART OF CHEPITO

By Cliff M. Bisbee

●

Chepito Lopez would be no dull slave of a farmer. He, with the heart of granite, would soon greet his foolish brother Bernardo and quickly fleece him of his well-stocked ranch. . . . But the gringo who bore Bernardo's name had a welcome of his own—served red-hot from a scattergun muzzle!

●

CHEPITO LOPEZ knew he had the right place when he spurred over the last round hill and looked down on forty acres of land as mellow-black as a raven's wing.

Around the clearing on three sides stretched an endless jungle of tall green tules. Behind were the hills where even now sleek cattle crushed down the wild grasses. In the farmyard were stout mud barns, pole corrals and a fine rush-thatched house of adobe brick. Or perhaps it was built of cut sod—what did it matter as long as the soul-shriveling work of the thing was over and done before he, Chepito, arrived on the scene?

A smile of eager anticipation spread wider over the brown, deceptively mild features. "That Bernardo, the brother I have not seen since the two of us ran naked and shouting in the pueblo of Los Angeles!"

As abruptly the smile vanished and Chepito drummed hard knuckles against his temple.

"The accursed problem of it! Should I at once engage Bernardo in a game of *los dados* —in which none is more expert than Chepito Lopez—and so boldly relieve him of his share in the inheritance of our father? Or better play the fox with the long tail of cunning and allow this brother of mine and his young *esposa* to continue working themselves to the thinness of dried beef while I, Chepito, dwell in luxury."

With a heavy sigh he pulled the black mare into movement. "There is much to be said for both plans," he thought. "And yet—*por supuesto,* one does not press the wine until the grapes have a ripeness. . . ."

Riding down the slope, where lengthening shadows of evening ran out over the pretty farmyard and the wide-spreading tule lands, his mind went back to the harsh death of his father in Los Angeles. Attacked and robbed on the San Fernando trail by a pair of gringo ruffians, the old man had finished the journey to collapse at the very feet of his son.

"It is the finest grazing and farming country in the world, that Valle del Sacramento," Old Martín had whispered, in a last painful speech. "In a few years these *norteamericanos* will be flocking in—already they come like vultures to a fat carcass. I rode south to find you, *hijo mio.* Bernardo works hard and so does his pretty young wife, on that tule farm of ours—but there is room for you, Chepito, and need for the strength of your hands. Even more is there need for you now that I—"

The old man coughed up blood and clutched at his chest where a bullet lodged. His eyes glittered with fever and the sure knowledge of death.

"Give up this accursed life of gaming and idleness in the pueblos, my son! The ranchito in the north is half yours. Go and work it with Bernardo, raising fat beef and fine chilis and good yellow corn. *Ai, Dios!"* Martín Lopez forced a last painful sentence. "Luisa is a fine girl, Chepito. You will like her very much!"

Chepito shrugged now and made a wrinkle of the nose. What good to him if Bernardo's *esposa* had the loveliness of a rare flower? His appreciation for beauty would be reserved for the gay señoritas of the pueblos, who could return his gallantry with the soft coin of love. His brother's wife he would not steal—unless of course, the thing were forced upon him.

But the ranchito was different. Chepito Lopez would be no dull slave of a farmer. Rather, he would farm this brother, Bernardo. For, having been reared by a sly uncle in the south, he was possessed of a heart with the coldness of granite. So he reminded himself often, with pride.

VARI-COLORED chickens fled squawking in the farmyard as Chepito slid from the saddle. From the house came a slim girl carrying a large gourd pail.

Chepito swept off his sombrero and felt his heart give a great leap not at all in keeping with its stony quality. *Santa Maria!* but she was a little beauty. Yet before he could speak she dropped her pail with a startled exclamation. On the small face was a look of terror that made Chepito stare in wonder.

"Luisa—wife of my brother!" he called out softly. "Do not run, but come and bestow a kiss on me, *hermana mia.* A sisterly kiss for Chepito Lopez. . . . "

The girl's rounded bosom heaved and the full lips trembled. There was a strain and weariness stamped plainly on the pretty olive features. Then her eyes, pools of a darkness and brightness to make one forget the prior rights of one's own brother, opened wider.

"You—you are Chepito, whom the old father went south to find? Thank the good mother you have come! But quickly—there is not a moment. . . . Those two vicious ones—"

A booming voice from the house halted her speech. It caught Chepito like a physical blow, jerking him around.

"You lie, Mex! You ain't my brother."

The man who stood in the doorway was a big redheaded gringo, a grizzly bear of a man. Chepito stared in amazement. But this was an ugly hombre! The skin of his forehead was just a thin line between ragged brows and the tangled mop of disgustingly red hair. His eyes were muddy as roiled puddles, and shot with blood. But the thing that drew Chepito's eyes like a magnet and caused a feeling like snakes crawling in his belly, was the long-barreled pistol in the stranger's hand.

"How *could* I be your brother, when you were so obviously sired by some gringo dragon?" Chepito inquired, still watching the gun. He added with dignity, "I am Chepito Lopez, come to claim—"

The big one broke in harshly. "Listen, Mex, this here is the Lopez ranch. The American government is fair. They'll see it stays in Lopez hands. Ain't it lucky I'm Bernardo Lopez and that hombre down there by the corrals is my brother? 'Course we're only half breeds, which accounts for us lookin' like white men. But that don't hurt our legal claim to this ranch."

"I think you are one filthy gringo," Chepito said dangerously. "You are not Bernardo." A chilling thought struck him and he whirled to the girl. "Perhaps it is that even you are not Luisa!"

The girl looked fearfully at the giant redhead. "I am Luisa," she almost whispered then. "Chepito, *ai!* Such a heaviness in my heart. . . . These two vermin on a coyote's

paunch, such horrors as they have done—"

"Silence, girl!" roared the gringo. "Get in the house before I cuff your pretty cheeks again. Move, or by hades I'll salivate this black son on the spot—"

The girl picked up her gourd pail and fled into the house. Yet even as she closed the door behind her a silent, electric plea was flashed to Chepito. Then she was gone and from within came a muffled sob. Chepito was jerked rudely back to attention by the prod of the redhead's gun in his ribs.

"I'll prove you ain't Chepito Lopez, Mex," the man growled. "That's him comin' up from the barn now."

A lanky, bearded man came across the farmyard, a rifle crooked in his arm. He had bushy black whiskers. *A redhead and a black whiskered one!* The identical descriptions old Martín Lopez had given of the pair of killers who attacked him after he had talked openly and proudly of his fine rancho and his two good sons. Chepito's fingers ached to get at the knife in his belt, or the musket suspended from his saddlehorn. But he could do neither with the guns of these ruffians ready to fill him with lead.

"Who's he?" Black Whiskers asked.

"Claims he's—uh—*you!* Ain't that a laugh?"

"That's agin the law, ain't it, Red? Goin' around the country claimin' to be somebody they ain't, gets a man in trouble."

"Sure does," Red agreed. "Men get hung for less."

His ugly face twisted in a leering grin. " 'Course, we're short of rope. Best we can do is a bullet. It's the patriotic thing to do, Blackie—I mean Chepito. I'll watch the gal to see she don't try no funny business, while you take this brash hombre down to the tules. Better weight the carcass down with rocks."

"Why don't you do the killin' once in awhile?" Blackie muttered sullenly. His snake-like eyes were fixed on the door of the house.

Red's grin went even uglier. "Do as I say," he ordered bluntly. "And git your mind off my woman. . . . "

With a curse Blackie jammed his rifle into Chepito's back and gave him a shove. "Get goin', Mex!"

Chepito's groan was half fear engendered, half honest rage. Never had he seen two such villainous ones. And Bernardo—surely they had murdered him. He took one step now, tensing. Yet before he could make a dive for his knife the house door flew open and Luisa rushed out, clutching a large stick of firewood. Like a female cougar she leaped at Red, swinging the stick, Spanish words screamed from her lips.

"You will not add Chepito's murder to the others. Myself I will kill you—"

The stick of wood crashed down, missed the red thatched head and landed with a loud thud on the thick shoulder. Red bellowed in pain, whirled and swung a big paw of a hand. The blow struck the girl across the face and she went down in a heap moaning.

The horror of it so quickly enacted before his eyes, held Chepito rooted only a split second. Then he too went into action, with a rush of voluble words fit for such men as these.

"Perro! Ladron! Striker of women—" He slammed into the giant, jarring back the shaggy head with knotted fist. Red went backward violently, recovered with a roar bursting from his throat. Chepito slugged him again.

Now behind the redhead Luisa raised up suddenly to her knees; Red stumbled over her and crashed down like a great tree falling. *"Muy bravo!"* Chepito yelled, fumbling for his knife, which he'd had no time to loosen in it's leather case. But now the girl screamed a warning.

"Behind you—*cuidado!*"

Too late Chepito whirled. Blackie lunged at him, swinging his rifle like a bludgeon. He saw it swinging in the air, behind it the yellow teeth in that loose mouth as the man put all his

strength into the blow, Chepito tried to duck lower, frantically whipping out the bright steel from his belt—and in the next second knew he was lost.

His foot slipped on a round stone. He cringed automatically, but the rifle butt connected with his skull. Behind him Luisa screamed again, this time in despair, and then there was only a great roaring in his ears and pain that was unbearable; after that only engulfing blackness.

HE WAS not sure he was really alive when sticky lids finally wrenched reluctantly open. Evidence was strong to the contrary.

Around him was a cacophony of sound that was certainly not of the world he knew. There were shrill calls and whistles, vibrating rattles, squawks and raucous cries that tried to outdo each other in filling the air with noise. It took minutes of painful concentration to realize all that clamor was merely the blended talk of wild things of the tule swamp, in the very belly of which he seemed to be.

He sat up groggily, clutching his head. His hand touched a tight circlet of cloth, under which was a lump that throbbed with thrice-cursed ardor. His clothing was crusted with black grime and had dried in forlorn wrinkles about his thin shanks. He surveyed them sadly for a moment, his still-reeling mind trying to decipher the puzzle of very existence.

"I am—but yes, Chepito Lopez. Yet how came I here into this roosting place of wildfowl? *Ai!* Now it hits me!" He hammered his head with knuckles doubled, and instantly regretted it with a hollow groan.

"Thost two gringo *lobos,* those *zapilotes* of red hair and black beard—they tried to kill me. How near they succeeded, who can now tell? Was I thrown into the swamp, but of a surety, as my clothes testify. Yet I am here."

It was simple as that—and a problem unsolvable. He gave it up and crawled to the edge of black water and bathed his hot face. Narrow canals ran out in every direction through the rushes, and warm sunlight filtered down through the green stalks. Sunlight! Then it was another day. . . .

Refreshed with the cool water he leaned back against the single willow growing here, and put his mind on the problem of those two who had welcomed him—such a welcome! Old Martín must surely have told them what a fine ranchito he owned in the north, and how he would bring his youngest son to share the labor and the fruits thereof. It's value, he would point out in his pride, would multiply sevenfold and more with the advent of many settlers from the States.

The greedy pair had killed Martín though he had made the balance of his trip before dying. Then they had come north, found the tule ranch; then moved in. And Bernardo—but surely they had murdered him.

"Luisa—*ai de mi!* What will happen to her one can guess." He shuddered. "It is good I am possessed of a cold heart," he reassured himself inadequately, and raised his head at a sudden redoubling of the wildfowl clamor.

In the next second the blunt prow of a small skiff came probing through the reeds!

Chepito scrambled to his feet, looked around wildly for a club, snatched a small limb and waited. The man who calmly poled the boat was tall, clean of face and bare, muscular torso; his skin was the fine olive brown of the Californio. Smiling, the man leaped from the skiff and held up two large catfish.

"*Companero*—we eat!"

"One does not meet food with a club" Chepito observed, throwing down his stick. "And I have a vast hunger. You are—" he looked around the little isle, at the plain sign that it had been camped on for at least several days, "my rescuer, eh? You brought me here, amigo?"

"*Si,*" the other answered.

Without another word he drew from his pocket flint and steel, knelt and proceeded to build a campfire. Within minutes, while Chepito watched in speculative silence, the roasting fish were sending up rich odors. And while the catfish cooked Chepito observed another thing. His benefactor's broad back was criss-crossed with half healed scars, but certainly the marks of a cruel and inhuman whipping. There were other scars visible on arms and shoulders, and some dark bruises.

"But surely you have been used badly," Chepito said, as they sat on a log and ate ravenously of the fish. He removed a bone from his mouth and pointed with it to the other's wounds; then raised it to indicate his own bound head. "Even as I."

Suddenly excited he exclaimed, "But look! Could it be— Who are you, then?"

His companion raised a curiously blank face. Then he smiled and shrugged. "*Quien sabe, amigo?* Who knows. . . . "

He didn't look, Chepito thought, like a man without brains, like a *tonto.* Yet there the thing was. He did not even know his name, nor how he came there. But he knew where he had found Chepito, and the knowledge held strange terror for him.

"Over there," he answered Chepito's gentle questioning, and pointed to the east. He shivered. "I prowl there, watching from the rushes—always watching. And you are dragged down like a slaughtered pig and sunk into the swamp, weighted with rock. When they go away I take you out, bring you here. This is last night," he finished, and subsided again into silence, brooding and deep.

"And why do you watch the farmyard?"

The other only shook his head and answered nothing. The fear died from his eyes and only dullness remained. But there was now a certainty in Chepito's mind. It could be no other way. He reached out and tapped the other's knee.

"You are Bernardo Lopez!" he said. His own knee he tapped then, and continued, "I am Chepito, your brother. Martín, our papa, is now dead, killed by those same gringos who beat you senseless and from which you somehow escaped into the swamp."

"Papa is dead?" The other asked simply, but without any particular feeling. "You are Chepito, I Bernardo. "Yes!" He laughed with enjoyment of it. "Bernardo!" He struck his chest and nodded proudly.

Chepito wanted to weep. "Brother of mine, I rode five hundred miles and more to make a fool of you—and you are a fool already. *Que lastima!* Even I would have stolen your beautiful wife, if the thing were possible. Now it is only that we must rescue her, and quickly. . . . "

Now he tried the girl's name on Bernardo. "Luisa. You recall Luisa, no? How could you forget that lovely one!"

"Luisa?" It was only a question in Bernardo's voice. His eyebrows drew down in concentration, then suddenly shot up. "Maria!" he crowed happily. "The lovely Maria! But where is she? Not here!"

It was Chepito's turn to frown. "No, not here, brother of mine. No girls are here in the tule swamp, and more pity. And you remember in your hazy mind not that so beautiful Luisa, your wife in the hands of thost gringos, but another named Maria? Por Dios! but you deserve to be stolen from. Look, we shall embark immediately on this rescue of Luisa and the farm, and I myself will see you take her in your arms. Surely then your senses will return and there will be no more talk of this Maria."

"*Si,*" Berrnardo answered, nodding complacently. "Maria."

Chepito groaned. Without further comment he climbed into the skiff. To his relief Bernardo followed, picking up the long pole. He turned the boat expertly at the first cross waterway.

"And where, amigo? he inquired then. "More fish? Perhaps a duck sleeping in the reeds—"

"To the rancho," Chepito commanded firmly. "Where you go to watch. Only we will do more than peer like marsh rats from the swamp, *hermano mio,* though of weapons we have none. *Naturalmente* the gringos removed my knife."

THEY had come to the end of the last shallow waterway and here a path led up through the muddy border of the tule swamp.

With an iron hand to the shoulder he pressed Bernardo down in the weeds, signaling that he should lay low for the present. Inwardly he murmured a prayer that the bereft brother's reaction would be of a helpful nature when the thing broke. He threaded his way to one side, still keeping well hidden, and presently he could see up across the yard to the house.

The man called Blackie was leaning against a lone tree in the yard, hat shading his eyes. Obviously he slept. *Bueno!* Chepito rose, then as quickly dropped back. Heavy steps sounded and the big redheaded man strode into view. He carried a rifle in one hand; from the other dangled a cottontail, its insides half blown out.

Seeing Blackie asleep the redhead gave forth a huge curse, rushed up and kicked him on the leg. The black one leaped up wildly with a scream of pain. "You damned lazy hound!" Red's enraged voice was loud. "I told you to watch the girl. You think we want her escaping to the authorities in Sacramento?"

He ran to the house, hurling further curses over his shoulder. He disappeared inside, was back almost immediately with fresh bellows of rage.

"By hell, she *is* gone! Skuttled out while you slept there like a bloated boar. Damn you, Blackie, I ought to put a slug of lead through your yellow guts. . . . "

And then, even while Chepito's heart was leaping with gladness that Luisa had managed to get away, his two eyes were seeing her emerge from the rear of the barn. He rubbed the bulging organs to make sure they worked aright. In truth it was Luisa, leading his own saddled horse from a rear door, going quietly with fresh terror paling her face at the loud rage of the redhead around front. *Válgame, Dios,* she was in the very act of escaping!

Chepito's eyes narrowed while he made rapid speculations and observations. The girl was hidden from the two men, yet the instant she mounted and made to fly along the field she would be seen, and unquestionably shot in the back. The horse could not take to the swamp, though that small area behind the barn was not in the view of the gringos just now. Apparently Luisa in her urgency to flee did not consider going afoot into the tules.

In a very agony of suspense Chepito ducked back and made his way back to Bernardo. The brother was on his knees, staring through the reeds at the girl, and his lips were moving stiffly.

"Luisa—Luisa. . . "

"So the mind's gears are trying to work, eh?" Chepito whispered. He dug curved fingers deep into Bernardo's shoulder, pulling him up. "Come!" he ordered harshly, and stepped out boldly into the clearing.

In the act of reaching for a stirrup, Luisa saw them emerge. She dropped the reins, her hands flying to her mouth in an effort to stifle an involuntary cry. Yet the startled sound came forth as she grasped a corral post for momentary support.

For a second the three froze there staring at each other, then from the farmyard came a hoarse query, "What was that squawk. Ja'hear it, Blackie?"

"Sounded like the woman."

Frantically Chepito signaled the girl to come to the swamp, thinking she might yet hide there. But to this astonishment she whirled quickly and darted back into the barn. Chepito started to groan, then understood. Such a girl as this! She would hold the ruffians within the barn while Chepito and Bernardo raced across the cleared space—their only possible chance of doing so without almost certainly running into sudden death from the gringo guns.

He clapped Bernardo on the back, nearly bowling him over. "You have sense returning, eh? Then it is now or never to prove it. *Sangre y muerto,* brother, we shall fight with what leaps to the hand. *Viene!"* And he led out across the field at top speed. The swift thud of feet close behind was sweet music.

AGAIN he restrained Bernardo with an outstretched hand, while he peered through a crevice. Inside, the girl was fumbling in a manger—at the very moment Red and Blackie rushed in through the wide front door of the barn.

"Hah!" Red bellowed. "So you're here, eh, girl? What was you yellin' about?"

Luisa turned, holding up her apron. She laughed convincingly. "The spiders—they scarce me, señor. I was gathering the eggs, and—"

"Why was you so damn quiet before then?" Red snarled, still on edge with suspicion. "If you're thinkin' of tryin' to escape, you'll regret it!"

"To run from you, señor?" she asked simply, then laughed again, shyly. "But I—I like you!"

Red's jaw drooped, then a slow grin broke across the ugly face. The grin widened. "You do, huh? Now you're gettin' smart, sister . . ." And he stepped forward, arms outstreched to enfold her, while Blackie turned and spat out the door in disgust, or perhaps envy.

Bernardo nudged his brother in the back, nad Chepito nodded grimly. *"Ahora!"* he whispered, and as one man they plunged into the barn.

"The pitchfork, Chepito—there in the loose hay!" Luisa screamed the words, even as her two small hands came up, clutching two white eggs in each. She thrust the eggs straight into Red's eyes, squashing them there as he spilled backward with a startled roar.

Blackie whirled like a frightened dog, and grabbed up the rifle Red had leaned against the manger. But he got it no more than half raised when Bernardo was on him with a wild yell and powerful, gripping hands.

Chepito snatched the fork handle inclining from a pile of loose hay. As Red recovered his footing and gouged streaming egg from one eye, Chepito brought the tines of the fork around. *"Viven los hermanos Lopez!"* he shouted, and gave a mighty thrust.

Red had clawed his pistol from its holster with the hand not engaged in clearing his eyes of the mess. He pressed the trigger and the gun roared loud in the barn as the tines of the fork met his heaving chest. His death scream was long and horrible, rattling the reed thatch of the roof with its loudness. But a death scream it was. He fell back, jerked and rolled over, the smooth tines driven clear through his body.

Surprisingly, Chepito found himself seated on the hay, the loose stuff underfoot having slipped and hurled him there with the force of his lunge of death. And behind him lead scarred the mud wall of the barn. Bernardo was bending the black bearded one over the manger. A mighty roar came from his throat, then there was a an audible snap. Blackie slumped limply to the floor.

"His back," Bernardo observed, blinking slowly and taking a deep breath. "I am afraid it is broken in two. . . . "

Chepito nodded weakly. "Now this brave girl—this wife of yours, my brother."

But Luisa had fainted. Bernardo stood blinking at her, wagging his head slowly. He swung to Chepito, stared a minute. "You are my brother then? But yes! Now I recall everything. Somehow my brain had become fogged from the treatment these gringo dogs gave me. They tied me up, whipped me without mercy—much more."

"So now that is all past, and once more you have your senses, eh?" Chepito almost growled the words, then raised his voice to a loudness. "Then why don't you see that your wife is comforted! Or do you still dream of this Maria?"

Bernardo's chin drooped. "But, *hermano;* my wife is Maria, the sister of this little chicken! Maria is now in Sacramento preparing to make me the proud father of a son—she stays with a cousin there. Now Luisa here—"

"Be quiet with your talking," Chepito commanded. He knelt beside Luisa, took her head on his knee. Her eyelids fluttered and a soft smile came to the red lips.

"You will stay and work the rancho with me?" Bernardo said insistently over his shoulder.

"Por supuesto—but of course," Chepito answered. "Now go see to my horse, will you, good brother? You have a far pasture? *Bueno!* Take the horse there, Bernardo. . . . "

And then Chepito's smile answered the one of the girl's.

SIX BULLETS BEFORE BOOTHILL!

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STRIFE BEGINS at SIXTY

El Paso was sure it knew Zeb Owings' secret—that in the old blacksmith, it was sheltering a famous gunman in disguise, one of the great Texas pioneers who had come out of retirement to avenge the deaths of the innocent.

IN THE middle 1850's, the Texas border town of El Paso was so full of gunfighting killers that on a windless day, it was said, the blue smoke of battle hung like a pall over the low adobe buildings simmering in the sun.

Most of the men there who directed the destiny of the West were young. Like the ring-fighters of today, they reached the zenith of their bullet-chipped careers at an early age, and found early boothill graves.

But the desperado El Paso best remembers was well past middle age, his hair and scraggly chin whiskers flecked with white, before he discovered that he was a gunslick.

For twenty of his adult years, Zebulon Owings was a drifting ranch hand. He was the kind that forked hay and dug post holes, not a larruping cowpuncher. At forty, Zeb Owings was tired of moving endlessly over the Texas prairie. He found himself in El Paso when he decided to settle down, so he settled there. For fifty dollars, he sold his saddle and purchased an anvil, and a mighty hammer that the wizened little man could hardly swing. He was no great shakes as a blacksmith, but Texas was full of horses, and competition wasn't very fierce. He got along.

It was some twelve or fifteen years after Zeb had settled comfortably into his adobe niche in El Paso that the then booming town was terrorized, for a short while, by a minor gunman whose name, now, scarcely survives. Some records call him Pedro Willes, other accounts identify him as Peter Wilson.

This killer had an edge on the other killers who had passed in and out of El Paso. Spoiling for a fight, day or night, he never bothered to waste time drawing his gun from a holster. He carried it drawn and cocked in his shooting hand as he went about his business. Irritable and suspicious, he had gunned down three of the town's most respected fighters.

Suddenly, for no apparent reason at all, Zeb Owings was seen one morning oiling up his rusty sidearm, which was a temperamental Colt. Then, as the whole town stood by, petrified, Zeb strolled coolly up the street until he met the anti-social gunman, called him, and shot him dead with the first bullet fired.

As far as can be known, Zeb had never seen the killer before he walked up to him, said, "Comin' at yuh, watch out!" and pulled the trigger.

And if El Paso was astonished when the gunslinger died without firing a shot, Zebulon Owings was absolutely confounded. For a full ten minutes he gazed down at the fallen killer who had gunned down some of the most dangerous men in the West, and then he spoke.

"By jiminy," he said. "By jiminy cricket!"

This naive expression of utter bewilderment electrified the city. Zeb awoke to find himself a celebrity, a celebrity toward whom men were careful not to turn their backs. Cool nerve, courageous, forthright, foolhardy, dangerous were a few of the adjectives applied to the humble blacksmith as he stood blinking in the sudden flood of notoriety. El Paso was sure it was sheltering a famous gunman in disguise, one of the great original pioneers of Texas who had come out of retirement to avenge the deaths of the innocent.

There wasn't a word of truth in it; this was the first time in his life he had fired a killing shot, but Zeb loved it. He listened to the talk eagerly, lapping it up, and, finally, he began

THE fighting men of El Paso stood aside and made way for Zeb Owings when he came slouching up the street the next day. At his side rode the battered Colt in a leather holster green with age.

He turned into the Green Eye Saloon and approached the bar. The men drinking there moved over and gave him room—plenty of it. Zeb ordered a short beer and surveyed the room thoughtfully.

The Green Eye Saloon was a pretentious whiskey palace, at least for El Paso, where people didn't go much for fancy fixings. It was lined with twinkling tinsel mirrors; the tables were marble-topped and the floor, now scratched with many scraping spurs, had been a fine, dark oak.

Zeb nodded approvingly. His ear caught the brisk snap of cards on a corner table and, glass in hand, he drifted over and declared himself in as a kibitzer.

As the oldtimer threw his shadow across to believe it.

By W. W. Carr

Drawing without a word, Acey Haynes curled his finger around the trigger.

the table, the man who was dealing looked up impatiently. He frowned. Acey Haynes was a professional gambler. He had drifted into town a few hours before and had gone to considerable trouble to line up the three money-flush cowhands at his table for a game of stud.

A great pile of silver dollars were riding on this next hand. The gambler's thin, white fingers slewed the cards out expertly. Under the table he hitched his heavy gun belt, loosened the wicked black sixgun in its silver-stamped holster. Acey Haynes believed in being ready. Temperamental Texans occasionally made trouble for a hard-working card sharp. A thin smile on his mouth, he gathered his cards close to his silk shirt. A faint groan escaped one of the cowhands sitting across the table, as he surveyed his hand.

Suddenly, Zeb Owings stumbled in between the gambler and the edge of the table. He placed a withered old hand on the gambler's knee.

"'Scuse me," Zeb muttered. "I saw ye drop something." And bending almost double, the old timer crawled under the table and came up holding three cards.

"Had yer boot heel right on top of 'em," he said cheerfully, handing the cards to Acey. The slowly purpling gambler made no move to grasp the pasteboards, and Zeb flung them, face up, on the marble table. The ace of hearts. The ace of diamonds. The ace of spades.

Drawing without a word, Acey Haynes curled his finger around the trigger and backed away to get a sure range. Just as stark terror replaced the mild astonishment on Zeb's face, and the three cowhands at the table began to howl with rage, someone entered the saloon, flinging wide the batwing doors. Texas sun-

light poured into the room, turned the swaying mirrors into blazing pools of blinding white light. Acey blinked as he pulled the trigger and his bullet chipped off a thumb-sized chunk of marble from the table. By this time, Zeb had his slow-drawn Colt out of its holster and before Acey Haynes could fire again, one of Zeb Owings' green and aged brass-nosed slugs had plowed through the gambler's silk shirt. The black sixgun fell from the card player's long fingers, and he fell, already dead, upon the gray table.

Zeb straightened slowly from the dramatic fighting crouch he had affected during the gunplay. He looked around at the silent, admiring crowd.

"Do you know," he said slowly, "I believe that feller was cheatin'?"

IF Zeb Owings' fame was great before, it was wild now. He was El Paso's seven day wonder. When he awoke in the morning, his first steps about his adobe shack would send a pack of admiring but fearful children scattering to the cottonwoods. As he worked at his forge by day, his business doubled, then tripled.

Then came the pay-off. Down from the Gulf Coast came a hard-riding crew of train robbers. There were four of them, led by ruthless Frank Stanley and his half-brother, Bill. Headed for the safety of the border, they had left five dead deputies behind them and were in no mood to be stopped at El Paso.

About a month after Zeb had taught Acey Haynes how to play poker, the gunhung blacksmith looked out one morning to find the main street of El Paso locked and boarded up tight as a skin.

"What's the trouble?" he asked a passerby.

"Frank Stanley and his gang are headed this way. They ought to pass through this morning, and nobody is looking for any misunderstandin'," came the answer.

Zeb scratched his head. "What they comin' through town fer, anyway? Seems to me they're askin' for trouble."

"I hear they need food bad . . . food and horseshoes," he was informed.

"Horseshoes!" Zeb looked nervously at his cold forge.

"Which way they comin'?" he demanded.

"East," said his informer. Zeb turned and dashed into his shop. He emerged shortly buckling on his gun belt and slid the bolt on his front door. Then he hobbled determinedly to the gate.

Barricaded El Paso peeked from behind barred shutters to watch the grizzled oldster as he hurried up the road.

"He's goin' to gun down the whole Stanley mob, all by himself!" went the whisper. In the excitement, no one noticed that, while the gang was expected to ride in from the east, the champion of El Paso was headed, as fast as he could go, due west.

The white noon sun was riding high when Zeb got out of sight of town. He wiped his steaming forehead with a cotton kerchief. His loaded gun belt cinched in tight around his hips felt heavy as lead and he walked for awhile with his gun in his hand to lighten the drag.

Ahead, a grove of cottonwoods twinkled in the sun. A seasonal stream was flowing near, and in the shadows at the edge of the grove stood an abandoned adobe house.

As he drew beneath the shade of the trees he raised his hand to remove his hat. Suddenly the sombrero was lifted from his brow and sailed into the bushes as a pistol cracked out from the adobe hut. Zeb flung himself into the bush on top of his hat. The gun he was carrying in his limp hand went off accidentally and Zeb's bullet clipped off a splinter from the hut's wooden sill. The head at the window dodged out of sight.

Zeb clung to the sod. A prairie dog popped out of his hole and stared at him solemnly. Zeb stared back, wishing unhappily that he were small enough to squeeze into the burrow. There was no doubt that he had walked straight into the headquarters of the Stanley gang, just like any tenderfoot greenhorn. The gang was smart, at that, in having circled El Paso to come in from the west.

A voice bawled from the house. "Come out of them bushes, or we'll come out and drag ya out!" A polished boot started out the door. Zeb's second bullet again chipped wood, and the boot withdrew.

Flushed with success, the blacksmith cut loose with a four-shot volley; then he reloaded. He saw a chance to keep the bandits at bay, at least until his bullets ran out or darkness fell. Zeb Owings was far from stupid, even though the fatuous oldster had, for a time, wanted to believe himself a shooting fool. He used the oldest trick in the world that afternoon and, playing on the frayed nerve-ends of these terror-stricken, desperate men, it worked:

"Close in from the back, boys," he yelled, none too commandingly, to his non-existent comrades. A deep, startled silence from the adobe shack rewarded his act.

For three hours, Zeb and the bandits pursued a policy of watchful waiting.

Accident and chance had created the legend of Zeb Owings. This time, it was an accident and a coincidence that saved his life. As the sun crept down and long shadows flowed from the cottonwood grove, one of the bandits slipped out of the shack and snaked down toward the stream. Zeb learned afterward that Bill Stanley, wounded, had nearly died of

thirst that afternoon when the four gunmen thought they were besieged by twenty men.

Three hours of lying in the sage had given Zeb such a painful crick in his back that he didn't much care if he lived or died. He rose to his knees when he spotted the man wriggling toward the creek, and taking leisurely aim, he killed him.

There was now left in the house, beside the wounded man, Frank Stanley and another rider. Zeb could see them clearly, as the lowering sun flooded the mud-walled room. He saw the two bandits moving about the room. Their faces were now gaunt and gray.

Frank Stanley knelt beside his brother, who was stretched on a pile of dirty blankets. The wounded man's cracked voice floated out faintly to Zeb's ears. He was crying for water. The bandit leader made a tempting target, but Zeb held his fire, for his belt was nearly empty now of those ancient, green cartridges.

Then Frank Stanley bawled from the house, "Send some men in to carry my brother. We'll come out. We've had enough!"

The hair curled on Zeb's neck. What would these half-starved killers do when they discovered that the "posse" consisted of one old man who was covering them with a gun carrying just one more bullet?

Desperately, he began to heave heavy pebbles at the blank mud walls. From within the house the striking rocks sounded like bullets chunking into the adobe. If he could just keep them inside until darkness fell, he might be able to wriggle away still wearing a whole skin. Firing a round of blanks, which were the only kind of cartridges for which he had any real affection, he continued to pepper the hut with rocks.

Stanley howled indignantly, "I surrender!"

Zeb hollered back, "I don't want to lay eyes on you onless you're dead!" He never said a truer word. Then he pranged his last shot through the window and began to pray.

A contingent of cavalry, armed to the teeth, single-footed through El Paso at dusk. The lieutenant at the head of the column snorted unbelievingly when he was told that a sixty-year-old gunfighter had the gang holed up somewhere outside the town. They spread out to look for Zeb, however, thinking him an eccentric old windbag who had become lost in the desert. Zeb's wild, popping bullets drew their attention. They closed in on Frank Stanley, his last man, and his dying brother, stumbling over Zeb just as he was clicking his hammer helplessly on an empty chamber.

BACK in the mirror-lined Green Eye Saloon that night, the story of Zeb Owings' lone stand against the Stanley gang was getting better and better as it was repeated to each newcomer. A dozen men stood by Zeb and took turns pounding him on the back. The gunhung blacksmith sat hunched over a table, a score of untasted beers stacked before him. For a long time, he was very quiet. The buzzing bullets of the afternoon still sang close by his ears, and he fingered the tattered holster by his side reflectively.

Another heavy hand thumped him between the shoulder blades, and a hoarse voice shouted, "Guess that reward won't be so hard to take, old timer?"

Zeb pointed up his ears. "Reward?"

"Sure, reward! A thousand dollars!"

Zeb brightened visibly. He climbed on his chair, put his foot on the table and downed not one, but five, of the untouched drinks.

"Guess I am a lucky gunhung fightin' fool, at that!" he declared happily.

For the next five years, Zeb Owings walked in the limelight of notoriety, and he thrived on it. Fortunately, it was a quiet five years for El Paso and his ancient, smoke-blackened Colt went unchallenged. When he died, his was one of the few corpses dead of natural causes to be honored by a fighter's grave in Boothill. On a rough slab of Texas granite was scratched, "Zeb Owings—who was he?"

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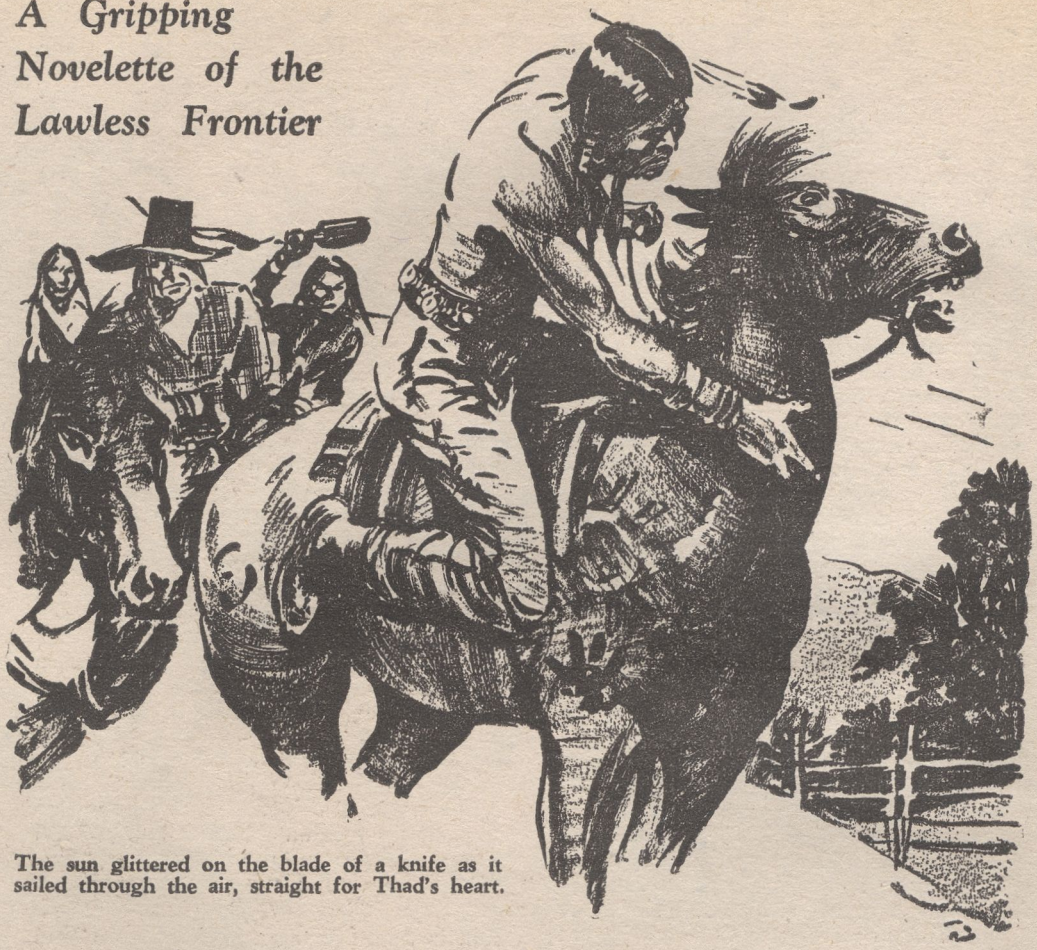

The sun glittered on the blade of a knife as it sailed through the air, straight for Thad's heart.

LAND BEYOND THE LAW

Chapter I

BAD MEDICINE FOR REDSKINS

THAD RAINEY looked at the coppery faces of his visitors and swore softly. Thirty young bucks and two thirds of them mean drunk! Plainly on the prowl for trouble.

Swinging his gaze back to their leader, a sullen eyed brave, Thad shook his head emphatically. "No firewater! Bad medicine for you!"

The brave answered him in perfect English, his tongue only a little blurred by the liquor he'd already consumed.

"Firewater good medicine for my men. Makes hearts stout."

"No firewater here," Thad repeated obstinately, his uneasiness growing as he saw the red faces darken with anger.

The Indian looked toward Thad's cattle, dotting the low rolling hills of the Cherokee Strip. "Oxie then," he compromised.

Thad knew Indian temperament too well to bargain with them. Giving them a beef would be cheap riddance and far better than to risk an open clash. But when the white settlers acceded to demands like that they won contempt rather than gratitude from the Indians. He shook his head firmly.

"No oxie unless you pay. Ten dollars." He held up both hands, fingers spread far apart.

The leader only scowled in answer but an-

Thad Rainey shouted that snarling bullets were too good for the man whose rotgut whiskey changed the peace-loving Poncas into killing savages. . . . And every settler in the Strip agreed—that Rainey himself must pay with his life for hiding those six cases of 40-rod murder!

By Ennen Reaves Hall

other buck dug his moccasined heels into his horse's flanks and rode forward.

"We take."

His tone was ugly and fear drove sharply through Thad but he gave no betraying sign of it as his hand flashed to his holster.

The Indian's hand darted to his waist line and the sun glittered on the blade of a knife as it sailed through the air, straight for Thad Rainey's heart.

But Thad was a split second quicker, perhaps because of the buck's intoxicated condition. As Thad's gun came free he stepped back and fired, but not at the buck. Killing

him would be rash folly. Instead Thad aimed at that flashing knife. There was the sharp sound of lead striking metal and the knife blade seemed to shatter into a million pieces.

For a moment the Indians sat as though stunned. Thad repeated firmly, "No oxie!"

With a grunt that might mean anything the leader swung about, hand flashing briefly in the sign of peace, then loped away. The rest followed in single file. Only when the last one swung into place did Thad draw a deep breath of relief. A close shave, that. The redskins had probably known he was alone on the ranch. If his bluff hadn't worked they might have carried his scalp off as a souvenir.

The tension over, his anger began to rise. Anger directed wholly toward the white man, or men, who had provided the Indians with the hard liquor they'd been drinking. Any fool knew how dangerous that was. Sober, the Ponca tribesmen were friendly and peace-loving. Drunk, they were red savages in whose hearts burned volcanic fires of hate and resentment. Whoever was supplying them with liquor was endangering every white settler in the Strip.

THAD WAS still trying to decide whether or not he should ride the thirty miles to Fort Reno to report the drunken marauders when his partner, Arkansas Ryder, rode up. Ark was a grizzled old-timer and wise in the ways of the Indians. He had just come from Fort Reno with the mail and supplies.

"No use riding back to the fort tonight," Ark told Thad. "The troopers are all down in the Kiowa country. Little hell busted loose down there. I left word for them to come out here and catch a whiskey peddler as soon as they get back."

Thad groaned. "And that may be two days or more, Ark. We can damn sure have some hell of our own before then if that whiskey supply ain't stopped."

"Right you are, Thad. But you gotta find a leak before you can poke your finger in it, lad. You any notions about who's firing up the redskins this a-way?"

"Hell, I don't know anybody, low enough to do it, Ark. It could be Commanche Joe Morgan, except he hasn't been through here for weeks so that lets him out. There's some ready to believe it's Cab Robbins or his kid."

Ark shook his grizzled head. "I don't savvy it that a-way, Thad. Cab knows Injuns too well to do it. The kid will buy it and drink it but that's all. That's just Jonathon Doan's talk because he hates Cab so danged hard."

"Well, somebody's doing it," Thad said gravely. "And we've got to find out who before we're all scalped in our beds."

Shortly after nightfall Ark's excited voice brought Thad to the door. "Fire, Thad! Looks like it might be over at the Doan's!"

Looking at the bright glow along the horizon a dark foreboding filled Thad. "It's Doan's all right. We'd better get going, Ark."

The Doan cabin, a mile west, was new and well built of pine lumber—or had been. It was little more than a bed of glowing embers when Thad and Ark arrived. Jonathon Doan and his motherless daughter, Lexie, looked dazed and bewildered at the sudden tragedy that had overtaken them.

Other neighbors were there ahead of Thad, or arrived shortly after. Lon Morehead, whose grazing lease adjoined Thad's, was binding up Doan's burned hands and listening to Doan's embittered complaints.

"The gover'ment ain't giving us no protection like they agreed. This bunch of redskins come by and demanded beef. I was scared to refuse so I let them take one. But the thieving sons didn't stop with one. They took three or four and when I tried stopping them they started running off half my herd. I had to shoot one and I wish to hell I'd loaded all of 'em with lead. Me and the girl was in the house, figgering what to do, when they slipped up and fired us. Now I reckon the gover'ment will be wanting to hang me for killing one of the thieving so and so's."

The men listened with grave faces. They all knew this might be the beginning of serious trouble. The ranchers were only permitted in the Strip because they held Grazer's Permits, obtained either directly from Indian tribes or from bigger ranchers who had obtained large holdings that way. If trouble broke out the government would order them all out and they would lose what they had invested in improvements and equipment and perhaps even their cattle. Thad knew he voiced the thoughts of all of them when he said grimly:

"What we've got to do is find that whiskey peddler and stop him. None of us are safe until we do."

Jonathon Doan spat angrily. "No need to look fur then. Everybody knows it's thet Cab Robbins and his half-breed kid."

Lon Morehead spoke up. "Why don't we call the ranchers together tomorrow and thresh this out? We set here waiting on the soldiers we're liable to all be burned out, or worse."

Doan nodded approval. "Now you're talking sense. We can shoot as straight as any brass-buttoned trooper and I can pull a rope without getting gover'ment pay fer it. You fellers spread the word and we'll meet at Lon's place tomorrow."

Thad wasn't pleased at the turn things were taking. He knew the dangers of vigilante action as well as he knew the dangers of Indian raiding. But he sensed also the uselessness of arguing against it now. He left them laying plans and went to the corral to saddle

two mounts for Doan and his daughter, Lexie.

Lon Morehead had invited the Doans to his place until they could rebuild and that didn't please Thad either. Though Morehead had the biggest house for miles and could make them more comfortable than anyone else Thad knew that he was in love with Lexie Doan Just as Thad was, and was every other single man in the Strip.

Lexie Doan was blond and dainty and as fragilely beautiful as a rare vase. Thad had long dreamed of the time when he could feel he had the right to ask her to marry him. He knew Lexie was waiting for that time, too, though nothing had been put into words between them. Sometimes he had a suffocating fear that she might get tired of waiting and turn to Lon Morehead who had more to offer her, or less scruples about offering it. A man couldn't feel too sure about a girl as pretty as Lexie. At least Thad couldn't.

Lexie cried all the way to Lon's place and Thad was glad when the ride was over and he could go on alone. Lexie's tears made him feel like a big, helpless hulk and as guilty as all hell. As though he'd failed her and couldn't expect to be forgiven. It wasn't a feeling to make a man happy and everything the others said jarred on him and left him more and more irritable.

Leaving Morehead and Doan, Thad warned them "We got to go slow and careful about this and not do anything we'll be sorry for."

Doan flared up quickly. "Reckon you was in my place you'd have a plenty to be sorry fer already. I say string up Cab Robbins and Derry and save breath asking them questions. He married one of them redskins so I say he ain't no better'n they be!"

Chapter II

YOU CAN'T TRUST A BREED!

THE NEXT morning Ark rode off early to round up the ranchers as he'd promised to do. Thad was just preparing to leave when he heard the sound of wagon wheels in the yard. When he got to the door a familiar figure was just climbing down.

Everybody in the Strip knew Commanche Joe Morgan, Indian trader. He went from camp to camp and reservation to reservation peddling his wares of crockery and calico and tobacco to the Indians. Busy ranchers, who only got to the trading posts at long intervals, also welcomed the old peddler and paid his exorbitant prices without complaint.

"Light, oldtimer!" Thad called out genially. "Coffee's on the stove waiting."

Then he saw Commanche Joe wasn't alone. A half dozen Indian bucks on horseback waited a short distance away. Thad was

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puzzled by the presence of the redskins. "What's the idea of bringing company?" he asked, sharply.

Commanche Joe brushed a dirty sleeve across his dust reddened eyes. "It's a buryin'," he mumbled. "They're kinfolks of my old squaw. She up and died on me yesterday, Thad. I brung her along to plant down thar on Owl Crick iffen it's all right by you."

The odd request left Thad stumped. He knew Commanche Joe had a Ponca woman as his squaw and the Poncas had burial grounds closer than Owl Creek. He asked, puzzledly, "But why on my land, Joe? Why not in an Injun burial ground somewhere?"

"Hit's thisaway, Thad," the old peddler said humbly: "Me not being a Injun myself I just don't hanker putting my old woman in one of them heathen places. And she was jest a plain fool about them wild plum bushes along Owl Crick when they're a-bloomin' like they be now. I figured you wouldn't grudge me a spec of land thar, no more than six by six in the middle of that biggest plum thicket. Ye wouldn't, would ye, Thad?"

Thad was touched. "Of course I don't grudge you the space, Joe. But I don't like those redskins hanging around. You get them away before they start helping themselves to my beef."

"Shore, Thad, shore." The old man sounded warmly grateful. "We'll all be gone come high noon. And you'll never know the old woman's thar, she'll be that quiet-like."

A sickly smile touched the tobacco stained lips and Thad turned away in disgust at the ill-timed joke. "Make it snappy then," he said sharply.

Saddling hurriedly, Thad rode off to Cab Robbin's place. In the night he had decided to talk to the man and his son and let them know about the charges that were being made against them. Any man was entitled to that much and to a fair trial. Doan, and possibly Morehead, would resent it but it was something Thad felt he had to do.

Caleb Robbins wasn't home. It was his daughter, Tula who came to the door in answer to Thad's hail. She stood there and stared at him in an unfriendly silence, her black eyes as darkly inscrutable as deep, muddy pools.

Again, as always, Thad felt an odd stirring of his pulses as he looked at her. She wasn't beautiful in the way Lexie Doan was but there was a lithe grace in her willowy figure and a challenging strength in the piquant face that sent a quick tingling through Thad's veins. He resented the feeling for there was nothing at all in the attitude of the girl to encourage friendliness. Rather there was plain and open hostility as she answered his query about her father.

"He's not here. What do you want with him?" Her voice was sharply suspicious.

Thad told her about the meeting. "We're going to do our best to get to the bottom of this whiskey peddling," he added. "Your dad and brother's being accused and if they're there they can defend themselves."

Anger lit up her face, shot her eyes through with little bright flames. "I heard you were accusing them, Thad Rainey. But you haven't any right to and you know it! Now get off our land before you get a load of buckshot to take with you!"

"Now, wait a minute, Tula. I haven't accused anybody. I only wanted to give them a chance. . . . "

"Sure, a chance to have their necks stretched for what they haven't done," her scornful voice broke in. "It's plain you hope to stir up trouble for us because Dad opposed your getting your lease, but you can't frame him on this charge, Thad Rainey!"

Thad looked at her in wonder, thinking again that it was odd the way this girl hated him. The only times he'd ever talked to her they'd clashed just the way they were doing now. Resentment sharpened his voice as he answered her.

"You're almighty sure I hold a grudge against your dad but I don't. All I hold against him is that he lets redskins hang around here drinking. If he don't sell them the stuff he must know who does. You all know and you ought to tell before serious trouble starts."

There was a glint like moisture in Tula Robbins' velvety eyes but her voice was still defiant. "I wish I did know. I'd sure fill the skunk full of lead. I've begged and begged Derry to tell where he gets its but he won't. And so has Dad. We'd make him tell if we could."

Thad had to believe her. "Keep trying," he said, gently. "See if you can't talk him into meeting with us this afternoon. None of us are for hanging a man without proof he's guilty. If Derry comes and tells where he gets it he'll be cleared once and for all. Tell him that for me, Tula."

RIDING back to his lease Thad thought about Tula Robbins and her younger brother. Derry was hardly more than a boy but sullen and hard and dangerously resentful of anything approaching discipline. This same wildness was evident in Tula. Why was she so unfriendly? Then he remembered the proud lift of her head, the defiance in the beautiful eyes, and a dim understanding came to him. Tula Robbins had inherited a racial pride from her mother that kept her from seeking out friends among the ranchers, yet her white blood and her mission school education had

separated her from her Indian kinsmen. Tula was lonely and this loneliness was like acid corroding her mind. Was that what ailed young Derry too? Thad thought it was and felt a guilt that he had never tried to make friends with the boy.

He found Ark already at the cabin, preparing their noon meal. He looked worried.

"They're all a-comin', Thad," he reported. "But they're a-comin' with their minds made up to string somebody up. I wish to tarnation we hadn't started this. I smell trouble."

Thad felt much the same way. Still it didn't do any good to admit it. "All anybody wants is to stop this flow of whiskey," he said, sharply. "I've been over to try to persuade young Robbins to tell what he knows about it. If he won't and it costs him his head then we can't help that."

"Nor we can't put his head back on when we decide it was the wrong head," Ark said, dryly. "Thad, what in tarnation is that bunch of redskins doing down on the crick? They said you told them they could have a burying there. You loco?"

"It was Commanche Joe's squaw, Ark. He wanted to plant her in the wild plum thicket. But they ought to be gone by now."

"They're gone," Ryder said, grimly. "But I had to make 'em look down the barrel of my Winchester to get 'em started. Thad, I'd swear they'd all been drinking, too."

"Maybe they're like the Irish and serve liquid refreshments at their wakes," Thad joked. But neither of them laughed. Indians and liquor were no joking matter and both knew it all too well.

It was midafternoon when Thad and Ark got to Morehead's. A dozen grim faced ranchers were already there, listening to Lon Morehead talk. Thad saw at once that Lon had them pretty well stirred up. He could feel the tense excitement in the air.

"So it's up to us, men," Morehead was saying. "We can set here and wait on the troopers and be burned alive in our beds or we can start doing our own snake killing. What do you say, men?"

"I'm for action," a rancher spoke up firmly. "We can't fight the redskins, that's certain. But we sure as hell can fight the so and so who's making them cussed mean with firewater."

Thad spoke up. "Question is who? Can't anybody name this snake, can they?"

Jonathon Doan said promptly, "I kin. Cab Robbins is jest low enough to do it an' thar's plenty of drinking goes on around his place. Iffen Robbins ain't selling it, who is?"

"That's what I've asked Derry Robbins to come here today and tell us. I believe he will, since he knows he's being accused."

Doan's face mottled with fury. "You mean you went thar an' warned him so's he could skip out! Thad Rainey, strikes me you're mighty anxious to stand up fer this breed bunch. Since you're so damn sure they ain't doing it then you tell us who is. Go on, we're a-listning."

When Thad was silent Lon Morehead answered for him. "Guess it hasn't occurred to any of you that Rainey might have a damn good reason for knowing Robbins ain't guilty. But it's my bet the boy won't show up here and say who is."

His voice was full of innuendo and surprise left Thad almost speechless. "I—I don't get you, Lon. What reason could I possibly have?"

Morehead's voice was suddenly contemptuous. "The best in the world," he sneered, "because you've been trading it to the redskin yourself. They went to your place before dark last night and they were drunk, Doan says, when they got to his later. And there were some on your land today and they had whiskey when they left. Benson here saw them and told me."

Recovering from his surprise at the attack Thad felt more anger than alarm at the unfair attack. "They were drunk when they got to my place yesterday. And if they had liquor today they brought it there. They came with Commanche Joe. . . . "

He stopped short as he realized how unfriendly the silence in the room was. Looking around he saw doubt in the face of all of his neighbors. His anger grew and exploded into words.

"Good God, men! You've got no cause to think that of me! When Derry Robbins gets here he'll tell you. . . ."

A VOICE from the doorway cut in—Tula Robbins' voice. She stood there, breathing heavily as though she'd been running, and her black eyes were like smoldering flares in her white face. Those flares were fixed on Thad and he could feel the heat of them searing through him as she lashed out at him.

"Derry Robbins won't get here to tell anything! Is that why you came to talk me into sending him over here, Thad Rainey? So you could bushwhack him and leave him to die with a bullet in his back? And after you talking so big about wanting fair play!"

It was like dynamite had suddenly been dropped in the room. The men all sat stunned, only their eyes betraying their mounting excitement. Awareness of his danger now steadied Thad, made him coldly cautious. He made a quick maneuver to edge nearer the door yet keep his back to the wall as he answered the girl.

"Hold everything, Tula. If Derry's been shot it wasn't by me. Where did you find him?"

Her hot eyes never left his face as she answered. "You left him to die but he managed to get on his horse and get home to tell me he'd been double crossed. Double crossed by you, Thad Rainey, for nobody else knew he was coming! And I'm going to kill you for it but not with a bullet in the back! I want you to die seeing the hate in my face!"

While the girl had been talking Ark Ryder had edged up close behind her. When she raised the gun in her hand he leaped, throwing both arms about her body, pinning her arms to her sides. The bullet plowed into the floor while chairs overturned as men scattered. Added to the uproar was Lexie Doan's frightened scream from the next room and Lon Morehead's voice shouting: "Rainey's our man! Don't let him get away!"

Thad saw he hadn't a chance of being believed now. Ark Ryder knew it, too, and motioned Thad to escape while he blocked the door with the struggling girl in his arms. Because there was something Thad wanted to do he slipped past Ark and was thundering away on his horse before the confusion in the room had died down.

Heading straight for Cab Robbins' cabin, Thad pushed his horse to the limit. He'd noticed Tula hadn't said her brother was dead, only that he'd been left to die. If the boy was still alive he might rally enough to talk more. When he did—or if—Thad wanted to be there to hear it. If Derry died the truth about a double-crosser who wasn't named Thad Rainey would die with him.

Chapter III

BUSHWHACK WHISKEY-SWINDLE

IT WAS sundown and the cabin was full of shadows when Tula got back home. Thad heard her coming and moved from his place by the bed to stand in the deeper gloom of a corner. He had no mind to serve as a target for the hot-headed girl before he could subdue her.

The instant her hand pushed open the door he spoke. "Don't touch your gun, Tula. I've got you covered and I'll shoot if you make me."

She stiffened, then stepped inside, hands immobile at her sides. A thrill ran through Thad to see her courage but the hot hate in her voice when she spoke made him wince.

"So you came to finish the job, Thad Rainey! You are afraid Derry will talk, aren't you?"

"I'm waiting to hear him talk, Tula. I want to hear him name that double-crosser but the name won't be Thad Rainey. And I reckon I'll have to take your gun while I wait."

She offered no resistance when he stepped close enough to lift the Colt from her holster and he felt a surge of relief. He'd merely been bluffing when he'd talked about shooting for Thad knew he couldn't shoot a woman, not even a wild one like this lovely and spirited. Tula Robbins.

She looked coolly about the room. "What have you done with Dad? I left him here with Derry."

"I persuaded him to ride to the fort for a doctor and to hurry the soldiers. Derry needs the doctor and looks like we all need the troopers."

She answered tiredly, all the intense vitality suddenly draining from her. "A doctor won't do poor Derry any good. And the soldiers won't do you any good if those ranchers find you first. They're out looking for you and my advice is to get moving, Thad Rainey."

He shook his head. "Not until I know Derry's past speaking, Tula. There's things he'll want to tell us if he's able—things that will help us stop this whiskey peddling and that will prove to you that you've no cause to hate me like you do."

Their eyes met and held for a long moment and Thad felt that wild racing of his pulses again. When she turned away he knew he'd scored a point for the angry light hadn't come back to her black eyes.

She went to the stove and began making coffee. "It may be a long wait," she said, sadly, and he knew she held no hope for her brother's life.

Watching her prepare a quick supper Thad thought again how stirringly beautiful she was. Even Lexie suddenly seemed colorless and drab compared to her. The thought made him feel guilty of disloyalty but he couldn't keep from thinking of how Lexie would be crying and taking on if she was in this girl's place. Yet he knew that Tula loved her brother deeply. Against his will he found himself thinking that a man would be mighty lucky to be loved by Tula Robbins. She was calm and inscrutable on the surface but there was plenty of fire inside. Loving her might even be like playing with explosives but a man wouldn't tire of it, or get that fed up feeling he sometimes got around Lexie. Only Tula was wild and needed taming and that would be a job Thad wouldn't want.

They had eaten in silence before the boy on the bed stirred and moaned softly. They ran to lean over him and Tula implored him: "Derry! Speak to us. Tell us who shot you, Derry!"

The youth's pale lips moved soundlessly. Again his sister begged and again he tried and finally they caught the one faint word, "Commanche Joe . . . " Then a shudder went

through the dying boy and they knew he had said all he would.

It wasn't enough but it told Thad what he had to do. "I've got to find that peddler," he said, grimly. "He'll tell me the rest."

Tula kissed the still face of the boy, then pulled a sheet over it gently. "I'm going with you," she said to Thad. "Derry doesn't need me any more."

Thad shook his head. "I'm heading into trouble, Tula."

"That's why I'm going," she said, briefly. "You may need help." By that Thad knew she no longer fully distrusted him and the thought was strangely comforting.

THEY rode for hours before they sighted the camp fire that told them the end of their trail might be in sight. As they drew near they saw the wagon was indeed the canvas covered one of the old peddler. But Commanche Joe wasn't in sight. Only a wrinkled faced squaw who threw more wood on the fire as they approached but took no other notice of them.

"Where's Joe?" Thad asked.

She nodded toward the wagon bed. "In there. Dead."

That swung down and went to lift the canvas flap over the end gate. The old man was there with a round, ugly hole through his head. He must have died instantly and then been loaded into the wagon. Thad went back to question the squaw. "What happened?"

"We make camp. It's dark, somebody shoot. Joe dead."

Cold struck through Thad as he heard the laconic story. Commanche Joe, who had shot Derry Robbins to keep him silent, had in turn been likewise killed. And not by the rancher-vigilantes for they would have made themselves known. Then who? It looked like more double-dealing if the old woman was telling the truth.

"Who are you?" Thad asked and felt a start of surprise at her answer.

"Joe's woman," she told him.

"But Joe's wife died. He buried her this morning, in the plum thicket on Owl Creek."

The old woman shrugged. "Me Joe's wife. Him plant firewater, not squaw."

So that was it! Thad's head reeled as the shock of the truth struck home. Commanche Joe had been tipped off that the ranchers were incensed and determined on action. In fear of being searched and caught with his illegal load he had dumped it on Thad's land. Derry Robbins must have known of it and that was what he tried to tell his sister when she thought he was accusing Thad of his murder.

But there were a lot of questions to be answered yet. Why did the peddler pretend to be burying his squaw? He could have left the whiskey in a dozen places without Thad's knowledge or consent. It looked like he wanted those Indians seen there, close to Thad's house. And that somebody else instigated the plot, for Commanche Joe was killed soon after executing it. And the peddler hadn't been seen for weeks, yet the Indians had been getting whiskey.

His hand dug hard into the shoulder of the Indian woman. "Who told Joe to bury the firewater on my land? Who did he talk with last night or this morning?"

"Morehead. He say you make trouble. Put firewater on your land, then soldiers take you away. Him get land and get girl."

THAT meant Lon Morehead was the whiskey runner! Thad wondered why he hadn't thought of that possibility before. Morehead was greedy and unscrupulous. He had probably been using Derry Robbins as a go-between with the Indians in his illicit trade dealings and had killed the boy, or had it done, to insure his silence. After using the peddler to put the cache of liquor on Thad's land Morehead had shot him for the same reason he had the boy. It all made sense. If either the troopers or the ranchers found that cache of liquor on Thad's land, with the further damning evidence of the presence of Indians in the vicinity, then Thad's lease would be voided and he would be barred from the Strip. That would give Morehead the adjoining rich rangeland he wanted, as well as clear sailing with Lexie Doan. And immunity from all the trouble his greed had started.

Tula's cold hand broke into his reverie. "If Lon Morehead set this trap for you, Thad, he's also laid plans for springing it. Isn't there something we can do?"

Thad did some fast thinking. "He probably planned to let the troopers discover it for themselves. Then he accused me to the ranchers because he saw they wanted action and

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it didn't matter who stretched my neck, after all. Since I got away he might manage to let the men stumble over that cache tonight, or he might decide to wait for the soldiers in the morning. But I don't see what we can do . . . "

Tula looked at the wagon of Commanche Joe, her eyes as bright as the smoldering camp fire. "Maybe we can move it. It won't take long."

Thad studied the suggestion. "We might have time. Only thing is if I'm caught at it it'll look worse than ever. But another thing, Tula. If it's left the Indians might come back and get it before the troopers get here. If those sore-headed ranchers meet up with a bunch of drunken Injuns there'll be blood spilling sure."

The girl nodded agreement. "That means we've got to try it."

Thad knew she was right and offered no more argument. He gave his horse to the old squaw and advised her to ride back to her own people. She seemed glad of the chance and quickly disappeared. With Tula's help Thad soon had Commanche Joe's bony team back in the harness. When he went to pull the dead man out Tula stopped him.

"Let him alone, Thad. It'll cause less questions for him to be found in his wagon than away from it and it might be we can't get back here."

She was right again so Thad tried to forget the old peddler rolling around in the back of the wagon and sent the team on a run across the rough prairie, and keep his mind on the job ahead. It might easily prove a big job to be tackling alone. Then the warming thought came that he wasn't alone. No man was alone who had a fighting partner like the clear headed, courageous girl riding her pony beside the rattling wagon.

It was past midnight, with only a pale moon shining, when they reached Owl Creek where it crossed the land under lease to Thad. So far they had seen no sign of the rancher-vigilantes but that didn't mean they had given up the search for Thad. His uneasiness grew as he began the search for the bogus grave.

It didn't take long to find the freshly turned earth under the plum bushes. With Tula on watch a little distance away, Thad started digging with the shovel he'd found in the wagon. In almost no time he had uncovered the six cases of whiskey. He'd just finished loading them into the wagon when Tula came running back.

"They're coming, Thad," she whispered. "Must be a dozen horses so I know it's the ranchers."

"How close?" Thad couldn't see or hear anything but knew he could trust the girl's keen ears.

"Maybe a quarter of a mile. Coming from toward your house. We've got to get that wagon away, Thad."

Something like panic stirred in Thad. "We haven't a chance. They'd hear the wagon and start shooting."

"We've got to," Tula said, sharply. "Listen, Thad. You decoy them away. Even if they catch you they haven't got any real evidence against you but this liquor. I'll get it away while you keep them busy."

It looked like the only chance. With a quick "Good girl!" Thad vaulted into her saddle and headed off at a gallop straight toward the oncoming men. He made himself as conspicuous as possible and when he was within thirty feet of them he jerked the pony's head and veered off at a tangent. At the same time he sent a shot over the men's heads and saw with satisfaction that they reined about to chase him. That was what he wanted for it took them away from the girl and the liquor laden wagon protected from sight by only a wild plum thicket.

Chapter IV

I LIKE MY WOMEN WILD!

WITH startled yells the men took after Thad. Lying as low on his pony's neck as he could Thad shot again and again toward his pursuers, knowing he was wasting lead. But his shots brought a rain of lead in answer and he banked on the noise of the guns covering the sound of the wagon wheels as Tula escaped.

Tula's pony was fast but not so fast as the rangy animals some of the ranchers rode. The pounding hoofs behind him got closer and closer and Thad knew he would be overtaken in another moment. He turned the pony down a grassy draw, then jumped from the saddle without slacking the pony's speed.

He landed with a jar that almost knocked the breath from him but rolled instantly to his feet and dove headlong into some sumac bushes. The ranchers thundered past, led by Lon Morehead's big roan.

Thad waited until the last man had passed his hiding place, then let out a wild yell. "Help! Help!" He wanted to detract their attention from that riderless horse for he'd just remembered it would be recognized as Tula's and that would involve the girl.

The men pulled up in indecision. Thad repeated his call and added a loud groan. Cautiously the men rode back to investigate. Thad groaned again and they dismounted to surround the sumac bush. Thad felt a surge of relief to see Ark Ryder's lanky form with the others. He had banked on Ark's trailing along to see what happened.

When he considered the men close enough Thad sang out loudly: "Throw down, men! You're covered front and back. Ark, put lead in the man that's too slow!"

The men obeyed quickly. When Lon Morehead had demurred Ark had jabbed his gun barrel into his ribs and he had followed the others' suit. Then Ark, at Thad's direction gathered up the guns and put them into his saddle bags. "I'll keep a leg over 'em, Thad," he promised grinning.

Thad tossed him his own gun. "And keep mine, too, Ark. Me and Lon have something to settle and we're doing it man style. He needs some hell beat out of him and I figure I'm the one can do it. Ready, Morehead?"

Morehead backed off, his face fear filled. "You keep your dirty hands off me, Rainey, if you don't want to be gunshot. I ain't looking for any fight with you."

Thad laughed at that. "I don't reckon you are at that. What you were looking for, Lon, was seeing me decorating a cotton wood limb and you getting hold of my land and buildings. But you're getting a fight whether you want it or not."

With that Thad turned loose a haymaker that caught Morehead flush on the jaw. He went down on his back and Thad waited while he got slowly to his feet. Then he smashed another fist into Morehead's face and knew a savage joy as blood spurted from the rancher's nose.

Morehead rushed awkwardly, ducking under Thad's flailing arms and swinging wildly for Thad's face. Thad dodged and buried a fist deep in Morehead's soft belly. With a grunt the big man folded and sprawled on the ground.

Thad waited again for Morehead to rise and the other's foul caught him off guard. As sudden as the strike of a snake Morehead swung a booted foot high and caught Thad squarely in the groin.

Doubled with pain, Thad didn't see Morehead's hand dart into his shirt for the hidden gun he carried there. He did hear Ark's shout of warning and knew Morehead now stood over him but pain held him so paralyzed he couldn't move.

The gun seemed to explode right against his ear. He felt the hot breath of it and waited an endless second for the shock of pain. But it was Morehead who spun about and crashed to the ground when Thad looked down dazedly he saw blood gushing from Lon's arm. Ark Ryder had shot a split second quicker and his bullet had struck Morehead in the arm just in time to deflect the lead meant for Thad.

Thad straightened up and looked down contemptuously at the groaning Morehead. "There's your whiskey peddler, men. Better see that he's around when the troopers come."

He offered them no further explanation. How could he tell of Morehead's double cross and of moving that whiskey cache without bringing in Tula? She had the load now, and a dead man besides, and Thad didn't even know where she was. He decided to wait for further developments.

They took Morehead home and cared for his wound. Lexie came in, pale and disheveled, and burst into tears at sight of Morehead's arm. She ran to his side and fell on her knees and Thad reflected that crying didn't seem to make Lexie any less pretty as it did some.

"O, Lon, you're hurt," Lexie sobbed. "What can I do for you?"

Surprised at how indifferent the scene left him Thad told her curtly, "You might try making us all some coffee."

But Lexie only wept and it was Ark who went to the kitchen and brought back steaming cups. The coffee seemed to revive Morehead's courage and he sat up suddenly.

"Look, men. You're making a mistake, listening to Rainey. He's the man you want and he's just trying to cover up by claiming it's me. He hasn't offered a damn bit of evidence against me."

A rancher silenced him by saying, "Guess you provided that, Morehead, when you tried gut shooting Rainey after he'd laid down his gun. Most of us figger that a man who won't fight fair can't be taken on his word. Guess we'll wait and let the troopers say what to do."

The others nodded agreement and the tense wait went on. Most of them dozed but Thad couldn't for wondering about Tula and that damning wagon she drove. What could he say to the troopers when they came?

THE TROOPERS arrived shortly after day break. Thad drew a long, shaky breath of relief as he saw them in the doorway and behind them the anxious face of Tula Robbins.

"We're looking for Lon Morehead," an officer said. "He's got some questions to answer about a dead man and a wagon load of liquor we found down in his pecan grove."

Morehead stumbled to his feet, his face gray white. "If you found that peddler on my land, Captain," he said a little wildly, "somebody brought him there after he was shot! And the whiskey, too . . . ."

He stopped short as the officer's face told him he'd said far too much. The officer said, shortly, "Don't think I said who the dead man is, Morehead. Or the fact that he was shot. Strikes me you know a good deal about it. Mind telling me how?"

Sweat glistened on Morehead's face as he looked about at the ring of faces watching him. Faces in which there were no signs of friendliness. A fear like that of trapped animal was mirrored in his face as he stammered, "I—I—It's Thad Rainey's doings! Why would I shoot Commanche Joe? The whiskey was on Rainey's land . . . "

He stopped again, helplessly. The officer took up, his face grim and hard. "The whiskey was in the wagon of the dead peddler, Morehead. Six cases of it and they looked like they'd been buried somewhere. My opinion is you can explain about that, too. If it was on Rainey's land maybe you put it there and shot the old man when he dug it up and tried to get off with it."

"No!" Morehead exclaimed, frantically. "I tell you the old man was shot first! He—he—" he stopped floundering and added, his voice dulled with hopelessness, "We've been chasing Rainey all night for shooting Derry Robbins because the kid was coming to my house to tell on him for peddling whiskey."

One of the ranchers spoke up then. "That's right, Captain. But it looks like we were sure chasing the wrong man. All the time the whiskey peddler and killer was right with us. Morehead wasn't at his house when we first got there yesterday. We waited nearly an hour afore he showed up. He said he'd been tailing a steer out of a bog but he could have been shooting Robbins to stop him from talking. And then last night he rode off whilst we made camp for supper and rested our hosses. He said he was scouting fer signs but he had time to ride back here where Commanche Joe waited."

Morehead mopped at his sweaty face and almost whimpered, "But I tell you Joe wasn't waiting here. He was . . . "

Once more he gave up and glared at Thad. "Smart, ain't you Rainey! You fixed this frame-up on me and you know it!"

Thad laughed softly. "A double cross on the rebound, Lon. That's all. And you'll be glad to hear I aim to take over your lease, won't you?"

Morehead looked like he would explode with helpless rage as the officer stepped briskly forward and snapped handcuffs on him. "I'll have to arrest you for murder, Morehead, since you can't explain how you knew about this Commanche Joe. As far as the whiskey peddling is concerned guess we'll find out about that too, now. This old peddler and young Robbins had some Indian friends who'll talk when they hear about their being killed. Indians stick together that way."

After the troopers had taken their prisoner away and most of the ranchers had left Thad looked for Tula and knew a queer disappointment that she had gone, also. Jonathon Doan was saying, half angrily, "Beats me. I'd of swore Cab Robbins and his youngster wuz doing thet peddling. Never would of thought it of Lon."

"That's usually the way," Thad said, thoughtfully. "If we don't like a person we're ready to believe most anything about them. Strikes me we ought to try being more neighborly with the Robbins family. Tula's a smart girl and might be nice to know."

He was looking at Lexie and she flared up, defensively. "She's wild as her savage ancestors, Thad Rainey, and I'd like to tell her so!"

Thad was reaching for his hat and she must have seen the purpose in his face for her voice suddenly sounded frightened. "Where are you going, Thad?"

"To tell her so," Thad answered, softly. "And to tell her I like my women wild when they've got courage with it. I'm thinking Tula's the kind of woman this country needs to help tame it."

He suddenly felt foolish as though he'd tried making a speech and added, awkwardly, "I've got a lot to tell Tula so I'll get started."

He bolted through the door without looking back. He knew very well what he'd see if he did. Lexie would be crying.

THE END

JOHNNY GET YOUR GUNMAN!

With a screaming curse the gunman leaped back.

By Theodore J. Roemer

Nobody in Sleeper took Johnny Meyers seriously, for to them he was just Big Ed's kid. . . . But when the proddy youngster donned their bullet-bitten law badge, he made the trigger-happy punchers either shuck iron or dance the dead man's rigadoon!

EVER since Sheriff Fats Morgan had put the proposition up to him, he'd been thinking of what he was going to say to Big Ed. But now that the time had come he looked across the battered desk in the front room of the Double B ranchhouse and the words wouldn't come.

Finally he said, "I'm leaving, boss—" then he stopped shortly.

Once again Big Ed surprised him with that quiet wisdom of his. "Yes, I know, Johnny." Big Ed sighed heavily and leaned his huge bulk back into the creaking chair. "Morgan's

asked you to be his deputy. Isn't that true?"

Johnny nodded and slid his dusty sombrero around in his fingers. Fat Morgan's offer had been something of a surprise to him. Two weeks ago he'd been in to Sleeper for a load of corn and Morgan had stopped at the feed mill. The job paid seventy-five per. Johnny just had to take it.

Big Ed now said, "Forty per isn't enough to get by on in the double harness, is that it, Johnny?"

"I was thinking of asking Nancy Hanna to marry me," Johnny admitted.

"Any other reason?"

Johnny swallowed. Big Ed had been like an old man to him. Eight years ago, when Johnny was a kid of thirteen his dad had been drygulched down at Sleeper. That night Big Ed had ridden up through a rain squall to the bankrupt little spread on the rimrock and broke the news easy to the kid. He'd liked Johnny, even then.

When Johnny had ended his sniveling, Big Ed had shoved a rough, wet, mackinaw arm around his skinny shoulders. "Brace up, button. Now you ain't got nobody an' I never did. So what say we pair o' mavericks throw in together? Come down to the Double B."

After that Johnny Meyers was known as Big Ed's kid.

He was twenty-one now. But somehow he had never out-grown the feeling he was just a kid "taken on". Big Ed treated him fine, but then there were others, Laughing Daley, Hump Adams, Sour Jack. . . They weren't mean, just kidded and looked down on him as a kid because he was small and wiry and hadn't grown up much. They never took him seriously and as a man, even though he was quick as a rabbit and there wasn't an outlaw on the spread could unseat him.

HE NOW stood in his tight-fitting dusty levis and faded shirt in the sunlight of the big white room and looked more like a kid than ever. He moved his floppy Stetson slowly in his lean hands. "Other reasons?" He shook his brown head. "I reckon not," he lied slowly. "Jest a change of pasture."

Some of the breath went out of Big Ed. He suddenly seemed just a big, old tired man in buckskin vest and sloppy, torn shirt. His grizzled eyes drifted out the curtainless window. The ranch house echoed empty; the gaunt, half-painted buildings of the spread lay out there in the flat sunshine. The Double B seemed a ranch slowly going to pot, waiting for an awakening—or a tombstone.

Johnny turned. He followed Big Ed's gaze. Hump Adams, the Double B foreman, was lugging a wagon tire to the blacksmith shop. Hump was old and bent over and cussed at every step.

Big Ed was muttering something. ". . . only a couple o' mavericks. . ."

"What's that?" Johnny asked.

Big Ed's slack jowls moved. "Nothing, kid. Nothing."

Johnny's smooth brown jaws tightened. There it was again—just a kid. Big Ed, of course, didn't mean it, but nobody thought him a man around this place. And about that maverick stuff, Big Ed never was a maverick and never would be. He owned a couple thousand head of cattle and as many acres of land. He was a power in this county. He could make and break sheriffs. He was no maverick. . . . But Johnny Meyers, the son of a drinking, gambling man, long-since dead, was.

He cleared his throat, but before he could speak Big Ed said quietly, "I reckon you know, button, why Fat Morgan's taking you on as deputy."

Johnny nodded. "I thought it out carefully."

"Election's comin' up this fall. Morgan got in as a darkhorse last time. He's found out it's a good job and wants to hang onto it. He figgers he can with my backing."

Johnny had his teeth pressed tight now. He said, "I thought that was it. But I'll make him a good deputy, better than Sam Westow who he kicked out."

Big Ed nodded. "I think you will, Johnny. I merely thought I'd mention it to you. I'm not backing Morgan this fall. I'm pushin' a better man. Who knows, Johnny, but it might be you."

Johnny pulled on his hat and grinned. "Thanks, Big Ed," but it was a forced grin. Big Ed was making innocent fun of him. He walked out into the sunshine, his spurs tinkling in the emptiness of the big house.

Laughing Daley and the boys saw him take off. Daley, fat and moon-faced, shook his hand. "Good luck, kid. Hope I never have you on my trail."

Sour Jack spat through his black whiskers. "Jest do Morgan's chores in Sleeper, kid. Tell him to do his own damned rough work."

Hump Adams growled, "You allus got friends here, Button, iff'n yuh need help. 'Member that."

Johnny grinned down at the trio. "Thanks, fellows," he said. These men meant right but even in their send-off they thought he couldn't hold up a man's job in the outside world. "See you in town Saturday night." He touched spurs to the flashy little bay mare that was his own and cantered smartly out between the pole corrals.

He rode down the valley out of the hills and when he crossed Tumble Creek he took a deep breath. He was off the Double B.

He meandered along the creek trail with the water trickling on one side and the cottonwoods and willows warm and sunny to his right. Eventually he came to the schoolhouse where he'd met Nancy Hanna last winter.

It basked white and sleepy in the sun. With the two big cottonwoods sighing overhead he felt pleasure as he remembered the box social dance and that he'd bought her box by prearranged signal. She was brown and pert and not very big. She had liked him. They had made a fine-looking pair.

Then the thought brought remembrance. He was out to show the valley he was a man. This job was his chance. He reached back into his war bag and pulled out the gun he'd bought at Ray Tom's hardware and general merchandise store in Sleeper two years ago. It was a Colt .45—big, plain-handled and cheap. He hadn't fired it a dozen times.

He hefted it, then strapped on the belt and holster. He hadn't worn it off the double B. Daley and the boys would have laughed. He shoved the walnut butt down snug in the stiff leather and kneed the bay forward.

HE FELT better as he came down onto the flats near Sleeper. He saw the red barn of Jim Hanna's spread peeking over a willow clump far to the west. He thought of riding over and seeing Nancy for a while, then gigged his mare resolutely toward Sleeper. He'd told Morgan he'd be in early today.

He came to where the trail forked. It was in a hollow. Maybe, he thought, he should get in a little practice with the .45 before he went in. He saw a "Wanted" poster on a blasted cottonwood and on impulse jerked to fill his hand.

When he finally got the gun into his claw, he blazed as fast as he could thumb and trigger.

He got in only two shots. The bay leaped; Johnny grabbed for the horn. The gun flew from his hand and Johnny ducked. A low branch took off his sombrero, ripped his shirt down the back. The bay skittered through the creek, wetting him to the skin.

Quarter mile down the trail he finally sawed the frightened horse to a stop. He cussed it disgustedly. "Helluva note. You boltin' 'cause of a little gunfire." He looked at the town really keeping up to its name sleeping on the flat ahead, then turned the bay back. "Serves you right to have to go back. Go on, keep blowin'."

He found his hat. Two minutes searching and he retrieved the gun in the weed-choked brush. He scowled at the gaunt limb that had curried his back, then out of curiosity he rode to the poster to see how effective his shots had been.

The 8x10 was entirely devoid of bullet marks. "Two-gun Lyons, six feet, red-headed, a killer when drunk" stared out at him with baleful, knobby-looking eyes, as if he didn't like being shot at, even if he were but a poster.

"Bacon rinds to you," Johnny muttered and lifted his reins. The sound of hooves on the soft earth trail behind him swung him in saddle.

A man emerged through the willow, humped in the saddle like a skinny witch. His black sombrero was shoved back on his jet-black hair and he rode a grey gelding that showed good ridge-runner blood—leggy and big-chested.

The man was scowling, then saw Johnny was young and slender, and a tooth-broken grin came over his swarthy face. "Saw you shootin' from the bench up yonder. What's the matter? Couldn't yuh hit it?" He grinned at the unmarked poster.

Johnny colored. "Horse spooked."

The newcomer's ragged grin widened. "Watch!" He rammed spurs to the gelding, yanked savagely on the rein jerking the well-trained animal to a rearing halt as it began to plunge forward. Even as the animal bounced crazily to the contrary commands the stranger's right hand leaped beltward. The big single Peacemaker came alive, belching, roaring six even-spaced consecutive times. As Johnny watched, the face of Two-gun Lyons on the poster became obliterated, blasted off by singing hot lead. Bits of paper flew.

Johnny turned with admiring eyes toward the stranger and then he stared in astonishment. The man had dropped the reins with his left hand and was holding that up rigid also, pointing emptily toward the lightning-struck cottonwood.

The roaring ended. The man dropped his hands, put the gun back into its holster. "Pretty neat, huh?" He lifted the reins. Swaggering pride shone in his green slaty eyes.

"Yes," Johnny said slowly. "Pretty neat."

They rode in to Sleeper and Johnny didn't say much on the way.

FATS MORGAN lifted his run-over boots and his leaning chair plunked heavily to the shaded floor of the porch. He squinted fatty brown eyes from the youngster sliding off the mare to the tall, thin man stepping off the gelding up the street before the Round-up saloon.

"Who'd yuh ride in with, Johnny?"

"Bill Barnacle. Cowpoke from up Neenah way."

"Desert sailor, huh," Morgan growled. "Looked dirty to me. If he ever saw water he wouldn't know enough to wash his face." Then he brightened his scowl. "C'mon in. Parsy

Jones has been waitin' two hours to swear yuh in. What'd Big Ed think? Liked it, I bet, that you've been given the job."

Johnny shrugged. "I reckon." Then Big Ed was right; Morgan was taking him in only to curry favor for the elections. He moved up on the steps and inside. Parsy Jones, the Justice, was sound asleep, his long head resting on the sheriff's desk, his gaunt arms dangling to the floor. A half emptied quart of Old Crow stood at his head; two flies buzzed and settled alternately on Parsy Jones' bellowing lips.

"Parsy can't take but two drinks no more," the fat sheriff muttered, "an' he's dead to the world. C'mon, Patsy. Shake a hank an' swear in young Meyers. They's work fer him to do." He sounded quite official and had his big belly pulled up into his chest. Johnny thought of what Big Ed had often said of Fats Morgan as a sheriff and was inclined to agree with Big Ed. The guy wasn't much of a go-gettin'-looking peace officer. But maybe Big Ed was wrong. Things had been quiet the past two years in Sleeper. Morgan never had had a chance to show his brand.

Johnny was sworn in. Parsy pinned a deputy badge to his torn shirt and took another swig of Old Crow. Fats Morgan said, "You kin get a room at the Palace, but first I want you to clean up the jail house. I'll show you." Johnny's work began.

The jail was a mess. It looked as if it hadn't been cleaned in years.

Johnny was hot and sweaty when he got the place in order. He found Morgan still sitting on the porch in the shade. "Reckon I'll go up to the Palace an' get cleaned up fer dinner."

Morgan scowled, then nodded. "Be back at one."

Johnny went up to the big frame hotel, got a room, changed clothes and went down to the dining room. He had put on a vest and pinned the star onto that. His .45 hung at his waist, heavy and inconveniently banging against his leg. Somehow it didn't fit.

Mike Carew, owner of the Palace, grinned as he came in. Ray Tom, the general merchandise owner from whom Johnny had bought the gun, saw it and waved at him. "Hullo, Deputy. C'mon over to my table." Others shouted and waved and Johnny flushed. They all liked him, but were at the same time poking fun at him. He wished he'd left the gun up in his room. And the star with it. He was still "Big Ed's kid" to them.

He moved down the counter smelling the beef and frying onions and then saw the strange rider with whom he'd come in that morning. The man sat at a rear table. He was tall, much taller than he'd looked in the saddle. His jet-black hair looked stiff and uncombed and his dark face with the broken teeth looked as Fats Morgan had said, none too clean. Then the man saw the star on Johnny's vest. A huge grin broke on his face.

"So you're a sheriff?"

"Deputy," Johnny said stiffly and sat alone at the counter. He ate in silence. When finished, he left the dining room.

He reported to Morgan at one and the sheriff had shifted to the north side of the building to keep out of the sun. He drawled, "There's a scythe hangin' above the pump house door. Scythe down them fox thistle an' pie plant around here an' back by the corral. Tomorrow's Saturday an' the cow outfits will be in town. We gotta show Big Ed how nice the place looks since you took over that shitfless Sam Westow's job."

Johnny shucked his vest and, cocking his sombrero against the burning sun, he went to work. He was glad he'd left his gun at the hotel.

He worked around the office building and whipped down a path of weeds to the corrals. He worked around the corral and he sweated mightily. He had never worked so hard on the Double B. Daley and Hump would have laughed at him. He leaned against the poles and panted. Wasn't he something of a damned fool? he thought. This deputy job was just a clean-up job. Fats Morgan should be doing this rather than hiring a deputy at extra county expense.

But Johnny thought of the seventy-five dollars a month it paid, and of Nancy Hanna's brown, pert eyes and he kept on swinging the heavy, iron-headed scythe until all the weeds around the county buildings were down. He looked at his blisters and swore softly.

"No cowpoke ever got water bumps from such work before," and hung the scythe up.

Evening was coming on. Fats Morgan, running a speculative finger inside his huge belt, grunted. "Grub time, Johnny. But before you eat run down to the springs an' see if that nester that's camped there is still beating up his wife. Widow Kelly was up an' said she heard some yellin' round about three o'clock."

Johnny put his thin blistered hands on hips and watched Morgan waddle away to the Palace dining room. Johnny's brown face was just a little on the set order.

The nester wasn't beating up his wife anymore. The guy was gone and so was his wife. The kids were bawling and there were six of them, all under ten years. Johnny shoved back his sombrero, dropped the mare's reins, and stepped down into the mess.

It was after seven before he got them crammed full of oatmeal and milk he'd coaxed from the gaunt cow staked near the spring. They had a tent and two beds in it. He put them in, three to a bed, tied down the flap and said, "I'll send your pop and mom," and rode

back slowly to Sleeper in the still twilight.

Being a deputy was a lot of work, at least under Fats Morgan. He wondered what else it would include before the day was over.

DUSK was velvety and utterly quiet and the fancy-stepping mare's hooves made dust puffs in wide street. Johnny looked at the red fading sky westward. Night came down on the plain from the foothills and the yellow light from Roundup saloon reached weakly out trying to meet the kerosene lamp's glow that stood before the Palace. Sleeper was a tired western town going to bed.

Johnny was tired also. He slumped in the saddle. His blistered fingers held the reins lightly. He wondered how he was going to like this deputy job under Fats Morgan for the next six months. He thought of the boys on the Double B.

A surrey was pulled up before Tom's General Merchandise. Johnny cuffed his sombrero back and stared. It was Jim Hanna's, in to do some mid-week buying. Then Johnny saw a girl in red calico in the hardware store beside her pa's huge figure, and Johnny's heart moved over a little. She had known he'd be in town this day beginning his new job.

Johnny wanted to go in and say hello, but on second thought he kept the mare headed for the Palace. He was dirty and pretty tired and, besides, he somehow didn't feel that this job measured up to what he thought it would be. He had merely become Fats Morgan's chore boy.

Seventy-five times six. He tried to figure that in his mind and then subtract forty times six. He wondered if the difference was worth what he was feeling inside.

And then he saw Laughing Daley's roan at the rack before the Roundup, and beside it Hump Adams' pinto and then Sour Jack's and Big Ed's horses! He rode forward, stiff with astonishment. This wasn't Saturday. What were they doing in town tonight?

But he didn't want to see them either, somehow. He didn't want to take any of their hoorawin', however good-natured. He swung the mare to the side street and stepped off. He saw a lurching figure at the end of the building and recognized the nester. A woman was with him, clinging to his arm, saying something as she tried to drag him away from the main street and the Roundup. But at the sight of Johnny she stopped and stood back. She was a thin, tired-looking creature. Johnny went forward to the man, now staggering on alone.

"Hold it! You, Smithers, the nester?"

The man glowered and staggered past. Johnny stepped in. Wiry arms spun the drunk. Johnny's right blistered paw made two swift passes across the man's face and the slaps were loud in the stillness. Johnny's voice cut.

"Get back to your camp. I fed your kids and put them to bed. Tomorrow pack your wagon an' git! Jeb Raine wants a man. If you're in town tomorrow noon I'm arrestin' you fer being a drunk."

The man leaned against the Palace clapboards. He blinked. He was inches taller than Johnny and outweighed Johnny by forty pounds, but there was something in Johnny's eyes and voice and the way he had his feet apart and his hands clutched that made Smithers back down.

He turned and lurched back toward the side street and the woman, with a grateful glance toward the young deputy, hurried after him. "A job, Jeb! Did you hear that? We can. . . ." Her excited words grew indistinguishable as distance increased between them.

Johnny shrugged tiredly and went in the side door.

Nobody was in the dining room. He went through the door into the lobby. It was silent and deserted. He scowled around, saw the clock said eight. He went up the creaky stairs to his room to wash up. A cold lunch down the street at Charlie's was in the offing he knew.

He had his face down and blowing in the tin basin when he heard them. He jerked up. Water streamed down his neck. He stared at the wall, listening. Was he crazy? No, he had heard them. This damned, funny silence. . . . That had been two shots and they'd come from the Round-up!

He heard a man running then in the street below. Johnny stuck his wet head out the window. It was Laughing Daley, only he wasn't laughing now. He had come from the alley back of the Roundup and was dashing into the Palace. In the kerosene lamp light his round face was grey and frightened.

"Morgan! Morgan!" he shouted in a half hushed voice down in the lobby.

Johnny wiped a sleeve over his wet face. For a long second he stared, watching the silent saloon down there, then he turned and strapped the big, cheap, plain-handled .45 around his waist. He went out and down the stairs.

He saw Daley coming out of the dining room. "Hello, Daley. What in the hell is going on around here?"

"Where's Morgan, kid? He was here when we went across?"

"What is it?" Johnny repeated quietly.

"Don't you know? A drifter hit Runt Sullivan over the head up at the Horse Creek linecamp. Guess Runt had made a batch o' drippin's an' they'd had quite a ruckus. Runt died before we got him to Big Ed's house."

"Runt is dead?" Johnny's voice remained quiet but pain colored the words. Runt had

taught him how to hang on a horse. Runt liked his liquor but he was a horseman.

Daley was still talking," . . . we trailed him here. Tall, dirty-lookin' saddle tramp. He was drinkin' over in the Roundup when we busted in. Big Ed wanted Morgan to go over with us, but Morgan said he had to git his guns. The guy drew an' plugged the boss an' Hump. I lit out the back door."

"Is—is Big Ed dead?" Johnny said slowly, expecting the worst.

"The slug dropped him to the floor. Dunno how bad either of them are. The guy's chain lightnin'—Hey, where you going?"

Johnny stopped at the door. He spoke, his eyes on the saloon across the street.

"I'm going over and arrest that man."

"You crazy fool," Daley said. "He'll kill you. It's Morgan's job. He's—"

But Johnny was out the door.

HE WALKED steadily across the dark, dust-carpeted street, passed around the four horses standing hip-shot at the rack, and he moved up on the thick planking toward the stoop. The sagging batwings were ajar.

He felt no special feeling. He knew there was fear in his heart, but it was subservient to another feeling and he couldn't put his finger on that feeling. He couldn't name it. He just walked steadily forward and pushed the wings apart. The yellow light of the saloon hit his young brown face.

Johnny looked over the motionless men in the place. Big Ed sat against a wall, a red crease over his shaggy, grey head. There was a blank look in his eyes. Johnny knew he was dazed.

He looked to Hump, face-down on the floor. But Hump was breathing. Hump's holster, as was Big Ed's, was empty.

Johnny swung his gaze to the three men at the bar. Sour Jack and the bartender were at the end, both weaponless, and the third man was the rider Johnny had come in with that morning, the man who'd called himself Bill Barnacle from Neenah.

Sour Jack saw Johnny. "Get out, Johnny," he said quickly. "This guy's a killer."

"Hah!" the man at the bar said. He had the others' guns stacked on the bar before him. His own was in its holster. "The depity!" He poured whiskey in the water glass before him and his broken-toothed grin cracked the dirty, swarthy face into two halves. "Have a drink, sonny."

Johnny's eyes flickered around the group. His floppy sombrero, which he'd jerked on his wet head as he'd left his room, shaded his eyes. He saw the saddle tramp who called himself Barnacle was very drunk. And Sour Jack was correct—the man was a killer. It was quite plain in his green, knobby-looking eyes, in the drunken pull of ugly lips, in the way he watched Johnny approaching.

"Easy, sonny," he murmured.

Johnny stopped ten feet away. The fear in his system was rippling in cold flashes up and down his spine, but somehow he knew what he was going to do and he didn't seem to dread the try—whether he'd succeed or not was to be found out. But oddly he'd grown in the past twelve hours. He was different from the kid who'd ridden into Sleeper on the fancy-stepping mare that morning, wearing a torn shirt and a lot of ideas about how he was going to handle the deputy job.

"I usually don't drink, Barnacle," he said quietly, "but if you're buying—" He stepped forward.

"Buying? Haw!" He poured double the amount in the glass and shoved it forward with his right hand. "There, depity. You're drinkin' that one. An' another one like it. Buying? Haw! Haw!"

Johnny reached forward and his right fist came down smashing on the man's right hand. Knuckles cracked knuckles against the solid mahogany.

With a creaming curse the gunman leaped back. His right hand leaped to his gun, his left flashing at the same time. But his numbed right couldn't drag the gun clear.

Johnny told himself *don't try to do it too fast* and he dragged out the big, cheap .45. He levelled it on the man and then saw the other's gun leap over into his left hand. The big, black gun was coming up swiftly. . . . Then it was that Johnny fired.

The tall, skinny man buckled. His back hit the edge of the bar. He coughed, and Johnny wondered where he hit him. Johnny felt a little sick, then, for he'd never shot a man before and he saw the blood coming out on the man's dirty shirt front, high and in the middle. The dangling gun fell from the man's fingers then the man followed it to the floor.

Sour Jack gave a yell and leaped the bar. He started kicking Barnacle's gun away from the man but there was no need. The man couldn't have used it if he could have gotten his hands on it. He was now coughing and twitching.

JOHNNY swallowed. He put his gun back in the holster. "Get Doc Edwards," he said in a sandy, shaky voice. "Big Ed an' Hump—Hullo, boss." He saw Big Ed was on his feet, weaving toward them. The dazed expression was gone from his eyes. He was all right but for the blood on his tired, craggy face.

"That was a man-sized play, Johnny," he said. "Smart headwork, but how in hell did you dare buck such odds."

Johnny grinned, self-consciously. Men were

pouring in from all doors. Laughing Daley was one of the first ones, and behind him was big Jim Hanna and Ray Toms and half the townsmen.

"You see," Johnny said, "I knew he was a two-gun man, and everybody knows a two-gun slinger isn't as fast if one side is slowed up. I figured if I slowed his right, I'd have a chance of beating him, his left not being filled to cut me down. He almost crossed me by jumping that gun to his left though."

"Wait a minute!" Big Ed exclaimed holding onto the bar for support. "This hombre isn't a two-gun man."

Johnny stepped forward, took the glass of whiskey and doused it on the fallen gunman's stiff, black hair. Johnny rubbed it momentarily. The black came off. Fiery red hair appeared. Johnny rubbed the black off his fingers onto his dusty levis and reached inside his shirt pocket. "That was boot-blackening stolen from Runt. Now I got this out of Fats Morgan's desk drawer. It's chuck full of 'em." And he spread the Wanted poster out on the bar.

"Wanted: Two-gun Lyons, six feet, red-headed, a killer when drunk. . . ." Johnny added, "He used only one gun for disguise. He's—"

"Hold on!" Laughing Daley ejaculated. "Look at what it says on the bottom! Reward, one thousand dollars!"

"What's that?" Johnny exclaimed. He peered. "Dawgone, I never saw that. One thousand iron men! Cattlemen's Association!"

Doc Edward yelled from where he was bending over Hump. "Little help here. Looks like finally Hump's coming around."

"What's going on here? What's the shooting about?" a blustering voice came from the door and Fats Morgan barged through the excited gathering. He was waving two .45s.

"Morgan," Big Ed drawled, "I reckon you can run an' hide again. A man's sorta took your job over. I allus knew the kid had the sand; it jest took a change of pasture to jar it loose. 'Member, Johnny, what I said about boostin' fer a good man next election? You're it, Button. Just say the word an' you're in come fall."

Johnny felt proud and embarrassed and then he said quietly, "If it's all the same to you, Ed, I'll just take back my old job. I reckon that thousand bucks will take the place of the better pay for—" He stopped and color came into his smooth brown cheeks.

Big Ed's thick, hairy arm crept around his shoulders. "Hell, Johnny, save your thousand bucks. I'll blow you to the dangest, hell-bustin' weddin' these parts ever heard of; how about it Jim Hanna? An' that big house of mine needs kids' voices. You've got Hump's job, kid, an' the whole dang ranch later. Mavericks, Johnny. 'Member what I once told you? We gotta stick together." His heavy voice was soft and lumpy and the warmth came thick and choking into Johnny's throat.

Big Ed's kid. He didn't mind it now. He pulled out the gun and laid it on the bar. He said,

"Be seein' you fellas later."

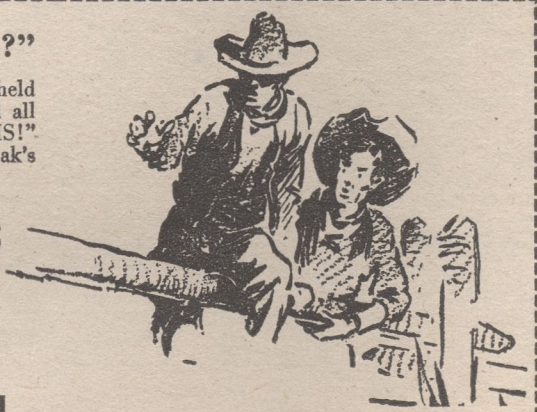
He walked out the door and headed for Ray Tom's General Merchandise and Hardware. Now maybe he'd have time for a little visit.

"WHO'S WHO IN BOOTHILL?"

A peg-legged swamper's little black book held the vital statistics of Squaw Creek town, and all the entries came under one heading: "DEATHS!" You can't afford to miss Clifford D. Simak's smashing novel

"WHEN IT'S HANGNOOSE TIME IN HELL"

in the April issue—on sale February 20th!



15c .44 Western MAGAZINE

"Frisco Breen's Bullet Ante," by Lee E. Wells, a hard-punching story of the California coast of lost souls, is also found in this big issue. You'll also thrill to numerous short stories.

SIXGUN SAVIOUR OF SONORA

By P. O'Brien Stumpe

Outlaws who lit a shuck across the Border to escape Yankee justice, soon found that they had hopped right from the skillet into the hottest fire north of hell!

OUTLAWS who skined across the Mexican border in the 1880's to escape Yankee justice in the Sonora wastelands, often found that they had leaped from the frying pan into the fire.

Bandits found no refuge in Sonora. Summary justice, in the form of a giant Russian Cossack with a curly black beard, patrolled the southern border from Yuma to El Paso. And his name was law!

No immigration record was ever made to show how Colonel Emilio Kosterlitsky, born in Byelo-Russia, got into Mexico, nor is it clear just how he latched on to his wild Rurales followers. But by 1881 the bark of his lethal firing squads could be heard all over the northern desert. Bandits lay low in the mesquite, and the colonel had acquired the nickname "The Scourge of Sonora."

United States authorities first took official notice of him when a company of Arizona Rangers set out to arrest a hardcased murderer named Chillis Monroney, who was hanging out in Tucson and lavishly spending marked money taken in a train robbery. With the Rangers on his tail, Chillis lit out for Mexico. He plunged recklessly through the broken country and, rowling his horse into a frenzy, he beat the law to freedom by about five hundred yards.

The Rangers reined in at the border and helplessly watched the owlhooter make good his escape. Monroney waved to them mockingly and plunged into the Sonora desert. The angry lawmen decided to camp for the night where they stood. Dog-tired, they rolled up in blankets right after sundown and went to sleep. Next morning the desert sun rose, pink and hot and very early. Just as its first rays began to stir the Rangers into wakefulness, the wild drumming of horses hoofs brought them all to their feet, alert.

Up from the south on the dead run came Chillis Monroney, wild-eyed with terror, his shirt torn to ribbons, his horse lathered to a cream. Behind him about a quarter mile, flanked by three other hard-riding horseman, there rode in pursuit the strangest-looking lawman the Arizona Rangers had ever laid eyes on. You could tell he was the law, all right, for jammed into a saddle holster was a staff from which floated the green and white flag of Mexico. The horse was a magnificent white, with a proud head and a flowing silver mane. As it bore its rider closer, the Rangers looked at one another in astonishment. It was their first sight of Colonel Kosterlitsky.

The Mexican man of justice sat straight and commanding in the saddle, with long, almost vertical stirrups. On one thigh flashed a short, dressy broadsword; on his head was perched a high fur shako, of the same texture as his curly black beard.

Ridiculous as he looked, the Colonel could certainly ride, and it was clear that Chillis Monroney was terrified. With a last bursting effort he re-crossed the border he had passed so triumphantly a few hours before. Unarmed, holding his hands high, he flung himself at the Rangers' feet and clasped one of them imploringly around the knees.

"Arrest me! Arrest me! Don't let that devil get me!" the outlaw begged. The Ranger grabbed him by the collar and, pointing to the strange figure now drawing up at the border, he demanded, "Who's that?" But Chillis, too frightened to answer, only babbled.

"Take my advice and hang the dog!" Kosterlitsky yelled in flawless English. He unsheathed his sword, swept a glittering half-arc in salute to the Rangers, and rode back into the desert. His men followed, turning in their saddles to wave in a friendly manner. The Rangers, nonplussed, waved back.

Six hours in Mexico had made an Arizona jailhouse look like a haven of refuge to Chillis Monroney. Colonel Kosterlitsky's network of agents reported his presence within two hours to the Cossack's headquarters. Knowing he couldn't hang a Yankee, even a Yankee killer, the Colonel deliberately chased him back over the line into the waiting noose of the Rangers.

ONLY once was the Colonel of Sonora handed a crushing defeat, when he tried to sing his way into the heart of the black-eyed daughter of one of his lieutenants. Clicking the heels of his polished boots, he presented his wishes in the matter to the girl's father, who was more than willing to promote the match. But the senorita, when interviewed, pouted and replied, "I prefer Porfirio," naming a young man of the village.

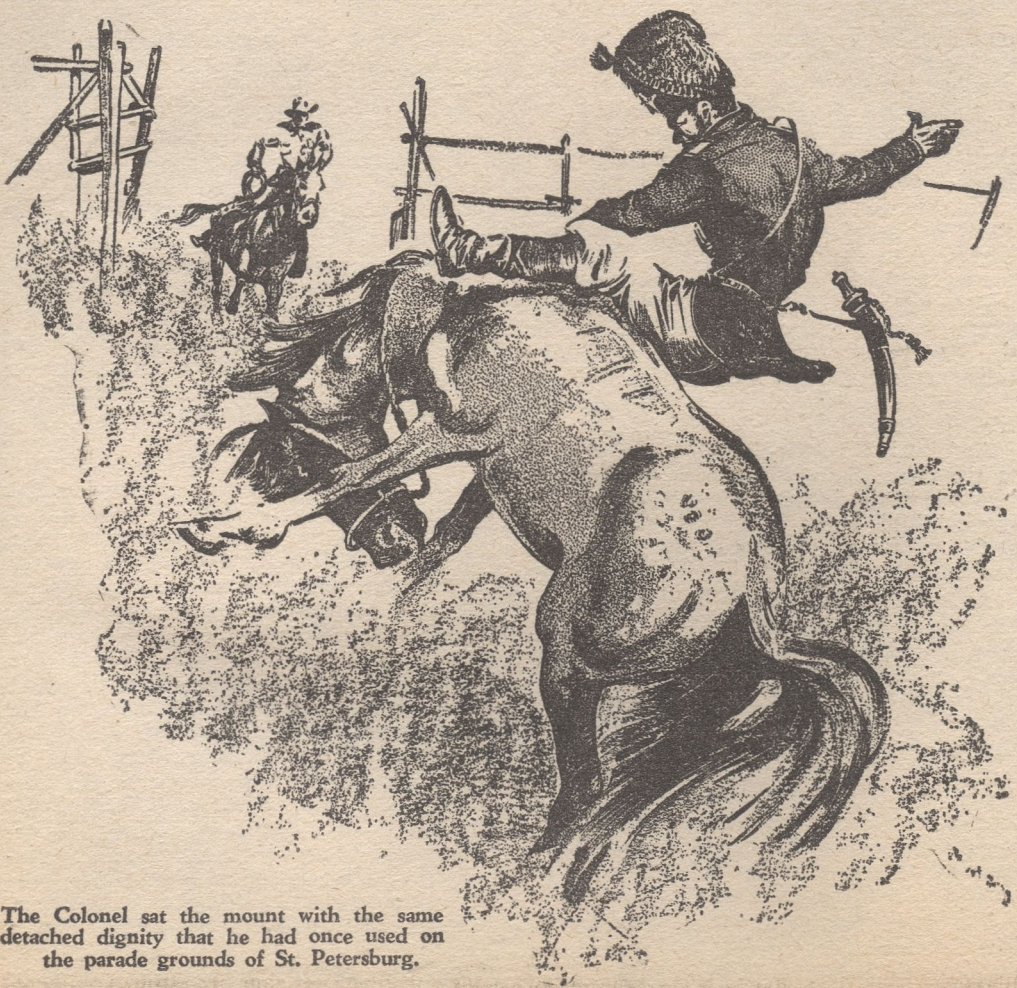
"Porfirio? She prefers Porfirio? But that is impossible!" cried the fighting Cossack. "I can outride him, outshoot him, and I have more money besides!"

Every day at high noon, the dashing Colonel appeared on horseback beneath the lady's window and put his steed through an exhibition of daring horsemanship, ending up by target shooting with his sixgun that amazed the righteous and terrified the wrongdoers. But he made no impression on the lovely girl. She continued to pout and ask for Porfirio.

One night he saw that her window was opened wide to the evening air and he glimpsed her slender form on the balcony. On foot, he hastened forward out of the shadows, but was stopped when a sweet young masculine voice broke into song. The girl clasped her hands and listened raptly to the end of the serenade. When the last notes of the soft strings had strummed away, she blew a kiss from the tips of her fingers to the singer and turned to go. The jealous Colonel saw his rival, Porfirio, tuck a guitar under his arm and stroll whistling down the street.

The senorita had just stepped within the long doors of her balcony when her ears were shattered by a discordant bellow from below. The Colonel was serenading her.

"Forward, ye fighting Cossacks of the Czar,
Ride, ye mighty, ride both near and far!"



The Colonel sat the mount with the same detached dignity that he had once used on the parade grounds of St. Petersburg.

It was the only song he knew. A few seconds later, courtship and song ended violently as the Colonel was smothered by a rug that had descended from the balcony and landed atop his head. While all of Mexico split its sides laughing at him, the wounded but dignified Russian replied, "I at least am a man, not a music box!"

Other than this setback, Colonel Kosterlitsky never lost a battle. However, he paid a heavy price for his law and order, for the fighting Cossack was a marked target for every outlaw's gun. He never dared turn his back to anyone and trusted only his own troops, who were loyal without exception.

Curiously, most of his aides were Texans. He felt a curious affinity for the Lone Star State and he often "raided" the ranches on the fringe, hiring away topflight riders, trailers and gunmen with the reward money he gained in bandit chasing.

One manpower hunt resulted in his signing on four men who became his top hands. More than anything else, the Colonel, a hopeless show-off himself, loved a rodeo. Looking for riders in Redoubt, Texas, he made the happy discovery that he was in town on the day of the annual blowout. Contests in riding, shooting and whiskey-drinking were in order.

Humbly, Kosterlitsky rode up to the judges stand and asked permission to enter the lists. The judges looked at him sharply. The country was full of refuge Mexican outlaws fleeing the justice of that feller, Kosterlitsky, and strangers were generally encouraged to ride on. But the wierdly costumed Colonel looked ridiculous rather than dangerous, so one of them said shortly, "Come ahead if you want. It's your funeral."

As he paid his entry fee and started around to the chute, he was surprised and hurt to hear one of the judges guffaw, "I swear that hat is alive! I saw it move!" The Colonel settled his fur shako more firmly on his head and marched on.

A wicked bronc was waiting for him in the shute. Eyeballs rolling, ears laid back, teeth bare, it dared him to climb aboard. Two cowboys were struggling to cinch a saddle on the animals taut belly. The Colonel waved them aside. "No saddle, please," he said, and shot out into the corral on top of the plunging horse. For twenty minutes the bronc reared and bucked and rolled and sunfished, hitting the ground with great jarring thumps, but the Colonel sat his mount with the same detached dignity that he had once used on parade before the gates of St. Petersburg.

The target-shooting was likewise duck soup. The befuddled cowboys' sixguns were no match for the Russian's flashing pistols.

If Kosterlitsky distinguished himself on the field, he was nothing less than sensational at the bar. He was still clear-headed at midnight, his good right elbow bending up and down with undiminished enthusiasm, long after even the bartender had given up.

As the four husky Texans next to him began to lose control, the Colonel put his arms around their shoulders and taught them to sing "Cossacks of the Czar." The song may have failed to win him a wife, but it roped in the four riders. Still singing, they allowed themselves to be herded gently onto their horses and they blindly followed the warbling Cossack into the night.

Waking the following morning they were amazed to find themselves on the other side of the river. Just as they concluded that they'd been rustled, the Colonel, bright-eyed and pink-cheeked, strode into the room.

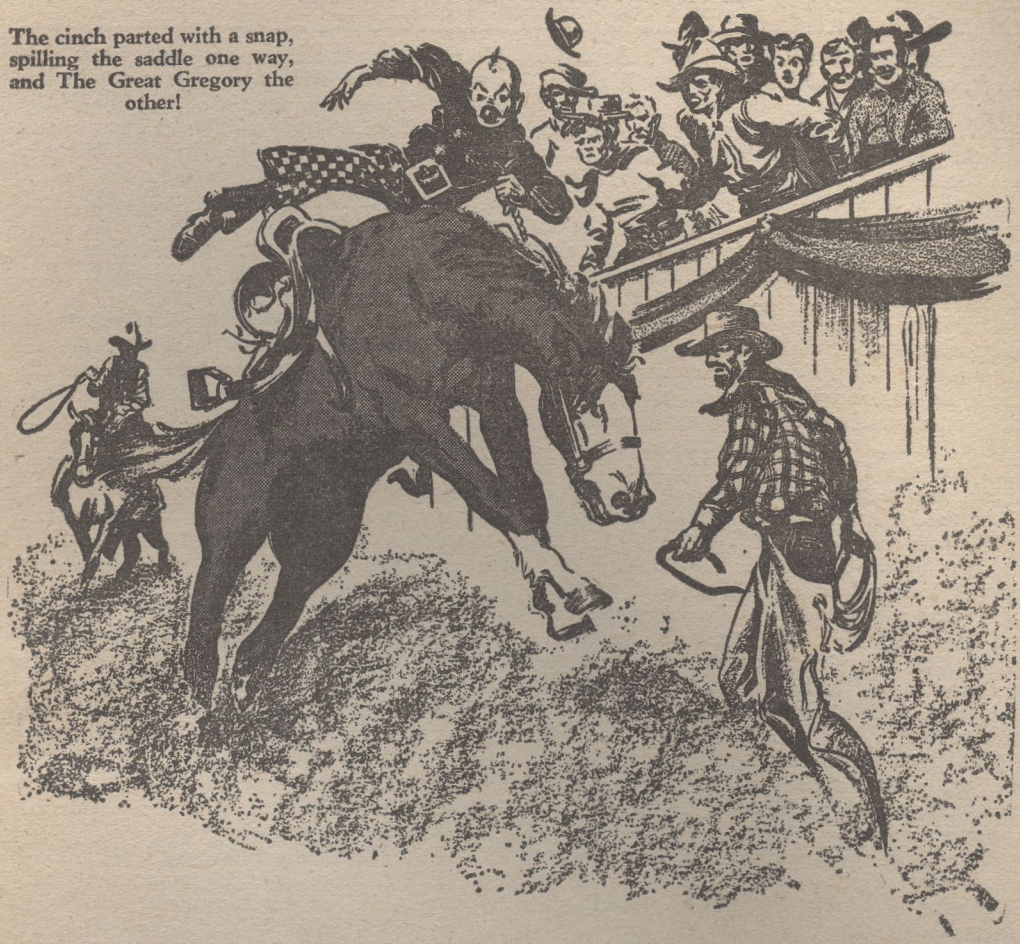
If they had admired him before, they stood in awe at him now. Their frames ached with the pounding they had taken from the bronc, their arms were stiff after throwing and firing their heavy guns, their heads were splitting. Here was the Russian, ten years their senior, who had bested them all the day before, and bounced back in top form.

The Colonel surveyed them with some amusement. "Kosterlitsky's my name," he introduced himself again, "how'd you like to ride for me?"

One Texan spoke for the rest. Thrusting out his hand, he said slowly, "Koster-whatever-it-is, we'd like it fine."

And they did like it fine. Hugh Towers, who had sealed the bargain, rode with him for eight years, until the day that prison doors swung sut behind the doughty Colonel.

For his power was relatively short-lived. Like all ruthless reformers, he made many enemies. Gradually a league of outlaws was formed against him. Mexico's President Diaz, who had supported the Colonel, was thrown out of office and his successor, fearing the Russian's uncompromising honesty, literally turned the bandits loose from jail to hunt him down. In the bloody streets of Nogales the Sonora Cossack was cornered and forced to surrender the sword and the office he had served so well. With him to jail went Hugh Towers and two of his other lieutenants, all charged with trying to overthrow the government. But his fondness for Texans paid off. The United States government, in securing the release of Hugh Towers, intervened in his behalf and in 1889 Emilio Kosterlitsky crossed the border for the last time, heading north, and leaving behind him a Mexico once more as bloody and lawless as though the Colonel of Sonora had never touched a sixgun.



The cinch parted with a snap, spilling the saddle one way, and The Great Gregory the other!

Dark-Trail Masquerader

By Archie Joscelyn

●

In the shadow of the hangnoose, Greg Dunlap, cowman fugitive, hid behind the mask of a despised rodeo clown. . . . But neither grease-paint nor pantaloons can disguise the fighting heart of a cattleman who doesn't know how to quit!

●

OLE DEVIL came bawling out of the chute, squealing his rage, bucking, sunfishing. The clown on his back, grinning foolishly in the fixed stare of the red-nosed mask, and billed as "The Great Gregory", bounced and grabbed wildly but somehow managed to keep his seat. The crowd roared approval. This was a good show.

It was something else than a good show, Greg Dunlap realized a moment later, when the cinch parted with a snap, spilling the saddle one way, and himself the other. That was bringing a fresh burst of applause, as a particularly good climax. But it hadn't been in the schedule. Neither had the trick of cutting that cinch two-thirds of the way in two.

Yet that was what had happened. He could see it, outstretched there in the dust like himself, part of the strands showing the ragged ear of the break, the others cleanly cut. He became suddenly aware that his clown mask had been knocked awry, leaving his face exposed to the gaze of the crowd. Fortunately it was well smudged with the dirt in which he had just rooted, but a chill ran through him as he clapped the mask back in place and got clumsily to his feet.

Old habit made him weave and stagger convincingly as he withdrew, keeping in character as the rodeo clown. Back in the horse barns, he leaned weakly against a stall for a moment, more shaken than he cared to admit.

That cinch-cutting had been no accident. And for the thing to happen, here, in his own home town, where the law would still be on the lookout for him, to hang him—

His own ranch lay back in the hills, that ranch which Hall Doran had coveted and now ranged his cattle over as though it was his own. Doran had won it by the simple expedient of perjuring himself on the witness stand, and railroading Greg Dunlap straight to the pen, and almost to the noose. It would have been a hangrope, if he hadn't managed to escape.

He'd lost himself in what seemed the unlikeliest place in the world, traveling with Lawson's rodeo performers, hiding behind a clown's mask.

It had shocked him to learn that they were coming west again, would show for a day at Rosebriar. But he couldn't very well do anything about it, not without exciting suspicion. And now, more than a year later, no one would recognize him in a masked clown—

So he had figured, but it looked as if he'd figured it all wrong. And pretty soon he'd have to go out, at the intermission between the bulldogging and fancy roping, before the bucking contests started, and do his high-trapeze stunt.

IT WAS old routine by now, riding a trick mule, then grabbing a rope and climbing, coming out on a flying trapeze high overhead, which had been cleverly hidden from the audience until it was shaken out in place. Then doing a drunken clownish act, ending up with high and fancy roping, seventy feet above the ground.

Everything was set. He'd inspected the ropes and equipment a while before. It would be nothing much of a trick, no more than usual—save that Hall Doran was somewhere in the crowd, and Sheriff Bob Thornton, who had once been his friend, would be out there, too. And after what had hapened to that cinch—

Someone was bawling for him. Time to go. He couldn't duck it—not in this town. He came out on the mule, a tall figure despite the bulging clown suit, lean and fit beneath the motley. He allowed himself to be thrown, and came to his feet again and leaned against a post, pretending to sulk, while he took stock of the crowd. One of the pick-up men brushed past.

"You're to do your main stunt later," he said. "After the first round of buckers. Get out of the way, now."

Greg stared, then, since the first rider was already coming out, ducked back to the barns. He was definitely uneasy now. Why was his act being postponed, and without previous warning? Coupled with the cut cinch, it looked as if something was afoot.

But maybe he was letting his imagination run away with him. He had to keep his head, in this town! He went on, to a back corral. He always headed there when he had a little time to spare. Getting back with the horses was like getting home again.

These were all Lawson's stock, back in here. There were, he saw, a lot of new cayuses here today—some thirty head which had come in while he was out front. Greg eyed them with a feeling of disappointment. He'd heard, as had everyone with Lawson's troupe, that the boss was getting a bunch of new horses. But report had said that they were golden palominos. And there were no palominos in this bunch.

Most of them were brown or black. They were high-stepping, spirited stock, a fine looking bunch, judged purely on size and build. But what had induced Lawson to buy them, instead of the palominos? A show like his, which traveled so much through the east, needed the unusual and the flashy.

He'd been more than ordinarily interested in these horses, Greg admitted to himself, because he had heard that Lawson was buying the palominos from Glory Wayne. He'd hoped it was true. It should be a profitable deal for Glory, now that she was running her ranch by herself. . . A deal like that would put her outfit on its feet again.

He turned back, disappointed, still worried by a feeling that something was wrong. He ducked into the little room assigned him, and was reaching for his mask, with the notion of scrubbing the dirt from his face; then he stopped, at sound of a familiar voice, from another room beyond, where Lawson had his own headquarters for the day. The thin board partition did not amount to much.

"I'm awfully sorry," a girl's voice was saying, and Greg's pulse jumped as it had in the old days, for it was Glory Wayne's rich contralto. "But I'm afraid I won't be able to fill that order for palominos after all, Mr. Lawson. You—you see, my herd was stolen."

"Stolen?" Lawson echoed. "I'm mighty sorry to hear that. But of course, if you can't furnish them, you can't. I'll have to look around elsewhere, I suppose—and probably be satisfied with ordinary stock."

He was still expressing polite regrets when the voices faded. Greg stared, his own troubles momentarily forgotten. He had long since assured himself that he had given up dreaming about Glory Wayne—a man in hiding, with a price on his head, could do no other way.

But that didn't keep him from still taking an interest in her. He'd known for a long time what a gallant fight she was making to keep her ranch running, to make a go of it. Raising palominos. Success could pay off big and save the ranch. But failure would mean loss of everything. And if her herd had just been stolen, it had the bleak sound of dismal failure.

Voices were returning. Lawson's, and another. Greg stiffened. He knew that other voice, too. Smooth and suave, it had condemned his own neck when he had heard it last. Hall Doran was still smooth, but Lawson was chuckling.

"It's a nice bunch of horseflesh, Doran," he said. "A mighty nice bunch, I might say. But your price is rather high—for ordinary stock."

"Certainly. But these, looks to the contrary, are not ordinary horses, as you know well enough," Doran retorted. "And I want my money, now. Twelve thousand dollars for thirty horses."

"You sound as though you didn't trust me," Lawson grumbled.

"I trust no one," Doran said smoothly. "It's safer that way."

"All right, here it is," Lawson agreed, a little impatiently. "I'm not kicking—though the girl was just telling me that *her* horses had been stolen—and that she'll lose her ranch if she doesn't get them back."

"Don't let sympathy for her mar your business judgment," Doran said curtly. "This way, you're saving three thousand. As for her, she can marry me whenever she feels like it—and maybe when she stands to lose her ranch she'll feel that way."

"Don't worry, I'm not letting sentiment interfere with business," Lawson said promptly. "For a twenty-per cent saving I pass up all sentiment!"

ONCE again the voices faded as the two moved away. Greg scowled behind his mask, puzzled. Then he turned and drifted back to the horse corral, well hidden from the gaze of the public by the barns. No one was around. He crossed to one of the new bunch which Lawson had just bought from Hall Doran, took up a curry-comb, and ran it over the horse, scrubbing off old hair. Then he stopped.

Now it was clear enough. These were Glory's palominos. They had been cleverly dyed, but in a matter of days—once the show had headed well east again—that would begin to wear off, and it wouldn't be long until they were golden again! That was why Lawson was paying far more than ordinary stock was worth, but less then such palominos would bring. The two of them were working to swindle Glory.

Anger blazed in Greg, driving out all other thoughts. He turned, strode back to Lawson's office and went inside, without ceremony. Lawson was there again, a tall, thin-beaked man, seated at a folding desk, frowning over a sheet of figures. He looked up and scowled at Greg's abrupt entrance, then relaxed as he saw who it was.

"Oh, it's you, Gregory," he said. "Did you want something?"

"You bet I did," Greg agreed, his voice brittle with the anger which tingled through him. "I overheard what you said to Miss Wayne—and then buying those horses from Hall Doran. And I happen to know that they're the stolen palominos!"

For a long, heavy moment, there was silence in the tent. Outside, rising and falling, came the cheers of the rodeo crowd, the hoarse bawling of a steer. Lawson stared back at the mocking, clown face, and his own went taut.

"Well?" he asked.

"I can see the way you figured it—to be back east when they showed as palominos," Greg said tightly. "But it didn't work."

"Apparently not," Lawson agreed. "What do you want? A cut?"

"What do you think I am? I want you to pay Miss Wayne the price originally agreed upon. You can get your money back from Doran—he'll give it back rather than go to jail."

"Maybe. But if I tried to put him there—he could make it uncomfortable for me—under the circumstances."

"Then take your loss. You've got it coming to you."

"And if I don't?"

"The sheriff would be interested in this!"

"So he might," Lawson agreed smoothly—too smoothly. "And I can just picture you going to him, or even trying to send word! I happen to know your true identity—Greg Dunlap, and that the sheriff is looking for you. This is your old stamping-grounds, isn't it—where you're wanted for murder! When you start to point out my record—it's rather a case of the pot calling the kettle black, isn't it?"

His words brought Greg up with a jolt. Somehow it had never occurred to him that Lawson knew him, but a lot of things began to take on clarity now. The boss of the bucking string was protecting him—just so long as it was profitable for him to do so, and so long as he could use him. No longer. For the moment, thinking of Glory, he had almost forgotten his own position.

"I don't think you'll be going to the sheriff—or saying anything," Lawson went on smoothly. "You'll keep your mouth shut and your face masked out of sight. And be mighty thankful that I give you the chance to!"

He turned back to his desk with a shrug of dismissal, and Greg stumbled out of the room. This looked like checkmate—his own neck against Glory's success or failure. The fact that Lawson was tangled in a deal with the man who, always professing to be a friend, had sent him almost to his death, was something else to think about. Behind his smiling clown-mask, Greg's face was set and harsh.

OUTSIDE, it was starting to grow dusk. Lounging back in the shadows, his eyes ranged the stands. He saw the sheriff, with Hall Doran not far away. Climbing to a seat near the judge's stand was Glory Wayne.

His heart seemed to stand still, at sight of her. He'd heard her voice, during the afternoon, but this was his first sight of her in over a year, and it had all the effect on him of a man dying of thirst coming suddenly upon a cool spring.

She was a girl with beauty perched on her trim little shoulders, hiding in the dimples in her cheeks, lurking in the tendrils of her brown hair. That had been his opinion in the old days, and he saw no reason to change it now, despite the paleness of her face today. She was keeping a stiff upper lip for the world to see.

He started a little, finding the sheriff's eyes on him, then relaxed, remembering his motley. But he had the uneasy suspicion that too many folks, here in this country, knew him. There had been that cut cinch—which might have been just by way of warning to him that he *was* known, and not to interfere. . . .

The last of the sunshine struck across the tall pole which had been set up, with its high cross bar, holding the rope and pulley which held his own high bar. Right now it made a shadow like a cross, at his feet. And now it was time for the rest of his act.

For the next several minutes, Greg performed mechanically but smoothly, his mind out on the broad acres of his own ranch, nostagia and bitterness crowding his throat. He worked unsteadily to the high trapeze which was suddenly swinging out up there, then clumsily pretended to risk a broken neck. Until, as a climax, he would abruptly show his real skill in a daring finale which always brought a wave of applause from the crowd.

He was perched high now, waving to the crowd, almost falling off and clutching wildly at the bar to regain his seat. For a moment he sat, studying the crowd. His eyes narrowed. Hall Doran was no longer in his seat. Then he saw him, standing near the foot of the pole, talking with Lawson.

A chill went through Greg. Why should the two of them be talking now? Had Lawson grown apprehensive, and was he telling Doran about Greg, and what he had threatened to do? Lawson was walking away, now—and as Greg came lightly to his feet on the bar, he saw that the roustabout who was supposed to stand at the foot of the pole and hold on to the rope which kept the trapeze safely in place, was gone. It was Doran who held the rope now!

For a moment, Greg stood tense. If he had entertained any doubts, they were gone now. Lawson had told Doran, and Doran was losing no time.

This time, he wasn't content to leave him to the law. Greg knew too much about him in turn, evidence which could not be discredited if he was given a chance to talk. Hall Doran would be branded a horsethief, and his own testimony against Greg, on which the whole case had hung before, would be badly shaken. It would mean ruin for Doran.

That same evidence could ruin Lawson as well. The owner of the bucking string and boss of a score of top-hand performers, had preferred, at first, to keep Greg on to do his clowning, since he was a main attraction. He'd figured on closing his mouth through fear. But Doran had vetoed that course as too dangerous.

So now they intended to murder him—and to make it look like an accident. In a space of seconds now he was supposed to start swinging on his high bar—swinging until it reached an awe-inspiring arc. And at the climax, to leap through the air to a second swinging trapeze, holding his coiled and ready lariat rope in his teeth as he made the jump.

The jump had been a thrilling stunt, but Greg had capped the act with a grand climax. Almost in the moment of landing on the second trapeze, it was his custom to snatch the lariat from his mouth, shake out the loop, and rope an object on a second pole—a target screened by a cloth till then, but unveiled by a jerk on a rope by an attendant on the ground.

Revealed to the staring eyes of the rodeo crowd, it appeared as the head of a steer. A longhorn on the prod. Greg had roped the head many a time, pulling it loose and swinging it triumphantly. Made of papermache, it weighed only a few pounds. It was

that act which had made him so valuable to Lawson, and he had perfected it, knowing that his value was his own protection.

Everything was in readiness now. The second trapeze was being swung by an assistant with a rope, on the ground, and he started his own in motion, following the beat of a drum. But he knew that he'd never be allowed to finish the act.

Merely by letting go of the rope which he held, at the crucial moment, Hall Doran could send him plunging to his death. Everyone would think it was an accident, and a roustabout would get the blame. Now Doran was brazenly waving a hand to him in a derisive gesture—taking the hand off the rope!

The next instant the rope was free. At the very crest of his swing, seventy feet above the ground, Greg felt the bar falter, jerk, and knew that death was pulling the ropes now.

THE thing had come to its own climax with startling speed. But months of experience had readied Greg for emergencies, for split-second decisions. The trapeze was starting to drop in a horrible plunge.

But at the apex, a little of its swing still remained. Not enough so that, by any possible effort, he could make his jump and catch the other bar. But they had overlooked one thing.

The pole which held the other rope, and the steer-head perched up on it, was a telephone pole. Every yard or so, along it, were outjutting spikes, driven there to aid a climber.

A spike made a small target, but it was right of front of him now. His split-second timing in roping the fake steer head had conditioned Greg for the job. Now he was acting steadily, swiftly. The rope, held between his teeth, was in his hand like a conjuring trick, the loop shaking out, spreading.

For a heart-breaking second, as the bar beneath him lost all its impetus and started to drop, Greg could not be sure. Then the rope jerked tight in his hands. He held on, swinging in a wide arc, then starting his slide down it even while the swing continued.

A horrified gasp had swept the crowd at first. Now it changed to ringing applause. They supposed that this was just a new thrill for their entertainment.

But Greg had no illusions. Luck had been with him—luck, and skill. But while he'd outfoxed Doran and Lawson for the moment, this was just a beginning. Their only safety lay in moving fast now, in his, in moving just a little faster.

As his feet hit the ground, he paused for an instant, twitching the end of the rope loose from the spike, up above. He might have more use for this rope.

If he'd had any doubts before that he was dealing with a hard-bitten pair, it was swiftly removed. These two were accustomed to swift action in times of stress, as well. Even as he steadied from his drop, something hit him like the side of a house, spilling him on the ground. His mask and headpiece went rolling, and he saw that Hall Doran had managed to run into him.

The crowd still believed that this was just a part of his clowning act. Well, he'd be glad to entertain them. Still flat on his back, he lifted both feet, as Doran rushed at him again, then lashed out, catching the rancher squarely in the stomach. It lifted his enemy and catapulted him back for twenty feet, like a sack of grain.

As he came to his feet again, Greg had a glimpse of Glory's face—startled, incredulous, and he knew that, with his mask off, she had recognized him. And so had the sheriff, just getting to his feet, eyes popping.

But Doran was not so speedy in picking himself up this time. There had been nothing clownish in the way Greg had handled him. Still, he was getting up, with Lawson running to his assistance. Unmasked, it was time to go. Now he was a target for any man's guns, and Doran wouldn't be squeamish about availing himself of that opportunity.

The sun had dipped out of sight, dusk was settling. A yell to stop him boomed out as Greg scuttled for the horse barns. Feet were pounding behind, now, as every bystander joined in the chase. A pair of arms grabbed at him from a shadowy pocket, someone cursed, then a gun jarred loud on the dusk, flame stabbing the gloom. The bullet zipped so close that he could hear the hissing whine of it.

A whole horde of pursuers seemed to be right at his heels. The speed of such an organized pursuit seemed incredible. Then Greg understood. Doran's crew, from the ranch, of course! At least a score of them. Doran had aimed to kill him, but he was taking no chances. He'd posted his crew so that, if anything went wrong, they could rectify the error.

Greg had to give them credit for trying. Men who drew Hall Doran's pay had long since left all scruples behind—mostly in penitentiaries, or in other places where the shadow of a noose was ever before their eyes. The pack was on his heels, now, and it was not their intention to capture him for the law. More than ever, Doran wanted him dead.

Other bullets were hunting for him now, fired with a callous disregard for the crowd, spilling out just at the side. If he kept running that way, some of the audience would be hurt, and there were a lot of women and

children. Greg turned at right-angles, so that his pursuers bullets would endanger no one—but himself!

For a little while they had been chasing him largely by guesswork, as he kept in the darker shadows of the barns, shooting, almost in the same way. Now, as he was out in the open, their yells, shrilled triumphantly, a hue and cry like the snarl of a pack of wolves closing for the kill. A bullet burned through the fleshy part of his left shoulder, lancing like a red-hot iron. Greg plunged ahead desperately, but now he could feel the hot blood running as well.

Hope came back to him. Just ahead was standing a saddled horse, where a pick-up man had left it. He vaulted into the saddle, snatching up the reins. The cayuse, sleepy-appearing before, was anxious to go. A moment later he was in the open, with a few scattered stars beginning to pin-point the sky overhead, and the fresh, sweet smell of open range in his nostrils.

Foothills lay just ahead, and this was familiar—his own country! He'd give them a race now!

Before he had left the town well behind, however, Greg knew that the pursuit was hot after him. Made up mostly of Doran's men, Sheriff Thornton was leading the posse. But, while he might not suspect it, Greg knew that Thornton was only a puppet in this act. He would figure to overtake Greg, arrest him, and return him to the law to handle. But those who rode with Thornton would do their best to see that he was never taken alive.

Abruptly, the thread of moon which had edged over the horizon, the high pale stars, were blotted away. Something dank and raw closed around him, and Greg laughed suddenly. Here was a real piece of luck—not alone for him, but for Glory Wayne as well. For this was fog, such as sometimes drifted in here at this season of year. Thick, clammy fog.

Perfect weather in which to keep riding—which was what the others would expect him to do. But even more perfect for the scheme that had suddenly popped into his mind. What he planned was the last thing they'd be expecting.

His wound still bled a little, but Greg, looking at it, was relieved to see that it was only a flesh wound, and shallow—not much more than a bad scratch. Nothing to worry about, for the present at least. He draped his coiled lariat over the saddle-horn, carefully. That rope had saved his life more than once, but never so surely as tonight.

He swung his horse, turned back. The sounds of the pursuit had been lost in the clammy fog, the crowd would be heading back for town. Most of those who would be after him, would be a long way from here by now.

Reaching the corral behind the horse barns, Greg took stock. The palominos were still there, as he had expected. He swung open the outer gate, rode among them, sent them streaming out into the gray blankness of the fog. They'd head straight for home, he knew, though he intended to follow for a while to see that they got there. Glory was going to have her palominos back, and if Lawson wanted them again, he'd have to pay what they were worth—with something added for interest.

SCENT of evergreens came strong to his nostrils, out here in the open country, freshened and made more spicy by the damp tingle of the fog. Though he couldn't see far in any direction because of the pressing grayness of it, seeing wasn't necessary. He knew his way here on the darkest night. This was home range.

Glory's ranch, the Diamond W, was close ahead now. The horses were holding to a steady trot, glad to get back. He'd been traveling for a good part of the night, Greg realized, and he was beginning to feel stiff and tired and hungry. The fog was commencing to lift. He'd better find a hideout.

Knowing the country as he did, that was simple enough. During the day, taking trout from a pool and roasting them, lying hid and watching the wide-spread man hunt, of which he was the focus, Greg had the satisfaction of seeing that Glory had her horses back, and that she had recognized them under the camouflage job.

Toward noon, he saw her riding out to where they were grazing in a big pasture, saw Lawson came riding out from town and join her. And head toward the horses.

He'd have to do something about that, Greg realized. Otherwise the crooked rodeo boss might convince her that he was innocent of anything that had happened, and buy them back for less than he deserved to pay. Greg knew that, if he had to, Lawson would pay almost any price for those golden beauties.

Greg had a piece of paper and a stub of pencil in his pocket. He wrote a note of explanation, wrapped it on a rock, and, keeping to brush and coulees, maneuvered presently, while the discussion was still going on, to toss it at Glory's feet. Lawson's back was turned for the moment.

But there, Greg's luck deserted him. The rock hit, bounced, and the note came loose, fluttering at Lawson's feet as he turned. He picked it up, read it, and his face showed no flicker of emotion as he casually informed Glory that it was for himself.

There was only one thing to do, since Lawson now knew where he was.

"He's lying, Glory," he called. "That note is for you, and I wrote it. Make him give it to you."

Knowing Glory, Greg knew that he didn't need to say more. If Lawson refused to hand it over, he'd at least never get the palominos—and probably some of Glory's crew, top-hands who had been with the ranch, many of them, since she was in rompers, would see to it that he *did* hand it over.

But, as he ducked back down a brushy coulee and into a scattering clump of evergreens, Greg knew that the pursuit was after him again. Half-heartedly for the moment, since most of the men near at hand were of Glory's crew. But as soon as Lawson could get word to Doran, there would be nothing half-way about it.

Within the next hour, Greg had full proof of that. They were really after him again, combing the whole country where they figured he must be, and making it a decidedly uncomfortable game of fox and hounds. Whether he could fool them and keep free until night came to his rescue again, became a touch-and-go subject.

He saw, an hour before sunset, that he'd lost. There were tall hills and wild, broken country, not far ahead—hills that he'd been trying to reach. But immediately at hand was a stretch of impassable swamp on one side, and a lake on the other—with a dubious sort of a trail winding between.

The trail ran for a considerable distance, hemmed in between swamp and lake. At a few spots it narrowed to a few yards of passable territory. In the middle of the trail, Greg discovered that Doran had managed to get men ahead, circling from hours before. They were ready to cut him off at the far end, before he could reach the hills.

If he turned back, others were coming along, doggedly persistent despite the rough, brushy passage. Either way, they'd have him. And if he stayed here, hiding out, they'd still find him, before darkfall.

Greg considered the matter. If he struck off into the swamp, he'd be in morasses and quicksand, and leave a plain trail. That was out. He could go down to the lake, but before he could reach the water, there was sandy, open beach, and they'd see him and get him.

HE STARTED suddenly as a horseman rode out of the brush at the side of the trail, and wished for a gun, so that he could at least put up a fight. Then he saw that it was Glory, her face tense with concern. He waited, while she came straight to him. Clowning had given him a lot of practice, and he contrived to grin in welcome.

"You're sure more beautiful than ever, Glory," he said softly.

"Greg!" she said, a little reproachfully. "Oh, Greg!" And there was such a depth of meaning in the words, in her eyes, that he had to look away quickly. Not daring to trust himself to say what he so desperately wanted to, he changed the subject.

"Did Lawson hand over that note?"

"Yes," she agreed. "And then he seemed to be in a great hurry to be moving on. So he paid for the horses, in cash—half as much again as our original agreement."

Greg smiled grimly. Lawson was afraid of being involved in this whole unsavory mess if he stayed around, and was trying to buy his way out of it. Well, that was all right with him, since he had been forced to pay Glory what she had coming.

"I'm mighty glad, Glory," he said.

"I know," she agreed. "I owe it all to you. And—Greg, this convinces me of what I've known in my heart all along. You aren't the cattle rustler and killer that they've painted you. You never were!"

"I'm glad you know that, Glory," he said, and gave up any idea of escape which her appearance had put into his head. There still wasn't any way out. "Your feeling that way—goes a long way, to make up for the rest."

There was pain in her eyes.

"Of course I know it, Greg. But isn't there some way to prove it, somehow? It must have been Hall Doran who was guilty—I can see that now. Isn't there some way, before they get here? Doran is coming up the trail, and he's ahead of all the others, swearing he's going to get you himself. The sheriff isn't far behind him. I managed to slip around and get ahead, when I saw what they were up to, to warn you."

That had been possible, of course, because, following the trail, they were forced, like himself, to come on foot. No horse could make it. Glory had circled the edge of the swamp. But he shook his head.

"I'm glad they weren't as smart as you," he said. "But I don't see any way to dodge 'em, close as they're getting now from both sides. Though, if you'll give me your gun—I'll even accounts with Doran, at least."

Glory stared, understanding what he planned. A shoot-out, between the two of them. He didn't intend to be taken back, to hang. Suddenly she was leaning forward in the saddle, talking swiftly, excitedly.

Taking her horse, he rode back the way she had come. And stopped, presently, where the trail pinched together. Off at one side was swamp, deep black muck, impassable. Close at hand was a towering ledge, and just beyond it, the lake.

Hiding his horse, Greg waited. Glory had kept out of sight, he knew. He hadn't long to wait. Hall Doran was coming, pushing

fast, confident that Greg had no gun, that he was about to be caught in the closing jaws of the trap which Doran had set. He came without suspicion, and before he knew what was happening, a noose settled over his head, jerked tight.

Greg was crouching in a shelf-like crack of the ledge, up above, like a waiting puma. Like a puma again, he dropped to the ground, landing on top of Doran, knocking him flat. He rolled off, came cat-like to his feet, and pulled at the end of the rope in his hands, which was looped now around an outthrust finger of the rock up above. His pull brought Doran back to his feet again.

BUT only for a moment. With the first shock of surprise and terror gone, Doran reached up, grabbing the rope above his head with both hands, climbing, relaxing the awful strain on his head and neck. His eyes were fairly popping, but he was a bull-necked man who could stand rough treatment. In another moment, holding the rope above with one hand, his great torso muscles bulging, he was lifting himself enough to ease the strain, starting to run a thumb around the strangling noose. Greg's voice stopped him.

"Leave it stay, Doran! Or I'll put six different brands of daylight through you!"

Eyes goggling, wheezing painfully, but still holding to the rope to save himself from strangling, Doran swung, to stare into the muzzle of Greg's gun. The clown had snubbed his end of the rope about an upthrust of rock, and he reached now and plucked the six-gun from Doran's holster. His sardonic smile was as clownlike as he had ever achieved with the mask.

"Leave it stay," he repeated. "When a man's born to hang, there's nothing to be done about it!"

"You—you going to murder me?"

"It's an idea," Greg said lightly. "Which do you prefer—noose or bullet? I've got you high enough to strangle, but not too fast. You can't hold yourself that way for very long. When your arms play out and you sag—I'll enjoy watching!"

"Don't kill me," Doran squalled. "Ain't there something I can do?"

"There might be, one or two things," Greg conceded. "Of course, your men will be coming along, pretty soon—but not soon enough to do you any good. But if you were to admit the truth, that it was you who murdered the man that I was accused of killing, Vale Stewart, and that you stole the cattle that you swore I rustled—then I just might decide to keep you alive for the sheriff. He'll beat your men here."

Doran knew that for the truth. And he was tiring fast. Already, his arms were becoming so leaden from the strain that he doubted if he could free himself from the noose which was cutting into his neck, even without the gun preventing him from making the try. Soon, as Greg said, his weight would pull him down, so that he'd simply sag in it and strangle. A crafty look came into his popping eyes.

"You—you'll promise to save for alive for the sheriff, if I confess?"

"Yes. If you admit that you murdered Stewart and stole those cattle, then railroaded me for your crime."

"All right," Doran gasped. "I'll confess. I did kill Stewart—and I stole those cattle. Now let me down."

"Sure," Greg agreed amiably, allowing the rope to slip a little. "But keep as you are till the sheriff gets here."

They were still in the same position, a few minutes later, when Sheriff Thornton came in sight, his eyes widening at what he saw. Greg gestured toward his prisoner.

"Here's the man you want, Bob," he said. "He's just confessed to what I knew all along, but couldn't prove—that he murdered Stewart and stole those cattle, and then railroaded me for his crime."

"I never confessed to nothin' of the kind," Doran snarled. "He's been torturin' me, tryin' to make me say what he wanted, but you know his record, Sheriff—"

"Reckon I do, Doran," Thornton agreed, and there was, for just an instant, a shade of regret in his voice as he looked at Greg. "Even if he had confessed it, Greg, it would be valueless without a witness—"

"Well, he's got the witness!"

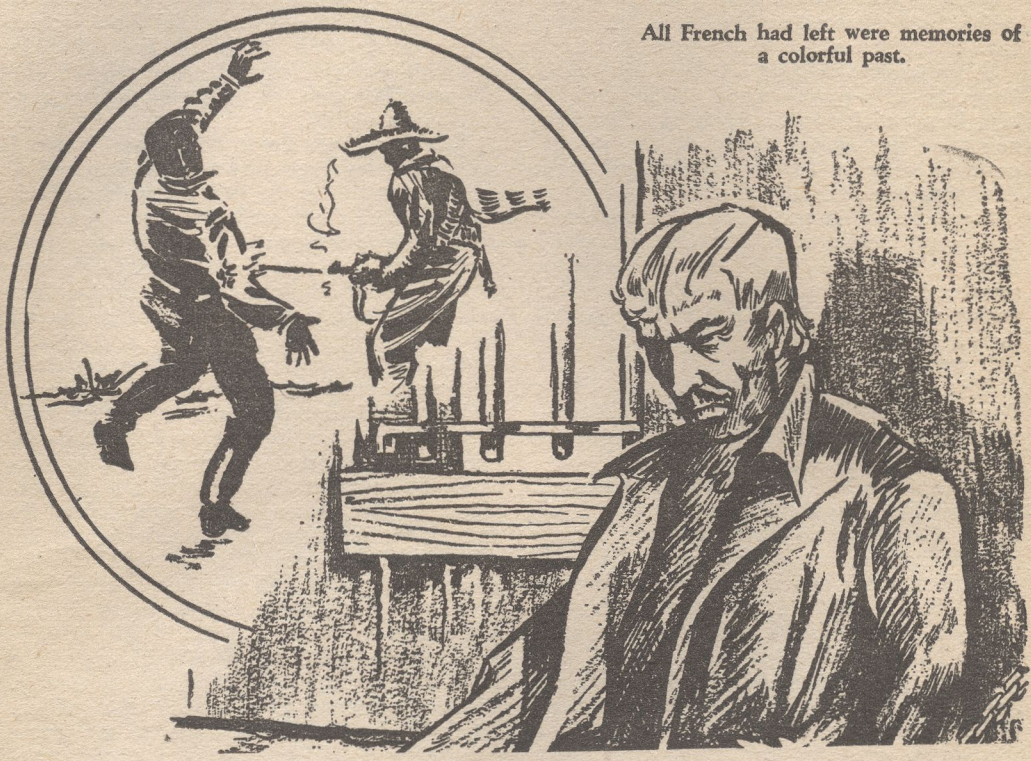
Doran stared, with sagging jaw, as Glory Wayne stepped into sight from behind a projection of the cliff. "I heard every word of what he said. He confessed to killing Stewart, and stealing the cattle, and framing Greg. And after the way he stole my horses and sold them to Mr. Lawson, I guess that Greg's word, and mine, will be enough to convince a jury!"

"Reckon they will, at that," Thornton agreed, and snapped a pair of handcuffs on Doran's wrists, while the rancher submitted in dazed silence. "And I'm sure glad that you happened along to hear that confession, Glory. It was mighty lucky for Greg!"

"Lucky, nothing!" Greg chuckled, recoiling his rope. "It was her idea, the whole of it. She knew that you were coming, and that I was pretty good with a rope. So she figured that putting a noose around his neck and giving him some of his own medicine would be easy to do, and fitting. And she was sure right about it."

GLORY ROAD TO HELL

By Roy Vandergoot



All French had left were memories of a colorful past.

In California there was gold for the man with brawn and a will to work. . . . But in Parker H. French's book, only fools and suckers sweat for grub and gold!

IT WAS near El Paso that the U. S. Cavalry detail spotted the wagon train.

"There they are, boys!" their commanding officer called, putting spurs to his fagged mount. "Follow me!"

On their tired horses his troopers followed.

But those at the train had seen them. There was instant activity. Point, flank, and drag, the outriders assembled at the rear of the train and opened fire. That stopped the soldiers. With accurate bullets from the long rifles pinning them down, their commanding officer reflected upon means and methods to deal with the problem.

He reflected too long. At the wagon train Parker H. French was hurriedly cramming the silver, the gold, and the currency into saddle bags. Then—a signal, and up leaped the rear guard to mount their picked horses. Spurring, yelling, shouting their derision at the troopers, they hit it up for the border. And over the line into Old Mexico they rode with $150,000 loot in their saddle bags.

Parker H. French was a smart man!

This was in the late spring of '49. Gold had been discovered in California the year before and word of it had leaped the land like a dry-grass fire the prairie. Now many men, adventurous men who wanted quick riches, were on their way West by the thousands. By the Oregon Trail, by way of Panama, around the Horn and across Mexico and by the old Santa Fé trail. They all wanted to get there quick and they were willing to pay good money for transportation.

The talk of great riches was in the land. In California there was gold to be had for any man who didn't mind hard work.

But there were some who *did* mind!

Among these latter was an Illinois store

clerk by the name of Parker H. French. He wanted riches, too; but he didn't like to work hard for them. And why should he? *He* had brains. And most other men had not. Most other men were honest. Most other men were fools. And there is none more easily duped than a honest fool!

That was something Parker H. French knew. So he began to think. All through the long lonely nights in his room in a little Illinois town, he thought. And from that thought came planning; and from planning, scheming. And then one little step further. . . .

He was a smart man. From his mother he had good looks: even features. From his father: the black eyes, the high forehead, the smartness, the consuming ambition, the imposing name. And from both of them he had the gift of gab. . . .

It was a good start!

He dressed well: with taste and with a flourish. And like that he carried himself—not like a clerk, but like a man who owned the store.

He kept the books, and he kept them well. Figures were his meat and the calculus his drink. He needed no other intoxicant to make him feel high. When writing figures he would sometimes mark down in black and white $100,000. He would gaze at that, with shining eyes, with moisture coming out upon his brow. He would lick his lips. . . .

He wrote a good hand. He knew it; and he practiced that gift diligently. Practiced till it became proficiency; then an art; and then—with one step further—a little more than art. . . .

IT WAS a dapper and well-groomed man who stepped off the stage in San Antonio, Texas, that spring day in '49. He strutted with an air as if he owned the town. The best room in the best hotel was for him.

When he emerged from that room he was something worth looking at: silk-hatted, cravated, gaitered, tip-top in everything; with a shine to his fine boots that blinded the eye. Straight to the bank he went—the best bank—to pay a personal call to its president; very correct, very business-like, very impressive—especially so when he deposited a letter of credit drawn on Howland & Aspinwall—the fashionable New York banking firm—to the tune of $750,000.

Things began to happen in San Antonio!

Merchant houses, livery stables, harness makers, outfitting establishments hummed with activity. Mr. French, it developed, planned to conduct a large passenger train to the gold fields of California, a train of six hundred paying passengers! A splendid idea, a money-maker, a veritable stroke of genius! The newspapers said so—and large ads announcing the venture and drumming for prospective customers attested the correctness of editorial opinion.

In a space of time so brief that the people of San Antonio de Bexar had no chance to catch their breath—let alone think and reflect upon this spurt of prosperity—the organization was planned, created, and executed and the most marvelous of all transportation marvels was a reality.

It was a magnificent train: one hundred splendid ambulances drawn by six hundred of the finest mules in the best of harness. Each wagon seated six passengers—and of customers there was no dearth! Each passenger paid in advance his fare to Sacramento, California: $250. One-hundred-and-fifty-thousand dollars cold cash! Oh, it was a stroke of genius, all right!

Besides the one hundred ambulances there were numerous baggage and provision wagons and a remuda of extra mules and horses, with a corps of drivers, hunters, cooks, attendants, quarter masters, commissary and wagon masters. There were also mounted men as outriders: men chosen with care, splendidly horsed, well-paid—so their loyalty would lay with the master—armed to the teeth with the choicest weapons. There were musicians, there were flags, there was pomp and circumstance and ballyhoo.

It worked fine. The talk of gold was on the land—the blindfold of big and easy money. Big to the tune of three-quarter of a million. And easy! *How* easy, none of the great merchants dreamed! For who would question the integrity of this charming man, this well-bred gentleman, this smooth-talking, affable person? Especially so over a bottle of champagne in the best bar in town, with the best citizens helping him drink it. . . .

It was a gay and brilliant parade that with music blaring and banners flying rolled out of San Antonio. Rolled out upon the open plains, heading West.

All went well, until near El Paso a detail of U. S. Cavalry overhauled them. The merchants of San Antonio had finally their eyes opened, had awakened to the fact that their prosperity was based on fraud; and they hollered so loud, Uncle Sam rushed to the rescue.

But Parker H. French had foreseen this, too. It was for this contingency that he had hired his gunnies and had paid them well. It was for just this reason that he had chosen the southern route, the road that skirted the line the law could not cross. His long nights of thinking in that lonely little room in far-off Illinois were bearing fruit now.

Parker H. French was a smart man!

What would have happened to the train had not the troopers caught up with it, is problematical. Likely it would have gone on

to Sacramento where French could have sold the equipment with ease and with profit. That *would* have been big money! Now, he abandoned the wagons. The soldiers saw to it that they were driven back to San Antonio. The six hundred passengers were left stranded. Some went on and made it; some went back home; and some stayed in New Mexico and Arizona. Stayed permanently, in hastily scooped-out graves by hurried wayfarers, or left to bleach their bones upon the sandy deserts, under the hot sun.

Far into Old Mexico rode Parker H. French and his gang.

Then came a gay time in Mexico. *"Si, si,"* it was; for the *gringos* had *mucho dinero.* And, how they spent it! Wine, women, and song. A glorious time was had by all. A glorious time on the road to hell!

It didn't last. Within a few months they were all broke.

What now? Why, they were a hard-bitten lot and they were well-armed. So it was robbery. Robbery along the highways of Old Mexico.

The Mexican government didn't like that. They sent the *rurales* after the gang. This was in Chihuahua. A pitched battle was fought in which the *gringos* lost out. Decimated, they were imprisoned in the dungeons of Durango.

Here French, in an attempted escape, had his left elbow shattered by a musket ball. Prison surgeons amputated the arm above that joint. A second attempt proved more successful, and so, in '53, Parker H. French turned up in Los Angeles, California.

The bird had lost his fine feathers. A prison pallor lay on his classic features; and his clothes smelled of the dungeons of Durango. But his mind was unimpaired. And neither had his charm suffered, nor his tongue lost its proficiency. He talked as smooth as ever.

He talked himself right into a room at the fashionable Bella Union; then into the best of raiments the town's stores and tailors could provide. He talked before the bar of the Bella Union, over a pony of the best of Scotch, to the best citizens, in the best of manners, charmingly, suavely. Quickly he made friends. Among them a man by the name of Horace Bell, a Major in the Los Angeles Rangers, a body of citizens keeping order in California when the law was unable.

Then French disappeared without paying his bills. Every one who knew him thought he must have been done away with.

IT WAS in San Luis Obispo, half way between Los Angeles and San Francisco, that French popped up again. Here again he turned on the charm. And talked. Talked so well that in the fall of that same year he was elected to the California Legislature.

But his interests lay not along lines legislative. His senatorship was merely a blind. While his skilled fingers forged titles and mortgages to ranches of newly-found friends and acquaintances, his nimble tongue and senatorial status sold these papers to moneylenders in San Francisco.

Discovery came in '56. That year Parker H. French hastily decamped for Nicaragua where he joined forces with a certain William Walker, an American adventurer who had seized the reins of government there. So taken was Walker with his lieutenant's able tongue and charming manners that he commissioned him as his Minister Plenipotentiary to Washington, D. C.

This was more than Uncle Sam could stomach. In no uncertain terms Secretary of State William Learned Marcy told French to get the hell out of Washington, or else!

French *vamosed pronto.* There was too much chalked on his slate for him to take chances with the wrath of the skinny man with the pointed beard and the striped trousers. But back in Nicaragua, William Walker, disgusted with his minister's fiasco, kicked him out of that country.

From that time forward the glamor and the glory faded. French had lost his grip. His erstwhile aplomb and finesse appeared impaired, his slickness failing. The trail grew dim and devious. In matters of felony and forgery his attempts grew picayune and wretched and quite unworthy of his once great talents.

Then came the Civil War and French was lost from sight—for a good reason. Or maybe we should say an ill one. . . .

Time passed. The War was over. In the fall of '63, Major Horace Bell went visiting in Boston. A friend permitted him to view prisoners of war confined at Fort Lafayette. And there, in a cell, he spotted his erstwhile friend from Los Angeles, his drinking pal of the Bella Union, Parker H. French.

"What," Bell asked of the warden, "is *that* man in here for?"

The warden eyed the one-armed hulk of a man skulking in the cell's deep gloom. "Why," he said, with mingled contempt and respect and fear in his voice, "that man was the most dangerous and enterprising spy of the Southern Confederacy!"

And so the trail of Parker H. French faded out and there was no more of him.

Perhaps he is now comparing notes with two other great talkers: Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini. Comparing notes in hell, wondering what it was what went wrong with their slick schemes. . . .

TOLL BRIDGE
TRINKLERS
The gunslicks inside were still hammering lead into the door.
With his own hands, Caleb Trinkler molded a frontier metropolis where free men could walk in peace. . . . And to show their appreciation, those grateful citizens gave the town-builder a rousing vote of thanks—then escorted him to the nearest cottonwood!

"WE PAY OUR TOLL IN BULLETS!"

By Giff Cheshire

Chapter I

NESTERS AND COWMEN DON'T MIX!

FOR SEVERAL weeks before the fall beef drives started, there were rustlings that told Caleb Trinkler they were coming. Then one hot autumn afternoon he saw dust rising on the horizon of the desert and knew that the first trail outfit was on its way. Excitement moved in him, and he lifted a thin, newly calloused hand to push it with a grin of satisfaction along his crisp blonde hair.

It would be the first outfit across the new toll bridge, and it probably figured on bedding down here, using the holding ground below the new town Caleb had built on the craggy banks of the wild Orinoco River. It would water in the big artificial pond he had created by ramming river water into a big, natural declivity. Its trail hands would eat in the tavern and trade in the store and cut loose for a wild time in the saloon. All these things Caleb Trinkler himself had created on this wild western strip of the big Orinoco Plateau.

The moment was like wine to him. Yet long before the herd had become easily distinguishable, Caleb had noticed a horse and buggy traveling the new and dusty ruts that led from the distant cow town of Apperly. As the buggy drew closer, he observed that its occupants were a man and a woman, and his curiosity was whetted. He had built this town as a cattle crossing, and they could go no farther than here with that rig.

Caleb watched its approach from the store porch, and when the buggy stopped below him a white-haired, ruddy man asked, "Where'll I find this here loco Caleb Trinkler, mister?"

Caleb grinned, "I'm Trinkler, but why the 'loco'?"

The other grinned cheerfully, little taken back. "Any man as builds a whole dang town on the hind end of a desert is crazy, in my book! But me, I like crazy people. We come to see about your hotel."

Trinkler's attention was mostly on the girl, who was young and very pretty, and he thought there was a little return interest in her blue-gray eyes. As he listened, a pleasant warmth stole through him. He had already staffed his new town, with the exception of the hotel. Though he had run advertisements in the Apperly paper, and in those of other towns beyond the Greybacks, no hotel men had responded. This, now, was a stroke of luck, with the first trail crew already in sight.

"Good!" he replied. "Looks like you barely beat your first patrons!"

"Name's Summers," the other said, "Finley Summers. And this here's my daughter Frances. Frances, smile pretty-like at the man. We

heard in Apperly you were looking for somebody to run your tavern, Trinkler. That it over there?"

"That's it." Caleb let his gaze stray with some pride across the street to the rambling log and frame structure next to the saloon, centering on the huge rock fireplace chimney occupying much of the front wall. "Want to see it?"

"In a minute." Summers looked at him thoughtfully. "Frances and me're looking for a solid set-up. I hear you mean to cater to the stockmen and give 'em a river crossing as'll save miles on the Plattsburg drive. But what happens to your town after the drives're over for the year? Does it hole up?"

Caleb studied him. He liked this man, so he gave him a thoughtful answer. "That's a natural enough wonder, Summers. It'll be a permanent proposition. It'll be a little seasonal at the start all right. But now I've got this much done, I aim to put a wagon road along the cattle trail. There's good farming country around here. I figure to attract settlers around Trinkler's Bridge and build a permanent, year 'round town. If you're looking for something solid, I figure this is it."

"Well—mebbe, but ain't you overlooking something? You're a Easterner, folks say. Maybe you don't savvy what a hot lid you're going to be settin' on, once you start coaxing nesters into this cow country! You won't be able to do business with both sides, mister!"

"Sides? I aim to be a help to everybody," Caleb returned slowly. "My bridge lops a hundred and ninety miles off the drive to Plattsburg. If the cattle men boycott it, they'll be hurting themselves. I'm taking the chance that they won't."

They went across to look at the new tavern, and standing in the big kitchen, a little later, Caleb swept a hand toward the stocked shelves, the immense wood range and the stacks of utensils, dishes and cutlery, neatly organized and ready to function.

"All we have to do is start a fire!" the girl breathed. "Oh, Dad, I like it! Let's!"

"I guess that settles it, mister!" Summers told Caleb, but from his wry grin Caleb thought there was still a little reluctance in him.

The girl remained in the kitchen, and was shucking off her duster even as the men left. Caleb took Summers back across the street and on to a little structure on the town side of the toll bridge, where he had an office. He outlined his terms:

"I own the land, buildings and equipment in every concern in town, and I mean to hold onto it, because I want to be sure how things go. My mile-saving drawing card could make me rich, and fatten anybody I let come in here. I don't want to work it that way. I want to build a real town and perform a real service. I saw enough destruction in the war, and now I want to build! These are my terms, Summers. You pay me a reasonable rent, and in return you agree to make only reasonable charges for your services, notwithstanding the fact that you probably could get a whale of a lot more!"

Finley Summers stroked his chin thoughtfully, a tall, gaunt man with deep-set, intelligent eyes and a friendly mouth. "Dagnab it, I admire you, Trinkler! But I ain't taking back what I said about you being loco. I've warned you about the hornets' nest you're poking a stick into, with your idea of bringing sodbusters into cow country. Let me tell you something else. This here western country's got a lot of set-ups to help a man to make hisself rich. A feller can't just plunk down on one like this, no matter how good his intentions are! There'll be jiggers along as'll see nothing but the opportunity, and a big-hearted man like you is apt to find himself under a mound of dirt! But I've got you pegged as a feller who won't scare out, Trinkler. Draw up your lease, and we'll sign!"

AT SIX o'clock the point of a long, plodding column of cattle reached the holding ground a half mile south of Trinkler's Bridge. Within a couple of hours the first punchers, their faces caked with trail dust and sweat, began to ride into town, most of them heading fast for Joe Vrooman's saloon. In a couple of hours the whole town was strung with cow ponies tied along the hitch racks.

At eight Caleb moved down street to the saloon. Standing at a vacant end of the bar, Joe Vrooman nodded as Caleb came up to him. "Howdy, Trinkler." He was of medium height, but big of girth, and his fleshy face showed heavy etchings of dissipation. It had been hard finding men willing to risk their time in this experimental, out-of-the-way town, and Caleb had not been able to pick and choose. Now, as the kerosene light slanted across Vrooman's face, Caleb caught a sinister look in his expression, something undefinable that disturbed him. Vrooman set up a bottle of whiskey, and Caleb poured himself a drink.

"Looks like it's going to pay out all right," Vrooman said, after a moment. "We've got something here, mister. Once the big herds start backing up waiting to cross your bridge, this place'll be hell on red wheels! A regular trail town, and when cow punchers go to market they like lots of salt and vinegar along the trail. I know a couple of gents I'm sending for to start some games. Maybe I'll bring in some girls. We gotta good thing, all right, Trinkler!"

Caleb set down his glass slowly. "We talked about that when we signed together, Vrooman!

No big gambling, and particularly no crooked gambling! And no vice! If you don't like that, we'll tear up your lease and you can get out!"

A cold flame appeared in Vrooman's eyes. "All right. I'll cut you in on the profits. You're a smart man, Trinkler."

"What you don't seem to understand, Vrooman, is that I'm not after a bigger cut! I'm trying to build and run a decent town, and thats all!"

The saloon keeper studied him. "No, I don't understand that. A man content to hoe corn over a gold mine! Remember this, Trinkler. Our deal was that I'm to run this saloon and furnish the stock. You own the building and fixtures. Since you also own every foot of ground around here, I can't put up my own place. But what do you think'd happen to your blasted old woman's club if I put up a real rip-snorter of a place, even if it was a mile outta town?"

"I'll wait until you do it to see!" Caleb rejoined angrily. He turned and left, remembering that Finley Summers had warned that it was not all going to come off as easily as he had expected. The human element made almost any kind of a proposition unpredictable. He was no blue-nose. But he had seen trail towns that unscrupulous men had turned to sinks of iniquity, with cheating, fighting and murder grown commonplace. And a town, like the proverbial dog, was apt to die under the smothering weight of a bad name. His jaw tightened. He was willing and ready to fight for what he wanted, contrary ambitions notwithstanding.

THE tavern dining room had been crowded through the evening with men tired of the chuck wagon and trail grub. When Caleb strolled in after the rush was over, he found Frances busy and enthusiastic.

"I've never fed such hungry men in my life!" she announced, then added with a woman's pride, "and I think they like my cooking. Anyhow, most of them said they'd be back for breakfast."

"This is just from one herd," Caleb pointed out. "Wait until several pile up here, trying to get across the bridge." As she hurried away to tend to a new customer, he drew a breath of satisfaction. Trinkler's Bridge was going to be a commercial success, at least.

The moment he first saw this site, Caleb knew that Providence had fashioned it for him. He had sat there a long while, astride a tired horse, regarding the thick grove of locusts and box alders, ruminating on the lucky impulse that had guided him this way. Behind was the great plateau lying on the eastern slope of the Greybacks, called the Orinoco plateau and stretching in a vast sweep of fertile range land. That morning he had left the little cow town of Apperly, where he had spent the night, and a stranger urge had pointed him in this direction.

All along the plateau, the two weeks previously, Caleb had been struck by the general prosperity of the huge cattle spreads and sheep ranches. In time he had discovered the inevitable drawback. The Greybacks, on the western strip, were not formidable mountains in themselves but they were skirted by the wild uncrossable Orinoco River. That was the fly in the ointment, a cowhand had told Trinkler the night before in Apperly. The rail head of Plattsburg lay fifty miles beyond the mountains, but to reach it trail herds had to swing to the extreme northern tip of the plateau, then turn down the deep Tumalum gorge. They had to travel nearly two hundred fifty miles to a market a crow could reach in less than sixty.

"Can't the river be forded somewhere?" Caleb had asked the puncher, in surprise.

"Mister, you ain't seen the Orinoco, I reckon! Most places it's cut down into rock, mebbe a hundred feet. The few spots where a man might throw a bunch across, it's either too swift or deep! That was tried a few times, a long time ago, and drowned critters changed everybody's mind!"

The initial idea had come to Caleb at that point. Less than a year before he had been mustered out of the Union Army, after the big war, a young lieutenant of engineers and filled with tight-nerved restlessness. When he reached his Illinois home he had found most of his few kinsmen dead, and a moderate inheritance waiting for him. With that converted into cash and stowed in his money belt, he had pointed a horse toward the setting sun.

And this was what he had been unconsciously seeking, this spot here on the far Pacific Slope. In talking with the puncher in Apperly he had wondered why nobody had ever tried to throw a bridge across this wild and restrictive river. In a day's ride he had found the exact place where it could be done.

The Orinoco was all the puncher had claimed for it. At this spot the savage, icy water was nearly seventy feet below the rocky-lipped banks. Maybe nobody but an engineer would have noted how easily a small cantalever bridge could be slung across it here, an engineer trained to meet the harsh and pressing demands of swirling war.

He had built the bridge and a town to go with it, using the last of his inheritance. His faith in the project had ever been strong, yet now he experienced a faint sense of relief with this material evidence that his gamble on the success of his scheme had been justified.

Frances Summers returned presently from her chore, and Caled smiled. "I hope you and your father stay here a long time."

"It looks like we might, Mr. Trinkler. You

seem to have unearthed something good and substantial."

Her approval pleased him. "Make it Caleb. I hope we're going to be friends, as well as neighbors and business associates! In the years to come—"

The thought trailed into thin air for the door had opened, and the girl's attention had strayed from him. Caleb turned. A man stood there.

It was Mike O'Mara, owner of the O-in-a-Star brand and boss of this big driving crew, who had come in on the drag of his outfit. He was a giant of a man, and his young, rusty face was rugged and handsome under a shock of brick colored hair. He stared at Frances Summers in frank pleasure.

"Evening, ma'am. Heard I could get some real grub here—"

"I hope you'll call it that, after you've eaten it! Do come in!"

Caleb sensed that he had been neatly cut out of her awareness, and a quick, keen feeling of loss hit him. The girl bustled off to the kitchen, with Mike O'Mara trailing behind to wash up, and with a resigned shrug Caleb turned toward the outer door.

THE next morning, just before he started tallying the big herd across the bridge, Caleb talked to O'Mara in his office.

"Nice town you've built here," the young cattle man commented. "And you're going to be real useful to us cowmen. But talking around, last night, I heard you aim to keep the place kinda reined in."

"I aim to keep it in good repute."

O'Mara grinned. "I said the purty thing first, because I gotta warn you, Trinkler. I heard you aim to open a wagon road through the Greybacks and promote a nester colony around here. That'd be a bad mistake, friend."

"I don't see that."

"You would, was you a cowman! Joe Vrooman's got the right idea. Charge us trail outfits all the traffic'll bear, give us a good time, and make your stake during the drives. Then you can hibernate in winter, and sleep your head off. We don't want no year round town here, if it means a nester colony, Trinkler!" There was the thin edge of a warning in his otherwise friendly voice.

Caleb did not like the annoyance that scraped his spine. His pride had suffered a little, the evening before, when Frances Summers had shown her quick interest in this big, handsome fellow. Yet Caleb was determined to get along with everybody if he possibly could without sacrificing too much of his own interests and principles. The best thing at this point, he decided, was not to push conflicting attitudes too far.

"You ready to start across?" he asked.

"Whenever you are."

"Then let's get started."

By the time O'Mara's outfit had crossed over the Grinoco, the Dot D herd came in, and by the close of the next week outfits were crossing the toll bridge continually with others piling up behind. Not only did Caleb Trinkler have the satisfaction of seeing his investment returning to him in the coin of the realm. This congestion brought mounting prosperity to Sam Crowder's mercantile, Pete Ringo's blacksmith shop, Joe Vrooman's saloon and Finley Summers' tavern.

In the wake of this it brought what Caleb was now willing to admit was inevitable. Late one afternoon two dark-clad strangers rode into town, instructed Finley Summers to turn their horses into the tavern corral and went inside to register. A sense of warning rose in Caleb as he watched them, and presently he went across the street and found Frances.

"Who're the newcomers?"

"One calls himself Larimore and the other Benson. They're from Plattsburg, or so they wrote in the register."

"A pair of scamps, if you ask me," Caleb said worriedly.

"Slippery looking customers, all right. And a long ways from home. I wonder what brings them here!"

Caleb thought he knew, but he did not tell her. Leaving the hotel, he remembered the run-in he had had with Joe Vrooman that first evening of the driving season. There had been no trouble since, but now the sudden realization came to Caleb that Vrooman had been working in his own way to carry out his intentions. Caleb waited to see what this pair was up to.

Meanwhile, he had launched the second phase of his plan for Trinkler's Bridge. By now he had hired a couple of drifting punchers to act as tallymen for him at the bridge. Relieved of that task, he had begun to investigate the route of his proposed road along the trail that the herds were following through the Greybacks.

His enthusiasm for that project mounted. It would be a high road, in places, and would call for considerable bridging, but it would come as close to being an all-weather road as any other in this mountainous country. He picked up another pair of drifters and with their help ran a rough survey through the pass, to where he could join his proposed road to an already existing road that ran on to Plattsburg. He would have to build less than twenty miles, himself.

Already his revenue, from the ten cents a head toll he charged the more than willing stockmen, was mounting to a point where he believed he might be able to launch the new work that coming winter. Preoccupied with the problem of finances, and of rounding up a

crew to do the work for him, Caleb resented doubly the intrusion of Joe Vrooman and his head-strong schemes.

A couple of days after the arrival of Larimore and Benson, Finley Summers sauntered into Caleb's office. "You were right about them jiggers, Caleb. Vrooman's trying to keep it quiet, but a puncher who got cleaned told me they're running a big game in the back room over there! Moreover, they're hinting about having some jezebels here pretty soon for the boys to dance with and squander their money on!"

Caleb rose wearily to his feet. He had put it off as long as he dared, but he knew that a show-down could no longer be avoided. But he was badly handicapped. If he ordered Vrooman to vacate and clear out of town, the man would only put up a completely uncontrolled den of vice somewhere within easy reach of the town. If he were allowed to remain in town, he would at least have to keep a semblance of decency and order to keep from voiding his lease.

After a long moment, Caleb squared his jaw determinedly. He would make no compromise with evil. He headed down street toward Joe Vrooman's saloon.

Chapter II

NO ROOM FOR A BLUE-NOSE!

CALEB had a feeling that Vrooman had been expecting him. The fat saloon keeper waved a pudgy hand to indicate the throng of cow punchers made idle by the congestion at the bridge. "If you want to talk to me, Trinkler, we'd better go in my office." And in the little room opening from under the stairway, he grinned coldly. "Well, what now?"

"I hear those two blacklegs of yours've started a big crooked game, Vrooman! I thought we had that out!"

"A game? Here? Somebody's been ribbing you, friend!"

"Don't pull that!" Caleb snorted. "I think now's the place to admit we can't work together. I'm asking you to vacate and clear out!"

"I'll do nothing of the sort!" Vrooman exploded. "I took the trouble to read over that lease, Trinkler. The only control it gives you is that I agreed not to charge wild-cat prices or run a disorderly place. Ask any cowhand what he's paid for his whiskey! Has anybody kicked about any disorder?"

Caleb was looking at him apprehensively. He had worried about Vrooman's starting a place outside the town, and had not expected him to find a loophole in the technical phrasing of the lease. Now he was forced to admit that, whatever his suspicions, he could not prove that its terms had ever been violated.

Anger swelled in him. "So that's how you mean to work it!"

Joe Vrooman allowed himself a grin. "I mean to abide by our agreement, Trinkler! I mean to charge reasonable prices and to keep order in my place! What I do beyond that is my own business, and I'm warning you not to come bellyachin' to me with your blue-nose complaints!"

It was with a distinct sense of defeat that Caleb returned to his office. He found that some of the savor had gone out of the new road project, the plans for which he was preparing. What was the use in building a town and community, only to have men like Vrooman foul it with greedy and sordid schemes? What was the use in providing stockmen with a better road to market, if they turned around and warned against doing anything that might displease them?

Yet, if anything, these setbacks crystallized his resolution, and crowded Caleb to recklessness. Though he was not as yet in a sound financial position, he went ahead and hired teamsters with ploughs and scrapers to start breaking ground for the new road through the pass. By now he had grown to expect his every move to bring objection, so he was little surprised when a group of cattle men, headed by Mike O'Mara, came to see him soon after the grading crew started to work.

It was not a polite deputation, but a handful of aroused men who considered their interests at stake. They crowded Caleb's small office, spraddle-legged, bunched fists on their hips, stony eyes staring out of weather-burned faces.

"I tried to give you a hint about this, Trinkler!" Mike O'Mara blazed, speaking for the others. "This time it's a open warning! Call off that work! Send them teamsters back down into the valley, where they belong! If you don't, we're driving 'em out!"

Caleb rose to his feet, anger flaming in his eyes. These men had made their easy drives, using his bridge and the pass trail it commanded, and had returned to the plateau apparently with not the least sign of gratitude. He had seen O'Mara only at a distance since, a couple of times when the high-handed red head had stopped at Summers' Tavern, ostensibly to eat but more to talk with Frances Summers. Now Caleb said hotly:

"If that's your intention, I'm arming my men! If you come to drive them out, you'll have a fight on your hands! Listen! I'm putting it to you right now! Would you like to have me close my bridge and let you drive down through the Tumalum gorge again?"

A cowman glanced at him uneasily. "Well, no, we wouldn't, Trinkler. Your bridge has been a good thing for us. Only we don't want to see this range chopped into farms! We'd

be willing to have you charge us three times the toll you do, even ten, and make your money that a-way! We want you here, all right, but not your blasted sodbusters!"

Caleb shrugged in despair. "I can't persuade anybody that I didn't come here to make money. I'm a builder, and I came to build a service, a town, a community! I don't mean to let anybody dictate how I'm going to do it, my friends! This is a vast and rich spread of country. In case you've forgotten, I'll point out that none of you owns the land he uses. It belongs to the commonwealth. That means everybody. You're not in a position to dictate what's to happen here!"

Mike O'Mara moved forward, shaken with rage. "If you'd been born and raised out here, you'd understand these things, Trinkler. Maybe you're right, according to the letter of the law. But here we recognize a man's rights to the land he grazes, and to his water. Let somebody come along who don't and we have our way of handling it! Don't make us resort to them, Trinkler! We appreciate what you've done, and that'd be a shame!"

"I'm building my road, O'Mara!"

For an instant the other studied him. "Then I reckon it's clear how it stacks up!" The group traipsed out.

They did not leave town immediately, but headed down the street to Joe Vrooman's saloon. Caleb hunched over his blueprints for a long while, after that, but he did not see them clearly. An awful possibility had entered his mind. The stockmen saw eye to eye with the sordid and grasping saloon keeper. They would be willing to let Vrooman have what he wanted to keep this strictly a cowtown. If they threw it together, one Caleb Trinkler was going to have a nasty fight on his hands.

THOUGH, in the days that followed, Vrooman scrupulously avoided doing anything that could invoke the cancellation clause of his lease, however, the two gamblers remained on. Finley Summers kept his ears open and reported to Caleb that the big game was still running. But the cowpokes apparently had been warned to keep their mouths shut about what went on over there, and even those that went broke bucking the tiger refused to make any complaint.

Then came the day when Jack Benson drove Vrooman's hack to Apperly and came back with three women riding with him. Caleb happened to be at the hotel when Benson brought them in to register them. Finley Summers looked at the bedizened trio and demanded, with an old man's bluntness, "Who are these—ladies?"

Benson gave him a thin-lipped grin. "Cousins of mine. Suddenly made orphans. They've come to make their home with me."

"They're not making it here!" Summers announced flatly.

"Surely you don't object to having a family man around, Pop!"

"Not as long as it ain't around me!" By way of emphasis, he slammed the register shut. "And you and your friend Larimore can move out, too!" Benson shrugged and left with his charges. Old Summers looked sourly at Caleb. "So now we're going to have percentage girls in town! And sweet sisters to listen to drunk cow pokes' sorrows and lift their bank rolls! Yet how you going to prove that anything's wrong over there, Caleb?"

Caleb's long jaw bit tight, and he shook his head angrily. "I couldn't."

"If them jezebels stay, Caleb, I'll take Frances and clear outta your town!"

"I wouldn't blame you, Finley."

When Caleb moved down the street, a half hour later, he carried a pinch bar and a claw hammer. He stopped in front of the saloon, studying the front of the structure. After a moment he inserted the point of the bar in a crack and began prying. The board ripped loose with a loud crack and he knew the sound carried to the inside. He pried loose another. Board after board he removed and tossed onto a growing pile in the street. Then Joe Vrooman pushed through the batwings and stared unbelievingly at a two-foot section of denuded studding.

"What in blazes're you up to, Trinkler?" he exploded.

"Tearing down my building."

The saloon man swallowed, his plump face turning purple. "Listen, Trinkler! That's something the lease *does* make plain! You agreed to furnish me a building as long as I keep my part of the bargain! You can't prove that I ain't keeping it! You're getting yourself into a mess of trouble!"

"You shall have a building," Caleb replied calmly. "The lease doesn't say where it's to be located does it? I'm moving this one across the river. Your customers'll have to use my bridge, and I'll have something to say about who and what goes across!" For the first time he grinned. "And in your own words, what can you do about that?"

"I—I—I" The saloon man's collar seemed to choke him. And for all Caleb's easy manner, the engineer could not help seeing something in Vrooman's eyes that sent a chill through him. Waving furious hands above his head, Vrooman plunged back inside.

Caleb continued with his task. He had collected a gallery of punchers, some amused, others looking about ready to challenge this threat to their amusement. Yet none tried to stop him, and by evening Caleb had the siding stripped from the front of the saloon. Satisfied with that, he took his tools and left.

The first herd coming through town to cross the bridge the next morning created the effect Caleb had anticipated. Yellow dust boiling up from the hoof-pounded street rolled in big choking clouds through the open front of Joe Vrooman's salon. In a couple of hours Finley Summers hurried over to Caleb's office to report, with a grin:

"You could plant a garden patch on Vrooman's bar and floor and glassware, Caleb! It ain't going to be so pleasant a place, today!"

It gave Caleb no amusement, for he knew he was locked in a struggle with a vicious element that would find means of retaliating. Yet he did not mean to let Vrooman's nuisance go on a day longer than he could help.

That afternoon a wagon bearing a piano arrived from Apperly and backed up to the sidewalk in front of the saloon. Stiff necked and defiant, Vrooman had it unloaded and carried into the dust-smothered saloon. The dust, in itself, proved insufficient to halt the cowhands, who ate pounds of it on the trail each day, and presently Caleb heard the tinny tinkle of the piano and a woman's whiskey-coarsened contralto lifting in a trail song. They were going to be a damned tough outfit to whip.

Finley Summers had stoutly refused to let Benson's charges enter his hotel, even to eat, nor would he let food be taken over to the saloon for the women. "Them dolls are going to get sick of it," he told Caleb at supper time, for Caleb now usually ate with him and Frances. "They're living on beans and skillet bread rassled up on Vrooman's heating stove. I give 'em a week at the most, no matter how hard Benson and Vrooman try to hang onto 'em!"

"And in a week," Caleb returned glumly, "a lot can happen!"

INTO an atmosphere of blueprints, grading problems, town strife and a now dwindling stream of cattle across the bridge, Finley Summers, the next day, introduced a note that Caleb had preferred to keep muted.

"What're you building, Caleb?"

"Sometimes I wonder."

"I mean, aside from all this? What're you building for Caleb Trinkler?"

"I expect that all this is for him. At least for the main part of him."

The old man gave him a wry grin. "Was I young and red blooded, this would come second with me!"

He did not elaborate, and Caleb did not press, but it was clear what the old man meant. It was warming to know that Finley Summers, whom Caleb had come to like very much, was interested in the matter of his some-day son-in-law and was nudging his favorite into the necessary action.

Since that first night, Caleb had made no effort to pay court to Frances Summers. Yet day by passing day he had grown more aware of her and his mounting feeling for her. He had argued the matter with himself a number of times. If she had shown no open preference for Mike O'Mara, he told himself, he would have entered the lists with the same burning energy he applied to his other ambitions.

Something in the way Mike O'Mara had drawn her that very first night, cutting Caleb into the throw-backs, had put a sting to Caleb's pride and raised a stiff necked aloofness in him.

As he shaved the following morning, Caleb was thinking of this and he looked intently at the mirror. He saw a lean face inclined to gravity, a tall, broad brow under crisp, curly blond hair a lean strong, tapering jaw. His engineering mind could not sum it up to romantic attraction when he posed this reflection against his memory of the rugged strength and magnetism of the young Irishman, and the quality, he knew not what, that carried the image of a man into a woman's heart.

Though the O-in-a-Star spread was across the plateau, he knew that O'Mara was calling on Frances on frequent occasions, and a time or so they had ridden together on an idle afternoon. O'Hara seemed to take his place with her for granted, which had led Caleb to suppose that there was a silent understanding between them.

Now a new feeling was emerging in Caleb. Something of the raw and rugged virility of this country was impressing itself upon the repressed Easterner he had been a scant year before. He had dreamed his dream and set out to realize it and come head on against the imponderables of reality. This was good, he was beginning to suspect, giving him a very necessary tempering.

The fires of conflict burning at Trinkler's Bridge were heating him to the eruptive action a man must sometimes take to gain, to implement, to hold his own. Abruptly, after Finley Summers hinting, Caleb knew he was in this fight for everything he wanted, which definitely included old Finley's daughter.

That very afternoon, with trouble fomenting all around him, Caleb knocked off work and strode across the street to the kitchen door of the hotel. He used this family entrance habitually now, and he found Frances relaxed between the wind up of noon dinner and the start of supper.

"Come ride out to the road camp with me," he invited.

She looked at him strangely, as though surprised and maybe not pleased. Or as if wondering what Mike O'Mara might think about it! After a moment she nodded. "All right, I will."

They rode across the bridge and cut into the deep ravines of the abruptly-rearing Greybacks. Caleb punctuated their leisured travel with little explanations of what he proposed to do at certain points, a bridge over this wild mountain stream, a grade along the face of that bluff, a fill across this short, swampy stretch.

At long last, the girl smiled. "It's interesting, Caleb. But how about the flash of those magpies' wings? The sun pouring gold down that mountain side? The big fat cloud roosting on that peak!"

He swiveled in the saddle and studied her. "Or your eyes, lighted with your enthusiasm for life! Your collar touching your throat! The trembling of your mouth when something rouses your pity!"

Her surprise was frank and honest. "Why, Caleb! You notice such things? Oh, don't keep that side of you so deeply buried!"

Frances had to get back to her duties, so they did not ride far, but Caleb had the feeling that he had come a long way on the trip. Though talk turned back to trivial things, the excitement of sudden and deep new acquaintance seemed to cling to them both. He did not mention O'Mara, but he could never long forget him.

That evening Caleb saw him. O'Mara rode into town on the big black gelding of which he was so proud, and he tied it to the hitch-rack in front of the hotel. An amused grin came to Caleb's lips. There were big ears and loose tongues in this, as all towns, and word of the ride out the new road would reach O'Mara. It would add its bit of fuel to fires already burning.

Remembering O'Mara's threat to drive off the grading crew, Caleb could not understand his lack of action to this point, though work had been in progress out there a couple of weeks. The delay was beginning to take on an ugly look. Caleb kept well enough informed to know that on the occasions when he visited the saloon, O'Mara had long talks with Joe Vrooman.

The cattle men might well like to see Vrooman set up as boss in this town. Joe Vrooman would like nothing better. A teaming of forces aimed at this purpose was in the cards, and it would be a tough combination to handle. Since he had started to tear down the saloon building, two days earlier, Caleb had done nothing more in that respect, hoping the stratagem would serve to discourage the imported honkatonk girls. Tying in with this new appreciation of the set-up was the fact that Joe Vrooman had done nothing more, either.

Vrooman had left the partly demolished front exactly as Caleb had left it, and Vrooman had continued to do business. Caleb saw now that there might be a bit of cunning there. The cow punchers would hold Caleb Trinkler responsible for their discomfort, and Vrooman could use this as a wedge to further divide the wide rifts already strongly introduced in the town.

IT WAS daily becoming clearer that this was not a situation a man could meet by sticking doggedly to a course and beating off the incursions of his enemies. This seemed to be a case where definite corrective action was needed. After all, he owned the town. More than balancing the disturbing and threatening Joe Vrooman were Finley Summers with his hotel, Sam Crowder with his store, and Pete Ringo and his blacksmith shop. All these wanted a decent progressive town, which he had undertaken to give them. They would back him. And in addition he had the three tallymen on the bridge and the grading crew, all of whom would support him.

The time had come to throw Joe Vrooman bodily out of the town, if necessary, clearing the atmosphere and preventing a powerful, sinister coalition between Vrooman and Mike O'Mara's proddy cattle men. And the time to hurl the challenge was now!

Caleb paced down the street, tension building in him but only augmenting his determination. He gave a grim look of satisfaction to the stripped front of the building and pushed through the batwings. It was his first entrance into this place for considerable time, and now it roused instant interest.

After the last, dust-kicking cow had passed through the town that day, Joe Vrooman had had his floor sprinkled with water and carefully broomed, and the bar and chairs and tables were dusted, the glassware washed. Now the partly open-air establishment was abandoned to merriment once more. A blowzy woman in a low-cut, dress was banging the piano down at the far end, singing in a rusty voice. The other two girls were dancing with cowpokes whose lustrous eyes indicated that they were filled tighter than ticks with Vrooman's whiskey. The tables were all occupied, either with drinkers or small gamesters. The big game would be beyond the door at the far end, he reflected.

Now, scores of eyes turned toward Caleb. The piano player stopped with hands arrested on the keys. The dancers halted and turned. Somebody, well down the room, ripped out with, "Here comes the sour-faced galoot, now!"

Then Caleb saw O'Mara, talking to Vrooman and seated at a table partly cut from view by the stairs. Caleb paced the length of the room.

O'Mara lifted quick eyes to scowl a little. Vrooman took the cigar from his lips with an

uncertain gesture. Caleb looked at the saloon keeper calmly.

"Vrooman, I'm here to give you a day to get out of town!"

Astonishment showed in the small, porcine eyes. Even O'Mara failed to restrain a startled flicker of the eyelids. This set Caleb in his resolution. He had stunned them by taking the initiative when they were least expecting it, by dropping reasonableness and legal points and adopting their own language—blunt, direct and aggressive talk.

"You don't say!" Vrooman whistled softly.

"Twenty-four hours!" Caleb repeated. "If at the end of that time you and yours are still here, you'll be ushered out! This is no bluff! As for you, O'Mara, you can like it or lump it, whichever you choose!"

O'Mara studied him. "I don't like it, Trinkler! And I ain't used to lumping it! I say that Vrooman stays!"

"You're danged right he stays!" the voice of a tipsy puncher chimed in from the gallery. "Vrooman's the one we want. We shore don't want no blue-nosed son running this town! If he hankers for a run-off party, boys, let's have one! Let's run Trinkler back where he come from!"

Caleb let a cold grin sweep around the gallery. "You're wrong if you think I'm a killjoy, boys! Maybe you've forgotten it was me rather than Vrooman who put this saloon here! You boys work hard, and you're entitled to fun! I simply don't want the town made into a sink hole! I want to keep it a place where a man can have a good time, but where he can also bring his women to trade and have his kids grow up and go to school! I want my town to live. I want to marry and raise a family of my own here!"

"O'Mara shot him a quick, black look at this last. "Hear you've been working at that, Trinkler!"

"I'm a busy man," Caleb returned, with satisfaction.

"And a danged reckless one!" the cattle man exploded. "And inclined to stick your neck into a bear trap!"

Chapter III

WHERE MEN CAN LIVE IN PEACE

THIS WAS a hostile crowd, yet Caleb did not place too much importance on surface indications. Dissension always lifts the loudest voice. There were decent men in this crowd; the majority of them were decent! Now was the time to reach them! He let a reasonable glance travel around the ring of watching faces.

"Mike O'Mara swings a lot of weight with you people, and I'm wondering if you realize he has reasons of his own for throwing in with Vrooman to finish me in this town! He's keeping you riled with his talk about the nesters! But I'm saying to you that he's afraid of me!"

O'Mara's chair went back with a ripping sound as it scraped the plank floor, and his big body snapped erect. "That's a blasted lie, Trinkler! Whichever way you meant it! But it looks like I've got to teach you that!"

Caleb Trinkler knew what he had on his hands, and he had asked for it deliberately. His hold on his town was slipping because men doubted the human warmth of him, which he had kept hidden beneath his gruff front of efficiency. Remotely in his thought was his memory of how quickly he had melted Frances Summers by showing her his shy other side. He needed the support of these men, here, men now turned against him.

"Teach away, mister!" he sang out to Mike O'Mara.

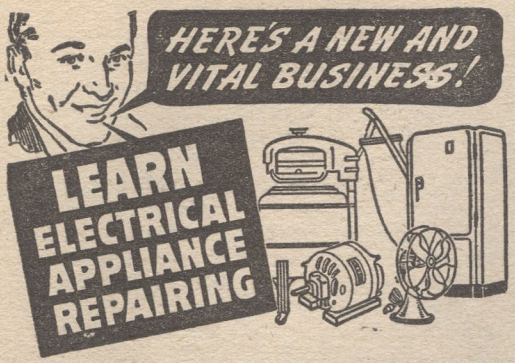
With a grin not entirely devoid of surprise, the Irishman sailed in.

There was probably twenty pounds difference in their weight, and O'Mara topped him by half a head, out-reached him by three inches. It looked like a sad, one-sided thing at the start. O'Mara came in with big shoulders hunched, a pair of huge balled fists suddenly turned to slamming sledges. He drove Caleb back half a dozen paces and against the bar, stood there pouring it on.

Caleb did not go down. Somehow he weathered it, abetted in this by the knowledge that he had a trump card he had not yet revealed. Army life had given him a cool, selfless courage, and introduced him to rough-and-tumble battling. Before that his academic years had taught him something else, the art of scientific boxing. He let O'Mara spend his first fury in that initial assault, then calmly launched his counter attack.

O'Mara had thrown himself off balance with the drive, and abruptly Caleb had danced clear of the field of fire and moved in from a slant to clip a swift, staggering blow to the soft place under the Irishman's short ribs. O'Mara's breath whistled out through his nostrils, and for the first time the gallery realized it was really seeing a fight.

A space had cleared. O'Mara tossed his head, hunched and bore in again. Caleb stood stock still for an instant, expertly taking the lethal edge off O'Mara's steaming punches by calmly fending them aside. Already, he knew, he had the big man puzzled and uncertain, had taken a bite out of his confidence. He withdrew under the charge, drew off its deadliness, and bounced back on the quick initiative. This time he drove O'Mara against the wall and kept him pinned there. Blood from opening cuts began to stream down O'Mara's face.



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Yet the issue was far from being certain in Caleb's mind. In addition to his extra bulk and reach, O'Mara had an unyielding fighter's heart and surviving instinct. Caleb's greater finesse served only to caution the man, to even the odds. O'Mara took wisdom from it, grew wary, put even more sting into his great swinging fists.

For a long while after that it was touch and go. Once, driven backward under a fire of smoking punches, Caleb tripped and went down. For a moment he believed that O'Mara was going to land on him with both feet to stomp out the finish. Yet O'Mara held back, bent and panting, until Caleb staggered to his feet, reluctantly admiring.

Then an explosion shook the town. It was a heavy jolt that ran in a wave along the ground, rattling every window in the vicinity. Every man in the place swept from frozen watching to stare at the still-shaking walls.

"Criminy!" somebody yelped. "That sounded like dynamite!"

O'Mara had stopped with his sweating palms flat against his thighs, a look of astonishment on his bloody, sweat-smeared face. Some instinct whirled Caleb toward Joe Vrooman, and he noted the fleet look of satisfaction the man hastily wiped from his features.

Then, the battle forgotten, Caleb was plunging toward the batwings.

DUST settled through the air, outside, and litter was still landing in the streets. Weakly he realized that it had been the bridge. As he plunged around the corner he could see it, and planking and timbers were still settling out of the moonlit sky. Caleb lunged up the approach, a tight, sick feeling knotting in his stomach.

Men were milling around him, and he knew that this had come as a vast surprise to most of them. It was a deadly blow. The middle span of the bridge had been blown to splinters by the dynamite somebody had placed in the understructure.

The damage was done, and there was nothing to do about it now except to find and punish the perpetrators. Sick and dizzy and wanting suddenly to be alone, Caleb plunged blindly into his little office, off the near approach.

Without lighting a lamp, he dropped into a chair, remembering the look of satisfaction that had shown so briefly on Joe Vrooman's fat face at the instant of the explosion. A guilt-free man would have shown surprise there, and O'Mara had shown surprise. It was Vrooman.

It could not have been an answer to Caleb's orders to quit the town, for there would not

have been time to prepare this. It was the result, likely, of Caleb's demolition action against the saloon. The ultimatum had merely rushed the thing, the fight with O'Mara had kept Caleb away from the bridge while the effort could be carried out.

And with what success! Vrooman must have guessed the fact that Caleb had crowded himself financially in pushing the new road so hard. Repairs to the bridge would be costly, and he could not make them under present circumstances. The road work would stop. O'Mara's ends would be served, after all.

Caleb slapped his desk with an angry fist. The thing had a subtle design, and abruptly he was not so sure that Mike O'Mara had no part in it! O'Mara must have been in on the plot, or why had he held off his own threatened attack on the the grading crew? They must have studied out this method of cutting off Caleb Trinkler's financial source! O'Mara had probably been surprised, not by what had happened, but by when it happened, having been less free to recognize the opportunity than Joe Vrooman!

His anger a bleak, deadly thing within him, Caleb pondered the question. If Vrooman meant to take over the town, why had he plotted to wreck the bridge, which in unscrupled hands could be turned into the richest source of revenue there? It was hard to see any profit in it to Vrooman, other than the flimsy profit of having taken revenge. Vrooman was too practical a man to want that kind of satisfaction.

The cattle men were the ones who had a logical reason for having done this thing, and they were led by Mike O'Mara. Caleb rose, remembering that he had a fight to finish.

He was aware of movement before it dawned on him fully. He looked absently toward the doorway, where a figure had loomed suddenly.

"Trinkler?" Joe Vrooman's voice asked softly.

"Yes. What do you want?"

"We've got to talk, Trinkler." The man came inside, closed the door, prowled on across the dark room. "You figure it was me who had your bridge blown up, but you're wrong! I've been plenty riled by our bickering, but I never cut in on that kind of scheme! Somebody'd like to set us to smoking it out, Trinkler! I've got to persuade you of that!"

"Who!"

"It'd have to be O'Mara! He never tipped his hand to me, understand, but it was the way he talked. He swore no nester was ever going to cross your bridge!"

"He was ready enough to use it, himself!"

"Yeah, but when a cowman's graze is at

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stake, he'd a dang site rather drive around through the Tumalum Gorge than lose his grass! O'Mara knew you were crowding yourself building that road! He knew if he could shut off your income, you'd be in such hot water you'd likely go busted! Little things he said told me all that, Trinkler!"

"Why're you telling it to me?" Caleb demanded savagely.

"We've got a business arrangement together. We've battled over methods, but we've both got the same idea. I can loan you the money to fix your bridge, Trinkler, and finish your road! I'm sick of O'Mara and his braggin' and bellyachin'! I'd like to help spike his guns!"

"What security'd you want?" Caleb asked suspiciously.

"Well, I'd have to have that, for my protection if anything happened. It won't take you long to get back on your feet. I'll take your notes, say for six months. Think it over, Trinkler, and keep your eye on O'Mara!" And abrupty the man was gone.

After a long moment, Caleb rose. He moved into his quarters, groped his way to the commode in the dark, and from a shelf took the service revolver, whose grip felt savagely good in his hand.

A QUICK survey from the batwings told Caleb that O'Mara had not returned to the saloon with the others who had come back, after investigating the explosion, yet Caleb had noticed that his black gelding was still tied to the rack in front of the hotel. He turned down the street and entered the lobby, finding Finley Summers, Frances and O'Mara there, as well as a handful of guests, all excitedly discussing the explosion.

"Whoever done it!" O'Mara was saying, "I reckon it's put that smart Easterner in a jackpot!"

"Quite a mystery who did it, eh, O'Mara?" Caleb asked coldly.

O'Mara whirled toward him. He had been leaning on the desk, talking across it to Finley and Frances Summers, and had not noticed who had entered. His eyes went abruptly stormy. "Just which do you mean, Trinkler? That I know who did it? Or that I did it?"

"I merely made a comment, O'Mara. But I'll add this. When I find out for sure who it was, he'll have to face me! That make you fell like reaching, now?"

An icy tension gripped the room instantly. Frances Summers gasped, "Oh, boys!" and Finley's face went stern. The guests found reason for leaving hastily through the big arch that led to the stairs.

Caleb Trinkler knew that the least feeling

of guilt would send Mike O'Mara's hand stabbing for his gun. For an instant it seemed that this was to be. Then the Irishman slowly relaxed his big arms.

"Trinkler, I'd give a pretty to know how that fight'd have turned out, if we'd finished it. Was a couple of times when I thought you had me. You're a danged good man, a danged nervy one, and a danged fair one! I ain't at all sure you couldn't kill me in a shoot out. But that's not what's stopping me from seeing! Fact it, I don't know who in the devil blew up your bridge!"

The last doubt was gone from Caleb. "I know who. And I might've persuaded myself it was you, if he hadn't been too foxy! After plopping me into hot water, he tried to loan me the money to get out on short term notes! I think he figured it'd be pretty easy to keep me from meeting them, when they came due, and he'd have the whole town, lock, stock, and barrel! He tried awfully hard to prime me to go gunning for you, O'Mara. Maybe he thought he might get me killed off, as an alternative!"

"Vrooman?"

"What makes you think so?"

"Because he's been trying hard to sic *me* onto *you!*" O'Mara grinned sheepishly. "He's been rubbing it into me about your nesters, but mostly how you're cutting me out with Frances. Had you come at me smoking, instead of talking, just now, he'd of succeeded, Trinkler! I should've known he was that kind of a double-crossing snake!"

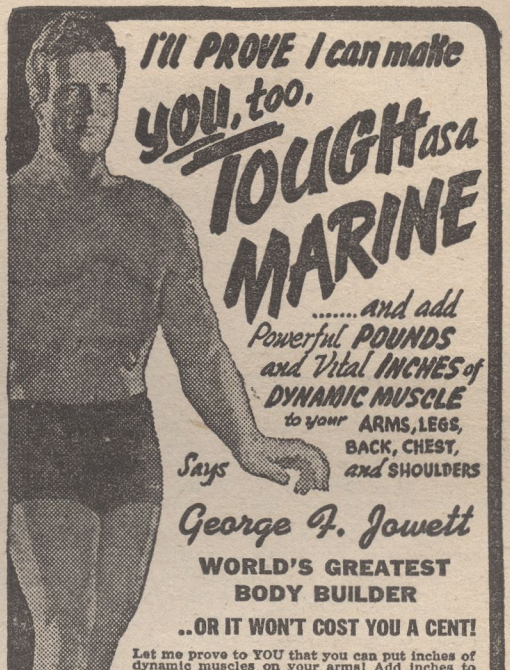
"How double-crossing? Have you been dealing with him?"

Now the big fellow looked actually hangdog. "Well—dickering a little. He had a proposition that sounded all right to me. He was to back you into a tight financial corner, then us stockmen was to furnish the money for him to buy you out. The way I understood it, he was going to bleed you to death through that new road of yours. He was going to rig it somehow with the territorial authorities so your right to put a toll road through the pass would be questioned, and get you all tied up in the courts. Maybe you won't believe me, Trinkler, but I had no idea there'd be any dirty work such as took place tonight. I reckon he was trying to run a whizzer on both of us!"

For the first time, Frances put in a word. "I think Mike's telling the truth, Caleb. He's got a sense of decency, even if he is a rough-tough customer! A woman sees those things—!"

"Come on, Trinkler!" O'Mara said, with an awkward, grin, and as though to cut her off. "We've got us a town to clean!"

On the sidewalk, with O'Mara striding be-



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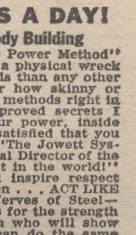

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side him, Caleb asked, "What makes you want to help me, O'Mara?"

O'Mara's mouth slipped into a wry grin. "I hate to admit it, Trinkler, but you kind of reached me with your talk about having a decent town, tonight! A place where a man could live with his wife and raise his kids and send 'em to school! I kind of had ideas like that myself, Trinkler, only I hadn't noticed 'em until you brought it up. When I come to town tonight, I had hopes of persuading Frances to come out to the ranch to live. Seems she don't want to. Says she wants to live in this town the rest of her life. So I guess it's up to me to help you clean it up so she can!"

They turned through the swinging doors of Vrooman's place together. The piano was going again, and a pair of the honkatonk girls were singing a tipsy duet, but it all stopped when the two stony-faced men came through the batwings.

Seeing Trinkler and O'Mara together, from his place at the end of the bar, Joe Vrooman knew that the climax had come. He slid from sight through the door to the back room. Benson and Larimore would be in there, maybe others who might decide to take their part.

The door slammed shut. Half a dozen paces from it Trinkler and O'Mara paused. "It's going to be messy getting through that door, Trinkler," O'Mara said.

The crowd out front had scooted toward the open-front wall and was melting through its apertures. Noise from beyond the thin partition indicated that there was an exodus from the big-game room, through the back door. But Caleb had no fear that Vrooman, Larimore and Benson would clear out in the rush. They were the cold nerved, tough fibred ilk that would fight viciously for what it wanted.

Darting swiftly forward, Mike O'Mara planted a big foot on the door panel, and with a seeming lack of effort sent it swinging inward with a crash. A pair of wild slugs from inside splintered the wall next to the casing as O'Mara slid away.

Caleb had flung himself to the floor, and now he went forward in a crawling run. The gunslicks inside were still hammering lead into the door, but it was all aimed at a standing target. Caleb was on the threshold, lining up with his gun, before they spotted him.

And he was triggering fast. The room seemed to have emptied itself, but there was at least a pair of men forted behind an overturned card table, which accounted for the hasty, blind shooting, and which leveled down their advantage. Caleb drove a hole dead center and heard a man yelp.

A furrow ploughed itself along a plank not six inches from his head. He swerved his gun, abruptly aware of Benson, who had pressed into the corner to Caleb's left. The gambler fired twice more, in a frenzy of fury, before Caleb caught him in his sights and triggered. Then O'Mara leaped over Caleb, coming into the room on pumping legs, his bull voice roaring. Caleb scrambled to his feet, from the corner of his eye watching Benson cave with the impotent, grotesque movements a man makes dying on his feet.

O'Mara hammered three slugs into the table top, and this, with the roar of his charge, lifted Larimore and Vrooman to their feet to meet it. Caleb laid fire with O'Mara's, felt the whip of air as lead whistled close to him, heard gun chatter pound to a peak of fury. He was not certain whose gun accomplished it; knew only, with a sick, dizzy feeling, that the sordid pair had gone out of the fight.

The hush that came seemed potent enough to cave the very walls inward. Caleb staggered to the front room, saw people pouring inside, now that it was over. He took hold of the bar to steady himself.

Mike O'Mara came back in, his gun holstered, his face pale but grinning. "Trinkler!" he roared, "you own yourself a lot of likker, it looks like! Where's your manners!"

A grind twisted onto Caleb's white lips. "Step up boys!" he said. "It's on the house!"

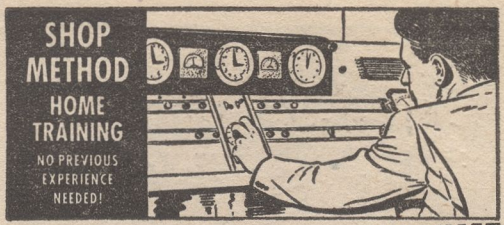
WHEN Caleb awakened the next morning it was with the startling realization that he was not in his own room. Pain was roaring in his head and thirst burned his throat. After a long moment he got the room to hold still long enough for him to decide that he was in bed in Finley Summers' hotel.

He slipped out and straightened groggily, noticing that his clothes had been piled neatly on the chair at the foot of the bed. He got into them, pausing once to take a long pull at the water pitcher. He didn't know how he had got here, but he had some hope of getting away again without being seen.

He was less than half way down the stairs when a bull voice roared, "Morning, Trinkler. We got hot coffee waiting for you!"

Nausea hit Caleb's stomach. Mike O'Mara stood in the door of the dining room motioning to him. For an instant Caleb wanted to murder the man for his serene look of health, his clear eyes and ruddy cheeks. Caleb went on down the stairs, knowing there was no ducking out of here now, and headed into the dining room.

The regular breakfast crowd, he noted, had already cleared away, but Finley and Frances were eating at the table next to the kitchen



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door, which the family used, and a couple of extra places were set. Caleb took one of these, O'Mara the other.

Caleb glanced quickly at Frances, noted that she was curiously imperturbed. Finley Summers grinned at him.

"Man, did you put jacks under your town, last night!"

"I have a feeling," Caleb groaned, "that I did!"

O'Mara chuckled. "Son, I never traveled so fast trying to keep up with anybody in my life."

"Bet them dolls never traveled as fast, either," Finley Summers put in cheerfully, "as they did larruping outta town in Joe Vrooman's hack! Wonder what riled 'em?"

O'Mara looked at Caleb. "Well—nothing ungentlemanly. Seems some jigger just made 'em set under the light over a card table so the shade reflected it good and strong on 'em. Funny how them wrinkles come out and the dyed hair and the hard eyes. Wasn't long until them ladies figured a night ride'd be good for their looks!"

"The jigger," said Frances, not without pride, "seems to have a fair knowledge of the workings of a woman's heart."

Caleb groaned. He could remember only the start of it. Maybe it was siding Mike O'Mara in a fight instead of going up against him. Anyhow, something had made him feel pretty good as he stood behind the bar setting up quarts of whiskey. He'd drunk with O'Mara and there had been a lot of others who showed a desire for the same. After that, things were pretty hazy. He had, he supposed, made a fool of himself. He could think of nothing to tell Frances, when he got the chance to talk to her alone, that might mitigate his guilt.

Yet Frances kept amazing him by watching him and smiling softly to herself from time to time.

A sudden forlornness filled Caleb. He looked at O'Mara. "Thanks for helping me clean up that mess, last night, O'Mara. But it's only fair to tell you that I still intend to build my road!"

The Irishman blinked. It was obvious that he had forgotten that little matter. His large black eyes grew stormy. He leaned forward and hit the table with his fist.

"You still mean to import your blasted nesters?"

"Nothing," Caleb answered, "has happened to change that!"

"By damn, something will happen to change it!" O'Mara roared. "I thought you'd got sense, Trinkler! I thought you'd showed yourself to be a pretty all right hombre! I—!"

"WE PAY OUR TOLL IN BULLETS!"

Abruptly Frances Summers spoke. She turned cold eyes on Mike O'Mara, switched her unwarming gaze to Caleb.

"You two make me sick," she announced. "Did it ever occur to either one of you that there might be a peaceful and entirely reasonable solution to that argument?"

"There might?" O'Mara grunted.

Caleb lifted curious eyebrows.

"There might," said an annoyed Frances. "You, Mike O'Mara, might try to understand nesters and learn to get along with any that show up here. And you, Caleb Trinkler, might concede that the cattle men have a real concern about men coming to string barbed wire all over the range and draw off the water for irrigation. But if you're incapable of that, there's an easier answer. I take it, Caleb, that you mean to build your farming community as carefully as you've built your town. Very well. The best farming land hereabouts is north of Wolf Creek. The cattle men rarely use that section because it's too out of the way for them. Build your new community there. And you stay on your own side of the creek, O'Mara."

"By criminy," grunted O'Mara. "She's bunged the nail square on the head."

Caleb was looking at her with interest. "Looks all right," he admitted.

After wolfing a breakfast it had made Caleb ill to watch Mike O'Mara got to his feet. He was grinning again. "That girl of yours's sure got a brain on her, Trinkler," he said, and left.

Finley Summers sauntered out with studied casualness, and Caleb looked at his plate. Then suddenly he was done with trying to find an excuse for himself. He got to his feet, and he rounded the end of the table. The girl looked at him strangely and stood up.

"Caleb! You scare me!"

Yet, a moment later, he doubted that she had risen to take flight.

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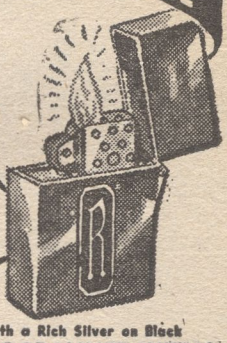

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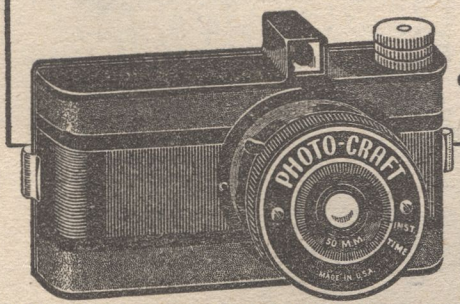

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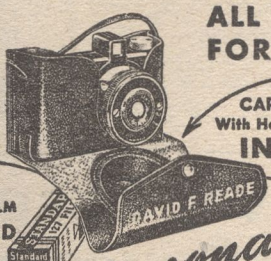

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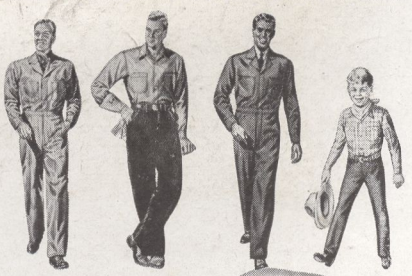

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