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VOLUME 62 NOVEMBER, 1952 NUMBER 4

Smashing Western Novelettes

Thrill-Packed Short Stories

—And—

ALL STORIES COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

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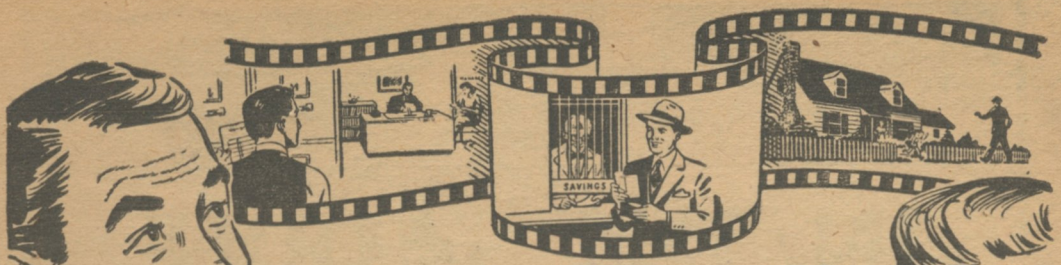

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IN THE SADDLE

SUPPOSE someone were to ask you to name the parts of the country where the Old West got its rough, tough reputation. You'd mention Texas, first, probably . . . then California, in the days of the Gold Rush.

The Southwest contributed its share of fast guns and dead men, and lots of gents would vote for the days of the Oregon Trail, further North. Kansas and Missouri had their fill of bad hombres: ask the citizens of Abilene and Independence.

And then—maybe—someone would think of the Yukon.

We figure it'd be a mistake to list the Alaskan frontier last. For the kind of courage that made the West great, you have to go far to outdo the old-time sourdough. James B. Hendryx—whose Yukon yarns have thrilled Western readers for years—has a story in this issue that points up what we mean. You'll find it further on.

And to prove that mystery, adventure and courage still hold sway in the far North, here's Cecil de Vaca's account of the deadly Nahanni Valley . . .

Located in Canada's Yukon province, Nahanni Valley derived its name from an Indian tribe. Reports have the Valley fabulous with gold and fur-bearing animals. Its gold is so abundant that it lies coarse and heavy on the bottoms of the Valley's mountain streams and in the quartz veins that thread the sides of the craggy canyons that shelter Nahanni itself. At last reports, Nahanni's grim secret still remained unsolved.

Up to 1947, fourteen men who entered the Valley intending to pan its gold did not return. When searched for and found, their heads were missing from their skeletons. Men who have gone into the Valley to trap, have returned laden with rich catches. But it takes a lot of will power on the trapper's part to return a second season. The only things that gave them any serious difficulty, the returned trappers say, was Nahanni's sinister, oppressive atmosphere and its ever swirling mists that kept their clothing in a constant state of dampness. Too, they had the feeling that they were being constantly watched by unseen eyes!

No Indian has ever been induced to go into the Valley; their belief is that Nahanni is still inhabited by savage Stone Age men and prehistoric beasts, the dinosaurs.

How do men lose their lives and heads in Nahanni Valley? All fourteen—and doubtless there have been more—did it in an almost identical manner Their heads were always missing! First of all, none of the victims were cheeckakos; they were experienced miners and outdoorsmen, hardened to the rigors of the northern wilds, and without fear as most men know it. They were well-armed and amply provisioned. Tinned foods were still found by their skeletons. Their rifles were still loaded. They didn't break any bones, so they might

(Continued on page 8)

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(Continued from page 6)

have succumbed from exposure. Robbery was not involved, because gold they had washed out was also found by their bones.

In the spring of 1940, Arthur Stanley, twenty-nine years old, and enjoying the health and strength that the North's rugged life brings, went into Nahanni, to get gold. Stanley was fully aware of the Valley's evil reputation and the fate that had befallen the other gold seekers. Now it is nothing out of the ordinary for prospectors to remain absent for a year. But when Stanley did not show up in 1942, a search was made for him. His skeleton fingers still grasping his loaded rifle. But his skull was gone!

THE next year Ernest Savard, an experienced miner and hardy adventurer, went into the Valley to look for gold. When his remains were found, it was very plain that he had died—or been murdered—while lying in his sleeping bag, because pieces of the bag and its zipper were still around his skeleton. The Something that had brought about his death had carried away his head!

Passing by the Valley's twelve other known victims brings us to Frank W. Henderson, the only man to enter Nahanni Valley to look for gold and come back unharmed. Henderson's background is noteworthy. Fifty-two years old at the time, he had worked with gold all his life in several parts of the world. At one time he was overseer for the South Africa Gold Corporation.

Frank Henderson and a trusted partner named John Patterson, entered the sinister Nahanni Valley on March 10, 1946. In order to cover more area in less time, the two partners went into the Valley from opposite directions, arranging beforehand to meet somewhere near its center. Henderson duly reached the rendezous area, but Patterson failed to arrive. As far as is known Jack Patterson's skeleton was never found, although Henderson tramped many weary miles for nearly two months looking for him.

On October 12, 1946, Henderson arrived in Fort Simpson, *with thirty ounces of Nahanni gold in his possession, or $1,275 worth.*

Under further questioning, Henderson declared that for gold, the Klondike had been mere peanuts compared to that in the Nahanni Valley. Never in his life had he seen so much raw gold lying around on the bare ground, to be had for the picking up.

When I asked him why he couldn't have brought back with him more than a mere thirty ounces, he said simply that he had been too heavily loaded down with food, extra clothes, utensils, mining tools, bedding, a heavy carbine, and what not, so he couldn't have carried more gold.

The geographical data brought out of the Valley by Frank Henderson is of more value than the thirty ounces of gold. During his five months stay in the Valley he did a lot of walking about. He insisted that he did not encounter a single human being; nor did he come across any human skeletons. But he did admit that every hour he was awake a feeling of uneasiness gripped him. A mysterious Unknown seemed to be watching his every move. Not until he had left the Valley behind did this apprehension leave him.

The belief that Nahanni had a tropical climate was definitely dispelled by Henderson. At most times, even in the dead of winter, the Valley's temperature is around fifty degrees warmer than that on the outside. While other rivers in Yukon province are still ice-bound in May, the Nahanni River never freezes solid. This is due to the Valley's geysers and hot springs that often startle the adventurer with their intermittent gushing, steaming and sputtering. It is these, Henderson said, that bring into being the mists and fog that enshroud Na-

(Continued on page 112)

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HORNED HELL!

What good is a hornless longhorn? Ask the cowhand who's trying to get one to market—alive!

By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

MOST people who know about roundups only from reading, know that the job of working young stock consists primarily of branding, castrating and dehorning. They can understand that a calf must be branded for identification; they understand that a young bull must be castrated in order to make a big, tender piece of beef. But there has been argument that to dehorn a calf, to deprive it of its only natural defensive weapon is needless and cruel.

It might be, though there is no real evidence that a modern calf ever saved his life with his horns. About all he is credited with doing is with wounding some other calf. And wounds cost money. They get infected when flies get into them, and the infection can kill an animal.

The most important reason for dehorning, however, is to prevent shipping damage. Cattle are raised for profit, and a bunch of cattle with horns are less profitabile than cattle without horns.

When fifty or sixty cattle are stuffed into a cattle trailer or car, and some of them have horns, there is certain to be damaged caused. A wound or bruise in the skin of an animal, if nothing else, decreases the value of the leather made from that hide. And a wounded animal, of course, loses weight.

It is therefore customary with cattle buyers to dock, or cut the price of cattle by as much as twenty-five cents per hundredweight when there are horned cattle in the shipment. This can add up to a loss of from fifty to sixty dollars per carload of beef. And that is a large and unnecessary loss for the cattleman to take.

Cattlemen are now turning more to the polled, or naturally hornless cattle. It is cheaper to raise a cow that naturally has no horns than it is to raise a horned animal and then go to the expense of cutting the horns off, and also risking infection which might kill the animal.

As a result, breeders have created polled or naturally hornless Herefords, Polled Shorthorns, and others, all though selective breeding.

One of the most popular of polled cattle, however, is the Aberdeen Angus, old blackie, who is a fine range cow, grows quickly, and is the only breed of cow that just naturally never did have any horns at all. Another advantage of this hornlessness is its prepotency. An Angus bull, when bred to any horned cow, will sire calves of which ninety-five percent will be naturally hornless. Thus he makes a good bull for any mixed breed herd, since he will not build up a dehorning job for the cattleman. ⁂ ⁂ ⁂

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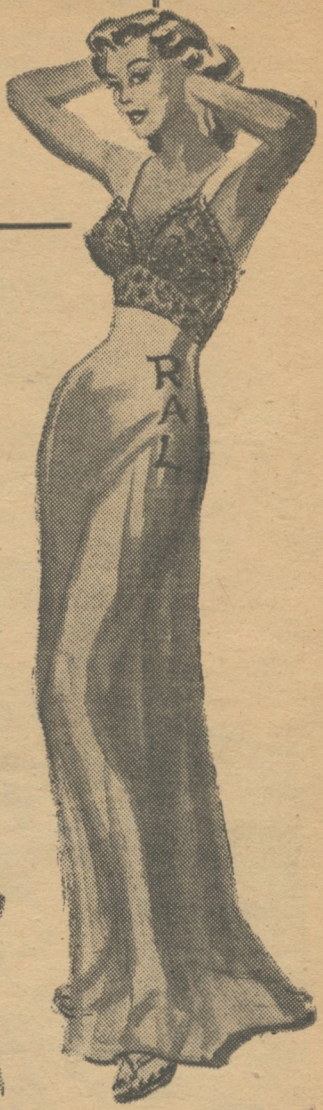

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GUNSMOKE TRIO —TEXAS STYLE!

There were fat steers in Texas, and up North there was hunger . . . and gold. But in the no-man's-land between rode all the quick-gun outcasts of both armies—plus Bert Malacay, late of the C.S.A.!

"Quite a show you're putting on, Malacay," Templeton said.

By THOMAS THOMPSON

THESE three were Texas men. They dismounted in front of the saloon in the small Kansas-Missouri border town and the muddy street rolled beneath their feet after sixty miles of constant riding. The tension of a long argument was between them.

The rain slanted against them, rattling off their saddles, steaming against their horses. It trickled down their gaunt faces through a three-week growth of beard. Bert Malacay, the youngest of the three, grinned at his companions, trying to salvage something from total disaster, feeling the drag of his responsibility. He looked at these two men he had known for so long

—Travis Beal, his cousin; Jay Dee Long, a man who had worked for the Malacays and the Beals for years. First war and now this had made them near strangers. Travis Beal, tall and dark, handsome even under his dirt and grime, gave his tied reins a savage tug. "You and your big ideas," he said, speaking directly to Bert Malacay. "Five hundred miles from home and ten thousand dollars in debt and still it's not enough."

"It could be worse," Bert Malacay said.

"How?" Travis grumbled. He was looking at the town.

"This saloon could be out of whiskey," Bert said. He kept his smile. He didn't feel it.

They pushed open the door of the saloon and the warm, steamy smell enveloped them. Jay Dee Long, older than the other two by ten years, licked his lips. He took off his hat and the lamp light glinted on his nearly bald head. He tilted the hat and let the stream of water run on the floor and he stared hard at the bartender, daring him to object. Jay Dee's eyes were hungry as he appraised the bottles on the back bar.

A half dozen muddy farmers glanced up and studied the riders. The bartender put his hands against the bar and reserved his opinion. The war had been over two years. There were all breeds of riders coming through Kansas these days, Union and Confederate alike. Kansas had learned to mistrust both.

The three men moved up to the bar. "Whiskey, bartender," Bert Malacay said.

The bartender put out three shot glasses and a bottle. He let his eyes run over the gray officer's coat Bert wore. "Ride far?" the bartender said. He didn't really care. He didn't expect an answer.

"From Baxter Springs," Bert Malacay said. He downed his drink and expelled his breath. "From Texas before that." Some of the wariness went out of the room. "Brought a herd of cows up last fall."

The bartender poured a second round on the house and now he was friendly. "What Texan didn't?" he said.

"There's been a dozen trail drivers here ahead of us, I suppose," Travis Beal said. He glanced at Bert, a small triumph in his eyes.

"You're the first I've seen," the bartender said. The tension went out of Bert's shoulders. The bartender mopped the bar. "Heard about how cattle piled up at Baxter Springs last winter though," he said. "How'd you make out?"

"Like the others," Bert said, more relaxed now than he had been in months. "Held them all winter. Those the snow didn't kill and the grass fires didn't starve and the Jayhawkers didn't steal we sold for a little less than they would have brought for hide and tallow in Galveston."

He didn't add that the herd had belonged to his neighbors and that those neighbors had gone head over heels in debt to finance Bert Malacay's disastrous drive. "How's things around here?" Bert asked.

"Just dandy," the bartender said. "We got a railroad building a hundred miles north of us. Brings in a load of Swede and Bohunk farmers once a week and dumps 'em out on the prairie. Some starve. Some walk back home. Some stop by here and drink themselves to death."

"That's what I thought," Travis Beal said.

"A man hears all sorts of things," Bert Malacay said, motioning for another round of drinks. "We even heard there was a Yankee cattle buyer here with a pocket full of money."

The bartender laughed. "Things get around."

"Anything to it?" Bert said.

"Depends on how you look at it," the bartender said. "Fellow by the name of Gordon Templeton come down here last fall full of ideas about getting cattle to drive up to the railroad. This is as far as he got."

"Is he still around?" Bert said. There

was a growing excitement in him that he was trying hard to conceal.

"He's here," the bartender said. One of the farmers laughed outright.

"Reckon I'll look him up," Bert said. "Know where I can find him?"

"Ought to be easy," the bartender said. "There's only one other saloon in town."

"Thanks," Bert said.

HE PAID for the drinks and went outside into the rain, Travis Beal and Jay Dee Long following at his heels. Jay Dee drew his head down into the collar of his coat and glanced back, remembering the warmth of the saloon.

"Satisfied?" Travis said. There was disgust in his voice.

"There is such a man," Bert said. "We'll talk to him."

"Are you crazy, Bert?" Travis said hotly. "This buyer is a fake, just like I said he would be. If he wanted cattle why didn't he come on down to Baxter Springs? There were ten thousand cattle there and he could have bought them for five dollars a head."

"Let's go ask him why," Bert said stubbornly. Travis Beal shook his head. Jay Dee Long stared at his boots.

"I've had enough, Bert," Travis said quietly. "We did what we could. It wasn't our fault there was no market. You can't save Texas single-handed."

"I can find a way to pay off what I owe," Bert Malacay said. He turned and headed down the board sidewalk, glancing across the street, looking for the saloon where Gordon Templeton, the cattle buyer, was supposed to be. In time Travis Beal and Jay Dee Long followed him.

Jay Dee felt the whiskey, warm and tantalizing in his empty stomach, and he was satisfied. This wasn't his argument. These two never included him. Jay Dee neither enjoyed nor resented his position. He didn't think much about it. Both Travis Beal and Bert Malacay had been majors in the war; Jay Dee had gone into the army as a corporal and mustered out as a private. It was a progression which pretty much paralleled his pre-war life. He followed along.

A passing buggy sliced the mud into twin ribbons of brown froth and spattered the dirty water across the sidewalk. Ahead, under the wooden awning of the town's only hotel, a girl stepped back, avoiding the spatter. She nearly collided with the three men.

She moved quickly, not wanting to notice them, and she stood there, nervously, looking out at the quagmire of the street. There was a charged tension about her that held a man's attention. Bert saw her face, young and pretty, and he saw the strain and worry that was older than her years. She furled her umbrella suddenly and shook water from it with quick, angry jerks that plainly damned the Kansas weather. She wanted to cross the street.

Bert Malacay and Travis Beal both moved at the same time. They removed their hats and bowed slightly. "Ma'am, if you'll permit me," Travis Beal said. He was always quicker with words than was Bert. He made a carrying gesture with his arms and nodded across the street. His smile brought out the good points of his dark handsomeness.

The girl's eyes widened. She looked at Travis Beal and then at Bert Malacay, a little frightened, and Bert felt a sudden constriction in his throat. Women affected him strangely since the war. He was uncomfortably conscious of his appearance. The top of the girl's head came to the level of his chin. He noticed that.

"It's the common thing to do in this foul weather, Ma'am," Bert said, trying to reassure her. The girl looked at him and found his smile beneath the growth of beard. "I could put out my coat like Sir Walter did but I reckon we'd just lose you and the coat both."

A quick smile crossed the girl's face and

was gone. She looked at the men and then glanced anxiously at the other side of the street and made her decision. "It's really very gentlemantly of you," she said. She spoke as if she were hurried and her voice matched the worry on her face.

"Happy to oblige," Bert said. He stepped forward, ready to pick her up, but the girl had already turned toward Travis. Travis lifted her easily. The girl made a small, breathless sound and put her arms around Beal's neck. Travis looked across her shoulder at Bert and Jay Dee, winked smugly and stepped off the wooden sidewalk into the slime of the mud.

Bert stood there, his fisted hands on his hips, watching them cross the street. Jay Dee laughed. "Us front-line soldiers always was the ones with the women, Major," Jay Dee said.

Bert felt a quick anger and forced it down. Travis and Jay Dee both had been in a lot of front-line fighting. They liked to remind Bert that his part of the war had been behind a desk as supply officer at Andersonville prison. Remembering the misery and starvation he had seen there, Bert wondered which had actually been the worse duty. Up front you could release your emotions. Sometimes blood and smoke left less of a lasting impression on a man's soul than did scurvy and bellies bloated from hunger and bloody bare feet on frosty ground. He swallowed against the dryness in his throat, hating the memory.

Travis and the girl had reached the other side of the street and it seemed to Bert as he watched that Travis was taking his time about putting the girl down. When he finally did he stood there, hat in hand, the rain splashing against his jet black hair. Travis bowed low. Bert saw the girl's nervous, fleeting smile. It bothered him and he knew he would always remember it. It was a smile that seemed so completely devoid of hope. He had seen too many such smiles through the south, but judging from her speech Bert had decided this girl was a Yankee. He saw her offer her hand to Travis now and then she turned and entered a small building which was obviously a city office of sorts. Travis came back across the street.

"You were right in front of that saloon we're looking for," Bert said. "Why didn't you stay over on that side?"

"Maybe I'm not going in that saloon," Travis said. "Maybe I'd rather put the horses away, get a room and get myself shaved." His dark eyes never could conceal anger. "Maybe I think you're being a damn fool."

"Because Texas has got a million cattle and I'm trying to find a market for a few of them?" Bert asked.

Travis shook his head. "No," he said. "Because you don't own any of those cattle. Because it's none of your damn business whether a bunch of shirt-tail cowmen starve or not. Because I happen to be half owner of *Malabeal* along with you—"

"*Malabeal*," Bert said. "White pillars and magnolia and unlimited credit—because it wouldn't be genteel to mention the fact that the Malacay and Beal families have been broke for twenty years or more." Bert's anger was thick in his chest. "You want to know why the North won the war, Travis? There's the reason. Too many *Malabeals*."

"Or maybe it was because the South fed the Yankee prisoners at Andersonville while we went hungry in the field."

"You'll bring that subject up once too often sometime, cousin," Bert said quietly. He stepped off the sidewalk into the slime of the mud and crossed the street, clenching his hands in the pockets of his officer's coat. Couldn't they realize that something had to be done—that people in Texas were actually going hungry? He knew he had been stubborn—even unreasonable at times—but if a thing had to be done. . . . He found himself wondering secretly, as he had so many times, just what it really was that prodded him so.

For it was more than a decision or an ambition and it wasn't money. He could have made more by staying home, getting *Malabeal* back into shape. But he had returned from the war hating the smug narrowness of his pre-war life and the feeling had persisted. He kept remembering those gaunt figures in tattered blue, dying in the courtyard of Andersonville prison. Sometimes he awoke at night, sweating profusely, thinking of them. He entered the saloon and without looking back knew that Travis and Jay Dee were one step behind him.

THERE was one other customer in the saloon, a pink and white man of around fifty, a bit soft and full at the middle, his hair and mutton chop whiskers white and in need of a trim. He wore a knee-length russet coat, piped in brown. It had an ugly stain on the left lapel. The garment needed pressing. There was a fine, brown beaver hat on the man's head. The hat had been crushed recently.

The man was telling his life story to a patient and unoccupied bartender. He stopped his telling when the three Texans entered and he stood there staring at them, his finger still pressed against the bartender's chest. When the bartender moved down to meet the Texans the man held his pose, his finger pressed against nothing.

"Don't pay no attention to him, boys," the bartender said, not bothering to lower his voice. "What'll you have?"

"Know where I can find a man by the name of Gordon Templeton?" Bert said. He wasn't sure just what he had expected, but it wasn't the man there at the end of the bar.

"That's him," the bartender said, jerking his head. "Just don't pay any attention to him. Whiskey?"

Gordon Templeton focused his eyes and saw the gray officer's coat on Bert Malacay. "Where'd you get the Rebel coat?" the Yankee said thickly.

"Stole it," Bert Malacay said. "Yeah, whiskey, bartender."

"Just stay down at your end of the bar, Templeton," the bartender said. "Whiskey it is."

Gordon Templeton pushed his bottle aside. He adjusted his beaver hat and it gave him a ridiculous dignity. Walking slowly, stiffly, he felt his way up the bar and leered closely at Bert Malacay. "Maybe you're a grave robber," Gordon Templeton said.

There was a slight smile playing around the mouth of Travis Beal. He watched Bert expectantly. Jay Dee downed his drink, wiped the shot glass out with his forefinger and put his finger in his mouth. He stared hard at Gordon Templeton. Finally Bert Malacay grinned. "All right," he said. "I'm a grave robber. Here's to you."

"So you're a grave robber," Templeton said. He waved his hand magnanimously. "That's all right. I got more respect for a grave robber than I have for a cotton-picking belly-robbing Rebel."

Jay Dee Long put down his shot glass and some of the color ran out of his leathery cheeks. "I told you to behave yourself, Templeton," the bartender said.

"Keep your remarks to yourself, Yankee," Jay Dee said suddenly. "Open your mouth again and you'll find a fist in it."

"Shut up, Jay Dee," Bert said.

"Why should he?" Travis Beal said.

"I'll buy you a drink, Mr. Templeton," Bert said pleasantly. The bartender, obviously relieved, slid out another glass and poured it full. Travis Beal's hand swept the bar and knocked the glass over, spilling the whiskey across Bert and Templeton.

"Maybe you drank with loud-mouth Yankees at Andersonville," Beal said. "Where I was we didn't."

Bert's hand dropped down and gripped Travis Beal's wrist. He twisted, forcing Beal back against Jay Dee. "I'll handle this," Bert said. He released Beal's wrist

suddenly and gave his cousin a slight shove.

Gordon Templeton's face had gone dead white. He appeared suddenly sober. "Who said Andersonville?" he said.

"I did," Travis said. "What about it?"

Gordon Templeton's bloated face was close. "You haven't read the papers much, have you Rebel?" the cattle buyer said. "Or maybe you ignorant Rebels can't read. Or maybe you don't want to." Bert's arm reached out and gripped the bar, blocking Beal's way. "There were thirteen thousand loyal Union boys deliberately starved and slaughtered in that pest hole, that's what about it." Templeton squared his shoulders and for that second he was sober. "My only son was one of them."

Jay Dee laughed unexpectedly. "War sure is hell, ain't it, Yank?" he said.

BERT MALACAY felt the strong tension running along his spine and he knew the color had drained from his gaunt cheeks. "I told you to shut up, Jay Dee," he said.

"Leave Jay Dee alone," Travis said.

Gordon Templeton's eyes were red rimmed but they were sharply sober. He put his hand aaginst Jay Dee's chest and shoved. "I said my son was murdered at Andersonville prison," he said quietly. "Do you find that amusing?"

"Forget it, Mr. Templeton," Bert said softly.

"I was talking to this rag-picking white trash," Templeton said, shoving Jay Dee again.

Bert's sudden move was too late. Jay Dee's fist came up from his waist and landed with a sickening, liquid sound on the butt of Gordon Templeton's jaw. The cattle buyer's hands went shoulder high and he rocked back on his heels, his legs stiff. His eyes rolled back and his body was rigid when it hit the floor. Jay Dee stood there, grinning savagely, rubbing his right fist into the palm of his left hand.

The bartender shrugged his shoulders. "I told you not to pay no attention to him, boys," he said. "He's been drunk for three months."

"I'll kill the dirty—" Jay Dee started. The caged anger in Bert Malacay exploded. The knowledge that he had failed his friends, the unknown thing that drove him; the remnant of hope that had flared when he heard there was a cattle buyer here in this town; the crushing disappointment now. He turned suddenly and gave Jay Dee an open-handed slap across the mouth, knocking the hired man back against the bar.

A sudden pallor came into Travis Beal's cheeks. His fists were doubled and he moved forward. "I think we might as well get this out in the open, Bert," Travis said. He shoved Bert hard.

"All right, Travis," Bert said.

The sudden opening of the saloon door held the moment in suspension.

A tall man strode quickly across the room and dropped to one knee at the side of Gordon Templeton. The tall man wore a floor length bearskin coat. It was open, exposing a holstered revolver. There was a badge on the tall man's vest. His hand went inside Gordon Templeton's coat and took a wallet from the inside pocket. He flipped the wallet open, glanced at the contents, a thick sheaf of Union greenbacks. He dropped the wallet in his own coat pocket then and stood up. "Well?" he said.

"It wasn't the boys' fault, Marshal," the bartender said. "Same old story."

The marshal looked old and tired. "He's getting out of here tomorow," the marshal said. "I already told the girl. I've had enough of it." He turned on Bert and the others. Jay Dee's eyes were wide, his lips dry. His tongue darted out and back. "What's your business?" the marshal demanded.

"Cattle," Bert Malacay said. "We heard the man was in the market."

"In the market for trouble," the marshal

said. "I'd stay away from him." He didn't wait for any answer. He stooped down, caught Gordon Templeton under the arms and jerked him to his feet. "I've had enough, Pete," the marshal told the bartender tiredly. "I've had too much." He started toward the door, half supporting Gordon Templeton, half dragging him. The bartender looked at the three Texans and shrugged his shoulders.

"Let's get out of here," Travis Beal said. "I want to shave and clean up before we head home."

Jay Dee stood there, staring. He licked his dry lips. "That purse," he said hoarsely. "It was chuck full of greenbacks."

"I saw it," Bert Malacay said. "That's why we're staying. Those greenbacks will buy a lot of Texas beef."

CHAPTER TWO

End of Malabeal

ACROSS the street, Marie Templeton stood in the lobby of the hotel and watched the town marshal drag her father across the muddy path. She felt nothing but a deep, lingering tiredness and she realized that in time emotion could run its entire gamut and build its own protective armor. She had been reminded of the danger of dropping that armor this afternoon.

For one fleeting moment when the stranger had caried her across the street she had felt like a woman. That one small gesture of chivalry and respect had undone everything. And during that moment she had thought of her father and felt all the old pains. She wouldn't let it happen again, she promised herself. It was better this way.

There was nothing she could say to the marshal when she went to his office. She had been to him before, always on the same errand. The only thing that set this visit aside from twenty other visits was the fact that the marshal had told her to take her father and leave town. She had been expecting that order. She had laid awake nights, wondering how she could face this one last indignity. Now it was here and she felt nothing. She felt nothing and she was proud of her lack of feeling.

She didn't speak to the marshal now when he came into the lobby. The smirk on the lips of the hotel clerk no longer bothered her. The marshal boosted Gordon Templeton up the stairs. Templeton's brown beaver fell off and rolled across the floor. Marie picked it up and brushed it carefully. Her shoulders were straight when she followed the marshal up to the connecting drab rooms where she had lived a lifetime in three months.

The marshal laid Gordon Templeton on the bed. Marie pulled off her father's well-made boots and unfolded a quilt and tucked it in carefully. "It's unusual to have this much rain this time of the year, isn't it?" she said.

The marshal reached into the pocket of his bearskin coat and took out the wallet. He handed it to the girl. "He drew the money out of the bank again," the marshal said.

"Yes," the girl said. "He told me he was going to." It didn't even hurt to lie for him any more.

"It's my responsibility if he gets his head bashed in and loses it," the marshal said. He was tired of being pleasant.

"I understand," Marie said.

"There's a stage going North at noon tomorrow," the marshal said. "I'll make arrangement for tickets."

"Please don't bother," Marie said. "We'll make out nicely." She held the door.

When the marshal was gone she stood there staring down at her father, loving him and hating him. Idly she opened the wallet and leafed through the large denomination greenbacks. Over ten thousand dollars. Ten thousand dollars to start buying a dream of cattle and railroads and

packing houses. Ten thousand here and a hundred times as much where this came from and the man who had access to all of it was here in this room, drunk.

She came to the photograph, as she always did. A young man in the uniform of a Union lieutenant. Her brother. She stared at the face and now her vision was blurred. . . . She took a towel and dampened it in the basin that stood by the bed. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she started bathing her father's face.

IN TIME he opened his eyes and he lay there quietly, watching his daughter's face. There was no regret in his expression; he was never ashamed. "Must be near supper time," he said. "You should eat your meals on time, Marie."

"Shall we eat here in the hotel?" she said. "I can't imagine crossing that street."

"That's the trouble, isn't it Marie?" he said quietly. "Always one more street to cross." He sat up and without thinking she reached out and brushed a whisp of hair away from his forehead, loving him in this moment, loving him actually more than she had before this thing had happened to him. Two years ago she wouldn't have brushed the hair in place any more than she would have made the same gesture to a stranger.

He was a highly intelligent man. She had always known that. That he was also a highly sensitive man she was just beginning to see. It was hard to realize. She remembered when her brother Bob had been taken prisoner. The atrocity reports about Andersonville prison had sickened her until she could neither eat nor sleep. They had seemed to strengthen Gordon Templeton.

And then, finally, when it was certain that Bob Templeton was dead she had given way to complete grief that had brought its own balm. But Gordon Templeton had accepted it as if it were just another day of the week. It was not until they had come here to this place on their way to buy Texas cattle that Gordon Templeton had finally faced reality. And this two years after the end of the war. . . .

"I found the answer, Marie," Gordon Templeton said. "I found it today."

His voice startled her. "I'm glad, Dad," she said. "We can leave for Baxter Springs in the morning. There must be cattle left there and if we can talk to the drovers—" She wanted to keep him on this subject. North of here, at a place called Abilene, a friend of one of her father's associates, a Joseph McCoy, was building holding and shipping pens, waiting for cattle which Gordon Templeton and others had promised to deliver.

"No," her father said. "Not Baxter Springs. Not anyplace. That isn't the answer, Marie. Don't you see that?"

"I don't know," she said.

"It's Bob," he said. He stood up suddenly, steady on his feet now, an imposing figure of a man. He walked back and forth, his hands clasped behind him, and she imagined he had walked this way at directors meetings when as much as a million dollars had been at stake. She knew better than to interrupt him. "It's the whole answer," he said. "It's what I'm doing to Bob. It's rank betrayal."

She hated these scenes. She never knew whether it was whiskey talking or some innermost recess of a tortured mind. One was as frightening to contemplate as the other.

"These Rebels," he said. He waved his right hand to encompass the entire south. "These half-civilized Texans. They starved Bob, along with thirten thousand others. They refused to give food. And now suppose McCoy's idea is right? Suppose he actually does succeed in building this Texas cattle thing into a multi-million dollar business? It would be a great thing for Texas. It would be putting food into the mouth of Texans—the very same Texans who refused to put food into my son's mouth. . . ."

He sat down heavily and put his face in his hands. "That's why I won't go through with it, Marie. I won't enter into such a thing. We're going back, Marie. Tomorrow."

For a long time she stood there, staring down at him, wondering if he knew what he had said, wondering if he would remember tomorrow in that lucid hour between the time he was fully awake and the time he took his first drink. A quiet terror touched her and because of her closeness to him, because of her worry, she could see him naked and stripped of all pretense.

She had known him as a man aloof and apart from the rest of the family, but a man who had remained the head of the family nevertheless. He was always there, a symbol giving prestige to the family name.

For the first time in her life she wondered what life had been like between her mother and this man. She remembered acutely her mother's death and the way the big house had moved on in its same unending pattern. She and Bob away at school. The housekeeper and the gardener running the house. She remembered the stoic acceptance of Bob's death and she had hated her father for it. There was no way to ruffle this man; there was no way to stop him or block his path.

And now, suddenly, he was a child—a child with a hurdle in his way. The man who had crossed a thousand hurdles was balking, and she knew, desperately, that if he didn't cross this one he would never cross another. She said, "No, Dad. We're not going home." She realized that she had never said "no" to him before; she wondered if others ever had.

He didn't argue, because even now he refused to accept what he didn't want to hear. That had been one of his tools of success. She knew he had heard her; she was positive he knew what she meant—that they would go on—finish this job even if it meant going on to Texas. She knew that at this moment he had recognized defeat. She just could not let him accept it.

Out in the hall the nasal voice of the hotel clerk grew louder over footsteps as he showed someone to a room down the hall. "The three of you can fit in here," Marie heard the clerk say. "I'll move a cot in."

"I want some hot water," a voice said. Marie recognized the voice. It belonged to the man who had carried her across the street. She couldn't hear the clerk's answer. Three doors down a key turned, a hinge complained tiredly. There was a sound of bundles being dropped on the thin wooden floor and then the clerk's footsteps passed her door and she heard him going down the stairs.

BERT MALACAY tossed his bed roll on the floor of the hotel room and shrugged out of his dripping, gray coat. Jay Dee Long looked around the room with appraising eyes, went over and touched the wall paper with the tips of his fingers, feeling the texture, finding it elegant. "What a rat hole," Travis Beal said, slamming his gear down on the double bed.

"It's dry," Bert said.

"Where's that cot the feller was gonna bring up here?" Jay Dee said. "Man pays fer a room like this he's got a right to expect what's comin' to him." He walked over and picked up the water pitcher, looked around, looked at the pitcher, then doffed it and drank directly from it. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"You were about to say something there in the saloon, Travis," Bert Malacay said. "The marshal came in and stopped it. Do you want to say it now?"

Travis Beal turned his back and started untying his bed roll. "Just that I thought it was crazy wasting time talking to that drunk," he said.

"That wasn't it, Travis," Bert said quietly.

Travis Beal whirled around and now the anger was plain on his face. "All right," he said, "so that wasn't it. I'm sick of you

licking the boots of every damn Yankee you meet if you want to know. If you want to carpetbag why in hell don't you go down to Jacksboro with the rest of the Unionists? My people came from Alabama. I was raised in Texas. I'm a Southerner, and I don't sell out for the price of a herd of cattle. That's what I was about to say, Bert. Is it clear enough now?"

Jay Dee Long had flattened himself against the wall and he stood there, his mouth dry, his eyes wide. He had heard these two argue, but he had never expected to hear one of them say anything like this. If anyone had accused Jay Dee of being a Unionist he would have killed the man. He stood there, expecting violence, and instead he saw the haunted smile on Bert Malacay's lips. "I'm glad the real trouble is out in the open, Travis," Bert said.

Jay Dee stood there, waiting for the explosion. It didn't come. And suddenly Jay Dee was seeing Bert Malacay with new eyes. He had always been half afraid of Bert. Bert was a landowner, one of a different class. In the war he had been an officer. There in the saloon Jay Dee had let Bert Malacay slap his face and he had done nothing about it. He had half expected it and he had accepted it. Now, suddenly, Jay Dee decided he was a bigger man than Bert Malacay. Nobody could call Jay Dee Long a Unionist. He pushed himself away from the wall. "I go along with Travis," he said, hitching his belt. "I ain't toadyin' to no damn Yankee."

"Keep out of it, Jay Dee," Bert said.

A grin twisted Jay Dee's lips. "Make me, Bert," he said.

At that second Jay Dee felt fear. He saw the muscles bunch along Bert's jaw. And then Bert was shrugging his shoulders. "All right," Bert said. "If you two want out of it, get out. I came here to find a market for Texas cows. I'll go back to Texas when I've found that market, not before."

"Then you'll go alone, Bert," Travis said. "I'm going back to *Malabeal*. It's half yours. When you get this nonsense out of your head, come on home and we'll start from there. As for the money you feel we owe, what can they do about it?"

"Back to white pillars and magnolia blossoms and unlimited credit, is that it, Travis?" Bert said.

"I like it that way," Travis Beal said. "I like a shave and clean clothes and I like to drink with gentlemen. I was raised that way."

"So was I raised that way," Bert said. "I fought a war for it and someplace along the line I found out it didn't amount to much."

"You fought a war," Travis said disgustedly. "You sat behind a desk and got fat and played nursemaid to a bunch of damn Yankees. That's all that's the matter with you, Bert. You listened to what those Yanks had to say and you figure now that they've got the upper hand you'd best string along with them."

"Show me a Southerner who's got money enough to buy a herd of cows and I'll deal with him," Bert said. "Otherwise take that back."

"I guess I don't forget as easy as you do, Bert," Travis said. "It's like I said before. I was killing Yankees, not feeding them."

Travis must have known that he had given Bert the final shove. He turned squarely, his fists ready, and he met Bert coming in. But there were no blows struck. For a second they stood there, ready, and then the woman's scream was in the hall and in the room, hanging there between them, a terrified sound that ripped their anger.

BOTH men ran out into the hall, followed closely by Jay Dee, and three doors down they saw the struggling figures. The girl was there, beating her fists against a man, scratching and kicking. Bert Malacay threw himself into the middle of it

without knowing what the thing was about.

Gordon Templeton was pressed against the wall, his face bloody. The cattle buyer was stunned and as Bert rushed in he saw the panic in Templeton's eyes. The man who fought him was dressed in rough clothes, a lean, hungry-looking man with mud stained boots and a bearded face. Bert remembered thinking that here was another man who had refused to take Gordon Templeton's drunken insults and then he saw the girl's face, white and terror-stricken and pleading. . . . He caught the bearded man's arm and twisted, forcing the man around.

There was a wild pounding of boots on the stairs and the bearded man broke free of Bert's grip. For a moment he hesitated, his eyes wild, then he turned and ran, throwing himself through a closed window at the end of the hall. They heard him land on the porch roof and now the marshal was there along with three other men. "I answered the door," the girl said frantically. "This man was there and he had a gun—"

"I told you to expect it, didn't I?" the marshal said without feeling. "It's a wonder it didn't happen before. Did he get the money?"

"No," the girl said. "I tried to shut the door on his arm and then Dad saw what was going on—"

"You're lucky," the marshal said. "But don't expect to live on that kind of luck forever." He saw Bert and Travis and Jay Dee then. "You three still around?" the marshal said.

"We have the room down the hall, marshal," Bert said. "Heard the confusion—"

"All right," the marshal said. The hall was full of people now. "Forget it, all of you," the marshal said loudly. "Get back about your own business."

"You look pretty shaken, Ma'am," Travis Beal said. "Could I get you a brandy or something?"

"No," the girl said. "No, I'm all right. Please go away, all of you."

"Are you going to leave a guard here, Marshal?" Bert said. "In case the robber tries to come back?"

"Are you telling me how to run my business, Texas?" the marshal said. "I thought your business was cattle."

"I asked a civil question, that's all," Bert said.

"I've had three months of guarding this man," the marshal said. "I'm sick of it. I've got a wife and three kids and a home of my own. If you want this room guarded, guard it. I've had more than I want." He turned without even looking at the girl and stalked back down the stairs. Bert looked at the girl.

"I'd be glad to keep an eye out if you'd sleep better," Bert said. "My name's Bert Malacay. I was hoping to talk to your father about selling him a herd for delivery to the new railhead—"

Gordon Templeton had been standing with his back against the wall, holding a handkerchief to the slight cut on his forehead. Now he dropped his hand and looked hard at Bert and Travis and Jay Dee, not recognizing them as the men he had antagonized in the saloon. He had heard the word "Texas" and he kept hearing the soft drawl of this man's voice . . .

"I'm not in the cattle buying business any longer, Rebel," Templeton said. "And I'll thank you to quit annoying my daughter. Come, Marie." He took his daughter's arm gallantly and started to turn her toward the room door. She took two steps and then jerked away from her father.

"We are in the cattle buying business, Mr. Malacay," she said suddenly. "And we are interested in hearing about your herd." Bert saw the flare of her nostrils and he heard the quaver in her voice that was decision and determination mixed with uncertainty.

"Perhaps we could have supper in the hotel and discuss it then?" Bert said.

"In a half hour," the girl said. Templeton was staring at her.

"You *are* interested in buying a herd?" Bert said anxiously.

"Step aside," Templeton said, "or I shall be obliged to call the marshal and have you put out of this hotel—"

"Yes," the girl said, and she was nearly shouting. "We're interested. We have a market for all the cattle in Texas if we can get someone interested in breaking a trail—"

"A half hour, then, Miss Templeton," Bert said, removing his hat. The room door slammed in his face as Gordon Templeton jerked his daughter inside.

BERT turned, his eyes excited, his anger of a few moments before forgotten. 'Well boys," he said, "what do you make of it?"

"A long way around to get a lady to dine with you," Travis said. "As for the old man, the scum on him is as thick as ever."

"Yuh can't blame a man none for trying to rob him," Jay Dee said. His voice was high with exitement, his breathing shallow and rapid. "He rubs your nose in all that money he's packin' and he invites yuh to knock him down and take it away from him." Jay Dee laughed hysterically, as if it were all a joke. "The marshal don't care no more and I'll bet there's fifty men in town hates that Yank. They'd have a hell of a time provin' who done it." He laughed again. "If I was runnin' this show—"

"You're not running it, Jay Dee," Bert said quickly. "I am." He saw Travis staring at Jay Dee. In the dim light of the hall Beal's face was hawk-like in its thinness, his dark eyes bright. Bert clapped his cousin on the shoulder. "Let's get shaved and cleaned up," he said amiably. "We don't want to keep the young lady waiting."

A hint of a smile lifted one corner of Travis Beal's mouth. "You go on, Bert," Travis said. "Jay Dee and I will eat at that place across the street."

"Suppose I make a deal?" Bert said, meaning the cattle.

Travis twisted the meaning deliberately. "Then have a good time with her," he said. "Personally, I don't need a woman that bad."

Bert Malacay hit him. Six months of veiled insults and innuendos and twisted meanings was in that one remark. He saw Travis crash back against the wall, saw his hand drop toward his gun and then, remarkably, Jay Dee was in between them, bringing a moment of sanity. Bert was breathing heavily. "I've got fifty or sixty dollars left," he said. "I'll leave your half of it in the room." He turned quickly and hurried away, knowing this was the end, knowing now that it had come that there would be no repairing the break. Lawyers could handle the division of *Malabeal*. Bert Malacay and Travis Beal were through. He felt a moment of regret as he realized he had split a family apart. And then suddenly, on the heels of it, he felt whole.

CHAPTER THREE

Jay Dee Takes Over

MARIE TEMPLETON talked with a rush of words and Bert Malacay listened. He had been disappointed when she came into the hotel dining room alone a half hour ago. He had expected her father to be with her. Now, listening to her, he forgot his disappointment.

She spoke with an utter candor and frankness, admitting her father's weakness, strengthening her own position by admitting it. She was trying desperately now to convince Bert that her father could buy cattle and he was trying just as hard to convince her that he could make up a herd. They stopped suddenly and looked at each other and both laughed. "At least," the girl said, still smiling, "you and I seem to be in agreement."

"It sounds fine to me," Bert said, think-

ing of her description of Abilene. "Have you seen these holding pens this McCoy is building? And the hotel?"

"No," she said, "but I know Mr. McCoy and the calibre of my father's associates. They wouldn't go into a thing like this unless they were convinced it would not only work but would work in a big way. These men all made money during the war. . . ." She stopped, embarrassed for the first time, remembering the gray officer's coat this man had worn the first time she saw him.

"That's all right," Bert said. "There are bound to be some people who make money out of war whether we like it or not. You and I are talking about cattle."

She smiled gratefully. "I'm afraid my father has made me quite aware of the color of uniforms," she said.

The waiter brought the food and they were silent for some time, eating. Bert had shaved and changed his shirt and otherwise freshened himself and once he glanced up and saw the girl watching him. She smiled fleetingly and lowered her eyes. This was difficult, this thing she was doing, he knew, but her frankness did not ask for pity. He wanted to match her frankness. "I would be willing to go on back to Texas and make up a herd and deliver it to your Abilene, just on the strength of what you've told me," he said. "Unfortunately, I was not one of those who made money during the war. I managed to get one herd together on speculation and I succeeded in losing a great deal of money for the men who financed me. This time, I'm afraid I'll have to show some money before I can get any cattle."

"We could hardly advance money to a total stranger without knowing we would get the cattle," she said.

"Hardly," he said. He found himself admiring the curve of her cheek, the delicate texture of her skin. He put down his knife and fork. "Would your father be willing to go down to Fort Worth with me?" The excitement was on him again. "If we could determine on a delivered price and say advance half of it, the other half to be paid on delivery and acceptance in Abilene. . . . That way your father could hand pick his herd—"

"When could we leave?" she said.

Involuntarily he reached across the table and took her hand. "As soon as you can buy a wagon and supplies for the trip," he said, grinning. "I can't even afford that."

She laughed, the first genuine laugh he had heard. "All right," she said. "There are three of you and two of us—"

"There's just myself," he said.

"Oh? I thought—" She put it aside as if it didn't matter. And actually it didn't. For a second she had thought of the dark, handsome man who had carried her across the stret. "You realize I still have to convince my father," she said.

"I believe you can do it," Bert said.

"I must do it."

She hadn't meant to say that, perhaps. At least not aloud. Bert looked at her and the feeling that ran through him was stronger than admiration. "If I can help in any way," he said quietly.

"You can," she said. "For the first few days—until he's well—forget your pride and forget the war." She bit her lip, wanting to tell him more so she could be sure, so he would understand. But he was a stranger. She took the advice she had just given him and forgot her own pride. "I told you we lost my brother in Andersonville prison. The reports we heard about that prison were horrible. The brutality of the guards and the atrocities. Those are the things Dad can't forget."

There was a thin line of perspiration on Bert's upper lip. "There are always two sides to things," he said quietly. "Up until the time of Sherman's march there were supplies at the prison. It was overcrowded but we did the best we could. After our supplies were cut off—"

"Dad has the feeling that anything that

will help the South will be betraying Bob—"

"The color of a uniform doesn't keep a man from being human," Bert said. The old nightmare of bloated bellies and gaunt cheeks and protruding teeth was sickening. "We did whatever we could and at the last, when it was the worst, the officers and guards went without and we shared what we had—"

She was staring at him, her eyes round, her lips noticeably pale. "*You were there!*" she said.

"Among a thousand others," he said. "I was a supply officer."

He stopped her question, knowing it was cruel to make her wait for an answer. "I can't tell you about your brother except to assure you that insofar as we could we treated officers like gentlemen. But I can't tell you anything because in prison everyone becomes alike. We did everything we could. You must believe that—"

And suddenly he was leaning across the table, holding both her hands, feeling hr strain to pull free, holding her, forcing her to listen. And every nightmare was real to him again and he was seeing men starve because there were no supplies and he was blaming the South—his South—because of the failure. Here in this pest hole that was Andersonville the real hell of war was underfoot and all around and in the fetid air until a man was crazy with it. . . . He stopped suddenly, out of breath, and the room and the girl came back into focus. He released her hands. He lowered his head, knowing he had spoiled everything. "It makes a difference, doesn't it?" he said.

She thought about it a long time. "No," she said finally. "I'm interested in your cattle, nothing more. The cattle can't be blamed for the crimes of the South." She stood up quickly. "I'll have the suppers charged to my father's account."

"Of course not," Bert said, protesting. "I invited you—"

She looked at him steadily. "This is strictly business, Mr. Malacay. It is my misfortune that I am in no position to choose my business associates. You will receive a full accounting of the meals you've eaten when our business is concluded. Please be at the livery stable at nine in the morning."

He watched her go up the stairs and in time he returned to his room. He saw that Travis and Jay Dee had taken the money he had left for them and they had moved their belongings. He stood there a second, staring at the floor. He had finally accomplished the thing he had set out to do. He had found a buyer for Texas cattle with the possibility of an unlimited market a growing probability. He had done what he had set out to do and the faith his neighbors had put in him would be justified. He thought of the girl then and he was immensely tired. Slowly, he started to undress.

THE anger in Travis Beal festered and swelled like a boil and Jay Dee Long watched it with a growing fascination. In the past hour it seemed to Jay Dee that he had grown to match Travis Beal's stature for the first time in his life. It never occurred to him that it might be the other way around—that Beal's anger and the whiskey they were drinking was bringing Beal down the ladder to a more simple set of values. "Here's to you, Trav," Jay Dee said, doffing his glass. The whiskey was warm in his stomach. This new companionship was warmer.

"The trouble with Bert is," Travis said, "he thinks he's God. He's always got a great cause." Travis slapped his hand on the bar, signaling for another bottle. "And then when a real cause came along—the South—he wasn't man enough to face it."

"He thinks the war's over," Jay Dee said. Jay Dee watched himself in the back bar mirror. He squinted his eyes and shoved back his hat and pursed his lips. He liked the image he saw. He liked it very much. The image of a smart man. Good whiskey,

serious conversation. . . . He thought of himself in a deep leather chair before the fire in the living room at *Malabeal* with a good cigar and a glass of sherry, sharing the problems of *Malabeal* with Travis. "To me this war ain't never gonna be over," he said.

Two men were near them at the bar. Jay Dee glanced at them and grinned. They were weather-stained men, dressed for riding. One wore a Confederate forage cap. "To the South," Jay Dee said, lifting his glass to them. Both men raised their glasses in answer to the salute.

"Let's get out of here," Travis said.

"Sure, Trav," Jay Dee said. "There's that other saloon across the street."

They went out into the night. It had quit raining and there was a biting chill in the air. There was surprisingly little activity in the town. The hotel lobby was lighted, as were the two saloons, and a few yellow squares marked homes at the edge of town. Jay Dee felt warm and secure. "Reckon Bert actually will get that Yank to buy cows?" Jay Dee said.

"I wouldn't know."

"Somebody will get the Yank's money, one way or the other," Jay Dee said. He glanced obliquely at Travis. "He damn near lost it tonight."

"Lucky we were there," Travis said.

"I was thinkin' that," Jay Dee said. "Now he's still got the money, just waitin' for somebody to come and take it away from him."

Travis stopped and the glow from the hotel lobby caught the anger in his eyes. "Damn you," he said tersely, "come out and say it. Quit talking all around it. I'm getting sick of listening to you talk all around it!"

Jay Dee's grin was wolfish. "I was just a poor private, Major. Maybe I can see what ought to be done but it's up to the Major to figger out how and when."

"Shut up about it," Travis said. "I'm sick of it."

"It's a hell of a lot of money, that's all," Jay Dee said. "Somebody's gonna take it away from him. I reckon it's enough money to put *Malabeal* on its feet."

"I said shut up, didn't I?"

They crossed the square of light in front of the hotel. The jagged tops of the wagon ruts glinting in the lamp light were like miniature ridges of obsidian in some predawn world. They moved into the darkness between two buildings and they felt, rather than saw, the man who had moved out in front of them. There was a faint glint on the barrel of a gun. "You're making a mistake, mister," Travis Beal said nervously. "We've got enough cash for a round of drinks and that's about all."

The gun prodded. "In behind this building," the voice said.

THEY felt their way along through rain trampled grass and discarded bottles and they came to the running stream that in drier times was an alley. There were two horses there. "The black packs double," the voice said. "Get on."

"I tell you you're making a mistake," Travis said in his thin, high voice.

"If I am it can be fixed," the voice said. Reins slapped and the horses moved off through the mud and water, taking their time, apparently knowing their direction. At the edge of town the clouds scudded aside and showed a thin moon and a cluster of washed stars and then the clouds closed in again and it was dark. They turned off the extension of the main street and the sound of run-off water was loud in an eroded gulley. Almost immediately, they came to a typical dugout, half under ground, half above. "Get down," the voice said.

The gun directed them inside. There was a lamp burning dimly, another man in the room. "Turn up the light, Perk," the man with the gun said. The room slowly flooded with the murky yellow and Jay Dee knew why they were here. The right hand of the man in the room was bandaged; there was a long cut on his cheek, another on his forehead. It was the man who had tried to rob Gordon Templeton there in the hotel. Jay Dee glanced at Travis Beal and was shocked. Beal was afraid. "Well, Perk?" the man with the gun said.

The man called Perk—the one with the bandaged hand—glanced swiftly at Travis and Jay Dee. "Yeah, Grat," he said. "That's two of 'em. There was three."

"Was there?" Jay Dee said. "Or was there only one?" Jay Dee's heart was pounding in his chest. He knew how to talk to men like Grat and Perk. They too were afraid. They were afraid of what Jay Dee and Travis and Bert might say. Grat and Perk wanted to make a deal. Jay Dee moved easily into the position of leader here in this room. He was the only man in the room who wasn't afraid of something.

"Maybe you better decide you never saw Perk here in your life," Grat said.

"Did me and my friend here pile yuh, Perk?" Jay Dee said, spitting across his lip. "Or was it another feller? Thin face feller with a gray coat maybe?"

"You better make up your mind," Grat said. "You better decide you didn't see Perk and then you better head out of town. I don't reckon it would be best if you stayed around here any more."

"You fumbled things bad, Perk," Jay Dee said. The blood was pounding in Jay Dee's veins. "Me and my friend here had things all laid out. We would of had that Yank's money and been long gone by now if you hadn't busted in when you did." He shot Travis a warning glance and even that gesture gave him a feeling of power. "Me and my friend here was pretty upset about it," Jay Dee said, "after all the planning we done. We was just about to ask you boys to leave town."

"You forgettin' I got a gun in my hand?" Grat said savagely.

"Go ahead and pull the trigger," Jay Dee said. "The whole town is nervous tonight. They'd get you before you rode a mile. Go ahead and mess it up the rest of the way. Either that or talk sense."

The common sense combined with the effrontery had Grat off balance. Jay Dee was quick to see it and quick to follow through. "Of course you boys ought to have something out of it," Jay Dee said. "If you'll put that gun away so we can talk this over man to man—"

"You know a lot, don't yuh?" Grat said.

"Not much," Jay Dee said. "But the Major here does. He knows the Yankee. Well enough that he can go knock on the door and be invited in for a drink. That right, Major?" Jay Dee turned and faced Travis squarely. His eyes plainly told Travis that it was this or a gun fight with one gun already drawn. Travis Beal licked his lips. "Your deal, Grat," Jay Dee said smugly.

"To hell with it," Perk said suddenly. "I almost got caught. I don't like it."

"You keep still, Perk," Grat said. There was a line of perspiration on Grat's furrowed forehead. He was a thick set man and it was a thickness that seemed to be all about him, a density that touched even his brain. His eyes kept shifting from Jay Dee to Travis and back again. "You boys got a room at the hotel?" he said finally.

"Sure," Jay Dee said. "How else you gonna come and go as you please? Me and the Major ain't crazy enough to take the chance you and Perk took. How come you didn't think of gettin' a room at the hotel, Grat?"

"Because we didn't have the price of a room," Grat said. "Damn it," he exploded suddenly. "Can't the Major talk?"

"We have a room at the hotel," Travis said.

"How about the feller that piled Perk? Who is he?"

"Cattleman from Texas," Jay Dee said.

"I asked the Major!" Grat said.

"He's from Texas," Travis said. "He's trying to sell some cattle to Gordon Templeton." The simple truth was impressive in its directness.

"So we gotta work fast," Jay Dee said. His thoughts were crystal clear. He had never remembered thinking so rapidly before. The whiskey hadn't fogged his thinking. It had sharpened it. His thoughts kept running ahead, wild stabs of light that shot through his brain. Travis Beal had gone this far with him, he would go further. First there would be Gordon Templeton's money and then there would be *Malabeal* and *Malabeal* was a leather chair in front of the fire and a good cigar and high class conversation and everything Jay Dee had ever wanted. . . . Grat and Perk? They were cheap ones. They could be bought off. The racing thoughts swept him into complete command here in this room. "If we stall around arguing about it," he said, "the Texas boy might get his hands on the money."

"Then we'll take it away from the Texas boy," Grat said. He was talking now. Just talk. He wasn't sure of himself; he wasn't even sure he wanted any part of this.

"Ask Perk if he wants to take it away from the Texas boy," Jay Dee said.

"I almost got caught," Perk said. "I ain't gonna stick my neck in a noose for nobody."

"Me and the Major got our plans," Jay Dee said. "You two want to come along with us or don't yuh?"

Grat looked at the gun he held in his hand. It was suddenly useless. He dropped it in its holster. "I ain't gonna pass up my share of that money," he said. "I'll listen and see if I like what you got to say."

Jay Dee Long looked at Travis Beal. He felt his complete triumph. Beal's face was white; his hands were shaking. "Got something to drink, Grat?" Jay Dee said.

He hooked a chair out from under the rough table and straddled it backwards.

He watched Grat take a bottle from the box cupboard on the wall and he watched Travis Beal take a long drink. Life, for Jay Dee Long, suddenly had a meaning. He had found his place.

AN HOUR later, with Travis Beal and Grat waiting in the deserted lobby, Jay Dee Long moved slowly along the upstairs hallway, feeling his way from door to door, counting the rooms. His breathing was shallow, controlled. He had a key in his hand, a key he had obtained simply by lifting it off the board in back of the sleeping clerk's head. He hadn't missed the admiration in Grat's eyes. Perk was holding horses in front of the hotel. A pillow would muffle the girl's screams. It was so easy—

Jay Dee Long stopped. His mouth went dry and he felt the sudden perspiration cold against his shirt. The next door was the door to Gordon Templeton's room. Stretched across in front of the door, rolled in his soggy trail blankets, was Bert Malacay.

Jay Dee backed away, clear back to the head of the stairs. All the confidence ran out of him. And then it came back. There would be another time. There had to be. He had tasted power such as he had never known there tonight in the dugout. The taste of it was still in his mouth. He got hold of himself and swaggered down the stairs and he built a glowering frown on his face. Grat got to his feet, eagerly. Travis Beal sat there, staring at the floor. "Did you get it?" Grat said hoarsely.

"No," Jay Dee said, "thanks to you and Perk. The damn Texas boy is standin' guard. Now we got to start all over again." He advanced on Grat and shoved him hard. "If you hadn't held us up tonight. . . . I ought to beat your damn brains out!"

"I'm sorry, Jay Dee," Grat whined.

"Sorry hell!" Jay Dee said. He slapped Travis Beal on the back. "Come on, Major. Buy us a drink. There'll always be another time."

The girl was at the livery stable at nine o'clock, just as she had said she would be, and Bert Malacay was there to meet her. He was stiff and sore from sleeping on the hard hotel floor but that didn't matter. He smiled at her. "Sleep well?"

"Get a wagon and whatever else we need," she said. She turned to the livery man. "I'll be responsible for whatever Mr. Malacay buys." She turned and there was a thickset man in her way. The man removed his hat.

"Mornin', Grat," the livery man said.

"Mornin'," Grat said. He put on his hat and went back into the barn.

Bert was busy all morning. Twice he took time to drop by the hotel to check on Travis Beal and Jay Dee. The first time the clerk told him they had engaged a room but hadn't used it; the second time the clerk said Bert had just missed them. They had checked out. Yes, they had had their horses. Bert shrugged and let it go. He knew he had hoped the three of them could return to Texas together. Travis was his cousin; Jay Dee was his responsibility. Coming out of the hotel he met the marshal.

"Good luck, Texas," the marshal said. He offered his hand. Bert took it briefly.

"Thanks, Marshal," Bert said.

"I was up to see the girl just now," the marshal said. "She's got the old man locked in. Feedin' him just enough whiskey to keep him tame. If you need help loadin' him in the wagon just whistle. I'm so damn glad to get him out of town I'll pack him half way to Texas if need be."

"All right," Bert said, irritated. "Do you know anything about the roads south of here?"

"Some freighting beyond Baxter Springs down into the Nations," the marshal said. "Wouldn't call 'em roads in this kind of weather. Ain't no bridges, far as I know. If I was you I'd cut east and—"

"I'm coming back up with a herd of cattle in a few months," Bert said. "Might as well see what I can see on the way down."

He turned and nearly collided with the thickset man he had noticed around the stable all morning.

"Sorry," Grat mumbled. He pulled his hat down over his eyes and went down the sidewalk. Without noticing, really, Bert saw him untie a horse, mount and ride out of town, heading south.

CHAPTER FOUR

Travis Beal Decides

THE prairie widened into an endless track of land domed over by the scudding gray clouds until it was a leaden sheet with here and there shallow lakes of rain water reflecting the gray of the clouds. It was cold, and Bert Malacay, riding ahead and to the left of the wagon, pulled his coat collar high around his neck. He glanced back from time to time and always saw the girl gripping the lines in mittened hands, sitting straight, staring ahead.

They had made a bed for Gordon Templeton in the back of the wagon and he lay there under the osnaburg top, staring upward, feeling the roll of the wheels. He hadn't resisted. Rather he had been cooperative and Bert wondered what this girl had said to her father.

With the increasing miles Bert found his thoughts about the girl increasing and in time he forgot Travis and Jay Dee—forgot them as much as he ever could. He tried to feel the triumph of knowing that he was bringing money to Texas but it was an empty triumph. The shadow of Andersonville prison was riding between him and the wagon, a shadow that was twice as impenetrable because it was not of his own making.

In late afternoon he spotted a motte of timber and motioned the wagon to head that way. He made his own camp that night, away from the wagon. The girl did not invite him to come and eat with her and her father.

He awoke around ten at night with the sky brilliantly clear, the weather cold. By habit he checked the horses first and then he glanced toward the camp and saw that the girl was awake too. She was standing outside the small tent he had bought to serve as a shelter and dressing room for her. "Anything wrong, Miss Templeton?" he called softly.

She went back into the tent and got a coat and pulled it around her shoulders and then walked over to him. "I just wanted to see if Dad was all right," she said.

"I'm glad you convinced him this was the right thing to do," he said. He could feel her nearness and it was a tangible thing, sharply outlined by the cold fence of aloofness with which she surrounded herself.

"He isn't convinced of anything," she said quietly. "He wants to prove to me that I'm wrong, that's all."

"About me?"

"I told him about you—about Andersonville."

His breath ran out slowly. "Oh."

"I needed something to take the place of the whiskey," she said. "I decided bitterness was the strongest drink I had. Bitterness because I've turned against him and against Bob's memory. But pretty soon he'll have to have something stronger. He'll have that when you make your first mistake." She looked straight at him. "He's contented now because he figures it won't be long until he gets that stronger drink."

"I won't make a mistake," he said. "Nobody ever cured a man by giving him a stronger drink."

"I know that," she said. "So for your own sake as well as his I hope you don't make that mistake." Her hand moved to catch the coat which the slight wind had opened. He saw that her hand clutched a small nickel-plated pistol.

"You don't need that," he said.

"I'll decide that," she said. She turned

and went back to the tent and he stood there looking after her. The star shafts were brilliant against the darkness of the prairie and someplace in the distance a dozen frogs started calling. He was completely alone.

He went back to his blankets and tried to sleep but he only dozed, fitfully, at times fully awake with the taste of momentary sleep in his mouth, at other times half conscious, enough to know he was dreaming, not enough to stop the dream. And always it was Andersonville with men dying and the stench he would never forget and the curses that were a surrounding sound, always there, day and night, asleep or awake.

He thought of the last days, the days of no supplies, and he cursed Sherman and then he cursed the South for being unable to break through and win. He dozed again and there were long lines of cattle marching north, out of Texas, food for the north, food that would have saved Union troops in Andersonville had it come three years ago. He awoke suddenly and sat up in his blankets. Was this, then, the thing that was driving him? Was it guilt? If it was, it was a guilt born of something that was in no way his fault, but the guilt that was war itself.

He remained awake, thinking of Gordon Templeton, remembering that Marie had said that her father had made money during the war. A lot of money. But not enough to send one loaf of bread to his son, starving in a Confederate prison, any more than Bert Malacay had been able to bring one head of beef out of the south to feed starving men. And now, feeling their guilt, Bert Malacay wanted to feed the world; Gordon Templeton wanted to deny food to everyone.

Bert made a cigarette and smoked it down and then he made another. He watched the thin dawn making up in the east.

And as the sun came across the rim of the plain, he saw the riders, four of them, riding in toward the camp.

HE WAS quick to recognize Jay Dee and Travis Beal; he didn't know the other two. He ran toward them, waving his hat, as elated as if he were seeing his own brothers after a long absence. He saw them rein up sharply and then Jay Dee, not Travis, came on alone. "Did you two drink the town dry and decide to come along?" Bert shouted.

He didn't notice Jay Dee's hand resting on the butt of his six-shooter because he wasn't looking for it. "You got the money with you, Bert?" Jay Dee called.

The tone of voice warned him. "Come on in, Travis," Bert called. "Coffee pot's on!"

Jay Dee's hand moved up and now it held the cocked gun. "We come for the money, Bert."

The voice at his elbow jarred him. "Nice planning, Mr. Malacay." From the corner of his eye Bert saw Gordon Templeton. Templeton stood with his arms folded across his chest. He was smiling. "I remember you," Templeton said to Jay Dee. "I met you in the saloon. You knocked me down."

"The slug in this gun can knock you down permanent, Yank," Jay Dee said. "You know what we're after, don't yuh?"

"Of course," Templeton said. "I've known from the first. I just wanted my daughter to see a bunch of cotton-picking Rebels first hand. She needed to know for sure what calibre of white trash it was that starved her brother for the sake of seeing a man die. I wanted—" The gun moved and Bert Malacay lunged, his shoulder catching Gordon Templeton in the chest. As the two men fell Jay Dee's six-shooter blasted and the ball smashed into the soggy ground a foot beyond them. They barely heard the crack of the small calibre gun over by the tent. They did hear the pain crazed squeal of Jay Dee's horse and then the animal was rearing and lunging and Jay Dee was fighting to keep his seat. Bert jerked Templeton to his feet and shoved him, heading him

toward the wagon. The trees near the wagon gave a small protection. Bert scooped up his saddle gun and tossed it to Templeton. "Use it," he said.

"Quite a show you're putting on, Malacay," Templeton said.

Bert turned on the man savagely. "If you're too spineless to fight," he said, "give the gun to your daughter. She's used to fighting your battles by now; she won't mind one more." He gripped the girl's arm. "Get in behind those trees and stay there."

"That man you spoke to," she said, refusing to move. "And the other rider. They were with you the first time I saw you."

"One of them is my cousin," Bert said. "The other has worked for my family as long back as I can remember."

"And you'd turn against them because of money?"

He hadn't even thought of that. "No," he said finally. "Not because of money. Now get behind cover."

"There's another rifle in the wagon," she said. "I'll get it."

The girl's first bullet had injured Jay Dee's horse badly. From the wagon Bert could see them out there, fighting with the animal, trying to examine the wound. In time he saw Jay Dee jerk the saddle free and then there was a single, muffled shot. Bert glanced toward the girl and saw that she had closed her eyes tightly and bowed her head. Bert stepped out from behind the wagon and cupped his hands around his mouth. "Travis!" he called. "Let me talk to you, Travis!"

The thin, high voice of Jay Dee floated back. "You know what we want, Bert. Don't make it hard for us."

"Have you lost your mind, Travis?" Bert called back. "You're no match for Jay Dee and those other two, whoever they are. If you did get the money they'd take it away from you. Come on over here where you belong!"

"Too late for that, Bert," Travis called back finally. "Just send the Yankee out here with the money and nobody will be hurt then come on back to Texas with us where *you* belong. There won't be any hard feelings."

Bert felt sick to his stomach. It was as if he were witnessing the end of an era, the dissipating of a clan. He tried once more. "If it's *Malabeal,* Travis, I'll sign my half over to you."

"It's *Malabeal* and a lot more, Bert," Travis called. "Someplace along the way you and I got off on different roads. I'm sorry."

"You sendin' the Yank out?" Jay Dee called.

"No," Bert said.

Slowly the men started moving in, Jay Dee on foot now, Travis circling to the left, the other two riders moving around to the right. Bert felt a small moment of panic and then it was gone. So this is what it's like, he thought. This is the kind of war some of the men fought when they looked across the trenches and saw their own cousins—. The first shot ripped through the leaves above Gordon Templeton's head.

Jay Dee broke into a crooked run, heading for the trees. He was a poor target and Bert fired at him, glad for an excuse to miss. It was still a nightmare, like the hellish memories of Andersonville, and soon he would sit upright in bed and it would be over. The stinging whine of lead forced him to reality. "Travis!" he called. "For God's sake, Travis, the girl's here. At least think of that!"

TRAVIS was there to the left, in full sight, riding in toward the trees. Bert looked at the girl and she was kneeling behind a tree, the rifle gripped in her hands. Gordon Templeton stood as if he were in a daze—or perhaps he too was caught up in an old nightmare that had no reality. He stood there in the open and another shot from across the trees knocked leaves down

in front of his face. At that moment he snapped into life and threw the rifle to his shoulder. "To your right, Malacay!" Templeton shouted. "Look out to your right!"

Bert turned and saw Grat—the thickset man who had kept near him all morning in town. Grat was riding in at a gallop, a six-shooter gripped in his right hand.

Bert didn't realize he had squeezed the trigger. He knew that he had taken his time, aiming the gun. He saw Grat stiffen in the saddle. He saw him hang there, almost as if he had ridden under a limb and the limb had caught him under the chin, dragging him out of the saddle. And then the horse was coming on, without breaking stride, and Grat's body, lifeless now, was crashing to the ground with a tremendous weight and it was still and crumpled, as if every bone had been broken in the fall.

A stunned silence came after the echo of the gunshot and Bert heard Travis Beal's voice, startlingly near: "My God, what am I doing?"

"Come on in, Travis," Bert said. "We'll hold our fire." He turned then and looked at Gordon Templeton, challenging the man to question the decision. Templeton looked old. For the first time his dissipation showed clearly, destroying the strength, erasing the dignity that was always with him.

Bert felt a swift comradeship toward the man and he knew that Templeton was feeling the same thing toward him. The comradeship of danger or stress. *Then can't you see,* Bert thought savagely, *that there in prison we were not Yankee and Rebel except for the color of our uniform? Can't you see that there was a respect of sorts between us—a respect that would make lies out of eighty-five percent of what you heard? Of course Andersonville was bad. It was hell. But war made it so, not the men who were stationed there nor the men who were imprisoned there.* . . . This flashed through his mind in less than a second and he was holding Gordon Templeton's eyes, trying to make him hear.

"All right, Malacay," Gordon Templeton said. "Whatever you say."

"I'm coming in, Bert," Travis called back. His voice was strained, high-pitched.

Jay Dee was no longer visible from the camp. He had worked his way into the trees. Travis was in plain sight, riding in now with his hands away from his sides. The other rider—Perk—had pulled out of effective range and he was out there in the open, fighting his horse, apparently trying to make up his mind whether to fight or run. Travis rode straight toward the wagon and camp, skirting the long, narrow motte of trees. He had to ride directly past the point where Jay Dee was concealed. When he reached that point Bert heard Jay Dee call out.

"Circle around back of 'em, Major!" Travis made no answer. He rode slowly, his hands in plain sight.

"Major! You gone crazy?" Beal was past the hiding point now. He was between Jay Dee and Bert.

"Travis! You yellow belly high tone!" Jay Dee's voice was raving now. "You act so damn high and mighty and you ain't got the guts of a smashed toad! Travis!"

There was a faint smile on Travis Beal's lips. He looked at Bert and the grin grew, a sheepish grin that made Beal look young. He was cleanly-shaved and bathed. He rode erect in the saddle, almost swaggering in the saddle, it always seemed. He was *Malabeal* and all it meant and the words of a man like Jay Dee couldn't touch him because he refused to hear them—

"Major Travis Beal!" All the venom of a man who had spent his life blaming others for his own failures was in Jay Dee Long's voice. His gun blasted. Travis Beal's expression didn't change. It froze instead. His hands went up shoulder high and he straightened his shoulders against the impact of the lead. The girl screamed

as he fell from the saddle and then Gordon Templeton was running forward, straight toward Jay Dee's hiding place. Templeton held the rifle hip high and they saw Jay Dee come out to meet him. The rifle exploded and still Gordon Templeton ran forward and then he stopped and he stood there, looking down, and there was a wild thrashing at his feet.

Gordon Templeton stood there a long time before he dropped the rifle. After a while he raised his eyes and looked across the prairie. He started to cry.

There was a squeal from Perk's horse as the outlaw sunk spurs and then Perk was riding madly, bent low in the saddle, slashing with his reins. . . .

BERT MALACAY buried Travis Beal and Jay Dee Long on opposite sides of the motte. He didn't ask for help. He buried Travis Beal facing south, toward *Malabeal*. He said a small prayer, a silent thing, for both these men he had known so long. When he came back to the camp the girl had harnessed up. She stood there waiting, determined, her chin high. She tried to meet Bert Malacay's eyes and failed. "North or South?" he said quietly.

"It's up to Dad now," she said. "It has to be up to him."

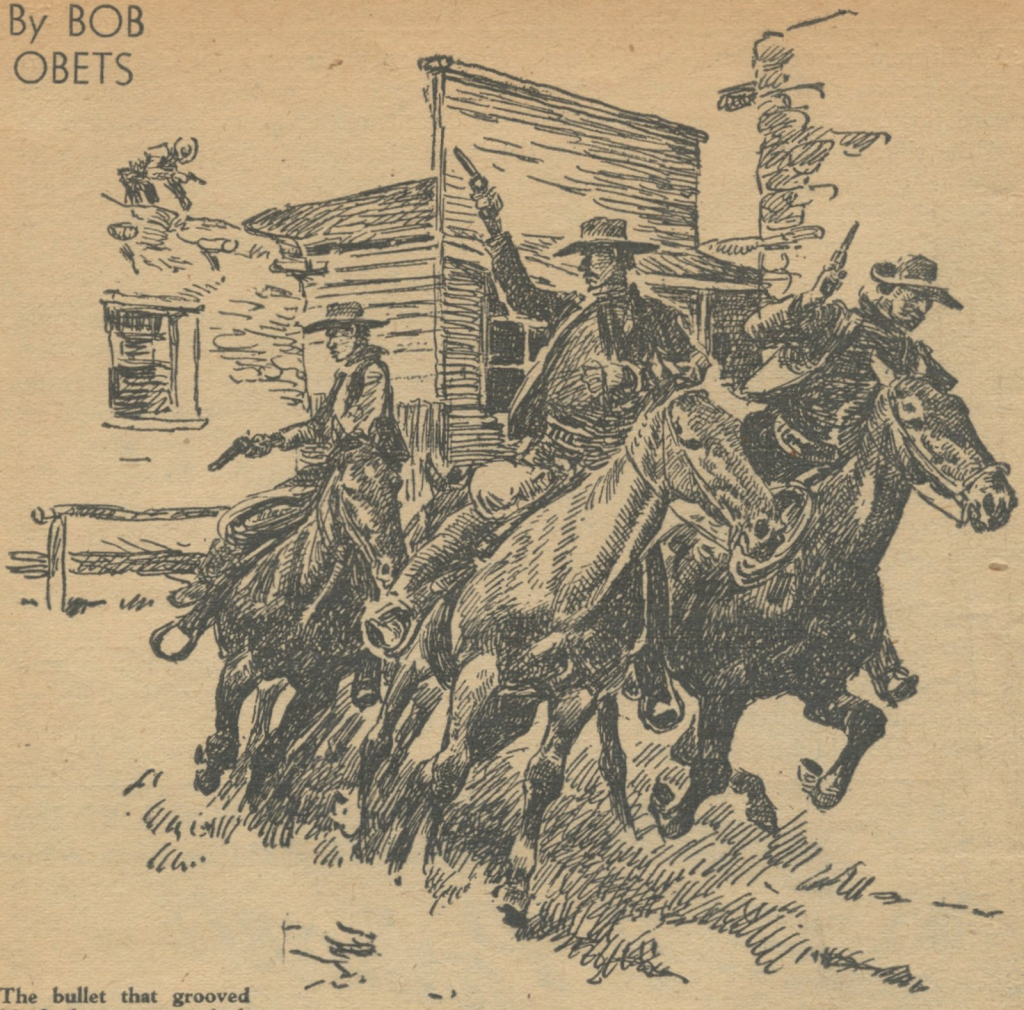
Gordon Templeton rubbed shaking hands across his face. He wanted a drink, Bert could see. He needed one badly. The cattle buyer dropped his hands and clenched his fists. His face was drawn and gray with the thoughts that had crossed his mind. His throat was parched, but he made a decision take the place of whiskey. "How far is it to Texas, Rebel?" he said.

"Not far," Bert Malacay said. "Not far at all."

He saw the girl rush into her father's arms and he heard her sobbing, letting down completely.

(Continued on page 109)

By BOB OBETS



The bullet that grooved his flank was a pure luck shot. . . .

THE KID FROM NOWHERE

"There's no place in this town for the son of a horse thief—except at the end of a rope!"

IN SOUTH TEXAS, when Danny Pardee was a kid, you could kill a man or rustle a few cows and maybe live to become a church deacon. What you had better not do was steal a horse. Caught horse thieves had a habit of dying suddenly of mesquite fever. It took Dobe Pardee that way, by surprise. Young Danny was all the family Dobe left, so it was up to Danny to bury him.

He knocked together a pine box; a Mexican family came over with a Bible; the passage, read in Spanish, was from Exodus; "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house . . . nor his ox, nor his ass . . ."

Danny never grieved much, which, in a way, was a good thing. Because after the funeral, when he went in to Nueces settlement, he got little sympathy but plenty of advice.

The preacher said, "Son, your father's sin is a cross you must bear, but take it where the burden will rest lighter. My flock will pray for you as you journey among the Philistines."

Sheriff Will Bass was blunter; Suellen June, his youngest, had taken on about poor Danny half the night. "Boy," the sheriff said, "here's five dollars. Help you to a more agreeable climate. No hurry; I ain't runnin' you off—but which way you headin' out?"

Danny headed West. In Del Rio, on the Rio Grande, he lucked into a man named Fogarty and helped him and two others chouse some mules upriver, to El Paso. That old town was booming, four trunk railroads building toward it; but none of them wanted a whip-built kid at any price. He tried stores, livery barns, the two variety theaters, and several saloons—was willing to take anything. He was about to cave in when Rance Fogarty took him in the Acme and bought him a drink.

The stuff chirped him up something wonderful. Rance was the best friend he had. Every percentage girl in town had her cap set for handsome Rance Fogarty. Ranger yonder, in the white hat, was eyeing him too.

"Kid," Rance said, "your belly's kissin' your backbone— but I like you. String with me and you'll get fat. How about it?"

They camped that night beside a big madroña—Rance, Danny, Bog Rankin, and the man they called Rime. This was March, and the high air like wine. It would be a cinch and not such a wrong thing, the way Rance laid it out: "That Del Rio mule man be squawkin' for his money, so we take it back from them card sharps that robbed me. Maybe with a little interest for our trouble. Kid, all you do is hold the horses."

An ember popped, sent up a bright burst of sparks. Rance chuckled. "Take it easy, kid. Won't be nothing to it."

He was part way right. Bog and Rime were back in saddle; Rance, with the take in a gunny sack, was swinging up, when the Ranger strolled around the corner whistling beneath his white hat . . .

They pulled up at the madroña to let their horses blow. Rance cursed bitterly while Danny knotted a bandanna around the older man's bullet-creased arm.

"I bet that son is a'whistling yet! Damn' mule man can whistle with him. Next time, I'll swing onto the money sack till they shoot my arm off. Nor it won't be for peanuts!"

It was not too much of a jump from Shafter, where they mined and smelted silver, to the float bridge at Presidio del Norte which spanned the Rio Grande. They tried this job in broad daylight, when the mine office was open, the payroll money handy. They made one mistake. They underestimated the Ranger. He trailed them out of El Paso, cut around and was waiting when they rode into Shafter.

Danny, holding the horses, saw the white hat rise above the parapet of a flat roof opposite the mine office. He yelled, and the parapet seemed to sprout rifles. The Ranger's first shot dropped Rime. Rance and Bog, nearly to the office door, whirled and fought their way back toward the horses, driving upslanting shots at every head that showed, getting plenty of lead in return.

Danny had all he could do to hold the horses. They about yanked his arms from the sockets before Bog and Rance reached them, and then Rance, with his left arm in the bandanna sling, had trouble mounting.

Danny waited for Rance, was last to get a horse under him. He jumped the sorrel past a sprawled hombre who had tumbled from the roof; spurred into lifting dust with bullets reaching after him.

The one that grooved his flank was a pure luck shot; he was almost out of reach when it caught him. The pain wasn't too bad, but after awhile he quit worrying about the men barking on his backtrail. Next he knew, Rance was shaking him, saying, "Kid! Grab that saddle horn! We got to travel!"

"Leave 'im here in the willers," Bog Rankin's voice growled. "Fool with that wounded kid, we won't never see Mexico."

"Yeah. Sorry, kid, but that's how it is." Something pushed against him. He seemed to float from the saddle. It was like falling headfirst into a deep, black well. . . .

SPRING, by all the signs, must have come late to the Brasada, but it was making up for lost time. Danny let his sorrel laze along while he drew in great breaths and, for some fool reason, felt like crying.

He shut his eyes once and played a little game with his nose, letting it pick out the fragrance of *agarita* or *vara dulce,* the tang of black chaparral, the bitter sharpness of *amargosa.* Mostly, though, he rode with his eyes busy. It was a funny thing—he was as much a part of this thorny land as that striped lizard scooting, yonder. He'd chewed its mesquite beans, been scared by its snakes, had his boils drawn with poultices from its prickly pear—but never before, in God's world, had he called it pretty.

He was still a little surprised to see it again, still a little peaked. He lost considerable blood before old Juan Seguin, looking for a strayed goat, happened through those willows. He owed Juan and his family for a lot more than the goat milk they fed him. He owed them for being able to see and hear and smell; he owed them for being alive. Maybe that, just being alive, was what made this old country seem so good to him.

But Will Bass was right. Soon as all the fuss died down, he was heading for some other climate. He reined up, lifted his father's old single-action off his thigh and stuck it inside his shirt; shell belt and holster he stowed in his *alforjas.* Just laying the ground, he told himself wryly, to collect another going-away present. Another five dollars from Will Bass. . . .

Suellen June was in the side garden when he sighted her. In jeans and blue shirt, a bandanna to keep the sun off her yellow hair, she was swinging a hoe along a row of pole beans. He pulled up beside the fence and heard her mutter, "Damn weeds, this is the—last—time—I'll ever—"

The sorrel stuck his head over the fence and whinnied. Suellen whirled and saw Danny and dropped the hoe. She didn't say anything, just looked; but suddenly Danny knew why he had come home.

"You'll have to excuse ol' Red," he said. "He's kind of hungry."

"Danny," she said, "you look—have you been sick, Danny?"

He shook his head. "I been all right. How've you been?"

"Fine, Danny. I've been—fine. How was the country where you've been?"

Danny forgot himself and grinned. "Why, it was toler'ble hot—parts of it. Raise fine milk goats, though, in the southern end."

"Goats," she said; and then he remembered Will Bass's Jerseys, how the sheriff prided himself on their milk.

She asked him to come in and have a glass, but he shook his head. He was afraid Will Bass would catch him there, ask a lot of questions that he didn't want to answer. He lifted the reins and Suellen said, "Are you home to stay, Danny? I—wish you would stay."

He gazed past her shoulder, along the row of pole beans; he wanted to look into

her eyes. He said, "Why, I don't know. I guess that—depends."

"It depends on you, Danny. Don't run away again. Don't ever run—from anything."

He straightened in the saddle and grinned at her, then. A grin a little rueful, a little sad. "I see your dad coming yonder, down the road, Suellen. I guess I better run, right now."

He touched spur to the sorrel and went away from there.

From the brushy bridge where he used to find so many blue quail, he looked down at the old place tucked in evening's shadows. To a man just back from seeing the world, the mesquite-log house seemed to have shrunk; its sandstone chimney appeared to topple toward the pole corral; the whole place was a rundown disgrace. On it, trusting they hadn't strayed or been stolen, he might find forty cows, counting in the cactus bloomers. There were some horses, Old Blue and Whiskey and Pesos—his father loved horses. And there was a time, must have been, when he loved this land. Anyway, he had fought for it—at Monterrey and through the Rebellion. A man, if he stuck around here, might work up some interest in trying to put the old place back on its feet.

Danny rode down the slope with something like regret nagging him. Pardee land bought with Pardee blood, and now it would go, like so much other Texas land, for unpaid taxes. Somehow, that didn't seem right.

He unsaddled, hung his gear in the shed and turned the sorrel out to grass and muddy creek water, in the trap behind the shed. He went toward the house thinking of supper. Come morning he would drop a fat young doe; for tonight—well, maybe there was some *frijoles,* some meal for hot-water cornbread.

And tomorrow, and the day after that *"I wish you would stay, Danny.... Don't ever run away—from anything."*

Well, why not stay—for awhile? Where else could a hunted man hole up? Where else could he find a girl like Suellen?

Danny lit the lamp that stood on the mantelpiece. He heard someone whistling softly, and cocked his head and then felt a little foolish. It was a sound he hadn't heard in a long time, his own whistling.

THE days that followed were much alike, warm and humid and filled with the scent of growing things. Danny spent a week repairing fences, working the sun up and working it down. He rode out, then, and took count of his stock; six horses, he found, and thirty-one head of cows, most of them with calves. The calves were unbranded, so he spent another week putting his father's old D in a Box brand on the bawling little critters, taking an overbit from each right ear, swallow-forking each left one. The bull calves came through the ordeal greatly surprised to find themselves steers. Danny, on his part, welcomed the change of menu—he was getting a little tired of venison.

He was getting a little lonesome, too. Three weeks he had been home, hadn't seen a neighbor or a newspaper. He kept wondering about Rance and Bog Rankin. Highly improbable, he decided, that he would see either of them again, or the Ranger with the white hat, or old Juan Seguin and his buxom wife who had fed him goat milk. It was just as well. Forget all of that. Maybe, if he stayed on here, really buckled down and worked and sweated, minded his own business, why. . . .

Suellen, with thirty cows and the calves, seven good horses counting old Red, a man who's a rustler maybe could get along. Can sell off them six old cactus bloomers an' the scrub bull, and—Suellen, you and me could get along, I know we could! I'm going to take them cows in tomorrow, see what I can get, how it works out. Then I'm going to speak my mind, stand up to your dad. You said you wanted me to

stay. Well, I'm agoing to stay—but I wish you were here with me tonight. Just you and me, together, for always.

So dreamed Danny Pardee, the son of a horse thief, because he was lonesome, because he had never owned much of anything.

From his blanket on the porch he could see a million far-away stars, he could hear a coyote crying from the ridge-top; and something deep inside him throbbed and hurt with a pain as old as Time. The dream became more vivid. The warmth of the night wind was a woman's warmth against his skin. The yellow moonbeams across his face held a fragrance, were silken-spun; he stirred restlessly and dreamed of Suellen with the bright yellow hair.

THE mercantile was more than just a store; it was postoffice and stage station, a cool, cluttered place always smelling of new leather and bolt cotton goods and fresh-ground coffee. Townsmen, farmers, ranchers all gathered here, and any family man whose name was missing from old Gid Callishaw's big credit ledger was apt to be a poor citizen. Fat and shiny-bald, old Gid waddled around his desk and stopped at the low rail; he rested his hands one across the other, on the firm fat of his paunch. His small bright eyes blinked at Danny. His smooth pink face was benevolent.

"Heard you were back, from Miss Suellen. Done made your fortune, I reckon—up El Paso way." The small eyes seemed to twinkle.

"Uh—no sir," Danny said, and he began to sweat. Like a hypnotized bird gazing at a snake, he gazed at the poster tacked to the wall behind the storekeeper.

WANTED FOR MURDER
AND ATTEMPTED ROBBERY!

That was what the top line said. And below that names, descriptions. Lorance Fogarty. Boggess Rankin. Boy's name not known; age about eighteen; height about five feet and nine inches; build slender; complexion olive; color of eyes. . . .

Murder! Danny remembered that man tumbling from the adobe's roof, in Shafter, and suddenly he felt sick, he wanted out of here. His heart drummed his ribs so hard that he felt certain Gid Callishaw could hear it.

"Boy, are you sick?" old Gid asked sharply. "You look like you seen a ghost. You look worse'n if I'd asked you to pay up your pa's old grocery bill."

"I—no," Danny said, "I'm not sick. I just—"

He swung away from Gid Callishaw's sharp-questioning eyes and found himself looking into the eyes of Suellen.

"Danny!" she said, as if seeing him was a wonderful surprise. Her strong, brown hand caught his arm. Her lips formed soundless words: "Danny, don't you run!"

She took a step, turning him so that they both faced Gid Callishaw, and she said in a demure, almost wifely way, "Finish your business, Danny. I'll wait for you."

So he knew that her being here was no accident; she had seen his scrub cows in the lot behind the store. He thought, *After all, no name on that wanted poster. I never killed anybody. I just held the horses.* A measure of confidence returned to him. He looked at Gid Callishaw.

"I brought in seven head, Gid. They ain't good and they ain't too bad. Tomorrow—guess you still hold auction day on Saturdays. Want you to put these cows over the block for me. I'm sort of planning to stick around, put the old place back on its feet again."

Old Gid gave him a bored, trader's look. Old Gid yawned and shook his head. "Auctioneerin' business been slow, but I'll take a look."

He took his look and shook his head again. "Them old pear-eaters—give you ten dollars a round, Danny. And you owe

me twenty dollars and some odd. Make it twenty even, and you get fifty in cash."

Old Gid now was enjoying this. He respected no man he could beat on a trade, and he thought he was going to beat Danny.

Danny licked his lips. "Well, now," Danny said—and Suellen squeezed his arm.

"Gid Callishaw, you'd beat your own mother out of her eyeteeth."

Suddenly Danny grinned. "Tell you what, Gid. Out to my place I'm long on cows, short on bulls. Now that three-year-old you got in the pen yonder—skimpy in the flanks, too much leg to him—but he's a l-ee-tle better than my bull, here. I might be willin' to take him, you keep my bunch and call the grocery bill even. Also I'd want credit for awhile—say fifty dollars' worth. If I'm going to stick around, breed up my stock, why I guess I'll have to take a rookin' to get me a bull."

"Even a skimpy-flanked, stork-legged—"

"That there bull?" Old Gid gave Suellen a reproachful look. "Why, that bull's worth a dozen of them wind-bellied, slat-ribbed—besides, how do I know he's worth riskin' fifty dollars' worth of credit on? How do I know Danny's going to stick around here long enough for that fine bull of mine to sire a calf crop? Last time I was by there, his fences was all down. Seen new calves an' mammys both half et up with screwworms, and only counted twenty-odd cows, at that. No, Miss Suellen, he looks like a poor risk even if he does drive a good bargain. Even if he does stick."

"How do you expect him to stick, Gid Callishaw? He needs medicine to fight those screwworms with. He needs that bull. Maybe he needs a little friendship. Danny didn't see me, but I rode out there yesterday. All his fences are up. He's been working like a dog. He's—how many cows did *you* own when you hit this country?"

"Two mules, a spotted hound and a spring wagon, but I sold the wagon and swapped them mules for a good horse and saddle. Oberbit Brisco staked me to some grub and Finis Franklin let me use his pole corrals to put the wild cows I caught in. At that, I blamed near—whoa up there, now! What's that got to do with this here situation?"

"They were good neighbors to you," Suellen said, and she stared steadily at old Gid.

Old Callishaw lifted both hands. "All right, Danny, I give up. I'll take a chance at neighboring with you. And some others around here, that maybe ain't so proud about—what happened to your papa, likely to be willin' to neighbor with you, too. But, by the great horn spoon, don't make us sorry, boy. Don't make us sorry."

"Don't worry," Suellen said. "I'll see to that."

DANNY was feeling good, the milk was good. The kitchen was cool and clean. Nicest kitchen he ever sat down in. Nicest company. He guessed, maybe, a man could make out here, a man who was a rustler, man who had himself a good wife. In this country a man Gid Callishaw was willing to risk money on was considered a good bet. Of course have to wait until things shaped up a little better, but still it wouldn't hurt to—sort of feel Suellen out, right now.

"Suell', I was— uh —thinkin' sort of. You take old Gid Callishaw, started with two mules and a wagon. Now me, it ain't much, but I got more than Gid had, to start with. So I was—well, thinkin'. Sort of."

"Yes, Danny?" Across the flowered oilcloth, her eyes were steady, she leaned toward him. "I was thinking too, Danny. Sort of. What were you—thinking?"

"Why, I—oh, Suell'!" And he was on his feet, going around the table, when the buckboard stopped at the back steps.

"Danny—what, Danny?" she said in a breathless way.

Then he heard Will Bass, in a hearty

voice, say, "Here we are, Carter. Take you in the kitchen while I soak this blamed foot. Caught a Minié ball with old John Hood's Texas Brigade, and been plagued off an' on ever—Suey June! Put the tea-kettle on."

The sheriff limped in behind his guest. "Suey, this here's Charley Carter. Friend of Judge Maybeso Grissom's, I used to ride with 'fore you was born. Charley's took over some new graze in the Devil's River country—going to windmill it, I guess—an' he wants me to find him some good Nueces cows to put on it. Suey, has them sheets in the spare room been slept on? Anybody old Maybeso thinks enough of to write me a interduction letter about, why—"

He must have felt a little foolish. Danny had been standing there beside Suellen the whole time.

Danny was staring at the tall-built, hawk-handsome man beside Will Bass. Seeing him here was like seeing that white hat poke up above the parapet, at Shafter. Rance Fogarty's dark eyes mocked him. The gun under his shirt pressed hard and cold against his belly.

Rance was frowning. "Haven't I seen—no, that young rooster had them same jumpy eyes, but turned out he was jumpin' from the law. Looked so hungry I bought him a drink, and blessed if he didn't ride right down the Rio, him and a couple more *ladinos* and try for a sure enough chunk."

He gave Suellen a wry-lipped smile. "That was in El Paso. Man like me—more irons in the fire than sense in his head—he misses out on the better things." And he went on to mention his mining deals and how the hundred sections he wanted the cows for was "just a little side venture, you understand, Miss—may I call you Suellen?"

She said he could and she smiled back at him. Will Bass eyed Danny like a bull eyeing a stray in his pasture.

"Take another look at him, Charley. This maverick could be the same one, if you was referrin' to that soiree at Shafter. Kid that helt the horses wasn't recognized—but let's see. Gone from here four months, wasn't he, Suey? About right for size, accordin' to that wanted dodger the Rangers sent out, and daddy was a no-good—"

"His daddy's got nothing to do with it," Suellen said, surprising Danny the way she said it. "Danny's no criminal, and don't you try to make him out one. Besides, even Dobe Pardee was entitled to a fair trial, by a court jury, and it was up to you to see him get one!"

She looked as mad as a hen with a hawk after her chickens. Will Bass tried to smooth her feathers.

"Now, Suey, we done gone over all that. Could I he'p it if I was on business over to Dog Town when the boys done the county a good turn?"

"*Business,*" she said. "The kind that pops up mighty convenient! Come on, Danny, and watch me whale hell out of them weeds!"

THE memory went with him out of town: Suellen blindly slogging weeds, then, as he started for his horse, whirling, her blue eyes almost black.

"Dad never means half he says. He just feels guilty because he was in Dog Town when—why don't you show them, Danny? Hold your head up! Don't ever run away!"

Actually, he guessed, you could call back there running. He ran from what he saw in her eyes, ran because he didn't trust himself with her longer. Coming back here had been a mistake. Gid Callishaw and all his talk about being neighbors! In this country Danny Pardee was no better thought of than a coyote that killed calves. Will Bass had made that plain enough.

But Rance Fogarty, calling himself Carter, was making out! He had old Will doing rollovers, and wasn't losing much time with Suellen. It made you wonder what his game was. And where was Bog? Not

that it mattered. Neither of that pair could afford to make trouble for him. Anyway, he was riding out of here, riding away from Suellen. She was only trying to be kind to him.

Unsaddling, he remembered the bull, still in Gid Callishaw's pen. Well, Gid could keep the bull, his good-neighbor policy too. He could preach it to somebody else. He could fold his hands over his fat paunch and tell Suellen, "I told you he wouldn't stick."

Danny stopped on the porch while he dug for a match. "Hold right there," a voice warned from the darkness. "You're a dead duck, in that doorway."

Danny froze with his hand in his pocket, sighed, "All right, Bog. Put up your gun."

"Damn you, kid. We thought you bled to death in them willers."

Danny stepped on in, heard boots cross to the fireplace. A match flared and, using it, Bog grumbled. "Surprise me if the lamp's got any coal oil. How about rustlin' some supper, kid? We got company."

The man was over by the table in one of the rawhide-bottomed chairs, his legs bound to the chair's front legs, the side of his face rusty with blood. His hands, Danny saw, were free to use a gun but there was no gun in his holster. His eyes reminded Danny of Suellen's. They were blue and steady above his roan mustache.

Bog Rankin chuckled. "Kid, meet Charley Carter, from Devil's River. I'll bet he sure wishes now he was back there!"

"Somebody else is going to wish it harder," Charley Carter said. His level gaze swung back to Danny.

"Son, I dunno how deep you're in, but I've got a boy near as old as you. I'll tell you like I hope any decent man would tell him. This hombre and his pardner are headed for a hangrope. Overtook me out of Fort Ewell, and I guess I talked too much. Anyhow, they pistol-whipped me, took my cash and a letter I had for the sheriff. But you wasn't mixed in that. So take my advice, son. Drag your rope while you can."

Rance Fogarty came in with a bottle of whisky. He set the whisky on the table, gave Carter a mocking smile. "Thought maybe you could use a shot. Your money paid for it."

He looked at Danny. "Kid, this deal is shapin' up dandy! Thank your lucky stars for friends who thought enough to come looking for you. We tried one little job in Mexico, then came straight here. We was worried about you, kid."

So was the wolf that ate grandma, Danny told himself. *Rurales ran you out of Mexico, most likely, and you remembered this place I told you about. Thought I was dead in those willows.*

"Kid, you listenin'?" Rance said sharply. "Here's the layout. Come mornin', sheriff an' me are supposed to go lookin' for cows to buy. Good ones and lots of

'em, for our friend Carter, here. Hell, I sort of regret it we ain't going to look. I could enjoy a few days hand-gentlin' that Suellen! But with all that money waitin' I'll forget her."

DANNY looked away, his eyes suddenly hot. He was still standing, Rance on one heel. "What money?" he asked.

"Why, those ten thousand beautiful dollars, kid! Came in by stage from the Del Rio bank, not two hours ago. Carter's cow money. Sheriff's at the Mercantile right now, talkin' cow-buyin' and braggin' about his old friend, Judge Maybeso Grissom. That poor chump's face is sure gonna be red, introducin' me around as Charley Carter. They'll laugh him right out of the sheriff's office when the money disappears and the story gets out of how we played him for a fool. Think you can spend some of that money, kid?"

Danny was thinking about Will Bass, who liked to brag a little, who in some ways was like a twelve-year-old boy. Old Will was proud of his badge. If this deal came off, he never would be able to hold his head up again. Suellen would be hurt. Charley Carter would lose ten thousand dollars. But why should a horsethief's son worry about that.

"Kid," Rance was saying, "you know Gid Callishaw. That Suellen was bragging about some deal you made, about a bull."

"I've got credit at his store," Danny said with a certain pride. "Why?"

"That's the pretty part, kid!" Rance got to his feet. "No bank in town, so the money's in Callishaw's safe. Callishaw, I found out, has a room in back of the store. So in a few minutes, you and Bog and me are ridin' to town. You roust old Callishaw out of bed. Tell him—tell him you're terribly sorry but you need some supplies. Some—"

"Some screwworm medicine?"

"Yeah, that's it! Some screwworm medicine. Bog will be holdin' the getaway horses. Old Gid will go inside the store with you. All you got to do then is stick a gun in his ribs, make him open the safe. I'll do the rest. We'll tie old Gid up, gag him, be in Mexico with the money before anyone's the wiser. And, kid, old Gid likely will have an extra thousand or two in the safe!"

"Suppose it ain't that easy? Suppose Gid puts up a fight? He's pretty tough. When he hit this country—"

"Hell, kid, I'll cool him off."

"Like you cooled that hombre in Shafter?"

"Yeah. Like that hombre in Shafter. What about it, kid? I wouldn't be balky. You in this or not?"

"Don't do it, son," Charley Carter said. "Drag out of here while you can."

Bog Rankin walked toward the rancher. He hit Carter across the face with his open hand, grunted, hit him again. "You and your advice."

Carter, gray to the lips, said "Don't do it, son."

"Shut up," Danny said savagely. "All right, Rance, sure I want in."

It was a dream, Suellen, a wonderful dream. But I haven't got a chance. I won't help them rob old Callishaw, but I'm going to run. I'm going to ride out of here.

Bog Rankin banged three tin cups down on the table. Using his teeth, he uncorked the bottle, filled each cup brimful.

"Come git it. Damned if I'll take it to you!"

Rance put an arm around Danny's shoulders. "Come on, kid, we'll drink—to ten thousand big round dollars!"

Bog downed his cupful in three noisy swallows. Danny, with thumb on the cup's rim, forefinger crooked in the handle, let his cup stay on the table; for some reason Danny didn't want any whiskey. Rance Fogarty stopped with his cup halfway to his lips, smiled his mocking smile. His eyes, Danny noted for the first time, were mean

and black and jeering as they looked at him.

"A toast, Danny. This calls for a toast." He lifted his cup a bit higher, seemed not to notice that Danny never lifted his.

It was a variation on an old honkatonk toast, and it obviously referred to Suellen. Rance was about to go into details, but Danny didn't wait. Shock and shame laced through him. He threw the brimful cup of whiskey into Rance's face, and while Rance was yelling, digging at his eyes, Danny fell onto him—and to hell with Bog Rankin, who was jigging around, trying to get in a shot without hitting Fogarty!

WILL BASS came to the front door grumbling, rubbing his eyes. Moon was up and bright and he saw a tall stranger with rusty blood on his face and something like amusement crinkling his eyes.

"Well?" Will demanded. "Who are you, and what you grinnin' at?"

"Name's Carter. Charley Carter, from Devil's River—and if I'm grinnin' it's at that sookey-pink nightgown. You look right doggish, sheriff."

Will glared at him. "Now I know you're drunk! Charley Carter's in my spare bedroom. 'Least I guess he come back and went to sleep."

"He came back, and I guess you could say he's asleep. I had to tie him and Bog Rankin in their saddles. Take a look, sheriff."

He stepped back and then Will Bass saw two men stretched out like dead men on the edge of his porch. He saw a third man, standing, hugging one of the porch posts.

"Bog Rankin, you say? Why, he's one them Shafter holdup men! Him and a kid and a feller named Fogarty. Stand back!"

And Will Bass, barefooted, in his sookey-pink nightgown, padded past his midnight visitor. He took a good look and saw Bog Rankin, a stranger to him, flat on his back, breathing shallowly, with a furrow alongside his head that a man could lay two fingers in. He saw his erstwhile guest, sleeping, not in the back bedroom, but sprawled beside Bog Rankin, a strong smell of whiskey about him, his shirt ripped away from one shoulder, his hawk-beaked nose smashed slaunchways, blood still trickling from it; blood marking the spot where a bullet had gone in, under his collarbone.

With a certain respect in his voice, Will Bass said, "For a man done all this damage, mister, you ain't marked up much."

"It wasn't me done it," Charley Carter said. "It was the kid there—Danny."

Will Bass turned to take a look at Danny. Danny, still hugging the porch post, slid down the post and came to rest.

Young Danny was a sight to see. Young Danny was through. Charley Carter talked swiftly to Will Bass. Charley Carter told of a boy's bright, foolish courage, of a kid who had braced a pair of cruel, ruthless killers, using fists, boots, and a stick of stove wood, finally a gun. And, concluding the tale, Charley Carter said, "I only hope my boy, Pete, is half as good a man. Sheriff, that pair never would have let me live. If it wasn't blood I sweated, tied in that chair, watching it, it should of been!"

Will Bass was looking down at Danny. Not unkindly, Will said, "You young sunnuvagun. But the law's the law, and you broke it, Danny. You rode with outlaws. You're on that wanted poster the Rangers sent me. I'll have to lock you up, Danny."

Gid Callishaw and Doc Parsons, Doc with his black bag, were coming through the front gate. Suellen June, in a light robe and barefooted, brushed past Will, dropped to her knees beside Danny, made little mothering sounds.

"We stopped by, Danny and me, and gave the doc a yell," Charley Carter said. "Tend to the boy first, doc; he's worth tendin', too! Well, sheriff? Or should I say, 'Windy'? That's what Maybeso used to call you. What you aim to do about Danny?"

(Continued on page 110)

BLACK JOHN —BUSHWHACKER!

It was Black John Smith's favorite setup: a cheechako in trouble, too much gold dust around for everyone's peace of mind—and a chance to apply his own special brand of outlaw justice!

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

The lad's eyes widened. "What's this—a holdup?"

BLACK JOHN SMITH, reputed leader of a band of outlawed men that hung out at Cushing's Fort on Halfaday Creek, a tributary of the White River, was heading for Dawson. The sun hung low over the western mountains as his canoe shot out of the mouth of the White River onto the broad surface of the mighty Yukon. The big man paddled steadily for an hour or more, heading the light craft downriver in the slowly fading twilight. Casting about for a camping spot, his glance was attracted by a thin column of smoke that rose beside the river.

"Might be Bob Henderson or Art Harper," he muttered, as he swung the canoe shoreward, "but chances is it's a cheechako camp." The lips beneath the heavy black beard twisted into a grin. "If it is, I can get in some psychological research, as Doc Sutherland would say. I ain't never yet been able to figure out what most of the damn cheechako uses for what they call brains."

As he drew nearer shore a young man appeared on the gravely beach, and catching sight of the canoe, waved his hat frantically.

Beaching the canoe, Black John eyed the clean-cut youngster, who appeared to be not a day over eighteen. Beyond him, a fire crackled brightly in a small cleared space in front of a small A tent.

"You heading for Dawson?" the youth asked.

The big man nodded. "Yeah, but I've put in a long day. It's about time to camp."

"I'm glad. It sure is lonesome camping alone."

"Alone? How come you're alone? Where's your canoe, or boat, or whatever fetched you here?"

"I haven't any partner. That is," he amended, "I have one, but he's on Hunker Crick. And night before last my canoe disappeared."

"What do you mean—dissappeared?"

"I landed here about this time two days ago and pitched my tent, intending to camp for the night. In the morning, when I stepped to the river to get water for my coffee, the canoe was gone. All day yesterday and today I've been trying to signal to the passing boats that I needed help. Lots of boats have gone down the river, but none of them stopped. The men in some of them waved back, but most of 'em didn't pay any attention. At that, though, I guess they wouldn't have had room for me. They all seemed to be loaded to the gunwales with men and dogs and outfit."

"Didn't hear nothin' durin' the night?"

"I'd put in a long day on the river, and I was pretty tired. I went right to sleep after supper and I guess I slept pretty soundly. I did wake up once when a steamboat went by heading upriver, but went right to sleep again. Whoever took the canoe probably didn't make much noise."

"Where was the canoe? Did you pull it clear of the gravel?"

"No. I pulled it about half out of water and left it there on the beach."

Black John smiled. "You heard the culprit, all right. The upriver boats hold in pretty close to shore along this stretch of river an' buckin' the current they kick up a wash that would float any canoe that was only half out of water."

THE lad looked crestfallen. "I guess I've got a lot to learn," he said.

"All cheechakos have. An' it's the things they learn the hard way they remember longest."

"My dad told me a lot of things about this country, but he didn't say anything about drawing my canoe clear of the water. Guess he thought any fool ought to know enough to do that."

"Your dad here in the Yukon?"

"No. He was here. My name's Bob Wilson. My dad, Sam Wilson, sold his farm near Sauk Centre, Minnesota, and bought a house in town. When news of the Klondike gold rush got around he tried to get someone to hit for the Klondike with him. Most of 'em had been reading about what a tough country the Klondike is and didn't want any part of it, but dad finally persuaded Lem Brink to sell his livery stable and throw in with him.

"Lem didn't have a very good reputation around town. He drank quite a bit, and folks said he was a pretty slick article when it came to horse trading. He killed a man with a neck yoke over a horse trade a few years ago, but his lawyer got him off on the grounds of self defense. The only witness was a stable boy that worked for Lem and he swore that the man came at Lem with a pitchfork and Lem had to hit him. But lots of people think that Lem told the kid what to say, and he was afraid not to.

"Mother didn't like the idea of dad hitting out with him, and tried to talk him out of it. But dad was determined to get in on the gold rush, and he wouldn't listen to her. He claimed that any partner was better than no partner, and as long as no one else would go, he was going with Lem.

"That was two years ago this spring. They made a strike on Hunker Crick, and got a lawyer to draw up a partnership agreement—a fifty-fifty proposition, with a clause that if either party died during the life of the contract, his entire interest reverted to the other."

"Was this clause Lem's idea, or your dad's?"

"When we went over the contract, just before I started out, dad said that Lem suggested it, claiming that if one should die, the other one's heirs wouldn't get anything anyway. The lawyers would see to that. They worked the claim that winter, and the test panning showed that they were taking out a thousand ounces a month.

"Late in the winter mother got sick, and the doctor was afraid she couldn't live, so we got word to dad, and he hit out for home before the spring clean-up. Lem promised to hire men to help him clean up the dump, and send dad his share.

"Along in the summer dad got a letter from Lem telling him that the gravel wasn't as rich as they figured it was, that he had hired four men to help with the clean-up. He said they sluiced out forty-two hundred ounces, that came to sixty-seven thousand, two hundred dollars. That figures thirty-three thousand, six hundred dollars apiece. The labor and expenses amounted to thirty-one hundred and twenty dollars, or fifteen hundred and sixty dollars apiece. He sent dad a bank draft for thirty-two thousand and forty dollars, together with a statement from the bank that he had deposited a like amount to his own credit.

"Then in June, this year, he got another letter from Lem, enclosing a draft for twenty-four thousand and ninety dollars. He said the gravel was running leaner, and he had hired four men all winter sinking new shafts, and kept them on till after the clean-up, so the expenses were high.

"Dad don't believe the claim is running out—and he thinks that last year's clean-up should have amounted to right around seven thousand ounces, instead of forty-two hundred, as Lem claimed. He wanted to come up this summer and find out for himself what was going on, but mother is still sick—it's her heart, and the doctor says she never will be any better. I got through high school this year, and talked 'em into letting me come up and look things over—sort of take dad's place in working the claim. So I hit out—and here I am."

Black John swung his pack from the canoe, pulled it clear of the water, and after supper, filled his pipe and eyed the lad. "You've done all right, so far, barrin' losin' your canoe. From Minnesota to here is quite a trip for a youngster to make alone—an' it ain't an easy one. It shows you've got guts. The way I see it, the job you've come up to tackle ain't an easy one, neither. Looks like your ma prob'ly had this Lem pretty well sized up when she tried to keep your dad from throwin' in with him."

"I'm not afraid of Lem Brink. Gosh, he's about half drunk most of the time," the lad said, a note of contempt in his voice. "Used to keep a jug of whiskey under his bed in the office of the livery stable."

"You might not be afraid of him—but watch your step. Plenty of drunk men have knocked off sober ones before this."

"I'll keep an eye on him. But I'm going to find out whether or not he's cheated on those two clean-ups—and I won't quit till I do."

"How do you aim to work it?"

"Why, I'm going up to Hunker Crick and take my dad's place. He assigned his share in the partnership over to me."

"So you're this here Lem's pardner now, eh?"

"That's right. And believe me, if I find out that he has been cheating dad, he'll come across—or else."

"Or else—what?"

"They've got police and law courts in this country, haven't they?"

The big man nodded. "Yeah, we've got police, an' we've got courts. We've also got a hell of a lot of country where even a half-drunk man might knock off a sober one—an' no one know the difference. A lot of right good men have been buried along the cricks. Some of 'em died natural. Some by accident. An' some died otherwise."

"It's a job I came here to do—and I'm going to do it—no matter what happens."

"That's right, son. But, from what you've told me, I judge this Lem to be a character that will stand plenty of watchin'. We'll be hittin' for Dawson in the mornin'. My name's John Smith. I've sort of knocked around a little, here an' there. Just happened to think—I know a fellow name of Burr MacShane that's got a claim on Hunker . . ."

"Burr MacShane! Why, he's got the next claim to ours. Dad told me about him—said he's a fine man—a sourdough, and a man I could depend on if I ever needed help of any kind."

"That's right—a man can depend on Burr. As I was goin' on to say, he'll prob'ly be in Dawson. There ain't much doin' on the cricks this time of year. I'll get hold of Burr, an' sort of find out how he's got this Lem doped out. You say Lem hires quite a bit of help there on the claim. Fact is, I'm sort of at loose ends, right now. I'm plumb out of a job, an' it might be that this here Lem might be able to give me one."

"I'll say he will!" the lad exclaimed. "Remember, I'm a partner in that claim. You'll get your job, whether Lem wants you, or not."

"That's right kind of you, son. Maybe I'll take you up, on that. It's accordin' to what Burr's got to say. I sure need the job, all right. But maybe it would be better to have Lem hire me. You stick around town till after I've talked with Burr."

THE trip down the Yukon was uneventful, and leaving young Wilson at the hotel, Black John dropped in at the Tivoli Saloon, to be greeted by Burr MacShane and Gordon Bettles who stood near the end of the bar. "What in hell you doin' in town?" Bettles asked. "Cush's safe get to bulgin' again?"

Black John filled his glass from a bottle the bartender set before him. "No. Fact is, I happened to glance in the lookin' glass when I got up the other mornin', an' it looked like I needed a shave."

MacShane grinned as he eyed the heavy black beard. "What's the matter—couldn't you find the barbershop?"

"Oh, sure, I found it, all right. But there was another fella settin' in the chair, so I says to hell with it. I'll get my shave some other year."

"Swiftwater Bill an' Moosehide Charlie's in town, an' Camillo Bill an' Doc Hamilton ought to be back upriver today. Looks like we might have a stud game tonight."

"Sounds reasonable," the big man replied, and turned to MacShane. "How's things on Hunker?"

"Oh, about so-so. Most of the boys done all right last winter. But, if you're figgerin' on buyin' in up there, you better look the proposition over pretty careful. She's spotted. One claim might be payin' out big, an' the next one to it not worth a damn."

"I ain't buyin' in on the crick. By the way, ever run acrost a feller name of Lem Brink, up there?"

"Lem Brink! Shore I know him. I've got Number Ten above Discovery, an' he's on Number Nine."

"Pretty good feller, is he?"

MacShane slanted the big man a glance. "If he is, then so's the devil. I wouldn't trust him far as I can spit. Him an' his pardner, Sam Wilson, located the claim a couple of years ago. Sam was a good man anyways you look at him. They was both from the same town somewheres in Minne-

sota. But why Sam ever throw'd in with a dirty son like Lem Brink is more'n I can figger. Along in the spring, a year ago, Sam hits outside, leavin' Brink on the claim, him promisin' to hire help fer the clean-up, an' sendin' Sam his share. They've got a hell of a good proposition there. Lem hired a hand an' sluiced out the dump, all right, an' it run between eight an' nine thousan' ounces. I don't know how much of it he sent Sam—but I'm bettin' it wasn't nowheres near what he had comin'."

"What makes you think Lem is crooked?"

"I don't think he is—I know damn well he is. When I said he hired a hand to sluice out his dump last spring, I mean he hired two hands, one to a time. He worked hell out of the first one, then accused him of stealin' dust on him an' kicked him off the place without payin' him. An' the other one had to knock hell out of Lem to collect his pay. Then, durin' the summer he kep' three, four men workin' sinkin' shafts all over the claim. They'd go down to where the seepage made 'em quit, then sluice the stuff out, shovel the gravel back in the shaft, level it off an' sink another shaft. Looks to me like he's workin' that claim fer all it's worth—milkin' it dry, so when Sam Wilson comes back there won't be a hell of a lot left in the gravel. Last winter he worked four men an' they done even better than the winter before. Come Christmas time, three of the men knocked off fer a week an' come down here fer a jamboree. One of 'em stayed on the claim with Lem. When the others come back, the one that stayed on the claim was missin'. Lem claimed he'd changed his mind a couple of days after the others left, an' hit out fer Dawson, too. But no one's seen him since. I'm bettin' Lem knocked him off to keep from payin' his wages."

"Where does Lem hang out when he hits town?"

"He don't hit town. He don't never leave the claim. When he needs supplies, he sends one of his men for 'em."

"Don't he never loosen up—come down for a time with the boys—play a little stud—do a little drinkin'?"

"Not him. He don't play stud. He drinks plenty—but he drinks alone, there in his shack. Keeps a jug in under his bunk, an' stays about half soused all the time. They've got two shacks on the claim, one at each end. Sam claimed Lem snored all night an' kept him awake, an' wore his clothes till they stunk, an' wouldn't wash no dishes. So he put up another shack an' lived there. Since Sam's been gone the hired hands uses his shack.

"The way things is goin', if Sam don't show up pretty quick, Brink's goin' to have that proposition milked dry as a bone. Then again, if he does show up, an' finds out what's ben goin' on, chances is he might disappear—like the hand did. If Lem would knock a hand off to keep from payin' him wages, he'd shore as hell knock Sam off to keep what he'd stole off'n him. Like I say, I don't know what he's been sendin' Sam—but I'm bettin' it ain't a patch on what it ought to be."

BLACK JOHN nodded. "Sam ain't comin' back. His wife's got a bad heart, an' he can't leave her. But his boy's here. He's a damn fine kid. I run acrost him on the river where a steamboat had washed his canoe loose durin' the night, an' I fetched him on down with me. Bob, his name is, an' he's over to the hotel right now. His dad transferred the pardnership contract over to him, an' he's goin' out to the claim to see what's wrong. Lem Brink sent Sam a bank draft for thirty-two thousand an' forty dollars for the first year's clean-up, an' twenty-four thousan' an' ninety dollars for this spring's. He wrote Sam that the stuff in the dump wasn't as rich as the test pans showed, an' that it's runnin' leaner all the time."

"My God!" MacShane exclaimed, "I knew Lem Brink's a crook—but I didn't know he was that crooked!" Drawing a pencil from his pocket, he figured on the back of an envelope.

"Lem panned out eight or nine thousan' ounces a year ago—call it eighty-five hundred. He skinned off right around four thousan' ounces that summer, an' this spring's cleanup was a good twelve thousan' ounces—that makes twenty-four thousan,' five hundred ounces—three hundred an' ninety-two thousan' dollars. He sent Sam fifty-six thousan,' all told, an' claimed that's all he kep' for himself. After takin' out Sam's cut, that would leave three hundred an' thirty-six thousan,' of which Lem's honest cut would be the same as Sam's, fifty-six thousan.' Takin' that out, it would leave two hundred an' eighty thousan' dollars that Lem has got salted down somewheres."

"Yeah," Black John agreed, his eyes on the penciled figures. "I wonder where?"

"He could have banked it—but I doubt it. He never goes to town."

"I'd sure like to know whether that dust was deposited in the bank. I know the boys in the bank, all right—havin' deposited plenty of dust from time to time. But—well—owin' to circumstances, and all—maybe it would be better if you was to step over an' find out how much Lem's got on deposit. You can tell 'em Lem's sort of figurin' on buyin' you out—you holdin' the adjoinin' claim, an' you'd like to know if he's got enough on deposit to cover the price."

"I'll do it!" MacShane exclaimed. "By God, I'd hate to see a damn skunk like him put anything over on a feller like Sam, or his kid."

He stepped out and returned shortly.

"He hasn't got a damned cent in the bank. He did make a couple of deposits—one last year for thirty-two thousan' an' forty dollars, an' another one this spring for twenty-four thousan' an' ninety—an' asked for statements of these deposits—then he withdrew the money within a week."

"Okay," Black John said. "Then he's got it cached somewhere—right around three hundred an' thirty-six thousan' dollars—twenty one thousan' ounces of dust—an' that's damn near three quarters of a ton! The amount is worth contemplatin.' This here Lem—he must figger he's done pretty well fer himself."

Mac Shane nodded. "Yeah. An' it looks from here like he has. He's a pretty slick article, Lem is . . . too damn slick fer any eighteen-year-old kid to tackle. Chances is the kid could never locate the cache. Even if he did, he'd never get the chance to get into it. Lem's right there on the claim all the time. If he even suspected the kid had located it, it would be jest too damn bad for the kid—you can bet yer life on that. I sure hate to think of that kid goin' up there, when Lem's got everything to gain an' nothin' to lose by knockin' him off."

Black John nodded, slowly, as he toyed with his glass on the bar. "Yeah, it is a kind of a doleful thought, at that. You say Lem hires him a hand, now an' then?"

"That's right—an' he could use a couple, right now. The two he had workin' fer him quit a couple of days ago. Jim Sutton's located on the claim below Lem's—Number Eight. I seen him in the A. C. store, this mornin', an' he says Lem told him to try an' locate a couple of new hands. Jim stopped in to the Klondike Palace where there was a lot a cheechakos hangin' around broke, an' he tells 'em that a feller up on Hunker wants to hire a couple of hands. Some of 'em spoke up, wantin' the job, till one guy asks who it was wanted 'em. An' when Jim tells him it's Lem Brink, on Number Nine Above, the guy starts in an' spills 'em an earful. He's the one Lem kicked off the claim without payin' him—an' when he got through onloadin' what he thought of Lem, there wouldn't none of 'em take the job."

"The kid goin' up there would give him one more hand. An' then, if some feller should happen along, someone that was broke an' needed a job, Lem would prob'ly hire him."

MacShane's eyes widened. You mean. . . ."

"I don't mean nothin,' except jest what I said," the big man interrupted. "An' then, after this feller was hired, if someone should happen to slip Lem the word that his new hand was a crook—one the police would give their right hand to locate—bein' as he's wanted for a couple of robberies an' a murder or so, somewheres down river . . . it might be that Lem might figure he could make use of his new hand, over an' above the routine chore of minin.' Even if he didn't, this new hand might take a likin' to the kid an' sort of keep an eye on him."

MacShane and Bettles exchanged glances, both grinned, broadly, and Bettles ordered a round of drinks. When the liquor was poured MacShane raised his glass. "Well, here's to Lem Brink. I wish him all the luck in the world—of the kind he's got comin'!"

Returning to the hotel, Black John found Bob Wilson seated in the lobby reading a magazine. "If I was you I'd go on out to Hunker an' get to work on your claim. I'll hang around here for a couple of days, an' then go out an' hit Lem Brink for a job."

"Why not both go out together? As I told you, I'm a partner in that claim, and I'll give you a job whether Lem wants to, or not. It's the least I can do—after what you did for me."

"Listen, son—I know you told me that. An' I remember you told me that you an' your dad suspect that this Lem ain't been givin' him a square deal on this partnership proposition. An' after talkin' to Burr MacShane, I know damn well he ain't. Lem knows it, too. If you show up there alone he'll prob'ly figure that bein' jest a kid, an' a cheechako to boot, he can outguess you without much trouble. But if two of us was to show up together, he'd prob'ly figure the odds was agin him. From what Burr told me you're goin' to need all the help you can get. So when I go up an' hit Lem for a job, don't you let on you ever saw me before. Two heads is better'n one—'specially when you're dealin' with a damn crook like this Lem Brink."

"I guess you're right, at that. I'll do as you say, and believe me—if things work out for dad and myself you'll never regret it."

"No, son, I don't expect I will. Fact is, I don't never remember of regrettin' seein' some damn skulldug get what's comin' to him."

CHAPTER TWO

Bad Bill Reddick

ONE day, a week later, as Lem Brink and Bob Wilson were repairing a sluice box on the lower boundary of their claim, Burr MacShane strolled over from his adjoining claim, passing close to Black John, who was busy at the upper boundary.

"Well," said Burr, "I see you got the two hands you wanted. I was talkin' to Jim Sutten the other day in the Tivoli an' he told me you wanted him to find you a couple."

"Yeah, but Jim never located me none. He went down to the Klondike Palace an' told them loafers about this job, an' when a couple of 'em says they'll take it, an' asks what claim they was to go to, another guy butts in an' tells 'em a lot of lies about me, claimin' I'd worked hell out of him an' then kicked him off the job without payin' him. I'd kicked him off the job, all right—but it was because I ketched him pocketin' a bunch of nuggets, he'd picked outa the dump. This here kid is my new pardner—an' the other one drifted along couple of days ago an' I hired him."

"Your new pardner? Did Sam Wilson sell out?"

"No. This here's Bob Wilson—Sam's kid."

MacShane's glance shifted to Black John. "This hombre you hired—did he tell you his name?"

"Said it was Smith."

MacShane grinned. "About as handy as any name, I guess. I'd sort of keep an eye on him if I was you. He's Bad Bill Reddick. Used to be smooth-faced. Prob'ly figures no one would recognize him with that beard—an' I guess he's right, at that. I sure wouldn't of spotted him, except when I passed close to him I happened to see that scar on the back of his left hand where a breed knifed him one night in the saloon in Rampart."

Brink's eyes rested for a few moments on the big man, and shifted to MacShane. "You claim his name is Bad Bill—what's so bad about him?"

MacShane shrugged. "Plenty, I guess—to hear the police tell it. I know Corporal Downey would sure as hell like to pick him up. There's a couple of robberies an' a murder he'd like to ask him about, down around Fortymile. The police figure he hit downriver. They've notified the marshals to be on the lookout for him over on the American side. There's a thousan' dollar reward out for him—dead or alive."

"How long ago did he pull off that there murder an' them robberies?"

"It was a couple of years ago, right after the spring cleanup."

Brink shrugged. "What he done before he come here ain't none of my business. He's a good worker, an' as long as he keeps on workin' good I sure ain't goin' to turn him in fer no thousan' dollars."

MacShane nodded. "Me neither. But if I'd spill what I know about them crimes Bill Reddick would stretch rope damn quick. What I claim, if a man's goin' straight, now—he'd ought to be given a chance."

"That's right," Brink agreed. "Thanks for the tip, though. I'll sort of keep an eye on him."

Black John and Bob occupied the cabin Sam Wilson had built for himself, leaving Brink to his own cabin, and the big man noted with amusement that since MacShane's visit, there seemed to be a slight aloofness in the lad's attitude toward him. The youngster was neither hostile nor openly suspicious, but several times Black John surprised a puzzled, questioning look in his eyes.

A FEW mornings later the two finished breakfast and were met at the sluice by Brink, who greeted the younger man jovially. "Hi, Bob! Fine mornin'! Say, I was jest thinkin' some fresh moose meat would go good—save on the grub bill, too. Couple hours ago when I went to the crick fer a pail of water I seen a bull an' two cows headin' up that draw, yonder. My eyesight ain't no good fer shootin,' no more, so why don't you take that there new rifle of yourn an' go after 'em. If you don't ketch up with 'em in the draw, cross the rim, an' you'll find 'em in the next valley. There's a slow-runnin' crick that widens out into a kinda pasture like where there's plenty of feed. If you git one, come back to the top of the rim and send up a smoke, an' me an' Smith'll fetch the packsacks."

"Sure I'll go!" the lad exclaimed. "I've been wondering when I'd get a chance to try out that rifle."

Returning to the cabin, he came out a few moments later, rifle in hand. "So long," he said. "Keep an eye on the ridge and watch my smoke!"

When he disappeared into the mouth of the draw, Brink eyed the big man. "Ever take a little drink, Smith?" he asked.

Black John grinned. "Not when I can get a big one."

Brink returned the grin. "Come on over to the shack an' we'll see what's left in the jug."

Inside the shack, Brink indicated a bench beside a table littered with dirty dishes. Reaching under the bunk, he drew forth a jug, and shoving the dishes aside, slopped liquor into two murky water glasses and shoving one toward the big man, seated himself opposite. "Drink up, *Smith,*" he said, with a wink, "there's plenty more in the jug." When the glasses were emptied and returned to the table, the man reached for the jug on the floor beside him and refilled them. "How do you like it, here, *Smith?*" he asked, again obviously emphasizing the name.

"Oh, I like it all right—far's I've got. One job's about like another. Shovel gravel fer a spell. Draw yer pay. Go to town an' blow it in. Then go back to the gravel."

"How do you like my pardner?"

"The kid? He's all right, I guess. Them cheechakos is all alike—don't know nothin'."

"Like it here better'n Fortymile, Bill?" Brink asked, abruptly.

The big man's eyes narrowed. "Bill? Fortymile? What the hell you talkin' about?"

"About you. You ain't foolin' me none, with this Smith name. Yer Bill Reddick—Bad Bill they call you down Fortymile way."

Black John found himself staring into the muzzle of a nickel-plated revolver. He leaped to his feet, his glance shifting to Brink's narrowed eyes as the other spoke.

"Jest keep yer pants on, Bill. Set down. Me an' you's got things to talk about."

The big man settled slowly back onto the bench, a look of fear in his eyes. He moistened his lips with his tongue. "I guess you got me," he said slowly. "But—how'd you know me—with these whiskers?"

Brink grinned. "Far as the whiskers goes yer safe enough, but you'd ought to wear a glove on that there left hand of yourn to cover up that scar—where the breed knifed you that time down in the saloon at Rampart."

Black John glanced at the scar left by a wound he'd received smashing a window to rescue a man from a burning cabin several years before, and nodded, slowly. "I guess you're right," he said. "But how come you know about that scare . . . an' about—Rampart—an' Fortymile?"

Again the man winked knowingly. "Oh, I been around some. An' I'm a-tellin' you, I ain't the only one that knows—the police does, too—about that scar, an' about a couple of robberies an' a murder that was pulled off a couple of years ago on Fortymile. This Corporal Downey—he'd give a pretty to pick up Bad Bill Reddick."

After several moments of silence the big man met the other's glance. "But—you wouldn't turn a guy in, would you, Brink?" he asked in a voice that trembled slightly.

"Well—mebbe I would, an' then agin, mebbe I wouldn't. It's accordin'."

A ray of hope flashed into Black John's eyes. "Accordin' to what?" he asked, eagerly.

"Accordin' whether you throw in with me on a proposition, or not. If you do, you kin stay right here an' what with them whiskers an' a pair of gloves, the police wouldn't never spot you in a thousan' years. An' on top of that, there'll be quite a bunch of dust comin' yer way, beside yer wages. If you don't, we'll be hittin' fer Dawson in a few minutes—you walkin' in front an' me behind, with this here gun on yer back. An' I wouldn't be makin' no bad play, at that, bein' as there's a thousan' dollar reward out fer you, dead or alive."

"I guess you got me, Brink." Black John said, after a few moments of silence. "What's your proposition?"

"It's like this—I an' Sam Wilson located this claim a couple years ago. We worked all winter an' the test plannin's showed the gravel was rich. Along in the spring, jest before the break-up, Sam got word that his woman was ailin' bad, an' he hits out fer home. I hired help an' cleaned up the dump. She was rich, all right, but

I short-changed Sam on his cut which I sent him a bank draft an' writ him a letter claimin' the gravel kep' gittin' leaner an' leaner. Sam's woman didn't git no better, an' he didn't come back, so this spring I done the same thing.

"Then this here Bob shows up. He's Sam's kid—an' he claims his ma ain't no better an' never will be, an' his pa won't leave her, so he transferred his share of the location to him. The kid, he's a cheechako, an' like you said, cheechakos don't know nothin.' But I figger this here Bob is smart, an' it ain't goin' to be long before he'll know the gravel's runnin,' an' then he'll know damn well that I double-crossed his old man on them two years' clean-up. Not only that, he could prove it, too. 'Cause this here Burr MacShane on the next claim —he knows damn clost to what I took out them two springs—an' he liked Sam Wilson a damn sight better'n what he likes me. He'd swear to what he knows in court —an' I'd be in a hell of a fix."

BLACK JOHN nodded. "Yeah, it kinda looks that way, don't it? An' even if they couldn't make no criminal action stick, the kid could bring a civil suit, an' tie up every damn cent you've got in the bank."

Brink grinned, and winked. "I ain't afraid of no civil suit. Let him sue and' be damned. I ain't got a nickel in no bank. I've got plenty—but the dust's cached where no court order would ever touch it. But what with provin' I beat Sam out of plenty of dust—which jest between you an' me I done—they could throw me in jail fer God knows how long. An' I don't aim to do no time in no jail!"

Black John grinned. "Can't no one blame you for that. Cripes, look where I'd be—if the police could pin them Fortymile jobs on me."

The other nodded. "That's right. But like I says—if you throw in with me, you ain't in no danger. Here's how we'll work it. Tonight I'll make up a hundred-pound pack of dust, an' tomorrow I'll send the kid to Dawson with it, tellin' him to open an account in the bank in Brink in Wilson's name an' deposit it. He'll hit out around noon. You take my rifle, there, an' lay fer him at that bend in the trail, where it swings in between them high rocks, an' that deep gulch. You let him have it an' shove him into the gulch an' cover up his body—an' fetch the dust back here. Then I'll split it with you . . . fifty pound of dust is what you git—that's eight hundred ounces—twelve thousan' eight hundred dollars—an' that ain't chickenfeed in no man's language."

Black John frowned. "It's a sight of money, all right. But—God, I kinda hate to shoot the kid, at that."

Brink's eyes hardened. "Listen, Reddick —they can't hang a man no higher fer two murders than one. If you don't do like I say, you'll swing fer that Fortymile murder as quick as I can git you to the police! You can't never make twelve thousan' no easier. An' besides, chances is, no one'll ever know anyone was knocked off. The kid ain't got no friends in the country—no one, outside of MacShane even knows he was here. It'll be a long time before his folks will be askin' about him, an' if the police comes inquirin' around we kin say he went off on a moose hunt, or a prospectin' trip a while back an' never showed up yet. Then with the kid outa the way, the hull claim is mine."

"Okay," Black John replied. "If I've got to, I've got to. You make up the pack of dust an' start the kid off with it—an' I'll do my part."

"That's the talk. Here, have another drink, an' we'll get to work on that sluice. I shore hope the kid knocks off one of them mooses. A nice thick steak would go good."

DARKNESS was settling when Bob Wilson returned without having seen a moose. Dog-tired, he rolled into his

blankets immediately after supper and was soon sound asleep. Shortly thereafter Black John slipped from the cabin, and took up a position in a thicket of scrub willows on the bank of the creek.

An hour passed—two hours—then the door of Brink's cabin opened, and the man stepped out, paused and peered about him in the dim light of the stars, and carrying an empty packsack, walked rapidly to a pile of firewood a short distance from the cabin. Throwing aside a few sticks of wood, he dropped to his knees, and clawed away some six inches of gravel from the mouth of one of the filled-in shallow shafts. He lifted out numerous moosehide sacks of dust which he placed in the packsack. Returning the loose gravel, he leveled it off, repiled the fire wood on it, shouldered the pack and returned to the cabin, pausing once more to scrutinize the landscape, before stepping into the cabin.

When the door closed behind him, Black John slipped from his place of concealment, and sought his bunk without disturbing young Wilson, who slept soundly between his blankets.

Toward noon of the following day Brink called the youngster aside, and with a glance toward Black John, who was busy about the mouth of a new shaft, spoke in a low tone. "Y'know, Bob, ever sence MacShane give us the low-down on Smith—er, Bad Bill Reddick, there, I been kinda wonderin' like. He's a good worker, all right, an' if a man's goin' straight, I sort of hate to turn him over to the police fer somethin' he done couple of year ago. At the same time, what a man done onct an' got away with he's apt to do agin."

Bob nodded. "I've been thinking about that, too. Smith seems to be a nice fellow—the last man in the world I'd figure for an outlaw. But Burr MacShane seemed to know what he was talking about, and he isn't the kind of a man who would deliberately lie about a thing like that."

"Yer damn right he wouldn't! He ain't a guy that would lie a murder an' robbery onto no man."

The younger man nodded. "As you say, Smith, or Reddick, or whatever his name is, is a good worker, and as far as I can see, we might as well keep him on the job for a while, at least. We haven't begun taking out any gold yet, so there wouldn't be any point in his murdering us."

"I ain't so shore about that," Brink replied. "Fact is, I've got sixteen hundred ounces in my shack, there, that I tuk out before you come. Half of that, of course, is yourn, bein' as you've took over yer pa's half of the claim. I never said nothin' about it, figgerin' it wouldn't be no hell of a while till you got a yen to hit fer town fer a couple of days or so—most young fellers does—an' then I'd let you pack the dust down an' start us a j'int bank account with it. But here yesterday, whilst you was moose huntin,' I told Smith I was goin' up to MacShane's to borry a file. Instid of which, I slipped into the bresh an' snuck down through them willers an' watched Smith. Figgered to find out if he'd soldier on the job when he thought we was both gone.

"Pretty quick he throw'd down his shovel an' looked all around. Then he slips into my shack an' stays in there mebbe it's three, four minutes. Then he came out agin. 'Course, he didn't fetch that dust out with him—nor no part of it, 'cause I checked up on it when I got back. But he damn well could of located it, figgerin' to watch his chance an' git holt of it later."

"Why—he could even slip out some night without waking me, and murder you there in your shack! I'd never know it till morning and he could be miles away."

"That's right," Brink agreed, "It don't look so good from my angle, does it? But, like you said, if there ain't no dust here fer him to git away with, he ain't goin' to do no murderin.' So instead of firin' him, we'll keep him on the job fer a while anyhow, an' you take that dust to the bank this after-

noon. Sixteen hundred ounces—that's a hundred pound, worth twenty-five thousan' six hundred at the bank. It's in twenty eighty-ounce sacks. I'll make sure Smith knows what's in yer pack when you start out, so he'll know the dust ain't in my shack no more. An' I'll damn well keep him workin' right close to me clean up till dark, an' by that time you'll have the dust in the bank."

Shortly thereafter Bob Wilson shouldered the pack, stepped from Brink's shack, and headed down the creek. "Don't let them damn bank clerks claim no short weight on you!" Brink called, loudly as the lad passed the shaft where Black John was working. "There's a full eighty ounces in all twenty of them sacks—an' be sure an' fetch the empty sacks back!"

A half hour later, Brink beckoned to Black John from the doorway of his shack. He poured half a tumbler of liquor and handed it to the big man. "Throw that into you an' git goin.' Here's the rifle. You kin easy overtake him. Like I said, wait till you git to where the trail runs between them high rocks an' that gulch, then let him have it. Cover up his body, an' wait till dark so no one could see you, then fetch the dust back here an' we'll divide it up. An' don't git no fool notion of makin' off with that dust, 'cause if you do you'll have every damn policeman in the Yukon on your tail before midnight."

Black John downed the drink and picked up the rifle. "Like I said, I hate to do it—but you've got me. I sure as hell ain't goin' to swing fer that Fortymile job." He turned, left the cabin, and headed swiftly down the creek. Rounding the first bend, he doubled back and keeping well into the bush, swung around to MacShane's claim.

"This is it, Burr. Here's where we get that dirty double-crossin' son dead to rights. He started the kid fer Dawson with sixteen hundred ounces of dust to deposit in the bank. I'm s'posed to lay fer him there on the trail, knock him off, bury him, an' fetch the dust back to Brink's cabin, where he'll split it with me—fifty-fifty. You wait here till the kid joins you. Then both of you lay in the willows till you see me come back. It'll be an hour or so after dark. Then, when you see me step into Brink's cabin, you slip over an' glue yer ears to a crack between the fifth an' sixth log, clost to the window. I punched out the chinkin' behind his calendar an' you can hear every word that's said. I've got a hunch that you two'll catch you an earful, an' when the play's over, Brink'll be hittin' the high spots. He sure runs off at the head when he gits too many drinks down him—an' I'm bettin' he'll drink plenty between now an' dark to steady his nerves till I get back with that dust."

CHAPTER THREE

Recruit for Halfaday

BOB WILSON mushed steadily down the trail, stopping to rest now and then and ease the burden of the unaccustomed pack. And as he walked his brow drew into a frown. "Maybe Lem isn't as crooked as dad and I figured he is," he muttered. "Take this gold—sixteen hundred ounces—I didn't even know he had it on hand. Half of it, more than twelve thousand dollars worth, is mine. He could have kept it all, and I'd never known the difference."

His thoughts reverted to the big man who had befriended him on the river and was now working on the claim. "It's hard to believe he'd be guilty of murder and robbery. In spite of what MacShane said, I can't help liking him."

As he was about to pass between the rim of a deep ravine and a mass of jumbled rock a man stepped suddenly into the trail barring the way. The lad's eyes widened as his glance shifted from the rifle resting in the crook of the man's left arm to his face. "You?" he cried.

The big man nodded. "Yeah. It's me."

"What's this—a holdup?"

"Yeah—you might call it that. Just slip out of them straps an' let the pack drop to the ground!"

The youth flushed angrily as he complied. "Then you are an outlaw, just as MacShane said!"

"Not knowin' exactly what Burr said, I couldn't say. Plenty of folks claims I'm an outlaw, at that."

"I see you've got Lem Brink's rifle. I suppose when you found out that I was packing this gold to the bank, you murdered Lem and took out after me."

The lips beneath the heavy black beard smiled. "I've noticed conclusions that's jumped to is damn near always wrong, The fact is, I didn't knock Lem off—much as I'd ought to. Bein' as I'm workin' for him, I'm just carryin' out his orders—that's all."

Something in the smile, the tone of voice, the twinkle in the gray-blue eyes dispelled the younger man's anger. "His orders? I—I don't understand."

"You will understand, by midnight, son—if you do like I tell you. Your dad knew Burr MacShane, an' liked him. An' he was right. There ain't a better man in the north than Burr, anyways you look at him. I'm savin' my breath. The way this play come up, you might, or might not believe me. If you do as I say, by midnight tonight you'll know all about what kind of a pardner you've got—an' you'll hear it from his own lips, too.

"Leave the pack where it is. I'll take care of it. You hit back up the crick an' slip into Burr's cabin without Brink knowin' it. Burr'll tell you what to do. He'll take over from there. Believin' I'm an outlaw, an' all, I know it's askin' quite a bit of you to hit back an' leave this dust with me. But it's for your own good, son. You've got to believe me."

Only for a moment the younger man hesitated, his eyes on the big man's face. "I do believe you," he said, suddenly. "I—I may be wrong. But I believe you. I'll do as you say." And turning abruptly away, he headed back up the trail.

AN HOUR after dark Black John stepped from the trail and headed for the dim square of light that marked Lem Brink's cabin window. As he neared the door he smiled slightly as he saw two figures step from the scrub willows and rapidly approach the cabin from the rear.

Stepping into the cabin, he found Brink seated at the table, a tumbler half filled with liquor before him. He swung the pack to the floor, and stood the rifle in the corner behind the door. Reaching for the jug on the floor beside him, Brink slopped it half full of liquor and shoved it toward him. "You got back, eh?" he said, thickly. "Set down an' throw that into you. Fetched the dust, too, I see."

The big man removed his hat, wiped his brow with his sleeve and loosened a couple of buttons in the front of his shirt. "Oh, shore. I got back with the dust, all right. Kinda hot, what with the pack, an' all. I been pickin' 'em up an' layin' 'em down pretty fast."

The drinks were downed, and Brink replenished the glasses. "Everything work out all right?" he asked.

"There's the dust. I jumped him right where you said."

"Git him the first shot?"

"I wouldn't see no sense in wastin' ammunition."

"Did you bury him, like I told you to?"

"I didn't leave him layin' there on the trail."

"Where'd you bury him?"

The big man grinned. "Listen, Brink—I ain't tellin' where I buried him—just in case you might try to double-cross me—like reportin' your pardner robbed an' murdered on the trail."

"Hell, man—I wouldn't report you to the police! If I wanted to turn you in, I

could do it on them Fortymile jobs you pulled—an' collect the reward, besides. Why I knocked a guy off last year—right here on the claim. Ketched him knockin' down dust on me, an' I whammed him over the head with a club, an' rolled him in one of them shallow prospect holes, throw'd the club in on top of him, an' filled the shaft with gravel."

"Kinda hard-boiled yourself, eh?"

"I'll say I'm hard-boiled! You an' me'll git along, all right. But don't never try to double-cross me."

"Guess we might's well divide up them onuces," Black John said. "You claimed there's twenty eighty-ounce sacks in the pack. You promised me half of 'em for knockin' the kid off. I'll take my ten now."

Brink's voice rasped suddenly harsh. "I promised you half of that dust fer knockin' the kid off. With him outa the way, this hull claim is mine. Don't never think I didn't know what I was doin' when I hired you to knock him off. You think your a hell of an outlaw fer gittin' away with them Fortymile jobs, don't you? Well, you ain't —you ain't nothin' but a damn boob!"

"What do you mean—boob?" Black John cried, slipping his hand beneath his shirt and scratching lustily at his belly.

"I'll tell you what I mean. I kin tell it to you here. I got it all figgered out. The kid's dead. You never drug his body no hell of a ways. It won't take the police long to locate it. When they do, the claim's mine—it's wrote right in the papers. All I got to do is tell the police he hit out fer Dawson with a pack of dust, an' never showed up no more. You done the job fer me—but it's the last job you'll ever do. You don't never leave this shack alive!"

As he spoke, the man drew the nickle-plated gun from his pocket—and the next instant, his eyes widened in terror as he stared into the muzzel of the forty-five Colt that the big man slipped from beneath his shirt. The gun dropped from his nerveless fingers and thudded onto the table top.

"What—what the hell!" he gasped, as his eyes raised to the steel gray eyes above the black beard.

Reaching across the table, Black John picked up the nickel-plated gun and slipped it into his pocket. "Hard guys like you hadn't ought to carry pocket guns—you might hurt somebody."

The man moistened his trembling lips with his tongue. "You got me," he wined, "but for God's sake, don't shoot! Take your cut of that dust—take the hull twenty sacks! Take 'em an' git to hell outa here! I'll keep my mouth shet—about them Fortymile jobs, an' you knockin' the kid off. Hell, I wouldn't dast to squawk, nohow—I told you about knockin' that guy off and' buryin' him here on the claim."

The big man grinned. "You ondoubtless lied, Lem. I've somehow got the impression that you ain't trustworthy."

"I ain't lyin'! I tell you I done it! I kin show him to you in the mornin'—what would be left of him. He ain't only three, four foot down. I shoveled the gravel on him, an' then throw'd them extry sluice planks on top of it, so's a wolf or nothin' couldn't dig him up. Hell, man—if I was to squawk, so could you! We'd both git hung —an' there ain't no percentage in that! You can't git away with shootin' me, nohow. What with the kid disappearin,' an' me, too—the police would git on the job, an' MacShane would damn quick tell 'em that you was workin' here, an' they'd be on yer tail before you could git nowheres. It looks like a horse apiece, Bill. Like I says—take that dust—sixteen hundred ounces, that's better'n twenty-five thousan' dollars—an' git goin.' With the kid dead, I'll have the claim."

"You like to shoot off your mouth, don't you, Lem?" the big man said, eyeing the other. "You know, if I ever knocked a man off I sure as hell wouldn't sit around an' brag about it—an' tell where I buried him, to boot."

There was a note of truculence in the

other's voice as he replied. "I don't never shoot off my mouth onless I know damn well who I'm talkin' to. You ain't in no shape to squawk—what with them Forty-mile jobs hangin' over you, an' the murder of the kid, to boot."

Black John smiled, broadly. "You'd be safe enough, Lem, if you hadn't made three, four mistakes. In the first place, my name ain't Bad Bill Reddick. I never pulled off any jobs on Fortymile—robberies or murders, either. No breed ever knifed me in a Rampart saloon. I got this scar smashin' a window in a burnin' shack to drag a man out. An' I might add that the kid ain't no more dead than you an' I are. You claim you never shoot off your mouth onless you know who you're talkin' to. That's your biggest mistake of all."

Brink's eyes widened, and his mouth dropped open, as Black John raised his voice and called. "Come on in, boys! Lem's spoke his piece!"

THE door opened a moment later, as Burr MacShane and Bob Wilson stepped into the room. MacShane grinned. "Yeah, it was quite a piece, at that. Mighty interestin'."

The blood rushed to Brink's face that had turned paper-white in the lamplight. "It's a damn lie! You couldn't hear nothin' through them log walls—an' the window shet!"

For answer MacShane stepped over, tore the calendar from the wall and pointed to the inch-wide gap where the chinking had been punched out.

There were several moments of dead silence, during which Brink's glance flitted furtively from one to the other of the three.

"What—what you goin' to do?" he asked, at length.

"It ain't what we're goin' to do that'll interest you. It's what you're goin' to do," Black John replied.

"How do you mean?"

"Meanin' that there's some slight adjustments to be made in your personal economy."

"I don't git you."

"You will before the evenin's over. It's like this. You admitted to me, yesterday, that you'd stole plenty off your pardner, Sam Wilson."

"I lied. Them twenty sacks in the pack there is every damn cent I've got in the world—an' half of them belongs to the kid."

The big man nodded. "That's right, Brink. An' half the claim belongs to you, now. But it won't in a few minutes."

"What do you mean—won't in a few minutes?" the man cried, his glance flashing to the butt of the sixgun that protruded slightly from the big man's shirt front.

"Oh, I ain't goin' to shoot you—much as you deserve it. I mean that it hadn't ought to take more than a few minutes for me to write out the assignment of your half of the claim to the kid. He's got the assignment his dad made out to him. It's all wrote out legal, an' I'll copy it, substitutin' your name for Sam Wilson's as the assignor. Then you can sign it, an' the kid can get it recorded. That will leave him as sole owner of this claim."

The man's face flushed angrily. "By God, I won't do it! Half of this claim's mine, an' I'll hang onto it."

Black John shrugged. "Suit yourself. You'll hang, all right, but it'll be on a gallows—not onto this claim. An' when you do hang, it'll be for the man you clubbed to death an' buried under them planks. Then your half of the claim will revert to the kid automatically. It was your idea—puttin' that clause in the papers, Brink—an' there was murder in your heart when you done it—Sam Wilson's murder—the same as you had Bob Wilson's murder in your heart, yesterday. You better sign over the claim, Brink. Remember there was three of us heard you admit murderin' that man—an' it won't take the police long to dig him up."

"I—I never murdered him. I had to kill him. He come at me with the rifle—an' I had to git him!"

"You'd ought to have thought that one up when you was braggin' about catchin' him swipin' dust. The real reason was to keep from payin' him wages. It won't take a jury long to convict you, Brink—when they see the *corpus delicti* an' hear what we've got to say. It's up to you—sign the transfer an' get to hell out of here by daylight—or refuse to sign it, an' let the court make the transfer after you're hung."

The man turned to MacShane. "If he's Bad Bill Reddick, how's he goin' to testify in court—with robbery an' murder agin him on Fortymile?"

MacShane eyed Black John and shook his head, slowly. "First off I thought he was Bad Bill, but come to look at him closer, I see he's someone else."

"God damn you! Damn you all! You're in cahoots to git me off'n this claim! I'll sign the transfer. I gotta. Damn if I'm goin' to git hung! But, first off, the kid's gotta dicker!"

"How do you mean—dicker?" Black John asked.

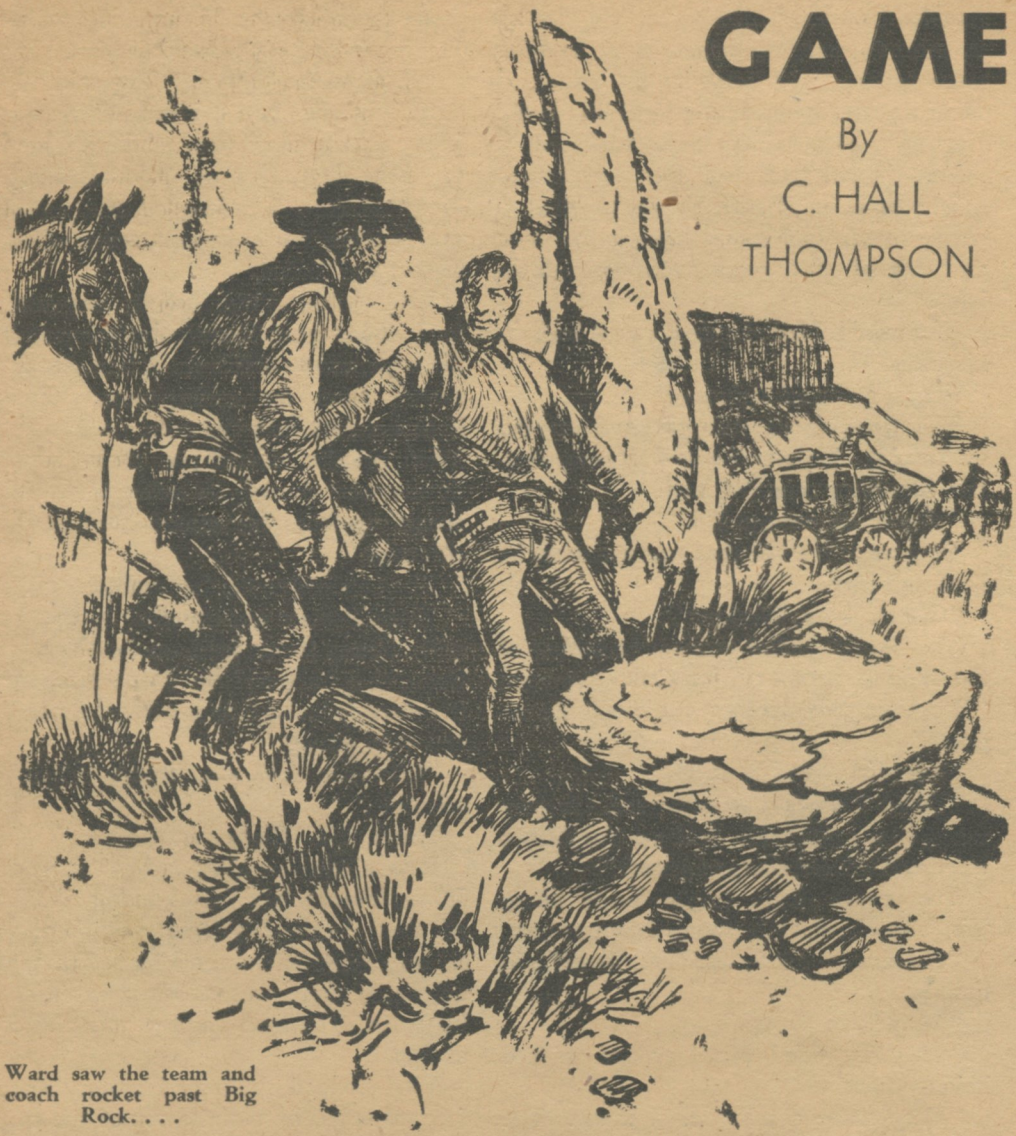
"It's like this—half the dust in that pack's mine. An' I've got more dust cached here on the claim—my share of the dust that's been took out of it, an' the dust I beat Sam Wilson out of. I'll give the kid what Sam's got comin'—but, by God, the rest's mine! I earned it, fair an' square!"

Black John's eyes widened. "Why, you dirty, double-crossin,' murderin' son—you never done nothin' fair an' square in your life! Now I'm tellin' you one—you'll sign that transfer, an' then you'll get to hell off the crick—an' you ain't takin' no dust with you—not one damn ounce! An' what's more, you've got just thirty days to get out of the Yukon. Thirty day from now, Corporal Downey'll come up here an' dig up the guy you murdered—an' he'll have your description, right down to a gnat's hind leg—an' by God, you'll swing for murder! Tomorrow we three'll dig up your cache there under the woodpile an' apportion the dust equitably. The kid'll get his dad's share. An' your share, amountin' to two hundred an' eighty thousan' dollars, will just about cover my attorney fee for drawin' up the transfer paper. Deprivin' you of the emoluments of crime is the best way I know to teach you damn crooks that crime don't pay."

(Continued on page 109)

THE FAME AND THE GAME

By C. HALL THOMPSON



Ward saw the team and coach rocket past Big Rock. . . .

They'd convicted Ward Bonner for a crime he'd never committed. Just to make the record straight, Ward planned a holdup they'd never pin on him. . . .

VIRG said, "Sit still, just don't move." He was sweating. The sweat made cold wet streaks in the traildust that stained his face. He looked younger than eighteen, tall and boy-thin in the dusty jeans and shirt, the black, battered Stetson. The trembling was bad at the pit of his belly, but he held the gun level on the man behind the desk.

The jailhouse was small with adobe walls and a picture of General Grant over the mantle. Outside, in the night, Nogales lay at ease; far over on Saloon Row, waddies were making loud jokes at the bars and Mexican dancing-girls did highkicks to the ring of a pianola. In some backyard, a mongrel bayed the moon. But, here, it was quiet; here, in Sheriff Wesley's office, a small, silent wind came through the door and stirred the greenshaded hangdown lamp.

The man behind the desk eased back in his chair.

Virg's gunhand tightened.

The five-pointed star glittered on the man's vest. He was fat and slow-moving. His breathing sounded loud.

"You're all wrong, kid."

Virg made a smile that was meant to be hard and sure.

"Get the keys, Wesley."

The Sheriff looked at him; he looked at the shining barrel of the Colt. He said, "Breaking your brother out won't do no good."

Virg said, "The keys."

"Ward Bonner was convicted. A jury found him guilty. He held up the Bisbee stage and killed a shotgun guard."

The sweat made bright beads along Virg's forehead. His young face was pale.

"There were witnesses," the Sheriff said quietly.

"They were wrong."

"They identified Ward as the masked holdup man."

"They made a mistake. I know. The day it happened, Ward was out mending fence. I was with him."

The fat face was expressionless.

"You're his kid brother. Any kid would lie to save—"

"Shut up."

"You're making a mistake."

"Shut up and get the keys!"

It came high and a little too shrill. The triggerfinger twitched.

The Sheriff quit arguing.

He rose, slow and careful, hands high from the holster at his hip. He took the keyring from its peg and looked at Virg.

"Back to the bullpen," Virg said.

The Sheriff obeyed. His bootheels struck heavy on the plank floor; the keys jangled on their ring. Out on the main drag, a bunch of cowpokes laughed and mounted up, heading home from a spree of town liquor and ladies.

Virg followed the broad, lazy-moving back. They went through the iron-gate into the wide, musty cellblock. A kerosene lamp swung from the ceiling-center. Peaked light reached into the cells. A couple of Mex drunks stirred in their whiskey dreams and snored. A miller batted blind wings against the smoke stained lamp chimney.

They walked to the last cell on the left.

Ward Bonner was standing by the door, wide, strong hands hard on the black bars. Something happened to Virg's face, then; it softened, broke into a half-grin, nervous and very young.

"Like you told me, Ward. Right on schedule."

"Sure, kid. Right on schedule."

It was Ward's voice; and yet, it wasn't. It was Ward's face, broad and dark-bearded, there in the half-light; yet, there was no easy smile to answer Virg's, like in the old days; there was no deep sureness in his voice. The tone was flat now and cold as metal.

Virg stopped smiling. He saw Ward's face, bleached by months out of the range sun; rotten months in a tiny closet with bars on the window. He saw the mouth, bitter with remembering the smug self-assurance of witnesses who had been dead wrong and ready to swear an innocent man into twenty-five years of prison.

But, that was over now, Virg thought. All that was finished. He gestured with the gun.

"Open up."

THE Sheriff used a key; the tumblers grated. The cell door swung wide. Ward looked taller without the bars before him; his shoulders looked squarer. He stepped out and faced the Sheriff.

"Unbuckle the belt, Wesley."

Fat fingers worked with creaking leather. The Sheriff let belt and holster slide to the floor. His eyes stayed on Virg's Colt.

Ward picked up the cartridge-belt, cinched it over his own hips. One square fist lifted the gun and closed on it familiarly. Ward looked at the Sheriff.

Wesley was breathing in loud, slow wheezes.

Ward said, "Inside."

The fat man stared back at him.

"We'll get you, Bonner."

Ward smiled. There was no humor in it.

"Into the cell," he said.

"You're crazy. Getting your own kid brother mixed up in your mess."

"Never mind."

"You're crazy."

Ward's lips went rigid and white. Virg looked at him. It wasn't Ward; it wasn't the soft, easy-going Ward he had ridden range with six months ago. Something had happened. Something had changed.

"Get in there."

The words were cold, bloodless. Only Ward's eyes lived and burned.

The Sheriff walked into the cell.

Ward moved fast.

Virg said, "Ward, no!"

But Ward was in behind the fat man, clubbing the pistol in one palm, lifting the barrel and bringing it down brutally, so that it caved Wesley's felt hat, dug into flesh just over the ear.

Thick legs pleated at the knees; the Sheriff went down like a sack of meal. He didn't even grunt. His hat rolled clear and lay still and, even in the dimness, Virg could see the torn skin under the hairline, the way blood-bubbles formed and ran down into the fat creases of the neck.

"Ward," he said thickly to his brother.

Ward had gone a step nearer the crumpled figure. That smile was still in place. It twisted as he dragged one boot high, ready to kick.

Virg caught his sleeve.

"Ward, for God's sake!"

Ward stared at him. Then, blind anger ebbed; the cold eyes focussed on Virg. Ward pulled in a deep breath.

"Everything set, kid?"

Virg stood there, pale and numb.

"You didn't have to hit him."

Ward's mouth tightened. "You got the horses?"

"You didn't have to—"

"The horses!"

The whiplash tone halted Virg. He kept staring.

What is it? his mind said. *He's changed. He's different.*

Aloud, he said, "Yeah." Dully, he said, "The horses are out back."

Ward's eyes avoided his.

Ward holstered the gun and locked the cell door. The Sheriff lay very still. He was breathing; that was about all. The blood had begun to form a pool on the floor by his chin.

"Let's go."

Ward led the way to the rear door. Virg followed.

His young, thin face was very pale. He felt sick.

The black alleyway smelled of dust and garbage pails. A gray tom rummaged for fishheads in one of the pails. Ward and Virg crossed to the ponies. Ward mounted the black gelding. Virg took the roan. They didn't talk. They pulled out of the alley, north and east along the main street.

Nogales was half abed. Moonlight spilled white in the rutted dust of the road. A thin Mexican sat by the church steps and made soft cantanellas on a guitar. Beyond the open churchdoor, old casadas prayed before lighted altar candles and, down on Saloon Row, the pianola rattled. A knot

of grangers lounged on the portico of the Bird Cage Hotel. Their talk paused. They eyed the two riders.

Virg's grip tightened on the reins.

"Slow," Ward said. "Easy and sure, like we got nothing to hide."

They rode on, idly, unhurried. The grangers went back to shoptalk.

The last low adobe houses straggled past. The street widened into a road, breaking out onto the flats. Without looking back, Ward nodded. Virg dug heels into the roan's belly. They hit out across moon-washed open land, headed toward Bisbee, toward the Arizona border and New Mexico, swinging from trot to walk to trot, to keep the horses under them.

The moon was at its peak. Stars were cold winking needlepoints against the black cloth of the sky. The wind turned cool and chilled the sweat under Virg's eyes, and through the changing rhythm of hoofbeats, he could hear his mind whispering: Stranger. He's not Ward anymore, he's a stranger.

IT SEEMED a long spell before Ward gave him the sign. Nogales was nothing but a cluster of firefly lights all but lost in the rolling folds of land behind them. They eased to a walk, resting the ponies.

Virg didn't speak. Ward sat back in the leather.

"Well. We did it, kid."

Virg didn't answer.

Ward's smile hardened; the coldness was in his eyes again. "Yeah," he said again. "We did it."

Hoofs made a sad clipclop in the dust. A jackrabbit skittered across-trail and hid in the berry-thickets. After a minute, flatly, Virg said,

"You didn't have to hit him."

Ward's smile faded. "I had to shut him up. We needed time."

"You could've tied him. You could've used a gag."

"Forget it."

"It wasn't like you."

"I told you. Let it go."

"I saw. You were going to kick—"

"You don't understand." Ward's voice was sharp and tight. "You're young," he said. "A lot, you don't understand."

"But you didn't need to—"

"Shut up, Virg. Just shut up."

They rode. Far ahead now, eastward in the night, a faint glow shimmered against the skyline—the lights of Bisbee. Ward sat his gelding stiff and straight, watching the lights. His eyes narrowed.

Finally, the kid said, "Ward."

"Yeah."

"It's over now," Virg said. "The past is past, ain't it, Ward?"

There was nothing in Ward's face. His stare had turned inward and for a moment, Virg knew, this wasn't the open trail heading for New Mexico and freedom. This was a county courthouse with dusty sunlight filtering through tall, dirty windows and a bluebottle buzzing in the heat and thirteen men with calm, hard faces in the jurybox. Ward was seeing the witnesses, hearing their glib, sure statements that swore Ward Bonner was the masked killer who robbed the Bisbee-Tucson stage.

The prosecutor had had a field day. Who could believe Virg Bonner's alibi story? Wouldn't any kid swear black was white to save his brother's hide? The bluebottle buzzed and the jury foreman talked heavy through his shaggy mustache. "We, the jury, find the defendant guilty as charged. . . ."

"It's done. It's all past, now, Ward."

"Yeah, Virg. Sure."

"Everything's going to be fine."

"Just fine."

"I got a fair price for the spread. Wasn't much left after the lawyers, but—"

"There's never much," Ward said thinly. "They never leave you much."

"But enough, Ward. We can hit for New Mexico. Up Taos way. We can start us a new spread."

Ward looked at him. For a minute, the square jaw eased. He jabbed Virg's shoulder with a gentle fist.

"Sure," he said. "Sure, kid."

It sounded all right. Riding along easy and quiet, Virg thought, *I ought to feel fine; I ought to feel better*, now. Only he kept seeing a tiny cell in jaundiced lamplight and a scar of ripped flesh and the blood that made a little shining puddle in the dust. He kept seeing the way Ward's eyes rested long and steady on the distant lights of Bisbee.

And he couldn't get shet of the sick, uneasy feeling at the pit of his belly.

THE Bisbee operator hugged a phone to one ear. The stub of his pencil scurried across yellow telegraph paper, finishing the signature, *Benj. Wesley, Sheriff, Nogales.* The ticking in his ear stopped. The little telegrapher frowned. He took off the headphone and shoved back his chair.

Outside, the street was ready for sleep. The Gay Dog Saloon stayed awake to amuse a few late-comers. Pale lamplight showed behind the window lettered, MARSHAL'S OFFICE. The operator's boots clicked fast and hard on the boardwalk.

The Marshal was bony and bleach-eyed, smoking a thick cigar, his feet propped on the rolltop desk. In the other chair, sat a thin man in a dark suit and hard hat. His face had a city look; his talk sounded down-east and fretful.

"Come all the way West for news copy and nothing fit to print. . . ."

He paused and looked at the telegrapher.

The Marshal smoked his cigar. "For me, Sam?"

The operator nodded. "From Nogales. Marked urgent."

Yellow paper rattled in the Marshal's grip. He read. He uncoiled his legs, sat up straight, and read again.

The telegrapher said, "Any answer, Marshal?"

Brows pulled together over cloudless eyes.

"Tell him we'll keep a lookout, Sam. Tell him thanks."

The operator went out.

The newspaper man watched the Marshal stand up.

"Story for me?"

"Mebbe." The Marshal pulled on a gray Stetson.

"Mind if I tag along?"

"Suit yourself."

They went downstreet under the low wooden awning of the main drag. One lamp burned in the little room behind the Bisbee Stage and Freight Building. Zwing Sutton, the stage driver, let them in. The Marshal didn't waste chitchat.

"Ward Bonner broke out down Nogales way,' he said. "Crowd of grangers saw him leave town. Ben Wesley says he was headed this way."

Sutton scratched the bristle of red beard. "You don't figure he'd try something?"

"Mebbe."

"It'd be crazy. Aiming to hold up the same stage a second time."

The Marshal frowned.

"Crazy," he said. "Or smart. Just about what nobody'd expect."

The newspaper man's eyes sharpened.

"Is this the same Bonner . . .?"

"The same."

"And you think he might try again."

"I don't think," the Marshal said quietly. "I know the Bisbee stage pulls out at sunup, carrying a gold shipment to Tucson." The frown deepened. "I know it's damn funny that Bonner busts out the night before the shipment."

The room was quiet. Sutton got a bottle and three jiggers out of the yellow oak desk-drawer. He poured. The Marshal stood eying his drink.

"I'll be riding shotgun," he said.

Sutton nodded.

The newspaperman said, "Can a man

buy a ticket to Tucson—for that stage?"

They looked at him. The Marshal shrugged.

"At your own risk. It's your party."

"My story." The newspaper man winked and lifted his glass. "Eye-witness report of stage-robbery. Here's to my story."

They drank. The Marshal walked to the door, stared down along the ribbon of road reaching west to Tucson.

"It won't be no fairytale," he said. "No sir," he said. "It won't be no pretty fairy-tale."

VIRG said, "I don't get you."

Ward built a cigarette and lit it from the tiny hooded brushfire.

"The horses need rest, kid."

Virg snapped a twig between taut fingers.

"I figured we'd ride. Sooner we hit the New Mex border the better."

"The horses are beat," Ward said. "It's not a bad spot."

The camp was laid in a stand of pine, on a rise that dropped sharply down to the Tucson-Bisbee road. Foliage sheltered the timid fireglow. The ponies browsed at a stake in the shortgrass.

Virg told himself Ward was right. They needed spelling, both men and mounts. It was a safe place. Still, he didn't like this unscheduled halt. He didn't like the way Ward rose now and walked like a man who waited.

Virg said, "We ought to keep guard."

"Mmm." Ward kept eyeing the curl and slope of the road below.

"I'll take first watch."

"No!" Ward twisted sharply; then, his eyes lidded, edged away from the kid's frown. "Never mind. You need the rest. I'll stand watch."

"But—"

"I'll stand watch."

His turned back ended argument. After a minute, Virg stretched out. The uneasiness was still on him but a cool wind came down through the pines and the fire danced and saddle-weariness eased into his body. A chipmunk winked at him from the clearing-lip, then skittered away. Somewhere, a nightbird shrilled. Virg slept.

There was no rest in the sleeping. Sounds came to him under the wind and the night-murmurs of the pines. He dreamed of hoofs that beat near and halted and a stink of liquor and voices that he strained to hear. Cold sweat drained along his ribs and he turned in the blankets. A pony nickered then, and sleep was gone but the voices went on droning.

He opened his eyes carefully.

It was Ward's voice that said, "You're sure?"

"On my mother's grave, Ward."

Virg lay quite still and told himself he was dreaming. But the firelight was real and the drawn-tight look of Ward's mouth. He could see the man squatted opposite Ward, the stubbled jaw and loose lips, the whiskey-raw eyes that blinked in wet sockets. The man wiped an old hand across his old, lined face. He watched the canteen in Ward's fist.

"A long ride from Bisbee. I could use a snort."

Ward held onto the canteen.

He said, "Go over it again. I don't want mistakes."

The old man made a face. "I told you, Ward—"

"Tell me again."

"Well, like you planned when we was cellmates down in Nogales. Soon's I was free, I lit up to Bisbee; watched like a old baldy eagle, I did. I know ever' move that stage makes 'tween here and Tucson."

Virg was trembling; his fist knotted on a tuft of grass, but he did not move. He did not speak.

"I sure could use a snort, Ward."

Ward just waited.

"Well, you know the rest," the old man whined. "That narrow cut down by Big Rock, this side of the Apache Wells Sta-

tion; the stage reaches there just about ten in the morning. Taking that gold'll be as easy as shootin' a one-legged pigeon."

"Ward!" It was a ragged noise in Virg's throat.

The old man started. Ward went stiff between the shoulders.

Virg was on his feet. "Listen, Ward—"

"I thought you was asleep."

"I reckon you did. Ward, are you gone loco—"

Flatly, Ward said, "We'll talk later."

Then, to the old man, "The kid brother. He busted me out."

"Well!" Dry lips broke over stained toothsnags. "Well, now, I heared big things about you, boy. Bet you're nigh as smart as Ward, here—"

Ward didn't look at Virg.

"Yessir," the old man laughed. "Real smart boy, this Ward. Got it all figured like clockwork whilst he was stewing in that Nogales pigpen." The sandpaper chuckle came again. "Won't the Bisbee boys be plumb surprised when old Ward slides them gold-boxes out from under their nose. Lordee, but won't they. . . ."

Ward said, "You better ride, now."

"Well. . . ."

"Get back to Bisbee. Keep a lookout for any last-minute changes."

"If you say so." Redrimmed eyes squinted. "About my cut—"

"After the job's done," Ward said.

"A third of the take."

Ward nodded.

"Right now, I'm kind of low on swill-money."

Ward turned to Virg. The kid's stare was cold, numb. Ward ignored it.

"Give me an eagle."

After a second, Virg fished out the coin. Ward flipped it to the old man. The chuckle rattled.

"Enough to keep me drunk till the stage rolls in, eh, Ward? Then, we'll all be wallowing in—"

"You got a long ride."

"Sure." The old man winked at Virg. "Smart, this Ward. Sharp and careful."

Virg's gaze did not leave Ward.

The old man took a swig from the canteen, then mounted a rundown coyote dun. He waved. Ward waved back. Virg didn't. The dun wheeled and went down, dainty, picking its way to the road. After a while, they could no longer hear the sound of hoofs. The grove was very still.

WARD stirred the fire with a boot-toe. He took the big turnip watch from his vestpocket. Smoldering flames glinted on the gold case.

"Four-ten," he said.

Virg stood there.

"Got to reach Big Rock before ten," Ward said. "Still time for some shut-eye."

He started for his bedroll, spread across the fire from Virg's.

"Ward."

He glanced over his shoulder. Virg stood with boots wide-planted, body taut, watching him steadily.

"You didn't commit that first holdup."

Ward let out a harsh laugh, flung back a blanket. "I was innocent as a foal—that time."

"Then, why this?"

Ward didn't answer. Virg moved a step nearer.

"Sure. You had a right to bust free. I helped you because we had a plan; a dream of a little strip of free land in New Mexico; a new start for both of us. I never figured you'd change into a—"

Ward spun abruptly, facing him. "A man's bound to change. You lie in a two-by-four coffin with bars on the window; you stare at four walls day and night and you think."

"Go on."

"All my life, I worked for that penny-ante spread we owned. I was honest. I never cheated a man out of a red cent. Then, it was all gone. Overnight, gone,

because a bunch of blind jackasses mistook me for somebody else! What'd my past mean? What'd it count I was decent and honest? Not a damn thing."

His breath came ragged and quick now.

"So, you think. And you learn—only one thing is smart in this life. Know what you want. Take what you want. And never let anybody or anything stand in your way."

The square jaw hardened.

"I want money. No more two-bit outfits. No more worry and sweat. I want all the things I never had because I was too damn sweet and honest. That gold shipment can buy what I want."

"But—"

Flatly, Ward said, "I know what I'm doing, kid. Leave this to me."

Virg stood very still. "So, that's the story."

"That's it."

"You got it all figured. You sigh and brood and cry for yourself. . . ."

"Shut up."

"And it all totes up to this rotten change—"

"You're a green kid. You don't understand."

"I understand you're not my brother anymore. You're not the guy I looked up to all my life. . . ."

The fire spluttered under a small wind. Ward's lips were a taut-drawn thread.

"Get some sleep, kid. You'll feel better in the morning."

He started to turn away.

"Maybe not," Virg said. "Maybe I don't want any part of a holdup—"

Ward twisted back sharply. "Nobody said that."

"You made the plan. Remember? We're scheduled to waylay the Bisbee stage at Big—"

"*I'm* scheduled." Tendons corded under the burning flush of Ward's neck. "Get that, Virg. *I* do the job. You got no part in it. You sit right here. You wait."

The clearing was quiet; aspen leaves sighed sleepily overhead. Virg stared for a long minute; slowly, his eyes narrowed. The words came low and even.

"You worked out a philosophy in prison, Ward. If it's good enough for you. . . ."

"Never mind that!"

"What's sauce for the goose—"

"I told you never mind!" It was raw in Ward's throat. "You're a kid. You'll stay put and do as I say."

Virg just looked at him. The hint of a grin on his lips. It annoyed Ward.

"I know," he said thinly. "You'd like to stop me."

The half smile didn't fade. "Any way I can."

"Maybe you got ideas. Like riding into Bisbee and warning the marshal." Ward's breathing came quick and dry. "But, you won't, Virg. You couldn't. You're my brother."

Virg stood there, silent.

"You'll wait," Ward told him. "You'll be ready to ride for New Mex when I get back." He said, "You won't do anything to stop me. There's nothing you *can* do."

Virg had quit smiling. Their eyes held for a long moment. Finally, Ward turned away. "We both need rest."

"Yeah," Virg said tonelessly. "Sure."

He went to his blankets.

Night sounds stirred in the brush and, far out on the flats, a coyote wailed. Virg lay back against the saddle. There was nothing in his face. He looked like a lonely kid ready for sleep.

But, behind slitted eyelids, his mind worked sharp and clear. *Wait,* it whispered. *There's plenty of time.* He could see the tall shadow of Ward standing beyond the fire, then sprawling in the rumpled bedroll.

Ward didn't sleep at once. He shifted, restless, one hand near the Colt by his saddle. Twice, he glanced toward Virg. The kid didn't move.

It seemed hours. It seemed a lifetime before Ward's long figure relaxed. The gut-

tering fire flickered low and Virg could hear the deep easy sound of snoring. He lay still, waiting, to make sure.

BISBEE stretched and yawned. On the lip of town, a cock crowed the sun and a swamper came out of the Gay Lady Saloon, toting bucket and rag to wash the ornate windows. He paused a moment and lit a pipe, watching the departure of the Tucson stage.

The coach was drawn up before the office. Zwing Sutton was on the buckboard seat. The marshal carried a shotgun in the crook of one arm. The swamper heard the freight manager say, "Well, good luck."

Sutton eyed the ironbound freight-boxes. "We'll need it."

The newspaperman grinned. "Looks like my trip West won't be wasted, eh?"

Nobody answered.

The newspaperman climbed in. The marshal got up beside Sutton. The freight manager waved. "Give Bonner hell."

"Sure."

Sutton swore and bellowed and the horse put shoulder into it. The coach rocked and jolted ahead, leather springs creaking. The swamper stood staring after the foxtail of dust that billowed in its wake. He showed broken, stained teeth in a slow grin.

"Just like clockwork, Ward."

His whiskey-red eyes glittered. He turned to his waterbucket.

Out on the flats, the stage rolled west for the Apache Wells Station.

* * *

The sound startled Ward. Sleep went away. His eyes opened to pallid morning mist. Slowly, lean fingers closed on the Colt-butt. That was the only move he made.

It came again—the light creak and rasp of dry brush.

Softly, Ward said, "Virg?"

There was stillness.

"Virg."

It grated now in his throat. Abruptly, he rolled to his feet.

Faint motes of sunlight struggled through the branches. At campedge, the black gelding shifted, restless on its tether, making the rustle Ward had heard. The roan was gone. So was the blanket roll opposite Ward's. So was Virg.

Ward passed a hand over blank eyes. His mind wouldn't take it in. His mind wouldn't believe. *Water,* he thought, *he went to the creek for coffee-water.*

Ward strode to the lip of the clearing.

"Kid? You down there?"

Only the light rush of a spring freshet over shale answered him.

Ward swore. He heard his own voice, echoing across last night's fire-glow, "Maybe you'd like to ride to Bisbee and warn the marshal." His head moved numbly from side to side.

Then, he found the roan's trace. That settled everything. He read the pattern of dainty hooves, light at first as if the horse were led, then heavier where Virg had mounted up out of earshot of the camp. The trail cut south and east, dead-on for Bisbee.

Ward straightened from his study of the ground. Anger made a stiff mask of his face now.

"All right," he said aloud. "Try to warn them. There's still time."

The gold turnip said nine-twenty. It was a half hour stint east and north to Big Rock.

Ward didn't waste motions. He struck camp and hitched the black with saddlebags that waited to hold the Tucson gold. He mounted, a thin smile twisting his mouth. Let the marshal form his posse. By the time they caught up with the Bisbee stage, they'd find an empty boot. And Virg. Ward quit smiling. Forget Virg. The hell with Virg. He dug spurs into the gelding's belly. He rode.

The going was rugged. Stretching out under him, always, he caught the trace of Virg's pony. He tried to ignore it. He tried not to think. Then, he struck the cutoff that turned north to Big Rock.

The roan's trail should have gone on, straight east for Bisbee. It didn't. It swung left. Toward . . .

"Big Rock."

Ward's dark brows pulled together. Virg wasn't headed for Bisbee. He was headed . . . In a thick, hoarse voice, Ward said, "Damn fool kid!"

He used the spurs again. He kept on using them.

THE sun climbed higher. It beat white and hot now on the steep humps of Big Rock. The roan was hobbled out of sight in an alder clump. Ward could see the boy, bellyflat against the stone, a gun under one fist, watching the bend and swerve of the Tucson road northward and below.

Ward tooled the gelding nearer. Virg must have heard the rattle of gravel underhoof. He didn't move. Deliberately, Ward stepped down. He kept it quiet, even.

"What in hell do you think you're doing?"

Virg turned, no hurry in the movement, the Colt in his right hand. He stood up and crossed to the roan.

"The coach comes through any minute. We got no time for talk."

He bent; his hands were steady, freeing the hobble.

Muscles knotted in Ward's jaw.

"Hit the saddle," he said. "Ride back to camp and wait."

Virg straightened, squaring off.

"You got it all wrong, Ward. I don't figure it that way."

"You're not getting tangled in this."

Virg holstered his gun. He stood quiet, immovable. "You told me yourself," he said. "Know what you want. Take what you want. Maybe I'm coming to like the idea—"

"That was different. That was me . . ."

"Not so different, I reckon. I just learned the lesson a little sooner. I had a big brother to teach me—"

Virg stopped short, harkening.

Like summer thunder it came from the east, the deep growl of teamed hoofs and spinning, jolting wheels. Ward's face tightened. He lifted a hand. Virg ignored it. He started for the roan.

"Virg."

He kept walking. The rattle of the stage got louder; they could hear the raucous bawling of the ribbon-man. The coach lurched around a bend into full view.

Ward moved fast. Three strides and his fist clamped down on the lean shoulder. Virg wheeled, freeing a boot from the stirrup. He dug a right deep under short ribs and Ward grunted but didn't let go. The shoulder-grip pivoted Virg, the big left cut out straight and hard. Virg tasted blood. He stomped back, flattening against a hunch of rock. Ward set his feet, bent and ready. But, the kid didn't move.

He just leaned there, a thin line of red at one mouth-corner, looking at Ward. Very slowly, his lips bent in a grin.

Ward saw, then. He saw the team and coach rocket past Big Rock, free and fast over the rutted trail. He saw the tail of it beating off westward for Tucson. He stood motionless until the rocking, grinding song of it died away. Finally, he had his breathing under control.

"You said you'd stop me."

Virg didn't stir. "Any way I could."

"You never meant to stage a holdup," Ward said slowly. "You knew I wouldn't let you."

The boy's grin turned a shade sheepish.

"I knew you couldn't. I reckon I knew my brother Ward was still there, under all the bitter talk."

A slight answering curl had touched Ward's lips.

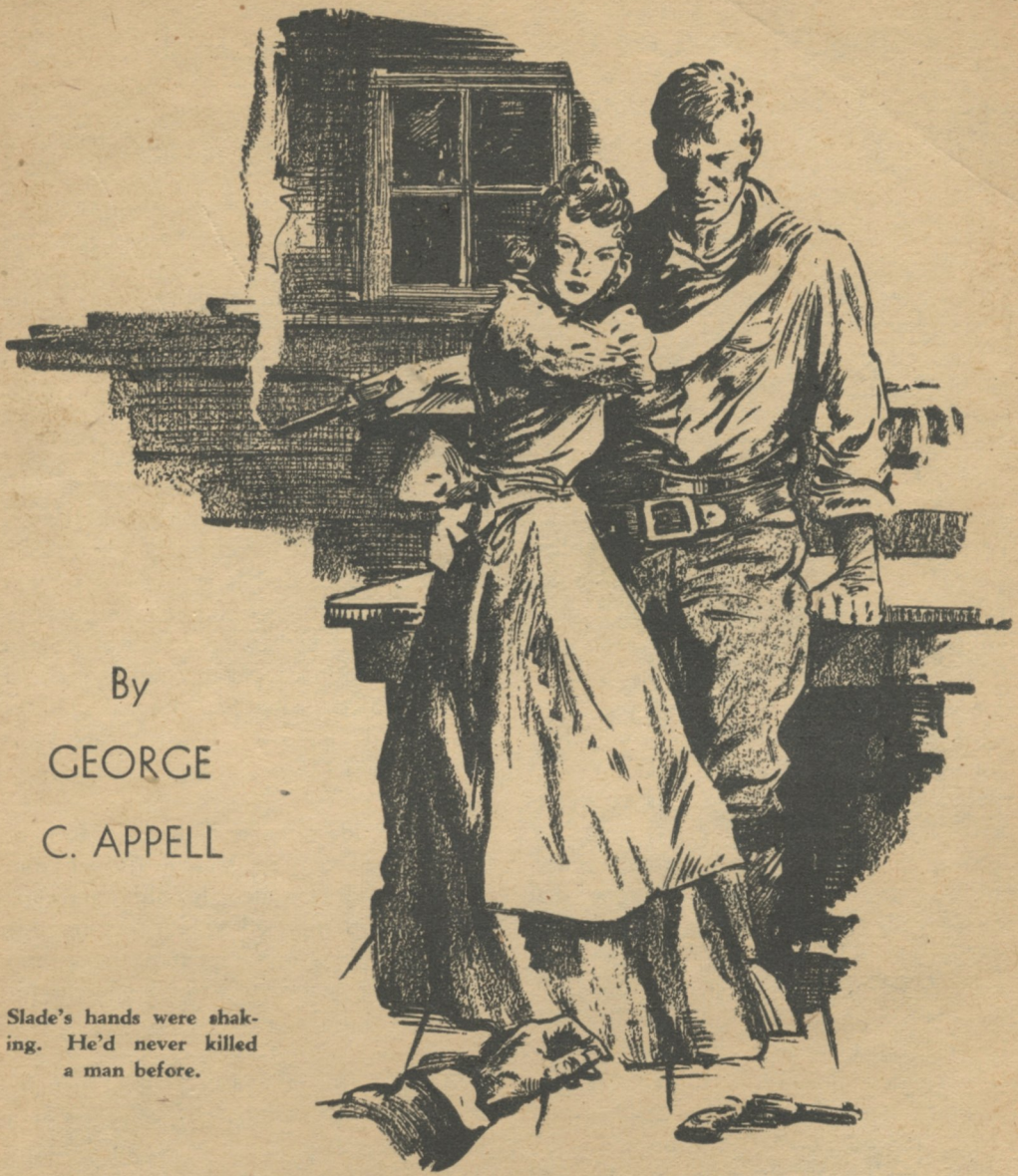
"He was still there," Vig said. All he needed was a chance to find himself."

* * *

The stage pulled into Tucson at night-

(Continued on page 111)

THE TRINITY GESTURE



By GEORGE C. APPELL

Slade's hands were shaking. He'd never killed a man before.

It isn't hard to make a mistake when you've the hunger for far horizons in your eyes and hell's own power in your hands. It's the mending that's hard. . . .

SLADE CULLEN was out in the barn wall-hooking tugs and hames that he had just finished cleaning because Roy had neglected it, breathing through clenched teeth: *Go away, Roy, go away. And don't come back any more.*

It was something he couldn't tell Roy, Roy was Vannie's brother. But he could

tell it to the barn walls, to the racks, to the feed bins. He reminded himself that he needed more feed for the buckboard team and for his own riding hack, too. He always seemed to be running out of feed. He'd ride fence around the pocket herd he was trying to build up, and come back in a day or two, and find the bins half down. He decided to ride into town in the morning and replenish the bins and get some fence nails too, unless Roy hadn't made off with the buckboard before dawn. Roy was in such hard health now that he could rise at three and roll at four and they wouldn't see him again until supper time. Looking for work, Roy said.

Slade wished he'd find it, it wasn't good to have him idling around the place all the time. Not good for Roy and not good for Vannie, and not good for Slade, either. Since Roy had fully recovered from his fevers, Slade was irritated by him. Wanted him off the place. *Go away, Roy—go over to your father's and leave us alone.*

Slade breathed it to Roy's roan, standing on three legs and flashing its tail. Roy had said, "Ne' mind the roan, I'll nurse it while Vannie nurses me." As cocky as that.

Slade stepped from the barn and glanced upward at the slate-hued twilight that wasn't really twilight at all, but a deepening of skies that had been gray all afternoon. It would rain, come tomorrow sometime. Slade hoped again that Roy wouldn't take the buckboard, because he wanted to ride the ten miles into Trinity and get his supplies and return home before the weather struck. It would strike all at once, all of a sudden, and wash the prairie clean and plaster the roads smooth and lash the cottonwoods leaves-over.

Slade wiped his hands on his trousers and cast an eye around the dark purple distances that belonged to him. There was wire out there—he could see an occasional silver splinter where he'd run new strands—and Gringo, the Mex herder, was out there too. Gringo had come up from the Staked Plains two years ago with Dave Meelam, Roy and Vannie's father; and Dave had loaned him to Slade Cullen until Slade could build up his herd and hire his own riders.

So the world was secure as of the end of this day, at least. There was no telling what tonight would bring, or tomorrow. There hadn't been, since Roy had appeared a month before, half-delirious and starved to the ribs and babbling about the men who were coming to kill him.

Roy was sitting in the firelight next to the stove, shelling peas and talking to Vannie. He would chuckle frequently as he talked, hugely enjoying what he was saying, trying to make Vannie enjoy it too. He talked a lot, but never about things that mattered. He talked about why rabbits will never drink and how you can trace a hair-brand from second-growth bristles and what that Dallas rider said after he'd roped his calf in six seconds and then found that the timer's watch had stopped. Things like that. Things from Texas, where Vannie and he had been raised. News from home.

When Slade came in and shut the door, Roy stopped talking. Vannie turned from the stove and examined this still-handsome man she had married a year before, this man who didn't smile much any more, and whose arms seemed to grow longer as his shoulders sloped lower.

TRYING to run a place virtually single-handed will do that to you. Even a small place. Slade returned Vannie's stare, not focussing on any part of her and therefore seeing all of her: the image of her head bound in auburn hair that never seemed to stay combed but sprouted fluffy wings at the temples; the shape of her eyes and the way they slanted upward a bit at the ends; the full lines of her understanding mouth.

She turned back to the stove, and Slade

was staring at the pinned coils of sleek hair on her neck. He walked past Roy and filled a pewter basin and rolled up his sleeves. His abrupt, jerky arm motions reflected the bitterness that was in him. It was bitterness born of the gradual realization that he, not Roy, seemed to bring fear into the house. Roy could make Vannie laugh, but when Slade came in she stiffened all over.

Slade reached for a towel. It's always like this when you have a clean conscience and shelter someone who hasn't. It reacts against you, as if you're the culprit. As if you're the one who'd trailed up from the south last month sick and feverish and haunted by the things you'd done. As if you were the one who should have come north with your family two years ago instead of staying alone in Texas. . . .

Roy had never been the one to settle down, though. It showed in the way he three-fingered a cigarette together and lit it—nervously, hurriedly, as if this would be his last smoke. It was in the way he swiveled his handsome head around all the time, looking for something that wasn't there.

Then he was facing up to Slade through cigarette smoke, blue eyes steady, hands twitching. The peas were all shelled, though he had spilled some on the floor. "Chores done?" It was an inoffensive question, yet it offended Slade. It was as if Roy associated him with chores and nothing else.

"All but your roan." Slade rolled down his sleeves. "I'd like to use the buckboard in the morning. And if you don't mind, would you take a shelter-half out to Gringo?"

"Sure." Roy waved his cigarette airily. "I've got to proceed myself over to the Alderville ranger station after breakfast, anyway." He inhaled and exhaled quickly, not taking the cigarette from his lips. "See that man Dawson again, 'bout a job." He tossed his cigarette into the scuttle and snagged out his gun. Muzzle up, he twirled the cylinder with his thumb, and the spinning metal whined loudly in the silence.

Vannie reached down to him. "The peas, my helper."

Roy handed them up to her, grinning. "Here's what's left. Some of 'em hopped out."

Vannie laughed and Slade's maroon anger glowed dangerously in his face. She loved this crazy sprite who'd made a mistake, and Roy loved her. But Slade was married to Vannie, yet they weren't a matched team. Roy was pulling them off-balance, disrupting it.

Slade said, "Better be careful, Alderville's a three-four hour ride." He had to remind Roy of that, against the time when some men would ride out of the south and cross his trail and leave him where they found him. Slade didn't know who they would be or what they would look like—Roy never talked about things that mattered—and Slade often had tried to visualise them. They'd be sheriffs, probably, or marshals. Same thing, when the shooting was over. Big men with black moustaches, the way Remington sketched them for Leslie's and Harper's. Black hats, gray vests, tuck trousers. And two guns, silver-mounted.

Or they'd be private persons, perhaps—the kind Roy had consorted with in Texas. Dour men who lived by chance, and habitually carried neatly-tied decks of crisp cards that looked new but were cunningly marked. It had always been Slade's guess—and Roy had never denied it—that Roy had flushed a cold deck and shot the man who possessed it. He'd had to ride for his life then, and in a sense he was still riding for it. They'd come for him—the peace officers or the private persons, and demand atonement. On the one hand, a marked-deck artist had been killed; on the other, a man had been murdered. And when the thing was settled, Trinity would have a soiled spot upon it indeed.

Slade smelled the sweet-earth aroma of boiling peas. "I don't know why Grover Cleveland wants a ranger station out here. We can watch our own land."

Roy looked up from his gun. "I might's well make a dollar out've it."

"God sakes—put that thing away!" Slade was staring at the gun.

"Why, all right." Roy holstered. "If it makes you nervous."

Vannie was watching them narrowly, holding a skillet an inch off the stove. The skillet was trembling slightly. Vannie had been brought up with guns. She always said there was a time and a place for them, like babies.

Slade said, "This is a peaceful place, we got no use for weapons on it." He knew his words made no sense to Roy. "Keep it out of sight in here, leastways."

"Why, sure." Roy winked up at Vannie, but she was watching her husband with icy eyes. Roy caught the look, slapped palms to knees and heaved himself to his feet. "Got to say good-night to m'roan, an' listen to his prayers. Ever heard a roan pray?" He was at the door, opening it, stepping sideways into it. "I've heard of prayin' mantisses, an' prayin' at prayer meetin's, but I've ne' heard the kind of prayin' that comes out've a roan. Like the west wind says, there's somethin' about the outside of a horse that does somethin' to the inside of a man." And he winked at Slade.

Slade's impulse was to warn him again to be careful out there. Roy was Vannie's brother, after all; and maybe he honestly wanted a new chance, a fresh start. It isn't hard to make a mistake, if you've got horizons in your eyes and hell in your hands. It's recovering from it that's hard.

Roy was reading Slade's mind. He fanned the cylinder, and there was a devil dance in his eye. "I'm ready for 'em." Then he was gone into the darkness.

Slade was arguing with himself. Maybe what he did was warranted, maybe he had to do it. Maybe he did bump into a wrong pitch, as he put it that time when he was out of his head and sweatin' through the mattress. Maybe he never did shoot a man in the back, like he seems to think he done. But the pleas rang emptily in his throbbing head and he sat down and lowered his face to his palms and squeezed thumbs to temples.

Vannie was talking to him, raising her voice above the crackling of the skillet. "We've got to give him this one chance, I don't care what he's done!"

SLADE nodded, not looking up. The cool pressure of his thumbs was easing the ache in his forehead. He was thinking primarily about the town of Trinity, though he couldn't tell Vannie that any more than he could tell Roy to get out. Their marriage was a by-product of Trinity, a direct result of its having been founded. The two were inseparable in Slade's mind. Trinity, a hope in the breeze. They'd laughed at that two years before, when Dave Meelam and his daughter Vannie and Will Yancey and his wife and the others had come up north from the Staked Plains to cast for greener ranges.

Slade Cullen had been shoving his thin herd west from Missouri, casting for the same thing, and the two small trains had met twenty miles west of Alderville. Shortly they became aware of the fact that they were surrounded by the blessed trinity—grass, wood, and water. So they'd named the place that; and not long afterward, Slade Cullen and Vannie Meelam were married in the town's first church: a patched army tent that shook in the wind and threatened to collapse on Amen. A frame building was there now, with stained glass windows freighted from Bismarck, its white steeple dedicated to the eternal Trinity. Other people had come, approved the site and stayed on it; but the original settlers considered that they had a spiritual equity in the place, to be jealously guarded.

Vannie went on, "Perhaps it was self-defense. We've got—"

"If it was self-defense," Slade asked his palms, "why're they coming to get him?"

"That kind always do! They never forgive, they never forget. I was raised down there, I ought to know."

Slade lifted his face. "What kind? Sheriffs? No sheriff is goin' to—"

"Who mentioned a sheriff? Roy never has, even in his fevers. That's when he kept repeating Mellinger and Unger, Mellinger and Unger. They're the same men—a gambler from Dallas."

"Probably some peace officer trackin' him down."

The skillet was smoking and Vannie shoved it off the fire impatiently. "I don't care who it is, we've got to keep him here 'til he's either found work or sure he can't get any." She grabbed a ladle. "That's the least we can do for him." This had been her idea, to keep Roy here and not let him hole-up at his father's. The names, she'd said, were different, and that might confuse pursuit. A man searching for Meelam would not be likely to call on Cullen.

Slade nodded again, still thinking of Trinity. The town was barely in its third year of existence now, and news of a murder would set it back. Talk can kill something just as surely as a bullet, and Slade Cullen didn't want to see the town die any more than he did Roy.

Roy was always thrusting himself into a thing just as it was coming to completion, as Vannie had often told Slade. Like the time down in Texas when they'd both been kids and Roy had fed the Christmas pudding to the dogs when everyone was waiting for it at the table, forks in hand. Or the time Roy had been perfecting his target practise against the rampart of the new Brazos dam and accidentally blown the log locks off and drained the reservoir, so that everyone from sixteen to sixty had to get out and pump for two days.

And now Roy was intruding himself between Slade and Vannie, interrupting the rhythm of their young marriage with his presence.

He came in from the barn, grinning. "Powerful prayin', that roan did. Got the smell o' hell in his nose tonight. Nothin' like a roan for—"

"Peas?" Vannie offered the dish.

Roy accepted it and sat with his back to the corner, facing the door, as he always sat. "Yuh, I take out in the mornin' for that ranger station, an' get me honest work." He winked at Vannie.

Slade had to say, "Well, be careful," even though Roy didn't require the advice.

"Don't worry 'bout me. Least when I get work, even sittin' in a watch tower, you'll be rid of me."

"It's not that, Roy." Slade tasted the peas, picked at his steak. But he wasn't hungry.

Roy was jubilant. "Might try pa next week. He's fixin' to throw some stock into the drive when it comes through." He asked Vannie, "Think pa'd sign me on?"

Vannie put down her fork. "Stay away from him."

"I'll go where I please." Roy spoke quietly.

"You always have."

Slade watched Vannie pass the platter, saw her biting her underlip, watched her brush blonde wings back into her auburn hair. Texas women, thought Slade, are an odd breed indeed. You never can tell what they'll do when they're transplanted beyond their own borders to new country. Slade fumbled for his pipe, frowning. He knew that it couldn't be much longer now, and that Roy and Vannie must know it too. Soon those big men would come jingling up from the south and put an end to this thing. And from what Slade had heard of Texas peace officers, it would be very soon. It doesn't take much more than a month to track a sick man down.

He stuffed shag into his pipe and lit it

and stared through blue smoke at Roy, hungrily cleaning his plate. Roy's face was spectral through the drifting smoke, and Slade knocked the pipe empty and stood up. He wanted to do violence on Roy with his hands, but he was unable to do so with his heart. Presently he said, "I've got to start early. Good night, all."

THUNDER was muttering heavily from the distances when Slade rolled through the gates at daybreak. He had heard Roy in the back room off the kitchen, when he was drinking black coffee, but Roy hadn't appeared. Slade half-braked on the shallow slope leading to the Trinity road, aware of a low whistle behind him. Roy was back there, leading his roan out and preparing to ride.

And then Roy was trotting east toward Alderville, whistling softly, apparently having forgotten his agreement to take a shelter-half down to Gringo. Slade released the brake and turned onto the road, promising himself to visit the herder as soon as he got back with the feed. It wouldn't rain until afternoon, he guessed, and he was timing his return to midday. He played the whip back and forth lightly, holding his anger at Roy inside him, trying to feel some of Vannie's calmness. But it wouldn't come. *To hell with Roy!* Slade slashed the whip smartly.

A horseman swung into sight where the road bent around the shoulder of a hill near the cutoff to Meelam's. He was thickset and ruddy of face and had sharp brown eyes that held a glint of welcome, a trail offer of peaceful intentions. He was neatly-dressed, the snakeskin band of his hat was new and had been trimmed with gold threading, and his dark clothing was spattered with dust clots and mud flecks as high as his waist. The thinly-braided loops of a grass rope were hanging from his pommel, looping down almost to his wide stirrup.

Slade Cullen, dipping his whip in greeting, judged that the man had come a long way. "Mornin'." He didn't pull down, only reined aside to permit the horseman to pass.

Sharp brown eyes brightened. "Mornin', seh." It was briskly-spoken and business-like.

And that was all. Distance grew between them, half a mile lengthened to a mile, and the shoulder of the hill was well behind him when Slade glanced over his shoulder. It wasn't considered polite to look back immediately, man might think you didn't trust him. The rider was out of sight.

An uneasiness was chewing into Slade by the time he rolled into Trinity. It wasn't caused by the averted faces of people in the street—he had become accustomed to those since Roy's arrival—but by the image of the polite stranger with the gold threading in his hat band.

The man wasn't part of a posse, he was too well-dressed for that; nor had he passed the time of day and asked questions, such as a posse rider or a sheriff might.

Vannie's words were echoing in Slade's memory as he tied up at Stout's Feed & Hardware Store: that kind never forgive, never forget . . . who mentioned a sheriff?

But this was one man, this stranger, and Roy in his delirium had babbled of more than one. Of the men who were coming to kill him. Though delirium does strange things to words, and Roy might have meant the one man with the two names.

Slade couldn't remember them, he was watching Jesse Stout come out of the store. Jesse spat expertly between two planks of the walk. "Mornin', Slade. You needin' somethin'?" It used to be: *Come on in an' break your jaw on some coffee an' we'll make you out a list.*

That was before Roy had come. Most of the people of Trinity had convinced themselves that Roy was hiding out at Slade's in order to simplify the planning of some unclean scheme in which the brothers-in-law would share equally.

Slade said, "I need some grain. Also some fence nails."

Jesse Stout spat again. "You been orderin' anythin' from Omaha, Slade?" He was facing away. "Not that it's any o' my business, course."

"Omaha?" Slade packed his pipe and swiped a match alight. "No." He lit the shag. "Why?"

"Man was here earlier, askin' did I know anyone named Meelam." Stout paused as thunder bumped along the darkening skies. "I told him where Dave lived, an' I mentioned that Dave's daughter'd married locally."

Slade sucked his pipe, and the taste was sour. "Who was he?"

"Oh, innocent 'nough feller. Sellin' range implements out of Omaha. You order anythin'?" Stout's commercial sense was overcoming his suspicions. "Thought you did all your business through us." He shrugged. "Anyway, I put him on the road."

"Thanks, Jesse. Guess the drummers are startin' early this year." He stepped to the tie rail. "You can load the grain right away. And I'll need fifty pounds of nails."

A DEEP crescendo of threat was in the growling skies as Slade whipped the team up the street and onto the road. Fear was mounting against him. It seemed to be a physical pressure holding him back, slowing the plunging team, clutching at wheel rims. And then the rain came. It plucked aimlessly at dusty ruts, as if softening the land for the kill. Then it struck harshly and drummed the dust into muddy troughs and glistened on the prairie and brought with it the fresh, metallic odor of rinsed earth. Lightning trickled down the skies and smashed itself to pieces somewhere miles to westward.

Slade was savage with the whip even as he pitied the team. The buckboard slewed and rocked and yawed dangerously, and Slade began to curse. He was still cursing when he turned off the road and whipped the straining animals up the shallow slope to his gates.

Vannie was in the doorway, unmindful of the weather. A man in a rain-blackened brown hat was standing next to her, and they went inside as Slade leapt from the seat without setting the brake. He was after them, collar open, hat back, hands to hips. He forgot to shut the door. "Roy?"

The answer was in Vannie's horrified face, in her bloodless lips, in the tight clench of her interlaced fingers.

The man was wearing a badge on his belt, to the left of the buckle. "My name's Dawson," he said. "I've come about your wife's brother."

Slade's spinning mind didn't even register what Dawson looked like. "What about him?" His voice was alto.

Dawson drew in a slow, deep breath. "I found him near my tower. I'm the ranger on duty at Alderville." Dawson licked his lips, made a hasty estimate of Slade's resiliency, and decided that it was sufficient to absorb the rest. "He was shot in the back of the head. I recognized him, 'cause he'd been over there before, asking for work. I don't know who did it, I hardly heard the shot. But I picked him up and got his horse, anyway."

"Roy?" Now that it had happened, it didn't seem real. It was all hollow—Dawson's words, Dawson himself. The rain, Vannie's shuddering gasps.

Dawson was saying, "It'll be easier to pack him into Alderville rather than to Trinity, Mr. Cullen." He coughed into a gloved fist. "There's a cemetery there."

Slade returned to the present in a whirling radius of interlaced fingers and belted badges and rain-soaked clothing and muddy boots. His tongue was unaccountably large in his dry mouth. "No tracks, Dawson? No signs?"

Dawson's reply came faintly to Slade's humming ears: "In this weather?"

"I'll go over with you now." Slade swal-

lowed, and almost choked. He forced himself to focus on Vannie, forced his eyes to meet hers. Was she judging him? Was she trying to divine whether he was glad or sad, relieved or shocked? He couldn't tell.

Whatever her judgment was, she withheld it. She moved away from him, over to the stove. "You'd better go, Slade."

Something was being thrust at him, held against him. It was Roy's gun. "He never had the chance to use it," Dawson said. "You take it." The cold weight of it was heavy in Slade's hand. "And here are the other things—makings, matches, three silver cartwheels—"

"Aren't you going?" The scream tore through Vannie's teeth.

Vannie heard the quick hoof falls of two horses trotting east, and she swayed back against the wall and shut her eyes, breathing hard. After a moment, a tear slipped from one closed lid, and then another. They kept pace with the leaking raindrops on the window panes; and like the rain, they kept coming and coming and coming. . . .

* * *

Slade Cullen was thrusting homeward with Roy's roan on a lead, and toward twilight he raised his house and noticed a rider coming in from the other direction, from the Trinity road. Gringo, that must be, coming to get his shelter-half.

There had been nothing back at Dawson's station but Roy's body and the patient roan. No tracks, no clues. Nothing but strumming rain and slimy prairie mud.

So Slade had started for home, heavy in the head with the dark anger that makes for murder, even though its ice takes the strength from fingers and leaves lips numb. Roy had wanted a chance. . . . And to be shot in the back like that! Slade hadn't fired a gun in a long time—Vannie had always been silently scornful about that—and he had to pry from his memory the things Roy had told him: aim at the knees and hit the belly; aim at the belly and hit the throat. In a barroom, 'course, an' not with any distance 'tween you. Revolver bucks up fast.

The rider up ahead had turned his horse into the barn and now he was moving toward the house. The herder, wanting his shelter for the night. The shelter that Roy had neglected to deliver to the range that morning. Roy, neglecting so many things. . . .

Slade put his horse and the roan into stalls and rubbed them and filled the bins. He fed the team, feeling the hard-angled shape of Roy's gun in his belt as he stooped; then moved in the half-darkness to what must be Gringo's patch-colored pony. But it wasn't a pony, it was a big animal mud-plastered to the withers, one foreleg hooked back in lameness. Its furniture was hanging from wall hooks over there, and Slade's groping hands struck against slippery strands, thinly-braided. The damp loops of a grass rope dangling from the pommel.

It was no surprise to see the stranger of that morning standing in front of the stove warming himself. The man was bareheaded now and his hair, like his eyes, was brown and glinting.

Vannie didn't ask questions with lips or eyes, Slade's crumpled expression told her all she needed to know. She said, "This gentleman's from Omaha. He had some trouble with his horse, and I've asked him to stay the night."

The man came away from the stove and gravely inclined his chin. "My horse unfo'tunately slipped an' wrenched a coffin-joint an' might've hu't his pastern. If he can keep his weight off that ol' leg awhile, I'm sho' I'll be able to proceed in the mo'nin', seh." The man tilted his head inquisitively. "I b'lieve we've met before." The hint of a smile softened the hard corners of his mouth.

Slade peeled off his hat and scaled it into a corner. It was the corner where Roy had

always sat. "Vannie, that's a hospitable gesture to make, but tonight—" he was addressing his guest—"we're not quite...." He didn't know how to explain it, he was still in the emotional vacuum that follows emotional shock. It puzzled him that Vannie could stand at a stove and grease a skillet and set out pan fries and pour coffee into boiling water, calm as a pond. Funny creatures, Texas women.

The man was holding his coat flares toward the stove. "I'm an implements salesman, seh. You got a nice spread heah, an' with some of our machinery—" he pronounced it mashinry—"you could develop new acres."

Vannie asked over her shoulder, "Are you a native of Omaha?"

"Ma'am, the hull've Nebraska's m'home town."

Slade thought of the bottle then. He needed a drink, he needed one badly. He went into the back room, Roy's room, and returned with the bottle. He filled two glasses and offered one, and the man took it. Slade tasted his drink, suddenly conscious of Vannie's arched shoulder tension, of the way she was inspecting the back of the man's head from the side of her eyes while not daring to look at Slade.

THE man approved the liquor with a raised brow and a pursed mouth. "If my presence, seh, is undesi'able—"

"Not at all." Something was troubling Vannie, and Slade had to know what. "Yes, we met this morning. Implements, eh?"

"Range implements." His voice was bubbly with suppressed humor, as if he were enjoying a secret joke.

Slade took another tug at his drink. "Weren't you headed this way earlier?"

"Yes, but I tu'ned off at Meelam's." He accepted a refill. "Thought I'd see him first, 'bout m'wares."

Slade pondered it. This man had been in Trinity that morning, asking where Dave Meelam lived. Though how Dave, being from Texas, could have been known to a man from Nebraska—

Slade drained his glass, his hands were shaking, he was perspiring. His tortured mind was clearing now and things were falling into the right slots.

Vannie turned away from the stove, eyes big and green and bright. "I failed to explain to Mr. Unger, here, that my brother Roy was killed near Alderville today."

The blood washed from the man's face and his skin became as gray as the gray of his cleanly-shaven jaws.

A great calmness entered Slade Cullen's muscles and his lips moistened and his fingers took warmth as they flicked to the gun in his belt. "I'd say Unger already knows about Roy, Vannie. Or is it Mellinger?"

The man's coat flare jerked open and both guns exploded at once and Unger's bullet slocked into the wall behind Slade's head. Then Unger buckled at the knees and toppled over on his side and lay that way, eyes glazing open.

Slade's hands were shaking again and he had to put Roy's weapon on the table. He held his sleeve to his face to soak up sweat. He had never killed a man before.

Vannie was beside him, snaking an arm around his waist, pressing herself against him, quick admiration and pride in her upturned face. "You gave him his chance, Slade. You let him draw, just like Roy would have let him draw." She hugged her husband hard against her.

"Roy never had his chance."

"Not today, he didn't. But he was trying to make one for himself here, and—I didn't want you to resent his trying."

Slade, after a moment, took his wife's shoulders. "How'd you know he was Unger?"

"I didn't, I guessed it. He was never from Nebraska or Omaha or any other place east." Her plainswoman's eyes passed over the doubled-up body. "Not with that Brazos accent, not with that horse furni-

(Continued on page 113)

SON OF THE

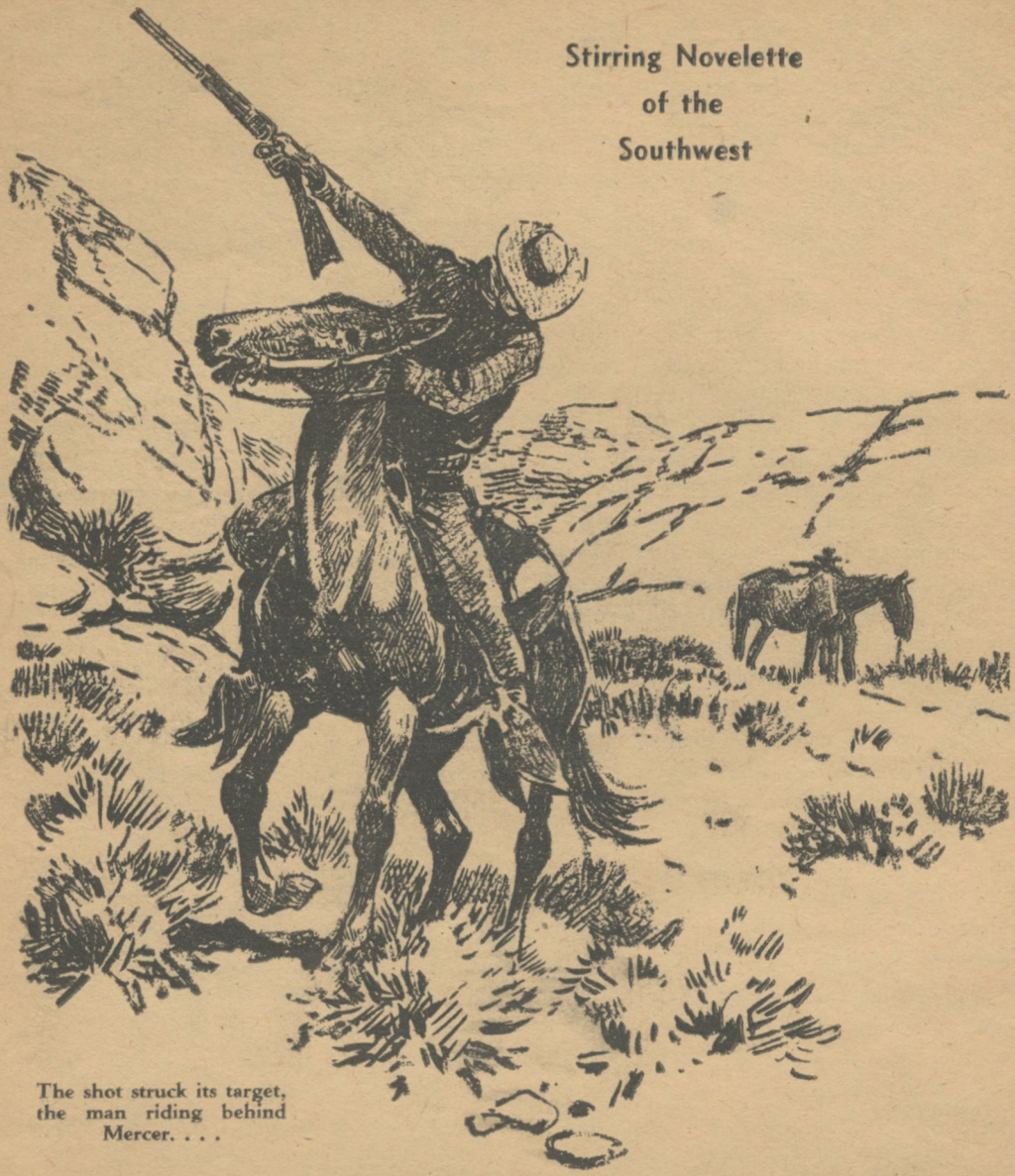
By RAY NAFZIGER

No man who crawls out of the desert on his belly is ever the same again. Some, like Charlie Mercer, declare war on the human race . . . and some—like Ben Tolleth—d e c l a r e war on the Charlie Mercers!

DESERT of San Miguel, it was called. A heat-whipped wasteland; belted with the cinders from ancient volcanoes, grown over sparsely with scraggly growths of mesquite, creosote brush and the hardier cacti. And, whitened by the sun, half buried in the sand, was

DESERT BREED

Stirring Novelette
of the
Southwest



The shot struck its target, the man riding behind Mercer. . . .

the occasional skeleton of the San Miguel's human or animal victims.

Crossing the desert now were two potential skeletons—staggering scarecrows of men, with thirst-tortured bodies, red-rimmed eyes and dragging feet. They were both range men, used to taking care of themselves, but the San Miguel had gotten the best of even them. A flood under a cloudless sky had roared down the dry wash they were crossing; had swept away their horses, the grub, their outfits—everything but their lives.

A high-heeled boot of the younger of the

pair tripped on a buried mesquite root and he fell. Lying face down, panting like a tired dog in the sand, he made no effort to rise. His older companion, rough-hewn of face as a Lincoln, looked down pityingly and let him rest a few minutes.

Then, "C'mon Charlie," he said. His voice was thick for the words had to move past the painfully swollen tongue in his mouth." You're doin' fine, old man. We ain't got far to go."

The panting man's face puckered as if he were about to cry, and then the young fellow broke out in a dry, rattling sobbing. Ben Tolleth knelt and patted Charlie Mercer's shoulder. It was Charlie's fault that they were lost. Charlie had said he knew this San Miguel country, but as they rode to prospect among the million-year-old cinders of vanished volcanoes, he had become confused by the scattered mountain ranges which rose from the desert floor about them. There was only one settlement in the desert—San Miguel town, and he didn't know in which direction it lay.

That hadn't mattered much as long as they had their horses, grub, and water. But it meant death to two men afoot, without water or food. When they had first been set afoot, Charlie Mercer thought he knew the direction in which San Miguel lay. After a day of travel he admitted despairingly that he didn't.

And when he saw he was wrong, that in hunting for a town they were searching for the haystack's needle, Charlie Mercer was plainly quitting. His husky body could stand the driving punishment of sun and thirst, but his soul couldn't face a death that crept closer hour after hour. Yet Mercer working back on the Block-A, near Ben Tolleth's ranch, had been counted a fighter. Ben Tolleth remembering that now changed his tactics: stopped pleading and slapped Charlie's face, cursed him.

"Git on your feet, you yeller-bellied polecat!" he ordered, with another hard slap and a string of curses. It worked, for it brought Mercer up to face Tolleth with doubled fists.

"We can't fight now," said Tolleth, "but I'm going to kill you when we get to water. You yellow-livered coyote—come on!"

Charlie Mercer followed, making savage sounds with his dry mouth. Courage against the desert oozed back in his veins with his anger.

He shambled after Ben Tolleth who, raised in a mountain country had decided to journey to the nearest range and trust that luck would find water. Like two slow-moving desert tortoises the pair continued. Tolleth was thinking of a rattler they had killed the day before. The Indians ate rattlers, and claimed they were good. He wished now that he had tried it. Doggedly they kept on, weaving, numb to the heat which blistered the soles of their shuffling feet. Their mouths were cinders; their bodies were slowly turning to ashes.

THEY were slowly working out of the volcanic country to one of sandy dunes. As they topped a low hill, Tolleth stared unbelievingly and then clutched Mercer's arm.

"Wagon!" he croaked. "See it! Wagon."

Mercer's tortured eyes made out the gray canvas of a wagon below. A million dollars heaped at their feet would have meant nothing, but a wagon meant water. Water meant life. On a shambling trot Mercer started down the hill, swaying like an old cow hurrying to water. Tolleth as he kept alongside, knew something was wrong with this wagon. He was halfway down the slope before he could figure it out. No horses were hitched to it.

On the shady side of the vehicle, someone was lying. Two figures on a blanket, Tolleth saw, as he stumbled over the tongue. A woman and a boy, the woman slight, youngish, with her dark hair fanned out on a pillow made of a folded blanket. Beside her slept a boy of six or seven, a youngster, with dark hair like the wom-

an's, curling above a dark handsome face.

Tolleth took off his hat as he stopped close to the woman. Her eyes were open and she was looking at him but she gave no sign that she saw him. Tolleth realized that her quiet was that of a sick person. So sick that what she saw no longer had reality. He glanced about him. The water barrel had been tipped over on its side; was empty. Two canteens lay on the ground, uncorked. The horrible truth came to Tolleth then. The mother and her boy were also without water.

A little distance away he saw a heap of sand the size of a grave, and at the head of it was a cross made of two boards from a packing-case wired together. The board bore penciled writing.

For a full minute the woman stared at Tolleth, and then her great dark eyes lighted. A choking cry welled to her lips; she stretched out her hands, beckoning Tolleth to come close. Her thin fingers touched the hot leather of his boots as if she needed assurance that this man was real.

"You have—no water?" she asked. Tolleth shook his head; his voice would have been too much a croaking mockery of hers.

"No water," she repeated in a whisper. Her hand went out to touch gently the black hair of the sleeping boy. Tolleth could see that she was done for. She had lived only until she could turn her boy over to someone else; until that moment she had kept alive by sheer will power.

"Will you look after Jim? Take him to San Miguel." She talked to Tolleth. Young Charlie Mercer did not matter in this; finding no water he had collapsed against a wheel, head sunk despairingly on his chest.

"He's strong enough to walk. Jim won't be any bother to you." Her voice shook off its hoarseness: for a moment came clear.

"I've been pretending to drink," she went on, "every time he had water. He wouldn't drink unless I did, too. You'll take him to San Miguel?"

"Yes," said Tolleth. "We'll take him on. You know the direction of San Miguel, ma'am? Partner and me . . . we're lost."

At the panic in the woman's dark eyes he realized that she did not know either. She had come with her husband and they must have circled with the wagon to dodge the deeper washes.

"Lost!" she echoed Tolleth's words. "But you'll take him along with you out of this?"

"I promise," said Tolleth. The woman sighed deeply; the little life left in her seemed to slip away, although her eyes still regarded Tolleth.

HE LOOKED at the sleeping boy and the mother, and gazing out into the white glare of the wasteland, for the first time felt real fear. A man must die sometime; he didn't mind that. His fear was for the boy. . . .

Around them the dry and dusty mesquite stretched raggedly to low hills topped by belts of creosote brush whose waxy green leaves were black under the shadow of the setting sun. In the distance the dusty dry sides of the mountains rising from the desert without preliminary of foothills were like the straight sides of a coffin. And a coffin it would be for them if they did not know the way to San Miguel.

"Didn't your husband say which general way San Miguel was?" he asked desperately. "Think, ma'am."

The woman was slipping away fast to the land of shadows. "San Miguel," she repeated dreamily. "San Miguel. My husband said when we got close, we would hear the bells there. The church has a lot of bells. They can be heard for miles. A rich Mexican gave them to the mission when he was saved from dying on this desert." The voice trailed off.

"Think, ma'am," hpe pleaded. "Your husband . . . he pointed out some peak, one maybe close to San Miguel. We got to know."

She shook her head. "He was too badly

hurt to tell me after the accident. The wagon fell on him. We were crossing a wash. The horses got away. He never told me. He tried to before he died. I don't know. Once last night I thought I could hear the bells, real close, but it was only a dream."

Tolleth stood looking at her helplessly. She lay so quietly that Tolleth thought she had slipped away. The boy by her side lay wrapped in sleep.

Then she suddenly roused and sat up, her face was transfigured with a smile. "The bells. You hear them? It's all right. They're quite close. Ringing loud. Very loud. You can take Jim on now?"

Tolleth listened intently, but he heard nothing save the dry rustle of a mesquite bush scraping against a wagon wheel. "Which way the sound of those bells come from?" he asked.

She pointed straight north, her eyes already with the glare of death on them, staring out across the waste toward a distant range. "They're quite loud. It can't be far to San Miguel. You'll be sure to get him there now, won't you? God bless you for what you do for him . . ." She fell back slowly.

Tolleth knelt by her side, believing that she had fainted. But there was no movement of pulse in the wrist that he held.

"Mercer," "She's gone. I'll lift her into the wagon. We can't stop to bury her. We got to take the boy on."

"On where?" croaked Mercer.

They talked with signs more than with words. Tolleth waved his hand. "Straight north. She heard bells from that direction. The bells of San Miguel."

Charlie Mercer laughed. "Bells! Thought she heard 'em. She was crazy. The only bells she heard was tollin' for us. San Miguel is somewhere south."

The sun sank behind a distant range. Tolleth lifted the woman into the wagon and covered her with a blanket. Then he woke the boy. The youngster rose smiling sleepily. He was not alarmed by the strangers, and asked about his mother.

"She's gone on, son," said Ben Tolleth. "She said you was to go with us. We'll take care of you. Yuh'll walk a while and when yo're tuckered, I'll carry yuh. C'mon, Charlie. We got somebody else beside ourselves to fight for now. She heard those bells north. They must be north. . . ."

The pause had done Charlie Mercer good. With the setting of the sun the heat gave way before a miraculously cool breeze. Mercer grumbled, whiningly got to his feet and with the boy they started north, the boy holding Tolleth's hand.

OF THAT journey there were great gaps for both Mercer and Tolleth. All that kept them moving was the cool night wind that blew in their faces as they set their course by the North Star. Tolleth would let the boy walk for a distance, and then when the lad got too tired, Tolleth would take him on his back and carry him. Mercer, without a burden under the cool of the night, kept up over the unending miles of crossing sandy stretches. He even got up enough spirit to jeer at Tolleth for following the dream of a dying woman.

"Bells!" he jibed. "God! She heard bells. She was hearing things."

"She heard 'em," said Tolleth stubbornly. "Maybe not real bells. But she heard something tellin' us the way to take her boy."

It might be many miles to reach San Miguel, but Tolleth felt that the woman in her last moments had been given superhuman power to hear. She had heard the bells of San Miguel. . . .

When morning came, under a sky brassy with heat, the desert became a furnace. There was no sign of a town across the flat stretch of empty plain. Trembling with weariness, his body drained of moisture, Tolleth led the way. For short periods the boy walked a little, giving the rancher time to rest up to pack him on. Charlie

Mercer was again quitting, and Ben Tolleth had to waste strength getting him to his feet. When taunts failed, he kicked him. What Mercer needed was a whip and Tolleth had to provide it.

Unending hours under the sun, fighting on against the time when exhaustion would claim them. The boy in the best condition of the three, began to suffer, but stoically kept from whimpering.

Every yard was a victory gained at the cost of heart-breaking labor. It was a hell through which they moved. Plains and mountains began to weave in Tolleth's sight, the stalks of the thorny plants all about them became ghosts. None were of the varieties which store water in thickened stems for thirst-bedeviled travelers.

In the late afternoon Mercer moaning, panting, lay down, and refused to get up. No amount of insult or abuse could move him. Tolleth had to leave him. He could send back help when he got to San Miguel and its bells.

THEY had journeyed so far that he knew now that the boy's mother could not have heard the bells, or if she had heard them, she had told them a wrong direction. But doggedly he kept on north, gambling the dream of a dying woman against death.

He knew he could last until night. And Tolleth told the boy that when Tolleth gave up he must go on alone, traveling toward the Pole star. The boy should walk without hurrying, through the night, until he reached a town, where people would look after him. Tolleth didn't think of asking him to tell the people that two men were lying back on the desert. All that mattered was that the boy should reach safey.

Small hills became mountains and climbing them was as heart-breaking as climbing the Rockies. Stooping like an old man under the burden of the boy, Tolleth dragged on to gain another mile, another hundred yards, another ten, against the time that the boy would have to go on alone.

About him the mountain-rimmed desert was turning black. Maybe night was coming, but he was too far gone for day and night to have any meaning for him. He stumbled often and fell often, but he managed along a few steps before falling again. But the last time he could not get up. It was time to tell the boy to go on alone. He stared about him in the dusky light of evening. They were in the bottom of a deep wide draw and the boy was calling to him to get up. Tolleth stirred, but could not make it.

And then to his ears came the sound of bells. Bells that boomed out, filling the night with thunderous clamor. They brought a new surge of life to Tolleth's muscles. He got to his feet, and taking the boy in his arms, climbed the weary height represented by the bank of the arroyo; walked on shakily, while the bells boomed in his ears, louder and louder, sure sign Tolleth knew, that he was going crazy. Those bells must be the same hallucination of the San Miguel desert. The same bells that had rung in a dying woman's ears, to send a boy and two men to their deaths.

Yet drawn by that ringing, he grunted up the sloping bank and passed among huge, ghostly cubes, as large as flat-roofed adobe houses. A ghostly group that even resembled houses, the houses of the town they had hoped to reach.

Now the bells filled all the air about him, boomed as he went on, as if they were directly over head. A despairing cry came from Tolleth. He had failed. He held the boy tightly to him, and still holding him, he fell, with the bells still crashing in his ears.

Then a voice penetrated the clamor, the voice of someone speaking Spanish.

Unbelieving, Tolleth slowly began to realize that he was surrounded by the white walls of the mission church of San Miguel for which a grateful Mexican had bought many bells. Arms reached down for the boy and other arms were lifting him to his

feet. Tolleth tried to talk, but his voice was gone altogether. With the last of his ebbing strength he spoke by sign language . . . a plea to go back for his partner. Then he toppled, fell to the floor.

CHAPTER TWO

Hero's Return

A THOUSAND times in San Miguel it was repeated how the bells, miraculously heard by Jim Travis' dying mother, had guided the three to safety. Ben Tolleth was looked on as a hero. For that matter so were all three who had escaped the desert. Nothing was too good for them.

Charlie Mercer had discovered a cousin in San Miguel, John Carn, a lawyer, who had become wealthy through investments in ranching and mining. Carn and his wife brought Mercer, Tolleth, and Jimmy Travis to their home, a spacious place with high, white walls and a patio that was a small jungle of vines and flowers surrounding a fountain on which floated nests of hyacinths.

Ben Tolleth was the last of the three to recover from the desert. A fever had fastened on his exhausted body and stuck grimly. But Ben Tolleth was as tough as the mesquite; he fought the fever-fire as he had battled with the desert's furnace. And very slowly he won out.

When he awoke he was amazed by the luxury of the Carn home, a luxury far beyond his own little ranch and log cabin. He was surprised, too, to learn that Charlie Mercer had found a job with his wealthy cousin, that the position had fine prospects. And Jim Travis, they told him, was very happy. The youngster missed his mother and father, but as it always happens with the very young, the deep tragedy of their passing was soon erased from his mind.

The boy had the gift of being instantly liked by everyone. John Carn's childless wife had made much of him; had bought him clothes and toys. But as soon as Ben Tolleth was able to sit up, the youngster haunted his room. Between Ben Tolleth and the boy a bond of steel had been forged in the desert furnace.

Tolleth found him a bright youngster with a mind beyond his years. Other people liked Jim for his bright chatter, his quick smile and cheerfulness; but Tolleth liked Jim Travis for something that went deeper —the promise he saw of the man to come.

Tolleth had promised the mother to take care of her son. He had meant not only to get him out of the desert, but also to look after him in later life. He and the boy would go to Tolleth's little ranch in Nogales Canyon which Tolleth had left to go on the prospecting trip with Charlie Mercer. Jim Travis would attend school, and he'd ride the range with Tolleth; together they would go fishing and hunting. His little cabin Tolleth would make into a real home for the boy. A real home for Tolleth again, too— who had lost his wife and child some years ago.

These were the plans he went over with the boy until the day Carn and his wife talked to Tolleth. They wanted to keep the lad in their home in San Miguel. They would adopt him: give him every advantage that money could buy. Tolleth gave in. By the side of wealthy John Carn, he felt that his log cabin and small cattle ranch could offer little. With the Carns the boy would have the best of everything. Ben Tolleth was outbid.

TOLLETH'S face was almost as drawn as when he had staggered in more dead than alive with Jim Travis. Jim's mother had entrusted Jim to him, but certainly if she had had the choice of putting her boy in a home with Tolleth or John Carn, wealthiest man in San Miguel, she would have picked Carn. And the cub needed a mother. Ben Tolleth swallowed his disappointment and agreed.

As soon as he was on his feet, he decided

to return home alone. Charlie Mercer was staying with Carn, who offered a future to his young relative. Tolleth bought a horse and saddle and prepared to journey back to his ranch, two hundred miles away.

In the hard school of the range he had been trained to mask all emotion. But on his last afternoon, when he rode out with the boy on the desert beyond San Miguel, Ben Tolleth felt as if he were losing his own son.

"Boy," said Tolleth, he looked out over the desert which had left the mark of searing hours on him, "don't forget your folks. What your mother done for you, you're too young to understand. She gave her life for you, boy. Saved water for you. When you see this desert, think of her occasionally.

"And when you ride over the desert keep your eyes open. There's a heap to be learnt on this desert you won't get elsewhere. After a heavy rain a lot of plants'll come shootin' up in the desert, bloomin' quick, and dyin' quick. They're too soft to stand the gaff. But this mesquite out here, son, it's got deep roots to stand drouth. It ain't showy, but when hard times comes, it fights on. Same way with people, son. You be like the mesquite . . . one what can take punishment and not whimper."

Tolleth wasn't thinking of his friend Charlie Mercer who had given up in the desert. Charlie was a friend and Tolleth excused him. No one had ever accused Charlie of lacking courage; the desert had simply wilted him, broken his nerve.

On the outskirts of town Toplleth put his arm round the boy, held him close. "Adios," he said, "maybe sometimes you'll come to visit on my ranch."

If Ben Tolleth had heard of it, he would have been flattered to know that after he had ridden away, the boy missed the homely rancher so much that he cried. No one could take the place in little Jim's heart of the low-spoken range man who had brought him to San Miguel. If he'd had his choice, Jim would have left the handsome house of John Carn, to ride with Tolleth to the small ranch in Nogales Canyon.

THE ranch, when Tolleth got back to it, was a lonesome place. Mrs. Carn wrote him once, that the boy was going to school and often spoke of Ben, that Charlie Mercer was getting to be a right-hand man to her husband. Ben planned to write back and ask Mrs. Carn to let Jim come up to stay for a few weeks during vacation.

But before summer, something happened that was to change Tolleth's life. His nearest neighbor, Bon Bright, when sober, was as good a neighbor as you'd want. A little shiftless maybe, and hot-tempered, but it was only when he was liquored up that he became bad. He had been getting worse on his sprees lately and one evening when Tolleth rode by Bright's place, Bon Bright was on a rampage. Tolleth could hear Ben in the cabin, threatening in his bull bellow to kill someone. Bright's wife running from the cabin screamed that Bon had his gun and was going to shoot his eldest son. A shot sounded in the house and the boy came fleeing into the yard.

Tolleth had no gun with which to face an armed rancher. Bright cursed Tolleth and ordered him to get back on his horse and ride on; no so-and-so was going to keep him from killing his own son. As Tolleth sprang in, Bright's first shot missed. His second slashed along Tolleth's arm. Tolleth grappled with Bon Bright and there ensued a desperate struggle for possession of the gun. Bright outweighed Tolleth forty pounds and only the big man's drunkenness gave Tolleth any chance at all. In the end as the gun was twisted between the two men, a shot tunneled Bright's big body and he went down, dead.

No one blamed Tolleth, Bright's wife least of all. A brute had been kept from killing his own offspring. There was no trial; the verdict of the coroner's jury was enough. But Tolleth was all broken up over the killing. He and Bright had been neigh-

bors for many years, and Tolleth was the sort on whom a killing left a deep mark. He felt that he was branded, and he hoped that young Jim Travis back in San Miguel wouldn't hear of it.

On an impulse he deeded over his little ranch to Bright's widow and six children. Her little ranch and Tolleth's would assure the children a living. Then Tolleth took two of his best horses and drifted. For five years, ten, fifteen, he was seen at various places about the West. In roundup seasons he rode with good outfits and could have stayed as foreman in more than one. In winters he went prospecting. He never settled down again.

Several times during those years, he met prospectors from the San Miguel country. They knew about John Carn's adopted son, and told Ben that Jim Travis was getting on well. So was Charlie Mercer. San Miguel had become the center of a prosperous placer mining country. Carn had organized a company with himself as president and Mercer as superintendent and both men were on the road to becoming millionaires. Which meant that the boy would be well provided for.

Silver threaded his head and streaked his mustache when he began a long circle that finally would take him back to the San Miguel country. He had decided to drop in for a day or two to see the boy he'd found in the San Miguel desert.

He'd shake hands too, with his old partner, Charlie Mercer, and spend a few hours talking old times. Of course Jim Travis wouldn't be remembering him. A bent, oldish rider, Tolleth, but still a top hand on any range. By this time the boy would be a broad-shouldered young husky. Maybe they'd made a mining engineer of him.

There was a plain road across the San Miguel desert now, running from a railroad where big freight outfits struck across toward the town of San Miguel. Other roads went to the mining camps scattered all through the nearby mountains. Traveling along one of these, Tolleth climbed a pass in a low range of hills. On the other side he saw San Miguel with its green crowns of cottonwoods, at least fifteen miles away, too far to ride that night. He decided he'd camp in a mile or so. Another rider appeared, a dumpy, hard-faced man on a thin-legged sorrel, and rode with Tolleth a piece. There was a little side canyon, the rider said, where there would be grass and water for Tolleth's horses. Tolleth took the rider's suggestion, and rode up the side canyon to camp.

DURING the night a burst of gunshots wakened him. From over in the next canyon, he guessed, as he drifted back to sleep.

He cooked breakfast before going for his horses. While the bacon was browning in the skillet, there was a clatter of hoofs and a party of ten men rode rapidly up the canyon toward him.

They had picked up Tolleth's two horses, unhobbled them and were leading them. All carried rifles over their saddle horns and in the lead was a bearded man with a sheriff's star on his flannel shirt. A posse hunting someone. The riders surrounded him, and the sheriff climbed down.

"Where was yuh last night, stranger?" he demanded.

"Right here in camp," said Ben Tolleth.

"So you say?" sneered the officer. "And I reckon your horse was in camp all night too. That bay mount o' yours left tracks outa here and back." His saddle horse, Ben noted with surprise, was coated with sweat, as if he had been ridden hard.

"Look over his plunder," the sheriff ordered. A deputy and the officer and another man moved over to examine Ben's bedroll and packboxes.

"Put up your hands, feller," ordered the sheriff. "You're it! Where's your gun?"

"Maybe you'd mind tellin' me what this ranikaboo is about?" said Tolleth.

Before the sheriff could answer, one of

his party, who had been circling around the camp, held up something, a small, heavy rawhide sack he had picked up not far from the fire. On it a man's name had been inked.

"That's the dust I sent down with the Tonto Mine shipment," said a rider from the posse, "—if you're needin' it as evidence that this is the right bird."

"We don't need it," said the sheriff grimly. "Nothin could be plainer than that this homely-lookin' buzzard is guilty. We follered his hoss tracks here, and found his horse all sweated up. That's all we need. He's cached the loot somewhere 'round and in the dark he lost that sack. Tie him up hard; we'll cry if the ropes eat into his skin.

Tolleth put up a fight, but they tied his hands behind his back. Then the sheriff stepped close, with his big six-shooter held in his hand.

"What did you do with that dust from the Tonto Mine?" he snarled. "Come across now, or we'll put a rope around your measly neck and choke it outa you."

"So that's what I'm supposed to of robbed?" said Tolleth. "I was in camp all last night. If you'll investigate, you can find that someone caught my horse last night and rode him off—if you got any real trailers in your outfit."

"Don't have to," said the sheriff. "You rode him. And Mercer's offerin' a thousand dollars reward for each of the fellers what's been robbin' his outfits. Easy money for me, boys, but we got to find the rest o' the loot to turn back to Charlie. Look here," he growled and shoved his six-shooter barrel into Tolleth's stomach, "where did you bury it?"

"Think you got a ground hog case ag'in me, don't you?" returned Tolleth. "Did you say Mercer is offerin' the rewards? And it's his gold I'm supposed to of stole?"

"He owns most of the stock in the Tonto company as well as most o' the mines 'round here!" said the sheriff surprised. "But what's that got to do with it?"

"S'posin' you take me to see him, and it'll have a lot to do with it," said Tolleth. "Charlie'll have more sense than your outfit."

It was a plain frame-up and Charlie Mercer would see it at once. The rider on the thin-legged sorrel who had told him of this camp spot had arranged all this. But it was no good to try to make this knot-headed sheriff believe that.

"We oughta broil his damn feet over his own fire to make him tell," growled the sheriff. He crashed the gun-barrel against Tolleth's face. The sharp sight drawn along above the eyes brought blood.

Tolleth, with his hands tied, lashed out with a boot, cracked the sheriff on the shin. Then the sheriff in a fury hit him again and again until Tolleth was beaten to the ground. The others of the posse did not protest the brutality. There had been several holdups of gold dust being transported to San Miguel and across the desert; two guards had been killed and several badly injured.

THE sheriff left men to dig about the camp in the hope of finding the contents of the Tonto strong box and took his prisoner into San Miguel. It was the hottest season of the year: the sun beat down mercilessly on Tolleth's bloody head. When he arrived in San Miguel he was nearly as sick as he had been when he had dragged in with young Jim Travis.

San Miguel's adobe houses had spread farther out on the desert; the mines had brought prosperity to the town.

There was a big bank on the plaza. It seemed to Tolleth that he saw Charlie Mercer's face at the window of this bank as he rode past, but since the man whoever it was, dodged back out of sight, Tolleth guessed that the heat and the gun-whipping had him seeing things.

They took him to the courthouse, a one-story building with many rambling rooms, and buried him in a cell with walls four-

foot thick, and a six-inch square of barred window. As they took him in, he aroused enough to talk. "Send for Charlie Mercer," he muttered. "Tell him I want to see him. If Mercer comes, I'll tell him something about where that gold of his might be buried."

"All right," snarled the sheriff. "I'll fetch Charlie Mercer, but after all these stolen shipments and guards that's been killed, Charlie's just liable as not to pull a gun and shoot you down. He's lost a pile the last few months. No matter how they guard them shipments and keep 'em secret, bandits been gettin' 'em. And the first time he took to sneakin' 'em down at night, there was another holdup. Mercer'll be plenty sore."

They put shackles on his feet, and on his hands before they left him hardly conscious on the floor. His head went around in dizzy circles. His mind was a blank. But the sounds of the town came faintly through the little window bringing him faint memories of another day, of the day Ben Tolleth had entered the town twenty years ago as a hero.

Charlie Mercer did not come down to see Ben Tolleth that morning. Nor did he come in the early afternoon. Tolleth was alone in the cellblock except for one man across the corridor, a loud-voiced man held for shooting up a saloon. He cursed the town of San Miguel and shouted out a lot of scandal about old John Carn and Charlie Mercer. They ran the town, owned the bank, and controlled most of the mining properties about San Miguel, but they were plain crooks. For years they had swindled and stole, selling fake stock, fleecing stockholders of their companies.

Tolleth didn't believe that. Charlie Mercer wasn't a thief. He called the man a liar and told him to shut up. He wasn't taking anybody's word about an old friend. Tolleth wasn't expecting him to come because Tolleth had once saved his life. Charlie would come because an old partner was in trouble, just as Tolleth would have come to his aid. But mid-afternoon and still Charlie Mercer hadn't come.

Instead Tolleth was taken, his handcuffs on and leg-irons clanking down to the sheriff's office. The district attorney wanted to question him, so the sheriff growled. And Ben Tolleth as he entered had a shock. At the desk sat a young six-footer, dressed in semi-outdoor garb. A young fellow who seen plenty of hard outdoor life and liked it, even if he had turned lawyer. It was young Jim Travis, looking a lot like the seven-year-old boy. But of course Jim Travis wouldn't remember Ben Tolleth and Tolleth was glad he didn't. He'd hate to have that boy identify him as a prisoner.

A fine-looking young fellow, although he didn't seem to quite fit in a business where a man's job was to try to hang men whose guilt or innocence was often doubtful. Something about the boy, too, seemed to be worrying him; that kept him altogether from facing the world as a man should face it.

CHAPTER THREE

Into the Desert

TOLLETH stood while the sheriff kept him covered with a short-barreled rifle.

"Things'll go bad enough for you," said Jim Travis . . . *Attorney* Travis. "You had help last night. I can't make any promise but it'll go easier for you if you'll tell us who else helped you in this. But I guess you aren't the kind that would talk."

"No," said Tolleth, "I don't reckon I am, son." The "son" slipped out.

Jim Travis started and looked at him, frowning. "You don't seem to be the kind of man that would pull holdups and kill guards in cold blood," he remarked. "I've seen plenty of your type out on the range; they can be trusted."

"I guess my looks is deceivin'," said Tolleth. "But this sheriff if he wasn't so bull-headed, could likely find out that my horse

was picked up an' rode by somebody else. And the same fellow must o' left a sack from that shipment near my campfire."

Jim Travis began eyeing Tolleth closely. A man's voice doesn't change as much as his face. Perhaps Tolleth's easy drawl wakened some memory in the young fellow.

"It's queer," said Travis, "but you remind me of somebody I knew so long ago I can hardly remember his face. A man who carried me in off that desert. Not your kind. He was a hero. He made my mother a promise to get me in to San Miguel and did it, although he arrived nearly dead."

It was on the tip of Tolleth's tongue to identify himself, but a stubborn pride made him keep still. So that was what the boy thought of Ben Tolleth. It didn't matter what happened to him. It was hopeless anyway in the face of this frame-up, even if Charlie Mercer helped, which looked doubtful. Let the boy keep his faith in Ben Tolleth.

"No use talkin' to him, Jim!" snarled the sheriff. "He's a hard 'un. If the boys bust in here tonight an' string him up, they'll be doin' us all a big favor."

At this moment the bells in San Miguel church broke out. There was fiesta of some kind in town and Jim Travis sat up in his chair and looked at Ben Tolleth searchingly. Then he turned to the sheriff.

"Let me see him alone," he said. "I might get something out of him." The sheriff grunted but he got up and went out, slamming the door behind him.

Travis got up and stood looking down at the prisoner. "You . . . you're Ben Tolleth!" he said. "Those bells put it in my head. Ben Tolleth came back. Ben, you sure you didn't do that job last night?"

Tolleth eyed the young fellow steadily. "I'm tellin' the truth, son. I lived this long without robbin'; it's too late for me to start in now."

"How did it happen?" asked Travis, and Ben Tolleth told him, including a description of the rider of the slim-legged sorrel.

When he was done, Travis put his hand on Tolleth's shoulder. "But why in hell didn't you let us know? And somebody had the nerve to try to frame you? Framin' you! I'll see Charlie Mercer and get you out of this in a minute. Why didn't you send Charlie or me word? Charlie knows he'd been left for the buzzards, if not for you. Hang and rattle, Ben," he said. "Charlie and I'll get you out, and then we'll celebrate. Where you been all these years? But we'll talk that over later."

"Sheriff!" he called, "I'll be right back. You got the wrong man."

"Like hell I have," growled the sheriff. "C'mon feller, back to your dog house."

TOLLETH was left alone again but he was smiling to himself. That boy had come through. He believed in Ben Tolleth.

He sat for a couple of hours, until footsteps sounded along the corridor, and the sheriff opened the door for someone. It was Charlie Mercer who stepped in. Charlie had changed. He was puffed up, as if he had drunk too much; had lived too soft a life. He looked prosperous all right, but he wasn't the hard, lean Charlie Mercer who had ridden range in the old days.

The sheriff returned to his office, leaving them together.

"Damn it, Tolleth!" burst out Mercer. "You sure rode into a tight. If you needed money that bad, why didn't you write me?"

Tolleth flinched as if he had been hit. "I didn't need any money, Charlie," he said deliberately. "Never needed it enough to steal it. You know that."

Mercer shook his head. "It looks like an open and shut case against you. But it's serious either way. They're talkin' rope for you tonight, Ben. One of the guards you—I mean, that was hit last night died a hour ago. And he ain't the first that's been killed in these robberies."

Tolleth got to his feet. "Damn you, Charlie, don't you even hint I was mixed in

'em. This is a dirty frame-up and you know it! Find the man that told me where to camp last night and you'll be on the trail of your bandits. I kin describe him so's you can pick him up in a—"

"Of course, Ben," said Mercer soothingly. "But we ain't got time for that now. I want to help you—I owe you my life—but you're only out is to make a run for it. You must know plenty of hidin' places up north. I'll fix it for a getaway. I'll unlock your handcuffs and manacles now, but don't do nothin' until the jailer brings your supper. The sheriff'll be gone then. Get the drop on that feller and the way'll be clear to the back of the jail, where I'll have a good horse for you."

"But that will be the same as admittin' I'm guilty, won't it?" objected Tolleth.

"When things simmer down, we can clear it up, but it'll be a rope for you if you stay in jail tonight. I can't see you strung up by a mob."

"If somebody had made a little investigation today," said Tolleth, "they could've proved a mob was wastin' its time with me. You still believe I pulled that job, Charlie. Why don't you ask me what I done with your gold shipment? It belongs to your company: ain't you interested?"

"Me—I'd forgot it," Mercer stammered. "Our company can get along without it. But I want you to git out of this country. Forget that dust."

Tolleth nodded. "I'll run. I don't hanker no more'n anybody else to have my neck yanked by a mob."

MERCER produced a key, unlocked the lock on Tolleth's manacles and leg-irons, then he slipped a loaded six-shooter under the blanket on the cot. "Good luck, Ben," he said. "Remember your horse will be waitin' out back. Just go out the back door from the sheriff's office."

Charlie shuffled back and Tolleth was left sitting alone on the cot. Somehow all this sounded queer to him. Mercer was Carn's partner—they controlled this town, owned the bank. Mercer had enough influence to get a key for the handcuffs and leg-irons. Yet he couldn't help him legally. All this had a false ring to it, but Charlie Mercer had been his friend, and wouldn't go back on him now.

The cell was faintly lighted by the corridor lights when the fat jailer came down with Tolleth's supper. The break was easy for Tolleth. As the man unlocked the door and came in, Tolleth produced the gun Mercer had left. Even in the dim light he could see the jailer turn pale.

"Don't shoot!" the man begged. "Don't shoot."

Tolleth took the guard's gun and cartridge belt, and locked him in the irons he had taken from his own hands and feet. Then he stuffed a torn strip of blanket in the man's mouth and slipped into the corridor, clanging the cell door shut.

He was halfway down the corridor leading to the sheriff's office when the door opened. Someone stepped through the doorway. Tolleth rushed toward him, raising his gun hoping to knock out the newcomer. Then he identified the man as Jim Travis.

"Ben Tolleth!" Travis called hoarsely. "They'll get you if you try to get to a horse out back. The sheriff and five men with rifles are waiting for you, ready to riddle you when you show up. Come with me—we're going out the front!"

Travis led the way into the sheriff's office, snatching a rifle from the gun rack as he passed through the office. He opened the door that led to the front of the building and they hurried across a weedy courtyard, and out on the street. Someone walked toward them and Travis waved his hand carelessly and said, "Hi, Sam!" The man passed on, but another slipped around the corner of the jail. He had been in the sheriff's posse.

"The bird's goin' this way!" he yelled.

Men's voices raised hoarsely. Then came the pound of booted feet. Tolleth and Tra-

vis began running. Two saddled horses stood before a hitch rail directly ahead, two rangy, rawboned animals.

Travis flung himself on the off horse, Tolleth on the other.

"Stay behind," ordered Tolleth. "I can get out of this, son, no use you runnin' a risk."

"Come on," ordered Travis impatiently.

A shot screamed over their heads as they raced down the street. Above the clatter of their horses' hoofs came the boom of the bells in the towers of the old mission church, nearly drowning out the sound of the rifles that rattled furiously. Rising above the tumult, came one loud voice.

"Get him! Shoot him out of the saddle!"

That voice was Charlie Mercer's. So Charlie had framed the escape against his old partner. Charlie Mercer had fixed it so that the riflemen would be waiting to riddle the prisoner when he ran out to get his horse.

Directly ahead of them the street was filled with Mexican children at play. No chance of getting by without riding one down. Travis swung down one of the narrow alleylike streets of San Miguel and the two clattered along it. Crossing a street which went out like the spoke of a wheel from the plaza, they were exposed to the rifles, but the shots sang past harmlessly.

Then the houses were pinching out and they dropped into the wide arroyo where Tolleth had first heard the bells years before. Along it they thudded, keeping under cover of the high bank. The sheriff and his men had no horses as yet; they were slow in organizing riders. Meanwhile the dusk had deepened to darkness.

THEY rode for three miles, pounding along the bottom of the wash, then leaving it to clatter over the flinty floor of a ribbon of green volcanic overflow.

Jim Travis knew the desert around San Miguel, and in an hour of doubling and twisting over rocky ground he left a trail which it would take an Apache to unravel. They stopped finally to let their horses blow.

"That was close," said Travis as he rolled a cigarette. "I'm glad you got out of that, Ben. If they'd shot you down, I'd have hunted up Charlie Mercer and killed him. You saved his life, and then he rigged up to kill you."

"When you do a rattler a favor, it don't make him feel any better towards you," said Tolleth.

"He sure assays pure rattler," stated Travis. "And without knowing it, I was the cause of his laying that ambush for you. When I left you, I rushed to the bank with the news that the sheriff was holding you. He said he knew it but couldn't do anything; that they had you cinched. I told him I was going to get the best tracker in the country and prove you were innocent. And investigate the man on the sorrel. From your description it sounded a whole lot like the guard at the Tonto Mine. Charlie acted funny, scared. He told me to let it all drop; he'd get you out.

"I trusted him until a Mexican friend of mine who hangs around the sheriff's office told me it was fixed to kill you while you were trying to escape. Mercer was figuring to act quick, damn him, to head me off from finding out something. But what could I find out to hurt him?"

"Any chance that Charlie himself might be mixed up in all those robberies?" Tolleth asked. "I never told it on Charlie, but before he started ridin' range for the Block-A, he held up a stage coach. But why would he steal money from one of his own companies?"

Travis ground out his cigarette. "By God, that's a lead. I never thought he'd go so far as open robbery, but that was before. I know he was equal to killin' you, Ben, so I think you've hit on it. Charlie and his bunch made you the goat to cover up this robbery last night, and they had to go through with it."

He stood up, faced Tolleth. "Ben, I've got something to spill. You're square. My folks were square. But me, I've done things that would earn me a cell. Helping Carn and Mercer on the legal end of what amounts to plain stealing. Carn used to be a square-shooter, but since he's old he's been under Mercer's thumb. The pair of 'em went hogwild. The companies they organized are rotten through and through. To stave off trouble they got me elected as district attorney. And me, I went back on my oath of office; protected them. Carn had raised me, and I hadn't the guts to smash him. Their bank here is crooked like everything else they own; they've stolen it poor. Several times when the bank examiner had 'em by the tail, Mercer turned up with a bunch of cash he'd got somewhere. And I know now where the polecat got that cash—from holding up the shipments of dust that came down from the mines. It would be easy for Charlie, being on the inside."

"It fits in, son," said Tolleth soberly.

"I've kicked myself plenty for bein' a crook, a thief. But I'm done with that. If I can fasten those robberies and killings on Mercer, he'll hang. The rest will mean prison for Carn and me. I've been raised soft, Ben—like those plants you talked about, the ones that spring up after a rain and die quick. I've had too much prosperity. I couldn't stand the gaff."

"I'm blamin' myself for part of that," put in Tolleth. "I left you in the lurch. Figgered you was in good, but a kid takes after the folks he's raised with. You growed up in a bunch of crooks. It takes courage to admit you're wrong, but it's in you to do it. Blood tells."

"I'll fight," growled Travis. "Tolleth, you ride out of this country. They won't follow you far, not when I start makin' it hot for that gang."

"If you go against Charlie, you mebbe won't last long, son."

"As long as I last, I'll be fighting," said Travis.

Tolleth's hands came out to meet Travis's. "Your mother would be proud of you, Jim. Mebbe I kin hole up 'round here close and be ready to lend you a hand."

"That's white of you, Ben. But we'll have a slim chance."

"We had a slim chance when me and you dragged in off this desert," said Ben Tolleth. "One in a thousand that we was headin' the right direction. We'll give them a whirl. You got any friend not too far off who can hide me out?"

Travis nodded. "Skookum' McClintic. Crippled old puncher who runs the station at Topaz Wells, supplyin' water to teams on the road to Moonstar Mountain. I tagged after him on the range. I'll take you over now. He'll hide you out."

THEY jogged on under the stars, crossing the obliterated tracks that Ben Tolleth had left twenty years before in taking Jim Travis to San Miguel. The little adobe shack of the station loomed ahead, but as they approached it they heard a body of horsemen beating down toward San Miguel. Tolleth and Travis waited in the darkness until they heard the men ride on. Then Travis went in afoot to scout the place to make sure that Skookum was alone.

He called Tolleth in and the old cowpuncher came out limping on a badly-twisted leg.

"Jim!" he exclaimed as he squinted at Travis. "Hell's turned flip-flop. Boy, they're on your trail."

"For turning loose a prisoner?"

"Nope. Wuss'n that. For bein' in the Tonto holdup last night in cahoots with another man. Reckon that's your pal here. After you helped Tolleth git away today, the sheriff searched your room and found a bunch o' dust in the sacks used by the Tonto mine. They claim you two fellers pulled all these holdups."

"You believe that, Skookum?" asked Travis.

"You know damn well I know you

didn't," said the crippled old cowpuncher.

"How about Carn?" said Travis. "Does he believe it, too?"

"Him and Mercer is offerin' two thousand dollars apiece for each of you, dead or alive. And a thousand for them in your gang. Yeah, Carn believes it."

"Or he figgers his only out is to believe it," said Tolleth as he watched Jim Travis's face. "That makes it tough for you, Jim."

"I'm glad it turned out that way. It's open war now, but if I show up in town—"

"You'll git it shore," said Skookum. "Hit outa this country fast, Jim. You ain't got a chance in San Miguel."

"I'm stickin'," decided Travis. "I got enough sand in me for that."

Tolleth nodded. There was stern stuff in Jim Travis; he was of the breed that could stand misfortune, face a fight when he knew he was sure to go down. "We'll both stay," said Tolleth. "Charlie'll be shakin' in his boots . . . afraid something will break to give him away. And Charlie can't stand it when the screws is tightened. But men'll be lookin' for us, shootin' at sight with four thousand reward money on the pair of us. What was these riders that just passed? A party hopin' to cash in by throwin' a loop over a pair of bandits?"

"Nope," said Skookum. "They've been sent up by Mercer to bring down the dust from Moonstar Mountain mine tomorrow mornin'. Mercer's sayin' back in San Miguel he's takin' no chances on losin' that, too, with a gang like yours in the country. He's sent up all of six guards to ride along horseback with the buckboard carrying down that dust."

"Something queer there," observed Travis. "Charlie's slick. Maybe he just aims to make a show by hirin' those guards. And maybe he's got something else in his head. That Moonstar Mine sends down around twenty thousand dollars worth of dust this time every month."

"We'd be handy to blame it on, if it was took," commented Tolleth. "No better time than with a couple wolves like us and our gang on the loose. It's a long chance that Charlie's plannin' to waylay their shipment. And if we could catch Charlie Mercer and his pals cold, we'd settle all this on the spot. A long chance."

"A long chance it is!" said Travis. "But long chances seem to be our long suit, Ben. We'll jog over toward Moonstar later."

They had supper with Skookum while their horses munched barley hay in the arroyo back of the station. From Skookum, Tolleth borrowed a rifle and cartridges. Then, to dodge posses which might pass in the night, he and Travis rode down the arroyo a little ways carrying hay for their horses. Letting their mounts feed, they lay down to snatch a few hours sleep. When they awoke they would ride for Moonstar Mountain, to throw the dice once more on San Miguel desert for life and death.

CHAPTER FOUR

Last Man Dead . . .

IT WAS a couple of hours before daylight when they watered their horses at the Wells again, and taking filled canteens and a bait of grub, headed toward Moonstar. The mountain was an isolated barren uplift, its canyons filled with brush and cactus, the whole peak waterless except near the summit where the mining company organized by Carn and Mercer had by a miracle, tapped a flow of water in the placers.

The two laughed at themselves for fools as they rode. If Mercer intended a holdup, why would he send along a heavy guard to make the holdup difficult? Perhaps, reasoned Jim Travis shrewdly, to raise a smoke screen.

The road, Travis said, came down from the mines along a high ridge on the north side of the mountain, dropping finally to the desert floor to bear west to San Miguel through the Malpais beds.

Travis headed toward one of the half

dozen steep canyons on the west side where the road made its long descent. They agreed that if a holdup occurred on the small mountain itself, the bandits would flee to the desert, since there was no place in the mountain to hide. It was more reasonable however for the holdup to be pulled in the desert country, somewhere among the low volcanic ridges.

Before dawn the desert was already terrifically hot. When the brassy ball of the sun pushed up it was like turning a blast of hot air into an overheated furnace room.

They climbed along a ridge covered with thorny brush and cactus and halted in the shade of a low cliff, deciding to wait there until the rig and guards had descended the mountain. Then with the slim chance that Charlie Mercer was forcing his hand, they intended to follow the rig across the desert, to lend aid in case of an attack.

They wiped sweat from their faces as they squatted out of the sun. Not a moving object could be seen in the desert, nothing but the miles of broken badlands with its thin growth of mesquite and cactus. Above them they could see the road from the mines swinging out of a cut, following close to the edge of a cliff for nearly two miles.

Tolleth stood up suddenly, took Travis's field glasses. Three riders had topped a little hill in the winding road above. The men held rifles over their saddle horns as they rode. Following at a distance of fifty feet came a buckboard, drawn by two poky fat mules and after them came three more horsemen carrying rifles. Another guard sat in the rig with the driver.

A snake of dust curled along the trail after the cavalcade. The trail swung sharply to avoid a high point, then paralleled the rimrock, the road following the edge of a cliff. Above the road was an inclined plane of mountain-side, sharply-tilted, covered by fields of boulders and small cliffs.

Peaceful enough all of it, and not a chance for a holdup. Tolleth handed the glasses to Travis.

As Travis raised them, he froze suddenly. By his side Ben Tolleth made a half motion for his gun. The whole mountain seemed to tremble as a tremendous explosion sounded on the slope far above them. As other explosions came, above the road along the lip of scarp, they saw puffs of dust—rocks and dirt hurled in the air. Other explosions followed, a dozen of them rolling like heavy thunder on the mountain. A whole cliff split off the sharply-tipped plane above the road, and tumbled down and hundreds of rounded boulders began rolling down the slope in advance of a tremendous slide of rock and earth from the undermined cliffs.

The outriders and buckboard driver had held up for a moment, to gaze astounded at the phenomenon above. The whole side of the mountain seemed sliding down on them and whether they raced forward or back they would have to run the gauntlet of boulders and its following mountain slide. There was no safety in fleeing to meet the slide, and on the other side of the road a cliff dropped nearly sheer for several hundred feet.

"Goin' to knock 'em off," muttered Tolleth as he and Travis watched to see the horses and riders race to escape either burial alive or being knocked off the cliff. The mad flight could last only seconds, for the rocks were coming fast. Small boulders, a foot in diameter led the advance, and plunging after them larger bulks of stone, weighing up to several tons, bounding high, gathering momentum with each leap. A more terrifying advance than a charging troop of cavalry, it was easily capable of sweeping a house out of its path.

The riders behind the rig had turned to ride back; the buckboard and those in front of it were racing madly on down the road.

Well timed as the explosions had been, all the horsemen reached safety and the buckboard also might have escaped if the driver had not been slow to recover from his shock. He was now swinging his whip, but his fat mules were much slower than

the saddle horses. The deluge of rocks won the race. The first stones thudded down on the road all about the vehicle.

Then as Travis and Tolleth stared, as helpless as beings in another world, the mule team careened sharply to the right. For a second it was poised above the cliff. The driver and guard flung themselves from their seat, but the buckboard and team toppled over the edge and plunged down several hundred feet to strike a narrow ledge. Carried over this by their momentum team and rig plunged to a mass of brush in a canyon north of Travis and Tolleth.

FOLLOWING the team and rig, there poured over the lip of the cliff a swarm of heavy boulders, thousands of them, popping like cannon as they struck the ledge.

"Buzzards'll be flyin' where there's meat," said Tolleth as he and Travis flung themselves into their saddles and were off. They were not far as a crow could fly from the spot where the rig had landed with its treasure load, but having to ride over a rocky ridge they were at best an hour away.

Travis reined in his horse. "Wait, Ben," he called. "Those skunks'll be picking up that load, and going down toward the desert. They won't be climbing, for there's no place to hide in the mountain and they'll risk running into the guards. Ten to one they'll go straight across the desert to their hideout."

"That's usin' your head," said Tolleth. "By the time we reach the rig they'd be gone an hour. We'll ride down the mountain and hope to catch a look at 'em below."

They took their time in the descent, saving their horses for what might be a long race in the desert heat. Already the animals were coated with sweat, breathing hard.

Coming through the cactus and brush they rode for a high point that looked over in the next canyon. In it they saw three riders moving rapidly on toward the desert. The trio they saw were masked and one led a packhorse, with boxes that hung from the cross trees.

"Masked so the guards above can't pick up their faces in field glasses," said Travis. "Those bandits are sure dodgin' bein' identified. And by the time the guards get out of that slide those three will be long gone. It's up to us."

They plunged down the slope, crashing through the brush, a good mile behind the raiders.

Down the sharp-slanting ridge their horses slid, sending showers of rocks rolling out from under their hoofs. The flow of boulders over the lip of the cliff above had stopped. Silence had again descended on the mountain. They were not far now above the desert. Fighting out of a dense chaparral clump Tolleth suddenly spurred his horse to a little bare point and brought his rifle from its scabbard.

Ahead he had caught a glimpse of a single bay horse. The rider still masked had pulled up to take a look-see, to make sure that there were no riders following close. Sight of Tolleth on the point gave him a shock. He had been carrying a rifle over his saddle horn, now he raised it to his shoulder and fired. The range was too long. Tolleth held his fire and the lone horseman emptied his gun and dropped out of sight.

Spurring hard, Tolleth and Travis followed, crashing through the thickets. Neither wore chaps, and the thorns and spikes tore their clothing to shreds and sent little trickles of blood down their faces and arms.

"They'll be heading for some layout where they got fresh horses is my guess," observed Travis as they stopped and rested their mounts. "Nobody would be damn fool enough to depend on one set of horses for a quick getaway across San Miguel on a scorching day like this."

Tolleth nodded. "Got to beat 'em, and on these horses. If that's Charlie Mercer and his *compadres*, they'll be heading straight for San Miguel town. After they

get there, all they got to do is send the sheriff out to mow us down. It'll be a race, but we got a chance, youngster."

They rode on out into the desert. If they raced their horses now in an effort to catch up and failed, the fresh mounts waiting for the bandits would later pull away from Tolleth and Travis. If the two held their horses back too much the bandits would easily outride them. They compromised on a stiff trot and came into a wide draw where the tracks of the four horses were plain to read.

As they clattered over the dry stream bed a shot came from the brush-grown bank ahead. Tolleth grunted and seemed suddenly to wilt in his saddle. Blood seeped down from under his sombrero brim and he all but toppled from his saddle. Travis was alongside, his arm supporting the older man, while he spurred their horses behind a screen of mesquite.

"One man laid back for us," muttered Tolleth. "Got to git him outa the way." He had kept his grip on his rifle and now, although he could not see ten feet, he slipped out of the saddle to give battle.

But Travis was already afoot and running around the mesquite thicket. The ambusher was peering from above his covering screen of bush to see the damage he had done. Travis took a careful rest, aimed first below the peaked sombrero and fired. The sombrero disappeared suddenly.

"I got him!" yelled Travis exultantly as he returned to Tolleth. "How bad you hit, Ben?"

"Just scraped my scalp. My head would turn a cannon-ball!" Tolleth was lying. He had not yet recovered fully from the gun beating given him by the burly sheriff and the blow dealt by the bullet had nearly finished him.

He hoisted himself painfully into his saddle and, choking the saddle horn with both hands, followed after Travis.

Back on the little hill was a saddle horse

(Continued on page 102)

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(Continued from page 100)

with his reins snagged in chaparral. The rider who had come within an ace of ending Tolleth lay on the ground on his back, dead.

"That's the man," said Tolleth. "He's the bird told me where to camp that night they framed me for the Tonto holdup."

"And he's a special guard at the Tonto mine," said Travis grimly. "Joe Button, a mighty good friend of Charlie Mercer's. They chum a lot together. A gunman that Mercer imported from up north a year or so ago. He's done for; that leaves two."

"Crowd 'em," growled Tolleth. "We'll take his horse along in case of an accident to our own and later to spell one of ours. And let me ride in the lead. You got a long time to live, son. I'm an old man and kin afford to take chances."

"Not by a damn sight," said Travis. He uncinched the heavy saddle and leaving behind, rode on ahead of Tolleth, leading the spare horse.

THEY pushed on for three miles and on a flat stretch again came in sight of their quarry, the remaining two men, one leading the packhorse, hurrying along, bearing off a little to the north of a straight line toward San Miguel.

In the dazzling whiteness of the desert, oppressed by the heat that magnified to hard labor the slightest effort, it settled to a desperate race. Dust puffed up chokingly until they put up their neckerchiefs—only to suffocate behind them. Tolleth, under the doubled handicap of heat and the bullet that scraped his head, fought engulfing waves of darkness to keep conscious. Every nerve in his body cried for rest.

They opened fire on the men ahead, shooting repeatedly in the hope of at least hitting a horse and forcing them to carry the loot on their saddles. Travis had hunted game from boyhood on up. One of his long-range shots finally sent the pack horse down

(Continued on page 104)

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(Continued from page 102)

and brought the two to a halt. While one man shifted small heavy bags from the packboxes to their saddle-horses, the other emptied his rifle.

With the glasses, Travis caught a look at the men. One with a heavy rounded body, he said, was undoubtedly Charlie Mercer.

"That suits me fine, son," said Tolleth as he filled the magazine of his rifle. "The desert didn't get us before. It won't get us now. This race is to the tough, and I kinda' think we fill the bill more than Charlie Mercer. He's goin' to crack. Accordin' to my theory, if a man wilted once, he'll wilt again, if we press him hard enough."

The race continued with a constant interchange of shots. Travis was hit in the leg, the bullet tearing through the fleshy part of the thigh. He lost a lot of blood and Tolleth put on a tourniquet.

That done, they traveled on, two wounded men barely able to ride.

The two who fled were now killing their horses off in a final burst of speed. They could afford to, with fresh mounts waiting ahead, picketed in an arroyo.

"They're bearin' off north, all a-sudden, Jim," said Tolleth. "That means they're goin' to change horses. They'll have to make a little circle to get back on a straight line for San Miguel." Tolleth's head was slowly clearing. If the two men ahead got on fresh mounts, the race would be over.

"Son, mebbe you and me better split up. S'posin ' you follow 'em close now; push 'em hard. And specially when they get on those fresh horses. Pour the shots at 'em and mebbe they'll be so bad scared they'll kill their horses for the first couple of miles getting away from you. I'll keep on now, ridin' straight for San Miguel. I'll change to this extra horse and be ready to take 'em on next. When you get done with 'em, their relays won't be so damn fresh that they'll run off and leave me."

Tolleth's word was law. Travis's hand came out. "S'long Ben," he said. "If we don't make it, we put up a fight. I'll be following as best as I can."

THE ruse worked. From the ridge which Tolleth followed, still leading their captured horse, he heard Jim start a fast shooting to the north. Return shots crashed and a battle moved along rapidly over the desert. Jimmy Travis was pushing them hard, and the two lost their heads. As Tolleth had hoped, after changing saddles to fresh horses, they were now racing their mounts to get away. Their new packhorse did not lead readily and finally in a rage the pair shot the animal so that he would not fall in the hands of the pursuers. Transferring the packbox contents to their saddles, they spurred straight toward San Miguel. Travis lost out fast after that. His horse slowed to a staggering walk. Tolleth waved to the figure in the saddle, and took up the chase. By riding in a straight line he had gained on the two fugitives. They turned their rifles on him, firing again and again.

But Tolleth came on, taking his chances, knowing that in the glare of the sun and with muscles and nerves shaky under the strain, long range shots would go wild. He left his weary horse and swung over to the bare back of the horse they had taken, tying his own mount for Travis to trade for his exhausted animal.

Mile after mile the grim race continued, and because of Travis' hard pushing of the fresh horses and the weight of the saddles and stolen dust, Tolleth held his own.

As they topped a little hill, the town of San Miguel with its church tower danced in the heat waves. Encouraged by the sight, the two loped ahead, and Tolleth in a final effort to bring them down, also loped his tired mount. He closed the gap a little and, in a bullet trade at shorter range, a shot slashed through Tolleth's left arm. Tolleth sprang down and, setting his teeth, with his

one good arm steadied the rifle barrel over his horse's back. The shot struck its target, the man riding behind Mercer.

Mercer turned his horse and shot the mount of his companion to prevent him from falling to Tolleth.

Behind him, Tolleth raised a hoarse yell. It was too far perhaps for Mercer to hear, but something seemed to go out of Mercer at seeing the oldish rancher riding toward him on a horse nearly done for. Stopping only to get the dust off the saddle of the dead horse, Mercer hurried on. He was thinking of a day long before when the sheer courage of Ben Tolleth had brought him into San Miguel. He had only one desire now—to get to the town and get help to end the bloodhound that clung to his trail.

TOLLETH'S horse was going down. No mount could have stood the pace they had set from Moonstar Mountain. The brute staggered on another mile and finally went down. Mercer up ahead branished his rifle, gave a croaking cry as he saw Tolleth afoot. He had won. Two miles away lay San Miguel with the green crowns of its trees.

Mercer looked back again and marveled how, hopelessly beaten, done for, Tolleth still pushed on, at a shambling trot, carrying only his six-shooter. As long as Tolleth was on his feet, he was a menace, and Mercer spurred his horse to find suddenly that the animal no longer responded. The fast pace which Travis had forced when the horses were changed told now. It was ridiculous, a man on a horse against a man afoot, and the man afoot winning.

Mercer could have lightened the load by unsaddling and leaving the stolen Moonstar dust, recovering it after Tolleth had been ended. Instead, in his panic, he flung himself from the saddle and cursing, toiled on through the deep sand, pulling the horse after him.

Despite all Mercer's desperate panting, Tolleth still gained. Mercer's horse dragged on the reins and in a rage, Mercer stopped to beat the animal, slapping it with the reins, and then hammering it over the head with his six-shooter. It yanked back, and breaking loose, started off to the side on a trot.

Mercer turned toward San Miguel. He was shocked to find that the oldish rancher seemed almost on top of him.

Ben Tolleth coming steadily on, refusing to admit he was licked. Again he was fighting for Jimmy Travis—for the boy's right to live, to turn his life from the crooked trail blazed for him by Carn and Mercer.

In a panic Charlie Mercer emptied his six-shooter. Fumbling reloaded it, he turned to run, pounding along, his heart going like a trip-hammer, the desert air fire to his lungs. San Miguel was only a hundred yards away now. And then his legs suddenly quit on him; paralyzing pains shot through them, and brought him to a halt. The foolish struggle with his horse had taken the last of his strength.

Tolleth raised his voice. Charlie, you're done for!" he called, and the grim finality in that voice was like a death sentence to Charlie Mercer. He raised his six-shooter, but the sight danced maddeningly before his eyes. Wildly he pressed the trigger, a second time—and then the reply shot came —a bullet that hit Mercer, sent the world spinning around him.

ON THE edge of San Miguel a Mexican boy coming to explore a dump had seen the two men, had watched the fight. He shouted and ran back to spread the news.

People suddenly poured from the nearest houses, a priest among them. Charlie Mercer realized through the pain that he would be able yet to win through, tell them that Tolleth and Travis had held up the Moonstar that morning.

And then over him bent the grim face of the man who had followed him.

"Tell 'em the truth, Charlie," Tolleth ordered. "You're licked—dyin'."

Mercer cringed away from Tolleth. He no longer had courage left to fight even with a lying accusation.

"Tell 'em you engineered the hold-up on Moonstar this morning," ordered the voice inexorably. "Tell 'em, Charlie."

As men crowded around him, Mercer's mouth opened. He was whipped and like a child taking orders, he obeyed Tolleth.

"You win," he whimpered. "You and this damn' desert. I'm done for. I pulled all these holdups. The shipment from the Tonto Mine and the Moonstar one this mornin'. I needed the money to keep off a wolf of a bank examiner. Now take me to the shade. I'm dyin' . . . but don't let me die out in this damn sun."

Tolleth rode out to help Jim Travis to San Miguel. A doctor patched up both Travis and Ben Tolleth. Mercer died that night. With his death the whole rotten structure that Carn and Mercer had built up crashed. Old Carn put a bullet in his head, and in the aftermath the authorities, considering that Jim Travis had been one of the two men who had brought justice to San Miguel, freed him of all blame.

When it was cleared up, Ben Tolleth and Travis rode out of San Miguel heading for a range where Tolleth knew of a cattle ranch to be picked up for a song. In country where Jim Travis could make a fresh start in work he liked better than law. A ranch where Ben Tolleth could at last stop his restless, unhappy drifting.

As they rode out across the San Miguel, Jim Travis stopped to salute a dusty, dwarfed bush. A small mesquite making its valiant stand on the bare desert floor. Nothing showy about a mesquite, but the heart in its ugly exterior is the heart of a fighter, a fighter that desert and heat and drouth have never conquered. ✻ ✻ ✻

GUNSMOKE TRIO—TEXAS STYLE!

(Continued from page 35)

Bert Malacay saddled up. Once he glanced toward the grove and then he forced his gaze away from it and he looked back up the road they had followed. In time, he knew, that road would be a cattle trail.

He had a quick vision of a town up there at the end of the trail. It was only a vision, for the town did not yet exist. But he saw the town and the main street ran north and south. And there at the north end of the street, smiling, stood the girl. And he, Bert Malacay, rode into the town from the south. He dismounted and started walking up the street and the girl, still smiling, walked down toward him. They met there in the middle of the town.

Bert Malacay felt the smile growing on his face. He raised his hand. "All ready, Mr. Templeton," Bert Malacay said. "Let's head for Texas." ✠ ✠ ✠

BLACK JOHN—BUSHWHACKER!

(Continued from page 62)

Just on the edge of daylight, with the transfer duly signed, the three watched from the doorway as Brink, his personal belongings in his packsack, headed down the creek.

Then, at the edge of the claim, he turned and shook his fist. "By God, you'll wish you never done me like this! I'm hittin' fer Halfaday Crick. They're all outlaws, up there, an' the police don't dast to show up! Black John Smith—he'll show you guys where to head in at!"

"Do you know Black John?" the big man asked.

"No, but I know a couple of his men! They'll make me acquainted with him—an' don't you fergit it!"

"I won't," grinned the big man, with a wink at MacShane as the other turned and headed down the creek. "An' when he does meet him, I'm bettin' he'll be plumb surprised." ✠ ✠ ✠

BOB OBETS

(Continued from page 45)

"Old Maybeso," Will Bass said wistfully. "So you are Charley Carter, sure enough!"

"And I'm going to be here awhile. Buying cows. And when I'm around any town, I talk. But that talk, Windy, can lean either of two days. One way, you could be a smart guardeen of the law, who saw through Fogarty's little game right off, and gave him enough rope to tangle up in. You figured his pard, Bog, was somewhere around and they'd try for that ten thousand of mine, that by now ought to be in the Mercantile safe. Fact, you was keepin' a sharp watch on the Mercantile—in your boots and sookey-pink—"

"No!" Will bellowed indignantly. "In such a getup I wouldn't set foot out'n the house. My constituents would laugh me clean out of the county! Besides, Danny Pardee broke the law, rode with them outlaws. I'll have to lock him up."

"Then," Charley Carter said sadly, "I reckon my talk will have to lean the other way. Sheriff Windy Bass gets took in by a thief and a murderer, invites him to his house, fixes it up so he can clean out the Mercantile safe. And if it hadn't been for the courage of a kid named Danny—"

"No, Charley, no," Will Bass said. "Don't spread no story like that! I've tried to be a good sheriff. Been proud of my badge."

"But you haven't been a good neighbor," Gid Callishaw said accusingly. "Not to Danny, you haven't. His name wasn't even on that Ranger poster. Description could fit a hundred young buckaroos. Will Bass, with your help, them crooks would of cleaned out my safe—a thousand of my own money in it! You let that boy be, Will, and nobody's the wiser."

"W-ee-l, you put it that way—"

"It's been put!" Suellen said. "Now help me get Danny into the house. He needs something more than a good neighbor. He needs a good nurse." ✻ ✻ ✻

(Continued from page 72)

fall. The last sun was red in the dust and a passel of yelling youngsters taggled after the lathered team. The Tucson freight master was a halfpint with fretting eyes that squinted up at the buckboard boot.

The marshal climbed down, careful with the shotgun. The newspaperman slumped out, frowning and sore-mad at the white trail dust that coated his derby.

"Had a wire," the freight master said. "Heard you was expecting trouble."

The newspaperman snorted. "Big story! Eyewitness to stagecoach holdup! Trouble? All we saw the whole day was dust and a couple of saddlebums."

"Saddlebums?"

The marshal's sunpale eyes grinned.

"Give us quite a turn for the minute," he said. "We was just cutting past Big Rock and I spotted these two, high up. Thought for sure it was the Bonners."

"And?"

"Like the newsboy says. Just a couple cowmen, I reckon. Probably headed up New Mexico way. Yep. Sure looks like the Bonner scare was a false alarm."

The Marshal glanced downstreet to the cool shadows of the saloon.

"What d'you say, gents? How's about a whistle-wetter?" ✠ ✠ ✠

(Continued from page 8)

hanni and that the moaning breezes from the mountain peaks swirl about, keeping a person's garments damp.

NOTHING was seen by Henderson that shed light on how the fourteen and maybe more hardy adventurers who sought the Valley's gold came to their end and why—if they were slain—their heads had such an attraction for the slayer. One theory is that Nahanni is inhabited by head-hunting natives. But if such were the case, someone would have seen them by now, or some trace of their abodes would have been found. It is certain that the Valley is not inhabited by Stone Age characters, or by prehistoric beasts. However, Henderson did assert that it is very probable that Nahanni was one of the last surviving places of dinosaurs.

One other guess is that the Valley is the sanctuary of outlaw whitemen who, obviously not wanting visitors, shoot intruders through the head and then remove it, thus doing away with the evidence of their deed.

Also it is thought that the Valley's unwholesome atmosphere might bring a sudden illness to the outsider that makes an end of him before he can get out. Then predatory animals when feasting on the remains carry off the victim's head. Hardly logical because, first, then the trappers must have been immune to the disease—it's only the prospectors that have died. Second, the skeletons apparently showed no signs that they were torn or mauled by carnivora.

There it is, compadres; gold for the taking in the Nahanni Valley—just don't lose your head over it! That would be a plumb unfortunate thing to do, for a man with no head wouldn't be able to read the next issue of the DIME WESTERN—and we've got some heady yarns scheduled for it! It'll be on sale October 31st. See you then!

The Editor.

(Continued from page 81)

ture—did you see it? I did, when he came limpin' in. I was raised with it, it's pure Texas. Grass rope, oxbow stirrups, double-cinch. And it was Texas fate that lamed his horse an' sent him here to us. No man in his senses, no man who isn't scared, would ever run a horse over mud flats."

Slade picked up his hat. "'Scuse me, darlin'. I'll tote this out, then take a shelter-half down to Gringo."

When he returned, he carefully removed his muddy boots and carefully took his wife's arms and held them close. "That invitation was a nice gesture to make for Trinity, Vannie."

"This is my home, too." And Vannie smiled to herself, savoring the woman-wisdom of knowing that it had not been a gesture for Trinity, but a gesture from it—merely the kind of thing you'd expect from one of the community's respectable members. ⁂ ⁂ ⁂

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You wouldn't believe it, but I myself used to be a 97-lb. weakling. Fellows called me "Skinny." Girls snickered and made fun of me behind my back. I was a flop. THEN I discovered my marvelous new muscle-building system—"*Dynamic Tension.*" And it turned me into such a *complete* specimen of MANHOOD that today I hold the title "THE WORLD'S MOST PERFECTLY DEVELOPED MAN."

ARE YOU
Skinny and run down?
Always tired?
Nervous?
Lacking in Confidence?
Constipated?
Suffering from bad breath?

What to Do About it
is told in my free book!

What is "Dynamic Tension"? How Does It Work?

When you look in the mirror and see a healthy, husky, strapping fellow smiling back at you — then you'll realize how fast "*Dynamic Tension*" GETS RESULTS! "*Dynamic Tension*" is the easy, NATURAL method you can practice in the privacy of your own room—JUST 15 MINUTES EACH DAY — while your scrawny chest and shoulder muscles begin to swell, ripple . . . those spindly arms and legs of yours bulge . . . and your whole body starts to feel "alive," full of zip and go!

Atlas Championship Cup won by Thomas Manfre, one of Charles Atlas' pupils.

One Postage Stamp May Change Your Whole Life!

Sure, I gave Thomas Manfre (shown above) a NEW BODY. But he's just one of thousands. I'm steadily building broad-shouldered, dynamic MEN—day by day—the country over.

3,000,000 fellows, young and old have already gambled a postage stamp to ask for my FREE book. They wanted to read and see for themselves how I build up scrawny bodies, and how I pare down fat, flabby ones—how I turn them into human dynamos of pure MANPOWER.

FREE **My 32-Page Illustrated Book Is Yours Not for $1.00 or 10c — But FREE**

Send NOW for my famous book, "Everlasting Health and Strength," 32 pages, crammed with photographs and valuable advice. Shows what "Dynamic Tension" can do, answers many vital questions. Page by page it shows what I can do for YOU.

This book is a real prize for any fellow who wants a better build. Yet I'll send you a copy absolutely FREE. Just glancing through it may mean the turning point in your whole life! Rush the coupon to me personally: **Charles Atlas, Dept. 83X, 115 East 23rd St., New York 10, N. Y.**

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Send me—absolutely FREE—a copy of your famous book, "Everlasting Health and Strength"—32 pages, crammed with actual photographs, answers to vital health questions, and valuable advice to every man who wants a better build. I understand this book is mine to keep, and sending for it does not obligate me in any way.

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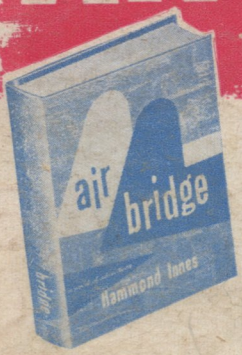

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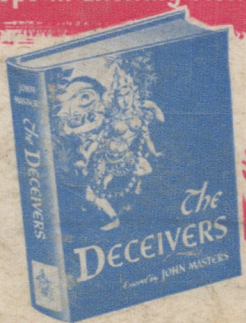

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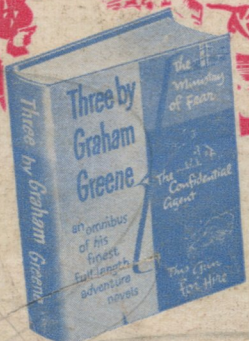

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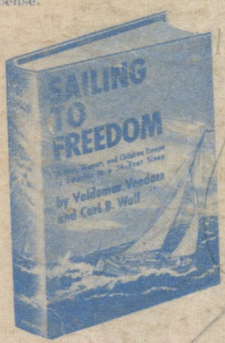

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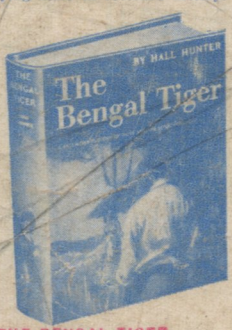

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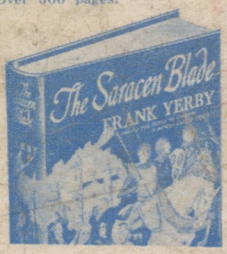

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