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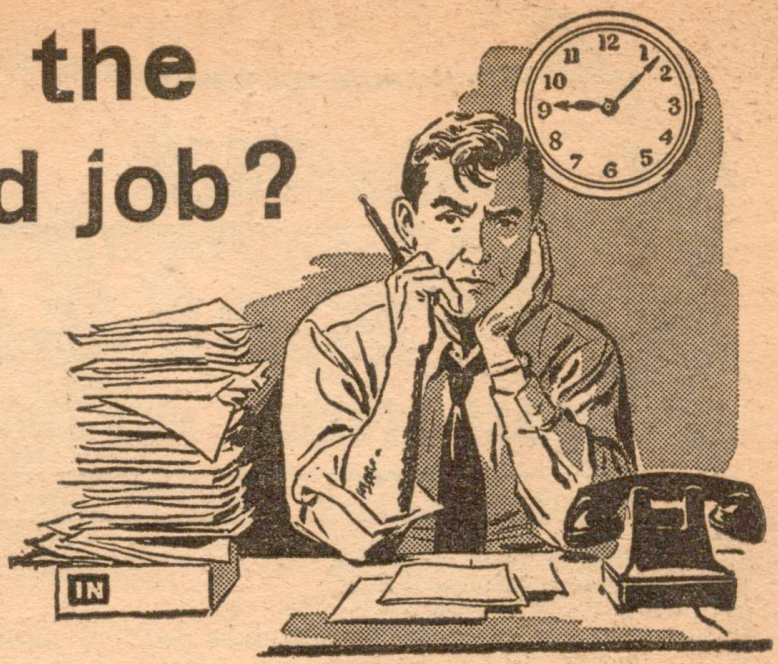

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This METHOD is NOT spinning, trolling, casting, fly fishing, trot line fishing, set line fishing, hand line fishing, live bait fishing, jugging, netting, trapping, or seining, and does not even faintly resemble any of these standard methods of fishing. No live bait or prepared bait is used. You can carry all of the equipment you need in one hand.

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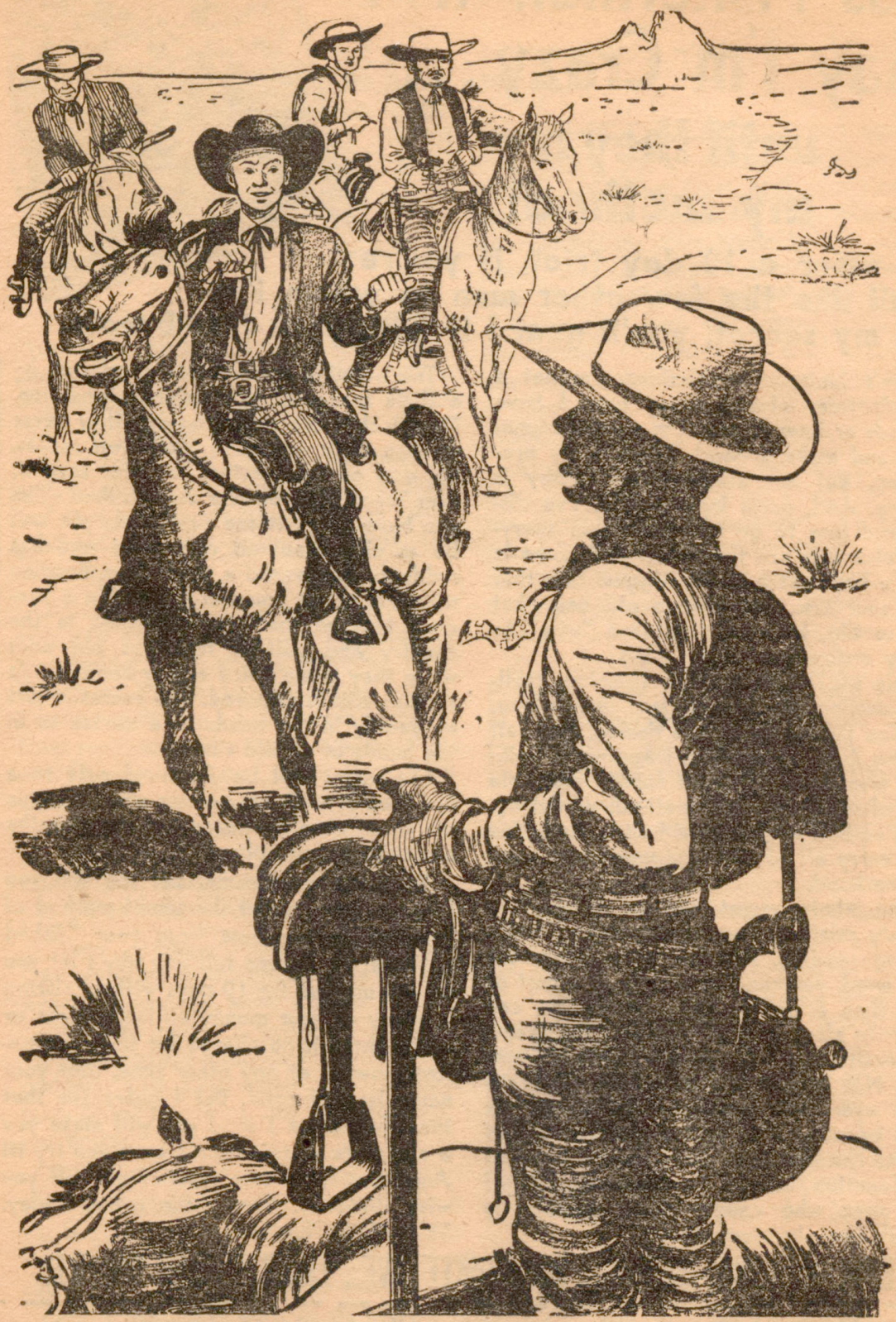

"You got an eight mile hike packing your saddle, mister. That's plenty of time to think it over. No trespassin' on War Bonnet!"

Sam Barbera owned the War Bonnet, and just about everything else in the county. And his main interest in life seemed to be to enforce the "No Trespassing" signs on his property. This, thought Silent Jim Travis, would make the War Bonnet an ideal locale for smugglers...

FEATURED NOVEL

OF FORBIDDEN RANGE

THE DARK AVENGER

by Lauran Paine

BRADE BALLARD wasn't a man who smiled often or easily. There was nothing especially unpleasant about him, unless it was his peculiar aura of wolfishness that could be felt rather than seen. He stood under six feet, in his boots with the heavily silvered Californio spurs; the full length of his body was hard and full, with the appearance of muscle packed and punched down under the swarthiness of his skin. He wore two guns, and a flat topped hat with a stiff brim; and his face, with the long, sensitive nose, was an etching of a man to whom life was real. He had black eyes and a thin mouth. Any of the men in the *Anglica Bar* in Chiqui saw that in a glance, and they left him alone; being a stranger in Chiqui, that was the best way.

Jim Travis gauged the stranger as was the custom. A new man in town—any frontier town—was measured as a matter of course. It was necessary. Sometimes a man's life depended on his guessing right; sometimes someone else's life, for the trails were ripe with all manner of men, not the least of whom were paid killers. Far worse were men who rode on a trail of hate all their own. Jim guessed the dark man to be one of these—a lone wolf hunting an enemy; there was that look about Brade Ballard.

Sometimes folks called Travis "Silent Jim Travis". He wasn't talkative—normally. With a low, broad forehead and chestnut hair that clung in large curls under the summer sweat of his floppy hat, Jim drank a tepid ale

in the *Anglica* and moodily studied the people. It was late afternoon. The sun was reluctantly surrendering to cool shadows, and the great range was almost sighing with a fragrant whisper that brought the smell of pines and sage and juniper to the heat-blistered town.

Jim looked at Chiqui and thought of the mighty War Bonnet beyond, where Samuel Barbera ruled his empire of cattle and horses and hard-eyed riders like a king, and bitterness lay back in the depths of his blue eyes. Barbera was a power in the Chiqui range. He owned—well— Jim drank the last of his ale. It didn't matter; he owned everything. Two-thirds of Chiqui. The bank, almost; and all the land, clean to the Mexican line. He was more of a legend than a man, and for that reason Travis felt no qualms over what happened to the man or his War Bonnet outfit.

But there was this other thing, this damned smuggling over the line. Jim had tried to see Barbera without luck. He had written him, without answer, and now he was going to trespass, regardless of the blunt warnings of the local men. Travis' job was to stop the smuggling; for that reason alone, he had been sent to Chiqui. He saw a tall, whisker-stubbled cowboy he had met the day before, when he'd been riding the land, getting the lay of it. The man rode for Ned Hawk's Muleshoe outfit, north of Chiqui about seventeen miles. His name was Merton; Jim remembered that: Alvin Merton. He sidled over and nodded.

Merton nodded back and made a wry face. "Gawdawful hot, ain't it?"

"Damn if it isn't. Day off?"

"Naw. I brought in the wagon. Supplies from Liddell's store." Merton studied him through squinted eyes. "You trespassed yet?" Travis shook his head slowly and Merton nodded. "Take the advice I give you yesterday at the salt licks. Don't."

"Like I said—it's open range, isn't it?"

"Don't cut no ice, pardner—not with War Bonnet. They make their own law. No fences an' no trespassin'."

"Anyone ever try to fence?"

Merton let the ale run down his scorched gullet before he answered. "Yas. Once. Homesteaders. They didn't last a month. Burnt out; shot out, an' run out." He put the mug down and half turned toward Jim. "It's like this. Ol' Sam'l Barbera says he owns the gawddamned land an' ain't nobody else got a right on it." With a shrug. "That's right, but most cowmen don't look at it quite like he does." Another shrug. "But the facts're the same. Barbera's biggest, wealthiest, hardest cowman in these parts. His words's law, pardner, an' he backs her up."

"How?"

"With a beatin', first; then, if that don't work, a bullet." Merton's eyes flicked to the dark man at the upper end of the bar. He hesitated, stared, then let his eyes drop to the bartop. "Who in hell's that, up there? That real dark gent with the skinny nose?"

Jim knew who he meant but didn't look. "Hell; I don't know." He turned away. "S'long, Merton. Time for my supper."

"S'long."

TRAVIS ate at the Chinese cafe, drifted through the cool night to the Parker House. He went to his room on the ground floor and lay awake for a long time, thinking, half deaf to the rising sounds of revelry. It wasn't like smuggling guns; that was difficult and dangerous, and all but discouraged now. This was better all around—smuggling cheap gold out of Mexico into the 'States—where it sold for much more than in Mexico—was good business. Profitable business. Unlike guns, there was no maker's name or trade mark to trace. All gold looked the same, and sneaking it over the line was becoming

increasingly popular because the bankrupt Mexican government couldn't and wouldn't pay a big price for the stuff, while the American government would.

Travis turned things over in his mind. It didn't sound like the work of cowboys, or even the small ranchers who lived along the border. Somehow, he suspected that a merchant's mind was behind it— Someone who knew values and commercial outlets. It just didn't make sense to Jim Travis, that none—or very little—of the gold was ever peddled in Chiqui or the other border towns. That, more than anything else, made him suspect a sound business organization—a merchant's guidance, not a cowman's. He turned up on one side and shrugged irritably. It was necessary to trespass on War Bonnet land to study the border where the stuff was probably brought over. He'd hoped to be able to make Barbera see it that way, but the man wasn't interested. Jim would have to trespass—which, he'd learned, was Barbera's first hate. War Bonnet's reasoning was sound: no trespassing, no rustling.

Dawn was the sweetest time of the day; it held warmth and fragrant coolness, plus soft light and silence. Jim rode down the immense swell of dead land and smelled the Digger pines and shaggy old junipers. Rabbits were out feeding and an occasional sage hen waddled off at his advance; but the land was as quiet, as motionless and peaceful as Heaven must be.

The sun turned from a blessing of delicate pink to a sphere of malevolent yellow that burned the sky into a faded, shimmering, brassy-blue, before Travis came to the little trails that wound across the border. Twice he found the signs marking the line, shot-riddled and bleaching on the ground; for the two miles between them, traffic had been heavy. He was studying the small hoofmarks on his knees, noticing how they were unshod and apparently made by burros, when the full blast of the summer sun rolled over the land bleaching the moisture and dew from plant and animal alike. He straightened up thoughtfully. Here, quite likely—not more than eight miles from Chiqui—was where the greatest number of smugglers came across. Evidently they drove burros laden with their contraband.

Travis mounted, flicked the sweat off his nose and reined back for town. He had to meet more of the merchants in Chiqui; the thought persisted that a more commercially-minded man than a cowboy or a rancher was behind this thing.

He hadn't traveled far—perhaps two miles—when he saw four riders coming toward him slowly, heads up and eyes staring. There was a sensation of wariness rising within Travis even before he saw the skeletal outline of a War Bonnet on their horses' left shoulders.

THE MEN stopped, barring his path, a silent, grim-faced lot. One rider, younger than the others, kneed out a few feet and ignored Jim's nod. There was open hostility in the sun-darkened face with its slate-grey eyes and full, heavy mouth. Jim measured this man; he knew instinctively that this was the leader. About Travis' own size, he was leaner, and possibly three years younger. The great silver belt buckle of his shell-belt, and the silver conchos on his saddle, spelled money.

Jim didn't nod a second time. "Howdy."

The younger man ignored it, studying him. "Stranger, you're trespassin'."

"Open range country?"

"Not on War Bonnet land."

Jim saw the suppressed wrath and met it calmly, glance for glance. "You got special laws, hereabouts?"

"For eighty miles, stranger; everyone knows War Bonnet's No Trespassin' laws."

"An' if a man doesn't know about 'em?" Travis knew, the instant he said

it, he had been baited. The man's eyes gleamed unmercifully. He nodded for the first time. "Then we teach him!"

Jim watched his small, gloved hand flicker to a wispy man on a breedy sorrel gelding. It was a signal. The wizened cowboy nudged out, flashed a gun and fired. Travis saw the motion toward the gun and flashed for his own, but his horse was falling even as he palmed it, shot dead by the wiry cowboy. He kicked free of the stirrups and leaped aside; the horse quivered once, threshed, and lay still, a torrent of sticky claret cascading out his nose. Travis' fury burned white hot and wild, within him. He tilted the gun muzzle and looked up into four cocked pistols. It was useless.

The leader of the War Bonnet riders was somberly looking down at him. "You got an eight mile hike packing your saddle, mister. That's plenty of time to think it over. No trespassin' on War Bonnet!" He holstered his gun, reined around and rode off, northwest. The riders followed.

Jim Travis had never sniped a man, but the impulse was like fire in him as he watched the broad backs riding off. A long, ragged breath slid over his cracked, compressed lips; then he holstered his gun, unsaddled the dead horse, cached the saddle and struck out for town. It was a blistering, maddening walk, with the full force of the murderous sun beating down, buffeting him with killing rays and sucking the sweat off his body before it touched his shirt. Spirals of rage whirled up with each irregular, panting beat of his heart, until the landscape was tinted a faint red around the rims of his narrowed, watering eyes. He didn't see the horseman following him, nor would he have understood, when Brade Ballard scooped up his saddle, balanced it on one hip and struck off behind him at a discreet distance, brooding-eyed and venemous.

Chiqui, for all its squalor and refuse and myraid stem-winding blue bottle flies, was a wonderful vision to Travis' dehydrated body. He swung up stiffly onto the plankwalk, where it ended and the raw range began, and stomped solidly toward the *Anglica Saloon*. He knew men looked at him as he passed, and he also knew that he was a sorry sight, with the coating of grey dust and caked salt stiffening his faded shirt, and the small, bloody cracks along his stiff lips. What he didn't realize, was that the murder that had turned his heart black, showed in his sunken, steely eyes. The men were used to dried sweat and dust and broken lips every day, but they weren't accustomed to the fury they saw.

"Ale."

The bartender set it up, watched Jim down it, re-filled, and watched that one disappear slower. The third, however, just set there, with one mahogany claw gripping it. He turned back to his other customers.

- 2 -

GORDO TOMAS' moon face, glistening with a greasy sort of perspiration, watched as the husky, very dark man dumped a saddle in the unkempt alleyway of his liverybarn. He blinked at the wooden face of the man, waiting. Coal black eyes ate into him; he could feel them going to his heart and beyond—to his soul. He smiled. Gordo, for all his great pendulous belly, thick arms and shoulders and spindly legs of a born horseman, avoided trouble the way most men avoided the noonday sun.

"Belongs to a hombre named Travis; he's up at the *Anglica*. Send him word, paisano. Don't say how it got here. Understand?"

Gordo's flat brimmed sombrero over the rank, coarse nest of black hair, nodded quickly. "Si, amigo. It is here, for Travis, but—*quien sabe?*—who knows how or why?"

The dark man nodded and rode on out of the barn. Gordo watched him ride South, past the constable's office, and swing West at the end of town. He shrugged. His part in the thing was small and he would fulfill it, but beyond that—no more. He beckoned to a 'breed urchin who was laboriously braiding a small riata in the fly laden atmosphere of the shady manure pile, near the rear maw of the barn. *"Muchacho, en aqui. Venga!"*

Jim Travis hauled up the buckets for a bath and winced as he drew off his boots. There was a magnificent blister on his right heel, the size of a quarter. He bathed glumly, dried himself and dressed in stiff new levis and butternut shirt, dumped the black bathwater, and smoked in the shade of the overhang outside of the Parker House. The bath made a difference. The resentment remained, as resolved, as eternal and solid as ever, but the savagery was gone. It went with the daylight scorch and mellowed with the coming of another late, shadowy afternoon.

He ate a big supper at three-thirty, and went back to the coolness of the hotel's overhang. He was still there when three riders jogged arrogantly down the dusty, manure-laden thoroughfare. They rode from the north end of town. Jim held the cigaret, forgotten as he watched them approach; he recognized them easily enough. One was the sulky looking leader of the men who had shot his horse, and the others were two of the cowboys who had backed him up. He watched them ride by, like proud rulers, and swing down outside the *Anglica.*

Travis' first impulse was to call the War Bonnet cowboys, one at a time. Then a wily thought occurred to him. Now would be a wonderful opportunity to prowl the War Bonnet itself. The riders were in town—most of them, anyway—and the mellow light of a nearly full moon would help him. He stamped out the cigaret, got up and went across to Tomas' livery barn, rented a horse and found his saddle where he'd hung it after the urchin had told him where it was, saddled up, swung aboard and rode out into the still warm night.

THE LIVERY horse was a good animal. Gordo Tomas was a born horseman in more ways than one; he fed and cared for his animals. Silent Jim Travis cut southwestward and rode for close to an hour before he saw orange squares ahead in the gloom. He rode closer, reined up and sat still, studying the orderly buildings of the War Bonnet headquarters. There were three great log barns. A long bunkhouse with a rambling cook-shack behind it. A regular galaxy of pole corrals, chutes and log squeezes, and—a little apart—was the large, low house of the legendary emperor of the huge Chiqui country. It was unmistakable. There were broad verandas and large windows, and flowers. Here was the nest of the mightiest eagle of them all.

Jim smiled thinly to himself. If he bearded the man in his own den—what then? Another dead horse? No; Merton had said first a beating, which he hadn't gotten, then a bullet. He spat to one side sourly. It wouldn't be so easy the second time. A warned man was an armed man; Jim Travis was both. He lifted the reins to ride down to the big, low house, when a voice stopped him rigid in the saddle.

"Hold it, hombre. Not a move."

Jim sat like a statue, cursing to himself. The damned place must be guarded like a fort. Why? He heard the spurs jingling softly as a man came up behind him, jerked his gun out, tossed it down and stepped back.

"Get down!" Jim got.

"Turn around." He turned, eyes widening in surprise. It wasn't a man at all; it was a tall, lithe girl with golden hair gathered into a ribboned, soft pony-tail behind her head, under a dove-grey Stetson with gracefully upcurving outer edges.

"What're you doing on War Bonnet land?"

Jim didn't answer right away. She was nearly as tall as he was, in spite of the silver buttoned moccassins on her small, broad feet. She was firm-breasted and narrow-waisted, with a swell to her hips that showed under the tight levis. His eyes went, then, to her face, and the jet black eyes in the creamy skin were startling. Even more so, was the handsome mouth, large, full lipped and graceful with a sensitive, slightly humorous upper lip. He smiled gently. "Lookin' for something, ma'm."

"Find it?"

He nodded slowly. "Yes. I think so." He flagged an arm toward the buildings behind him. "The headquarters of the War Bonnet."

"War Bonnet doesn't need riders, stranger, and doesn't take to trespassers."

"So I've heard," he said dryly.

"Then what're you doing here; sneaking around at night?"

"Not sneaking, ma'm. Just wondering what'd happen if I went down and demanded to see Barbera."

Her ebony eyes had a saturnine look. "You're going to find out, mister; turn around," she waved her carbine at him, motioning toward the buildings. He didn't move. She frowned a little. "Did you hear me?"

"Yes'm."

"Then turn."

"No'm."

The look in her handsome face was harsh and unpleasant. He heard the dog snap back on the carbine. "I'm not fooling, cowboy."

"Me either—ma'm."

"You—damned fool!" The finger was cuddled around the trigger like a small, sinewy snake.

Jim saw it and wondered at the wisdom of his stand. "War Bonnet's hard up for men. Usin' women sentinels."

She didn't answer. Indecision was in her eyes, but not in the cold set of her jaw.

He shrugged. Impasse. "I'll make a trade with you, ma'm. If you'll answer three questions for me, I'll go down there with you; otherwise you can pulled the trigger and be damned."

There was a brittle silence, then she licked her lips. That was all he needed.

"First: who are you?"

"Linda Barbera."

"Samuel's daughter?"

"Yes."

"Thanks. Two: who's a young buck with a big silver buckle on his shell-belt? Rides War Bonnet horses?"

"Jack Talbert. My cousin; he's foreman here since my brother left."

Jim nodded. "Thanks again. Now one more: why won't War Bonnet allow trespassing?"

"That should be easy. No strangers, no rustling. No trespassing allowed; no trouble from the outside."

Jim frowned slightly. "Why 'outside', ma'm? War Bonnet got trouble inside?"

"That's four, stranger."

Jim almost smiled. He nodded at her thoughtfully. "All right; I'll stick to the bargain." He started to turn, hesitated, and looked back at her. "War Bonnet killed my horse today, Linda. Do they ever pay damages?"

She walked close and prodded him over the kidneys with the gun. "You were lucky, mister. Usually they do worse to trespassers."

JIM TURNED without another word, caught the reins of the livery horse and walked stolidly toward the ranch yard. There was a reason, then, why Jack Talbert hadn't had him beaten.

A badly used-up man could never last the eight miles to Chiqui. He grunted to himself. It was clever at that. By the time he'd gotten back to town, he was as battered and bruised—and blistered—as though he been trounced, anyway.

"Toward the house; leave the horse here."

He looped the reins once around the hitchrail and walked on across the yard, up onto the roofed-over veranda, where the smell of honeysuckle and sage was overpowering, and stopped.

"Rap."

Jim knuckled the door and watched as it opened. A small, aging woman stood blinking out at him for a second, then she turned away without a greeting and jerked her head.

"Samuel."

But Barbera didn't get there before the girl prodded him inside. Then he was face-to-face with the man who held the lives and fortunes of the Chiqui land in his fist. And it was quite a fist, at that.

Barbera was short, squatty, massive. His face was aloof and cold, and wore the serene half-contemptuous, half-ruthless look of a man born to power. Their eyes held. Both blue and icy, then Barbera's appraisal was over. He turned to the lithesome girl without a word, waiting. She leaned the carbine against the wall, tossed her hat on a table and nodded toward Travis. "Found him sitting on the range looking over the buildings. Alone."

Barbera's smoky eyes came back, hostile. "Trespassing, stranger?"

Jim had made his mind up that he wasn't going through that routine again. He fished in his pocket and held out his palm. Barbera's glance dropped for a second, but the cold look didn't alter. His voice was the same; hard and impersonal.

"So?"

"Smuggling. I'm here to—"

"Not on War Bonnet you're not, Mister." The aloof eyes held on Travis' face. "No trespassing means that and no more: *No trespassing*. That goes for lawmen, cowmen, soldiers—even the President himself. If you have smugglers to contend with, Mister, you'll do it without trespassing on the War Bonnet. Do you understand?"

Travis' wrath was boiling up. "Even if the smugglers are using the enforcement of your no trespassing law to work without fear of interruption?"

Barbera nodded once, curtly. "Even then, Mister. If smugglers are trespassing, *I'll* teach them a lesson; not you. Anyway, I don't believe you."

Jim saw the iron resolve staring out of the cold eyes at him. It left him with a definite sensation of nullity. He couldn't reason with the man; that was obvious. He was face-to-face with the unwritten law of the Chiqui country, and it wasn't subject to reason, logic—or anything else. He looked past the powerful man to the small, drab woman behind him, watching impassively. He noticed her black eyes, like two brilliant pools of oil, and the creamy darkness of her skin and knew where the handsome daughter got her coloring.

His thoughts were jerked back to reality when Samuel Barbera spoke again. "Mister, you've come to the house and have immunity because of it—even though you didn't come voluntarily. You will ride away unharmed. But I promise you, lawman or no lawman, I'll give orders in the morning that if you're caught on the War Bonnet again, you're to be treated as any other trespasser. Is that clear?"

Jim didn't answer right away. He let his contempt show in his face for a moment, then he turned abruptly and started for the door. "You're a little behind the times, hombre; now you're going to find it out."

He slammed the door and stalked angrily across the yard to his horse, untied it and was toeing the stirrup when he saw the wispy shadow beside

the hitchrail and recognized the man who had shot his horse.

Jim swung up and glared down at the shadow. "Pardner, I'm waiting for you to show up in Chiqui." He whirled without getting an answer, and rode back the way he had come.

- 3 -

THERE WAS a bench outside of the blacksmith's shop, next to the abstract office and directly across from the raucous *Anglica Saloon*. It was in the darkness. Jim Travis sat on it and smoked. Orders to run the gold smugglers to earth were expected; as a Ranger, he was used to things like this. But the hostility of the War Bonnet complicated things. He could send for help, of course, but that wasn't the way he worked. He exhaled a gust of smoke and grunted under his breath. This was the first time he'd ever had both the forces of right, and wrong, aligned against him.

Barbera was within his rights, up to a point. But his refusal to cooperate with the law made it a peculiar situation. Jim knew the War Bonnet wasn't in on the smuggling. What would a man who had everything—and had gotten it legally—want with more wealth that he didn't need? Why would he sneak to get it? No, Barbera was just a ruthless cowman—a product of an earlier era—and he made things very awkward.

Travis got up and started toward the constable's office, then stopped. Three men stamped out of the *Anglica* and stood on the duckboards, carelessly making strollers go around them. He recognized them as the War Bonnet men he'd seen earlier, and his mouth drew down. The riders seemed to be discussing something; then the younger man, with the flashing silver belt-buckle, threw back his head and laughed. It had a nasty, grating sound that jangled on Jim's backbone.

Angry and resentful before, Jack Talbert's laugh brought up his gorge of fury. Without thinking, he swung off the duckboards, stalked through the filth of the street and approached the War Bonnet men. If they saw him coming, it meant nothing. Not until he was close, then his voice made them squint into the shadows of the night.

"Talbert!"

The foreman turned his head but not his body; the arrogant eyes were baleful. That was Jack Talbert's first mistake. Jim's hand caught his shirt and yanked savagely. Talbert went off balance, staggered out into the dusty roadway, and felt a blasting numbness high on the side of his head, then a thick, encompassing vortex of red and black light carried him downward. When his face smashed into the filth, he didn't feel the pain. There was a thin streamer of blood whipped upward from the edge of his mouth, onto one pale cheek.

Jim looked at the War Bonnet cowboys, dumbounded and rigid. "Second blood, boys. War Bonnet got first this mornin'." He was watching them closely and didn't see Brade Ballard leaning against the saloon, behind them, one hand resting easily on his gun, the other hand holding a dead cigaret. He nodded toward Talbert. "Haul him away, boys." He was turning back toward the constable's office when he spoke. "Let's see who gets third blood."

Jim was walking back across the roadway, wide shoulders swinging in contempt, when one of the Barbera riders dipped for his gun. His little eyes were murderous. "I'll kill the son!"

"Try it, cowboy!"

The man took his hand away from the gun, half drawn, and twisted his

head. Brade Ballard's hands both held guns, cocked and pointing belly-low. The dead cigaret was gone; the swarthy face nodded under the wild glitter in the black eyes. "Go ahead. Try it, you filthy scum."

Jack Talbert groaned. It was the only close sound over the racket of the saloon's patrons. Again the dark head nodded. "I'll remember your faces, boys. You got the rest of the night to leave the Chiqui country. By dawn I'll be out huntin' you. Shoot on sight, boys, because I will!"

The guns disappeared.

"Get your garbage, War Bonnet, and git!" The cowboys scooped up a wobbly Jack Talbert and left town.

CONSTABLE ELMORE nodded in silence as Jim Travis talked, then he spoke. "Yeah; I've heard there's smugglin' along the line. Heard it ever since I was a shaver." He shrugged. "Except fer the town, though, I got no authority."

"How about War Bonnet?"

Elmore's face looked pained. "Barbera's ruled this country for a long time, Ranger. A long time. I've been sick of his damned highhandedness for quite a while; still, he's never bucked the law before." He smiled thinly. "Of course the law's never stepped on his toes, either."

Jim nodded bleakly. "All right, Constable. I told you the facts for just one reason. If anything happens to me—or the War Bonnet riders that jump me—you'll know the lay of the land."

The constable watched the husky Ranger get up and noticed his hard look. "All right, son; I understand. Insofar as I can, I'll he'p you, but don't ask the impossible."

"I won't, Constable."

Gordo Tomas was asleep in a chair padded with stinking horse blankets when Jim shook him. He blinked furiously, then slid his customary smile up onto his face with no meaning. "Si, senor? Si?"

"The same horse I had before."

Gordo grunted erect. His feet had swollen in the boots and he swore uncomfortably as he hobbled out into the feebly-lit alleyway of the barn.

Jim rode northwest again, across the War Bonnet. He had a long detour that carried him past the War Bonnet buildings, saw only the sallow light from the bunkhouse's lantern with its eternally untrimmed wick, then he swung due East, bypassed Chiqui, and swung down along the border until he was close to the downed markers. Here he left the horse, his spurs buckled around the saddle horn, and went on afoot. It was gruelling work and he grunted over the small irritation of the broken blister on his heel; but suddenly, it paid off.

In the shadow world ahead he saw a string of doleful little burros plodding patiently along, single file, with worn alforjas strapped to them.

Jim's mouth was like cotton. He hunkered in the soft, moist light and counted. Seven burros, but no drivers. He waited until the small *clop-clop* was faint in the distance, then he jogged back, caught his horse and swung up.

Following the burros wasn't easy. The faint silhouette of a mounted man, moving against the stillness of the range, was easily seen by watching eyes. He finally left the horse in a chokecherry thicket and trudged along afoot until he saw the animals somberly walk into the deserted and tumble down old corral beside a long dead ranch of bleached, bedraggled wood, and calmly start munching at a heaping grain and hay manger. Two men came forward without sound, from the old barn, and began the unsaddling and unpacking of the small animals. Jim had seen enough; he dared not push his luck. He retraced his steps, swung back onto his rented animal and rode

thoughtfully back toward Chiqui. That much was solved.

Someone, over the line, in Mexico, loaded the animals and turned them loose. Grained and fed the choicest feed, the little burros immediately returned across the border to their home corrals. It was good; all the rangers in Arizona could wait at the border and arrest the smugglers as they trooped homeward, but who ever heard of prosecuting seven sad-eyed little burros?

By the time Travis turned the animal back over to Gordo Tomas, he was perilously close to a smile. The night had been productive; he forgot the bitterness of earlier and went to his room.

SAMUEL BARBERA listened to Jack Talbert's version of why two of the War Bonnet riders drew their money and rode. There was an odd look in his pale blue eyes and he kept letting them slide off Talbert's bruised face to the impassive, jet black eyes of his wife, who sat perfectly still at the breakfast table, listening. Finally he waved a hand abruptly at his foreman.

"All right, Jack. We'll take the boys into Chiqui later on and throw some weight around. Can't have things like this happening. Hard on War Bonnet's prestige." His face went up again. "Did you try an' talk 'em out of quittin'?"

"Yeah." Talbert's words were thick past the swelling of his mouth and jaw. "But they got no heart fer it."

"All right. That's all; I'll be out later."

Jack left and Samuel Barbera avoided his wife's stare and ate slowly. He knew Linda's eyes, so like her mother's, were stabbing at him, too. He didn't think she'd speak, though, and when she did he was nettled more than surprised. "It must've been that same man. The Ranger."

He grunted. "I'll take care of that."

His wife spoke then, in her strained, soft voice. A quarter of a century of hard domination had made her like that. "But—this other man, Samuel."

His cold eyes glared. He seemed on the verge of saying something, then just shook his head harshly, threw down his napkin and left the table. Linda reached over and squeezed her mother's hand. She knew what lay behind those other black eyes. Her brother, missing for close to seven years, disowned by his father, for crossing him. Linda left, too. She saddled her horse and rode aimlessly. The blasting, smashing sun was no detriment; she'd never known anything else.

Jim Travis arose late, ate, then strolled casually over to the hot shade of the bench by the blacksmith's shop and turned his discovery over in his mind. He saw the long nosed, black eyed two-gun man ride down through the early heat and swing in at the blacksmith shop, and wondered about him idly. There was something about the man—he shrugged; too much else on his mind right now. Then he saw Frank Liddell, the wealthy young trader who owned the largest mercantile store in Chiqui—Liddel's Emporium—leading a handsome bay gelding toward the forge, and a thought struck him.

Liddell was youngish, thin-lipped, like a bear trap, with genial, deep set eyes, and a quick, insistent way about him. He was smart enough all right.

Jim's eyes narrowed as he slouched on the bench. He watched Liddell through the lashes and speculated. Tonight he'd go deeper into the thing. He'd hide in the barn in the early afternoon and wait. It made him wince; he'd have to turn his horse loose to avoid detection, and that meant another eight mile hike across the range—this time with a blister already on his right foot. He was grinning to himself when he looked up and felt his eyes drop into a pair of stony, black eyes atop a handsome grey horse.

LINDA BARBERA felt the raw heat on her shoulders as she looked down at the Ranger; there was a self-satisfied smirk on his face that annoyed her. Then, when he looked up and saw her staring at him, it left. There was just the startled, surprised look in his blue eyes, but she had seen the other look.

"Feeling smug today, Mister Ranger?"

Jim looked at her with unveiled admiration. Tall in the saddle, lithe and wholesome. He felt something more than admiration. She was beautiful here, in her native habitat. He would have put her nowhere else; she wouldn't fit. Just here, in open range cow country.

He shrugged. "No reason not to, ma'm—uh—Linda."

She flicked her reins just as Frank Liddell walked up with his led horse and smiled up at her. "Hi, sweetheart. Have lunch with me?"

There was spite in her voice, and it was louder than it had to be. "Glad to, Frank; soon's I have my horse's shoes re-set."

Jim didn't see the triumphant glare she fired at him. He was looking at Frank Liddell. "Lunch," Liddell had said. In the country "lunch" was called dinner, and the city man's dinner, was called supper. Liddell was a city man, originally.

Jim stowed that away with other little things he'd seen or heard. There were several items in his mind, but they still didn't make sense. Not yet, but he felt they would—soon. He could have all the suspicions he wanted, but suspicions had never caught a man yet, to his knowledge; he'd have to get something more solid. He lifted his eyes, watched the girl dismount, disdaining Liddell's offer of a hand, and felt the funny little sensation again. She was just about perfect—even over a carbine barrel in the moonlight.

That reminded him. Tonight it would be a full moon; he had to get to the old deserted ranch early. He fished listlessly for the tobacco sack and made another quirley, lit it and looked up at the shadow standing at the end of the bench, watching him. It was the constable.

"Howdy, Elmore. Have a seat."

The lawman sat and squinted at Travis. "I saw that look Linda gave you; you aren't very popular in that quarter, I reckon."

"No," Jim drawled with a pensive look. "Not very. In fact, I punched a little stuffin' out of her cousin, Jack Talbert, last night, after goin' to the War Bonnet and arguin' with her paw. I don't reckon she's got any call to love me." His breath went out of him when he unconsciously said the last two words and the strange sensation came back with a roar that made his ears ring. He puffed quickly on the cigaret to hide the sudden revelation.

Elmore began to whittle a stick. "Ranger, I smell trouble for you in Chiqui."

"I'm not surprised."

"But—you got a friend, too."

"Who?"

"It don't matter; can't say, exactly. But after the news got around you punched Talbert silly; well, sir, you suddenly had a friend. Hombre I've knowed all of his life. Makes a damned fine friend too, believe me."

Jim ground out the cigaret. "Well," he said, arising, "if this is your day for riddles, Constable, you'll have to answer 'em for yourself. Personally, I never cared for 'em." He turned and strolled down the duckboards, his spurs ringing musically, headed toward Tomas' livery barn.

Constable Elmore watched him go with a speculative look on his face. Neither the constable, nor Jim Travis, saw the two other watchers. One was a girl, leaning against the grimy doorway to the blacksmith shop. Her face was intent, and just a bit admiring. The other was Brade Ballard, slouched in a chair by the window of the *Anglica Saloon,* peering past the jillions of fly-

specks, thoughtfully. Brade finally left off staring at the man Elmore had told him was a Ranger, and looked over at the girl, his black eyes thoughtful.

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GORDO TOMAS saddled the livery horse with mild curiosity. The same horse every time—but Gordo said nothing. He just smiled and nodded as Travis swung up, reined around and rode out of town, northeast, over the shimmering land, then went back to his shady little office and drowsed. In fact, Gordo slept all through the coming and going of Brade Ballard, who coursed the stalls, saw which horse was gone, then walked back up the duckboards, behind the constable's office, and soon rode down through town, himself. Heading northeast, too.

Frank Liddell's deep eyes hooded their depths and hid the look behind a smile as he talked with Linda Barbera. He had pressed his suit as far as he dared. Now it was up to the girl to either discourage him, or encourage him, and so far she had done neither. He looked past and saw the rider she was watching. "Who is he?"

"A Ranger, Frank."

Liddell's smile fell apart; a rigid look crept up and puckered his face. "Oh? How do you know?"

"He was at the ranch last night." She didn't say how Jim had been rifle-herded by herself. "He wanted permission to trespass on War Bonnet."

"Why?"

Linda felt, more than saw, the vivid interest. It made her uneasy in a tiny way. She shrugged. "He's looking for smugglers."

Liddell's eyes flickered, then he levered up the smile again and nodded to her. "Well, it looks like he's trespassing again, from the direction he rode out of Chiqui."

She scowled a little. "He'd better not; he's been warned."

Frank shrugged and started past her. "Well, got to get back to the store. Anyway, what's one trespasser? See you later, honey."

Linda nodded without speaking. Her eyes were pensive. She scarcely heard the merchant's words as her eyes caught the powerful, broad figure of another horseman riding northeast, out of town. She looked twice, then her eyes widened and the full underlip was caught harshly between her teeth. Recognition and disbelief—and something close to horror—flashed for a second as she stood rigidly and watched the second man ride out of sight.

Liddell never looked back. Only the blacksmith frowned when he had to tell Linda for the third time that her horse was ready. When she heard, she paid him quickly, swung up and heeled the animal suddenly and roared out of town, swung West and disappeared over the cringing, heat drowned War Bonnet range. The blacksmith reached up and scratched his head, then wagged it back and forth in pure wonder.

When the War Bonnet riders walked their horses evenly down the crooked roadway of Chiqui, the loungers scented trouble. Word went around that old Samuel Barbera himself was leading them, and that Jack Talbert wasn't along. Barbera swung down in front of the bank and went in, but the cowboys rode on over to the *Anglica* before they tied up. Barbera had ordered it that way; the bank's manager was his thumb-stamp. Orders for Chiqui came through him. Barbera didn't condescend to issue ultimatums except through others. It was a part of his successful strategy. The banker's word was backed with Barbera's wealth, plus the bank's prestige. He went into the little cubbyhole office and dropped into a chair, and asked about this Ranger.

Chiqui's bank was his clearing house of information, and never failed him. He listened to everything the manager had picked up with his aloof, mahogany face set and wooden, and his frozen-steel eyes hooded and emotionless.

WHEN LINDA got home the War Bonnet was almost deserted. There were only three people in the house. Herself, her mother, and a Mexican house-girl. She sat down in the large parlor and wondered how to phrase her discovery, then plunged into it without further thought. Her mother's black eyes were liquidly intent. She sensed something. "He's back, mother."

For a long time there was silence, then the older woman nodded slightly. "I knew it." She smiled and rocked gently. "He had to come."

"But why now? After seven years?"

The mother almost smiled. *"Quien sabe?"* A flicker of doubt darted over the black eyes. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. He's heavier, and a lot sterner looking, in the face, and now he carries two guns. But it's Brade, mother; I'd know him anywhere. Even after seven years."

The older woman smiled fully then, nostalgically. "He's three years older than you are, honey. Still, the pull of the blood is strong; you should know if it's your brother or not."

Linda got up with a frown. "Well, it was, all right; I know that."

"Where are you going?"

Linda's black eyes shone with perplexity. "I'm going to ride a little, mother. I've got a feeling—" she shrugged. "I don't know. For two days now I've been restless—uneasy. I'm going to ride around and see if I can't figure things out."

Her mother was looking up at her wide eyed. "You've been uneasy since the Ranger came; is that it?" She saw the color mount in her daughter's face and shrugged. "Well then, go take your ride; Jack is riding, too."

Linda's frown deepened. "But I thought Dad said they were going into Chiqui."

"The boys went with your father. Jack said he wanted to do some riding; he said he'd heard there were more trespassers."

"Oh." The uneasiness became almost tangible. Linda threw a flashing smile to her mother and went back out into the blazing daylight. There was that odd sensation in her, stronger now. She mounted her horse still puzzling over it, and the return to Chiqui of her brother, Brade Barbera, after his silent, seven-year absence. She knew by instinct, that trouble was building up for the mighty War Bonnet.

Jim Travis saw the old ranch from the poop of his rented horse and sat back in the shaggy eminence of a juniper, studying it. There were wagon ruts leading to it, and a lot of saddle horse tracks going and coming, but, aside from those things, it looked like hundreds of other discouraged, haunted old ruins throughout the cow country. He ran his fingers through the rank mane of the livery horse, sighed and swung down. It took only a moment to loop the reins, turn the horse and start him back toward Chiqui. Then he slipped forward afoot, got to the mouldy smelling old barn, whistled noiselessly at the amount of good hay and grain stored in it, and laboriously crawled into the ancient mow, where dust was decades thick; he lay down and waited.

The interior of the barn was like a blast furnace, under the cracked and flapping roof slats. He sweated and found himself thinking of the black-eyed girl. It was a pleasant way to kill the hours until the burros came—if they came.

JACK TALBERT rode into Chiqui not more than a half an hour after Samuel Barbera had left it. He had been watching from the covert. When War Bonnet rode out, he rode in, tied up in front of the *Anglica*, swung

down and walked jinglingly down to Liddell's Emporium.

Liddell looked up from a ledger, jerked his head toward a chair and made a wry face. "Ranger snoopin' around."

"I figured that's who he was. But who'n hell's the other one?"

"What other one?" Liddell's face was tight again, wary and angry both.

Talbert rolled a cigaret. "I never seen him. The boys told me he backed up the Ranger's play when I got knocked out last night."

Frank Liddell sat perfectly still for a long moment, looking at Talbert. He didn't speak until after the foreman's cigaret was a smoking ember, then he shrugged.

"Didn't know there was but one. Maybe just a cowboy that didn't like the idea of War Bonnet ganging up on the damned Ranger."

"Yeah," Talbert agreed dryly. "An' maybe somethin' else, too."

"Like what?"

"Another Ranger."

Liddell nodded. "That's possible. After I discovered from Linda this other one was a Ranger, I went over and talked to Elmore."

"What'd he say?"

Liddell's eyes clouded in annoyance. "Nothing. Closed-mouthed old goat. He just gave me that wide-eyed look of his and said, 'Is that so? I hadn't heard.'"

Talbert's eyes darkened. "I don't like it, Frank; Rangers are bad medicine."

Liddell nodded speculatively. "Yeah. I watched him ride off northeast, too, Jack." He watched for the reaction and saw it immediately. Talbert's face swung toward him with a frozen look of wonder. The cigaret dangled forgotten.

"Toward the old barn, Frank?" It came out softly, guardedly. Liddell nodded, still watching the War Bonnet foreman. Talbert swore and got up. "I don't dare use the ranch riders on him if he's at the old place. Hell, they'd get suspicious, seein' the hay an' grain in there."

Still Liddell said nothing. He watched the seed of doubt he'd planted grow and develop in Talbert's less shrewd mind. Waiting for the total he knew was coming, because he knew Jack Talbert. He wasn't disappointed. "By gawd I'll have to do this job myself, if he's snoopin' around out there."

He looked down at Liddell. "Frank, we'd better quit—for a while, anyway. Rangers'd raise hell with both of us."

Liddell nodded thoughtfully and spoke, then. "Yeah. After this shipment tonight, I'll pass word down the line. No more until we get a new receiving point." He reached up and knuckled one deep set eye. "It's too bad, Jack. You keepin' the old man stirred up on that no trespassin' hobby of his, has made the War Bonnet the best damned depot in the Chiqui." He swore with irritation. "Well, we've made enough so's we can afford to lie back an' wait until things're ready again, huh?"

Talbert's baleful face sagged noticeably. "Maybe *you* have, Frank. I don't have much of it, any more."

Liddell nodded slightly; he knew his man. Jack Talbert could have a hundred-thousand, and he wouldn't have it long. He felt contempt for the lean, brutal man before him, but didn't let it show. Still, he couldn't resist one little barb. "Well, you sure got rid of Brade easy enough. Seven years, Jack. He's probably dead by now, as quick-tempered as he was."

TALBERT'S face stiffened. "He asked for it. Always taggin' after me and pryin', an' double-checkin' the damned out-range tally sheets and askin' about the cattle that vanished." Jack's mind found satisfaction in the past, that offset the uneasiness of the present, and dwelt on Brade's banishment from the War Bonnet. He was even smiling a little.

"Sam'l's a hotheaded old fool, too, or it wouldn't have worked." He half

smiled and stamped out the cigaret on the office floor. "It wasn't hard to decoy Brade into an argument with Sam'l about the missing cattle. Brade accused Sam'l of not keeping enough outriders on the back country range, an' Sam'l accused Brade of knowing something about the vanished cattle. It was pretty good, at that. Sam'l swore an' cussed an' asked Brade how he knew how many riders were at the line camps, unless he'd slipped around on the outrange, where he had no business. It was the same as sayin' Brade stole them damned critters himself. If I hadn't stepped in between them, then an' there, there'd of been blood."

Jack laughed. "Steppin' in an' takin' Sam'l's part was the best thing I ever did. He made me foreman. A job for life." Talbert looked down at Frank Liddell. "It's paid off, too, Frank. Up to now."

Liddell turned impatiently back to his ledger with a stiff little smile. "It will again, Jack; just be patient. If it isn't gold, it'll be cattle again."

"Yeah. How about the Ranger, though, an' this other hombre?"

Frank looked up. "Forget the other man. He's just a coincidence. The Ranger, though, we'll have to discourage by stoppin' all packs after tonight." He looked back at the ledger. "That's all, Jack."

Talbert got the hint, shrugged and walked out, still frowning. He knew Liddell would be at the deserted ranch on time. That was one good feature about Frank. He was always on time. Talbert turned on the duckboards and started back up toward his horse, there was a hard smile on his mouth. Why shouldn't Frank be on time? He'd always gotten plenty of money out of their dealings. In fact, he now had a flourishing store, built from the illegal fortune he'd made in smuggled gold and rustled cattle. Jack untied and swung up. And he had nothing to show for his share, but legendary gambling losses. He squirmed uncomfortably under the fierce heat and reined broodingly out of Chiqui.

- 5 -

BRADE BALLARD heard Talbert's horse coming over the still, breathless land, long before he saw the rider. He rode farther off into the distance, dismounted, tied up and went back. He wasn't a hundred feet when the War Bonnet foreman went by. There was a savage, bitter light in the black eyes, but he didn't move until Talbert had ridden into the old barn and swung down. Then he went closer, hunkered in a tracework of manzanita shade, and waited with the stoic patience of his kind. There wasn't much to see, except when Jack grunted and forked the hay into the manger and dumped vast amounts of grain into the bunkers.

The dark eyes glinted softly. He watched Talbert's red face drip sweat from the exertion. Even with the sun sliding toward the sawtooths on the horizon, it was still insufferably hot. To Talbert and the Ranger in the stifling haymow, but not so unbearable to Brade Ballard—who had all but forgotten his other name; the right name of Barbera—because he felt the dying fires of a seven-year hate, and it cooled him.

Linda rode without aim or purpose. The feeling of impending disaster rode with her; she went eastward beyond Chiqui. She had intended to ride into town, but remembering that her father was there with the War Bonnet crew, deterred her. Instead, she rode past the town, then swung northward so as to come onto the juniper and Digger pine section of the range where she could find shade and seclusion, since this section was never used for the cat-

tle, unless riders were kept there, because of strays drifting over into Mexico, thus becoming lost to the War Bonnet.

When Jack Talbert finished putting out the feed, he carefully walked all around the old buildings, eyes squinted at the ground, looking for tracks of the Ranger Frank Liddell had said rode out of Chiqui, northeastward. It was impossible to read much on the granite hard earth, in the maze of tracks from other days, so he finally contented himself with sitting in the shade of the old barn, squint-eyed, and glaring over the shimmering land for sign of movement. Brade Ballard saw this and grew wary. He knew that something had alarmed Talbert. Sweat lay under his shirt and dried with a sticky sense of coolness. He didn't move. Didn't dare. Not until Talbert had smoked a cigaret and shrugged, then went back into the shade. Then Brade took his spurs off and walked back to his horse, narrow eyed. Evidently Talbert thought the Ranger either hadn't found the old ranch, or hadn't arrived yet. If he'd thought otherwise, he'd have looked more closely.

Brade was swinging up when he heard a shod horse's hoof strike stone. It was a small sound, but distinct in the sharp, arid air. He went off again, listening, the sound came back to him; he waited motionless, one hand near his horse's nose to squeeze off any sound. When he saw Linda ride by, head down and lost in her thoughts, he was tempted to speak, to signal or step out. She was going directly toward the old ranch. He hesitated, confused, and by then she was close enough for the sound of her coming to carry to Jack Talbert. Brade left his horse and slipped forward again.

Linda saw the blackish old ruins ahead of her and vaguely remembered they had been erected by an early homesteader whom her father had discouraged. She glanced at them indifferently and was reining around, when a voice slapped her to sudden, jarring, reality and she reined back, stopping. "Hold it!"

The black eyes swept around and found the cold muzzle of a sixgun staring back. Behind the gun was Jack Talbert's sweaty, surprised face. For a long second neither spoke, then Talbert let the gun droop and flushed a raging crimson. "Linda! What in hell're you doing over here?"

His anger stung her to instant resentment. There had never been anything but shielded animosity between them, anyway. "Riding. What difference does it make?" She looked beyond him, saw the tell-tale glitter of sunlight on another pistol barrel. Unknowingly her eyes widened. Jack Talbert saw it, cursed and spun around, but the range was empty. Fear mounted in him; the uneasiness was gone now, as were the rancor and dissatisfaction. Fear replaced both. He was wide-eyed when he motioned with the gun. "Ride over to the old barn." He started toward the building.

Linda glared. "Suppose I don't want to?"

He swung back and raised the gun again. "Then you'll damned well lie right where you are." She saw the wild fury in his eyes. The gun jerked quickly. "Move!"

LINDA'S SMALL anger turned to amazement, then seeping, growing fear. She reined toward the barn, rode inside, saw Talbert's horse inside, drowsing in the shade, and swung down at his order. For a while there was silence. Jack's face was pale under the red heat rash of perspiration; his eyes were dangerously thoughtful.

"Who'd you ride over here with?"

"No one. What's the matter with you?"

His anger flared. She'd unconsciously touched him on the ragged nerves. He shook his head quickly, brusquely. "Nothing; not a damned thing. Where's that damned Ranger you brought to the house." He didn't wait for an answer. His eyes widened a little as a thought

struck him. "That was a put-up job, wasn't it? It didn't stick though, did it?"

Linda was frowning. "What're you talking about?"

"You said you found him out on the range and herded him in with your rifle. Hell, I can see through that; you was meetin' him all the time. You brought him in to tell Sam'l about the smugglin'. Damn you, Linda, you're in this thing hand and glove with him, aren't you?"

The black eyes were wide. She was facing death and knew it. Also, she suddenly felt the unrest crystalize; a lot of other little facets dropped into place then, too, like Talbert's constant abuse of trespassers, and the way he kept her father stirred up. Dimly, she remembered how Jack had sided against Brade. It all began to make a design she could understand.

"Jack, you're in that smuggling some way. I know it."

He slid his gun back into its holster with a hard smile. "Yeah? How'd ya know it?"

"I—I—can sense it. You're behind it, some way. Call it intuition, but I know it."

He nodded slowly. "Call it what you like, Linda. You're not going to talk much about it around Chiqui, or the War Bonnet. That's a promise." He was looking at her as something suddenly attainable.

"Over the line's Mexico, Linda. You an' I're going over there after the burros come back. This time I'll take *all* the gold. Frank can rage all he wants to, I know when it's over; besides, he don't need it like I do. I'll take it all, an' you too."

Linda felt almost chilly. It was like a breath of doom, clammy and cold, had suddenly blown over her. She watched Talbert nodding his head with that awful, tight smile, and could feel the words dying in her throat. Then she heard another voice. It was soft and clear, like a bell, with a bell's impersonal detachment, and she recognized it in spite of its acquired knife-edge and timbre. Her brother's voice, Brade Barbera. "Jack, turn around!"

Talbert started suddenly, then froze. His eyes were fixed intently on Linda. She could see the parade of thoughts that flashed over them. He made no move to obey and she heard the voice again, coming from the sun bleached yard just beyond the barn maw.

"Turn, Jack. You've given the orders long enough. Turn now, and take an order. Just one, Jack. Turn!"

There could be no mistaking the deadliness of that command. It rang like a knell. When the War Bonnet foreman turned, someone was going to die.

TALBERT'S wild eyes narrowed, contracted and seemed to grow opaque and glassy. Linda watched from off to one side with fascination. Talbert turned slowly, very slowly, keeping his gun hand free, but away from the pistol butt that hung so comfortingly, so accessible, at his hip, then he sucked in his breath and Linda tore her eyes off him and looked at the wide legged man, leaning forward a little, motionless and beady eyed, in the glare of the sunlight. Talbert breathed a name, almost hoarsely. "Brade!"

The two-gun man nodded with one small movement of his head. "Yeah. Brade Barbera. It used to be that, Jack. Now it's Brade Ballard." The long beak of a nose, thin and dark and slightly hooked, showed outside of the perimeter of the man's hatbrim of shade.

"Seven years, Jack. I didn't find out about you an' Frank Liddell until two months ago. Talbert, Liddell, an' olf Epifanio Escalante, down at Fronteras. You three been damned good, up until now, Jack. First War Bonnet cattle, then this gold smugglin' deal. Maybe I'd of never found it out, Jack, except I went down to see my wife's folks at Fronteras. They knew all about it. The gold I could overlook, Jack, but not the

War Bonnet cattle—or the way you've always worked to turn my dad against me." The black eyes never left Talbert's flushed, shiny face. "Linda, move away from him."

She was starting to obey when another voice cut in. Linda and Brade started, but Brade's face pulled into a faint, sardonic smile. "Hold on, down there. Don't any of you make a move." There was a scramble, then a thud behind them, and Jim Travis walked stiffly up out of the shadows, his clothes streaked with dust and dried sweat. There was the small, glistening brilliance of his badge, high on his shirt. He was moving with open authority; there was no longer any need for secrecy. He disarmed Jack Talbert with one muscular swoop, then nodded at Brade. "Chuck it, hombre."

Brade holstered his guns, straightened with a hard, granite smile at Talbert, and walked into the shade of the old barn as Jim Travis smiled uncertainly at Linda, then turned toward the men.

"Talbert, I can't recall ever nabbin' a man I disliked as much as I like you." He turned toward Brade. "Who're you, hombre?"

Brade mopped at his dark forehead. "I'm the hombre who packed your saddle in the morning Talbert here had your horse shot out from under you. I been watchin' you ever since you hit Chiqui. Y'see, when I found out what Talbert was doin'—through my wife's kinsmen down at Fronteras, in old Mexico—I wrote to the Texas Rangers and gave 'em all the dope I had. Then I rode on into Chiqui myself, to sort of be on hand, should the Ranger they sent need any help."

Brade nodded toward the hay mow. "I followed you like a shadow, pardner. In fact, I saw you go up there an' been waitin' outside ever since." He smiled widely at Linda. Brade's smile was a flashing, brilliant thing, that completely altered his face. "Hi, sis," he said.

Linda walked over with a funny little, half tearful look that wasn't quite a smile or a sob. "I'm awfully glad you're back, Brade. Mother will be, too."

His smile went flat. "Dad too, sis?" She knew what he meant and didn't answer. Quickly he reached over, took her hand and squeezed it. "Don't worry, Linda, honey. We'll see what happens before we judge the old cuss. I don't really hold it against him an' you an' mom shouldn't. It's the way he had to keep above water here, in the Chiqui, in his day." He turned back to Jim with a self conscious smile. "Now what, Ranger?"

"Get to horse an' ride for town."

Brade nodded softly. "All right. I caught that horse you turned loose an' tied him up. Let's go."

JIM LET Brade watch the crestfallen, sullen foreman of the War Bonnet while he maneuvered Linda Barbera up ahead with him. For a long time they rode along engulfed in their own thoughts and the sudden unmasking of the smuggling plot under the very nose of the Barbera clan, then Linda looked over at Jim Travis. Her eyes flickered from the small, burnished badge, glittering harshly under the merciless sun, to his rugged, honest face, and she blushed because her thoughts were bitter, as they once had been. Jim looked down, caught her looking. She had to say something, quick, to cover up her embarrassment. The blush remained, however. "Did you know Frank Liddell was mixed up in it, too?"

Jim shook his head. "No; not exactly. I sort of wondered about him, but until I heard your brother say what he knew, I wasn't more than just suspicious." He studied her handsome profile somberly. Brade saw the look and stared in surprise. He'd had no idea—he shrugged. It happens once to everyone. He turned and glared at Talbert and didn't hear Jim's words.

"Linda?"

"Yes?"

Their eyes were locked, shy yet challenging. Both were dusky with high

color. "Do—do—you really think I'm as ornery as you made me think in town; there by the blacksmith's shop?"

She let her eyes drop before his glance, and shook her head. "No. It was just that—well—like you said once. We, on the War Bonnet, have trouble on the inside. In the family."

Jim nodded. "Brade?"

"Yes. He an' dad had an—"

"Well, pretty quick you'll have the answer to that, honey."

She looked up at the interruption. Ranger Travis was looking straight ahead and pointing. They saw the riders coming toward them over the wavy land, reined up and waited. Linda nodded without speaking. It was her father with the War Bonnet cowboys. No one spoke until Samuel Barbera reined up, his hard-eyed riders at his back, and let his cold eyes range over them. They stopped dead still at the sight of Brade. Tension was in the air like electricity. Jim Travis looked among the War Bonnet men for the wispy rider who had shot his horse out from under him. The man wasn't there.

He turned a thin mouth and bitter eye on Barbera and spoke, yanking the man's glance from Brade. "I told you about the smugglers, Barbera, an' I've got one," he wagged his head to Talbert. "Now, if you'll get out of the way, I'll go get the other one."

Barbera acted as if he hadn't heard. His eyes fell on Linda, beside the badge-wearing Ranger. He seemed lost in thought and when he spoke, it startled all of them. He swept the cold blue eyes past Travis. "You back to stay, Brade?"

The hawkfaced son squinted, saw the pleading, poignant look in his sister's face as she twisted in the saddle, looking at him. He shrugged. "I reckon. Why?"

Barbera's face didn't yield, but his voice was husky. "Glad to have you back, son."

Travis nudged the girl. "Come on, Linda; let's go get Frank Morton. It'll make me feel good to nab him with you as bait." His eyes were grinning wickedly down at her.

She flashed him a warm glance. "Aren't you afraid of being baited, too, Mister Ranger?"

"No'm. I'm just a willing sucker." They both blushed, laughed and rode off. Barbera's massive hand engulfed his son's harder, leaner, hand. Peace had come to the War Bonnet.

★

Digger John didn't really think that this Chinese lad could out-tough Gus Sory. He just made that bet to divert lynch-mad minds, in hopes of finding a killer before Gold Run's Chinatown was burned out, because of the murder.

DIGGER JOHN LOSES

by A. A. Baker

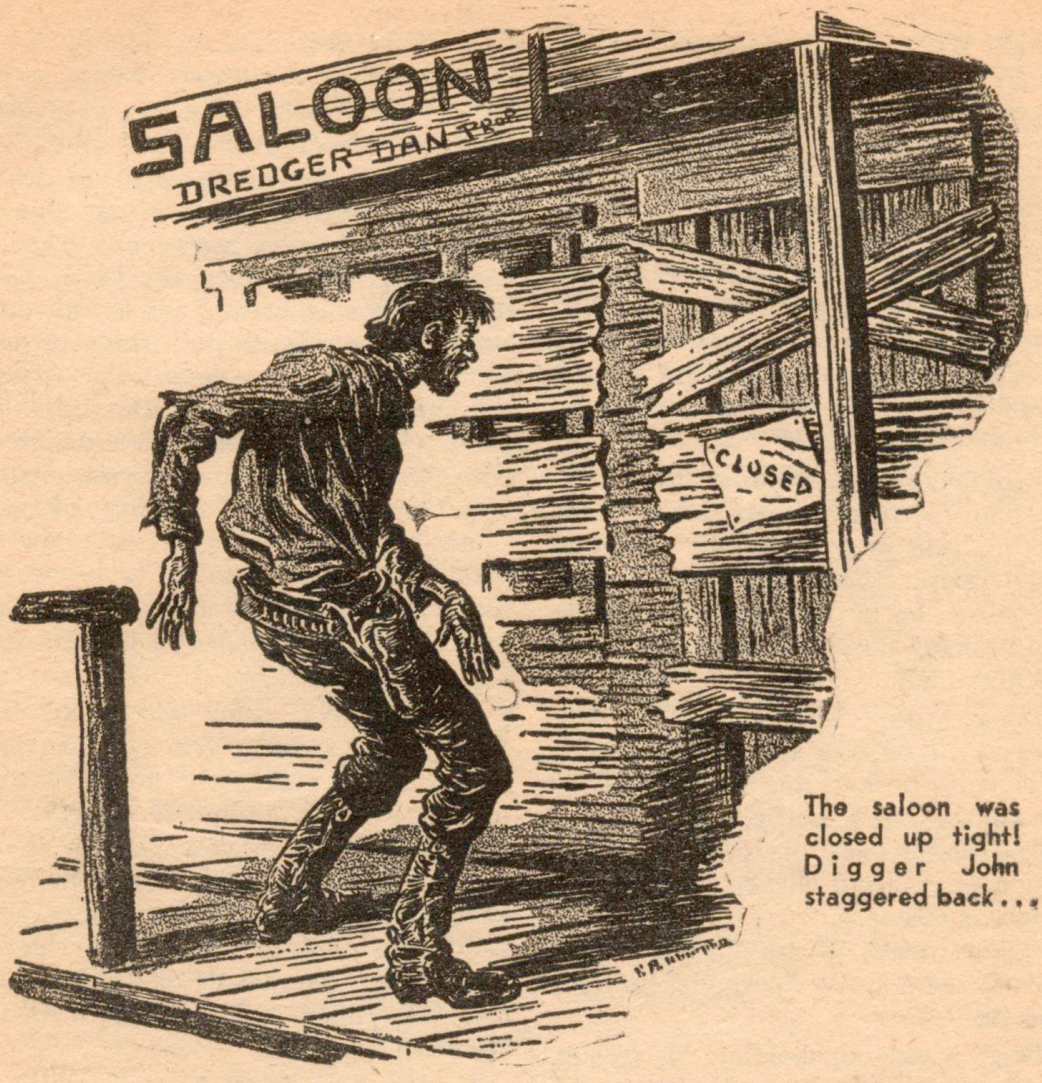
DIGGER JOHN stepped onto the porch of his adobe, eyes tightly closed as he listened. The creek water threshing along its granite channel screeched like a hob-nailed man sliding down a tin roof. Opening his mouth to ease the screech of the water, the cold morning air flowed in and drove the sour breath back into his lungs and brought up a soiled belch that shook his scurrilous red beard. He braced a freckled hand against the door jamb then, with great reluctance, opened his eyes.

Digger glared at the Sierra Mountains. The stacked slopes reflected dull sunlight off their new vests of raw snow. Dark autumn clouds to the east relieved his eyestrain and he courageously lowered his reddened eyes to inspect the main street of Gold Run.

The Chinese quarter, half hidden by spiraling pine trees, was quiet. The Orientals rose before dawn and probably had had four hours work behind them on How Soup's hydraulic mine. One boy, his head wrapped with heavy bandages, squatted in front of the Cowbean Tong House, waving flies away from a goat's shank turning crustily on the spit of the open fire.

Higher up the street the blacksmith hammered on the bent nozzle of a monitor, letting his sledge clatter against the anvil. The blacksmith building seeming to shout the noisy clatter up the street where the mud walls of Digger's adobe absorbed the sound. Sun glittered on the neck of a broken whiskey bottle as Digger stepped tentatively away from his stoop toward *Dredger Dan's Saloon*. He closed his eyes as he passed the reflecting shimmer of water in the horse trough and felt his swollen tongue warm in anticipation as he neared the batwing doors.

A storekeeper stepped from under the canvas archway over Black's store and grinned as the bear-shaped miner laid a hand gently on the batwings and began to push, his mind centered on the cool barroom—on hoisting a drink that would let his ears stop the screech



The saloon was closed up tight! Digger John staggered back . . .

of creek water, to ease the glare of the weak winter sun and subdue the smashing thunder of the blacksmith's hammer. But Digger John never got the hair of the dog; he got the dog-in-the-manger treatment. Those friendly doors were bolted!

Without hesitation he stooped to pass under the swinging doors but the inner door was also barricaded. In panic, he stepped to the iron bars crossing the paint-checkered windows and shook the heavy bars until the screws protested, but held. Carrying the dangdest hangover a Sierra Mountain man ever had, Digger John could not get at liquor!

Like a booted grizzly, with bees swarming and keeping him from the liquid honey behind locked doors, Digger John reached for his gun. The holster was empty. He raised on his toes, eyes bugging against the dirty window glass as they followed thirstily the length of the cool moist bar. He saw his navy revolver hanging on what Dredger Dan called the 'beggar's hook.' Sadly, Digger realized he must have put his gun up for security the night before.

HIS LEADEN LEGS took him off the boardwalk, his aim the water-trough where he could bury his head in its cool water. But the shimmer hit his eyes and repelled him, directing his stagger toward Black's store.

The ceiling-high doors slammed as

Donald Black poked the broom handle threateningly through the mail slot. "Nope, not this time! Last time I give you vanilla extract to cure a hangover, an' I told you—never again."

Dazed, mouth working to build up enough saliva to spit, Digger stepped away barking. "Then where is Dredger Dan? An' why is the saloon locked?"

"Every man in town's gone to bring in Corley's body," shouted Black through the glass. "He was killed by a Chinese—now get!"

"Chinaman?" the words struck Digger and he turned toward the goat-cooking man in front of the Cowbean Tong House. "Rice wine, Sam?" Digger stood back, moving carefully to avoid raising dust that might make the Oriental mad.

"Shoo—Lice wine..." The boy reached a long arm around the corner, extracted a basket, dug in and held up the square black bottle.

The bottle neck, its paper scrolling wet, emerged from Digger's mouth with a sigh of rescue.

"Gloat meat, Digga?" The seated cook flexed a knife invitingly over the haunch.

Digger gagged, holding his repugnance back by raising his upper lip over his teeth and holding the smile firmly with a forefinger as though he was considering the offer. " 'Fraid not, Sam. What's happened?" he pointed to the blood-drying bandage.

"White man go clazy, come last night. Say Chinaboy kill white man. Kick Sam—bleak his head. Some Chinaboys bad—Sam not bad. Bleak bad Chinaboy's head—all light. Why bleak Sam's head? They go..." The seated man pointed toward the How Soup Mine. "Find mo'e Chinaboys—bleak mo'e heads, Digga?"

"Don't know, Sam. When miners get wound up—yew never can tell. Any new Chinaboys come lately?"

"Some. Flisco Chinese. Hatchet man for Cowbean Tong come for pay of Pow-Gi betting. No see his hatchet. Digga...?" The smooth words were liquidly pleading. "Digga, Chinaboy betta go? Betta leave Gold Lun?"

"Don't know, Sam. Wait at least until Dredger Dan's men get back. Sit tight; maybe we can square things." Gratefully, he received the black bottle, riled a slug around his mouth and let it warm his throat, then turned back toward the saloon. The creek murmured sweetly now through the green clusters of watercress under a friendly sun; the snow capped mountains absorbed the tinkling of the smithy's sledge. Digger slid into a wirelegged chair, leaning back out of the sun, and cradled the bottle as he waited for Dredger Dan's return.

LATE THAT same afternoon, the sky now a dusky red from the setting sun that etched the undersides of billowing clouds, the posse returned. A straggling crew hurried tiredly along by the moaning wind that pressed against their backs as they limped into Gold Run without the Chinese killer. Corley's hatcheted body, stiffening with the chill, rolled with the movement of the pack animal.

Corley had been a good man, a bible reading man who blessed the great broad land that gave up its golden treasures to his gentle hand. But now he was dead, as dead as the most vicious pioneer that rested under wooden headstones on Cemetery Hill. The remnant of a nugget watchchain, torn apart by the thieving hand of his killer, swung with the uneasy sway of the horse.

Even his watch, thought Digger John, letting the chair legs drop to the splayed boards of the hotel porch. The watch that had ticked off the long days during Corley's residence in this rough land of California would bring a few dollars into the killer's pocket—or had this posse, led by the squat chunk of a man, captured the varmint?

"How high did yew hang him?" Digger rose with the question.

"Never hung nobody yet!" bellowed Dredger Dan, polishing the dust from his balding forehead. "But they's gonna be somethin' done about them Chinese—soon's we wet some danged dry whistles! Seems you..." he pointed a derisive thumb at Digger's empty wine bottle..."sunk might-y low. Corley dead by Chinese fiends an' *you* drinkin' their rotgut..."

"Might be rotgut," agreed Digger, then grinned, needling the fat man. "An' what made yore gut rotten, Dredger? There's them that claim when yew was put together, they had a pig appetite left over an' sewed it into yew, or was that...?"

"This the galoot, Uncle?" A huge man, legs spidered and arms crooked at the elbows, rank black hair matting from the open flannel shirt, moved onto the boardwalk. "Is this that Digger John, that grizzly of the mountains—the guy who eats mountain lions for breakfast—the guy who can poke a hole in an oak board with his fingers—the guy what greases that bushy head with skunk grease?"

"That's him, Sory," was the delighted answer as the hotel man stepped back off the porch, moving quickly under the hitch rack and leaning his elbows on the rail.

"This what I come for four weeks to do?" Sory's mouth caught a straggling grip on whiskers like a woman braiding her hair.

"This is what you come to do," agreed Dredger Dan.

"Yew come to Gold Run," interjected Digger, "to clean my plow?"

Sory nodded.

"Yew just fight anybody Dredger sics you onto?" Digger sounded hurt.

Sory smiled sourly and raised his arms until the blunt elbows sprang forward as he moved toward Digger.

Digger John hooked the chair forward, braced a leg against its bottom and shoved it between the splayed legs of Dredger's nephew, hefting the wine crock by its small neck.

"He'll *kill* you Digger!" shouted a bystander. "That's Gus Sory, the ironbreaker..."

"Then what'll *I* do?" Digger jumped aside as Sory craw-danced around the chair. He dropped the wine bottle.

"Don't fight him!" shouted the posseman.

"Aw right, I'll run!" agreed the big miner, hooking a smashing left hand into Sory's narrow waist, doubling the attacker. Then waiting a split second until Sory's jaw came level, he brought an uppercut up from the floor. Blood spurted from a cut under Sory's eye.

"Get him off'n me!" howled Digger, smashing through Sory's guard; prying his elbows apart with a deft paw, he popped another left against Sory's nose, bringing another spatter of blood.

SORY ROSE on his heels and toppled, his arms still cocked. Dust rose around the sprawling man but he crawled to his feet and came on toward the miner. The ironbreaker was breathing hard, working his long arms like pistons of a locomotive skidding its wheels for a start.

"Dred-ger!" shouted Digger John, "call him off."

The hotelman hooked a nonchalant arm over the rail, laid his cheek happily against the smooth wood, firmly believing that at long last Digger was to get whipped.

Digger was sweating as he hammered Sory's head. The heavy cloth of his shirt sleeves soaked up blood and made his fists slippery. Sory backed off and went down again. "He's shore beatin' hell outa Digger's hands—with his head," a bystander yelled.

But as Sory got up again and Digger felt his bile rise, he pulled a punch against Sory's right ear that threw the ironbreaker off balance. This gave Digger a chance to step around the

flailing hulk. Somehow, pummeling this stupid hulk didn't seem right. He looked into Dredger's bland face, the eyes still crinkled in a smile and suddenly smashed an open handed blow against the smile. As the slap popped, Digger felt Dredger Dan reel away saw him fall scrabbling in the dirt like a scorpion trying to slip under a rock.

Digger turned. There was just one thing to do—put Sory out. He kicked against Sory's ankle, cocked his right hand at waist level and as Sory toppled brought up the uppercut; he felt the cheek give under his knuckles and stepped aside to let Sory fall. Digger John walked off the porch, shoving through the crowd of hopping men, and headed for Chinatown.

Behind him, Dredger Dan dragged Sory out to the water-trough, ladled water onto the bleeding face and shouted angrily, "By God, Boy, you run him off! But next time—hit him, dang it, hit him!"

Sory, the ironbreaker, was bent at the middle, gurgling cold water, but raised his head to mutter, "Aw right, Uncle Dan, aw right. Next time I'll kill him!"

AN HOUR LATER, Hi Gow met Digger John. The aged tong leader was tall; smooth thin legs, covered by yellow stockings, showed through the brocaded slits in the ankle length black robe. The shadows hid Hi Gow's face but the graying queque shook with his words as they faced each other in front of the ornate marquee of the red painted Tong building.

"You have lived long among us." began Hi Gow.

"I'm still livin' among us," growled Digger; "an' I expect to do the same for many years to come."

"We have respect for you," continued the tong leader. "It is our wish that you speak with the posse who have hunted the killer of the white miner."

"Yeah, Hi Gow."

"We wish to join the hunting."

"That hatchet man from 'Frisco—did he kill Corley?"

"That is something we do not know. We do know the white miners have no feeling for the Chinese. A mule cannot be stoned here, but, a Chinese can be killed. . ."

"Yew brung it on yoreself!" snapped Digger. "Coolie labor."

"True once, Digger. Our people wished to work only to return for a life of cheerfulness in China, but, what of this? We want to help capture the murderer." Calmly, he pointed over Digger's shoulder.

The miner turned. A row of miners crowded closely together and spanned the street, advancing slowly. Several broke away, rifles gleaming under torches, and hurried up the reservoir bank. As Digger watched, he saw them flatten out behind the levee top and train their guns on the Chinese buildings.

He had seen all this before. White miners hated the Chinese. Hated their grubbing for gold in worked over river bars. Originally brought into the gold fields by boatload, slaves under the domination of labor bosses, their one collective hope seemed to be to mine enough gold to be shipped home to China for burial. The California government had placed a poll tax on the Orientals but they continued to flock in. Patient, ox-like humans, bound by chains submerged across the wide Pacific and every forged link tying them closely to the customs of their native China. But these coolies were changing, gaining stature. Their eyes gleamed with the sparse freedom they tore from the slavemasters here in this new, honest land. They hung tightly to the independence gained from rubbing shoulders with the hell-raising,

daredevil white man, who cherished independence above all else.

Digger John knew the torches in the hands of the advancing mob would soon burn this Chinatown out. The rifles on the reservoir bank would chatter. Then after the burning was done, the white miners would feel that Corley's death had been properly avenged; he would be planted on Cemetery Hill while the killer would scoot free.

Digger turned away from Hi Gow's straight, lean form and walked slowly forward to meet the mob. Sory, eyes puffed, marched beside Dredger Dan who was wearing his top hat, indicative of his authority as judge of the Miner's Court. The ironbreaker spread his swollen lips to snarl as Digger planted his frame in front of the advancing men; but the little hotel man silenced his nephew and shouted, "Get the hell outa the way, Digger John!"

"Don't blame yew," Digger spoke over Dredger's head to the glowering bleak faces under the torches. "Don't blame yew for revengin' Corley's murder—it should be done, but it should be done right. The right man should be caught—be he Chinese or white man."

"Now we got to listen to a speech!" Sory bellowed, stepping to the front.

DIGGER JOHN seized the opportunity to swing the crowd. This ironbreaker Sory, had earned a reputation in the southern mines. He could shovel ore, massacre men with his fists or cut their gizzards with a bowie; he could out-tough all until his name danced through the goldfields with the deadly rattle of a striking diamond back.

"Don't rear up, sonny," jibed Digger. "Let us *men* talk." He turned back to Dredger Dan, knowing Sory couldn't hold himself in.

"Say-that-again!"

"Aw, shuddup!" snapped Digger. "Yew ain't tough; we got a ten-year-old kid in Gold Run can pull yore legs off an' use them for hangin' out the laundry."

"Show me the kid!" raged Sory, beginning to stomp like a stallion.

"Aw, hell," growled Digger, flicking a look at the mob. Several smiles were appearing and growing broader in the torch light and a few chuckles rose. He had them diverted from their intent of arson and murder, but that diversion had to hold. "Aw, hell," repeated Digger John, "see that little Chinaboy cookin' goat meat? The fella who got his head busted this afternoon?" Sory nodded and words worked upward through his long neck. "That Chinaboy," grated Digger, "can out-tough yew!"

"He can't neither!" exploded Sory.

"Damn it, Sory," the hotel man hooked his nephew by the elbow and jerked. Sory flung the fat man aside.

"I c'n whup him," bellowed the stringy giant, bringing his elbows up into a fighting stance.

"Sure yew can whup him," agreed Digger, mildly. "But can yew out-tough him? Can yew outwalk him from here to Donnor Lake?" He flung a pointing arm toward the black mountains, their peaks lost in the lowering clouds.

"I c'n piggyback a mule," was the answer, "and still beat him from here to Donnor..."

"Two-to-one on the ironbreaker!" Slim Deakins, Gold Run's gambler, shouldered through the crowd.

All threat to Chinatown passed as heated arguments rose from the mob. The rifle men scrambled back off the levee and the citizens straggled back up main street. The hotel swelled with the excited miners. Capture of Corley's murderer was shrugged aside as a task to be finished later. Digger John had disappeared for an hour and reentered the saloon followed by the tall

figure of Hi Gow. The slanted glance of the Oriental was calm but the hands folded under the wide sleeves of his robe shook. Digger carefully slipped a hand under the silk and gently pried Hi Gow's fist from the grips of a Dragoon Pistol.

"There's a truce, Hi Gow," he chided.

The room quieted. Men grudgingly drew back, opening a circle. Gold coins clinked ominously. The roulette table was bumped and chips dripped to the floor, rolling crustily.

Hi Gow loosed the wooden buttons and extracted a heavy poke that thudded onto the bar. "Chinese bet on Sam; gold is to support pride." Sullenly, the white men stared.

Hi Gow shouldn't have brought the gun and Digger burst the dangerously mounting silence with a booming roar. "Now for details. I've talked to Sam—the one with the busted head—and Hi Gow represents him here. It'll be Donnor Lake and return. First man back here—white man or Chinese—wins. Simple as that, and me..." He lifted his eyes over the sullen heads and stared into Sory's blackened eyes... "Me, I'm bettin' on Sam!"

"Fair enough," shouted Dredger Dan, flinging down his bar towel, "but who's to say he went all the way?"

"That's fixed," answered Digger. "Remember the Dutchman?" The men nodded. The Dutchman was the last man brought out of the ill-fated Donnor party.

"He tol' me," continued Digger, "where he left his watch buried—in a tin box under his cabin. Winner brings back that watch." He asked, "Everyone satisfied?" The men muttered assent. "Trek starts at sunup from out here in front of the saloon. Contestants can take any sort of equipment they wants —'ceptin' horses or such. Now, them bettin' on Sory, here, better strap him down so's he can travel in the mornin' without sloshin' whiskey outa his boot tops."

DURING the night it snowed again. Digger John, seated on his porch, rifle-guarded for Sam who was sleeping hard in the adobe. He watched the celebrants drift home in the early hours. But the light in *Dredger's Hotel and Saloon* burned brightly until the dawn seeped over the ridges silvering the clouds. The wind was cold, turning the snowflakes in an updraft, like feathers that seemed never to touch ground.

At sunup, the men got off. Sory's light leather packsack bounced high on his shoulders as he unfolded his calipered legs down the lower street; while Sam, the weight of his meager rations pulling against his belt, ducked between two buildings and was gone.

It would be a long dangerous trip. Seventy miles of mountains swallowed in the gaping jaws of a storm, buffeted by a wind that could tear out trees and seemingly bend the peaks under the knotted fists of a maddened giant. Digger, picturing the slight form of Sam bucking such a storm, slant eyes slitting against the ice crystals he would meet on the peaks, wondered if he had been right. By arranging the contest he had diverted the murderous raid on Chinatown; but, thinking back on the thin friendly hand preferring the wine bottle, Digger John realized that the body of Sam might be lost forever. Or the stripped bones found in some coyote's den years later. So Digger John walked across the street, bucked his way through the crowd in the saloon, and prepared to find forgetfulness in the bottles that lined the bar.

Dredger Dan, face burning with an alcoholic heat, sidled the bottle down the bar. "Have a drink on the house, Digger."

The big miner, gulping the whiskey, was puzzled by such a turn-about. First off, he saw that Dredger Dan was

drunk; Dan had never before forgotten to snap closed any thirst that attempted to gain free liquor.

"Have 'nother on the house, Digger..." the bottle wobbled back down the bar. Digger drank again then started back as Dredger shouted, "Ever'body get to hell outa my saloon!" Without waiting for the startled customers to obey, Dredger Dan snatched the shotgun from under the bar and let go with both barrels. The shot peppered the ceiling, dropping on the hunched backs of the fleeing customers. Digger John poured another drink and watched the beserk hotel man fumble extra cartridges from a canvas sack. Digger reached over the bar, shoved the bottle neck into a gaping barrel and let the liquor trickle through the breech. Then he grasped the hotel man by the shirt front and heaved the clawing man over the bar.

"What's botherin' yew, Dredger? Yore drivin' away business—yew gone crazy?"

"Not me!" Dredger's words throbbed up the miner's arm from the hotelman's swelling neck. "*I* ain't crazy—but Sory is!"

"How'd yew mean?"

"He's never goin' to Donnor Lake. Steada playin' it straight, he's got a rifle..."

"Never had no rifle when he left this mornin'...!"

"Stashed it out last night, mile up the trail. Gonna bushwhack Sam on the way back—let the poor beggar find the watch then plug him comin' back..."

"Last night..." snarled Digger John... "Them lights in the bar. Yew musta thought it was a pretty good trick last night! But under that fattenin' skull they's a soft spot, and yew got drunk now..."

"An' a—an a soft spot here," Dredger tapped his chest.

"Yew ain't never *had* a heart!" was the growl from the big miner's throat as he hurried for the door. "Any soft spot yew got is in yore head!"

"Where you goin', Digger?"

"I'm goin' up on Donnor an'—one thing's for sure—Sam's comin' back alive!" Digger whirled at the batwings. "This bushwhacking nephew of yores, what trail did he take in to Gold Run when yew sent for him?"

"Didn' send for him!" yelled Dredger, threshing his hand in the cartridge bag like a monkey. "He jest walked in an' said—'Here I am, Uncle!' S'first time I'd ever seen him with a double eagle in his pocket."

Digger hit the batwings and was gone.

DIGGER JOHN paused on the windblown ridge. Behind him the slopes were softened by drifts of snow. A rolling gauntlet of storm fury had crusted the miner's mackinaw, soaked his pants to the waist, and fashioned miniature icicles around his mouth and nostrils.

Below him spread Donnor Lake, frozen over and pillowed with ridges of crusty snow. And toiling up was the slender figure of Sam, his pockmarking steps filling as he advanced. So Sory must be hidden along the ridge—or could he have squatted down anywhere along the route? But Digger discarded that thought. All day or the preceding

day, he had seen neither the Chinese nor Sory; until now, no trace of either. There would be a half dozen routes, and Sory would have to be lodged somewhere near in order to intercept.

Flatly, the rifle shot scurried down the canyon. To the left of Digger. He moved hurriedly and watched Sam scurry behind a knob of snow. Sam was peeking out, pulling the bandage from his head and trying to trace the sound of the slug.

As Digger, hefting his cold rifle, ducked through the stunted trees, floundering in the wet snow, he could see Sam leaving his hiding place. Sam began clawing his way up like an elastic band that was pulling him toward the bushwhacker. Again the rifle spat and missed the charging Chinaboy. Now Digger caught the glint of the knife Sam had loosened from his belt, then Digger plunged into a snow-filled chasm, the snow sucking him down until his flailing arms beat frantically on the surface.

He heard the next shot and a controlled scream of pain from Sam. Then Digger was free and struggling over the icing on a boulder. From there he saw the end of the fight between Gus Sory and Sam.

Sory had reversed the rifle, leaped down the drift and was belaboring Sam with the butt. They were both covered with powdered snow; a snow bear fighting a knife-wielding snow wolf. Quickly, the battle turned. Sam had clawed his way above Gus Sory, standing shoulders above the floundering killer and then with a wild yell, Sam dropped down. The knife flashed. Sory staggered backward, freed his feet and turned to escape. The long legs carried him out into space then his body contorted and he skidded; small snow slides gathered around his feet and curled over his head.

Sam stepped away and lay down, Digger could see the blood melting the snow. The wind, as though expelling a pent up breath, blew and began to cover Sory. Sam struggled against the enveloping whiteness then curled up, too spent to fight the storm.

FOUR DAYS LATER, Digger John, a humped giant with Sam's dangling form, staggered into Gold Run's lower section. Owlishly he peered through the slatted doors of the Joss House. The incense tapers glowed drawing the darkness in and sucking night shadows from the corners of the silent room. Figures seated stiffly on straight chairs jumped when Digger kicked against the stoop.

"Open her up—get Sam thawed out..."

The lean hands of Hi Gow were the first to lift the limp body from Digger's shoulder. The tong leader's hands were gentle as they lifted Sam and his eyes were fixed on Digger John's back as the miner plodded tiredly up the street, bracing himself against each porch support he passed. Quietly, Hi Gow followed, his manderin slippers stepping carefully in Digger's sloshing footprints.

The saloon was glaring with light. Wall lamps flared and the peekhole in the stove flickered against the knees of moving men. The backbar chandelier dripped rainbows against the glistening bottles. Digger leaned against the doorway and surveyed the staring weight of questioning eyes.

"Gus Sory's dead—but Sam come

back." Digger's cold fingers fumbled the rawhide belt loose from his mackinaw and extracted a gold watch. "The Dutchman's...brought out of Donnor Lake by Sam."

Angry scowls began clouding the faces. This meant that the Chinese gold bet by Hi Gow would be doubled. The Chinese had not only murdered Corley but now they would dig their long nails under the pride of the white man.

"We shoulda burnt 'em out for Corley's murder!" shouted a bystander. "First off, we shoulda...!"

"Why?" Digger asked coldly, once again searching through his pockets. He brought forth another gold watch, the segments of a broken nugget chain still dangling from the clasp.

"*This* watch I took off Gus Sory's body! It's Corley's. Now, yew varmints, pay off yore bets, an' leave them Chinese alone!"

"Let me speak." It was the soft hiss of Hi Gow who had entered the saloon. His wise old eyes squinted against the light.

"This white man," he laid a gentle hand on Digger's shoulder, "brought Sam back. The bet was that a white man could beat a Chinese; it was done. This white man brought in Sam, so the white man is winner of all bets. Hi Gow gives greetings; the golden bets are to be paid for the white man is the winner."

Digger John straightened and turned to watch Hi Gow leave. The man was right and more; it had been proven that Sory had murdered Corley. The Chinese colony would be safe. His glance over the subdued men told him they were agreed. But... Digger's thoughts stuttered... *I Bet On The Chinaboy!* His chest filled with anger, then he recalled the thin hand proffering the wine bottle and smiled. That wine jug had saved his life!

"Yew got a drink in the house, Dredger?"

"Yeah..." was the sour reply then, "You bet, Digger!" and Dredger gave a sudden smile of relief.

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THE LAST DAYS OF SITTING BULL

SPECIAL FEATURE

by White Eagle

MUCH HAS been written about *I'Yotankahan Tatankabdoka* (Sitting Bull), and the so called "messiah" craze; perhaps it was a craze which developed among the Indians, but it was also quite harmless—something white people did not understand. The messiah was nothing more nor less than a new religion in which the Sioux—and other tribes—came to believe that their lands and the buffalo would again become theirs, and the white raiders who had driven them into poverty, and practically destroyed the buffalo, would disappear from the face of the earth.

The messiah was not a dance of war, but a harmless religious dance which the Indians believed would, if continued over long periods, drive the white men from their lands, and again the great plains would become a land for the Indians only; and the buffalo would return in great numbers.

But white people misinterpreted the messiah as a preparation for war

against the whites; and so, while the messiah became a craze among the Indians, it became a scare among the whites. How was the messiah started? I will come to that later—first let us look into the life of Sitting Bull.

He was the son of a Sioux Chief named *Wankankan Tatankabdoka* (Jumping Bull); he was born near Willow Creek in Dakota territory in 1834. His two uncles *Yo'pa He' Pteke* (Four Horns) and *Wotihnisa Ta'wa E'kde* (Hunting His Lodge), also were chiefs in the Hunkpapa (Unkpapa) tribe.

Sitting Bull was first named *Na'Zin Wakan* (Sacred Stand). This name indicates that he had great individual propensities during his young boyhood. As he grew into manhood, he became known as a Medicine Man and religious leader of his tribe, and that he became great as a leader is indicated in his control over the several tribes who took part in the Battle of the Little Big Horn.

Sitting Bull, in his younger life, was also known as *Wankankan Hoka* (Jumping Badger), like his father's name, *Wankankan Tatankabdoka* (Jumping Bull). While still a boy, he went along with his father who had taken to the warpath against the Crow Indians; during a battle, the boy killed a Crow warrior with bow and arrow, and counted coup on one other. On the return of the warparty, the boy's father during a feast called council, announced that his son had won the right to be named a warrior, and gave him the name of *I'Yotankahan Tatankabdoka* (Sitting Bull); from that day on, he was known only as Sitting Bull.

Throughout the years, from the time he was a boy of fourteen, to the time of his murder in 1890, Sitting Bull endured as the typical Indian nomad. He never became an agency Indian; the range was open, and free, he would set up his village in the bottomlands during summer months; when the weather became severe, he migrated to the interior of the badlands. Always did he have scouts standing guard on the mesas, and hunting parties out to keep watch over the buffalo—from which, he and his people drew practically all of their economic needs. When pressures of the white man confined him to narrow quarters; he fought back. He was zealous in defending his open domain under terms of treaties, or agreements with the Great White Father; and when they were broken, he retaliated in a manner that brought down upon his head the odium of being a hostile.

His career may be divided into several periods; his boyhood, to his participation in 1863, of the New Ulm Massacres in Minnesota; his preparations for the battle of the Little Big Horn in 1876; his defiance of the American military authorities from 1876; his surrender at Fort Buford in 1881, from where he was taken to Fort Randall as a prisoner.

A year and a half later, he was allowed to return to the place of his birth, near the Grand River, where later, he accepted and fostered the so called messiah religion, which sent white people scurrying for the shelter and protection of the military. Had they known the real meaning of the messiah, then there would have been no scare.

THE REAL instigator of the messiah was a Minneconjou Sioux Indian by the name of *Nataka Mato* or *Nabagbaka Mato* (Kicking Bear). He had traveled far from the west—through the badlands to the Cheyenne reservation—spreading the doctrine of a new God— The messiah—for had not the Great Spirit forsaken the Indians? Kicking Bear, according to some white people was a half-crazy fanatic. With that I do not agree; if spreading religion is crazy, then most of our present day gospel singers and evangelists are crazy. I have seen many of the so called traveling preachers standing before their sheep, thundering their sermons

as if they were afraid they would not be heard.

Kicking Bear had taken onto himself a religion which had been given him by others to the west. He spoke of having been told by a race of people with yellow faces, who lived west of the Ute country, that the religion would bring about the coming of a new god—The messiah—who would bring back the buffalo, and rid the earth of white people. This belief traveled far, especially among susceptible Indians, and it was later to find roots in the mind of Sitting Bull, and many of his followers.

Sitting Bull, when he learned of this particular religion, sent a band of his young braves to Cherry Creek on the Cheyenne River, with the request that Kicking Bear make him a visit. Kicking Bear accepted the invitation, and went to Grand River where Sitting Bull lived with his two wives and his son *Siha Kangi* (Crow Foot).

Kicking Bear initiated Sitting Bull into the mysteries of the new cult, took him into his confidence, and imparted to him the doctrine he had learned from the yellow-faced people living to the west. Sitting Bull became an avowed convert to the new doctrine, and immediately influenced his followers to participate in what was later, to become known among white people as the "Ghost Dance"—which in itself was quite harmless to anyone except the Indians. They would dance night and day till they dropped from exhaustion, hoping and believing, that the messiah would eventually drive the whites from the face of the earth; in this, there were no more harm than in what many white people believe—that if you pray to god for something, you will receive it.

The Indians firmly believed that the Great Spirit had forsaken them; hence they turned to this new god, the messiah, for sanctity, believing that this new god would return to them their hunting grounds, and bring back the buffalo in increased numbers.

As the impact, and teaching of this new religion spread, it reached far to the west, and south. The so called messiah, or ghost dance, soon reached the Northern Cheyennes at Lame Deer Montana where a Cheyenne Medicine Man named *Pahin* (Porcupine) took up the religion, and became an ardent believer in the doctrine—which led to his arrest by the military authorities at Fort Keogh, where he was held for some time.

LET US look at some of the excitement along the Missouri River slopes, where white people were running for military shelter even though there were no signs of an Indian uprising. According to Jim Flanagan, an oldtimer who had just returned from the Standing Rock, as far as he had been able to observe, there were no outward indications of trouble. He said the Indians were still dancing at Sitting Bull's camp, but it meant little or nothing.

At Fort Lincoln, at the time, there was one battery of artillery, four companies of Infantry, and two troops of Cavalry, stationed there for the protection of the settlers along the west slopes of the Missouri river, should the Indians under Sitting Bull make a break from the reservation.

On November the 28th, 1890, Colonel William F. Cody (Buffalo Bill), arrived at the Standing Rock Agency carrying with him an order signed by General Nelson A. Miles, then the Division Commander, directing military officers to supply Buffalo Bill with all assistance necessary during a trip he was to make to the Grand River, where he was to talk to Sitting Bull, whom he knew well. If talking failed, he was to arrest Sitting Bull with the help of the military.

Major McLaughlin did not take kindly to the presence of Bill Cody, feeling that he alone, was responsible

for the conduct of the Indians. Had he known how wrong he was, then there is no doubt but what he would have let Colonel Cody handle the matter; Cody, and Sitting Bull had been friends for many years, and Cody knew how to handle the Indian leader. As matters turned out, McLaughlin was directly responsible for the murder, not only of Sitting Bull, but of Chief Big Foot and over three hundred of his people.

Major McLaughlin made an unwise and disastrous decision when he sent a telegram (to the commissioner of Indian affairs in Washington D. C.) which read as follows. *William F. Cody (Buffalo Bill) has arrived here with a commission from General Miles to talk to, or arrest Sitting Bull. Such a step at present is unnecessary and unwise, as it will precipitate a fight which can be averted. A few Indians are still dancing, but it does not mean mischief at present. I have matters well in hand, and when the proper time arrives I can arrest Sitting Bull by Indian police without bloodshed. Request Gen Miles' order to Cody be rescinded, and request immediate answer.*

The answer came two days later, as follows, and dated December 1, 1890. *By direction of the Secretary, during the present Indian troubles, you are instructed that while you shall continue all the business, and carry into effect the educational and other purposes of your agency, you will, as to all operations intended to suppress any outbreak by force, cooperate with and obey the orders of the military officers commanding on the reservation in your charge.*

So it can be seen here, that while McLaughlin believed that the arrest of Sitting Bull should be made, he wanted the credit for himself; but at the same time was afraid to take the proper steps. Had Bill Cody, and his friends Dr. Frank Powell (known to the Indians as "White Beaver") and H. R. Haslan (better known as Pony Bob) been allowed to go to Sitting Bull's camp, then it is certain there would have been no trouble. This conclusion is drawn from the fact that all of the three named, were known to Sitting Bull as friends. But as matters turned out, it was to end in murder and bitter conflict in which many died, all the way from Grand River and as far south as Wounded Knee Creek in south western South Dakota, where Chief Big Foot and over three hundred of his people were murdered after they had been disarmed. None of them had committed any other sin than that they were following a new religion, harmless to anyone except the Indians themselves, in that they wore themselves out dancing.

Let us follow Bill Cody and his party, who were totally unaware of what McLaughlin had done, and were well on their way to Sitting Bull's camp. When within twenty miles of the camp, they were overtaken by a courier, bearing a message from the Washington authorities not to arrest Sitting Bull. Turning around, Cody and his party headed for Mandan, where they arrived at midnight in a snow storm, having ridden some 95 miles in 24 hours. From here Cody telegraphed General Miles, giving him all particulars of the situation, and awaited further orders. But Major McLaughlin had used all his influence against the arrest of Sitting Bull, and it was due to his advice that Colonel Cody received the order cancelling the arrest.

While in Mandan, Cody told of having met a young warrior while on their way to Sitting Bull's camp. During their conversation with him, the warrior imparted the information that Sitting Bull was the one who had been bringing all the fine late fall weather to the Indians. He wanted to know why the Great White Chief (Cody) didn't send them some white snow, which according to the warrior was just as good. Buffalo Bill told the warrior to tell his chief that within 24 hours he, Buffalo

Bill, would send a snow storm down upon the Indians. And, on that very night as they were riding towards Mandan, a raging snow blizzard swept over the land.

The general talk among the white people at the time was that McLaughlin was afraid to arrest Sitting Bull as well as being jealous of others who would, and could do the arresting; he had used his powers to prevent them from doing so.

RUMORS continued to spread; Indian scares were being circulated westward to Dickinson and the small settlement of Belfield; settlers from the surrounding territory began to enter the settlement of Belfield—singly, and in droves. All were greatly alarmed about the Indians; reports had reached them that the Indians were camped along Grand River, and were heading for the badlands by way of Belfield. Some of the men in Belfield were keenly disturbed over the reports coming in about the so called Indian uprising, and accordingly made a fast ride to Dickinson some twenty miles to the east.

They learned nothing more than what they already knew; but to the settlers, the Indian scare was no laughing matter. They were scared, and kept watch night and day around the small settlement. And even though the Indian situation was easing off, and there were no actual signs of belligerency shown by the Indians, troops were sent down from Fort Totten, and from as far west as Fort Keogh near Miles City Montana. All of this because the Indians had developed a new religion, and a new God, figuring that the old one (The Great Spirit) had deserted them. And so rumors, most of them magnified many times, continued to spread over the land west of the Missouri River. In order to allay public fear, Major McLaughlin finally made a statement at Standing Rock that the removal of several Indian leaders, names of whom he had written down in his report, would have the effect of removing public fear, and put an end to all uneasiness felt by the people directly affected, and would eliminate all trouble.

McLaughlin's list contained the names of such leaders and chiefs as *I'Yotankahan Tatankabdoka* (Sitting Bull), *Ta' Kumibe Mato* (Circling Bear), *Tan'Ka Siha* (Big Foot), *Kangitoka Sunka* (Crow Dog), and *Ku' Ceyedan Sunka* (Low Dog).

On December the 14th, McLaughlin called in two top leaders of the Indian Police—*Pa Tatankabdoka* (Bull Head), and *Pa Kasda* (Shave Head), Bull Head being the father of the yet living Mrs. Long Chase. McLaughlin told them that from reports he had received, it was time to make the arrest of Sitting Bull. Where did these reports come from? He did not say. But one Allen Eastman, who lived in Bismark at the time, stated that he was convinced that the yet-to-come murder of Sitting Bull, was a well planned, and politically-inspired scheme to get rid of the Indian leader. And although Sitting Bull had given the Indian service and the Military Department a bad time in the past, he was pretty much minding his own business at the time of his arrest and murder.

There is no argument but what Sitting Bull was an inspiring leader among the Sioux, and he exhibited no enthusiasm for the presence of white people residing in the settlements west of the Missouri River. And it is a fact that, had the Government upheld its treaty obligations, then no white men would have been allowed to settle in this territory; but as always unscrupulous politicians were again giving the Indians the double-cross.

There is also the statement of Henry Jacops—a half-breed Indian policeman—who took part in the arrest and murder of Sitting Bull. He told me that matters could have been settled without trouble, had it not been for

Sitting Bull's son *Siha Kangi* (Crow Foot), and two other Sioux warriors *Zu'za Kin Mato* (Catch the Bear) and *Apa Kin Ca'ga* (Strikes The Kettle). Strikes The Kettle and Catch The Bear hated Bull Head and Shave Head, considering traitors who had fallen for the ever-false promises of white men, and had enlisted others against their own people. Mrs. Long Chase will not like these statements, but facts speak for themselves.

Henry Jacops came a few years later to the Fort Thompson territory where I met him. We became friends, and camped together in the Big Bend country during the winter of 1898, 99. He spoke of many things that were wrong during the Sitting Bull killing, and the final chapter of this great leader's life.

McLaughlin, according to his own idea wanted the arrest made early in the morning when Sitting Bull's followers were still asleep. And in support of the Indian Police, two troops of the 8th Cavalry, under command of Capt. E. G. Fetchet were ordered to ride that night, in order to arrive at the Oak Creek crossing near Sitting Bull's camp by early morning of December the 15th. There they were to hold up and be ready to support the police, if that was found to be necessary.

A total of forty two Indian Police officers closed in on Sitting Bull's camp, with orders not to let him escape under any circumstances; this order was given to *"Onspecannonpa Sa"* (Red Tomahawk). In this order, it can well be seen that Sitting Bull was to be brought in, "Dead or Alive".

EARLY IN the morning of December the 15th, the Indian police rode into Sitting Bull's camp, which consisted of several good-sized log cabins, barns and corrals. The entrance of the police awakened the camp, but no one appeared in sight; Bull Head and Shave Head with 10 Indian policemen entered the cabin occupied by Sitting Bull, his two wives, and son Crow Foot.

As they entered Sitting Bull sat up in bed and wanted to know why his home had been entered. Bull Head told him he was under arrest, and that he must come to the Standing Rocky Agency.

"Very well, I will go with you," was Sitting Bull's reply. Turning to one of his wives, he told her to get his best clothes; turning to the police, he demanded that his best horse, a gray, be saddled.

Up to this point there had been no trouble, so it can well be seen that Sitting Bull did not mean to cause trouble, and not knowing what his arrest was all about, he was willing to go with them. Outside of Sitting Bull's house, a large crowd of Indians had gathered, some armed, some not. As Sitting Bull came out, he walked directly to his waiting horse with Bull Head on one side, and Shave Head on the other, and Red Tomahawk directly behind. Sitting Bull, still not knowing why he was being arrested, was about to mount his horse when the voice of his son Crow Foot was heard reviling his father. "You have called yourself a brave man, and stated in the presence of others that you would never surrender to policemen; and now you give yourself up to Indians who wear the uniform of those whites who have stolen our lands, killed our women and children, and driven all Indians into poverty."

Feeling upbraided by what his son had said, Sitting Bull paused. He began to realize the real meaning of his arrest; he saw now that white men meant to chain him down in prison and leave his people without his leadership. Gazing around him he looked into the faces of his people and commenced to talk; as he talked in that so-well-known golden voice of his, the tempo of his voice increased as he felt the surge of defiance within him. He saw that there was a steady increase of his people and friends appearing on the

scene; he knew that in the Badlands they were gathered many more of his people and friends. They needed him to lead them—a leader possessed with determination against the white settlers, and the *HaSka* (pale face) warriors who had killed so many of his people, and who were now wanting to chain him and his people down in slavery on what little land the *HaSka Wakansica* (Pale Faced Devils) had not yet stolen. In a loud voice he shouted out an order to attack the police.

Catch The Bear and Strikes The Kettle, who were of the few who had rifles, opened fire mortally wounding Bull Head and Shave Head; Bull Head still standing, turned and shot Sitting Bull through the body. Red Tomahawk, standing in back of Sitting Bull, shot him in the back of his head; then both Sitting Bull and Bull Head fell to the ground.

Red Tomahawk, taking command of the Indian police, who were well armed with both rifles and side-arms, retreated inside the barn, from where they held off Sitting Bull's followers, until the cavalry came up and poured shell-fire into the camp, from the hill above. Sitting Bull's followers retreated. Six of the police were killed, and many were seriously wounded; eight of Sitting Bull's followers were killed.

After the killing of Sitting Bull, military orders rang up and down the Missouri from Fort to Fort. The orders were the same: drive all Indians in on their Reservations; those who refuse must be exterminated. So once more the bloody work of making Indians "good" was going on; ending with the murderous killings of Chief Big Foot, and over three hundred of his people at Wounded Knee Creek in South Western South Dakota.

The deliberate murder of Big Foot and his people were committed by the seventh cavalry under command of Col. James W. Forsyth, after they had disarmed all the Indians.

From the killing of Sitting Bull, on December the 15th, to the killings of Big Foot and his people on December 29th 1890, nearly one thousand Indians were murdered throughout North and South Dakota by ruthless orders from the commanders in the field. After the massacre of Wounded Knee Creek, there were still many skirmishes between the Indians and soldiers; but it was pretty much the end of all Indian resistance. With their leaders killed off, they lost, not only their heart, but their all.

And it may astound the reader to learn that twenty-three of the soldiers who took part in the Wounded Knee slaughter of unarmed Indians, received the Congressional Medal of honor. This was to give the impression that the soldiers had engaged in a terrific battle. Six more such medals were issued to other soldiers who participated in the campaign of the so called Messiah Craze. Anyone in doubt as to the above may write Col. William Robinson, South Dakota's state historian; he knows this to be true, as do I.

MUCH BROODING over the injustice of the Wounded Knee Killings gave cause for much numbling among the Indians, especially among the survivors. Many pow-wow's were held, and the details of the tragic episode was told around the council-fires, until one day some years back, *Pipe On Head* grandson of Chief Big Foot, and Dewey Beard decided to take the long trail to Washington where they could lay their claims before the Great White Father and tell their story. They did not get to see the President, but did tell their story before Congress. In their story Pipe On Head told of the cavalry charging after the unarmed Indians, shooting them down for no other reason than the lust to kill. "We could not defend ourselves for, the soldiers had taken our weapons." Dewey Beard told of how the soldiers on foot chased after panic-stricken women and children, shooting them down with equal aban-

don; the only ones who escaped were those who fell in the snow, pretending to be dead, or those who could find places in which to hide.

It will be remembered here, that General Custer led the seventh cavalry during the battle of the Little Big Horn. The troops under command of Col. James W. Forsyth at the Wounded Knee massacre, were also of the seventh cavalry, and that these troops meant to revenge Custer and his men is a well-known fact. Mrs. Hollow Head—who at the time of the massacre was a young woman who understood English—stated she overheard a soldier say, "When we get them unarmed we can do with them as we want."

She spread the alarm, but it was too late; all had been unarmed. Then as if by signal, a single shot was fired. Who fired the shot has never been told, but it is certain the Indians didn't; they had been unarmed and could not have done it; so it is plain enough to see that some yet unknown, fired the shot as a signal. Anyway the four Hotchkiss guns placed above the camp began throwing shells among the Indians.

Mrs. Hollow Head living on Lost Dog Creek in South Dakota, was shot through the jaw, but she can and will testify to the above. So will Dewey Beard, who can be seen at Cedar Pass in the Badlands. Dewey was shot in the leg and back, some of the Long Chase family—that is to say Mrs. Long Chase's husband's relatives—were also killed at Wounded Knee Creek. As for Dewey Beard, he likes to talk about how he fooled the soldiers by playing possum, and lying still while the soldiers stalked back and forth, shooting every fallen Indian who so much as moved, or twitched a muscle.

Well, to make a long story short, Congress through Senator Case of South Dakota appropriated the sum of $200,000 to be paid to the survivors of those killed in the Massacre. At Wounded Knee Creek there is a mass grave over which stands a monument marking the sire of the massacre; it censures the army for its action at Wounded Knee sixty four years ago—an army which rewarded slaughter of the innocent with medals. Time, and the often severe Dakota weather is slowly obscuring the inscription written in bitterness and grief on the monument standing alone on the open prairie as a grim reminder of the story that lies buried in the war department files.

Ned Window wanted Marshal Nathan to resign, or be fired; Mayor Lindley wanted Nathan to lie low — until these two ex-pards from the marshal's owl-hoot days had shot it out with each other. But Britt Nathan wondered who had brought Hardee and Yates together again here...

BRONCO MARSHAL

by W. J. Reynolds

TOWN MARSHAL Britt Nathan had nursed the feeling for two days that something was about to happen to his town, but he didn't know what it was until he came down from his room in the hotel to his breakfast in the hotel's cafe. He had no more than sat on his favorite stool when Ida Hand placed a cup of coffee in front of him and said, "You don't seem worried, Britt. It's a pretty good sized order—even for you."

Britt spooned sugar into his coffee, tasted it for flavor and hotness then grinned at Ida. Ida was twenty, with light streaks in her rich brown hair; her eyes, also brown, were not dancing with her usual good nature. Her wide mouth, usually ready to curve into a smile, was long with seriousness.

"I'm a big boy, Ida," he said. "What's this big order?"

She looked at him a moment, closely. "The law is the last to know," she

said and sighed. "Everyone knows, Britt. Bus Yates and Big Hardee are due in today or tonight, to shoot each other to little pieces. The talk varies. Some say Hardee is counting on you to help him—for old time's sake; others are just as sure that you will help Yates—for old time's sake. I say, go on a week's fishing trip. Right now!"

Britt drank his coffee slowly, savoring it, and winked at Ida. "Well, well," he said, the silence in the cafe telling him that a dozen men were hanging on his words, "does no one say that I will uphold the law, that I will sell my life dearly to maintain my untarnished reputation?"

Ida's eyes darkened. "Britt Nathan, don't you dare start getting one of your foolish ideas, the way you do when you start spouting like that!"

"I can't help my foolish ideas, honey," he said. "The only unfoolish thing I do consistently is ask you to marry me every Sunday!"

Ida wheeled away to take the orders of two other customers, and deliver orders to others; then she came back with Britt's usual plate of ham and eggs. She refilled his coffee cup, her eyes flashing at him. He grinned at her.

"Britt Nathan, such as this is the reason my answer is always the same. I want a live husband, not a dead one! You've been carrying a badge now for six years, since you were sixteen, but no one can forget that you were raised with a wild bunch, that Hardee and Yates were both members. The rumor is that you asked them here, with the plan to help one kill the other. Britt, don't you see what a fight here will do to you?"

"Yeah," he said, eating with obvious enjoyment, "if they shoot each other up better than they did last time, it'll save me the job."

Her hands trembled before she clasped them tightly together. "Britt, will you shoot Yates after he pulled you out of the river that time? Or Hardee after he saved your life once in Abeline?"

Britt smiled a little. "The Wilson boys thought Hardee was with me in that Abeline dive; he had to fight. Yates pulled me out of the river because I had all the shells left, and there was a posse on our tails!" He reached out and patted her hand. "Pay no attention to gossip, honey; leave things to Papa Britt!"

Ida made a small, impatient sound and turned to wait on other customers. Britt finished his meal, apparently not noticing Ida's worried glances. He finished his coffee leisurely, but his senses were alert. He understood now about those side glances he'd been getting for the past few days. It was serious, damn serious as the fact that no one had mentioned it to him proved. Most people were still ready to count him mostly outlaw.

Still, the idea of Hardee and Yates coming here to fight it out was a lot of hot air. They stayed out of each other's way, and no long range fight plan fit either of them, especially Yates. They wouldn't plan a business like this —unless they had a reason.

A damn good reason.

BRITT PAID Hanson, the balding proprietor, and strolled outside to sit in one of the rockers on the hotel's porch. He fired a cigar, getting it to drawing to his satisfaction before leaning back and tipping his hat forward against the morning sun, giving this situation his attention.

Hardee and Yates. Deadly enemies; both had faced each other over flashing guns, both had laid the other out apparently dead. Britt remembered the incident that had precipitated the shooting and broken the wild bunch completely.

A simple, foolish thing that had cost the lives of five men, and nearly two more. A loaded cigar had blown up in

Yates' face, and always of an unstable temperament, he'd knocked a tooth from Hardee's mouth. A moment later, both men lay bleeding from several wounds, and only empty guns had stopped it there. They were taken to different cabins in the hideout and both lived. But the next day, the bunch taking sides, a fight had started and when the smoke cleared five men lay dead and dying.

Britt, the kid member of the gang, had been moving the horse herd; coming into camp after hearing the shots, he found the gang dead except for Hardee and Yates, both men still down from their wounds. Britt had nursed them both, and later helped them to ride out in different directions, more dead than alive—each thinking he was getting away from the other.

Britt had knocked about on his own for a year until his fast gun had attracted the attention of a cowtown marshal. He'd ridden for the law ever since. Twice in that time he'd sent word to Yates and three times to Hardee, to ride into his town only for a drink and a game and move along. They had heeded his warning.

What was up now?

Both were well known badmen, and had dozens of charges on them about the country. But a local lawman and marshal, if he had no definite warrant, let such men alone if they behaved in his town. Britt did likewise. But this seemed different. He had sent no word to either; this wasn't range gossip—this was something cooking.

This was the tag end of the cow season; the town was loaded with cash. The bank, the bigger stores...

"Nathan, you're wanted at the mayor's office." Britt looked up at Ned Window, Two Feathers' largest merchant. The cadaverous merchant's slit of a mouth was smiling a little with satisfaction, his steel blue eyes unflinching, showing his feelings. "It is a pleasure to me, Nathan, to summon you personally."

Britt flicked the ash from his cigar and grinned at the merchant, knowing that his easy manner infuriated the other. That and his two hundred dollars a month salary. "Did the august council give you the dime they would have given a boy to come, Window? Better run down and enter it on the profit side of your books right quick." He reached in his vest pocket and tossed the merchant a quarter. "Here's my contribution; that makes thirty-five cents!"

Window caught the quarter even as several men laughed, stopping to watch this between the marshal and the town's leading merchant. Then the storeman threw the money violently into the dust, his face going red with anger. "You'll need your quarters after today, Nathan!" he shouted. "You'll have to work for what you're more nearly worth. Twenty dollars a month!"

"Yes, Mr. Window, sir," Britt said getting to his feet. He tossed his cigar into the street. "Go into the hotel bar, Mr. Window, sir, and have a drink on me to cool you off. A short beer. Tell the bartender that I said it was all right!" He stepped into the street.

Laughter came from the watching men and Window made a furious sound and lunged past Britt and down the street. Britt was close behind him as he went up the stairs to the mayor's office over Burney's Drugstore. Window was just taking his seat at the table when Britt entered.

ED LINDLEY, the mayor, with three other business men, Guy Hall, Will Stacey, and Joe Nemmers, were at the table. "Gentlemen," Britt said, winking at the glowering Window. "Mr. Window, sir, was kind enough to tell me I was wanted here; subject: termination of contract."

"Sit down, Britt," Lindley said quickly, smoothly. "We have a few

things to discuss with you—the welfare of this town mostly. You are, of course, conversant with the rumors about Hardee and Yates?"

Britt sat down. "I heard about it, no later than this morning. Such a scandal, the way people keep the law ignorant of these rowdy goings on! Am I fired now or after the big fight?"

The other businessmen were glowering with Window now at Britt's lightness of manner. Lindley looked at them quickly and said, "Britt, it's hardly a joking matter. You know that. . . what people say is that you sent word—"

"Sure," Britt said. "People say a lot, Ed, and a lot of the time they have no basis on fact. Is it unusual for two enemies to meet and shoot it out, gents? It's been done before; Yates and Hardee have been on shooting terms for years."

"How do you propose to handle it, Britt?" Lindley asked.

Window snapped, "He won't! Don't let him sidetrack you with that smooth talk, Lindley. He knows about it and he's getting two hundred a month to keep law and order in this town, to sit on his back sides on the hotel porch! He's mixed up in it and it's a damn dirty business. We called him here to fire him; let's do it!"

"And see that he gets out of town before high noon," Nemmers said.

"Just like a bad boy, eh, Window?" Britt said. He sat up straight in the chair and his grey eyes lost their humor and became hard and cold, almost savage. He looked at Window steadily until the merchant looked down and fiddled furiously with his pad and pencil. Britt shifted his stare to the other men in turn and only Nemmers stared back at him.

Britt said softly, "My contract has a month yet to run. It says I will be paid to the end of it even if dismissed. Also a thousand dollar bonus. I neither see the folding money nor hear the clink of coin."

Window made a small angry sound and Lindley said quickly, "We thought if you decided to quit, Britt, that you'd take the salary and forget the rest. Being fired won't help your reputation." He added hastily under Britt's grey stare, "Not that I'm in favor of you leaving."

"Damn it, Lindley!" Window shouted. "You was ready awhile ago! We know why he wants those outlaws here; a big fight will build his reputation bigger, even if he has to kill some of his old friends. And maybe a few innocent townsmen! We'll fire him and fulfill our bargain! Let him get mad and fall in with his outlaw friends, there's enough good men in this town to handle all of them!"

"Let's not lose our tempers, gentlemen," Lindley said smoothly. "I have a plan. We'll say that we suspend Britt temporarily; he can stay in his room for two days. That will give this business time to clear up. Let Hardee and Yates shoot each other up—no loss—and the town can stay indoors with the marshal. That will prove Britt's willingness to let folks know he wasn't trying to build up a fight for his reputation!"

Window jumped up. "No! I'll have no part of such a plan. I'm herewith resigning from the council, and I'll not put out another dime to pay Nathan a salary! Neither will anyone else I can talk out of it!" He glared at the council. "Are you men with me?"

He wheeled and stamped out and after a moment's hesitation, the others, except Lindley, followed him. Lindley looked at Britt with lifted eyebrows. "That's it, Britt. In the next few days they will elect another mayor—and hire another marshal."

"All right," Britt said. "You can pay me off, with bonus."

Lindley shook his head. "The town fund is in Window's safe; he won't give it up now."

"I'll be the marshal till he does,"

Britt said. "They'll cool off by tomorrow, and pay off to get rid of me."

Lindley's face tightened for a moment, and a fleeting emotion darkened his eyes. Then he smiled. "Britt, why not stay in the hotel? It'll protect your rep, if you want another job. I'll give you a recommendation, and I'll say it was my order. I'm still the mayor until they elect another." He was looking at Britt intently through his cigar smoke.

It seemed to Britt that there was a tight expectancy in Lindley, beneath his smooth exterior. He got to his feet. "I'll think about it, Ed." He walked out.

THERE WERE several things he wanted to think about. Something was wrong. He could have slipped out of it easily there if he hadn't got mad, but some elusive hunch had made him bow his neck. Ed Lindley had switched horses there, but he'd still had his plan for keeping Britt out of the pending fight. Why? He'd tried to stay on the good side of Britt, to keep the marshal's well-known stubbornness from asserting itself. None of them had any affection for Britt. What would it profit Lindley to get the other businessmen down on him?

Britt smoked a cigar leaning against a hitch rack, and finally he paused in mid puff, flung his cigar away and walked rapidly to his room at the hotel. He went then, to the livery, saddled his horse and rode to the hills south of town. On a vantage point he staked his horse in a grassy draw and took his post, seated with his back comfortably against a boulder, and uncased his glasses and adjusted them on the town. It would be a long vigil until night, but it should indicate if his growing suspicions were correct.

He didn't see how the pending trouble with Hardee and Yates tied in with the council's actions unless his suspicions were correct. If they were, he would know it before night. He might be earning his two hundred before morning.

It was past mid afternoon when Britt sat up and trained his glasses with sharp attention on a rider passing out of the hills toward town. The man rode one horse and led another. The led horse was a long-legged sorrel. Fast. A horse that would take a man a long way in a hurry. The rider bushed up in the brush along a small branch running out of the hills about a half mile from town.

Before the first man had more than gotten set in his hiding spot, another rider angled from the road to pause and let his horse drink from the branch near the brush. The glasses brought the first man into clear focus where he stood back in the brush to talk. Then the second man rode on to bush up in a ravine a mile from the first one, and on the opposite end of town.

Then Hardee and Yates, riding together, came from the hills and left spare, fine horses with the first man in the brush. Then they separated and rode into town from opposite directions.

Britt Nathan cased his glasses, and smoked a cigar through, his eyes narrowed and hard upon the town. Finally, he flung his cigar away, saddled his horse and rode toward town.

"Old hoss," he said aloud, "I reckon there's some folks in Two Feathers getting greedy, and figure the town lawdog is a fool. Maybe he is—but not that much of a fool!"

He stabled his horse at the livery, and the hostler looked at him slaunchwise but said nothing. Other men, as Britt walked down the street, looked at him in much the same manner. They were uneasy and a little scared.

More gossip, Britt thought, and none of it to build trust in the marshal!

He entered the hotel cafe and the first man he looked at was Big Hardee. The badman sat at a corner table, and the other tables near him were empty.

Britt nodded, "Howdy, Big; long time no see."

"Howdy, Kid," Hardee said and grinned a little, a real pleasure in his broad face for a fleeting moment. Then he went sober again with his thoughts. "You ain't got no warrants for me, have you, Kid?"

Britt sat on his favorite stool. "Nope, Big, sure ain't. Have your drink and game and move along. Same old rule." He grinned at the big outlaw, remembering the tales the usually goodhumored owlhooter used to tell him. He'd always liked Hardee and knew that the outlaw liked him. But there were times when friendship went out the window in the broader picture of living. A hard picture to frame sometimes.

Hardee nodded. "I'll be riding along, Britt."

BRITT NODDED and looked then at Ida. Her face was white, her eyes dark and dilated with worry and fright. "Britt," she said, her voice choked, "Britt, how can you enjoy a life like this? You smile at a man, might even be his friend, and a little later you're trying to kill each other! Oh, Britt, why—"

Britt patted her hand. "Stop your worrying now, honey, I want you looking purty as usual on Sunday; it's my proposing day!"

"Britt Nathan, how can you be so ...so casual, and hard? Sometimes I could just choke you!"

He said solemnly, "Wait till I get around that steak. I don't want my goozle too sore to swallow. I need my strength to combat evil!"

Ida wheeled away and ran back to the kitchen, but not before he saw the quick tears in her eyes. He became absorbed in flipping a spoon into his glass by placing the end of one spoon under the bowl of another and tapping the extreme end. He did it six times in a row and turned casually to wink broadly at the dozen pairs of eyes watching him. The other customers went hastily back to eating.

Big Hardee finished eating and left. Britt ate his own steak leisurely then smoked his usual cigar on the hotel's porch. He flung his cigar away then and started on his rounds an hour after dark.

Big Hardee was in the *Elephant Saloon* playing poker with several cowboys. Britt looked the crowd over carefully but saw no hardcases he knew.

At the *Carney House,* he found Bus Yates. The lean, fidgety outlaw was leaning at the bar drinking, sparingly, for him.

Britt stopped beside him. "Howdy, Bus."

"Howdy, Britt. Guess you've come to tell me to move along." His little marble blue eyes regarded Britt in flashing glances.

"Just saying howdy, and have your drink and game. But be gentle with our little town, Bus; we excite so easily around here."

Bus Yates grinned, obviously pleased with his thoughts. "I'll do that, Britt. I'll be real careful of your town."

"You're not figuring on having a smoke-up time with Big, are you, Bus?"

Yates' lips thinned. "Heard he was in town. Nothing I'd like better than to shoot his guts out. But I can wait until I leave town." The words were bitten out, hard.

He means it, Britt thought, *so they made up for a good reason, and some esteemed citizen helped it along. They all get their pockets filled.*

"Sounds fair," Britt said. "But you know us marshals; we worry a lot. So you stay on this end of town and Hardee can stay on the other. No accidents that way. Right?"

"O. K.," Yates said.

Britt nodded to Yates again and strolled out the door. There was audible sounds of relaxing behind him.

From the shadows of the saloon's

front, Lindley said, "Britt, damn it, I thought I told you to stay in the hotel! Let them shoot each other up. I'm passing the word for everybody to go home early and let them at it!"

"Go ahead, Ed; that's a good idea," Britt said, "passing the word to stay clear of the streets. Maybe I can get to bed early, too."

"You won't stay in the hotel then?" His smooth voice held a note of baffled rage.

"Maybe later," Britt said. "Evening, Ed." He moved on as Lindley went into the saloon, his violent curse grating on Britt's ears.

Britt walked on, a faint, humorless smile on his lips. He finished his rounds quickly and went to the livery for his horse, and rode east out of town. Behind him he heard a man hotfooting it for the main part of town, and knew in a few minutes the word would be out that the marshal had lit a shuck. That ought to please several people.

A COUPLE of hundred yards from the brushy ravine, Britt burst into a maudlin song, and swayed loosely in the saddle, reeling and singing with time out for cursing his horse for dodging about. He nearly fell from the saddle at the ravine, and hung there cursing; his floundering to right himself in the saddle caused the horse to wheel and Britt fell off. He lunged about for a few moments, after his horse, keeping the animal moving with his hat. Finally, he gave it up and lay down and started snoring, careful not to overdo it.

The man in the ravine cursed viciously and came toward Britt. "...a damn drunk! Have to move him..."

The outlaw drove a boot at Britt. Britt caught it, twisted violently, and the man fell heavily, his startled yell cut off as his breath left him. Britt hit him solidly over the ear with his gun barrel and the man went limp. Britt tied him securely and dragged him back into the brush.

"Be a good boy, now," Britt said, "until Papa Nathan gets back." He mounted and rode toward the other end of town.

There was a yard-wide ditch with water gurgling through it where the second man was hidden, waiting for the time to sneak into town. Britt, swaying and singing at the top of his slurring voice fell out of the saddle when his horse jumped the ditch. He floundered about after he got his breath back and cursed his horse for a bronco and a fool, and lunging at it with blood chilling threats. The reins left thrown in opposite directions over the horse's neck wouldn't fall immediately and the animal snorted and trotted away. Britt fell into the ditch again, and the horse was out of the little branch before he got out. He cursed the horse and lunged into the brush yelling for it to "Whoa!". After awhile he appeared to give up and resorted to his snoring.

But this man was more cautious and made no sound or approach. After a half hour, Britt gave it up, not daring to waste too much time out here. He got to his feet, reeling a little, knowing he had to get a rise out of this man some way.

He started thrashing about in the brush, muttering about his horse, and cursing. He threw chunks and yelled, and eventually, he heard a horse snort after he threw a rock, and knew the outlaw was still here. Britt yelled triumphantly then, and started toward the horse that had snorted.

"There you are!" he bellowed. "Come outa there, damn your sneaking hide! I'll 'tend to you!"

He almost didn't see the man until too late. That one came out from the brush to Britt's left as he crossed a ten foot clearing, and the thin moon showed the glitter of a knife in his hand as he lunged at Britt.

Britt leaped aside, twisting away

from that arcing knife, and drawing his gun. The man regained his balance with the agility of a weasel and slashed with the knife.

Britt struck with his gun and heard the clang of metal on metal and saw the knife spin away. Then the other was leaping back, his gun whipping up and blasting at Britt.

But Britt was firing too, his shots coming in a bunch, and the outlaw reeled away to fall loosely. He drew his second gun and emptied the other two shots from his right one and yelled a long yipping cowboy yell. That would take care of anyone hearing the shots in town—just a cowboy bellowing at the moon.

The man on the ground didn't move and in a moment Britt went over and examined him; he was dead. Britt reloaded his gun, holstered both of them, and trotted away after his horse. He found the animal grazing on the prairie beyond the branch, the reins fallen now and holding him. He mounted and rode toward town.

He left the horse beyond the first house and entered town on foot, moving cautiously now, aware that the town apparently was bedded down even at this early hour, all but a couple of saloons.

HE WAS EASING out of a back alley when he almost bumped into Ida Hand. "Britt!" she gasped and ran to him. "Britt, the town is holed up. Yates and Hardee are about to shoot it out. Yates challenged Hardee to a shoot-out, he come from one end of town, Hardee from another. Stalking each other in the dark! I've been looking all over for you!"

"Ida," Britt said. "Doggone it, honey, I ought to spank your...uh... You ought to be inside! Get now, and leave this up to me. I understand this kind of doings. Scat!"

"Britt!" she cried. "You've got to go down to Window's store—there's a bunch of men there—and get help. You must, Britt; you'll be killed!"

Britt sighed. "Ida, this is all a putup, a show to get the town treed and indoors. It's been carefully planned. They wanted to get rid of me by having me discredited and fired. This town is loaded with cash, Ida, and those longriders are after it! Hardee, Yates and two men I've already taken care of, were working together. And another man here in town. I'm the only man can stop it now; will you scat now and let me get at it, before it's too late?"

"Britt! You can't stop it alone!"

"I can try; it's my job." He turned her around. "Go on, Ida."

He watched her fade down the street and then he was watching a bulging shadow against a building across a narrow alley. It was a big bulge.

Britt smiled a little. "Big, it was a right good plan."

After a moment, Hardee said, "You're a smart kid, Britt. I told 'em I didn't figure it would work in your town."

Britt said, "Big, you want to ride out? Or make your try now?"

Big Hardee was silent for a full minute and Britt heard his gusty sigh then. "I always liked you, Kid. I still do; reckon I'll take a ride."

"So long, Big."

"So long, Kid." The bulge disappeared and Britt waited until he heard the fading sound of a fast-traveling horse. He moved on then.

He worked toward the bank and was only the distance of a vacant lot from it when he saw the fast moving shadow flatten against the bank. Then the back door opened and closed again. Britt waited, his straining glances probing the gloom for Yates.

He saw the lean shape then across the street and he waited until Yates was midway of the store there before he said, "Big's gone, Yates; and so are your two helpers."

Yates said, "You were always the

smart one, Britt," and fired four times, hammering the shots at Britt.

But Britt was hugging the store's waterbarrel; then his gun was streaking fire across the barrel's top as he returned the fire, patterning Yates with the lead. Britt drew his second gun as he was running across the street on the heel of his last shot. But Yates was down and breathed his life away in a last choking breath as Britt halted beside him. Britt turned and ran for the bank.

He was within twenty feet of the door when a man ran out, a bulging, heavy sack in one hand, a gun in the other. "Hold it!" Britt yelled. "You're under arrest—"

THE MAN cursed shrilly and fired furiously, emptying his gun in a savage burst of too-hurried fire. Britt aimed and shot him twice, and watched him fall. Britt turned and walked down the street to Window's store and rapped on the door.

"It's me, Nathan; open up."

Cautious voices came from the store and in a moment Window came and let him in, dropping the bar behind him. There were five men, holding guns, looking at Britt grimly.

"Well, Nathan?" Window said.

Briefly, Britt told them what had happened, and ended, "The third party, the one here in Two Feathers, was to clean the town with the help of the two men waiting to come in at a certain time. Hardee and Yates were to keep everybody inside with their fight. I was to be discredited and fired—or, as a last resort, confined to my room."

Window called names. "We'll bring them in. Les, stay and bind up the marshal's arm; it's bleeding all over the floor!"

Les had just finished binding the gashed arm when Window came back with another man carrying Lindley's body, and two more men came in behind them with Yates.

"So Ed Lindley was the man planned it. Come to think of it, he was the man told me about you sending for Yates and Hardee; he started that rumor about you!"

"Yeah," Britt said.

Window looked uncomfortable but he met Britt's gaze steadily. "I apologize, Britt, and will be glad to have you stay on—at two hundred!"

"Britt! Oh, Britt!" She was running from the sound of her steps, and then she was jerking at the door.

Britt grinned and winked at Window. "I'll think on it, but you can't tell, I might have to retire. A married man, you know!"

"Britt!" Ida came in the door and he turned to take her in his arms.

He held her tightly and she clung to him. He said loudly to Window, "I got a question to ask a lady, Mr. Window, sir, on Sunday. I'll give you my answer then, on Monday!"

Ida's arms tightened around Britt. "Ask the Sunday question now, Britt. I don't want to wait."

Britt grinned, "Will you marry me, Miss Ida, ma'am?"

"Yes!" she said.

"The answer, Mr. Window, sir," Britt said solemnly, "is no!"

☆

Know Your West

A Department For Western Story Readers

By Harold Gluck

FOOL'S GOLD?

THE WAGON TRAIN had halted as the sun went down; and again began the nightly problem. The cattle must graze but the overlanders must also be protected. So the wagons, with tongues outward, were pulled in a vast circle and chained together. Front wheels to rear to form a protective fort. Captain John Markel dismounted from his horse and spoke to Luther Hathaway, the chosen leader of the wagon train.

"This is as far as I can accompany you with my men. We must now ride back to the fort. I suggest you stay here an extra day. There is an abundance of Sage, Buffalo, and Red Clover; cut it and take it with you. Then check your water supply. Across the desert you can't afford to run short of water for yourselves and animals, nor grass for your stock. Don't worry about the Indians; they should be the least of your problems. You are well armed."

His narrow high forehead, thinning black hair, deep set brown eyes, and black mustache gave Luther Hathaway the kind of a face that stuck in your memory. When he replied, he spoke for the entire wagon train. "We want to thank you for your protection. I guess our greatest danger will be to prevent our nerves from getting the best of us."

"Yaas," interrupted a powerful voice that belonged to Scout Dan Bricker, "goin' to be more than your nerves. There's rain, hail, cholera, breakdowns, lame mules, sick cows, washouts, prairie fires, flooded coulees, lost horses, dust storms, alkali water, and other troubles. Seventeen miles every day, or you'll land in the snow and eat each other like the Donner party in '48."

Captain John Markel remounted his horse, and then with a forced smile gave some parting advice. "Don't worry too much about what Dan just said. You keep your eyes open for Ben Ewing and his group."

The eyes of the members of the wagon train were all focused on the soldiers who were leaving them. The women and children waved their farewells. Luther Hathaway walked with the party's Scout back to his wagon. Jim Peabody was checking his Allen pepperbox. Most of the men were armed with that weapon, for it was the

fastest-shooting handgun of its day, and very popular with the Forty Niners.

"Now's as good a time as any," said young Jim Peabody. "We go over to Ben Ewing and tell him we are going to split up. Better do it now. Otherwise we might wake up some night and find us all dead. He's got his eyes on the cash we are carrying."

Strains of music hit the ears of the worried man. No doubt about who was playing that musical instrument.

"The Professor certainly can play the Long-tom. Got a good ear for music."

Whether it was coincidence, perfect timing, or that he could hear those words, the Professor stopped playing and walked over to the men. His close-cropped beard and immaculate dress put an air of respect around him. "Gentlemen," he began. "Something tells me the topic of the day is our esteemed Ben Ewing. But why worry about him? His own greed will be the cause of his destruction."

It seemed as though Ben Ewing was reckless. His two powerful arms could break a man in two. He had finished his supper, cooked in a trapper's oven using buffalo chips as fuel. Now he was ready to speak his mind to his small group of followers.

"There's a fortune in paper money in this party. We wait until we are out in the desert. Joe can start working on their water barrels. They'll be stranded and die; we can loot them without having to fight them."

Luther Hathaway did not speak what was on his mind because of the presence of the womenfolks.

"We should have gone by boat," complained Sam Rulley. "I like the water. The *Flying Cloud* with Captain Josiah Perkins Creesy is my choice. Took him only eighty-nine days from New York to San Francisco. His spars were carried away; the sails blew out; and the mainmast cracked under the strains. But he made it."

"I'm getting seasick listening to that story," complained young Jim Peabody. "Remember I got to stay up guarding tonight while you sleep. The Professor is going to keep me company."

THERE WAS a stillness in the night that slightly scared Jim Peabody. His right hand was near his holster. But nothing happened. Except an idea born in the Professor's brain.

"Somebody could make a lot of money writing a guidebook for folks going to California. Give them good advice. What's the treatment for collapsed wheels? Replace spokes if you remembered to provide spares. Otherwise buy or steal some hardwood and make new spokes with tools at hand."

Morning came and the two guards went to a well-earned rest. Everybody got busy following the advice of Captain John Markel; even Ben Ewing and his group cheerfully did their bit.

At noon a rider came into camp. He had exciting news to tell. "They struck gold at Meadow's Point. Why go to California? The gold is right here; turn back and head southeast for Meadow's Point."

"Show me the stuff," demanded Ben Ewing. "I know real gold from fool's gold."

The stranger had a big bag which he emptied. The Professor appeared upon the scene. He took a quick look at the samples.

"Nothing but iron pyrites. That's what they call fool's gold. I should know; I taught about minerals in college."

"You're a dirty liar," shouted Ben Ewing; "you want to fool us. This is real gold. Well, I'm going to Meadow's Point. If any of you follow me and my party, I'll kill you all."

Luther Hathaway was cool, and

noticed the Scout's hand edging closer to his gun. A warning look from his eyes stopped that motion. He had to think quickly and correctly. Here was a good chance to get rid of Ben Ewing and his men; destination was California. There was a lot of gold in California. Onward they would go!

The wagon train split, and Ben Ewing and his group headed for Meadow's Point. The others remained with Luther Hathaway. And they were content. They crossed the desert without incident and gave thanks to the Lord. The Professor played the Longtom and they danced to the strains of his music. When finished the Professor made an announcement. "You owe me for my services."

"Ten dollars will cover that," suggested Jim Peabody.

"Five hundred dollars," was the startling reply. "That's what I paid the man to ride into camp and to get those samples of gold. I saved you all from death; you know it."

"Double that amount," shouted Luther Hathaway. "First time I ever saw real gold to be fool's gold."

Questions Can you spot the error in this story. (You'll find the answer on page 98.)

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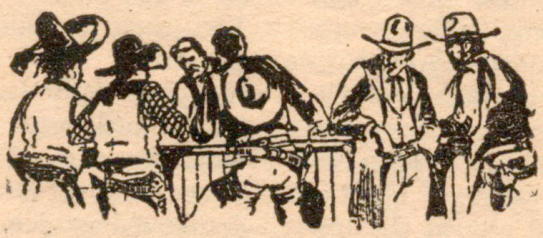

NEVADA SALOONS

Special Feature by Nan Baker

IN GOLD RUSH days, not all the gold lay in the hills waiting to be extracted from the earth. A great deal of the yellow ore lay in men's pockets, ready for the itchy fingers of the barman who sold the thirst-quenching redeye, and entertained his patrons with games of chance. These men knew the needs of their customer, and went to all ends to satisfy and sell as much as they could.

One goldfield saloon proprietor was therefore very much perturbed that his new shipment of roulette wheels and shiny birdcages was not coming through on time. The Virginia and Truckee R. R. yard at Carson City, Nevada, was filled to overflowing and only cattle cars had priority. Feeling this daily loss of money keenly, the owner juggled his shipment on its way by putting an aged cow in the boxcar along with all his deluxe gaming equipment. The load left Carson City the very next day.

Another saloon keeper was one day flabbergasted to learn from travelers that the booming town of Tonopah was entirely void of a bar for thirsty men. With mercenary kindness then, he placed his establishment on skids, attached four span of oxen, and headed south to Tonopah. He didn't close his doors to patrons during the entire trip; and southbound stagecoach passengers were able to partake of his wares, without even slowing down on their journey.

★

FAIR ODDS

by Mat Rand

After all — how many Rangers are needed to clean up one outlaw gang?

THE SUN had gone down at the end of a day that all but sapped the life of every living thing. A day when even the dust, dry as it was, seemed too languid to rise more than a foot or two when stirred by the hoofs of some hollow-flanked horse that was ridden through the single sandy street of Palo Verde. It was one of those August days when such living things as survive gasp avidly for the first cool drafts of night air. What optimistic soul named the town, nobody knew. It was five miles from the Rio Grande, in a part of Texas where it didn't even rain occasionally, but only on extraordinary occasions. The only "green timber"—which is literal English for the Spanish name of the place—that there was within fifty miles of Palo Verde was two stunted cottonwoods that caught the overflow from a water tank by a creaking windmill. These managed to survive the scorching heat of the arid country. A dozen yellow leaves still flapped lazily and dejectedly on each of the trees, as the night wind stirred them.

Usually, Palo Verde slept, or lay in a comatose state, throughout the day, to wake when the night winds revived it from its swoon. On this night it didn't really wake, but barely stirred in its stupor. A guitar tinkled just beyond the danger zone, where gunplay was common, and a sweet, but tired voice sang "La Paloma." The bartender in the *Favorite Saloon*—which was the favorite only because the other three were worse—lounged to the door and listened a moment.

"Hell of a night to sing," he grunted. "A dove would be a dang' fool to ever come back here, once he got away." Just then a child cried, weakly and hopelessly. "Hell of a night for kids, too. Especially fat ones," and turning on his heel went mopping his face toward the only three customers in the house, who sat at a table, and just now demanded service.

There was no ice in Palo Verde, never had been any. Beer was cooled to a tepid, foamy mess by placing it in wet gunny bags and hanging it in the wind at night.

"Bring us some of that beer, Clem," ordered the burly, broad-hatted gentleman who seemed to be the head and life of the party. His name was Arn Hoyt, or at least that was the name he was known by in that country.

"It ain't cooled none yet," protested the bartender.

"Don't make no difference. It ain't no hotter than this forty-rod we been drinking. Maybe it's wet enough to put out fire, and I'm goin' to begin to blaze in a minute if something ain't did."

Clem went out the back door to where he had hung up the beer bags in the shade of the house, late in the afternoon. He put his hand to one of them.

"Dry as a lost Mexican's canteen," he muttered. "This is some hot spell,

when it don't cool off none at night," and he began fishing in the bags, trying to find three bottles that were not hot enough to burn his hands before he could get them to the table.

The beer wouldn't be fit for human consumption, but the bartender's absence would give Hoyt a chance to tell his companions something that was troubling his mind.

"Get this, fellows," he told them. "A squad of Rangers is being sent into this country to see how comes what happens here."

One of the others, a tall, hatchet-faced man, looked straight at Hoyt and calculatingly expelled a cloud of cigarette smoke through his beak of a nose. This gentleman's name was Carl Tinsley—in and around Palo Verde.

"Is that straight, Arn?" he asked, after his straight, questioning look at the ranchman. "Can't you handle the sheriff, as many votes as you control?"

"Shore I can handle the sheriff, but the trouble is he can't handle the Rangers. He's the one told me Rangers were coming."

"But I thought Rangers didn't go places until the local peace officers gave up and yelled for help."

"They mostly don't, but counties on three sides of this one has yelled for 'em. Mexico's on the other side, but she ain't got no vote in this election."

"Have you seen Rangers?" asked Tinsley, doubtingly.

"No, I ain't saw any, but that's no sign there's none in this part of the country. Rangers are pretty hard to see sometimes. Sheriff Bell says there is no doubt about it, and he's sore. Says he can handle anything that comes up in his county. I'll tell the judge he can, too, handle it the way I want it handled. Rangers has got some dang' strict ideas about the way the cow business ought to be run, and they don't always suit me."

"Well, if that's straight, looks to me we ought to ride some," said Tinsley.

"We shore ought to. There's plenty to do at the old AH Bar, before company comes. Dang it all, it's hard enough to make a living in thet cow business in this godforsaken country, when a fellow's let alone. He shore needs help, when it don't rain for three-four year on a stretch."

THE THIRD man in the party was not more than five foot four in his boots, and slender at that. A midget, in fact. He had a big head, and a rather intelligent face. He also had a tremendous big voice. Probably because he rarely used it, and it was always rested. Palo Verde had guffawed at its own joke when it dubbed this pigmy "Jumbo Huff." The joke had been forgotten, but the name, shortened to "Jumb," stuck. He hadn't spoken since the bartender went out, and he didn't speak now. He merely turned his head, with the quick movement of a weasel or some other small animal, and his sensitive nostrils worked like those of a rabbit. The other two men stopped talking, and Clem Garrett entered the back door with three bottles of beer. He set them on the table, and they popped like champagne as he removed the tin tops. Hot suds poured out on the table, leaving three little islands of foam as the men picked up the bottles and put them to their mouths, without the formality of glasses. Clem wiped his hands on his apron and scuttled behind his bar, for another customer had entered the *Favorite*.

This wayfarer had evidently ridden far, and as fast as the heat would let him. Sweat had come through his woolen shirt across the shoulders. Dust had settled in it, forming a sort of shell. There was white dust on his hat and in his hair. He was smooth shaved, which was uncommon in Palo Verde at that time. He appeared to be quite gray-haired, and one judged him to be in his fifties, for all his broad shoulders and narrow waist. This pilgrim might have

been a ranchman, cowpuncher, outlaw on his way into Mexico, almost any of the various kinds of men who frequented Palo Verde. He seemed to give one shrewd glance at the place and the people in it, as he walked to the end of the bar nearest the front door, and then to forget it.

"What'll it be pardner?" greeted Clem.

"Water."

"Wu—water!"

"Yes. Just plain, wholesome, wet water. Got any?"

"Shore, we got some, but it ain't very plain and wholesome. It's about fancy mixed," and Clem shot a glass across the bar that was filled with a milky mess from the town well that had to serve as water in Palo Verde. " 'Bout all I can say for it is that it's sorty damp and'll put out fire."

"And I'm dry," said the stranger. "Now give me a drink of the best whisky you got."

In another minute, the stranger had paid his score and gone. A casual observer would have sworn that the man had seen nothing but the bar and bartender and the murky water and mean whisky he had drunk.

"Know that gent, Clem?" asked Hoyt, as the bartender swept up the three empty bottles with one hand and mopped the foam from the table with a dirty rag held in the other.

"Never seen him before. Seemed right dry."

"Yes—for water. Must have rid some ways. Say anything?"

"Yep. Called for water; drunk it. Called for whisky; drunk that. Throwed four bits on the bar and said, 'Thank you.' "

"He'd be talkative as hell in a deaf and dumb asylum," commented the hatchet-faced Tinsley.

Jumbo Huff said nothing, as usual. Hoyt paid the score, and the three left the place together. Just outside the front door they stopped and held a muttered conversation.

"We better scatter," said Hoyt, "and see if we can locate that pilgrim. He looks like the breaking up of a long drouth to me, but we got to keep our eyes open. Birds fly before a storm, and he may be heading for the border, but I'd like to know where he's going and which way he came so we can dodge what's after him."

Their spurs rattled dully in the sand as they set out, one for each of the other three saloons, in search of the stranger.

Clem Garrett happened to glance at the back door a minute after the three customers had gone out, and what he saw gave him a start. It was a long, slim white hand, beckoning to him from the darkness. Nothing could be seen but the hand, and it was positively uncanny. A moment's thought and he realized that he had seen that hand before. The stranger had wrapped it avidly around the glass of milky water. Yes, it was his hand, but Clem had seen a hand like that still farther back on the crooked trail of life that he had traveled. Where was it? No matter. There was something impelling about this one, and picking up an old forty-five, Clem held it under his apron, went to the back door and peered out. That was quite as far as Mr. Garrett had intended to go in this uncanny business, but he heard the click of a gun.

"Come on out," a voice by the side of the door said. "Just lay that gun on a barrel. You won't need it if you walk straight and keep quiet. If you don't do that, you still won't need it, because—"

"WHU—WHO are you?'" asked Clem, as he laid his old cannon on the head of a barrel and stepped out into the inky darkness.

He didn't want to take that step, but he had to. The man was in the dark, and he was in the full light of the open door.

"Never mind who I am, right now. What's that?" and the stranger nodded toward a small building that stood against the back end of the old 'dobe saloon.

"Shack where I sleep."

"Good! We'll just go in there. Lead on."

Inside the shack, Clem scratched a match with a shaking hand and lit a candle, then stood staring at the gaunt, raw-boned, dust-covered stranger. The man didn't have his hand anywhere near his one plain, wood-handled Colt, and he was smiling at Clem.

"You did me a good turn, once," he said, "and now I'm going to do you one."

"That's good news," and there was a sickly grin wrinkling Clem's pasty face. "I thought you was takin' my measure for a nice, new wooden overcoat."

"No! Nothing like that. You don't seem to recognize me."

"I shore don't."

"Recollect when you tended bar in Mex Pete's place, down at Del Rio, and—"

"Terry!"

"Good guess."

"But what makes you so gray? Your hair was black, and—"

"It's still black. That's alkali dust. Now you listen to me. I don't know who you are tied up with, here in Palo Verde, but I know I can talk to you. The first good turn I'm going to do you is to tell you to keep your ears and eyes open, and your mouth mostly shut for a while—except when you see me, and even then don't talk too much. A few things are going to happen to Palo Verde. Now I want to ask a couple or three questions."

"All right, shoot. I'm goin' straight out here, but of course there are things I see and hear."

"I'LL BET there are, plenty of them. The first question is: who's doing all this stage robbing, killing and general rough stuff along this part of the border?"

"Why, Black Bill McCamish, of course! Ain't you heard that?'"

"Oh, yes, I've heard it, but Black Bill must be some jumper. He robs a stage in the outskirts of El Paso one day, and between Brownsville and Santa Maria the next. Seven-eight hundred mile is some jump to make in one day."

"I don't know what reports is, but Black Bill's doin' what's being did around here."

"Did you ever see him?"

"No, but I've heard fellows that was stuck up by his outfit say Black Bill is seven foot tall and got a voice like a cross bull. He ain't got no patience a-tall with gents that don't come across pronto when he holds 'em up. I've had fellows pointed out to me that belonged to his gang."

"Are the ranchers in this part of the country standing in with Black Bill's gang?"

"No, I wouldn't say that. He's got 'em all buffaloed and gets anything he wants. He'd take it anyway, so they just try to be friendly. This McCamish is rough, and can't be took, and he ain't fit to have ag'in' you. Where's the main squad of you Rangers?"

"I love you, Clem, but I don't love you that much," grinned Terry. "Personally, I'm going to be around Palo Verde some, for a while. I haven't got any right to tell about the others. If anybody asks you about me, I used to ride over to Del Rio from the other side, sometimes, and I'm about as far from the border now as I ever get. Understand?"

"Shore!"

"Well, pet your memory. If anybody finds out different, I'll be about the first to know it, and if I find out that you throwed me, I'll—"

"Aw, hell, Terry! You know I wouldn't do that. I couldn't afford to."

"I don't believe you would, and I

don't believe you could afford to," said the Ranger, meaningly. "There's just one more little question: who were the three gents at the table?"

"Them? Why that was Arn Hoyt, owner of the AH Bar, and two of his punchers. 'Bout the best customers I got. All steady drinkers, and all good pay. I reck'n they're about the only three plumb square gents around Palo Verde, unless you'd count Sheriff Bell. He's so honest he's sorty silly."

"I see. If I get in a jamb, I can call on these three friends of yours, can I?" and Terry showed his even white teeth in a broad grin.

"I wouldn't say that. Most anybody in this country would turn down the Twelve Apostles, to keep from getting Black Bill down on them."

"He's that bad, is he? Well, that'll be all for this time," and suddenly blowing out the candle, Dave Terry slipped out the door and disappeared.

NOT MORE than five minutes elapsed until Clem Garrett was back behind his bar, polishing glasses, and decidedly unhappy. Things had been breaking pretty good for him at Palo Verde. It was so hot and dry that men had to drink, and water wasn't very plentiful. Most of his stock was smuggled, and came pretty cheap. He was really running his place as square as anything could be run in that town. He didn't smuggle. He merely bought what was offered him and asked no questions. He knew that there was never a day that he didn't serve men for whose necks a halter was waiting. Still, he was there for what money he could make, and he treated them all alike.

The freebooters of the border were free spenders. Nothing else on earth but easy money would keep any sane man in Palo Verde. If Rangers broke up the gangs, his business was ruined, but he couldn't squeal. The fact was, Mr. Garrett had a rather unsavory past of his own. He had saved his face at Del Rio, two years before, by becoming a stool pigeon for Ranger Dave Terry. He knew Terry had enough on him to railroad him good. True, there was only one of Terry, and the chaparral around Palo Verde was full of bad ones. Trouble was, very few people had counted Terry.

Clem knew that rawboned Ranger's number, and knew it good. He didn't know how many Rangers were in that bend of the Rio Grande, but he did know that, with Terry to do the scouting, they'd find out all they wanted to know. So, business or no business, he was going to sit tight, and if he had to lean to either side, it would be toward Terry, and safety from the law. At the same time, he was going to be extremely careful that no one else found it out.

While Clem was polishing his glasses and meditating over the trials of life on the border, Terry, with the gray dust still in his hair, slipped into the shack from which the singing had come. It was the only excuse for a hotel in the town. Not much of a hostelry, but decidedly better than the average chili joint of the border towns. In addition to the restaurant, there were a few rooms. The place was presided over by a wonderfully pretty, full-bosomed, red-lipped young Spanish woman. She was called, in Palo Verde, simply, "Rosita of the Posada." For five years she had been running this only substitute for a hotel that the town knew.

If "Rosita" was meant to indicate that the lady was a little rose, she had outgrown her name, for she was now at least in full bloom. Rosita was the typical border posadera. Welcome beamed from her black eyes and smiled from her ruby lips, as she laid down her guitar, invited Terry to a table, and served wholesome food and black coffee. Throughout the meal they talked in Spanish. Having discovered that the gray dust in his hair changed his appearance beyond recognition, Terry went on playing the role of a wanted man, who spent much of his time on

the other side of the Rio Grande. When he left, the woman was convinced that he was an outlaw, fleeing from officers, and would cross to the other side before morning; but Terry wasn't convinced of anything.

The posada was a thatched-roofed 'dobe building, neatly whitewashed inside and spotlessly clean. Rosita's intelligence was far beyond that of the usual chili queen. More than that, both her dress and her jewelry were beyond the income of a little Mexican restaurant, and Terry felt that Rosita and her posada were decidedly worth keeping an eye on. A turbulent character like Black Bill McCamish would be just the sort to become enamored of Rosita. Somebody was putting up real money, and it was a safe bet that the place wasn't being run for profit, but as a lookout post.

Terry paid his modest bill and left the posada. Crossing the street, he stopped in the deep shadow of a vacant shack, and stood watching the bar of light from the open door of the restaurant, as it struggled feebly to penetrate the sultry gloom of the night. Strangely enough, there had been no one in sight about the place except Rosita.

As he stood thus, watching, he saw Arn Hoyt and his two companions enter the place. Nothing wrong about that. Everybody had to eat and the posada was the only place of public entertainment in town. All sorts and conditions of men must patronize the place, but he felt sure that if he watched long enough, some time he would see the giant Black Bill McCamish enter that welcoming door. Rosita might be the sweetheart, or even the wife of the king outlaw of the Palo Verde country. Terry grinned at the thought of how Rosita would squeal if a squad of Rangers surrounded the place and made a pinch.

HALF AN HOUR passed, and no one but the three cowmen entered or came out of the place. If Black Bill was seven feet tall, and possessed the voice of an enraged bull, he was clearly not in Palo Verde that night, or he would have been either seen or heard by the alert Ranger. So, calling it a day, Terry mounted and rode out of town. He went south, toward the river, to carry out the convenient idea that he was a fugitive from justice, in the event that anyone watched him.

Jogging on toward a place he knew of, where he could get water, grass for his horse, and a chance to rest and sleep through the following day, Terry's mind was busy with the situation he had been sent to investigate. For months Black Bill and his gang of desperadoes had terrorized that part of the country. The stage had been held up with amazing regularity, and the wildest tales told of the methods of the highwaymen, the outstanding features of them all being the giant stature and terrible voice of the leader.

The holdups were not a myth, for old Hank Sherritt, the stage driver, had not only given graphic descriptions of them but had brought in slashed mail bags, and on two occasions the bodies of passengers who had not come across with their valuables as promptly as the bandit chief desired. Hank admitted that he couldn't identify Black Bill. All the holdups had been staged at late dusk or early dawn. He had heard the bull voice, however, and was sure that it took some man to go with it. He would tell of a robbery, at the next stage-stand after a holdup, and his invariable finish, as he swung to his seat and picked up the lines and the long whip, was:

"Don't know as I ever see a prompter and more businesslike outfit. Been driving here for ten year, and been hilt up plenty of times, but I lose less time with these fellers than any that's ever been in the business on this trail. Giddap!"

Dave Terry wasn't seen in Palo Verde for a week. Business was good;

the old town slept through the day and woke at night, a usual. It began to look as if the tale of Rangers was a false alarm. Clem Garrett got over his cold sweat. He hadn't talked, and he wouldn't, but he devoutly hoped that he would never see Terry again. He wasn't deceiving himself, however. He knew that the fact that he hadn't seen the Ranger scout was no sign that he wasn't still in that part of the country. Clem caught himself tiptoeing when he was alone in the *Favorite,* as if he were walking on dynamite. Dave Terry didn't give up very easily. He was on the trail of Black Bill McCamish, and unless Black Bill had left his usual haunts there would come a day of reckoning. Then one morning, Palo Verde got a real jolt.

For months, the up-country stage had rumbled into Palo Verde, just at good daylight, changed horses and rocked on toward El Paso. All the robberies had been perpetrated on the down stage, and between Palo Verde and the larger city. So apparently no one ever thought of robbing the up-stage. On that morning old Hank was chewing his tobacco and meditating on a cup of coffee and some breakfast at Palo Verde, after a night drive.

The old driver was thinking of everything else on earth but a holdup, when a lone horseman rode out into the trail and held up his hand, with a gun in it. Mr. Sherritt stopped his team. Veteran of many stand-and-deliver episodes, Hank had long since concluded that his life was worth more to him than were the passengers, mail and express that he hauled, so he didn't argue. He wouldn't have had a chance, anyway. There wasn't a passenger in the stage, and very little express. The wrinkled old driver chuckled at thought of the light haul the robbers would make, as he elevated his hands in the formal manner, hoping the business would soon be over and he could go on to his breakfast and coffee.

"Stick 'em up, damn you!" roared the bull voice of Black Bill, from the chaparral to one side of the stage.

"Already got 'em up, mister," said Hank, jocularly; "you just can't see 'em good. Get to business. I'm a little late, and I aim to eat a snack at Palo Verde."

Three men stepped out of the brush, all wearing bandanas over their faces.

"Where's your passengers?" demanded one of the bandits, with an oath.

"Why, they forgot to come, this trip," replied Hank.

The bandits went through the boot, where valuable packages were usually found, but there was little to be had.

"Hurry up, there!" roared Black Bill. "We can't stay here all day."

Now, Hank had overlooked a slight technicality when he stopped the team. For some reason he failed to wrap his lines on the brake lever, as was his usual custom, and they crawled over the dash like a lazy snake, and fell to the ground. Just as the bandit chief roared at his men from the brush, and the three at the stage stood back from their unsuccessful search, a fusillade of shots came from a thicket a little way behind the stage.

One of the three fell to the ground, and the other two sprang into the brush and disappeared, as did the horseman in the trail who had stopped the stage. The six half-wild mustangs sprang into their collars as if they were fresh from the corral, and the stage went rocking up the trail toward Palo Verde. Hank grabbed for his lines, saw they were gone, so he just hung on and cursed until the stage stopped in town and a crowd gathered around to learn what was wrong.

IN A DECIDEDLY shaky voice, the veteran told a weird tale of the event. According to his chronicle, there had been a terrible battle, and doubtless a heavy casualty list. He was positive that it had been Black Bill's gang who

had held up the stage, and his guess was that some rival band of outlaws had interfered, like savage beasts quarreling over their prey. Hank was still chattering, and his goatee bobbing up and down, when he released the brake and the fresh team went bounding out of town, the old stage rocking in a cloud of dust.

Sheriff Bell and a posse had already gone to the scene of the holdup and battle, for Bell thought he was a good sheriff. Certain more or less prominent citizens had told him that no Rangers were needed in that part of the country, and that he could handle all the trouble there was. They had told him that so often that he believed it. In fact, Bell was about the only strictly honest man in the town. His only trouble was that he didn't know his stuff, and trusted too many people.

When the sheriff and his men reached the scene of the crime they found a mail pouch on the ground, that the robbers had not had time to cut open, and one dead man. The handkerchief had been stripped from the dead robber's face, and someone had gone through his pockets. Careful search revealed nothing else. The dead man must have been a stranger in Palo Verde. At least, if anyone there knew him he wasn't willing to admit it.

The sheriff said that that kind of thing had to stop—he always said that—and that the balance of the gang had got away, but he'd get them. He always said that, too. All sorts of wild stories were being told, but Clem Garrett clenched his nail in his teeth to keep from talking, and went on waiting on trade and polishing glasses. There was just one solution to the situation—Rangers. True, none had been seen in the country except the one lone scout, and that was more than a week past, but Clem knew something about what Rangers could and would do. Also, he knew that Terry could stay in that locality for a month, and no one ever see him, while he saw everything he wanted to see.

From that first night Clem had known things would happen. They had begun now, and would happen fast. If Black Bill had any real friends in that town, they ought to warn him. Bill might be—indeed, he obviously was—untakable by ordinary men, but Rangers were not ordinary men, and Terry himself was hardly human. Clem shivered, hot as it was, at thought of that slim, white hand beckoning to him from the darkness.

At night, when he was alone, he glanced often at that back door. He had a premonition that he would see that beckoning hand again, and that when he did it would mean trouble. Had he known that every night since Terry had called him out the back door, the Ranger scout had looked his customers over; had he known that every night of that quiet week Terry had spent some time in the vacant shack across the street from the posada, he would have believed more than ever that the Ranger scout saw everything.

It was just after dark on the evening of the frustrated holdup. Clem was in the *Favorite* alone. Business was not so good as usual. It seemed that something was keeping trade away from his place. He wondered if the citizens of Palo Verde suspected him of standing in with Rangers. If they did his days—yes his very hours—in that sleepy old border town were numbered. He was wondering at that moment if it wouldn't be wise to pack what ready cash he had on his person, so he could at least take that if he left town suddenly. In the midst of these thoughts some inexpressible, unseen thing jerked his head around. There hadn't been a sound, but there was that slim, white hand, beckoning him to the back door.

Clem didn't reach for a gun this time. There was no use. He knew that hand, now. He also knew its eerie tricks with a gun. Slowly he went to the back

door, as if to his own hanging. From time to time he glanced toward the front, to see if anyone entered the place. The night was much cooler than that other night had been, but sweat was streaming from Clem's face. He couldn't disobey the Ranger, and if a gang came in they'd catch him red-handed, giving aid and comfort to the common enemy of Palo Verde. No one came in, and, making a virtue of necessity, Clem slipped boldly out the back door.

"There's going to be a party in town, Clem. Want to go?" said Terry, when the greetings were over.

"Whu—what sorty party?"

"Black Bill McCamish is in town, and I aim to pinch him."

"No! You're right sudden with a gun, and all, but don't you ever try to take Black Bill on by yourself. Have the whole squad with you when you go to that party."

"I'll have the whole squad, but we might need more. That's why I asked you. Don't you want to go?"

"No! I ain't—"

"Oh, all right. I just thought I'd ask you. If you don't want to go, why just sit tight and go on chawing your nail. Don't close up until I tell you. We may need a drink right bad when the party's all over and the smoke settles."

"How do you know Black Bill's in town?"

"I saw him."

"Where?"

"Down at the posada. I don't believe you'd throw me, Clem, but I'm telling you, just to give you a chance to. If you go straight it will be best for you. If you don't we'll take you along, too."

"Aw, hell, Terry! This mess is apt to ruin me, but you know I ain't going to throw you."

"All right. See you later. Don't close up until I come back," and Terry slipped away in the darkness.

Clem Garrett was never in his life so torn between fear and desire as he was at that moment. He had built up a good business at Palo Verde. He had told the truth when he said he didn't know Black Bill McCamish, but he had long ago suspected Rosita of the posada of being in league with the bandit chieftain in some way. His own business depended on the outlaw being warned, and he felt sure that if he could get the warning to Rosita, it would get to Black Bill, but something told him that his immediate health depended on his sticking pretty close behind his bar. Terry saw everything, and if Terry saw him enter the posada just now— Well, it wouldn't do, that was all.

Clem stood behind the bar pondering these things for half an hour. Not a soul came into the *Favorite,* and he was getting lonesome. Again a guitar tinkled down the street, and Rosita's voice was wafted on the night air as she sang "La Paloma". Clem went to the door, and looked out.

"Funny thing," he mused. "First time I've heard her sing that song since the first night Terry was here. Wonder if he's got her for a spy, and that's a signal. Aw hell! I don't know what to think. I am to lie low, and wait some," and he strolled back to his place behind the bar, devoutly hoping that if a gun fight had to happen, with that lead-slinging fool Terry in it, he'd be out of range, and it wouldn't be any closer to the *Favorite* than the posada.

Another half hour of terrible suspense passed, during which not a single customer entered the *Favorite* and the town was quieter than Clem had ever seen it at night. Then spurs trundled in the street, and a moment later Arn Hoyt and his two punchers, Tinsley and Jumbo Huff, entered and sat down at a table. Clem drew a sigh of relief. He'd have company, at least.

The three men ordered drinks and were served. They had sat talking for ten minutes, and Clem was standing at attention, expecting Hoyt to say something about a bird not being able to fly

with one wing. He was keeping one ear cocked toward the posada, and expecting to hear sound of battle at any moment, when Terry staggered in the door, howling drunk. The three men recognized him as the same stranger they had seen there a week before. They watched him as he lunged against the bar and threw down a handful of coins.

"Gimme a shot of poison, and put me up a road-bottle for the rest of that!" he roared. "Gotta ride. Rangers coming."

Clem set a glass and bottle on the bar and turned to fill a flat pint, which was the customary road-bottle. The men at the table were about ten feet from where the drunk Ranger stood. He began trying to fill his glass, but poured more liquor on the bar than into the glass.

"Gimme 'nother bottle, podner," he called to Clem. "This'n scatters too bad."

As the three men at the table grinned at the drunk's remark, he turned, raised the bottle, and threw it over their heads to the far side of the room. Instinctively, they turned their heads to see where the bottle struck. Terry gave one spring, and the side of his heavy Colts fell on Hoyt's head. The ranchman slid from his chair, out for the count. With the roar of a bull, Jumbo sprang to his feet, reaching for his gun. Tinsley was the quicker of the two, and got a bullet between his eyes for his pains.

"You're next, little man," drawled Terry, as he shoved his gun into Jumbo's face. "Better just put 'em up."

Huff's hands went up. He was pretty cool, but he knew the real thing when he saw it, and he didn't want to commit suicide just yet. Then, too, he was just one of Hoyt's punchers, as everybody knew.

"Come here, Clem," called Terry. "Put this little gent's gloves on before his hands get cold—and his feet get warm again."

Handcuffs on, Jumbo Huff settled into a chair. Hoyt stirred and sat up, to find handcuffs on his wrists.

"What the hell you mean, Terry, roughhousin' my customers thisaway," protested Clem, when the mess was over and Hoyt and Huff were sitting in sullen silence.

"Why, this is that little party I invited you to. That little runt there is the giant Black Bill McCamish, with a voice like a surly bull, that couldn't be took."

"No!"

"Shore it's him. I seen him do his stuff this morning. He is seven foot high, when he's on a horse, in the chaparral, with a high hat on. I reck'n you can close up, now, and we'll take these gents down to the posada."

HALF DAZED by the whirlwind that had struck his place, Clem obeyed. When they reached the posada Rosita was not in sight, though there was a light and the door was open.

"The posadera ain't feeling very well, and she had to go to her room, so we'll have to sorty make out the best we can," Terry said, as they entered.

Handcuffed together, the two prisoners were placed in a small room of the thick walled 'dobe house. Terry then opened another door and disclosed Rosita, sitting bound and gagged in her chair.

"You sorty wanted to screech some a

while ago, Senora Huff," Terry said, removing the gag.

Rosita didn't want to yell, now, but her black eyes told plainly what she'd like to do if she was loose and had a knife.

"Say Jumb is all the same like Black Bill, and Rosita is his wife?" asked Clem, a little later, when the guests had been made safe for the night.

"Yes," replied Terry, "and Hoyt and Tinsley were his partners. Those three and two others were all there was of Black Bill's gang. One of the others was killed in the holdup this morning, and the other of the two is hid up somewhere, trying to get enough lead picked out of him so he can be hauled out of the country. I'll find him in the morning."

"Well, they's just one more question I want to ask," Clem insisted. "Where's the rest of your squad?"

"Rest, hell! How many Rangers do you think it takes to make a squad?"

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VAQUEROS Y CABALLEROS

Special Feature by Pidge Short

COLTON SAID: "A horse's back is the Californian's home. Leave him his horse and you may have the rest of the world." Stephan Watts Kearney, a brilliant soldier, overshadowed by Fremont, whom he sent back to the 'States in disgrace, with just cause, said: "The finest horsemen in the world."

Early Western history abounds with evidence of the Californians' masterful horsemanship. There was the battle of San Pascual, for instance; American cavalry was badly handled by los Caballeros y vaqueros, who used their most deadly weapons—the riata and the lance—against the guns of the Americans.

Wry and humorous comments on this first-love of the Californios has come down to us in many ways, and it's all based on truth, at that. Fishing, it was said, never became popular with the old rancheros and their vaqueros, because it couldn't be done on horseback. Likewise, farming.

When the Civil War broke out, and ripped the soft underbelly of the nation, the Californios, ever one to volunteer for excitement, organized a company of volunteer fighters—cavalry, of course. They marched off to war with bland assurances to the protesting Yankees that, really, all they needed was their riatas, for with them they never missed; with a gun—so noisy and dirty and heavy—there was always the chance of error.

Today, this may seem unbelievable; but to those who know, it is not. The Californios gave their small children little riatas to play with. There were few toys that weren't connected with horses and horsemanship. The children had games built around roping dogs and birds and chickens. In time, then, it's not hard to understand that a mature Caballero or vaquero never missed. Great sport was the roping of deer, bears, wild horses—mestenos—wilder cattle, and even elk and larger game.

A facet of Californian life that startled the Americans, when the gold-inspired invasion brought them, was the fact that horse-theft was non-existent. There never was need to steal a horse. The animals were bred selectively and abundantly, so that no man need be afoot—unless by choice. If a traveler needed a fresh horse, or wanted a new one, he had but to ask

in order to receive; the native Californian knew, two-hundred years before the Yankee, that "a man afoot, is no man at all."

Bancroft said: "The men were always on horseback, horses being as plentiful...as dogs and chickens..." He also says: "There are no better riders in the world than the Californians, they being so early accustomed to equestrian exercises."

Horsemanship among the rancheros and their vaqueros was more than a pride, an art, or a skill; it was a way of life. The horse was an integral part, not only of the Californio's economy, but of the man, himself. When the Yanquis came, they borrowed the Californian way of handling horses and working cattle. They tried to improve on it—only to discover what an older world already knew. "You can't improve on perfection; you can only imitate it."

IN THIS, the later cowboy was a failure; he couldn't acquire the exquisite skill of a center-fire saddle, which required more than balance, so he added a flank cinch, or "poop-strap". He used—and still uses—the falisariendo and jaquima (corrupted into the anglicized word "hackamore"), and the spade bit, but for appearance. The number of reindadores alive today, who break a horse by the old way, can almost be counted on one hand. The science has become lost along with the skill; nowadays, the world cannot wait a full year for a piece of horseflesh so perfectly trained that it is more precise than a machine. Moreover, nowadays, there are few indeed, who could—or can—ride such an animal.

Many of the old secrets are lost, or supplanted by cruder, crueler, and less perfect efforts; but so long as there are horsemen to ride, and animals to work with, a great deal of the "finest rider in the world's" heritage will remain.

The great ranchos always had horses saddled and tied, in the shade, for the use of anyone who had work or an errand to do. These fun-loving people never walked if it could be avoided—a good, sensible view, if there ever was one, then as now; and to borrow a horse was merely to take him. He was branded and would eventually be returned to his home rancho; at least, this prevailed until the Americans came.

Mexico City is about twenty-five hundred and seventy odd miles from San Francisco, California. In 1834 Don Rafael Amador rode this distance in forty days (with frequent stops to change horses en route, which were hastily made available to him), including stops to eat and rest. The horses, then, were as tough and durable as the men.

The love for horses and horsemanship was an ancient heritage with the Californio. It went back to Spain, where, in the dimness of history, gentleman and horseman were one and the same, even as they are in Mexico today. The very word "Caballero", means a mounted-gentleman. Vaqueros were—and are—herdsmen on horseback. When the Spaniards were conquered by the Moors, who rode without armor and with bent knees, this tactical superiority was quickly acknowledged and incorporated into the Spanish concepts of horsemanship; it came down to the Californios perfected to its finest degree.

Olden California was conducive, too, to horsemanship, since it was basically an empire of cattlemen, where the sharp-horned, wild-eyed, slab-sided critters could fight like el tigre, run like a deer and hide like a sliver. Californios *had* to be the world's best riders and horsemen; otherwise their cattle-economy wouldn't have supported them for long.

Nowadays, ropers confine themselves to around thirty feet of rope for their lassos. The Californio held any-

one in contempt who could not rope—accurately—with less than sixty feet of rawhide riata; many preferred eighty feet.

John Charles Fremont—The Pathfinder—acquired a horse from a Californian, called Canelo (meaning "cinnamon" and probably referring to his color) which he rode, once, between San Luis Obispo and Monterrey, a full ninety miles in one day; then, when he switched horses, Canelo had to go another herded thirty miles with the remuda. Again, the horses were bred for durability, as were the men.

BY THE time the younger Californios were six years of age, they were tagging along behind their fathers and the vaqueros. It was unheard-of for a youngster of this age not to be able to manage a well-broken horse alone—unless, of course, some physical reason prevented him from doing so. The little girls, too, were taught to ride astride, when they were very small in order to achieve that sense of elan and balance so necessary to the perfect rider; then, naturally, they were later put in the sidesaddle. I can well imagine their annoyance at a convention that deprived them of riding *with* their horse; still, modesty and dignity must be maintained—then, if not now.

The Caballeros and vaqueros were never without their riatas, but they frequently discarded the short sword earlier Californians and Mexicans carried. A sort of brush-knife, also pressed into service for skewering game if the chance came along, and once in a while was used in fights. Their exaggerated sombreros (from the word "sombra", meaning shade); their colorful serapes; their heavily silvered and engraved spurs, conchos, bits and saddles; and their fabulous horsemanship and mounts, conspired to present a sight to the eye that was breathtaking and long remembered. Here, as never before in the world, and certainly never since, was the criterion of riders the world over—the native Californian horseman, unequaled in the past, unsurpassed at present, and certainly in no danger of losing his laurels in the future. Truly, the finest horseman the world has ever known.

As close as one can get today to seeing how this grande—this *gente de razon*—and his understudy and employee, the vaquero, worked, played and lived, it is necessary now, to go deep into Mexico during the summer (and believe me, it's hot down there, then). Patiently search out the rodeos (ro-day-os) and fiestas for a glimpse of the traditions that are kept alive with jealousy and real appreciation; the Mexican, today, is about the only man left on earth to whom the heritage of horsemanship remains an art, a science, and a deep love.

Charreadas in the early days, rodeos currently, are something every lover of the Old West should support; but, in order to see them for what they originally were—namely, combined skill of horse and rider; and not as the American West shows them now, for the exclusive glorification of the rider, and to hell with the horse—one must travel the pilgrimage trail to Mexico. Here, in the land of the Caballero, rodeos are as different from American Western versions as night from day. It's an eye-opener for those who have seen only the American idea of a rodeo. In Mexico, the rodeo is based on skill, precision, art and teamwork between rider and horse. There is little crudity, and less cruelty, as in our rodeos. Too, in the Mexican rodeo, you will come as close as you will be able on this earth, to breathe again the air of excitement, of fraternity and naivete, that existed with the old Caballeros y vaqueros. Here, too, you will get an insight into the ancient art of the horseman and what has made him great.

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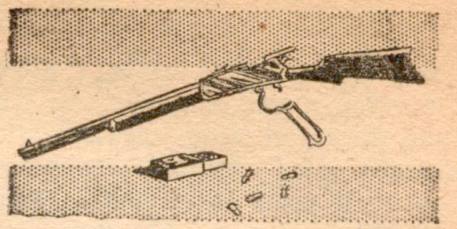

Complete Novelet

WORTHLESS CLAIM

by J. J. Mathews

Gene Lester had been taken in; that claim he bought was good for nothing at all — from the standpoint of gold-seekers, that is!

THE FOREMAN of the grading outfit yelled, "All out!" as he stood on a little eminence overlooking the laboring teams in the long railroad cut. Instantly the trained mules stopped in their tracks, some with scrapers half filled, others with scrapers half dumped, and answered the welcome call with a prolonged bray. Hurriedly, the dust-colored, sweating teamsters unhitched their teams, and rushed away to the nearby construction camp. There they washed their faces in tepid water that had been hauled from the nearest waterhole in a wooden tank, and prepared for the noonday meal of beef, beans, and coffee.

It was only April, but already the sun was bearing down like August. Hot puffs of dust-laden wind came from the great desert that lay to the south. The snowcaps on distant mountains aggravated the mind, without relieving the bodily discomfort of the men who were building a railroad through the very heart of the state of Arizona, to connect two great transcontinental lines.

Gene Lester raised the water from one of the battered basins on a long bench, and dashed it over his sun-browned face and neck. Then, when he had dried his face and hands, he picked up a twisted piece of brush and beat the white dust out of the folds of his sweat-stained shirt, before going into the mess tent. By a hundred little acts, all of which Gene seemed trying to hide, he showed that he was with, but not of, the miscellaneous crowd required for frontier railroad building.

The fact was, Eugene Lester was a gentleman. A man who, even when he fought, and he sometimes had to fight, did it in a gentlemanly, fair, clean manner.

Gene was nearly six feet, broad of shoulder, and his sober gray eyes looked out straight from beneath heavy sandy brows. A thatch of crispy, reddish brown hair, lightened by alkali

dust and the lack of a barber's attention, covered a well shaped head. The sun and dust and wind, together with a naturally good-humored disposition, had put little nests of permanent wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. Just now, there was a look of seriousness in Gene's gray eyes.

The reason for the serious look was that he was about to undertake an adventure of which he could see only the beginning and couldn't even guess the end. He was quitting the construction company for two reasons. One was that if he stayed on the job he would have to whip Buck Spradley. That, indeed, would have been a rather pleasant task if it had been merely a matter between him and Spradley, for Buck needed a trimming. But Mr. Spradley owned three teams which he worked on the grade, hiring his own teamsters. Gene knew they'd gang on him, and he also knew he wasn't rough enough for the other men to take his part.

The main reason for his quitting, however, was that he had been working steadily on the job for more than a year; he'd had enough. Besides that, he had been thinking. People would come in with the railroad. They would have to eat. A few irrigated acres of land would be a fortune, and he was going to look for land and water that could be gotten together. He would need no engineer to tell him that water would run down-hill. He was an engineer himself. That was what he had come West for. He had found that engineers, like officers in an army, were fairly plentiful, but privates were always in demand, so he had worked in rock cuts, driven teams on grade work, and served a general apprenticeship at railroad building. Now that he had learned the trade, he was quitting to try something else.

AS GENE LESTER entered the tent, he met a man coming out. The stranger was a tall, slender, sharp-featured man, wearing a long-tailed coat. He greeted Gene with a nod as they met and passed on. A few minutes later, when Gene came out, placing his pay check in his pocket, he saw the stranger sitting on a boulder a little way from the tent.

"I'd like to talk to you a minute, pardner," said the man and motioned to a seat on the stone by his side.

Lester had never become fully accustomed to the Western custom of being perfectly at home with strangers. This man was clad very much like an itinerant gambler, but he hadn't the right expression in his face.

"Quitting the outfit?" asked the stranger.

"Yes."

"Don't blame you. It's pretty rough. Going back to civilization?"

"No. Thought I'd just stick around and help civilize this country."

"Oh, I see. Joining up with the Rangers, I reckon."

"Wrong again," laughed Gene. "I'm no fighting man. Fact is, I'm going to look for some land that I can put water on and grow things for all these new people to eat. I have an idea—"

"And it's a good one, too!" interrupted the stranger. "I wanted to do that, but—"

The man coughed, and they sat in silence for a full minute. "Marshall is my name—John Marshall," he then went on. "I'm up against it, hard, and I want to talk to a man that can understand things. I believe you are that kind, and I want to tell you my troubles. It won't hurt you, and maybe it'll help me."

"Go ahead," nodded Gene. "My name's Gene Lester, and I have nothing to do until morning. Then I'm going down to Badger Hole, at the end of the track, draw my pay, and look about a bit."

"Won't be a long story," Marshall answered. "A year ago the doctors told

me to get a wagon and team, come out to this dry country, and rough it. I did, and I seemed to be getting better, but I found out that a man can't keep traveling about without money. I got the same idea about farming by irrigation that you have. I found the place, too, and could have bought the claim for a song, but by that time I couldn't sign a note. I was broke, and looking for something that I could do, to eat. I came down here, thinking I might work my team a while on the grade, but it's no go. I began to cough when I got in a mile of this dust. Then I gave up, decided to sell my wagon and team for enough to take me back to the old home, where I can at least be buried like a Christian."

The man stopped and hung his head in a despondent manner.

"Did you sell your team?"

"No. That's what I was doing in the foreman's tent. He said the outfit wouldn't buy horses at any price, because they couldn't stand the work. If I had mules, he might buy them. The wagon, he wouldn't have."

"That's hard luck," commented Gene, in a sympathetic tone.

"Yes. I've got a good outfit. The horses are Missouri stock. Been out here a year and are acclimated. They're only six years old, and the wagon was new when I started. A fellow that runs some teams on this job, name's Spradley, offered me seventy-five dollars for the two horses, if I could get rid of the wagon. I'd take it, but that wouldn't get me back to Phoenix, by stage, and buy me a ticket home, to say nothing of anything to eat."

Gene pondered the problem a minute before he spoke. "If I had enough money, I'd buy your outfit," he said then. "I might raise enough, but there'd be none left for a grub-stake."

"It wouldn't take much to buy it," said Marshall, with a gleam of hope in his sunken eyes. "You could go up on Little Bowlegs, then, and get that claim I told you about. There's about a hundred acres that can be put under water, and there's an ocean of water in Little Bowlegs. Plenty of good pasture land adjoining it, and nobody would ever crowd in, because there's no more farm land on the creek. Just the place you're looking for. I wouldn't tell you, but I can't have it myself. Come, go down to my camp, and look at the outfit." Marshall rose from his seat on the boulder.

Lester joined him and they walked away together. The stranger had described the very thing that Gene had been dreaming of for months. He had more than enough money to buy the outfit at a reasonable, but not enough to do that and have any operating capital left.

As they walked away through the camp, a man got up from behind a great boulder, within twenty feet of where they had been sitting, and went into the foreman's tent.

A QUARTER of a mile from the construction camp, they came to Marshall's wagon and the two great, rawboned bay horses. Gene looked the horses over the best he could in the fading light, caught the spokes of a wagon wheel and shook it to see how badly the thimbles were worn, and then sat down on the wagon tongue, and lit his pipe.

"Hasn't the climate done you any good?" he asked, between puffs at his pipe.

"As long as I could stay up in the foothills, like the Bowlegs country, I seemed to mend, but as soon as I come down where the alkali dust is, it's all off."

"Wouldn't you like to go back up there?"

"I'd rather be there than anywhere on earth, but I can't live on climate and scenery. Buy my outfit, at your own price. Then go up there and make a fortune. I'd rather have that little

irrigated farm than to have any mining proposition in the territory. I'd like to try a lot of things on it that I learned in my four years in college. Botany, horticulture, and agriculture were hobbies of mine."

Gene Lester smoked in silence. Buying horses from strangers in Arizona at that time was a doubtful enterprise. They might be good horses, but the buyer might also be called on by a party of enraged citizens, who knew but one remedy for horse stealing and carried it with them, coiled at a saddle horn.

"I won't buy your team," he said at last. "I—"

"Oh, I'll take any price you say. I can't work and I don't want to starve. This West they tell about is a great place, and the people are all right. The proportion of good and bad is about the same as in other places—except in railroad camps—but the West is too busy to take care of cripples. It's a fight, out here. A real, he-man's job."

"Oh, I don't know. I've seen some cripples make a pretty good fight, in my time. Using your head in a fight cuts a good deal of ice sometimes. I'm going to make a proposition to you by which I can't lose and you can eat."

"Let's have it."

"I'll go up to the bunk tent, get my dunnage, and put it in your wagon. Then we'll get a little sleep. About four o'clock, while it's cool, we'll head out for Badger Hole. When we get there, I'll draw my money, grubstake the outfit against your wagon and team, and we'll prospect Little Bowlegs together, share and share alike. That's fair."

"More than I ever hoped for!" cried Marshall, grasping Gene's hand. "I didn't want to be a quitter. With a partner like you, I'll stick it out and get well yet."

THREE DAYS LATER, the wagon well stocked with supplies and grain for the team, the partners topped a rise, and Marshall, who was driving, stopped.

"Yonder," said he, "is Bowlegs Creek. There are two of them, Big Bowlegs and Little Bowlegs. Big Bowlegs is dry, except when it rains, which isn't often. Little Bowlegs has a flood of water, from head springs, all the time. You see that the two streams head almost together, curve out like a parenthesis and come together again. It looks like a bowlegged giant, lying on his back, his head in the mountains, his feet together in the edge of the plain, and a ridge of foothills between his knees. That's what the creeks took their name from. This trail crosses just below where the two creeks come together. Half a mile below that point, the water sinks into the sand and disappears. Below that, Bowlegs is a dry gorge, except when there's a waterspout, and then it's a terror."

"Looks quiet and peaceful up there," commented Gene.

"Yes. Only the one squatter in all that country, far as I know, and he's anxious to get away. There's no water between here and the crossing on Bowlegs, so we've got to make it there tonight." Marshall urged the team on.

Peaceful! Oh, yes. Bowlegs looked peaceful enough; but one old-timer said: "Yep, you kin grow crops awful quick on this Arizony land, if you put water on it. Plumb 'stonishing, but more 'stonshinger how quick men kin raise hell on it—without no water a-tall!"

It was quite dark when, winding through the thick timber that grew along the banks of Bowlegs Creek, the partners heard the welcome music of the gurgling, rushing stream.

"Hullo!" said Marshall. "There's a campfire just this side of the creek. Wonder what's up now?"

They made camp at a little distance from the other and started a fire. Pretty soon the other wayfarer came over

to their camp. "Hello, Fiddler! Glad to see you!" cried the visitor, and extended his hand to Marshall.

"Why, why—how are you, Mosby?" returned Marshall, grasping his hand. "Make yourself comfortable, and we'll have some supper pretty soon. This is my partner, Mr. Lester."

Mosby acknowledged the introduction. "Much obliged, but I done et," he said. "I'd like to hear you fiddle some after supper, though."

Marshall and Gene went on with their cooking, but Gene was wondering just a little about this acquaintance of Marshall's, in a country where there was supposed to be but one man. Marshall was doing some thinking himself. He was wondering how the owner of that coveted claim in Little Bowleg came to be camping here below the forks, and presently he asked the question.

"Oh," said Mosby, as he squatted on his heels and smoked his old pipe, "I done sold out my claim on Little Bowlegs. Made the trade yesterday."

"To whom?" asked Marshall with a note of disappointment in his voice.

"Fellow named Spradley. Said he'd been running some teams on the new railroad. Traded me a pretty good mule, to match the one I had, and 'lowed I could get work down there."

"I'm sorry," said Marshall. "We were on our way up to give you a trade for that claim."

"Shucks! You don't want that little old place. I stung that feller Spradley good, when I traded it to him. They's on'y a hundred acres of farm land. 'Sides that, they's a trick in it that I didn't tell you. It lays pretty, there in the bend, and looks like movin' about four shovels of dirt would put water all over it, and it would, just about."

"What's the trick, then?"

"Gravel subsoil and cracks in the rocks underneath that lets the water all out," and Mosby went on to tell the faults of a property he had sold.

"Is there any other farm land farther up Bowlegs?"

"Not on Little Bowlegs. There ain't a patch of dirt that a dog could bed on, from my old place to the head of the creek—just a lot of canyons and crevices and rocks, where a yerthquake or something has plumb busted things some time."

The partners finished their cooking and fell to with hearty appetites and the silence that usually attended eating on the frontier. Mosby's jaws were not otherwise employed, so he went on talking.

"If you fellows want some real good land, you'd orto go up Big Bowlegs. There's two or three hundred acres up there. Red clay subsoil, good, deep loam, and she lays plumb pretty for water, 'cept they ain't a dang drop of water, only when it rains; then they's too much. Old Gray Hoss Riley's up there—or was, last time I seen him. He's been there five years, and raised one good crop."

Mosby rattled on until the partners finished eating. Afterward, Marshall got out his violin and blended its music with that of the gurgling stream.

NEXT MORNING the partners were awakened by the rattle of Mosby's wagon, as he broke camp a little after daylight.

"I don't like to give this Bowlegs project up," said Marshall, after breakfast. "If Mosby told the truth, Spradley will be wanting to sell pretty soon. Suppose we take a little trip up Big Bowlegs and get the lay of the country. No use trying to trade with Spradley now."

"Might as well, now that we're here," replied Gene. "I don't want to see Buck Spradley."

They hitched up the team and took the dim road that led up Big Bowlegs. Ten miles from their camp, they emerged from the boulder-strewn

wilderness into a beautiful valley, walled about with foothills. The creek ran almost due south from the mountains, and the valley lay on the east side of it. As Mosby said, there was two or three hundred acres of fine land, but no water. There were two cabins in sight, and a wreath of smoke was curling from the chimney of one.

Old Gray Hoss Riley was standing in the door of the first cabin they came to, and the old gray bag o' bones that gave him his name was grazing the stunted bunch grass near the cabin.

"Mawnin', gents," called the old hobgoblin, as the wagon stopped, his tobacco-stained whiskers bobbing up and down and giving the appearance of an ancient billy goat. "Prospectin', I reck'n," he went on, when they had returned his greeting.

"Thought we might locate a claim in this section, if we could find a good one," ventured Gene.

"Ain't but three claims in twenty mile that's worth the filin' fee, and they're all took. Mosby's got one on Little Bowlegs, and I got two here on Big Bowlegs. His claim ain't worth a copper-lined damn. Nothin' but water over there. Land's no account."

"How's this land of yours?"

"Best land east of the range."

"Don't seem to be much growing on it."

"Too airly yit. Git our rains mostly in May and June."

"Would you sell these claims?"

"No, sirree! Just suit me to a tee."

Marshall made a movement as if to start the team.

"Hold on, pardner! Don't hurry. I might sell that'n up there that the other cabin's on. I reck'n one's all I need. I'll take a thousand dollars for it, and—"

"And I'll give you a hundred for a quit-claim deed," said Gene.

Anybody but a pair of easy marks would have known Riley for what he was—a cold-blooded old reprobate, who would rob his grandmother's grave for a penny. He swore and protested that the offer was an insult, but within an hour he had a hundred dollars—which was more than he would have given for the whole of Arizona—and the partners had a quit-claim deed, written by Marshall and duly signed, together with the original papers issued by the land office. This title wasn't much as it stood, but if they made certain payments and did certain things within a specified time, it would be perfect.

They took possession of the cabin, and Marshall began to figure. He was figuring forty bales of alfalfa to the load, and a ready market at $1.50 a bale, at the railroad. He took no account of the fact that when the railroad was built, alfalfa would be shipped in cheaper than that. In the midst of his figuring, while Gene was silently trying to figure out why he bought the claim, Old Gray Hoss hobbled up to the cabin.

"Howdy, gents. Been thinkin' about these claims. You'd orter have one apiece. I'm getting old, and I'd sell out entire, if I got the right offer."

Gene was putting up the money for the enterprise, and had been wondering why he had paid a hundred for a dry claim, where it never rained. Neither of the partners spoke.

"Tell you what I'll do," Riley went on. "You seem a likely pair of youngsters, that's apt to make something of this valley. I'm too old to work it. I'll sell you the other claim for another hundred."

"No," said Gene, "if it's any good one claim is enough. If it isn't any good, one claim is too much."

But Riley was no quitter, when he had set his hand to the plow. He came down to seventy-five, then to fifty, and finally offered to take a Winchester rifle and twenty-five dollars, and leave the valley. More for the riddance than for the land, Gene made the trade.

Soon after noon, Riley packed his most intimate belongings on the old gray plug and disappeared into the roughs at the south end of the valley.

IN HIS two years in the West, Gene Lester had seen very few safe deposit vaults—except the mountains, where nature had deposited her gold and silver and copper and had apparently thrown away the key. By tacit agreement, he was head of the firm, so he took all the papers in the land deal, folded them carefully, and placed them in his pocketbook. He noticed that the papers from the land office, on which the quit-claim deeds were based, had been much handled, and on one of them there was a splotch that looked like dried blood. He paid it no attention. So the papers reposed in the old leather pocketbook, which Gene always carried on his person.

Gene was an engineer. He saw at a glance that with very little labor a dam could be built just above the upper cabin, and storm water enough stored to irrigate considerable land. As soon as Riley was out of sight, he picked up the remaining rifle, told Marshall he was going to take a look farther up the gorge, and left the cabin.

It was little more than a mile from the cabin to the head of the creek, but owing to the curve it couldn't be seen. Gene took his way up the gorge, scanning the ground with critical eye. A little way up the stream he came upon pools of water, with lush grass and weeds growing along the banks.

Half a mile from the cabin the gorge became a crevasse, with towering walls of stone, and the stream a tiny ripple over the stone bed. By this time, he could see that the gorge ended, apparently, in the side of a mountain, with no way out, except the way he had come in. He went on, and came upon an immense blue pool of water under the overhanging cliffs. A hundred feet above him, a tiny stream came over the precipice. It looked like a silver rope that unraveled as it came on, until it was a broad tassel of spray by the time it struck the pool and cast a tiny rainbow on the dark blue water.

At last he searched out a way, and climbed the bluff on the east side of the creek. At the top of the bluff he walked around to where the little stream broke over the cliff, then stopped and caught his breath. About a hundred feet to the west of where he stood was the head of Little Bowlegs.

A flood of pure, clear water was pouring through a deep, wide crevasse in the solid stone of the mountains. The tiny stream that flowed into Big Bowlegs was simply overflow from a low place in the stone banks that ran through an age-worn channel to the cliff. From where he stood, Gene could see his own valley, and could see that it was far wider and lower than that of Little Bowlegs. At that point, the head of Little Bowlegs was a straight, stone channel for several hundred feet, as if nature had labored at it for a million years, or some Titan had chiseled an immense chute in the stone. The water was level with the top, and sweeping by with the speed of a railroad train.

Gene turned from it, and started to find the source. He had gone but a little way, when climbing on to a ledge of stone he saw for the first time, the Basin Spring. It was a hundred feet across, and boiling and bubbling like an immense pot. He crept to the edge of the spring, and gingerly put his finger in the flood. It was icy cold! The melting snow of the mountains was finding its way to the sea through crevices and grottoes.

Gene glanced up, and then started as he saw a woman standing on the other side of the basin. She was looking at him, but if she was speaking he couldn't hear her for the rumble of

the water. A little way beyond the woman was a cabin. There was a climbing rose by the cabin door, and just above the house, watered by a smaller spring, was a little garden patch and some green alfalfa. Here and there were bright spots where some homely flower bloomed.

Walking around the rim, Gene crossed a brawling little stream that came from above the garden, and emptied into the basin. The woman didn't run away. She didn't seem the least frightened or embarrassed. Just surprised. She was a young woman, little more than a girl, and she was pretty. Gene said, "Good evening." The girl's teeth flashed white between red lips as she returned his greeting.

"Do—do you—" and Gene stuck.

"Yes," laughed the girl. "Strange as it may seem, I do. I live in that cabin, with my father. Won't you come and see him?"

Gene would, and he did. On the way to the cabin he told the young woman his name was Eugene Lester, and she told him her name was Peggy Cleveland.

WHEN THEY entered the cabin, the visitor saw a long-haired, bushy-whiskered old man, sitting by a window, fingering some bits of broken quartz.

"This is my father, Mr. Cleveland, Mr. Lester," introduced Peggy.

"Glad to meet you, sir," and the old man extended a gnarled and knotted hand. "Knew a Jim Lester, at Placer City. Any relation of yours?"

"Why, I haven't figured, but—er, that is, I don't know, sir!"

"Yes," said Cleveland, a little later, "I been prospecting here in these mountains for twenty years or more. Everybody on the range knows Old Ranse Cleveland. Most of 'em knows I got a cabin on the head of Bowlegs, but mighty few have ever seen it. How'd you find it? Prospecting?"

"No, sir," replied Gene. "I bought some claims down on Big Bowlegs."

"Claims? Claims? Why you got flimflammed. There's no mining down there."

"Claims of land," explained Gene.

"Oh, squatter's claims. Why, they ain't worth a whoop. Why didn't you take up that little pocket of land down on Little Bowlegs? Plenty of water to irrigate that. Can't raise anything here without water."

"I was on a trade for that, but another fellow beat me to it."

"What! Another fellow? What's his name? Know him?"

"Yes, sir, I know him. Buck Spradley is his name."

"Huh! This country is getting too thick settled for me. Don't mind having one neighbor, but if they get too thick— Don't matter on Bowlegs, though. I've prospected both branches, clean to the mouth, and never got color. Now, I struck a little pocket, over on the west prong of Hell Roarin' Creek, in '72 I reck'n it was, and—"

"Father, did you know the alfalfa was ready to cut again," interrupted Peggy.

"Reck'n it is. Now, there's something that'll show you what good dirt and water will do in this country, Mr. Lester. Four years ago we built this cabin here at the Basin Spring. Nothing would do Peggy but we must have a garden patch. It raises all the fruit and vegetables we want, and enough alfalfa to feed my saddle mule, Peggy's pony, and two burros. Why, back in '72, or maybe it was the next year, I struck a little pocket over on—"

"Maybe Mr. Lester would like to see the garden, father," interrupted Peggy again.

"Yes, I expect he would," and reaching for his cane, Ranse Cleveland rose and hobbled to the door.

"I limp pretty bad yet," the old fellow said, as they went toward the miniature farm, "but I'm getting better all the time. Pretty soon I will be able to make another round. I was up

the range a ways last year, or maybe it was the year before, and fell and busted my leg. Minded me of the time I struck that little pocket, back in—"

"Father, tell Mr. Lester how many times we cut this alfalfa in a year."

Diverted from his "little pocket" again, Cleveland told Gene about the hay, and the fruit and vegetables that Peggy grew on the little plot of ground.

"Yes, sir, it is wonderful what will grow on land in this country if you give it water, but Peggy's the farmer," he concluded. "I'm a prospector. Back in '73, or maybe it was '74, I struck a little pock—"

"There's at least another acre of good land here, Mr. Lester," said Peggy, again preventing her father from explaining about that little pocket, "but I can't get the water on it. It looks lower than the other, but the water won't run that way."

"Well, now I haven't figured, but if I had my instrument here I could fix it for you," Gene said.

"Oh, could you?"

"Yes'm. All you have to do is find out which way is downhill, and let the water run that way. If you want, I'll bring up my instrument and figure it for you."

"I'd be so glad! That would make me quite a farm."

That was the beginning of their acquaintance. Gene stayed an hour, and at Peggy's invitation promised to come the next day and show her which way was downhill.

Old Ranse Cleveland had tried a dozen times to tell about that little pocket on the west prong of Hell Roarin' Creek, but every time Peggy would interrupt him. The facts were that old Ranse had been out on a prospecting trip three years before. Peggy had been with him. The old fellow had fallen off a bluff and had broken about everything that was breakable, knocking a dent in his head for good measure.

Gene looked again at the mammoth spring and speculated on how much—or rather how little—labor would be required to turn a sufficient amount of that great volume of water into his valley, to irrigate all the farm land he and his partner had. It was the heart of a primitive wilderness. Doubtless this was the first time a trained eye ever had studied the possibilities of the spring as an irrigation project.

Reaching the bed of the gorge by a perilous climb, Gene gave one hurried glance at the beautiful silver rope, which he meant to enlarge until he could climb by it to fortune.

IT WAS ALMOST sunset when he got in sight of the cabin. He could see only one of the horses and Marshall was not in sight. He sensed something wrong and quickened his pace. He found his partner bound and gagged, on the dirt floor of the cabin. There was a lump on his head, where he had been struck a heavy blow.

"Who did this!" demanded Gene.

"I don't know," replied Marshall weakly. "After you left, I lay down to take a little nap. When I woke, or rather when I came to, I was bound and gagged and my head was bursting."

Gene forgot the wonderful story of luck that he was going to tell his partner. The first thought that came to his mind, as he removed the gag and unbound Marshall's hands—even before Marshall had spoken—was that Buck Spradley was at the bottom of it.

As soon as Marshall was a little better, Gene dug into a pack and got out an old Colt's .45. He buckled it on, grimly.

"Seems like you have to fight for what you get in this country, same as anywhere else," he said. "I didn't want to fight, but if nothing else will do, I'm in."

Marshall tottered over to a battered old grip, and hauled out an old hogleg. He buckled it on, dragged it from the holster, and spun the cylinder awkwardly. It was a piece of comedy to watch him, and Gene laughed outright.

"Oh, I know it's a joke, Gene, but —but—I'll do my best to shoot the next fellow that—oh, hell! I'm not fit for the frontier. Let's hitch up and get out of here."

"Hitch up what? Didn't you know one of the horses was gone?"

"No."

"Well, it's true, and I've been wondering why they didn't take both. Looks like—"

"I know why. Nobody on earth but me can catch Old Seelum, when he's turned loose. I turned them loose to graze."

"Well, here we are. I might put the saddle on Seelum, and try to track the thief down, but it would be foolish. I don't know the country. The thief has got four or five hours start. Guess we'll have to let him go—for the present."

THEY ATE supper, tied Seelum to the wagon, right at the cabin door, where they could watch him, then sat smoking in silence. Finally, Marshall broke out, railing at himself for getting them into a mess.

"Oh, cut that out!" growled Gene. "I'm the one that caused it all, by making an enemy of Buck Spradley. Don't blame yourself. You're hurt worse than I am. You've lost a horse and got a cracked head. I've only lost a couple of hundred dollars—and that ain't lost yet, I don't think."

The last words Gene spoke, as they went to bed, were: "I'm going to sleep with one eye open, and if anybody fools around this cabin before morning, I'll do my best to keep him with us."

It was past midnight, and the waning moon had risen, when they both woke and sprang up to listen. The pounding hoofs of a running horse came thundering up the valley. They drew their guns and stood tensely waiting. Grim determination was on their faces. Neither of them had ever been in a gunfight, but they were willing to try. The lone horse galloped into view, a length of frayed rope flying at its neck. It was Seelum's mate, come home.

"Good!" cried Gene. "Now we are whole again, except your cracked head."

"And that'll heal," said Marshall, as he secured a rope and tied up the returning horse. "I won't go to sleep at the switch again."

"Marshall," said Gene, next morning after breakfast, "there's no use trying to fool ourselves about this thing. We're up against trouble. Somebody—I don't know who it is—don't want us to have these claims. If you say the word, we'll pull up and leave."

"If I say the word! Do you want to quit?"

"Not any. I never wanted to do anything as much as I want to stick on and fight this thing out."

"Talk sense, then," said Marshall. "I wouldn't live more than fifteen minutes anywhere else, and I'd get more pleasure out of taking one shot at the gent that cracked me over the head than I could ever get in any other way. Let's take the balance of our stuff out of the wagon and go to housekeeping right."

That afternoon, Gene fished his transit out of his kit of surveyor's instruments and told Marshall he wanted to group the gorge again and take some levels.

"Go ahead," coughed Marshall. "I haven't got wind enough to go with you, but I've got good eyes and I won't be caught asleep again."

After finding Marshall bound and gagged, Gene didn't mention his discovery at the head of the gorge. He'd take some levels and make sure that he could do what looked so easy before he told his partner about it.

BACK AT the Cleveland cottage, Gene set up his instrument, ostensibly to do a bit of engineering for Peggy Cleveland. He could have handled her problem by simply looking at the ground. An hour's work with the pick and shovel, and he had water on

the little plot of ground. Incidentally, he had found out something he wanted to know about the stone that lay between the basin spring and the bluff where his silver rope hung over.

"I don't know how I can ever repay you for putting the water on the balance of my little farm," said Peggy, as he was about to take his leave.

"I'll take part of the vegetables that grow on it," grinned Gene.

"Oh, shame on me! Why didn't I think to offer you some vegetables. There are plenty here. Take what you like."

"Not this time," he said. "This old transit is load enough. There's something that I would like to have, though."

"And that is?"

"Permission to turn some of the water from the basin spring into Big Bowlegs, so I can irrigate my land."

"Turn it all in there, if you want to. It's below my farm. Can you do it?"

"I don't know how I can ever repay you. But I may find out something in a week or two, and I can tell you then."

Gene found Marshall undisturbed. On his former return from the Cleveland cabin, his story had been held back by the condition in which he had found his partner. Now there was another cause. He would not have admitted it—didn't even know it, in fact—but, subconsciously, he was telling himself that he had found this wonderful woman and didn't want her to meet this polished, affable John Marshall, with his music, until— That was as far as his mind went. It refused to set a date for the meeting.

"We've got to go down to the nearest land office in the morning," announced Gene, as they sat smoking after supper. "I want to be sure of our title to these claims."

"Think they're worth the trouble,

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with no water on them?" asked Marshall.

"Yes. I think we can put water on them, with a little work, but I won't do the work for someone else."

THE FOLLOWING morning, they loaded their effects into the wagon, and left at daylight. Gene made the mental note that it looked as if they were abandoning their claims, and wondered what Spradley's next move would be.

It was fifty miles to the nearest land office. Arrived there, it was discovered that the documents were all regular. The payment of nominal fees for the recording of the papers and going through certain forms perfected the title to the two claims, one in the name of Eugene Lester and the other in the name of John Marshall.

"Now let Spradley crack his whip," said Gene, as they left the land office. "That land is ours, 'To have and to hold, etc.' "

"I'm afraid I've let you in for a lot of trouble," said Marshall, in a doubtful tone.

"Trouble! You've let me in for a fortune and the only life worth living."

"You are an enthusiastic farmer," smiled Marshall.

About noon, on the fourth day, their wagon, now heavily laden, and containing, among other things, some bags of alfalfa and other seeds, rattled into the Valley on Big Bowlegs. Gene had feared Spradley would burn the cabins in their absence. The valley was just as it had been when they first entered it. Even Old Gray Hoss Riley was standing in the door of the first cabin, and the old gray bag o' bones was cropping the dry bunch grass.

"Mawnin', gents," greeted Gray Hoss. "I been on a little prospectin' trip over east a ways. I draps in here last night about dark, to see how you fellows makes out in yo' new home. Don't see nobody around, so I stays all night in the cabin. Where y'all been?"

"Down to the railroad to get some bacon and flour," replied Gene.

No effort was made by either of the partners to detain Riley, and he soon left, going down Big Bowlegs, just as he had done on that first day when they had bought him out.

"Wonder what that old devil is hanging around here for," growled Gene, when Riley was out of hearing.

"Oh, he's just a shiftless old prospector," replied Marshall. "The mountains are full of them. They're no good to themselves or anyone else. The hundred and twenty-five you paid him has made him rich. He'll go on hunting a fortune, now, until his money is gone. Then he'll freeze to death in a blizzard or starve in the desert. Most of them are half crazy."

Gene thought of Old Ranse Cleveland, but didn't mention him.

"Well, Riley is one prospector that I can get along without," he said, instead. "I've got a hunch that he's acquainted with Buck Spradley. Our title to these claims is good, and I mean to stay here. If he comes snooping around here again, I'm going to find out why."

A little way above the upper cabin, which the partners had selected as their home, a natural dam lay across the creek. It looked as if, at some time, Nature had hurled down part of a mountain, and the seamed stone had landed across the gorge. Their water supply came from what was supposed to be a spring, at the upper end of the long pool formed by the dam. That is, at the upper end of what would have been a deep pool, a quarter of a mile long, had there been any water in it. The partners drove the wagon around the end of the dam, and on toward the spring which Gene knew was nothing but the water from his silver rope, and which trickled down the gorge under the gravel that covered the solid stone floor.

"Must have been ten years since it

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rained in this country," commented Marshall, "or there'd be water in that place."

"Fissure in it," replied Gene. "That's what those ten bags of cement are for. Nature has done just about everything for us, up here. All we have to do is put on a few finishing touches, and we'll have a paradise."

On high ground, near the spring, a good part of their load was unloaded, beneath some bushes, and covered up.

"I feel better," said Gene, as the wagon rattled back down to the cabin. "I know what dynamite will do, and I don't enjoy riding on a load of it."

Back at the cabin they unloaded a plow, hoes, shovels, bags of seeds, and miscellaneous supplies.

"Now we're all set!" cried Gene, as he wiped the sweat from his face. "Can you plow, Marshall?"

"I think so. I never plowed much, but I have a general working knowledge of the business," and Marshall smiled in his whiskers.

"I don't mean to be bossy," said Gene, "but the job of stopping the fissure in the dam and turning water from that spring I found is too hard for you. If you'll keep house and plow a little on both claims, just to show our good faith as homesteaders, I'll work at the water problem."

"Fine! You're the boss, Gene. If it hadn't been for you, I'd either have starved to death or else I'd be back at the old home, broke, coughing away the little time left me, with everybody pitying me and at the same time wishing I was out of the way. I'd rather be dead. Yes, I'll plow what I can. You go right ahead and boss the job."

Two weeks passed. Gene was off by daylight, every morning, and returned at dark. Marshall saw the white, limy drill dust on Gene's overalls, and knew he was preparing to blast some stone, but he asked no questions. He,

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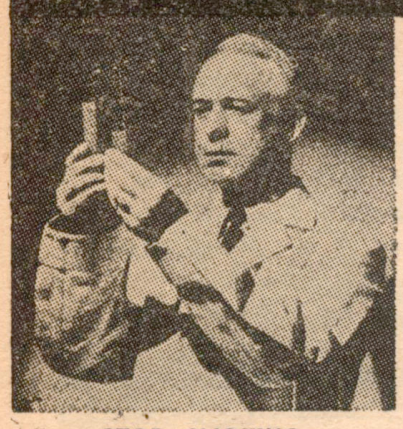
NEW EASY WAY STOPS SMOKING



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Numerous medical papers have been written about the evil harmful effects of tobacco breath, tobacco heart, tobacco lungs, tobacco mouth, tobacco nervousness . . . Now, here at last is the amazing easy to take scientific discovery that helps destroy your desire to smoke in just 7 days—or it won't cost you one cent. Mail the coupon today—the only thing you can lose is the offensive, expensive, unhealthful smoking habit!

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The nicotine laden smoke you inhale becomes deposited on your throat and lungs . . . (the average smoker does this 300 times a day!) Nicotine may irritate the Mucous membranes of the respiratory tract and tobacco tar may injure those membranes. Stop tobacco cough, tobacco heart, tobacco breath . . . Banish smoking forever, or no cost to you.

PROLONG YOUR LIFE SPAN —SAVE $200 A YEAR!

Now at last here is a safe, scientific way to quit using tobacco in every form. Here is a way to say goodbye to smokers' cough, jittery nerves, irritation of nose and throat, loss of appetite, and other ailments caused by tobacco. Here's a way to feel so much better—to live longer—to say goodbye forever to cigarette "Coffin Nails"!

Now do as thousands do to break the smoking habit—it's a dangerous, expensive habit—send for STOP SMOKE chewing gum now! Try it no matter how long you have been smoking or how much you smoke. Try it no matter how many times you have tried to quit smoking. Remember "STOP SMOKE CHEWING GUM" must curb your craving for tobacco in seven short days, even less or money back. It's pleasant tasting—and it's medically approved for safety and results! Don't delay—mail coupon today—you'll feel ever so much better—you'll probably live longer!

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too, was busy. He had plowed a considerable patch of land on the upper claim, and enough on the lower one to show good intentions.

EVERY DAY, these two weeks, Gene had eaten a good dinner of fresh vegetables, wholesome bread and meat and coffee, at the Cleveland cabin, while Old Ranse's dog spurned the lunch he invariably carried. He felt ashamed of not telling Marshall what was at the head of the gorge, but he just couldn't do it. He was willing to work for his sick partner, and to divide everything else with him, but Peggy Cleveland was a different matter.

Every day Peggy watched from the cabin door as Gene drove the long churn drill into the soft stone barrier that lay between him and a fortune, and he began to hope. There was no other woman on earth like Peggy, to him, and he knew there never could be.

She had come out to where he was at work, late that afternoon, as she often did, and stood watching him draw the long drill and clean the drillings from the hole with the narrow iron spoon.

"That's the last hole," said Gene, as he looked up at her. "Pretty soon I'll shoot them, and then I'll have water on my land."

"And pretty soon after that you'll be busy on your farm and forget where the water comes from," she said, and there was a wistful note in her voice.

"Not in a thousand years!" and Gene's voice trembled. "I've got everything ready to turn the water into Big Bowlegs, but unless—" and he stopped.

"Unless, what?" murmured Peggy.

"Unless I can have you, I don't want any water, don't want any farm. It would mean nothing to me. I'll go back to rambling."

[*Turn To Page* 86]

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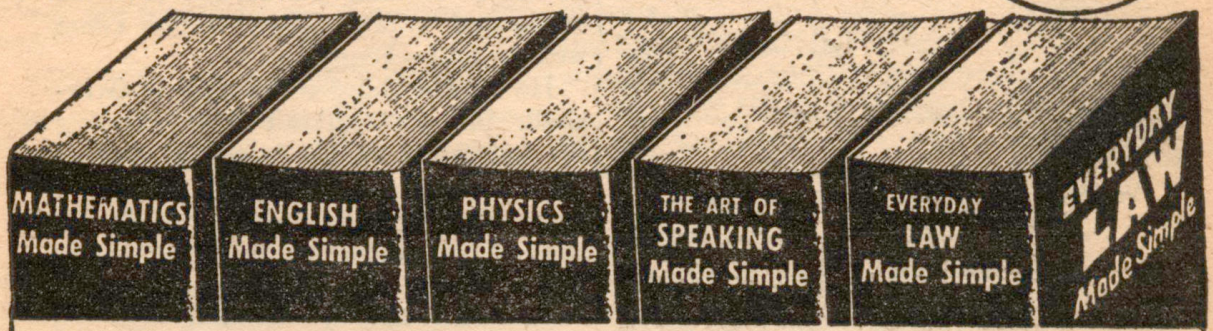

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He looked into her eyes, and the next instant she was in his arms. The only other work Gene did that day was to take a sledge and cold chisel and break away the stone at the low rim of the basin. This let out enough water to enlarge his silver rope about a hundred times. As he went down the gorge, water was gurgling over the stones, and he knew there would be plenty in the great pool by morning, with which to mix his cement and close the fissure. Then he would be ready to turn the stream into his enchanted valley. Then would come wealth, and—Peggy.

He said nothing of all this to Marshall, but he couldn't help showing his happiness in his beaming countenance. Marshall saw it and attributed it to the buoyant health which his partner had and which he himself could never regain.

Marshall had a "fiddling fit" on him that night. On into the night the violin poured out its melody; Gene sat in the cabin door, listened and wondered.

He thought of Buck Spradley, of Old Gray Hoss Riley, of Mosby and his apparent intimacy with Marshall. Someone wanted him out of the valley. Who could it be, except Spradley? Why had he kept quiet the last two weeks? He wasn't the kind to give up without a fight. Ugly thoughts marched through Gene's mind, like platoons of enemy soldiers. When at last they went to bed, sleep didn't come quickly as usual, and he was restless when he did finally sleep.

Gene woke with a start and sat up on his pallet. The moon was shining brightly and Marshall's pallet was vacant. Gene called to him, and he answered from just outside the door. A moment later, he came in.

"I've got a blue spell tonight, Gene," he said. "Been sitting out there on the

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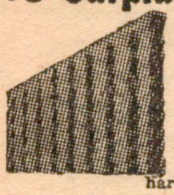

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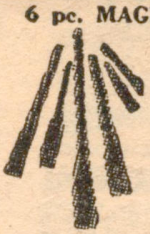

Plastic, insulated handles, scientifically designed for non-slip grip. Blades are of highly polished, hardened and tempered quality tool steel.

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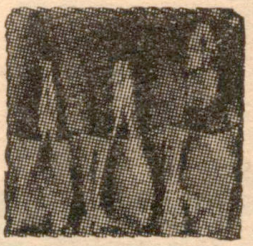

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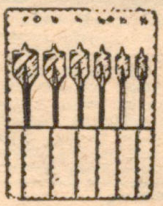

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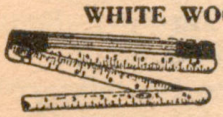

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old wagon tongue, looking at the moon, as I have so often done since I've been in this country. It looks as if one could almost reach the moon and stars. Do you believe in premonitions?"

"No," laughed Gene. "Guess my liver's too active for that," and he stretched out on his pallet.

The two horses had been driven up the gorge, above the spring, and left to graze on the greener grass and weeds they found there. There was a dead stillness over the place, and Gene fell asleep again. It seemed to him that he had slept but a moment when Marshall shook him by the arm.

"Wake up, Gene," he whispered. "Listen!"

IN THE GREAT stillness, they could hear the hoofs of several horses coming up the valley.

"They're coming to drive us out this time," said Marshall, calmly.

"And we won't drive worth a damn!" snapped Gene, as he drew on his trousers and boots, buckled on his pistol, and sprang for his rifle that stood in the corner. "Will you stay with me, if it comes to a fight, Marshall?"

"I'll stay as long as I last, Gene, but I'm afraid I won't be much help. I never was in a gunfight, and—"

"Hello, in there!" called a voice from the outside.

"Hello, yourself," returned Gene. "What do you want?"

"Come out here."

"Can't right now. I'm busy. State your business; I can hear you."

"All right. We come to notify you nesters to get out of this valley. This is a cow country, and we don't aim to have any farmers in it."

"Oh, you won't have any farms?" Gene answered. "Well, now you listen to me. There's one little farm on Bowlegs that's going to stay right here. We have a title to the land, from the

[*Turn To Page* 90]

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Government, and if you don't get away from here and stay away, somebody'll get hurt."

The reply was a volley of shots. Peering out through a crack, Gene had seen six mounted men. One of them was Old Gray Hoss Riley. The others were strangers; Buck Spradley wasn't with them. As the bullets spattered the cabin wall, one or two coming through cracks, Gene's rifle spat a streak of flame, and Riley slid from his old gray bag o' bones.

"Get down and rush 'em, fellers!" called the man who had been the spokesman and seemed to be the leader. "They're just a coupla damned tenderfoots."

At the word, Gene and Marshall both began working their guns. Gene was mad, now, and beside himself with rage.

"Come on in, damn you!" he called out, in a lull of the firing, as he shoved fresh cartridges through the loading-gate of his Winchester.

The gang dismounted and bunched for a rush. Two streams of fire from the cabin wall poured into them. Two more of the six went down. The other three fled toward their horses.

Through his lookout, Gene saw four more men gallop up to the fray.

"Reinforcements! Now we will have it!" he growled.

Marshall, leaning against the wall, coughed slightly but said nothing. He had said he would stay as long as he lasted, and he was staying. Gene had no time to look at his partner. A funny thing was happening out there in the moonlight. The four newcomers had covered the three survivors of the battle, and coolly handcuffed them.

"Hello, within there!" called one.

"All right," replied Gene. "What's on your mind? Want a little of the same?"

"Not any, thank you!" laughed the

[*Turn To Page* 92]

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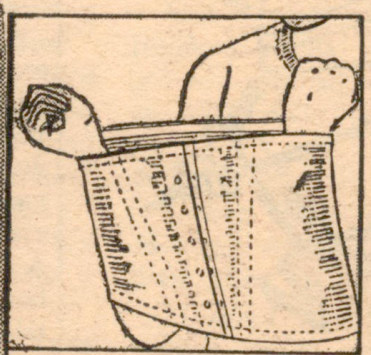

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man. "We're state Rangers and tried to catch this gang before they got here. Let's suspend hostilities, and see what you have done to them."

At that instant, Gene heard a choking noise from Marshall's corner of the cabin, and turned just in time to see his partner slump to the floor.

Gene lit the old battered lantern, and the captain of the Ranger squad came in.

"One dead, and two hurt bad enough to hold 'em for a while, on the outside. What's the casualty list in here?"

"My partner's hit," faltered Gene, looking up from where he knelt by the side of Marshall, who was covered with blood.

The Ranger went over the still form that lay on the floor. "Yes, your partner's hit pretty hard." A moment later he said: "He's dead. I guess that bullet caused his death, but the blood didn't come from his wound." Then, lowering his voice, "He was a lunger, wasn't he?"

Gene nodded.

"I thought so," continued the Ranger. "It's murder, just the same, and will be the finish of this gang. We've been trying to catch them with the goods for a year. It is a regular organized business. They have filed on claims like this all along the foothills. A tenderfoot comes along; some member steers him to one of the claims, telling him it can be bought for a song. He buys it, and then the gang runs him off."

By this time, they had walked to the door. In spite of the battle and of Marshall's death, Gene was thinking of another matter.

"What about that claim on Little Bowlegs?" he asked.

"That," replied the Ranger captain, "was another one they used. The land is worthless, but there's plenty of water, and the green settler grabbed it.

Fellow by the name of Mosby worked it. They hadn't bumped a sucker for months, and we thought they'd quit. Then a few days ago a man named Spradley came to us with a tale about trading for Mosby's claim and afterward being run ragged until he left it. Then we heard somebody was plowing the claims on Big Bowlegs, and hurried up here."

Gene said nothing. He was pretty sure Spradley knew all about the claim on Little Bowlegs, and had intended to bump him with it, but had been caught in his own net.

Came morning, and the Rangers helped Gene bury his late partner on a bit of rising ground at the edge of the valley.

"Now, Mr. Lester," said the Ranger captain, "we'll pay you to take your wagon and haul this quiet gent—who was wanted dead or alive—Gray Hoss and the other cripple, and the three sound ones, down to headquarters."

"You can take the team and bring it back," said Gene. "I don't want to leave here just now."

"Don't blame you much. We'll send the team back, and also a split out of the reward money."

"Just send the team. Don't think I could use any money I got that way," said Gene.

IT WAS midafternoon. John Marshall's old brown violin lay silent in its case. Gene had looked through the dead man's meager effects. There was nothing but some odds and ends of clothing and a book or two. Nothing to identify him. No former address. From a little bunch of keys found in Marshall's pocket, he fitted one to a leather-bound, trunk-shaped valise and opened it. Here, Gene expected to find papers that would tell whom to notify of his partner's death. What he did find was a single sheet of paper. The

[*Turn Page*]

last will and testament of John Marshall, dated the day before and written in ink, in a clear hand and scholarly language. It left his wagon and team, his interest in the claims, and all his earthly effects to Eugene Lester.

Gene folded it and placed it in his pocketbook for safekeeping. Whoever and whatever Marshall may have been, there was no evidence now. A little heap of paper ashes in the fireplace, evidently made the day before, and unnoticed by Gene until now, bore mute testimony of the man's thoroughness. Gene was thinking sadly, that they had buried him almost before he was cold, when a shadow fell in the cabin door. He started violently, and turned to see the tear-stained face of Peggy Cleveland.

"Wha-what's the matter?" stammered Gene.

"Fa-father's d-dead!" Peggy sobbed, as she sank to a proffered camp stool.

Then she sobbed out her story. Old Ranse had spells in which he fell and became unconscious. A doctor had told her once it was caused by clots on the brain and that some time it would kill him. That morning he had fallen.

When she had rested a while, Gene took up his pick and shovel and silently led the way up the gorge. There was nothing to say. At least, his tongue was not schooled to say the things that might be said, so he used the true language of sympathy—silence.

In a little cove, above the garden, under a juniper tree, Gene made a grave. Then he took up, tenderly, the emaciated body of the broken old prospector, and laid it to its last long sleep. When the last shovelful of earth had been replaced, they returned to the cabin, and sat in the doorway as the sun sank in the west.

Peggy told him she had no one to go to, no relatives, no friends. Her mother, had died when she was twelve;

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after her mother's death, she had gone from place to place with her father. The last four years, they had lived in this cabin, spending sparingly of the proceeds of the "little pocket," of which Ranse was always talking. It was about gone now. Their last trip to the little mining town, thirty miles over the range, had almost cleaned it up.

"I don't want you to go to anybody else, Peggy," faltered Gene, "but—"

"I know, Gene. You're thinking about a preacher, and everything regular, like that. I been thinking about that, too. We can make a trip down to the settlement and get married regular, so people won't talk."

"Another thing, Peggy. When I drilled the holes for those blasts, I didn't think about anything but getting water into Big Bowlegs. If I ever fire them, there won't be a splinter left of your cabin—"

"That's all right, Gene. I won't need it any more. I'm going with you. Wait until I put a few things in a bag. We'll get the rest before you fire the blasts." Together they went back down the gorge in the dusk.

The team came back and a week later, the fissure in the dam was closed. A thunder of blasts shook the mountains, and the waters of Bowlegs Creek changed their course. Little Bowlegs was a dry gorge after that, and Mosby's worthless claim became a barren spot of the mountain.

The records relate that Eugene Lester and Peggy Cleveland were duly married on a certain date, approximately that of the great blast. Down where the Bowlegs once sank into the sand, there is now a great reservoir, and many hundreds of acres of fruit and alfalfa, but Gene's old claim on Big Bowlegs was the pioneer, and still yields its crop of green gold.

★

ANSWER

To The Quiz Story "Fool's Gold"

The Long-tom was not a musical instrument. It was used by the gold miners. That stuff about the Allen gun is straight stuff.

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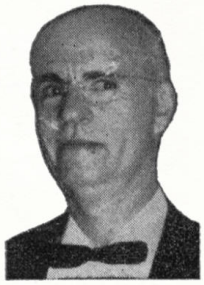

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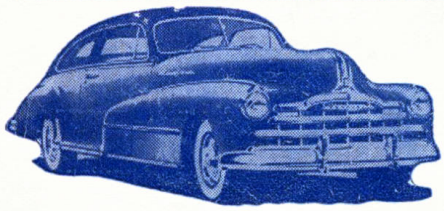

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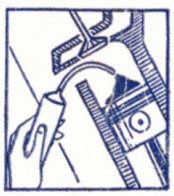

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Compression Readings—1945 Dodge Truck

	Cylinder 1	Cylinder 2	Cylinder 3	Cylinder 4	Cylinder 5	Cylinder 6
Before	87 lbs.	75 lbs.	75 lbs.	60 lbs.	75 lbs.	85 lbs.
After	100 lbs.	110 lbs.	115 lbs.	95 lbs.	105 lbs.	118 lbs.

TEST #2

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Compression Readings—1948 Pontiac

	Cyl. 1	Cyl. 2	Cyl. 3	Cyl. 4	Cyl. 5	Cyl. 6	Cyl. 7	Cyl. 8
Before	105 lbs	95 lbs	107 lbs	120 lbs	110 lbs	115 lbs	95 lbs	123 lbs
After	125 lbs	120 lbs	120 lbs	125 lbs	122 lbs	120 lbs	115 lbs	116 lbs

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