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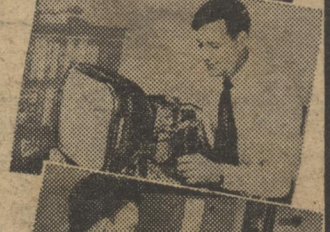

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VOLUME 28, No. 1 — JANUARY, 1954

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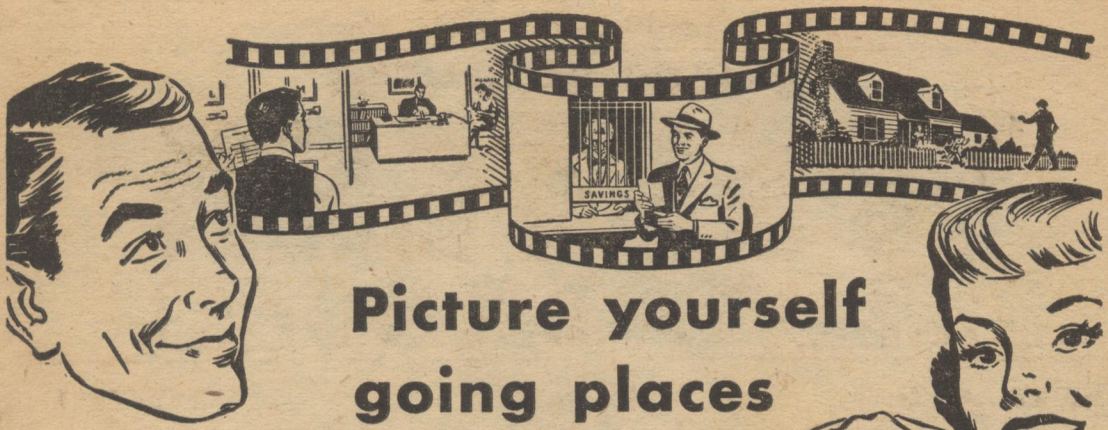

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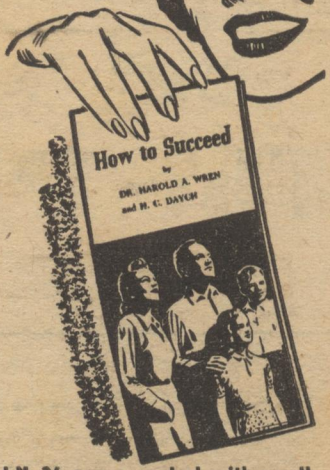

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The PROSPECTOR

By VIC SHAW

Mr. Shaw is a well-known authority in the fields of mining and mineralogy, with nearly a half-century of practical prospecting behind him, and with numerous published works, as well as a lifetime of service as consultant on pertinent matters to his credit.

FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES is both pleased and proud to add him to its roster of regular contributors—and hopes the additional service Mr. Shaw enables us to perform for our readers will result in profit to all concerned—in funds, fun and health!

Mr. Shaw will answer all queries gratis—simply enclose a stamped, self-addressed return envelope with your letter. Address all queries to *FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES*, Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.

WISCONSIN PROSPECT

Query: I would like to know of any valuable or non-valuable minerals around the northeastern part of Wisconsin.

Dale Peroutha,
R. R. No. 2
Two Rivers, Wisconsin

Reply by Victor Shaw: Can't give you much encouragement with regard to minerals, especially of the gemmy types, in your state, and particularly in northeastern regions. In fact, it was badly glaciated to the extent that the vast ice sheet plowed off much of the favorable rocks (which normally have deposits of such minerals and ores) and later even the more favorable areas were covered by sands and gravels.

You see, to know where such minerals exist, you should know the common rocks, which are known to be favorable, by sight. This means a knowledge of minerals and gemstones, also of rocks that are known to have them. There are many books giving such knowledge for study, if you're really interested.

Fact is that I know of very few minerals of any type that occur in Wisconsin; that is, outside of minerals associated with the ores of iron, lead, and zinc, which Wisconsin does produce. However, the only such portion of your northeastern part of the state is in Iron County, fronting partly on Orento Bay facing Lake Superior, this being in the Iron Belt region which produces much iron ore, though there is some iron produced also down in Dodge County near Milwaukee.

Zinc in form of sphalerite, also some lead ore, comes from Grant, Iowa, and Lafayette counties in the southwestern region.

The only collector's minerals I have listed includes agate near Lake St. Croix, St. Croix County and the moonstone variety of feldspar near Wausau, Marathon County.

(Continued on page 8)

HER HIGHNESS

JOAN THE WAD

9, JOAN'S COTTAGE

Lanivet, Bodmin, Cornwall, England

ALWAYS. UPON YOU DAME FORTUNE WILL NOD, IF YOU ALWAYS CARRY YOUR WEE JOAN THE WAD

WONDERFUL LUCK. "Would you be so kind as to forward one Joan the Wad History. I am very anxious, as I have heard so much about her. My friend has one and has had wonderful luck since" writes Mrs. Douglas Campbell of 150 Leinster St., St. John, N. B., Canada.

BUSINESS SAVED. Mr. Shadrack Charo of Malindi, Kenya, West Africa, writes 12.2.52: " . . . am sending P.O. for One Joan and one Jack for my wife. The one you sent has proved useful. I gave it to my wife who is running a shop. Before that we had decided to close the shop owing to lack of customers, but now the shop runs nicely and I have no hesitation to say that it is due to 'Joan'."

DO YOU BELIEVE IN LUCK ?

BETTER HEALTH—MORE FRIENDS. "Enclosed find $5.00 for 3 more 'Joan the Wad' mascots. Since I got Joan the Wad I have had better health and more friends. I wouldn't give up 'Joan the Wad' and think she's wonderful . . . you just have to have faith in her" writes Mrs. Lucy Getts of 1019 Cedar Ave., Swanton 5, Pa. U.S.A.

LUCK TURNED. Mrs. K. Raynes of Crown Mines, Johannesburg, S. Africa, writes 22.9.52: " . . . enclose P.O. for a 'Joan the Wad' and also two 'Jack O' Lanterns'! Have already received a 'J.T.W.' for my husband. We had her one day when his luck turned and he won $336.00. All our faith are in both. Do let me have all three, including History."

HURRY

Daisey Harris of Greensboro, N.C., U.S.A. writes 25.3.53: "I was so thrilled when I received my little Joan and won $40."

G. W. K. Botchey of Agona-Nyakrom, Gold Coast, W. Africa writes 10.11.52: "Four of my companions have won $1,960 since receiving your mascots."

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is Queen of the Lucky Cornish Piskeys. Thousands of persons all over the world claim that she has brought them Wonderful Luck in the way of Health, Wealth and Happiness.

WON HAMPER: "I received my 'Joan the Wad' this morning and won a hamper of groceries the day (Feb. 19th) she was mailed to me. I feel my luck has changed" writes Leslie Dales of Edmonton, Can., 22.2.52.

Just send Two Dollars and a large self-addressed envelope to:

9 JOAN'S COTTAGE
LANIVET, BODMIN, CORNWALL, ENGLAND
and I will send you both History and Mascot.

(Continued from page 6)

PLACERING IN OREGON

Query: I am interested in prospecting for gold in Oregon (placer) — thought around Baker would be a nice location. Would greatly appreciate any information that you are able to give me on the subject.

R. L. Glendenning,
Sacramento, California

Reply by Victor Shaw: I regret that you haven't told me how much practical experience you've had at prospecting for alluvial gold deposits. It makes quite a difference—particularly in Baker County. The fact is you're somewhat late in picking Baker County, which with Grant County also, has been plenty combed for small-scale surface deposits even 25 years ago. At that time there were only a few surface placers working, with just a nominal yield; and 75% of the placer gold was produced by dredging, hydraulics, and drift operations. Not much hand-placering recently.

Hydraulicking was mostly in canyon creeks of the Blue Mountains Range, from around Whitney up through Sumpter and beyond; and the dredging was chiefly along Burnt River by big outfits near Unity, and Herdford, and Bridgeport. Hand-placering has in the past 10-15 years been mostly around Cornicopia and on Pine Creek—snipers got a little on the Snake River near Huntington. There were a few other hand-placers sluicing in creeks around both Sumpter and Whitney to the west and southwest of Baker City, with not much yield however.

A friend of mine from Portland has prospected on the Powder River west of Sparta on creeks flowing in from those hills, but there'd been dredging in many of them that were open ground, and quite a lot of that region was staked and privately owned by some oldtimers who wouldn't allow trespassing. Your best chance in my opinion will be on north side of Burnt River Mountains, on creeks flowing into the Burnt River.

ARIZONA PAYOFF

Query: It was a surprise and a pleasure when I picked up a copy of *Fifteen Western Tales* and discovered your fine department. It is about time somebody is taking an interest in the people who are the ones really responsible for most of the important mineral discoveries of the world—the common prospector, who is usually looking for a grubstaking to seek new pots of gold.

What I am interested in is locating a gold placer, wet or dry though I would prefer wet, where I can grub out a living while I prospect for something better. I know something of small scale mining with a pan and sluice. I am a polio victim and cannot do too much walking, so would have to locate where I could drive to. My means are limited and I would have to be able to start making something within a week or so after getting on the ground.

I would like to locate within a 100 mile radius of where I am now, if possible, but probably could stretch that some, if necessary. What I really want is a location on an old place that is still good enough to eat on at least. Any help you can give me would be very much appreciated.

I am interested in some felspar and manganese claims near here.

Best of luck to you in your new department.

C. Giff Kneeland,
Safford, Arizona

Reply by Victor Shaw: Thanks for the bouquet. I sabe your problem, and believe me it's a tough one for your present location—I mean to find a pay-placer inside a 100-mile radius. Safford is in south-central Graham County, which hasn't been noted for many major placer concentrations—ever. In fact, this county has chiefly been noted for its lead-zinc ore: rather than gold. *And* all placer gold comes originally from a *gold vein* outcropping.

However, some placer gold occurred in eastern Graham County, along the Gila River, chiefly up-river from the mouth of Bonita Creek. In the west part of this area, a dirt road takes you in 7 miles north from the Safford-Duncan Hwy. (and 14 miles from your town) to the site of these placers, where the Gila runs through benched bluffs of what is called the "Gila conglomerate". In this curve of the river, these benches contain ancient river gravels that carry gold. There are lots of boulders there big and little, also reddish iron-stained pebbles of flint and there's a lot of black sand when panning. The gold is flaky and/or wiry and in size runs from flour to wires of ¼-inch. Most of these gravels contain values from 15¢ up to around 50¢ a cubic yard. It's been worked some in early years, but you've some chance there.

You may have better luck over in west Greenlee County, near Clifton on what was called the "Clifton-Morenci placers". They're on benches of the San Francisco River in the same "Gila conglomerate," and the gold is probably derived from gold veins in lower Dorsey and the Colorado gulches a few miles north of Clifton on west side of the river. Some mining outfit spent plenty in early days on a pipe line for a hydraulic plant, but lack of grade for gravity flow, also the want of enough space for tailings forced them to abandon the attempt.

You might try out these gravels; also another in Gold Gulch 2-3 miles west of Morenci, which was worked some back about 1907-08. However, back about 1933-34 there was quite a bit of placering done in this district. The ground is privately-owned, but small-scale miners were permitted to operate without paying any royalty —or for a lease. The pay-gravels lie on a granite bedrock 50-60 fet above the river and

Also, gold was placered on the lower river, as far down as Eagle Creek where the river curves—and you know a stream-*bend* is one

(Continued on page 113)

Whee!

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Sponsored by the NATIONAL BOOK CLUB

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HOW TO SOLVE SAMPLE PUZZLE

CLUE No. 1: THE "HOOSIER" STATE.

You will see there are a SINK, a DIAL, the SOLE of a shoe and various letters of the alphabet. There are two plus and two minus signs. It is necessary to add and subtract the names and letters as shown by the plus and minus signs. First, write down SINK. Then, add DIAL to it. Next, add ONEA. All this equals SINKDIALONEA. Now, you must subtract the letters in SOLE and K. When this is done you are left with INDIANA. Indiana is the Hoosier State, so the result checks with Clue No. 1.

Fun? Yes! Now Solve This Typical Contest Puzzle

CLUE No. 1: THE "PINE TREE" STATE.

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CABALLERO'S CURSE

By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

THERE ARE those among us who like to express grave sympathy for a steer who happens to be on the wrong end of the rope in a bulldogging contest. For that matter, there are those who think it is pure cruelty for a man to catch a calf and let him bust himself when branding time comes.

It doesn't do much good to point out to these people that a range steer is a pretty rough, wild animal in the first place, and that it doesn't do much more than jolt him up when he comes up short against a snubbed rope. After all, men aren't raising cattle for pets, they are raising them to eat; if these objectors carried their arguments on to the proper conclusions, they would have to argue just as seriously against subjecting the animal to the final pain and humiliation of being killed and eaten.

However, since we are a nation of beef eaters, we will continue to prepare the beef for market, and that includes roping the animals. But the sympathizers might get some comfort in knowing that our way is much more humane than that practiced by the Spaniards who started the beef industry in our Southwest.

When the early Spaniards wanted to gather in the beef, they could not rope and bust a steer, for they did not know how to throw the riata. So they devised another method of capturing beef animals. The caballero would take a long pole; then on the smaller outer end of it, he would fasten a half-moon shaped knife blade sharpened to a razor edge. He would then ride out toward the selected steer, bearing his pole with the knife on it, and while chasing the steer he would reach out with the pole and sever the tendons in the steer's hind legs just above the animal's hocks.

That is called hamstringing an animal, and the animal can never walk again. The Spaniard's steer would thus fall to the ground and lie there until the butcher came along in his cart—maybe several days later—and kill and dress him. ✪ ✪ ✪

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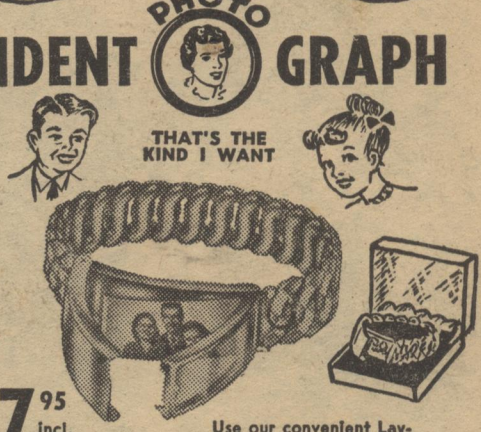

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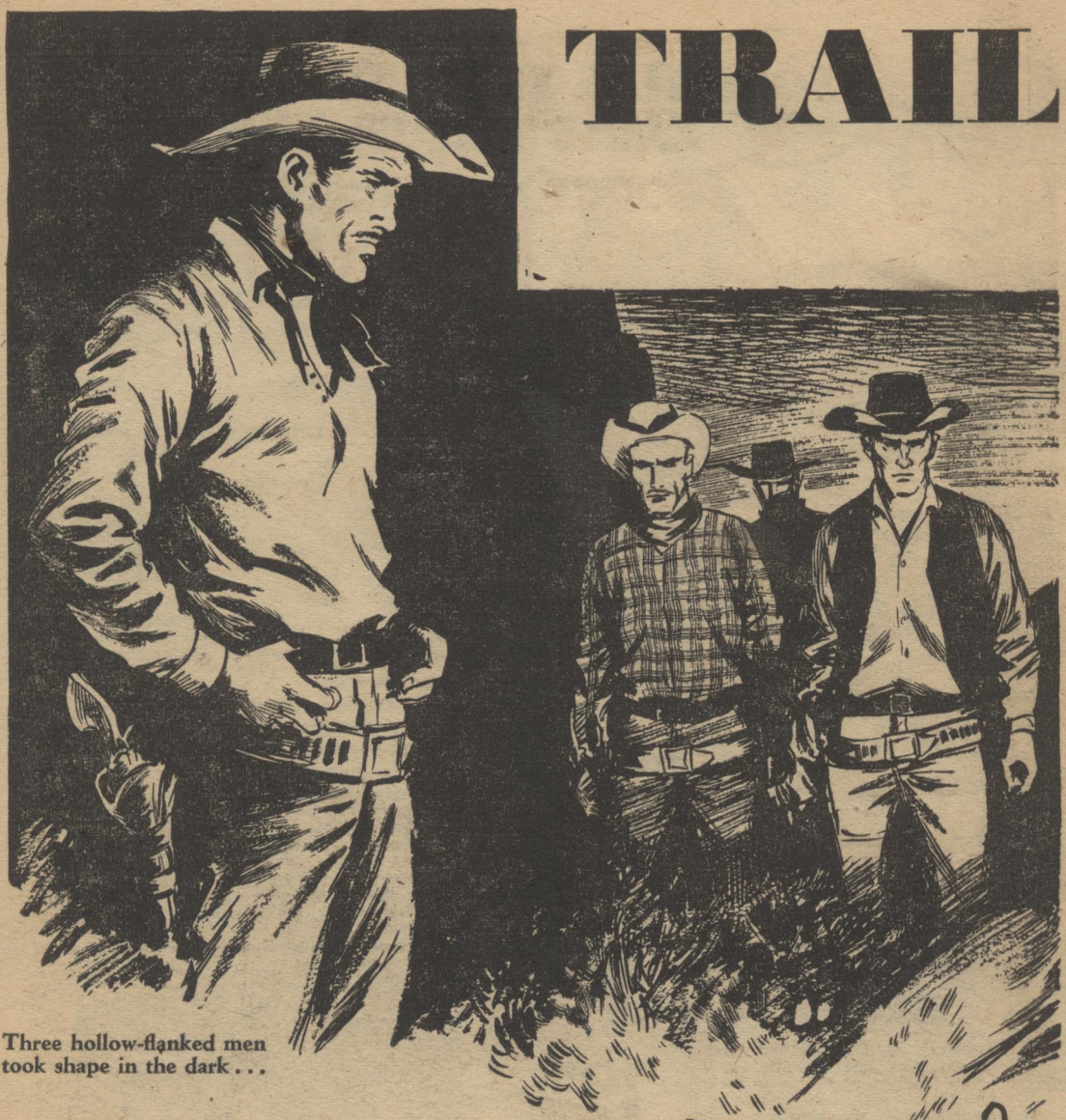
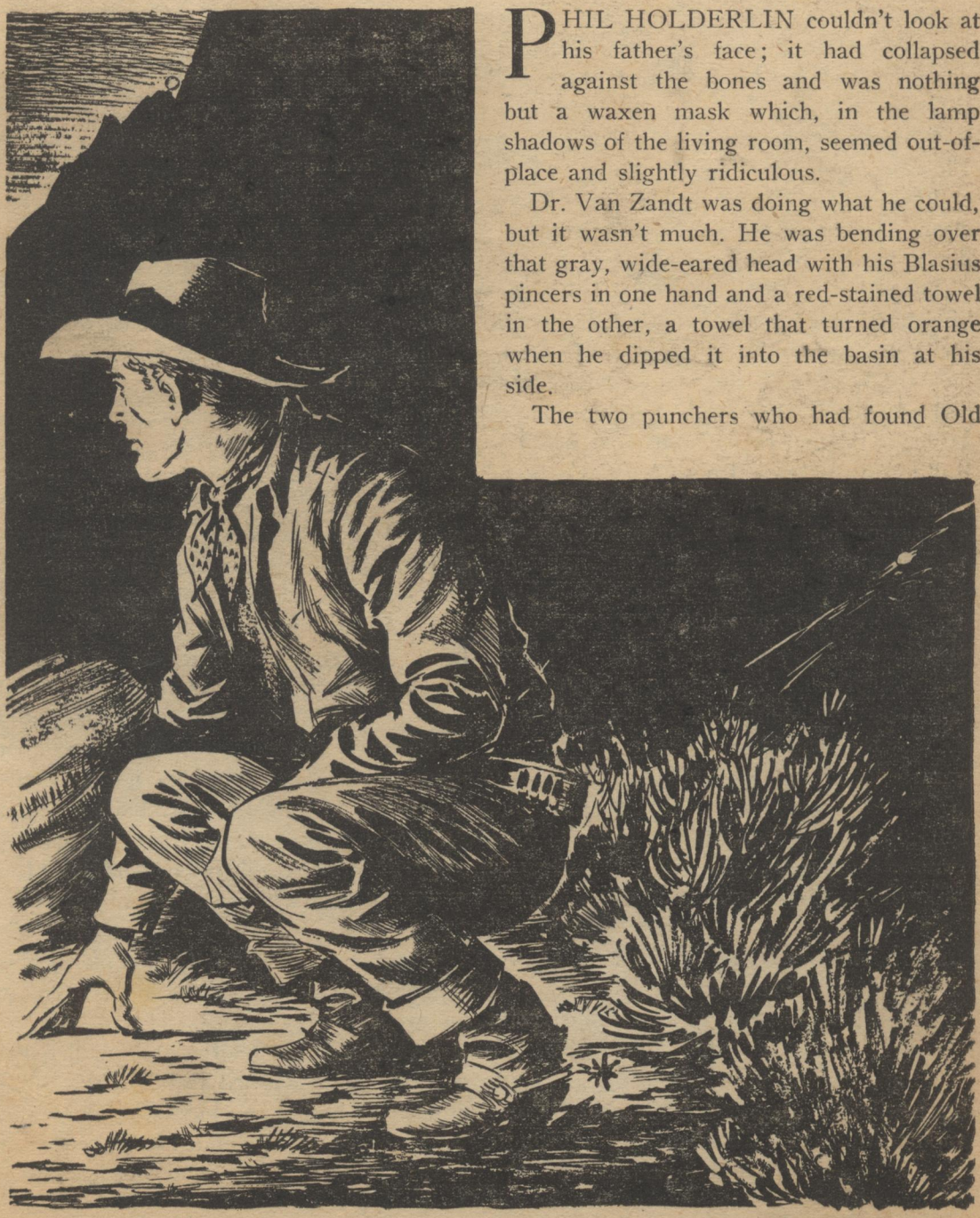


Three hollow-flanked men took shape in the dark . . .

When old Bull Holderlin died with a bullet through his lungs, he left but one legacy to his scapegrace son—a stag-butted .44 to mark his owlhoot grave!

OF THE LOST

By GEORGE C. APPELL



PHIL HOLDERLIN couldn't look at his father's face; it had collapsed against the bones and was nothing but a waxen mask which, in the lamp shadows of the living room, seemed out-of-place and slightly ridiculous.

Dr. Van Zandt was doing what he could, but it wasn't much. He was bending over that gray, wide-eared head with his Blasius pincers in one hand and a red-stained towel in the other, a towel that turned orange when he dipped it into the basin at his side.

The two punchers who had found Old

Bull Holderin were standing behind Phil, uneasy in their muddy boots, running their hat-brims through grimy palms in continual motions of despair. Then the front door opened and Rance Holderlin stepped in and for an instant before he closed the door, damp air whispered through the room with the feel of something wet and dead. Rance was plastered with mud up to his hips; it clung in clots to his wrinkled shirt and there was a long smear of it on his jaws.

He looked a question at his brother, and Phil shrugged. Rance moved closer to Phil and said behind his hand, "They got away clean. Cleaver's getting a posse to run 'em down, but it won't do much good."

The Chinese cook came in from the kitchen with another basin of hot water and Dr. Van Zandt smiled gratefully. The cook took the basin with the orange towels and padded out.

One of the punchers who had carried Old Bull up to the house from where he'd been ambushed cleared his throat and caught Rance's eye.

"Mebbe we better join Cleaver. Did he go into town for his posse "

Rance nodded, looking at his father's face; and suddenly he knew with dread certainty that the life would never return to it, that never again would those strong throat and chest muscles swell with sound.

The puncher nudged his companion, murmured something about a six-hour head start, and went out. They hadn't been gone a minute before the door opened again and the Reverend Fogg came in hesitantly, his black clothes smeared with fresh mud, his spectacles steaming with moisture. He whispered to Rance.

"I just heard. Sheriff Cleaver told me." He gazed pityingly at the dying man, preparing himself for the ritual to come. Then slowly he pushed a thumb and middle finger against his eyes. "Oh, these awful killings." The breath ran from him in a long gust and he asked, "For what?" He lowered his hand in a tired way, blinking through disarranged spectacles. "A few cows. . . ."

The rain was slackening off, lessening its pressure against the window panes Dr. Van Zandt grunted and drew himself backward and upward, waving his Blasius pincers.

"Here's the first one. It perforated his lung and lodged against his spine."

Rance grabbed the bullet and carried it to the nearest lamp.

"Winchester-center-fire," he breathed. "A forty-four forty." He glanced sharply at Phil. "That's Nat Slythe, all right. His brother Morgan used the same weapon."

"You can't prove it."

Rance stared at Phil as if he was an offending yokel and he was trying to decide whether to hit him now or give him one more chance. Square-set and dark, Rance Holderlin, and with black brows laying evenly across wide gray eyes.

"I'll prove it." He offered the flattened bullet to Phil. "A keepsake for you."

But Phil turned away. He was not wanted here; he was excess. He sought the Reverend Fogg's sympathetic gaze, but the minister was kneeling to Old Bull Holderlin, grasping one of his big, heavy hands. Phil caught a glimpse of himself in the oval mirror above the mantel, and he didn't like what he saw any more than his father had liked it—pale skin that no sun could redden for long; tight curly hair the color of straw; deep blue eyes with the shadows of something remembered and destroyed in them, and a small, pursed mouth. His mother's face, actually; there was nothing apparent of his father in him except his ranginess and that certain aloof irony in his eyes.

Dr. Van Zandt got the other bullet, the one that had smashed through old Bull's illium and blown one kidney apart, but it wasn't going to help much and the doctor knew it and the Reverend Fogg knew it and, presently, Rance knew it too.

And so did Old Bull himself. When he

returned from unconsciousness to a fleeting awareness of the present, he beckoned to Rance.

He tried to speak but he couldn't form words, there was little air left in him and almost no strength at all. Then a last impulse of energy brought his head up an inch and he said, "Rance—" but the word was hollow and empty. Then he lowered his head and shut his eyes, and swallowed painfully.

DR. VAN ZANDT had his stem-winder in one hand and Old Bull's wrist in the other. He didn't notice when the hoofs splashed up to the veranda; he never turned when the door whined open and Lester Fenwick came in with his arm around Charlotte, his daughter. Tall and stooped, Fenwick, with a goatee that was a dyed dash of black adding length to an already long chin.

Phil Holderlin's glance traveled to Charlotte, and the bitterness ran out of him. For she was lovely, even after a ride through the rain—not theatrically lovely nor yet golden-haired blonde. Just honest blonde. A young woman with something fine etched into her face. She was cleanly-strung, too, with long straight legs and a good chest.

"Father wanted to come," she told them quietly, "and I wouldn't let him come alone." She did not force any false feminine cheerfulness into this occasion, but she did smile.

Rance took her stained woolen coat from her shoulders and hung it carefully across two wall hooks, spreading it to dry.

"Phil," he said under his breath, "Mr. Fenwick's hat."

But the lawyer had already hooked it onto a horn rack next to the mantel, and was peering down at Old Bull Holderlin. A wind came from somewhere far away, bringing with it the clean smell of meadows and pine, of fresh grass and new buds. Rance went to close the door, and when he returned to the room, Old Bull was dead.

Dr. Van Zandt clicked the cover of his stem-winder shut, rose and tucked it into his vest pocket. He tried to think of something suitable to say, something that would fill the awful vacuum between fact and realization. At Moncrieff's the month before he'd said, "It was quick, he never felt it;" and at Peel's before that, he'd said, "He died like he wanted to, in the saddle."

But this was going to be more difficult. Moncrieff and Peel had been comparative newcomers to the section, homesteaders with small spreads, while Old Bull Holderlin was one of the biggest cattlemen in the county.

Rance led Charlotte into the kitchen, holding his own tight sorrow behind his teeth while her father conferred in the dining room with the Reverend Fogg. Dr. Van Zandt opened his wallet, drew out a printed form and searched around the room.

"Want something?" Phil asked. He still could not bring himself to look at his father's face any more than he had been able to accept the first bullet as a keepsake.

Dr. Van Zandt saw his chance to say something suitable.

"Your father would never have ridden a horse again, Phil. He probably would never have left his bed, had he lived—Yes, I want pen and ink so's I can fill in this death certificate."

Phil leaned against the mantel, thumbs snagged into his belt.

"What," he asked, "are you going to say was the cause?"

The doctor was startled.

"Why—gun shots, of course." Then he added: "As county medical examiner, I'll state that it was homicide. That means murder."

"Yeh," Phil Holderlin said. "I know."

He pushed himself away from the mantel and ambled into the kitchen. Charlotte Fenwick was pouring coffee for Rance, seated

at the table clutching his head in both hands. Charlotte glanced quickly at Phil and as quickly glanced away.

"You'd better have some too," she told him.

Phil was twisting a cigarette together. He stuck it into his lips, and matchlight burst whitely across his cheeks.

"Thanks," he said, "but I've got my own remedy."

Rance looked up at him.

"Haven't you had enough of that?"

"There isn't that much." Phil strolled into the dining room and went to the mahogany sideboard, interrupting the urgent conversation of Lester Fenwick and the Reverend Fogg.

"Go right ahead, gentlemen, don't mind me."

He opened the lower panel of the sideboard slowly, knowing that they wouldn't continue their talk while he was there, knowing that neither of them fully trusted him. He even knew, or thought he knew, that the lawyer would suspect him of killing his own father in order to get his hands on the ranch, and the thinking of that lent savor to his casual pursuit of Charlotte. He could even hear Fenwick storming at her later: "Why, that drunken young puppy isn't worth a yard of rope to go 'round his neck! If it hadn't been for Old Bull, he'd have been behind bars long since. But Rance, now, he's—"

Smiling, he drew out a bottle of sour mash, closed the lower panel and turned the key.

"It's there if you want it, gentlemen."

His smile of invitation briefly touched the Reverend Fogg, and then he carried the bottle back into the kitchen. The cook was out in the rear shed, scrubbing the basins and quacking incantations to himself. Phil considered offering him a drink, then thought better of it.

Instead he held the bottle under Rance's nose.

"It'll do you good."

Rance groped for his coffee, blinking dampishly.

"You seem to think this is a party."

"Maybe it is." Phil winked at Charlotte. "How can we cheer him up?"

RANCE'S CUP flew through the air and smashed against the wall and he came directly after it—lunging for his brother's face, lips skinned back off his teeth in sudden rage. Phil danced away and kicked the table between them, laughing.

Dr. Van Zandt hurried in, and when he saw the brothers were at it again he flung out both arms scarecrow-fashion and blocked Rance.

"Easy, now." He took him by the upper arms and forced him back, pushing him into a chair. Then he turned slowly to Phil. "I suggest that you leave the house for awhile." He stared stonily at him for the count of five. "The funeral will be tomorrow afternoon. After that, you'll be welcome to return."

"Thanks." Phil spun the bottle, caught it, and tucked it under his arm. "Maybe that's a good idea."

Lester Fenwick was standing in the entrance to the dining room.

"And after that," he said sonorously, "I'll want to see both of you here at the ranch, so don't try to join Cleaver's posse. Phil—you won't forget?"

"You know me—old dependable." He strode out through the living room, shutting his eyes as he passed his father's body. On the veranda he stood inhaling the clear air that had none of the mustiness of death to it, none of the taut atmosphere of sorrow. The night lay wild and deep across the desert and the moon, soaring from a bank of clouds, was a frozen silver that touched but could not dissolve the world's incredible blackness.

A step sounded behind him and he turned, pressing the bottle more tightly against his ribs. Charlotte Fenwick was standing next to him, but not close to him,

vague in the shadows. Her face was strangely incurious, as though she were waiting for something to come and knew that it would.

An apology, Phil thought. He shook his head and said, "Your coat's dry now. Why don't you put it on?"

"You mean—why don't I leave?"

"I didn't say that, I meant—if you're cold. . . ."

The stamp of a hoof sounded at the tie rail, followed by the whimper of harness. Phil saw the two rigs—Fenwick's and the Reverend Fogg's—cut like metal against the darkness.

Charlotte drew a small breath.

"Why did you do that to Rance?"

Her voice was cool and he could hear the faint loneliness in it, the fatalism that made her words so even.

He was both attentive and puzzled, and a sing and a rush of strong feeling went through him like a quick wind, lifting him up to the balls of his feet.

"To distract him, maybe."

"No," she murmured. "You've always quarreled anyway. You did it to distract yourself."

He lowered his chin, his mind reaching back to the exact reason why he had riled Rance. But it eluded him, he couldn't nail it down; and that's when he first sensed the wisdom in her, her knowledge of the fears that men concealed behind their attitudes, the deep hungers that rode them so savagely and drove them to do the unaccountable things they did. For she had been right—he had sought to distract himself.

Suddenly the rashness in him glowed hot again and he pulled her to him and raised her chin and kissed her hard on the mouth, holding her tightly against him and feeling rough pleasure as her fingers dug at his shoulders. She hung against him with such an insistence that a moment of wonder passed over him. This was not gentle Charlotte Fenwick. He held her until he felt her body shaking with strain, and then he drew back his head and saw that her eyes were closed and her face was drawn into a dreaming serenity. He saw no shadows on her face, no self-consciousness. But abruptly something became wrong, and it showed.

Then she released him and stepped down, touching her hair and wetting her lips. She was alert now, and her face was troubled.

"It won't do, Phil."

His rashness grew cold, he needed to hit her and he did. Abruptly she lifted the hem of her skirt and ran to the door and opened it. Rance was coming out, breathing heavily and with his fists clenched tight—so tight that his knuckles showed as round knobs.

Charlotte pressed her fingers against his chest and Phil heard her say, "It's all right, let's finish our coffee."

But Rance hesitated, standing solidly against the lamplight from inside.

"Hasn't he any sense of what's decent? Any idea of how to behave at a time like this?" He turned to her. "What brought you out here?"

They went inside then, and Phil slouched across the yard, hat tugged down over his face, bottle held firmly under his arm. It occurred to him that he hadn't dropped it when he embraced her, and he hoped fervently that she hadn't noticed it.

CHAPTER TWO

Long Chance

HE ROUNDED the stable and stood rubbing a hand across his gaunted cheeks, feeling the need of a drink howl through him. But first he placed the bottle carefully on a sawbuck and searched himself for the makings.

His fingers were trembling when he lighted a lucifer and immediately he whipped it out so that he wouldn't see the physical effect of his own foolishness. He took the bottle and tore the cork out and drank in long, strangling gulps. Whiskey could nev-

er quite destroy the self-condemnation in his head, but it made his memories a little easier to bear.

The sideboard in the dining room was one of his earliest memories and he had always wondered why—why that, instead of his mother or his dog Runner or even Rance, who was two years older than he. The sideboard had been freighted all the way from St. Louis for his parents' tenth wedding anniversary. and on every occasion of significance after that it had been loaded with platters of food and tureens of wild turkey and always, for the boys, a dish of tiny meat pies. Phil used to slip a few under his shirt and feed them later to Runner, when no one was looking.

But after his mother's death the sideboard had reverted to the somber piece of furniture that it really was, a mahogany hulk containing the whiskey and some old linen, yellow with disuse, and the family silver wrapped forever in tissue-paper and cotton.

His next best memory was of his father, and how he'd bellow at the riders to git to hell onto leather an' shag yore lazy selves up to the bench an' haze them strays back home!

He remembered his father best as he had ridden across the grass, a natural part of the dust and sun and sweet winds. He'd had an easy and unruffled quiet that grew on people, when he wasn't bellowing, so that they didn't pay much attention to him when he was around, feeling secure in his nearness; but they noticed it a lot when he wasn't.

Like the time he'd ridden off alone to hunt down Morgan Slythe, the rustler, and had found him, called him out and shot him within twenty-four hours. People prayed for Old Bull Holderlin then, and long afterwards, too.

It wasn't until later, until about the time Phil first began to shave regularly, that he realized that Old Bull didn't honestly like him much, that his primary affection had gone to Rance and had always stayed there.

That's when Phil's minor follies had started—picking off a neighbor's chickens with an old Army carbine, painting a yearling red on the Fourth of July, stealing Sheriff Cleaver's keys and letting the town drunk out on Sunday so the churchgoers would find him stretched out in the ruts again when they emerged from worship. But it didn't take long for the major follies to commence, for the wild drinking and the reckless riding and, ultimately, the gambling.

The gambling, Phil Holderlin thought—and took another mighty swig from the bottle. That time in Denver when he lost everything to Marble John and threw a gun on him and demanded his money back. And how he'd been taken from behind and thrown out, gun and all. And how he'd come home with the need to steal, and discovered how easy it was to satisfy that need. And how he'd faced down from Charlotte when he was standing in her father's office waiting for him to explain the laws and penalties of embezzlement.

He emptied the bottle in a rapid up-toss and pitched it far out into the grass. He stood with his feet planted wide, feeling the night wind move against him and push him off-balance. He fought it weakly; he was choking, and then a sob erupted through his clenched teeth and his tallow knees buckled and he sat there in the damp grass, sobbing uncontrollably.

The crowd thinned out in town, after the funeral, so that by the time Rance and Phil were riding the last miles back home, they were almost alone.

Lester Fenwick was behind them in his two-wheeler, but far enough behind so as not actually to be with them.

Rance hadn't spoken since the services, except to ask the sheriff curtly, "Get 'em?" Cleaver had shaken his head and said nothing, which prompted Phil to ask, "Was it Nat Slythe or wasn't it?"

Cleaver wasn't sure.

"We followed 'em from where your father was shot to where the tracks petered out, up beyond the rim. The rains'd washed most of the trace away, though, an' remember too that they had a good six-hour head start. Old Bull was shot in the middle of the afternoon, durin' a storm, an' he wasn't found 'til almost dark." The sheriff touched the tobacco-stained fringes of his white mustache. "But we'll get 'em yet, Rance, we'll get 'em."

"Get who?" Phil persisted.

Cleaver looked coldly at him. "Whoever done it, that's who."

"Well, you had Jim Peel and Herb Moncrieff as starters. I wouldn't say, sheriff, that you haven't had time to think about it."

Cleaver's face stiffened, but he didn't answer. He turned instead to Rance and said, "Don't worry, the posse is still workin'. Maybe Nat Slythe did this to pay off for his brother Morgan's death, but I'm not sure, Rance."

Phil stepped into his stirrup and mounted. *Why always Rance? Why don't they include me in things? Don't they think I'm capable?*

Riding the last mile home now, he touched up to come alongside Rance and do some talking.

Rance, though, was glum and withdrawn.

"Later," he said thickly. "When Mr. Fenwick gets through. Then we'll talk."

"About Charlotte?" Phil couldn't help the question, but he regretted asking it.

Rance pulled back on his bridle and looked at his brother in such a way that Phil thought he was sick, that fever had struck him. Rance's skin was flushed and his lips were working loosely and he was swinging his jaws as if shaking off the effect of a blow he hadn't seen coming.

Then he said, "You'll never learn manners, Phil." He rattled his bridles angrily. "Someday you'll wish you had." He spurred to the gallop in a scatter of pebbles and was gone.

WHEN LESTER Fenwick arrived at the house, Phil was in the kitchen pouring a drink for the foreman, who had come to express regrets for all hands. The foreman refused a second drink, though.

"Them killers ran off a lot of stock the night they cut your pap down, an' we'd better keep on chasin' it."

Fenwick called from the dining room then, and Phil went in. The lawyer drew out his leather case, selected a cheroot, bit off the tip and lighted it.

"Now then." He placed splayed fingers on the table, took a deep, lung-cracking breath and said, "I guess you want it straight, like you want"—he raised a brow to Phil—"your liquor."

Rance's jaw set.

Fenwick went on: "This ranch, as a business proposition, is broke." He took a tug at his cheroot and cleared his throat. "It's got physical assets—the buildings here, the open range, and the cattle. Also," he added with slow deliberation, "the quality of its personnel." Tobacco smoke swept across the table. "Your father always picked the best, because he knew the round value of every dime that went into the place. He himself didn't have a dime when he came out here from St. Louis thirty years ago."

"Thirty-one," Phil corrected.

Fenwick removed his pince-nez, breathed on it, and replaced it.

"Thank you." He sniffed distastefully. "Now, your father left everything to Rance, with the condition that Phil be provided for in perpetuity." He looked at them. "But perpetuity doesn't mean much when there's nothing left in the till."

Phil sat forward on his chair.

"Nothing at all? I'll settle for a couple of thousand, just so I can go back to Denver and bust Marble John like he ought to be busted. Give me a couple thousand, and I'll sign away—"

"Phil," the lawyer told him forcefully, "there's nothing—not even a thousand. And I'll tell you something else—the reason for

that is you." He pointed across the table. "Your father went into hock to keep you out of prison. There's a mortgage on this place that'll take a few prosperous years to pay off. It was taken out in order to raise enough money to replace the operating funds that you embezzled two years ago, Phil, after you got cleaned in Denver."

"Yeh." Phil's smile was wintry. "The old man made me bookkeeper to keep me out of trouble." His lips stretched to the long edge of laughter, but neither Rance nor Fenwick saw the humor of it.

The lawyer leaned back in his chair.

"Phil, the Reverend Fogg is our local preacher, but I'm going to preempt his franchise for a minute, right here and now." His mouth grew hard. "You don't know what this place meant to your father—what Colorado meant to him. It wasn't a place to ranch, it wasn't a state, it was much more than that. It was a way of life, a manner of living." He leaned forward and made a cage of his fingers, holding them out. "Can't you understand that? It was church to him, it was his god. That's why he worked twenty hours a day, why he drove himself harder than he dared drive his men.

"It's why he never compromised with quality, and why anything indecent sickened him and made him mad and when he got mad, he got mad all over." Fenwick lowered his caged fingers in an attitude of prayer. "It's why he went after Morgan Slythe single-handed and shot him before Morgan could even draw—a gesture without honor for the theft of honor—because Morgan was a rustler and a killer and therefore indecent."

Phil had been slumped in his chair with one leg raised across his knee, toying with a rowel; but when he heard that Morgan Slythe hadn't even drawn a gun, quick admiration brightened his face and he stood up.

"No fooling? The old man cut him down cold?"

Rance glared at him.

"Do you still want proof that Nat Slythe killed him."

Phil's fingers rose to his pockets for the makings, and he rolled a cigarette very thoughtfully. Through spouts of smoke he said, "That's Cleaver's worry—his and yours, Rance, since you're top hand here." He yanked his hat to his head and tugged it down over his eyes. "Me, I got a date with Marble John." He winked at Fenwick. "After I say good-by to Charlotte." He strolled out, trailing blue smoke.

At the stable he chose a horse, rigged it with spade bits and Spanish housings, cinched up a stock saddle and mounted. In the yard he met Rance and Fenwick, and Rance told him, "You'd better change your mind."

Phil rode toward the gates at a walk, sensing their hostile eyes following him until he was out of sight. His first stop in town was at a small white frame house set deep in cottonwoods on a side street. Charlotte Fenwick opened the door to his knock.

"May I come in?"

She led him to the parlor, shuttered against the drenching heat of the day, and indicated an over-stuffed chair. He removed his hat and ran his arm through the cord and pulled the hat up to his shoulder. They were silent; she was making a decision about him from his manner, and he was weighing her as well. His former impression of her lonely spirit remained. He stood undecided a moment, knowing what he wanted to say but not knowing how to say it.

He had a feeling unusual for him—awkward and very troubled.

"I'm going away for awhile. I just wanted you to know that I'm not running."

"Running?" she asked. "From what?"

He lost his tongue again and didn't find it immediately.

"From what people might say."

A smile formed on her mouth.

"Since when has Phil Holderlin worried

about what people say?" She stepped closer and her smile opened wide. "You know what I mean."

"No offense." As soon as he put his arms around her she pulled back and looked at him with the most urgent directness. Her soft dreaming had vanished before a hunger which loosened and parted her lips and created a metal brightness in her eyes. The delicacy he had seen in her wasn't there, the gentleness had evaporated. He stared at her and then he drew her head against his chest but she pulled it back again, moved by some contradictory impulse.

HE LOOKED beyond her, shocked out of his desire. He had done a cheap thing, catching her in a weak moment and stripping her of her niceness. This wasn't the Charlotte he had danced with or ridden the high trails with, affecting him like the melody of a distant bell at twilight; this was a girl he had drawn beyond her limits.

And so he said, "You're right, Charlotte. It won't do."

She dropped her arms and looked at him with a deadened, cooling expression.

"You'd better go away, if you're going."

"I'm sorry, Charlotte. For you and for Rance." He pulled his arm out through the hatcord.

"That's for me to have on my conscience, and if it isn't, it shouldn't be on yours."

He put on his hat and slanted the brim rakishly.

"A man should be careful what he does to a woman who builds a dream for herself. I'd rather have you keep yours intact, than to find it isn't there."

"Maybe you should have thought of that sooner."

"Maybe I didn't understand until now." He felt the stormy agitation in her and he disliked himself intensely for it. "Goodby, Charlotte." He walked out of the parlor and through the front door. Swinging up into his saddle, he saw Fenwick's two-wheeler turning into the street, and he waited.

Rance was sitting next to the lawyer, talking animatedly; but when he saw Phil he stopped. Fenwick dropped the baffle block and climbed down, and Rance slid out the other side.

"Thought you'd gone." There was a crouched savagery to him, a mute challenge.

"I'm taking my time."

Lester Fenwick wagged a conciliatory hand. "I've asked Rance to lunch, Phil. You're welcome too."

"I know that." He gathered his reins, smiling tight-lipped. "Charlotte just told me." And he rode off slowly, expecting to be called back. But he wasn't, nothing followed him but the stiff silence of resentment and doubt.

That'll do Rance good, he thought. *Rance won't take her for granted any more.*

Sheriff Cleaver had just come back from lunch. He was chewing a toothpick and leafing through some old Wanted dodgers, viewing each other with a disinterested eye. Without looking up he asked, "What can we do for young Mr. Holderlin?"

Phil sat on the rim of the desk and pushed his hat back.

"You got anything on Marble John in Denver?" He'd need money to buck Marble John's game, and he wanted Cleaver to know it.

Cleaver looked up.

"In Denver? Hell, that's not my jurisdiction." The name of Marble John stirred his memory. "Why're you so interested?"

"I figure to go back there, that's all. If I can throw a dodger in his face and say, 'How would you like this known?' maybe he'd deal an honest deck and I can get my money back."

Cleaver's memory suddenly grew sharp.

"You got it back." He waited for Phil to move, to offer fight, but Phil didn't. He remained perched on the desk, hound-dog tense and with a faint sweat damp on his face. Cleaver slung the dodgers into a

drawer and spit out his toothpick. "Why don't you show some interest in Nat Slythe, if you want to get tough?"

"Why don't you?"

The sheriff drummed stumpy fingers on his blotter, plainly dissatisfied.

"Phil, my saddle days are about over, and besides, I got things to do besides track killers. I know how you feel, your father was my friend. But I got to let the posse handle this. I can't do the whole thing alone." He curled his fingers in front of him and studied their brown nails.

Phil shrugged. "Since you mentioned Nat Slythe, what do you know about him?"

"Well, he don't much resemble his brother Morgan, he's shorter and—"

"I mean—what is he?"

"Oh, beef and horses for a main suit, with a side line in fancy robbery. He'll bag a pay agent bound for one of the ranches. He'll knock over a stage if there's anythin' solid on it. He'll steal the beef issue off a reservation or dry-gulch a cattle buyer headed west with specie. Until a couple of months ago, I hadn't been able to pin anythin' on him that'd stick in court. But right now, I want him for the murders of Jim Peel, Herb Moncrieff, and Old Bull Holderlin—God rest his soul."

"Nat Slythe sounds like big money," Phil said idly. "I reckon he shot Peel and Moncrieff for the same reason he shot the old man—unsettled accounts."

Cleaver shook his head. "He shot Jim and Herb because they made a stand against him when he did some midnightin' on their spreads. He's got help, Phil, which is why I wanted the posse to be big." The sheriff found another toothpick and inserted it between his teeth. "He shot your father on account of what your father done to Morgan, and at the same time he took the chance to shove a few cows through the fence too."

"Where does he throw all this stock that he steals?"

"Like I said before, the latest tracks petered out beyond the rim, but I'm damned if Nat Slythe lets a slow-moving rustle anchor him down. He'll most likely double back north and let the cattle drift where he leaves 'em." The sheriff ruminated a moment. "Though I just got word that there's fresh sign down near where the Chacuaco comes into the Purgatoire—or Picketwire, as they call it here. That means they're heading straight south into New Mexico."

Phil came off the desk.

"Hell, that's not far."

Cleaver feigned great surprise.

"You thinkin' of going down there?"

Phil Holderlin laughed out loud.

"Not with your hand-picked gunfighters so far ahead of me." He slapped his belt buckle a few times, smiling. "Nope, I'm going to Denver and settle things there."

He swaggered out, and the sheriff's features clouded with disgust. Then he surprised himself by biting his tootpick clean in half.

CHAPTER THREE

Gesture Without Honor

PHIL LEFT the town behind and rode the afternoon well down before he raised the trace of Rush Creek and pointed north along it toward the Arkansas Divide. There were more than a hundred miles between him and Denver and he wanted to ride them slowly, following the turnings of the trails into higher country at a pace that would not endanger his horse and that would make his interception of the northbound Slythe gang more certain. And he was certain that they were doubling north away from the Purgatoire.

He was using a Texas rig with those Spanish housings—double cinch, oxbow stirrups and a grass rope—and he'd packed a canvas brush jacket in his cantle roll. Nights, it was cold enough to wear that jacket; the chill air of the high places had

a definite bite to it, though elsewhere the fragrance was the syrup of a thousand distilled odors out of the pine hills and the sage flats.

He was setting coffee to boil on the spider one evening when he heard a disturbance of hoofs and the squeak of leather. Then the sound of a bit against a horse's teeth, the click of a rowel against a cinch ring, and the jingle of the rowel itself. He turned slowly, very slowly, mindful that at night, in open country, a quick move can actuate a trigger.

He saw a stocky, bow-legged man with a cropped black mustache and thick dark hair chopped ragged to the collar. His nose was arched and prominent, with hairs bristling in a pair of impertinent nostrils. His eyebrows, like his mouth, bent downward at the ends and accentuated the scornfulness of his expression.

Phil nodded politely.

"Want some coffee?" Fright pulsed through him like the throb of a cut artery. He didn't know why he was frightened, but he was.

Some of it faded when the man spoke; his voice was low-pitched and even.

"Got enough for everybody?"

Phil turned all the way around then, still hunkered on his haunches.

"For everybody?"

"Some friends are with me." The bow-legged man waddled closer to the fire. "Is there enough?"

The friends took shape in the dusk—three hollow-flanked men clearly stamped by the guns strapped low on their hips. But it wasn't the guns alone; something in their faces, so watchful and so smooth, also showed their trade.

"Yeh," Phil Holderlin said quickly, "I got enough."

And that's how he met Nat Slythe.

His name, Phil submitted, was Runner.

"Where from?" Nat Slythe asked casually.

"Trinity, Texas."

"Nice place, Texas." Slythe caressed his mustache, secretly amused at something. "Big place, with room to maneuver."

It wasn't until the next day, when they were over on the Republican River drifting east toward the Kansas line, that he spoke his name. And when he did, he and his three friends were braced for an adverse reaction from Tex Runner.

But Phil only said, "Slythe?"

Straight out Nat told him, "I had a brother, Morgan."

"Morgan?"

One of Nat's friends, the one called Jug, asked, "You goin' to cut him in?"

"Sure I'm going to cut him in."

They were close to Kansas now, and there was talk of crashing the bank at Goodland. Nat Slythe remarked that they could use another gun, if a man knew how to handle it.

"Goodland's a setup," Jug argued. "Two day tellers, one night guard." He was flipping a coin and catching it, flipping it and catching it.

Slythe told him to put it away.

"Reflection," he said, and pointed to the sun. "Goodland, eh?" He eyed Phil curiously. "Can you fend?"

"Fend?"

"In case we're interrupted getting away. You ride across the front of the pursuing horses, and spook 'em."

"Sure I can fend." He didn't want to fend in Goodland, though; he wanted to do it in his own town, on his own terms. He named his town and said, "The bank there is built of cardboard. I spotted it coming north. And besides, there's more prosperity around there than there is in Goodland."

Slythe glanced at Jug. Jug beckoned the other two, and the four of them walked away from Phil. He ambled close to Slythe's horse and was able to see the disassembled Winchester .44-40 packed behind the cantle in a tarp. He was greedy for that gun, he wanted to use it back

home and show the townsfolks how a rifle was expertly handled at close quarters—from the hip, with Kentucky windage.

Slythe and Jug came back and Slythe asked, "What else do you know about this town? "

"It's ripe for the taking. You'd have to reconnoiter Goodland, but I can tell you all you'll need to know about this place."

Jug said, "We had occasion to be near it recently, an' it might still be kind've warm."

Phil narrowed his small mouth in thought, frowning. Then he nodded.

"That must be why all the able gunmen are down along the Purgatoire."

"The Purgatoire?" Slythe and Jug said together.

"Heading into New Mexico for some rustlers." Phil looked steadily at Nat Slythe. "So now would be a fine time to hit."

Slythe considered that; it made good sense. "Lightning never strikes twice in the same place, eh?"

"It don't have to," Jug told him. "Lissen, Nat, just 'cause we turned them cows loose on the Chacuaco don't mean we got to go back for more. I say Goodland's a better place 'cause it's—"

"Shut up, Jug," Slythe said easily. He caught his upper lip in his lower teeth and half-closed his eyes. "I think Runner has the best idea. The sheriff down there's no damned good, he's only a ridden-out antique they keep around to dust the office with. And if all his deputies are south of there. . . ." His voice roamed off.

Jug said, "Runner, what's your interest in this place, anyway? Got a grudge?"

"No," Phil said simply. "I need the money." His thoughts went to Marble John, but only for an instant. Then there rose in his mind the image of Charlotte Fenwick and a little flicker of guilt nagged his conscience.

He thought of all the good times they had had together, and of all the good times she was going to have, and the guilt flickered like a little flame nibbling at the edge of a piece of damp paper. Something had passed out of him, and he felt that he couldn't enjoy himself, again, ever. Virtue by defect. Abstinence by nausea.

"Let's get going," Nat Slythe said.

"East?" Jug asked eagerly.

"South." Slythe took his horse and mounted. "You poke ahead, Runner. We came into this section from the other direction and we don't know the trails too well."

THE AIR was thin, like the radiant heat from a fire. There was no body to it; a man's lungs couldn't bite into it. The smell of dust was constant; it lay like talcum on Phil's face and ate into the skin around his eyes, smarting them to tears. He rode for a distance with his mouth open, feeling himself starved for wind, and then the dust caked his throat. Up to his right, the hills were like crumpled tin under the sun.

The file of five riders furnished the only life in a punishing day; nothing else in this land stirred, nothing else made sound, and Phil Holderlin wondered why his father had loved it so—had, indeed, died for it.

In the middle of the burning afternoon he came without warning to the beginnings of a great hollow that worked its way southward between rising ridge walls. The trail threaded the bottom of the hollow and curved from sight, and Phil headed down toward it, remembering it with the thought of water. There was a creek somewhere ahead, a sluggish watercourse murmuring between sandy banks with watercress growing in the few shady spots.

Nonetheless he considered turning around, thinking, *This is a hell of a place to be in if that posse finds us.* But his thirst could not overcome his caution, the notion of extra riding was too much; so he continued forward half-listening for the crack of a gun to roll out of some niche above.

The trail curved again and came to the creek, and Phil dismounted and turned his horse into it. Then he dropped belly flat and drank in steady gusts, rooting his face and head into the water. He had to force himself away from that luxury, and he felt its coolness die as he traveled on with the others, filing behind.

Darkness found them in a narrow coulee. Phil felt dryness again gluing his throat together. His muscles ached with the tension of waiting for trouble, his nerves were tight and hot and he needed a drink—a strong one.

Nat Slythe shook his head.

"I don't carry it when I'm working. In this business, you never know when you'll have to shoot straight and shoot fast." It was the first time Phil had ever heard him mention his calling, however obliquely.

The smells of sage and dust drifted steadily past them and coyotes were lifting their half-howl and half-yip along the desert and mystery swept in from the dark horizons, the mystery of space and wildness. Phil pulled off his boots and lay awake against the wall of the coulee, not yet able to sleep. He was grateful for his brush jacket now; it did more than attest to the Trinity country, it continued to keep out the cold.

There was no moon. The stars were clear and thick, lighting the vast dome of creation from rim to rim. They were faraway reminders of life quickly lived and too soon ended, and for Phil Holderlin they grew nearer and nearer.

These were the stars he had watched as a boy, with wonder and with the nameless dread their mystery always brings to youth which hates mystery. These stars had guided him through his reckless twenty-some years with cold and unreachable constancy, nor had all his querulous ponderings ever brought him nearer to the answer. But it no longer mattered; the dread was

gone and in its place was a determined man's willingness to gamble his luck in that mystery.

He was giving way to lassitude now, but still did he cling to the last shreds of wakefulness, tardily aware why Old Bull Holderlin had chosen this country as his church. The awareness was not unpleasant, and Phil carried it into slumber with him.

Daylight was a yellow pulse in the low east when they filed south again. Horses sneezed and saddles squeaked, warming to the weight of cold butts, and gear clacked dryly through the half-light. They rode sulky and slow-witted from sleep; they rode in dismal silence until the sun rose fully, when Nat Slythe spurred ahead to Phil and suggested a change in approach.

"How far's this town from here? Coming from this direction?"

"Twenty miles, give or take one."

"That makes it a matter of timing." Slythe called Jug to him and said, "Twenty miles to go. Shall we take it in daylight or wait until tonight?"

Jug was sour on the whole idea.

"Ask Runner, he's the one who thought of it."

Slythe looked at Phil.

"What would you do?" There was a kindredness in his expression, as if he could well understand the corsair spirit in this stranger chafing at the small rules of the world he found himself in, not liking them at all.

"It's undefended, so what's the difference?"

Jug said, "If we hit it today, the chances of meeting the posse coming back'll be less than if we wait 'til later."

Phil studied his face a moment, his mind tight with close thinking.

"What makes you so sure the posse'll be back this soon? The lower reaches of the Purgatoire are a long way off."

"And when was the posse last seen on the Purgatoire—as you call it? The right name is Picketwire."

"About a week ago," Phil said, sensing the trap. "And in Texas, we call it the Purgatoire."

"All right, Tex," Nat Slythe said quietly. "The posse should be scouting north by this time, the way we've been. They've found the loose cows by now, and if they've got any sense they'll realize we've doubled back." He almost smiled. "We sure parlayed that six-hour head start into a two-day lead.

Jug was doubtful. "There'll be more than one posse after us, Nat. I say, let's hit this bank right away if we're goin' to hit it at all, then get lost in the Cherokee Outlet."

"No," Slythe decided. "I like to work at night. We'll take our time today, and have the horses in better shape for the getaway. Runner, describe this town to us. We've only been near it, never in it."

PHIL DESCRIBED it as they rode, but always did an old picture accompany each new word, so that he was seeing the past while delineating the present. He saw himself walking barefooted with his dog Runner bouncing along at his side, sometimes leading him and sometimes flanking him but never trailing him; he saw little Phil Holderlin tip-toeing into the spring house behind the restaurant for some of the forbidden delights contained in the crock of sugar water, and he saw him waiting in his room at the ranch later with his breeches down, waiting for his father to come up and larrup him for stealing that sugar water.

Sunlight in the green arches of the cottonwoods, and spindly Charlotte Fenwick dressed in white gingham with pink sashes, starched for church and with a ribbon in her hair. Rance standing on one foot and blushing horribly as Phil stole up behind her and kissed her braids. Fenstermacher's General Store, smelling of pine sap

and varnish, with broad and genial Fenstermacher himself offering a twist of licorice with each ten-cent purchase. And the loft overheard where the weekly dances were held, and that had the same paper flowers in it from one year to the next. And the bank being built, scantling by scaffold, stone by stone. . . .

"So it shouldn't be hard," Phil finished. "We can shinny up the drain-pipe in back and cut through the roof, then lower the stuff on ropes."

Nat Slythe was delighted.

"Sounds to me like you've been in this line of work before."

"I've been around." Quick in him was the thought that if the posse did return, he'd never get away with this, that he'd be branded forever as a thief and lie in an unmarked grave in the Strangers' Ground—unless Rance chose to erect a headstone. But Rance wouldn't, his gray eyes would harden and he'd say, "Phil? Phil's not around any more."

Phil said, "Nat, we'd better lay up here awhile. Town's not far ahead." He hoped that the stars would be out tonight, although he didn't want a moon. Stars were good for this sort of work but a moon showed you too clearly to people who'd be watching for you to make a false move.

The western sky burst into broad flame and grew cold and the land turned gray-silver. The wind moved from the north, already cool, furrowing the grasses as it passed.

Nat Slythe grasped the cheek strap of his horse. "Ready?"

They swung up into their saddles as if on command, eager now to start the job and get it done. Slythe and Phil rode in front with Jug directly behind them, and the other two trailing at the rear. Phil set the pace, unable to get rid of his haste. All through that day and the preceding night a loneliness had worked its way into him, strumming on nerves that were fiddle-string taut and giving him the notion that listening ears were everywhere around him and that men were rushing violently toward him.

"Easy," Slythe growled. "Easy."

Phil tightened his bridles and slowed the pace. A cold sweat was on him, damping his shirt and breaking along his thighs. At the end of the main street, where the dust lay underfoot like flaked silver in the starlight, they stopped while Slythe unbuckled his tarp and assembled his Winchester.

Suddenly he frowned suspiciously and pointed toward Fenstermacher's loft.

"What the hell?"

A dozen rigs were at the rack in front, the loft was lighted and from inside came the rhythmic strains of a piano and violin playing a waltz.

"Hey, Runner, we're in luck. They're all at a dance!" He loaded the Winchester and thrust it down through the leather ring socket on his saddle.

The soft desert darkness of the street was broken only by the higher lights from Fenstermacher's loft and, nearer, by the lone light in the sheriff's office.

Trotting hurriedly, they made a sharp turning movement toward the bank. Phil fended against Slythe, bumping his horse, and a hard luminescence strengthened along his eyeballs as he snatched the Winchester from its ring socket and clapped it to his hip.

"Good-by, Nat."

Slythe, utterly astonished, went for his hand gun but he never drew it. The Winchester exploded and Slythe sagged and clung to his saddle horn desperately.

Phil presented the rifle at Jug and fired again even as Jug fired, cried faintly and toppled out of his saddle.

The other two riders snapped out of their frozen shock and their arms lifted and their guns slammed gusts of sound against the town walls. Phil made a sharp pivot and tagged one man and took the other bullet squarely through his chest and fell without noise into the cushioning dust.

He sighed a little and found somewhere a last fragment of tigerlike energy that raised the rifle against the remaining man and they fired together. Phil's body jerked to the impact of the second bullet and the other man dropped from his frightened horse like he'd been sledged.

Men came running, fanned out and wary; Dr. Van Zandt beckoned the hesitant night deputy and they lifted Phil and carried him into the sheriff's office.

Rance came in then, speaking over his shoulder to Charlotte. He tried to close the door on her but she kicked it open and followed him to where Phil was lying.

He was white with dust and caked wet in the armpits with sweat through his brush jacket, and his face was drawn to the bones in pain. But he winked up at Rance as if in perpetuation of a long-standing family joke and turned over his hand, palm upward, drawing Rance's hand to it.

Dr. Van Zandt tried to think of something suitable to say, but he didn't get the chance because Charlotte said it for him.

"Isn't that just like Phil—breaking up a dance?"

Rance led her out and together they breasted the awed crowd and climbed into their rig and started toward the small white frame house set deep in cottonwoods on a side street. Finally Rance said, "He knew he'd be killed." He thought, *A gesture without honor for the theft of honor.* "We'll bury him next to dad, where he belongs."

Charlotte sat close to him, her eyes dry, her mouth serene, her dream still intact. ✪ ✪ ✪

CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

By HALLACK McCORD

(Answers on page 111)

HOWDY, *hombre!* How's your knowledge of the rangeland holding up these days? Pretty fair? Then see how many of the following Western brain teasers you can throw and hog-tie. Answer fifteen or more of them correctly, and you're in the expert class. Answer thirteen or fourteen and you're good. But answer fewer than a dozen, and you land smack in the tenderfoot group. Good luck, *hombre!*

1. True or false? Arbuckle's coffee was a brand well-known on the range.
2. True or false? Near the Mexican border, the term *barboque jo* was sometimes used to refer to the chin strap on a cow puncher's hat.
3. If a cowpoke friend of yours told you you were "barking at a knot," what would he mean you were doing?
4. True or false? The term, "bedding out," was once used in reference to the roundup season.
5. True or false? The term, *caballada,* means "herd of cows."
6. True or false? The spur known as a "California drag rowel" has a rowel which drags the ground when the wearer is on foot.
7. If the ranch boss sent you out for a "calico horse," which one of the following animals should you return with? A pinto horse? A rangeland dress form? A lady bar tender?
8. What is a "chuck-line rider"?
9. True or false? A "churn-dash calf" is so named because it is liberally fed on butter.
10. True or false? The cowpoke traditionally uses the term, "critter," to refer only to small animals such as a goat, sheep, etc.
11. True or false? A "dogie" is an anemic calf that has not wintered well.
12. The cow puncher uses the expression "fodder forker" for what well-known Western individual?
13. If the ranch boss sent you out for the "gentler," which of the following should you return with? A six-shooter? The local school marm? An animal used to neck to a wilder one?
14. True or false? The expression "gimlet" is used in reference to the act of riding a horse so that its back becomes sore.
15. What is the meaning of the cowpoke slang expression, "to hairpin?"
16. What does the rangeland expression "a hundred and sixty" refer to?
17. If a cowpoke friend of yours told you he was looking for the "long-eared chuck wagon," what item would you think he was seeking?
18. True or false? "Lump oil" is a rangeland expression used for kerosene or coal.
19. What is cow-camp etiquette when the cry, "man at the pot" goes up?
20. What is the meaning of the western slang term, "trap a squaw."

THE LONG RIDER

By
GENE MARKEY

Coldly she said, "I can shoot, mister. An' I will!"

Shan figured he'd be able to hole-up at the ranch by the mountainside and then head west when the posse lost his trail. But he hadn't figured on a pretty girl reaching his heart—with something deadlier than bullets!

TEN DAYS ago he had come upon the Army outfit, camped along the Powder—more troops than he had seen since '65. From a distance Shan Kenvir had sighted their supply boat, *The Far West,* tied up. Coming closer he had recognized a Seventh Cavalry guidon and had ridden into the bivouac. A chance meeting with an old comrade from his Ohio regiment, Mose Teel, now a sergeant in the Seventh, made clear what was up. General Terry was leading an all-out campaign against the Sioux under Crazy Horse, Gall, Two Moons and Red Cloud, gathered in force somewhere between the Rosebud and the Bighorn.

That night Mose had pointed out the Seventh's commander, Colonel Custer, gaunt and long-haired in stained buckskins, striding past their cook-fire. Shan, watching Custer, had felt a stir of respect for this intrepid fighter, who had been the "boy general" at the close of the war. For an instant a wild idea flickered in Shan's mind: to re-enlist. Often during the eleven years he had hankered to go back to soldiering. Nothing had ever quite taken the place of that turbid excitement, not even the life he had led with Red Mowry, Little Sam and Indian Joe, drifting back and forth across Texas and territories. But when Sergeant Teel offered to see the adjutant about re-enlisting him—or taking him on as a mule-packer—Shan remembered his rendezvous with Red.

Red had been holed up in the Antelope Hills since the Cheyenne job, and they were to meet June 15 outside Rock Springs. Abruptly—too abrubtly, maybe—Shan told Mose Teel that he had changed his mind; and Mose knew better than to ask questions. After bacon and coffee with the cavalrymen, Shan had saddled up and left their camp.

He had crossed the Powder and cut down into Wyoming Territory, keeping to eastward of hostile country. As he rode the thought of joining up with Custer plagued him. He had an uneasy feeling it was a mistake to keep the rendezvous at Rock Springs.

That had been ten days ago—and now he knew what a fatal mistake he had made. Reining the spent mare, he pushed back his hat, wiped sweat from his eyes and listened. From below rose thudding hoof-beats. He could hear old Tom Slade yelling to the posse to split where the trail forked. The next twenty minutes would decide it; either he'd get up this mountain and find shelter—or they would take him. The one cartridge left in his .45 couldn't do much good. And if they took him they would hang him before sundown. A cold emptiness slid into the pit of his stomach. Red had said once that Shan Kenvir never felt fear. But Red lay dead now, back in the town. He could never know what Shan felt, seeing a cottonwood in his mind and something dangling from it.

Grim, sweat-wet, he hunched forward and dug his spurs into the trembling mare. She had gone lame and she was finished—but she made a frantic scramble up the rocky trail. Behind him mens' voices, shrill with blood-lust, rose in the thin clear air. He raked the mare with his spurs and she struggled, grunting, up the steep slope. Then her hoofs hit shale; she slipped and fell heavily. Shan sprang clear as she went down. She rolled, trying to get up, and he saw the broken leg. Terror and agony flared from her eyes but she made no scream.

Moving quickly, instinctively, Shan grabbed the bridle and urged her to her feet. Tugging at one rein, he led her off the trail into a stand of pines, the mare hobbling after him on three legs. He halted. She stood shivering with pain and bewilderment as he drew his .45. He could hear pounding hoofs below, and suddenly knew he could not risk the sound of a shot. Holstering the gun he pulled out his hunting-knife, and with his other hand felt for her throat. Women—men, too, on occasion—had told him there was no pity in him, yet he could not look at the mare's eyes as he gripped his knife. When it was over the animal crashed into the bushes. Swiftly he unbuckled his heavy spurs and hurled them, clinking, into the undergrowth. Then he ran out through the trees and started climbing, clawing his way over rocks, up to a high ledge above the trail where he could see but not be seen.

They had been gone a good hour. From where he crouched on the ledge he had watched Slade the sheriff and five posse men studying the trail near the pines. Rocks and shale showed no horse-signs; on the softer ground no hoof-prints led upward.

Holding his breath, the forty-five in his hand, Shan had heard old Tom Slade say, "Boys, he sure never come this way." Then they had turned back and disappeared down the trail, silent but for the creak of leather and the jingle of bit-chains.

Only when he heard them reach the road at the foot of the mountain did he relax and put a cigarette together in his brown hands. Leaning against the sun-warm ledge, he inhaled deeply and figured his move. He could not go back the way he had come. Posses would be covering every wagon-track and trail around the town. He must get over this rock pile, down onto the flats and strike east to Bitter Creek where Link Bantry had a cabin. Link would keep him till the ruckus died down, then he could work his way north to the Green Mountains. Once there he would be safe. Other long riders were holed up in the Greens. But first he must find a horse.

He stared up the mountainside at the brassy sun, low over scrub pines. In another couple of hours it would be too dark to travel. Suddenly the slanting sunlight caught a flash of color. Half a mile up, a woman in a blue dress was walking across a clearing. Shan got to his feet and threw away the cigarette.

AT THE spring the girl filled her tin pail, then set it down and stood for a moment frowning at a clump of box elder below in the valley. But she did not see the box elder: she saw the Illinois town from which they had come, a year ago. This was Saturday afternoon—and back home on a Saturday afternoon Main Street was a lively place, with girls walking arm-in-arm, pretending not to notice the boys lounging in front of the harness shop, the postoffice and the frame hotel. Horses and rigs stood at hitch-racks, for all the farmers were in town—and you heard laughing talk along the crowded street, sometimes the music of a fiddle. She had felt alive and happy there; out here in Wyoming Territory she felt only loneliness—no young folks, nothing but empty plains and silent mountains that stretched away to nowhere.

When he brought her and her sister out west Captain Dimmock had promised everything. None of his promises had come true, not even the ranch he had always gabbed about. So here they were, stuck on this barren patch of land—and both Dimmocks laid up, he with his broken leg and Carrie expecting a baby. The baby would not be due till fall, but already Carrie was indulging herself as an invalid.

"Eva-a-a!" a voice whined from the cabin.

Resentment clouded the girl's blue eyes. For months she had been doing all the work—the cooking, the washing, feeding the stock—while those two lolled in the cabin demanding to be waited on hand-and-foot.

"Eva-a-a!"

Rebelliously she pushed the copper-red curls from her freckled forehead. Like as not they wanted their supper. And only a little while ago she had cooked dinner for them. But first the cow had to be milked and the chickens shut in—against coyotes that prowled, screeching and yammering all night. It was more than a body could put up with!

"Eva-a-a!"

She seized the pail of spring water and trudged toward the cabin.

From a thicket Shan Kenvir watched her go in. His quick dark glance had not dwelt on the girl. He was appraising this run-down place—the slab cabin with a mud-patched chimney, the sagging barn, the backhouse that tilted as if a good wind would blow it over. Shiftless nesters lived here.

A horse nickered and Shan's mind snapped back to his own survival. Skirting the barn, he kept out of sight until he came to the corral. In it stood a swaybacked roan with one watch-eye. As he turned to

look for a saddle in the barn he noticed cook smoke feathering up from the cabin. A waft of coffee fragrance reminded him that he had not eaten since yesterday morning. Then he saw the red-haired girl coming along the path. He stepped back watching her enter the lean-to and heard the bawl of a cow in there.

She had set a bucket in place and was pulling a three-leg stool close to the brindle cow when Shan appeared.

"Evenin, ma'am."

She whirled, staring at the tall young man. His hard dark eyes and the stubble of beard on his face were not reassuring, but she felt no fear. In this wild country even the worst men rarely molested a woman. She said nothing, only stared at him.

"Way you go about it, I'd say you don't relish milkin'." He smiled, showing strong white teeth, but the smile had no merriment in it. "Maybe you and me could make a deal."

"What kind of a deal?" Her voice was a whisper.

"Hungrier'n a grizzly," he said. "I'll do the milkin'—for all I can drink."

She moved back. "Go ahead, then."

Shan had not milked a cow since boyhood, back in Ohio. In the West no puncher ever did it. But he sat down now and went to work. While jets of warm milk splattered into the pail, she watched him, her blue eyes curious. After a moment she said, "If you're so hungry, just milk won't help much."

"Coffee'd sweeten it."

Her swirl of coppery curls nodded. "I might fetch some vittles—"

"Mighty kind of you." He gave her a sidelong glance as she turned away. "Better if you don't mention my bein' here to your folks."

Something in his tone halted her. The blue eyes brightened with suspicion. "Where'd you come from?" she asked quietly.

"Yonder." He nodded toward the mountains. The impulse to tell a plausible story passed. "I'm movin' on."

As she looked at him her heart was thumping fast under the firm breasts outlined in blue gingham. Without a word she turned and left the lean-to.

My mistake, he thought, scowling. *She won't come back—she'll figure I'm on the dodge. I've got to find out who's in that cabin.*

HE RELEASED the cow's leathery teats, lifted the pail, and took a long drink of warm sweet milk. Then he set the pail in place, and his fingers went on stripping until the cow had given all she had. That was the bargain he had made with the girl. Red and Little Sam would laugh at him for keeping such a bargain—but Red and Little Sam were dead and his own luck had not run out. Not yet.

He stood up, put the pail on the stool and straightened the heavy holster on his shell-belt. The girl wasn't in sight, and he knew now that she would not come back. But if she—or they, whoever they were—had gone to raise an alarm, they must have gone on foot, for the watch-eye roan was still in the corral.

Shan had started toward the barn to look for a bridle when he saw her hurrying along the path, carrying a plate and a cup. The wary hardness went out of his eyes and puzzlement showed.

Her freckled face was flushed from the stove's heat; she looked almost pretty. "Here." She thrust the plate at him. "It's not much—"

He looked down at the chunk of salt pork, the dollop of greens and the slice of hoe-cake. "I'm obliged."

"Coffee's good an' hot," she said.

He sat down on a stump to eat—but before he took the first mouthful his glance went to her. "Your folks inquire about who you're feedin'?"

"Folks!" Contempt sharpened her voice. "I haven't any folks."

"Who lives here, then?"

"Just my sister," she said, "an' her husband Captain Dimmock."

The tin fork halted in mid-air. "What's he captain of?"

"In the war he was a paymaster."

"Paymaster." Shan grinned. "An' he still calls himself captain?"

"He wants everybody to call him captain." Then with a swift smile she added: "His leg's broke."

That dispelled the cabin threat; Shan could take his time getting out of here. Relieved, he began to eat. "Your brother-in-law sounds like quite a man."

Her pent-up resentment flared. "He's a lazy, shif'less, no-account windbag! Look at this place—" Abruptly she broke off, knowing she should not speak so freely to a stranger.

Shan drank slowly and said, "Finest coffee I've tasted this side of St. Louis."

She made no answer, staring at the tumbled gold clouds where the sun had been—and he saw that she was listening intently. The breeze had died, but now the thin, still air carried a sound up the trail.

"Somebody's comin'." She turned and gave him a searching look.

The situation had changed suddenly. This peaceful moment was shattered, and once more the anxiety of pursuit picked at his nerves. Swallowing the last pinch of hoe-cake, he rose and handed her the empty plate and cup. "Many thanks."

He could not read what was in her eyes. She said nothing, but swung away and hurried toward the cabin.

The barn had a back door, hanging on one strap hinge. Shan stepped in and crossed the dirt floor, noting an old saddle perched on a barrel and a bridle pegged above it. Through a crack he peered out and saw a man riding up the trail. A middle-aged man with a brushy mustache—not one of Slade's posse. He was mounted on a fast-stepping bay; a carbine stuck out of the saddle-boot.

The red-haired girl came to the door.

"Howdy, Eva!" The rider touched his hat brim, spurring his horse to the cabin step.

She answered quietly, without enthusiasm; then a scrawny man on crutches appeared behind her and elbowed her out of the way, shouting, "Ef it ain't Dave Hoag!"

"Howdy, Dimmock."

"Git down an' come in."

"I'm in a hurry."

"Hell, you ain't neighborly," Dimmock complained. "Come in. Supper's on the table."

Shan, listening, caught the lickspit note in the nester's voice; he was currying favor with this man, Hoag.

"I'm due back." Hoag spoke drily, precisely. "They need me for a posse tonight."

"Posse?" the girl said quickly.

"Red Mowry's gang robbed the pay-car at the railroad camp near Rock Springs. Red and his brother, Sam, were killed but two of the outlaws got away. One's a half-breed Indian."

Dimmock gave a startled whistle. "Well, I'll be dog-switched!"

Hoag said, "They won't get far."

"If I hadn't broke my leg," Dimmock puffed, "I'd join that posse, m'self. Like t' see' them two stretch hemp."

Hoag spoke sharply to his dancing horse; then, as if dismissing the nester: "I stopped by to speak to Eva."

"Ha! Figured you young folks'd want to do some courtin'. Soon as it's dark enough!" Dimmock cackled obscenely and shuffled indoors on his crutches. The girl threw a look of contempt after him.

The man on the horse seemed embarrassed. "There's a social in town next Saturday night. I—" he glanced off into the deepening twilight "—I'd like to take you to it."

She frowned without answering. The pause became awkward.

"Well, Eva?"

She stirred suddenly. "That outlaw that got away—"

In the barn Shan Kenvir's hand crept to the .45 at his thigh.

He heard Hoag say, "There were two."

The girl let go a long breath. "I reckon the posse'll take care of 'em."

Hoag swung his pony closer to her. "What about the social?"

"All right," she said listlessly. She turned and went into the cabin. The man wheeled and rode across the clearing.

SHAN, WATCHING from the barn, saw the darkness of the trail fold around horse and rider. He stood without moving until the strike of hoofs died away down the mountain. The girl's behavior had him puzzled. She knew now what he was. Why had she said nothing to Hoag? Could it be that she wanted to protect him? But all this mattered little in the urgency of getting away. His thoughts fastened on the watch-eye roan in the corral. Tonight would be pitch-black; it would be bad getting down the other side of the mountain, where there was no trail.

Abruptly a coal-oil lamp glowed in the cabin window. Then the door opened. She was coming through the dusk, toward the barn. Silently he slipped out the back door, into the shadows of trees. The girl paused by the corral—probably to make sure the horse was still there; then Shan saw her go into the barn. A few seconds later she reappeared, lugging the saddle, with the bridle clinking as she walked. Startlement held him—then it was too late. She had hurried into the cabin. The door banged shut and he heard the clack of a wooden bolt.

Well, she had outmaneuvered him. He leaned against a tree, knowing he had nothing left to get him down the mountain, even with a good horse. A heavy tiredness numbed his body and his brain. No sleep for thirty-nine hours; that and the gunfight and a whole day dodging ahead of the posse had left him dead beat. His customary daring, his caution, even the primal instinct for survival had ebbed. He wanted only to sleep.

In the barn he fumbled to the hay pile and stretched out on it, placing his .45 in his hat beside him. As he dropped into sleep an owl hooted—and he sat up groggily. Then he remembered. There were no Indians hereabouts; it was a real owl. He lay back and slept.

Toward morning a shrill scream woke him. He clambered up, sweating, the .45 in his hand, and went to the door. The cabin was a black patch in the starlight. From it a woman's voice wailed, "Or-rin! Eva-a-a!" Then a light flashed in the window. As Shan stood breathing deep, the chill air swept the fog from his head. He could hear them moving around inside. "I'm going to die!" The woman moaned.

"Now, Carrie!" Dimmock's voice.

"I know I'm going to die!"

Shan heard the girl trying to comfort her—but the woman's whine rose higher. "Outlaws! We'll all be killed in our beds! Oh, why did I ever let you bring me out to this God-forsaken wilderness!"

"Now, Carrie—"

"I never wanted to come here! Never! If I die it's your fault, Orrin Dimmock!" She was hysterical now. "I don't know why I ever married you! My folks warned me—"

"Now, Carrie," her husband pleaded.

"I can't stand it! I'll die in childbirth—like my poor mother did!"

"Carrie," the girl's voice cut through, "you're not going to die. The baby'll be months yet. Now, drink this—"

"You're as heartless as him!"

For a sick woman, Shan thought, her lungs were mighty powerful. He turned away, understanding what the girl's life must be, waiting on this tyrannical self-made invalid who was afraid to have her

baby. He even felt sorry for the no-account captain.

The mountains to eastward were graying—then suddenly it was dawn. The moment for getting out of here had come. He stepped back into the barn and searched in the litter on the dirt floor until he found part of an old rat-chewed strap. Quickly he hunkered down and began tying bits of twine to it, forming a makeshift hackamore.

THE WOMAN'S hysteria had abated. The cabin was quiet now. Shan's fingers, knotting the pieces of twine, slowed. Something was bothering him. For years he had not been aware of possessing a conscience. In the untamed west to which he had drifted in '67 it was easy for a man's better nature to develop a callous, and even had he desired, he would have found it difficult to trace the steps which had led him to be a long rider. Across the remote cattlelands of Texas there were plenty of individuals not too squeamish about putting a rope on another man's steer . . . plenty of experts at brand changing. Often a cowpuncher making a trail-drive knew that the herd contained stolen critters—and cared little. It was a common practice . . . a crime or a game, depending on the way you looked at it. Shan, restless after the fighting and marauding of four war years, had found it a game. And once "on the rustle," it was only a jump to becoming an outlaw.

Hunkered in the doorway of the nester's barn, he gazed at the bright dawn rising out of the east. He was remembering another June morning, at Red Mowry's ranch on the Brazos. Red had had a good little spread, a thousand head of longhorns, mostly his own—and when word came that J. T. Ellery, the Fort Worth banker, was foreclosing on a legal technicality, taking the place lock, stock, and barrel, they had all felt downhearted. Shan liked Red: the best boss he had ever known. He liked Little Sam, Red's brother, and Indian Joe,

their other hand, a half-breed Kiowa. This was the first time Shan had ever seen big Red defeated. The giant with the carrot beard and the steady blue eyes could outfight and outshoot any man who'd stand up to him; but Ellery, with his legal trickery, had done him in. It was the last breakfast there and they were all feeling low about it—when Little Sam walked into the kitchen where they ate. Shan could see him now . . . the bald head too big for his scrawny, short-legged body, the sharp black eyes glowing. Red had the brawn, but his brother had the brains—leastwise when he was sober. He had told them his plan; and looking back, Shan recalled that none of them had been much startled. It sounded so simple and right. "The Good Book says, 'an eye for an eye an' a tooth for a tooth," Little Sam had stated. "Man's got a right to defend hisself. This cuss Ellery over to Fort Worth is stealin' what's ourn. Thing for us to do is sashay over there an' even things up!"

That was how the plan for robbing the Fort Worth bank had been born. The boldness of it had appealed to them—and no one considered ethics or morals. "An eye for an eye" was good enough in those lawless days after the war.

This remembrance fled across Shan's mind in the passage of a few seconds. Four wild years had followed the Fort Worth bank jobs. There was no turning back. Train robberies and holdups of stages carrying bullion; Red and Little Sam and himself and Indian Joe ranging across Texas and the territories, shooting their way out of towns and mining-camps, pursued for weeks by posses, holing up for months in the mountains; always on the dodge, always with reward money offered for their capture. Throughout those reckless years Death had ridden at Shan Kenvir's stirrup, and half a dozen times he had been wounded. Yet his luck held.

Two days ago he had seen old Red fall under blasting gunfire at the railroad-camp. He'd seen Little Sam, both legs riddled, trying to mount a crazed pony when two bullets ripped into him and he rolled into the ditch. Already Indian Joe was riding for the hills. Shan had crawled to Red then and tried to lift him, only to find that he was dead. So there was nothing to do but run back, zig-zag through flaming crossfire, to catch his mare and streak out of the camp.

Living those hell-hot minutes again, he sweated, his hands shook—and the hackamore dropped to the dirt. He snatched it up and rose quickly. That old life was over—finished and done for. No going back to it now: nothing left to go back to. What had been bothering him was the red-haired girl! Plain loco to think about her—or to worry about taking her horse. *Get out fast,* his lips said, *or get your neck stretched.*

HE HURRIED down to the corral and slid through the gate. The gaunt roan eyed him suspiciously, then gave a shrill nicker and bolted to the far end. Cursing softly, Shan followed—and when he had cornered the horse, gripped its mane. As he slipped the hackamore over the bony Roman nose he heard the girl's voice behind him.

"Stand back."

She was at the gate, holding an old Sharps rifle level with his stomach. Its barrel, he saw, was steady and her eyes blazed anger. The saddle lay at her feet.

She said—with a coldness which he had to admire: "I can shoot, mister. An' I will." She took a step toward him. "Toss your gun here."

Disgusted at himself, his mouth twisted in a wry smile. He pulled the .45 from his holster and flung it. It fell, lifting a puff of dust midway between them. In that instant he could have killed her—a man of his skill with a six-gun . . . but the impulse did not cross his mind.

Bitter amusement rose in him now. It

was hard to believe that this could have happened. Yet there was the Sharps, held on a line with his belt buckle. He moved back and leaned against the top pole of the corral, watching her with sardonic respect.

Not taking her angry gaze from him—as if she meant to control him as much by force of will as by rifle—she picked up saddle and bridle in her left hand, and came toward the horse. "Hold still, Charley."

To Shan's surprise the animal made no attempt to evade her. She dropped the saddle and, keeping Shan covered, slipped the bridle over the roan's head. The bit gave her some trouble, but she managed it—then her deft fingers buckled the throat-latch.

Watching her, he thought what a fine capable wife she would make some rancher. That starchy fellow Hoag—the one who had stopped by last night . . . maybe there was already an understanding between them. Somehow the thought of it scratched Shan. As she stooped and with one hand lifted the heavy saddle, he spoke. "I'd be glad to cinch-up for you."

"You stay where you are," she told him.

She threw the saddle onto the roan's back ,and for a flickering second her eyes left Shan while she reached for the latigo strap. He made no move, but he realized she was not going to be able to cinch-up with one hand and hold that rifle on him with the other. As she fumbled with the strap he saw exasperation deepen the color of her freckled cheeks.

"Better let me help you," he suggested mildly.

The blue eyes flared. "I don't want any help from you!"

He grinned. The madder she got, the prettier she was! "Then let me hold the rifle," he said. "You need two hands."

She turned on him. "You're not so comical!"

"No," he said, "I'm practical."

"The posse'll take care of you."

"So you're fixin' to go after the posse?"

"I'm goin' after the doctor," she snapped. "For my sister."

His shoulders relaxed against the corral, and he took a paper and a sack of tobacco from one shirt pocket. Rolling the cigarette, he said, "Your sister don't need a doctor."

She stared at him intently, but made no answer.

He licked his cigarette together, struck the match and took a deep inhale. "What that lady needs is a hard day's washin'," he said. "She'd ought to get out an' milk the cow—like she'd have to do if you wasn't here to wait on her."

The girl frowned and bit her lip. He saw that she was thinking it over. Then he added: "Draggin' a doctor up here for her is plumb foolish. She's no more sick than you are."

"That's none of your affair!"

"It's a powerful lot my affair," he answered. "I need the horse."

THE EFFRONTERY of it took her breath. Then she hurled her anger at him: "Outlaws like you! Stealin' an' killin'—spoilin' the country so decent folks can hardly live here! I hope that posse tracks you down an' hangs you!"

He smiled with mockery. "Thanks."

"You'll see! Some day this territory'll be settled—an' the law'll be strong enough to drive out all your kind!"

He blew a high cloud of smoke. "I agree with you."

A somber seriousness showed in the set of his mouth. "Law an' order will come, like you say—an' it'll come soon." He straightened up. "That's why I got a far piece to travel."

He started toward her. She dropped the latigo-strap, gripping the rifle with both hands. "Get back."

He took another step. She had gone pale; her finger was on the trigger. "Keep away—"

(Continued on page 110)

Blabber-Mouth

Buckaroo

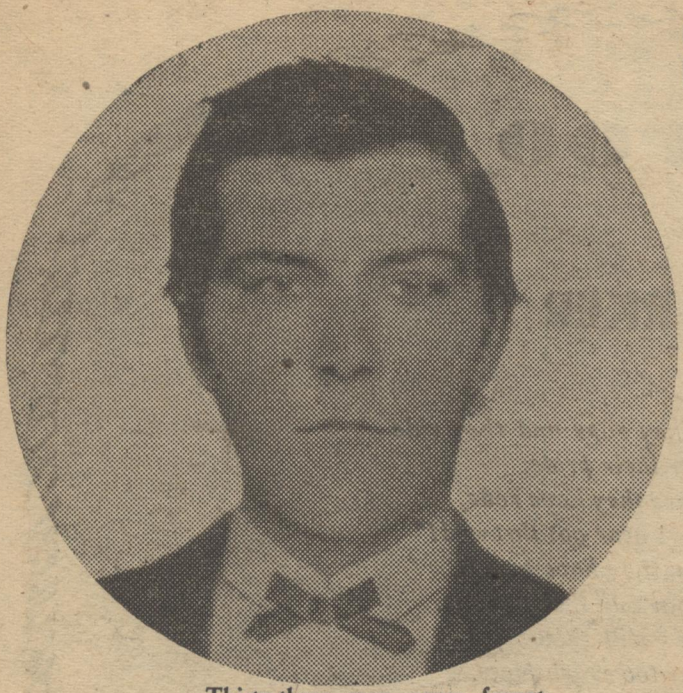
By
S. OMAR BARKER

Most cowboys ain't braggers. They rope and they ride
Without no self-praisin' to bolster their pride.
When speakin' of man-killin' broncs they have rode,
They'll freely admit that they "purt near got throwed!"
They'll win a big ropin', and when they have won it,
Insist that their hoss was the main one that done it.
They figger true buckaroo makin's will show
In case you have got 'em, without too much blow.

But once in awhile there will happen along
Some cowpoke that sure loves to sing his own song.
He's rode the worst broncs, he has heard the owl hoot,
He's prob'ly learned even Bill Hickok to shoot!
His tongue flaps around like a banner unfurled,
To let all hands know he's the wolf of the world.
He'll boast and he'll brag till you're ready to vow
He's got more loose lip than an ol' muley cow.

It ain't very often, of course, that you'll find
A cowpoke that's one of the big-windy kind,
But when one appears you can purty sure bet
The others will learn him some camp etiquette!
They'll rawhide him, razz him, ignore him and balk him,
Or throw in together and try to out-talk him.
For one thing most cowpokes don't like worth a shuck,
Is a blabber-mouthed hombre that "drowned the duck!"

SATAN



Thirty-three men never forgot this handsome face—John Wesley Hardin as a young man.

There's a heap of stories about Billy the Kid and Jesse James... But here's a tale about the deadliest outlaw the West ever knew—a story thirty-three men never lived to tell!

HOW TIMES have changed! Today the most notorious gunman of the nineteenth century wouldn't stand a chance. No man, like John Wesley Hardin, could kill thirty-three men, many of them peace officers and soldiers, and get away with it for more than a few days. Yet this Texas badman, who killed his first man at the age of fifteen, spent ten years roaming the Southwest with blazing guns to become the Number One recorded lawless killer of all time.

The age was slow; the pace fast. Crime was rampant. A man could kill and get away with it until he was killed. Today, because of modern police coordination, a gunman like Wes Hardin would lose on the first round.

John Wesley Hardin was the son of a Methodist preacher and the grandson of John Wesley, famed founder of Methodism. He was born too late to be a soldier in the Civil War. The only thing he knew about fighting was the backwash of those terrible days that followed the war between the states.

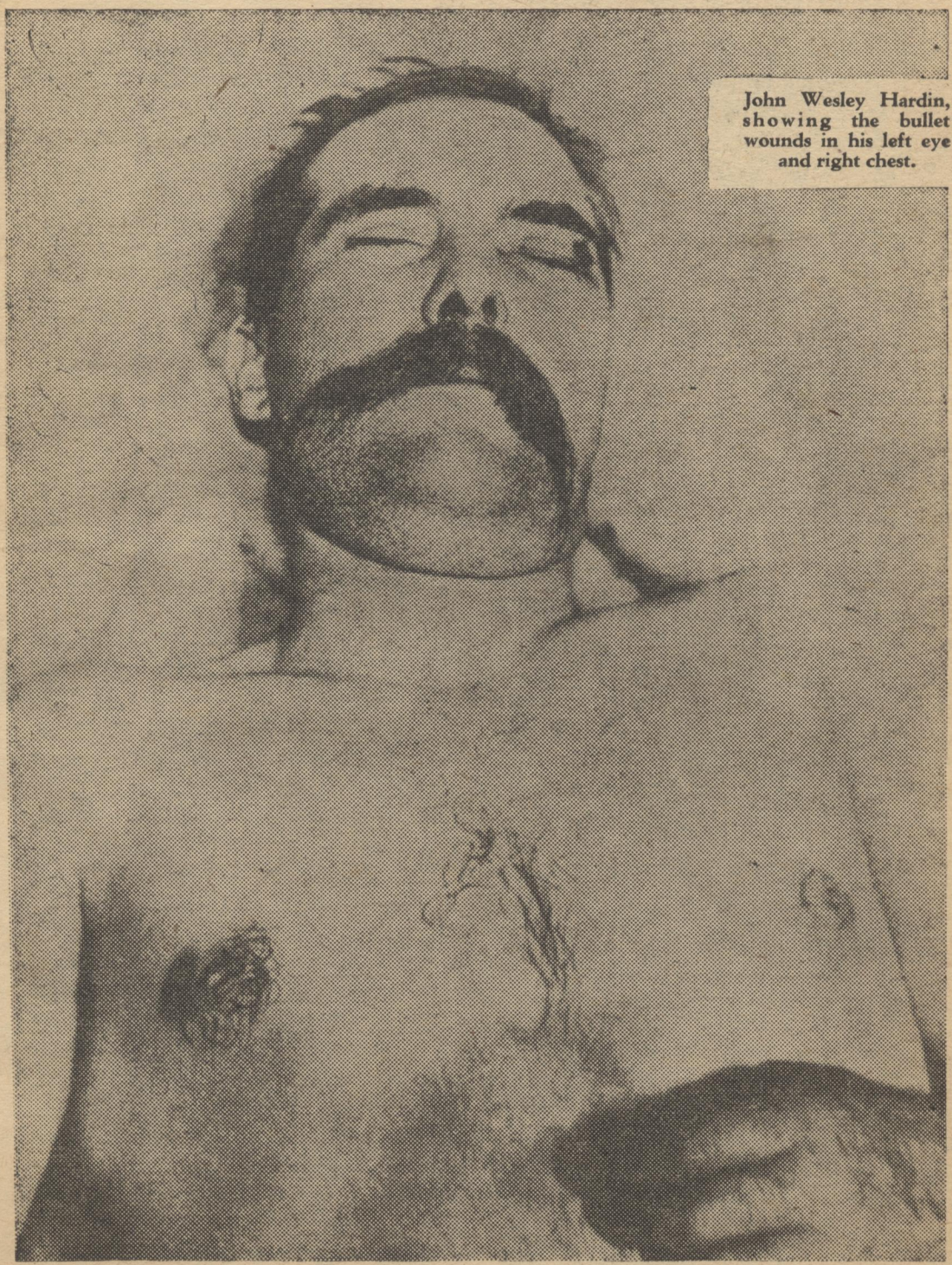
Wes was only twelve years of age when that war ended. Carpetbaggers and Negro police were overrunning the East Texas bottom lands. Settlers were burning Abraham Lincoln in effigy. Wes Hardin was a part of this rebellion. His father spared neither prayer nor rod to give the boy guidance.

But Wes had learned too much about hate. In 1868 he killed his first man, a Moscow Negro, in the river bottoms with an old cap and ball pistol. An uncle gave him a twenty dollar gold piece and told him to get out of the country. Wes took the old cap and ball .44 and followed the North Star and winding creeks far back into the state.

Three soldiers were sent out after him and they followed him for days in a game of tag. Finally he ambushed the soldiers and shot two off their horses. The third fled with Wes hot on his heels and a rebel

RIDES SOUTH

By L. A. WILKE



John Wesley Hardin, showing the bullet wounds in his left eye and right chest.

cry in his throat, shouting his vengeance.

"Surrender in the name of the Southern Confederacy."

The soldier didn't surrender. Wes buried the three and continued on his way into the little town of Pigsa in Central Texas where his brother Joe lived. Pigsa had a store, a cattle loading pen and a school, but no teacher.

He had learned well at the knees of his preacher father and choir singing mother, so he took the job. He taught a class of boys and girls, many of them older in years but not in the ways of the world. He made a good teacher and the pupils liked him. But Wes couldn't play with them. When school was out in the afternoon he headed for the cattle loading pens. There he met men, older men—law dodgers like himself.

From them Wes learned to gamble—cards, chicken fights, dog fights, fast horses, or spitting at marks in the dark. Wes was lucky.

But an uncanny ability at gambling was no match for fate. When that unseen hand tossed the dice they were always loaded.

Frank Polk, a loading pen loafer, killed a man. Soldiers were sent out to get him. Wes learned of this and knew they would be after him, too. He slipped his gun from under his shirt and dropped it to the scabbard at his hip.

Simp Dixon, a cousin, teamed up with him. They waylaid the soldiers and killed two in a surprise attack. Wes had another notch on his gun.

He had to move again.

"Let's go down on the Brazos," his brother Joe said. "There perhaps all the family can get together again." Wes listened and in 1869 the family was reunited. Wes, however, was still a wanted man. He had killed five men. He was a long way from the East Texas bottoms, and unless more soldiers came he wasn't particularly worried. So far all his killings, except of the Negro, had been soldiers.

On Christmas day Wes borrowed his father's horse to go to the store. He found some men who thought they had faster horses. Lady Luck rode with him and he won seventy-five dollars.

"Let's play poker," someone suggested. Wes soon had won all the money in the game. As he raked in the last coin, Jim Bradley, an Arkansas bully, came up with a gun. He took over the money and forced Wes to leave the place without his boots. There they stood, the bully from Arkansas and a beardless boy. Bradley attempted a hip shot and missed. Young Hardin's bullet caught him in the heart. Wes now had killed a man who wasn't a soldier.

At his father's house he got a shotgun and hit out for the Brazos bottoms where he outsmarted a posse and got away. He went back to Pigsa and resumed school teaching.

In the spring a circus came to the little farming community. What boy can stay away from a circus? John Wesley Hardin, who had killed a half dozen men, became a boy again. In the cages were animals he'd never seen. He stumbled over stake ropes as he groped in the flickering light of the kerosene lanterns.

He bumped into a circus worker. His boyish apology was profuse.

"Watch where you are going or the next time I'll smash you in the nose," the man told the boy.

"Smash and be damned," Wes said. "I'm a kind of smasher myself."

"So you are?" The circus man slapped at the boy, reaching for his gun. He was number seven.

Wes took the back trails to Kosse, where the inevitable happened. He met a girl and made a date. That night when he called at the girl's home another boy was there, too. He threatened Wes, who again was profuse with apologies.

"Then if you are sorry give me a hundred dollars or I'll kill you." Wes started counting out the money. A coin slipped from his hand and fell to the floor. The

bully reached for it. When he raised his head he was looking squarely into the barrel of a gun.

Without so much as telling the girl goodby Wes left her standing there in the room with the body of her boy friend. Wes now had killed three white civilians. The state law was looking for him. In our modern times the alarm would flash from El Paso to the Sabine, but in those days word passed by word of mouth slowly.

THIS TIME he went to Brenham. For months he gambled and put away money. In August he heard his brother was to get a diploma at Round Rock, a hundred miles away. An old school teacher was there, with whom they both had attended school in the early sixties. Wes rode there and after attending one day he was graduated with honors in the same class as his brother. He was only twenty miles from Austin, the capital, where state police had been told to get him.

He dodged the police and got back to his father's home.

"Get out of the state, Wes," his father advised him. "You've killed and the Bible says we must not kill. Our laws say you must not kill, either. I know you wouldn't stand a fair chance. Get away. Maybe some day the Democrats will get back in control and you can come back and be a free man and live a useful life."

Wes headed his horse for Louisiana. At Marshall, just a few miles from the state line, state police caught him. They put heavy irons on his feet and took him to the jail at Waco.

Somebody smuggled in a gun. He hid it under his shirt. Two guards, Captain Stokes and a quarter-breed Negro, Smolly, were to take him to Austin for trial. They beat him along a rain-soaked trail for two days. Smolly rode behind him most of the time, daring Wes to run. On the third evening and only a few miles out of Austin they stopped for camp. Captain Stoker went out to cut some feed for the horses and left Smolly to guard the prisoner.

Within a few minutes Wes had caught the Negro off guard, slipped the gun from his shirt and killed him. With his handcuffs still on, Wes rode all night to his father's home. Here he got rid of the cuffs, took a fresh horse and started out for Mexico.

Captain Stokes spread the word of his escape. Wes had ridden only a few miles when three men, Jones, Davis, and Smith, grabbed him. It was a great capture and they had to celebrate.

Wes was able to get close enough to one to grab a gun and killed all three as fast as he could shoot. By now he had killed a dozen men.

He took his own two pistols from the bodies of the dead men. He walked about them, swearing at his own and at their stupidity. He started crying, and then raised his head to the stars.

"I swear I'll never surrender again at the point of a gun." He said it over and over, but along the line somewhere later he had forgotten the pledge.

Wes rode on to Gonzales. The law was looking hard for him now in all his old territory. At Gonzales he found three cousins of doubtful honor. They were Manning and Joe and Gyp Clements. The four decided they would drive a herd along the trail from Texas to Abilene, Kansas.

Wes had always wanted to be a cowboy. Now the time had come. They gathered cattle and with a herd of twelve hundred they set out across the wide miles of Texas toward the Red River. They fought their way through the Indian territory.

The tribes had sought a ten cent per head bounty for permitting the cattle to cross. Wes thought this was too much money. The Indians threatened to take some of the cattle and Wes warned them the first Indian who cut out a cow would be killed.

Two tried and failed. The others quit.

Just before they were through the territory Mexican bandits came along. Wes killed three of them and took the herd on to Abilene.

Abilene, Kansas! It was wild. There was liquor. Gambling was wide open. There were women. What more could this seventeen year old boy want? And he was out of Texas. In Texas he was a wanted man. In Kansas he became a crony of Marshal Wild Bill Hickok.

Ben Thompson, another Texas killer, had come up there and opened the Bullhead Saloon. Ben and Wild Bill didn't exactly get along. Time after time Ben would warn Wes that some day Wild Bill would get him.

"That man is a damn yankee," Ben would say. "He never kills anyone but southerners and he likes the blood of Texans best."

"I am doing nobody's killing but my own," Hardin told him.

Hardin and the marshal often drank together. Wild Bill showed him a proclamation from the governor of Texas, offering a reward for his arrest.

"Young man, I like you. You are in a lot of trouble now. Don't let Ben Thompson influence you."

Wes stayed on and gambled. Like all the others he wore his six-gun on his hip.

Wild Bill was there to keep law and order. He ordered all to take off their six-shooters.

Hardin said he wouldn't take off his guns for anyone. One day he met the marshal on the board walk in front of the saloon. Wild Bill walked by, drew his gun and whirled.

"Take off those guns! I arrest you!"

Those who had seen the two men approaching knew there would be trouble. They ducked behind the corners and waited for the shooting.

Wes momentarily was flustered.

"All right, Marshal. Seems you have the drop." He lifted his gun from the holster and proffered it to the officer butt first.

Here the marshal made a mistake. His eyes shifted. As they did Wes spun the gun in his hand.

"Now drop your gun," Wes told him. The calm voice of the killer was back. Thompson had come out in time to see the play.

"Kill him, son. He'll kill you next time," Ben Thompson told him.

"This is my fight and I'll kill the first man that pulls a gun," Wes said. The crowd backed away.

"You are the gamest boy I ever saw," Wild Bill said. "Let's go in and have a drink. I'll always be our friend."

"Pick up your gun first," Wes told him and dropped his own back into his scabbard.

It was a celebration to end all celebrations—the officer of the law, the boy killer, the cowboys who had driven their cattle across a thousand miles of sand and cactus without a drink. There was singing and cursing.

Finally someone started cursing Texas. Their cursing reached the befuddled brain of the boy killer. He stepped high on a box and waved his sweat stained sombrero.

"I'm a Texan," he shouted. "Who has a word to say against me?"

"To hell with Texans," one of the crowd yelled and pulled a gun.

Wes shot him in the mouth. The bullet plowed through his rum-soaked tongue and came out back of his ear. It was Hardin's first killing in Kansas.

The shot sobered him. Wild Bill had a warrant for his arrest and return to Texas which he had not served. Now he had killed one of Wild Bill's men.

Wes and his cowboys had made a camp at Cottonwood Springs, some thirty-five miles away. Wes knew what his trouble was, but by the time he reached the camp fate stepped in again. A Mexican had killed a cowman who had come up the trail. Other cattlemen felt no Mexican should

kill a cowman in Kansas and get away with it. They asked Wes to take the trail.

There, with the burned powder of his last kill still fresh in his Colt barrel, Wes was sworn in as a deputy sheriff.

HE SET out on the trail of the Mexican, found him in a little restaurant in Bluff, Arkansas. When the Mexican pulled, Wes killed him. He went back to Abilene and collected a thousand dollar reward.

Meantime Manning Clements had gotten into more trouble and had killed a man. He had less to fear in Texas than Wes, and started back. Wes decided to go along and visit his father and mother.

E. J. Davis then had been elected governor. He sent out word that Wes Hardin would be unwelcome, but Wes went on. He rode directly into the arms of a Negro policeman. Wes again used the road agent's spin and killed the policeman. Another sitting on a nearby mule pulled his gun and Wes killed him, too.

Communications were improving. As soon as word of the two killings got back to Austin a posse was sent out to get him. He waylaid the posse and killed three of its members.

By now the eighteen-year-old boy had killed a score of men. He knew the best places to hide and where his friends were. Then he found Jane Bowen and married her. They honeymooned for two months before his money ran out. This meant work and he decided to take another herd to Kansas. Before the cattle had been gathered, however, he had to kill a Mexican. This changed his plans and he started out to Louisiana with a drove of horses. This led him through the East Texas bottom lands where he had killed his first man three years before. A posse was formed and closed in on him. He shot one of the men off his horse and fled. For a month he holed up at Livingston, where he had friends.

He also met up with another cousin, Barnett Hardin, Jr. They went down the Trinity where they joined up in a poker game that lasted for several hours. Phil Sublet lost some money, left the game and came back with a shotgun.

For the first time Wes felt the pain of hot lead. He jerked his own gun and pulled the trigger, but the spring broke.

"That man shot me," he shouted. "If all the gold in the world belonged to me I would give it to kill him."

Hardin had fallen to the sawdust-covered floor. He told his cousin Barnett to take his money to his wife. When the doctor came Hardin was placed on an improvised table and the buckshot taken from his body.

Communications were getting faster by the day now. Word of his wounding had reached Austin and papers came for his arrest. Two men came to his house with Winchesters. Friends delayed them at the front door, while he slipped out the back. As he started off one of the men shot him in the hip.

Wes killed him. But he had another slug in his hip.

Sheriff Reagin convinced Hardin he had nothing to do with the shooting. Hardin surrendered, forgetting the pledge he had taken back there the night he had killed three men in the space of a minute when he was but sixteen.

Wes stayed in the hotel under the sheriff's watchful eye until his wounds were healed sufficiently to travel. He was then put in jail at Gonzales. He soon sawed out.

Things went quietly for several months. Police were still hunting Hardin but he had too many friends. He made too much money gambling. It couldn't last, however, and one night in a bar at Cuero another game was started.

J. B. Morgan called for drinks. Wes refused. This infuriated Morgan and he made the mistake of going for his gun.

News of Morgan's death spread rapidly.

Jack Helms organized a vigilance committee, which rode ruthlessly over outlaws, but some innocent victims also were hit. Hardin knew this had to be stopped. He contacted Helms and some of his gang. The arguments grew hot.

"Shoot the damn scoundrel," someone yelled.

It appeared to Hardin that Helms was the scoundrel.

The death of Helms, however, had a quieting effect on the whole area. For a year Hardin was able to work and gamble. He killed no one.

It seemed the law no longer was looking for him. In the spring of 1874 he headed for Brown County, in Central West Texas. As soon as he got there someone told him a deputy sheriff by the name of Charlie Webb was gunning for him.

It was Hardin's twenty-first birthday. He decided to celebrate. Frank Wilson, a deputy sheriff, came into the saloon and told Hardin he had had enough to drink and to get out.

"Wes, the people here have treated you well. Don't drink any more and go home and let's avoid trouble."

"I'm ready to leave," he said.

"You know it's a violation of the law to carry a pistol," Wilson told him.

"But I have no pistol." Hardin displayed an empty holster. He had used his old trick of slipping the gun under his shirt.

"Let's go back into the saloon for one more drink. I want to pay my bill and then go home."

About that time Deputy Webb came swaggering down the street with a six-shooter. Hardin whirled and faced him.

"Have you papers for my arrest?"

"I do not know you," Webb said.

"I am John Wesley Hardin."

"Now I know you, but I have no papers for you."

Hardin then invited Webb into the saloon. He turned his back. Friends yelled a warning but it was too late. Before Wes could get his gun Webb had shot him in the left side.

Falling, Hardin put a bullet into Webb's face.

"Wes Hardin has killed Charlie Webb," someone shouted. "Let's hang him."

By this time Sheriff Karnes was on the scene. Hardin handed his gun to Karnes but the mob moved in. The sheriff covered them, but warned Hardin he wouldn't be able to hold them off.

"I can't help you," the sheriff told Wes and returned his gun. Wes took the gun and jumped on his horse. He rode away to the mountains until his wound had healed. He was just twenty-one but he'd been a long way in six years between boyhood and manhood. There were twenty-seven notches on his gun.

He wanted to be back with his family. He slipped back to his father's home and learned his brother Joe had been killed by a mob.

Another mob began closing in on him. He took a Winchester and shot one of the men off his horse and got away.

But Hardin's money was running low. Without money he found fewer friends. He talked his father-in-law into buying some cattle to take back to Kansas and sell. The law closed in again and he had to kill another officer.

He shipped his wife and baby out to New Orleans and then slipped away himself. From there he fled to Florida where he opened a saloon. He moved from town to town but the law was still following. Two Pinkerton men who had taken up his trail in Texas were closing in on him.

He fled to New Orleans again, but the Pinkerton men caught up with him. In the fight that followed both were killed.

THIS TIME he fled to Mobile. There was a card game which grew wild. Someone fired a shot. Hardin thought he had been the target and killed another man.

He tossed his pistol over the back fence and fled right into the arms of the law.

It cost him $2,500 to get out.

Meantime in Texas the law was still busy. Dick Hubbard had been elected governor. He had promised to get Hardin. Texas Rangers by then had taken over the job of state policing and the Negro policemen were out. Ranger Captain John Armstrong was detailed to get the killer. He sent Ranger Jack Duncan to Cuero where he was able to get Hardin's address.

Hardin had gotten to Pollard, Alabama, and was in the dogging business.

Armstrong and Duncan slipped into the town and went into a huddle with the local sheriff. Later the same afternoon Hardin boarded a train for a short trip. A deputy, with whom Hardin had once gambled, was also on the train. He engaged Wes in conversation. This was the Judas tipoff. The two Rangers grabbed Wes. Others confronted him with guns.

"Robbers. Help!" Hardin shouted.

A young man with Hardin was so frightened he jumped from the train. Guards, thinking it was Hardin, riddled his body with bullets.

Finally the killer was subdued.

"Where's your gun?" Captain Armstrong demanded.

"I have none."

"That's too thin," the ranger replied. "John Wesley Hardin wouldn't be caught in hell without a gun." He found a .44 under Hardin's shirt.

Thus on July 23, 1877, the law had finally caught up with the killer.

He stayed in jail until September when he was tried for the murder of Charlie Webb four years before. Just one year later, in September of 1878, Hardin began a sentence of twenty-five years of hard labor in the state penitentiary.

Hardin was as much trouble to the law inside the prison as he was without. He attempted several escapes, but the walls held him.

Finally in 1885 he reformed his ways and began studying law. He became a Sunday School teacher behind the prison walls.

On Feb. 17, 1894, John Wesley Hardin was pardoned from the penitentiary by Governor J. S. Hogg.

This time Hardin went West. He stopped at Pecos for his first law case. His cousin Jim Miller had killed a man and Hardin was to help defend him. The trial was moved to El Paso where Miller was freed and Hardin became a resident.

The saloons of El Paso and the night life of Juarez, just across the river in Mexico, were too much for Hardin. He took up drinking and gambling again. He also took another man's wife to live with. One night his woman was arrested by a young policeman, John Selman. Hardin had been away trying to find a publisher for his autobiography.

He returned to El Paso and jumped the policeman's father, Constable John Selman.

Selman drew down on Hardin.

"I have no gun, John," Hardin told him. "I am going to get one and when I come back I'll kill you."

Hardin turned and walked into the Acme saloon. There he looked into the long glass mirror behind the bar. No one was following. He stopped at the dice table, picked up the four dice between his long finger and dropped them into the cup.

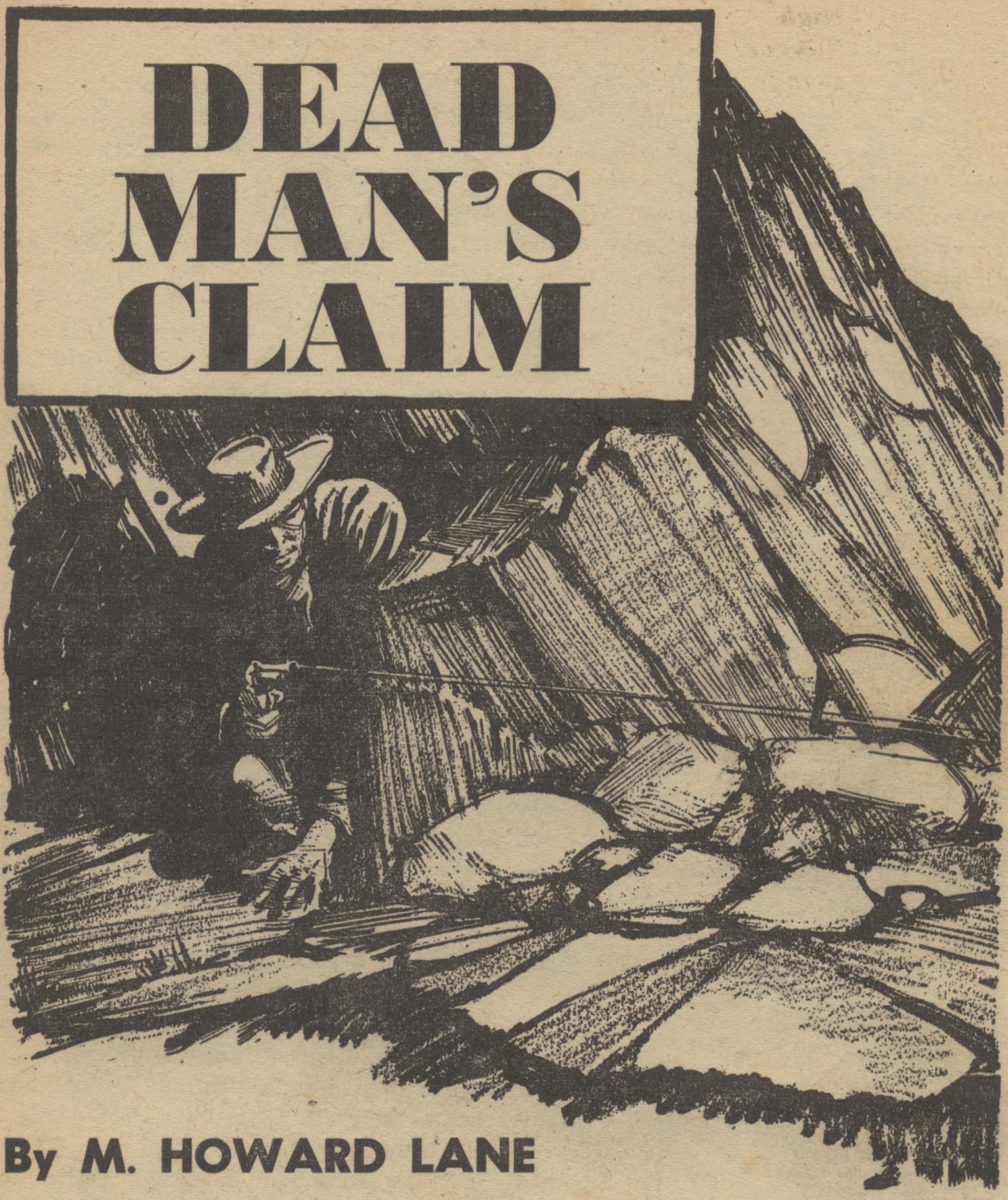
He blew into the cup and rolled them across the green velvet top to bank against the mahogany rail.

"Four sixes," he said and reached to pick up the dice.

He had taken his eyes from the mirror. There was a loud blast of a Colt. Hardin spun around like the dice he had just rolled. Constable John Selman cocked back the hammer of his old hog leg thrice more. Two of the shots went wild, but the third hit Hardin in the head.

The long arm of the law, which was very slow in those days, had finally ended the life of John Wesley Hardin. ✪ ✪ ✪

DEAD MAN'S CLAIM



By M. HOWARD LANE

THIS WAS not the first time he had watched the lights spring out of the dusk on San Francisco's hills, but there were many more of them than he'd seen in '50 when he'd visited this coast for the first time. Now it was 1853, and the bay air had a warning sharpness of winter in it that brought a frown to Matthew Garth's broad forehead. He wondered if he'd be able to finish his business in the Sierras before snow put an end to mining, and a silent curse shaped his wide, mobile lips. If he only knew a little bit more about what to expect. But he didn't. The answers awaited in Coarse Gold. He shrugged broad, tailored shoulders, and knew he had no one to blame but himself. He'd taken this job with his eyes open, not because

High in the snow-swept pinnacles of the Sierras, Matt Garth sought the richest gold vein in California—only to find the claim was staked in his blood!

he wanted it, but because he felt that he could accomplish the mission assigned him as quickly and honestly as any other man.

Perhaps even a little more honestly, he thought wryly, for this was a year when chicanery was rampant in most gold operations. The first flush of '49 was past, some of the earlier placers exhausted. Miners were turning their eyes to the hills now, to quartz claims which down through the centuries had fed their precious metal into the streams. But it took money to sink shafts and build mills, and more than one operator had sought Eastern capital to develop his properties. Some legitimate, and others not so legitimate. A Midwestern farmer, or a New York housewife couldn't travel to California to look over a mining claim before taking her savings out of the family tea-pot to invest in gilt-edge stock certificates.

And it hadn't taken the bunco fraternity

The bullet lifted his hat and left just the faintest prickle of fire through his hair.

long to realize that all the gold wasn't in California. Hundreds and thousands ponied up their savings for crisp sheets of pretty paper, and some of those stocks weren't worth the ink that had been wasted on them. Nobody knew that much better than Matt Garth. He had heard the talk in 'Frisco, in El Dorado, and a dozen other towns along the Mother Lode. There was more "sucker money" coming into California than might ever be taken from her mines.

But that had been no concern of his, for he'd been one of the lucky young men back there in '50. He'd found a good claim along the fabulous Puba and saved his dust instead of digging all day and spending all night. And one memorable afternoon Garth had hit the jackpot. A pocket at bed-rock with nuggets the size of pigeon eggs. One hundred thousand dollars he'd cleaned from it in the space of a week, and that had ended Matthew Garth's placer days.

Some of that money he'd invested in Sacramento real estate, and a good share of it he'd carried back to Boston with him. He'd married the girl that had waited for him, but tragedy had come before the end of their first year together. His wife had died bearing him a son that had quickly followed his mother, and Matt Garth's thick black hair had turned frosty overnight.

He had been at loose ends, a man without much purpose left in life, when the pastor of the small church he occasionally attended had come to him some four months past now. Worry had lined the Reverend Talbot's face, and he'd had a story to tell, and a favor to ask.

Matt Garth stood at the rail of the clipper *Falcon* waiting for the shore-boats fighting their way through the surf and the choppy waves of the bay seemed to reflect the faces of the people he'd met that night in the pastor's modest house.

Their story was the same that a man might hear in a hundred communities from Sioux City to Cape Cod.

A grizzled prospector, still smelling of sweat and Sierra clay, who had struck it rich and had quartz samples to prove it. And with him, a smooth-talking promoter with stock certificate to sell. The prospector's name was Tom Horn, and this gave some versimilitude to the story, for in Sacramento in '50, Garth had met and liked the man the pastor named. But he'd never met, or even heard of Todd Wellman, the promoter who had formed the company to exploit Tom Horn's mine.

The church-flock, he'd learned that night, had scraped together every penny it could spare, some had even mortgaged their homes, to buy up the whole issue of stock in the T & H mine.

"We should have had a report months ago," Reverend Talbot told him worriedly. "Our first dividends were supposed to come before this, but all we've got so far are requests for more money for development work. We, ah, are all in so deep now, Mr. Garth, that we dare not back out. If you, ah, understand me—"

Matt had understood them all right. And the hell of it was, with Tom Horn the discoverer of the mine, all the money these people had put up could be classed as legitimate expense.

"It takes dollars," he'd told them briefly, "to develop a lode claim."

And then Reverend Talbot had come to the real point.

"We know that," he admitted, "but all of us are about at the end of our resources, and we want the report of an unbiased observer who can tell us whether we are being hoodwinked or not. Mr. Garth, we know you as a man of experience and integrity. We will pay your expenses and any salary within reason, if you will go to the coast, to this, ah, Coarse Gold town, and investigate the T & H mine. We know, after your recent bereavement that this is asking a lot, but we thought—"

And Matt Garth remembered that he'd suddenly given the circle of weary faces

looking at him the first genuine smile that had touched his lips in a long time.

"You thought," he finished for the preacher, "that maybe a trip like this might take my mind off what's happened. Well, Reverend, you may be right. I'll go to Coarse Gold, and you forget the pay and expense money. Who knows," he added, "if this mine is as good as Tom Horn says it is, I'll buy in myself!"

One wizened little man with a deaths-head face and a pale scar above his right eye had smiled, but said nothing. His name was Ben Sarcer.

"I'LL GIVE a bright penny for your thoughts," a demure voice said at Matt's elbow. With the slap of the waves against the hull in his ears, Garth hadn't heard the girl approach, but now he turned and looked down at her courteously, and he hoped devoutly that this might be the last time he'd see her, but he knew it wouldn't for she was also on her way to Coarse Gold.

A little thing, Carrie Pines, she could probably stand beneath his outstretched arm, and never touch the smooth brown of her hair to his coat. She looked almost like a child in her gray traveling suit, but there was a full womanliness in the contours of her body, and Garth had watched the eye of more than one male passenger turn enviously after them as he had strolled with the girl about the deck of the *Falcon* on their long turn around the Horn.

"My thoughts," Matthew told her, "haven't been worth the penny. You're ready to go ashore?"

"All packed," Carrie nodded. Her warm lips smiled up at him. "And excited," she added. "I hope my father is here to meet me."

He knew her reason for taking this trip, for she'd prattled it all eagerly to him, after their meeting on shipboard.

"Dad has a mine in a place named Coarse Gold," she'd confided, "and I'm coming out to make a home for him there. Don't you think I'll make a fine camp-cook?"

Garth had been willing to admit that, but he couldn't understand a father asking a Boston-bred daughter to come out to the primitiveness of a gold-camp. Coarse Gold would be no place for a girl.

They took their seats in one of the heavily loaded shore-boats, and were rowed ashore. Garth moved the girl's luggage back from the edge of the water, and put his own with it as he looked about for a drayman, or some enterprising hand cart operator who would take their grips to Portsmouth Square. People swirled over the beach, high-hatted Mexican gamblers, stocky merchants watching for cargo, real estate promoters eager to bid for a passenger's attention and though the dusk was deepening. Garth stiffened suddenly. A small man who looked enough like Ben Sarcer to be a brother had disappeared into the crowd.

"You're seeing ghosts," Garth grunted to himself. "What would he be doing in California?"

There was certainly no immediate answer to that question, and Garth shrugged it aside. Sarcer was a man he'd met twice at Sunday service in Reverend Talbot's church, and just what the man's occupation might be he did not know, or care.

He felt a hand touch his arm and turned to find Carrie Pines looking up at him. Beside her was a tall, smooth-faced man about his own age of thirty, and Garth felt his thick brows lift unconsciously. This man certainly was not Carrie's father.

"Mr. Garth," the girl said, "this, this is Mr. Trumbull, dad's partner. He came to meet me because my father couldn't get away from the mine."

"Harvey Trumbull," the man amplified, and his eyes were the hue of a striped bass coming from some Sierra lake. He extended his hand to Matt Garth.

Garth took it, and he felt no callouses

against his palm. This gentleman had spent little time behind the business end of a pick or miner's shovel, he thought.

"Pleased," he said coolly. "And how is Mr. Pines?"

"Oh, fine, fine," Harvey Trumbull said heartily. "The diggings are going great guns. Two Texas boys found a fifteen thousand dollar nugget a few days ago. Why, they're picking chunks of alluvial gold right out of the grass on some of the flats. Coarse Gold is sure the name for that town, when you can find it in chunks as big as your fists—"

"Mr. Garth is on his way to Coarse Gold, too," the girl explained.

Garth wished, for no particular reason, that she'd kept that information to herself, and he saw Trumbull's eyes start to grow opaque.

"Fine," he said, "fine. Plenty of gold there for all of us—"

But Matthew Garth wondered. If gold was so plentiful at Coarse Gold why were Tom Horn and Todd Wellman asking for more and more money from their backers—

Matt carried his own telescope bag up through the sand-hills to Portsmouth Square. He'd been invited to ride in the rig Harvey Trumbull had hired to bring him down to meet the *Falcon,* but he'd declined the invitation. Trumbull made his skin crawl, and his knuckles itch wtih the desire to smash them solidly against the man's barbered chin.

He might be Jim Pines's partner, but he certainly wasn't a working one. Of course the man would treat Carrie with extra courtesy, so he had no reason to worry about the girl, but Garth found himself doing it just the same, and he tried to banish her from his thoughts.

Trumbull had made the remark that he had reserved rooms at one of the newer, plush hotels springing up about Portsmouth Square, and when Garth found lodging for himself in a small, side-street rooming house the ten dollar price of the room was enough to make him lift his dark eyebrows. Trumbull was probably paying at least thirty. Yes, the Pineses' were obviously doing very well for themselves in Coarse Gold.

After shaving and slipping into a clean shirt, Garth moved out into the evening, a long Havana clamped between his teeth. He walked the short block along the dark street from his rooming house to Portsmouth Square, and the garish brightness of flaming torches in iron scones before some of the bigger saloons drew him. Inside the Golden Palace he found a place at the long bar, and a perspiring barkeep said, "What's your pleasure, sir?" And he looked a little curiously at the contrast of Matt's frosty hair, thick black brows, and young-looking face.

"A little I.W. and water might do me fine," Garth murmured, and he laid a double eagle on the bar. The drink came back and Garth leaned his elbows on the bar. "And a little information," he added, "might earn you the balance of this."

The barkeep's eyes bugged a little, and he swiped at his brow: "If it's a woman, or a plug-ugly you want to hire—"

"Neither," Garth said easily. "Tell me," he went on, "don't quite a few of the mining fraternity frequent your bar?"

"Most of 'em come here," the barkeep said proudly. "We got the best show in town, and the chorus line ain't above—"

Matt waved that kind of information aside. "I'm wondering," he asked, "if you ever heard of a couple of gentlemen I'm interested in meeting. Harvey Trumbull for one—"

"A fishy-eyed, smooth-talkin' gent?" The barkeep was eager to earn the balance of that shining gold piece. "A big gent. About your size?"

Garth nodded.

"I hear he's interested in Coarse Gold properties."

"That hombre," said the barkeep, "is

interested in anything that'll turn a dollar, and he don't look at it too closely, if you savvy me—"

"I savvy you," Garth nodded, and somehow all these bits of information he was gathering together were adding up to a misfit hand. Carrie Pines was honest as a smiling sun. And likely her father was too. So how did it come that he'd pick a partner like Trumbull?"

"Number two," Garth laid a second finger on the bar-top, "is a promoter named Todd Wellman, an associate of Tom Horn's in the T & H mine at Coarse Gold."

The barkeep's expression turned puzzled.

"Friend," he said, "I don't know who you are or where you got that information, but there ain't no mine in Coarse Gold called the T & H, less'n it's been staked inside the last week. We hear of 'em all here at the Palace. As for a Todd Wellman, I don't know him either. Wish I could tell you more—" His eyes were on the gold again.

"You've told me more than you bargained on," Garth told him meagerly. He flipped the double eagle into the barkeep's eager hand and turned from the bar. Harper's best had lost its flavor.

HE STEPPED outside, signaled a loitering hack, and was driven down to the Embarcadero where the sloops and river schooners came to unload passengers and produce from up the Sacramento. There were regular passenger boats a man could take, Captain Sutter's *Amelia* being the most popular, but Garth wanted no company on his voyage—least of all, Harvey Trumbull and Carrie Pines.

Garth made arrangements with a Portuguese boatsman to leave on the dawn tide, and headed back for the Square. He was hungry, and he needed rest, but there was enough on his mind to make him forget painful memories. And he was thankful for that.

He ate grizzly roast in a Chinese restaurant, savoring the sharp, wild flavor of the meat, and stepped once more into the open. His cigar tasted good as he paced back toward the turn-off to his rooming house. The dark street into which he turned was hardly wider than an alley, and he seemed to have it all to himself, the glow of his cigar a spark of light to show him the way.

Then somewhere in a narrow passage between two of the close-built houses, a rat squealed, the sound as loud as though someone had stepped on its tail. Garth turned, and the cigar in his mouth was a bright spark as the ashes shook free. He heard a sibilant sound in the darkness, and something tugged at the Havana. The tip of it showered sparks, and he knew the razor edge of a knife had sliced the cigar in half.

The darkness was not so deep but that he saw the shadow of a man wheel away. He leaped toward him, stumbled over debris in the alley, and felt rough dirt and greasy garbage against his palms. Garth made his feet, and he sighted the dim shape going across a back-yard fence with the ease of a climbing tom-cat. Breathing hard, he paused, wiping his hands on a suit that wouldn't look the same again until it was cleaned, and he knew there was no use in trying to follow the man who had flung the knife at him.

Garth had a human's natural aversion for rats, but he knew the garbage-eating rodent had saved his life. *Someone,* he thought, *knows I favor cigars, and figured to use the one in my mouth for a target.*

He tramped back to the street, and upstairs to the room he'd taken, but he wasn't going to be using it. He changed into more familiar garb. Dark pants and boots, and a blue flannel shirt, and at the last he notched a gun-belt about his waist.

If the game's going to get this rough, he thought, *I better be able to fight back.*

The Portuguese boatman was astonished to see him aboard his sloop so soon, but

Garth shrugged it aside. "I might wake up late in the morning," he explained. And he thought, *If I stayed in my room, I might not wake up at all.*

A knife was a silent thing that did its work neatly and with dispatch in the hands of an expert, and certainly the man who had targeted his cigar had been an expert. Only the turn of his head had saved him.

Lying on the deck, with a pile of gunny-sacks for a mattress and the night wind sighing through the shrouds, gave a man time to think, but the surmises in Garth's mind were as nebulous as spider-webs across the face of the moon. Who had tried to kill him? Why? Had it been Harvey Trumbull? Or could it have been, and he cast the thought aside as fantastic, a little man with a scar above one eye that he'd seen dodge into the crowd when they'd reached shore that afternoon? A Boston-man named Ben Sarcer?

"You better get yourself some sleep," Garth counseled himself. "Do your worrying tomorrow—"

But his mind wouldn't rest. That barkeep in the Palace heard many things across the mahogany where he set out drinks, but he had never heard of the T & H mine in Coarse Gold, nor a promoter named Todd Wellman.

Another picture crossed Garth's mind. The strained faces of men and women looking at ruin unless a mine started paying them the dividends they'd been promised. A mine, that if Tom Horn was the discoverer, should return their investment and more. A mine that a Palace barkeep said did not exist!

CHAPTER TWO

Bushwhack Bullets

SACRAMENTO LOOMED beyond her own Embarcadero, a growing town of raw-board buildings, where money flowed freely. Front Street, along the river, roared night and day, and Garth saw again the strange mingling of incoming gold-seekers vivid with enthusiasm mingling with bent-shouldered men who carried nothing but disillusion on their faces. They'd found no gold, but the newcomers weren't the ones to listen to their advice. It was "Ho for the gold fields, and the devil take the hindmost!"

He drank I.W. in a Front Street bar, and strolled up-town to Mark Merrick's real estate office. Mark was there, a small gray man, with the energy of a beaver.

"Lord," he said at the sight of Garth's tall shape, "I thought you'd never come back, Matthew. You told me to hold the lots you bought, and I've had the chance a dozen times to sell them for ten times what you paid."

"Keep holding them," Garth grunted. "Some day they'll be worth a thousand times more. Sacramento is a growing city. It's in the center of the state. Who knows, it may even become the capital—"

"A profit," said Mark Merrick, "is worth taking at any time."

"I have other worries," Garth told him grimly. "You ever heard of the T & H mine in Coarse Gold down the San Joaquin, in the foothills of the Sierras?"

"Everybody," said the real estate man acidly, "has heard of Coarse Gold. A man built a store there, where miners on their way to Fresno Flats could buy bacon and beans. But the service was so poor they'd git tired and start prospectin'. One of 'em struck it rich, and now there's ten thousand people in Coarse Gold, living in tents and dug-outs. Some of them are panning a hundred a day out of Sweet Gulch, and Deadwood Creek. Of course most of 'em ain't makin' bean money, but they keep tryin'. What's your interest there?"

"Have you," Garth asked, "ever heard of a man named Tom Horn?"

"Hell," said Merrick, "he was a mighty good friend of mine. But he never run into anything but tough luck. Take El Dorado

now. He prospected a hole to what he thought was bed-rock and it turned out to be a clay layer. He give it up. Another gent came along and turned a few shovelfuls of dirt, and danged if he didn't hit the real bed-rock and clean up twenty thousand overnight. That's Tom Horn's luck—"

Garth drew a deep breath.

"Ever hear of the T & H mine—?"

Merrick shook his head. "Not in Coarse Gold," he said emphatically, "nor nowhere else."

"Or a gent named Todd Wellman?"

"He sounds like a promoter," said Merrick keenly, "and I know most of 'em. There ain't no Wellman 'tween here and Coarse Gold. Include Madera and Fresno and Mariposa if you feel like it. There still ain't no gent named Todd Wellman—"

Tom Horn's luck. The words sang like a refrain through Matt Garth's mind as he left Merrick's office. Horn was a man few would forget. Big, stooped from spending so many hours over pan and rocker, his face was honest as Sierra granite. Tom Horn had found the T & H mine, and taken a partner. Together they had gone East to Boston to raise money to drop a shaft and run drifts into stringers of gold-bearing ore. Now there seemed to be no mine called the T. & H., and no man named Todd Wellman. Garth shook his head, remembering the attack that had been made on him in San Francisco. Had it been tied in with his going to Coarse Gold? Was someone trying to keep him from reaching that Sierra gold camp? Only the girl, Carrie Pines, and Harvey Trumbull knew of his destination. He'd mentioned it to no one else.

But there'd been that little man who had dodged away in the crowd at the landing, and now, eyes blinking with surprise, Garth saw him again in the swirl of men moving along the boardwalks. The narrow shoulders and the black coat were something he couldn't mistake, and he quickened his pace. This time he was going to satisfy his curiosity, once and for all.

But some intuition of being followed seemed to enter the other's mind, for Matt saw him swing suddenly through the doorway of a store specializing in miners' supplies. He caught one profile glimpse of the man's narrow face, but not enough of a look to make identification certain.

A knot of men got in his way and Garth skirted them, cursing the delay. Down one of the dim aisles of the store he saw the other man moving fast enough to make his coat-tails pop. He lengthened his own stride, dodging benches loaded with stacks of clothing and heaps of gold pans and gear. A store-room door was open at the rear of the big room, and Garth saw his quarry break into a run as he neared it. Quick on his own feet, he took after the man, brushing a clerk aside as he leaped into the thicker darkness of the storeroom.

A pepper-pot pistol spat angrily through the gloom, and Garth felt the slug brush past his cheek and strike into the wall. He reached for his own Colt, then hesitated for a dray-load of merchandise was drawing up to the loading platform directly across the store-room from him, and he saw the black-coated little man swing from shadow into direct range of the dray. He dodged across the platform and dropped from view.

Garth slowed his pace, and walked out to the wagon. His eyes lifted to the driver.

"You see a little gent dodge out here?" he asked.

"Goin' like a scared rabbit? Yeah and I did," grinned the big drover.

"Would you," Garth put his question carefully, "have noticed if he had a scar above one eye?"

"He did that," said the drover emphatically. "Showed white against his brown skin."

"Thanks," Garth said slowly, and it was the last bit of proof he needed. Ben Sarcer was here in Sacramento. A little, sanctimonious man who attended service every Sunday, but was not above using a knife and pistol the rest of the week!

THE PROOF of his surmise was still hard to believe. Why had Ben Sarcer been waiting for him in San Francisco? Reservations on an earlier ship could have got him to the City of Seven Hills, but why? There was only one obvious answer. Sarcer was tied up with the mysterious Todd Wellman, who didn't seem to exist save as a name, and he didn't want Matthew Garth to reach Coarse Gold. Was it because no one had heard of the T & H mine? And yet he had the proof that Tom Horn had been along on that junket to Boston to raise funds for development work.

Then something hit Matt with almost the impact of that pepper-pot pistol shot. *Maybe it's because Tom Horn isn't alive—*

Tom Horn dead? The thought pressed him like a hand between his shoulders, and he was unconsciously hurrying as he stepped from the store.

A girl in bright crinoline, looking singularly alone on a street peopled mostly by men, almost collided with him as he reached the boardwalk.

"Matt!" the girl cried. "Oh, I've been hoping to find you—"

Garth halted, and Carrie Pines looked up at him. He saw the depth of her violet eyes, and the softness of her red lips, and silently cursed the day he had ever met this girl. She was not for him. She was nothing but a distraction to a man with other things on his mind.

"You've found me," he said, and his voice was unconsciously curt.

"Matt," Carrie laid her hand on his arm, and her eyes were pleading, "I'm just lost. I've got a pair of tickets in my bag for the Inter-Valley Coach Service to Madera, and a transfer from there to Coarse Gold, but I'm going to have to make the trip alone, unless you'll go down with me."

"What happened to Trumbull?" Garth asked.

"He's going to stay here for a few days," the girl said. "It—it's some kind of business connected with our mine. Machinery—"

"Machinery?" Garth asked, and his black brows arched. "You don't need much machinery to operate a placer mine," he said, but the unconscious thought came to him that a lode claim used heavy equipment.

He asked a question then that he knew deserved no answer, but the result was astonishing.

"Have you ever heard of a man named Ben Sarcer?"

"Ben Sarcer?" the girl's brow wrinkled, then smoothed. "Why yes," she exclaimed. "A little man with a scar over his right eye. He came up the river with us on the *Amelia*. Mr. Trumbull introduced him to me, and he mentioned that he was from Boston. I told him you were also from Boston, and going to Coarse Gold. I asked him if he'd ever met you, but he said 'no.' So how does it happen that you know his name?"

Garth's lips quirked.

"Carrie," he said, "if I could answer a few questions as easily I wouldn't have to go near Coarse Gold!"

That night he prowled the Front Street saloons, and no barkeep or prospector had heard of Todd Wellman, or a mine called the T & H.

But one grizzled El Dorado prospector, who had recently returned from Coarse Gold, gave him something more to puzzle over.

"Tom Horn?" he said. "Hell, I ain't seen that old coot since we both missed out in Dorado, but I hear tell he comes into Coarse Gold ever now and then with a poke full of coarse dust. The kind a feller gets with nothin' but a mortar and pestal, and I'll tell ye, if a man can crush out gold with that equipment he's got rock that'll make a hundred dollar pan look like two-bits!"

Matt rode down-valley the next morning with Carrie Pines in the coach beside

him, and when the driver hit some of the ruts that lay beneath the white dust of the road, the girl's body was a soft, disturbing presence tossed against him. Her own cheeks were pink, but Matt guessed the heat could account for that.

Wooden-faced, he sat beside her, but the answers he was trying to piece together wouldn't come to him. They rode that day, and put up for the night in Madera, and a coach with six wicked-eyed mules turned them and the other passengers across valley in the morning toward Coarse Gold in the foothills that loomed high as they drew nearer the Sierras.

"I hope dad will be waiting for me," the girl said as they rode the coach onward after a noon meal at Half-way House. "Mr. Trumbull didn't seem to want to tell me just where our mine is located. He said it is so rich that some of the prospectors in the town might try and jump the claim if they knew how to locate it."

There was some truth in the girl's statement. Men from every state, and the far corners of the world were in these Sierra goldfields, and some of them would cut a throat as quick as they'd throw a man's tools from a claim and swear he'd abandoned it. If a team of men had a pair of rich placer claims, they woudn't advertise the fact. Perhaps Jim Pines and Harvey Trumbull had those kind of claims. Garth didn't know, but he intended to find out. For somehow it seemed to him that Tom Horn, Pines, Trumbull, and the man who was non-existent, Todd Wellman, were all wrapped up in the same package. *And add Ben Sarcer*— he thought.

He made only one request of the girl as they finished their ride into the white oak foothills.

"If anyone," he said, "should ask you, I'm just another promoter looking into properties I can buy and sell—"

"Why, yes," Carrie Pines said, "I—I thought that was why you were here. If there's some other reason—?"

"No," Garth shook his head grimly. "No, there's no other reason—" And he felt like adding: *Only mayhem and murder and mystery!*

Coarse Gold lay in a fold between tawny hills, with a creek of the same name paralleling the town. Sweet Gulch was just beyond, spoking off to the left into the white oak hills, and beyond it was Deadwood Creek.

One dusty street, banded by saloons, honky-tonks, a single hotel, Callahan's, and the town pump comprised the camp. The pump was topped with a pergola that gave shade, and a place for prospectors to loaf and gossip.

Matt eyed the group beneath the pergola as the stage halted in front of the hotel across the street. *There might be a good place to learn a few things,* he thought.

He handed Carrie down from the Concord, but she hardly noticed his courtesy for her eyes were scanning a group of loungers on the porch of Callahan's store.

Garth felt her fingers grip his arm.

"Matt," she choked, "I see no sign of dad."

"He probably figures you're with Trumbull," Matt reassured her, "so more'n likely he's staying at your mine. We'll get rooms at the hotel, then I'll rent a horse and take a ride. Your dad shouldn't be too hard to find. And while I'm gone," he added sternly, "you stay in the hotel—"

"I—I will," Carrie promised. "Matt, I don't think I'm going to like this town. There's a feeling about it. Like, like something terrible is going to happen—"

"That's just your Irish imagination overworking itself." Garth tried to cheer the girl.

HE LEFT her in a hotel room that still held the heat of the day, and moved downstairs through the lobby and across the thick dust of the street to the town pump, where a half score of miners was passing a bottle and washing down the forty-rod

with dippers full of the clear spring water.

"We call 'er a Coarse Gold Combine," one miner chuckled as Matt idled up to the group. "Come on, stranger, wet your whistle." He passed Garth the bottle and dipper, and one swallow of the liquor was enough to show Matt why the dipper was necessary. This local whiskey was like a bomb hitting his stomach, and the water only partially quenched the fire.

He passed the bottle in turn, and grinned.

"Not good," he said, "but I've drunk worse in El Dorado."

The miners were looking him over, trying to make up their minds whether he was promoter or prospector. The cut of his dark clothes named him miner, but the cleanliness of them classed him as promoter.

"Where," Garth asked idly, "can a man rent a horse, and get a little information?"

"Caswell's livery is right on up the street," a black-bearded Missourian told him, "but you cain't do much prospectin' on hoss-back."

"The lady who got off the stage with me," Garth explained, "is Jim Pines's daughter. Where have he and Trumbull got their claim? I want to ride out and tell Pines that his girl has arrived."

His words brought swift silence to the group about the pump. Garth watched the men glance at each other, then ten pair of eyes were focussed on him again. Finally the big Missourian cleared his throat.

"Stranger," he said gruffly, "if you-all can find Jim Pines you'll be a heap sight better man than any of us!"

Garth felt his teeth clench. "Dead?" he asked softly.

"We don't know," another man chimed in. "Some of us'n have got claims up Deadwood Creek not far from Jim's. About a week ago we 'un's saw Trumbull pull away from their shack, all duded up. Hear he took stage to Sacramento. After awhile, when ol' Jim didn't hit the Creek, some of us went along to see if mebbe he was sick. Only we didn't find out, on account there warn't no Jim around. He was gone slicker'n a whistle, and there ain't none of us seen hide nor hair of him since. T'ain't like Jim to disappear thataway. He's a purty steady sort of feller, don't drink much, or carouse around like some of us!"

How could this word be broken to Carrie? Garth didn't know. He stood silent for a moment, and then asked another question.

"There's another friend I'm looking for. Old Tom Horn, from El Dorado—"

Again he saw that questioning glance pass about the group of prospectors.

"You name the dangdest fellers," their bearded spokesman complained. "Ain't nobody seen Tom in a coons-age. He haided up into the Pinnacles, toppin' Deadwood Creek, and ain't been around for close on thuty days. Last time he was in town he slapped a fat poke in Callahan's safe. Sharp gold. Not coarse. Jest sharp like he crushed it outa rock. Some folks figgered he'd been snipin' up in them Pinnacles, but Tom ain't that kinda miner. Pussonally, I figure he's got hisself a lode claim—"

"Then why'n't he record it and go to minin' proper?" one of the group asked.

It was the same question Matthew Garth had been asking himself since that 'Frisco barkeep in the Palace had told him he'd never heard of the T & H mine in Coarse Gold.

"Tom never filed a claim on a mine called the T & H?" he asked.

"Nada." The bearded Missourian shook his head emphatically.

"Ever hear of him takin' a partner named Todd Wellman?" Matt queried.

"Ain't ever been a gent by that name in Coarse Gold," came his discouraging answer.

"By dang," another drawled significantly, "all this here talkin' is makin' me dry—"

Garth grinned. "Let's go into Calla-

han's," he invited, "and see if he's got any good whiskey."

"Now that's the kind of talk I like to hear!" their leader approved. "Come on, boys. This here stranger looks like a proper gentleman, even if he does ask a heap of questions!"

Garth gave a freckled boy on the porch of the store a five dollar gold piece, and told him to bring a horse from the livery. Then he led the new friends he'd made into the bar that stretched a hundred feet along one wall of the big store building.

He drank I.W. and it tasted sour in his mouth.

"Any lode claims ever been located up in those Pinnacles you were telling me about?" he asked the prospector standing next to him.

"Hell," the Missourian spat, "that country's so danged rough even the eagles leave it alone! Ain't no sense prospectin' up there when we can clean up a scad right here—"

That logic was irrefutable. Garth looked moodily into the oily smoothness of a second glass of Harper's best and gulped it without even tasting the good bite of it. Through a dusty window he saw the boy proudly leading a tall bay to the hitch-rack in front of the store.

He left a double eagle on the bar and said, "Drink it up, boys."

Only the big, black-bearded Missourian who had acted as spokesman for the group followed him out to the porch. He coughed and said with a kind of embarrassment in his voice, "Look, friend, I ain't no hand to pry into another man's business but were I you I'd forget about ol' Tom and Pines, too. Some say Tom's crazy as a looney bird. Bad luck's got him by the throat, and it hits anybody else who tries to side him. That's why he cain't git, nor keep, a partner. As fer Pines, I dunno. His slick sidekick will likely be back one of these days, and then we 'uns will have some questions to ask him. Stay with us. You'll jest git yourself lost if you go foolin' around them Pinnacles."

The advice was probably good, Garth thought grimly, and it had certainly been offered in all friendliness, but he shook his head. A dust banner lifted in the wake of a passing horseman, and the cloud seemed to mirror a pinch-faced group of worried Boston folk. Men and women, their savings spent on a mine that didn't seem to exist. Their money paid to a promoter as nebulous as the T & H, and to a prospector who had vanished!

Garth shook his head, and his stubborn jaw was set. Those Boston friends weren't going to lose out if he had to locate a mine for them himself!

CHAPTER THREE

Dead Man's Creek

A PROSPECTOR up Deadwood Creek pointed out Jim Pines's placer to him, and with the shades of evening already dipping down into the canyon, he hurried his examination of the premises, and one thing struck him as of some significance. He could find no miner's pick or shovel either on their claim along the stream, or about the small shack. The equipment had been taken by Pines when he'd left the premises.

Pines was gone before Trumbull left for 'Frisco, Garth thought. *The cuss knew that so why did he lie to Carrie?*

Matt pondered that question and found no answer as he rode up-creek. For the distance of another mile or more, claims rubbed elbows with each other, and then started to thin out. Keeping to the left bank, Garth climbed steadily, seeking a ledge that would take him to the ridge above the creek. The Pinnacles were still hidden from his view by the twisting convolutions of the canyon, but he figured that once on the ridge he would be able to get a view of them.

The creek dropped away below him until it was only a white thread seen through the dusk. Gnarled white oaks gave way to scrub pines and twisted madrone, and Garth saw the rim loom above him. The bay was a good mountain horse, its hoofs solid on the shelf that led up to the narrow plateau that topped the ridge. Sunlight still lay on this height, and northwest loomed the Pinnacles, gilded by the light. A man could not mistake that fantastic jumble of towering buttes and narrow, eroded canyons. The winds and the rains of countless centuries had seamed the cliffs until they were wrinkled as the face of an old man.

Garth studied the labyrinth from what he figured was a distance of three miles, and shook his head. One man or a hundred could disappear in that maze, and never be seen again. But there was something else, even at this distance, that caught his eye. It was the folded serpentine strata that seemed to run through those cliffs and canyons like a gigantic, undulant serpent.

"Maraposite," he said half-aloud. "Porphyry there, too—"

And where those formations were present a man might find gold-bearing ore. He felt a prospector's excitement start to course through him, something that hadn't touched his blood in near three years now.

"Maybe," again he spoke musingly, "old Tom ain't as crazy as some of 'em think. If I located a ledge back here, I'd keep the news to myself, too, until I could trace its course so as to know which way to stake my claims—"

There was one question he cursed himself for not asking in Coarse Gold. He wondered now if Jim Pines and Tom Horn had been friends.

Riding the plateau, he moved slowly closer to those tortured canyons and cliffs ahead. He was, he guessed, a good five hundred feet above the main floor of the Pinnacles, and it was just about where he planned to make a dry camp for the night. From this vantage point, once the vast Sierra dark fell over the land, he could spot even a pin-point of light in any of those gorges below him. If Tom Horn was down there he'd build a supper fire, and Garth knew he could plot the general vicinity of the prospector's camp from such sign.

He reached the farther rim of the plateau, unsaddled and tethered his mount beside a small seep of water that came from a granite fissure, and then he squatted patiently, waiting for darkness to come.

He was seated, staring down over the tumbled Pinnacles when the bullet lifted his hat and left just the faintest prickle of fire through his hair. The sound of the shot was almost an instant echo, and Garth's legs pushed him forward over the rim of the gorge. He rolled down for ten feet before his grasping hands caught at a sturdy madrone. No second shot followed the first, and Matt drew a quick breath into his lungs.

That one, he thought, *was just about close enough!*

Death stalked the dusk. Matt inched back to the rim and studied the plateau he had crossed. Boulders and granite slabs were scattered over it like giant marbles. Scrub pine and madrone gave added cover for the man who had fired at him. Spotting the bushwhacker in this fading light would be an impossibility, but by the same token his own body would soon look indistinct to any watcher.

"So then we'll play hide and seek," Garth muttered.

They would play hide and seek on the high plateau and death would referee.

It was going to be belt-gun against rifle, but darkness would even the odds. He eeled over the rim, and made a short run for the fissure where he had tethered his mount. The night was thick enough to hide him now, and he looked with fresh interest at the tall granite boulders on each side of the small rill of water.

That bushwhacker had undoubtedly spot-

ted the tethered bay. Matt glanced from his mount to the boulders again.

"Be smart to leave a gent afoot up here," he decided. "Take him a long time to get back to Coarse Gold, and a heap of things could happen before he made it. A feller good enough to trail me sure is wise enough to figure it out the same way. So instead of huntin' him why don't I set tight and let him come to me?"

The answer to that question brought a smile to his lips. Matt Garth used his fingers and toes to inch up the slanting surface of the granite boulder beside the fissure. He stretched flat on its top, waiting like a mountain cougar for game to approach.

Ears tuned to pick up the slightest alien sound in a night full of small animal noises, he waited, and then as his eyes coasted out over the velvet black that cloaked the Pinnacles, he felt himself stiffen. Almost directly in front of him, off across that black void, he saw light rise and fall. A pinprick of brightness in the night, over there where porphyry and serpentine were folded into the tortured cliffs. A camp-fire? Tom Horn's? Jim Pines's?

"You're getting closer to some answers, son!" Matt told himself, "but you ain't at the end of this trail yet!"

He heard a gray squirrel's querulous chirp along the route he had followed across the plateau. Another, closer this time, took it up. Pine needles stirred as though a gentle breeze had touched them, and Matt Garth had to admire the stealth of the man approaching his camp. There were few who could move so quietly over pine needles and the fine twigs that lay beneath the stunted trees.

A light man, he thought. *No heavyweight could make it—*

Something in black moved beneath him, and Matt saw the pale flash of a knife. A knife to cut the bay's tether and set him afoot. Garth gathered his muscles and leaped from the boulder. A hundred and eighty pounds of weight smashed down on the smaller man beneath him, and they struck the ground together. Matt slugged down with the Colt in his right hand, and felt it slide off the other's shoulder. The man's slashing knife streaked his leg, and Garth slugged the Colt at the pale blur of a face. Then a pair of kicking heels caught him at belt-line and seemed to lift him into space. Half paralyzed, he lay for an instant, and the seconds were long enough for the other man to make his feet and leap toward the rim.

Garth fired, once, and again, and he thought he saw his quarry stagger, and then the man was gone from view. He heard the rattle of stones down the precipitous slope beyond his camp, and the sickness in his groin was leaving him enough now so that he could climb to his feet. He leaned against the boulder he had leaped from and found something clenched in his left hand.

Matt touched a sulphur match to the rough rock, and peered at a bit of good black broadcloth torn from his coat.

"Only an Easterner," he thought, "would wear a coat in this country." He listened, half subconsciously, to the fading clatter of rocks beyond the rim and muttered, "Ben Sarcer!"

FINE DUST on the cloth gritted beneath his fingers, and he could tell from the feel that it was not the same as the granite sand that floored this plateau.

"Road dust," Matt surmised. "Sarcer made it from Sacramento to Coarse Gold on horse-back, and somebody there told him I was coming up this way." Any of the Missourians, he realized, could have done that, for he hadn't cautioned them to keep his destination to themselves.

Had Harvey Trumbull returned with Sarcer? They had met, according to Carrie Pines, on the *Amelia* for the first time. But that meeting could also have been pre-

(Continued on page 96)

TRIGGER PROUD

The two of them locked eyes in a long look of mutual enmity . . .

Case Burdick's guns ramrodded the spread until the day he used them on a squatter and found he'd be taking orders from a new boss—a gent called Death!

IT WAS a fine morning, a bright, sharp looking morning. Case Burdick appraised it from his kitchen window, and thought to himself that it looked like the start of a day in which a man might accomplish something. The thought brought a half-smile to his mouth, because he fully intended to accomplish something today—something that he had been looking forward to doing for some time.

His breakfast finished, Burdick sent the cook down to the bunkhouse for his foreman, Sam Turney. While he waited for Turney to appear, he lighted a long cheroot,

By RICHARD H. NELSON

and smoked contentedly, idly thinking of what was to happen today.

Turney let himself in by the kitchen door. He stood a moment, while his eyes adjusted from the morning glare to the comparative darkness of the room.

"Sit down, Sam," Burdick invited. "Still some coffee in the pot—pour yourself a cup."

Turney obeyed, and sat down, across from Burdick. Burdick continued smoking while Turney sipped his coffee. It became a sort of contest, each man letting the silence pile up, waiting for the other to give in and break it.

In an unusually generous mood, Burdick decided to give in.

"We're taking a little ride this morning, Sam. I wondered if you'd want to come."

"If you want me along, sure."

Burdick nodded absently, his gaze still on the window and the morning landscape beyond it.

"Yeah," he continued unhurriedly, "thought we'd ride over to the Double U, pick up Johnny Baines, then stop by the Crooked-horn for Potter and his boy—then maybe swing across to the buttes for Massenger . . ."

Turney put his cup down carefully.

"You sure you want me along? I'll feel kinda funny—the only hired help in a bunch of big land-owners like that."

Burdick's gaze came away from the window and focussed on his foreman.

"Big? You're ramrod on my spread, ain't you?" He smiled. "That sets you up as big as any of 'em, Sam."

Turney smiled back, on cue.

"I guess that's right, too," he agreed dutifully.

"And after we get our little bunch together," Burdick went on, concentrating now on the glowing end of his cheroot, "I figure we'll most likely head over towards the river, and—say howdy to some folks."

"Oh," Turney said, seeing at last what it was all about.

"Still want to go?" Burdick asked.

"Sure, sure," Turney replied, a little hastily.

"It's all planned," Burdick said, his tone businesslike now. "They'll be waiting for us—Baines, Abel and his boy, and Massenger. I didn't tell you about it because I didn't want it getting noised around the bunkhouse."

Turney's mouth flattened down.

"Sure," he said, but only because he had to.

"No offense, of course," Burdick assured him, but it didn't sound very assuring.

The foreman's brow wrinkled thoughtfully. He sloshed his coffee dregs around in the bottom of his cup.

"You look for a little trouble, maybe, when you get to the river?"

The other man shrugged.

"They're funny people, Sam. I guess they think they own that land down there, just because they been squattin' on it—and I think they might offer to fight for what they figure they own. Don't let that religion of theirs fool you. There's some men can get as much spit an' vinegar out of a Bible as others get from a gutful of whiskey." His cheroot had gone out. He relighted it.

"I don't figure they can give us more trouble than we can handle, if that's what you mean," he said.

"I didn't mean that," Turney said.

"We can get going any time," Burdick told him. "Saddle us a couple horses—I'll meet you down at the corral."

Turney stood and headed out. He paused in the open doorway.

"Winchesters?" he asked.

"I'll take mine. Colts will do for you, I expect."

"Sure." The foreman stepped outside and closed the door quietly behind him.

The sunlight was warming to ride in. A mile out from his ranch house, Burdick loosened his shirt collar.

"Might get hot, on towards noon," he said.

Riding beside him, Turney nodded.

"We'll all eat something at Massenger's place, before we ride on to the river," Burdick added.

"Sure," Turney agreed.

THEY RODE capably, two strong men, big and solid in the saddle. Of the two, Burdick was the larger. His hair showed gray at the temples; there were lines around his eyes and mouth and on his forehead, and his belly pushed out from behind his belt a little, but these were the only marks of aging on him. Turney was a younger edition, as yet unblanched, unlined and unfatted. They both had a look of coldness about them. You expected a cold wind to follow in their wake, dulling the brightness of the spring-green range land.

"Ain't nervous about this, are you, Sam?" Burdick asked.

"No," the younger man answered.

Burdick shifted in his saddle, eyed the other man carefully.

"You don't look real pleased about it."

"I figure we could have a little better help, is all," Turney told him frankly. "They're all old men, all but young Potter—an' he's too much the other way."

"We need 'em, just the same."

"Well—you know, I guess."

Burdick smiled. "I'll tell you why we need 'em, Sam," he said. "Those damn hymn-singin' squatters are on my range. If just me and you, and maybe a couple of the boys went in there, and there come some trouble out of it—it don't look good. The laws got things in 'em about squatters' rights, now, and we might get into a potful o' grief."

"I suppose," Turney acknowledged.

"But this way, with the three other big ranchers in the valley ridin' with us—well, hell, Sam, we're a delegation."

"Yeah, I guess we are at that." Turney thought about it for a time. "How did you talk 'em into coming in with you?" he wanted to know.

"Easy." Burdick laughed shortly. "They're scared o' squatters, for one thing. If the word gets out that there's green pastures a-plenty here, there'll soon be a squatter behind every bush. For another thing, they're scared o' me. I'm king-coyote on this range—they'll follow my lead, because they don't want to be on the other side of the fence from me."

"Uh-huh." Turney sounded dubious.

"You don't think so?" Burdick demanded. "You watch. If it gets so I have to talk rough, they'll be in it as soon as I am. Soon as my gun is out, theirs'll be, too. Like a bunch o' sheep, Sam—an' I'm top sheep-dog."

"Uh-huh," Turney said.

Old Johnny Baines was waiting on his veranda. His horse was hitched to the porch rail, saddled and ready. When Burdick and Turney rode in, Baines eased himself out of his cane-bottom rocker, and mounted his horse.

"Expected you some earlier," he said, by way of greeting.

"Too hot to ride fast," Burdick replied. "Plenty o' time," he added.

Baines made a wry face. "All the time in the world, far as that goes," he admitted.

They turned south from Baines's Double U ranch, riding stirrup to stirrup across the range. Baines rode as though his spine were one solid bone, straight and unyielding as the barrel of the Winchester in his saddle scabbard.

Studying Baines from the tail of his eye, Burdick felt vaguely amused. It was amusing that a man so old would carry a young-sounding name like Johnny. And Baines looked old. That ramrod back didn't give any illusions of lingering youth. It looked more as though time had decided to petrify Johnny Baines, instead of corrupting him.

The sun crawled higher, reaching for its zenith. The earth warmed, and sent up shimmering heat-waves. Warmth closed down around the riders as the miles jolted past. It smothered conversation. When

they reached the Crooked-horn spread, sweat had already soaked the armpits of their shirts.

Abel Potter and his son Ed, waiting in the shade of their veranda, looked cool and comfortable by comparison. It irritated Burdick. He reined in and sat glowering at father and son as they moved in a leisurely manner to mount their horses.

"Sure wish I could set in the shade all morning," Burdick said, showing his annoyance.

Young Ed Potter grinned at him.

"Well, now, Case, if you want to swap ranches with us, you won't have so far to ride, next time."

Burdick snorted, obliquely flattered at the absurdity of this.

Abel Potter eyed Sam Turney with open disapproval.

"Didn't know you figured to bring help with you, Case," he said to Burdick.

"Sam's a handy man with guns, if it should come to that," Burdick told him. Potter and Johnny Baines exchanged glances at this, but neither of them said anything more about it.

But young Potter kneed his horse over next to Turney's.

"Say, you a real curly-headed gunslinger for true, Sam?" he inquired with dry gaiety. "Maybe we'll get to shoot up a prayer meeting today, eh?"

Turney, his prediction about his feelings in this crowd of landowners coming true, chose to let it pass.

"Sure," was all he said.

THEY LEFT the Crooked-horn behind them, angling more east than south, now; riding for the low twin buttes that marked the Massenger ranch. The country was open and flat. They rode across it five-abreast, fanned out like a cavalry troop on parade. Burdick held the middle of the line, with Baines and Abel Potter on his immediate left and right, young Potter and Sam Turney riding either flank.

After a time, Abel Potter turned to Burdick.

"How we going to do it, Case? I mean, what are we going to say?"

Burdick shrugged.

"It's all been said, plenty. They've been told to get out—now we got to show 'em we mean business."

On his right, Johnny Baines shook his head.

"They won't go easy," he predicted darkly. "They think the Lord led 'em here, or something."

"The Lord can damn well lead 'em some place else," young Potter offered. "Ain't that right, Case?"

Burdick smiled. "That's the ticket, Ed." He favored his little army with an approving glance, right and left. "Just follow my play," he told them. "It'll be easy, real easy."

"Sure," Turney said automatically.

At Massenger's, they stopped to rest the horses, and to eat. Phil Massenger, a noisy bright-eyed little man, sparked laughter with a running fire of crude humor about the squatters and their religious peculiarities. But only Burdick, Abel Potter and his boy Ed laughed with Massenger. Turney was silent, still feeling ill at ease, and there was no telling what Johnny Baines felt. His face was studiously blank. Burdick noticed, and thought that Baines was like so many old men, who profess quiet wisdom with their silences, when actually they are stupid and senile.

Then the noon meal was finished, and they sat smoking, pipe and cheroot. Massenger ran out of funny things to say about the squatters.

"What you think, Case?" he asked, after a lull in the talk. "Time to go?"

Burdick let a few seconds of silence fill the gap between Massenger's question and his reply. He wanted a touch of the dramatic in this—he wanted the jovial mood left here at the table, when they started for the river.

"All right," he said at length. "Now's as good a time as any." He stood up abruptly. His chair scraped back with a sudden grating sound that made Johnny Baines wince nervously. Burdick was achieving the thing he wanted, apparently. It was all grim, purposeful business, now.

Even the horses seemed to sense it. They set out from the Massenger ranch at a crisp gait. The six riders fanned out, less companionable and more militant, joking and light talk replaced by a stern, silent concentration. Burdick secretly congratulated himself for establishing a grim atmosphere so quickly. He overlooked the fact that this was the same mood in which Johnny Baines had cloaked himself all morning long.

The flat land tilted under them after a time, and they were riding down an imperceptible grade toward the valley floor. A current of cooler air moved up to meet them. The horses pricked their ears, and nickered hopefully at the smell of running water somewhere ahead. A tension was building in the men. Abel Potter took to clearing his throat repeatedly, much to Burdick's annoyance.

Surprisingly enough, it was Johnny Baines who broke the silence at last.

"Don't figure they'll be expecting us, do you, Case?" he inquired.

Burdick shook his head. "It don't matter if they are," he replied shortly.

Nervously, little Phil Massenger glanced back and up, at the thin haze of dust, rising from beneath their horses' hoofs.

"They'll be expecting us, all right," he predicted. "If the Lord don't tell 'em we're coming, our dust will."

Young Ed Potter snickered at this, but no one else found it compellingly funny. Nevertheless, Burdick felt called upon to reassert the gravity of their mission. He pulled his carbine from its scabbard, noisily levered a cartridge into the firing chamber, thumbed the hammer down to safety position, and then returned the gun to the boot.

No one openly took notice, but after a long minute, Johnny Baines went through a similar ritual with his own carbine, and then, one by one, the others made a show of readying their individual weapons. All but Sam Turney—he had checked his Colts before starting the ride that morning, and he wasn't so swept up in Burdick's mood that he felt the need to check them again.

Grass swished rankly beneath the horses' hoofs now; there was no more plume of dust to betray their coming. On their right, cottonwood and clumps of willow stood green beside the shallow river. Beyond a grove of cottonwoods just ahead, a curl of wood-smoke lifted waveringly to lose itself in the brassy sky. The riders sifted through the screen of trees, and moved out into the fringes of the squatters' encampment.

Deep-bellied wagons stood empty here and there. Near them, dun-colored tents had been raised, until permanent houses could be built. The ranchers rode past them, and continued along the wide river bank.

"They saw us comin', all right," Abel Potter said. "Ain't nobody in sight any place."

"They'll be up ahead," Burdick told them. "Up where they've started their meeting house."

Massenger and Johnny Baines nodded silent agreement.

ANOTHER GROVE loomed before them. Relentlessly the riders pressed through it. When they emerged, they were moving across a flat meadow, dotted with more wagons, more tents, and grazing animals. Directly ahead a long, log building stood half-completed, and before it a knot of men was waiting.

Burdick didn't let his horse slow its pace—he urged it forward, then reined back crisply when he reached the waiting group. The others reined in behind him—several feet behind him.

Coldly, Burdick surveyed the silent men. They returned his stare from under their flat-brimmed hats, the square-cut beards of the older ones jutting firm and unmoving. At length, Burdick's gaze rested impersonally on the man who stood forward as the leader of the squatters.

"You know me, I think," Burdick said to him.

"You were here before; I remember you from that," the other replied. There was no expression whatever on his flat face, above the beard. But the beard itself seemed to express, by its jutting solidity, a hard displeasure with Burdick and the other ranchers.

"When I was here the other time," Burdick continued, "I told you this was private land. That it ain't free range, and it ain't open for homesteadin'."

"That is what you told us," the Elder agreed. His eyes never wavered from Burdick's.

"All right," Burdick said. He turned in his saddle, looking across the meadow at the wagons, and the silent tents. He turned back to the Elder, saddle leather creaking under him. "Your wagons ain't been reloaded, and your tents are still up." He motioned toward the uncompleted log building, and the lumber and tools scattered near it. "And you been workin' some more on this."

"We do not intend to leave here," the Elder stated flatly.

The two of them locked eyes in a long look of mutual enmity and unyielding determination. Then the silence behind him brought a whiff of worry to Burdick's mind. He threw an involuntary glance back over his shoulder, and saw that the faces of his companions were set as rock-hard as he felt his own to be. Reassured, he turned back to the Elder.

"It won't do," he said. "If we have to force you off, we will."

The Elder's thick shoulders moved in a slight shrug.

"We are forbidden to resist you with weapons," he told Burdick. "Nevertheless, we stay where we are."

"Do you, now?" Burdick snapped. Moving deliberately, he pulled his carbine from its scabbard. Leather creaked behind him and he smiled grimly down at the Elder. "Do you, now?" he repeated.

There was an uncomfortable stirring in the group of squatters, but the Elder remained unmoved.

"We are forbidden to resist," he repeated strongly. Burdick sensed that it was more a reminder to the rest of the homesteading men than anything else.

"Have it your own way," he shrugged. His fingers moved suggestively over the breech of his carbine. He looked beyond the silent, stubborn men, to where a draft-ox grazed, a hundred yards away. In one motion, the carbine came up, was fired, and the spent cartridge was levered out to lie smoking in the grass. The ox bellowed, and swung its head wildly, before collapsing.

Two of the homesteaders broke away from the group and ran uselessly to where the ox had fallen. The rest milled like stampeded cattle—some backed fearfully away from the ranch men, some pressed forward angrily.

"Hold!" the Elder shouted above their gabble. His men quieted, and he faced Burdick, eyes burning. "Our animals have done nothing to injure you," he said fiercely. "There is no call to destroy God's innocent beasts—"

"Why, hell-fire, man," Burdick laughed, "we can have us a real fine turkey-shoot! What you keep in those tents, brother—chickens?"

He swung the carbine over to bear on the nearest tent. A yell went up from the squatters. One of them, a young, beardless man, scooped up an axe that leaned against the wall of the log building. He charged toward the ranch men, brandishing his weapon, then he tripped, thrown off balance

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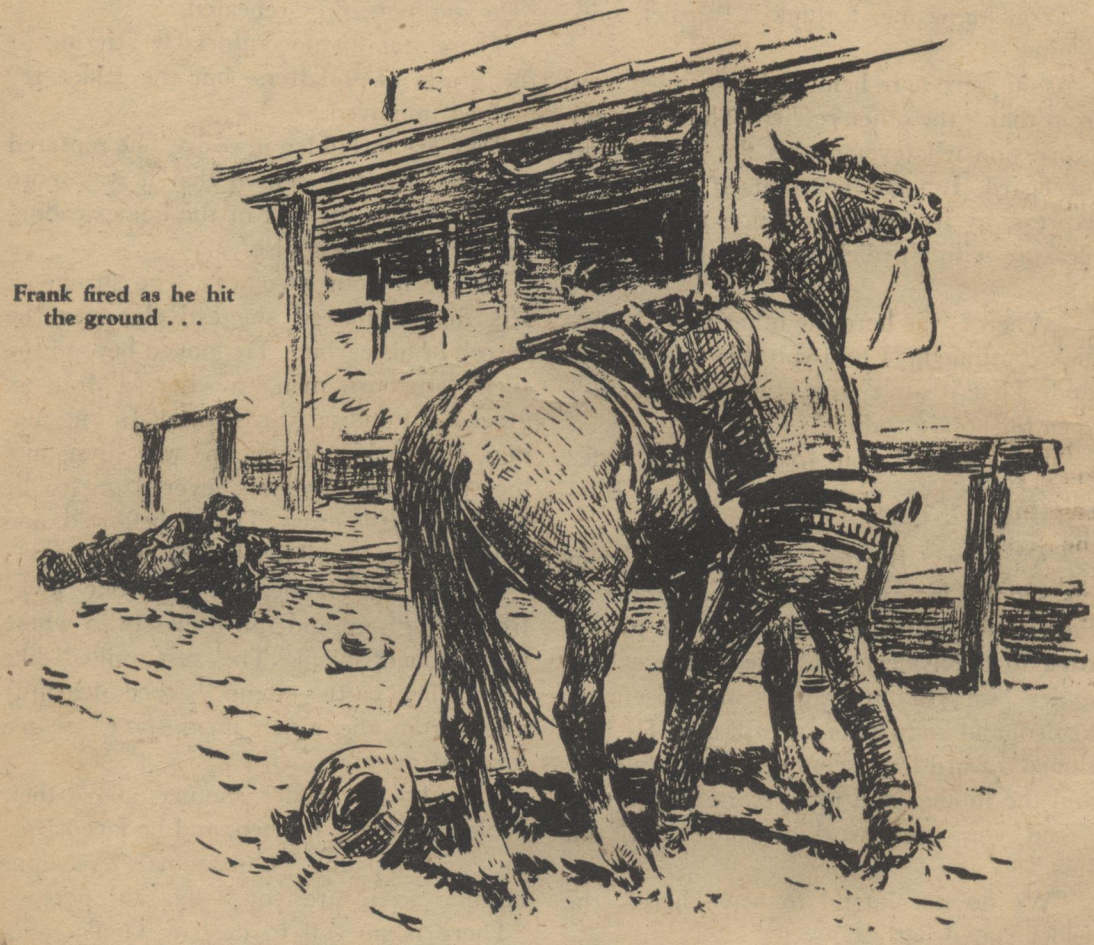
MAN HIGH

By
W. J. REYNOLDS



Frank fired as he hit the ground . . .

You can push a man just so far, Acey Woolsey found . . . And then something's bound to break—an outlaw's nerve or his neck!

IT WAS getting up toward noon and young Frank Bonner was beginning to feel the inner urgency, the worry of a man unused to trading. He knew that he shouldn't worry. He'd sell the two horses, easy, before the afternoon was out. Both were blood bays and saddlers, and the hundred and twenty-five each that he asked was reasonable enough he thought.

Frank rubbed a freckled ear with a blunt finger and squinted one blue eye at the sun. Shucks, he had plenty of time yet. Real trading wouldn't get started till after dinner a spell. Right now everybody was

wandering around, spotting the things they wanted to trade for, and sort of feeling out the owner. He had nothing to worry about; he'd already had three offers even though they didn't approach his asking price.

Acey Woolsey had offered him two hundred for the two. Frank wished it had been somebody else. He'd have talked trade. But not to Woolsey. He didn't want no truck with the Woolsey brothers. The Woolsey's, Acey and Jake, meant trouble. and that was a thing that young Frank Bonner didn't want. Besides, Acey Woolsey wouldn't ever give a fair price and Frank and Mary needed that two-fifty to to get married.

Frank shifted, gripping the lead ropes on the bays, and his eyes cut quickly in rapid glances, embarrassed, like everybody knew he was getting married. But no one paid him any attention. Folks milled about the trade grounds, gossiping, working up trades on old guns and hound dogs and horses, having themselves a time.

"You decided to sell me them horses, kid?" a voice said behind Frank.

Frank turned, feeling the seeping shock in his belly as he saw Acey Woolsey's narrow face and mean little yellow eyes over the flabby body. "Not for no two hundred, I ain't," Frank said sharply. He hadn't meant to be so crabbed and he added quickly, "Aim to have two-fifty for these saddlers."

Woolsey poked the horses, making them shift about, looked in their mouths for the third time this morning and felt for saddle galls.

All the time he was talking in his whiskey voice. "You're the boy Matt Carl raised, ain't you? His nephew? Thought so. Knowed your pa and ma 'fore they took sick and died. Fine folks, the Bonners, took a liking to old Jim first time I ever seen him. Never knowed your ma real well. You look a lot like Jim. Same freckles and eyes, but you're bigger than Jim was. You're a real big strapping boy, ain't you? Guess I can give two-fifty for these horses. I'm a man likes to do right by old friends and such."

Frank felt the grip of uneasiness, a queasiness in his belly. He wished somebody besides Acey Woolsey was here, but two-fifty was two-fifty, and Acey Woolsey's money would spend just as good as anybody's. Still . . .

Acey Woolsey was watching Frank from his hard little eyes and now he straightened up and said loudly so others could hear, "Speak up, son, speak up. That was your price, wasn't it? Acey Woolsey's word's his bond, but I got the gold money right here." He pulled a handful of coins from his pocket as several men walked up and stood watching. "Is it a deal, boy?"

Frank cast a last uneasy look around, but he felt a little better now that other men were about. "All right," he said. "It's a deal."

"Fine," Woolsey said heartily. "Come right over here to this wagon. It's mine and we'll tie them up and I'll make your pockets jingle with gold, boy!"

Frank moved over to the jockey wagon with its canvas top and with several other horses tied around it. Woolsey took the lead ropes from Frank and tied the bays to the front wheel. Two other men that Frank vaguely associated with the Woolseys were sitting on the wagon's seat and watching them. They jumped to the ground as Acey and Frank tied the horses.

"This is fine," Woolsey said, pulling the handful of gold coins from his pocket again. "Nick and Dade here can witness the deal in case there's any question about ownership later. Not that there is, of course. I know you raised them horses, boy, because you said so. Here you are."

He counted the double eagles out into Frank's hand—ten of them. Woolsey said heartily, "There you are, son. Two hundred dollars and both of us satisfied, eh? That's a good price for them horses. . . ."

"That was two hundred and fifty!" Frank said quickly—so quickly that his voice cracked as the shock came again in his belly, turning it to water.

Even as Frank inwardly condemned the boyish crack in his voice, fear suddenly flooded through him, and the realization that he had been gypped. The three men before him had gone still and glaring, and Acey Woolsey was fingering the big pistol that he had stuck in his belt. One of the others, Dade, Frank thought his name was, suddenly pulled a long-bladed pocket knife and commenced to scrape his finger nails, eyeing Frank from glittery eyes. Nick, the other, was cracking big knuckles and scowling at Frank. Involuntarily, Frank backed up a step.

Woolsey snarled. "Boy, are you saying I cheated you? You calling Acey Woolsey a liar? I said I'd give two hundred for them horses, and you took me up. You try to get me in trouble and yell around that Acey Woolsey cheated a boy and I'll just blow your damn brains out! Hear me?"

"Maybe if we split his ears he'll have something to yell about," Dade said.

The blood drained away from Frank's heart and his breath came in jerky gasps. His uncle Matt Carl's complaining and harping came back to him. Matt had said over and over that some smart jockey would skin Frank out of his horses, or some "big bug" would out sharp him. A "pore" man didn't have a chance, according to Matt Carl, and he spent a lot of time telling that to everybody who would listen to him. Frank had grown up hearing it, and he realized now that it was some of that feeling and belief that had caused him to feel uneasiness and fear, and wish he already had the horse money in his pocket.

"It was two-fifty!" Frank yelled again. "I want my money!" He pointed wildly to the men gathering around them. "They heard you take me up on my price. They heard you say two-fifty!"

THE CROWD was growing but no one said anything. All of them were watching Acey Woolsey, mostly. Woolsey cut hard-eyed glances at the crowd. His narrow face picked up a mean little grin. "Nobody heard me say anything like that, boy. Ask them. You better ask them, then git. Acey Woolsey will make that much allowance for a shirt-tailed kid trying to be smart. But after you ask you'd better scat for I ain't fooling with you much!"

Frank looked wildly around. "You heard him!" He pointed at a man, then another. "Both of you were there." But despite Frank's panic, part of his mind was functioning clearly and he knew that they hadn't heard. Woolsey had repeated the two-fifty part quietly and then made a loud show of taking Frank up on his price. Woolsey had aimed to skin him all along.

The men indicated backed up and cast uneasy glances at Woolsey. They shook their heads. "Nope, not me," one said. "I heard him ask if it was a deal and you said yes. I didn't heard no price mentioned." The other nodded quickly. "That's what I heard."

Acey Woolsey nodded, and Frank saw that he figured it was closed. He grinned his mean grin and started to enjoy himself. "Nobody heard me say something I didn't say, boy. Just get you a witness that says Acey Woolsey is a liar and I'll blow a hole in him you can put a wagon through! Now you hike up your shirt-tail and get from here before that same Acey Woolsey gives you your needings for trying to cheat older folks! Git! Boo!" He jumped at Frank and slapped his pants leg like he was scaring a chicken.

Rage and action hit Frank at the same instant. He still held part of the heavy gold eagles in each hand and as Acey Woolsey jumped at him, Frank hit him square on the nose with a gold-filled fist. It was a solid blow and it hurt. It slammed Woolsey back into his two friends.

Woolsey gasped, stared at Frank, then

roared with rage and charged. Blood streamed down his nose, making his narrow face fearful below the flaming yellow eyes. His big fists lashed at Frank, flooding him with blows. Frank backed up, trying to get in a blow of his own. Then Frank, with the pressure of his rage, leaped aside, shoved the gold in his pocket, and slammed a hard blow that caught Acey Woolsey on the neck.

Woolsey staggered back, cursing, and Frank leaped in, slamming blows with all the power of his bulky shoulders into Woolsey's flabby body—hammering that sagging gut. Woolsey lunged backward and sprawled against the wagon's tongue as men yelled and the horse lunged and snorted.

Then Acey Woolsey was scrambling to his feet, snarling curses, and grabbed the gun from his belt. Men yelled and scattered wildly. Frank stared, too mad and excited to move until Woolsey was lining the gun on him. Then Frank kicked, sending a shower of dust into Woolsey's face. He followed the dust in a fierce leap as the gun banged. Woolsey missed. Then Frank was on him, fear making him merciless. He beat Woolsey to the ground and knocked the gun aside; then sent a cowhide boot driving at the gun hand. But Woolsey somehow jerked the gun aside. Frank missed the aimed kick and the momentum jerked him off balance. The last Frank remembered was seeing the arc of that big blue gun whizzing at his head.

Frank came to at the horse trough on the rim of the trade grounds. His Uncle Matt Carl and several other men were dousing him with water. Sputtering, Frank sat up; then nearly fell as his head whirled. But after a moment it cleared again and he made it to his feet. Matt Carl's beaten, frightened face instantly brought back to Frank his own troubles.

With rising anger he realized that Woolsey had skinned him, flat cheated him, and then made him like it or accept it—together with a gun whipping. Frank admitted that he had been scared, and others had too. All of them were afraid of the Woolseys and wouldn't speak up against them.

Both Woolseys were mean, Frank had heard, real mean. But Jake was the one men really dreaded. Jake was the killer. Jake had been to Huntsville two-three times and tried for killings on several occasions. Somehow, Jake usually went free. Acey had killed two men that were known, but Jake topped that figure considerable. Nobody wanted to get the Woolseys down on them.

"I aim to have my other fifty dollars," Frank said.

His words seemed to release the pent flood of words in Matt Carl. "You're a fool, Frank! A plain fool. Didn't I tell you time and again you'd get beat? A pore man ain't got a chance for the big bugs and the crooks. He sweats and works. Then when he gets something to sell, somebody is ready to take it, without giving the price, wanting something for nothing without working. . . ."

It was a familiar song to Frank and he let his uncle run on without listening. Matt Carl always had plans. Then as soon as it became a little hard, he found a dozen reasons for giving it up. He'd been like that since Frank had gone to live with him at the age of eight. Matt had been whipped a long time.

"Frank," one of the men said seriously, "you'd better keep the two hundred you got and forget it, put it down to experience. The Woolseys are bad men to cross, and I hear Jake is due in today from the Indian Nations. Get them both together and harping on trouble you caused them and they're liable to kill you, son. Let well enough alone and figure you're lucky to get two hundred." Others present agreed and considered Frank lucky.

Some of the anger drained out of Frank under the general agreement, and uncer-

tainty gnawed at him. His head hurt like forty and he felt fit to burst, and he couldn't seem to think straight. He wiped at the blood from his split scalp and his hand shook. Maybe they were right.

BUT IT hurt a man to be flat out robbed. Just have a man take his property right off him easy as pie and have people agree he was lucky. Then there was Mary to face and tell that the man she was marrying could be robbed like a wet-eared kid and made to like it. Fine husband he'd make like that.

Anger gripped him again. "I aim to have my money," he said. "Woolsey or not." He turned toward town. He'd get his head sewed up and maybe the bleeding stopped so he could see. Then he'd have another talk with Acey Woolsey. By damn he'd have his horses back or that fifty dollars . . .

"You're a fool, Frank Bonner!" Matt Carl yelled excitedly. "Just like your pa, hard headed as a mule! I tried and tried to get that out of you! But you won't learn, hard headed and stubborn. . . ."

Frank walked on and then he saw his uncle hurrying toward the wagons behind the edge of town where Mary and Aunt Sal were. Matt Carl had to tell them what a fool Frank was and share the excitement again of telling how Woolsey had beaten Frank. Frank shut his lips tightly and went on toward the doctor's office.

The doctor was knotting the last of three stitches in Frank's scalp when Mary burst into the room. Her eyes were wide and a black-blue with excitement and worry, and she was panting from her dash up the stairs.

"Frank! Frank! Uncle Matt said you'd been beaten with a gun. Doctor, is he hurt bad?"

"Just the skin busted," Frank hastily assured her, "and a few bruises."

"But he said you'd fought! He said Woolsey would likely kill you!"

The doctor added his blunt assurance to Frank's and then Frank hurriedly paid the doctor's fee and hustled Mary through the door. But on the stairs she stopped and faced Frank, her attitude changed to determination—a woman with definite ideas about her man's behavior.

"Frank, we'll get the things we need and go home. We can be out of this town in an hour. I—"

"Mary," Frank cut in gently, stubbornly, "I've got fifty dollars to collect yet, and I aim to have it. I ain't aiming to knuckle under to no crooked horse jockeys and let myself be beat out of what's mine."

"But Frank—"

"Nobody stood up to Woolsey out there. They were afraid and Woolsey knew it. He gambled on it to cheat me. I aim to go see the marshal now. You go back to the wagon."

"Frank Bonner, I won't! And you listen to me—"

"Mary! You hear me? What you want for a husband, a damn whiner and complainer because everybody beats him? You do what I said!"

It was a tone of hard command that Frank had never used on Mary. In fact, he'd never used it before. It startled him a little and drained the color from Mary's face. She stared at him and her breath caught in her throat.

"I'm sorry, honey," he said quickly. "I ain't aiming to take my mad out on you. But you run along now."

She turned without another word and walked back toward the wagons at the rim of town, and Frank Bonner looked after her with tenderness and love. He would do his blamedest to be man-sized and deserve her. He didn't aim to knuckle down to the Woolseys of the world and be cheated and bullied—if he could help it.

The marshal was a man turning to fat from soft living and he was sunk deep in a padded chair. He eyed Frank without

enthusiasm and tugged at one end of his walrus mustache. "What's fer you, bub?" he asked.

Frank told him, then ended, "I want my horses or the fifty dollars, that's all."

"And you want me to get it," the marshal said sourly. "Might be a chore." He sat up and looked at Frank. "Look, bub, if nobody would stand up to your side out there I reckon they won't if I see them. Acey's got his two men to back him. Looks to me like you lost fifty dollars. Lucky it wasn't more."

Anger gripped Frank again. "Lucky!" he yelled. "That's all I can hear is how lucky I am! I don't think it's lucky to lose fifty dollars or my horses." The anger bordered on rage and Frank shut his teeth grimly. Lucky he was a kid and lucky not to lose all he had.

He was a man and taking a wife. Frank said through his teeth, "You're the law. You aiming to help me or not?"

The marshal watched Frank steadily and some of the sourness had left his face. But he still didn't appear to like the chore ahead. But he stood up and said, "Come on, bub, we'll see Acey. Won't do no good though."

THEY LOCATED Acey Woolsey, with Dade and Nick, in the Texas Saloon. The three men had a half-empty whiskey bottle in front of them and Woolsey had a plaster on his swollen nose. He glared at Frank and the marshal as they halted at the table.

"Acey," the marshal said, "the kid here says you owe him fifty dollars yet on a horse trade."

"He's a damn tarnal liar!" Acey Woolsey snarled and jumped to his feet. "And I'll finish knocking his head in!"

"Sit down," the marshal said amiably. "Each of you claim the other a liar. Now who can oust up a witness?"

"I can," Woolsey pointed to Dade and Nick. "I got two here says we agreed on two hundred. The damn kid is a welsher and a liar! And if he keeps after me I aim to use my gun on him—the bullet end."

As Dade and Nick agreed with Woolsey's story, the marshal turned to Frank. "There you are, kid, and you say nobody will back you. Aint much I can do."

Frank glared at Woolsey. "You're a liar and a cheat, Woolsey, a low-down stinking liar and thief!"

Woolsey leaped away from the table and charged around it. Frank lunged to meet him, but the marshal collared him. "Whoa, boy! Hold up, Acey!" He blocked the furious jockey and Acey glared, cursing.

"Turn him loose and I'll gut shoot him!" Woolsey roared. "Get you a gun, you snot-nosed smart aleck!"

Frank was wild with anger. "I aim to, blame you for a thief!" He ripped loose from the marshal and his fist whizzed around to slam against Woolsey's sore nose. Woolsey bawled a painful burst of curses and leaped in. His fist came at Frank and Frank ducked. The fist hit the marshal on the ear and sent the lawman plunging to the floor, adding his howl of rage to the uproar.

Frank hit Woolsey again, aiming for the nose, and Woolsey went into a screaming fit of cursing. Blood spurted from his nose and his little eyes flamed with a berserk rage. He ripped out his gun and Frank hurled a chair as Woolsey fired. The bullet barely missed Frank and he instinctively charged in upon Woolsey, knowing his one chance was to get hold of the gun.

Frank batted at the gun as it roared again, and then with Woolsey jerked half off balance, Frank hit him with all the power of his husky shoulders behind the blow. He caught Woolsey square on the chin.

Woolsey plunged backward, then seemed to butt the bar rail head on. There was a sickening thud, a deadish sound, and Woolsey half sat up, his eyes blank. Then

he keeled over to kick and lie still, head odd-shaped on top.

In the dead silence, the marshal moved over to kneel by Woolsey and feel of his heart, then lift an eye-lid. He stood up and looked around at the white-faced and staring Frank.

"Dead. Head caved in."

Every eye in the saloon was upon Frank and he felt weak and scared. He blurted, "I wasn't aiming to kill him. I didn't want him to shoot me!"

"Ordinarily a feller wouldn't like being shot," the marshal said.

Feet shuffled and men came from behind and under what cover they could find when Woolsey had started shooting, and came to crowd around Frank and the marshal. They yelled opinions and information. Near as Frank could tell they were suddenly on his side, telling the marshal not to hold him, that it was an accident.

Finally the marshal made himself heard. "I ain't aiming to hold him! Now dammit hush up a minute!" As the noise quieted a little he turned to Frank. "Son, you'd better hit the high road plum out of the state of Texas before Jake Woolsey gets here. Jake is a mean hellion. Acey is, or was, a fine upstanding gent beside his brother Jake. Jake will be wanting to kill you and he will if he can find you!"

Frank stared at the marshal and the words jarred and sent fear coursing up and down his back. His belly felt weak and washed out. He was, Frank realized, scared stiff.

Beyond near the door, Frank saw the staring eyes and open mouth of his Uncle Matt. Then Matt turned and scuttled out the door to the street. He was heading, even now, to tell Aunt Sal and Mary that Frank Bonner had just killed Acey Woolsey and that Jake Woolsey was coming to kill Frank. Suddenly, Frank plunged for the door himself and when he reached the street, Matt Carl was thirty feet down the street.

Rage flooded Frank.

"Matt!" he yelled. "Hold on, damn you!"

For a moment Frank didn't recognize his own voice. It seemed that the hoarse, ragged and angry order came from another. It suddenly sobered Frank to see his uncle skid to a stop and stand there white-faced and trembling, scared within an inch of his life at the transformed nephew, the nephew that had just killed a man.

Frank walked up to Matt Carl and hot words trembled on his tongue. If Matt Carl hadn't been hiding on the sidelines at the trade grounds, and had stepped up like a grown man and backed Frank, none of this would have happened. And by hell he could go tell Mary if she needed telling . . .

Frank held the words back and looked at his uncle with new eyes. He saw a beaten old man who was afraid to stand up to anybody and who could, now at his age, merely justify himself with excuses and keep hidden the thing in his heart that told him he was beat before he started.

With a shock Frank realized he was falling into the pattern that had molded his uncle, blaming others for his own misfortunes, making excuses. He remembered the times when Matt Carl couldn't make a decision, and had let his wife prod him into necessary action; then take refuge in anger, saying he didn't give a damn if it wasn't done or turn out right, and so on. Putting himself in the clear and shifting the blame for possible failure to her.

It wasn't Matt's fault that he, Frank Bonner, had been taken in a trade. It had been Woolsey's intention from the first. Woolsey was that kind, or had been. It was up to Frank Bonner to stand on his own feet. He was a man now and getting married and planning to make a home for himself and Mary.

Frank reached out a hand to take his uncle's arm gently, and said softly, "I'm boogered, Uncle Matt, don't pay me no

mind. Come on and we'll tell the women folks, they have to know."

It hurt Frank and aroused a great compassion in him to see the tears start in Matt Carl's eyes. He went along and pretended not to notice, suddenly wanting to spare the old man's feelings.

AN HOUR later, with Mary pressed close to him, Frank Bonner sat near the small cook fire at the wagons, eating a belated meal. Across from them were Matt and Sal Carl. The sudden commotion in the street two hundred yards away brought them to their feet. Men milled in the street and waved their arms in apparent excitement, and most of them were looking toward the Bonner and Carl wagons. Then a man detached himself from the crowd and came toward the wagons at a trot.

Mary gripped Frank's arm with a tense strength and he could feel her beginning to tremble. Frank was still, but inside he was turmoil, sensing what the man would tell him. As the man rushed up, Frank said, "What is it?"

It came in a panting flood of words.

"Jake Woolsey just hit town. You should a heard him cuss when they told him about Acey. He sent me to tell you he was coming to kill you. He's got Nick and Dade holding the marshal in his office. Boy, you'd better hit the timber in a high lope!"

Mary sank against Matt with a soft moan and across the fire Matt and Sal Carl sat trembling, faces white and scared.

"Go back and tell Woolsey that he won't have to come, just meet me. I'll be coming into town in five minutes."

The messenger turned and ran back toward town, and Frank looked down at the frightened girl he was to marry. With a firm and gentle strength, he freed himself from her.

"It's better this way, honey. It'll be over and done an' he won't be sneaking around home and maybe shoot me in the back and from ambush."

Mary sank to the ground sobbing, and Frank turned to the wagon, got his old Colt with the brass caps and stuck it in his waistband. Then he took it out and laid it back in the wagon. Jake Woolsey was an expert with a pistol and Frank Bonner wouldn't have a chance. But with a rifle. . . .

Frank pulled the Henry from the scabbard lashed to the dashboard and made sure the magazine was full. Then he levered in a shell and turned toward town with steady strides.

Frank wished that his legs were as steady as they appeared to be, but it didn't seem as if they would support him another step. Sudden panic gripped him. What if he just keeled over from fear? Frank shut his teeth tightly.

Ahead the street was clearing as men ran, hunting cover and a vantage point for the fight, and down the street farther a man on a big sorrel horse was riding toward Frank at a walk. Even from the hundred yards or better that separated them Frank could tell that Jake Woolsey looked a lot like his brother Acey had. Both had the flabby bodies and narrow faces, but Jake was leaner and his head jutted forward, reminding Frank of a buzzard. Jake Woolsey was eying Frank steadily and it seemed to Frank that he could see the mean, killer gleam in Jake Woolsey's eyes.

Jake Woolsey pulled a saddle gun from a scabbard under his stirrup fender and Frank plainly heard the action as the gunman jacked in a shell. At seventy-five yards Jake Woolsey suddenly pulled the horse up and broadside to Frank and slid off the opposite side. The rifle barrel slid snake-like over the saddle's seat. Jake Woolsey liked a cinch, Frank thought with a stolid anger—using his horse for cover.

Woolsey's eye lined down the barrel at Frank, and Mary screamed, "Frank! Shoot, Frank, he's aiming—"

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THE DEVIL'S DEAL

They pushed Hunt up on a horse . . .

By MALCOLM REISS

It was the strangest wedding the little town of San Felipe had ever seen, the day Señorita Clorinda became a widow before she became a bride!

STRANGE, THOUGHT Hunt, peering from his hideout among the buckbrush and oak, that no matter how brutal man might be, the sky continued just as blue, the hills just as golden, and towns like San Felipe del Rey went on looking just as serene. Why, the place should have been blood-smeared! In the last two years it had had the cruelest history of any town in California.

Hunt waited until evening when the last red gold was out of the grass. Then he mounted in the blue shadows of late twilight and rode down toward the lighted houses. At the first house he dismounted and led his horse around to a small gate half hidden among the hazelnut bushes. He knocked at the door and waited while the smell of honeysuckle and lemon verbena did strange things to his heart.

"Who is there?" came in Spanish.

Hunt grinned.

"A traveler who asks a night's lodging."

The voice answered bitterly, "Go along. We have had too many travelers. Those days are done."

The grin grew to a smile on Hunt's dark face.

"A traveler who has been away a long time. A traveler by the name of Don Eduardo Hunt—eh, Pachecho?"

There was fervent swearing from the other side and the screech of rusty bolts. The door cracked open and an old peon came out. He seized Hunt by the arms as if he were going to throw him. The high bred, nervous horse reared back.

"Whoah!" Hunt said. "Easy, Pachecho. I didn't come back to get killed."

That struck a chord in old Pachedo.

"I am a thousand times sorry, Don Eduardo. That must have been terrible news."

"Yes," Hunt said briefly. "It was not of the best. Is your mistress here "

"I forget," apologized the old Indian. "The señorita will never forgive me."

"Ask her to come here," Hunt called softly after him. "I must not be seen tonight. In a little while you come back, eh, Pachecho!"

"*Si, si,* Don Eduardo."

Hunt led the skittish roan under the low gateway. He tied the horse to a tree. Then he walked down the little alley of tamaracks toward the soft sound of water running into a pool.

A woman came flying down the white path towards him, straight into his arms.

"Eduardo!" she sobbed. "Eduardo. At last you've come back."

He held her very tight while she sobbed. He said nothing. He was afraid of his own voice.

Finally she lifted her head from his shoulder.

"I'm so glad, Eduardo. Now you can take me away."

There was faint moonlight. Her face had all the beauty, all the tenderness which he had missed these last two years while he was away.

"In a little while I will take you away," he said gently.

Clorinda was quick to catch the reservation. Her lithe body drew back as she peered at him.

"No," she said. "We musn't wait. If we wait, something will happen. We must go now."

"First I have someone I must see, Clorinda."

She understood instantly. She begged him. "No. No. You mustn't try to kill Auliff. Too many have tried. Pepi Vargas and the Cisneros boys. And where are they now? They're dead! Auliff is too wise. If I believed in the devil, I would believe that Auliff was he."

Something like hysteria edged the girl's voice and she wasn't the hysterical kind. Hunt's tanned hands closed hard on her arms.

"Has Auliff been bothering you?"

"No, no," she denied. "Just that we must go." But the shiver that passed through her body contradicted her words.

Hunt said slowly, "In spite of everything, I might have let him go. But not now. Not after this."

Her voice came pleading as he opened the gate.

"No, no, Eduardo, come back. Something will happen to you."

"When I am done," he called softly, slipping through.

Pachecho, the old Indio, was waiting on the other side, wide straw hat on his head. Together they went into the town.

TWO YEARS before, when Edward Hunt had left San Felipe for the Oregon country, the little town had been as quiet, as gentle a place as you could find. Tonight, in the old houses that had been changed into saloons, there were lights and music and the yelps of drunken men.

Pachecho had taken off his wide hat as he stopped to peer in the windows. Young Hunt strolled casually a little way behind. At the second place Pachecho called to him. He pointed his finger, gnarled like a piece of olive wood.

"*Aquì, señor.* The tall one with the beard."

There were many men with beards but Hunt could tell Auliff in an instant. There was a look of evil burnt deep into his emaciated face. He could understand Clorinda thinking that he might be the devil.

"Watch at the window, Pachecho. Signal me when he comes."

"He is very fast with the gun, *señor.*"

"We'll see," said Hunt.

He went across the street and took up his position on the edge of the covered wooden sidewalk in front of Gasset's saddlery. There was a little wind and clouds scudded across the sky. The sign above his head creaked in the breeze.

Hunt thought to himself, *And this is how I have come back!* And he felt the cold butt of his gun.

He had never dreamed two years before that his return would be like this. His father, a factor with the American Fur Company before coming to California, had wanted him to have the experience of the hard Oregon country. Young Hunt had gone, expecting to return after a few years and marry Clorinda and settle down to the life of a *Californio* to which he had been born. But while he was away had come the news from Sutter's Mill which had startled the five continents. Gold! And on the tail of that news men rushed from all over the world.

Perhaps the worst of all those thousands was John Auliff. In the rich valley where San Felipe lay, well away from the world and man-made justice, he and his bunch had found an easier way of growing rich than by digging for gold. He had descended on the *ranchos* and struck before the elder Hunt and the other *rancheros* had time to collect themselves. Anyone who opposed him he killed.

Hunt wondered if he knew that there was one of the Hunt tribe left. Well, if he didn't, he'd soon learn.

Minutes turned into hours. Young Hunt stood motionless, from time to time glancing anxiously at the sky. Clouds pressed across the face of the moon, making the street dark. Then abruptly he stiffened. Pachecho had called to him and was scuttling off.

Hunt stepped into the street.

It seemed a long time before the swinging doors of the saloon opened to throw light into the night. A man stood there, one hand flat against the door, looking back. He called something, and loud, hoarse laughter followed him into the night. His boots rang on he planks.

"Hullo!" Hunt called.

The man jerked and turned. His bearded profile swung slowly.

"You're Auliff?"

Hunt couldn't afford to make a mistake. It was shadowy under the wooden awning.

The man said in a cold, brief, voice, "Who are you?"

"Hunt's the name. Mean anything to you?"

"Yeah," said the man. "There was a fellow around here called Hunt. You one of his tribe?"

"Yes. Maybe now you know why I came?"

The man did not answer right away. He was very still, standing there in the shad-

ow. The moon pushed through in time to put a finger of light on the gun that was moving up the man's side. Close on that came the spit of flame.

Hunt took one quick step sidewise. His own gun was out now. Another bullet ripped by. Carefully he took aim and triggered. He heard the bullet *thuck* into flesh. He saw the man stumble sideways. Holding his gun, Hunt ran. As he went around the corner he heard men roar off into the night.

Hunt sheathed his gun and strode quickly along the side of the smooth adobe houses. At the first alley he turned. He moved down to the back door of the saloon, listening. It was quiet in there. The sound of horses galloping came faintly from in front.

Calmly Hunt opened the door and went in. He had reached the swinging doors just as they flung open to admit a bunch of men carrying a body. Hunt glanced quickly to see if the man was dead. A queer expression puckered his face. The man was not Auliff.

Hunt went to the bar and ordered himself a drink. He needed it now. As calm as he had been, his hand was shaking. He asked the bartender, "Who was the man they shot?"

The bartender looked at him dubiously. "You a stranger here?"

"Yes," said Hunt.

"Well, take my advice and watch your step. That was Slim Roget, one of Auliff's body guards. Looks like one of the greasers got mixed up. They don't like the bunch much—not that I blame them."

"Thanks for the advice," Hunt said, and swallowed down his drink. He went outside.

GROUPS OF men were patroling the street. Several times they stopped Hunt but when they saw his face, his miner's shirt, and his trousers stuffed into boots, they gruffly let him pass. He circled around the town until he got back to Clorinda's house. She was waiting for him just inside the gate.

"Thank the good Lord," she said, and leaned against the wall. "I heard the shots. I was afraid it might be you. Pachecho has the horses ready. We'll ride now."

Hunt took off his hat and dropped on the wooden bench.

"Not yet. I haven't finished the job. I shot one of Auliff's body guards. He must have sent him ahead. It seems almost as if he knew."

She dropped down beside him.

"He knows everything. We must go now. Auliff won't rest until he finds out who fired the shots."

Hunt said, "Maybe you're right, Clorinda. I don't like this killing business. Justice will catch up with him in the end."

"I'm so glad. I'll go and get ready."

There was a scratching at the door. Hunt's hand jumped to his holster.

"Who is it? Speak up."

"Me," came the voice of Pachecho.

Hunt pulled back the bolts. Pachecho pitched into his arms.

Clorinda touched him.

"Pachecho—Pachecho! What's the matter? What have they done?"

"Wait," Pachecho gasped. "A little moment, and I am all right. Let me rest a moment, *señorita.*"

Hunt laid him on the bench. The girl whipped off her white mantilla and put it at the old peon's bleeding jaw.

"Poor Pachecho," she said. "This place is cursed. We will take you away."

"What happened, Pachecho?" Hunt asked in a hard, cold voice.

"*Ai, señor,* they caught me; they beat me. They thought to make me talk."

"Do they know?" the girl asked quickly.

"They know nothing. They believe it might be Don Elias Espinosa. They have taken him to the *juzgado* and they say unless he talks they will hang him in the morning."

Clorinda's frightened eyes lifted to Hunt. "The poor man."

"Leave Don Elias to me," Hunt said.

Her hands opened out.

"You said we would go away."

"We can't go now."

"No, we can't go now," she said. She raised her face proudly to Hunt. "We will stay and fight this out."

There had never been need of a jail in the old days, but there was one now. Pachecho told Hunt carefully where it was. It was the two story building attached to the *Viuda* Peña's house which had once been used for the purpose of storing grain.

Before sunrise the next morning, Hunt sauntered by. The street was empty and quiet. A cock crowed prematurely in the faint pearly darkness that was neither night nor day. There was a thin wind through the plumes of the tamarack trees. Hunt went to the unglassed windows and peered in.

Two men were asleep on a pile of straw in a corner of the bare room. Rifles stood propped against the wall close by the ladder which went to the next floor. Hunt grunted thankfully. Espinosa must be above.

He walked across the street and examined the Peña house. A balcony ran across the front supported by wooden pillars. Hunt wasted no time in climbing up. From the balcony it was not much of a job to make the roof. The roof of the house and the roof of the granary were one.

Quickly Hunt went to work on the tiles. In a few moments he had removed enough of the orange-brown tiles so that he could look in.

"Don Elias," he called. "Don Elias, are you there?"

A composed voice answered him in Spanish.

"Yes. I am here."

Hunt's eyes got used to the dark, and he could make out the glimmer of the old *ranchero's* head.

He laughed.

"You've gotten grayer since last I was here."

The old man turned his face up.

"Ai, boy, so might you."

A few minutes later he was lifting the old man through the hole. When they stood on the roof together. Hunt looked around. There was a faint glimmer, like water, flowing along the edges of the eastern hills.

"An excellent spot for us to leave," the old man said.

"It won't be long," said Hunt. "Are you able to slide down the pillar?"

"Observe," the old man said, and went to it limberly.

He was waiting for Hunt as he came down. He put out his hand.

"Thank you, my boy. We shall have more suitable times to talk."

Hunt's rare smile came.

"That's so, Don Elias."

"I wouldn't leave yet, gents," a voice mocked them from the doorway, and they swung as if on wheels.

A tall, thin, bearded man, with peculiar protruding eyes, came toward them, hands on hips.

"Who are you?" he asked Hunt.

Hunt said, "That's my business."

"Yes," the man said, twisting his thin lips, "so it is. I call myself Auliff, but that isn't my name. But then I'm not telling you anything you don't know, or you wouldn't have tried to kill me last night."

"That's right," Hunt said.

"I expected to catch someone darker than you," shrugged Auliff. "Course it's all the same." He said to some of his men who had followed him. "Wind a few ropes around him. We'll have our breakfast before the hanging."

"What'll we do with the old bird, boss? String him?"

"Let him go," said Auliff, massaging his beard. "He's a good decoy. There ain't many left of them."

They tied Hunt to the ladder in the

granary and left three men to watch him. The compliment made Hunt smile.

NOW THAT the rope was all but around his neck, Hunt wondered if he hadn't been a fool. Perhaps he should have listened to Clorinda and ridden away in the first place. But riding away wasn't in his nature.

But there was Clorinda. Auliff was more than ever a threat to her. Hunt prayed that he would get one last chance at the man before he swung quietly between earth and sky.

Auliff was not the man to take chances. When he came back to take Hunt to hang him he brought twenty riders with rifles across their cantles. Still bound, they pushed Hunt up on a horse and trotted silently out of town.

The news had spread, and there were many people in the street, some of whom had once been young Hunt's friends. But as he rode along, looking down at their despairing faces, he knew that they had been too much cowed to be of aid.

One or two called him by name. Auliff turned, a light dawning in his eyes.

"I get the drift now. You're name's Hunt, eh?"

Hunt did not answer.

They took the wandering road through the dry, bleached valley, turning off toward a hill where huge oaks stood. Hunt's mind was alert. His eyes were everywhere, looking for an opening. He prayed for one last chance at the man. But the prickly fibres of the rope rasped his neck as they tossed it over a bough.

"Anything to say?" Auliff asked, caressing his beard.

"There are a lot of things I'd like to say," Hunt said.

"Well, you can save 'em."

Auliff was riding around to haze the horse from under Hunt when one of the men called, "Look—someone's coming."

Auliff raised in his stirrups, squinting.

"Who is it? I can't make out."

"A woman," the man said.

"Ah, yes," said Auliff. "Maybe we'd better wait."

Clorinda came riding fast, her side-saddle skirt flying back from her. She wore no head covering; her dark hair flew free and her eyes were wild.

Auliff leaned over to Hunt.

"Pretty thing, ain't she?"

"You'd better leave her alone," Hunt said. "These people will stand for a lot, but they won't stand for that."

"I've thought of it," Auliff laughed slyly.

She rode up and pushed her horse between the two. Her eyes were burning like two black holes in her dark face.

"Auliff," she cried, "you musn't do this!"

"Why not," he said.

"I won't have it."

"What can you do?"

She turned and looked at Hunt and her hand opened in a small helpless gesture. Then she looked at Auliff. She said quietly, "All right, I'll marry you. But you have to let him go."

Auliff's eyelids drooped a little. His bearded mouth curved in a smile.

"Anything you say. He shall come to the wedding. As soon as the ceremony is over I shall put him on a horse and he can go wherever he wants. Is that a deal?"

"Clorinda, no! You can't do this thing. You're mad!"

Still smiling, Auliff leaned over and whipped his thick horsehide riding gauntlets across Hunt's face so hard that the blood followed. Hunt did not move.

Great preparations were going on in the huge walled garden in back of Clorinda's house. A wedding feast was in preparation. Whole beeves had been brought in and placed in pits and covered with corn husks and then laid over with charcoal. There was hammering and pounding and sewing

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BRAND OF THE LAWLESS

Rainey saw the boy clinging to a pine sapling . . .

When Jim Rainey traded his tin star for an outlaw's gun, he had no idea his own better past would come back to him in the clear, blue eyes of the man he had to kill!

By

BARRY CORD

THE LITTLE man sat cross-legged on the trail, rifle across his knees, chuckling with enjoyment. He was a balding man with a small bump of a belly on a scrawny frame. Tobacco stains dyed the dirty gray of his scraggly beard.

"Why, go ahead, marshal," he taunted. "Try again."

Town Marshal Jim Rainey remained on his back, keeping his eyes away from the canteen propped invitingly against a rock. He had taken a bullet below his collar bone and a more recent one had smashed through the fleshy part of his forearm. Blood made a dark stain across it, drying and congealing rapidly in the waning day's heat.

He had lain here since morning, waiting for Joe Mizner to finish him. The savage heat of this border trail had cracked his lips and dried his mouth. And that was the torture Mizner was using—water!

But more rankling than his thirst and his wounds were the taunts of the little man. Little Joe Mizner. Marshal Rainey had always looked with contempt on the man—at Mizner and his partner, Beefy Bowdin—and then, like a fool, he had ridden into their trap.

The body of Bowdin lay sprawled ten yards up the trail, flies thick on his body. It gave Rainey a meager satisfaction. With both of them blazing away at him, he had managed to kill Bowdin. . . .

Mizner chuckled again. "Look, marshal—water!" He sloshed his canteen and began unscrewing the cap. Rainey kept looking up into the sky at a patiently wheeling dot, and despite himself a chill went through him. It was a hell of a way to die!

"Big Jim Rainey!" Mizner mocked. "Hell an' high-water Rainey, marshal of Bonetown! Everybuddy scared to hell of Rainey!" He spat into the sand. "Everybuddy but little Joe Mizner!"

He took a long drink, letting the water gurgle down his throat. "Hear that, Rainey? Water! Cool water!" A burst of viciousness shook his scrawny frame. "Reach for that canteen, marshal—so I can smash yore other arm!"

The marshal didn't move. He lay still, watching the buzzard wheel slowly back. He was a hard man who had lived a hard life and he expected no quarter. Last night Mizner and Bowdin, both drunk, had killed a man named Lewis for six dollars and hightailed out of town. He had followed them. They had headed for Devil's Gap and he had not expected them to try an ambush. Not Bowdin and little Joe Mizner!

Out of the corner of his right eye he noticed the shiny muzzle of his Colt where it had fallen on the trail, less than a yard away. It could have been a mile. Long before he could painfully roll over and reach for it one of Mizner's slugs would get him. The thought brought a hard decision to focus in him. Joe would get tired soon and finish it anyway. The viciousness of the little man would make it slow, and if he made a break for his gun now, it would hasten and perhaps bring on a clean death.

He took a long breath and tried to steady the flutter in his muscles. . . .

A whistling came up the trail, preceding the clack of hoofs. Joe Mizner looked up, a startled expression on his narrow face. For the space of seconds indecision held him motionless. . . .

A gray Stetson bobbed between the trail boulders. Then a tall, lean rider came into view and pulled up abruptly at sight of Bowdin's body.

Fear rocked Mizner to his feet. He flung a quick shot at the rider, the slug ricocheting off the rocks past the man's body.

Rainey rolled over. His right hand closed over his gun and he was on his side, facing Joe, when he saw Mizner break for the shelter of the rocks.

A Colt slammed angrily from uptrail. Joe spun around, dropping his rifle, and Rainey put two deliberate shots into him before Mizner hit the ground. Then Rainey let the Colt drop from his hand and sucked in deep gulps of air. Painfully he crawled toward the canteen Mizner had set up in the shade.

He was unscrewing the cap, hugging the container to him, when he heard a horse ride up and a shadow fell across him. He didn't look up. He tilted the canteen to his mouth and let the water run down

his throat, closing it occasionally to let the cool wetness seep into the dry tissues of his mouth.

A friendly voice said, "Reckon the little fella deserved what he got—"

Rainey propped himself against the rock, his pained eyes seeking the stranger's face. He saw a tall, easy-smiling man of less than thirty, with friendly blue eyes, a not unpleasant face, topped by a big hat covering a thatch of straw-colored hair.

Rainey said, "You came along in time, stranger. Mizner was getting ready to finish it for good."

The other slipped out of saddle, his glance sliding from the marshal's badge to the blood staining his shirt and his forearm. "Looks like you need help, marshal. Here, let me give you a hand. . . ."

It was night when they rode down Bonetown's wide street. The stranger pulled to a stop before Doctor Sorrel's house. Men who had followed him down the street clustered around. The stranger handed the marshal down to them.

"Have to be moving," he apologized. "I took the short cut through Devil's Gap to make an appointment on the border. I'm late now."

The marshal roused himself from a half stupor. "Well, thanks—" he started to say. But the tall stranger had swung away, leaving Rainey only the memory of friendly blue eyes and a faint crescent scar over his right eye, half hidden by a lick of straw hair.

FIVE YEARS brought changes to Bonetown and to Jim Rainey. Two weeks after the incident on the trail his young wife had died in childbirth. Ten days later his two year old son drowned in Pitman's Creek.

Bad luck has a habit of dogging some men; and it seemed to cling to Rainey like a barnacle after the Mizner affair. A month after his boy drowned he killed an innocent bystander in a ruckus in Dave's Saloon. That was the beginning of the end. He grew sour and cynical and brutally callous, and finally Bonetown would have no more of him.

He took his walking papers with a grim smile. He had tamed Bonetown when it was a roaring gold camp, and this was the way they paid him off. The night he left town he held up the teller in the bank and got away with five thousand dollars.

It doesn't take much to start a man on the wrong road . . . and less to keep him there.

Word drifted back to one-time friends in Bonetown of "Killer" Rainey, whose gun was for hire!

Five years later, almost to the day, Rainey signed up with a northern outfit run by Jack Penner. Penner was in trouble. Range War. He offered Rainey five hundred a month—and he wouldn't have to herd cattle. His time would be his own. His job would be to handle trouble. Gun trouble.

Five hundred a month was good wages. Cynically Rainey admitted it. He didn't care who was right and who was wrong in this ruckus. He merely hired his gun. Once it had been on the side of the law—now it was on the side of the most money.

Penner, a heavy, unmarried man in his mid-thirties, gave Rainey the background. He was expanding. He needed more graze and more water. His natural outlet was the Cisco Basin. But a small group of homesteaders was holding out.

"There's one jasper in particular," Penner rasped. "He's pretty good with a Colt. He homesteads on the upper Cisco. The others are standing behind him. Name's Steve Emmons. Get him, Rainey, and the whole Basin'll fold."

Rainey shrugged. "Get word around I'm looking for him. If he's good with a Colt, he'll show up in Kelso town tomorrow. At noon."

Penner nodded eagerly. "That's what I wanted to hear, Rainey." His jowls shook

with excitement. "Emmons has a pretty wife that—"

A twinge hurt Rainey with bitter remembrance of his past. He said flatly, "I'll see the color of yore money now, Penner."

Penner said, "Sure, sure—" He got up and went into a back room. When he came out he counted five hundred dollars on the table in front of Rainey and poured out another drink.

Rainey let the drink stand. He took the money and thrust it into his pants pocket under his holster. He stood up, stifling a yawn. He was a big man, unpretentiously dressed. The scar on his left forearm had healed in a raw and ugly line and only a slight pucker under his collar bone reminded him how close he had come to death that day east of Devil's Gap.

He said, "I'll find my way to the bunkhouse." Ten minutes later he was sleeping soundly.

He was up at dawn and had breakfasted before the sun chinned itself on the horizon. A restless and moody man, he couldn't sit and wait. He told the cook, "Tell Penner I'll be back before noon," and went out to saddle his horse.

He rode north until the sun was two hats high in the sky, licking the land and the graze. He saw why Penner wanted the Basin, and why the smaller men wanted to hold on to what they had. After a time he cut in for the shade of a projecting rock and rolled himself a smoke. And for a spell his thoughts broke through the iron barrier he had erected against them. He thought of his wife and the boy he had never come to know—and a vague dissatisfaction with the way of his life came to nag at him.

He flung his butt aside and rode west, cutting back in the direction of Kelso town. He didn't intend to ride into town this morning—not until he had to meet Emmons. But he wanted a look at it before he swung back to the Big P.

Lost in unwanted thoughts, he became aware of the sound slowly. A dog barking. It was a small dog, he judged—and it was excited. He couldn't see the animal—it was out of sight behind a small limestone outcropping flanking the Kelso trail.

He touched his heels to his horse's flanks, and came around the bend to a sight that sent a sudden icy chill down his spine.

A light spring wagon was stopped on the trail under the limestone outcropping. Along the base of the cliffs a small white-and-tan dog of mixed breed was running, pausing to bark excitedly at a woman painfully trying to climb to a ledge a dozen feet above the road. Rainey's gaze followed her and lifted to the small figure of a boy of about four, clinging to a pine sapling growing from a crevice about twenty feet above the ledge.

The woman was crying encouragement as she tried to reach the ledge below him. Her long skirts hampered her.

Rainey took in the situation at a glance. There was no time to climb above the boy and drop a noose over him and haul him to safety. Maybe there was no time for anything. . . .

He was racing his bay now, drawing his legs up to the saddle, like a circus performer. He swung the animal in alongside the cliff, and the boy's piteous voice dried his mouth.

"I'm gonna fall, mommy!"

RAINEY JUMPED for the ledge while the bay was still running. The woman stopped climbing and turned a white, scared face to him. He was on his knees when the boy's hold loosened. He barely had time to straighten, hold out his arms.

The little fellow's left shoe hit him a glancing blow along his cheek, then the full weight of him knocked Rainey off his precarious position on the ledge. He managed to twist as he fell so that he landed with the boy on top of him.

Luckily there was loose sand below, but the boy's weight on his stomach momentarily knocked the wind from him.

The boy scrambled up and found a seat on his chest. A good-natured, lightly-freckled face with serious gray eyes looked soberly down at him. "Hello, man," he greeted Rainey.

Rainey managed a weak grin. "Hello, yourself," he said.

Then the woman was over them, pulling the boy to her, hugging him, half laughing, half crying with emotion and shock. "You're all right, Bobby?" she asked. "You're all right?"

"Sure, mommy. But my hands hurt."

Rainey got to his feet. There was a pain in his left shoulder which had taken most of the shock of the boy's weight and part of his subsequent fall. He was a little surprised to find that was the extent of his damage.

The woman was probably in her late twenties—and pretty. The boy looked a lot like her, except for his eyes. His were gray and serious—and hers were dark and had little crinkle lines of humor. But they were not laughing now.

"I'll never be able to thank you enough," she said. "I can only thank Providence that you were around—and helped."

He felt a little uncomfortable. The boy was watching him from his mother's side.

The woman went on, as if she had to explain—finding an emotional relief in talking. "I was driving to town to meet my husband. I stopped here because I wanted —to paint." She blushed as she said it, and he followed her glance to a charcoal landscape drawing lying in the sand beside the wagon.

"Bobby was playing with Lucky. How he got up on that ledge I'll never know. But the next thing I knew he was calling for me to watch him—he was leaning way over the edge. I didn't even have time to warn him back. Luckily he caught hold of that sapling just below as he slipped. . . ."

Rainey nodded. The dog had quieted and was standing beside his young master. The boy reached down to scratch an ear.

Rainey mounted. The woman said, "You're a stranger here, I see. I'd like to know to whom I'm grateful?"

Rainey smiled briefly. "My name doesn't matter, ma'am. I'm glad I was able to help." He touched his hat with half-forgotten gallantry. "I had a boy once. . . ."

He waved at the youngster and turned the bay away. He rode without looking back, trying to fight down awakened memories that would give him no peace.

Word went down to Kelso that Penner's new gun slinger was coming to town. To call Steve Emmons. Word has a habit of getting around, and a curious fascination drew people into town this day. They knew this would be Jack Penner's bid for Cisco Basin, and they knew, too, that if Emmons went down under Rainey's guns, Penner had what he wanted.

Word reached Emmons, as Rainey knew it would. And as Rainey knew, Emmons took the challenge.

The woman looking up at Emmons said for the last time, hopelessly, "It's not worth it, Steve. We've moved before. We can move again. Let Penner take over."

The man avoided her eyes. They were standing by the wagon which she had driven into town, and a little boy with a white-and-tan dog was looking soberly up at them, trying to understand the fear in his mother's voice.

Emmons's face was stubborn. "It's taken two years to make this place of ours what it is, Mary. You've worked like a squaw beside me. We're not leaving it for Penner!"

He put a hand on her shoulder. "This is the way it has to be, Mary. Take Bobby and wait for me at the Joels—"

He turned abruptly away, not wanting to see the hope die in her eyes. He mounted and rode down the street, toward the end of town. The sun was hot on his shoulders, but the sweat under his arms had a cold and clammy feeling.

He turned to look toward the trail down

which Rainey would be riding. Another hour. With a faint shrug he pulled up before Muggins's Bar and went inside.

RAINEY CAME down the trail, flanked by Jack Penner and three Big P hands. They rode in silence, he and Penner up front, the other three slightly behind.

Kelso lay in the noon heat, its wide street quite deserted.

They pulled up at the rail. Rainey eased out of his saddle. How many times in the past five years had this happened? He felt the unbidden question annoy him, chip at the wall he had erected inside him. The feel of Penner's money in his pocket gave him a thin satisfaction.

Just another target, he told himself coldly. *Just another fool willing to match his gun against mine. . . .*

Emmons was alone at the bar, a lean and solitary figure, hat pushed back.

Rainey ran his hard glance over the man's tight face. Brown long lines, blue eyes, faint crescent scar. Rainey stiffened a little, his eyes running over that tight brown face again. For the space of a heartbeat he saw himself on his back, watching a buzzard drift patiently above him in a brassy sky.

The blue eyes of the waiting man were no longer friendly. Nor was there recognition in them. A hollow laughter sounded in Rainey's thoughts. Had he changed that much? Or had Emmons so easily forgotten the man whose life he had once saved?

Steve had turned clear around now. He took a step away from the rail, his lean body expectant, his hand over his gun butt.

"I'm Steve Emmons," he said dryly. "You looking for me, Rainey?"

This was the moment. Behind Rainey Penner moved further out of bullet line. But the unfriendliness in the other's eyes bothered Rainey. And he kept seeing a patiently wheeling dot in a brassy sky.

He shook his head. "Must be some mistake, feller," he said. His voice had a flat finality. He turned away. He saw Penner's mouth open in startled wonderment, as if unable to believe what he saw.

Let the fools think what they want!

Rainey was almost to the door and abreast of Jack Penner when he remembered the money Penner had given him.

He stopped and half turned, reaching inside his pocket for the bills.

Emmons's slug caught him in the side. It turned him completely around, so that he faced those cold, unfriendly eyes. He felt himself falling, and through the stunned surprise in his head, he thought wryly, *Emmons must have figgered I was going for my Colt. . . .*

That was the last thing he remembered for forty-eight hours. When he opened his eyes again he looked into Mary Emmons's tired, anxious face.

He managed a weak smile. "Hello.

A great relief flooded her. "Steve!" she called. "Come in, Steve!"

Steve Emmons came into the bedroom. He stood beside his wife, a relieved smile on his lips. "I haven't slept in two days," he said frankly. "Mary told me about Bobby. If I had known—"

Rainey chuckled. "You got a poor memory for faces, son. Or you'd have remembered you saved my life, five years ago, down by Devil's Gap. . . ."

Steve said, "Why, sure—I—" He spread his hands in a helpless gesture. "Reckon I was in too much of a hurry then, Rainey," he admitted. "You see, I was on my way to get married."

Rainey grinned. He thought of young Bobby and said, "You didn't lose any time, Steve." He tried to hitch himself up and bit his lips at the sudden stab of pain through his side.

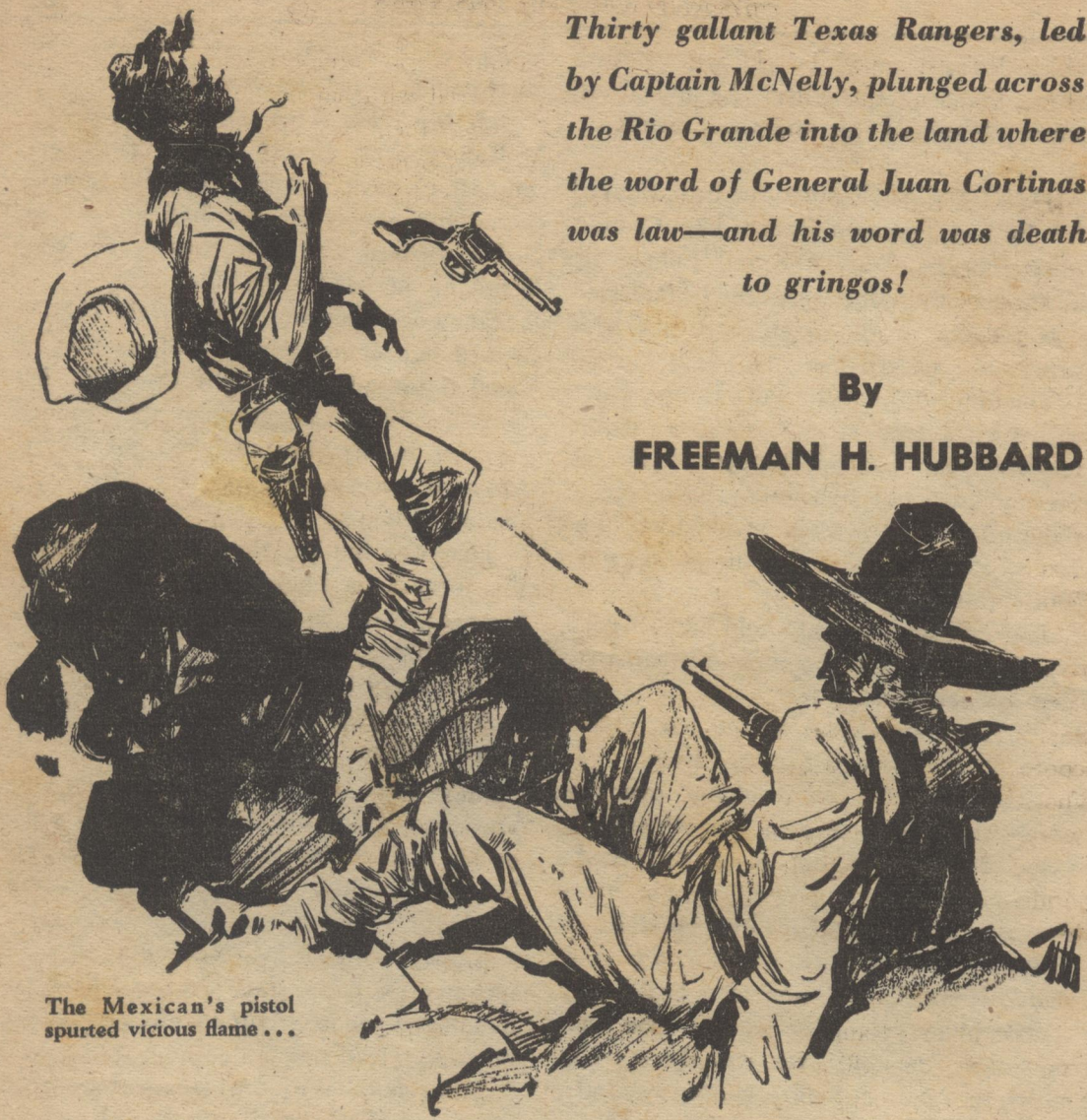
"Reckon you can use a hand at your place?" he said tightly. "A second-hand gunman to kinda look after yore boy?"

Mary's hand tightened over his gnarled fist. Steve cleared his throat. "Reckon Bobby needs someone to look after him at that!" ✪ ✪ ✪

Thirty gallant Texas Rangers, led by Captain McNelly, plunged across the Rio Grande into the land where the word of General Juan Cortinas was law—and his word was death to gringos!

By

FREEMAN H. HUBBARD



The Mexican's pistol spurted vicious flame . . .

CROSS THE RIVER TO HELL!

BACK IN the days when bandits were driving great bellowing herds of stolen cattle across the Rio Grande into Mexico, the governor of Texas commissioned a dashing young captain, Lee H. McNelly, to form a company of thirty Rangers and patrol the border.

McNelly was a thin bearded fellow. He had won his captaincy in the Civil War at the early age of seventeen by setting up a Confederate spy system and commanding the cotton-barge crew that seized a Federal gunboat at Galveston. Now, at twenty-nine, he faced the gigantic task of policing the long, wild and lonely Texas border with a handful of men.

A Mexican general, Juan Cortinas, was the ringleader in the cattle rustling. Congress looked into the matter and found that he had licensed nearly three thousand desperadoes to prey on American property.

McNelly's blue eyes twinkled as he read the report.

"That makes the odds about right," he remarked.

He knew that Cortinas himself had once led a foray into Brownsville, Texas, leaving behind a trail of murder and pillage. He knew, too, that the elusive general held a contract to deliver beef cattle to Cuba at the rate of a shipload a week and that a considerable part of these cargoes bore Texas brands.

McNelly's first move, after organizing his company, was to institute a spy system based on the pattern he had used in the war. One of these spies he sent into Mexico to check up on Cortinas. Each man who joined the Rangers was given a twenty-two-page book listing the cattle brands in the Lone Star State and describing hundreds of men wanted by the authorities on criminal charges.

"They're a tough lot," the captain said grimly.

Some of the Rangers were mere boys, tempted by the $40-a-month pay. Sonny Smith, the company wagonmaster's son, volunteered at the age of sixteen, and George Durham at fifteen. But they all knew woodcraft and plainscraft. They could ride hard, shoot straight, and endure hunger and fatigue.

A Ranger had to buy his ammunition, his horse and saddle. If a mount got lost or killed on duty, the state reimbursed its owner handsomely. The men loved their horses. McNelly specified lightweight bits and bridles and stirrups, dull spurs, and double saddle girths. One trick he had learned in the war was to loosen the girths before swimming his horse across a stream. The animals swam better that way.

McNelly's right-hand man was Jesus Sandoval, a Mexican-born scout who smoldered with hatred for bandits because a gang of them had burned his ranch house and ravished his wife and daughter. This man used his own methods for getting information. After forcing a captured bandit spy to talk, Sandoval would loop a hangman's knot around his neck and give him a horseback ride under a large tree, a ride which ended with the fellow dancing on air.

The Rangers set up headquarters at Las Rucias Ranch, near the present town of Mercedes. They seemed to be constantly in the saddle. Groups took turns at patroling the river bank. But for many months the wily robbers outfoxed them.

One June day in 1875 Sandoval rode into camp, his pinto in a lather, and reported that he had seen some Mexican horsemen ford the Rio Grande into Texas about eight miles from Brownsville. McNelly sent a patrol to investigate.

Three days later the border guards trapped an enemy spy. From him they learned that the rustlers had come from Las Cuevas Ranch, a Mexican bandit stronghold, in charge of Aboja; they were driving about three hundred stolen longhorns, and they aimed to cross the Arroyo Colorado that night, Friday the eleventh, and make for the Rio Grande on Saturday.

At that time there were only sixteen men at Las Rucias. One of them, Bill Callicott, was wearing a white shirt.

"Bill," said McNelly, "there'll be shootin' tonight, I reckon. Can you spare me that shirt? I'll buy you another one next time we get to a store."

"Sure, cap'n, ef you need it. I can fight jest as well in an undershirt."

McNelly tore up the white garment and gave each man a strip to tie around his left arm as a means of identification in the darkness. Then the Rangers mounted and took a short cut to Laguna Madre, a swamp located near the border, to head off the rustlers.

They were not uniformed. Mostly they

wore flannel shirts, buckskin or corduroy pants, patent-leather boots, and stiff-brimmed Stetsons. Vests took the place of coats. Each man had a cartridge belt but was under strict orders not to waste ammunition.

"Don't shoot," McNelly would say, "unless somebody needs killin' real bad!"

THE MEN toted Sharps carbines, .45 Colt pistols and Bowie knives, all issued by the state. Two or three bought Winchester repeating rifles at their own expense. A Winchester cost $33.50 more than a Sharps—the best part of a month's pay—but they gave quicker service, a priceless asset in border fighting.

Early in the morning of June twelfth, as the little band of Rangers, sixteen all told, were jogging along, McNelly astride a big roan, they sighted the enemy.

"Here we go again!" said the captain.

The bandits ran the stolen cattle at top speed for about three miles. Then, as the Rangers were gaining, they drove the herd onto a small island in a salt marsh and took their stand on the far slope, Pittal Hill.

McNelly formed his men as skirmishers.

"Don't fire till I give the signal!" he ordered.

For about six hundred yards they rode through the swamp, through muddy water that lapped the horses' bellies, into a fusillade of bullets. At the foot of the slope McNelly cried, "Fire!"

The rustlers broke and fled. After that it was a succession of single fights for six miles.

"I have never seen men fight with such desperation," McNelly wrote later in his official report. "Many of them, after being shot from their horses and severely wounded three or four times, would rise on their elbows and fire at my men as they passed."

He had often warned, "Don't walk up on a wounded man! A man that's down will kill you." But Sonny Smith, eager to take a captive, edged over to a desperado he had shot. The Mexican's pistol spurted vicious flame and the reckless lad fell with a bullet in his heart. Around his left arm when he died was the strip from Bill Callicott's white shirt.

Aboja was the last raider to hold out.

"He's mine," McNelly claimed.

The opposing leaders took cover and blazed away until both guns apparently were emptied. Then, stepping out from a thicket, McNelly shouted to his men. "Bring me more shells quick!"

Aboja swallowed the bait. With a smirk he moved into the open and took deliberate aim. McNelly beat him to the trigger by a split second, sending a slug through Aboja's open mouth. Holding back the last cartridge was a favorite trick of McNelly's.

"The boys did all right," he grinned, lighting a cigar. "There was sixteen of us and sixteen bandits. There's now fifteen of us and none of them."

They recovered 265 steers, most of which belonged to the King Ranch, an outfit boasting a million and a quarter acres. This ranch was generally regarded then, as it is today, as the world's largest cattle spread.

Thirteen of the raiders' bodies were picked up, carted into Brownsville, and laid in a gruesome row on the market plaza as a stern warning to General Cortinas. Sonny was given a grand funeral. The Rangers and two companies of the United States Army marched behind the hearse. The regulars fired a volley over the grave and left the wagonmaster's son to sleep out eternity beside the Rio Grande.

But the raids did not let up. Mexicans continued to elude the Rangers and drive stolen herds across the river.

November twentieth found the entire company, thirty-one men, on the north bank of the Rio Grande, gazing with anger and disgust at the *banditti* they had trailed to the water's edge. The followers of Cortinas were safe on the far side with about

250 steers, dripping wet, most of them taken from the King Ranch.

McNelly addressed his company.

"Boys, you were hired to fight in Texas, but now I'm crossin' the river. It will mean trouble. I'm goin' to Las Cuevas and I'm callin' for volunteers."

Every Ranger stepped forward.

THIRTY-ONE men and five horses! A tiny army invading a foreign country! But McNelly acted with characteristic energy.

They marched single file along a narrow cattle trail. A thick white fog billowing up from the river shut off their view. The advance guard rode into a ranch which they thought was Las Cuevas, killed five pickets, and then proceeded to the main bandit stronghold.

There they found some 250 Mexicans drawn up in line; a large number of them were mounted. McNelly's heart sank. He knew that his plan for a surprise attack had failed. The noise of firing at the first ranch must have warned the defenders.

After a brief exchange of shots in the murky night, the Rangers fell back, taking advantage of bushes beside the road to cover their retreat. The five mounted Texans fought a rear-guard action until their comrades reached the river bank.

There they all dug in. Pretty soon a force of mounted Mexicans poured out of Las Cuevas to attack them. A brisk skirmish ensued. General Juan Salinas, owner of the ranch and a close associate of General Cortinas, toppled off his horse with a Ranger bullet in his brain. (Today, a monument marks the spot where he fell.) The Mexicans then retired in confusion. Not one of the Rangers had been hit!

In the lull that followed, Colonel J. H. Potter of the United States Army sent a messenger across the river demanding that McNelly come back to American soil at once with his entire command, *by order of the Secretary of War.*

The lanky Ranger captain wrote back:

> I shall remain in Mexico with my Rangers as long as the situation, in my judgment, seems to warrant it, and I shall recross the Rio Grande at my own discretion. Give my compliments to the Secretary of War . . .
> (signed) J. H. McNelly, commanding
> Texas State Troops, Mexico.

That was Sunday night. Later, the Mexicans approached McNelly under a flag of truce. They pointed out that the Americans had killed twenty-seven of their number, including the great General Salinas, and they asked the invaders to state their terms for withdrawal.

"I will leave," McNally said, in effect, "when you return the cattle that were driven across the river on Friday. Unless you do," he added, with tongue in cheek, "I shall have to ask the United States Army to cross the Rio Grande."

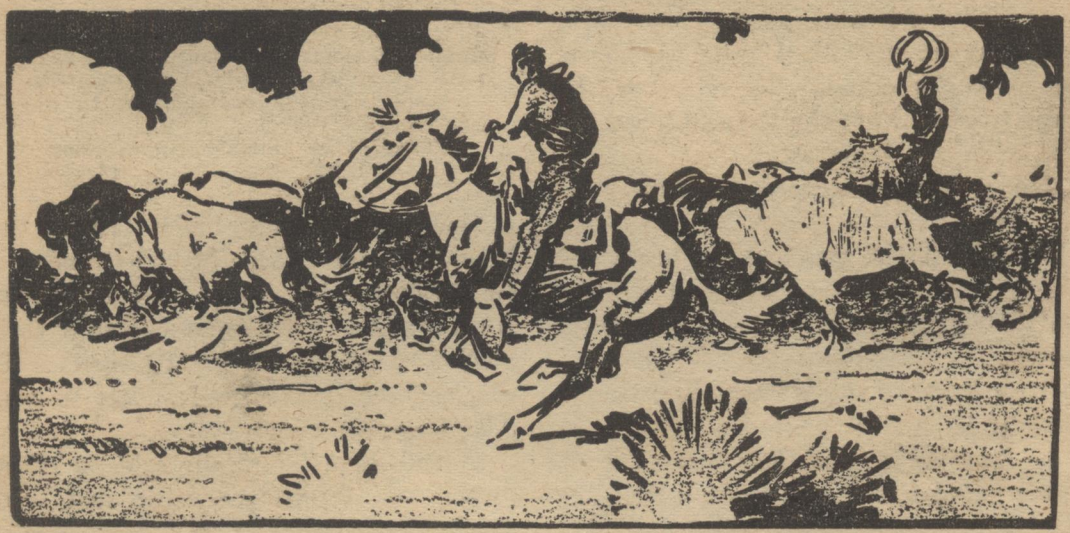
The bluff worked. The Mexicans produced seventy-five steers, insisting they could not find any more. McNelly agreed. He was in no position to hold out for the full number.

His men covered the Mexicans with guns. That ended the argument. For the first time in recorded history, stolen American cattle taken into Mexico were driven back across the river. It marked the end of Cortinas's wholesale cattle rustling on Texas soil.

Thirty-five beeves, branded I-K, went back to Richard King. The cattle baron was delighted. He equipped the whole company of Rangers with Winchester repeating rifles and gave McNelly $1,500 to divide among them. Then he ordered his foreman to saw the right horn from each of the homecoming cows, for identification purposes, so that they could spend the rest of their lives in peace on his ranch, never going to market; and he stood beside the corral gate watching till the job was done

It was a fitting tribute to thirty-one gallant Texans who risked their lives to make history along the Rio Grande. ✪ ✪ ✪

KING OF THE RANGE



By BART CASSIDY

THE town man who has tried to raise himself a little meat with bought feed is inclined to call a beef cow a natural born oat burner. He keeps digging into his pocket for feed money, and when he has got his cow raised and starts to add up the cost, he usually finds that he has paid more for his meat than he would have had to pay the butcher for it, not to mention the work involved. He is inclined to wonder how a cattleman can make a living, and he is particularly puzzled when he hears of the recent sale of a white-faced bull for $28,000.

The fact is that the beef steer is about the most expert and valuable manufacturer we have. He eats matter that is not fit for anything else, and turns it into luscious dollar-a-pound steaks and roasts.

Let us examine the raw material with which he works. In the course of building up a 1200 pound beef carcass, a steer will use up the following material: 10 to 15 tons of grass, a ton of hay, 250 pounds of protein supplement, and 60 bushels of corn. Nowadays he is even making beef out of the 2 million tons of orange and grapefruit peel and seeds left by citrus canners.

It might be noted that most of this material is unfit for human consumption in its natural state. Grass is everywhere, but human beings can't eat it as it is. A steer will consume 30,000 pounds of it in green state, along with 2000 pound of dried grass or hay, and deliver it to your table as roast beef. The 250 pounds of protein supplement he requires is composed of meat scraps, cottonseed hulls, or soybean meal, neither of which is human food. Only the 60 pounds of corn on which he is finished would otherwise have been of any use in its present form.

Since half the American continent is covered with grass, it seems unlikely that there ever will be another animal which can be as much help as a beef cow in converting our natural resources into food for us. ✪ ✪ ✪

YOUR CHOICE OF TWO GREAT BOOKS

THE GOOD TIDINGS by William Sidney
(Published at $3.00)

In the days of Augustus and Tiberius, the Jewish people, suffering under the double yoke of imperial Rome and the tyrant Herods, were fighting a desperate battle for survival. This vivid novel of the troubled days preceding Christ's ministry portrays a land in turmoil, a people waiting for a Messiah to deliver them.

Through the pages of THE GOOD TIDINGS strides the mystic figure of John the Baptist. First as a boy watching his father die as a living torch to light a tetrarch's feast; the youthful John fleeing Jerusalem to study under the Magi; the man, returning as the voice of one crying in the wilderness, and finally, the slaughtered corpse, for whose head Salome danced.

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by a slug from Burdick's rifle. He dropped the axe, fell to his knees, clutching his shattered stomach.

A long female scream lifted from one of the tents. A woman broke into the open, running to the place where the youth crouched over his hurt.

Burdick's horse stepped daintily back from the sudden smell of blood. Burdick himself levered a third cartridge into place, then glanced around to see what his companions were doing.

For the most part, they were calmly observing the action before them. Young Potter looked a little sick . . .

Not one of them had drawn a gun. Not even Sam Turney.

Suddenly confused, Burdick looked back at the squatters, clustered around the wounded boy. The Elder emerged from the press of men after a moment, and stood, dazed and white-faced, staring up at Burdick. Burdick stared back at him, until he felt someone pulling at his arm.

"Come on," Sam Turney was saying.

"What?"

"Let's go," Turney said, with a sideways movement of his head. Burdick looked in the direction indicated, in time to see Johnny Baines, Massenger and Potter and his boy riding back through the cottonwoods, the way they had come.

"Let's go," Turney repeated. Dumbly obedient, Burdick followed him.

JUST AS they reached the trees, he heard another scream from the woman. But this one ended in a sobbing, final wail. Burdick looked back once, to see the men in their black, flat-brimmed hats, turning away from the dead boy to watch him go.

For a solid minute, they rode in silence, trotting their horses to catch up with the other four riders.

"What the hell happened?" Burdick demanded at length. "What happened? You were supposed to back me up!"

Turney didn't look at him. "Didn't seem like you needed any help," he replied.

Nothing more was said for the moment. They overtook the other four riders, and continued along in silence. Burdick found that he was riding one of the flanks, now. They were traveling stirrup to stirrup as before, but this time Johnny Baines held the center of the line.

"What you think, Johnny?" Abel Potter inquired. "Think it'll do for 'em? Think they'll go?"

"Not right off," Baines answered. "Not for awhile. But there's plenty o' time . . ."

"All the time in the world," Burdick heard himself say. He wondered immediately why he had said it. The others looked at him strangely. No one asked his opinion of what the squatters might do now. Finally he couldn't hold it in any longer.

"Why the hell didn't you follow my play? Like we said before?"

Massenger chuckled nervously.

"You play too rough, Case," he said. Potter and his son chortled without humor. Baines and Sam Turney didn't even crack a smile.

Burdick tried to shake off a growing feeling of desperation.

"Well, it's done, anyhow," he said. "Drinks are on me, eh? At my place."

"Sorry, Case," Massenger apologized. "Lots to do tonight . . ."

"Me, too," Abel Potter said. "Another time, eh, Case?"

Johnny Baines didn't even bother to excuse himself. Burdick told himself it didn't mean anything.

They climbed out of the cool, river air into the thick heat of the grazing land. After a time, Massenger rode off in the direction of the twin buttes. Later, Potter and his boy turned in at the Crooked-horn, and not long after that, Johnny Baines rode off, stiff-backed and silent, toward the Double U.

Burdick and Turney rode the last miles to Burdick's ranch.

"I guess it was too rough for 'em," Burdick said at length. Turney had been lost in thoughts of his own. He looked at Burdick questioningly.

"You were right, Sam," Burdick went on. "They were too old for it—except young Ed, and he was too much the other way."

"Oh," Turney said. "Sure."

Burdick thought he detected something alien in his foreman's voice. He looked at Turney, frowning in the late afternoon sunlight. Turney met his gaze and smiled a smile that Burdick didn't like.

"I was right, and you was right," Turney said.

"What's that mean?"

"You said they were afraid of you—Baines, Potter, Massenger—well, they were. And now they ain't."

"Now?"

"Now that you've killed a man," Turner explained.

"That squatter?" Burdick said. "Hell, that was just—"

"That was murder, Case," Turney cut in. "Murder, plain and simple."

"You're crazy," Burdick argued hotly. "They were with me, they backed me—" His words quit abruptly. Almost to himself, he said, "If it ever came to that, they'd testify it was self-defense . . ."

His foreman looked at him pityingly.

"Testify? For you?" He shook his head. "They weren't near as scared of the squatters as they was of you, Case. Why go after gophers when you can kill off the top-coyote of the range?"

Burdick rode silent for perhaps a mile. His voice, when he spoke again, was hardly recognizable.

"But you'd testify for me—you would, wouldn't you, Sam?"

Sam Turney glanced away quickly, his eyes seeking a far horizon.

"Why, sure, Case," he said absently. "Sure." ✪ ✪ ✪

(Continued from page 61)

arranged. Matt pushed himself away from the rock, and stepped toward the bay on legs that were half-crippled. But the lethargy in them was hardly noticeable to him for some of the cards in his misfit hand were beginning to fall into place.

A promoter, clever enough to hoodwink a group of Boston church-goers was hardly the kind to leave that flock unattended. *If they started to figure something was wrong, he'd want to know about it,* Matt thought. *So mebbe he'd pick the right character to keep him advised. Sarcer now, he was on hand the night I took this job!*

Another card slipped into place. One of the missing, and Garth cursed himself for not having thought of it sooner. *A man might call himself Todd Wellman in Boston, and Harvey Trumbull out here!*

It could account for no one having heard of Todd Wellman in 'Frisco, or Sacramento, or here in Coarse Gold. Matt reached down groggily for the saddle he'd taken from the bay, and one flaw in all his reasoning showed up like the key log in a log-jam. Tom Horn was not the man to play a part in any chicanery!

Garth's eyes swept over the velvet black that shrouded the Pinnacles, and the spark of light he'd seen out there near a high, needle-point spire was gone. Only the faint glow shed by the high stars illuminated those buttes and canyons now.

Matt mounted the bay, and swung back across the plateau. He stopped to listen a half dozen times, and finally heard another horse nicker a friendly greeting to his mount. Garth found the animal and loosed its tie-rope. Ben Sarcer would have a pair of sore feet before he made it back.

Gradually Garth's eyes accustomed themselves to the gloom, but the going was slow and treacherous. One stumble on the narrow shelf they were descending would send both the bay and himself plummeting to their death. There were places where he was forced to dismount and lead the horse, feeling his way carefully. An hour passed and the sound of the creek rose musically now, growing louder as they continued their descent. Garth judged their progress by increasing loudness of the stream. Finally he could see the shine of the water and he knew they had succeeded in making it down from the plateau.

Traveling was easier here, for a definite trail had been marked out by the feet of prospectors who'd traveled this way to test the sands for color. But few, if any, had troubled to explore the Pinnacles. That would come later after the placers were exhausted, and all the alluvial gold snatched from the flats. Tom Horn's luck might be considered bad by most prospectors, Garth thought grimly, but at least the old-timer had been canny enough to realize that he'd have the Pinnacles to himself if he went prospecting there while the rest toiled with their pans and rockers along Deadwood Creek and Sweet Gulch.

Matt fished a cigar from his shirt pocket, for its glow would not disturb his vision now. Two links in the chain remained to be forged before he could return to the Pinnacles and that needle-point peak he'd marked out. Two links, and the thought of one brought him grim pleasure. He massaged his knuckles. They were going to smash Harvey Trumbull's flesh before the night was over if the promoter had returned to Coarse Gold, and Trumbull did not look like the kind who could absorb much punishment. He might, Garth guessed, even be willing to admit that his name in Boston had been Todd Wellman.

The other task would be to ask Carrie the question he'd neglected. He wanted to ascertain if her father, in any of his letters, had ever mentioned an acquaintance with Tom Horn.

The hour was midnight or later when he sighted Coarse Gold below him, but time didn't mean much to this camp. Callahan's never closed, vying with other saloons along the street for the patronage of men

who panned all day and spent all night.

Light showed in the hotel lobby, and some of the rooms upstairs, but the one he'd taken for Carrie was dark. The girl, Matt guessed, as he drew into the rack before the hotel, was probably sleeping.

A drowsy clerk nodded to him as he stepped through the lobby to the stairs and climbed to the second floor. Carrie's room was next to the one he had reserved for himself, and he knuckled the door softly to awaken her. After a moment he rapped again, a little more insistently. There was still no sound of movement through the thin panel. Garth tried a third time and vague alarm was beginning to mount in him. There was still no response, and he laid his hand on the doorknob. Surprisingly, it turned beneath his fingers. He had cautioned Carrie to lock herself in her room, but now the panel was opening in front of him.

Light from the garishly bright Tinsel Dance Parlor across the street cast a glow through the uncurtained windows, giving enough illumination to halt Matt Garth in his tracks. Carrie Pines was not here. Her bed lay unused across the room!

GARTH STARED, a man turned momentarily to stone; then he wheeled back into the hall. A picture of the girl's empty room flashed once more across his mind as he took the stairs two at a time. Her luggage was still there, except for one small handbag she had been carrying.

His boots echoed loudly on the uncarpeted lobby floor, and the drowsing clerk jerked erect in his chair, breathing noisily. He blinked sleepy eyes into wakefulness at sight of the grim-faced man.

"M—mister Garth," he stammered, "is something wrong?"

"Plenty," Matt told him curtly. "Where is Miss Pines? Her room is empty."

"Why, why, she left soon after dark with

Mr. Trumbull," the clerk said. "Was there anything wrong with that? I heard him say that he was going to take her to see her father—"

Garth drew a ragged breath. He spun toward the door and the pattern of Sarcer's and Trumbull's actions were as plain to him now as his own had been. Those two had waited behind in Sacramento until they were certain that Garth and the girl had boarded the stagecoach for Coarse Gold. Riding cross country then, they had probably reached here even before himself and Carrie, and posted in some vantage point had watched them arrive. Sarcer had trailed him from camp, his chore to finish what he had started in San Francisco. And Trumbull? What were his intentions concerning Carrie? Did he want the girl for himself, or was there some stronger motive underlying his spiriting her from Coarse Gold?

Likely both! Garth thought grimly. *He knows Pines left their claim, and the only place he could have gone, where nobody along the creek would have spotted him, was into the Pinnacles. So that's where he's taking Carrie.*

Why? When he got the answer to that question there would be no more mystery, Garth realized. The misfit hand he'd been playing almost since his arrival in San Francisco would be filled.

"And I'll be holdin' an ace-high flush or a bust!" he muttered.

A voice from Callahan's porch across the street hailed him as he reached the hotel steps. Matt looked up to see the black-bearded Missourian he'd met that afternoon beckoning to him.

The man was boisterous, but not drunk.

"Come on over hyar, stranger," he bellowed. "It's my turn to stand treat!"

A drink, Garth decided grimly, certainly wasn't going to hurt him any. He was sore and stiff and his groin pained him, but there was plenty of riding still ahead.

Noise welled over them as he accompanied the Missourian into the saloon. A chorus line was dancing on the stage behind coal-oil footlights. Roulette wheels were spinning, and poker tables were busy. Miners lined three deep at the bar, but the big Missourian shouldered a way to the mahogany.

"Harper for my amigo," he roared. "And by the Lord I'll take some of the same. I'm tired of that bust-haid you been servin' me all night!" He looked a little owlishly at Garth, standing quietly beside him. "You meet up with yore leetle friend?" he asked.

"A little friend?" Garth repeated.

"Sallow-faced cuss who looks like he's jest one jump ahead of the undertaker. Got a scar over his right eye. He come ridin' along not much after you left for Pines's claim, sayin' he had to see you in a hurry. I directed him up Deadwood Creek—"

Garth tossed down his drink, and signaled for another. He took off his flat-crowned California hat, and poked a finger through the hole in the crown.

"He had a present for me."

The Missourian's eyes bugged.

"Lord," he gulped. "You sure got nice friends! And what happened to him, if I ain't askin' too much?"

"He's on foot up at the head of Deadwood Creek," Matt told him grimly, "and I got my doubts if he's feeling very good right now."

"But why'd he want for to shoot you?" the Missourian asked.

"Maybe because he doesn't want me to find Tom Horn, or Jim Pines." Then Matt asked the question that he'd been planning to put to Carrie. "You've been here long enough to know whether Pines and Horn were friends?"

"Thicker'n thieves whenever they get together," the Missourian said promptly. "Say," his eyes were widening again, "air you guessin' Jim slipped off to join ol' bad-luck Tom in them Pinnacles?"

"I'm hoping so," Matt said briefly. He paid for the drinks and added as he swung toward the door: "He's either with Tom—or dead!"

Garth exchanged the fagged bay for a fresh black mount at the livery, and questioned the attendant before leaving.

"You acquainted with Harvey Trumbull?" he asked.

"Shore." The attendant was eager for conversation. "Him and the cutest little trick of a girl I've seed in a long time picked up a couple of broncs round about nine o'clock last night. Dunno where they went, but that Trumbull sure acted like he was in a hurry. The gal now, I dunno. She looked a mite nervous to me, but I ain't the one to pry into the likes of Trumbull's business. He's a bad man to cross. Wears a sleeve gun that he can draw quicker than a rattler's strike."

Garth left the livery and rode toward Deadwood Creek at a fast trot. The news the stable attendant had given him verified his own surmises concerning the destination of Trumbull and Carrie, and he was pleased at the liveryman's statement that Carrie had appeared ill at ease.

She'll be keeping her eyes open, Garth thought, but even so what could a girl do to protect herself from a man like Trumbull? Matt asked himself the question and could find no answer, and again he wondered why Harvey Trumbull wanted to burden himself with a woman on a quick ride into the Pinnacles.

Two elements in the night's happenings might favor him now, Matt reflected. Sarcer's shot was something that could have been heard through all the Pinnacles. It would be enough to put Horn and Pines on guard if they were together. Two old cronies, wary as timber wolves, they would be watching their backtrail if they suspected treachery. One more element might give him a faint edge, too, Garth reasoned. Trumbull would be relying on Sarcer to

finish what he had started in San Francisco, and so if he could come up with the promoter and girl before they made contact with Sarcer, surprise would be on his side.

As he reached Deadwood Creek and turned upstream, Matt wondered if Pines had sensed that Trumbull might be planning to kill him, and so had taken the chance on leaving for the Pinnacles.

"That's something else you may be finding out in the morning," Matt assured himself.

CHAPTER FOUR

Pinnacle Pay-off

HE RODE the trail at a fast, steady trot through darkness that was starting to lighten over Goat Mountain and Thornberry Peak to the east. Gray pre-dawn was coming, and when he reached the turnoff he had taken that afternoon to the plateau, he quit the black's saddle for a moment and stepped ahead, scanning the faint trail that led on up the canyon. The tawny dust held a message for him—the fresh imprint of horses' hoofs heading toward the Pinnacles.

Trumbull and Carrie had come this way. Most prospectors traveled afoot, and certainly those who kept horses wouldn't have been night-riding this trail.

In saddle again, Matt continued up the lightening canyon, but he rode more cautiously now, for dawn brought its hazards. If Trumbull held the faintest suspicion that someone might be trailing him an ambush would be the easiest thing to ride into. Scanning the narrowing canyon, Garth saw how it had likely got its name. Huge piles of driftwood all but blocked the flow of water in a dozen different places, and any of the jack-straw heaps could give Trumbull shelter, and a chance to draw a bead on a rider coming up the trail.

But that was a gamble he had to risk.

Crooked miles dropped behind him, and he was close enough now to get an occasional view of the Pinnacles as the canyon twisted. One tall, spirelike butte that rose to a needle point against the morning sky held his attention. At the base of that butte someone had kindled the campfire he'd spotted the night before. The butte was like a lighthouse beckoning him, and Garth crossed Deadwood Creek and swung the black into a dry ravine that angled toward that tall spire.

He let the black pick its own patient way along the rocky course of the dry stream bed, and then the animal reached a long stretch of crusty sand. Surprise made Garth draw rein. There were fresh indentations of hoofs covering older marks of booted feet that had broken through the smooth crust.

Trumbull and Carrie had traveled this same gulch.

"And they sure ain't the only ones!" Matt said half-aloud. "Damned if this don't look like a regular highway—"

High road to Hell or Glory! The words came unbidden into his mind.

Slowly now, Garth rode onward, trying to digest the information these tracks had given him. Tom Horn was certainly there ahead of him, and from the looks of the second set of boot tracks Jim Pines or some other man was keeping him company.

That makes two knowin' their way in here, he thought. *Trumbull makes three. He's got Carrie with him now so that makes four.* Now I wonder if Trumbull gave Sarcer directions that'd make him five—?

Matt pondered that question, and he twisted in his saddle to study the plateau where Sarcer had made his killer play the evening before. It was far enough away to make a walk to this gorge a long jaunt, even in daylight. At night it would have been even more difficult.

Now if it was me makin' this trip, Matt thought, *I'd walk, then rest awhile, and*

walk some more. Take just about until now to get this far, so why don't you and me hole up in them rocks ahead, hoss, and see what comes along. Might be we can get in on the bushwhackin' side for a change—

Garth slowly savored one of his last cigars, nursing it along to still his impatience. If his guess was wrong he was wasting time that might spell the difference between life and death for those friends ahead of him. But on the other hand it would serve little purpose to make contact with Carrie and Tom Horn only to have Ben Sarcer drive a bullet into his back.

That cuss won't miss me next time! was the grim hunch that came to Garth.

He stayed in the ring of boulders, marking time by the slow-crawling shadows that inched back to the nest of boulders as the dawn sun rose higher above the Pinnacles.

The ears of the black picked up sound before his own. Matt saw the horse's head swing to their backtrail and his ears prick forward inquiringly. One hand warningly over the animal's muzzle, Garth watched through a notch between two of the boulders, and saw a tattered shape come shambling into view. The apparition weaving toward him on dragging legs did not look like the dapper Ben Sarcer who had followed him from Boston. The sight brought a bleak smile to Garth's lips, and he felt no sorrow for the little man's predicament as he came on, head down, following the trail up the gorge.

Sarcer was right below him now. Garth cocked his Colt with intentional loudness, and he saw the Bostonian stiffen and seem to freeze in his tracks.

"Ben," Garth said pleasantly, "you had three tries at me. One is all I need—"

Sarcer's head slowly turned and his lips were slack, his eyes glazed.

"Garth," he said. "Damn you, Garth, and damn this country!"

"While you're at it," Matt drawled, "damn Harvey Trumbull, alias Todd Wellman, for getting you into this. He hired you before he left Boston to keep an eye on his flock of pigeons. You knew I'd bring trouble, so you took a fast boat to 'Frisco, planning to kill me right there and collect from Trumbull. How much did he promise you, Ben?"

The scar above Sarcer's right eye was a sweating white ribbon slashing up to the line of his thin air.

"Hunt your own answers!" he snarled. "Damn you, you've got the gun. Go ahead and shoot—if you want the girl to die. Harvey will cut her throat if he hears a shot!"

Under his breath, Garth cursed. Sarcer was probably telling the truth. One report of a Colt might spell the doom of Tom Horn, Pines, and Carrie.

His fingers touched the customary lariat thonged to the pommel of his saddle, and he unfastened the lashings with his free hand. Below the cover of the rocks, where Sarcer could not observe his actions, he built a small loop, and started it twirling. He felt the loop widen a little, and he sent it flipping in a single motion across the top of the boulders. Sarcer's wary eyes saw the rope coming, but he could not dodge fast enough. The noose settled about his shoulders, pinioning his arms.

"I've heard stories of California bear hunts with nothing but riatas for weapons," Garth observed pleasantly, "but I never figured I'd use one myself to catch me a killer!"

He was swinging swiftly to saddle as he spoke, keeping the rope taut. Sarcer stood like stone as Garth rode up to him from the rocks.

"What are you aimin' to do with me?" he choked out.

"Mebbe make a hoss trade on up the line," Matt told him briefly. "Now get moving, and you better forget you got a tongue unless you want to lose it."

SARCER SHAMBLED ahead of the black, and the sun lifted and beat down into the gorge with a fierce unrelenting heat. Ahead of them now the needle-point spire loomed like a gigantic cathedral, and they were close enough for Matt to recognize the tell-tale folds of serpentine and porphyry. He felt excitement hotter than the heat of the sun mounting in his blood. If Tom Horn had found lode gold, it wouldn't be far ahead of them now.

The thought made him swing the black into the meager shade of the canyon wall on their right, and he tossed the reins over the animal's head. Keeping the riata taut in his left hand, he swung down.

"Move on along, Sarcer," he said softly. "Things are apt to get interesting up ahead."

The gorge narrowed, climbing steeply in front of them. Matt watched ahead, probing each turn warily. The needle-point peak loomed almost directly above them now, a frowning monolith hundreds of feet high. Its eroded sides made a sounding board that was like a megaphone echoing and magnifying the sudden high cry of a girl. It was Carrie's voice, filled with Irish defiance.

"Dad, don't sign over your claim to—to this four-flusher! Let him do what he wants to me. He can't make you and Mr. Horn give up your claims!"

The girl's words were enough to fit the last card into Matt Garth's hand, but he knew with grim certainty that he couldn't be sure yet whether he was holding a flush or a bust. Trumbull had brought the girl here to use as a pawn in his high-stake game. A game that might include lode gold as well as placer properties.

But Carrie's life meant more to him, he knew suddenly, than all the gold in the Pinnacles! Garth realized that now, and his nerves tightened like fiddle strings.

Ahead of them, probably right around the next bend, this gulch would flatten out in front of Tom Horn's camp, and with the

girl for his prisoner, Trumbull had probably ridden brashly into view, using her for a shield. Surprise had been as potent a weapon as any gun. But surprise was a weapon that two might use—

Garth let the rope in his hands slacken a little as the sound of the girl's voice faded, and he watched Ben Sarcer's body grow rigid with sudden hope. The little man's shoulders twisted suddenly. His arms flailed and he flung the riata over his head. He sprinted for the bend in front of them.

Matt dropped the rope, and his long strides carried him easily after the Bostonian. He let Sarcer reach the bend, and then laid one shot between the man's running feet. Sarcer tumbled forward, squealing like a wounded pig, and the sound of the Colt smashed like a cannon's blast against the stone of the needle-point pinnacle. Sarcer regained his feet and plunged on, ragged coattails flapping.

Garth followed him, a tense smile playing about the corners of his lips. Yes, surprise was a weapon two could use. The sound of his Colt, and the sight of Sarcer should be enough to confuse a better man than Trumbull.

He caught full sight of the camp then, a sheltering canvas strung across the tops of two boulders, a pile of rock showing at the mouth of a narrow tunnel driven straight into the base of the needle-point peak. A morning cookfire still glowed in front of the shelter, and two white-bearded men squatted on either side of it, their hands carefully flat on the ground.

Harvey Trumbull had been facing them, one hand holding the reins of Carrie Pines's mount, the other balancing a Colt. An easy smile of triumph had been on his lips, but Garth saw it freeze into a grimace as he whirled at the sound of the single shot he had fired. He watched the promoter's Colt swing into line on the first man to come in view. Flame played palely about the muzzle of the weapon as it bucked in Trum-

bull's hand, and Ben Sarcer's dying scream almost drowned the sound of the gun.

"Harv— Harv— You've shot me—"

Trumbull seemed to realize his mistake then, but his gun hand was shaking as he tried to center the sights on Garth. Matt shot the Colt from the promoter's hand, and watched it spin almost into the fire. Tom Horn made one crab-like leap for it, but Garth kept his smoking weapon trained on Trumbull.

"Want more?" he asked coldly.

Harvey Trumbull's knees started to sag, and he put out a hand blindly to steady himself against the shoulder of the girl's mount.

"If he does," Tom Horn rasped, "let me give it to the whelp! He's been tryin' ever way outside of bushwhackin' to git his hands on this claim, since we come back from Boston. He's done got a big share of the money them Boston folks put up salted away in a Sacramento bank where I cain't lay a finger on it. Dad blast not bein' able to read anyway. I trusted this whelp tuh begin with, and put my X on the papers whar he said it should belong, and all I was doin' was assiginin' him all the rights to the T & H mine. Learned that when I tried to straighten things out at the bank, but I fixed his wagon danged quick. Warn't nobody could record the claim I got here, but me, and I jest been neglectin' to do it ever since. Ain't no law ag'in a feller changin' his mind about what he's going to name a mine so when she goes on the books I think we'll call 'er the Carrie Pines! Now, with that offen my chest, how be ye, Matt Garth?"

"Fine," Garth said briefly, and he kept his eyes on the promoter. "Step away from Carrie's horse," he ordered grimly. "Pines, get some rope and tie up this gent. We're going to take him back to Sacramento and let the sheriff handle his case—"

"You're taking me no where, Garth!" Trumbull's right hand flicked, and Matt remembered the Coarse Gold stableman reminding him that the promoter was quick as a rattler with a sleeve gun. The derringer coughed before he could trigger his own Colt, and Garth felt the slug band his ribs with fire. He thumbed the hammer of his weapon once, and again, as the girl's horse shied. Trumbull slumped down with a bullet in one leg, and one through a hand that would never hold a sleeve gun again. The man was crying, mouthing curses, but none of them heard him.

Garth, and the girl's father reached Carrie's mount at the same time. Tied hand and foot in the saddle she was trying gamely to hold her seat as Pines caught the reins and gentled the horse with soothing words. His canny blue eyes turned on Matt Garth.

"Son," he drawled, "I don't know you from Adam, but it 'pears like that ol' fossil, Tom Horn, and my datter, are friends of yours, so you go right ahead and help her from that saddle."

"Father—" Carrie Pines's cheeks were pink suddenly.

Jim Pines chuckled. "I come up hyar to check on this hyar Trumbull with Tom, after he wanted me to agree to a scheme of puttin' out stock on our placer. He claimed we could make more dinero sellin' stock than we could diggin' gold, but I warn't so sure I wanted that kind of money. As for you, Carrie," he looked sternly at his daughter, "ye should know I cain't read any better'n Tom hyar, so when I got your letter I had Trumbull read it to me, and he set your comin' as nigh on a month from now. That's how-come he was the one to git his dew-claws on ye in 'Frisco while I was up here a-helpin' this old fossil run a tunnel and dig some drifts."

Matt listened as he untied the rawhide lashings about the girl's ankles and wrists, but somehow he'd lost interest in gold claims. The smile she gave him was worth more than all the gold in the Sierras.

"You'd better lift me down, Matt," she said demurely. "I doubt if I can stand on my feet after being tied so long."

Her arms seemed made to fit about his neck, and she was light in his arms as he brought her from the saddle. Her lips brushed his cheek as he carried her to the shelter, and he felt his ears start to burn.

"I—I'm going to have to go back to Boston to make a report as soon as I find out what Tom's got here," Matt began, "and it's sure going to be lonesome traveling alone—"

Tom Horn was grinning.

"That," he grunted, "is about the dangdest proposal I ever heer'd. Now I recollect—"

"Do your recollectin' somewheres else you old fossil!" Jim Pines had come from staunching the flow of blood from Trumbull's wounds. "Didn't you hear the gentleman? He said somethin' about samples—"

Matt heard them, but his eyes were on the girl as he stretched her gently on her father's bed-roll.

"Matt." She whispered the words to him alone. "Matt, I don't think either of us will be traveling alone, ever again!"

He roused himself almost like a sleepwalker, and Tom Horn was coming toward him from the mine tunnel, his arms laden with chunks of white quartz that looked like honey had been spilled over them. That sight alone was enough for Matt Garth, and he grinned suddenly.

"It looks," he said, "like folks will have to find a new name for you, Tom. They won't be callin' you bad-luck, once an assay report on this ore gets out."

Tom Horn chuckled and spat dangerously near the wounded promoter. "T'ain't the gettin' that's so much fun, Matt boy. It's the lookin' that keeps a man young!"

"But the getting," Garth said, and his face was suddenly sober, "is what keeps the world rolling. I know some people in Boston who are going to be mighty happy—" And under his breath, he added: "And they're not the only ones!" His eyes found Carrie Pines. ✪ ✪ ✪

(Continued from page 81)

and cooking and decorating going on. Auliff was going to have this marriage go off right. He had sent for a priest and musicians and invited everyone in the countryside whom he thought would be afraid not to come.

Yet a stranger who was used to these affairs, had he ridden by, would have thought one thing oddly lacking. There was no sound of song and that was unusual.

Before noon, six of Auliff's riders called at the granary for Hunt. It was one of those rich California spring days with the sun golden and bland and the sky a sea blue. Hunt thought that on such a day he had hoped to marry Clorinda.

One of the men dropped in step beside him.

"Auliff says to tell you no funny business. The first wrong move and. . . ."

Hunt looked at the man, his cool eyes for one moment humorous.

"So that's where you wear your gun when you're all dressed up," he said.

As they reached the house on the edge of town the main gates were opened for them. They went in and the gates swung shut. They crossed the huge garden to the closed-in patio where Auliff stood.

"Ah, my friend," greeted Auliff, a grin on his sardonic face. "I'm sure glad you came. This wedding wouldn't be the same without you."

Hunt looked Auliff up and down. He had on the costume the *Californios* wore—short jacket and tight britches. It did not suit him very well. Young Hunt smiled politely and turned away.

He was standing beside a pillar when Pachecho came up to him carrying wine in a goblet of amber Mexican glass.

"Señor Hunt, you must go now," he whispered. "After the ceremony they will be waiting for you. They will never let you escape alive."

"I won't go unless the senorita goes with me," Hunt said, his lips tight.

"She says you must go. Your horse is saddled outside."

"No," said Hunt. "I do not leave here alone."

IN HALF an hour the open spaces of the garden were filled with people. People with strange expressions on their faces while Auliff's cold-eyed riders circulated among them. The priest came out and the mandolins struck up. Perhaps of all the people there that little priest was the only one who did not know what it was about. He was still dwelling in a world with St. Francis of Assisi where even the birds spoke wise, kind things.

At the last moment Clorinda came through the open doors. As she came a faint murmur arose from the crowd for she looked so beautiful. But Hunt's heart sank. He had hoped she would not come. That would have been the end of everything for him, and yet he wished it.

During the ceremony they pushed young Hunt well up in front where they could watch him. From time to time, Auliff glanced sidewise at him and smiled his sly smile. As the ceremony was over he turned and asked, "Well, Hunt, would you like to kiss the bride? This will be your last chance."

Hunt stepped forward. The man had a diabolical feel for what would hurt the most. Hunt took Clorinda in his arms. She was shaking. She put her lips close to his ears.

"Go," she said. "Go. I shall be all right."

Hunt said softly, "The game is not yet over, dear."

They sat down at the great tables and drank. Hunt ate little but he pretended to drink much. From time to time he felt Auliff's mocking eyes upon him and Clorinda's appealing ones, begging him to go.

The people, released from themselves by the drink began to grow a little gayer. The thing began to sound a little more like a wedding feast. Hunt noticed that a num-

ber of Auliff's men were drunk. By the time the dancing and the games started there was a strange, feverish gaiety about the place.

Toward the end of the meal Pachecho came again.

"You must go," he begged. "I have someone to open the gate. There is a revolver in the serape behind the saddle. The mistress wishes you to go."

Hunt said softly, "Put my horse with the other horses. I'm going to see if I can get him inside."

Pachecho looked at him hopelessly.

"As you will, Don Eduardo."

At the lower end of the garden was a long open space. Horsemen, on fleet California ponies were competing. They were mostly drunk. They galloped by, one hand to the pommel and the other hand down to sweep the feather from the ground.

Hunt was standing watching when Auliff's voice cut across his desperate mood. The more he thought, the less good it seemed to do.

"I suppose you're good at these horse games?" he said mockingly.

Hunt was about to turn and walk away when an idea struck him.

"If I had a horse, I could show you a few things."

He turned in time to see the workings of Auliff's face. Auliff believed it was some plan to escape. Hunt expected him to refuse.

"All right," Auliff said. "I'll send Pachecho for your horse and we shall see." There was that cat and mouse look in his eyes.

Pachecho came to the call. Auliff ordered him to bring in Hunt's horse. Hunt would have liked to have spoken a word to Pachecho but he did not get the chance.

Word had gone around that something was going on in the lower garden. The dancers stopped and the people wandered down. Clorinda came wearing her mantilla, and there was stark dread in her eyes.

Auliff stood there very still and musing. From time to time his fingers tapped something hard under his armpit.

The roan had not been ridden for several days and he was filled with life and skittishness. He sidled away as Hunt came up to mount. Pachecho held the head.

Hunt threw him a couple of short orders in Spanish, from the side of his mouth. Pachecho looked worried but he said, "Ai, it goes thus."

Hunt cantered the horse down to the end and wheeled short. The people called, *"Ola! Ola!"* as he touched the roan into a gallop, swooped down on the feather and plucked it out.

"Now a coin," Hunt called.

Auliff threw him a Mexican dollar. He was smiling now. He thought he saw just how the break would come. When Hunt whirled by next time he would be approaching a point where the wall was low and where a horseman with some daring might try to put his horse over. Auliff put a possessive arm around Clorinda and his other hand slid to his gun. Hunt had galloped to the far end and was turning to make his swooping ride for the coin.

ONCE MORE he put the roan to a gallop, hung low from the saddle, swept up the coin, tossed it glittering in the sun and caught it again as he galloped on towards the low place in the wall. Auliff had his gun out. He waited for Hunt to lean forward and lift the horse. Instead Hunt stopped and wheeled around. Auliff grunted in surprise. His gun lay flat in his hand.

"How did you like that?" Hunt called as he cantered up, reins held lightly and one hand resting in back.

Auliff let the girl go and leaned forward.

"You're a better horseman than you are a fighter," he called derisively.

"We'll see," grinned Hunt. "Is that a gun in your hand? Well, here's mine!"

Auliff let out a grunt like a pig and threw down. Hunt was smiling that brief moment as he swung his mount sideways. Smoke made a little puff at his hip. The two shots came so close that the reports overlapped each other. Auliff seemed to stand very straight, to stretch, and one of his clawing hands reached out and brought down Clorinda's mantilla.

Hunt let out a yell of triumph. He heeled his horse to the low terrace where Clorinda was standing and lifted her. Auliff's men were running for the big gate in order to cut Hunt off. But Hunt did not go that way.

With Clorinda's arm around his neck and his arm gripping her waist he galloped toward the house. Under the huge arches of the patio they went. They flung off. Clorinda picked up her heavy embroidered white satin skirt and ran, and as she ran she laughed.

"I don't care what happens now."

Hunt threw her a grin.

"Come on."

Pachecho was holding two horses. Hunt threw Clorinda upon one and he swung onto the other.

"Where do you go?" Pachecho cried.

"We'll be back," Hunt called. "There's still Auliff's men. We'll be back, Pachecho. Wait for us."

Then they both galloped off.

Hours later, when it was evening and they were safe among the hills they knew so well, Hunt helped Clorinda down and took her in his arms.

"You shouldn't kiss a widow so soon," she said with a laugh.

In an instant all the laughter went out of her.

"Oh, darling," she said. "You don't know what I owe you for saving me from that man. I would have killed myself. I'm sure he was the devil."

Under the shadows of the red-trunked madrones, Hunt held her close.

"Don't worry, Clorinda," he said. "Think of it no more. We've said *adios* to the devil, you and I." ✪ ✪ ✪

MAN HIGH

(Continued from page 75)

Frank hurled himself to the ground as Woolsey's rifle cracked spitefully. Frank fired as he hit the ground, vaguely hearing the noise of Woolsey's bullet, but giving his full attention to the gunman's booted legs under the horse. Woolsey shot again, but the bullet was wild as his legs were jerked from under him and he fell. The horse wheeled around, leaving Woolsey fully exposed on the ground. Desperately he brought the rifle around to bear on Frank. Already in position, Frank fired with a calmness that caused him amazement.

Woolsey was jerking under those smashing bullets, but from somewhere he mustered the strength to lever and fire the saddlegun, feverishly, wildly, then with a deadly detachment. Frank felt the air was full of bullets until suddenly there was a dead silence and he realized that Woolsey was a still shape yonder on the ground.

Frank sat up and not until then did he realize that his left arm behaved curiously, numbly, and that his left side was covered with blood. Then things blurred. . . .

Frank woke up in his wagon with Mary sitting beside him.

Suddenly her face was pressed against his and Frank said, "Shucks, honey, I'm all right." He grinned at her as she sat up; then looked down at a pile of coins.

"That's the two hundred and fifty for your horses. The marshal got real mad about being held by Dade and Nick. He jailed them and reclaimed the horses and then sold them for this two-fifty."

Frank felt a great calmness and content inside him.

He was glad that he had stood up on his feet, and he knew that it wouldn't be so hard next time, and not so much trouble and danger. A man had to stand up for his rights. Sometimes it was a chore, but after awhile it got easier and the satisfaction made a fellow feel man high. And —by grab—he was man high, too! ✪ ✪ ✪

(Continued from page 37)

With an incredibly quick movement he flicked his cigarette into her face. It struck her chin in a shower of sparks—and as she involuntarily flung up one hand to shield her eyes, he seized the rifle.

"Sorry I had to do that. But it didn't burn you none." His voice was almost gentle. "I told you I need this old roan."

"Take him then—you horse thief!"

"You're wrong about that." He shoved the rifle in the saddle-boot, then jerked the latigo-strap tight. "I'll send him back." Leading the horse across the corral, he picked up his Colt, holstered it, and turned to her. "I'll do better'n send him back—I'll pay for him." He took a buckskin pouch from his pocket and held it out to her. "Here. Like as not your sister an' the captain 'ud rather have the cash anyhow."

She gazed at him, startled. "I wouldn't touch your money!"

The buckskin pouch clinked in the dust at her feet. "Then keep it till I come back."

"You wouldn't dast to come back here!"

"I sure will." He reached for the horn, thrusting a foot in the stirrup. In these last few seconds a plan had formed in his mind. He swerved up into the saddle with a lightheartedness he had not felt for years. Swinging the horse around to face her, he smiled. "I'll come back," he said. "An' when I do I want to find you."

The last of her resentment was in the whisper. "I won't be here—"

"I'll locate you," he said. "I put my brand on your pretty chin."

She lifted a hand to the faint pink spot—then her cheeks flushed and she glanced away.

"What's your name?"

The suddenness of it brought her answer before she was aware: "Eva Scott."

"Eva Scott," he repeated, fancying the sound of it. "Mine's Shanley Kenvir." His smiling dark eyes held her, as if he were touching her with his hands. "You'll see me again!"

He whirled the horse with a dig of his heels and rode out of the corral into the morning sun. Eva Scott stood still and watched him until the green pines closed around him.

Going down the mountain, Shan was figuring how many days it would take him to work north, across the Powder and overtake Custer's Seventh Cavalry. Their Ree scouts would be trailing Crazy Horse's Sioux somewhere around the Bighorn. Shan knew that country well; he could do a job for the Army. They were unaware he was hunted by the law. They would sign him on—if not as a scout, then as a civilian mule-packer. It would wipe the slate clean. More than anything he had ever wanted in his life he wanted now to join Custer. Nothing would stop him.

Riding out from the pines he turned in the saddle and looked up. The girl was a small blue figure motionless by the corral. He took off his hat and waved to her; saw her raise one arm and wave back.

Down the mountainside Shan rode, fast as the roan could keep its feet on this rocky slope. In a few days he would be with Custer. ✪ ✪ ✪

Answers to Cattle-Country Quiz

(Questions on page 28)

1. True. Arbuckle's coffee was a well known brand on the range.

2. True. The term, *barboque jo,* was sometimes used near the Mexican border to refer to the chin strap of a cowpoke's hat.

3. If a cowpoke friend told you you were "barking at a knot," he would mean you were attempting to do the impossible.

4. True. The term "bedding out" is one that was once commonly used in connection with the roundup season.

5. False. *Caballada* means band of horses.

6. True. The "California drag rowel" has a rowel which drags on the ground when the wearer is afoot.

7. If the ranch boss sent you for the "calico horse," you should return with a pinto horse.

8. A "chuck-line rider" was a cowboy who rode from outfit to outfit obtaining food. In certain instances this was legitimate. A few punchers, however, abused the privilege and became virtual professional chuck-line riders.

9. False. A "churn-dash calf" is one which does not have access to all of its mother's milk.

10. False. The cowpoke traditionally uses "critter" to refer to a cow.

11. True. A "dogie" is an anemic calf that has not wintered well.

12. The cowpoke uses the term "fodder forker" —among others—to refer to the farmer.

13. If the ranch boss sent you for the "gentler," you should return with an animal used to neck to a wilder one until the latter becomes more gentle.

14. True. The expression, "gimlet," is used in reference to the act of riding a horse till its back gets sore.

15. The cowpoke slang expression, "to hairpin," means simply to mount a horse.

16. The rangeland expression, "a hundred and sixty," generally refers to someone's homestead. Traditionally, many homesteads were of a hundred-sixty acres.

17. If a cowpoke friend said he was seeking the "long-eared chuck wagon," he would mean he was looking for the pack mule carrying the grub.

18. True. The term, "lump oil," is a rangeland expression for kerosene or coal.

19. If someone hollers "man at the pot!" when a cowpoke in camp is at the coffee pot, it is only good manners that he make the rounds and fill everyone's coffee cup.

20. To "trap a squaw" means to get married.

THE MAN-HORSE

By
REX CAMPBELL

IN THE days when vast parts of Texas were marked "Wild Horses" on maps and perhaps two million horses roamed the West, mustangers found many ways to capture these free horses. Professional mustangers seldom depended on roping, for the finest and fleetest would escape.

Some mustangers surrounded bands of horses, or built pens to lure them into with water, mares, or salt. Others chased their mustangs when the wild horses were weakened by scarce winter food and their own mounts had been kept strong. A few tried creasing the animals they wanted, momentarily stunning them with a bullet barely grazing the spinal nerve along the top of the neck.

Of all the mustangers, Bob Lemmons, an ex-slave, was the most unusual and original. He captured entire bands of horses by convincing them that he himself was just one of them. They made him their leader.

When Lemmons started after a band of wild horses he followed them easily. Gradually they would cease to fear him, would allow him to join their band. He would more and more make them do his wishes. By the end of the second week in most bands, he would take the place of their lead stallion.

He would guide his band to strange territory where they would more completely depend on him. He would act like a horse himself, sniffing, searching, before approaching water holes; warily prancing and snorting if he saw signs of enemies such as panthers. Sight of a distant man made him lead the band on a wild flight.

While with a horse band, Lemmons never changed his clothing or his horse. If some partner brought supplies to him, the man could come no nearer than a hundred yards to leave the food.

Slowly Lemmons would lead his band to a trap. Coming near the entrance, he would break into a run with them, and as they entered the pen, he would be let escape from the other side, forsaking his horses, becoming just a man once more. ✪ ✪ ✪

(Continued from page 8)

promising place for a bedrock placer in the inner side where a backeddy always makes a sand bar. This is the spot to work any creek. But reports state that the daily recovery per man here was about 50¢

Gravels have much sand and some boulders, also pebbles of magnetite, hematite, and limonite; and the bedrock pay-gravels range in thickness up to 25-ft or so with gold grains from flour, to coarse up to size of a small bean. It's richest on-or-near bedrock.

Further, and inside your stated radius, there are some in Cochise County, to the south of Safford, namely: The "Dos Cabezas Placers;" reached by driving south on US-666 for 47 miles to Wilcox, then southeast on dirt road about 15 miles to village of Dos Cabezas. It's in high country around 5,000-ft alt. Plenty water in winter and spring, and most gulches in the district have gold-bearing gravels, thinner in canyons a little north of the village, but thicker to south and away from the mountains. Mexicans in early days made $4 to $6 a day with pans only. However, you'll hit some clay in these gravels, and this must be eliminated by "puddling", before panning, rocking or sluicing. This gold is usually flattish, ragged, and fairly coarse, for it doubtless came from the many gold-quartz veins in those hills. In summer months these may be worked by dry-washing methods, but as is always the case some values are always lost by dry-washing methods.

Also, there are the "Teviston" placers at the north base of Dos Cabezas Mountains. Here bedrock is deep being from 50 to 75 feet from surface; *but*, you can get some gold at from 3 to 10-foot depth, most of it coarse and has average for handwork from a low of 3¢ a cu. yd. up to high as $28.00 a cu. yd. Biggest nugget found in early workings was valued at $375. Many of the gulches from the Range have placer gold in fine-grained sands having some "caliche" (cement) in places but dig below this and you'll find gold values underneath. A false bedrock of clay exists in places too, with values concentrated.

Farther south, in Central Cochise County, there are some placers on the eastern and western margins of Pearce Hill, where the gold was washed down and concentrated from gold-bearing quartz veins in the hill above. These veins being a sugary manganese-stained type of quartz, having free gold associated with cerargerite (horn silver) and embolite (silver chloride). The overburden to bedrock ranges here from a maximum thickness of 25-ft on the east margin, to 15 on the west side.

This is the best I can do for your district and within your stated radius. Arizona is not, in fact, really termed a gold-State, for its greatest production is in copper, although it has produced a limited amount of placer gold in early days. Most dry placers occur in western and southern counties, but the yield of these has been only from 25¢ a day, to 50¢ in certain areas, and $1 in just a few areas. ✪ ✪ ✪

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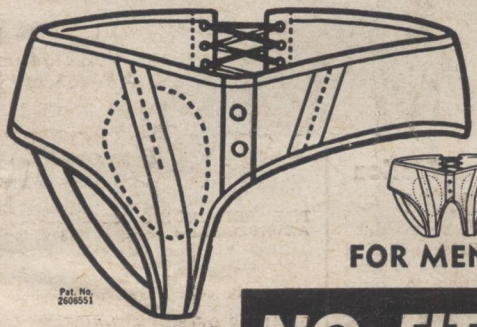

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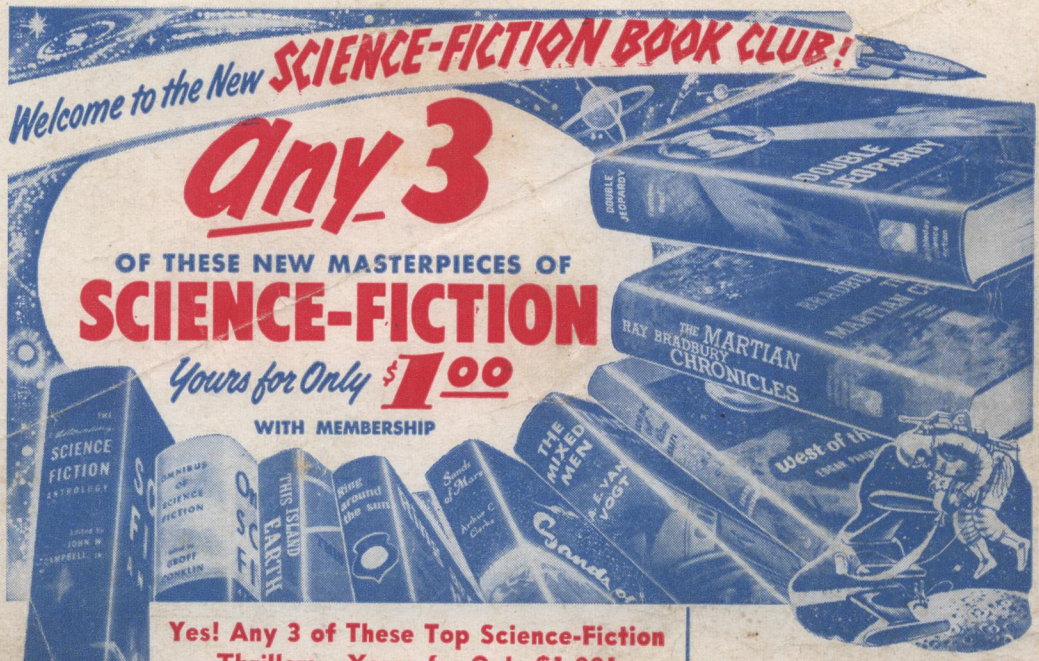

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