

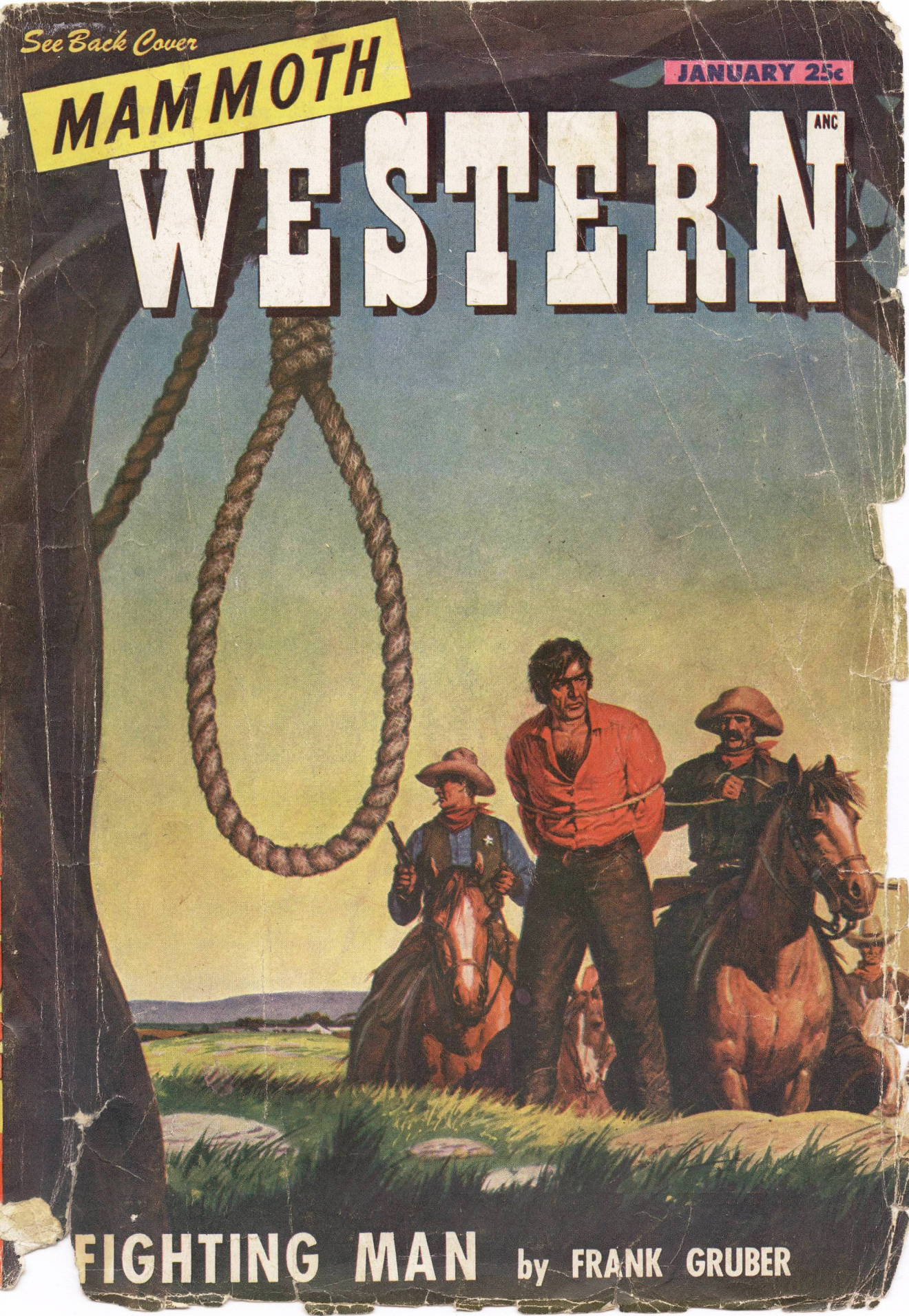
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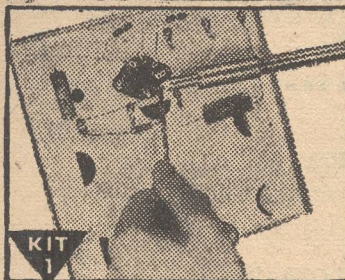
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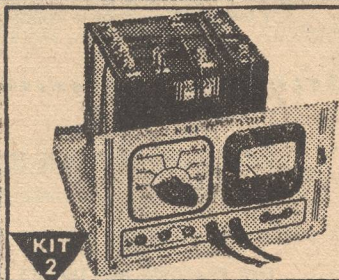


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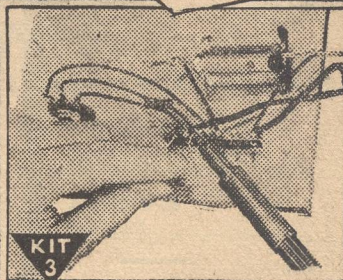
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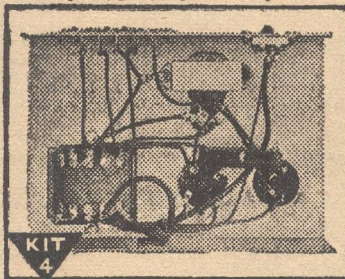
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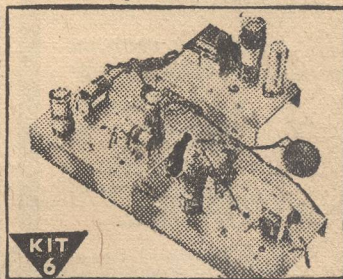
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Published monthly by ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY at 185 North Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill. New York Office, Empire State Building, New York 3, N. Y. Washington office, Washington Building, 15th & New York Avenue, N.W., Washington 5, D.C. Application for second class privilege is pending at the Post Office, Chicago, Illinois. Subscription in U. S., Canada, Mexico, South and Central America and U. S. Possessions, \$2.50 for 12 issues; in British Empire, \$3.50; all other foreign countries, \$4.50 for twelve issues. Subscribers should allow at least two weeks for change of address. All communications about subscriptions should be addressed to the Director of Circulation, Ziff-Davis Publishing Company, 185 North Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.



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Front Cover painting by Robert Gibson Jones illustrating a scene from
 "Fighting Man"

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RIDIN' HERD

with the Editor



WITH this editorial you may find an assortment of asterisks and various other marks denoting cuss words. The reason for that is that this is the second time we've written this editorial. The original copy got lost somewhere, and with this form due to go to press tonight, you can see why the air is blue in this vicinity. So, if this makes any sense to you, it'll be because our trusty old Underwood can make sense no matter what keys your editor hits.

AND we had such a brilliant editorial written, too. It sets the pace for the magazine with its masterful description of the fine entertainment to be found in the pages of the brand new (movie to be) novel by Frank Gruber, entitled "Fighting Man." It went on with striking force to depict in vivid editorial overtones the sheer genius of Paul W. Fairman in writing about a piece of sod and making it a superlative example of the art of short story writing. His "A Piece of God's Prairie" will illustrate what we mean. Then, proceeding with the natural ability toward dramatics which your editor displays with such incredible nonchalance, we described in reverent innuendoes the predicament of Robert Moore Williams' hero in his "Face Fifty Guns." Ah, the beauty of that particular passage! Such art! And to have it lost . . . ah the bitterness of it! But even with that we cannot pause to shed more than a few tears, for we must go on to the inspired phrases which pointed up Berkeley Livingston's great story, "The Curse." Even now, as we rewrite this editorial, we feel that thrill of pride in a bit of materialized genius. If only you could have read those immortal words! You would have sat enthralled, reading them over for hours on end, and . . . oh hell what's the use! You'd look silly on end, wouldn't you!

ANYWAY, we do have one unusual story in this issue. It's unusual because it's true! Yes, "The Fire Trail" by Oge-Make is a true story of an Indian ceremony which took place in New Mexico this summer. The fire-trail ceremony is one of the oldest and most honored of the ceremonies of the Navaho tribe, and on this particular instance, a problem of great importance to the tribe was being placed at the mercy of the gods for a solution. Oge-Make, walking the fire-trail in his

spirit body, went on the most amazing trip through space and time that the Indian has ever told to the white man. It must be remembered that this is a very sacred ceremony, and Indians do not usually tell things like that to the white man. Thus, it must be a matter of very great importance to induce them to break a silence of ages. So, when you read this story, it should be with the full realization that the Navaho Indians have done a very great favor for us, and that they are perfectly sincere in the warning they pass on to us. Their own question went unanswered in the ceremony, and it is a question that needs answering. When you have read the story, read the article at the end of it, relating the problem of the Navaho, and then do something about it. Here is your chance to do a real good turn. And maybe the white man can answer the problem of the Navaho with a ceremony of his own! Certainly it isn't such a hard problem to solve. And we owe it to our friends, the Navaho, whose very existence is today imperiled by the acts of the white man, no matter how innocent they may be. But atom bombs seem to be atom bombs, and pasturage conservation seems to be pasturage conservation.

NEXT month we're going to give you Rex Engel's "Gold And Guns" which is a western railroad novel about the days when the west pushed through the iron horse and the Indians tried to push through the same iron horse. We still think the Indians should have won that fight.

FOLLOWING, we'll have another Hopson novel, this one the best he's ever done, and that's saying more than we intended to say. Because doing better than he's done is doing a lot! And maybe you wouldn't believe it! But the proof will be in the reading.

IF you haven't noticed, we have a fine color painting of another Indian in our series of American Indians by Walter H. Hinton. This one's the Nootka, and it's as accurate in every detail as it's possible to make it. Mr. Hinton knows his stuff about Indians and you can be sure that every detail of costume, habits, etc. is correct. We think you'll like this return to cover paintings on the back cover as well as on the front. And these paintings should go into your collection!

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FIGHTING MAN

by FRANK GRUBER



The bullet caught one man squarely between the eyes—

The vociferous West was asking for war, and these four hundred tough men knew just how the request could be granted!



—as the cavalcade thundered through the camp.

DO YOU remember what you did in Independence, Jennison? Do you remember, Anthony?

And you, Jim Lane—yes, Senator James Lane. You're not banging on Abe Lincoln's bedroom door this morning. You're not telling him how to run the war. You're home today, home in Lawrence, Kansas.

This is August 21, 1863, a day you will never forget.

It's early morning and you're still in your night shirt, but look out of your window, Jim Lane. Look out and see who's coming.

Yes—it's Quantrell, the man you drove out of Lawrence, three years ago. He's come back—with four hundred fighting men, four hundred of the most desperate, deadliest men this country has even known.

You wanted war, you abolitionists. Well, your war's come home to you!

* * *

CHAPTER I

H E WAS twenty-six years old, a towhead with washed-out blue eyes that had seen too much of life. School teacher, gambler, horse-thief, camp follower, murderer and cannibal; he had been all of them.

And now he was at the crest of his career. Riding into Lawrence, Kansas, the town he hated more than anything in life. He had known hard times here; humiliation and degradation. Men had sneered and jeered at him. They had thrown him in jail and threatened to hang him. And now he was going to pay them back, every mother's son of them.

Lawrence was spread out before him; Lawrence, Kansas, the home of the Jayhawker and the Redleg, the Boston Abolitionist. The home of Jennison and Anthony, and Jim Lane.

Quantrell rode down into the town,

four hundred men at his back. Ahead of them, at the edge of the village, was a double row of Army tents, containing not more than thirty—you could scarcely call them soldiers, for they were mere recruits, untrained youths who were waiting to be shipped east where they were sorely needed. The war had not touched Kansas soil; there were no Confederate troops west of Missouri.

Only Quantrell. Quantrell and four hundred guerrillas, armed with Navy Colts, the finest weapon of destruction ever invented, which the Federal Government had not yet got around to buying for its soldiers. But Quantrell had bought Colts and had distributed them so liberally among his followers that each man had a minimum of two and some as many as eight, stuck in their belts.

Those tents in which thirty recruits were sleeping in their blankets. To whom would Quantrell delegate the honor of drawing first blood in Lawrence?

Quantrell's eye ran over his captains. George Todd, Bloody Bill Anderson, John Thrailkill, Cole Younger, Frank James, the ferocious boy, Arch Clements. Fine men, all of them. Ah, but there's Jim Dancer. His father was shot down in cold blood at Independence.

Quantrell nodded to Dancer. "Those tents, Captain."

Young Jim Dancer, nineteen years old, tall and lean and bitter, turned in his saddle and raised his right hand. He swept it forward . . . and his troop left the main body of guerrillas and charged.

Down upon the tents.

A sentry, stupid from illicit sleep, raised himself between two tents, to see what was causing the noise that sounded like galloping horses. His

mouth fell open in amazement . . . and then he died.

Captain Dancer's troop struck the tents, trampling them down. Iron-shod hooves crushed out the lives of men. Blue-clad soldiers scrambled out from under canvas and were riddled with bullets. Not one had time to return a shot. Thirty men died and Captain Dancer's troop swept on into Lawrence, only a hundred yards behind the main body of Quantrell's men.

But already the carnage was under way. Guns thundered and roared. Horses galloped down the streets and men yelled and women screamed.

Captain Dancer's men thundered past him, heedless of his commands. The blood lust was surging up in them and they were beyond human reason. They were killing in Lawrence, killing and looting and they wanted their share of both.

THE gunfire in the town became a continual roll of thunder. Flames and smoke shot out of burning houses and store buildings. A bearded man burst out of a house and started to run across the street. A half dozen men charged down on him, a dozen bullets tore through his body and ten more went into his dead body as it lay on the dusty street.

Guerrillas dismounted from their horses, smashed in doors and windows of homes. Sometimes they killed men inside the houses, sometimes they dragged them out upon the street and shot them before the eyes of their wives and children.

And always they burned. A hundred houses were sending pillars of smoke toward the heavens, a hundred and fifty, then two hundred and in a little while three hundred.

Fifty men were slaughtered in their homes, another hundred died upon the

streets.

But not Jim Lane. At the first sound of shooting in Lawrence, Senator Jim Lane was out of his home. With the tails of his night shirt flying behind him, he was heading for a corn field. And there he groveled for hours until the holocaust that was Quantrell had departed.

Oh, they searched for him, as they hunted for other men in the town. Guerrillas with sheets of paper containing lists of names rode through the towns and ransacked the houses from cellars to garrets. Sometimes they found men whose names were on the lists. They died horribly. They were the prominent men of the town, or men whom Quantrell or his followers bore personal grudges.

In these things young Jim Dancer took no part. He had led the attack against the soldiers in the tents. They wore uniforms and had taken an oath to fight against the Confederacy. That they were sodden with sleep, that they had no chance when Dancer's men rode them down, was their hard luck. Soldiers had no right to sleep with both eyes closed.

Hate, Dancer had; hate for the North that had spawned the men who had killed his father in cold blood. He killed soldiers because if he did not kill them they would kill him.

But Jim Dancer could not kill unarmed old men, nor those who would not defend themselves.

A guerrilla backed out of a doorway dragging a man by the heels. Behind him came a young girl of not more than fifteen or sixteen. Anguish distorted her face and tears streamed from her eyes.

"Please," she cried in utter panic, "please don't hurt him! Please! please . . .!"

The guerrilla, a filthy, unshaved ruf-

fian, dropped the legs of the man he was pulling and tugged a Navy Colt from his belt. The girl, seeing her chance, sprang past the unconscious form of her father and fell upon the guerrilla's gun hand.

The man swore a vicious oath and tried to shake the girl from him. She clung with the desperation of a lost soul.

"Let go," howled the ruffian. "Let go, or—"

He suddenly cuffed the girl with his free hand, a savage hard blow. She fell to her knees, but still clung to his wrist. The man took a half step back, braced himself and tore his hand free of the girl's grip.

The hand went up and the gun covered the girl.

"You asked for it," the guerrilla said thickly.

CAPTAIN DANCER stepped up and jammed the muzzle of his gun into the man's back.

"We're not shooting girls, Yancey," he said coldly.

For a moment the guerrilla froze. Then he squirmed and turned. "You, Dancer," he snarled. "I always said you was chicken-hearted."

Dancer struck him in the face with the barrel of the Navy Colt. Blood spurted from the man's face, but he stayed on his feet.

"I'll remember this, Dancer!"

"Do."

The guerrilla stumbled away and Dancer stepped forward to the side of the girl. She was down on her feet, cradling the head of her father in her arms. The older man was regaining consciousness.

Dancer stooped and taking hold of the man's shoulders helped him to his feet. The girl's arms were about her father and she started to help him

toward the house from which he had so recently been dragged.

A black stallion shot forward and cut off the sanctuary of the girl and her father. The tow-headed Quantrell looked down upon them and Dancer.

"What's this, Captain Dancer?" the guerrilla chieftain cried.

Yancey appeared beside Dancer, a sneer of triumph on his face.

Dancer said: "Yancey struck the girl."

"Didn't!" Yancey snarled. "On'y pushed her out of the way." He pointed the muzzle of his revolver at the girl's father. "This is Theodore Slocum. His name is on the list."

"No!" cried the girl. "His name isn't Slocum."

"It's no use, Evelyn," said the man.

"No," Quantrell agreed. "It isn't, because I remember you." He nodded to Captain Dancer. "All right."

Captain Dancer remained rigid. Quantrell's terrible eyes bored into those of his lieutenant. "I said *all right*, Captain Dancer!"

Yancey, the guerrilla, stepped forward with raised gun, but Quantrell's voice crackled. "No, Yancey. I'm going to let Captain Dancer have the honor."

George Todd and John Thrailkill came trotting up.

Dancer said, evenly: "Killing an unarmed old man isn't war."

Quantrell bared his stained teeth. "I gave you an order, Captain Dancer . . ." His eyes went to those of bloody George Todd, merciless John Thrailkill. The guerrilla chieftains flanked young Jim Dancer. Yancey, blood still trickling down his face, was breathing heavily.

Slowly Dancer raised his gun, pointed it at Theodore Slocum.

"No—no!" screamed the young daughter of Slocum.

"Fire!" Quantrell ordered.
Dancer pulled the trigger.

CHAPTER II

TWO horses jogged along the old Santa Fe Trail; they trotted side by side and the right hand of one of the men on the horses touched the left hand of the other rider. This was because the two hands were handcuffed together.

One of the men was Jim Dancer, nine years older than he had been at Lawrence, Kansas. He was still lean and hard-bitten and his eyes were slitted and weary. They had seen too much of life and none of it good.

The man who rode beside him was named George Cummings. He was a detective in the employ of the great Pleasanton Detective Agency and he was concluding a mission that he had begun eighteen months before and which had taken him through a dozen states; the pursuit and capture of Jim Dancer.

He was a formidable man, this George Cummings. Dogged determination had brought him up with Dancer but it was sheer luck that had him alive with Jim Dancer a prisoner beside him.

He said as they jogged along: "I don't know what you've done, Dancer, and I don't give a damn. Yes, I've heard a thousand stories about you, but I believe nothing of what I hear and only half of what I see. I work for Arthur Pleasanton and he sent me out to get you. It's a job of work to me, that's all. I'm turning you over to the Kansas City office, and then I'm going to sleep for eight weeks."

"I guess you've earned your sleep, Cummings," Dancer said. He rode in silence for a moment, then he added: "I haven't slept in nine years myself. Not really slept."

Cummings looked thoughtfully at him. "You were with Quantrell during the war, weren't you?"

Dancer nodded.

Cummings looked straight ahead. "Tell me, was he as bad as they say?"

Dancer said: "You heard about Lawrence, Kansas? That was Quantrell at his worst." He was silent a moment. "But Bloody Bill Anderson and George Todd ran Quantrell out of Missouri afterwards."

Cummings rode in silence for awhile. Then he said: "There's only you and me here; it can't be used against you. Did you ride with Frank and Jesse?"

"No," Dancer replied shortly.

"Then why does Pleasanton want you?"

"I don't know,"

Cummings screwed up his face in thought. "I don't mind telling you, Dancer, my orders were to get *you*. Pleasanton didn't say anything about Frank or Jesse, or Cole or the Miller boys. Only you. He told me to get you."

"Well, you've got me."

Cummings nodded. "I'm not kidding myself, Dancer. I've been around. I've had a few close shaves in my time, but it had to be luck for me to get you."

Dancer thought: *It's still another day to Kansas City. You've got a handcuff on my wrist and a gun in your pocket—on the far side. But watch yourself, Detective!*

TOWARD evening the detective and his prisoner reached the swollen banks of the Wakarusa. A wizened man stood on the river bank, scowling at a flat-bottomed scow which was straining at its mooring.

"Can you take us across?" Cummings asked.

"Yesterday I wouldda been glad to do it," retorted the ferryman. "And

maybe I'll do it tomorrow. But right now I wouldn't tackle the job for love nor money."

"Will you do it for this?" asked the detective. He produced a Navy Colt and pointed it at the ferryman.

The man regarded the revolver for a long moment. Then he shook his head. "Mister," he said, "you must want to get somewhere powerful bad."

"I do." Cummings held up his left wrist—along with Jim Dancer's. "I want to reach Kansas City tomorrow."

The ferryman searched the face of Jim Dancer. "An outlaw, Sheriff?" he asked the detective.

"I'm telling you to take us across this river," Cummings said grimly.

The ferryman studied the swirling river a moment, then exhaling heavily, clambered aboard the ferryboat. He caught up a sweep and maneuvered the boat a foot or so closer to the shore.

Cummings said: "We'll dismount, Dancer."

Holding his left hand high in the air, Cummings dismounted carefully, then stood sideways while Dancer got off his own horse. Cummings moved forward, caught the bridle reins of both horses in his free hand and stepped toward the ferryboat. Dancer, perforce, was compelled to move with him.

Then Cummings tried to urge the horses aboard the boat. They balked, for in spite of the ferryman's efforts with the sweep he could not get the boat close enough to the bank to make boarding easy.

"Get the horses on!" Cummings shouted to the ferryman.

"And who'll hold the boat?" the ferryman retorted.

The sensible thing, of course, was to free Dancer until they were across the river, yet Cummings was loath to do that. But ten minutes of struggling only resulted in all three of the men

being soaked from head to foot and at the end of that time the horses were still ashore.

Then Cummings finally drew the handcuff key from a pocket, handed it to Dancer and in almost the same movement drew his Navy gun.

"All right," he said harshly. "But watch yourself, Dancer!"

Dancer unlocked the manacle from about his wrist and the moment it was free, Cummings stepped back. From a vantage point he watched Dancer load the horses on the barge.

Then he clambered aboard himself and the ferryman threw off the rope that held the scow to the bank. At once the boat whirled out into the current, almost upsetting Cummings, who was not quite prepared. When Cummings recovered his balance, Dancer was within five feet of him. There he stopped, his eyes boring into those of Cummings.

"The key," Cummings grated. "Put it down and then move back."

DANCER stopped and deposited the key on the deck, then moved back as far as he could go. Cummings picked up the key and started to put it back into his pocket when the boat was caught in a sudden eddy and whirled almost completely about.

"Hang on!" cried the ferryman.

Cummings plunged forward, down to one knee. The key was jolted from his hand, plunked on the deck and disappeared in the muddy waters.

"Damn!" swore Cummings. He got carefully to his feet. "That means we stay together until we get to Kansas City."

"You'll never get me to Kansas City," Dancer said tonelessly.

"I'll get you there," Cummings said ominously. "Although I may have to carry you. Come over here."

He held out his left hand from

which dangled the manacle. His right hand he drew aside carefully, so that he could point the muzzle of the gun at Dancer and fire quickly and accurately.

Dancer came forward.

"Put the cuff on your wrist," Cummings ordered.

Dancer slipped the metal band about his wrist.

"Press it," Cummings continued. "Tight!"

Dancer pressed the cuff until it clicked. And at that moment the ferryman made his move. Cummings' back was to him and the ferryman drew his wooden sweep out of the water and swung at the detective.

The withdrawal of the sweep from the water let the boat out of control. It lurched forward, sending Cummings sprawling—and the sweep missed his head. Cummings cried out hoarsely, twisted about and fired.

He aimed at the ferryman, but the unleashed boat frightened the horses, so that they began to pitch and rear and it was one of the horses that took the bullet. The animal screamed and reared up on his hind legs, causing his mate to begin bucking. The ferryman was struck by a plunging hoof and knocked overboard.

The wounded horse reared up so high that it went over backwards into the river. The removal of the horse's weight from the one side of the scow shot it high into the air, completely out of the water and Dancer and Cummings skittered across the deck, got embroiled with the remaining horse and all three scudded into the waters of the Wakarusa.

CHAPTER III

THE stagecoach schedule was a flexible one. The coach left Topeka

at a definite time but its stops along the route depended entirely upon the weather and the temperament of the driver. So, for that matter, did the route.

The ford at Eel's Bend was six feet under water and therefore no ford, so Joe Partridge swung to the left and followed the winding Wakarusa. There was a ferryboat eight or ten miles up the river and it ought to be able to take the stage across, provided the coach and horses were taken over in relays.

Only there was no ferryboat. The rutted trails that served as a road led up to the water's edge and could plainly be seen on the far bank, but the ferryboat was gone.

Joe Partridge, who had been a mule-skinner under Sherman, pulled up his horses and swore roundly.

The right-hand door of the stage opened and a man stepped to the ground. He was a lean, sardonic-looking man wearing a Prince Albert and a flowered vest.

"What's the trouble, driver?" he asked.

Joe Partridge shot out a stream of tobacco juice. "It's the gosh-danged ferryboat, Mister."

The lean man surveyed the river. "What ferryboat?"

"That's it—there ain't none. But there oughtta be."

"What's become of it?"

"Don't know. Busted its rope and went down the river, I guess."

Another man stepped out of the coach, an enormously fat man of about forty.

"If the ferry's gone how are we going to cross?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, Mr. Kerigan," retorted Joe Partridge. "I was supposed to cross by the ford, eight-ten miles back, but there was six

feet of water there. I oughtta change these horses about now, but don't see how I'm goin' to, with the station on t'other side of the river."

Kerigan frowned. "Is there any other place to cross?"

Partridge scratched his head. "There is another ferry 'bout ten miles down-river, but that means back about eighteen before I c'n change horses. Twenty-eight miles." He shook his head. "We'll have to rest them."

"They're resting now," said Kerigan.

"Yeah, sure. I'll give them ten minutes." Partridge scrambled down from his perch. "Anybody want to stretch for ten minutes c'n get out," he called.

The passengers descended from the coach.

First came Florence Peel. She was in her mid-twenties and her beauty caused every man she met to breathe a little faster. But when they looked into her eyes they were always repelled. They were green and as cold as ice. Florence's father had been a famous Mississippi River gambler, whose der-ringer caught in his vest pocket when Florence was twelve. That was in 1860, the year before the war, and Florence had supported herself ever since.

The fat man, Kerigan, was a cattle-man from Texas. A herd of his was coming up the Chisholm Trail, but Kerigan had taken steamship passage to New Orleans, then come up the Mississippi to St. Louis and west to Kansas City by trail. He was going south now to meet the railroad that was building west. It was a long, roundabout trip, but it lacked the rigors of the overland Chisholm Trail route and Kerigan, who had been shipping cattle since 1867, was rich enough to indulge himself.

The fifth passenger's name was Paul Hobson, although he had given it to

none of the other passengers on the coach. In fact, he had spoken less than a dozen words since the beginning of the trip.

IT WAS Dave Oldham, the lean sardonic man in the Prince Albert who discovered the two men down by the river bank. They were a hundred yards from where the stagecoach had stopped and they must have seen the coach, but had not acknowledged its presence by rising or calling.

One of the men was seated on the river bank; the other lay close beside him.

Dave Oldham started toward them, then thought better of it. He turned back and catching Joe Partridge's eye, indicated the men downstream.

Partridge looked and exclaimed, "Be damned!" He put his hands to his mouth and using them like a megaphone, called: "Hey, you . . .!"

The men made no reply, nor did either of them get to their feet. They couldn't, although those at the coach did not know that.

"What's the matter with them?" Kerigan exclaimed. He started forward, but was stopped by the stagecoach driver.

"Just a minute!"

Partridge stepped to the side of the coach, reached up to his seat and brought down a double-barreled shotgun. "Might be a trick," he said.

Kerigan unlimbered a short-barreled revolver. "Come on, there's only two of them."

He started downstream, with Joe Partridge at his side. Dave Oldham fell in behind them and Hobson followed after a moment. They were halfway toward the men down by the river bank when Florence Peel suddenly decided to hurry after them.

When they were twenty feet from

the strangers, Joe Partridge stopped. The two men had not changed position since they had first been observed.

"What's the trouble?" Partridge cried.

The sitting man held up his right hand and by doing so brought up the limp hand and forearm of the other man. The two wrists were joined together by a pair of handcuffs.

"He's dead!" ejaculated Kerigan, referring to the man lying on the ground.

Partridge stepped forward, the muzzle of his shotgun pointed at the sitting man, but it was Oldham who reached him first. His right hand hovered near his vest where he could reach his deringer in a swift draw.

Oldham's eyes bored into those of the man seated on the ground.

"How long've you been here—like that?" Oldham asked.

"Last night," was the reply. The man was lean and hard-bitten and his eyes were slitted and weary. They had seen much of life and little of it good. They looked past Oldham and Partridge at Kerigan and Hobson who were coming up, and beyond them to Florence Peel.

"Where's Bart Huggins who runs the ferryboat?" Partridge demanded.

The man on the ground indicated the river. "That's how this happened. He was taking us across the river when the horses got panicky and capsized the boat." He looked down at the man who was handcuffed to him. "One of the horse's hoofs caught him on the head."

Joe Partridge grunted. "Surprised Bart ever took a chance crossing the way the river must have been yesterday. Never saw a more cautious man in . . ." Then he suddenly inhaled sharply. "Say . . . which one of you two is—?" He broke off, but his eyes were filled with suspicion.

The stagecoach passengers exchanged glances. Then Hobson asked softly: "What's your name?"

The man on the ground looked at him steadily. "Cummings, George Cummings."

"Marshal?" asked Partridge. "Never heard of any by that name in this territory."

"I'm not a marshal," Cummings replied. "I work for Arthur Pleasanton."

"A Pleasanton man," exclaimed Joe Partridge. "I'll be damned. Didn't think you fellows ever got out this far." He pointed to the dead man. "Who's he? Soom poor devil whose wife got the Pleasanton Agency after him?"

Cummings said: "I don't know what he's done, for sure. His name is . . . Jim Dancer!"

Joe Partridge cried out in horror. "Jim Dancer!"

Dave Oldham shot a quick look at Cummings' face, then took a step forward and peered down into the cold dead face on the ground. "You never got Jim Dancer," he said thinly. "No Pleasanton man ever got Jim Dancer, not like this."

"Say," said Kerigan warmly, "I've heard of this Jim Dancer. He's a curly wolf." He nodded to Oldham. "I side with you, pardner. No city detective will ever take Jim Dancer."

"Dancer's the most desperate man in the West," Paul Hobson added.

THE Pleasanton man shook his head wearily. "I don't know anything about Jim Dancer. Yes, I've heard a thousand stories about him. They say he's killed a thousand men and made two hundred orphans. I believe nothing of what I hear and only half of what I see. But I work for Arthur Pleasanton and he sent me out to get Jim Dancer. That was a year and a half ago. I followed Dancer to Mon-

tana Territory, to Oregon and California. He went to Mexico and I followed him and then he came back and yesterday—" he stopped for a moment, then said: "He had to sleep sometime."

"Yes," Oldham said bitterly. "Sometimes a man gets tired. And then he's got to sleep." He exhaled heavily. "And Jim Dancer went out like that, handcuffed to a Pleasanton man."

These people lived within the law: Kerigan, Leach, Hobson, Florence Peel and Joe Partridge; yes, even Dave Oldham. But the ignominious end of a notorious outlaw affected them all. They should have been respectful to the detective who caused the death of Jim Dancer, but there was no friendliness in any eye. Only aversion.

George Cummings drew a deep breath. Then, looking at Partridge, he said: "Have you got such a thing as a steel file in your coach?"

"No," replied Partridge. "I don't carry tools on this run, what with stage stations every three-four hours." His eyes smoldered. "Where's your key?"

Cummings nodded to the river. "When the boat was capsizing, Dancer made a play. I threw the key into the water to keep him from getting it."

Florence Peel said: "You'll have to cut off Jim Dancer's hand."

Paul Hobson shuddered and turned suddenly away. The others exchanged uneasy glances. The suggestion had occurred to all of them, but none had wanted to express it.

Joe Partridge worked at his chewing tobacco for a moment. Then he drew a huge clasp knife from his pocket. "If it's gotta be done I guess it's gotta be done."

CHAPTER IV

BERTRAM SLOCUM turned in at the three-story brick building and

climbed the stairs to the second floor. Near the head of the stairs he saw a ground glass door on which was stenciled:

PLEASANTON DETECTIVE AGENCY

NEW YORK CHICAGO LONDON

Kansas City Office

Slocum, a tall well-built man of about forty-five, with slightly greying hair, drew a deep breath and opened the door. In the small outer office a sharp-faced man took his boots off a desk.

"Mr. Pleasanton?" Slocum said.

The sharp-faced man grunted. "You mean the gent that owns this here detective agency? He ain't never been in this office, far's I know."

"I received a telegram yesterday asking me to come here." He drew it from his pocket. "It's signed Captain Travers."

"Oh, sure, Cap'n Travers," was the reply. "He runs this here branch."

"Can I see him?"

"Don't see why not. But you said *Mister Pleasanton an'—*"

Slocum cut the man off coldly: "My business in the past has been with Arthur Pleasanton and when I received a telegram I assumed he would be here."

"You assumed wrong, Mister. The old man with the whiskers don't bother about little things. What's it you want us to do for you? I c'n probably take care of it myself."

"I want to see Captain Travers!" Slocum snapped.

The Pleasanton man got to his feet. He shrugged. "Well, whyn't you say so in the first place?"

Muttering to himself he opened a door and went through, closing the door behind him. He reappeared almost instantly and nodded to Slocum.

Slocum went through the door, through an empty office and beyond, entered another door. A lean, black-

moustachioed man got up from behind a desk.

"Mr. Slocum," he said, "I'm Captain Travers."

Slocum nodded. "I got your telegram. Is it . . . about Jim Dancer?"

"Yes," replied Captain Travers. He paused a significant moment. "We've got him."

For just a second Slocum stiffened. Then his entire body relaxed. "How?"

Captain Travers pulled out a drawer and took from it a telegraph form. "This came from our Chicago office last night. Cummings reported there, as he was working under direct orders of Mr. Pleasanton."

He handed the telegram to Slocum. The latter scanned it quickly. It read:

Have just received despatch from George Cummings filed from Bower Springs, Kansas. He reports that he is bringing in Dancer. Am unable to come to Kansas City myself, so contact Bertram Slocum, Lawrence, Kansas, at once, as operation was for his account. Have wired Cummings to proceed to your office with prisoner.

Arthur Pleasanton.

SLOCUM lowered the telegram. There was an odd yellow glow in his eyes. He said: "Bower Springs is only about forty miles from here. This—this Cummings should be here by now."

Captain Travers took the telegram from Slocum and put it back in the drawer. He closed the drawer and seated himself in a creaking swivel chair. Then he said deliberately: "He should have been here this morning."

Slocum stared at the detective for a moment. "You don't think that Dancer got away?"

Travers evaded a direct answer. "Mr. Pleasanton considers George Cummings

the best operator he's had since the war. He gives him the hard ones."

"I've paid Pleasanton twelve thousand dollars in all," Slocum said bitterly.

"That's a lot of money," Captain Travers conceded. He paused a moment. "What did Dancer do to you?"

"He killed my brother."

Travers' eyes searched Bertram Slocum's face. "Your brother was killed during Quantrell's raid on Lawrence during the war."

Slocum nodded. "He was shot down in cold blood—by Jim Dancer."

"How do you know it was Dancer who did the actual killing? Were you an eye witness?"

"No. As a matter of fact, I was living in St. Louis during the war. But my brother's daughter, my niece, saw the killing. And it was murder, cold-blooded murder. My brother was unarmed, offered no resistance. He was dragged out of the house by the heels and shot down in cold blood, right before the girl's eyes."

"But how did she know the killer's name was Dancer?" Travers persisted.

"Because Quantrell himself called him by name. I assure you, Captain Travers, my niece has ample cause to remember every detail of that horror. She was only fifteen years old at the time and the tragedy made an indelible impression on her." He frowned. "As a matter of fact, it was my niece who urged me to employ your agency to bring Dancer to justice."

"Mr. Slocum," said Captain Travers, "this happened nine years ago, during the war. I doubt if you could get a jury to convict a man today for something that was done during the war."

"They haven't forgotten in Lawrence," Slocum said angrily. "Besides—there is Dancer's record since the

war."

"Just what *is* that record?"

"I should think you would know it better than I."

"I wonder," Travers said thoughtfully. "Yes, I know all the things Dancer's done. He's held up stage-coaches, banks, trains. He's murdered a hundred men and he's supposed to be Jesse James' lieutenant. But could you *prove* any of those things in a court of law?"

"Bring him to Lawrence and you won't need any proof. Jim Dancer'll never appear before a judge."

Travers grunted. "I can believe that."

There was a knock on the door and the sharp-faced operator who had engaged Slocum in verbal jousting opened the door a few inches. "George Cummings is here, Cap'n."

Captain Travers kicked back his chair and leaped to his feet. "Send him in!"

THE door was pushed open and George Cummings came into the room. He was haggard and drawn, his clothing wrinkled and foul from immersion in dirty water. He was alone and Slocum got the significance of that at once.

"Where's Jim Dancer?" he cried.

Cummings looked briefly at Slocum, then at Captain Travers, who was behind his desk. "You're Captain Travers?"

Travers nodded. "Yes. Mr. Pleasanton sent word that . . ." He jerked his thumb at Slocum. "It's all right, Mr. Slocum is the client for whom we've been working on this—this matter."

"Slocum," said Cummings and looked at Slocum. "I thought it was Theodore Slocum who was—"

"I'm his brother," Slocum snapped.

"Ted was killed by—" He scowled at the open doorway as if still expecting to see Jim Dancer materialize.

Cummings said flatly: "Jim Dancer's dead."

"Dead!" cried Slocum. "Where . . . how?"

Cummings addressed Captain Travers. "I sent the telegram from Bower Springs and I waited there until I got a reply from Mr. Pleasanton. He told me to bring Dancer here to you."

He paused and Slocum prodded savagely. "Go on, man!"

"The Wakarusa was in flood," Cummings continued. "We tried to cross on a ferry and the boat capsized. The ferryman drowned and Dancer—well, he died, too."

"What about his body?" Slocum asked.

"Joe Partridge, who drives the Holli-day stage, helped me bury it."

Slocum swore. "Damn it, man. You should have brought it in. I've got to know for *sure* that it was really Dancer." He appealed to Captain Travers. "I've paid enough money to have positive identification."

There was a slight frown on Travers' forehead, but he nodded agreement. "Mr. Slocum's right, Cummings. You brought Dancer that far, you should have brought him the rest of the way."

Cummings reached into his pocket and brought out a wallet. He took from it a thin packet wrapped in oil-skin and dropped it on Travers' desk. "My credentials," he said. "I'm turning them in."

Travers exclaimed, "You're quitting?"

"I quit this morning," Cummings said, "along about sunrise. After I sat all night on the river bank, handcuffed to a dead man."

"What?"

"Dancer made a play," Cummings said. "I threw the handcuff key into the water so he couldn't get it. Well, I won, but the stagecoach driver had to cut Dancer's hand off . . . with a pocket knife."

Even Bertram Slocum shivered.

Cummings went on tonelessly: "You can send in my resignation to Arthur Pleasanton." He reached into his pocket and brought out a pair of handcuffs. "And you, Mr. Slocum, can have these."

He turned and walked out of the office.

CHAPTER V

CHARLES LANYARD, vice-president of the Missouri, Kansas & Pacific Railroad was seated in his Kansas City office, reading the stock market quotations in the *Kansas City Standard*, when a clerk came into the room and handed him an embossed calling card.

"Bertram Slocum," Lanyard read. "Who is he?"

"He says he wants to see you on an important personal matter."

Lanyard grunted. "A salesman?"

"He doesn't look like one."

"They very seldom do." Lanyard shrugged. "All right, I'll give him a minute."

The clerk went out and a moment later Bertram Slocum entered the office. He shook hands with the railroad man and seated himself in a convenient armchair. Lanyard regarded him coolly.

"Mr. Lanyard," Slocum began, "I understand that you are in charge of construction on the M. K. & P."

"That's right."

Slocum nodded and rising, stepped to the wall on which hung a large map of Missouri and Kansas. A red criss-cross line stretched from St. Louis to

Kansas City and westward across Kansas to the borders of Colorado. Superimposed upon three-fourths of the red line was a green one.

Slocum took a pencil from his pocket and touched the point of it to the map where the green line stopped. "Your road is now at this point, isn't it, Mr. Lanyard?" he asked.

Lanyard was watching Slocum narrowly. "What if it is?" he demanded truculently.

Slocum moved his pencil a little ahead of the green line and about a quarter inch below the continuing red line. He drew a small square on the map.

"I own a bit of land here. Not very much, as land goes out West, but still—" He smiled blandly. "Twelve thousand acres. I bought it from the government, two years ago for fifty cents an acre."

"A pity," Lanyard said coldly. "If it were a few miles further north it might become worth something."

Slocum turned and smiled at the railroad man. "That's what I came to see you about."

"I don't get you."

Slocum turned back to the map and tapped the red line with his pencil. "This point here is exactly ninety miles from the town of Potter, back here—" He indicated a dot several inches closer to Kansas City. "It will therefore be a division point on your railroad where you will build repair shops, etcetery. Am I right?"

"We figure a division as ninety miles—yes. But I still don't understand what you're driving at."

"Why, it's simply this, Mr. Lanyard," Slocum said. "My property is exactly eight miles south of this point and your division headquarters isn't going to do me any good at all."

Lanyard smiled frostily. "Quite." Then he added: "There's a little place

called Bruno eight miles north of your property. Now *that's* going to be quite a town."

SLOCUM again touched his pencil to the map. He drew a slight curve from the red line, down through the penciled square that indicated his holdings, then up to the red line.

"Suppose," he said, "your road made a slight southward curve—like this—what would happen to my land then?"

"And why would we do that?"

"Because of the topography of the country. There's a river running right through my land which would give you water facilities."

"There's water at Bruno."

"Ah, but I just told you—I don't own Bruno."

"And because you own that land you think we should swing the road down? Increasing our trackage about six miles—"

"Seven. I've had it surveyed."

"Seven miles," said Lanyard grimly. "At forty-two thousand dollars a mile."

"Two hundred and ninety-four thousand dollars," Slocum said blithely. "Not a great deal of money—to a railroad."

Lanyard got to his feet. "Goodbye, Mr. Slocum."

Slocum made no move to go. He said, almost lazily, "Are you a rich man, Mr. Lanyard?"

"What concern is that of yours?" Lanyard snapped.

"None, really," Slocum admitted. "But I've been hearing a bit of talk, something about your getting caught in that New York Central deal—"

"Get out of here!" Lanyard roared.

"Two hundred thousand it was you dropped, wasn't it?" Slocum went on.

His face purple from rage, Lanyard strode around his desk and crossed to the door. He jerked it open. "Get!"

Slocum stepped to the door, took hold of the edge and swung it shut. "Don't be a fool, Lanyard," he said coldly. "Do you think I came here with empty pockets?"

Lanyard stared at him. "What—what do you mean?"

"I have fifty thousand dollars in my pocket."

Lanyard recoiled as if struck. For a long moment he looked at Slocum, then he walked slowly back to his desk. He stood there for a moment with his back to Slocum, then slowly turned.

"You . . . you're offering me fifty thousand dollars as a . . . a . . ." He could not bring out the word, but Slocum said it.

"Bribe."

He let it sink in a moment, then he went on. "The water facilities at Bruno aren't adequate, Mr. Lanyard. This town is going to be the closest point in the entire state to the Chisholm Trail and cattle drovers are going to bring their herds to it. You're going to need unusually large shipping pens—and plenty of water that you'll get from the river. You're a far-sighted man, Mr. Lanyard . . . and you're the vice-president in charge of construction."

Lanyard suddenly drew a deep breath. He walked to the map on the wall, studied it a moment, then turned to Slocum.

"Yes," he said, "I'm in charge of construction. And I'm also a substantial stockholder in the railroad."

"More or less," Slocum corrected, "you've pledged most of your stock to cover your losses on the New York Central deal."

"Oh, you know that, too?"

"I know everything about you, Mr. Lanyard."

"Then you also know that my brother-in-law is president of the

road?"

Slocum nodded. "But your brother-in-law didn't lose any money on the New York Central."

"If he had I suppose you would have gone to him."

"N-no, I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"Well, frankly, because I believe your brother-in-law is a man of greater, shall we say, integrity?"

The insolence of that no longer affected Lanyard. He had made up his mind and he was going to play out his hand. He said: "He would have thrown you out of his office. As I almost did."

"Yes, as you *almost* did."

"Slocum," Lanyard said, "I admire your gall. You come in here to bribe me with a piddling fifty thousand dollars on a proposition that's going to make you one of the richest men in the West."

"That's what I thought," Slocum conceded.

"The proposition is worth millions, properly handled."

"Oh, I expect to handle it properly."

"Exactly. So, shall we consider the fifty thousand dollars merely as an— an advance?"

"Advance against what?"

"One half of your deal."

The good humor left Slocum's face and it became as cold as Lanyard's. He said thinly: "One quarter."

It was Lanyard who had the upper hand now. "You've investigated me thoroughly, Slocum. You know that I'm a man of very little integrity. And you know that my brother-in-law is president of this railroad and possesses those qualities that I lack. But he is my brother-in-law and between us we run the M.K. & P. You've got to do business with me or you don't do business. Is it one half . . . or is it— nothing?"

Slocum exhaled heavily. "It's one half."

CHAPTER VI

THERE were ceremonies when the railroad reached Lanyard, Kansas. A committee of citizens met with a group of railroad officials and following the precedent set at Promontory Point in Utah, three years before, a gold-plated spike was driven into a tie.

The M.K. & P. would build west of Lanyard, but not for awhile. There was a little matter of financing that would have to be done in St. Louis, Chicago and New York. More bond issues would have to be floated.

George Cummings, because of the letter "C," was one of the first track layers to be paid off. He walked from the railroad pay-car to the single street of the town of Lanyard and stopping there for a moment, marveled what men could do.

Two months ago, there had been only buffalo grass here. Now there was a town—a row of false-fronted buildings, a few of which had even been painted. And beyond the buildings, stretching out into the prairie, were rows and rows of white painted stakes, indicating building lots.

There was a block of wooden sidewalk, raised from the prairie soil some eight inches. Cummings strolled along this sidewalk, past the Bon Ton Hat Shop, the Eldorado Saloon, the Boston Dry Goods Store, the Lanyard Saloon & Gambling Hall, the New York Bazaar, the Trail Drivers' Saloon, the St. Louis Barber Shop, the Texas Bar, the Cattleman's De Luxe Bar & Gambling Saloon and finally to the Drover's Hotel, a two-story frame building—the biggest in the town.

Here he turned in. There was a tiny lobby, off which was a saloon that ran

the length of the building. Paul Hobson, in Prince Albert coat, was behind the desk. He looked at Cummings and handed him a pen.

Cummings wrote his name on the register. Hobson swung it around and read aloud, "George Cummings." He looked up. "Late of the Pleasanton Detective Agency."

"Late of Track-Layers Gang, Number Nine," Cummings retorted.

"You quit the detective business?"

"Nine weeks ago. . . . How much for the room?"

"Two dollars."

Cummings put two silver dollars on the desk. That was as much as he had earned in a day on the railroad. But he wanted to sleep in a bed.

Hobson handed him a key. "Number Eleven."

Cummings nodded and clumped up the stairs to the second floor. There was a long hall running down the length of the building and a shorter one across the front, so that the rooms were arranged in the shape of a T. Number Eleven was the last room on the left, in the front corridor. It was about six by eight feet in size, had bare, unpainted walls and contained a cot, a porcelain wash bowl and pitcher, a small unpainted stand on which the last two items reposed, and an ordinary unpainted kitchen chair. There was a thin mattress on the cot and a moth-eaten Civil War blanket.

Cummings locked the door on the inside, hung his coat on a nail in the wall and taking off his boots, stretched himself out upon the bed. For a moment he stared at the bare ceiling, then he closed his eyes and let the air out of his lungs.

OUT on the street a gun banged. Cummings winced a little but did not open his eyes. Another gun banged, then another. The last shot was punc-

tuated by a loud scream that brought Cummings up to a sitting position on the bed. He had heard that sound before; it was the wild Confederate yell.

A fusillade of gunfire followed and the Confederate battle cry went up and down the street.

Someone had made a mistake.

There were fourteen Texas trail herds grazing on the plains near Lanyard; they had been awaiting the arrival of the railroad. That was all right, the railroad wanted the business. The mistake was in paying off the railroad men. They were Northerners and the cowboys were from Texas, where the carpetbaggers still controlled. You couldn't mix Northerners, Texans and whiskey.

A dozen cowboys were drinking in the Texas Bar, when a score of railroad men entered. There wasn't room for all at the bar and there was some crowding. A railroad man bumped a cowboy's elbow and the cowboy promptly threw his whiskey into the railroad man's face.

The fight that followed wrecked the interior of the Texas Bar. The railroaders drove the cowboys out upon the street, where the Texas men mounted their horses and galloped them up and down the street. They challenged the railroad men to come out upon the street. A few accepted and were promptly driven back to shelter by a volley of gunfire.

It is hard to put guns away once they have been drawn and the Texas men now amused themselves by shooting out store and saloon windows. They had a lot of powder and lead and quite a lot of whiskey, which they replenished periodically from saloons, without paying for it.

In short, Lanyard was treed.

In his room, George Cummings abandoned the thought of sleep. He put on his boots and leaving his room, clumped down to the lobby. There were a half

dozen men crouched behind the desk, whose thick planking gave protection from stray bullets.

As Cummings came down, Paul Hobson was having an altercation with a heavy-set, mustachioed man. "I've had just about enough of this nonsense, Simmons," he was snarling. "You'll get out there and stop them or you can turn in your badge."

The man called Simmons unpinned his nickeled badge and dropped it on the counter. "The marshal's job is open, Hobson," he said.

Although he had issued an ultimatum and it had been accepted, it wasn't what Hobson wanted. "You can't quit now!" he cried.

"I ain't in the mood for committin' suicide today," Simmons declared.

"He's right, Hobson," said one of the other men behind the desk. "There are fifty Texas men out there."

"If we let those crazy Texas men get the upper hand, they'll take over the town," Hobson protested.

"They've already taken it over," the other man said, "and there ain't a thing we can do about it."

DURING the discussion, there was a lull in the shooting outside and one of the men ventured out from behind the desk. He looked out upon the street through a broken window and suddenly cried out hoarsely,

"That girl. She'll get killed!"

Cummings stepped quickly to the window and saw a girl across the street. She had apparently just stepped out of a dry goods store and was moving toward a buckboard nearby. Even as Cummings looked a gun banged and a bullet kicked up dirt inches from the girl's feet.

She came to a stop and a horseman galloped up. He swung down from his horse and advanced upon the girl.

Sober, there was no greater respecter of women than the Texas man, but these cowboys had been drinking all day. Moreover they were in a fighting mood and they were in the stronghold of what was to them, the enemy. Perhaps their respect of women did not extend to Northern women.

At any rate the cowboy suddenly grabbed the girl and tried to kiss her. She struck him in the face, which merely served to enrage the cowboy and he began wrestling with her.

George Cummings jerked open the door of the hotel, stepped out upon the street and started across at a dead run. He heard the thunder of horses' hooves as he ran, but paid no heed. A bullet whistled past him.

He reached the girl and the cowboy, just as the latter was forcing his unshaven face against the girl's. He caught hold of the cowboy's left arm, jerked him away from the girl and drove his fist into the man's face. The cowboy reeled back and Cummings, stepping in, smashed him again in the face.

The cowboy hit the ground and his gun was knocked from his hand. Mouthing savage oaths he scrambled for the gun, got it and came up to his knees.

Cummings, moving in, was caught. The only thing he could do was hold his hands clear of his sides to indicate that he was unarmed:

"I'll kill you," screamed the cowboy.

"I haven't got a gun," Cummings said quickly.

It would have made no difference to the enraged cowboy, except that another Texas man spurred his horse in between Cummings and the cowboy on the ground.

"Hold it, Ben!" the new arrival cried. "You can't shoot an unarmed

man."

Ben got to his feet, shook his head and stepping around the man on the horse, faced Cummings. "Get yourself a gun," he snarled. "Get yourself a gun and come back."

"We can settle it without guns," Cummings said calmly.

"Nothin' but guns'll finish this," the cowboy cried. "I'll give you ten minutes to get one or by God, I'll come and pistol-whip you."

BY THIS time a dozen cowboys were surrounding the group on the ground. There was hostility on every face. One of the cowboys expressed the general sentiment. "You heard what he said. Get yourself a gun or start runnin'."

Cummings turned away. For a moment he looked into the wide eyes of the girl he had rescued from the drunken cowboy, then he walked past her, across the street to the hotel.

Inside, Paul Hobson caught his arm. "That's Bert Slocum's niece you saved, Cummings!"

"Yeah, and that was Ben Slattery you hit," exclaimed Simmons, the former marshal. "He's lightning with a gun—killed a man day before yesterday."

Hobson looked narrowly at Cummings. "There's a horse behind the hotel."

"Why would I want a horse?"

Grudging admiration came to Hobson's eyes. "You've got guts, Cummings, but you can't go up against a gunfighter."

"It doesn't seem as if I've got much choice in the matter." Cummings looked at the marshal. "You've got a Navy gun. Wonder if I could borrow it."

"You're going to face Slattery?"

Cummings held out his hand and the

former marshal gave him his gun. Cummings hefted it to get the feel of it, spun the cylinder and examined the caps on the nipples. Then he took off his coat and dropping it on the hotel desk, stuck the Navy gun in the waistband of his trousers.

He stepped to the window and looked across the street. More than a score of cowboys were assembled. Ben Slattery was the only one afoot.

Cummings opened the door and stepped out upon the wooden sidewalk. A man across the street yelled: "There he is!"

The distance between Cummings and the cowboys was almost two hundred feet, too far for accurate shooting. Cummings stepped down from the sidewalk into the dust of the street. He started across, walking deliberately, but at a fast pace. His eyes never left the face of Ben Slattery. The cowboy was suddenly alone, although he had not moved. It was the mounted men who had backed off to give Ben all the room he needed.

The distance between the two men narrowed to less than a hundred feet, but it was Cummings alone who walked. Slattery remained by the hitchrail in front of the building that housed the Lanyard Land Company.

Seventy-five feet.

"All right, Slattery," Cummings called. "Make your play."

But Slattery remained as if frozen to the ground. His arms were slightly crooked and his right hand was within two inches of the gun in his holster, whereas Cummings' were hanging loosely at his sides.

Fifty feet and Cummings could see that Slattery's mouth was working nervously. He wasn't sure, but he thought that Slattery's face had broken out in perspiration.

"Wait a minute!" Slattery suddenly

cried. "Wait a —"

And then he went for his gun.

WITHOUT breaking his stride, Cummings whipped out the borrowed Navy gun. He thrust it out before him, thumbed back the hammer and pulled the trigger. The motions were continuous, performed with incredible speed and accuracy; the work of a man who knew what he was doing and had absolute confidence in himself.

Both guns roared, Slattery's as well as Cummings', but it was the latter's which went off first. The bullet struck Slattery dead center in the forehead, knocked him off balance, so that his own gun merely fired into the sky.

Slattery was hurled backward to the ground. Before he touched, Cummings was pointing his gun at the mounted cowboys.

"Was it a fair fight?"

The cowboys were stunned by the unexpected defeat of their champion. They exchanged bewildered glances, looked at the unwavering gun in Cummings' hand.

There was a man in the front of the crowd, the same one who had come between Slattery and Cummings before. He saw the gun muzzle pointed at him. He said quickly: "It was a fair fight," and turning his horse, galloped it off.

A cowboy followed, then another and then the entire lot of them. They rode down the street and out of Lanyard.

Before they had gone very far, Bertram Slocum sprang out of the door of his office. He strode toward Cummings, giving only a brief glance at the dead cowboy.

"I saw it from the window," he said. Then he looked again at Cummings' face and exclaimed. "Cummings! The Pleasanton detective!"

"Former detective," Cummings cor-

rected.

Then he stepped to one side to watch Hobson and the men from the hotel come up. In their van was Simmons. Cummings held out the Navy Colt, butt first.

"Here's your gun, Simmons," he said. "It shoots straight."

"If there's a good man behind it," Simmons replied in a tone of respect.

Cummings walked past him, heading for the hotel. Paul Hobson halted, wheeled. "Cummings, wait a minute, we want to talk to you."

"Later," Cummings called back over his shoulder. "There's some sleeping I've got to finish, first."

CHAPTER VII

IT WAS a few minutes after seven when Cummings came down from his room. It was getting dark outside and in the hotel lobby a pimply-faced youth of eighteen or nineteen was lighting lamps. New glass had been put into the front windows.

The saloon adjoining the lobby was doing a rushing business. The noise from it had awakened Cummings in his room overhead.

Cummings opened the door and stepped out upon the wooden sidewalk. Sounds of revelry came from the saloons, but otherwise Lanyard seemed reasonably peaceful. Nobody was galloping horses up and down the street and there was no shooting.

A sign next door to the hotel caught Cummings' eye: *China Cafe*.

He walked over to the building and peered through the window. The interior seemed clean, although only sparsely patronized for what should have been the dinner hour.

Cummings entered and sat down at a table. A pig-tailed Chinese came padding up. "Got nice beefsteak," he

said smiling.

Cummings nodded. "All right."

A man got up from an adjoining table and crossing, seated himself opposite Cummings. It was Dave Oldham, the lean man who had been a stagecoach passenger that day when Cummings had been found, handcuffed to a dead man.

"That was quite a stunt you pulled this afternoon," Oldham said. He shook his head. "Violence seems to follow you around."

"I imagine you've seen your share of it," Cummings retorted.

Oldham shrugged. "I'll never have a grey beard." He pursed up his lips. "They say you quit the detective business, Cummings."

"Who're 'they'?"

"Everybody in town. Hobson. Slocum."

"This Slocum," Cummings said. "What does he do in this town?"

"He's manager of the Lanyard Land Company which owns the townsite. The girl, for whom you killed Ben Slattery . . . she's Slocum's niece. Evelyn Slocum."

Oldham, looking into Cummings' eyes at that moment, saw that they were oddly masked. He dropped his own eyes to the table.

"This is a new town," he went on. "Nobody knows much about anybody, but there's talk about Slocum being more than just the manager of the land company."

Then he stopped and pushed back his chair. "I'm late."

He got to his feet. "Stop in at the Eldorado if you feel like it." He left the cafe.

Cummings stared unseeingly at the far wall. Evelyn Slocum, the girl who had paid the Pleasanton Detective Agency twenty thousand dollars to get Jim Dancer. And because of her, this

afternoon, Cummings had killed a man.

THE Oriental brought the dinner and Cummings ate, but scarcely tasted the food. He paid for it and leaving the restaurant, stood outside and looked across the street at the narrow building that housed the Lanyard Land Company.

Then, after awhile, he drew a deep breath and walked up the street to the Eldorado Saloon & Gambling Hall. It was one of the biggest places in the block and when Cummings pushed open the swinging doors he saw that it was doing a thriving business.

A bar almost fifty feet long ran down one side of the room. Six bartenders were working behind it. The rest of the room was given over to a few tables and gambling layouts.

Cummings pushed his way through until he came upon Dave Oldham dealing faro. The gambler caught his eye and nodded slightly. Then he inclined his head to the right and Cummings, looking in that direction, saw another old acquaintance: Florence Peel, the girl with the green eyes who had also been on the stage that memorable day.

Her blonde hair was combed high upon her head and in striking contrast to the low-cut green velvet evening gown she was wearing. She was weaving her way in and out among the tables and Cummings watched her for a moment as she came closer.

Then her eyes suddenly caught his and she stopped. She recognized him but her face remained inscrutable.

A cowboy, beside whose table she had stopped, reached out drunkenly to grab her, but she brushed away his hand without even looking and came forward.

"Mr. Cummings," she said.

"Hello."

She smiled impersonally and said

under her breath, "My office is in the rear." Then smiling again, she walked past him, talking to a man here, another there.

Cummings watched a faro game for a moment, then headed aimlessly toward the rear of the room. An anaemic-looking man with a cigarette in his mouth was playing a tinny piano beside a door and gave Cummings a shrewd look as he opened the door and entered a small room, furnished with a roll-top desk, a couple of chairs and a small steel safe.

Cummings pulled up one of the chairs and started to seat himself when the door opened and Florence Peel came in. He got to his feet again.

"It's all right, sit down," she said. She crossed the room to the desk and sat down in the swivel chair.

"You own the Eldorado?" Cummings asked in surprise.

She nodded briefly and leaning back in the chair, studied Cummings thoughtfully. A little frown creased his forehead, but he remained silent, waiting for her to speak.

Then she said suddenly: "You almost gave yourself away this afternoon."

"What?"

"The fight with Ben Slattery. You were too good."

He regarded her steadily. "How can a man be too good in a gun fight? I had to kill him or be killed."

"Detectives aren't gun fighters. You beat Ben Slattery to the draw."

HE SEATED himself and drew a slow breath. "I don't get you."

"I think you do."

He shook his head. "I don't."

"Would you understand if I called you by your real name . . . Jim Dancer?"

Without hesitation, he exclaimed

softly, "Jim Dancer's dead!"

"Is he? When did he die?"

"That time we met down by the Wakarusa. When you told them to cut his hand from mine." And then he looked into her green eyes. "When did you know?"

"Then. Your right hand was handcuffed to his left."

"The others didn't notice that."

"I think Dave Oldham did, although he's never mentioned it. But then Dave's one of us."

"Us?"

"Us," she repeated clearly.

He shook his head slowly. "Oldham's a gambler."

"And so am I," she said quietly. "In a little while you can go out there and watch me deal faro, or poker—or three-card monte."

"And tomorrow morning," he added, "you can walk down the street and people will talk to you. They don't talk to . . . Jim Dancer."

"Jim Dancer!" she exclaimed. "Who's Jim Dancer?"

"A man who rode with Quantrell."

"And who's been riding ever since. Why, Jim Dancer?"

"Because they wouldn't let us come in. Yes, I know all Confederate soldiers were given amnesty. Some of the boys who rode with Quantrell tried to surrender in '65. They were murdered." He shrugged. "So some of us are still riding."

She looked at him narrowly. "Are you here in Lanyard alone?"

He jerked up his head. "I haven't ridden with anyone since the war. No matter what they say."

There was a knock on the door. Florence Peel looked at Dancer, then called: "Yes?"

The door opened and Dave Oldham slipped into the room. He closed the door before he spoke. Then he ad-

dressed Jim Dancer. "Paul Hobson and Bert Slocum want to see you."

"What about?" Florence Peel asked sharply.

"They didn't say."

Dancer got heavily to his feet. "All right."

Dave Oldham left the room as cautiously as he had entered and Dancer started to follow, but Florence called to him. "Mr. Cummings!"

Dancer turned.

Florence Peel said: "That's all I wanted to say—*Mr. Cummings*. Watch yourself with Hobson; he's tricky."

DANCER nodded and left the room.

Out in the gambling hall he discovered Slocum and Hobson seated alone at a table. Hobson had a glass of milk before him. He saw Dancer approaching and signalled.

Dancer pulled out a chair and sat down.

"We've got a proposition to make you," Slocum said bluntly. "But first I want to ask you a few questions." "Yes?"

"Do you have any objections to my telegraphing the Pleasanton Agency?"

Dancer looked carefully at Slocum. "Why?"

"I want to make sure that you really quit the agency."

"You were there at the time."

"I know, but how do I know you didn't retract later? If you're here in Lanyard on detective business there'll be no proposition."

"Why don't you tell me what the proposition is?"

Hobson nodded to Slocum. "Why not?"

Slocum's face showed annoyance, but he shrugged. "We want you to be the marshal of Lanyard."

A little shiver ran through Dancer. In his wildest dreams he had never

thought of himself as a law officer. He looked from Slocum to Hobson, then back to Slocum.

"You're offering me the job of marshal of Lanyard?"

"Yes," said Slocum. "There's no actual city government in Lanyard, but a number of the merchants have chipped in to pay the marshal's salary. However, we're having a city election the day after tomorrow. Simmons' name has been down for marshal but we're going to take it off. After what you did today you won't have any trouble being elected."

Dancer began to shake his head and Hobson exclaimed: "So you *are* still with Pleasanton?"

"I'm not. It isn't that."

"We haven't told you what this job will pay."

"I imagine it'll be as much as the M.K. & P. paid me these past nine weeks."

"You've been working on the railroad?"

"Laying track."

Slocum snorted. "A common laborer, at two dollars a day! We were going to offer you three hundred a month..."

"Which is a lot of money," Hobson offered.

"And three dollars for every arrest you make," Slocum added angrily. "If you're the kind of marshal I think you are, you can make five hundred a month. You can't refuse that kind of money."

Dancer leaned back in his chair and studied the two men for a moment. Then he said slowly: "You can get a lot of good men for five hundred dollars a month."

"Wild Bill Hickok asked for the job," said Slocum. "He's a killer, but only when the breaks are in his favor. John Wesley Hardin, a seventeen-year-old boy backed him down in Abilene.

Nobody would have blamed *you* for backing down this afternoon. But you didn't." Slocum paused. "Besides, the whole West knows by now that you're the man who got Jim Dancer."

Hobson said, "That alone will make those Texas men behave in Lanyard."

Dancer pushed back his chair and got to his feet. "I figured I'd had enough of manhunting when I turned in my badge to Pleasanton. I don't intend to start being a killer, not for pay."

He walked away from the table and left the place. Outside, he walked to the Drovers Hotel and climbed up to his room. He locked the door on the inside and, undressing, went to bed.

But it was hours before he went to sleep. Nor was it the noise from the saloon on the first floor that kept him awake.

CHAPTER VIII

IT WAS the middle of the morning when Dancer came down from his room. The youthful clerk was in attendance behind the desk and he was spared having to talk to Paul Hobson. Outside he walked to the China Cafe and taking a stool at the counter, ordered his breakfast.

He was starting on his eggs when Dave Oldham entered and sat down beside him.

"Up rather early, aren't you?" Dancer asked, to make conversation.

"I don't sleep well," Oldham replied. He gave his order to the waiter, then said: "There's talk that Slocum offered you the marshal's job."

"I refused it."

Oldham was silent awhile, then asked: "Why?"

Dancer knew that Oldham was pressing the matter for reasons other than idle curiosity, so he said, "It's not the kind of work I'd like."

"Because your sympathies are with—" Oldham smiled thinly, "—the underdog?"

Dancer hesitated. "Perhaps."

Oldham nodded thoughtfully. "They will probably hire a man like Wild Bill Hickok or Johnny Tancred, who shoots first and asks afterwards if the man was guilty."

"In other words, you think I ought to take the job."

"I think it'd be a good job for the man who got Jim Dancer."

Dancer finished his eggs and mopped up the remaining yolk with a piece of bread. When he had eaten it, he said: "You've talked to Florence Peel?"

"No," Oldham said quickly. "But I served under Colonel Plumb in Clay and Jackson Counties. Man for man, we got licked by the guerrillas every time. It took me a long time to figure it out. Our men were good soldiers. They were willing to die if they had to, but they wanted to go home again."

"They had homes to go to."

"I saw you fight that Texas man yesterday. He knew he was fast and he'd won some fights. He thought he had the edge. He didn't expect to *be* killed . . . and when he finally figured that out, he went to pieces. Quantrell went into a fight to kill *and* be killed. We to kill *or* be killed. That one little word makes all the difference in the world. We cared, you didn't."

"You may be right," Dancer said slowly, "but sometimes a man gets tired of killing. And there comes a time when he can't run any more."

"Then you've got to compromise," Oldham said. "Florence Peel's father worked the river boats. He took her along with him because a man with a child is above suspicion. Well, his luck ran out when Florence was twelve. She had every reason in the world to hate cards and what goes with them,

but she found out after awhile that no matter how bad a thing is, there's something worse. She was a drudge, worked in the homes of the rich. And always there was a man around because she was poor and a poor girl can't fight a rich man. So at last Florence knew that she had to be rich and she turned back to the one thing she hated more than anything else."

HE STOPPED and began eating. Dancer, who had finished his own breakfast, watched him for awhile. Then he said, "And you, Oldham?"

Oldham shrugged. "I'm a gambler because I was no damn good as a lawyer."

"You know that I'm Jim Dancer?"

"Dancer's dead," said Oldham. "I helped bury him."

"All right, Oldham," Dancer said.

"This is Lanyard, Kansas," Oldham went on. "It's a new town and it's raw, just like all the country west of the Missouri. It's a strong man's country and the weak are going to give up or die. But in a few years the country'll be civilized and the ones who've lasted from the beginning, the strong ones, are going to own it . . . You're as strong as any of them, Cummings."

"Fighting's all I know," Dancer said.

"Fighting and losing. We fought in Missouri and lost and then after it was over I went down to Mexico with Shelby and fought with Maximilian. And after that I went with the French to France and we fought the Prussians and lost again. I've been in a few of these trail towns and I've seen some pretty good marshals; they never stood a chance to win. Sure, I got Ben Slattery yesterday, but what about today and tomorrow when a hundred Texas men come back to get revenge for Slattery? I can't fight them all."

"If someone doesn't," Oldham said,

"you might as well set fire to Lanyard, because this is going to be the roughest, toughest trail town of them all. It's the closest to Texas and all the herds and all the trail drivers and what comes with them will come here."

Dancer was silent for a moment. Then he shook his head slowly. "This man, Slocum—does he own the town?"

"Why, yes. He pretends to be the local manager for the Lanyard Land Company, but he's the land company. He owns the townsite and all the country round about. He's selling it off piece by piece and he isn't taking all his pay in cash. He's got an interest in almost everything in town, the dry goods store, the barber shop, the bank—most of the saloons."

"The Eldorado?"

"No, Florence had enough money to buy her site outright."

"Where does Hobson come in?"

"Slocum's front man. He's going to be the mayor tomorrow. There's talk that Slocum and Hobson were in business together during the war. Selling rotten beef and weevily flour to the Union Army."

Dancer said carefully: "What sort of a woman is Slocum's niece?"

There was just the shade of a pause before Oldham replied. "I don't know her and as far's I know, nobody does." He stopped, then, looking out of the window.

Dancer's eyes followed and he saw Evelyn Slocum walking past on the opposite side of the street.

He put a silver dollar on the counter and rising, said to Oldham, "If I don't see you again—so long."

"You're leaving?" Oldham asked.

"I usually do," Dancer replied and left the restaurant.

OUTSIDE, he saw Evelyn Slocum turning into a shop. He walked

down the wooden sidewalk until he was directly across from the shop and he could read the sign on it: *Carrie Brown, Milliner*.

Beyond a few doors on Dancer's side of the street was a livery stable. He walked down to it and found the liveryman shoeing a black gelding and not enjoying the task, for the horse had spirit.

Dancer watched for awhile until the man finished nailing down the shoe. Then he looked up irascibly, but his annoyance disappeared quickly.

"'Morning, Mr. Cummings," he said.

Dancer nodded. "Good horse. Yours?"

"Until I can find someone to take him off my hands."

"He can run a bit, I imagine?"

"He can run like hell," snorted the liveryman, "but so can every goddam Texas pony and the people in town don't want to rent a horse that don't like to be rid."

"What were you figuring to ask for him?"

The liveryman wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Well, Mr. Cummings, if there's one thing around this barn I got too much of, it's horses. And one thing I ain't got much of, it's money. So what do you figure you'd want to pay for a horse that ain't much good for nothin' but runnin' and buckin'."

Dancer thought a moment. "He's worth more, but I can pay only fifty."

The liveryman shook his head. "I couldn't accept fifty dollars—not unless you took this-here saddle and bridle along with him, which ain't much good, anyway."

He pointed to a saddle and bridle that hung over a stall.

"The saddle alone's worth fifty," Dancer snapped.

"To who? These fool cowboys sell them for ten dollars when they're drunk

and want to get more drunk. The demand sets the price, Mr. Cummings and out here there are more cows and horses and saddles than there are prairie dogs on the prairie. I figure I ought to board the horse for you a month for that price."

"Well," Dancer said, "I want you to keep him here a little while at least." He took out a roll of greenbacks and counted out fifty dollars and then he saw Evelyn Slocum come out of the shop across the street and hurriedly left the livery stable.

On the sidewalk, however, he showed no haste. He crossed the street leisurely and was setting foot on the board sidewalk just as the girl came along.

She started to pass him, then suddenly stopped. "Mr. Cummings, isn't it?" she asked.

"Why, yes."

Her color was rather high. She was embarrassed—but that was all. "I—I didn't thank you yesterday," she said, "for what you did."

"It's all right, Miss Slocum," Dancer said stiffly.

"Oh, but it isn't. You were forced into that terrible—" She shuddered and could not finish the sentence, so shifted to another. "What I meant to say was, well, my uncle suggested I ask you to dinner." And then she suddenly threw up her chin and attempted a wan smile. "Tonight?"

"Why, thank you, ma'am," Dancer said slowly, "but I'm afraid I can't make it. You see, I'm leaving town in an hour."

"Oh!" She squinted a little as if in pain. "I'm sorry. I—I mean, I didn't know. At any rate, I want to thank you." And with that she nodded and walked past him.

DANCER remained standing a moment where he was, then began

walking back toward the hotel, clumping heavily along the wooden planks. His eyes were straight ahead, so that he didn't see Florence Peel, who had just dismounted from a horse in front of the Eldorado. She spoke to him and he took another step before the words penetrated his brain and he wheeled.

"I'm sorry," he apologized.

"Day-dreaming, Mr. Cummings?" Florence Peel asked calmly. She was wearing a green riding habit and carried a quirt.

He grimaced wryly. "I was just thinking about the horse I bought. The liveryman didn't recommend him very strongly."

Florence Peel's eyes were looking past him, down the street. "A filly, Mr. Cummings?"

He turned and followed her eyes. Evelyn Slocum was just disappearing into another store. He said: "No, I haven't found fillies good for the kind of traveling I do."

Her green eyes regarded him inscrutably. "You're riding on?"

"Yes."

She nodded and slapped her quirt into her gloved left hand. "I suppose there are still some hills you haven't crossed?"

"No," he admitted, "there aren't. At least, the other side always looks the same. But what can I do in Lanyard?"

Dave Oldham was crossing the street from the China Cafe. Florence Peel looked at him broodingly and said to Dancer: "I don't know, Mr. Cummings."

Oldham came up and stopped. "Have a good ride?"

"Yes," she said. "Mr. Cummings and I were just discussing work. Have you heard of any *jobs* that are open in Lanyard?"

Oldham looked closely into Dancer's eyes. "No," he said, "I don't know of

a thing."

Florence pointed across the street with her quirt. "Maybe Mr. Slocum knows of something? He's got his fingers in a lot of pies around town. Why don't you go over and talk to him, Mr. Cummings?"

Dancer said: "Perhaps I will."

HE SMILED bleakly at Oldham, nodded to Florence Peel and started across the street. There was a heavy-set man with a black spade beard in the office with Slocum, but the latter saw Dancer through the window and was on his feet when he came in.

"Ah, Cummings," he greeted Dancer. "Shake hands with Carter Bullock." He smiled. "Mr. Bullock's president of the bank."

The banker shook hands with Dancer. "How are you, Mr. Cummings? There's been quite a bit of talk about what you did yesterday. Mr. Slocum was just telling me that he suggested your running for the office of marshal, but that you couldn't accept."

"I've changed my mind," Dancer said.

Slocum blinked quickly. "Darn it, I told Paul not to be in such a hurry." He pulled out his watch, a massive gold stem-winder. "The stage has gone by now. It's carrying a letter to Johnny Tancred."

Dancer suddenly knew disappointment. "That's all right, Mr. Slocum, I should have spoken sooner."

"No," Slocum exclaimed. "I'll send another letter telling Tancred not to come. He was a last resort. The job's yours, Cummings."

Bullock coughed gently. "By all means, Mr. Cummings; you're the sort of man this town needs. A—uh—firm hand, you know . . ."

Slocum reached for his hat that was lying on a chair nearby. "I'd better

run over to the printer's; he was going to start on the ballots. I want your name on it." He smiled thinly. "Better if it's legal, you know."

"Yes, yes," agreed Bullock. "It ought to be legal."

That afternoon the Texas men hurled the town, but Dancer remained inside the hotel, despite a pointed remark or two from Paul Hobson.

"You could take over today, Cummings," Hobson suggested at one point, after a window of the hotel had been smashed by a stray bullet.

Dancer shook his head. "Mr. Slocum likes things legal."

He went to bed early that night, but sleep was almost impossible. Every ten or fifteen minutes a drunken cowboy came out upon the street and emptied his gun at the moon. And generally he let go a few rebel yells to accompany his bullets.

CHAPTER IX

THE next day the voters of Lanyard went to the polls. This was an amazingly simple matter. A large wooden box with a slot in the top was set up on the desk of the Drovers Hotel. It was guarded by Paul Hobson, a clerk from Bullock's bank, and a man named Meeker, who dealt faro in Hobson's gambling hall. Hobson himself handed out the ballots to whatever citizens were in the mood for coming into the hotel and voting. It was Hobson, too, who decided who was a qualified voter, since the oldest resident in point of time was Hobson himself and he had been in Lanyard just a few days over sixty.

When Dancer came down from his room, Hobson extended a ballot to him.

"For voting," he said.

"But I've only been in town two days."

"What of it? You're a resident of Lanyard, aren't you? Not many people have been here a great deal longer."

Dancer examined the ballot. Paul Hobson was down for Mayor, Chandler Leach, Justice of the Peace, Kenneth Vedder, Prosecuting Attorney and George Cummings, City Marshal. There were three other names on the ballot: Bertram Slocum, Martin Bullock and Jason Walcott, who were running for City Council. No space was provided on the ballot for writing in candidates. You either voted for the people on the ballot or you didn't vote.

Dancer borrowed a pencil from Hobson and put an X in front of all the names, including his own. Then he folded the ballot and deposited it in the box.

Hobson nodded in satisfaction. "All right, you're marshal of Lanyard."

"Before the ballots are counted?"

"A mere formality." Hobson reached under the counter and brought out a nicked badge. "Put this on and go down to Keller's store and pick yourself out some guns—whatever you think you'll need."

"A couple of things I have to know," Dancer said. "If I arrest someone, what do I do with them?"

"Why, you throw them in jail."

"There's a jail?"

"Of course there's a jail," exclaimed Hobson. "At the end of the street on this side, the two-story log building."

Dancer nodded. "And after I throw them in jail?"

"Judge Leach and Prosecutor Vedder will try the prisoners every morning in the courtroom over the jail."

"What about a man to guard the prisoners, or am I supposed to do that?"

"I don't see why you can't hire a man for about fifty dollars a month."

"I pay him myself?"

"I guess you'll have to, since there's no provision for such a job. The same goes for a deputy marshal, if you feel you need one. You can hire him, but you'll have to pay his salary yourself." Hobson suddenly smiled wolfishly. "A good man would earn his pay from the fees."

"He probably could," Dancer said, "but I think I'll try the job alone until I see how it goes." He started to turn away, then stopped. "Suppose I step on the wrong toes?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, can I be fired?"

"Who's going to fire you? You're *elected* by the voters." Hobson looked narrowly at Dancer, then added, "Of course, you're responsible to the city council, which includes all the names on this ballot."

"Including myself?"

"You're a member of the city government, so you'll have a vote." Hobson pursed his lips. "There's just one thing you want to keep in mind: it's the business men of Lanyard who pay your salary."

"And a very good salary it is," Dancer said, and left the hotel.

OUTSIDE, he walked to the gun shop of Keller, a few doors up the street. Keller greeted him by name as he entered the store.

"Good morning, Mr. Cummings."

"Good morning. Mr. Hobson suggested I stop in and pick out some guns."

"Certainly, Mr. Cummings. Here's a very fine .44 . . ."

"Have you got a second-hand Navy gun?"

"I've got a dozen of them, but surely you'd rather have something new."

"I wouldn't. No better gun was ever made than the Navy Colt and I'd prefer a gun that's been used."

The gunsmith took a couple of guns out of his showcase. Dancer picked up a .36 Navy Colt, tried the action and spun the cylinder. He hefted it for the grip, twirled it once or twice and examined the nipples to see if they showed any signs of wear.

"That gun's been taken care of," Keller said, as he watched Dancer handle the gun. "This other one would make a mighty fine mate for it."

"One's all I'll need," Dancer replied. "Although I think I'd like to have a good shotgun."

"A shotgun, or a rifle?"

"A shotgun." Dancer pointed to a fowling piece that was hung on the wall. "What sort of a shotgun is that?"

Keller got it down. "It's an English gun, Mr. Cummings. Double-barreled and uses a brass shell." He broke the weapon and handed it to Dancer.

The latter examined it closely. It was a beautiful weapon of fine tempered steel and a carved walnut stock. Keller brought out a boxful of brass shells and Dancer tried a couple in the gun. They slipped in smoothly and when he broke the gun again, after closing it, the shells were thrown out.

"That's all right," Dancer said in satisfaction. "I'll take this and the first Navy gun."

He bought a supply of shotgun shells, a couple of hundred caps for the Navy gun and enough paper cartridges to go with them. He completed his purchases by buying a worn holster and broad belt to hold it.

He wore the holster and gun and carried the shotgun under his arm when he left the shop.

A FEW minutes later he stopped before the town jail. It was a log building, well constructed, of two stories. A staircase on the outside led up to the second floor.

The door on the lower floor was unlocked. Entering, Dancer found a room some eight by twelve feet, which contained a wooden table and three or four chairs. A barred door, standing open, led into another room twelve by twenty feet—the jail. A single iron-barred window lighted up the interior.

He found a couple of large keys in a drawer of the table in the marshal's quarters and put them in his pocket. Leaving the building he climbed the outside stairs and found the door of the second floor also unlocked. He opened it and looked into the courtroom, which was merely a single room covering the entire second floor. A chair and table at one end comprised the furniture.

He closed the door and started down the stairs. A whiskered man, riding a mangy horse, was passing the building. He went twenty or thirty feet, then turned his horse and rode back, reaching the foot of the stairs just as Dancer came down to the street level. He peered into Dancer's face.

"I know you," he said suddenly.

"You'll know me a lot better if you don't behave yourself in this town," Dancer retorted.

"I ain't makin' no trouble," the man on the horse said in a whining voice. "But I do know you from somewheres." He scratched his whiskers. "I can't just remember where."

"When you remember come and tell me," Dancer said sarcastically. "You'll find me right here in the jail."

He walked away from the man and entered the marshal's office where he deposited his shotgun on the table. And then he looked at the table for a long moment and exhaled heavily.

The man out on the street had known him, all right. And Dancer knew the man. His name was Yancey and because of him Dancer had murdered a

man in cold blood . . . Evelyn Slocum's father.

It was nine years since Dancer had seen Yancey, for the guerrilla had deserted during the black days following the Lawrence Massacre. General Ewing had issued his infamous Order No. 11 and his troops, under Colonel Plumb, had burned every home in three and a half Missouri counties; they had killed every head of livestock in that territory and destroyed the crops in the fields so that no guerrillas could exist.

The scorched earth policy had scattered Quantrell's guerrillas; many had deserted and the rest had retreated to Texas where they remained inactive for the rest of the war.

Dancer went to the door, opened it and stepped out upon the street. Yancey was gone, refreshing himself in some saloon, no doubt.

CHAPTER X

DANCER walked down the street and entering the China Cafe, had a breakfast that he scarcely tasted. Leaving the restaurant he stood outside a moment and watched a half dozen Texas cowboys ride up to the Drovers Hotel and, tying their horses to the hitch-rail, go in.

The time of day apparently meant nothing to the wild Texas men; they could drink as well at ten in the morning as ten at night. Then Dancer remembered that the Drovers Hotel, today was the polling place.

He went quickly toward the hotel and even before he entered heard blustering voices. He pushed open the door and stepped into the lobby.

Paul Hobson spied him instantly.

"Here, Marshal!" he called. "Get rid of these men."

The Texas men faced Dancer. "Look—he's got a tin badge," one of them

jeered.

"Get out!" Dancer snapped.

"Who's going to make us?" a second Texas man challenged.

"I am," Dancer said calmly.

The Texas men exchanged glances; they apparently knew that this was the man who had killed Ben Slattery two days ago and they were a little worried, but they had evidently discussed this subject before riding into Lanyard and had probably come on a dare.

Their bluff had now been called and it was up to the Texas men to make the next move.

Only Dancer didn't wait. He took a quick step forward, half turned so that his left side was toward the closest Texas man, then with his right hand whipped out his newly purchased Navy Colt and laid it along the side of the nearest man's head. The man fell like a log but before his body hit the floor, Dancer had leaped back and was covering the others.

"Reach!" he said.

The Texas men were caught flat-footed. They cursed wildly, but as Dancer's eyes narrowed, they began raising their hands.

Dancer signaled to Hobson. "Get their guns."

Hobson and one of the poll workers came out from behind the counter and collected the weapons of the Texas men. Then Dancer holstered his own gun and stepped to one side.

He pointed to the unconscious man on the floor. "Pick him up."

The Texas men shuffled about for a moment, then two of them picked up the buffaloe man, one by the shoulders, the other by the legs.

"Outside," Dancer ordered.

He herded the group out to the street where they waited for further directions. Dancer nodded up the street in the direction of the jail.

Half the population of Lanyard came to doors and windows as the little procession passed and a half dozen men joined in, among them Dave Oldham.

"Well, how's the job?" the gambler asked.

"Six head, at three dollars each," replied Dancer grimly. "Not bad."

IN THE jail, Dancer herded the prisoners into the back room and locked the door on them. As he left, curses followed him. Dancer and Oldham walked silently back to the Eldorado. At the door of the gambling hall, Oldham stopped.

"What made you change your mind?"

Dancer had had ample time to figure out an answer to that; he'd been thinking about it since the day before. "I guess you convinced me that this is my job, Dave."

Oldham looked at him in sudden embarrassment. "A man does the job he's cut out for."

"And you think I'm cut out to be a law man?"

"You've just proved it, haven't you? Simmons wouldn't have tackled those six men—not if he knew that they'd come primed for him."

Up the street, Yancey, the former guerrilla, came out of the China Cafe. He saw Dancer and came over.

"Saw you leadin' those boys to the calaboose," he said. "Nice work." He cocked his head to one side. "Was it Cheyenne we met, Marshal?"

"No," Dancer replied shortly. "I've never been in Cheyenne."

"I have," Oldham said calmly.

Yancey sized up the gambler. "Yeah, I seen you. Dealin' faro in French Jack's, wasn't you?"

". . . The time you got run out of town," Oldham finished.

Yancey scowled at Oldham and trot-

ted off at a shuffling gait.

"Dirty bushwhacker," Oldham muttered.

"He thinks he knows me," Dancer said.

"Does he?"

"Yes. He can't remember from where." He paused a moment, then added: "It'll come to him."

"Run him out of town," Oldham suggested. "It'd be good work, too, for he's a sneak thief and cutthroat."

"He'd still remember."

"Oh, it's like that."

"He was at Lawrence."

Oldham whistled softly.

Either the voters of Lanyard had all voted by noon or Paul Hobson judged that enough votes had been cast to make it legal, for he announced that the polls were closed and that all the candidates had been elected.

An hour later Dancer got his first taste of what it meant to be a politician.

Arch Kerigan rode into town from his camp five miles out on the prairie. He sought out Paul Hobson, the newly-elected mayor of Lanyard, and talked to him for ten minutes. Then the two men went to look for George Cummings, the marshal. They found him standing on the walk outside the barber shop.

"Cummings, this is Walter Kerigan who's got a herd of six thousand Longhorns south of town."

"We've met before," Dancer said quietly.

Kerigan exclaimed. "Of course, you're the Pleasanton man who killed Jim Dancer."

"That's right," Hobson said. "You were on the stage-coach with me that day." He nodded. "Cummings, those men you arrested this morning work for Kerigan."

"That's too bad."

The fat cattleman grunted. "I want

you to turn 'em loose."

Dancer looked at Hobson. "That's not within my province, is it?"

"It's all right. The boys didn't really mean any harm."

"They meant to kill me."

"Oh, say," expostulated Kerigan. "That's pretty strong. They came to town to have a little fun, that's all. You're making too much of this business."

"You've got a judge," Dancer said to Hobson. "If he says turn loose the prisoners, I'll turn them loose."

The mayor of Lanyard made an impatient gesture. "That won't be necessary, Cummings. I've vouched for Mr. Kerigan and it's all right to let his boys out."

Dancer said deliberately: "You told me the procedure was to deliver the prisoners to Judge Leach in the courtroom."

"Ordinarily, yes, but not this time."

"Oh, there are exceptions to the rule?"

Kerigan blustered. "Looks like your marshal doesn't know who's boss around here, Hobson."

Hobson flushed. "This is Cummings' first day on the job, Walter. You'll have to excuse him."

"I'll excuse him as soon as he lets my boys out of his calaboose."

"That'll be when the Judge says to let them out."

"Now look, Cummings," Hobson said ominously, "let's not have trouble right at the start."

"All right, let's not," Dancer replied. "So just get Judge Leach to tell me to let the prisoners go."

Angrily, Hobson turned away and strode to a narrow building between two saloons on which was a sign: *Chandler Leach, Lawyer*. He disappeared inside. Kerigan followed Hobson, but waited outside the building.

DANCER walked to the jail a block away. As he reached it he turned and saw Hobson, Kerigan and a tubby little man coming toward him. He waited in the doorway.

Chandler Leach, Justice of the Peace, was about five feet four inches tall and about two-thirds of that distance wide. He affected a goatee and a black slouch hat.

"Marshal Cummings," he snapped briskly as the trio came up, "what are the charges against these men?"

Dancer looked at Hobson. "What *are* the charges?"

"How should I know?" Hobson said testily.

"You told me to throw them out of your hotel."

"They weren't doing anything."

"Case dismissed," Judge Leach said.

"Lack of evidence."

Dancer went into his office and unlocked the jail door. The man he had buffaloeed was on his feet with his friends. "You're free, boys," Dancer said to them.

They filed out of the jail, each man in turn giving Dancer a dirty look. Outside, they began complaining to Walter Kerigan.

"It's all right, boys," Kerigan soothed. "The marshal got a little uppity. You've had a long trip from Texas and you're entitled to a little fun. Go and enjoy yourselves."

Dancer came out. "Without your guns," he said.

"Are you crazy, Marshal?" Kerigan demanded. "A Texas man isn't dressed without his gun."

"Then he'll have to do his celebrating outside of Lanyard," Dancer said, "for I'm not going to permit the wearing of guns inside the town limits."

Hobson bared his teeth. "You're going too far, Cummings. There's no ordinance against carrying guns."

"I'm making a personal one," Dancer told him. "And I'm going to arrest every man who carries a gun."

"And I'll turn them loose," barked the justice of the peace.

"In that case," Dancer said calmly, "you can hold a new election for a town marshal."

He closed the door of the jail and walked away from the group. But before he had reached the Drovers Hotel Hobson caught up to him.

"Don't be a fool, Cummings," the mayor said. "You're making a mountain out of a molehill."

"I didn't ask for the job," Dancer replied. "You asked me to take it."

"I know," Hobson said. "And personally I agree with you about that gun-toting business. After what happened yesterday such an ordinance might be a good thing. I'll bring it up before the council."

BERT SLOCUM was cutting across the street from the land company office. Dancer saw him coming and stopped.

"What's the trouble?" Slocum asked before he reached the two men.

"Cummings has threatened to quit his job," Hobson said surlily.

"I haven't threatened—I've quit."

Slocum shot an angry glance at Hobson. "What's this about, Paul?"

"Just a misunderstanding, Bert. Cummings arrested some of Walter Kerigan's men and Kerigan got all hot and bothered so I asked Cummings to let the men go. He—uh—insisted he couldn't let them out without an order from Judge Leach."

"What was wrong with that?"

"Nothing." Hobson frowned. "But you know Kerigan. He brings four-five herds up the trail every year and—well, he's an important man. Bert, you know that as well as I."

"True, he spends a lot of money here and the railroad gets a lot of his business, but if we're going to have law, Paul, it's got to be the same law for everyone." Slocum clapped Dancer on the shoulder. "You were quite right, Marshal. Of course in the case of a man like Walter Kerigan, you *could* have taken the men before Judge Leach right away."

He smiled. "Is that all that this is about?"

Hobson hesitated. "He also thinks we ought to pass an ordinance against gun-toting within the town limits."

"An excellent idea. I was going to bring that up at the first meeting of the council. You saw what happened here a couple of days ago. Such a thing couldn't take place if we had such an ordinance and enforced it."

"You're right, Bert, I agree with you."

Slocum beamed at Dancer. "So it's all settled then, eh, Cummings?"

Dancer shrugged. "We'll try it."

"Good. Paul, have you told him about tonight?"

"Clean forgot. There's a party to-night at the hotel, Cummings. Sort of celebration. We expect you to be there."

CHAPTER XI

THE Texas men began coming into town around noon, but Dancer, in view of the promise of a forthcoming ordinance prohibiting the wearing of firearms, decided to forego the disarming of the cowboys until he could do so legally.

There was some carousing during the afternoon, but no shooting. Some of the Texas men left town before dark, but their places were taken by others who had been riding herd during the day.

Dancer had his dinner at the China

Cafe around seven and then went to his office in the jail building and got the shotgun. He left it with the clerk at the Drovers Hotel. The hotel was centrally located and if he needed the gun he could get it more quickly here than from the jail.

He made a leisurely tour of Main Street afterwards, going down one side of the street and returning on the other. He stopped in at two or three saloons and gambling halls and received the hostile stares of a few Texas men.

Dancer didn't like it; things were too quiet. At eight o'clock he stopped in at the hotel and found Paul Hobson freshly shaved and wearing his best Prince Albert.

"You're going to the party, aren't you, Cummings?" Hobson asked.

"I intend to look in."

"Make it before nine; we're going to have a little meeting and I'd like to get started before there's too much drinking."

Hobson left the hotel with Dancer and they walked a half block to a big frame building which had a wooden sign over the door: *Masonic Hall*. The front door was open and the interior brightly lighted. A small orchestra at the rear was tuning up its instruments. Fifteen or twenty people, including several women, were already inside.

"I'll see you later, then," Hobson said as he left Dancer at the door.

Dancer nodded and started down the street. As he was crossing to return on the other side he met Bert Slocum and his niece, Evelyn, just crossing to the side on which the Masonic Hall was situated.

"Evening, Marshal," the land company man greeted Dancer. His niece nodded.

"Good evening," Dancer responded. He finished crossing the street and looked in at the Panhandle Saloon. Two

or three cowboys were having a warm argument with a bartender and Dancer lingered for awhile, but when the argument subsided he left.

As he came opposite the Masonic Hall, music came across the street, the lilting strains of *Sweet Betsy From Pike*. Dancer stopped and listened for a moment, then crossed the street.

There was a small crowd standing outside the hall. All were well dressed indicating that they were business men of the town. One or two greeted Dancer and he responded. The door was partly closed now so that he could get only a glimpse of the interior, but since it was already eight-thirty or later, he opened the door and stepped inside.

THE room was a large one, with a staircase at the far end leading to the second floor. Just inside the front door was a plain table behind which sat a middle-aged man with flowing white mustaches. Behind him was a row of nails upon which hung revolvers and pistols of all sorts.

"Check your gun," he said to Dancer, then recognized him and grinned. "Guess we'll make an exception in your case. And you won't have to buy no ticket neither."

"I don't mind buying a ticket," Dancer said. "How much is it?"

"Dollar, but we can't take money from the marshal. Go in and dance." He winked. "Some mighty nice-looking women folks here."

Dancer had already seen one: Evelyn Slocum. She was dancing with a paunchy middle-aged man whose Prince Albert dragged below his knees. She was smiling but it was a forced smile.

The music stopped and Evelyn's escort said something to her and walking off, left her in the the middle of the floor. Evelyn shook her head and

started for the side of the room, then suddenly changed her course and came toward Dancer.

"Well, Mr. Cummings," she said as she came up. "What do you think of our society? They're all here—the best people of Lanyard."

"They're good people, I imagine," Dancer said.

"Until the men get liquored up." She nodded toward the staircase at the rear. "We're not supposed to know why the men keep going upstairs." She smiled. "Well, I'm keeping you from joining the procession."

He shook his head. "I don't drink."

"You don't—drink? A Southerner . . ."

"I'm not a Southerner."

She seemed surprised. "I wonder what made me think you were?"

At that moment the four-piece orchestra started playing and Evelyn looked at Dancer questioningly. For just a second Dancer stiffened, then he drew a deep breath.

"Are you engaged for this dance, Miss Slocum?" he asked hesitantly.

For answer she smiled and held up her arms. Dancer placed his right hand in the small of her back and took her right hand in his left. He started to lead her awkwardly. Fortunately the piece was a waltz and he could concentrate upon the steps, for it was ten years since he had danced.

They made a half circuit of the room without speaking, then Evelyn broke the silence. "You're an improvement over my last partner."

"Not much, I'm afraid. It's some time since I've danced."

"Well, you *are* a little stiff," Evelyn admitted. "It might help if you relaxed a little."

A fine film of perspiration was already covering Dancer's face. "Would you rather sit it out?" he asked.

"Oh no, I'm enjoying the dance." She looked up at him. "Besides, I've wanted to talk to you ever since the—the other day. You say you're not a Southerner, Mr. Cummings. I was almost certain you were because I can't imagine a—well, a Northerner risking his life to help a woman. What made you do it?"

"I don't think I stopped to think of a reason."

"You acted instinctively?"

DANCER didn't like the trend of the conversation, but did not know how to change it, so remained silent. A little frown of annoyance flitted across Evelyn Slocum's features.

"I understand you're not supposed to question a man about his past out here," she persisted, "but I'm curious about you, Mr. Cummings. Where *are* you from?"

"Hasn't your uncle told you about me?"

"Why, no," she said. "I asked him but he said he knew nothing about you."

Dancer was surprised. "He didn't tell you I was a . . . a detective?"

She exclaimed. "A detective!"

"That was my qualification for the marshal's job."

The music stopped and Dancer released her, but for a moment she stood with her arms half raised, frowning at him. "Is there . . . some reason my uncle hasn't told me about you?"

"I can't think of any. I was a detective for Arthur Pleasanton." He paused to let that sink in, then added: "I'm the man who got Jim Dancer."

She recoiled as suddenly as if he had slapped her. "You . . . you . . . got him? You mean Jim Dancer is *dead*?"

"Didn't you know?" Dancer asked tonelessly.

Around them the couples had left the

floor, but Evelyn Slocum seemed not to have noticed. She stared at Dancer with burning intensity.

"I'm sorry," Dancer said stiffly. "Your uncle probably had a reason for not telling you."

Her lips parted a little and her tongue came out to moisten them. Her eyes remained wide open. Dancer bowed. "Thank you, Miss Slocum, for the dance."

He walked off, heading for the stairs at the rear. It wasn't until he was climbing them that he risked a quick glance back at the dance floor. Evelyn Slocum was walking to the side of the room, her legs carrying her as stiffly as if she were an automaton.

Dancer swore under his breath.

"Ah, Cummings," Hobson called from the top of the stairs. "I was just coming down to see if you'd showed up. We're ready to start."

There was a little room at the top of the stairs where there was a table on which stood a half dozen bottles of various brands of whiskey. Several men were sampling them, but Hobson took Dancer beyond to another room.

Here were gathered around a table the rulers of Lanyard. In addition to Leach, Justice of the Peace, there was Kenneth Vedder, the prosecuting attorney, a lean consumptive-looking man in his early thirties and the members of the city council, Bertram Slocum; Walter Bullock, the banker, and Milo Meeker, who owned the biggest dry goods store in the town. With Hobson, the mayor, and Cummings, the marshal, they comprised the "elected" public officials.

HOBSON introduced Cummings to those members of the council whom he had not yet met, then they seated themselves at the table.

"We might as well get right down to

business," Slocum began, then. "Paul, as mayor of Lanyard, you have the chair."

Hobson pursed his lips. "What'll it be first—money matters?"

Walter Bullock chortled, but found that his humor received no support and quickly sobered. "Money's always interesting," he said lamely.

"If you've got it," Vedder, the prosecuting attorney, said drily.

"We haven't," Slocum said testily. "A few of us have been digging down into our own pockets, but we've got a regular government now and I think we ought to make it self-supporting." He frowned at Vedder. "How much pay d'you figure you ought to have?"

"That depends on how much time I'll have to give to the job."

"I think you'll find that it'll take just about all of your time," Slocum said grimly. "I want Lanyard to be the kind of town where a respectable woman can walk down the street at any time of the day or evening without being in danger of her life, or—"

"Or dignity?" Vedder suggested.

Slocum scowled at the prosecuting attorney. "Or dignity!"

Hobson hastened to say, "A good town means business for all of us. Lanyard's the fastest growing town in Kansas. Another two years and it'll be a city."

"Danged near a city now," declared Judge Leach. "If you don't mind, I been doing a little thinking. I can make my office self-supporting."

"How do you figure that?" Slocum demanded.

"The fines. Marshal Cummings arrested six men this afternoon." He looked furtively at Paul Hobson. "I could have fined those men ten dollars apiece for disorderly conduct."

"Which amount you expected to keep for yourself?" Slocum asked with-

ingly.

"That's the way they do it in a lot of towns," Leach said defensively. "The Justice of the Peace keeps the money he takes in."

"You'll get twenty-five per cent," Slocum snapped. He turned to Vedder. "And another twenty-five per cent goes to you. The other fifty goes to the town treasurer."

Kenneth Vedder smiled mockingly. "And who'll be the treasurer?"

"Bullock. He's used to handling money." Slocum took a slip of paper from a pocket, unfolded it and studied some notes. "Now, there's taxes."

"Taxes!" exclaimed Vedder. "Isn't that a county matter?"

"We haven't got a county government. Lanyard's the county—except for Bruno, that wart on the prairie, up north. But we don't have to consider them. I'm in favor of taxing the business men of this town."

AND then Milo Meeker spoke his first words. "Wal, now, Mr. Slocum," he began.

"Yes?"

"Wal, I dunno, don't they usually tax the property owners afore they do the business men in a town?"

Slocum's eyes glowered angrily. "A man makes money off business, not land."

"Correction," interposed Vedder. "The first money around here is made by the land-owner who sells the property to the business man."

Slocum fixed Vedder with a cold glance. "Seems to me you're making a lot of suggestions, Mr. Vedder."

"Oh, am I?" Vedder said, not at all abashed. "I apologize. I'll let some of you other gentlemen talk. What do you think, Mr. Bullock?"

"Oh, quite," said the banker of Lanyard. "I agree with Mr. Slocum. Don't

you, Mr. Mayor?"

"What Mr. Slocum says makes sense to me," Hobson said. "It's the merchants of this town who'll get the benefit of the—ah—civic improvements and I, for one, expect to pay for them."

"Then it's agreed that we tax the business men of this town?" Slocum said.

"Objection!" cried Vedder.

Slocum banged the table with his fist. "What the hell are you objecting to, Vedder? You don't own any business."

"I'm objecting to what you objected to a moment ago, Mr. Slocum," Vedder said coolly. "Too many *suggestions* by one man. I think we should have a vote."

"A vote on what?" Slocum demanded.

"Your *suggestion* of taxing the businessmen instead of the property owners."

Bertram Slocum leaned back in his chair and looked around at the faces around the table. "All right," he said finally. "What's your vote, Meeker?"

"How much would the tax be?" Meeker asked fidgeting.

"No more'n you could pay."

"I'd like to know how much. I paid quite a lot for my store building and I'd like to get it back."

"You'll get it."

Meeker still did not seem too certain. "Business has been all right so far, but you can't tell what it will be like in winter when the herds stop coming to town."

"Taxes won't be as high in winter."

"How you going to determine just how much a man's to pay—and when? Some businesses are bigger than others. And more profit in them. You take a saloon—or a gambling hall—it's nearly all profit. But I sell merchandise that costs a lot of money. My prices are low."

SLOCUM pounded the table again. "Let's not get into that or we'll be here all night. My idea is that the tax will depend on the size of a man's business, but we can thrash that out later. Let's just decide now who's going to be taxed: the business man or the—the property owner. Mr. Vedder thinks we ought to vote on it. All right, let's vote."

"I vote that *both* the property owner and business man should be taxed," Vedder said promptly, and received a glare from Slocum.

"Hobson?" snapped Slocum.

"The business man."

"Meeker?"

Meeker swallowed hard. "I vote like Mr. Vedder."

"All right, what about you, Bullock?"

"I cast my vote with yours, Bert."

"That leaves the judge and the marshal."

Judge Leach cleared his throat. "I'm afraid, Mr. Slocum, that I'll have to agree with Vedder. The property owner—"

"All right, you've said it," Slocum cut in. "That makes it three to three, with the marshal yet to vote."

"I know very little about city governments," Dancer said, "but what the prosecutor said seems to make sense—those who get the benefit of a government should pay for it and it strikes me that the property owner gets as much benefit as the business man. . . ."

"Very well," Slocum conceded, "the majority votes that the property owner pays a tax along with the business man. That takes care of the city finances. We'll work out the details later. Now, Marshal, you suggested a special ordinance prohibiting the carrying of guns in Lanyard. Suppose we passed such an ordinance? Do you think you could enforce it?"

"I could try."

"You can't be on duty day and night, though. I think you ought to have a deputy marshal."

Chandler Leach suddenly brightened. "A town this size really needs two law officers and three mightn't be a bad idea."

"Two ought to do it, for the time," Slocum said. "I propose that the council employ a deputy marshal to assist the marshal, at—say, a hundred dollars a month. And a percentage of the fees would only be fair, wouldn't it?"

Dancer saw that he was being penalized for having voted against Slocum on the other proposition and he could foretell the vote on this new issue: the more peace officers in the town, the more arrests . . . and cases brought before Judge Leach—at twenty-five per cent.

CHAPTER XII

THE vote was a unanimous one, for Dancer surprised the others by voting in favor of it. Kenneth Vedder hesitated over his own vote, but when Dancer announced his own decision, Vedder went along.

Two or three minor matters were brought up by Slocum and disposed of, then Slocum pushed back his chair. "I guess we've about covered everything now. Shall we join the ladies downstairs?"

They filed out of the room, but Vedder catching Dancer's eye, held him back. Then, when the others had gone out, Vedder held out his hand.

"Didn't really get a chance to say hello before," the prosecutor said.

Dancer smiled. "Hello."

"I'm glad we're to be friends," Vedder said, "for it looks like you and I are going to be on the same side in a lot of things." He grinned. "We forgot to give a vote of thanks to the may-

or for the way he conducted the meeting."

"The mayor?"

"Isn't Slocum the mayor?" Vedder asked innocently.

Dancer chuckled. "Well, it's his town, isn't it?"

"That's why I thought he ought to pay for its upkeep," replied Vedder.

They left the room. Judge Leach was in the ante-room with a bottle tilted over his mouth, but the other members of the city council had gone downstairs.

Vedder indicated the liquor. "A snort, Marshal?"

Dancer shook his head.

"Guess I'll have a short one," Vedder said.

Dancer left him with his colleague, the judge, and proceeded on down the stairs. At the foot of the stairs he stopped and surveyed the dance floor. It was considerably more crowded than it had been before and it seemed to Dancer that the character of some of the guests had changed.

He got it after a moment. Some Texas men had filtered in. Two or three were even dancing with the wives and daughters of business men. And the latter were not exactly showing approval. Several were gathered in one corner in a spirited huddle. Bert Slocum, one of the group, spied Dancer and started across the room.

Dancer, seeing him coming, tried to ease along the far side of the room, but was blocked by the dancers so that Slocum caught up to him.

"Look here, Cummings," Slocum said angrily, "I want you to get rid of these Texas men."

"Sure, replied Dancer, "if you'll point them out."

"I don't have to point them out," snapped Slocum. "You can pick them out by their clothes."

"Oh," said Dancer, "I get it. The ones wearing old clothes are Texas men." He suddenly reached into the dancers and caught hold of a man wearing a suit of rusty broadcloth. "Here, you, Mr. Slocum says to get out of here."

SLOCUM lunged forward and grabbed Dancer's arm. "Not him," he cried. "He owns the Lanyard Hardware Store. Excuse it, Chester . . ." He stabbed his forefinger at a man in soiled levis and high-heeled boots, who was dancing nearby. "There's one."

The cowboy saw Slocum's pointing finger and released his partner. "You pointin' at me?" he demanded truculently.

"Throw him out," Slocum ordered Dancer.

Dancer went up to the cowboy. "This is a private party, Mister."

"Who says so?"

"I do."

"And who the hell do you think you are?"

"I'm the man who's going to break your thick skull if you don't get out of here quietly," Dancer said.

The Texas man started to bluster but Dancer grabbed his arm and twisted it around behind the man's back in a savage hammerlock. He propelled the man through the dancers toward the door and was shoving him out of the hall when he heard pounding footsteps behind him. He released the man and whirling, faced three charging cowboys.

Dancer stepped quickly to one side and dropped his hand to the butt of his gun. That brought up the cowboys, for they were all unarmed.

"Out," Dancer said coldly.

"It's a Yankee trick," one of the men snarled. "We have to check our guns and they keep theirs."

"I'm the marshal," Dancer said.

"There's a law against carrying guns in Lanyard."

"Since when?"

"Since ten minutes ago, when the city council passed it."

"One of the cowboys suddenly winked at his friends. "Okay, we're leaving town now. Give us our guns." The last sentence was spoken to the white-mustached custodian of the checked guns.

Dancer blocked the table of the gun checker. "You'll get your guns tomorrow."

"We ain't comin' into town tomorrow."

"Then you'll have to wait until you do come in."

"Oh, yeah?" sneered one of the Texas men. He made a sudden lunge for Dancer—and reeled back as Dancer smashed him in the face with the barrel of his Navy gun.

"Now you go to jail," Dancer said.

The man at the door, the one whom Dancer had brought out from the dance floor, ducked outside. But the other three men were caught and Dancer herded them out of the Masonic Hall and up the street to the jail where he locked them in.

Leaving the jail he returned to the Masonic Hall, but found that whatever other Texas men had been there had left. And quite a few of the townspeople were leaving.

Dancer caught a glimpse of Evelyn Slocum with her hat on, but she either did not see him or saw him and kept her eyes averted. He left the hall and walked down the street to the Eldorado, where he turned in.

THE place was doing a land office business and Dancer saw Florence Peel herself presiding over a faro table. She did not see him as he approached the table.

"Place your bets, gentlemen," she was droning. "The house pays Number 7—eighty dollars to the man with the hat on."

She manipulated the cards in the box. "The king wins and the deuce loses."

She looked up then and met Dancer's eyes. "Are you playing, Marshal?" she asked mockingly.

"Not during working hours," he retorted.

"A drink on the house?"

"Yes."

She shoved the card case toward the house man beside her, and came around the table. Touching his arm lightly she led the way through the crowds to the bar.

"Bourbon, Marshal?" she asked.

"A bottle of beer."

"You fight on beer?"

He grinned. "I do my best killing on water. I've just come from a meeting of the city council—that's why I need the beer."

"As bad as that?"

"You'll find out when you get your tax bill."

"What taxes?"

"City taxes. That's what the meeting was about." He shook his head. "You can't run a government without taxes, you know."

"Then let Bert Slocum pay taxes. He owns everything around here."

"Oh, he's going to pay taxes. We out-voted him on that—four to three."

"Who voted against him?"

"The prosecutor, the judge, Milo Meeker and myself."

Florence's lips curled contemptuously. "And Bullock and Hobson voted with him? . . . How much are these taxes going to be?"

"It wasn't decided. I have a hunch Slocum's going to decide that without bringing it up in another meeting."

"And then who's going to do the collecting?"

"Not the marshal of Lanyard. Oh—that reminds me, there's going to be an assistant marshal."

Dave Oldham came up and dropped his hand on Dancer's shoulder. "Evening, Marshal. How long are you supposed to be on duty?"

"Don't know's there are any special hours. Why?"

"Thought you'd be turning in by now."

"What's up?"

Oldham shook his head. "Nothing. Just thought you'd be tired along about now."

"Don't try being subtle, Dave," exclaimed Florence.

Oldham said in a low voice: "Just overheard something. They're getting together a crew to break some of their friends out of jail." He smiled and signaled to a bartender. The man brought a bottle of whiskey and a small glass. Oldham filled it and tossed off the whiskey in a single gulp.

"What's the difference, Marshal? The judge let six of them go this morning."

"I can't help that," Dancer said. "But you're right, I can't stay up all night. Think I'll turn in." He nodded to Florence, smiled at Oldham and left the bar.

HE MOVED leisurely toward the door, but once through it, walked swiftly toward the Drovers Hotel. The pimply-faced night clerk was dozing in an armchair behind the desk and Dancer got his shotgun without awakening him.

Leaving the hotel he crossed the street and strode quickly toward the jail. By striking a couple of matches inside he found a lamp, which he lighted and by its light examined the

front door. It was a sturdy one, made of planks two inches thick, and would withstand any assault less than a battering ram. But looking about the room Dancer saw only one window and that was on the side. The architect of the building had made an error there. If he locked the door on the side, Dancer would be a prisoner himself—until the door was broken down and then the fighting would be at extremely close quarters.

He shook his head and stepped out of the jail. He walked to the edge of the building, noted the stairs going to the second floor and returning to the front door, pulled it shut and locked it with the key.

Then he ran lightly up the stairs and unlocked the courtroom door. He stepped through the door and closed it to within two or three inches. He leaned the shotgun against the wall and seated himself beside it.

For a mob, the Texas men were pretty quiet. Dancer, his ears cocked, had expected to hear loud talking and shouting as they approached the jail building, but the first he was aware of their presence was when the doorknob was rattled down below.

A voice called: "Hey, Marshal, there's a man been hurt at the Texas Bar."

There was of course no reply from inside the jail. Upstairs, Dancer got to his feet and picked up the shotgun.

Down below and around in front, a Texas man banged on the door with his fist. "Open up, Marshal!"

After that wrangling began among the Texas men. Dancer swung open the courtroom door and stepped cautiously out upon the stair platform. Boots pounded and a man came running around the corner. He was headed for the rear of the building.

"Looking for something?" Dancer

called down.

The man cried out and skidded to an abrupt halt. His eyes darted about on the ground for a moment before they turned upwards and picked out Dancer, who was silhouetted in the moonlight.

"It's the Marshal!" the Texas man cried out hoarsely.

By that time there was a rush from the front of the building. Eight or ten Texas men pounded around the corner of the building in a solid body and like their vanguard came to a halt and searched for the whereabouts of their enemy.

Dancer called down from the head of the stairs: "I've got a double-barreled scattergun here."

A man shouted, "We want those prisoners!"

Moonlight gleamed on a revolver down below. "Drop that gun!" a man cried.

"I've got my finger on the trigger," Dancer said calmly. "Even if you get me, half of you'll die."

THE truth of that was apparent to the Texas men, for the range was not more than fifteen or sixteen feet. It was merely a matter of nerve and the men on the ground had seen his stand against Ben Slattery a few days ago when Dancer had gone against almost certain death.

A couple of the Texas men began edging backwards so that they could spring around the edge of the building for protection, but Dancer saw them move.

"Stand still," he warned.

He started down the staircase, taking each step with deliberate care. When he was halfway down so that he stood about six feet above the men, he stopped.

"All right now," he said, "start un-

loading your hardware."

From the middle of the street a cool voice called: "Do what he says!"

And they obeyed, nine Texas men who had been a mob only a few minutes ago. Dave Oldham moved forward from the gloom of the street with a derringer in his left hand and a full-sized six-gun in his right.

Dancer came down the rest of the stairs then, and moving up beside Oldham, handed him the key to the jail. "Unlock the door, Dave."

A couple of minutes later the jail held an even dozen prisoners. At twenty-five per cent of ten dollars a head, Judge Chandler Leach would make a nice profit on his next day's work.

When the Texas men were locked up, Dancer and Oldham stepped out upon the street. "Thanks, Dave," Dancer said.

"I didn't do much," Oldham replied. "You had the situation well in hand before I showed up." He paused. "As a matter of fact, it was Florence who suggested I go and see if you'd really gone to sleep."

Dancer was silent for a moment. Then he said: "I'm going to bunk down here tonight."

"I'll keep you company."

That won't be necessary. I doubt if they'll try anything else tonight."

Oldham hesitated, then nodded. He walked off into the night. Dancer watched him until he was out of sight, then locking the door of the jail, climbed up to the courtroom. He locked that door on the inside and stretching out on the floor, was asleep inside of two minutes.

CHAPTER XIII

JUDGE CHANDLER LEACH, accompanied by the prosecutor, showed

up in the courtroom a few minutes after eight.

"Hear you got some prisoners, Marshal," he said, with satisfaction in his tone.

"An even dozen."

The judge rubbed his hands together. "Fine, fine. Bring them up, please."

Dancer went down to the jail and unlocked the inner door. "All right, boys," he said, "the judge is ready for you."

The Texas men filed out sullenly. Out on the street a group of Lanyard residents had gathered and watched the prisoners climb up to the courtroom. They followed Dancer up the stairs.

Judge Leach surveyed the prisoners. "Well, Marshal, what's the charge?"

Dancer picked out the three men he had arrested first. "Disorderly conduct for these three."

Vedder said: "What'd they do?"

"They were at the dance last night and Mr. Slocum wanted me to throw them out. I asked them to leave and then—well, there was some argument . . ."

"The charge is disorderly conduct and resisting arrest, Your Honor," Vedder said.

"Good, good!" exclaimed Judge Leach, then caught himself. "How do you plead—guilty or not guilty?"

The three men looked at each other, then all said, simultaneously, "Not guilty."

"Guilty!" snapped Judge Leach. "And you're fined twenty-five dollars each."

"You go to hell!" cried one of the Texas men.

"Twenty-five dollars for contempt of court," snapped Judge Leach. "That's fifty dollars for you and if you say another word it'll be another twenty-five."

The Texas man glared at Judge Leach, but swallowed hard. "I haven't got fifty dollars."

"Then you'll go to jail."

The three sentenced prisoners got together in a huddle and produced some money. "We got sixty-two dollars," one of them announced.

"Try again," the judge instructed.

This time the trio went into a huddle with the other nine men and the hundred dollars was raised. Judge Leach accepted it and thrust the money in a pocket. Then he nodded to Dancer.

"Next case."

Dancer indicated the nine men. "These men tried to break the other three out of jail."

"Jail breaking, eh? That's a serious charge. Guilty or not guilty?"

"Not guilty," cried a couple of the men.

Leach surveyed the prisoners coldly. "I find you guilty and fine you twenty-five dollars apiece."

Howls of rage went up and there was considerable calling of names, but when the contempt of charges had all been slapped on, Leach was holding out for a total of four hundred dollars from the nine men.

They scraped together one hundred and eighty dollars of the amount. Judge Leach singled out four of the men, along with the three whose cases had been disposed of first. "You men can go; the others stay here until the fines are all paid."

OUTSIDE, boots pounded the stairs and Paul Hobson and Walter Kerigan came into the courtroom.

"Just a minute, Judge," cried Kerigan. "I've hired an attorney for these men—he'll be here in a minute."

"Too late; I've already sentenced them."

"You can unsentence them," roared Kerigan.

The judge pounded the table with his fist. "Mr. Kerigan, I must warn you,

you're liable to be in contempt of court. I've already had to fine several of these men for that very thing."

A stocky, middle-aged man came into the room. "Your Honor," he said, "I've been retained to defend these men . . ."

"You're too late, Counsellor," said the judge. "But you're in time to advise Mr. Kerigan to make up the balance of the fines—"

"I'll see you in hell first," roared Kerigan.

Leach pounded the table. "Fifty dollars for contempt of court!"

Kerigan began to sputter. "Why, you, goddam two-bit imitation. . ."

"One hundred dollars!" thundered Judge Leach.

Kerigan's lawyer grabbed his arm. On the other side Paul Hobson took hold of him and between them they propelled Kerigan out of the courtroom, out upon the stairs. Then, after a couple of moments, Hobson returned, his face flushed.

"What's the total amount, Judge?" he asked.

"It was two-twenty and I fined him one hundred for contempt of court—three-twenty all told."

Hobson took out a large roll of bills and counted out the money.

"All right," Leach said to the prisoners, "you can all go now."

They left with a good deal of mumbling and muttering. As soon as the door was closed, Hobson strode to the judge's table. "Now look here, Leach, you've gone too far!"

"Have I?" Leach asked grimly.

"Kerigan is the biggest cattleman in the Texas Panhandle," Hobson cried. "He's brought two herds to Lanyard already and he'll bring five a year."

"Then it's a good thing he learns about law and order," Leach snapped.

Hobson whirled on Charles Vedder.

"That twenty-five per cent stuff was a mistake. You two have cooked this up between you."

"Oh, no, we haven't," retorted Vedder. "This is the judge's own idea." He chuckled. "Although it's not a bad one, if you ask me. The town's cut is three hundred."

Hobson choked down more angry words and fled the courtroom.

THE judge took out all the money he had collected in fines. "Six hundred dollars," he said gleefully. "Not bad, not bad . . . That's one hundred and fifty for me, the same for you, Prosecutor." He was sorting out the money. Vedder watched him in complete astonishment.

"Aren't you going to turn it over to the city?"

"What for? The agreement was twenty-five per cent to you and me, so why shouldn't we take it when we get it? And you, Marshal, you get three dollars per arrest. Here's your thirty-six dollars. Keep up the good work and we'll make ourselves a nice little pile here."

"I think you'd better turn mine over to the city treasurer," Dancer said. "I'd prefer to collect it from him all at one time . . ."

"That goes for me, Judge," Vedder said.

Leach shrugged. "Just as you say, but I'm taking mine now."

Dancer left the courtroom, but before he had reached the ground, Vedder was coming down the stairs after him.

"I'll walk with you, Marshal," Vedder called.

They walked side by side a moment, then Vedder said, "Well, what do you think of justice in Lanyard?"

"About the same as yesterday."

Vedder grinned. "Yes, but Leach is going to be on our side—he's so hungry

for money he'll defy even Bert Slocum."

"Do you think Slocum will take it?"

"Slocum's in a pretty good spot. He owns the town site and Lanyard is a hundred miles closer to Texas than any point on the railroad; that's a saving of ten days' travel with a herd and the drovers will come here whether or not they like the town."

"Yes, but Slocum's money comes from selling business lots. And merchants do a better business if the town is wide open. So by tightening up Slocum hurts his own interests."

"That's the part I'm wondering about," Vedder said. "Slocum's got some angles I haven't figured out. I'm convinced that he owns the Drovers Hotel and most of the bank and he's got some sort of influence with the railroad."

"Are you guessing about that?" Dancer asked. "Or do you know?"

"Look at the map," Vedder replied. "The road was originally surveyed to go through Bruno, eight miles north of here, but suddenly the route was changed—the road made a neat little curve to run through Slocum's prairie lands. It cost the railroad quite a bit of money to do Slocum that little favor."

"Maybe Slocum owns part of the railroad?"

Vedder shook his head. "I don't think Slocum's that rich." Then he added, "Although he'll be before Lanyard is much older."

At the China Cafe Vedder left Dancer and the latter entered and had his breakfast. Leaving the restaurant he went to the Drovers Hotel.

As he climbed the stairs to go to his room, a big man who had been sitting in the lobby his face concealed by an open newspaper, folded the paper and followed.

DANCER unlocked his door on the second floor and entered, closed it. He was starting to take off his coat when there was a light tap on the door.

"Yes?" Dancer called. He dropped his right hand down to the butt of his gun.

The door opened and the big man stepped into the room. He was well over six feet in height and weighed more than two hundred pounds. He wore a neat suit of heavy black serge.

Dancer stared at the man in utter astonishment.

"My name is Harrison," the big man said quickly. "Stanley Harrison."

Dancer stepped forward and gripped the big man's hand and at the same time reached past him with his free hand and closed the door.

"It's been a long time," Dancer said.

"So it has," Harrison replied. "I saw you last night at the Eldorado. I couldn't believe it was you because we were so sure that you were dead."

"I took the Pleasanton man's name."

"Isn't that risky?"

"It was the only thing I could do at the time. I even rode into the Kansas City office where Cummings wasn't known and resigned his job for him, so there wouldn't be so much mystery if he disappeared."

"Being marshal of a boom town isn't such a good way of disappearing."

"I was forced into this job." Dancer motioned to the chair. "Sit down."

Harrison seated himself on the chair and Dancer sat down on the edge of the bed. "Yancey's here in town," Dancer went on.

"Yancey?"

"He was with us for a few months."

"Oh, yes, I recall him now." The big man's nose wrinkled distastefully. "Scum!"

"He hasn't placed me yet."

Harrison looked at Dancer thought-

fully for a moment. "What about this marshal job, Jim?"

"It's a strange story."

"Feel like telling it?"

"It goes back to Lawrence."

Harrison grimaced. "You had some trouble with Quantrell there, I seem to recall."

Dancer nodded. "There was a name on the list—Theodore Slocum. Yancey was dragging him out of the house by the heels and Slocum's daughter, a fourteen- or fifteen-year-old girl, was trying to help her father. Yancey slapped her around and I interfered. He ran off for Quantrell and came back with him—and Thailkill and Todd. Quantrell ordered me to shoot Slocum. And—well, I did."

He was silent a moment and Harrison prodded gently: "I don't think any of us feel very proud at all about Lawrence."

"There's a little more to the story than that. Either Yancey or Quantrell called me by name and the girl never forgot it. About two years ago the Pleasanton Agency got on my trail. George Cummings followed me to the Northwest to California and then Mexico and back here to Kansas. He was a good man and—he caught up with me."

"Pleasanton's a bloodhound," said Harrison. "He may get us all one day." His eyes narrowed suddenly. "You think this young Slocum girl got Pleasanton after you?"

"Yes. She spent twenty thousand dollars with Pleasanton. Her uncle was in the Kansas City office when I came in to resign as George Cummings. His name is Bertram Slocum."

Harrison exclaimed: "The man who owns this town!" Then he whistled softly. "And he knows you as George Cummings, the former Pleasanton man!"

(Continued on page 158)

A PIECE *of* GOD'S



There was a sudden roar of gunfire in the night and the sound of running feet

PRAIRIE *by Paul W. Fairman*

**There's nothing like the open prairie
and it doesn't belong to any man, really. So
it's sacrilege to spill human blood on it . . .**



THERE was a high-noon sun burning down on Big Forks and any shade along the dusty main street was at a premium. Pop Dane had the choicest spot—the easy chair on the porch of his two-story hotel, and Missouri Calhoun ran him a close second. Missouri sat at Pop's feet on the edge of the porch, his own black boots planted firmly in the yellow, western-plains dust.

Pop squinted out along the East Trail, a vague ribbon that faded around Cottonwood Bend, reappeared, and meandered up into the foothills.

"Wagon comin' 'round the bend," Pop observed, casually.

Missouri Calhoun didn't even glance up. He continued his close study of the dust formations at his boot tips. He said, "Hell," very softly, and it was obvious that he referred to something in his own mind—not the wagon.

Pop leaned forward and squinted even harder at the back of Missouri's clean-shaven neck. "You know what I'd do?" he asked. "I'd jist plain hit the trail. Why hang around here and git your head blown off? It ain't no disgrace to light out when a man like Torrence has declared himself agin' you."

Calhoun received the advice in silence, appeared to be giving it careful consideration.

"You ain't a gunman," Pop went on. "You don't claim to be."

Missouri Calhoun should have been hot and uncomfortable, dressed as he was. He should have been wet and wilted in his tight, black trousers, black, split-tail coat, heavy Stetson and gleaming white cravat. Yet he seemed as cool as a mountain stream. And too, he should have looked like an undertaker in all that somber raiment. But he could have been spotted instantly for exactly what he was—a pale-

skinned, long-fingered gambler.

He raised his head a trifle, shook it slowly:

"No, Pop. You're wrong about that. A man has to face things where he finds them. Running is no good. It does something to you."

"All the same, I'd rather be a live runner than a dead stayer," Pop maintained, stoutly.

"Obviously it's better to be alive than dead, but you've got to stand by your principles."

"Principles?" Pop asked as though they were something of which he'd heard only vaguely.

"Precisely. I'm a gambler, of course, but I'm a square gambler. I've never bottom-dealt in my life. I've taken my cards along with the rest and played them strictly table-top."

"But you always win," Pop observed. It was not meant nor taken as an insult, because Pop's philosophies were plain and to the point. You stuck with a friend and you stuck it into an enemy. He always liked a good double-cross until he could switch his admiration to a better one.

"No," Missouri corrected. "I don't always win. I just win more times than I lose. I happen to know my business. After all, wouldn't it be strange if I could be beaten at my own game by cattlemen and cow pokes who regard it merely as a pastime?"

"That could be, but you *did* take three thousand dollars away from Torrence in a poker game and he swears you cold-decked him."

"Which wasn't true. Torrence is a hard loser and he feels he must save face by killing me."

"Which he'da done right there at the table last night if you hadn't got that little vest pocket pop-gun o' yours trained on his wish bone in time."

Pop lowered his voice and asked,

confidentially, "Did you really beat him to the draw?"

"Of course not. I merely read his eyes. I'd have no more chance with Torrence on an even draw than I'd have with a bolt of lightning."

Pop sighed. "All the same, he's kind of a coward—Torrence. He'd just as like plug you in the back some dark night. I think you ought to skeedaddle."

"No. I'll play the hand out."

"Yep, right out to Boot Hill."

Missouri didn't answer. The wagon Pop had seen coming around Cottonwood Bend had just pulled up in front of the hotel. Pop and Missouri eyed the newcomers with frank interest.

THEY were young—too young, Missouri thought—to be facing the west alone. The boy looked to be about twenty-two or three, and the girl a trifle younger. Their identical coloring—golden blonde—and their marked resemblance, set them down as brother and sister. Missouri and Pop watched as the boy stepped on the high wagon wheel and jumped to the ground. He grinned engagingly and said, "Howdy, pardners."

Pop stared. Missouri returned the greeting with a flicker of amusement in his dark eyes. "Howdy, stranger."

"I'm Wes Taylor," the boy said. "This is Vonnie, my sister."

Pop sat like a rock, but from ignorance rather than boorishness. Missouri Calhoun stood up and removed his Stetson. "I'm glad to meet you, Miss Taylor," he said. Then he sat down again and turned his attention to the youth.

The boy might have fooled a less experienced eye, but careful observation was a part of Calhoun's trade. He was not misled by the high-heeled boots, the leather chaps, the ten-gallon hat, nor

the two guns hanging in tooled leather holsters.

"Chicago, St. Louis, or New York?" Missouri asked.

The boy's handsome face reddened. He glanced up at his sister and got a quick smile with a lot of meaning behind it. Then he grinned and dropped down onto the porch beside Missouri.

"Chicago," he admitted. "Guess we must look like city slickers for shore. Must not have enough dirt on the clothes yit."

"How'd you happen to head in this direction?" Pop Dane asked. It was the first time he'd spoken.

"Well, Dad died and Vonnie and me always hated the city, pardner. We kind of hankered fer the open spaces—a section o' God's prairie would jist sort o' fit us. So we bartered fer this rig in St. Louie and come a'trekkin' west."

Pop Dane blinked. Missouri's amusement deepened. He caught the look of annoyance in Vonnie Taylor's blue eyes.

"And how're you-all a-plannin' to git yore hooks on this-here-now section?" Missouri asked, elaborately.

"A-trekkin'," Pop Dane muttered to himself. "How in tarnation do you go about doin' that?"

The boy was unabashed. "I'm a vetinary," he announced, confidently. "Took a course in it afore we left the city. Figgered a man could always make a livin' fixin' up critters out here. There's shore plenty of 'em."

"Yes, we've got plenty of critters," Missouri admitted.

"Mushin'—I've heard o' that," Pop Dane grunted. "They do that in Alaska, but—"

Wes Taylor's mind had slanted off in another direction. He kicked at the dust with a toe and said:

"Tell you why we stopped. We're—we're kind o' broke and I figgered may-

be we could float a little loan until we sell the rig and get—git a little money rollin' in."

Pop Dane squinted at the two heavy bays. "Nice horses," he conceded.

"Shore are, but I'd rather use one o' these for security. Wuth two hundred apiece." He flipped one of the .45s from its holster and handed it to Missouri.

MISSOURI held the gun lightly, almost reverently. All his life he'd liked fine things, and this was the most beautiful gun he'd ever seen. Its entire metal surface was silver plated, and had been polished to a high sheen. The grips were of old ivory, lovingly carved by a master hand. "At two hundred, this was a bargain," Missouri said.

"And I know how to use it too," Wes Taylor said. The braggadocio in his voice was apparent, but not grating. It was the bragging of a small boy who was very proud of an achievement. Missouri felt no resentment, smiled tolerantly.

"I practiced gun slingin' 'fore I left the city," Taylor went on. "Bet you a thousand bucks I can hit a silver dollar on a snap shot at fifty yards."

"I'd like to see that, young un," Pop Dane said. But Missouri Calhoun showed no interest. He turned the gun over in his pale hands.

"It should certainly be good for the loan of a few dollars," he observed. "After all, we can't let newcomers starve to death. That wouldn't be western hospitality."

He drew a handful of coins from his pocket and selected several gold pieces. "Would seventy-five carry you for a while?"

"I'll give you a receipt," Taylor said, gratefully.

"Never mind that," Missouri said. "T'd probably just lose it." He ex-

tended the gun. "And you'd better hold this for me. You might get lopsided, walking around with only one."

"Well—wal, that's mighty white o' you, pardner. I don't—

The boy hesitated, then turned and helped his sister down from the wagon. The girl dropped lightly to the dust of the street and smiled at Missouri. The smile was warming. It was as if she and Calhoun shared a secret. "Thank you very much," she said. "We are indebted to you."

Missouri arose and again removed his hat. He bowed silently. He liked the girl's cool dignity. But more, he liked her ability to accept a favor in the spirit in which it was offered.

Calhoun now turned his attention to Wes Taylor. The gambler's smile was as close to a grin as it would ever get. "And by the way," he said, "we may be quite a distance west of Chicago, out here, but we *do* speak English. Try us and see."

Taylor flushed and grinned back. "I—I think I understand what you mean, but there's a saying—do as the Romans do—

"Haven't seen a Roman in this area for years," Missouri returned. "And now why don't you and your sister head for the restaurant and put away a few of 'them thar' groceries? You two must be pretty hungry. And Pop will find a couple of rooms for you upstairs."

After the wagon had pulled off down the street, Missouri readjusted his Stetson, and stood looking into the trailing dust cloud.

"Maybe that's what we need," he mused. "More starry-eyed kids looking for a piece of God's prairie. New blood." He heard a grunt. Pop was thinking.

Missouri started across the street, toward the Golden Eagle, then stopped

and turned back toward Pop Dane. "Trek," he said, "is an African term. The boy just got his books mixed. He'll probably call a wagon train a safari before he's through, but don't take it too seriously."

In the Golden Eagle, Missouri Calhoun stood at the bar, gazing into a whiskey glass. He was uneasy—strangely so—and he was trying to analyze the feeling, pin it down with a positive label.

The fact that he would probably not be alive two days hence, didn't weigh too heavily. Not that he was a fool, but he *was* a fatalist. He believed that a man fated to cash in his chips would do just that, even if he stayed in bed. A bullet with your name on it would seek you out, he felt.

No, it wasn't a sense of fear, but rather one of guilt. In his heart he loved this great, sprawling, raw-boned land west of the Mississippi. He remembered his earlier years, east of the Big Muddy, with no sense of nostalgia. He was at home out here in the dust and the dryness and the wind and the incredible distances.

BUT he had contributed nothing. Why not face it? The fact that he was a square gambler didn't alter his basic uselessness. That was what hurt, he decided. In the end, he would never be able to point to a constructive deed and say, "I did that. This land is a better land because I lived in it."

He motioned for a refill, scowling. "I must be softening up," he muttered.

Then Torrence walked in and Missouri Calhoun brought his mind back sharply to the immediate place and time.

Nate Torrence didn't look much like a killer. His eyes were shifty but a lot of harmless people have shifty eyes. The gun, worn low on his right thigh,

was a danger signal. But then again, a great many guns were worn low.

Torrence was large in every sense and his skin had an olive tint under the tan. Somewhere back in his line there had probably been a Mexican.

Missouri Calhoun turned and rested his elbow on the bar, bringing his finger near the lapel of his black coat. His face went flat, expressionless, but his mind balanced on tiptoes. If this was it, he'd do his best. It wouldn't be good enough of course, but he'd make some kind of a showing. If he could get the little derringer out of his pocket he might be able to drill Torrence from the floor, unless Torrence's slug hit him around the eyes and blinded him. Calhoun had seen men fire with a fair degree of accuracy even after they were dead—after their hearts had been torn open. It doesn't take long to pull a trigger.

Torrence didn't reach. He stood flat footed, staring down the bar. When his hands moved, they came upward. One caught the leather thongs that hung down on his chest from either side of his sombrero. The other gripped the bright medallion, through which the thongs were laced. He jerked the medallion up tight, under his chin, as though he intended to ride in a high wind.

The gesture was not a casual one, however. It was a vicious, studied motion indicative of a knife being plunged into a throat; a motion that revealed Torrence as a killer.

He lowered his hands and smiled icily. "How about a little stud—gambler?" he asked, throatily.

Calhoun glanced across the room. At a round table, three players had been carrying on a desultory, half-hearted game. But the game had hung in the air since Torrence's entrance. The scene was almost ludicrous. A lean cow-

hand, in the act of dealing, had not quite let go of the card he'd been tossing. Now his arm could have been an arm of stone, holding a piece of pasteboard.

Torrence' voice snapped the spell. The card spun to the table. Men began breathing again.

Silently, Missouri Calhoun moved toward the table. Torrence followed.

They faced each other across the circle. Torrence reached up and loosened the thongs of his sombrero. "Stakes?" he asked.

Missouri's reply was carefully courteous. "You name them."

"No limit."

The three who had been playing, didn't seem to resent the high-handed intrusion. Torrence had ignored them completely and they seemed to realize that they were mere props—window dressing. Yet they stayed put. In a no-limit game, they'd still have a show for their money.

THE deck was pushed to Torrence.

He shuffled, got a cut from the right, dealt twice around, up and down. Calhoun was high—a king. He snapped his hole-card, found a deuce and threw a five dollar gold piece into the center of the table. Two men dropped and Calhoun faced a fifteen dollar pot, a queen and a seven. Torrence had backed the seven with five silver dollars.

He dealt again and the third man had a pair of queens. That ended the hand. Calhoun threw in a six-trey next round. Torrence won twenty dollars on the third card and Calhoun got the deck. Another dull round. An ace to the little fat man on Calhoun's left held one stayer who dropped against a ten dollar raise on the fourth card. The plump wrangler took the deck, and Calhoun was looking at a king in front of Torrence, with a ten, a jack and a five

spot, around the table, matching his queen.

Torrence threw in a ten dollar gold piece. Missouri flicked up the corner of his own hole card. The same deuce. The five spot dropped. Three calls. Tubby dealt again. Missouri Calhoun's card spun, slowed, evolving into a trey. He scanned the table. No visible help anywhere. Torrence had drawn an eight. The big gunman's lip twisted slightly as he pushed twenty dollars into the pot.

One player got lost. The jack called—the jack and Missouri Calhoun's unassisted queen. Fourth cards hit the table—three of them. Calhoun's queen dropped in front of Torrence. A jack made the third player top man. Missouri glanced down and realized that he now held a pair of deuces—one buried.

The third player hesitated, staring at Torrence's king, then threw in five dollars in silver. Torrence was due next. He scowled at the table, reached slowly down and began tugging at his middle. When his hands came in sight again, they were holding a money belt. He dropped it in the center of the table.

"Gold in there," he said. "Three thousand. Want it counted?"

The question was directed at Missouri Calhoun. The gambler shook his head, curtly "Your word is good."

"That's the bet."

Calhoun studied the third hand. Two jacks showing. This would be a nice spot for a third one buried. Calhoun doubted that the hungry-looking puncher could come up with more than a few dollars. If he had the jack he would put everything he had on the table and call for a showdown. That would leave Torrence's possible king pair leaning against the pot, obstructed only by a pair of feeble deuces.

Calhoun drew a wallet from his hip. He tossed it on top of the money belt.

"More than three thousand there. We can count it out later. I call."

There wasn't a third jack. The hungry wrangler looked even hungrier as he folded his cards. "Too steep for this boy," he muttered.

The cards came. A deuce for Torrence. Calhoun's quick smile was mirthless. Torrence's kings would stand. Then Missouri's fifth card fell.

The caser! The fourth deuce! There was a tickling in the pit of Missouri Calhoun's stomach. Lady Luck was laughing.

Torrence eyed the pair morosely. He raised his eyes and examined Calhoun's face—a face that could be read as easily as a newspaper printed in invisible ink. "Check," Torrence grunted.

CALHOUN thought swiftly. If he threw his hand in he might live to a ripe old age. Torrence would have his money back; there'd be no cause for a killing with himself on the receiving end.

But there were his principles, leering at him. He sighed inwardly. Those principles were going to ride him into Boot Hill yet. They said that it would be just as cowardly to throw in three deuces as to run from Torrence's gun.

"I'll bet two thousand," Missouri said. "It's on the table."

Unconsciously, Missouri's hand slid under his lapel as Torrence exploded. Torrence lunged across the table as his arm lashed out, and the sound of his open hand smacking against the dealer's face drowned quick curses.

The dealer went over backwards. Consternation held him tight to the floor.

Calhoun was not distracted by the side issue. He watched Torrence—kept his gaze on Torrence's hands—turned slowly as the big gunman got to his feet and headed for the door like

a man dying for a breath of air.

Nothing was said as the tension eased. The fat little dealer got up and righted his chair. He threw down what was left of the deck, his features tight with rage. He said, "The cold-hearted swine knows I can't draw fast." It was almost a sob.

The hungry-looking wrangler had played there on the previous night. He looked at Missouri. "Maybe you kind of signed your death warrant with that play, Calhoun," he said.

"The hand was cold," Missouri snapped. "But I get your point."

Missouri picked up the money belt and tossed it to the barkeep. "Hold that for me." He pocketed his wallet and scraped his loose money off the table. He moved toward the door.

Torrence was not in sight when he hit the street. He walked slightly toward the Bow Restaurant—the only one of which Big Forks boasted—his eyes covering both sides of the street. He had half hoped to find Wes Taylor and his sister at the restaurant, but the clientele consisted of three dusty cowboys wolfing steaks.

Missouri took time over his supper, drank two extra cups of coffee, and didn't return to the Golden Eagle until well after dark. On the way he stopped off to find Pop Dane reading a catalogue behind the pine-board desk at the Dane Hotel.

Pop looked up and evinced interest. "Heard about your second run-in with Torrence," he greeted. "You got any relatives anywhere—friends you want told about it after it happens?"

"No. Just dig the grave deep and put in a layer of rocks to baffle the coyotes. The kids get their rooms all right?"

"Yep. Looks like they're goin' to eat into your seventy-five pretty fast."

"Don't throw them into the street

when they've used it up," Missouri said.

THE GOLDEN EAGLE was doing a good business. A lot of faces turned when Missouri walked in, and the ripple of talk went down a trifle. Missouri passed up the bar and went directly to the round poker table. There were five players now. Missouri slipped into a vacant chair and laid some gold money on the boards. He sat where he could see the two windows giving off the street. They were black rectangles and Missouri reflected that if a slug came through either of them, there was little he could do about it. He entered into the play.

The game moved at a slow pace. There seemed to be a tension in the air. The players were nervous—appeared to be poised at all times for a dive toward safety. Little money changed hands. Players dropped out. New ones filled in.

Then Missouri heard a cheerful voice at his elbow and looked up. Wes Taylor grinned down at him. "Hya pardner—er, I mean, good evening, Mister Calhoun. Vonnie sent me out hunting you. She thought it would be nice if you'd drop up for a cup of chocolate. We sure want to be neighborly."

All eyes in the group centered on the tall youth. The eyes took in the fresh young face, the open smile, and then dropped to the pair of .45s worn so proudly. There were a lot of question marks in a lot of minds.

Missouri smiled back at the youngster, almost fondly. Somehow he'd grown to consider Wes and Vonnie Taylor as his own discoveries. He felt an indescribable bond drawing them to him.

"There is nothing I'd like better, just now, than a cup of chocolate," he answered gravely.

"Swell. The game treating you

right?"

"Not badly. We'll go after this hand. We shouldn't keep your sister waiting."

Missouri threw in his cards when a pair of sixes raised, and got up from his chair. "A drink first?" he asked.

Wes Taylor shook his head doubtfully. "No thanks. Better not. Vonnie might smell my breath." Missouri followed the youth out the door.

The thundering of a gun came from the darkness up the street as they stepped off the walk. There was the short, vicious whine, and Missouri felt a bullet tug at his sleeve. Then he heard the impact against flesh, one—two, as he dived from the shaft of light coming through the saloon door. His hand had gone out and grabbed Wes Taylor's shoulder, but, as he went headlong, his fingers slipped and he was clutching air.

He whirled as he fell, and he landed with his eyes on the boy. A soft cry came into his ears, the cry of a child, slapped for a transgression it didn't understand, and he saw Wes Taylor melting down into the dust. And he saw too, the big silver gun rising from the tooled leather holster—heard its single peal of thunder. Then the gun lay in the dust, under a young, unmoving hand.

Missouri came to his feet like a cat. Down the street a horse nickered. Missouri ran silently in the darkness, the small derringer in his hand. His heart raged in cold, unreasoning fury.

As he approached his objective, there came the sound of hoofs, milling in panic. Then their beats turned into a steady gallop and diminished.

But there was something lying there jerking, twitching—a huddled form that was vaguely outlined in the street. Missouri ran against it—leaped back. Then he knew that there was no need for

caution.

The clouds thinned and let a bit of moon through. Missouri went down to his knees and turned over the body of Nate Torrence. There was no life in it. Missouri jerked the shirt open and found the hole he was looking for. Then his eye caught on something bright. It was the medallion Torrence used to hold his sombrero on when he rode in a high wind.

And right through its thin center was another hole—torn by a .45 slug.

Missouri got to his feet and went back to where Wes Taylor lay in the center of the crowd that had poured from the saloon.

The boy was dead.

VONNIE TAYLOR sat straight as a ramrod, staring at the wall. Her brother had just been laid to rest in the small cemetery on the edge of Big Forks.

"He wanted a piece of God's prairie," she said, then her voice grew bitter. "And he got it—six whole feet of it!"

Missouri Calhoun groped for words. "He died because of me—because of a feud that developed over a poker table. It was my fight, so please believe me when I say that I'd gladly take his place if I could."

She didn't move. She kept staring ahead. "I think I hate you." The words came flatly, without emotion. "I'm—I'm all mixed up, but I think that when I finally get my thoughts organized, I'll loathe you more than any living thing. You're a gambler. You spawn on the hard-earned money of honest men. You follow the fringes of progress like a skulking jackal and fatten on the gains of others until the law comes and chases you out."

Missouri Calhoun's spirit writhed under the lash of his own thoughts put into words and laid across his back.

His face was a gray mask.

"Your likes and dislikes are your own," he said, "but I am an honest gambler. I pay my debts before I sleep. That's why I've come." He counted money from a roll he took out of his pocket. "I made a bet with your brother. I bet him a thousand dollars that he couldn't drill a silver coin on a snap shot at fifty yards. He did just that. He won the bet. There is no sentiment involved in my paying off."

He laid the money on the dresser and stepped back.

Vonnie Taylor didn't move. Her eyes could have been frozen in her head.

"That's nonsense. I heard Wes make that boast. It wasn't a bet at all. It was a small boy, proud of what he'd learned to do. The sweetest —"

Her head went down into her hands.

"The sweetest kid that ever hit the west," Missouri filled in. "And he wanted some of it for himself and for you. I think he'd like you to stay. This town needs a good restaurant now, and later there will be more for you—lots more." Missouri bit at his thin lip.

"I'd like to have you stay, too," he said, almost humbly.

"I think we've talked enough," she answered. "I'm going east on the morning stage. Good-bye."

Missouri Calhoun went out, as silently as a shadow drifting across the sun.

He stood on the porch of the Golden Eagle next morning and watched the stage pull up in front of Pop Dane's hotel. A trunk came out and was anchored on top. Then a fat drummer waddled through the door and climbed aboard the stage.

Time passed. Missouri's spirits welled up. Maybe—maybe. Then his face hardened as Vonnie Taylor came

out, followed by Pop and her luggage. A whip cracked. A door slammed. The stage pulled away.

Missouri Calhoun went into the Golden Eagle and ordered a double whiskey. He stood by the bar through the day and far into the night ordering double whiskeys. The barkeep began watching him with a speculative eye, apparently wondering which way he'd fall and how soon.

At three o'clock, Missouri walked from the saloon, as straight as though he'd never had a drink in his life and crossed to the hotel. He went to his room, shaved with a steady hand, and went to bed.

He was up late the next afternoon. He shaved again, dressed and went to the Bow and ordered a steak. When it was served, he looked at it, paid for it, and walked down to the Golden Eagle. He found an open seat in the poker game.

THE first bet was three dollars. Missouri raised. His face-up five was called all around the table. The next bet was four bucks. He raised. Everyone looked at his three spot, then at him and called. He stared unseeing at the table, heard somebody bet five

dollars. He raised. Everyone was looking at his last card. He looked at them and wondered what it was. He didn't bother to look down at the card.

Someone was pressing against his side. Then a voice. Pop Dane's.

"You know somethin', son? She's back. Just came in on the late stage, and I hiked over to tell you. Figgered you'd be hankerin' to know."

Missouri didn't say anything. He heard the voice as through a mist and, in his mind, was the idea that he had been doing some betting and raising, but he didn't know how often or how much.

Then another voice — half-defiant, half-fearful. "Well, I called the fifty bucks. What in hell have you got?"

To Missouri Calhoun it was as if he had just awakened from a long sleep.

"Got? Why not a thing, cowboy — not a thing. You just won yourself a pot." And Missouri grinned like a fool.

He got up from the table. He was walking on air. He felt like yelling from sheer joy. It was a wonderful life.

He thought he'd like the restaurant business.

THE END



THE SPANISH INFLUENCE IN OUR LIVES

OF ALL the many things that are so attached to our own peculiar way of life in these United States, if we sit down and try to attribute them to anything at all, or to any European country, hardly ever does it occur

to us that the most commonplace affairs of the day stem not from England or France, or the Balkans, but, from all places, Spain. And this is true mostly in the things which we feel are from America alone, and were never transported with

our ancestors from foreign shores.

The Spanish influence in our way of life is felt mostly in the Western section of our country, but it stretches far more easterly than we are aware of consciously. There are certain terms in our everyday speech that are taken directly from Spanish, and others are Spanish, but come to us from our Southern neighbors the Mexicans, and the South Americans.

For example, the name of the Swanee River, which is known throughout the country in every home, is a name that was given to the river by the early Spanish explorers. And yet the average American believes that it is just another Indian name, as are most of the river names of America.

And as for the things we eat, the Spanish had something to do with that, too. The sugar cane which is in so much demand today is a Spanish offering, which they cultivated when they first reached these shores and began to settle here. The lemons we use, as well as other citrus fruits, were planted by the Spaniards, and the wheat which is so important a grain in our diet, is likewise to be attributed to the Spaniards' desire for good food and nourishment.

In livestock, we have the Spaniards to thank for bringing sheep and horses to our shores, for all that really roamed our land were the buffalo.

The first people to wear the "chaps" that are a part of our modern western cowboy's attire, were the Spanish, and the word is even derived from the Mexican *chaparejos*, which in turn is a Spanish word.

And the great western hospitality which one hears so much about is an outgrowth of the first settlers, the Spanish pioneers, who brought with them their gentleness which the high-born of Spain are so well known for.

And this is no surprise, for the Spaniards were well established in this country when the English pioneers were making a miserable living quarter out of a cave alongside of an eastern port. At the time of Jamestown and Plymouth, and even before, the Spaniards were already working mines on islands separated by only a stretch of clear blue water from the United States. Aside from being settled on the mainland itself, the Spanish had colonies in such important islands as Cuba and Haiti, where the fields teemed with grain, cotton and sugar cane. As far as any other vocation being followed in these islands, the harbors were continually being filled and emptied by ships coming in and out, ships laden with great treasures of European goods or the treasures of the New World. And the Spaniards themselves lived as the kings of the Old World in good times; their haciendas, forts, and missions portraying a wealth and regalness never even dreamed of in the courts of the noblemen of Spain. They lived in a style truly befitting the great names of Europe and paying far less for it.

And when did all this colonizing take place? That date is not important, for it was the ground work which was laid in the sixteenth century by

the Spanish explorers who pushed up and down the two continents, and brought the Spanish names to the natives of the land. Soon after that, with their men of God along to convert the Indians to Catholicism, colonizers arrived and extended the Spanish name and flag over more than half of what is now the United States.

The Spaniards are all from different sections of Spain, which is divided into certain states, and the people who helped to colonize this land of ours were for the most part from Castile, a Spanish kingdom that was small in size and population, but which was the most highly educated and refined section of Spain. Their civilization made a great and important contribution to the background of our lives as we know it today, and which is often overlooked by all historians.

For the interest of all who enjoy to grow plants, over two-thirds of the hundreds of species now being cultivated in this country were brought to these shores by the Spanish colonists and their missionaries.

Besides the sheep and horses which were already mentioned, the Spaniards also brought in many of our now domesticated animals, and certainly the most exotic of our fruit even today was brought from Spain's sunny shores.

The western life of the United States today is what has continued to have the Spanish influence, and has so often been affiliated with it. The buildings that are put up in the west today are fashioned after the Spanish patterns and the Spanish buildings still standing from the time of their erection are the oldest in the country. They are redolent of a still greater antiquity. And the old mission bell of the church still standing in San Miguel in Santa Fe, New Mexico, was sent here from Spain, shipped first to Mexico, where it was brought in from Mexico City by oxcart to the church in which it now dwells. This bell bears the date of 1356. Another great work of art in this same church are the paintings on either side of the altar. They were painted by Cimabue, a thirteenth century Florentine.

Most of the western riding terms and their everyday vernacular are Spanish in origin. Such words as "lariat" and "rodeo" were supposedly contributed to our language by the dashing caballeros.

While discussing the Spanish words coming down to us through the ages, the names of most of our large western cities have survived from the Spanish missions. Such cities as St. Augustine, San Antonio, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, are all Spanish names given to the missions set up there long ago. The whole name of Los Angeles was *Nuestra enora de Los Angeles*, which means Our Lady of the Angels. And although the name of Hollywood is not a Spanish word, it is derived from the word of the True Cross, another Spanish influence.

Yes, when one thinks about it, there is more Spanish in our everyday life than we can imagine.

Alice Richards

FACE FIFTY GUNS

by Robert Moore Williams



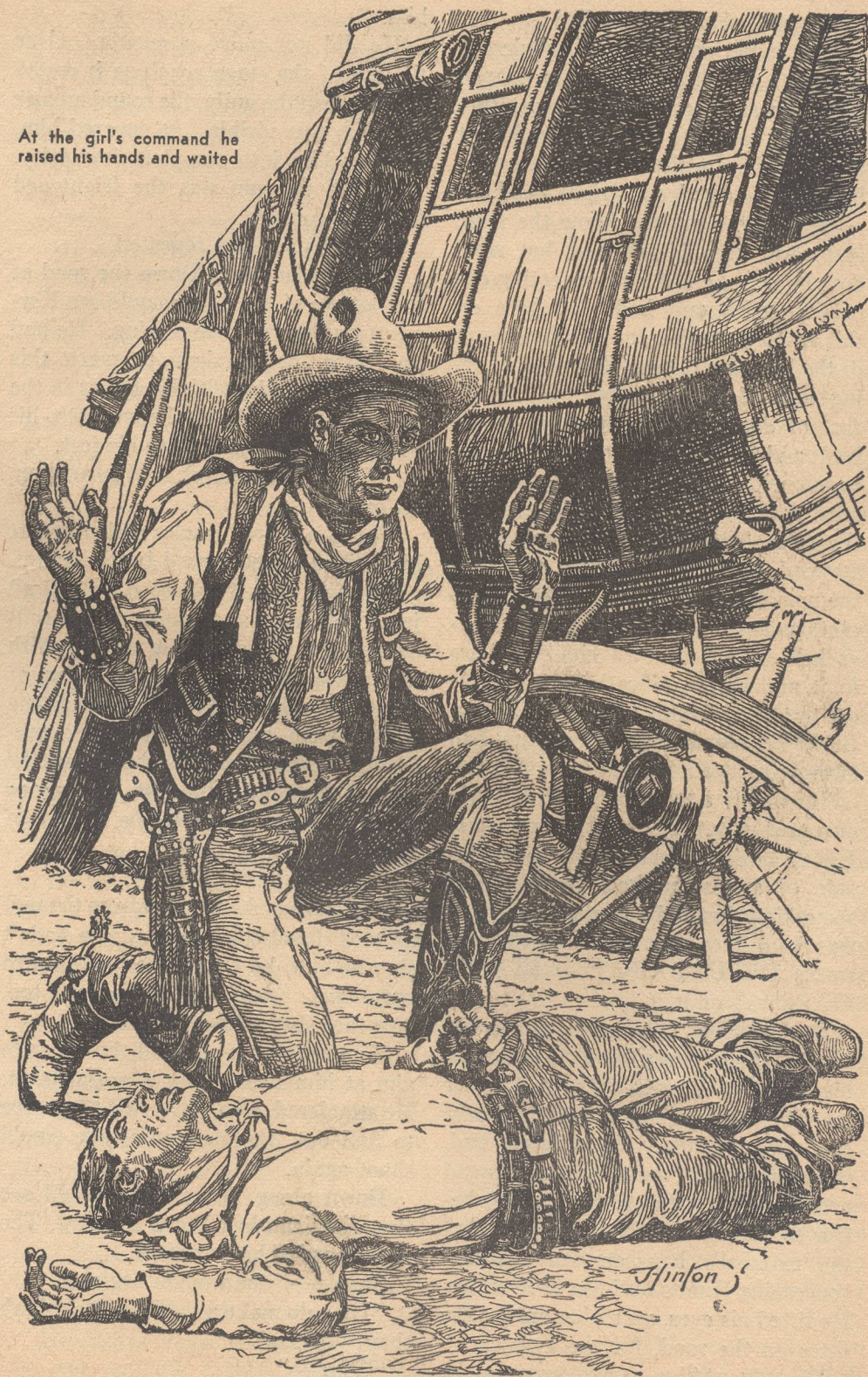
HE CAME up to the top of the ridge on a lathered, heaving horse and looked down at the road winding under the hill. He could see the stage coach lying on its side in the gully, its contents strewn along the road like a ripe watermelon that has been dropped and has burst, splashing its red meat on the ground. He could also see the man sprawled face down on the rocky road and, even from the top of the hill, he could tell the man would not move any more.

To the south, along the road to the town of Macklin, moving dots caught his eye. Three horses were there and three riders. Jim Kerrigan and two men. At the sight of the three moving dots, his face tightened itself into a grim mask. He clucked to his horse and rode down the hill.

His horse smelled blood and snorted and tried to indicate it didn't want to go near the wrecked stage coach. Dismounting, he tied the animal to a scrub cedar and walked the rest of the way. Unlike his horse, he couldn't smell blood, but he could see it. It had run from the lips of the man lying on the road and had stained the man's cheeks and chin and gathered in a little pool

What would make a man willing to face fifty guns? Yes, you've got the answer—a lot of money! But what if you found out later there wasn't any? That WOULD pose a neat problem!

At the girl's command he
raised his hands and waited



on the ground as the man died.

The man was well, if modestly, dressed. He had apparently leaped from the stage coach as it went into the gully and had been shot as he hit the ground. A Colt .44, with one chamber fired, lay under his right hand.

John Burke did not know the man, had never seen him before, but whoever he was, he had come shooting out of the coach and had died here on this rocky mountain road five miles out of the booming town of Macklin. Forcing himself to be indifferent to the fact of death, Burke squatted on his heels and turned the man over. A gold watch with a broken crystal dangled from the end of a chain looped through the vest. The hands of the watch had stopped at 12:18, marking the time the man had sprawled to his death here on this mountain road. The coat pocket held a billfold with eighty dollars in it and an identification card made out to George Hunt, Denver, Colorado. Burke wondered what George Hunt had been doing down here in New Mexico, on his way to a town caught in the grip of a gold rush. The card did not state Hunt's business, but pinned to the inside of a vest pocket, Burke found something that did explain what Hunt was doing here—a small badge with the words DEPUTY UNITED STATES MARSHAL on it.

Burke turned the badge over in his fingers. Hunt was a deputy marshal on his way to Macklin. He had never reached his destination but he would reach it, eventually, in a wagon bed, when the news of the holdup was spread around in Macklin and the curious began to arrive. Burke wondered what the marshal's baggage would reveal concerning Hunt's business in Macklin. He lifted his eyes, searching among the litter on the road, for the baggage.

"Hands up!" a voice screamed at

him.

He did not move a muscle. Over the top of the stage coach as it rested on its side in the gully, the round muzzle of a gun was visible. It covered him, freezing him into complete inactivity.

Behind the gun was the frightened face of a woman.

"Hands up!" she repeated.

"Hello," he said. Down the road at the bottom of the hill he could see Kerrigan and his two men coming. He had no desire for Kerrigan to reach this spot and find him with his hands in the air. He slipped the badge into his pocket and got casually to his feet.

"Hello," he repeated. "Who are you, ma'am?"

The gun roared smoke and sound at him. The bullet missed by three feet.

The fact that it had been fired at all jarred him almost as much as the suddenness of the shot. A woman with the courage to shoot a gun! Most of the women he had known—excepting Abby—were scared of guns, or pretended to be scared of them, but the woman hiding behind the overturned coach did not seem to be afraid of them.

HER face looked at him from the puff of dissolving smoke. She hadn't shot at him, he knew, she had shot to scare him. And she was scared too, now that she had fired the shot.

He wondered if she had the nerve to aim at him if she took a second shot. He wondered, also, if he had the nerve to find out whether or not she would shoot again.

Down along the road he could see that Kerrigan had heard the shot. The town marshal had stopped.

"I said—" the woman began.

"They do make a terrible noise, don't they?" he said.

"What—"

"A gun, when it goes off in your hand. It makes an awful loud noise, don't it?" He nodded, casually, to show that he was friendly and to show, he hoped, that he was not scared. He made no move toward the gun holstered at his own hip.

"Why—" the woman began.

He wished he could see more of her. All he could see was a white forehead with the mark of a bruise on it and hair piled high on the top of her head and two eyes staring at him.

"You might as well put down that gun," he said. "You can't win." He nodded down the slope. Kerrigan had pulled his horse off the road. He and his two men were coming along the slope to the right.

For the first time, she saw the three riders. A look of dismay appeared on her face. "Friends of yours—"

"How'd you guess?" He moved casually toward her. Her eyes swung back to him. "I ain't aiming to be curious, ma'am, but where'd you come from?"

"I was a passenger on this stage when it was held up."

"You were?" Surprise moved in him at the words. When Gene Wicker, the driver of the coach, had stumbled from his horse in front of the jail in Macklin—almost falling over Jim Kerrigan as he slid from his mount—he had not mentioned a woman passenger on the coach. But Wicker's omission didn't mean anything, Burke realized. All Gene had had time to say was that the stage had been held up, spouting out the information and his life's blood at the same time. But there had been a passenger, a woman, and she was a witness to the holdup. He walked around the coach. "What happened, ma'am?"

The gun followed him.

He took a quick stride and reached out very quickly, grabbing the gun and

shoving the muzzle to one side. She tried to struggle. He clamped both hands around her wrists and turned, lifting her arm high and keeping the gun pointed away from him. He jerked her over his shoulder before she realized what was happening. Then he had the gun in his hands and it was not necessary to throw her completely over his head. He released her very gently, then faced her fury and wiped sweat from his forehead.

"You got to be careful with these things, ma'am," he said, and he meant what he said as he had never meant anything else in his life. "These things kill people. You don't go around pointing them at just anybody." He wiped sweat again and nodded toward the gun.

"You—" Fury made her more attractive.

"Easy, ma'am. I haven't mistreated you or showed you any disrespect. All I did was take a gun away from you."

"I should have shot you like the thief you are!"

"Thief?" The accusation shocked him.

"I saw you take that dead man's billfold. And I saw you take something out of his vest pocket—"

"Oh," he said, relieved. "That don't necessarily make me a thief, ma'am. And now—" He caught a glimpse of Kerrigan coming along the slope, "I'm going up to the road and talk to these fellows. If I was you, ma'am, I'd stay out of sight till they leave."

"Don't you want your friends to see me?" she jeered.

"Friends?" he answered. "That fellow on the bay is the town marshal, ma'am, and the two men with him are his side-kicking partners. And they're no friends of mine, ma'am, not that I recall."

"You tricked me!" she gasped. "You made me think they were your friends

and that I didn't have a chance—"

"You *didn't* have a chance!" he answered, his voice grim with hidden meaning. "They haven't seen you yet. Now you can take your choice: either stay down here out of sight or come on up with me. But if you come with me, ma'am, I'd advise you not to get very close to me while I'm talking with the town marshal."

"Oh," she said. "Is it that bad?"

"I don't know, ma'am. I'll have to wait and find out. Now what do you want to do?"

"I'll—I'll hide under the coach again," she answered.

Between the side of the coach and the bottom of the gully was a hole big enough for several men to hide in. She had apparently been hiding in this hole when he rode up. She went back into it now, in a flurry of rustling skirts.

John Burke stepped up on the road to wait for the town marshal.

CHAPTER II

KERRIGAN rode his horse down the slope. The two men with him Burke recognized as Brad Matthews and Joe Wilton. Kerrigan was tall and slightly stooped and he sat his saddle with the uncomfortable air of a person who found a chair at a poker table much more comfortable than a leather-covered saddle tree.

Kerrigan had been in Macklin less than four months, coming into the booming town from parts unknown. His personal antecedents were unknown but by profession, he was a gambler, and by reputation he was a fast man with a gun. When the last town marshal had tried to corral the last drifting tough and had died with his boots on, Kerrigan had been the only applicant for the vacant job. The town council, glad to find somebody who wanted so dan-

gerous a job, had quickly appointed him, over-riding the protests of the sheriff. The resulting over-lapping authority between the office of the sheriff and the office of the town marshal had added a note of tension to a town that didn't really need any additional notes in this area.

Macklin had been a cow-town of two hundred inhabitants and it had been as peaceful as any cow-town in this brawling country. Then gold had been discovered in the Sawtooth Hills, within ten miles of Macklin. Within two months, the town had grown from two hundred to two thousand inhabitants. Every tough, every cut-throat, every bandit, every drunken, worthless miner who had ever followed a gold rush anywhere in the western country had promptly moved into Macklin.

Kerrigan and Matthews and Wilton had come with the stampede.

Kerrigan slid his horse to a halt in front of John Burke, sawing the reins to keep the animal from shying from the smell of blood and from the sight of the man lying in the road.

"I heard a shot," Kerrigan said.

"Me, shooting at a snake," Burke answered.

Kerrigan's eyes were darting over the wrecked coach. "Somebody sure played hell here! Who is that man in the road? Where's the strong box?" He pulled his right foot out of the stirrup.

"The stage was on its way to Macklin, not going out. So far as I know, the strong box was empty since inbound stages usually don't carry anything of value. No, don't get down." Burke pulled his gun.

At the sight of the gun Kerrigan let his foot slide back into the stirrup. His gaze went from the gun to Burke's face. The sight of the weapon froze Matthews and Wilton in their saddles, Matthews like a hulking bear that had

somehow gotten itself glued to saddle leather, Wilton like a gray coyote caught in the same kind of trap.

Burke jerked his head back in the direction from which they had come. "Move on," he said.

"Move on?" Kerrigan grunted. "I came to offer my help. Why should I move on?"

"Because I say so," John Burke answered.

Kerrigan's eyes were cold but his face was expressionless. "Is that a good reason, deputy?" he asked.

Burke wiggled the gun. "With this backing it up, it is!"

"I am duly appointed—" Kerrigan began.

"Town marshal," Burke finished the sentence for him. "Your authority ended five miles back, at the town limits. Out here you're just another man getting in the way and maybe messing up the evidence."

Matthews, on Kerrigan's right, grunted. There was no other sound. The three men looked at Burke and he looked at them. "Well, deputy," Kerrigan said at last. "Supposing we don't choose to take your sayso? Supposing we choose to help whether you like it or not?"

"The town'll have to get another new marshal," Burke said.

Kerrigan blinked at that. He turned the words over in his mind slowly, savoring the feel of them. He didn't like the way they felt or sounded and his dislike showed on his face. "You think you can get the three of us?" he said.

"I said *town marshal*," Burke answered. "Matthews and Wilton ain't marshals, not so far as I know." He eased the hammer of the gun back to full cock. The click of the locking dog slipping into place was the only sound in the stillness of the mountain afternoon. John Burke waited.

WAS Kerrigan going to take his dare? Burke had been asking himself this question for two months, knowing that the time was coming when either the town marshal ran the sheriff's office or the sheriff's office ran the town marshal. It was one or the other, sooner or later.

Kerrigan looked at the gun. "You've got your dog loose," he said.

"Yep," Burke answered. "And that means you move on."

Kerrigan sat in his saddle without moving, his face expressionless but his eyes hot with rage. "Okay," he said at last. He turned the head of his horse.

Matthews and Wilton followed him. As they rode away, Matthews spoke to the marshal, a single angry sentence that Burke did not catch. Kerrigan's voice lashed back, a single phrase, "Shut up! This is not the end of this!"

Inside of him, John Burke felt the tension begin to subside. He had won a victory here. He wondered how temporary that victory was.

Slowly, he slid the gun back into the holster, turned to talk to the woman.

She came crawling out from under the stage, her flowered dress torn and smudged with dirt. Her teeth were chattering. She looked toward the three men riding away.

Fear had taken all traces of color from her face.

"No need for you to be scared," Burke said. "They wouldn't have bothered you."

"They wouldn't?" she whispered. "I'm not so sure of that. The big one that looked like a bear, he was one of the men who held up this stage."

"What?" Burke gasped.

She nodded violently.

"Are you sure?" Burke questioned.

"Of course I'm sure. I saw him right back there—" She pointed toward an

overhanging ledge. "He was hiding there, with a shotgun. I saw him pull the trigger and fire the shot that knocked the driver off the seat."

"Brad Matthews," Burke said. If what she had said meant anything to him, he kept all sign of it off his face. "You saw him shoot Gene Wicker?"

"I don't know his name. I saw him shoot the driver."

"What?" he asked casually. "What about the other two? Did you see them at the hold-up?"

"No. I didn't see them when they were here either. I just had a little hole that I could see out of. All I could see looking through it was the big one. If the others were at the hold-up, I didn't see them."

"Was there more than one man involved in the hold-up?"

"Yes. I heard another man shooting."

"But you didn't see Wilton or Kerrigan?"

"I didn't see anybody—*What was that last name again?*" Her voice grew suddenly sharp and almost shrill. A startled look appeared in her eyes.

"Kerrigan?" he answered. His eyes were on her, watching every change in her face. "Do you know the man?" he asked.

"No." Vehemence crept into her voice. "No! I never heard of the man before. Who is he?"

"Town marshal."

"He was the man you were talking to, the man you told to move on or else?"

He nodded. "Was he at the hold-up?"

"No. No! I never saw him before. Say! He called you *deputy!*"

HIS nod was casual. "That's what I am. Deputy sheriff. Does the fact that I'm a deputy sheriff make any

difference?"

"Difference in what?" She was wary now, as wary as a she-wolf. And she wasn't looking at him.

"Difference in whether or not you recognized Matthews?" he questioned bluntly.

"You don't have on a star," she said.

"Lots of times I don't wear one. What about my question?"

She was suddenly all smiles. "Deputy, I don't see what difference it could possibly make. I told you I recognized him, didn't I? What more do you want?"

"Nothing more," he said. "Except your name and what you're doing here?"

She answered readily enough. Her name was Lillian Gray and she was on her way to Macklin to open a dress shop. "That's it, a dress shop," she repeated. Besides her, there had been only one passenger on the stage. "The man there in the road," she said. When the driver had been shot and the team started to run away, the passenger had drawn his gun and jumped out of the stage. She didn't see who had shot him and didn't know he had been shot. The stage had gone into the gully at the side of the road and she had been knocked unconscious. When she regained consciousness, the passenger was lying in the road, dead, the driver was gone, she didn't know where.

"The driver got to Macklin about two o'clock," Burke said. "He came directly to the sheriff's office at the jail. Kerrigan was there at the time."

"Then—then Kerrigan couldn't have been in on the hold-up!" she spoke quickly.

"He had plenty of time to get to Macklin before the driver got there. No, I'm afraid the fact he was in front of the jail when Wicker rode up don't clear him of the hold-up. To my mind,

the fact that he was around the jail at all is mighty suspicious, like he was waiting there to see if Wicker would show up. He would know that's where the driver would go if he could get there."

"It doesn't prove—"

"I know it don't prove him guilty either. But Matthews is guilty. You've identified him and I know he's guilty."

"Yes," she answered slowly. "What—what on earth is that?"

He was aware that he too, was hearing the sound that had attracted her attention, the tinkle of tiny bells. It was certainly not a sound usually heard on a lonely mountain road. It was coming from above them. He turned quickly.

Around the uphill turn in the road came one of the oldest burros on earth. Head down, big ears flopping in rhythm with his slow steps, the beast was meandering down the road half asleep. Astride the burro, also half asleep, was a wizened figure that Burke recognized. Pablo Nunes, an ancient, withered Mexican sheepherder, riding in to Macklin from his shack in the mountains.

Tiny bells were attached to each leg of the burro. The ringing sound came from these.

THE bells took on a sudden jangle as the sleepy burro smelled the man lying in the road and tried to shy away. Then his rider woke up, too, and became aware of the body lying in the road, the wrecked coach, and the man and woman staring at him. The Mexican's eyes popped open at the sight of this destruction and sudden death. He hastily crossed himself.

"Quien es?" his cracked voice quavered.

"Muerto es," Burke answered. "A dead man." He knew the old herder

understood very little English. "Vamos, Pablo. No time to talk now. Beat it." He waved his hand.

The Mexican understood that he was to get to hell and gone away from there. He was quite willing to co-operate. Shrilling to his mount, he pulled the burro over to the far side of the road, and pummeling his heels into his mount's side, went past with averted head.

Lillian Gray was silent and Burke told her to sit down and rest while he looked around. "As soon as I'm finished, I'll figure out a way to get you to Macklin." She looked grateful at his words.

He made a hasty inspection of the scene. He wasn't greatly interested in what evidence he could find here, now. He had Lillian Gray. He had a witness to identify Brad Matthews.

With that identification the fight between the sheriff's office and the town marshal would be blown wide open. Kerrigan and Matthews were pals.

The situation was potentially violent, Burke knew. If Kerrigan was not in on the hold-up, he at least had knowledge of it. Burke wondered why the stage had been held up in the first place. Outbound stages, carrying gold, were always in danger of being held up, and carried heavy guards to prevent it. Inbound stages, on the other hand, carried little or nothing of value. Inbound stages had been immune from attack in the past.

This one hadn't been immune. He wondered why? Kerrigan had asked about the strong box. He searched for it but couldn't locate it. He located and searched the baggage of the passenger, wondering if somebody had held up the stage to keep a deputy United States marshal from reaching Macklin. The baggage revealed nothing. George Hunt had been too smart

to carry anything of an incriminating nature in his battered telescope bag. He hadn't, however, been too smart to die.

They rarely were too smart for that.

A yell floating down from the top of the ridge above him jerked his eyes upward. Up there, he saw a man waving a hat at him. He recognized the man as Ike Mason, his fellow deputy. Mason had not been in the office at the jail when the news of the hold-up reached town. He was just now reporting on the scene.

Mason rode his fagged horse down the slope, slid off in front of John Burke. "I just came from the old man," were his first words. "He said the bank just notified him what had happened."

"Bank?" Burke questioned.

"Uh-huh," Mason nodded. "The news is all over town now."

"But why would the bank notify the sheriff of the hold-up?" Burke persisted.

"Oh," Mason said, his voice sagging. "Yeah. The bank notified him because they had thirty thousand dollars coming in on this stage. That's thirty thousand bucks gone to hell, Johnny. Thirty thousand iron men!"

CHAPTER III

IF THE bank had a shipment of money coming in, why in the hell didn't they hire a guard?" Burke blazed.

"The damned fools thought their best insurance was secrecy," Mason answered. "They thought the money would be safe if nobody knew it was coming into town. Only Bob Green, the president, and Bill Dahl, the cashier, knew it was coming, Johnny."

"That's what they thought!" Burke

answered. He knew Bob Green and Bill Dahl very well. They were honorable men, they were capable men. There had been a leak somewhere in the bank, or maybe back at the other end of the stage line. Bob Green and Bill Dahl hadn't talked. "This don't stack up quite right, them taking a chance on running money in secretly," Burke said.

"I know," Mason answered. "There's more to it. They had to have the money in a hurry, Johnny. A big depositor notified them he was going to withdraw twenty-five thousand dollars tomorrow, at noon. That was two days ago. They had had some heavy withdrawals they hadn't expected already and when this depositor notified them he was going to withdraw twenty-five thousand, they suddenly realized they didn't have much more than that amount of cash in the bank. They had to have the money, quick, they had to have it secretly, because if word got around that they couldn't meet their withdrawals, as sure as shooting a run would start on the bank. So—they took a chance. It wasn't a question of the bank being solvent, it was just a question of not having the cash on hand. Johnny, this is darned serious."

Mason's voice trailed into silence. He was a very worried deputy sheriff and Burke knew the cause of Mason's worry. He had seen a run on a bank once, with depositors fighting each other trying to get to the windows to get the money that wasn't there, couldn't be there, if all of them wanted it at the same time. He never wanted to see another run. He knew that all that was needed to start a run in those times was just a whisper of insecurity in a bank. Just one whisper that would run like a forest fire through the crowds in Macklin. Burke shuddered at the thought.

"That money ain't here, is it, Johnny?" Mason asked. The tone of his voice was that of a man who is hoping against hope.

"No," Burke answered.

Mason sighed. "I knew it wouldn't be. Johnny, the boss says we got to find the men who held up this stage and we got to get the money back by tomorrow noon. We got to, Johnny. And nobody besides us can know it's missing."

"I know," Burke said.

"Johnny, I saw old Bob Green, at the sheriff's house, before I came out here. That old man has aged ten years since yesterday. All he said to me was, 'I'm depending on you and Johnny Burke.' Johnny, we got to deliver or that old man is going to lay down and die!"

"I know," Burke said. "Maybe we can do it."

"What?" Hope gleamed in Mason's eyes. "Have you found out something, Johnny? Have you f——"

"I've got a witness who identified one of the men who held up the stage," Burke answered. He nodded toward Lillian Gray, sitting on a rock beside the over-turned coach. Mason hadn't seen her yet but he saw her now.

"That's wonderful, Johnny! That's wonderful!" Mason's blows on his back jarred Burke down to the soles of his boots. "Who was it?"

Burke explained what had happened. Mason sobered when he heard the name of Brad Matthews. "He ties up with Kerrigan and that means we got trouble on our hands."

"I know it," Burke repeated. "But that's the kind of trouble we can lick. How's the old man, how's he taking this hold-up?"

MASON sobered instantly. Sheriff Browder was in bed, sick almost

to death, with typhoid fever. "Abby was threatening to tie him in bed if he didn't stay there. The old man's sick, Johnny. If he gets up out of that bed, it'll be the end of him. And what a struggle it is for that old war horse to stay in bed with something like this happening! I talked to him for maybe five minutes. Abby wouldn't let me stay any longer. He told me you was in charge, Johnny, and he also said—" Mason's voice trailed off and he looked at his fellow deputy sheriff as if he had something he wanted to say but didn't quite know whether he ought to say it.

"Said what?"

Mason took a deep breath. "He said for me to tell you not to shoot anybody unless you have to, Johnny. He—he's kind of worried about you."

"Why? Does he feel I shoot first and ask questions afterwards?"

"No, not that exactly." Mason squirmed, groping for words to express the sheriff's meaning. "He says you sort of feel that a crime is a personal insult to you, and because you feel insulted, you take too many chances. He says you don't have to take wild chances, that the law always wins in the end. I think he's really worried about something else, though."

"What?" Burke said uncomfortably.

There was truth in what Mason had said. He was inclined to feel that a crime was a personal insult against him. "What else has he got on his mind?"

"Kerrigan," Mason admitted. "He's afraid you're going to tangle with Kerrigan. That marshal is bad business, Johnny."

"Is he afraid I'll get my tail shot off?" Burke hotly demanded.

"Maybe," Mason admitted. "I don't know exactly. He likes you, Johnny, and he wants you to take over his job when he's finished—"

"Liking me is one thing and trying to

mother me is another," Burke answered. "If I get my tail shot off, I get it shot off, and that's that."

Mason sighed. "This is what both the sheriff and Abby are scared of, Johnny. Forget I said it." His voice changed. "When I came over the ridge, I saw three men down below. You know who they were?"

"Kerrigan, Matthews, and Wilton," Burke answered. "They just left here. What were they doing?"

"Spread out like they were looking for a sign. I didn't know who they were but I thought they were trying to pick up the trail of the men who held up the stage."

"Probably busy mixing up their own trails," Burke said. "This is one time it won't do 'em any good to ride over their own tracks. This time we got a witness." He nodded toward Lillian Gray. "Take her into town, Ike, and find her a place to stay. Then send somebody out here to bring in this wreck."

"Okay, Johnny, you're the boss. But what are you going to be doing? You're not—" His eyes went down the road in the direction Kerrigan and his two men had gone.

"I'm going after a warrant for the arrest of Brad Matthews," John Burke answered. "I'm going to toss him in jail and I'm going to start sweating him. Before midnight, by the lord Harry, I'll know where that money is. Before daylight, I'll have it in the bank where it belongs."

Admiration showed in Mason's eyes. And something that looked like caution. "By golly, I believe you're the man to get the job done. But you had better take me with you, Johnny. You've got a job cut out for yourself."

"I'll see you in town," Burke answered. "And stop talking like an old woman."

HE STOPPED long enough to introduce Lillian Gray to Ike Mason and to tell her that Mason would see to her safety and comfort, then he scrambled up the slope to the scrub cedar where he had tied his horse and swung into the saddle and headed for Macklin. He took the same short cut he had used to beat Kerrigan to the scene of the hold-up, for two reasons. He wanted to beat Kerrigan back to town if he could. He also wanted to avoid meeting the man on the road to Macklin.

In his secret heart he knew he could not guarantee what he would do if he met Kerrigan, Matthews, and Wilton again, especially Matthews now that the man was positively identified as a killer.

As he rode toward Macklin the thought kept coming back to his mind that Lillian Gray was a beautiful woman. He found himself comparing her with Abby Browder. Abby had a quiet, grave serenity that was like the promise of rest to a weary man but Lillian Gray had a heady beauty that sent the blood pounding faster and faster still through a man's veins.

He tried to put these thoughts out of his mind, for deep in him was the knowledge that he loved Abby sincerely. In spite of this knowledge, he kept thinking of Lillian Gray. She had brought something into his life, something that had not been there before. The feeling of personal crisis grew strong in him and he sensed that somehow through this woman and this hold-up his life was coming to a decision point. Here was the cross-roads, here was where a man turned to the right or to the left. A man had to turn blindly, not knowing what was down either trail. Kerrigan and Matthews and Wilton were forcing him down one trail. The sheriff, who knew him, was

warning him of dangers down that trail. And Lillian Gray was along that trail somewhere, in a way that he could sense but could not see clearly or understand at all.

And Abby Browder was along another trail.

When he reached Macklin, he went first of all to report to the sheriff.

CHAPTER IV

SHERIFF BROWDER, a hollow-eyed ghost propped up on pillows in a shaded bedroom, listened angrily to what he had to say. When he had finished, the sheriff swung long legs out from under the sheets. "By God, I'll go get Brad Matthews myself!"

Rising to his feet, the sheriff took a single step. He would have fallen on his face if Burke had not caught him. Burke helped him back to bed. Sweat was pouring from his face from the effort of getting out of bed and standing up. "I—can't make it, Johnny," the old man whispered. "Go get your warrant and get Matthews. With him in jail, Kerrigan and Wilton will have to do something. Go on, boy."

Burke rose to his feet. Abby was coming into the room. She had heard the talk. She walked with him out the front door.

Abby Browder had gray eyes and a sun-browned face and brown hair. The eyes were grave now, with the pressure of her knowledge of the things that were coming, had to come. She was a western woman, the descendent of pioneers. Generations of mothers back of her had sent their men out to battle, against a wilderness, against the Indians of that wilderness, and when the wilderness had been pushed back, against the lawless men who have existed on every frontier since the dawn of history. This was her heritage, the sending of men out to

fight. Her mother and her grandmother had done these things. Now it was her turn.

She didn't tell Johnny Burke to be careful, she didn't ask him not to take chances, she didn't wail that he was risking his life, and for what? She kissed him and turned abruptly and went back into the house.

He saw the look in her eyes as she turned away and he knew she was hurrying from him to keep him from seeing that she was on the verge of tears.

He turned, walked slowly down the street. He went first to the chambers of Judge Krim and got the warrant directing him to arrest one Bradford Matthews, on the charge of murder. Folding the legal paper, he slipped it inside his coat pocket.

The sun was low in the west when he came out of the judge's office. Its slanting rays were flowing straight down the main street of the town of Macklin. That main street, as it had been for months now, was jammed. Gold seekers were still coming to this town, every manner of conveyance, ox-drawn covered wagons that had once creaked across the prairies, buggies, wagons, on horseback, even afoot. Macklin was the nearest town to the gold strike in the Sawtooth Hills and every gold seeker headed first for this town. Prospectors got their supplies here, brought their gold here for shipment. Machinery for the mines that were being dug was brought in here from the railroad by freight wagon.

The main street was jammed as far as he could see with men and horses and wagons. Men lounged along the board sidewalks, waiting for sundown and the drink that went with it. From the saloons—and every building that could be made into a saloon had already been made into one—came the continuous rattle of tinny pianos.

The town of Macklin was getting ready for the activities of the night, for drinking, gambling, shooting.

He had to go into that mass of humanity and find a man and arrest him for murder. He had to make that man tell him where the money stolen from the stage coach was hidden.

Finding Matthews ought not to be too hard a job. Kerrigan, and Matthews, hung out at the Silver Palace Saloon. If Matthews was back in town, he ought to be at the Silver Palace.

Far down the street he could see the glaring front of the saloon. Next door to it, he could also see that the building that had previously been vacant was being remodeled. He wondered if another saloon was going to start in this building, in competition to the Silver Palace. It was an idle thought. What difference would another saloon make? There were far from enough saloons in Macklin to meet the thirst of the men swarming there.

Feeling of his left coat pocket, he made certain he had his handcuffs. He checked his gun, to see that it was fully loaded and that it slipped readily from the holster. Then he started walking, very slowly and casually, like he was just taking a stroll to see what the town looked like, down the main street of Macklin, toward the Silver Palace Saloon.

A dozen friends tried to stop him and ask him about the holdup. To each of them he gave the same answer, a shake of the head. When he reached the Silver Palace, he saw that a covered passageway was being built from the saloon to the vacant building next door. The Silver Palace was expanding.

He pushed open the batwing doors and entered the saloon.

TO THE right was a long bar with a frosted mirror. On the shelf under

the mirror, bottles were arranged in tasteful displays. The saloon was fairly quiet, not the smoke-filled dive noisy with the rattle of dice, the clatter of glasses, the roar of conversation, the bang of the tinny piano that it would become later. Burke drifted to the bar.

"Whiskey," he said to the bartender. Ed Matkins was behind the bar. He knew the man. He could see that Matkins wanted to talk. "That hold-up, Johnny—" Matkins began.

"I haven't got a thing on it, Ed," Burke answered.

"You got any ideas who did it?"

"Not yet."

There was a worried frown on Matkins' face. "Why would they hold up an inbound stage, Johnny? I just don't see any reason for it?"

"Maybe they were new in the business," Burke hazarded. He finished his drink. "Brad Matthews around?"

"In the back room," the bartender answered. "Say! You don't think—"

Burke rolled a cigarette. He carefully fitted each morsel of tobacco into place, turned the tube in his fingers, licked the edge of the paper. "I don't think," he said. "I'll go back and talk to Brad."

The bartender watched him as he moved casually across the big room toward the door at the back. Brad Matthews was in the back room. Burke knew what that fact might easily mean but he let no indication of his knowledge show on his face. He opened the door of the back room.

Three men were seated around a big table. Kerrigan, Wilton, and Matthews. Three men—and one woman. Lillian Gray.

She was laughing when he entered the room. She saw him. The laugh went into quick silence.

He stepped quickly through the door and closed it behind him.

Eyes turned toward him. He stood with his back to the door, aware of the quick silence that his entrance had caused, aware also of one startling fact—Lillian Gray was here!

He had not expected to find her here. Matthews, Kerrigan, Wilton, yes, but Lillian Gray, no!

Yet she was here. She was sitting at a table drinking casually with three men that he knew were his enemies. She had been laughing at something one of them had said.

"I see you know these people," Burke said.

Lillian Gray's face changed. "I—"

"What's it to you, deputy?" Kerrigan asked. The marshal's hands were in plain sight on the top of the table, as were Wilton's. Matthews' hands were out of sight under the table.

"When I ask you a question, you can answer it," Burke said. The thin trace of a flush appeared on Kerrigan's face. "Don't take your hands off the top of the table," Burke added.

The room was suddenly hot and quiet.

"Do you know these people?" Burke spoke again.

"Mr. Kerrigan I've know for a long time," she answered. "Mr. Wilton and Mr. Matthews I just met."

"Ah."

THE silence was becoming a painful thing. Lillian Gray had washed her face, he saw, and had applied powder and rouge. Under the powder the bruise on her forehead was scarcely visible. Muscles moved in her throat but no sound came. She was watching him, she was watching Kerrigan, there was something she wanted to say but she was too scared to say it.

"You've known Kerrigan for some time?" Burke spoke.

"Yes."

"And Wilton and Matthews, too?"

"No."

"Did you ever see either of them before?"

The muscles moved in her throat again. "No," she said.

Inside of him, John Burke was aware of sudden sickness. She was telling him that she would not identify Matthews as the man, or as one of the men, who had held up the stage.

In that moment, Johnny Burke learned the feeling of betrayal. It is a sick, heavy feeling deep inside of a man. It is a feeling that hits a man a knockout blow where he lives. He had this feeling now. "You—you never saw Matthews before you came to Macklin?"

"No."

"You didn't see him at the stage holdup?"

Her face was milk white. "No."

Burke pulled his gun. He pulled it very quickly, in the sure knowledge that if he didn't pull it quickly, he would never get it free of leather. Matthews' shoulder hunched forward as he grabbed for his own weapon under the table. The killer's hand stopped moving as he saw Burke's gun covering him.

"Pull your gun and drop it on the floor," Burke said.

Matthews flashed an appealing glance at Kerrigan but the marshal was not looking in his direction right now. Kerrigan was watching Burke, and waiting.

Slowly, an inch at a time, Matthews pulled his gun free from the holster. There was a clump as it hit the floor. He lifted his hands.

"What's the meaning of this?" Kerrigan spoke.

Burke did not answer. "Stand up," he said to Matthews. "Walk toward me." With his left hand he pulled

the handcuffs from his pocket. He snapped one steel link around Matthews' right wrist, left the other link dangle free.

"You!" The muzzle of the gun swung to cover Lillian Gray. "Stand up and come here. Kerrigan! Keep your hands on the table!"

The town marshal froze in his chair. Lillian Gray looked at Burke as if she did not understand what he had said.

"Stand up, I said, and come here!"

Her face blank, her eyes still without comprehension of anything but the meaning of his order, she rose to her feet and came toward him.

He snapped the empty bracelet of the cuffs on her wrist before she even began to realize what he was doing.

"Hey!" Brad Matthews rumbled deep in his throat, as the lock clicked home.

"Damn you!" Lillian Gray hissed.

"Hey!" Kerrigan yelled, from the table.

The gun covered Kerrigan and Wilton.

"I got my dog out," Burke said. "I wouldn't advise you to start barking."

HIS move had taken every person in the room by complete surprise. They might have been expecting him to arrest Matthews but they were not expecting him to put handcuffs on both Matthews and Lillian Gray. They didn't understand the meaning of it.

"Jim!" Lillian Gray whispered.

Kerrigan ignored her.

"What kind of games did you think you could play with me?" Burke spoke.

"I don't know what you mean," she answered.

"Then I'll tell you what I mean. You told me Brad Matthews fired the shot that killed Gene Wicker."

Her eyes were pools of naked fear.

"When I come here to arrest Mat-

thews, I find you in his company. And you tell me you've never seen him before."

She was looking at him but out of the corner of her eyes she was watching Kerrigan. "It's a lie, Jim!" she spoke. "I didn't say any such thing. This deputy is lying."

In the silence that followed John Burke grunted. All the contempt that he could not put into words, the contempt for liars and thieves and no-good wastrels, was in that sound, especially contempt for liars.

"Is it a lie?" he said. "Well, you're under arrest, both of you. And I'm going on the witness stand and testify under oath that Lillian Gray positively identified Brad Matthews as the man who fired the shot that killed Gene Wicker. Then you can have your turn, explaining to the court and the jury how you happened to change your mind about identifying him. We'll see which one the jury thinks is a liar! Out the door, you two. Start walking!"

They obeyed him, Matthews rumbling curses under his breath, Lillian Gray looking as if she would like to scratch his eyes out. They went out the door and into the saloon.

"I wouldn't try following," Burke said to Kerrigan and Wilton.

They understood what he meant. Neither of them moved.

He marched them out of the saloon and along the crowded main street of Macklin, to the frank stares of the astonished onlookers, Matthews, a hulking bear of a man cursing beneath his breath, Lillian Gray, a beautiful but terribly frightened woman in a flowered dress.

Johnny Burke was a coiled snake following behind them, very much on the alert for an attempt to rescue them before he could get them behind bars.

The attempt was not made.

He locked Matthews in one of the four cells in the jail. Lillian Gray he took into the stuffy little office. He wanted to talk to her. From the expression on her face, he knew she wanted to talk to him, if only to tell him how glad she would be to cut his throat.

CHAPTER V

"YOU'VE killed me!" Lillian Gray said desperately. "You've murdered me just as surely as if you pulled your gun and shot me through the heart."

"You're telling me!" Burke answered. "You identified Matthews for me. Now you're telling me that you're in danger because you identified him. Why didn't you think of that in the first place? You didn't have to identify him, you know. You volunteered the information."

"I didn't know Kerrigan was side-kicking Matthews when I identified him!" she answered.

"You didn't know—"

She shook her head and spat words at him. "I saw three men riding up to the wreck. They were too far away for me to recognize them. When they were talking to you, I was hiding under the coach and Matthews was the only one I could see. If I had known Kerrigan was with him, do you think I would have identified Matthews?"

"You seem right impressed with Kerrigan?" he said slowly.

A shudder passed over her body. "I am!" she answered.

"Mind telling me why?"

"I'm not telling you anything!" she flared. "I've told you too much already!"

"Where's Ike Mason?" he asked.

"How do I know?"

"I left you with him."

"I'm not with him now and I don't know, or care, where he is!"

"Where was he the last time you saw him?"

"None of your darned business!"

Ever since he had found this woman in Kerrigan's company, the fear that something might have happened to Ike Mason had been a dark shadow in the back of his mind. There were other shadows there too, Kerrigan, and Wilton, and Matthews, and the money that had to be in the Bank of Macklin by noon of the next day. In the back of the jail he could hear Matthews yelling that he wanted to talk to a lawyer and he could hear Sam Harker, the old attendant who took care of the place and supplied the prisoners with meals, telling Matthews that he might as well shut up. "Johnny Burke put you in here and here you're going to stay until he tells me to turn you loose."

He could tell that she was also listening to the talk going on back there. "Where's the money?" he said quietly.

"It's—" She was listening to Matthews and Harker yell at each other. She started to answer him before she realized what he had asked her.

Fury burned crimson holes in her cheeks. She was sitting facing him and she slapped him with all the strength in her body, a blow that gave him the impression that he had been kicked by a mule.

"What money? I don't know what you're talking about. Damn you!"

He caught her arm as she tried to slap him again. He didn't mind the slap. He had learned at least part of what he wanted to know. She knew where the money was!

"Were you in on the hold-up?" he said.

"Me?" The accusation left her speechless. "Do you think I'd a been

on that stage if I'd a known they were going to hold it up? Do you think I would have risked a broken neck or a charge of shotgun slugs? What kind of a fool do you think I am?"

"Just a plain fool," he answered. "Playing a deadly game and not really knowing what you're doing. That's what a fool is. A man or a woman who don't know what he's doing."

"How does that definition fit on you?"

"Fine," he answered. "Except that I know I'm being a fool. Where's the money?"

She laughed at him, a harsh mirthless sound. "You find it!" she said.

A step sounded in the hall. The door was pushed open. Burke had his gun out the second the step sounded. The tired face of Ike Mason looked into the room. "There you are," he said to John Burke. He looked at Lillian Gray and scowled. "Hi, Dancing Lil," he said, and came on into the room.

"You know me?" Lillian Gray whispered.

"Yeah," Ike Mason said. "I just came up main street looking for Johnny here, and I heard he had brought you and Matthews this way. I talked to some people who knew you and what you are doing here." Mason looked at John Burke. "This is Dancing Lil," he said. "Maybe you've heard of her before. She's run dance halls in half the mining camps in the west."

"UH!" Burke said. He, and every other male in the Southwest country had heard of the woman known as Dancing Lil. She had been in Tombstone and other towns running elaborate dancing establishments for the entertainment of the miners. She was a sort of a queen of the dance halls. He looked at her. "You told me you were

coming here to open a dress shop," he said.

"She did?" Ike Mason said. "Well. She actually came here, so I was told, to open up a dance hall in that vacant building next door to the Silver Palace. They've already begun cleaning up the place and building a runway between it and the saloon. And that ain't all, Johnny," Mason said, pausing.

"No!" Lillian Gray spoke huskily.

"Kerrigan brought her here," Mason went calmly on. "To open up a dance hall with him as a partner. And that still ain't all, Johnny."

"No!" Lillian Gray screamed.

"Go on," Burke said.

"She's Kerrigan's wife!" Mason said.

For a long time, Burke looked at the woman he had known as Lillian Gray. She was fighting hysteria, he could see. He let her keep on fighting it. "What happened to you?" he said to Mason.

"Everything!" his fellow deputy answered bitterly. "You told me to bring her into town. I was bringing her, riding double, when we run onto Kerrigan and his two pals."

"Uh-huh. Go on."

Mason was shamefaced. "They pulled a gun on me, Johnny, and made me get off. Then she rode my horse away. I guess she rode it all the way to town."

"How'd you get here?"

"Walked."

"I knew Jim should have shot you!" Lillian Gray spoke. In that moment, as never before, she was certainly Jim Kerrigan's wife. All the hard, ruthless brutality of the marshal was in her. It came out in the tone of her voice.

"You're maybe right, at that," Ike Mason said.

She was silent.

Mason turned to Burke. "They had a Mexican with 'em," he said.

"What?" Burke spoke sharply.

"He had a burro with bells on its legs," Mason went on. "They had him tied to the saddle and they took him off with them."

"What for?"

"Ask her," Mason said, nodding toward Kerrigan's wife.

"Why?" Burke spoke. He got no answer. He was expecting none. From Mason's description, he recognized the Mexican as Pablo Nunes, the old sheepherder who had come past the wrecked stage coach while they were still there. Pablo had gone on down the hill and had obviously run into Kerrigan. They had kidnapped the old Mexican. Why?

Burke turned the question over and over in his mind and could see no answer. He let it go.

"Do you think you're in danger from your husband?" he asked.

She didn't answer.

"A few minutes ago you were telling me that I had as good as murdered you by saying that you had identified Matthews as one of the men in the hold-up. You seemed plenty scared of Kerrigan then. Are you still scared?"

SHE shook her head. "I've said too much. I'm not going to tell you anything."

"Surely your husband wouldn't threaten you?"

Muscles worked in her throat but no sound came.

"Do you think he will feel you have betrayed him to the law? Do you think he feels you have double-crossed him?"

A vein was pounding in her forehead.

"Is that why you're scared of him?"

A vein was throbbing in her throat.

"If you double-crossed him and betrayed a pal, and maybe him, too, you think the fact that you are his wife will make no difference to him?"

She shook her head violently. "It won't make any difference! I know him."

"Then that's why you're scared of him?"

"Yes!"

She was breathing with difficulty. Waiting, Burke turned over in his mind the problems facing him. He was beginning to think he saw a way out of one of them. Not all, just one. Maybe the least important, maybe the most important, depending on whose viewpoint was taken.

"Where's the money?" he said quietly.

A shake of the head was his answer. She knew where the money was. She had no intention of revealing this information.

The chair scraped as Burke got to his feet.

"Goodbye," he said, to the woman he had known as Lillian Gray.

She stared at him from panic-stricken eyes. He opened the door of the office. "You're free," he said.

"You— you mean —"

"I guess I won't be seeing you any more," he said.

He had never seen such fear on the face of any man or any woman. It was not a good sight. He steeled himself against himself, against the thought that he might relent. She was Kerrigan's wife. She was intimate with thieves and killers. She had come to Macklin to open a dance hall, to take her percentage out of the work of dancing girls.

"I'm— I'm a woman," she whispered pleadingly.

"I'm a deputy sheriff," he said.

"He'll— he'll kill me."

"He will?"

"It's your duty, as a deputy sheriff, to protect me."

"It's also my duty," he said slowly,

"to find the money that belongs to the Bank of Macklin."

"Oh," she said.

"Goodbye," he said.

She stared at him. His face was rock-hard, with no trace of pity on it. He kept it that way.

"You're going to send me away, if I don't tell you where the money is?" she whispered.

"Of course," he answered.

She collapsed in her chair. "It's— it's hidden under the boards in the back room—of the Palace Saloon," she whispered, through wailing tears.

They locked her, still crying, into a cell, and told Sam Harker that he was not to turn her loose or to let anybody under any circumstances get in to see her. Then they went back to the little office. In Ike Mason's eyes, as he stared at his fellow deputy, was awed respect and sombre misgivings. "You know where the money is, Johnny!"

"Darned right we know. And we'll get it, tonight. And Bob Green will have it back inside his bank before sun-up."

"You've done a whale of a job, Johnny. But tell me, knowing Kerrigan would kill her for betraying a pal, would you actually have sent her out to face him? Would you have done it, Johnny?"

"You ask the gosh darnedest questions!" John Burke snarled. "I probably would, but I don't know."

Ike Mason grinned. "That's what I thought, Johnny."

Burke said, slowly, "I intended to kick the information I wanted out of Brad Matthews. But when I learned she was scared to death of Kerrigan, it seemed easier to get what I wanted out of her. I got it. Now we know where the money is and we can get it."

Conflicting emotions moved in him.

He was elated because he had discovered where the money was hidden. But mingled with that elation was the sober knowledge that he didn't have the money where it belonged. And there was still one man very much to be reckoned with—town marshal Jim Kerrigan.

Burke loosened his gun in its holster. "Come on," he said to Ike Mason. "We're going after that money, now."

Outside, the daylight had turned into dusk. Night was coming down. Side by side, they went out of the door, into the growing night.

Ahead of them, somewhere down main street, something else was growing—a sound, the muted, clamorous roar of many voices blended into a single ominous note.

Yells, shrieks, curses, all these were blended together into a single sound.

"What do you think?" Ike Mason questioned, uneasily.

Burke shook his head. "I've quit thinking. Come on. We'll go see."

CHAPTER VI

PEOPLE were running down main street and turning into a side street from which the main volume of sound was coming.

"Kerrigan's caught somebody!" Burke heard a man yell.

"You hear that?" Mason asked.

"Uh-huh." They turned the corner into the side street. In front of them probably fifty men were gathered. Others were standing along the sidewalks looking on, taking no part in what was taking place but not attempting to stop it, either. The main knot of men—saloon loungers, loafers, miners who had refused to work—were knotted around a big dry-goods box that had been placed under a spreading cottonwood tree. From this group the

clamor was coming.

A wizened, trembling figure was being hoisted to the top of the box. His hands and his feet were tied. His hat had been knocked off.

"Pablo Nunes," John Burke said. "There's the Mexican you were telling me about."

"What the hell are they doing with him?" Mason gulped. He spoke because he felt he had to say something and he didn't know anything else to say. He knew what they were doing. John Burke knew what they were doing.

It was a mob. The mob was going to hang the Mexican shepherd.

"Why?" Mason gulped.

"You ought to have it figured out by now," Burke bitterly answered. "Listen!"

Kerrigan had climbed up on another box. The town marshal was waving the mob to silence.

"Shut up!" voices called from the crowd. "Jim's got something to say!" "Keep quiet and listen."

"Gentlemen!" Kerrigan said. He had a strong, compelling voice that rang through the group. Silence came quickly. Kerrigan waited until he had the complete attention of the crowd.

"I just want you to know these things," he said. "Today, at noon, the inbound stage was held up a few miles out of town. I imagine all of you have heard about the hold-up by now, but there are certain things I am certain you haven't heard about because the person from which the information should come is not likely to do any talking."

He paused. Behind him, someone was starting a fire of dry-goods boxes. He waited a few moments for the flames to leap up enough so that everyone could see him.

"As soon as I learned of the hold-

up, I rode immediately to the scene, to offer my assistance to the deputies who were handling the case. Gentlemen—" His voice dropped a notch. "I'll bet none of you can guess what happened."

"What did happen, Jim?" a voice called.

"Yeah, Jim, tell us what happened."

Kerrigan nodded. "My offer of help in catching the hold-up men and killers was bluntly refused by the deputy sheriff who claimed to be in charge. I was, moreover, ordered away from the scene by this same deputy sheriff."

HE PAUSED again, to let the weight of his words sink in. "This deputy was holding a shotgun on me at the time and I had no choice except to obey him. Consequently, I was forced to leave the scene of the hold-up. I need not remind you that I am a duly appointed town marshal—"

A roar went up from the crowd.

"Run Jim Kerrigan away, this deputy did!" an enraged voice yelled.

"Wouldn't take any help, this deputy wouldn't!" another voice shouted.

"That big lying—" Ike Mason started to say.

"Shut up," John Burke said.

"But he's making out that you wouldn't let him help—"

"I didn't let him help."

"But the way he tells it, it sounds like you didn't want to catch the hold-up men!" Mason protested.

"That's the way *he* tells it," Burke answered. "There's more coming. Listen."

Kerrigan was waving the crowd to silence again.

"I just wanted you to know that in the face of no co-operation from the sheriff's men, your town marshal went ahead and captured the killer who held up the stage coach today."

A hush fell over the crowd.

"Go to the jail and get a shotgun and a Winchester," John Burke said to Ike Mason. "Come back here and get on top of one of these buildings."

"But —"

"Move! And if you have to kill somebody in Kerrigan's mob, don't hesitate."

Mason left, on the run.

Behind Kerrigan, the flames from the burning boxes were reaching up. He was outlined against them.

Pablo Nunes screamed, and jumped, or fell, off the box. The shepherd tried to run. Rough hands grabbed him and lifted him back up on the box. Two toughs climbed up to hold him.

"See, he's trying to run," Kerrigan spoke. "He knows he's guilty. Gentlemen, part of the loot taken from the stage was found in this killer's possession!"

Reaching into his pocket, Kerrigan pulled out a handful of silver dollars. "Here it is! Silver for the bank. Does anyone doubt that we have captured the right man?"

A roar was his answer.

Kerrigan's voice boomed through the crowd. "Gents, I leave it to you. What do you want to do with this killer? The sheriff's office is too weak to act. Do you want to take a chance of turning him over to the sheriff, and maybe having him go free to kill somebody else, or do you—"

His voice was drowned out in the growing tumult.

"String that murderin' Mex up!"

"Hang him!"

A rope spun snake-like through the air. The first cast missed the limb of the cottonwood at which it was aimed.

Pablo Nunes screamed. He probably did not understand the words the men were shouting but he clearly understood the meaning of the rope. He

didn't know why they were doing it but he had no question of the fact—they were going to hang him. He tried to jerk free again, useless, since he was tied hand and foot, but he tried anyhow. The two men held him.

On the second cast, the rope went over the limb.

John Burke fired one quick shot into the air. He couldn't wait any longer for Ike Mason. In another minute or two, Pablo Nunes would be kicking his heels on air.

They hadn't seen him. In the gathering darkness, they didn't know he was present, until they heard the shot. The clamor went into quick silence. Faces turned in his direction.

"It's the deputy!" he heard a man gasp.

"It's Johnny Burke!"

On top of the box, Kerrigan was staring hard in the direction of the shot.

"I'm coming through!" Burke called. He moved forward. A lane opened grudgingly before him. He hoped desperately that Ike Mason was up on top of one of the buildings on either side of the street, covering him. If Ike wasn't up there, he was facing fifty guns.

HE WAS, moreover, facing what might very well be a trap, and knew it. This mob scene might well have been planned to pull him into it and make him a target for fifty guns.

He didn't dare look around to see if Ike Mason was up there. A moment's inattention might put a bullet in him. He walked forward. The lane opened in front of him. It closed behind him. Men formed a circle around him, a circle that moved as he moved. He kept going in one direction, straight toward the box. Kerrigan looked down at him.

"Well?" the marshal said.

"You're under —" His voice was drowned in a yell from behind him.

"*Hang him, too!*"

He heard the shout. His gun covered Kerrigan. "Tell 'em to shut —"

Thuck! A pistol barrel came down across the back of his head.

He fell forward to his knees, dazed, stunned, only half-conscious. He tried to lift the gun in his hand, to cover Kerrigan. The town marshal was gone from the box. He pulled the trigger, blindly, the bullet ploughing into the ground. He was kicked from behind.

"*Kill the son of!*"

"Shoot him!"

"Stomp him!"

"Hang him!"

Voices roared around him. The gun was kicked from his hand. He was still on his knees. A heavy boot landed on his jaw. He hit the ground, face down. He tasted dirt in his mouth, felt it grit in his eyes. He was a cooked goose and he knew it.

Facing fifty guns was something to think about, not something to do. Somebody would get behind you, you would do down under fifty men. What if they were going to hang an innocent man? What difference did one less Mexican sheepherder make?

He was Johnny Burke. To him, even the life of a Mexican sheepherder was valuable, if that herder was innocent. He was a man who fought for the under-dog. He had gone in to fight for Pablo Nunes. Now—

A boot crashed into his side.

"Git the ropes ready!"

"We'll hang both of 'em!"

Dirt gritted in his mouth. He tried to reach his gun, lying on the ground. It was kicked out of his reach. Somebody tried to jump up and come down on top of him with a pair of heavy boots.

The only thing that saved him, even for a moment, was the fact that too

many men were around him. There were so many of them they were getting in each other's way. They couldn't get to him. Hands were reaching for him. He felt the grit of dirt between his teeth. There was a roaring sound in his head. The screams around him, the many voices, were blending into a dim noise, a muted, far-away sound.

To him, the crack of the rifle was just a muted *pop*, a far-away noise without any real meaning, like the explosion of a kid's popgun. He didn't hear the bullet thud home in flesh, didn't hear the sudden cruse.

He did hear the sound die around him, quickly.

"What the hell's that?" a voice gasped.

"I'm shot!" another voice said.

"Who the hell fired that shot?"

Johnny Burke sucked air into his lungs, and strength with it.

"Help me. I'm shot."

"Somebody with a rifle——"

THE rifle spoke again, *crack*, a sharp, ringing, spiteful sound that talked of sudden death. The bullet thudded home.

On the ground, Johnny Burke sat up.

"Get 'em, Ike!" he screamed. "Shoot the sons of ——! They're wrong ones, every one of them. Let 'em have lead!"

The rifle answered him!

He knew what was happening. Ike Mason had reached the top of a building. Ike was shooting down into the mob.

The mob discovered the source of the shots at the same instant. Guns roared, a smashing, cracking, many-tongued and ragged volley. In the darkness fingers of flame reached upward toward a figure crouched on top of a roof.

The rifle answered them. A man

went down.

"Git 'em, Ike!" Johnny Burke yelled. The rifle spat fire downward.

From the rifleman's perch, this shooting down was like shooting fish in a barrel. Bullets reached up at him. He ignored them. His figure was dimly visible on the roof, a head laid flat against the stock of a rifle pointing downward. Fire leaped downward.

On the ground, Johnny Burke found his gun.

Two guns were going now, a rifle on the roof and a revolver on the ground.

The mob became fifty—or what was left of fifty—frightened men. Heavy feet pounded as men ran in both directions along the street, seeking shelter, seeking cover, seeking some place to get away from the deadly fire from the rooftop. Rifle and revolver bullets followed them.

Johnny Burke was on his feet. "Kerrigan!"

There was no answer. The flames from the fire leaped up. On the ground, a bound figure writhed and tried to crawl away. Other figures were crawling, or sitting up, or lying still, targets of the rifleman's bullets, targets in which lead had gone home.

Kerrigan was not one of them.

Down the street, from some doorway, a bullet screamed up the street, whistling past Johnny Burke.

Some of the mob had found refuge and were shooting back from cover.

He was a target here in the empty street.

Grabbing the bound figure of Pablo Nunes, he tossed the herder over his shoulder, staggered into the alley behind the store where the rifleman crouched on the roof. He was safe here, for a few minutes, but he suspected it was for only a few minutes.

"Hey, Ike!" he yelled.

A sound came from the roof above.

The building was two stories high but a stairway led from the alley to the second floor and a ladder led from the stairway to the roof. Shoes rasped as footsteps came down the ladder, then down the stairs.

"Ike, you saved——" He stopped, appalled.

It wasn't Ike Mason coming down the steps. It was Abby Browder. She was holding the rifle firmly in both hands.

"Abby!" he whispered. "Where—where did you come from? I thought—Where's Ike?"

"At the jail," she said tonelessly. "With a knife in him."

"What?"

"I found him there. He said to bring a gun and get on top of a roof quick. He also said to tell you that Sam Har-ker is dead—a knife, Ike said—and that Matthews and the woman are gone."

"Uh!" Burke whispered. "Ike? How is he? Will he be all right? Abby——"

"On the way here, I saw Dr. Carter. I sent him to Ike. He was alive when I saw him last and I think he will be all right."

SHE stood on the bottom steps in the darkness of the alley, a firm, resolute little figure.

"What—how did you happen to come to the jail, Abby?"

"To tell you that——" Her voice broke under the pressure of the emotional load she was carrying, then came strong again. "To tell you that daddy is dead."

"Uh?" he gasped.

She nodded. "He said you were going to need help and he insisted he was well enough to come and help you. I couldn't stop him. He got out of bed and got dressed, and collapsed."

"Oh!"

"He said for me to tell you that you're sheriff now."

In that moment, Johnny Burke didn't, couldn't say anything. Around him was the evidence of sudden death. Out on the street moments before bullets had been whistling around him. There were dead men out on that street. Up at the jail there was one dead man, Sam Harker, the old turn-key, and another man with a knife in him, Ike Mason. At Sheriff Browder's home, a still figure was lying on the bed, still forever.

"I'm sorry, Abby," he said at last.

"It happens to all of us sometime," she answered. "It's part of living, dying is."

"Yes," he answered. "But there is one man in this town who has delayed that part of his living too long."

He was thinking of Jim Kerrigan.

"Abby," he said, "that fight out in the street where you saved my life was just the start of the fight there's going to be in this town tonight. Kerrigan's got forty to fifty men with him. Abby, I'm going to have to clean them out, tonight. Tomorrow is too late. It's got to be done tonight."

He was thinking of the money that had to be recovered. He knew, now, that the money was gone again. Even if Lillian Gray had told him the truth when she said it was hidden under the floor of the back room of the Silver Palace—a fact which he now doubted—it probably was gone by now.

Some of it, at least, Kerrigan had tried to use as evidence in getting Pablo Nunes lynched. Burke had laid the Mexican on the ground and had forgotten him. A groan came from the body. He stooped and cut the ropes. Pablo, whimpering, tried to get to his feet and kiss Burke's hands.

"It's got to be done tonight, Abby,"

Burke said.

"I know," she answered. "I'm here to help you."

"You?" he gasped. He had been planning on sending her home.

"Don't tell me I'm not, Johnny," she said. "I'm fighting with you tonight. Me and daddy's gun." She lifted the rifle in her hands.

"But——"

"I know," she spoke quickly. "I'm likely to get killed. And so are you. What reason do you think I would have for living if you were gone?"

He didn't know how to answer. His reason for wanting to send her away had been the sure knowledge that he would have no reason for living if she were gone.

"Okay, Abby," he said, softly.

CHAPTER VII

AFTER the shots stopped, the town of Macklin was quiet. Where the roar of many voices had sounded, now was stillness. It was an odd sort of quiet. Listening to it, Johnny Burke had the impression he could hear people holding their breath. He led Abby and Pablo along the alley to the next cross street, turned down it to the main street. It was before the days of street lighting. Darkness gripped the town. There were people in this darkness, many of them. He could hear them walking very softly, he could hear them talking in low voices, he could hear them whispering.

The sound of shots had echoed all over Macklin. The inhabitants were coming to see what had happened, but being wise, they were staying in the shadows. They weren't walking down the main street. The street was deserted. Horses tied to the hitching rails moved uneasily in the darkness.

Down the street lights were burning

in the saloons, including the Silver Palace. Burke could see figures moving in front of the lights. They moved very quickly, darting along the street.

Most people did not know why the guns had talked or when they would start talking again. Most people were keeping under cover.

The pianos in the saloons were quiet.

"Wait here," Burke said to Abby and to Pablo.

"Johnny——"

"I'm just going scouting," he said. "I'll be back and I won't start anything."

He left them in the doorway of a closed store, Abby holding the rifle ready.

He was back in five minutes.

"They're all in the Silver Palace," he said. "Kerrigan, Kerrigan's wife, Matthews, Wilton. And all their pals. They're holding a pow-wow and deciding what to do next."

"They know there's only one deputy," Abby spoke. "How many are there?"

"Fifty, maybe," he answered.

"Fifty against two," he heard her whisper. He knew she was thinking what it meant to face just one gun. There was death in a gun and death was the last adventure of any man.

She was the daughter of a western sheriff, the daughter of a long line of pioneers. She knew what guns meant. She knew what it meant to face fifty guns. The meaning was in her toneless whisper.

"I don't think so," he said, quietly.

"What?"

"I don't think it needs to be two against fifty," he said.

She didn't understand him. She stood in the doorway, the rifle held grimly, and looked at him, trying to see him in the darkness, trying to grasp his meaning. She didn't for one split part

of a second think he was suggesting that the odds against them were too great. She knew him. He was Johnny Burke. He was a fighter, not a runner. So she knew he was not hinting that they run. But what did he mean?

"Watch and see," he said softly.

His heels clumped on the gravel as he walked to the center of main street. Then his voice rang out in the darkness, bell-clear and compelling.

"I want fifty honest men!"

He was talking to the men he knew were in the shadows, in the store fronts, looking out darkened doors, watching from behind windows.

His answer was—silence. He could hear feet rasping as men turned toward the sound of his voice, he could sense faces looking at him. He knew they were wondering what madness was this. What crazy fool dared to stand in the middle of the street when the guns had hardly stopped talking and say he wanted fifty honest men.

"I'm Johnny Burke," his voice rang out. "And I want fifty honest men!"

THERE were, he knew, in these shadows and in this darkness, men who knew him, knew him for what he was. There were men here who knew Sheriff Browder, knew him too, for what he was. Johnny Burke was betting that the men who knew him would answer his call for help. Would they? He could hear the pound of his own heart as he waited for an answer.

"It's Johnny Burke," he heard someone say.

"What do you want, Johnny?" a voice called out.

He hesitated, thinking what he wanted to say and how he wanted to say it. So much depended on what he said now! If he could reach these men in the darkness, tell them of his need,

well—he knew them. He knew the response he could get from them, if he handled them right.

"Sheriff Browder is dead," he said, slowly, so everyone could hear. "I'm acting sheriff."

A buzz of voices answered him. There were men here who knew, respected, and admired the man who had worn the sheriff's star in this county.

"What do I want?" his voice rang out. "I want help. There are fifty criminals in the Silver Palace Saloon. Included among them are the men who held up the stage today and killed Gene Wicker. You ask me what I want? I want fifty honest men to go with me to the Silver Palace and clear out the nest of rattlesnakes hiding there! Who will go with Johnny Burke into the Silver Palace Saloon?"

His voice died out. Silence answered him. He could sense, he could feel, wondering awe in the darkness around him. But—no one spoke. It was a difficult thing he was asking, a dangerous thing. Some of the men who went with him to the Silver Palace Saloon would never see the sun rise.

He waited. There was no sound.

"I'll go with Johnny Burke!" Abby's clear voice rang out in the silence.

Her feet grated on the gravel as she came into the street to stand beside him.

"I'm Abby Browder," she said, so that anyone listening might hear. "I'll go with Johnny Burke, into the Silver Palace Saloon, or anywhere else that he asks me to go!"

Johnny Burke's heart was up in his mouth then and he was choked inside.

"Me, too!" a man's voice yelled in the darkness. "I'll go with Johnny Burke and Abby Browder and we'll clean out these snakes. Who'll volunteer to bust a cap with me and Johnny Burke!"

In two minutes, he had fifty men. In four minutes, so crowded was that seemingly deserted street, he had a hundred. He could have had two hundred if he had wanted them.

He began to line them up, to make certain they had guns, to send them where he wanted them to go, five down this side street, five down the next street, ten, with rifles, to climb to the tops of the buildings.

From the Silver Palace Saloon a rifle spat viciously in the darkness. Up the street a bullet tore sobbing holes in the air.

The men in the Silver Palace had discovered what was happening.

They were fighting back.

AGAIN the drum of gun fire shivered the darkness of the little town of Macklin. Ten guns, then twenty guns, then more than fifty guns, rifles, revolvers, the heavy boom of an eight-gauge shotgun, the whaaang of a Sharps rifle, a rolling, erratic, uncontrolled but never-ceasing drum-fire rang through the night.

From a side-street, Johnny Burke lined up his men and sent them to their places. He listened to the gun fire, looked at the faces of the men coming to him. "I never knew there could be anything like this," he said. "I mean, all these people willing to help. No, son, no," he said to a twelve-year-old boy lugging an old muzzle-loading shotgun.

"When you're fighting on the right, you don't have to fight alone," Abby said, beside him. "Daddy was always afraid you wouldn't learn that—in time."

"I don't see why I'm not good enough to help," the twelve-year-old protested.

"You are good enough," he said, gently. "It's just that—" He tried to think of the reasons that were some-

where in his mind.

"You see," Abby said.

Down the street, the eight-gauge boomed again, like some ancient cannon roaring in the night. The whaaang of the Sharps rifle answered it. And a man screamed.

"See, boy," Burke said. Slowly and reluctantly, the twelve-year-old nodded.

A circle of kerosene lanterns sitting on the side walk cast a wan glow. The boy turned, walked reluctantly out of the light. A bearded miner came running up.

"We got 'em cornered in the Silver Palace," he panted. "We tried to get 'em to come out and give up but they wouldn't." He pointed down the street. "I've got a couple of kegs of black powder down there. I can pour it into pieces of pipe and put a fuse in it and plug up the ends. That makes a pretty darned good bomb. You want I should—"

Burke nodded slowly. "If they won't come out, blow 'em out. We'll come with you."

On top of a building next to the Silver Palace, he watched the bombs prepared. When they were ready, he stepped to the edge of the flat roof.

"Hold your fire!"

His voice rang out through the darkness. Little by little the shots slackened. When they were completely still, he called out: "You in the saloon, listen."

They were listening. He could tell they were listening. "What the hell do you want?" a bull voice roared at him.

He told them what he had and what he wanted. "We've got bombs. Come out with your hands in the air or we'll blow you out."

It was the fair thing to do. Give trapped men a chance to save their lives.

"Go to hell!" the bull voice roared. It was Matthews talking, down there in the saloon. A rifle snarled upward. The bullet tore a groove across the cheek of Johnny Burke. He leaped back from the edge, nodded to the miner.

The rifle fire leaped up again. Fuze spluttering, the bomb arced through the air and landed on the flat roof of the Silver Palace. It laid there, rolling and sputtering, for a second. Then it let go!

FLAME leaped fifty feet into the air.

Like the blow of a monstrous sledge hammer, the explosion ripped and rocked the night. Pieces of roofing material went into the air, fell in a clumping rain of broken boards.

A hole gaped in the roof of the saloon.

"Drop one through the hole this time."

The miner nodded.

The second bomb floated through the air. It went through the hole. The explosion was muffled, muted. It was followed by the tinkle of falling glass.

Then there was silence, inside and outside the saloon.

Flames began to flicker inside the saloon. They grew quickly. The explosion had broken whisky bottles and the alcohol had caught on fire. In minutes, the saloon would be a white-hot roaring furnace.

"Don't shoot!" the bull voice of Matthews spoke down below. It was a begging, pleading whimper now, with all bravado gone from it. "We're coming out. Don't shoot."

"Come on out," Johnny Burke answered.

Weaponless, hands in air, lighted by the burning saloon behind them, the men began to file out of the saloon. Several were carried out, wounded but still living. From the roof-top, Johnny

Burke watched the scene. He saw Matthews, one arm hanging limp, stagger out. The bear that had been in the man was gone now. He saw Wilton carried out.

"Where's Kerrigan?" he called sharply.

There was no answer.

Off, two blocks away, a gun suddenly snarled. It was answered by a second weapon, then a third. A man came running. "Where's Johnny Burke?"

"Up here," Burke answered.

"We've got Kerrigan cornered!" the words floated up to him. "They was tryin' to sneak out the back alley. We spotted 'em. They ducked into a grocery store."

"Who's with him?"

"The woman," the answer came. "Dancing Lil."

He was clearly outlined in the light from the burning saloon. Faces turned toward him. Men were beginning to move in the direction of the store where Kerrigan was hiding.

"Wait a minute," he called sharply.

Behind him, the miner spoke. "You want me to fix another bomb and blow 'em out of that store?"

He shook his head sharply. The odds had changed. Before, the odds had been fifty to one against him. Now the odds were the other way around. They were fifty—a hundred to one—against Kerrigan.

"I'll get Kerrigan out of there," he said.

Turning, he found Abby standing beside him. She walked with him as he found the ladder that led down from the roof, followed quickly after him, but she did not tell that there was no need for him to go alone into a dark building after Kerrigan. But, as he reached the street, and turned to help her down, he could see that her lips were moving and he knew

that she was praying.

She knew he was fighting a bigger battle here than the battle against Jim Kerrigan. Here, in this night where guns had roared and where a burning saloon was sending long streamers of flame to the sky, he was fighting the battle against all the Jim Kerrigans who might come to Macklin at any future time. The whole town was watching him. He was already acting sheriff. As soon as an election could be held, he would be the elected sheriff. If, here in this blazing night, he showed himself to be the type of man who could go in against a deadly gunman, and fight, and win, the reputation he would make would do more to keep the peace in Macklin than a dozen deputies.

HE WOULD have the respect of the people of Macklin forever. Even the whisper of his name would send law-breakers riding on!

"Johnny Burke will get you if you make trouble in Macklin!" That was what they would say about him. His path would be easier tomorrow if he was a man tonight.

The grocery was dark, a place of shadows. The front door sagged open. Light from the burning saloon sent racing shadows across the front of the store.

Men crowded around him.

"He's in there. You sure you want to go in alone, Johnny? We can get him out, you know."

"I'll get him out," he answered. "Kerrigan!" he called. "Kerrigan, send out your wife."

Minutes passed while he waited for the answer that did not come.

"Kerrigan, send out your wife. I'm coming in. I just want you, Kerrigan, not her."

There was a stir inside. "Don't

shoot," a woman's voice called. "I'm coming out."

She stood in the doorway, her hands down at her side hidden in her flowing skirt, looking up at the flames, the woman he had known as Lillian Gray.

"I thought you said he would kill you," Johnny Burke spoke.

She laughed at him. "Kill me? Never! I was leading you on so you would believe me when you thought you had forced me to tell you where the money was hidden. It was a trap to get you into the back room of the Silver Palace again. If I could get you there, I knew Jim would finish you off."

Her voice was brazen with defiance.

"Come on out," he said.

She came toward him. "You did a good job of lining up the fools who think it's smart to be honest," she said. "You're a natural leader and you lined them up where nobody else could have done it. But, with you gone —"

Her hand came out from her dress. It held a derringer. Fire lanced at him.

He felt the shock and the thud of the bullet.

She had come out to kill him, thinking that if he was gone, no one else would be able to take charge of the people of Macklin.

She shot once, turned, and tried to run. He grabbed her arm, swung her around, flung her into the waiting men. He didn't know what happened after that. He didn't have time to look and see and he didn't care.

Somewhere inside of him was a bullet.

Gun in hand, he went through the door of the store. "I'm here, Kerrigan."

There was the sound of a foot moving, then a pistol boomed at him.

In that moment, Kerrigan must have

been a terribly frightened man. Outside the store were enemies. Coming in after him was a single man. Kerrigan triggered the revolver in his hand.

Johnny Burke shot at the flashes, and kept shooting long after there were no flashes to shoot at.

Then, as strength began to go out of him and he sagged downward, he was aware that feet were racing behind him, many feet, coming to him, coming to help him.

LATER when he regained consciousness and found the worried face of Doc Carter bending over him and heard the doc saying, "Boy! I was afraid you were never coming around!" he tried to sit up.

"Lay still, boy!" Doc Carter belloyed at him. "You'll be all right. Just lie still. Here, Abby, help me hold him down." Carter turned to the woman in the office with him.

Johnny Burke was aware that Abby's arms were on his arms. "It's all right, Johnny," she was whispering. "It's all right."

"The money," he whispered. "The bank's got to have it."

"We found the money in the store, with Kerrigan's body," she answered. "It's already in the bank."

"Well, that's fine." He was aware that Doc Carter had left the office. The doc was out on the porch saying something. Johnny Burke couldn't understand what the doc was saying or who he was talking to. He didn't understand even after the doc stopped talking and the roar started.

It was a roar of many voices.

He tried to sit up. "What—What's that."

"Shhh," Abby soothed him. "The whole town's outside this office, waiting to hear how you are. Doc just told them you're all right and they're yell-

ing because they're glad."

The roar grew, a mighty volume of swelling sound. He listened to it, wondering why so many people should be interested in the welfare of Johnny Burke."

"It's because you *are* Johnny Burke," Abby whispered, sensing his wonder.

He saw she was crying.

"Hush, Abby, hush," he said.

She didn't stop. "I'm—I'm so proud of you—"

"Sh" he said. "If—if you don't stop, Johnny Burke will get you."

She laughed, then. "Johnny Burke's already got me," she whispered.

THE END

A DREAM THAT LED TO JUSTICE

THE Northwest was a paradise for desperadoes in the period of the 1860's. The Indians were fairly well subdued, but the law was only sparsely represented over large areas. Gold was being discovered in many parts of the territory, and bad men flocked in with the good, finding crime easy and pickings rich.

Three such bandits were David Howard, D. C. Lowry, and James Romaine. It was in Lewiston, Idaho, in August, 1863, that they chose as their prey one Lloyd Magruder, a rich pack-train owner and trader. He had a train of seventy mules laden with supplies which he was taking from Lewiston to Virginia City, Montana. After Magruder departed, the three desperadoes left also, announcing their destination to be Oregon. Their real intention was to rob Magruder. They trailed him, and were joined by a trapper, William Page, who went along with them. In a day or so they caught up with the Magruder outfit, and made themselves so friendly and helpful that they rode right into Virginia City with the traders. There they stayed around while the goods were sold. They even watched as Magruder collected \$25,000 for the goods. They continued to play their parts so well that Magruder asked them to go back to Lewiston with him as protection against bandits. This, naturally, suited the bad men fine. They were a little taken back to learn that four other men were joining the party, but believed they could handle the situation, being as bold as they were bad.

They started for Lewiston. About halfway there, Howard, Romaine and Lowry let Page in on their intentions, which were to kill all of the party and help themselves to the cash. Page was told he could either help them and share in the booty, or be killed himself. Since he already had a rather shady career behind him, Page consented to throw in with the murderers. That night, therefore, Magruder and the four other men were killed with axes, their bodies wrapped in blankets and thrown over a cliff. Taking what horses and mules they needed, they drove the rest over the same cliff. Calmly, with the wealth of the murdered men in

their possession, they proceeded on their way. They intended to avoid Lewiston, go directly to the coast, and there find a ship to take them to some foreign country. But they could not cross the Clearwater River, because it was flooded, and so they had to change their plans. They went into Lewiston to get a stage for Walla Walla.

They were a little afraid of Lewiston, being knowh there, but they muffled themselves up and were seen as little as possible. Page was the stranger, and he it was who went to the hotel to engage passage on the stage. A man named Hill Beachy kept the hotel. Something about Page's actions aroused Beachy's curiosity, and, casually, he followed the man. When Page joined his companions, Beachy recognized the three and remembered that they had left town about the same time as his good friend Magruder. Why were they acting so furtively? Suddenly there came to him a vivid recollection of a disturbing dream he had had a few nights before. The dream was that Magruder had been murdered in the mountains. He had always had a strong belief in the importance of dreams. Magruder was overdue. Those fellows were certainly acting peculiarly. It all added up to Beachy, and he decided to do a little sleuthing. The four men had left town by this time, but he discovered they had left their horses nearby. He went to look at them—discovered Magruder's saddle!

That was enough. He was convinced that Magruder was dead, and that the four men were the murderers. The law was slow in those days, and Hill Beachy filled with ire and desire to gain revenge for his friend, had himself appointed deputy sheriff. He armed himself with warrants for their arrest, and got extradition papers for Oregon, Washington and California, then started in pursuit.

The trail was not too difficult to follow. He found them in San Francisco. A good deal of their ill-gotten wealth was in gold-dust, and they were waiting to have it coined at the mint. Beachy arrested them and took them back to Lewiston. Justice caught up with them—because of a dream!

Mildred Murdoch

THE CURSE

By Berkeley Livingston

**Some mighty peculiar things happen
in the West; and having a curse
put on you is one of them**





He fought his way forward, clutching at his throat, gasping for air

THE end of the trail. This was it! A nine-by-nine room in the shabbiest hotel on Clark Street, an oblong slip of pink cardboard, and a letter on ruled note-book paper.

Johnny Maypole crumpled the receipt for his two-dollar daily-double bet into a small ball and threw it into the waste basket. He started to sit on the bed and remembered the bed bugs, and used the chair which he pushed close to the window. Once more he read the scrawled words on the paper; an old man's wailing over the loss of his best friend. And the words brought back the memory of some of the friends Johnny had; they too were gone; the beach at Anzio and the Rapido River took their toll. And what of the hedges of France . . . ?

Johnny shook his head clear of the old nightmare. The doctor had told him *not* to think too much of those days . . . Yet they persisted in coming. Johnny Maypole, first sergeant, line outfit; hero, soldier, man! And now the slogans were dead, the drive was gone, the shouting had died and life and business went on as usual. Life went on!

He looked out the window at the scabrous front of the call-house across the way. There were two girls standing on the short stoop, smoking and talking. They wore short skirts, sweaters, and slack socks with red shoes, the mark of their calling. A man walked by and one of the girls called something to him. He laughed and walked on. They went back to their talking.

Once more Johnny went back to the letter. It was easy to see that the writer had never written much, of anything. The writing itself was like that of a child, large, scrawling letters, some crossed out, others misspelled, and not a single mark of punctuation. But the loss this man felt was visible in every

word. Quietus Stevens had loved the man who had died.

Johnny looked deeply into his mind's eye and tried to bring forth some picture of William Maypole, but there was nothing. There were just some memories; of his mother, the dead man's sister, and the old house they had lived in out west where that fine subdivision was now going up. Then his father had died, and Johnny and his mother had had to move to a rattle-trap tenement on the near north side. School days and the tough kids who had made Johnny learn how to fight to preserve a certain something which was part of him.

And suddenly a birthday came to mind. Johnny had been fifteen years old that day, and the afternoon mail brought a small package. It had been addressed to Johnny, and the package had come from some town in Arizona. He had ripped the paper open and looked with wonder at what it contained. A twenty-dollar gold piece. He remembered his mother had tears in her eyes as she read the five-line letter which accompanied the gold piece.

"From your Uncle William," she told him. "For your birthday."

JOHNNY'S brows furrowed in sudden, startled thought. What had ever happened to that gold piece? Hadn't his mother made a locket . . . No! By all that was holy! She had gone out that afternoon, and bought a two-piece metal folder for photographs. In one section she had placed the photo of her husband, and in the other a snapshot of herself taken a few years before. Behind the snapshot of herself, she had placed the twenty-dollar gold piece.

"Some day, son," she had said, "this may come in handy. Save it for that day."

The years had passed, his mother had died, but somehow, no matter what his circumstances, he had managed to save the folder.

He leaped from his chair and rushed to the bed. Shoving it aside, he reached behind the headboard and pulled his battered suitcase out. With feverish fingers he unlocked it. His clothes, what few there were, lay, unpressed and worn in dusty sections. His fingers trembled slightly as they searched out the jacket to the blue suit. There was an old wallet in the inside pocket . . . If memory served right, the folder should be in it . . . *It was!*

The gold piece sparkled brightly in the sunlight which filtered through the dust-grimed windows. There was a date on it; 1907. A speculative look came into Johnny's eyes. Didn't some of these coins have a value far above their marking? Where, how could he find out? Of course. The Public Library.

There it was; twenty-dollar gold piece, St. Gaudens, wire edge, high relief, 1907 mint date, depending on condition, from two hundred to four hundred dollars . . .

Johnny grinned crookedly as he opened the outer door to the stamp and coin shop. Here he had something worth several hundred dollars in his pocket and couldn't afford a street car ride.

There was a single customer in the store, a man. He was bent over one of the showcases, his eyes intent in the pages of a catalogue. A bell had announced the door's opening and a man came from the rear, saw Johnny, and walked forward. The man at the showcase didn't even look up.

The clerk was a short, dark-faced man, in a shiny blue suit, the jacket of which was stained along the lapel. He wore thick-rimmed glasses which were

perched low on the bridge of a formidable-looking nose. He peered nearsightedly at Johnny, who removed the coin from his pocket, tossed it on the glass, and said:

"Buy this?"

The clerk merely looked at the coin, then looked up at Johnny. A thin hand disappeared into a vest pocket and came up with a jeweler's magnifying glass. He attached it to the right lense of his glasses, picked the coin up and gave it a quick examination. Mumbled words came to Johnny:

"Good! Mint condition . . . U'hm, h'hm. Very nice . . ."

He removed the glass, put the coin back on the counter and said:

"I'll buy it. You've probably looked up the value, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, don't be misled by the book. It's in excellent condition. And although it is somewhat of a rarity, still, I have to resell it. I'll give you two fifty . . ."

"And I'll take it," Johnny said.

Johnny walked out into Dearborn Street, and suddenly the sun was brighter, the drabness of the street was not so noticeable; in fact it wasn't such a bad old world after all. He shook his head. How things worked out. Yesterday he had three dollars between him and nothingness. The rent took one of the bills, and the bookie took the other two dollars. He had bet the daily-double. He remembered how he yelped in excitement when the second horse came in. And had moaned in horror when it was disqualified.

Now he had two hundred and fifty dollars. A fortune. Well, first, some clothes, then . . . He sobered at the thought of some words:

"... the yellow-livered rats tortured him. He said they kept askin' about the gold, but he wouldn't tell. He said

he cursed 'em. He said they'd be buried as deep as the gold was, some day.

"I promised to write to you. He said it was all yours, but you'd have to find it. If you're comin', write to . . ."

There was an address. Once more he looked at the envelope. Copper Shaft, Arizona. What a name! He grinned, but the humor was gone from his lips. Gold! The letter said it was his. What the hell difference did a name make. There was a fortune waiting for him . . .

QUIETUS STEVENS' watery eyes peered narrowly at each descending passenger. Copper Shaft was a lunch stop for the Roadways Busses. He was trying to spot Willie's nephew. The last of the passengers stepped from the bus, and the driver looked to the rear before he closed the door. And suddenly Quietus saw him move to the back. Quietus stepped closer and peered through one of the windows. There was a man lying on one of the rear seats. The driver was shaking him. After a few good shakes the man sat erect, looked to the driver, who said something and jerked his head for the other to get out.

Quietus stepped away from the bus, and watched the young fellow stagger down the two steps. He caught himself and peered through red-rimmed eyes at the cafe in front of which the driver had parked. A wry smile parted his lips. He shook his head free of the whiskey fumes and started toward the door.

"Say, feller," a voice stopped him.

He turned and looked at the odd character confronting him. It was pretty hard to tell the man's age, though Johnny saw he wasn't what any one would call young. The man was quite tall, taller by several inches than

Johnny's own five-nine, although much leaner and straighter. The man wore faded clothes which seemed to have been laid in dust for a long time. The dust, too, seemed to have become part of the man's skin, and it faded the handle-bar moustache to its own color.

"Couldn't be you're Johnny Maypole?" the man asked.

"Could be," Johnny said.

"Well, I'm Quietus Stevens."

"I'm hungry," Johnny said. "Come on in and have something to drink with me."

Quietus didn't make a move to accept Johnny's invitation.

"I thought you said you was *hungry*?" Quietus said.

"I meant some coffee," Johnny answered peevishly. What the hell kind of goof was this old guy, anyway?

Quietus shook his head in acceptance. Johnny staggered slightly as he turned toward the door and the older man took his arm. Johnny shook the other off.

"I ain't crippled," he said sourly. "I can walk by myself."

Johnny looked with distaste at the other passengers. They were a tired-looking, grimed group of men and women. He had traveled with them for hundreds of miles, and had grown to like them less and less with each mile. It was the reason why he had bought a pint of whiskey and gotten drunk on it.

"Better get some food in yore belly," Quietus suggested. "Feel better for it."

Johnny had a wild notion to tell the man to keep his mouth shut but thought better of it. After all, the old guy was going to tell him where the gold he wrote about, was. He ordered some ham and eggs. Quietus had a cup of coffee.

"Yeah," Johnny said, after the meal, "I'm Johnny Maypole. And so you're

Quietus Stevens? Well, I'm here. Now what?"

THE watery, blue eyes which had looked so deeply into a thousand suns regarded Johnny with an odd fixity. It seemed as if they wanted to probe into his very soul. The old man began to talk after a few seconds, but hesitantly, as though he weren't quite sure of his audience:

"I don't know rightly, whether or not I'm glad you've come. I reckon I wrote the letter because there was no other way of getting what was on my mind, off. Will Maypole was my best friend. Many a time the two of us would go off in the desert and stay for months at a time.

"But that was long ago. And now he's dead. Murdered! But you're here. An' if you're anything like Will, then Tom Jenks and his gang of murderous snakes is gonna get what's comin' to 'em."

"Now take it easy, mister," Johnny said. "I didn't come here to make trouble. I just come to get the money what's coming to me."

Quietus growled a something deep in his throat. His mouth worked suddenly and he arose and sauntered over to a spittoon at the end of the counter and relieved himself of the chew juice which had collected. It also helped clear his brain of the heat of anger which Johnny's words had brought.

"Look, Maypole," Quietus said in his low hoarse voice. "If that's the only thing you came out here to get . . . Well, Will said it's yours all right. Every dad gummed penny of it. But you'll have to scratch for it, just like them what's looking high and low for it, too."

Johnny's eyes widened. What did Stevens mean?

"Didn't my uncle leave a will?"

"Yep. He said the will's where the gold is," Quietus said. And there was a hint of sardonic laughter in the watery-blue eyes.

"But where's that?"

Quietus Stevens stood then, and, still looking deep in the other's eyes, said:

"Will Maypole never told anyone where he had it, *if he ever had it*. That's just what people hereabouts been saying. That he had it. So you'll just have to search for it. But far as I'm concerned, I hope a critter like *you* never finds it. 'Cause you're as low as the Jenks boys."

The color fled from Johnny's face. His hands clenched into fists, and a fine bead of sweat wet his forehead. Why the old jerk! If it weren't for his age . . .

"There he is, Tom," someone said.

The old man and the young one at the counter turned their heads in the direction of the strange voice.

"Tom Jenks and some of his boys," Quietus said.

Johnny *felt* rather than *saw* the flurry of excitement behind him. He heard the movements of the two waitresses, but didn't know what they were doing. He had eyes only for the three men approaching.

ONE was short, bandy-legged, with high-crowned Stetson, once white but now a dirty-grey; he had a brick-red face, narrow and tight-skinned, with close-set eyes mean and shifty. The second Johnny noticed, was a bean pole of a man. He was dressed in somber clothes, and although it was quite hot, he wore a dark suit coat and dark trousers, the bottoms of which were stuffed into his well-shined boot tops. He had a greyish face and the blankest eyes Johnny had ever seen. A pair of guns swung low against his thighs.

These two walked the flanks of the

third, who was the most eye-compelling.

He was only of average height but so broad through the chest and shoulders, he looked a lot shorter than he actually was. He wore an elaborate western-style shirt, customed trousers and shoes, and a flat-topped light-tan hat. He had a full face, muscled and heavy-fleshed, with thick, pouting lips under a sliver of black moustache. Thick, tufted eyebrows shadowed black eyes which flashed a red light of danger at the two men by the counter.

Quietus deliberately turned his back on the three and in an aside to Johnny, said:

"Middle one's, Jenks; right bower's, Parson Welsh; left bower's, Snake Gerts . . ."

"Stevens," Jenks spoke in a thick, controlled voice. "I want to talk to you."

Johnny's eyes went to the quirt, which he noticed for the first time dangling from Jenks' wrist.

Quietus gave Jenks a broken-toothed, brown-stained smile. It was like the snarl of an old tabby meeting a young tom and knowing it's in for a battle.

"So Tom Jenks wants to talk," Quietus said, half to Jenks and half to Johnny. "Might as well listen, Johnny. This is the man who went to your Uncle Will . . ."

"That's what I want to talk to you about, you damned old nosey desert rat. I told you to keep that blabber-mouth closed!" Jenks said hoarsely. Yet the words weren't spoken in heat. They sounded a little tired, as if they were addressed to a fly which was irritating, yet too small a thing to be angry about.

"Pleasea! Pleasea, Mister Jenks!"

It was the proprietor of the lunch room, a stubby Greek, whose dark face was beaded with sweat, and whose voice shook under the strain of his fright.

"No makea trobble. Fight outaside. Pleasea! Bosses stop, peoples no come in."

"Take it easy, Gus," said the short, bandy-legged Snake Gerts. "Besides, there ain't no customers here, now."

"Shut up, Snake," Jenks said. "Gus is right. We don't want trouble here, and I didn't come here to make it. I just wanted to tell this old geezer something. Now he's told."

"I been told," Quietus said. "Now, Johnny. Take a good look. An' don't forget them. 'Cause if you're gonna stay, these'll be the ones you'll have to watch out for."

Jenks, who had turned to leave after telling Snake off, did an about-face.

He came back with panther-like steps to stand squarely before Johnny.

"So you're Will Maypole's nephew, eh? What you want here?"

THE whiskey-cloud which had befuddled Johnny's brain had fled with the first approach of these men. A numbing cold had begun to make itself felt as Tom Jenks began to talk. Johnny knew the meaning of the cold. It was not a physical thing, yet could not be described except in physical terms. He had felt it in the early morning hours before an attack; the time when a German 88 had caught their range; the time a machine-pistol man and he had met face to face. It was like fear and ecstasy rolled into one.

And now, facing this man, Johnny got the same feeling.

"I don't want any trouble," Johnny said slowly. "This man wrote and said my uncle had died, and that he had left me his . . . well, whatever he had to leave."

Snake Gerts broke into hoarse laughter.

"Willie Packrat leaving anything

more than his spit, is a laugh," he said between bellows of laughter.

"And how do *you* know so much of what he had?" Johnny asked.

"What you mean?" Gerts asked. There was a droop to his eyelids and his fingers became curling claws, though there were no guns on his person, that Johnny could see. "What're you tryin' to say, stranger?"

Johnny bit his lip. He swallowed the cotton which all of a sudden filled his mouth. The three before him lost their air of tense expectation, when Johnny said through dry lips:

"Nothing. I said I didn't want trouble."

"So don't ask for it," Jenks said. "And while we're talking, I might as well tell you, Will Maypole wasn't liked around these parts. You being a relative won't find a welcome, either. Understand?"

Johnny nodded his head, but said nothing. There was a thoughtful look in his eyes as he watched the three depart. But if he had nothing to say, Quietus had:

"Of all the yellow-livered backdowns I ever see'd, that one takes the prize. To think that any blood-relative of the guttiest man I ever knowed, would take that guff without at least tryin' to fight . . . Well!"

"Where's there a place I can stay in this town?" Johnny asked, paying no attention to the other's words.

"What the hell good would your stayin' here do?" Quietus asked. "Come tomorrow, and one of those *hombres* see you . . ."

"I asked you something," Johnny said coldly. "If you can't answer, take a walk. I'll manage."

A wide grin split the other's mouth. There was delight in his voice:

"You mean you're going to stay? Glory be to quartz hill! Where the

hell do you think you're goin' to stay except with me? Come on, boy, and I'll show you the neatest diggin's in the town."

JOHNNY dropped the single, worn bag he had brought with him, and just looked his surprise. He hadn't any idea what to expect. But certainly not this tar-paper shack stuck on the side of a hill. He had to admit, however, that the inside of the place was a great deal more prepossessing than the outside. A clean bed sheet hung suspended by some tacks from several sections of slatting which had been nailed to the wall. The sheet made two rooms out of one. One room was kitchen and dining room, the other was Quietus' bedroom.

Neither of the rooms had more than the bare necessities, but the floors were clean and everything had its place and a place for everything.

"T ain't much," Quietus said, though not in apology. "But it's clean, and there's food up there on those shelves and a bed for you to sleep in . . ."

"Fair enough," Johnny said. "But what do you mean *me* to sleep in? Where are you going?"

"Shucks, son," the old man said. "I'm not for city life . . ."

Johnny wondered what he meant by city life. Copper Shaft was little more than a bare cross-roads in Arizona, and if it weren't for the fact the busses stopped there for a lunch stop, no one would ever know of its existence . . .

". . . I just stayed to bury Will and wait for you. Now you're here, I guess I can go along."

Johnny seated himself gingerly on one of the rickety chairs, and motioned for the old man to take the other.

"Okay, so you gotta scram. But before you go, give me a few of the

details. How did my uncle die?"

Quietus made ready to tell the tale as if it was to take all night. He crossed a leg over the knee of the other, pulled out a can of tobacco and filled an old, burned-out cob pipe with it. He lit it, got it going good, then started in:

"Well fust of all, I was up the Diabolo River country. An' Will was in the Sierra Nueva foothills, a favorite spot of his. If you'll look at the map you'll see that Copper Shaft is just about in between these two places, smack in the middle. Every year, fust week in June, we meet here and spend a couple days together gettin' drunk and doin' a little hell-raisin'.

"I was about a hundred miles closer in so I got to town fust. I give Will two days. But when four passed, I figured I'd ride out and meet him. 'Cause maybe I was worried; I'd never knowed Will to be late before. I was right to be worried . . ."

He heaved a sigh and the creases along his mouth and eyes deepened in the memory of what he'd found.

" . . . I found why Will wasn't on time. I don't know how long he laid in the brush. But he was pretty far gone when I got to him. Funny thing was, he didn't have a mark on him except across his face, which was whipped raw and bloody, like he'd been dragged through the brush; or like somebody'd used a quirt on him like he'd been a horse. He was pretty far gone, but not so far he couldn't talk. Only trouble was, he'd only talk about you, the little he said. Said he wanted you to have what he left, said you were his only blood-relative, said you'd been a hero in the war, said you'd know what to do with the Jenks gang . . ."

"They were the ones responsible for his death?" Johnny broke in.

"Yup!" the old man said, and sighed deeply. "Only thing was, how we goin'

to prove it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Will died 'fore I could get him back. Efen I tried to talk, I'd wind up by his side and that wouldn't do anybody any good. Tom Jenks runs this end of the Devil's country. Only man to stand against him is Deveraux, the man who owns the paper. Shucks, Johnny, even the sheriff is tied hand and foot. You got a job to do."

"Did Uncle Will leave me any real property?"

"You mean houses and that stuff?"

"Uh, huh."

"Come here, son," Quietus arose and sauntered to the single window and stood looking out across the sand. Johnny joined him, there. The old man pointed a skinny, big-knuckled finger and said:

"Take a look out yonder, son. As far as you can see; that's what Will Maypole owned. All that sand, and sun, and wind and mountains. They was all his. He loved it, like man loves woman. It was all he cared about, that and sometimes coming in and chinnin' with me. But I came second.

"But now and then he'd think of somethin' else. You. He knew you was alone. And that someday you'd come back from the war. So a long time ago he bought him six hundred acres out there in the foothills. And he built a cabin out there and said to himself, this is where Johnny's going to be someday.

"But Johnny. A man gets kind of queer out there in the sand hills and quiet and gets to thinkin' strange things. You can't blame your uncle for the way he got to thinkin' about whether you were the one to leave his all to. So he comes to town one day and walks in to Deveraux's place and makes out a transfer of his deed, to you. The whole thing is yours. But you

can't see Deveraux until morning. He went to Tucson on business. There's only a couple of things I got you can use. That is if you got a mind to?"

JOHNNY watched him to go to an old-fashioned trunk stuck up against a wall, and wondered what the heck he was up to, now. His mouth fell open as he saw what Quietus dragged from the bottom of it. A pair of .45's and a cartridge belt full of shells.

"This is the only thing real Will left to you," the old man said. "They're the only things do you good out where you're going."

"Going? But I'm not going anywhere," Johnny said.

"If you want that gold Will was talkin' about, you're goin' somewhere. You're goin' up in those hills and live in that cabin. Somewhere in the cabin's the papers for his claim; the claim Tom Jenks killed him for. Yup. That's why Will died. Because he wouldn't tell them where he got the gold."

Johnny shook his head. He'd be damned if he'd take those guns. He didn't come out here to be killed. Besides, he had enough of blood and fighting. He just wanted that dough. Now why the hell did his fool uncle have to rig something like this up on him? Why couldn't he just . . . Oh, damn him and his ideas!

"Take 'em," Quietus said, shoving the holstered guns toward Johnny. "They're yours."

Johnny shoved them aside angrily. "I don't want the damn things," he said.

"Better take them," Quietus said. "They're gonna be layin' for you. Everybody in town knows that Deveraux has the deed to the land. And now Tom Jenks knows that you're here. So better take them."

"And have them gang up on me!"

Johnny said bitterly. "Not on your life, pal."

Quietus smiled grimly.

"There's a late bus, leaves at eight tonight. You got three hours. Better take it," Quietus said.

Johnny swallowed hard. The old guy had put it to him squarely. He wasn't afraid of Jenks and those two characters who were with him. Or was he? He turned from the old man and squinted thoughtfully. Maybe he was frightened. It was the first time he had ever turned from a fight.

"Why did Jenks supposedly kill my uncle?" he asked.

"Bus leaves in three hours, son," Quietus said.

"Don't worry! I'll be on it," Johnny said angrily. "I just want to know what uncle had that they wanted it so badly they'd commit murder for it?"

"Only Deveraux knows. And he won't be here till morning. So you'd better get on that bus."

"God damn the bus!" Johnny yelled. "And damn you, too. Give me those heaters . . ." he grabbed the belt and guns from Quietus and threw them on the table. "You said you were going someplace. Well get moving, do anything. Only get out of my sight!"

Quietus walked to the door, turned, grinned at Johnny.

"Bus still leaves at eight, if you don't change your mind," he said, and still grinning, closed the door behind him.

THE gas flame flickered, went out, and Johnny stepped into the clear moonlit night. Below, and spread for a mile or so into the desert, the lights of Copper Shaft made irregular pattern.

He buckled the holster strap, slipped one of the guns into it and making sure the holster was flat against his chest a little below the shoulder, put on his jacket. Johnny had decided to visit

Copper Shaft.

Main Street was alive. There were two theaters, several restaurants, a dozen taverns, and various stores, all open and doing business. Johnny strolled down the walk, window-shopping, and just being curious. He passed a darkened front and saw a gilt sign on the window; The Clarion. He peered into the window and saw a light in the rear. There was nobody inside the paper offices, and a partition prevented him seeing if there was anybody in the rear.

He came to the restaurant where he had eaten earlier and decided to stop in. He wanted information which this Gus might be able to give.

The place was deserted except for a red-faced cow puncher sitting at an end stool. Johnny noticed that the same waitress who had been there earlier was still on duty. He sat down and ordered a steak. There was a counter near the door where cigars and cigarettes were to be gotten. There was a cash register on the counter. But there was no one behind it.

"Nice place," Johnny observed to the girl.

She stood, one leg leaning on the counter and smiled down at him. She had nice teeth.

"So you're a friend of Pop Stevens?" she said.

"Well . . . I suppose you could call me that."

"He's a nice old guy," she said, "But a funny old guy, too. All those desert rats are that way, though. There used to be another one came in here. Man named Maypole. He was even stranger than Pop. I *liked* him!"

"Yeah? Why?" Johnny held his breath. Was he to learn something from this girl?

"I guess he was kinda lonesome. 'Course they're all lonesome. But he

liked to talk. Most of them forget how . . ."

Johnny thought of Stevens and realized the truth of what she said.

She went on:

". . . Not Pop, though. He loved to shoot his lip. See this?"

She pulled a locket from below the top of her uniform, and brought it close to view.

"Pop gave me the gold piece inside of it. I bought the locket to hold it."

Johnny examined it. It was a gold piece exactly like his.

"Last Christmas. He said he came into town just to give me a present. Gee! He was a nice old guy."

"Yeah. I heard he died just a few days ago."

Her eyes darkened. He wasn't sure whether in anger or sorrow.

"I know. Me and Pop and Mister Deveraux were the only mourners. I guess it's tough when a man hasn't got any kin folks and gets laid out like that with no one but strangers to grieve over him."

"Yeah. I came too late. If I'd known about it, I'd of come sooner," Johnny said. "Y'see, I'm his nephew."

Her lips parted and her eyes widened at his words. She stepped away from the counter as if he had intentions of striking her.

"You're his neph-phew?" she hesitated over the word.

"That's right. Why? Is there something wrong in that?"

"Oh, no. No! Noth—*ing*," the last part of the word faded in her throat. She swallowed hard. "Look, mister."

"Yes?" he felt a sudden nameless tension.

"I wondered why Tom Jenks and those gunmen of his were so tough with you this afternoon. They didn't seem to know you. I understand now. Please! Watch yourself. They're killers. And

they . . ."

"Miss . . ." it was the red-faced cowboy.

SHE signalled Johnny with her eyes.

He made pretense of drinking his coffee while she saw to the cowboy's needs. But the cup fell to the counter with a clatter of breaking china, when he saw the man grab the girl's wrist and twist. She yelped in pain. Then Johnny was whirling the man around.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" Johnny gritted.

The man grinned tight-lipped at him. "Nothin'. She talks too much, that's all."

"And so do you," Johnny said, and hit him.

The cowboy fell sideways from the stool and skidded a few feet when he hit the floor. Johnny leaped forward before the man could get to his feet, grabbed a handfull of fancy shirt and heaved the other erect. He jerked the other forward until their faces almost touched.

"What's it to you what she says?" he asked coldly.

"He's one of Jenk's gunmen," the girl said. She was pale-faced, taut in fear, yet oddly not afraid.

"So! A western tough guy. Okay brother, here's something to remember me by," Johnny said, and began to slap the other, backhanded slaps which stung and burned, yet which did no real damage.

Suddenly the man jerked loose, jumped back several paces, and went for the gun in the holster at his hip. Johnny hadn't even noticed the man was armed. The gun was at the very lip of the holster, before Johnny made a move for his.

There were two explosions, one a bare instant behind the other. And Johnny drew first blood in the fight

which he realized was now inevitable. The die had been cast when the man drew his gun.

The man's arm hung limply. Blood crimsoned the floor in splattering drops from a shattered elbow. Johnny had fired first, the other firing in reflex, the shot going wild. But Johnny's had gone right where he aimed it. He hadn't meant the bullet to kill. But he did want it to put the other out of commission. It meant one less to watch out for.

"Better get over to a doc," Johnny said grimly. "I'll keep that!" he said more sharply as the other stooped to get the gun on the floor, with his good arm.

There was fear, and the beginning of a wild pain, as the man backed out of the door.

Johnny turned to the girl who now leaned her entire weight on the counter. She looked as if she were going to faint. He walked quickly to where he had been sitting and returned with the water he hadn't drunk, and gave it to her. She drank of it greedily. Slowly, the color came to her cheeks, but when she spoke, her voice still trembled:

"Gee! I saw him go for his gun. I didn't think you had a chance. An' he'd of gotten free. You hit him. He'd of . . . Mind if I sit down?"

Re-action had set in. She slumped in the stool, elbows on the counter. She gave him a sidewise look and continued:

"I never saw anyone come up with a gun that fast," she said in admiration.

"How do you mean, gotten off free?" Johnny asked.

"Self-defense. That was Slick Purvis, one of the best, next to Snake and that horrible Parson Welsh," she said. "Sure. The Sheriff would have let him go scot free. That's the way things are in this town. Jenks has old man Gossens in his pocket."

BUT they were no longer alone. The shots had attracted a crowd. There was a tavern flanking both sides of the cafe, and the men came swarming in. The first of them had seen Purvis leave. Now they crowded around the two and started in with the questions.

Johnny made a face and without another word, elbowed his way through the crowd. It was strange how they made way for him. Even as the door closed on him, he heard the girl begin the admiring tale of what happened.

"... Like lightning, he was! I hope he ..."

Well, Johnny thought, as he began the two-mile walk to Steven's cabin, I guess there's no turning back, now. And now that they asked for it, they'll get it. Damn 'em! I didn't want trouble. Okay, so they did.

They're gonna be maybe more than I can handle, and if the law is on their side I'd better take it easy. Or find somebody who doesn't like them, either. But who? Deveraux seems to hate their guts. The question is, will he fight? H'm.

It *was* a problem. He had served warning that he was a force to be reckoned with. Now he would have to walk, looking at both sides of the road, and front and back too. He felt sure they wouldn't stop at cold-blooded murder.

These thoughts and others like them filled his brain as he walked the sandy shoulder of the concrete road. He came to the dirt road which led past the cabin and went over to the center where the ruts were fewest. Shadows came and went across the sand, making the cacti more grotesque-looking than nature had done. He walked with his head lowered, seeing only the grey earth. The drumming sound came to him from far off, but he didn't interpret the sound properly. But as it came

nearer, he wondered about it. It became louder, more rhythmic, and his head shook as he realized what it was. Horses.

They were coming his way, and there were more than one. He stepped to the side of the road, not understanding why, except that a new-born caution had been given him. Indeed, he sought the cover of whatever offered itself as he walked along.

He saw them approaching, after a bit. The road led upward in a gentle slope, and he saw them when they were still a good half mile off. He was thankful, then, for the clouds shadowing the moon, and the thick underbrush. Something told him, cover was what he needed.

There were two of them. They came at a gallop one behind the other. He watched them from his place of concealment and as they passed, he saw the something which looked like rifles across the pommels of their saddles. Then they were past in a cloud of grey dust. He waited until they had gone far enough so as not to see him when he came out on the road again.

THERE was something queer about the window. There should have been moon reflections from the panes. *There were no panes!* And the door was wide open. Steel glinted from the barrel of the .45 as it leaped from the hidden holster. He came forward on tip-toeing feet. Only the echo of his own footsteps on the wooden sill. He ventured only beyond the threshold, stood poised with bated breath; but there was nothing and no one.

His fingers shook a little as he turned the wick of the lamp up. Then he saw and knew what had happened. The place had been riddled with shotgun slugs. The sheet still hung, separating the two rooms, but gaping holes told

how little protection it afforded. The bed was ripped to shreds by the slugs. And when he walked back into the main part of the cabin, he saw that there was no corner where the slugs had not struck.

"At least four barrels, which means two guns. They'd have got me if I'd hung suspended from the ceiling," he spoke his thoughts aloud.

A terrible grin dawned on his mouth and a terrible vengeance in his breast. This was not one man against another. This was as bad as he had met with across seas. He blew the flame out, and began to undress. Then he wondered if it were wise. But a moment's reflection told him that they wouldn't come back tonight. For the one thing they needed was an alibi. Therefore the place for them was Copper Shaft and their friends. And there they would learn of his encounter with Slick Purvis.

They would know he had returned and would be on the lookout for them. They wouldn't come back. Not this night.

Johnny slept the sleep of the just.

The sun was an hour across the sky when he woke. He managed with eggs and coffee after washing. Then he buckled the heavy belt around his middle, with the one empty holster gaping like an empty tooth in the middle of a man's mouth. The gun which should have been in that holster lay in another, pressed close to his breast, with a spring attached to it for a lightning draw. And Johnny was ready to see Deveraux.

Early though it was, Copper Shaft was alive. Women were already doing their shopping, and when he passed the cafe he saw several customers at breakfast. The double-doors of The Clarion were wide open. A man sat bowed over the old-fashioned roll-top desk. Johnny stepped into the office, and the man said, without looking up:

"Greetings, friend. Find a chair; be with you in a minute."

Johnny did as the other suggested and looked the man over in frank appraisal. He could see that Deveraux was short and thick-set, with a head of white hair which hadn't been barbered lately. He worked in a tee shirt and light-colored, unpressed slacks. He worked with his head cocked to one side, and as the pencil moved over the proofs he was doing, he whistled a monotonous tune of two notes.

A LAST check of the pencil and Deveraux swiveled around and gave Johnny as frankly an appraising look as he had received.

"So you're Johnny Maypole, eh. Well, Johnny. It looks like you've made a small name for yourself already, fighting Slick Purvis like you did last night. Course I wouldn't recommend too much of that. You can only be lucky so long, then the odds go against you. Understand?"

"My number's been up on the board for a long time, Deveraux. Some day someone's going to erase it. Got to expect it. Only I want to be there, facing it, when it happens. I don't like to be asleep and find some rat using me for a target . . ."

There was a few seconds' stillness, broken by Deveraux's clearing of his throat.

"So they started in already, eh? And you come to me for information. Well, go ahead . . ."

"Okay. Now first of all, what did my uncle leave me?"

"Six hundred acres of fine grazing land, and a cabin on the lip of Dead Man's Hill. I see Pop Stevens gave you the guns and belt Will used to wear. That's about all . . ."

"But—But I though Uncle Will left cash, or valuables," Johnny said in

puzzlement.

"I don't know where people got that idea. I was, well, Pop and me were his best friends, and I never heard of him having any of this gold. You and Tom Jenks got ideas, but where you got them, I don't know."

"Then *what* is Tom Jenks after?"

"Those six hundred acres. Will fenced that land in when he bought it. You see, Jenks owns about ten thousand acres all around Dead Man's Hill. But when he bought the property, he didn't look into the deed very well, and thought it was clear. As it turned out, your uncle got that acreage from the man who sold the balance to Jenks. And that six hundred lies smack across Jenk's cattle trails to water."

Johnny wondered what was so important about water. Deveraux enlightened him:

"Water's the most important thing in this world of cattle. In all the ten thousand acres Jenks has there isn't a water hole big enough to satisfy a rabbit's thirst. He'd have to sink wells . . . and he hasn't that much money. I should have a map to really give you a good picture. Anyway, beyond your uncle's land, but only to be reached by going *through* it, there are a half dozen wells. Jenks, on the other hand, would have to send his herds through Dead Man's Canyon and come up the other side of a *mesa*. He'd lose more cattle than would reach water that way. And that, friend Johnny, is why your uncle was killed."

"The dirty rats!" Johnny said savagely. "If he was killed, why doesn't someone prosecute . . .?"

"Easy, son. Gotta have proof of a killing in these parts, Pop found your uncle. No one knows how long he'd been lying in that brush. You see, he'd either fallen from or been roped off of his horse, and broke his leg when he

fell. He was lying in the open when Pop found him, so he must have dragged himself, broken leg and all, for a couple of hundred yards. His face was welted up from I don't know what, and he was almost out of his mind. He died without naming the man or men who did it. But we know it was murder."

"How?"

"Will's horse was nowhere around. No nag that's been part of a man's life for as long as that horse was, will leave a fallen rider. Pop found the horse three days later. He was dead, and the birds had been at him. He was mostly bones. But there was no question about whose horse he was.

"But why was he killed? For what?"

"I think I know the reason," Deveraux replied. "Will was a desert man, and the man who sold him the land wasn't. He hated these prospectors who'd go out for months at a time looking for Bonanza. So he had a clause inserted that Will had to maintain residence on his land for a certain period each year. That's why Will built the cabin. Now, if residence wasn't maintained, the land was to be made public sale property, Will to receive from the proceeds, the money he'd paid for it. Does it begin to make sense?"

"A little. Only how was Jenks to know that my uncle had no relatives . . .?"

DEVERAUX pursed his lips. This Johnny wasn't a fool, by a long ways. A most logical question.

"There was no reason for him to think otherwise. Will never mentioned any. Besides, any relatives Will had, who would come out, would be Easterners. They wouldn't know what it was all about. He banked on their ignorance. And he wasn't far from wrong. And if, as it happened, someone like you came, who wasn't afraid, there are

other ways of making you quit. He'll try everything in the book, I warn you. Now I'll get the deed for you . . ."

He swiveled around, pulled a bunch of keys from a pocket and opened a drawer with one of them. He turned again and tossed a legal-looking envelope to Johnny.

"There it is. All yours, now. And I might as well tell you, you've got two weeks left to get out there and stay for one month. That's the residence clause."

"Okay," Johnny said, picking the envelope up and putting it into the breast pocket of his jacket. "Now how do I get out there?"

"Horse, son. Horse. It's fifteen miles from Copper Shaft. You'll have to get a horse . . . Something wrong? Now don't tell me you can't ride?"

"I can ride, all right. My outfit was cavalry and I learned all about riding horses before they mechanized us. To tell you the truth, though, I'm almost tapped."

Deveraux shook his head in sympathy, got to his feet in a grumbling, slow way, and said:

"What I expected. Oh, well. Come along. I'll get you a mount. And it looks like I'll have to get someone to ride along with you."

Deveraux and the stable man had an argument about the price, an argument which Deveraux finally won. Johnny regarded the horse with a great deal of scepticism; it looked ragged and about ready to call it quits with this world. Then he saw the look of baleful light in the horse's eyes, and changed his mind about him.

The two men watched Johnny mount the horse, and both held their breaths as the animal began a skittish, sidewise dance. But the dance ended almost as fast as it had begun. Johnny tightened the reins in a grip of iron and the horse's

head came back slowly but inexorably. They saw the muscles gather along the withers, and like a streak of light Johnny's open palm came down hard on the animal's muzzle. That ended any ideas about fussing up, the horse might have had.

"All right, son," the publisher said. "Ride back to the paper and I'll meet you there."

There were three men walking down the sidewalk toward Johnny. The man in the middle was a stranger to him, but the other two were familiar. One was the bandy-legged Gerts, and the other was the somber-clothed Welch. They saw Johnny at the same instant he saw them, Gerts' face lighted in an evil smile, as he turned and said something to the middle man. The man nodded his head, and suddenly stepped to the middle of the street and held up his hand for Johnny to come to a stop.

Johnny reined in his horse. But his eyes seemed to be on all three men at once.

"Come off that horse, Maypole," the man said.

Then Johnny saw the star pinned to the man's soiled shirt. So this was Gossens, the sheriff. He didn't look like much, with his tobacco-yellowed moustache, the red galluses, the worn levis, the harried air of impotence . . .

JOHNNY dismounted lithely and waited for Gossens. If the sheriff wanted to say something then he could come to him. But the primary reason for his standing still was to keep an eye on the two jackals who had been walking with the sheriff. They stood shoulder to shoulder and eyed him, though their eyes seemed to center themselves on something above or beyond him.

The sheriff cleared his throat importantly and continued:

"Don't you know it's against the law

to wear a gun in this town?"

"No, I didn't," Johnny said.

"Well, it is. So better hand it over."

"Them two, friends of yours, sheriff?" Johnny asked, nodding toward Gerts and Welsh, who were wearing their guns openly.

"Why?" asked the sheriff, looking over his shoulder.

"Then maybe those things they're wearing are cap pistols. Or have they got permits?"

"Don't be so smart and hand over that gun," said the sheriff, whose face turned brick-red in anger. Yet it was an anger that lay only on the surface. For with Johnny's next words, his face paled to a waxen tinge.

"You want it, take it," Johnny had said, and his lips opened in a grin that was mockery itself.

The sheriff swallowed hard. He hadn't expected this when Snake had told him to get the gun. He thought Johnny would give it up without question. But he should have known better after what had happened to Slick. Then the least-expected happened. Johnny stepped forward, loosened the belt and handed gun and belt to the sheriff, saying:

"You're not a bad guy, sheriff. Just a man who's scared to death of these goons."

Johnny wasn't sure, but he thought he detected an air of gratitude in the older man's face.

"You can pick this up at my office when you leave," the sheriff said, and started to go back to the two he had left on the sidewalk.

But they were no longer there.

The instant Johnny started to take the belt off, they moved swiftly toward the two men.

"Beat it, Gossens," Snake said from the side of his mouth as they confronted Johnny.

Gossens looked helplessly from one to another. But they had eyes only for Johnny. Slowly, he backed away from the three. There was something suddenly deadly in the air. And that air made itself felt over the whole street. The street had been almost deserted. Now men came to the cover of doorways, peered through windows, lounged against posts, watchfully waiting for a something to happen.

"Didn't Tom tell you to get out of town?" Snake said.

"Guess I'm hard of hearing," Johnny said. His hands hung loosely at his side.

"Listen to me, you swine!" Snake said. "When . . ."

Johnny moved, yet there was no one who saw what he did; they only saw what happened. Snake's head snapped back, a glaze covered his eyes, and he fell forward without a sound. He fell on his face, and not even his hands cushioned the fall. Blood seeped from the side of the upturned jaw.

JOHNNY had hit as he had been taught to hit, with a quick, shifting movement of feet and body, and to recover almost instantly. So it was that Snake had barely started to fall and Johnny was waiting for Welsh, Johnny and all the others who were watching. Nor did they have long to wait.

Welsh's face was a mask of indifference. Only those strange eyes blazed in a something that was like madness, and the nostrils became pinched and pale. Welsh had the hands of a woman, delicate and small and well-kept. Now they hung suspended, like pieces of marble, above the pearl gun butts.

A peculiar trembling grin quivered on his lips, and words came whispering from him:

"Go on, Maypole. Make a move!" And once more Johnny moved to-

ward Welsh slowly, deliberately, his hands still hanging limply at his side. But though Johnny appeared casual-mannered to those watching, he boiled with a terrible anger within. He knew Welsh was trying to egg him into something so he could pull those guns. And he didn't care. His eyes never left those of the man in front of him, nor did he hesitate the slightest in his walk. Five feet separated the two men, four, three, two and they were a foot apart before Johnny did anything definite. Only he wasn't facing someone with as slow a set of reflexes as Snake Gerts.

In one movement Welsh bent from the waist, dodging the blow Johnny aimed at his head, and at the same time he twisted to one side as his hands clawed for the guns.

His hands were faster than the eyes could follow. But they weren't quite fast enough. The heavy Colts came out of their leather sheaths, spitting their leaden pellets of death, but to the sky and the roof tops. Johnny's hand was a blur of brown as it went in and out, the gun held hard against his hip, cushioning it against the thunderous explosions. It seemed impossible that any man's hand could move faster than Welsh's, yet Johnny's did.

Welsh was driven back by the trip-hammer blows of the .45's. One of them almost tore his shoulder out, and the other, Johnny only fired twice, struck between the elbow and shoulder.

It would be a long time before Welsh would pull the trigger of a gun.

A dozen voices screamed a warning. And a single shot echoed their sound. And Johnny spun sideways, his face twisting with shock. Then his own gun was spitting the balance of its shells at the man sitting on the street. And as each shot took effect, Snake was jerked backward as if by invisible strings.

Gossen's face expressed disbelief as he bent to examine the dead man. There were four holes in his chest just above the heart. A beer bottle cork might have covered the four holes.

It was instinct and the something which has no definition that saved Johnny's life. For he had started to turn even before the first man shouted in warning. Had he been a split-second slower, Gerts would have killed him. As it was, Johnny got a nasty flesh wound.

The crowd surrounded the sheriff, Welsh and Johnny. Their attention and concern was with the latter:

"... Get him to Doc Winters ..."

"... Wow! He got them both ..."

"... 'Bout time Snake got it!"

And the sudden bellow of Deveraux:
"All right! Let's get him to Doc's."

"WELL," said Winters. "He's a pretty lucky man. It'll be painful for a while, but I've got it taped nicely. Just don't move too sudden, that's all."

The newspaper publisher paid Winters who gave it back to him.

"It was a pleasure. About time somebody took care of those murdering blackguards," he said, and waved them out of his office.

Deveraux shook his head from side to side in admiration.

"Son," he said. "You're the best thing ever happened to Copper Shaft, and the toughest. Why even old Gossens acted differently when we walked with Welsh. By God! He acted like a man and not an echo."

They were walking back to Deveraux's office, where one of the men had tethered Johnny's horse to the old-fashioned hitching rail outside. Johnny grimaced in slight pain. He was glad, though, that the pellet had passed through and had not lodged in the flesh.

As it was he knew he was in for some painful moments.

"I've got an idea," Deveraux went on, "that Jenks won't bother you for a while now. Not with two of his gunmen shot up. Besides, I noticed a pretty healthy sign today. Jenks has had this town so buffaloeed I'd almost come to the opinion the men in it weren't men, just shadows. Now maybe they'll see that Jenks isn't god after all."

But in a room at the Alvarez Hotel, a man paced back and forth, a well-chewed cigar in one hand, and in the other a half empty bottle of whiskey. A stream of obscenities passed his lips. It was directed at the man seated in an overstuffed chair. The one in the chair regarded the other with half-closed eyes which mirrored hatred and defiance.

The one pacing stopped his cat-like prowling, and said:

"Well, all right, then. I'll grant this Maypole's lightning on the draw. So we'll have to use other means. Slick's out. He couldn't use a gun if his life depended on it. You're so badly shot up, you're just about useless, too. And Snake's dead . . ."

"I tell you, Tom," Parson Welsh said, "this kid's poison. Why don't you buy him out?"

"It's too darned late. I figured he'd scare. Well, I made a mistake. So now we got to mend that mistake."

"But how? He's probably so mad, he wouldn't sell. What's worse, the town's for him. And I think our friend, Gossen's, got a bug in his ear too."

"T'hell with him. He's about over his usefulness anyway. No. We've got to figure out a way to get rid of Maypole."

"Maybe," Welsh said, wincing with sudden pain, "he'll *fall* off his horse and break his neck, like his uncle?"

"I heard enough about that," Jenks snarled. "You'd think every time something happened to someone in this town it was my fault."

Welsh grinned widely. It usually *was* Jenks fault. But no use getting him hotter than he was.

"Welsh," Jenks said after a few moments' reflection, "you stay in town. That shoulder and arm aren't in shape for riding or work. Keep seeing Winters until they're healed. I'm going back to the ranch. I'll work something out."

DEVERAUX leaned his short, aggressive body against the saddle and looked up at Johnny. His eyes had sparks of fire in their depths. But though his eyes hid his thought, his voice didn't. It held a tremor of excitement:

"Now watch out for yourself, Johnny," he warned. "You're going to be alone out there, seeing that you're such a fool who won't take advice."

"I'm no baby," Johnny said. "What good would having another man up there do? If they're going to get me, they'll come with enough to make sure, no matter how many of us are there . . ."

"The more reason why you shouldn't be alone."

"Okay! I shouldn't be alone. But I'm going to be. Because that's the way I want it. I've got a feeling that . . . Well. It's because of this feeling that I want to be there alone."

Deveraux turned to the other horseman.

"Take this young fool to the Maypole place," he said. "And keep your eyes peeled for *things*. Understand?"

The other let loose a stream of chew juice from the side of his mouth, shifted the rifle to a more comfortable place and shook his head in understanding.

"Well, good luck, Johnny," Deveraux said in parting.

The cabin might have been fifteen miles as the crow flew. But only to a crow. To Johnny the ride seemed to take forever. His companion led him straight across country, through brush and sand. And after three hours they came to the slope of a narrow valley from the bottom of which Johnny could see a small cabin at the very top of the slope.

"Dead Man's Hill," his companion said. "That's Will Maypole's place up there. An' good luck to you, partner. This is where I leave you. Though why anyone wants to stay in that forsaken spot is beyond me. But that's your lookout."

Johnny rode up through the lush grass. He felt the accelerated beat of his heart. Was there to be a fortune waiting him at the top of the hill? Or was he to be disappointed again?

The door was closed but not locked. He pushed at it, hesitantly, then stronger. It opened inward, squealing a bit. He stepped in, and muttered an imprecation. Someone had beaten him to it. The cabin's interior looked like it had gotten mixed up in a tornado. Whoever had been there had gone through it as effectively as a detective searching for a clue. Even the stove had not been overlooked. Ashes made a grey mess on the floor. Cans and food lay strewn about in wild confusion. Johnny didn't even bother looking any further. He knew if the secret had been there, it was no longer. The search had been too thorough for the searcher to have missed much.

Johnny walked out and leaned against the wall. He sighed deeply. He would never know, he thought, whether there was truth or not to the question of his uncle's wealth. But here before him stretched the visible signs of it;

Deep, lush grass, fenced in for all of its six hundred acres. He moved around until he stood on the four feet which separated the cabin from a sheer drop of a couple of hundred feet to the bottom of the canyon. Below, was just a jumble of rocks and dried river bed. He shrugged his shoulders, decided, philosophically, to make the best of things. First, the cabin needed cleaning . . .

IT WAS nightfall before the cabin's interior approached at least cleanliness. Johnny stood back and thought, not so bad. Uncle Will was a clean housekeeper, cleaner even than Stevens, and more orderly. The thought of Stevens made Johnny wonder what had happened to the old coot. He hadn't said where he was going or when he'd be back. He just left, nor for that matter had Johnny seen him leave.

A sudden clap of thunder and flare of lightning brought Johnny to the window. A storm. Clouds raced in thick formation across a darkening sky. The mountains echoed the roar of the thunder. Johnny scurried outside through the already pelting rain and gathered up several handfuls of firewood, stacked alongside the cabin. He was going to be warm, anyway.

He made a meal of canned beef, beans and coffee, and afterward found a small library of books his uncle had on a shelf behind the bunk bed in a small separate room.

Johnny suddenly was reminded of his horse. He didn't want it to get away and he remembered he hadn't tethered it. The trees made swaying, blurring shadows in the sudden glare of streaked lightning. The shadow which moved near a line of tall bushes was just another shadow to Johnny, as he caught sight of the horse. He brought the horse in among a deep, thick growth of pines and made the halter fast to a sap-

ling. Here, the horse would not get so wet, nor was there much of a chance of it being struck by a bolt of lightning.

By the time he got back to the cabin he was soaked to the skin. He barged through the door, and stopped there, staring blankly at the man by the fire. It was Quietus Stevens who stood warming his hands, the water dripping in large drops from the bottom of his trousers.

"Evenin', son," Stevens said. "Lucky thing I was up this way. Bad weather to be out in."

Johnny joined the other by the fire.

"Yep," the old man continued, "thought I'd make the short cut through Dead Man's Canyon, saw the storm comin' up and run for Will's place."

"You mean on foot?" Johnny asked.

"Nope. Got my hoss tied up back a piece. Got any more of that coffee?"

Johnny realized he could use some of the brew also. It had turned quite chilly out and he had run through the rain in only his shirt and trousers.

The old man ambled on about where he was going, but Johnny was too busy to pay any attention. The fire was going good by the time coffee was ready and after they had a couple of cups, Johnny felt a drowsiness steal over him. He yawned several times; at last, after an extra wide one, he said:

"Might as well turn in, Pop. You use the bed in there. I'll find a place by the fire here."

Still talking, Stevens started to remove his clothes as he went into the small room which had served Will Maypole as a bedroom. Johnny, in the meantime, cleared a place near the stove, and found several spare blankets which would serve both as mattress and covering. He bundled himself well in them, called a good night, and had no sooner laid his head to rest than he was sound asleep.

A BRIGHTNESS between his eyelids awakened him. He blinked in the glare of the morning's sun. Suddenly he sniffed loudly and appreciatively. There was bacon and eggs frying, from the smell of it. He turned his head and saw the old man busy at the stove.

"Mornin', Pop," he called to the other.

Stevens grinned his snaggle-toothed grin and said:

"Might as well come and get it. Gonna throw it out, otherwise."

"Betcha weren't expectin' visitors," Pop said between mouthfuls of food.

"Oh, you're not the first," Johnny said.

There was a suddenly watchful look in Pop's eyes. He seemed to swallow his food with a peculiar care, with slow and thoughtful gulps.

"Yep. Seems like there's more than one heard about Uncle Will's gold. Or whatever it was he was supposed to have left. He or they, I don't know how many there were, just about shook the floor apart; come to think of it, the only thing they didn't look into *was* the floor. And I guess they figured only a fool would try to hide things under that."

"Y'mean . . .?" Pop didn't seem to get it.

"That's right. This place was turned upside-down. Why they even sifted the ashes from the stove. Y'know, Pop, I don't think Uncle left anything solid. I think it was a paper of some value that they were looking for."

"A map! That's what! By golly! I betcha it's a map," Stevens burst out in great excitement, the food completely forgotten.

"A map? Why a map?"

"Because he didn't want anyone but you to know where he hid the gold . . ."

"Now hold on! You've mentioned this gold more than once. What makes you so sure there is gold?"

"Because he told me there was. Lots of it. Enough for . . . for two men."

Johnny was sitting facing Stevens at the opposite end of the table. He shifted his body around, popped one leg over the other and turned an amused face from the earnest old man across from him, who was trying so hard to convince him of a ridiculous possibility. Johnny shook his head and looked down at the floor. Stevens rambled on about the map.

Johnny noticed the texture of the floor, how smooth and even the grain ran, how well-laid it was and conjectured on how long it took his uncle to put the flooring in. The flooring ran in single, long strips, wider than the conventional flooring by more than two inches. His brow furrowed suddenly, when he noticed a peculiar something. Either his uncle had run out of the single strips, or . . . But it was hard to see from where he was sitting.

Stevens looked blankly at the other as Johnny got to his feet and moved to the stove, where he got down on hands and knees. Pop watched Johnny rub his hands across the surface of the floor under the nearer part of the stove and wondered what he was doing. The answer was surely unexpected.

For Johnny rose in a swift move, stepped back to the table where he got a knife and returning to the floor under the stove, inserted the knife in what appeared to be a crack in the floor.

"Come over here, Pop, and lend me a hand. There's a trapdoor of some kind here."

Between the two of them they managed to lift the heavy trap. A cool, damp odor rushed up at them.

"A cellar, by gum!" Pop yelled. "I betcha it's down there."

"Yeah. Might be. There's a stair. Wait up here . . . Better yet, find me a flash," Johnny directed.

Oddly enough, Stevens had one. It was in the pocket of his worn jacket. When he returned with it, Johnny was nowhere to be seen.

"I'm down here," Johnny called from the depths. "Drop it. I'll catch it."

Stevens waited with bated breath. Would there be . . . ?

"It's here!" Johnny yelled.

And the question was answered.

"Pop," Johnny called again.

"Yeah?"

"Get a rope or something. This chest is heavy as hell."

IT TOOK Stevens longer to find the rope than the flashlight, until he remembered he had one tied to the saddle of his horse. He called to Johnny where it was and ran for it.

In the meantime Johnny was investigating his find by the flashlight's beam. It seemed to be a square case, about two feet square and about a foot and a half in depth. There was a strong padlock which seemed to be welded or riveted to the hasp. He pushed at the case and grunted at its weight. But he found new energy in the clanking sound of coin when he moved it.

He heard the heavy tread of Stevens' feet above, and an instant later a coil of rope came twisting down.

"Got it," he called out. "Wait till I make it fast. Then haul away."

With Stevens hauling at one end of the rope and he pushing, they maneuvered it to the opening. But the old man didn't have the strength to haul it up by himself.

"Wait a second," Johnny said.

He thought for a second, then said:

"Guess the only way is for me to get up. The two of us should manage it."

But Stevens had a better idea.

"There's a plank outside we c'n use," he said. "I'll get it and we'll slide it up."

It was easy after the plank was laid against the stairs. Johnny pushed at the case from below and Stevens hauled from above. Even then it was back-breaking work and Johnny was almost winded before he saw the heavy case disappear. He took the last two steps, and had his head and shoulders out of the opening before he saw Stevens. The old man was standing a couple of feet back of the opening, a shotgun cuddled in the crook of his elbow, and a leer of derision on his mouth.

"Thanks, Johnny-boy," he said. "Knew you'd help me find it. Guess the old eyes ain't what they used to be. Couldn't spot that break in the planks . . ."

It was all clear to Johnny, now. Jenks hadn't killed his uncle. It was this old guy, with the screwy name. He knew, then, he had been led astray by his own reasoning and circumstances; he had assumed two shotguns had blasted those slugs at his supposedly-sleeping figure; and the assumption seemed borne out by the horesmen he had seen riding from the direction of the cabin. For he had recognized one of them as being the short, bandy-legged Gerts.

"... I see by yore face you got it figured out, eh? Yore right, too. Sure, I killed Will. Woulda got you too. But how'd I know you'd get up and go back to Copper Shaft? Don't make no difference now, Johnny-boy. Gonna make sure of you . . ."

"Why did you kill my uncle and how?" Johnny asked. He seemed to be only interested in the answer to his question. He leaned his weight against the lip of the trap door and looked steadily up at the old man.

"Was gonna leave everything to you, he was," Stevens said. "An' I was gonna

be left out in the cold. Me his podner for thirty years. Who helped him hold up that bank at Douglas, twenty-eight years ago? And he takin' all those gold pieces for his own. We was supposed to split, but I never seed one of 'em. Now I got 'em. Will made one mistake. Gave one of those pieces to that girl down at Gus's. An' she wore it an' I saw it. Knew he lied about havin' to get rid of it in the chase what followed the hold-up.

"Sure. I waited for him in the brush. Roped him neat, too. An' dragged him for a couple hundred feet. But he was a stubborn cuss, he was. Wouldn't talk after he laid out in that sun for two days. Just cussed me, he did. Died cussin' me and that gold. But I knew he'd given Deveraux your address . . ."

SO THAT was how he'd gotten mail. When his mother had died, Johnny moved from the small flat they had. He had notified her only relative, Will Maypole, about her death, and had given his address as general delivery.

"... So I told Deveraux a story about Jenks and his boys doin' the murderin'. Knew he'd send for you. Figured if I wasn't smart enough to find it, you would . . ."

Johnny wondered at the devious reasoning of this old man. Only an insane person would and could think up something so out of the world of thought. But it had worked. And now he was going to die. Soon the old man was going to tire of talking. If only there was a means of distracting him? Johnny had an idea the moment his eyes left those of the old man he would let go a blast from the double barrel.

And suddenly there was a bellow:

"What's goin' on here?"

Johnny could only see the booted feet of the man who had shouted so. But

he saw Stevens turn his head for an instant. And in that small fraction of time Johnny heaved himself out of the trap. He landed on hands and knees, and at the same instant went diving for the old man's legs.

There was a blast of sound and hundreds of bees with the sting of death in them, went buzzing in his direction. Stevens had shot without lifting the gun to his shoulder. Several of the slugs passed through the shirt and one burned Johnny's skin along the shoulder. But none hit a vulnerable spot.

But if they didn't hit where they were aimed, some hit a more damaging place. There were a couple of cans of kerosene near the stove. The slugs hit them, ripping them to pieces and spilling kerosene all over the stove. There was a blast of flame and fire leaped in a river all over the cabin.

Johnny scrambled to his feet just in time to see Jenks; it was he who had arrived on the scene, draw his gun. This time there were two explosions and a wild scream of pain. Once more Stevens had been slow. Slugs tore upward through the roof as Jenks' shot caught the old man high on the chest, just under the left collar bone. The shot knocked Stevens backward against the wall, the shotgun slipping from his limp fingers. But Jenks didn't have time to fire again. For Johnny dove head-first for the stocky cowman and his hands encircled Jenks' knees in a grip of iron.

They both fell to the floor, Jenks hammering a vicious tattoo of Johnny's back and shoulders with the pistol barrel. But only for a couple of swipes. Johnny had known this was not to be one of those polite fights where if one was knocked down, the other had to observe the rule of permitting the fallen man to rise before resuming battle.

With the first blow of the steel barrel, Johnny brought his fist back and with

all his strength, hit Jenks in the groin. That one blow should have ended the fight. But because of the way the two men were tumbling about it was impossible for Johnny to get any power in the punch. It did, however, make Jenks twist away, and that second of attempted escape was enough. Johnny managed to get his other arm free and with the stiffened side of his palm, chopped down against the bull-throat.

Jenks relaxed his grip and Johnny freed himself with a lithe movement of his body. But he was no swifter to get to his feet than the other. Only the odds were more even, this time. For in the scuffle, Jenks had lost his gun. But gun or no, Jenks attacked. He lowered his head and charged forward as if he expected to bowl the other over by sheer weight.

JOHNNY side-stepped, grinning as he did so, and started to pivot, and felt something tear loose in his side, painfully. He was barely able to dance out of Jenks' way, but he knew he couldn't do it for long. The next time Jenks charged, Johnny met him, with a straight left, and a right hook. The two punches should have stopped a horse, but Jenks shook them off as though they had been drops of rain water on his face, lowered his head until his head and neck were one, and came in once more, his hands spread wide, not to punch but to grab.

Once more Johnny used foot work, hitting from all angles as he skipped out of reach. He knew he had to work fast. For one thing, flames were licking at the walls of the cabin; smoke filled his eyes and nose; for another he could not escape for long, those rushes of Jenks'.

Jenks came in again on slow-moving feet. And this time Johnny wasn't dancing away. A straight right, a left

and another right, all three to the eyes stopped Jenks, knocked his head back. And suddenly Johnny pivoted from his hips, and a long arm came out with all the power at Johnny's command, to land with terrific force full on Jenks' Adam's apple.

Jenks gasped, gagged, his face turning brick-red. His hands fell to his sides, and his knees gave way. He looked like he was going to die. And Johnny made his mistake. He stepped forward, and Jenks hit him for the first time.

Johnny was knocked clean through the door.

He landed on his back and skidded for a few feet. Instinct and nothing else made him come erect. Jenks was a shadow which was coming at him, a terrible shadow which had sledge hammers for fists. Every time Jenks hit Johnny, Johnny felt as though everything in his stomach was going to come up on him. Blood poured from his nose and mouth in streams of crimson which soon soaked his shirt and trousers. And still Jenks pounded at him.

Once more Jenks knocked him down. Through blurred, barely seeing eyes, Johnny saw a booted foot coming toward him. Somehow, he managed to grab the foot with both arms and twist inward. There was a sharp crack as he twisted at the ankle, and a bellow of pain. Hands tore viciously at his hair, pulling it out by the roots; fists pounded his face into the dirt; but he held his grip on the ankle as though it were death. And in a few seconds those terrible beating hands, those grappling-hook fingers stopped their work. There was only the sound of his own grasping breath, and the horrible sound of moaning pain which Jenks was heaving from his lungs.

Johnny let go, then, and rose to his feet, which like a drunk's, would not keep him steady.

His head weaved from side to side as he looked down at Jenks through blurred eyes.

"Get up. Get up. I ain't through," Johnny said.

"Can't. Broken—leg," Jenks gasped.

A breath of heat-laden air made Johnny gasp. Somehow, through a mind dulled by pain, a something he should have remembered, entered. The cabin. It was on fire! And the old man was still in it!

Johnny forgot all about Jenks. He couldn't get away anyhow. Not with that leg.

He looked toward the cabin. Smoke and flames were pouring through every opening. Summoning his last bit of strength, Johnny staggered to the door and into the inferno. A curtain of flames was between him and what lay inside. Suddenly, as if by magic, the curtain lifted. And he saw something which would never leave him. Stevens, bent almost double, a great blotch of crimson staining the front of his shirt, was coming toward him, in slow, barely-moving steps. The rope was looped around one wrist and he was dragging the heavy case after him. His head was bent but Johnny saw the expression of terrible intent on his face. Then the flames parted him from the other. There was a crashing sound as one of the roof's timbers came down in a fiery crash, and Johnny staggered back just in time, for in the next second the whole roof caved in.

JOHNNY MAYPOLE sat on the ground beside Tom Jenks, and looked at the still-burning cabin. So the curse had come true. "... Be buried as deep as the gold..." That was it. Well, it had come true! There was no question that Stevens was dead.

He looked down at the quiet Jenks and saw the other was looking at him.

"You're a pretty good man," Jenks said. There was no pain, no anything of emotion in his voice. He was simply stating a fact. "A damned good man, Maypole. As good a man as your uncle was. But you got something wrong. I know the old guy told you I was the man responsible for his death, but it isn't true . . ."

Johnny started to say something, but before he could, Jenks stopped him with a lifted hand:

"Now hold on. I've never lied about anything. That don't make me out to be no angel. I've killed men, and the boys who work for me have done the same. But we've never bushed anyone. I know all about what happened with you, Snake and the Parson. But that was their own idea. I came out here to try to buy this place from you. Hell! You're no westerner. You're as lost out here as a sheep would be. Look. I know the terms of that sale paper. You've got to live on this land for the next month.

"How you gonna do it? But don't tell me. I'm offering you ten thousand dollars, cash. That's more than these acres will ever bring. I've got to have 'em. I lose too many cattle in the canyon . . ."

But Johnny wasn't listening to him, now. He was thinking of a case and a man. By now, the heat of the fire would have fused the gold into one lump. And the man into a charred something out of the inferno. Of what good was the gold? So that was how his uncle had gotten it. He had stolen it. Of course no one would ever know, or would they? It had been stolen from a bank . . . He laughed grimly. The pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Why one of those gold pieces had been worth a hundred and fifty dollars.

Both men looked up at the sudden sound of galloping hoofs. It was the

sheriff and Deveraux. The horses slid to a halt and the men leaped from the saddles.

"What the hell's been goin' on here?" Deveraux asked.

"What are you two doin' here?" Jenks asked, disregarding the other's question.

"We come to arrest Pop Stevens," Gossens said.

"For what?" Jenks asked.

"For the murder of Will Maypole."

"How did you know?" Johnny asked.

"Well," said the sheriff, looking straight at Jenks as he talked. "You said something about not being scared of these boys. Kinda got me. So I went to see Slick. Remembered something he told me a couple of months back. Seems he got Pop drunk one night and the old man got to braggin' of the old days when he and Will Maypole were tough boys. Got to sayin' the young ones didn't have it on the old ones. Told him about a bank robbery, a bank in Douglas, he and Will committed.

"I checked on that. There was twenty thousand dollars in twenty-dollar pieces taken in that robbery. To this day there ain't been no trace of it . . ."

"It's all there in that cabin," Johnny said. "And the remains of Stevens guarding it, I guess."

Deveraux told the rest:

"Gossens came to me with what he heard. I began to piece things together. Got to wondering why Will got this cabin. And suddenly what he said about leaving it to a nephew sounded fishy to me. I remembered him getting a letter that his sister had died. Why he didn't even bother answering it.

"Then I got to thinking about how he died. It was Stevens who had found him. And Stevens knew about Will leaving his all to his nephew in a will I made him make out. I got to figuring

that Stevens and Will had split, somehow, on the gold, and Stevens wanted it. So he killed . . ."

But Johnny wasn't listening.

Ten thousand dollars could . . . what?

Ten thousand dollars could maybe buy the paper Deveraux had. Or a partnership. That was a nice girl at Gus's restaurant, and Copper Shaft seemed like a nice town . . .



THE GOLD IN THEM THAR WESTERNERS

By

CARTER T. WAINWRIGHT



WHEN one speaks of the West of yesteryears, the mind usually takes hold on such states as Texas, Wyoming, Arizona, Nevada and Utah, never ever getting as far west as Washington or California. And yet, these Western states, which border on the Pacific Ocean, are as much a part of the West as any of the inland states, and hold almost twice as much legendary stories about their beginnings as do the rest of the Western states. Most of this background material centers on the discovery of gold in California, and the beginning of the Gold Rush.

When the first gold nugget was dug from out of the ground in California, the man it belonged to was not the only one who felt its importance. The effect of finding gold in this land which had originally been settled a quarter of a millennium before for that purpose only by the European settlers, was far-reaching, to say the least. Over tens of thousands of persons is a conservative estimate on how many actually packed up their homes and personal belongings and moved West, but there were countless others who made money on and read with interest about the great discovery. The West was large, and it was at this time that the frontier unrolled itself to its greatest extent—to the shores of the Pacific. And thus the very sand which was washed by the Pacific waves was Western sand, and the people who lived on its banks and land were as truly Western as their neighbors inland.

The gold which was their incentive on the long and hazardous journey by oxen and mules,

when dug out of the land, was the mainstay of the government of the United States at that time, and it helped to save the nation from a dire and great economic distress and probable bankruptcy. It helped to back up the country's issuance of so many paper dollars floating around, and brought the highly unstable financial condition of the nation a little more under control. The gold discovery was made prior to the Civil War, and so during that struggle, it was the California gold which enabled the Union government to supply all of its soldiers with what it deemed the necessary food and clothing for fighting men. It took at least twenty years for this gold to make a showing on the books, but California, with its uninterrupted flow of that yellow metal, more than doubled the wealth of our nation.

And what of the people of this land? How did they live, what did they wear, what did they eat? Were they so different from other pioneers, or fundamentally were the men who found the gold in them thar hills, just the same type of Westerner as we are familiar with, but with just a bit more taste for adventure?

The great city of San Francisco as we know it today, is a far cry from the once sprawling little village of Yerba Buena, its origin. The people who helped to mine out the precious metal lived in this sprawling village. At its inception, the village consisted of only shacks and adobe houses, and they very seldom went any higher toward the sky than one story. But this was explainable by the fact that it was known that this land was

in danger of earthquakes, and the closer one was to the ground, the less he had to fall. And these were the homes of the first American settlers in the western coastal areas of the United States. There were the forty-miners, who were the real miners of that day, who felt it a waste of time to build more than a tent, and considered it beneath their dignity to do anything but live in canvas shelters. They camped in tents, or open, canvas-roofed shelters, or sometimes, bunked in shacks roofed with canvas or calico. They were never very fussy about their abodes, as they were always ready to move on to the next hill, and didn't care as long as they could pack their home and move in a hurry. But it was still considered a lucky break for a man to find himself a hut thatched with bulrushes, for they knew that this was a sturdy home, for the Indians used these to insulate their habitations against the winds and the rains. But they were few, and mostly the habitations were seen to be thousands of tents and packing-case shacks, which were not laid out in orderly fashion at all; in fact, they looked like a helter-skelter pattern, and gave the town the appearance of being merely an overnight encampment. At night, when the oil lamps were seen shining through the canvas-sided tents, these little homes looked like nothing more than huge glow-worms.

There were two major weather conditions that upset the routine of the town of Yerba Buena, and that was the rainy season, and the dry season. At the first sign of rain, the cloth roofs came off the huts and were replaced with wooden ones, and in this way, frame houses were soon introduced into the Western seaboard town, being shipped through the waterways from the East. But this rain, aside from developing the houses, also played havoc with the streets, making them not much more than small channels of mud, churned up by hundreds upon hundreds of heavy miners' boots, the hooves of horses, and the wheels on all the vehicles going through the streets. When there were shipments made to the stores along the road, they were dropped off any place in the street and left there. Thousands of dollars' worth of merchandise was destroyed in this way.

As if this were not bad enough, the buildings themselves were often flooded, and in the first school house Sacramento ever had, the children were very many times forced to sit on the tops of their desks, as the water had completely covered the floors. It is recorded in history, that there was a great flood in 1861 in California, and when the governor-elect of the State, Governor Stanford, returned from his inauguration, he found that the only way he could keep his furniture from going out the door was to latch it with rope onto the bannisters and posts, so that the water could not make it bang against the walls.

But as was already stated, if the rainy season was dreaded, the dry season was dreaded as much or even more so. When it was dry, the flimsy

wooden houses were more likely to be set afire. In fact, in one short year and a half, the city was burned down completely six times. A great fire in the year of 1851 destroyed the city almost entirely, doing away with over two thousand buildings in less than ten hours.

But even though these were forces of nature which could not be quelled, the small town of Yerba Buena put up with them and was not impeded too greatly in its development by them, and the city grew as if by magic. Houses sprouted up almost overnight, and where there had been vacant lots for miles around one week, might turn into a great shopping district the next.

And the people who lived in the town were as distinct in their clothing as in the almost primitive ways in which they first lived. The typical miner who worked his stake all day, was easily picked out in a crowd, for his apparel was almost one of uniformity. He wore a heavy wool flannel shirt of bright red or blue, and had pantaloons of heavy material tucked into the top of his big thick boots. Most of the miners wore their clothes so long that they were always greasy and old. They looked this way, practically from the time they would put clothes on. The pantaloons always smelled of snuff, and were the woolen homemade fabric so many clothes were fashioned out of. Their hats were felt and of a dirty-colored brown. Those of the miners who cared or thought at all about their apparel were considered fops, and took a partiality for carmine colored clothes, from stockings on up. Their bowie knives, always a part of their standard equipment, as were pistols, were silver handled, and the sashes around their waists were of rich silk in bright colors, also.

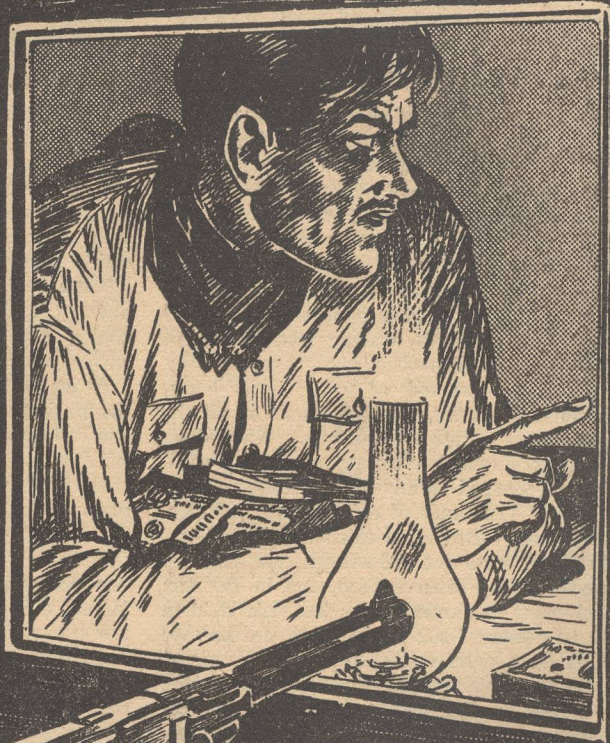
Their hair and their beards were their pride and joy, and they never cut either of them by choice, and the longer they grew, the more envious would be the other miners.

As for the nationalities of the people, there were the Mexicans, who wore cream-colored sombreros, and had their ever-present serapes flung over their left shoulder. There were innumerable Frenchmen, come to seek adventure, who dressed as fashion plates in the latest styles from Paris. There were the dandies of all races, but especially amongst the Chinese, who could be seen flaunting their sky-blue or purple colored silks, both pants and jackets, and sometimes they even wore tight yellow trousers. But no matter what color, the material was always the best Chinese silk. The pig-tail was always present, neatly plaited under the scarlet skullcap adorning his head. But this was the Chinese clothes horse. The ordinary Chinese wore shapeless and baggy jackets and pants, and a cone-shaped hat he used to pack his tools in, and these were more comfortable than they were pleasing to the eye.

This is a slight picture of the people and their habitations and their way of living in the early days of gold-rushing, when everything was permissible, because everything was being done.

Beady

SILVER CITY DUDE



There were bundles of money spread all over the table

by Velma Benedix

"SILVER CITY!" called the conductor. "Silver City!"

Steve Randall snatched his grip from the baggage rack and dashed to the door.

The conductor looked at him in surprise. "Didn't know you were getting off here!" he said.

"Neither did I," Steve grinned, and swung from the moving train.

As he strode toward the block-long main street, Steve couldn't help but smile at the audacity of this tiny Colorado town calling itself a city. The downtown district seemed to consist of nothing but a gas station, a tavern, and a general store.

Steve went into the general store and asked the sun-dried little man behind the counter for a package of cigarettes.

While the little man made change, Steve remarked, "Nice country around here. Any ranches up for sale?"

The storekeeper looked him over with eyes that twinkled pleasantly. "Thought all you fellers wanted poultry farms—not cattle ranches. What branch of the service were you in?"

"Air Force. I was a pilot."

"We got an Army Air Field right here," he said. "Just a little one." Then he chuckled. "I'm a vet myself."

Steve tried to conceal his surprise. "You're a veteran?"

"Didn't say that, son. I'm a veteri-

Steve Randall was an Air Force pilot, and used to tough spots—but he found Silver City the toughest!



narian." The little man rocked with laughter at his own joke. "Got tired of traipsing all over the country in the middle of the night. So I got me this store." He nodded proudly at the display of miscellaneous merchandise. "Folks fer miles around come here to shop at Porter's. I'm Parmalee Porter."

"I'm Steve Randall." They shook hands. "Now how about that ranch?"

"Well, if I was a young feller like you, I think I'd be kinda interested in the Flying V."

"Think they want to sell?"

"Shouldn't be surprised. The place is looking purty seedy. Why don't you stick around there for a while and see what you think of it?"

"How could I manage that?"

"Easy!" Parmalee Porter winked. "I'll jist call the Surreys—that's their name—and fix it up fer you . . . Now, here's how you git there . . ."

Parmalee Porter walked to the door with Steve. He acted as if there was something on his mind, something which he wanted to say and couldn't. At last he blurted, "Some mighty queer goings-on down there at the Flying V." But when Steve turned to him with a question on his lips, the older man pushed him out the door. "Fergit it!" he said. "Fergit I said a word!"

Steve knew it was something which he would not forget, but he whistled as he hiked down the road in the morning sunshine. He had the world by the tail! Enough money for a downpayment on a cattle ranch—everything he needed to make a dream come true! Getting together that money had meant a lot of saving, but owning a ranch, he was sure, would be worth any sacrifice. He swung his grip and took long, deep breaths of the pine-scented air.

There was the roar of a plane overhead and Steve stopped whistling. He clenched his fists and tried to ignore the

sound. But his stomach tied itself into a tight, hard knot, just as it always did at the sound of a plane, just as it always had ever since that crack-up—the crash which had made him hate the sight, the sound, and even the smell of a plane.

As the plane disappeared in the distance, the lump in Steve's stomach dissolved. By the time he reached the rural mailbox marked "Surrey" he was feeling fine again.

He turned in at the clay driveway and almost stumbled into a water-filled rut. "Road needs fixing," he thought. "Fences need fixing, too," he decided as he walked farther. "And the house could use a coat of paint."

THEN a girl came through the door of the house. Like the house, she was unpainted. Unlike the house, she had no need of paint. She was slim and tiny, with wavy brown hair, and brown eyes which were not quite happy. Her pink cotton dress was clean and smooth, but it was patched and mended.

"Hello," she said in a soft, breathless voice and held out a rough little hand which was as pink as the dress she was wearing. "Uncle Lee called to tell us you were coming. And was I glad! We certainly *need* a hired man."

"You do?" said Steve. Then suddenly it dawned upon him that Parmalee Porter—"Uncle Lee"—had arranged for him to work as a hired man so that he could look over the ranch. "Is Parmalee Porter your uncle?" he asked.

"Oh, no!" said the girl, with a smile which lighted up her eyes. "He's just a very old friend. By the way, my name's Jenny."

Just then a harsh voice came from just outside the barn, "Hold still, you darn black critter. Ain't got the sense yuh was born with." Steve turned and saw a man putting a bridle on a big

black stallion.

Jenny beckoned to the man and he came over to them.

"This is Jake Mungo, our foreman," said Jenny. "He really runs the ranch. My father has been laid up in bed for almost two years now. Jake, this is Steven Randall, our new hired man."

Jake chewed the corner of his moustache and stared at Steve with hard, unfriendly eyes. "Ever had hold of a pitchfork?" he growled.

"Sure," said Steve with a grin. "Where I come from we use 'em for eating oysters." But Jake Mungo did not smile, and Steve explained seriously. "I wasn't raised on a ranch, if that's what you're trying to find out, but I did spend some of my summers there when I was a kid. I can milk cows and chop wood—and handle a pitchfork, too."

"Where you from?"

"Chicago."

"A dudel!" Jake spat contemptuously past Steve's left ear.

"Hired help's hard to get, Jake," Jenny softly reminded him.

"Okay, if *you* say so, Jenny," said Jake, giving Jenny a pat on the shoulder. Steve noticed how she seemed to shrink from his touch. Then Jake turned to Steve. "C'mon! I'll show yuh the bunkhouse."

The bunkhouse was dark and airless and its floor was strewn with newspapers. "You'll sleep there," Jake indicated a blanketed cot. "Throw yer bag down anywhere."

Steve dropped his grip beside the cot.

"You kin git busy on the woodpile," Jake said. "It's right back of the house." He walked away bow-leggedly, leaving Steve to find the woodpile.

By dinner time Steve had a sizable pile of firewood to his credit, (not to mention the blister ballooning on his

thumb) and an appetite to match. Dinner was served in the big ranch house kitchen, which smelled of freshly-baked apple pies and the pine wood burning in the iron stove. Jenny's cheeks, flushed from the heat of the stove, became still pinker as Steve complimented her cooking.

The first call came from the sickroom soon after Jenny sat down at the table. "Jenny! This soup's too hot!"

JENNY hurried to the south downstairs bedroom. "All right," Steve heard her say. "I'll fix it."

She brought the soup into the kitchen and poured it from one pan to another, cooling the pan each time with water. She had barely sat down again before there was another querulous call, "Jenny! This soup's too cold. I can't eat cold soup."

"All right, Jed," she told him without impatience. "I'll heat it up a little."

Jake, meanwhile was systematically shovelling stew into his mouth. Then he devoured two pieces of apple pie without comment, wiped the coffee from his moustache, and left the room.

Steve stayed on, waiting for Jenny to finish her much-interrupted meal. "I guess you keep pretty busy, don't you, Jenny? Cooking, and cleaning, and nursing your father besides." "You're right about the cooking and cleaning. But Jed Surrey isn't my father—he's my stepfather. My father's name was Wren. So of course my name is Wren, too. Jenny Wren." She smiled ruefully. "Isn't that awful?"

"Well, anyway, you won't have that name all your life," Steve told her, and wondered why his comment made her bite her lips and look so unhappy.

Then she gave her head a little shake and managed a smile. "Are you a good dishwasher?" she asked.

"One of the best" said Steve. "Never

break more than half of 'em."

"That won't get you out of it," Jenny laughed, and set to work scraping dishes.

Steve waited until they were half through with the dishes before he asked, in his most casual manner, "How much is a ranch like this worth?"

Jenny wrinkled her brow. "I don't know exactly how much it's worth now. But we were offered eighty thousand for the Flying V last year."

A cup slipped through Steve's soapy fingers and crashed upon the floor.

"No matter," said Jenny comfortably. "That cup didn't match anything."

"Eighty thousand dollars!" Steve repeated. "And I thought I was going to make a down payment on a ranch with my measly little savings."

Jenny's voice was warm with sympathy. "I'm so sorry."

"Maybe it's the cattle that make it expensive. How many do you have?"

"Not so many right now. About two hundred head. They're all up in the hills on government range—all except a few milk cows we keep down here. We've lost a lot of cattle lately. Everyone has."

"Lost them?"

"Cattle rustlers. Nobody has enough hired help to take proper care of his cattle. The men swap help back and forth, but even that isn't enough."

STEVE finished the dishes in a daze and left the kitchen, almost stumbling over Jake on the back step.

"Took yuh a mighty long time," Jake grumbled. "What's been keeping yuh?"

"Dishes."

Jake grunted and spat contemptuously. "Woman's work! C'mon. I've got a man's job fer yuh. You kin clean out the cowbarn."

Steve cleaned and scrubbed the cow-

barn violently, working off most of his disappointment. Then he started a voluntary scrubbing of the stables. The work suited his mood. When he was through, both barns were clean.

Then he sat down on the front steps and began to wonder why he was staying here, working as a hired man, so that he could investigate a ranch—a ranch which he couldn't even think of buying.

He went to bed that night full of aches, pains, and firm resolutions about leaving the Flying V first thing in the morning.

But when he awoke at six-thirty the next morning, after a good night's sleep, his aches and pains had subsided and his firm resolutions were wavering. He stood in the doorway of the bunkhouse and drank in the clean, cold mountain air. And as he looked around him, he knew that this was just the ranch he had hoped to find, the very ranch he had dreamed about.

It was in a deep valley, with dark, snow-capped peaks in the distance and green hills close at hand. Steve liked the way the house was set far back from the road. He liked the clear, icy creek which was so close to the back door that Jenny used it as a refrigerator for her jars of cream and bowls of butter. And he longed to explore the thick woods at the back of the house.

"Breakfast!" called Jenny from the doorway of the ranch house. And when Steve sat down to a breakfast of hot pancakes, maple syrup, and hickory-smoked bacon, he knew that he did not want to leave the Flying V right away.

"Well, Jake, what's the program for today," he inquired, pouring thick yellow cream into his second cup of coffee.

"Reckon we'll ride fences. Some of them fences could stand a little fixing."

"They all could if you ask me," Steve replied with a grin.

Jake frowned. "Didn't ask you," he growled.

But Jenny smiled approval.

When Steve left the kitchen, after the breakfast dishes were done, he found Jake sitting in his usual place on the back steps.

"C'mon out to the corral," he said. "We'll saddle up the hosses. You kin ride old Nell. Even a dude couldn't fall offa her."

"You're right," Steve commented as he swung into the saddle, atop the big brown plug. "Nobody could fall off this horse. She's broad as a barn—and just as lively."

"Kick 'er in the guts!" Jake advised. "That'll make 'er go." He dug the spurs into his own black stallion.

THEY were about half a mile from the house when Steve pulled up on his reins and shouted, "Hey, Jake! What's that?" He pointed to an old log cabin.

Jake said nothing, but he stopped his horse and set to work on a broken patch of fence. Steve caught up with him.

"Golly! That cabin's a real old timer. The first settlers must have lived there. Didn't they?"

"Yup."

"And now it's deserted. I'd sure like to take a look inside."

"Jist keep yer nose out of there, young feller," Jake snarled. "That there homestead's none of yer concern. Don't let me catch yuh near the place."

Steve looked at the foreman in surprise. "I only—"

"Jist keep off, that's all. Keep off if yuh know what's good fer yuh."

Steve made no promises. And he began to wonder whether the homestead could have some connection with the queer "goings-on" which Parmalee Porter had mentioned.

All day Steve speculated while he helped Jake repair fences. In the evening, over the supper dishes, he remarked to Jenny, "I saw the old homestead today—just from the distance. Thought I'd like to have a look inside some time."

"My grandfather built it," Jenny volunteered. "My father was born there—my own father, not Jed Surrey. There's no reason you shouldn't take a look at the place, but I don't think you'll find it very interesting. It's just an old log house. I never go near it."

"Jenny! Jenny!" came the whining summons from the south room.

Jenny ran to answer the call. Steve heard Jed Surrey's voice, "I shore wisht I had some strawberries."

"But it isn't strawberry season yet around here," Jenny told him.

"You kin git 'em in Denver. 'Taint much pleasure I git, laying here in bed from morning till night."

"All right," Jenny promised. "I'll drive into Denver tomorrow."

"Take that there new hired man along. I want him to git some barbed wire and stuff."

Jenny explained to Steve when she returned to the kitchen. "He gets spells like that every once in a while. Oh, well, I suppose all invalids have queer cravings. But it's eighty miles over Loveland Pass to Denver—takes most of the day to get there and back."

Steve was beginning to wonder more and more about the invalid, who remained in his room all day with the door shut, and apparently had no friends, for he saw no one but Jake and Jenny.

JAKE stuck his head in the kitchen to announce that he was going into town.

"Wait a minute," said Jenny, pulling off her apron. "I'll ride with you as far as the Porter's house. I promised

Mrs. Porter a recipe."

"Run along," Steve said. "I'll finish up here."

Soon he heard the pickup truck rattle away over the rutted driveway, and he had a sinking feeling as he pictured Jenny alone with Jake.

"Well, anyway," he thought, "here's my chance to explore the homestead."

There were still some chores to finish, so it was about an hour later that Steve started out. He found a path leading south through the woods and decided that it would probably lead him straight to the homestead.

The path was narrow, and the woods at each side were dark and forbidding. Coyotes howled in the distance, and every once in a while a branch crackled in the woods nearby under the feet of some unseen mountain creature. At each sound Steve thought of mountain lions and wished he were armed with something better than a pocket flashlight. "And I won't even have any good of the flashlight," he thought, "unless I save this battery." So he depended upon the moonlight for the last quarter mile.

At last, with a sigh of relief to be out of the woods, he stepped into the clearing which surrounded the house. Then suddenly he stiffened. There was a light in the homestead! The windows were blacked out with heavy shades, but an unmistakable line of light was seeping out between two of the old logs which formed the wall of the cabin.

"If I had any sense I'd get out of here," Steve told himself. "But I've got to see what's going on in that cabin." He dropped to all fours in the sage brush and began to inch his way closer and closer to the crack in the wall through which he could see the light. At last he was able to put one eye close to the opening, and found that he could see part of the room.

Within his range of vision was a battered old table, and on it were half a dozen beer bottles, a pistol, and three piles of folding money. As Steve watched, a hand reached out and clutched one of the piles of money. The hand was broad and white, and in its center was a crimson, v-shaped scar.

Then another hand reached out and closed over the second pile of money. This hand was dark and shaggy—it was a hand which Steve knew well.

Steve decided that he had seen enough, and he began to crawl quietly back to the shelter of the woods.

What was Jake Mungo doing out here in the deserted homestead? And who were his pals? There were probably three of them altogether, judging by the number of beer bottles and the piles of money. Yes, there were certainly "queer goings-on" at the Flying V.

STEVE got undressed in a hurry and tumbled into his cot. Then on second thought he got up and took the Luger—souvenir of Germany—from his valise, he loaded the pistol and put it under his pillow.

He was fast asleep before Jake came in.

"Have a high time in town last night?" Steve asked Jake next morning as they were milking.

"Shore did," Jake replied without interrupting the rhythmic flow of milk into the pail.

"See a show?"

"Nope. Played poker."

Possible, Steve thought, but not likely. The money on the table might have been poker stakes, and there could have been cards just outside his range of vision. But why go to the old deserted homestead just for a poker game?

"It's his own business what he does in his spare time," Steve decided, "but I'm still going to see the inside of that

homestead."

The next day he had no opportunity to go near the place. He and Jenny had to drive to Denver in search of out-of-season strawberries.

"Will you drop me off at Mrs. Porter's?" Jenny asked, when they were on their way home. "I brought her some things from Denver. I'll only be there a little while."

So Steve left Jenny at the Porter's home, on the outskirts of Silver City, and stopped off at Tom's Tavern to kill half an hour.

A tall man was sitting at the bar. "Howdy!" he said, and indicated the vacant place at his side. Steve sat down and ordered beer.

The man peered at Steve through rimless glasses. "I'm Charlie Parsons," he said. "My ranch is right across the road from the Flying V. You're the new hired man there, aren't you?"

"Right!" Steve admitted with a grin. "My name's Steve Randall. You probably know that, too."

Charlie Parsons nodded and shook hands with Steve. "They certainly needed someone on the Flying V. Seems as if Jake Mungo can't keep any hired help—or maybe he doesn't want to . . . I understand you're from the east?"

"News sure travels fast around here."

"I'm from the east myself. Came here twenty years ago. I used to teach school. Came here for my health—believe it or not."

Steve believed it. Though Charlie Parsons' skin was tanned and ruddy, he still was thin, and his tall, spare frame was stooped as a question mark.

Three other men joined them at the bar. The one nearest Steve was short and dark, and he managed to swagger even while sitting on a bar stool. "This is Sheriff Henderson," Charlie Parsons introduced him.

"How about it, Sheriff?" said one of the men. "Ain't it about time you cracked down on them rustlers?"

"Cracking down is exactly what I'm a-doing. I've even got me a posse to check all the cattle trucks coming through here. But we ain't caught nobody shipping cattle that wasn't his'n."

"Them devils got twenty head of my cattle," one of the men complained.

"They musta got thirty of mine," said someone else. "At this rate I won't have none to sell."

"I've been lucky." Charlie Parsons rapped the wooden bar with his fist.

"Mighty funny they'd miss you," someone grumbled. And there were a few suspicious glances cast in Charlie Parsons' direction.

STEVE finished his beer and left the tavern. "Wish I could do something about catching those rustlers," he thought. "But if the sheriff doesn't know what to do, I sure don't. Guess I'm just a pilot with my wings clipped—or a cattle rancher without a ranch or any chance of getting one. Anyway I'm going to find out what goes on in that old log house. Maybe tomorrow . . ."

But the next morning Steve was roughly awakened by Jake's pounding him on the shoulder. "Git up. We're gonna ride the range today."

Steve shivered and rolled out of bed. It looked like the middle of the night and it felt like twenty below zero. His watch said 5:30.

Jenny was up and had breakfast ready. "The men ride the range about once a week," she explained to Steve. "They have to drive the cattle farther up the mountain, where the snow has just melted and there's fresh pasture."

As Jake and Steve went out to the corral after breakfast Steve said, "You don't expect me to chase cattle with

that old nag I've been riding! I can't get her past a trot, and she does a shimmy every time she goes downhill. Just about shakes my teeth out."

"You kin ride Babe," Jake told him grudgingly. "She's that pinto over there by the fence. Babe's kinda frisky, but mebbe yuh kin stay on her."

"Swell!" said Steve. "I'll sure be glad to do some real riding."

"Yuh wont git to do much fast riding," said Jake.

"Why not?" Steve asked.

Jake busied himself with the saddling of his black stallion and did not answer. So Steve got down his own saddle and threw it over the pinto's back. Then Jake began to put the pack saddle on old Nell.

"Fill up them two wooden boxes with rock salt," he ordered. He put one of the salt-filled boxes on each side of the pack saddle, and tied the pack mare's halter rope to Steve's saddle horn. And Steve knew then why he wouldn't have a chance to do any fast riding.

They started out along the highway and rode for about five miles. Then they took a trail leading through the sage brush and willows up into the mountains.

Rabbits and chipmunks scampered across their path, and twice Steve saw a deer standing motionless among the pines in the distance. But he had little opportunity to observe the wildlife. He was having a constant tug-of-war with the pack horse.

The pack mare was an individualist who had no inclination to follow the beaten path. She would trail along quietly for a while, then without warning take off into the willows, getting her long halter rope thoroughly tangled among the trees. As the rope looped itself around a willow, there would be such a sharp tug on Steve's saddle horn that he would be almost

thrown from his horse. Or he would be half-way across a shallow stream when suddenly the pack mare would decide that she preferred dry land. And her quick backward pull would nearly throw Steve into the icy creek.

Jake, meanwhile, rode up ahead on the black stallion as easily as if he were sitting in a rocking chair. And he made no offer to help Steve with the pack mare.

Steve was beginning to feel as if he had been riding for the better part of a lifetime and was almost beginning to doubt the existence of any Flying V cattle up here in the mountains. "How'll you know where to find the cattle?" Steve shouted to Jake.

Jake did not answer. But soon afterwards they saw a dozen white-faced Herefords grazing in the open grass while their calves sunned themselves nearby. Jake started the cows and calves moving, then rode up among the trees and brought down about fifteen steers and heifers.

"I'll round 'em up," said Jake. "You keep 'em moving." So Jake brought more and more cattle to the herd, while Steve rode back and forth behind the gradually increasing herd, and as he rode he dragged the pack horse with him.

"Are any of your cattle missing?" Steve asked Jake. "Some of the men in town said that rustlers had stolen a lot of their cattle."

Jake counted. "We're missing about fifteen head," he said finally. "Damn rustlers got 'em, I reckon."

Steve wondered whether all ranch foremen were as casual over the loss of their cattle. But then, Jake never did say much . . .

AT NOON they stopped for lunch beside a stream and ate the sandwiches which Jenny had prepared—

thick slices of home-made bread spread with sweet butter and filled with tender beef. When they were thirsty they lay face downward and sipped the icy water of the spring-fed stream as if they were drinking from a fountain.

Steve threw a crust of bread to a chipmunk and watched the little creature as it nibbled away, holding the food daintily between its tiny paws. He listened to the birds, and he tasted the clean mountain air.

"This is just about perfect," he thought.

Then he happened to look at his companion, and immediately changed his mind. Certainly Jake with his walrus moustache, bearlike paws, and the eating habits of a gorilla, was not a suitable companion for such a setting. If only the right person were here with him—Jenny, for instance!

Jake gulped his food, took a quick catnap, and was ready to start work again just when Steve finished his lunch. But before he swung into the saddle, Jake took a small flask from his pocket. He threw his head back and drank.

Steve had heard about the powerful effects of alcohol at high altitudes, but even so he was surprised at Jake's sudden change. Jake became talkative!

"This'll be the hard driving," he explained. "Them cattle are all tired out, and they want to stop and graze. It'll take a lot of yelling and riding to get 'em into the next draw."

"You sure know a lot about cattle," Steve said.

Jake stuck his chin in the air. "Shore do. Ain't nobody around these parts knows more about cattle than I do."

Steve had been wondering what Jake's status was at the Flying V. He didn't seem to be merely a hired foreman. Perhaps it was a tenant-farmer arrangement, a partnership of some

kind with Jed Surrey. This seemed like a good time to ask the sixty-four dollar question—in a not-too-obvious way.

"I guess the Flying V couldn't get along without you."

Jake raised his chin still higher. "I got an interest in the Flying V," he bragged. "I'm looking out for that there place. It's gonna be all mine some day." Then he yelled "Hi!" and started out after a straying cow. Jake's drinking did not affect his ability to herd cattle.

The sun was beginning to sink behind the highest peak when Jake said, "When we get them cattle over the next ride, we've got 'em where we want 'em."

At last the cattle were all driven into a ravine, where the grass was almost as high as the animal's bellies.

"We'll make a salt lick for 'em now, so they'll stay here," Jake said. "Throw down that salt along the stream. Make about half a dozen piles."

STEVE left the salt in piles along the stream. Then they started for the ranch house. By this time, riding was pure agony for Steve. Every bone in his body ached, and his legs were rubbed raw. He tried to ease himself by shifting position, but no comfortable positions were left.

Leading the pack mare was like dragging her on skids.

"Her hoofs are sore," said Jake in an interested manner. "They always get sore from walking over walks."

"So a drink makes him talkative," thought Steve bitterly, "but it doesn't make him into a nice guy—not a nice enough guy to help me with this pack horse."

Jake rode ahead after they reached the highway, and by the time Steve reached the ranch house, the foreman had eaten and turned in for the night.

Steve was too tired to be hungry, but he managed to bolt down an unwanted supper. Jenny had already taken care of the milking, so there was nothing left for him to do but fall into bed.

But he could not fall asleep. Every part of his body ached so much that he could not find a soft spot on the cot.

"So Jake has an interest in this place," he thought, as he tossed wakefully. "Probably he takes half the profits . . . It isn't very likely that he'd rustle his own cattle, or anyway cattle that are half his own. Guess I'm off on the wrong track about Jake being mixed up in this cattle rustling . . . Wonder what happened to Jed Surrey that laid him up . . ." At last Steve dozed off.

"I'm gonna ride the range again today," said Jake next morning. "Gonna help Charlie Parsons drive cattle. Want to come along?"

Steve was sure Jake knew that even the thought of a horse made him wince. But he only said, "Guess not. I should chop some more firewood."

The moment Jake was out of the way, Steve thought once more of the homestead. And even though the half-mile walk seemed anything but attractive to him in his present condition, he resolved to take advantage of his opportunity.

As he walked along the path leading to the homestead, Steve thought of the sturdy pioneers who had come across the country in covered wagons and settled here, living in houses hewed from the logs around them. He tried to imagine how the place would be furnished, and in his mind's eye he saw rustic furniture and shiny copper kettles.

The door of the log house was closed and locked from the outside with a padlock. The heavily shaded windows were closed and fastened down with sticks

from inside—all except one. Someone must have opened that one window for air, and then forgotten to close it. Steve found a heavy stick and managed to pry the window open still more, so that he could crawl through it, into the house. Then he lifted one of the shades and looked around.

IT WAS a dreary place—just one large room, filled with the odor of stale beer and tobacco. The unpainted old table stood where Steve had last seen it, with a few broken chairs crouching dejectedly around it. The furniture all looked as if it might have been assembled from a junk heap. On the floor beside the chairs were empty bottles which had once held beer and cheap whiskey. Old newspapers littered the floor and cluttered the corners of the room.

Steve picked up one or two of the newspapers, hoping that they might be old enough to be interesting. But their datelines were recent.

"Maybe the old ones are at the bottom of the piles," he thought, and he lifted up a large stack of newspapers which stood in the corner, intending to go through them systematically. But as he moved the stack, something fell at his feet—something which had been wedged between the newspapers and the wall.

Steve touched the thing experimentally with the toe of his shoe, then picked it up gingerly. It was a pair of overalls! They were stiff with dirt and perspiration and spattered generously with big, brown stains.

"Looks like blood," said Steve with disgust. "It is blood." He dropped the overalls quickly, kicked them back into the corner of the room, and replaced the stack of newspapers so that they were again concealed.

So that was the homestead! A place

where Jake had his drinking orgies. Strange, though, that he should hide his dirty overalls there. Strange, too, that those overalls should be stained with blood. "He probably wears 'em when he slaughters cattle," Steve decided. Then he had a sudden thought. "But maybe they aren't Jake's overalls. They could belong to anybody." He went back to the corner and forced himself to go through the pockets of the overalls. In one pocket he found a soiled handkerchief with the initials "J.M."

Steve left the homestead, having replaced everything just as he had found it.

"There's nothing wicked about slaughtering cattle," he told himself as he walked home. "Still, if I happen to run into Sheriff Henderson, I'll tell him about those overalls."

But when Steve drove into town that night he did not have Sheriff Henderson—or Jake Mungo either—on his mind. For Jenny was beside him in the pickup truck, and they were on their way to the movies.

All through the second half of the picture he held her rough little hand in his. Later they stopped for sodas at Porter's General Store.

"Will you excuse me just a minute, Steve?" said Jenny, when they were almost through with their sodas. "I'd like to take a look at those aprons over at the other side of the store." And while she was gone, Steve chatted with Parmalee Porter.

"There's something I've been wondering about, Mr. Porter," Steve said. "What kind of accident was Jed Surrey in? What happened to him, so that he's been laid up all this time?"

"I can tell you all about that, son. Doctors were scarce a couple of years ago, so they called me in—beings how I'm a vet. He fell off a horse. Got

thrown against a barbed wire fence. Ripped open his hand, and—"

"Steve! Steve Randall!" Steve felt a hearty slap on his back.

STEVE turned around. "Bob Rogers! What're you doing here?"

"I'm stationed over here at the Air Field," said the young man in the crisp Army uniform. "You flying?"

"Nope."

Bob shook his head sympathetically. "That's tough. I always said you were the best darn pilot the Army ever had—next to me, that is."

"So you've re-enlisted?"

"Sure. Say, why don't you drop in at the Air Field? We'll have a good, long gab. You could even take a plane up. You're still a reserve officer, aren't you?"

Steve nodded.

"That makes it all right. You can fly an Army plane any time you want to . . . Well, gotta be on my way." He winked. "I've got a date. Be seeing you at the Air Field."

Jenny arrived just in time to hear Bob Rogers' last words.

"Are you going to the Air Field?" she asked.

Steve shook his head.

"What did he mean, then?"

"Oh, that was an old Army buddy of mine. He said I could come and fly one of their planes."

"Could you take a passenger along?"

"I guess so. But I don't want to take any passengers. I really don't care about going over there at all." Steve tried to sound unconcerned, but his stomach was churning at the mere thought of the Air Field.

"I'd like to go up," said Jenny with enthusiasm.

"Have you ever?"

"No. But I wouldn't be afraid—not with *you* as the pilot."

Steve couldn't help feeling pleased at her confidence in him. But he only said, "We'd better get started home, I suppose."

Jenny had a far-away look as they began the homeward trip in the pickup. Steve was afraid she still had her mind on airplanes. Just to make her think of something else, he said the first thing that came into his head.

"Wonder what Jake did tonight."

Jenny still had the far-away look, and she did not answer.

"He probably stayed home and trimmed that overgrown moustache of his," Steve answered his own question. "And it's about time. He always reminds me of the old man with the beard—"

"The one who said, 'It is just as I feared! Two owls and a hen, four larks and a wren.'"

Steve joined in the chorus, "Have all built their nests in my beard."

Jenny giggled. But when Steve looked at her a moment later, he saw that her chin was quivering.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Jed says I've got to marry him—I mean the man with the beard—I mean Jake—" and now she was quietly sobbing.

Steve pulled to a stop on the broad shoulder of the road. "You can't marry him!" He put his arms around her and pulled her close to him. "You can't marry him—because you're going to marry me!"

"I am?" she looked up. "I mean—I am." The tears still ran down her cheeks, but the corners of her lips turned up in a smile.

Steve kissed her eyes with the salt tears still on them, and he knew that he could never let her marry Jake Mungo. Then he kissed her on the mouth, and knew that he could never let her marry anyone—anyone but him.

"Jed'll kill me," said Jenny, when she had a chance to talk. "He mustn't find out—or Jake either."

"They don't need to find out," Steve assured her. "We'll elope."

JENNY nodded. "To Nevada. Nobody will know us there. And we can get married without waiting."

"And we won't come back," Steve added.

"Oh, but we have to come back! Who'd take care of Jed?"

"But, Jenny, he's only your step-father. And he must have plenty of money if he owns that big ranch. Why can't he hire a nurse to look after him?"

"We've got to come back," said Jenny, and her chin was tilted at a stubborn angle.

Steve pressed his foot on the starter. "Okay. We'll come back, and I'll have it out with Jed. It's about time I got a look at that step-father of yours, anyway."

Jenny patted his hand gratefully.

They rode along in silence for a while. All at once she said, "Steve, would you do something for me?"

"Just name it," said Steve.

"Promise?"

"Promise."

"Let's fly to Reno in one of those Army planes. It would be so romantic! I don't know anyone who went away in a plane to get married. It would be the quickest, too."

Steve groped desperately for something which would dampen her enthusiasm for a plane trip. "You might get sick," he blurted. "Some people get awfully planesick."

"I wouldn't get sick . . . You promised."

"People have been killed in plane wrecks."

"And train wrecks, and auto wrecks, and falling off a horse, even. You can't

scare me."

Steve sighed. There was no way out. He couldn't admit to Jenny that he was afraid to fly a plane. "All right," he said. "I'll phone Bob at the Air Field. We'll leave tomorrow afternoon, if that's all right with you."

Might as well get it over as soon as possible. Nothing could be worse than thinking about it.

The next day Steve heard Jenny tell Jed Surrey that she had some shopping to do in Denver. "I'm taking Steve along to help me carry things," she added.

Jake had left on horseback at ten o'clock that morning, muttering "Have to see a feller." So there were no explanations to be made to him.

As he and Jenny drove to the Air Field, butterflies fluttered in Steve's stomach. Jenny chattered merrily, but he could answer hardly a word.

Bob had a plane warmed up and ready. "So that's the bride!" he said, when Steve introduced him to Jenny. "Hubba, hubba!"

Jenny smiled and stepped into the plane.

"I hope she'll be planesick—just a little," thought Steve. "Then we'll never have to go through this again."

He gritted his teeth and sat down in the cockpit. His stomach was a tight, hard knot and he felt faintly sick. Handling the plane almost automatically, he taxied along the runway, then started to climb. And as the little two-seater went higher and higher, the knot in Steve's stomach began to dissolve. Then he looked down and saw the countryside spread out below, and he had the old familiar feeling that this was the place he wanted to be—up here, looking down.

He relaxed and grinned. "Why, this was a swell idea you had, Jenny!" He felt a surge of joy as he realized that he

was one of those lucky airmen whose wife could share his love of flying.

Then he looked at Jenny!

SHE was staring at the ground below and there was horror in her eyes. "We're so high!" she moaned. "Everything looks so little."

"We're not so high yet," Steve told her.

But she still seemed unconvinced, and he knew that he must try to keep her mind off the altitude.

"Look there!" he said. "I'll bet those are all people we know. They're driving cattle on government range. That's about the part of the range where Charlie Parson's cattle should be."

Jenny showed no signs of interest. She was turning a pale green. Steve gave her a quick look, then rattled on.

"Five men down there, but I don't see Charlie. I can't see their faces, but I'd know Charlie Parsons anywhere—he's so tall and stooped . . . One of those guys walks like Jake, doesn't he? Bowlegged and sort of hopping . . . Hey, that's funny! What're they doing with those moving vans?"

Jenny just gulped and shook her head.

"Nobody ships cattle in those big, closed moving vans. And if Charlie Parsons were shipping cattle he'd certainly be there, picking out the ones he wants to ship—"

"I don't care about Charlie Parsons' cattle," said Jenny. "Open the door. I want to get out."

"Take it easy! You can't walk home from an airplane ride."

Jenny smiled wanly.

"See? You're feeling better already. Soon we'll be in Reno, and I'm going to buy you the biggest orchid in town."

"Really?" cried Jenny. "I never had an orchid."

"And I never bought one," Steve

told her. "So just for that, I'll buy you two."

Jenny seemed to take a new lease on life. She opened her handbag and took out a small jar.

"It's hand cream," Jenny explained with a blush. "I want my hands to look nice when you put on the ring."

Steve resolved to buy her the prettiest ring in town, as well as the two biggest orchids, and at the same time he decided not to bother her with his suspicions about the closed vans down on government range, and the man who walked like Jake Mungo. But his mind was busy, trying to figure out why they were not using cattle trucks for shipping cattle. Suddenly a picture of the blood-splattered overalls, hidden in the homestead, flashed into his mind, and he knew the reason for those closed vans.

In Reno Jenny said that she wanted to freshen up and then do some trousseau shopping.

"I have to buy those orchids," Steve told her. "And I have a couple of other things to take care of. I'll meet you at this jewelry store in about an hour." Then he headed for the nearest phone booth.

IT DID not take long to make connections with Silver City. A woman's voice, high and quavering, answered the phone. "The sheriff isn't here right now. This is Mrs. Henderson. Do you want to leave a message.

"Yes. Get this, it's important. Tell him to get together a posse and investigate all moving vans that come through his territory. One of those vans is carrying stolen cattle—dead cattle. And you'd better tell him—no, never mind." Steve still wasn't sure about Jake Mungo; there might be any number of bowlegged men in a horse country such as this. "Tell him that Steve Randall

gave you the message. And I'll talk to him in person this evening, when I get back to Silver City."

Steve pondered for a long moment. Then he picked up the receiver and made a second call. After that he went to the florist, purchased a corsage almost as big as the girl who was going to wear it, and finally met Jenny at the appointed place.

A justice of the peace married them. As Steve clipped the ring onto Jenny's finger, he noticed that her hands were almost smooth and that while she was waiting for him she had gotten a manicure—it must have been her first.

During the plane ride home, Steve stole a look at Jenny now and then out of the corner of his eye, wondering whether she was enjoying the trip. If only she loved flying as much as he did! He pictured himself and Jenny taking long trips together in a plane of their own—travelling everywhere and seeing everything worth seeing. But Jenny did not mention that she might never want to get into an airplane again. And who could blame her, after the way she had felt that afternoon?

Jenny interrupted his thoughts by saying, "There's one person I have to tell—about our being married, I mean."

"Who's that?"

"Uncle Lee. He's my very best friend in the world. Let's stop in at his store before we go home."

"Okay," Steve agreed. And so he stopped the pickup in front of Porter's that evening before going home to the Flying V.

Parmalee Porter's face was grim as he met them at the door of his store. "Did you hear what happened?" he asked, before Steve and Jenny had a chance to tell their news. "Them rustlers got Charlie Parsons."

"You mean they killed him?" Steve said unbelievably.

Parmalee Porter nodded gravely. "Shot him with a forty-five. Tied his body on his own pack horse. The old horse just come home about an hour ago."

"What did they do that for?" Jenny asked in a small voice.

"Jist as a warning, I guess—a warning to all of us."

"How come Charlie Parsons was out on the range? Jack helped him drive his cattle yesterday," said Steve.

"Charlie's wife said Charlie didn't have no salt yesterday—he was all out. Today he got a load of salt, so he took some of it up to the cattle. Then rustlers musta knowed he was out on the range yesterday, and they didn't expect him to show up today."

STEVE wondered if he could have prevented Charlie's death, and he felt a sudden guilt that he had not managed somehow to get in touch with the sheriff sooner.

"I saw those cattle rustlers in action today, when we flew over the range," Steve said. "I called Sheriff Henderson. Thought he'd have them all rounded up by this time."

Parmalee Porter looked surprised. "Ain't heard nothing."

"I'm almost sure now that Jake Mungo was one of them. We'd better get out to the Flying V right away. If the sheriff didn't get the message—"

"I'll go out there with you," Parmalee Porter said. "Wait jist one minute." He went to the back of the store.

"Jake—Jake Mungo a cattle rustler?" said Jenny unbelievably.

"I'm afraid so, Jenny," Steve told her quietly. "You'd better stay here in town until we get things straightened out at the Flying V."

Jenny shook her head. Her face was flush with excitement. "I'm going."

The three of them drove to the Fly-

ing V in the pickup.

"Better leave the truck out by the road," Porter suggested. "That-a-way we kin sneak up on Jake."

"Good idea," Steve agreed.

They were just passing the path to the bunkhouse, walking quietly on foot, when Steve said, "You go on ahead. I want to get something in the bunkhouse."

He threw open the door of the bunkhouse and almost collided with someone who was on his way out in a hurry.

"Didn't think yuh'd be back so soon," growled Jake Mungo, and seemed to change his mind about leaving the bunkhouse. Steve went on in, and headed for his own bunk. Then he noticed that there was a man sitting on Jake's cot. Jake made no introductions, and Steve made no remark.

There was something vaguely familiar about the man on the cot. Steve wondered why the stranger did not speak.

As soon as Steve had reached his own cot, he snatched the Luger from beneath his pillow. Pointing it midway between Jake and the strange man, he snapped, "Okay, you two! What do you know about Charlie Parson's murder?"

"Not a darn thing," growled Jake. "Put down that there gun and quit making a damn fool of yerself."

Just then Jenny's worried voice came from outside the bunkhouse door. "Steve! Jed's not in his bed. Do you think Jake—" She opened the door and stood still on the threshold, staring at the man inside the bunkhouse on the cot. "Jed! What're you doing out here in the bunkhouse?"

The man spoke with the invalid's querulous tone. "A feller gits tired of the same old four walls, day after day. Thought I'd like to lie out here in the bunkhouse fer a change. Jake here helped me."

"Jist about had to carry him," said Jake.

"Sounds mighty fishy to me, Jed Surrey," Steve said. "No one in his right mind would stay in this rotten old bunkhouse a minute longer than he had to." Then suddenly Steve realized what had seemed familiar about Jed Surrey when he had first seen him. It wasn't his face—Steve had never seen the man's face before. It wasn't his voice—for at that time the man had not spoken a word. Yet, Steve was sure.

THERE was no hesitation in his voice as he said, "Jed Surrey, I believe you're in this rustling racket with Jake. And I know very well that you can walk as well as I can."

"But, Steve—" Jenny protested.

"We're going to find out right now whether you can walk or not." Deliberately Steve took a packet of matches from his pocket, lighted a match, and touched the flame to a piece of the paper with which the floor was littered. He threw the burning paper into a corner of the bunkhouse. In no time at all, the dry wood of the building began to crackle and burn.

"You get out of here, Jake," Steve ordered. "You, too, Jenny." Then he spoke to Jed Surrey who still sat on the cot, his white hands clutching its edge. "We're walking out of here. As for you—you can do as you please."

Steve started out the door. Then, as an afterthought, he turned back and picked up his valise, then set it safely outside the bunkhouse.

"Steve!" Jenny cried. "Are you sure you're doing the right thing?"

"Trust me, Jenny." Steve lit a cigarette and kept his eyes on the door. "I'm sure."

"Yuh can't burn a man to cinders, Steve." Jake's growl had a note of pleading. "That's jist plain murder."

"At which *you* are an expert," said Steve. "Or don't you call it murder when you shoot a man with a forty-five?"

Suddenly the door of the bunkhouse flew open. Jed Surrey came out, and he came out shooting!

At the first shot, Steve pushed Jenny to the ground. He threw himself down beside her.

"Pretty lively for a bedridden invalid, aren't you, Surrey?" Steve asked when the shooting stopped.

"Don't worry about that," Jed's eyes were gray slits, and his voice held no hint of the plaintive invalid. "You and Jenny won't need to worry about nothing when I git through with you." He picked up the Luger, which Steve had dropped in order to save Jenny. With his gun he indicated the dark woods in back of the house. "Start walking."

"I don't feel like walking," Jenny said. "My feet hurt."

Steve was not sure whether she was stalling for time, or whether she did not know what this trip to the woods meant.

"I said start walking," Jed Surrey snarled.

Steve took hold of Jenny's ice-cold hand, and they started for the woods, with Jake and Jed close at their heels.

"Steve!" Jenny whispered. "Steve! How did you know Jed could walk?"

"I saw him—and Jake, too—in the old homestead one night. I suppose he used to sneak out through the window of that south bedroom and just head south half-a-mile down the path."

"You saw him there?"

"I didn't see his face, but I saw his hand. I couldn't forget that ugly, v-shaped scar."

"I suppose he got those cravings for strawberries and things just so that he could get rid of me, and go out cattle-rustling," said Jenny thoughtfully, as

they rounded the corner of the barn.

SUDDENLY there was a voice at their back! "Drop that gun, Jed Surrey!" Parmalee Porter thrust a thirty-eight caliber revolver into Surrey's back. "I thought there was some mighty queer goings-on around here. Now I know who was in back of 'em."

"You mean you suspected all the time?" cried Jenny.

"Jist suspicions, Jenny. But I knowed I done a good job of setting that broken leg of his, even if I am only a vet. And I knowed it don't take two years fer a broken leg to mend."

"A broken leg!" Steve repeated. "So that's all that was wrong with him!"

"Yup! If I'd a knowed then what I know now—well, you know what a vet does to a *horse* with a broken leg!"

"Well," Steve grinned, "I'm sure glad you came along—you and that thirty-eight. Didn't even know you'd brought a gun."

Parmalee Porter chuckled. "Not likely that an old ex-sheriff like me would go out without his shooting iron."

Just then they heard a car jolting over the rutted driveway.

"That's the sheriff," said Parmalee Porter, when he saw the car. "Reckon he just now got yer message."

The first thing Sheriff Henderson saw was the burning bunkhouse. "What's going on?" he shouted. "Who started that fire?"

"Steve, here, done it," Jake's tone was sullen.

"Fergit the fire, Sheriff," said Parmalee Porter. "This here is more important. Steve and I have rounded up a couple of cattle rustlers fer you." He indicated Jed and Jake.

The sheriff laughed derisively. "Jake Mungo and Jed Surrey? You're crazy."

"He's right, Sheriff Henderson," said Steve. "I saw five men driving Charlie

Parsons' cattle today. I'm pretty sure that one of them was Jake. They had a couple of moving vans ready to load the cattle into. They just slaughter the cattle on the spot and then cart them away in refrigerated vans. That's why Jake here is so careful to hide his slaughtering overalls in the old homestead."

"It's a lie," Jake snarled. "I don't know nothing about it."

Sheriff Henderson frowned. "Looks bad fer you, Jake—and you, too, Jed, if you're in this." He turned to Parmalee Porter. "Put away yer gun, Porter. I'll take over."

Parmalee Porter replaced his thirty-eight in his shoulder holster, while Sheriff Henderson took his own thirty-eight from his own holster. Then he pointed his gun—pointed it at Steve.

"I'm arresting you, Steve Randall," he said deliberately, "fer the murder of Charlie Parsons."

Steve was too surprised to speak, but Parmalee Porter sputtered, "Why—why—you ain't got no evidence to arrest Steve. You're in cahoots with them rustlers."

"You're wrong about that evidence, Porter," said Jed Surrey. "Sheriff, why don't you take a look in Steve's valise?"

"Look all you want to," Steve told him. "It's right outside the bunkhouse. If I'd had any incriminating evidence in it, I'd have let it burn up with that old shack."

They all went to the bunkhouse, and the sheriff picked up the valise. He turned its contents out upon the ground.

"Look!" gasped Jenny.

Lying on the pile of underwear and socks was a gun—a forty-five caliber automatic pistol.

THERE was a smile on Sheriff Henderson's face as he picked up the gun and examined it. "That's the kind

of gun that killed Charlie Parsons. And I reckon we'll find out it's the *same* gun that did the job."

Steve's eyes narrowed as he saw the self-satisfied expression on the faces of Jed Surrey and Jake Mungo. "So that's what you two were doing in the bunkhouse—planting the evidence in my grip."

Parmalee Porter patted Steve on the shoulder. "Don't worry about it, son. You've got Jenny and me behind yuh!" Jenny nodded her head vigorously, and tried to give him a reassuring smile. "Nobody'd take the word of a couple of no-good coyotes like Jake and Jed."

Jed Surrey scowled at Porter's words. Then suddenly he began to rap out orders. "Gimme them guns," he said to Sheriff Henderson. The Sheriff meekly handed over his own gun and the forty-five. "We coulda pinned the murder on Steve if Porter and Jenny hadn't showed up. But Porter usta be the sheriff, and everybody'd believe what he told 'em." He shook his head. "We can't git away with it."

Steve felt a sudden surge of hope.

"So-o-o," Jed continued. "We'll jist have to wipe 'em all out—the whole kit and caboodle."

Jake frowned. "Hey, Jed. Yuh don't mean Jenny, too?"

"Shut up," Jed snapped.

"I told yuh not to shoot Charlie Parsons," Jake grumbled. "Why didn't yuh listen fer once?"

"Shut up, I said." He herded Steve and Jenny and Parmalee Porter ahead of him. "Git going. Head fer the woods." He smiled an ugly smile. "Don't want to mess up my dooryard."

They had almost reached the woods when there was a sudden roar, as a plane swooped low, flashing its searchlight upon them. The plane circled and taxied to a stop in the side pasture. Two men, armed with tommy guns, jumped

out of the plane and ran towards them.

"F.B.I.," one of them said crisply.

Sheriff Henderson rallied quickly. "I'm the sheriff," he told them importantly. "Jist so happens I'm making an arrest. Steve Randall, here, murdered a man this afternoon. We've got evidence to prove—"

Steve smiled. "The evidence is right where it should be—in Jed Surrey's possession."

The sheriff gulped. "Well, that ain't the only charge against Steve Randall. There's a little matter of arson, willful arson. Ain't that right, Jed? . . . Jed Surrey owns this place."

Jed Surrey nodded.

Jenny drew herself up to her full height of five-foot-one. "You're mistaken, Sheriff. I happen to be the owner of this place. And I'm not bringing any charges of arson. That old bunkhouse should have been burned down long ago."

"Good fer you, Jenny," Parmalee Porter chuckled. "She's telling the truth, too," he told the federal investigators. "This here ranch belonged to Jenny's pa. He left it to Jenny, to be held in trust until her marriage. Jed Surrey is jist a sort of trustee."

"And as the trustee, I'm bringing charges—" Jed began.

"Not so fast, Jed. You ain't got nothing to say about it. Jenny was married this afternoon."

"How—how did you know?" Jenny gasped. "We never did get a chance to tell you."

"Easy!" Parmalee Porter said. "I could hardly see yuh behind all that shrubbery." He pointed at the corsage of orchids. Then he winked at Steve. "Bésides, why'd yuh think I sent this young feller up to the Flying V in the first place?"

"This is all very interesting," one of the federal investigators remarked

briskly. "But we aren't concerned with arson. Our men picked up a couple of vanloads of cattle—stolen cattle—as they were being transported into Wyoming. Under the National Cattle Theft Law, that's a federal offense."

THE other investigator turned to Steve and held out his hand. "Thanks, Mr. Randall, for calling our Denver headquarters today and tipping us off to watch out for those refrigerated vans."

Steve shook hands and grinned. "You got here just in time," he said. "Another fifteen minutes and we'd all have been dead ducks."

"You won't have any more trouble," the investigator assured him. "We got a confession from the van drivers. Now that we've picked up Jed Surrey—the ringleader—and Jake Mungo, and 'Sheriff' Henderson here—well—we've got 'em all."

Meanwhile the other man was snapping handcuffs on Jake and Jed and Sheriff Henderson. "Let's get going," he said. "That plane of ours holds five." He gave Jed Surrey a shove with the butt of his Tommy gun.

Jenny slipped her hand in the crook of Steve's arm, and they started for

the house.

"Well," Steve remarked. "You don't have to worry about taking care of your poor, bedridden, step-father."

"And you don't have to worry about getting a ranch. Will you settle for this one?"

"Sure will," Steve replied with enthusiasm.

They stopped in front of the house and watched the plane take off. The roar of the motor sent delicious tremors up and down Steve's spine, and he was sure that there was no more wonderful sound in the world.

Jenny squeezed his arm. "Know what I'm thinking?" she asked.

"No. But I'd like to."

"I'm thinking that in a year or two, if we can afford it—and we probably can, now that those cattle rustlers are out of the way—maybe we can get a little plane of our own."

"No maybe about it!" said Steve. "Know what I'm thinking?"

"No. But I'd like to."

"I'm thinking that I'm the luckiest man alive. What more could any man want than a good cattle ranch, a plane of his own—and just the right girl to share them?"

THE END

THE-MAN-WHO-NEVER-WALKED

AN EXAMPLE of the extraordinary courage and devotion to principles of honor in Indians is found in this instance of the death of the Sioux whose name was The-Man-Who-Never-Walked.

He was born a cripple. His twisted, shrivelled legs had never been any good to him, and his arms were not much better. This was a very great tragedy to an Indian, because it meant that he could not take part in the activities which bring glory and honor to the Indian brave. Prestige was the all-important goal, and it was won chiefly on the warpath.

On this occasion, the Sioux were battling a company of white men. Soldiers were approaching the camp of the Indians, their shells dropping among the tepees. The Indian women were preparing to leave; the warriors were

gathered together on a nearby hill, awaiting the next advance of the white men.

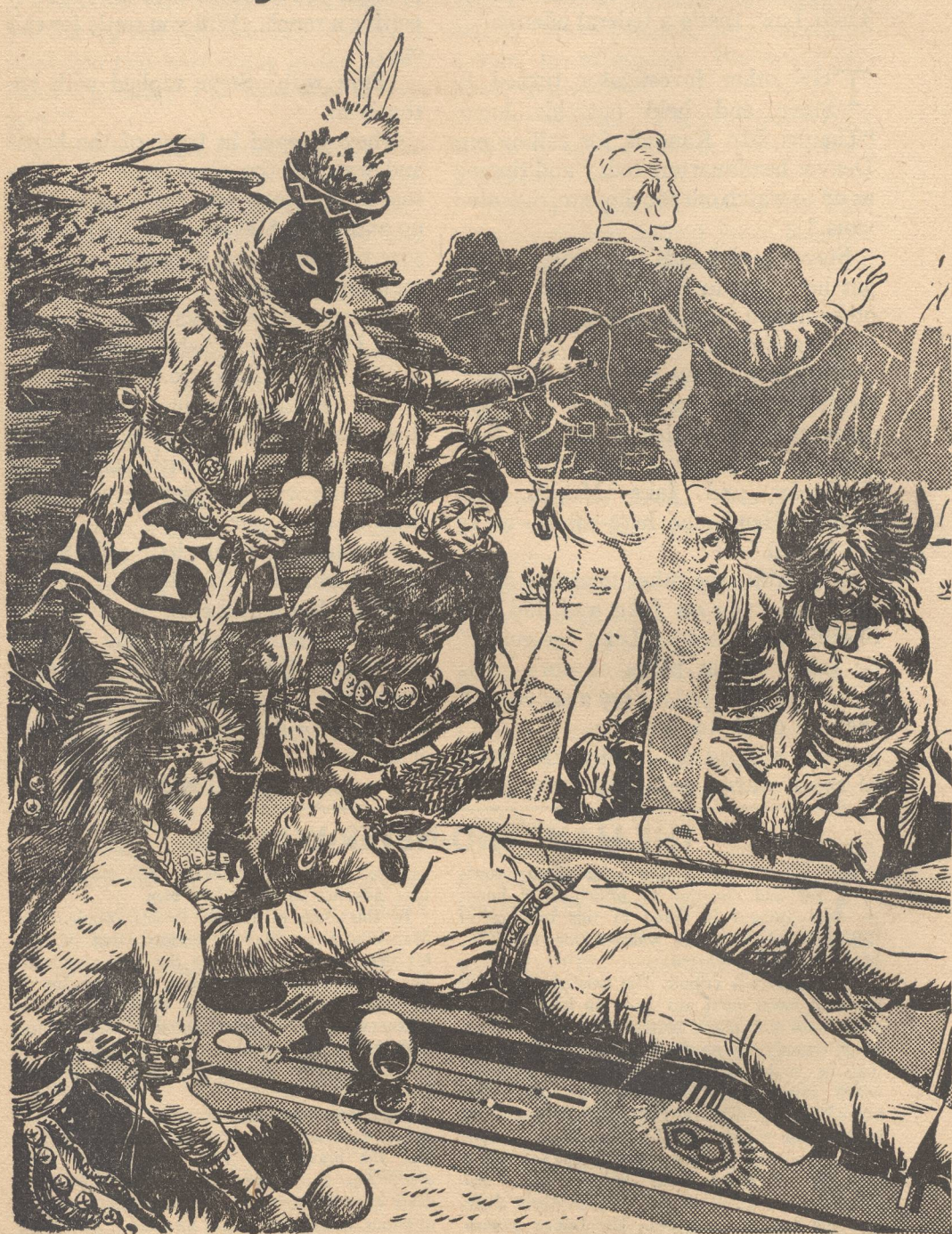
In this time of danger to his people, The-Man-Who-Never-Walked decided that at last his time had come to play the part of a man, like other men, even though he died for it. He asked to be put into a travois, a sort of basket which is dragged behind a horse. Then, with his poor, withered arms, he guided the horse toward the enemy, singing a war song as he went.

Later, when the soldiers came upon his body during their advance, they were amazed to find that the brave man who had charged them alone was a helpless cripple. His courageous death gave The-Man-Who-Never-Walked a place of honor in the memories of his tribe. *Pete Bogg*

* * *

The FIRE TRAIL

by OGE-MAKE



I walked up and up, on a pathway of flame . . .



The American Indian has demonstrated many times that he has knowledge of a strange kind. Here is a true account of a weird Navaho ceremony and its result!

A SINCERE WARNING

IN THE following pages you will find an accurate account of what happened when Oge-Make walked the "fire trail" of the Navaho in the summer of 1947. To walk the fire trail is to leave your body during a trance and travel, not only through space, but through time. Many times the Navaho have conclusively proved they have this weird power—but this time they were trying to prove nothing; only obtain an answer to the grim problem that faces them this winter. Instead, to their disappointment, the walker of the fire trail brought back a message of vital importance only to the white man. Through our mutual friend, scientist L. Taylor Hansen, they have passed the message on to us. We pass it on to all Americans—and we believe it! Read it and think!

"YOU sent for me?"

I looked around the circle of lean, hawk-like, copper-skinned faces lit fitfully by the light of the campfire, and the thirteen pairs of dark eyes fastened on mine. The ceremonial blankets over the shoulders of these men blended into the star-dusted blackness of the night. Here and there a bit of silver or turquoise setting caught up the gleam of the fire. I repeated my question in a different phrasing.

"Word came to me through Running-Deer that I was wanted by the Elders.

I left my classes in the University to come to you, my people. What is it that you wish of your pale son?"

A man rose from the circle and waved me to a seat on the desert sand. As I glanced at the spot I saw the lean, graceful, bending figures of a Navaho sand painting. I hesitated a moment. Was this a Navaho ceremonial? The Navaho have been traditional enemies of our tribe. What could this mean? Again the leader waved imperiously and I sank to earth on the sand-painting.

Then in the flickering firelight, I saw that the leader was my grandfather, looking more majestic than I had ever remembered him looking as the ceremonial blanket was gathered and held like a Roman Senator might hold his toga. Only the wind, playing across the wide expanse of fantastic desert land about us, accentuated the silence. Finally he began to speak:

"Yes, my son, we sent for you. I am going to reveal to you a secret of the past. The time has come when it is necessary for you to understand. I have brought you up from babyhood in the ways of my people. I have taught you the lore and ceremonies. You have been one of us. Even though you have desired to learn of the white man in his schools, yet in the summer times would you return to learn of us, and bring us the results of your mounting knowledge. That was good.

"You have thought yourself to be the unwanted babe of my daughter who eloped with a white man. I told you that to keep you one of us. The truth is that the river brought you to me during a flood. I never knew your parents. I had hoped that you might be part Indian but it becomes evident to all that your parents were white."

My brain whirled at this revelation, and I struggled to control my expression. Not my grandfather—this mag-

nificent old warrior I loved so deeply? Not my people—these men to whom I felt such an inexpressible bond of affection? Not mine?

I searched each face. Behind the mask-like expression, I fancied the old affection I was so used to seeing still lingered undimmed. Yet I sensed trouble there, too. Those eyes were watching mine hungrily like children watching the eyes of a beloved leader. Then I saw the Navaho with their knotted-up hair. There were four of them. Their eyes were curious and not unfriendly. Yet they had a sort of haunted quality about them. Their blankets were ragged and their bodies were bags of bones. I swallowed as the significance of this hit my brain. Hard times must have struck these handsome, haughty silversmiths and weavers.

My grandfather's fine ascetic face drooped slightly in the firelight. Not that anyone could have suspected that droop but me. Yet I knew that this confession was not easy for him to make. I wondered why he was making it before all these men—including the strangers? As if answering my thoughts, he continued:

"Terrible times are threatening us all, my son. In our mutual danger, old misunderstandings are being forgotten. We are all Indians. First the Pueblos joined their councils, seeing that always one was in danger, though not ever the same one. Wassington* always threatened the lands of one of us by some bill. If we get enough people to stop one bill then they pass another. Now our brothers, the Navaho, are in trouble."

HE FOLDED his blanket around him and sank silently upon the earth. Then from his side of the fire a pitifully thin, shrunken old Navaho

* The Indian accent gives "Washington" a hissing sound.—Ed.

arose. His quavering voice spoke in broken English and I wondered how much of my grandfather's speech uttered in melodious Keresian he had understood. After casting a tiny whiff of corn pollen to the four directions and blowing something into the fire, he began:

"Once Navaho strong people. Our ho-ghans dot plains. We ride for buffalo. Never take all animals—only old bulls or crippled cows. No Indian kill for fun—only white man. Buffalo strong, deer people strong, and Navaho strong. Then white man kill for skins. Leave buffalo rotting on plains. Many like sands rot on plains and make smell of death. Navaho know he must fight white man. We have no guns like he have. We have only arrow and stone hatchet—and great courage. We fight hard. No use against guns which kill far-off. Navaho rounded up in great red canyon of death. Soldier kill women and shoot little children. My mother and baby brother die. I hide in bushes and pray. Soldiers go way but one day find me hunting rabbit and send me on Long-Walk."**

I knew the old man was referring to the exile from which one-half of the tribe died. After a pause, he continued:

"I will not speak of Long-Walk. To Navaho it was time-of-greatest-sorrow. Many dropped to die in desert. But in time people come back to own lands, build ho-ghans again. Raise sheep.

** Long-Walk refers to the exile of the tribe following the massacre in Canyon de Chelly and Canyon del Muerto in 1863-64. It was at this time that General James Carleton of California Column renown had begun what he had chosen to call "The reduction of the Navajo." He was joined by Kit Carson and some 800 New Mexican volunteers. After the massacre, the tribe was rounded up and marched 800 miles to the east, to Ft. Sumner on the Pecos River. There smallpox finished the nefarious business that massacre had begun and only a pitiful remainder struggled back to Chinli and the "Red Canyons" in 1869, after the treaty of '68 had been signed.—Ed.

Catch some mountain sheep for strong wool. Forget Long-Walk. Weave rugs and white man buy. Make silver-work. People happy. Then come men from Wassington. Him say too much sheep on land. Mebbby so. Mebbby kill few, but Wassington send men to kill most all sheep. Wassington kill sheep when young men fight across waters. Now no sheep. No wool for blankets and Navaho hungry. What can we do?"

Then arose the husky figure I recognized as the head snake-priest of the Hopi. He spoke briefly of the bill which would have separated the Hopi from their corn fields,* but which was defeated. He ended with a bitter plea for the vote.

"Must only Indians and the insane be considered unfit to vote? Why are Indians classed with the mentally deficient?"

His language reminded me that he had once obtained a degree from a university. He was followed by a stranger who introduced himself as a Yee-Hat from Alaska. His plea was that against sacred treaty, the Alaskan Indians have just been separated from all their inherited lands. This bill was passed in the closing days of the '47 congress when debate was limited, and at the recommendation of the Indian Bureau! Before all this had time to fully impress itself on my mind, my own tribe was again speaking. The subject was the old nightmare of the dam.

"Why must New Mexico build her dam where the water will back up and cover the lands and sites of five pueblos? Some of our people have sworn to die in the rising waters which will cover our farms, our sacred pottery

*The Bursum Bill. This Hopi Bill was attached as a rider to a veterans pension bill. Alert white "Indian Defense Club" of New Mexico rallied enough letter writers by lecturing women's clubs, to defeat it.—Ed.

mines and kilns, and our dance places which were already ancient when white man first came to the land!"

After a pause, he asked the question in English: "Why is it always our lands or our animals? We Pueblos never made war on Wassington. Now they take our food by drowning our lands. These corn fields were ours before the memories of men. What can we do?"

Everywhere I looked, eyes were asking mine the same question "What can we do?" I wanted to cry out! To tell them it was not my fault! That I was just as helpless as they were! I wanted to shout: "Who am I? What can I do to stop this wicked march of greed?" But my grandfather had arisen and his voice was flowing out in the liquid tones of my own beloved Keresian Pueblo tongue:

"I know your thoughts, my son. You have not as yet learned to hide them well. Yes, we know you of yourself can do nothing. But tonight we are asking you to intercede for us. We have chosen you because you have white blood and know the way of the white man, yet your soul is ours. We are asking you to go to those who make your laws and learn from their minds if there is hope for us. We ask you to do this not in body, for we do not have the money to send you, but in the Indian way—in spirit. We ask that you walk the Fire-Trail!"

I GASPED at the shock of the revelation. The holy-of-holies reserved for medicine men—this adventure was to be mine! I began to remember the stories I had heard from childhood—how one man sent his spirit to Mexico and warned his son who had gone to trade turquoise, of the approach of Aztec slavers! I remembered the far more recent story mentioned in "Jungle Trails and Inca Ruins" of the medicine

man who sent his spirit up the river to explore for the author and who minutely described the death of a chief in a distant maloka which the author himself verified some two months later when he had reached that point. I remembered the well-authenticated trip of Chief Seattle who described the city that later bore his name. Other cases flashed to mind. Sees-The-Living-Bull early in the contact of white traders saw the passing of the buffalo and the coming of short-haired spotted cattle—a description which must have bewildered his hearers who had never seen a cow. Many other cases flashed to my mind. Some had traveled in space only. Others had traveled in time.

"Will you go, my son?"

I nodded as I felt my temples throb with my rising pulse. Of course I would go, but . . . how could I be sure? Again my grandfather read my thoughts.

"Since you are a novice and it is your first trip, you will not be able to guide your journey. Yet we must send you because our most able guides are aliens in this white man's world. There you are at home. We have sung the songs and said the sacred prayers for your journey. You will go forth. It may be that you will return with a message. Are you ready?"

"I am."

The medicine men of four tribes circled me, dusting me with pollen. My grandfather took a cup from one of the main medicine men and held it aloft in prayer. Then he came over and offered it to me. His mask-like face betrayed no emotion but his eyes seemed to smile courage into mine. Then returning to his place, he sank again upon the earth.

"Drink, my son."

I tipped up the pottery goblet and drank. The stuff was not too pleasant, but I allowed no reflections of distaste

to cross my face.

"Now take the ancient peace pipe and blow the sacred smoke."

I accepted the old red sandstone pipe from the frail Navaho and exhaled the smoke to the four directions.

"Now, my son, stare at the fire while you chant with us the prayer of the Fire-Trail."

The drums which had begun softly, some time before, now arose to a crescendo and the throbbing chant began:

"Lord and Master of all the elements of life, from whence all came and into which everything goes, guide my footsteps upon the Trail-of-Fire. Upon the pathway of flames do I walk in beauty. Upon the pathway of flames do I walk in knowledge . . ."

At first I was aware that the fire had been ceremonially built. This meant that it had probably been lighted from flints struck into cedar shavings and carefully nurtured by cedar boughs placed in a crescent, twelve at a time, in groups of four. I was aware of the pleasant odor of burning cedar mingled with the scent of sage which drifted in on the desert wind, of the dancing flames and the cool sense of vastness.

Then my head began to throb, and the pulse of the drums began to be as a hammer on my temples . . . "Upon the pathway of flames do I walk in beauty."

Yes, the flames were beautiful—like swaying orange hands with purple nails—like expanding veils—like corridors—strange undulating corridors that grew and grew . . . They grew until I was walking upon their undulating color, until I was but a fragment of smoke carried high upon the emerald and violet veils that swept from a volcano. Higher and higher I was carried. Far below me, the mountain was belching forth lava and fire over what appeared to be a teeming jungle. Above me, the heavens were turning dark and

the stars were shining out with a brilliance I had never before known.

IT SEEMED to me that my senses were never clearer, except for that of touch and its kindred sensations of heat and cold. I know that my mind never functioned more clearly, for I knew that I should go to Washington. Yet I was supremely elated with the spirit of adventure as I began to leave the earth. For it was quite evident to me now that I was leaving it. Furthermore, I seemed to be gathering speed. As the earth receded like a dwindling ball, it became also evident to me that I was retreating from our sun and our family of planets.

Immeasurable space surrounded me, as the sun which had been my day star retreated to the size of untold thousands of others. Ahead of me a giant sun of tremendous proportions loomed out and expanded. Yet it was soon also evident that the sun was not my destination, but a planet spinning around that sun. Then just as quickly as I had gathered speed, I swung around the planet twice with rapidly reducing rates, and at last began to flutter downward with a lazy side to side motion like a heavy snowflake.

I could not at first decide whether this was air or water through which I finally drifted, but decided it was atmosphere of a heavy variety since there was no surface difference which one would have encountered between a layer of air and that of water. Yet movements through this medium were slow, and the denizens seemed to have a fish-like quality about them, with graceful waving veil-like tails which apparently propelled them. As one of these creatures came toward me, I found myself wondering if I would be swallowed like a bug on a leaf, but apparently the monster did not even see

me and lazily turned away.

Then came the giant plants with their magnificent, jewel-like flowers. The foliage blended from the palest of greens to a violet-purple. The trees were of a slender fern type, waving their fronds in the heavy air, although some huge sprawling leathery plants were also in evidence.

"This was Planet One in their year 50,050."

I looked around in surprise at the sound of this soft, well-cultivated voice. It came from a tall man dressed in a white toga, with the features of an Aristotle.

"I am your guide," he informed me with a smile. "Do not fear to talk out loud. We can neither be seen nor heard."

"Have they no senses of perception?"

"Yes, but not for us. We belong to another cycle. Let us leave the forest area. I shall show you one of their cities."

Then catching my arm, he pointed toward a clearing.

"A flight car is coming in. They leave workers to gather honey from the flowers and return in an hour or two to pick them up again. These people live largely on honey."

As he spoke a slight drone rapidly swelled to a roar and a great shining cigar-shaped vehicle came to rest. Out of it stepped some half-a-dozen creatures who strangely resembled our ideas of the fairy. Gauzy garments of extreme delicacy floated from the shoulders of the women, giving them an almost transparent beauty.

"How strange that these people should so much resemble those of earth."

"Yes, they do. And so does their destiny. However, at that point the resemblance stops. These people have already mastered not only their own

planet but all the planets of their system. All are well-run gardens for the people of One."

He made a deprecating gesture.

"Of course, part of their more advanced condition is due to the fact that they discovered the value of fuels earlier in their history. And in part it may be due to the fact that being a more frail creature upon a larger planet than man in proportion to his birthplace, their intelligence was more advanced than man's when they began their conquest of their planet. But now it is the year 50,050. Remember that date. It is the hour of their destiny."

WHILE I was pondering over the meaning of these words, he beckoned me into the airship. We entered and found it a spacious affair. The engine room of the ship was in the nose and was set off from the rest by great glass panels, and many of the creatures were crowded along these panels to watch the working of the well-run engines. The rest of the salon was equipped with shining threadlike lounge swings and hammocks. Great flowers of jewel brilliance climbed a lattice-work. I decided that at least a part of the light which flooded the interior came from the walls, but not a small portion of it came from the pulsing color of these magnificent flowers.

As I turned to say something to my companion, I saw that the great sliding doors were closing and in a moment the ship was in the air with the forest becoming but a greenish blur far below us. We must have left the ground with a tremendous rush of speed.

"It is strange that we haven't more sharply felt the pull of gravity from such a large planet."

"The ship is insulated, as it were, with gravity nullifiers and giant internal springs," my guide answered. He

walked toward one of the huge windows and I followed.

"This planet was once a heavenly place. The natural balance here was working splendidly. To offset a greater distance from its greater sun, than that occupied by Earth, there was a larger amount of internal heat. Thus the temperature was not much different from that of Mexico on Earth. But civilizations grow upon fuel. Like the people of Earth, these inhabitants first used their natural vegetable and mineral fuels. Nuclear fission came some time after their mastery of their own planet and its use was rigidly controlled. Radiation danger was kept at a minimum for thousands of years. There was no disastrous releasing here such as would have come with an atomic war. But look at the beauties of One!"

We were gliding in the heavy, bluish air through which the sun cast fantastic wavy shadows caught by the fern forests glimpsed now and then as the ship dropped down lightly to take on or leave off passengers.

"These creatures have never been carnivorous. As I said before, they live largely on the honey of these giant, luminescent flowers. The honey is syphoned into storage tanks along a part of the hull. Perhaps that partly accounts for the fact that they have never been too warlike—that is, up to now."

"They are becoming war-like? With whom . . ."

But I didn't finish. The ship again zoomed into the sky, but this time barely skimmed over the tops of the lacy trees.

"Is something wrong?"

"No. We are about to land at the First City of One. The First City is the world capital. Look ahead and you will soon see something glittering in that direction."

"Yes, I do!"

"Those are the massive glass domes of First City."

"Why do they build their cities under glass? To preserve the heat?"

"No. To keep out radiation. And they are not glass as we know it on Earth. This is a chemical compound of One. Radiation has been a growing nightmare here for many generations."

"How long is a generation?"

"It used to be several hundred years because life was so easy and pleasant, but it has been growing shorter."

"Why?"

"Radiation poisoning."

That statement had the effect of making my very stomach do a flip-flop. My thoughts flew back to my own studies in physics. I remembered Ernie, who had been on Bikini Atoll, and what he had told me of radiation poisoning. Of how the little fish infected the larger fish, whose death passed the infection to the algae which in turn infected the very ship hulls of clean boats. . . .

"Stop dreaming! We are landing and you are missing the sights. Remember that you will not pass this way again."

I CAME to myself with a start and stared around. The space ship had slipped through a great dome which had closed over it. From the air I imagine it must have looked like shining lips opened and swallowed the torpedo-like space-craft.

As the huge sliding doors of the ship again slid apart, I found myself looking upon immense cavern-like walls that glowed with a faint green light. These walls in which we found ourselves as we left the ship were in the shape of a globe, but almost immediately a part of them rolled back, revealing a purple and green forest lit almost entirely internally by the great

light-pulsing flowers. And now I was due for a new surprise, for the diaphanous robes flowing from the shoulders of what I had supposed to be the women were in reality wings. These creatures had large wings of the iridescent type such as are used by the dragon fly of Earth. Simultaneously, I also made the discovery, as one passed close to me, that their bodies were covered with either a tight-fitting garment, or were covered with minute scales which gave the impression that their skins had been dusted in silver dust, whose metallic gleams caught every refraction of the light-pulsing flowers.

As the stream of people (for I still thought of them as people) entered the forest of flowers, fountains of water sprayed up from all through the forest, and these lovely beings spread their wings and fluttered through the water with every evidence of great enjoyment. The sight of them flying, turning and whirling was truly a thing of beauty, for as the flowers pulsed various colors, so the water drops and the bodies of these beings with their glittering wings all took on and reflected color until they seemed like living jewels.

"The rain-dance is a ritual with them. One must take it in order to enter a city. The reason is radiation. Water is the best methods of removing the poisons if recently acquired."

Must that man ruin everything? But my annoyance was short-lived. Another question was inserting itself into my mind.

"I suppose the large size of the rain-drops is due to the small size of the people on this planet?"

"Right."

"And these ferns then are in truth not as tall as the Woolworth Building, nor the flowers as large as houses?"

"Probably not. Size is relative."

"Then we are not as large as we are

on Earth?"

"If you had remained the same size you could not have made the trip to the Planet One and enjoyed the beauty of First City through the eyes of its inhabitants. Again I say size is relative. On Earth you have the correct size for your cycle, but you are being given a glimpse of another cycle through the eyes of its dominating civilization."

Almost nostalgically I remembered "Wassington," the manner in which the Indian accent distorts that word. To my surprise, my guide answered my thoughts.

"You are being given a message. Concentrate on what you see and hear and smell for the time grows short, and you shall not pass this way again. Nor indeed, shall any man, for this is the year 50,050."

His words had recalled to my mind another strange fact. It is true I could hear the splashing water, the hum of wings and many voices whose drone was not unlike the mighty notes of an organ. I could smell the damp smell of forest plants and the lighter perfume of flowers, but I could not feel touch of the water. Again my guide answered these unspoken thoughts.

"As you have been taught by the Elders of the Indian people, there are only four senses. Sight, hearing, smell and that fourth which some men call intuition. These are the senses of the spirit. The others are the senses of the body."

As he spoke, we moved rapidly through the great forest of the splashing fountains and light-pulsing flowers, to see other great doors ahead slide back. Through these doors a golden light poured in, and almost immediately the fountains died down, the symphony of a thousand voices was hushed and the shining swarm flew toward the opening. As we joined them, my guide said:

"For the purposes of our visit we have been given an understanding of the strange language of One. A debate has been going on for many days. The arguments of both sides have been carried by television to all parts of One, and even to the colonies on their other planets. We are to come in for the finish. Space ships are bringing similar throngs from all the forests for all work is now being suspended, and in a moment the flower-forests of the sixteen entrances to First City will be filled with the returning throngs."

MAKING our way through the heavy air as did the others all about us on their gauze-like wings of dusted silver, now taking on the golden glow of the great domes, we circled over the city. The buildings were massive with hundreds of openings. They seemed to be made of mother-of-pearl or some other opalescent material that caught and reflected the golden glow of the great domes. The street-like canyons between the buildings glowed with their own light-pulsing flowers, and occasional fountains.

One great central structure, towering over the others, was apparently the destination of the throngs. With them we reached one of the openings and walked along a glowing corridor. This grotto or series of grottoes gleamed like a blue neon sign, and yet in a way, I was reminded of the corridors leading to the football stadium on the campus. I felt an air of expectancy, yet I cannot say that it was entirely a pleasant expectancy. There seemed to be a haunting dread in the back of the minds of these people. Talk had died down to a minimum murmur. Then we came into the amphitheatre of One.

Earth holds no possible comparison to its immensity. It must have held a million souls. One could barely see the

stage in the distance as we took our seats with the others. For many moments we waited while yet other thousands took their places. From somewhere music was playing. Tinkling notes filled its long sweeping phrases, like the splash of the fountains of which the people of One seemed to be so fond. Phrases of the symphonic music, I noted, were accompanied by color changes in the immense dome and fainter whiffs of perfume. Did the symphonies of One coordinate the pleasures of the senses?

But the music was fading and the hum of voices was dying to an expectant hush. The colors which had been changing in the overhead dome, began to die down and what I had taken for gigantic curtains above the tiny platform in the distance began to glow with the image of a speaker.

"People of One, this day Seventy-Two of the Year Fifty Thousand and Fifty is the Moment of Destiny. For days we have debated the issues before us. We know that in the early days of nuclear fission when we were experimenting with the heaviest atoms, much radiation was released. We also know that subsequent generations have had to limit space travel because of the heavy radiation trails and even go back to more primitive fuels for our own planet's use. Now the sins of our ancestors are coming upon us. All of us, even in our generation, have noted the increasing heat of One. Yet the other planets of our system with whom we have friendly intercourse and trade are just not suitable for our continuing existence. We have all known for some time now that we must someday leave One. Our daily lives have become a nightmare of heavy infection. We have not gone unscathed either. In a minor way we are all infected even now with the death of One.

"Our hope has been to get to another planet where our least infected children could survive. Our space fleet feels justified in recommending Planet X330 of Sun 32. The trouble is that this planet is infested with a civilized form of life which has the gunpowder weapon that it uses upon its own kind. To attempt to reason with such individuals would be absurd. To use the fission of the heavy atom would be equally absurd because we would immediately sow the seeds of radiation poison, which is *all* we are attempting to escape from here.

"Whether the people of One who have thus far made their way without the destruction which more savage creatures call war, is justified in now taking a planet by force, is the question. The people have voted for war!"

AT THIS point a tremendous demonstration of stomping and wing-flapping was drowning out the speaker. The face faded from the screen and another took its place.

"That is *not* the question. Because I do not believe in war I have been accused of having sympathies with these miserable creatures of Planet X330 who kill their own kind. Obviously they are still in a savage stage of evolution. Whether they would ever develop a civilization comparable to One if allowed to go their way without interference, is a moot question. BUT I do object to this new weapon developed by the military! This weapon uses for its fuel the tremendous force of the exploding hydrogen atom! I object to this because it is dangerous—even more dangerous than uranium radiation!"

Again the first face took the screen.

"My opponent has brought up the question of the new weapon merely as a means of diverting the thoughts of the people from this new war. If we do not take this planet, then where can we go?

To still more distant, uncharted systems? We need living space and we need it immediately! Look at the freaks developing on One among the animals! Look at the new heat fissures appearing almost daily! Look at the new volcanoes! When the radium was first discovered we did not know about these deadly radiations. We did not know that these forces had to disintegrate before the planet could become habitable. We did not realize that we had unleashed a monster which would devour us. Since then, it is true that our experiments have become more and more controlled. We realize now that the core of our planet has become heavier through thousands of years of atomic disintegration, and that in spite of all our knowledge, we cannot stop the chain of fate. We must have the new weapon for the war. Then that war will be most devastating, but it will be over in a hurry, and the planet becomes ours!"

Again the slim face of the second speaker. The eyes had almost a haunted look of fear.

"When I plead for you to think twice about this new weapon I am not trying to divert your thoughts from war. I am pleading for our planet! Do you realize what makes a sun burn? It is atomic disintegration! And now with the hydrogen atom, we are stepping forth into a new field. Water is composed of hydrogen. So is our atmosphere. Shall we set fire to it? And if we do, can we stop it when we wish?"

A roar booed him down and I realized that he was pleading a lost cause. Again he tried to speak, but a roar of jeers drowned him out. Then the first face came back with the light of victory in his eyes.

"I knew that you were too practical to listen to this prophet. Now for the promised experiment! None of you

watching me shall ever forget this moment. Our civilization has reached a new peak in power! With this new and cheap fuel we can reach more distant constellations in one-half the time now required! We shall explore for more and more planets!"

For a second the opponent came back:

"And who is to say that other civilizations have not also sought this power and found DEATH? Remember that all begins and ends in FIRE." Then in desperation he pleaded: "I beg of you—do not do this thing. We still have a few years. . . . Remember that our greatest leader once said that two atoms should be sacred from experimentation—hydrogen and oxygen!"

In the jeers which drowned out his voice, I heard only those fateful words: "All begins and ends in FIRE!"

A tense hush fell now over the assembly. The opposition had said all it could and failed. The long-awaited experiment was about to take place. A general lowering the lights added to the sense of expectancy. I knew that these people of One had shouted down the voice of reason because they had so passionately wanted to believe the first speaker, yet the second really had them worried. No one could say for certain just how this experiment would turn out. Perhaps this half-cupful of water would drive a liner across the widest ocean, but what was there to prevent it from spilling over and exploding that ocean? I realized that in a way this choice was forced on them by their own desperation. They saw the cancerous spread of radiation poisoning with its heating effect—those things, when produced by nature, had to die out before a globe could become habitable.

My thoughts were interrupted by several men on the screen bending over what seemed to be a table. And then it

happened. . . .

A TERRIFIC blinding white light on the platform etched for the space of a second, on the screen above, and for eternity on my mind, the horror in the half-dozen faces of the men making the experiment, before they disintegrated into light.

For the space of another second, that gigantic amphitheatre rocked with the screams of the doomed, as the explosion on the altar of science spread with lightning swiftness in all directions through the air. Then the swarming mass of living creatures were seared to powder as the vast domes crackled and burned in the swiftly mounting terror.

My companion and I seemed to be borne aloft like a particle of smoke on the conflagration which spread with unbelievable swiftness. It was as if the planet was a picture soaked in gasoline, to which some one had touched a match. The forests writhed like souls in agony, while between the burning trees long cracks appeared in the crust, through which poured the bubbling red planetary blood of lava. Then even these were blotted out in light as the flames became higher and hotter and whiter. I knew that they must have become hotter with the heat of a new-born sun, although I could not feel them.

Nor could I even see them so well, for I was speeding away with unbelievable rapidity. The Planet One, which had become a sun, still circled its greater day star, and as I watched its magnificent brilliance, I heard my companion say:

"That was the year 50,050 on the Planet One, but as for Earth, it was before—long millenniums before—the memory of man or beast."

"Then they were not speaking of Earth?"

"No. Earth would never have been

available for the people of One. It was not large enough. We are now crossing over from the long cycle of the past—that past which might become the future.”

“But One? Where is the Planet One?” I asked as I watched its fading brilliance becoming smaller and smaller with the increasing distance. Yet I could not take my eyes from its white beauty and its rainbow corona.

“Know you not of a small sun circling a larger neighbor? Know you not of a small sun with a heavy core such as might be expected from millenniums of atom-stripping?”

Of course! Sirius and its dwarf companion!

From the distance I heard chanting voices:

“Upon the pathway of flames do I walk in beauty! Upon the pathway of flames do I walk in knowledge!”

Perhaps I still had time to ask one more question.

“Will Planet One ever again become habitable?”

Through the chanting and the tomtom, I heard the voice of my guide as

if from an ever-increasing distance:

“There are some things which even I do not know.”

Then the pin-prick brilliance of One became lost in the purple-tipped carmine of flame corridors upon whose smoke-veils I was lowered. . . .

“Upon the pathway of flames do I walk in knowledge.”

And I found myself sitting upon the sand-painting while medicine men were sprinkling pollen upon my skin. My first words must have sounded very Indian, for I merely stated:

“I have returned.”

Yet later when I told them my story, they did not betray the great disappointment which I know they must have shared. The only comment, given by my grandfather, was pronounced after due deliberation.

“We sent you out, my son, as a white man. As a white man have you returned. Your message is not for us. It is for that world of yours where you walk with such confidence. It is for white man. Go forth, my son, and deliver to that world your message.”

THE END

AN EXPLANATION OF "THE FIRE TRAIL"

YOU have just finished reading a true story. We obtained this account of an actual “fire trail” ceremony which took place this summer in New Mexico from our good friend, L. Taylor Hansen, who is a good friend of the Navaho. He considered the “story” interesting material for us.

As we understand it, the ceremony is an ancient one and was attended by several different tribes; the Navaho, the Pueblos, Hopi, and even a Yee-Hat from Alaska. The man selected to travel the fire trail was to ask an answer to the problem of what to do about the threatened loss of lands, of crops, of

food, and of other rights, due to several scientific and governmental projects in the area.

When Oge Make returned from his mystic adventure, he revealed that his “guide” had not taken him on a trip to Washington, to the Great White Fathers, to get the answer to their question, and to try to implant a correction in the minds of the White Fathers, but had instead taken him on an incredibly fantastic trip into space and into the far past, to a world circling Sirius. There he was given the message you have just read!

Your editors know it is true!

PLIGHT OF THE NAVAHO

DURING July and August of 1947 the Navaho Indians in New Mexico were deprived of their means of livelihood by a series of unavoidable catastrophes and face extreme privation and hardship and perhaps even starvation this winter. The government order which contributed to this condition was for the slaughter of the herds of sheep which form the Navaho's sole support. The Navaho nation, up to now, has been entirely self-sustaining from its sheep-raising, rug-weaving and silverwork. Without sheep, they cannot obtain wool for rug-weaving; they cannot sell sheep to obtain money for purchasing silver; providing meat for food this winter will be impossible.

Perhaps it has been necessary to slaughter the sheep to conserve grazing lands from destruction, as has been suggested, or perhaps it is true that the action became necessary to prevent contamination among both Indians and Whites because of a diseased condition directly attributable to the explosion of the first atom bomb in the neighborhood, the effects of which are still being felt. Along those lines, we recently published a novel by Rog Phillips, called, "So Shall Ye Reap," which suggests a possible effect from the bombs already detonated and pointing to a disastrous effect if more are detonated. Certainly further experiments to obtain positive information as to just what effects the explosion of atom bombs have on our atmosphere, soil, climate, etc. should be carried out before any further work is done along destructive lines. However, that is another matter, already being very hotly argued by leading scientists. Right now the plight of the Navaho

people is our concern.

We suggest two courses of action, to be taken by our readers in a purely humanitarian way. First, PLEASE SEND PACKAGES OF NON-PERISHABLE FOOD TO THE NAVAHO IMMEDIATELY, AND CONTINUE TO DO SO THROUGHOUT THE COMING WINTER TO HELP THIS HONORABLE INDIAN NATION'S PEOPLE THROUGH A CRISIS IN THEIR HISTORY. Second, "*adopt*" an Indian child, and pledge yourself to support that child through the winter. Really be a "great white father"! Either of these things can be done by addressing the following persons:

Chief Zhealy Tso, Chinle District 10, Navaho Reservation, New Mexico.

Clyde Lyzer, Window Rock, Navaho Reservation, New Mexico.

Howard Gorman, Window Rock, Navaho Reservation, New Mexico.

Roger Davis, Window Rock, Navaho Reservation, New Mexico.

Address your food packages to any one of these men, who will see that the packages reach those in most immediate need of help. If you care to "adopt" an Indian boy or girl for the winter, write to these four men, who will act as intermediary, or place you in direct contact with the child or child's family who will benefit by your assistance.

Let us, as Americans with a heart, show the Navaho that we do not intend to let hardship come to them, no matter what the reasons are for what has happened. Your editor for one, has "adopted" the first Navaho child and hereby pledges that child's support through the coming winter. Why don't you do the same?—Raymond A. Palmer.

FIGHTING MAN

by FRANK GRUBER

(Continued from page 53)

"Yes. Last night I danced with his niece, Theodore Slocum's daughter."

"She didn't recognize you?"

"It's nine years and she was only a child at the time. She remembers a name—Jim Dancer . . ."

HARRISON leaned back in his chair and studied Dancer thoughtfully. "But you're sitting on a keg of powder, Jim. She may suddenly remember you, or . . ." He snapped his fingers. "Yancey! You were only nineteen at Lawrence and you've changed a lot since then, but Yancey hasn't—he was over thirty then."

"I've thought of that."

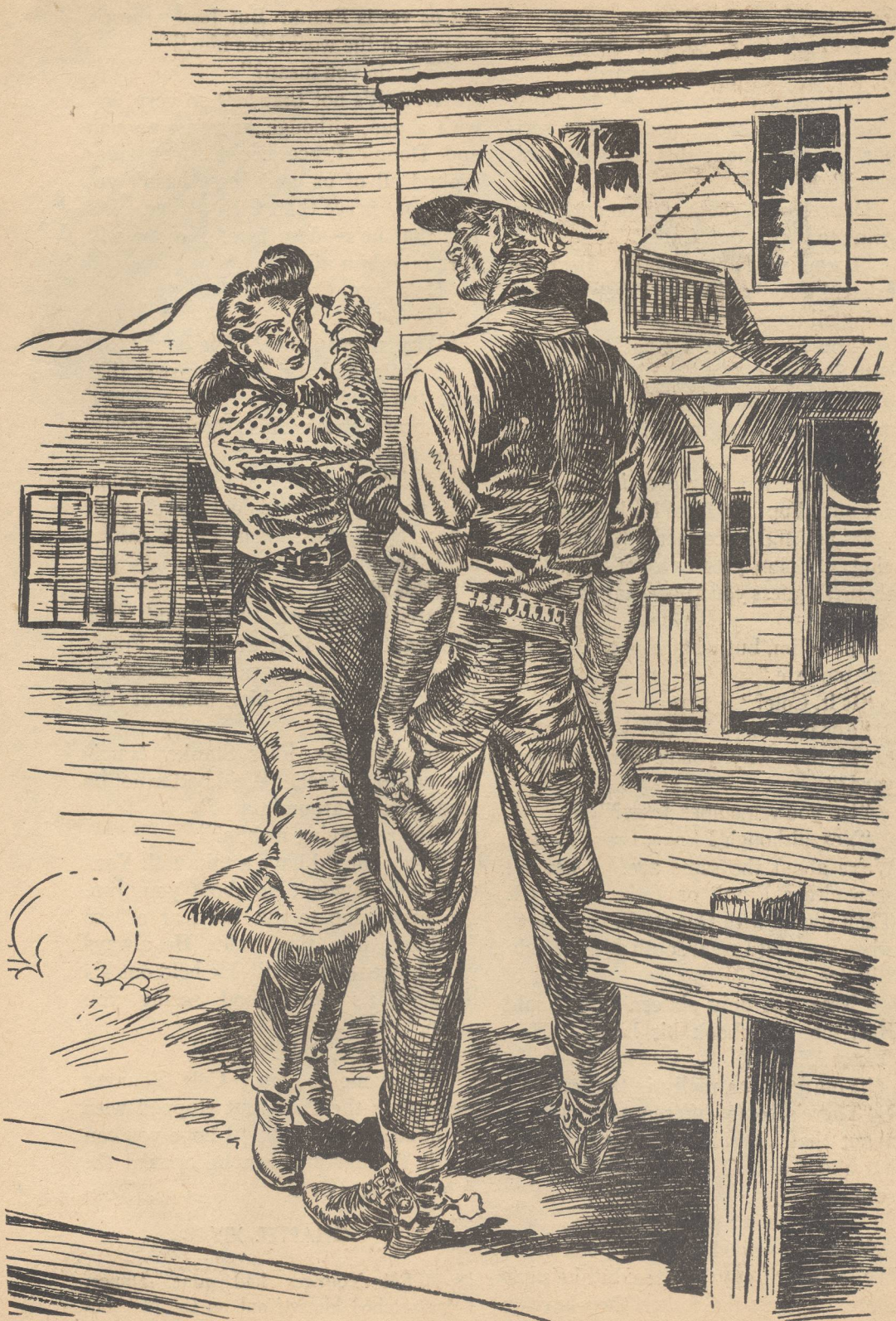
Harrison's eyes narrowed. "Maybe I'll look up Yancey."

"You're not here with him?"

"Good lord, no!" There was disgust in Harrison's tone. "You don't think we'd let a scurvy chicken thief like

She whipped the quirt square across his face





Yancey ride with us?"

"I didn't think so, but—well, what *are* you doing here in Lanyard?"

Harrison's mouth opened to reply, then suddenly he grinned. "How serious are you about this marshal business?"

Dancer was silent a moment. "I'm going to play it out, Cole."

"I wondered about that." Harrison exhaled heavily. "What have you been doing all these years, Jim?"

"You knew that I went to Mexico with Shelby?"

Harrison nodded. "Yes, but Maximilian was killed in '67. That's five years ago."

"There was a war over in Europe I got mixed up in. I got back about two years ago and since then I've been running. A man gets tired of that. Although I guess you know that as well as I do."

"Yes, Jim, but what else can we do? It's too late."

"Is it, Cole?"

"For us it is."

"Is that why you're here in Lanyard?"

"Do you remember Jesse?"

"Yes, although I knew Frank better. We're about the same age. I haven't seen either Frank or Jesse since '64. They stayed with Quantrell, you know, when you and I went south with Bloody Bill."

"Jesse was only sixteen then," said Harrison. He shook his head. "He's changed."

"You mean he really is the leader?"

"There's some difference of opinion about that. Frank has matured; he's got about as fine a brain as I've ever seen."

"Yours wasn't so bad."

Harrison smiled wryly. "Book stuff. Well, Frank's got that, too, but he's got more. I guess the reason they haven't

got us yet is Frank. But Jesse; there's no man in the world like him."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, it's not that he's so very fast with a gun, although he's fast enough and Donny Pence could shoot rings around all of us, and Jesse hasn't got any more nerve than Clell Miller. It's just that he's—desperate. No one will ever take him alive."

"He's here, Cole?"

"N-no."

"Why are *you* here? The bank?"

"I don't think I'd better answer that one, Jim."

Dancer shook his head slowly. "Don't . . ."

Harrison nodded. "I'd hate to think that you and I were looking at each other across guns. And Frank thinks a lot the way I do."

"Jesse?"

Harrison sobered. "You can't ever tell about him. If it wasn't for Frank he and I would have tangled long ago. Frank can handle him most of the time."

Cole Younger, alias Stanley Harrison, got to his feet. "We'd better not be seen together around town."

"You're staying awhile?"

"I thought I'd have a talk with Yancey. Oh, it won't be about you, Jim. I'm just going to put the fear of the Lord into him, that's all. He always was chicken-hearted." He held out his hand. "It's been good seeing you again."

"Good luck, Cole."

"The same to you." Cole Younger stepped to the door, but stopped with his hand on the knob. "I hope you can see it through." Then he opened the door and went out.

CHAPTER XIV

AFTER Younger had gone, Dancer stretched himself out on the bed, but

it was a long time before he slept and then it was only fitfully. Toward noon he got up and, stripping to the waist, washed himself in cold water.

A few minutes later he descended to the lobby. The place was deserted except for Paul Hobson, who was behind the desk.

"Cummings!" exclaimed the hotel man. "I was just about to come up and see if you were in."

"Why?"

"Mr. Slocum would like to have you step over to his office. He's got a man with him he thought would do for a deputy marshal."

"He hasn't wasted any time."

"Don't you think we need another man?"

"We may need a bigger jail," Dancer said as he went out.

He crossed the street to Bert Slocum's office. With Slocum was a lean young man of twenty-four or -five, who wore a gun on each hip. He had deep brown eyes, one of which had a slight cast. Jim Dancer thought him the most vicious-looking man he had ever seen—and he had seen many in his time.

"Ah, Marshal," exclaimed Slocum as Dancer entered, "I want you to shake hands with your new deputy—Johnny Tancred."

"H'arya, Cummings," said Tancred, although he made no move to extend his hand.

Dancer nodded shortly. "Hello, Tancred."

"Johnny left Abilene before he got my second letter," Slocum explained. "He came here expecting to have your job, Cummings." He coughed. "He's quite agreeable to being deputy, however. I've told him you'd split the fees."

"Hear you got twelve last night," said Tancred. "Not bad, but we ought to get twice as many in a day—especially with that no gun-totin' ordinance." He winked. "That worked out fine in Abilene and Wichita. Towns're too tame now, though."

"We want a tame town here, Johnny."

"You'll get it."

"The quicker the better. All right, Cummings, I'll let you two get acquainted."

Taking that as a dismissal, Dancer and his new deputy left Slocum's office. Outside, Johnny said: "Guess we might as well start earning some of those fees,

eh?"

"Go right ahead, Johnny."

Johnny Tancred grinned wickedly at Dancer. "Don't care much for me, do you?"

"Slocum hired you."

Tancred squinted at Dancer. "What'd you ever do, Cummings, outside of drowning Jim Dancer?"

"You and I are going to get along fine, Johnny," Dancer said.

"Look, Marshal," said Johnny Tancred, "I know this business. I've been doing it in other towns. It takes something that you don't find in Chicago—plain nerve, see? I'll show you what I mean."

ACROSS the street two cowboys had come out of a saloon; both were wearing guns on their hips. Johnny Tancred started across the street and when he was a dozen feet from the men he whipped out both of his guns.

"All right, hombres!" he cried. "Reach!"

The hands of both men shot up into the air. Tancred stepped up to them. "There's a law against gun-totin' in this town," he sneered. "You're both under arrest."

He holstered his left gun, then stepped up to the cowboys and relieved each of his sixgun, which he tossed away contemptuously. Then he struck one of the men in the face with the back of his hand. "When you get out of jail you can tell your friends that Johnny Tancred's running this town."

Dancer crossed over and handed Tancred the key to the jail. "Nice work, Johnny," he said. "Now you can lock them up."

"Sure, and they'll have company in a little while." He fired at the boot of one of the men, missing by about a half inch. "Get movin'!"

The Texas men started down the street, their hands still in the air. Johnny Tancred swaggered after them.

Dancer drew a deep breath and sought out the local print shop, where he learned that the printer, a man named Anderson, was about to issue the first edition of a weekly newspaper to be called: "*The Lanyard Lance*." Dancer ordered a dozen placards, to read:

PUBLIC NOTICE

The carrying of guns within the limits of this town is prohibited by a town ordinance. Please deposit all firearms at desig-

nated places immediately upon arriving in town. They can be retrieved when leaving.

*Signed: CITY COUNCIL
Lanyard, Kansas*

The printer promised the placards for that evening and Dancer began a tour of the saloons and gambling halls. In every place he told the proprietors of the new ordinance and asked them to accept the guns of the Texas men as they entered their places. There was some grumbling on the part of one or two of the saloon keepers, but all agreed to act as gun repositories.

The job took Dancer almost two hours to complete and twice as he came out upon the street he saw Johnny Tancred heading for the jail with prisoners. His last port of call was The Eldorado, where he found Dave Oldham playing solitaire at a table.

"Sit down, Marshal," Oldham invited as Dancer came up to the table. "Tell me how you like your new deputy."

"I don't," replied Dancer, seating himself opposite the gambler.

"Do you have to keep him?"

"I've been wondering about that, Dave. Slocum figures he made a mistake making me the marshal and he hired Johnny Tancred to keep me in line."

"That's what I gathered. But just what could Slocum do if you refused to have Tancred?"

Dancer shrugged. "I'm not worried about that. I'm just wondering what Slocum's game is. He's certainly doing his best to antagonize both the cattlemen and the business men of the town."

"Maybe he just hates everybody."

"It goes further than that."

"He'd better not go much farther," said Oldham. "He's sold a lot of property here at pretty stiff prices. The buyers have got to make out on their investments or there's going to be hell to pay." Oldham began laying out the cards for a new game of solitaire. "Did you know that there's a private railroad car on a siding at the depot? President of the M. K. & P., or maybe just the vice-president. Slocum spent most of the morning with him . . ." He broke off as two shots sounded on the street.

DANCER kicked back his chair and ran to the door. He sprang through, drawing his gun, and saw Johnny Tancred

standing over a man in the middle of the street.

As Dancer approached, Tancred put his foot against the man on the ground and turned him over. Dancer needed but a glimpse of the staring eyes to know that the man was dead.

"He drew against me," Tancred said briefly.

"While you had your gun on him?"

"Sure. There's always some damn fool who doesn't know when the score's against him."

"How about you, Johnny? Do *you* know when the score's against you?" Dancer raised the muzzle of his Navy Colt to the level of the deputy's stomach.

Tancred stiffened. "What's the idea, Cummings?"

"You're through. I'm firing you, Johnny."

"You are like hell," retorted Tancred.

"Drop your gun, or try to beat my bullet, Johnny—like the Texas man tried to beat yours."

Out of the corner of his eye, Dancer could see Bertram Slocum striding toward them, but he continued to concentrate on Johnny Tancred.

"You can't fire me," still protested Tancred.

"Maybe not, but I can kill you," Dancer said grimly. "And I will if you don't drop that gun."

Tancred let the gun fall to the ground and then Bert Slocum reached them.

"What's going on here?" he cried.

"Cummings says I'm fired," Tancred said quickly.

Slocum fixed Dancer with a cold look.

"You have no authority to do that, Cummings."

"You had no authority to hire Tancred," Dancer shot back at him.

Slocum's eyes blazed. "You know very well that the city council authorized the employment of a deputy."

"I know," Dancer said grimly. "I voted for it myself. But nothing was said about *you* doing the hiring. You forget that I was elected marshal. I'll hire my own deputies."

"What's the matter—afraid I'll get your job?" Tancred taunted. Then he appealed to Slocum. "I've arrested eighteen men in less than two hours."

"And you murdered one," Dancer added.

"I did like hell—he drew on me."

Slocum said: "You killed a man the other day, Cummings."

"In a fair fight," Dancer retorted.

"I fail to see the difference," Slocum said. "Slattery drew on you and you beat him to the draw. This man drew against Tancred."

"While Tancred had his gun on him. And Tancred drove him to it."

"What the hell do you mean?" Tancred cried. "He was violatin' a city ordinance and I told him he was under arrest, that's all."

"Just like you told the eighteen men you've already arrested."

"Yes."

"All right," said Dancer. "I won't argue the point. But you don't work for me."

"Now look here, Cummings," exclaimed Slocum, "you're carrying things too far." He glared at Dancer a moment, then suddenly capitulated. He signaled to Tancred. "Johnny, I want to talk to you."

Tancred stooped to reach for the gun he had dropped, but Dancer kicked it away. "You'll carry no guns in Lanyard."

"I'll take custody of his guns," Slocum said quickly.

Johnny Tancred started to protest, but Slocum shook his head warningly. He picked up Tancred's gun, then drew the other from his holster.

"And now," Dancer added, "you can remove this body."

"What'll I do with it?" Tancred asked sullenly.

"That's your lookout."

Tancred was spared that, however. A couple of sullen-looking Texas men who had been listening to the proceedings from the doorway of the Eldorado came forward and relieved Tancred of his job. They loaded the dead man on a horse and rode out of Lanyard.

AT SLOCUM'S office the land company man found a man in the uniform of a trainman awaiting him with a note. It read: "Come and see me—now!"

Slocum thrust the note in his pocket. "I've got a new job for you, Johnny," he said, "but I haven't time now to tell you about it. I'll be back in a half hour."

"I'm not going to hang around here a half hour without any guns," Johnny Tancred cried.

Slocum put the guns down on his desk. "The law's against wearing the guns,

Johnny. Nothing says you can't sit inside here, *near* guns."

Johnny Tancred chuckled wickedly and Slocum left the office. He walked to the end of the street to the railroad depot and then another hundred yards to the siding where the private car was standing.

A trainman, who had a big bulge in his side coat pocket, was sitting on the little observation platform. "It's all right, Mr. Slocum," he said. "Mr. Lanyard is waiting for you."

Slocum pushed open the door and stepped into the car. The rear half was fitted out as a luxurious office, and Lanyard was seated behind a desk dictating to a secretary.

"Ah, Mr. Slocum," he said; then to his secretary, "I'll be occupied for awhile."

The man got up and went into the other section of the car. Lanyard reseated himself, took a fresh cigar from a humidor and took some time biting off the end and lighting it. Slocum, meanwhile, seated himself on a sofa and waited for the railroad man to speak.

CHAPTER XV

LANYARD took a couple of puffs on his cigar. Then he finally said: "All right, Slocum, lay your cards on the table."

"I haven't got any cards," Slocum replied calmly.

"No?"

Slocum shrugged and made no further reply. Lanyard took three or four puffs on his cigar. "You hired a notorious killer as a deputy marshal this morning. I understand he's arrested over a score of men in the last two hours."

"Something like that, Lanyard. And a few minutes ago he killed a man who resisted arrest. However, he isn't working for the town any more; the marshal fired him."

"Good!" snapped Lanyard. "But you should never have hired the man in the first place."

"What else is on your mind, Lanyard?" Slocum asked.

The railroad man looked narrowly at Slocum a moment, then he grunted. "I said, put your cards on the table."

"And I told you I haven't got any cards," Slocum retorted. "But maybe you've got some."

"I have, Slocum. I've got a half inter-

est in the town of Lanyard."

"What did you pay for it?" Slocum asked insolently.

"Seven miles of a railroad."

"And how much freight has this town given your railroad in two months?"

"Quite a lot—but it would have had the same amount if the railroad had gone through Bruno. But stop beating about the bush, Slocum. If this is a showdown, let's have it."

"You're making the showdown, Lanyard."

"All right, so I am."

Slocum nodded. "What were the terms of our deal?"

"I don't think you've forgotten, but I'll remind you. I built the railroad here, instead of through Bruno and for that I was to cut in for one half of all the money you made out of this town."

"That's right, Lanyard—and haven't you gotten your half? It seems to me that I've paid you something like ninety-five thousand dollars in less than sixty days."

"I haven't complained about that part of it."

"Then what do you want?"

"I want half of *everything* you've got here."

"Correction, Lanyard. The deal was for you to get half of whatever money comes out of the town."

"What's the difference?"

"The town site measures a mile by a mile."

"I still don't see your point. The town, including the railroad right of way and the loading pens, doesn't take up the entire town site. Even if it grows it'll be some time before the mile is built up."

"That's right, Lanyard."

"Then what are you quibbling about?"

"I'm not quibbling; you are."

"You've got something up your sleeve," Lanyard said, screwing up his face.

"Uh-uh," said Slocum. "You can come down and look at the books anytime. I've sold town lots to the amount of one hundred and ninety-thousand dollars. There are roughly three hundred lots left in the town site."

"What about our interest in the hotel and bank?"

"You'll get your share, but it'll be awhile before there are any profits from them." Slocum hesitated a moment. "I'll tell you what, Lanyard, if you're dissatisfied, I'll

buy you out."

"Not a chance!"

"Then how would you like to buy me out?"

Lanyard exclaimed in surprise. "What?"

"I'll sell you my half interest in the town site, the hotel and the bank."

"For how much?"

"Make me an offer."

Lanyard looked at Slocum narrowly.

"Seventy-five thousand?"

"Why not make it ninety-five—the amount you've taken out so far?"

LANYARD pushed back his chair and came to his feet. He walked around his desk and looked down at Slocum. "You'll pull out of here?"

"I didn't say that."

"What would be the point in your hanging around if you sold out your interest?" Lanyard asked musingly. "All you'd have left is some prairie land." His eyes suddenly widened. "Just how much prairie land have you got?"

"Quite a lot." Slocum smiled like a wolf about to devour a jack rabbit. "I had twelve thousand acres to begin with."

"And the town site occupies only six hundred and forty acres. That leaves you more than eleven thousand."

"Oh, no, it leaves me about twenty-one thousand. You see, I spent most of my ninety-five thousand for more land. Among the right of way. Cost me quite a bit of money—some of it four dollars an acre."

"You've got twenty-one thousand acres of land—along our right of way?"

"A mile and a half on each side of your track, for about fourteen miles. The town site is right in the middle of that land."

"In other words you've got the town surrounded?"

"That's what it looks like on the map."

"And anyone who wants to get to the town would have to cross your property?"

"Unless he came by train; I deeded a strip ninety feet wide to your railroad, you'll remember."

"It's still a blockade; we need those ninety feet for trackage." Lanyard leaned back against the edge of his desk and chewed the cigar that had gone cold in his mouth. "So you've had an ace in the hole all the time!"

"An ace in the hole is a good thing to have."

Lanyard's face was suddenly very pale.

His tongue came out and licked his lips. "It rather looks as if your ace wins the pot, Slocum."

"I don't see any stronger hands, do you?"

LANYARD shook his head slowly. "What are you going to do?"

"Why, we were talking about freight awhile ago, Charlie," Slocum said genially. "According to my figures close to one hundred thousand head of cattle have been shipped from here since the railroad came. There are about that many head out on the range now, grazing on *my* land and the way the herds are coming in, I wouldn't be a bit surprised if another half million head are shipped from here by the first of November."

"I'm not arguing the figures, Slocum," Lanyard said tightly.

Slocum nodded. "I've given the railroad a lot of freight business. Don't you think the railroad ought to give me a commission?"

Lanyard swallowed hard. "How much?"

"I thought about a dollar a steer."

Lanyard cried out hoarsely, "You're mad, Slocum!"

"Oh, I don't think so."

"My brother-in-law would never stand for it."

"You sold him on swinging the road south of the original survey."

"And I had a hard time doing it. It cost a quarter million dollars."

"... Of the stockholders' money."

"Harley Nelson is the principal stockholder, a fact of which you're undoubtedly quite aware."

"Yes, he owns about twenty-five per cent and you've got ten—only your stock is pledged to a couple of St. Louis and Chicago banks because of the beating you took in the New York Central."

Slocum regarded Lanyard steadily for a moment. "As you said awhile ago, Charlie, I've got you blockaded—not a head of cattle will go into your loading pens unless I let them." He paused. "But if I raise the blockade the cattle will have to cross the town site of Lanyard . . . and the original agreement is that we split share and share on what comes out of that."

Lanyard grabbed at the lifeline. "You mean—?"

"Get the road to pay that dollar-a-head commission and we split fifty-fifty."

Lanyard widened his eyes and began to breathe a little faster. "Fifty-fifty . . . straight down the line?"

"A quarter million dollars apiece . . . inside of four months!"

Lanyard whistled softly and Slocum drove in the last nail. "More than enough to redeem your stock in the M. K. & P."

Lanyard straightened from leaning against the desk and took a quick turn up and down the private car. Then he suddenly stopped and faced Slocum.

"I'm going to have trouble with Harley over this . . ."

"A man can stand a lot of trouble for a quarter million dollars."

"I know—I need the money. Harley's pretty tough, but so is his wife . . . my sister. I *might* swing it."

"Why don't you tell him the truth? That a dirty dog named Bert Slocum's got the railroad over a barrel." He chuckled. "Although I don't think you'll want to tell him that you're the dirty dog's partner."

AFTER Slocum was gone, Lanyard sat at his desk staring out of the window. His secretary came into the room and seeing that Lanyard was in deep thought tiptoed out again. But after a time Lanyard struck a bell on his desk and the secretary re-entered.

"Russell," Lanyard said, "I need a man to solve an important business problem and I find that I don't know how to go about getting the right man for the job."

"What is the business problem, sir?"

"I want to rob a bank."

The secretary gave a start of surprise. "I beg your pardon!"

"I'm serious, Russell. A pipsqueak who's suddenly gotten too much money is trying to destroy me and the only way I can stop him is to take away some of his money. He keeps it in a bank, where he can get at it quickly. I don't want his money myself, but I want it removed from this man's reach. Now, the problem is to find a man who can remove it."

"I'm afraid that's a rather large order, sir," said the secretary.

"Aren't you from Missouri, Russell? I thought that's where all the bank robbers come from."

"As a matter of fact, sir," said Russell slowly. "My home is at Independence . . ."

"Independence!" exclaimed Lanyard. "Isn't that the home of—?"

Russell cleared his throat. "As a matter of fact, sir, I—I have a cousin, a distant cousin, who—"

A gleam came into Lanyard's eyes. "As a matter of fact," he said, slowly, "I've been thinking of visiting Independence. You—ah—might happen to run into this cousin—the distant cousin . . ."

CHAPTER XVI

MOUNTED on the horse he had bought his first day in Lanyard Jim Dancer rode beside Dave Oldham, who was astride a rented gelding. On the right of them was a herd of at least fifteen hundred Longhorns, grazing on the rich buffalo grass. Off to the left was an even larger herd, and straight ahead, the prairie was dotted with cattle.

"You wouldn't think people could eat that much beef," Oldham said.

"There are a lot of people in the East," Dancer replied, "and beef is cheap." He pointed straight ahead. "There's a sodhouse up there."

"Could be the place we're looking for."

They put their horses into a canter and passed through the herd of Longhorns. The sodhouse seemed to be about a half mile beyond and, once through the herd, Dancer and Oldham picked up a rutted wagon trail.

They rode at a trot to within four hundred yards of the house, then Dancer pulled up his horse. "That's a barbed wire fence around the place," he said to Oldham.

"Why would anyone want to fence in a place like that?" Oldham asked.

"To keep out the cattle . . . maybe."

A sharp whining sound penetrated Dancer's ears. He was already flattened down behind his horse's head when the boom of a rifle came over.

He looked sideways at Dave Oldham, who sat erect in his saddle, his revolver in his hand. "Careful, Dave!" he cautioned.

"That was only a warning shot," Oldham said. "Seems like they don't want visitors. What do we do?"

Dancer sat up. "We can't charge because he'd pick us off with that rifle before we got in revolver range."

"Then we go back to town?"

"I'd rather ride back than be carried back."

But even as Dancer said that a man

came out of the sodhouse and vaulted into the saddle of a horse that stood inside the fence. He rode toward a gate, leaned over and unfastened it, then sent the horse through the gate and putting it into a gallop came toward Dancer and Oldham.

"Oh-oh," said Dancer.

He drew his Navy Colt, holding it carelessly across the pommel of his saddle. Near him, Oldham suddenly exclaimed: "That isn't a man!"

Dancer had already discerned that. "I know. It's Evelyn Slocum . . ." He holstered his gun.

Evelyn Slocum, wearing boots, Levis, flannel shirt and a black, flat-crowned Stetson, pulled up her horse, a spirited young filly. "I recognized you through the glass," she exclaimed. "I'm sorry about that shooting."

"You did it?" Dancer asked.

She shook her head. "No, it was Bill Harmer."

"Who's Bill Harmer?"

"A former buffalo hunter who works for Uncle Bert. He lives there."

DANCER and Oldham exchanged glances. She caught the look and laughed. "My horse threw a shoe and Bill offered to nail it on. Uncle Bert couldn't wait, so he and Johnny rode on." "Johnny?" Oldham asked.

"Johnny Tancred. He works for Uncle Bert, you know."

"I hadn't known," Dancer said. "I thought he'd left town."

"Oh, he has; he works out on the ranch."

Dancer nodded toward the sodhouse. "Is that the ranch?"

Evelyn half-turned. "Oh, no, that's just a sort of storehouse."

"Must be storing something valuable," Dave Oldham observed, "if the caretaker shoots at anybody who comes close."

"I'm sorry about that," Evelyn said. "I had no idea what he was going to do until he fired." A frown creased her forehead. "Isn't it rather unusual for you to be riding out here?"

"Just getting a little exercise," Dancer replied.

Oldham gathered up his reins. "We rode out farther than I expected to. Do you mind, George? I've got to get back."

"Not at all."

Oldham nodded to Evelyn and Dancer,

turned his horse and put it into a swift trot, in the general direction of Lanyard, five miles away. Dancer knew that Oldham was in no hurry to get back to town; he was merely riding ahead because he thought that Dancer wanted to be alone with Evelyn Slocum.

And that was one thing that Dancer did not want. Or thought he did not want.

Evelyn fell in beside Dancer and they began to ride easily. For a moment they rode in silence, then to make conversation, Dancer said: "I didn't know Mr. Slocum was going in for ranching."

"He's got all this land," Evelyn said, "he thought he might as well get some use out of it."

"That was quite a shipment of barbed wire that came out this way, a few days ago."

Evelyn started to nod, then suddenly looked sharply at Dancer. "Aren't you unusually—well—concerned, about my uncle's activities?"

Dancer shrugged. "There's been a lot of talk that he's fencing the range."

"What if he is?" exclaimed Evelyn. "It's *his* land."

Dancer nodded. "So it is, but you see, your uncle made the town and he brought the trail herds to Lanyard. He sold a lot of townsites to people who depend on those herds. They're a little nervous now that fencing in this grazing land will interfere with the herds."

Evelyn showed sudden relief. "They've got nothing to worry about. Uncle isn't fencing in *that* much land."

"I hope not."

"But why should *you* be worried?"

"I'm not."

"Isn't that why you rode out here?"

Dancer nodded reluctant assent. "Yes."

"Well, now you know."

"I know your uncle's fencing in some land," Dancer said. "I don't know why he has an armed guard to shoot at anyone who comes in rifle range. And I don't know why your uncle has hired a man like Johnny Tancred."

Evelyn's color was several shades deeper than normal and her eyes were blazing. "What's the difference between a man like Johnny Tancred and you? You're both—killers!"

DANCER jerked his horse to an abrupt halt. For a moment he stared at the

girl. Then he exhaled slowly. "I'm sorry," he said and raked the horse's flanks with his spurs.

The animal leaped forward and went into a gallop. Dancer let it run for awhile, but had to slacken speed as he passed through a herd of cattle. Through the herd, he saw Dave Oldham, jogging along a few hundred yards ahead.

He put his horse into a gallop again and Oldham stopped his horse when he heard the drumming of hoofs. The gambler looked at him sharply as he came up, but as Dancer glowered at him, he made no comment. Not for a half mile.

Then Oldham said, with the ghost of a smile playing about his lips, "Maybe I shouldn't have gone ahead."

By that time Dancer was in better humor. He grinned wryly: "I guess it was kind of a dirty trick to pump her about her uncle."

"Just the same," said Oldham, sobering, "there's something awfully fishy about Bert Slocum. Aside from Johnny Tancred, have you noticed some of the people that've been coming into town, staying a few hours, then riding out this way?"

"There've been quite a few salty-looking lads lately," Dancer admitted, "but I haven't paid much attention to the direction in which they've been riding." He paused a moment. "You think Slocum's hiring a crew of gun-fighters?"

Oldham shrugged. "That sodhouse couldn't hold a half car of barbed wire, let alone six full cars."

"The wire goes farther?"

Oldham nodded. "I'd say the lad with the rifle is stationed at the sodhouse to discourage anyone from *going* any further." Then he added: "And I notice, Slocum's niece didn't get past the sodhouse, either."

"She said her horse threw a shoe."

"That's what she *said*," Oldham agreed, although the emphasis on the word "said" was not lost on Dancer.

They rode into Lanyard and returned their mounts to the livery stable. Then Oldham went to the Eldorado and Dancer walked to the jail, over which a middle-aged ex-mule-skinner, named Romeike, now presided. Dancer paid him fifty dollars a month, out of his own pocket. In the jail proper, a man named Chadwick was serving out thirty days in lieu of his refusal to pay a twenty-five dollar fine for

disorderly conduct.

"Hello, Marshal," the jailer greeted Dancer. "There was a fella here lookin' for you."

"Who?"

Romeike scratched his head. "He gave his name, but doggone if I can remember recollect it now. Harper, or something like that."

"I don't know anyone by the name of Harper. What'd he look like?"

"Tall, pretty well set up. Black whiskers. Seemed anxious to talk to you. Stranger around here. Leastwise, I never saw him before."

Dancer nodded and started to leave, but with his hand on the door, turned. "The name couldn't have been Travers?"

"That's it!" exclaimed the jailer. "Travers. And I remember now, he said he'd be staying at the Drovers' Hotel."

CHAPTER XVII

DANCER left the jail and walked down the street. He was nearing the Eldorado when he saw the tall figure of Captain Travers of the Pleasanton Agency come out of the barber shop. The detective recognized him at a distance, but waited until Dancer had come up before speaking. Then he held out his hand.

"Hello, Marshal," he said, in a conversational tone. "How are you?"

"Good enough," Dancer replied. "And you?"

"Couldn't be better. Like to buy you a drink."

Dancer nodded toward the Eldorado. "Here's a good place."

They entered the saloon and Dancer headed for the bar, but Travers touched his arm. "Could we have it at a table?"

"Of course."

It was mid-afternoon and there were only a few patrons in the place. Oldham was watching a desultory poker game in the far corner, but Dancer was sure that he had spotted him coming in.

He signalled the bartender and led Travers to a table, at the near side of the room. They seated themselves.

"Been reading about you," Travers said, as he rested his elbows on the table and leaned forward. "There was a piece in the Kansas City paper last week that said you'd tamed this town."

"It's a job of work," Dancer said.

The bartender came up. "What will you drink, Cummings?" Travers asked.

"Beer."

"Make it two, bartender."

Travers leaned back and surveyed the room until the bartender brought the beer. Then he raised his glass.

"How!"

He drank about half of his beer, although Dancer barely wet his lips on the glass. Travers set down his glass and smiled. "You should have left a forwarding address, Cummings," he said.

"I didn't have any, not for quite awhile."

"So we discovered, when our mail come back from your old Chicago address."

Dancer raised his glass and drank beer slowly. It was coming now and Dancer had to guess at the right answers.

"Your brother was quite worried about you," Travers said.

Dancer said: "My brother?"

There was a shade of hesitation before Travers replied and Dancer knew that he had guessed correctly. "Why, yes," Travers said.

Dancer shook his head. "I haven't got a brother."

Travers looked at him in surprise. "Why, I'm sure the chief said it was your brother."

Dancer nodded. "Probably. That's why I didn't leave an address."

Travers exclaimed. "You don't mean—?"

"I guess even Dancer had friends."

TRAVERS leaned back in his chair and regarded Dancer steadily. "The chief thought that might be a possibility. But after I sent him that piece from the Kansas City paper—well, he wondered if you'd use your right name out here." He half smiled. "It's outlaw country, you know, and Dancer's friends . . ."

"I think a couple of them have looked me over."

"Lately?"

"About a month ago."

Travers frowned. "We've got a lot of men devoting their full time to Jesse's outfit. We came pretty close in Omaha, a couple of weeks ago."

"Just a little late, though."

"As usual," Travers sighed. "Mr. Pleasanton said you could name your own salary to come back."

Dancer shook his head. "I'm afraid not."

"What difference is there, whether you work for the agency, or work as a marshal."

"I sleep in a bed here."

"And you're a walking target. The average life of a peace marshal is pretty short. Yes, I know, you've tamed this town, but Tom Smith tamed Abilene and he was dead in three months."

"A man's got to play out his hand," Dancer said, doggedly.

"But he can draw new cards."

"No," said Dancer. "Whatever's going to happen is going to happen here."

Captain Travers drank the last of his beer. "The chief's coming down to Kansas City; you'll go in and talk to him?"

"I haven't got anything to talk to him about."

Poorly suppressed rage began to darken the detective's face. "There's no chance of you changing your mind?"

"None whatever."

Captain Travers pushed back his chair and got to his feet. "Goodbye, Cummings," he said angrily and stalked off.

Dancer remained seated at the table and after awhile Dave Oldham came over. "An old acquaintance, Jim?"

"Captain Travers of the Pleasanton Detective Agency."

Oldham whistled softly.

"Pleasanton sent him out from Kansas City. George Cummings disappeared a little too completely."

"Disappeared? They were able to find you."

"Most people have relatives somewhere. Although I know one relative Cummings didn't have. A brother." Dancer traced a design on the table top with his finger. "Captain Travers was very cute about it." A frown flitted across his features. "Or maybe he wasn't cute."

"Another month," Oldham said, "and there won't be a Texas man in town. Half the business places in Lanyard will board up their windows until next year. I'm thinking of going to New Orleans for the winter."

"The Eldorado'll close?"

"No point keeping it open for just the townspeople. Besides—Florence has been talking about selling."

Dancer looked up in surprise. "I thought the place was doing well?"

"It is—too well, perhaps. That may be

the trouble. Some nights she doesn't even come out of her office."

"Why not?"

"She's lost interest. Or maybe her heart isn't in it."

Dancer looked steadily at his friend. "You're in love with her, Dave?"

Oldham looked at his lean, flexible hands. "I'm a gambler, Jim. Florence is the daughter of a gambler."

"And for that reason she wouldn't marry a gambler?"

"I mean," Oldham said evenly, "Florence isn't in love with me."

DANCER, looking past Oldham, saw the door of Florence's office open and Florence come out. His eyes on her, he said to Oldham: "How do you know, Dave?"

Oldham, who saw that Dancer's eyes were focused on the office in the rear, pulled out a chair and seated himself across from Dancer. He took a pack of cards from his pocket and began to manipulate them.

Dancer watched the gambler a moment, then looking up, caught Florence watching him from across the room. He got up, looked down at Oldham a moment then, circling a table, bore down on Florence Peel.

She stood in the doorway of her office, watching him approach. As he came up, she said: "Afternoon, Marshal; haven't seen you around much lately."

"I'm here, now."

"So I see."

Dancer looked about the sparsely populated gambling hall. "Things are pretty quiet this afternoon."

"Yes."

"Has business fallen off lately?"

"Some. Why?"

"I was thinking that the herds haven't been coming in so fast lately. Another month and there won't be any."

"They'll come again in the spring."

"I know, but there won't be much doing in Lanyard during the winter."

"And Dave told you that I might close up for the winter? Is that what you're getting at, in a roundabout sort of a way?"

Dancer winced a little because of his bungling. "He mentioned that he might go to New Orleans."

She looked at him steadily for a moment then turned and walked into her

office. When she reached the middle of it, she stopped and turning about, signalled with her head.

"Come in!"

He went into the room.

"Close the door," she said.

He swung it shut and stood with his back against it.

"All right, Jim," Evelyn said. "You asked for it."

"No," he said quickly.

"You wanted to know if I was going to New Orleans, with Dave?"

"I said Dave thought he might go there."

"I'm closing the Eldorado for the winter. I might even sell it. But I'm not going to New Orleans."

HER greenish eyes were on his so intently that he had to drop his own. He cleared his throat awkwardly and tried to say something, but did not know what to say. And Florence, the dam having burst within her, could not stop.

"Don't you know there's only one man with whom I'd go to New Orleans—or anywhere he wanted me to go?"

And still he could not speak.

Florence went on poignantly. "You're blind, Jim, or you're a fool."

"Yes," he admitted tauntly.

"Yes, what?" she cried harshly. "Yes, you're a fool? She won't have you, Jim. She won't have you even as George Cummings and if she knew you were Jim Dancer, she'd cross the street to keep from passing near you."

"I know that even better than you, Florence," Dancer said tonelessly. "You see, it was her money that put the Pleasanton Agency on the trail of Jim Dancer."

"What?"

"She paid twenty thousand dollars to get—me!"

Florence was shocked out of her bitterness. She came toward Dancer and looked up into his face. "Why? Why should she do that?"

"Because I killed her father."

A low cry was torn from Florence's throat. Her hand reached out and involuntarily gripped Dancer's arm. "I don't believe it. You—you're not that sort of a man."

"It was in August '63."

"But that was during the war!"

"What Jamison and Anthony did in In-

dependence was war; what Jim Lane forced Ewing and Plumb to do in Clay and Jackson Counties, that, too, was war. But *they* won the war and we didn't. So what we did in Lawrence . . ." He made an impatient gesture. "*That* wasn't war."

Florence let go of his arm and retreating to a chair, sat down heavily. "And she's lived with the hatred of a man named Jim Dancer for all of these years?" She shook her head and a tear splashed her hand. "And I've been feeling sorry for myself."

"Don't, Florence," he said, "don't feel anything—for me."

She laughed bitterly. "There's not much pattern to it, is there? Dave and me and . . . you. Maybe I'll go to New Orleans, after all."

Dancer opened the door and looked back at her. Her eyes met his. "And maybe," she said, "I'll go to hell."

He closed the door softly on her and went through the saloon. As he passed near Dave Oldham's table, the gambler looked up from a game of solitaire he had started. He looked at Jim Dancer—and looked through him!

Dancer walked out of the Eldorado and walked up the street to the Drovers' Hotel.

He entered and Paul Hobson picked up an envelope from the desk.

"Cummings, here's a letter for you. From Bert Slocum." He handed the envelope to Dancer. "Leastwise," he added, "I suppose it's from Bert. His niece left it here a few minutes ago."

"Thanks," said Dancer, and climbed the stairs to his room.

Inside he closed the door and looked at the envelope Hobson had given him. His name was scrawled on the face of it. He stretched out on the narrow cot and putting his thumb under the flap, tore open the envelope. But even then he waited a moment before unfolding the note.

At last he opened it.

Mr. Cummings:

Won't you come to dinner this evening, so that I can apologize for this afternoon? Unless I hear from you otherwise, we shall expect you at seven.

Evelyn Slocum

Dancer re-read the note, then returned it to the envelope. After awhile he got up from the bed and finding a pencil and some paper, wrote a note:

Dear Miss Slocum:

Thank you for your kind invitation. I would like to accept but my duties will not permit.

*Sincerely,
George Cummings*

Two minutes after writing the note he tore it to shreds. He left his room and going out, stopped in at the barber shop where he had a shave and haircut. Then he returned to the hotel and in the lobby wrote a duplicate of the letter he had torn up; only this time he wrote with pen and ink.

He went so far as to locate a colored boy who worked as a swamper in a saloon, to deliver the message, but even as he put it in the boy's hand, he changed his mind.

And at a quarter to seven he rode his horse out of the livery stable and started for the home of Bertram Slocum.

CHAPTER XVIII

IT WAS a big two-story frame house, the most imposing in Lanyard, as was to be expected of its foremost citizen. The house was located on the main road, leading west of town, approximately three-eighths of a mile from the center of Main Street.

As Dancer rode up, a man came around from the side of the house and took the reins from Dancer's hand. And then Bertram Slocum appeared on the verandah of the house.

"Good evening, Marshal," he said heartily. "I understand you're having dinner with us."

"Yes," said Dancer. He climbed the short flight of steps to the verandah.

"Dinner's almost ready," said Slocum. "But suppose we have a drink before we sit down?"

He held open the door for Dancer to enter. The latter stepped into the living room which was furnished like an eastern room. Beyond the living room was the dining room, where a colored maid was setting out plates.

In the living room, Slocum poured out whiskey into small glasses and filled a couple of tumblers with water. Slocum winked. "You can't buy stuff like this in town."

To Dancer, who was not a drinking

man, it tasted no different than the other occasional drinks he had been forced to drink at one time or another. But he nodded approval.

Then Slocum said: "Evelyn tells me you were out riding on the prairie today and that Harmer took a shot at you." He shook his head. "I'll have to fire that man."

"Not on my account."

Slocum chuckled. "A miss is as good as a mile, eh? You were in the war?"

Before Dancer could reply, Evelyn Slocum entered the room. She was wearing a deep red velvet dress, cut low and trimmed with stiff black lace.

"Good evening, Mr. Cummings," she greeted him and held out her hand. "I'm glad you could come."

"Thank you for asking me," Dancer replied stiffly.

In the dining room the maid announced: "Dinner is ready."

They entered the room and seated themselves at the table, Slocum at the head, Evelyn on the right and Dancer directly across. The maid brought out the food, roast pork, a rarity in the cattle country, and vegetables that had come on the railroad from Kansas City.

As they ate, Slocum pursued the subject he had touched on before Evelyn had come in. "I'm fencing in some land out south of town. That is, I'm getting ready to do some fencing. Thought I'd wait to do the actual work until the drovers have gone home for the winter. They don't seem to like my fencing." He grunted. "Got an idea they can graze their herds wherever they please. They'll find out differently next spring."

"You're going to run cattle yourself?" Dancer asked.

"A few head." Slocum looked sharply at Dancer. "I don't see any reason to keep it a secret any longer. People'll find out soon enough. I'm planting wheat."

IT WAS apparent from her surprised expression that this was news even to Evelyn.

"Wheat?" she exclaimed. "Out there on this prairie?"

"Winter wheat," said Slocum. "You plant it in fall and it's ripe before the really hot weather comes along in the summer. T. C. Henry, over in Abilene,

planted five thousand acres last fall and this summer harvested forty bushels to the acre."

Dancer lowered his fork and looked at Slocum in astonishment. "Isn't wheat selling for around a dollar a bushel?"

"That's why I'm going to raise wheat."

"How many acres are you going to put in, Uncle?" Evelyn asked.

"I've got twenty thousand acres of land."

"But you're not going to plant it *all* in wheat!"

"Why not?" Slocum saw the frown on Dancer's face. "This isn't cattle country, Cummings; no land is if it can be farmed. Food comes before anything else."

"Beef is food."

"Beef can be raised on barren ground; this soil is too rich to waste on grazing cattle."

"The same might be said of all the land east of here."

"Right. There'll be no herds coming east of Lanyard. But that's all right, the railroad's going to build westward during the winter."

"Even so, isn't this the closest point to the Texas Panhandle?"

Slocum shrugged. "What if it is? They'll just have to drive their herds a little further—and ship them a few miles more. There'll be just as many steers going on the trains—only they won't go from Lanyard."

"But suppose the cattlemen insist on shipping from here?"

"Insist?" cried Slocum. "What good would it do them to try if they can't reach the shipping pens? Why do you think I'm spending all that money on fencing?"

"And what happens to the town of Lanyard?"

Bert Slocum's face twisted in a cruel smile of power. "Lanyard's *my* town; I made it and I'll keep it going . . . but it'll be the kind of town I want it to be, without saloons and gambling halls. A few stores, the bank and hotel . . ."

As he talked, Dancer heard the drumming of hoofs outside come to a sudden stop. Boots pounded up stairs and someone banged loudly at the front door.

Evelyn Slocum pushed back her chair. "Excuse me," she said, and got to her feet.

Slocum did not even seem to notice. "Lanyard will exist because I'll need a

town for the people who'll work for me. It takes a lot of men to farm twenty thousand acres and—"

He stopped as Evelyn re-entered the room, accompanied by the youthful night clerk of the Drovers' Hotel. "Excuse me, Mr. Slocum," the lad said, "but there's hell—I mean, things have popped in town. Milo Meeker's been killed and—"

Bert Slocum kicked back his chair. "Milo Meeker dead! How?"

"His store was held up by some men. Mr. Hobson thinks it was the James gang."

Dancer was already on his feet. "You'll excuse me . . ." He started for the door.

"Wait!" cried Slocum. "I'll ride with you."

BUT Dancer was going through the door. Outside, he sprang to the ground and ran around the house to the stables. He found the hostler rubbing down a couple of Slocum's horses.

"I've got to go back to Lanyard in a hurry," Dancer exclaimed.

"Sure," said the man. "I didn't know how long you'd be so I didn't unsaddle your horse."

Slocum came running up. "Amos, saddle Black Ben—quick!"

Dancer unhitched his horse from a stall, backed it out. "I'm sorry, Mr. Slocum, I can't wait."

He led the horse out of the stable, mounted and almost ran down Evelyn Slocum who was coming around the corner of the house. He pulled up his mount as she threw up a hand in a signal to stop him.

"I'm sorry we didn't get a chance to talk," she said. "I wanted to apologize for—"

"You already have," Dancer replied. "And thanks for—everything!"

He touched his horse's flank with his heel and the animal sprang past the girl. He sent it into a furious gallop and inside of three minutes was pulling it up before Milo Meeker's store.

It was dark on the street, but enough light came from inside the store to reveal a crowd outside. Dancer tied his horse to the hitchrail and pushed through the crowd at the door.

Inside Meeker's store were eight or ten townsmen. Hobson spied Dancer at once.

"Here you are, Marshal! A fine thing

when you're needed!"

"What happened?" Dancer interrupted.

"The James gang!" Hobson exclaimed.

"How do you know it was the James boys?"

"Who else would it be? A half dozen men galloped into town, pulled up outside here and while a couple of them stayed outside the others charged in and—*and* killed Milo."

Dancer brushed past Hobson to where the merchant's body lay sprawled in a pool of blood, at the end of the counter. He had been struck by no less than three bullets; the killers had wanted to make sure.

Dancer turned back. "Was he in here alone?"

A man in shirt sleeves and wearing an apron pushed forward. "I was in here with him, but it was like Mr. Hobson said, they came in shooting—"

"What about money? Did they get much?"

The man's mouth fell open. "Why—uh—I don't know's they got anything. There was three-four of them inside here and they was all shooting . . ."

"At you, too? Or only Meeker?"

"I guess at both of us, although they didn't hit me. I ducked down soon's they began shooting . . ."

"Where did Meeker keep his money?"

"In the till."

"Where's that?"

The clerk went behind the counter, reached underneath and pulled out a drawer. He exclaimed. "They didn't touch the money!"

"Guess they didn't have time," a man said.

"The James boys *take* time," retorted Dancer. "This isn't their work."

"How do you know it ain't?" Paul Hobson cried.

DANCER did not even bother answering that. He brushed past Hobson and headed for the door. As he stepped through to the sidewalk, Bert Slocum dismounted at the hitchrail.

"Is it true, Cummings?" he cried.

"About Meeker—yes. But it wasn't a holdup. No money was taken. It was just—murder!"

"But who'd want to murder Milo Meeker?"

"I don't know." Dancer turned to the crowd. "Anybody see which way they went?"

Two or three men pointed eastward. "That way."

"How long ago?"

"Not more'n a half hour," someone said.

"A half hour!" exclaimed Dancer.

Paul Hobson had come out of the store. "Everybody in town was looking for you, Cummings. Seems to me we're paying you enough money so you'd—"

"He was having dinner at my house," Slocum interrupted sharply. He looked at Dancer. "Do you think we ought to organize a posse?"

"It wouldn't do any good tonight. They rode east, but once out of town they could have gone in any direction. I'll try to pick up their trail in the morning."

"This is a terrible thing," Bert Slocum said, "just as I was thinking that the town was tamed." He smacked his right fist into the palm of his left hand. "Some drunken Texas men, who had it in for Meeker."

Dancer caught sight of Dave Oldham standing at the edge of the crowd. Oldham's head moved almost imperceptibly and as soon as he could Dancer slipped away from the crowd. He joined Oldham near the entrance to the Eldorado.

"I heard the shooting," Oldham said, "and I was at the door when they rode off. They weren't Texas men."

"How do you know?"

"It wasn't quite dark yet and you know that I can spot a cowboy anytime, anywhere. They were riding northern horses—good ones."

Dancer shook his head. "Hobson keeps saying the James boys, but that's ridiculous. Stores aren't in their line and anyway, no money was taken."

"Too excited, Jim? I doubt it—those boys knew what they were doing." He paused. "One of them was your old guerrilla friend, Yancey. I recognized him."

Dancer was silent a moment. "So he came back."

"The others were strangers, Jim. But they weren't cowboys."

Dancer said, "Meeker was a member of the city council . . ."

"That's what I was thinking," Oldham said softly. "Vedder was by a few min-

utes ago; said if I saw you to tell you he'd walk down to the courthouse in a little while."

Dancer looked down the street and saw a light in the second floor window of the jail building.

"He's there now." He started to walk off, then turned back. "If you're not busy, Dave, come along."

OLDHAM fell in beside Dancer and they crossed the street to detour about the crowd in front of Meeker's store. A few minutes later they climbed the stairs to the courtroom and found the door locked. Dancer knocked.

"Who is it?" called the voice of Charles Vedder.

"Cummings," Dancer replied.

The bolt was shot on the inside of the door and Vedder opened it. "You've been over to Meeker's?" Vedder asked.

"Yes."

Vedder frowned as he saw Oldham on the stairs outside. "Dave, do you mind? I'd like to talk to the Marshal."

"I'd like him to hear, Vedder," Dancer said quickly.

Vedder hesitated, then bobbed his head. "All right."

Dancer and Oldham went into the room and Vedder closed the door.

"Marshal," the prosecutor said, "I just got back from a trip to Kansas City. I went there because of Slocum. Do you know that six carloads of barbed wire have gone out of Lanyard in the last two weeks?"

"Dave and I know about that," Dancer said. "As a matter of fact, we took a ride out south of town today to see where the wire went to."

"Did you find out?"

"We turned back because someone took a shot at us with a rifle. But it's all right, the wire's Slocum's. He's told me all about it—and why he bought it."

"Why?"

"He's fencing in his property—to raise wheat."

"That's what I was going to tell you!" Oldham cried. "I found it out in Kansas City. He's placed an order for two hundred plows that are going to be delivered in a few days. They've never had an order like that in Kansas City and they think Slocum's crazy—but he's paid for the plows

and for a lot of other machinery he's ordered."

Dancer said: "He told me about a man at Abilene who got forty bushels of wheat to an acre on five thousand acres. Slocum's going to plant twenty thousand acres."

Oldham whistled. "That's going to cost him something."

"Two hundred plows," said Vedder in a tone of awe, "at least four hundred good horses to pull them, discs, harrows, seed—at least three hundred men to do the work."

"Has Slocum got that sort of money?" Dancer asked.

"Nobody knows what he's got. He's made a lot off the town but still . . ." Vedder exhaled heavily. "If he wins he'll clear a half million in a single season."

"If he wins," Dancer said. "Do you think the town'll let him?"

"If he fences in that land," Vedder said, "he'll kill the cattle business for this town." He paused. "And I don't think the people in Lanyard will let him do that. That's why I called you over here."

"To stop Slocum? I don't see what we can do . . ."

"I've already done it," Vedder took a long envelope from his breast pocket and handed it to Dancer.

The latter looked at the envelope.

"What's this?"

"Your appointment as sheriff of Bruno County."

"County!" exclaimed Dave Oldham.

"I've been working on it for several weeks," Vedder said. "The population of Lanyard alone is over one thousand and there are a couple of hundred people in Bruno."

"But how could I be appointed sheriff?" Dancer asked, puzzled. "Who appointed me?"

"Judge Currier of the Third District Circuit, who arrives in Lanyard tomorrow." Vedder smiled faintly. "And I'm county attorney. Of course the appointments are only temporary until county elections are held, but that won't be for several months yet. In the meantime, Judge Currier runs the county."

"And Leach?"

"Is a Justice of the Peace. He can perform weddings—and things like that."

Dancer opened the envelope in his hand and studied the warrant that appointed

him sheriff of a Kansas County. "Town marshal is one thing, Vedder," he said, "but sheriff . . ."

"Don't be silly, Cummings," Vedder said warmly. "There isn't a better man in Kansas for the job."

"He's right," Oldham added.

Dancer looked steadily at the gambler.

CHAPTER XIX

DAWN was scarcely breaking over Lan-
yard when Jim Dancer entered the
livery stable. But early as it was the liv-
eryman was up and already had Dancer's
horse saddled.

"He's all ready for you, Marshal. Had
a good feed of oats."

"Thanks."

Dancer started to lead the animal out
when a voice spoke to him from the ad-
joining stall. "Morning, Marshal!"

It was Dave Oldham.

"Dave!" exclaimed Dancer. "There's
no point in you getting up this early."

"I haven't been to sleep," chuckled Old-
ham. He led out his horse, saddled.
"Don't argue—I'm riding with you." He
tapped a rifle in a scabbard alongside his
saddle. "And I'm a little better armed
than we were yesterday."

They rode out of the livery stable and
started down Main Street.

There was a well defined trail rutted by
wagon wheels leading eastward but within
a quarter of a mile after leaving the town,
the trail became a dozen trails, each cut-
ting off across the prairie land to wherever
the Texas outfits that had made the trails,
had camped. Both Oldham and Dancer
realized the futility of trying to pick up
the trail of a half dozen riders in the maze
and ignoring the trails completely jogged
in the general direction of the sodhouse
where they had been stopped the day be-
fore.

They passed a trail herd of seven or
eight hundred Longhorns. A range cook
was making breakfast for a half dozen
Texas men who were still wrapped in their
blankets near the fire.

Dancer and Oldham swerved their horses
so that they came up to the camp.

"Morning," Dancer said to the cook.

"G'morning to you," replied the cook.
"Coffee's just about ready if you want to
light."

"Don't mind if we do," said Dancer and
climbed down from his horse.

Oldham also alighted and the cook got
out tin cups which he filled with scalding
black coffee.

"That hits the spot," Oldham said.

"I ain't human until I've had my cof-
fee," the cook said. He gulped down a
mouthful of the steaming liquid. "Out
pretty early, aren't you?"

Dancer nodded. "You didn't happen to
see six men riding by this way yesterday
evening, round about eight or nine
o'clock?"

"Waal, no," said the cook. "I didn't
see anybody, but I heard—"

"He didn't hear nothin'," said a voice
behind Dancer. He turned and discovered
that one of the cowboys was sitting up in
his blankets. "He's deaf, so he couldn't
hear a damn thing."

"Come to think of it," said the cook, "it
was some Longhorns I heard."

"Six men who weren't from Texas,"
Dancer said, "they murdered a man in
town."

"You're Cummings, the peace marshal,"
retorted the man on the ground. "I
wouldn't tell a marshal what day of the
month it was."

"That's your privilege," Dancer said
coldly. He returned the tin cup to the
cook. "Thanks for the coffee."

HE AND Oldham climbed back on
their horses and rode off. Out of ear-
shot of the camp, Oldham said: "I guess
they passed this way, all right."

"There wasn't much doubt in my mind
that they'd wind up down there," Dancer
replied. "It was just a question of how di-
rectly they went. I guess they were in a
hurry."

They put their horses into a canter and
in about twenty minutes sighted the sod-
house from which they had been fired upon
the day before. As they approached at a
more conservative pace, Oldham said:
"Quite a lot of horses inside that wire."

Dancer made note of the smoke coming
from the stovepipe that stuck a couple of
feet out of the roof. "And somebody's up,
making breakfast."

"Well, what do we do—snipe?"

"No. There are enough of them so they
won't be afraid of two men riding up.
Come on."

Dancer put his mount into a fast trot and Oldham kept pace a few feet beside him. Dancer had an idea they were being watched from inside the house as they bore down on it, but there was no sign from within.

They pulled up outside the barbed wire gate and Oldham started to drag the long rifle out of the scabbard, but Dancer shook his head. "Too awkward for close use, Dave."

He put his hands to his mouth and hallooed the house. "Hello, inside!"

The door opened and a middle-aged man stepped outside. "Hello, yourself," he called back.

"Your name Will Harmer?" Dancer called.

"That's me."

Dancer gestured to the gate. "Like to talk to you."

"Sure, why not?"

He came forward and unlatched the wire gate. Dancer and Oldham passed through and Harmer began fumbling to close the gate. "Go right in the house and make yourself at home," he invited carelessly.

"No hurry," said Dancer.

He stood aside and waited until Harmer had closed the gate, then he and Oldham fell in behind the caretaker. At the door, Harmer reached forward to open the door, then stepped to one side, but Oldham suddenly gave him a shove so that he went hurtling through the door. Then Oldham followed, reaching for his gun. He let go of it when he saw the guns in the hands of the six men who were ringing the room.

Dancer came through the door, hands swinging at his sides. His eyes picked out Yancey, the ex-guerrilla, as dirty as ever, more vicious-looking even than the last time Dancer had seen him.

"Hello, boys," Dancer said easily.

"You got a nerve bustin' in here," one of the men said.

Dancer retorted, "Harmer invited me in."

"This-un's the Marshal," Yancey said, pointing at Dancer with his Navy gun.

"Yeah?" said the first man. "Well, a marshal's got no authority outside his town."

"That's right," conceded Dancer, "but I thought you fellows might want to ride into Lanyard on your own account."

"We ain't lost nothin' in Lanyard," re-

torted one of the ruffians.

"No, but you killed a man there last night."

"Look here," began Yancey, "I know you from somewhere and I'm beginnin' to remember from where. It was a long time ago . . ."

"In St. Louis?" asked Dancer, smiling.

Yancey scowled. "I ain't ever been in St. Louis."

"Maybe it was Chicago," said Dancer. He took a casual step forward and with a lightning blow struck down Yancey's gun hand with his left fist.

WITH his right hand he grabbed Yancey's left shoulder and whirled him completely around, at the same time circling the former guerrilla's neck with his left forearm. With his then free right hand, Dancer whipped out his Navy Colt and jammed it in Yancey's back.

"Anybody shoots," he cried, "and Yancey gets it first!"

"Don't!" choked Yancey. "Don't shoot—he's Jim Dancer!"

"Jim Dancer!" cried one of the ruffians, falling back.

"It came to me," babbled Yancey in sheer fright. "We was at Lawrence together."

At Dancer's side, Oldham drew a deringer with his left hand and a nickel-plated sixgun with his right. But the announcement of Dancer's real identity was what did the trick.

A gun clattered to the floor, then another. Dancer shoved Yancey away so roughly that the outlaw fell to his knees. Then he fanned the other outlaws in the room. One of them looked for a moment as if he would try to shoot it out, but when Dancer's gun came even with his eyes, he dropped his weapon hastily.

Dancer stepped to one side. "Start filing out!" he ordered, gesturing to the door. "And that goes for you, Harmer."

"I ain't done anything," Harmer whined.

"You gave shelter to a bunch of killers."

"Yeah, but you ain't got no authority outside of Lanyard. You said so yourself."

"This is enough authority," Dancer said, raising his gun. "Although you're wrong. I can arrest a man anywhere in the county. I'm sheriff of the county."

"Sheriff!" exclaimed a couple of the men. "There's no sheriff out here."

"There has been since yesterday. I guess if you'd known it you wouldn't have stopped here last night."

"If I'd known Jim Dancer was the sheriff, I wouldn't even have *come* here," one of the men retorted.

"Outside," ordered Dave Oldham.

THE men filed out and Dancer and Oldham stood to one side, while they saddled their horses. Clear of the enclosure, Dancer and Oldham mounted their own horses and the cavalcade started for Lanyard.

They had gone less than a half mile when Yancey fell back.

"Stay up there," Dancer ordered.

"I want to talk to you, Jim," Yancey whined.

"I've got nothing to talk to you about."

But when Yancey still held back, Dancer let him talk. "Look, Jim, you don't want to go arrestin' me," the ex-guerrilla said. "We rode together during the war, you know, and since then I—" He dropped his voice in the hope that Oldham wouldn't hear. "I saw Cole Younger a few weeks ago . . ."

"Are you through?" Dancer asked grimly.

"No, I'm not through," Yancey said with sudden spirit. "But maybe *you* are, Jim. You're supposed to be dead and there's been talk for years that you been ridin' the night trails yourself. I'll bet they don't know in Lanyard that you're Jim Dancer."

"They'll know it after you sound off," said Dancer.

"I don't have to tell them, Jim. Just give me my gun and nobody'll ever see me around here."

"Or your friends."

"They'll go with me—and they won't say a word, Jim. I promise you they won't."

"There's a better way to keep you from talking," said Oldham. He drew the rifle from the scabbard.

Yancey bleated and spurred his horse ahead to catch up with his gang. Oldham looked sideways at Dancer. "You know he's going to sound off."

"Yes."

"This way nobody'd know."

"You and I would, Dave. And I don't think you could murder seven men in cold blood."

"They killed Milo Meeker in cold blood."

"Even so."

Dave Oldham exhaled heavily. "Maybe you're right, Jim, but you know what this is going to do to you?"

"I've a fair idea. I wasn't cut out to be a sheriff."

"The hell of it is, Jim, I think you were."

CHAPTER XX

OLDHAM and Dancer had ridden out of Lanyard before five and a few minutes after seven they rode back into the town. There were only a few people on the streets and they stared in astonishment at the sight of seven mounted men being herded along to the jail by Dancer and Dave Oldham.

Romeike the jailer stood in the doorway as the cavalcade came up. The prisoners were herded into the cell at the rear of the jail and locking it, Dancer handed the key to the jailer. "Don't let anyone talk to them," he instructed the man. "I'm going to get some breakfast, then I'll be back."

He and Oldham remounted their horses and rode slowly back up the street. As he dismounted in front of the China Cafe, Charles Vedder darted out of his office; he lived in a back room.

"What's this, Cummings?" he cried. "Somebody just told me you got the men who killed Meeker."

"They're in jail."

"That's terrific, Sheriff!" Vedder's eyes lighted up with an unholy gleam. "Judge Currier comes in on the eight o'clock train. I'll run him right over to the courthouse and we'll show Bruno County some fast justice."

"All right," said Dancer. "Romeike'll bring in the prisoners and if you want me I'll testify, but before court opens I think you'd better give this back to Judge Currier."

He took the sheriff's warrant out of his pocket and handed it to Vedder, who exclaimed in surprise.

"What's the idea, Cummings?"

"That's the idea, Vedder," Dancer said. "It's made out in the name of Cummings and my name isn't Cummings."

"Well, what is it, then?"

Dancer drew a deep breath. "Jim

Dancer."

For just a second Charles Vedder remained motionless, then he recoiled in horror. "Jim Dancer!"

"That's right," said Dancer, and walking away from the prosecutor, entered the China Cafe.

He seated himself at the counter and had given his order for ham, eggs and coffee before Dave Oldham came in and sat down beside him.

"It's going to be a warm day," Oldham said, after a moment.

"I expect so," replied Dancer, "but there's one thing a man can't do anything about—the weather."

They were almost finished eating when the train whoo-hooed, as it neared the terminus of Lanyard. Judge Currier was on that train; Judge Currier who represented the only real *law* within two hundred miles. Vedder would be down at the depot to meet him and then Lanyard would receive a shock—two shocks.

Dancer put two silver dollars on the counter and got up from his stool. The door of the cafe opened just then and Paul Hobson stormed in, his face bleak.

"Here you are, Marshal. We're having a council meeting over in Bert Slocum's office—an emergency meeting."

"Now?"

"They're waiting."

"Don't go," Oldham said under his breath, but Dancer pretended not to hear. He followed Hobson out of the cafe and across the street, neither of them speaking.

IN SLOCUM'S office were gathered Slocum, Chandler Leach and Carter Bullock. Slocum sat behind his desk, grim-faced. Chandler Leach was seated in an armchair fidgeting nervously, and Carter Bullock looked unhappy about the whole thing.

As Dancer and Hobson entered, Slocum grunted: "We're not going to wait for the prosecutor, in fact that's why we're holding this meeting."

"You're sure you want me here?" Dancer asked.

"You're still the marshal of Lanyard," replied Slocum. "Although you may not be when we get through."

It dawned on Dancer then that the group had not yet learned of his real identity, merely that he had been appointed sheriff

of the newly formed county. He sat down in a straight-backed chair.

"Vedder," Slocum began, "thinks he's pulled a fast one. Behind our backs he's gone to the state authorities and had a county made of this territory with himself as county attorney and our friend, the marshal here, sheriff."

There were no reactions among the other members of the city council, so they all knew that already. Slocum went on: "There's a Kansas City judge coming out here this morning—in fact, he's probably arrived during the last ten minutes. He thinks he's going to tell us how to run this town. But he isn't. This is a legally elected council and Lanyard is a legally incorporated city. If this Kansas City judge knows his law, he'll know that he can't go interfering with city affairs."

"He can keep me from trying cases," Chandler Leach said morosely.

"To a certain extent, yes. We'll take that up later. First of all, there's some more important business to take care of—specifically, two things."

He drew a slip of paper from his pocket and consulted it. "I want to propose a new city ordinance, to wit: 'Because it has become a public nuisance, it is hereby ordered that the driving of cattle through the city streets of Lanyard be declared illegal, as of October 1, 1872.'"

He lowered the piece of paper. "That's a week from today."

"I move that we have a vote on that," Paul Hobson said quickly. "All in favor?"

"Aye," said Slocum.

Bullock, the banker, bobbed his head: "Aye."

"Aye," said Paul Hobson.

Chandler Leach looked unhappily about the group, swallowed hard and said: "Aye."

Slocum fixed Dancer with a cold stare. "Cummings?"

"Opposed."

"The ayes have it," declared Hobson, "four-to-one."

"The driving of cattle on our streets is illegal as of October first," Slocum amplified. "We now come to the second matter of business." He paused but this time did not consult his slip of paper. "Because he has been found derelict in his duties, the city council hereby suspends Marshal George Cummings and relieves him of his duties."

"All in favor?" exclaimed Hobson.

THIS time Chandler Leach did not hesitate. He had made his choice a moment ago and voted promptly with the majority. Dancer unpinned his badge and dropped it on Slocum's desk. He headed for the door, but Slocum called to him.

"The keys to the jail, Cummings."

"Romeike has them."

"He's your man; tell him to turn loose the men he's got in jail illegally."

"Not illegally, Slocum," Dancer said quickly. "I arrested them outside the city limits—in my capacity of county sheriff. They're murderers and they'll go on trial before Judge Currier."

"That remains to be seen." Bert Slocum rose quickly. "Johnny!" he cried in a sharp voice.

Johnny Tancred appeared through a door that led to a rear room.

"Johnny," Slocum said. "You've been appointed temporary marshal of Lanyard. I order you to clear the Lanyard city jail of all people held there illegally. Now!"

Johnny Tancred grinned lazily at Dancer. "Going to stop me?"

"I don't know," Dancer replied. "But I'll walk to the jail with you."

"Sure enough."

Tancred winked at the members of the city council and followed Dancer through the door. Outside, a couple of men who had been loafing at the hitching rail fell in behind the two. And a hundred feet behind them came the city council.

The procession moved toward the log building that housed the jail and courthouse. From a distance, Dancer saw that a crowd had gathered outside the place and he saw Vedder, the newly appointed county attorney, standing at the top of the stairs that led to the courtroom. Dancer quickened his pace then and as they came up to the jail, the crowd parted to let him and Tancred through.

A tall, heavy-set man of about forty-five came out of the courtroom and stopped beside Charles Vedder.

"Sheriff," Vedder called down, "Judge Currier is ready to try the prisoners."

"There's a little difference of opinion, Vedder," Dancer replied. "Mr. Tancred, the new city marshal, insists that this is a city jail and that he has sole authority over it. He intends to turn loose the prisoners."

"What's that?" cried the man standing beside Vedder.

"You heard what the man said," Johnny Tancred said, smirking.

"And you listen to what I say," Judge Currier said savagely. He came down the flight of stairs. "I represent the state of Kansas in judicial and criminal matters and if you interfere in any way with the prisoners of this court I'll hold you in contempt of court. In other words, you'll go to jail—and it won't be *this* jail."

JOHNNY TANCRED'S cocksureness faded. He licked his lips uncertainly and looked about the crowd and saw only hostile faces. But then he spied the city council coming up.

"Mr. Slocum," he cried, "he says he'll send me to jail. What do I do now?"

Slocum, his face taut, pushed through the crowd. "You're Judge Currier?" he asked of the newly arrived judge.

"I am," snapped Judge Currier. "And you?"

"I'm a member of the city council."

"Then tell this fool marshal of yours what he's in for if he tries to defy this court."

Slocum also saw the hostile faces about him and knew that they would become even more hostile when they learned of the new city ordinance. He nodded to Tancred. "He's the boss, Marshal."

Charles Vedder, meanwhile, had come down the stairs. He indicated Dancer. "Here's the sheriff, Judge."

Judge Currier shifted his fierce eyes to Dancer. "Ah, yes, bring the prisoners into the courtroom, Sheriff."

Vedder nodded to Dancer. "All right—Sheriff!"

Dancer went to the front of the jail and discovered that Romeike had barricaded the door on the inside. But he opened it in response to Dancer's command.

Dancer went in and accepting the key from Romeike, unlocked the cell door.

Yancey popped forward. "So you're turning us loose, eh? Got your orders?"

"You'll go outside, around the corner and up the stairs," Dancer said.

"Sure, sure," chortled Yancey, licking his lips. "Gotta make it look official, eh?"

CHAPTER XXI

THE prisoners filed out of the cell, went through the jail office and out through the front door. They hesitated a moment

or two, in the face of the throng outside the doors, but with Dancer prodding them along they rounded the corner of the building and climbed the stairs.

In the courtroom, Judge Currier had taken his place at the "bench." Vedder stood in front of the table and the prisoners lined up at one side, facing several spectators on the other side of the room, the entire city council and few townspeople. More of the latter came in.

Judge Currier picked up a little wooden mallet and tapped the table. "Fourth District Court, County of Bruno, State of Kansas, now in session."

Charles Vedder took a step forward. "Your Honor, the case of the State of Kansas, versus seven John Does, on a charge of willful murder."

"Proceed," Judge Currier said.

Judge Leach stepped out from his crowd. "Just a minute, Your Honor, I'm Judge—ah—Chandler Leach. I—ah—represent the defendants and I ask the court to dismiss this ridiculous charge on the grounds of lack of evidence."

Dancer, looking at Yancey, saw the former guerrilla grin foolishly.

"Lack of evidence?" Judge Currier asked. Then, to Vedder: "What do you say, prosecutor?"

"Let me call just one witness, Your Honor," said Vedder.

"Objection!" cried Leach.

Judge Currier gave him a withering look. "Hold your objections until later, Counsellor."

Vedder said: "Otto Holtz!"

The clerk from Milo Meeker's store, stepped out of the crowd.

"Raise your right hand," Vedder ordered and as the man obeyed, "Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God?"

"Yeah, sure," said Otto Holtz.

"Mr. Holtz, what is your name?"

The clerk blinked. "Why, Otto Holtz—you just said it."

"What is your occupation?"

"Why, everybody knows that I been workin' in Milo Meeker's store."

"You were working there yesterday?"

"Of course."

"What happened there yesterday evening, shortly before eight o'clock?"

Holtz looked at the prosecutor, puzzled. "Ain't that what this is all about?"

"It is, Mr. Holtz." Vedder drew a deep

breath. "Perhaps you'd better tell the court—in your own words—just what happened at Mr. Meeker's store last night."

"Sure, that's what I'm here for. Mr. Meeker got killed by them—"

"I object!" cried Chandler Leach.

Vedder made an impatient gesture. "Perhaps you'd better just answer questions, Mr. Holtz."

"Huh? Did I say something?"

Vedder said patiently: "You were working in the store last night, Mr. Holtz?"

"That's right."

"And while you were there some men came in?"

"Yeah, sure, four of 'em. Like I told you last night. They come bustin' in and began shootin' and then they tore out again an'—"

"And after they left, your employer, Milo Meeker, was dead; is that right?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Thank you, Mr. Holtz. Now answer the next question carefully. Did you see the faces of these men who shot Mr. Meeker?"

"Of course I seen 'em. Them's them—"

"I object!" howled Chandler Leach.

"Objection overruled," snapped Judge Currier. "It is apparent that the state is endeavoring to make an identification. Proceed, Mr. Veeder."

"Thank you. Now, Mr. Holtz—these men you saw shoot down Milo Meeker . . . do you recognize any of them here in this courtroom?"

"I sure do." Otto Holtz moved across the room, let his eyes roam over the prisoners. "They was all shootin', but this man here," he pointed at Yancey, "his was the first bullet to hit Mr. Meeker."

THE smirk was suddenly gone from Yancey's features. His mouth fell wide open. But then it suddenly clamped shut. "Hey!" he cried. "What's the idea? I thought—"

He took a step forward to cross the room toward Bert Slocum, but Dancer, standing near, reached out and pushed him back.

Otto Holtz picked out three more men. "There three was also in the store with him. There was a couple of them outside holding the horses, but I didn't get a good look at them . . ."

"The state rests!" Charles Vedder an-

nounced in a loud tone.

Then Chandler Leach pounced forward. "Look here, Judge," he blustered. "I demand a jury trial for my clients."

Judge Currier banged his gavel on the table.

"You may think you're within your rights, Counsellor, and if this were Kansas City I would be the first to concede it. But it isn't; it is a raw frontier community. Only a few moments ago there was a discussion as to who had jurisdiction over this very building. This is a new county and it so happens that I have special judicial powers—which I assure you are not without precedent in this state. We have neither the time nor facilities for jury trials in clear-cut cases and your appeal is therefore denied. The four men who have been identified by the witness, step forward."

The men remained where they were. Dancer waggled his finger at Yancey. "All right, Yancey, that's you."

Yancey moved forward in a sudden rush, past Dancer and Vedder, to the judge's desk.

"Looky here, Judge, I got somethin' to say that's goin' to knock you off that there chair."

Judge Currier banged down so hard with his gavel that he splintered its handle. "Order!" he thundered. "You'll get your chance to talk later."

"But, Judge . . ." still protested Yancey.

"Shut up!"

Yancey closed his mouth, but his eyes glowered dangerously. Dancer prodded forward the other three prisoners who had been identified by Otto Holtz.

"You men," said the judge, "have been identified by a proper witness of this court. The court finds you guilty of murder, and sentences you . . ." He paused for just a second. ". . . to be hanged by the neck until you are dead, each of you!"

A roar went up in the courtroom. Judge Leach shouted over and over that he objected, but his words were drowned out. Judge Currier, having broken his gavel, pounded on the table with his fist and after awhile the noise subsided.

He said then: "And in view of the fact that we have no facilities for keeping prisoners in this county, I order the executions to take place as soon as possible. Sheriff, I remand the prisoners in your custody."

"Sheriff, hell!" howled Yancey. "That's what I been tryin' to tell you all this time. He ain't no goddam sheriff. He's—Jim Dancer! It's him that ought to be hung, not me. He's Jim Dancer, the outlaw!"

FOR a moment there was a stunned silence, then a roar went up that was even greater than the one that had followed the sentencing of the murderers.

Bert Slocum, during the hubbub, moved up and gripped Dancer's arm. The latter tried to shake it off, but couldn't. And then suddenly the room became silent.

Except for Slocum's lashing voice: "Is that true, what he said?"

Dancer said evenly: "The part about my name being Jim Dancer—yes!"

Charles Vedder stepped up beside Jim Dancer. "Your Honor, the sheriff's real name has nothing to do with the case before the court."

"You're right, Prosecutor," Judge Currier said, "still, I would like to know if you were aware of the sheriff's true identity?"

"He told me this morning."

"This morning?"

"Yes. He—he gave me back the warrant you issued, appointing him sheriff."

"Where is it?"

Vedder took the document from his pocket. The judge examined it and laid it on the table before him. "This court is adjourned for an hour." Then he grimaced. "That is, it will be adjourned after the prisoners have been locked in the jail downstairs." He looked steadily at Dancer. "Lock them up, then come back here."

"Ain't you goin' to lock *him* up?" Yancey cried. "He admitted he was Jim Dancer!"

Judge Currier merely glared at him.

Dancer nodded to the prisoners. "Let's go."

Yancey drew back. "I ain't going with you, Jim Dancer . . ."

Dancer struck him a blow that smashed the former Quantrell man to his knees. He drew his revolver and Yancey bleated in fright and scrambling to his feet, hurried for the door. The other prisoners followed him quickly.

Going down the staircase, Dancer held his gun on the seven men and after two or three looked over their shoulders, they kept good order and marched quickly

around the building to the front door.

Dancer locked them in the cell and handed the key to Romeike. "You may earn your pay today, Romeike," he said.

HE LEFT the jail office and reclimbed the stairs to the courthouse, which had been cleared of most of the spectators, although there were still eight or ten present, including the entire city council. Slocum was orating savagely to Judge Currier as Dancer came in.

"This is the most ridiculous situation I've ever heard in my life," he was saying. "Appointing as sheriff the most notorious criminal of our time."

"Just a moment," cut in Judge Currier. "I appointed a man named George Cummings, not Jim Dancer. However . . ." He fixed Dancer with a cold glare. "Let's get to the bottom of this. You actually admit that you are Jim Dancer?"

"Yes."

"The *outlaw*, Jim Dancer?"

"I'm the Jim Dancer you're referring to," Dancer said carefully, "but I'm not an outlaw. I never have been."

"That's absurd, Judge," cried Bert Slocum. "Everybody knows Jim Dancer's an outlaw."

"That's a matter of opinion," interposed Charles Vedder. "The Jim Dancer we've known in this community for three months has been anything but an outlaw. He's been marshal of this town and he's been a good marshal."

"He's a highwayman and murderer!" shouted Slocum.

"You can prove those statements?" Judge Currier demanded.

"I don't have to prove them, any more than I have to prove that two and two is four. Everybody knows—"

"Everybody doesn't know," the judge snapped. "I'll admit that I've always heard Jim Dancer referred to as an outlaw—just as I've always heard that Jesse James is one."

"He's one of the James Gang!"

"You can prove that?"

"Make him prove that he isn't."

Judge Currier shook his head. "No, the burden of proof is upon the court. A man is innocent until proved guilty."

Slocum pointed a finger at Dancer. "Didn't you kill George Cummings?"

"No."

Paul Hobson leaped forward. "That's

a lie! That's one thing *I* can prove. And so can two other people in this town."

The judge's eyes narrowed. "Who are these people?"

"A man named Oldham and a woman named Florence Peel, who owns the Eldorado . . ."

"Get them!"

BERT SLOCUM signaled to Chandler Leach and the fat justice hurried out of the room. Then Slocum nodded to Hobson. "All right, Paul, tell them about the first time you met," he pointed to Dancer, "him!"

"It was when I was coming out here on the stagecoach last May. He was sitting on the river bank with a dead man handcuffed to his wrist. He told us the dead man was Jim Dancer, the outlaw, and that he was George Cummings, a Pleasanton detective. I—I even helped bury the dead man after," he cleared his throat, "after we cut the man's hand off because there was no handcuff key." Hobson sneered at Dancer. "You deny that?"

"No," said Dancer. "That part of it's true enough. I deny, however, that I killed George Cummings."

"Oh, he was drowned trying to swim across the river?" Slocum said sarcastically.

"The ferryboat capsized," Dancer said. "There were two horses on the boat and in the struggle one of them kicked Cummings. He was dead before we struck the water."

"And what about the ferryman?"

"He drowned."

"You expect us to believe that?"

"No. I didn't expect Arthur Pleasanton to believe it, either. That's why I assumed the identity of Cummings and went to Pleasanton's Kansas City office."

"Oh, you admit that part of it? Will you also admit that you met me in that office?"

"Of course."

"And why was I in the Pleasanton office?"

Dancer paused and saw that the eyes of everyone in the room were upon him. He said: "You were there because you had hired the Pleasanton Agency to run me down."

Triumphantly, Slocum turned to Judge Currier. "Is that enough for Your

Honor?"

"Hardly," retorted Currier. "Anybody can employ a private detective. I could go to Arthur Pleasanton and tell him that *you* were an outlaw."

"All right," said Slocum, "then I'll tell you *why* I employed the Pleasanton Agency. As a matter of fact, it was on behalf of my niece." His eyes glowed with an odd yellow light. "Nine years ago this man Dancer shot down my niece's father, my own brother. He did it wantonly and in cold blood—before my niece's eyes. Ask him to deny that!"

Dave Oldham stepped into the room and said: "That was in 1863, during the war!"

The judge turned on Oldham. "Who're you?"

"My name is Oldham; I was told that I was wanted here."

"He's the man who was on the stage-coach," said Hobson, "when we buried the Pleasanton detective that Jim Dancer killed. But I must warn Your Honor that this man is friendly to Dancer."

"I gathered that," Currier said. "A moment ago, Mr. Oldham, you came to Dancer's defense."

"Merely as a former soldier, Your Honor. Jim Dancer's crime—if it was a crime—was committed during the war. The war has been over for more than seven years. History will decide as to the right and the wrong of it."

"Well put, Mr. Oldham," conceded Judge Currier. "I know a little about the war myself."

"Your Honor," cried Bert Slocum, "Jim Dancer was never a soldier. He was a murdering bushwhacker, no more!"

JUDGE CURRIER'S eyes gleamed. "You rode with Quantrell?" he asked. And, as Dancer nodded, "I think we had a little brush with you the day before Westport. The Fourth Wisconsin Cavalry?" He nodded thoughtfully. "You fought very well, considering we outnumbered you about four to one." Then he suddenly caught himself. "This is not a War Commission trial; it's a civil court. It's not up to us to decide upon the war guilt of—"

"You're siding with him," howled Bert Slocum.

"I'm not siding with anyone, Mr. Slocum. You say your brother was killed

by Quantrell?"

"By Jim Dancer, not Quantrell. He was foully murdered during the Lawrence Massacre. The war had nothing to do with it. Any more than it had to do with Jesse James being an outlaw!"

"Jesse James isn't on trial before this court," declared Judge Currier. "Nor for that matter is Jim Dancer."

"Then I'll bring him to trial."

"If you can furnish sufficient evidence—actual evidence, Mr. Slocum, of any crime that Jim Dancer had committed since April 15, 1865, this court will consider the issuing of a warrant against Jim Dancer."

"You mean you're not going to do anything to him?"

"Until you furnish this court with proper evidence, no."

"You're keeping him on as sheriff knowing his identity?"

Judge Currier cleared his throat. "That is another matter. Whereas this court lacks evidence that Jim Dancer is an outlaw, there seems to be sufficient *rumor*, or perhaps I should say public opinion, which is unfavorable—although perhaps unwarranted—against Jim Dancer, which would make his appointment an unhappy one." He looked steadily at Jim Dancer. "An officer of the law must be above reproach. Mind you, I do not say you are not, Dancer, but public opinion is against you and I feel therefore that I must void this appointment."

Jim Dancer nodded. "Thank you, Judge."

He turned and walked to the door. As he passed through, Dave Oldham fell in behind him.

Dancer started down the stairs and Oldham clapped his shoulder. At the bottom of the stairs a crowd of forty or fifty people stood silently watching him. The expressions on their faces were not especially hostile. They'd all heard that George Cummings, the man who had tamed Lanyard was Jim Dancer, the notorious outlaw. Curiosity was on most faces, pity on some.

As he reached the foot of the stairs, the crowd parted and made a passageway for Dancer. He walked through, started up the street in the direction of the hotel.

Behind Dancer came the drumming of a galloping horse's hoofs. A clear voice shouted at him: "Jim Dancer!"

DANCER flinched visibly but continued walking. A small caliber gun barked and a bullet whistled past Dancer, missing him by less than a foot.

Dancer stopped and slowly began to turn. Twenty feet away, Evelyn Slocum pulled up her horse so suddenly it skidded to its haunches. She bounced from the saddle, a riding quirt in one hand, a .32 caliber revolver in the other.

"Jim Dancer," she cried, "get ready to die!"

She raised the revolver.

Dave Oldham leaped out of the crowd and lunged toward the girl. She saw him coming and sprang forward to avoid him, firing at the same time.

The bullet seared Dancer's left side, but before she could fire again, Oldham had knocked the gun from her hand. She started to stoop to retrieve it, but Oldham kicked it clear across the street.

Evelyn leaped clear of Oldham, the quirt dangling in her hand. She rushed straight at Dancer.

He could have torn the riding quirt from her hand as she came blindly at him, but he didn't. The leather sizzled through the air and lashed his face and neck like a red hot iron.

"Maybe the law can't do anything to you, Jim Dancer," Evelyn cried hysterically, "but I can!"

The quirt went back again and again it seared Dancer's face. She struck a third time and a fourth and was in the act of striking a fifth time when Florence Peel stepped off the sidewalk and wrenched the quirt from her hand.

"Go home, you fool," Florence said. "Go home and ask the God that made a fool like you to forgive you. Jim Dancer's the best man you've ever known and some day you'll realize it."

She reached out and with the flat of her hand pushed Evelyn off balance so that she fell to one knee. From that position, Evelyn looked up at the proprietress of the Eldorado. The hysteria was suddenly gone from her and Florence, seeing that, threw the quirt contemptuously at her feet.

"Maybe you'd like to use it on *me*. Well, go ahead!"

Evelyn picked up the quirt, got to her feet and still staring at Florence Peel, walked to her horse. She got stiffly into the saddle and suddenly whirling the ani-

mal, galloped it away in the direction from which she had come.

Dancer, the blood trickling down his side and his face smarting from the blows of the whip, gave Florence Peel an odd glance and, turning, walked off.

CHAPTER XXII

FOR a moment that day, the city of Lanyard, Kansas, had known law and justice. Four murderers had been arrested, brought to a quick trial and sentenced to a death they deserved.

But the execution of the sentence was not carried out, for there was no one to perform it.

Judge Currier offered the post of sheriff, upon the recommendation of Charles Vedder, to a man named Kelso, who ran the livery stable and was known as a good man. Kelso almost accepted until he learned what his first official duty would be.

"No," he said. "Maybe they need it, but I'm not hanging four men."

The county attorney made a list of a half dozen potential candidates and went about the town and canvassed the men. He returned in a half hour to the courthouse and shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Judge," he said. "Nobody'll take the job—not when they have to begin with a hanging and the job only a temporary one."

"What do you mean, temporary? There won't be any election here until next year."

"By which time Lanyard will be a ghost town," said Vedder. "Bert Slocum played his trump card this morning; he put through a city ordinance making it illegal to drive cattle through the streets of Lanyard."

The judge looked at him in astonishment. "But that'll kill the cattle trade that made this town."

"That's what Slocum wants; you see, he's through with cattle. He owns twenty thousand acres of land and he's going to plant it all in wheat."

"And Slocum thinks he can get away with that? Bring him here!"

Charles Vedder hesitated, then shrugged and went to see Slocum in his office up the street. Johnny Tancred and a couple of his friends were loafing outside the office and followed Vedder into the building, where Vedder delivered the judge's order.

"So the judge wants to see me," Slocum said. "Well, I've been thinking things over and I don't think that I want to see the judge."

"He'll issue a warrant for your arrest if you don't come to him."

"And who'll serve his warrant?"

Vedder looked at Tancred and his associates, each of whom wore two guns on their hips and he turned and walked out. Tancred and his friends followed him.

"Going to get yourself a gun, Prosecutor?" taunted Tancred.

White-faced, Vedder went back to the jailhouse. At the foot of the stairs Tancred sent a last taunt after Vedder.

"Like to hire a good sheriff, Prosecutor?"

IN THE courtroom, Vedder told the judge of Slocum's defiance. Currier listened in silence, then got up and went to a carpetbag that he had brought with him directly from the train that morning. He got out a long-barreled revolver.

"Vedder," he said, "I followed the Union Pacific all the way across the country. I've seen fifty towns without law and I've known a lot of lawmen, some good and some bad. And sometimes I've seen bad lawmen who were better than the good. Tom Smith was the leader of the Bear River riots and two years later he was marshal of Abilene—the best lawman a boomtown ever had. We're going to call on Jim Dancer and *beg* him to become sheriff of this county." He headed for the door, but Vedder, his eyes shining in delight, beat him to the door. He started out and downstairs, the judge following.

From below, guns spouted fire and flame and death. Charles Vedder cried out and fell headlong down the stairs and after him came Judge Currier!

Johnny Tancred holstered smoking guns and said calmly to his two assistant murderers:

"They drew on us!"

He walked to the front door of the jail and tried the door. It was locked on the inside. He banged on the door with his fist. "This is Marshal Tancred," he cried. "Open up!"

"I don't take my orders from you," Romeike called through the door.

Johnny Tancred stepped back, drew one of his guns and placing it to within six inches of the lock on the door, fired twice.

Then he kicked in the door.

A shotgun roared inside the jail office, but Tancred, expecting that, had jumped aside and the full blast of the charge tore a huge hole in one of his men.

Then Tancred fired twice into the jail and walked calmly into the room. He saw the cell key lying on the table, got it and unlocked the cell door.

"All right, boys," he said, "you're free."

The seven prisoners, four of whom had been convicted of murder and sentenced to death and three, to whom the judge had not got around, poured out of the cell into the jail office.

"Hold up your hands, boys," Johnny Tancred said jocularly. "I'm going to swear you all in as deputy marshals."

"What about the judge?" asked Yancey, a bit nervously.

Tancred laughed. "What the hell do you think that shooting was for? There ain't no more judge—and no law in Lanyard County except us."

"Where's Jim Dancer?"

"He got fired. Yeah, by the judge, before he died himself."

"I've got a score to settle with him," snarled Yancey, "and I don't mean for what he did to me today."

"Go ahead and settle it."

Yancey's face twisted in a frown. "You say we're the law in Lanyard?"

"That's right."

"Then why don't we all go and get Dancer? Make it legal."

Tancred looked sharply at Yancey a moment, then began to chuckle. "Legal, eh? Yeah! Dancer didn't like the way I worked the last time I was a marshal. Well, let's give him a sample of the way we're going to run things from now on."

THE nine men poured out of the jail and started up the street. But before they had gone very far they turned in at a hardware store and requisitioned a round of revolvers and ammunition.

"Charge them to the city," Tancred said to the cowed hardware store man.

As they came out of the store they were met by a frightened Bert Slocum.

"Johnny," cried Slocum. "You—you killed the judge and Vedder?"

"Sure," Johnny replied easily. "They drew on us. It was self-defense."

"There'll be trouble over that, Johnny," said Slocum, shaking his head in fore-

boding.

"Nothing we can't handle. Don't worry about a thing, Bert. We got plenty of law here." He winked. "I deputized the boys. We're on our way to arrest Dancer. Legal-like, too. Which reminds me, round up Judge Leach so we can give Dancer a quick trial—like he give the boys this morning."

Tancred winked again at Slocum and led his procession of deputies up the street.

As they neared the Eldorado, Tancred caught sight of Dave Oldham standing in the doorway. His eyes lit up in unholy glee.

"Well, well," he cried. "If it ain't the ex-marshal's volunteer assistant."

"Leave me alone, Tancred," said Oldham tautly.

"Why, I wouldn't think of bothering you, Mr. Oldham," Johnny Tancred said smoothly. "But I thought since you like to help marshals so much you might want to come along . . . while I arrest your friend, Dancer . . ."

"You're going to arrest Dancer?"

"He's an outlaw, isn't he? This is a law-abiding town and we don't tolerate outlaws."

"What about this rabble that's with you?" Oldham asked savagely.

"They're my deputies."

Florence Peel came through the door. "Deputies," she said scathingly, "that scum isn't fit to clean Jim Dancer's boots."

"Just for that, lady," snarled Tancred, "you can have a ringside seat at Dancer's hanging."

"The likes of you will never see Jim Dancer hang . . ."

"Oh, no? Where do you think we're going now?"

Oldham stepped out upon the sidewalk to block Tancred and his cutthroats. "They mean it, Florence. Go and warn Jim."

Startled, Florence Peel looked at Dave Oldham. What she saw in his eyes caused her to inhale sharply. She stepped out upon the sidewalk, started to run past Oldham, toward the Drovers' Hotel a hundred feet away.

Tancred cried out: "Here, you . . .!"

He reached for his guns. Oldham was already reaching for his own, but Oldham was an amateur gunfighter, Tancred a professional. Tancred's bullet slammed back Oldham, drove him to his knees. From that position Oldham fired at Tan-

cred, putting his bullet through Tancred's left forearm. And then Tancred's second bullet caught Oldham between the eyes.

"The girl!" shouted one of the ruffians. "She's going to warn Dancer!"

Yancey was already in pursuit of Florence Peel, but she was outstripping him. He stopped suddenly, whipped out his gun and fired. Florence broke in her stride and plunged to the sidewalk. The Tancred men, their leader among them, pounded up.

Tancred, blood dripping from his wounded arm, did not even spare a glance at the girl on the sidewalk as he ran past.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE group tore into the hotel, grabbed the young clerk who was in the lobby. With a gun in the boy's stomach, Tancred demanded the number of Dancer's room.

"N-number five," bleated the clerk.

Tancred shoved him aside and bounded for the stairs.

On the second floor, Tancred wasted no amenities. He kicked in the door of Number 5 and caught Dancer on the bed, just sitting up. His gun was in his belt which hung from a nail on the wall.

"You're under arrest, Dancer!" Tancred cried.

"And you're going to hang, damn you!" howled Yancey.

"So you let them loose," Dancer said soberly. "I guess that was the shooting I've been hearing."

"The judge, yeah," sneered Tancred. "And your friend, Oldham."

"Oldham's dead?"

"I never saw a deader man in my life. And that gambling woman friend of his."

"Florence Peel?"

"Yancey got her. She tried to run ahead and warn you we were coming."

Dancer looked steadily at Yancey. "I guess that more than evens things between us."

Yancey shrank back from what he saw in Dancer's eyes. "I been after you a long time, Jim Dancer!"

"And now you've caught up with me?"

Yancey reached forward and struck Dancer in the face with the muzzle of his gun. The blow laid open a two-inch gash

(Continued on page 188)



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on Dancer's cheek. Blood trickled down onto his shirt.

Dancer said: "I expected that from you, Yancey."

Dancer's calmness enraged Yancey. "You're tough, Dancer, but you'll be down on your knees begging before this day is over."

"Let's get going," Tancred said impatiently. He shoved Dancer toward the door. Hands gripped him roughly and propelled him down the stairs and through the hotel lobby.

Out in front of the hotel, Tancred stopped his crew. "Where the hell's that judge?"

He looked up and down the street which was virtually deserted, except for four horsemen who were standing a few feet down the street.

Tancred swore roundly. "Yancey, take a couple of men and find the judge. Bring him here even if you have to drag him by the heels."

Yancey started to protest, but Tancred roared savagely at him: "I'm running this show."

Yancey touched a couple of his friends and the three trotted off up the street. Downstreet, two of the horsemen dismounted and giving the bridle reins of their mounts to the others, walked over to Tancred's crowd.

Tancred scowled at them. "What do you birds want?"

"Not a thing," said one of the men. "We're strangers here and we thought—"

"Go and mind your own business," Tancred snarled. "It'll be healthier for you."

The two men held their ground. "We were only trying to pass the time of the day."

"You've passed it."

"All right, but you don't have to be so tough about it. We thought some of settling in this town, but if people are like this . . ."

"Look, stranger," Tancred said sourly, "we're law officers and we're about to hang an outlaw. We haven't got time to make a reception committee for strangers."

"Well," said the bigger of the two men, "a hanging, eh? I've always wanted to see one. When does it come off?"

"As soon as the judge tries him. We do things legal in this town."

"Good! Good!" said the big man. "There's nothing like a legal hanging."

A MUFFLED shot sounded in a saloon up the street and a moment later the door burst open and Judge Chandler Leach came running out as fast as his short legs could carry him. Behind him came Yancey, the former guerrilla, and his two mates. And behind them Bert Slocum.

Leach outstripped the others in his approach to Tancred's crowd.

"Marshal," he cried, "I can't do it. I haven't got authority to try a man on a hanging matter."

"You had plenty of authority before that Kansas City judge came here," sneered Tancred.

"Yes, but that was before we knew that a county had been formed."

"Well, it's been unformed," snapped Tancred. "And if you need any authority to try this man, here it is." He drew his gun and pointed it at Leach's stomach.

Slocum came up. "Johnny," he pleaded, "you've gone too far. You can't get away with this."

"But, Mr. Slocum," Tancred mocked, "I'm just a hireling—don't you remember? You hired me."

Slocum walked stiffly away from the group, crossing the street to the bank, which he entered. Johnny Tancred glowered after him a moment, then gave his full attention to Leach.

"All right, Judge, do you think you've got the authority now?"

Leach gulped. "Y-yes."

"The prisoner," said Johnny Tancred, "is a notorious outlaw and murderer, one Jim Dancer. That's him over there, the sick-looking bird with the blood on his face."

Judge Leach seemed to be trying to swallow his Adam's apple. Tancred poked the muzzle of his gun into the judge's ribs—not gently. "Can't you talk, Judge?"

"Uh—yes—uh—what is the evidence against this—this man?"

"Evidence, Judge? Why, I just told you he was a murderer; isn't my word good enough in this court?"

Yancey piped up. "I can give some evidence. I saw him kill a man once."

"There," said Tancred. "What more evidence do you want? Even Judge Currier took the word of only one man this morning."

The judge grasped at the straw. "That's right. I—I find the prisoner guilty as charged."

"That's fine, Judge, just fine. Now the sentence."

"Twenty-five dol" began the judge, then caught himself and shot a frightened glance at Tancred. The marshal's cold eyes caused him to drop his own.

"Death," the judge croaked. "Death by hanging . . ."

"Thank you, Judge," Tancred mocked. "You've done a good job—and there are plenty of witnesses here who heard you sentence the prisoner. Just in case there's any question about it later . . ."

"No, no," sobbed the judge.

"What's that?"

Leach tried to turn away but Tancred caught him roughly by the shoulder and turned him back. "I think you'd better put the sentence in writing. Andy—run into the hotel and get the judge some paper and a pen."

ONE of the deputies ran into the hotel. He returned in a moment with the required articles which were handed to the judge and the little man scrawled a few words on a sheet of paper.

"And now," Johnny Tancred announced, "we're going to have that little hanging party that the town's been looking forward to." He chuckled wickedly at Yancey. "You lucky dog; it couldda been you just as well."

"Don't joke about a think like that!" cried Yancey.

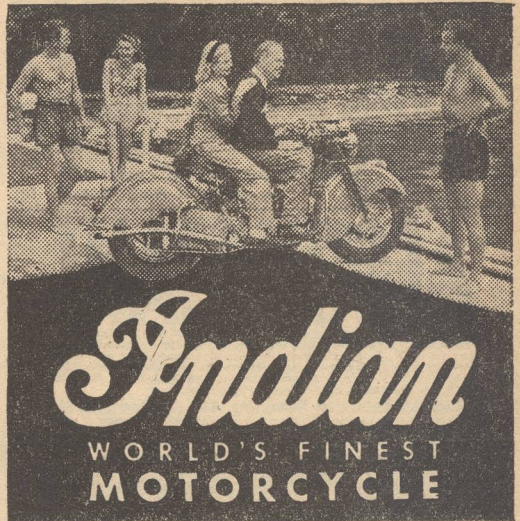
"I'm not joking; you had a close shave. And just to make you appreciate your good luck I'll let you tie the knot and slap the horse out from under him. How's that?"

"That's something I've been looking forward to!"

"All right, what do you say to that nice cedar at the end of the street? There's a branch just about eight foot off the ground that's just made for a nice hanging."

The crowd started up the street, herding Dancer along in front. From doors and windows townspeople watched the procession, but no one interfered. The law of Lanyard was gone; the town was in a worse condition than when Jim Dancer had first entered it. And now—now Dancer, the man who had made law in Lanyard, was leaving. . . .

But the hanging party was going to

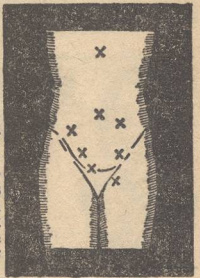


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have some spectators after all: the four strangers who were mounted on beautiful horses, followed the procession at a distance of about a hundred feet.

One of the marshals picked up a horse along the way and after awhile the hanging party came to the end of the street where a fine cedar tree stood alone at the side of the road. Ahead, less than an eighth of a mile, was the imposing residence of Bert Slocum, the deposed ruler of Lanyard.

And now that they had the tree and the horse, the would-be executioners discovered that they lacked the essential item, a rope. No one had thought to bring one along.

That was where the four strangers came in. They rode forward and one of them, a lean, sun-tanned young man of twenty-four or twenty-five, took a coil of rope from his saddle pommel.

"Here's the article you want, friends," he said, smiling crookedly.

TANCRED stepped forward to take the rope and looked sharply into the lean man's face. "Didn't I tell you awhile ago to mind your own business?"

"Seems to me you did say something like that, mister," retorted the lean young man. "But hangings don't come along every day, you know, and we hate to miss a good one." He suddenly smiled. "Besides, you're going to use my rope. That ought to be good enough for an admission ticket."

Tancred took the coil of rope and scowled. "You can stay, but keep clear, understand?"

"You bet!"

Tancred turned and tossed the rope to Yancey. "You said you wanted the pleasure of tying the knot."

But Yancey was suddenly standing as if petrified. His mouth was agape, his eyes threatened to pop from his face. He was staring at the lean young man who had given Tancred the rope.

"What's the matter with you, Yancey?" cried Tancred.

He whirled suddenly and looked at the lean man. The latter was smiling lazily and Tancred, puzzled, turned back to Yancey. He gripped the ex-guerrilla's shoulder and shook him.

"Snap out of it. You look like you'd suddenly seen a ghost."

The lean man on the horse said: "Takes nerve to hang a man. Maybe your friend's a little chicken-hearted."

"I told you to keep out of this," exclaimed Tancred. He grabbed the rope from Yancey's hands, shook out a length of it and began to tie a knot. By the time he had finished, Yancey had recovered somewhat, although his Adam's apple was moving furiously up and down.

Tancred gave him a disgusted look and walking past him, threw the clear end of the rope over the low limb. One of the "marshals" caught it and twining it about the tree trunk, knotted it securely. Tancred stepped up to Jim Dancer with the noose in his hands.

"Well, sheriff," he said, "you had a short run."

"Yours may be even shorter, Tancred," Dancer said evenly.

"Not as short as you think. I don't mind telling you that my plans don't call for me to hang around this territory." He grinned crookedly. "Old Slocum's going to get the surprise of his life when we run out on this and let him hold the bag—an empty bag. He's got a hundred and fifty thousand dollars in that bank of his that we're going to relieve him of."

The lean stranger suddenly rode his horse forward. "What's that, Mister? You're figuring to hold up the Lanyard bank?"

Tancred turned savagely to the mounted man. "I warned you to keep out of this . . ."

The lean man's horse was oddly restless; it moved so that it was sideways to Jim Dancer and between him and Tancred.

The man on the horse said: "Hanging's one thing, Mister; that may be your job. But mine's holding up banks . . ."

"Look out, Tancred!" suddenly screamed Yancey. "He's Jesse James!"


And at that moment Jim Dancer reached up and grabbed the butt of the revolver that was so conveniently within his reach in the lean man's holster.

THE man on the horse didn't seem to mind; his own right hand had gone under his coat—and came out with a twin to the gun that Dancer had appropriated.

Dancer fired the first shot; he dropped to his knees and, firing under the horse's belly, caught Johnny Tancred with his

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gun only half drawn.

The bullet knocked Tancred backwards into Yancey, the former guerrilla, and spoiled his own aim. Jesse James' bullet caught Yancey in the stomach.

Yancey fell to his knees and took a second bullet in the back of his head; it was fired by the big stranger on horseback who had spurred forward.

"I told you to stay away from this town," cried the big man, who was Cole Younger.

That was all the shooting there was. There were nine more men in Tancred's group; one or two had gone for their guns, but the swift deaths of their two leaders paralyzed their hands . . . or perhaps it was the sudden knowledge of the identity of the four strangers . . . who were aligned with Jim Dancer.

Guns began dropping to the ground, to the great disgust of the young bandit leader. "Why, damn you for a bunch of chicken-hearted cowards," he raged. "You've got us outnumbered. Why don't you fight?"

"I ain't fightin' Jesse James," whined one of the craven crew.

"Then, if you ain't fighting," cried Cole Younger, "start running!" He fired at the foot of the man who had spoken, his bullet clipping off a bit of the leather toe.

The man started running blindly—as did his friends. The outlaws fired a few shots after them.

Jim Dancer went around to the four horsemen and shook hands with each of them. He gripped the hand of Cole Younger, the longest.

"Sorry I had to break my promise to you, Jim," said the big outlaw. "I wouldn't have done it only we thought it would help you out." He smiled. "We got word in a roundabout sort of a way that you were having a lot of trouble here because of a man who owned the town and had too much money."

"Bert Slocum!"

"That's the man. Well, we were tipped off that this man wouldn't be so much trouble around here if he lost about a hundred and fifty thousand dollars that he kept in the local bank."

"What do you mean, you were tipped off?"

"He's telling you the truth, Jim,"

laughed Jesse James. "A big railroad man named Lanyard tipped us off." He made a clucking sound with his mouth. "He's got a good railroad too. May have to hold it up sometime."

Dancer, looking past the outlaws, toward the town of Lanyard, saw two riders come slowly toward them. At a distance of more than a hundred yards he recognized Bert Slocum and his niece, Evelyn.

Jesse James said: "Of course you're riding with us, Jim."

Dancer shook his head. "A man's got to play out the hand he's dealt . . . and mine is here."

"Jesse!" exclaimed a tall, mustachioed man. "We'd better go." He gestured toward the approaching riders.

Jesse nodded. "Right, Frank!" He looked down at Dancer. "Been good seeing you again." He grimaced wryly. "And maybe this makes up for the time you saved my life at Baxter Springs."

He gave Dancer a half salute and dug his spurs into his horse's flank. The animal sprang away, headed for the open prairie. The other outlaws followed Jesse James at a full gallop.

JIM DANCER looked at the gun he had borrowed from the outlaw chieftain and forgotten to return, and thrust it into the waistband of his trousers. Then he mounted the horse that had almost served as an execution block for him, and rode toward the town.

After a moment he had to pull up for the horses of the Slocums had stopped and were blocking the road.

"So you won after all, Dancer," said Slocum in a strangely dead tone.

Dancer made no reply and Slocum drew a slow breath. "I give you the town of Lanyard, Dancer. Carter Bullock ran off with all my money."

Dancer stared at him and the broken ruler of Lanyard rode past him. But the road was still blocked for Dancer, for Evelyn Slocum remained.

Dancer finally looked into her face and saw that it was heavy and dull.

"She loved you, didn't she, Jim?" Evelyn said slowly.

Dancer gave a start: "Florence Peel?" "Who else? She died trying to help you and I—I tried to kill you."

Her impassive face suddenly broke and

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she buried her face in her hands. A sob shook her body and Jim Dancer, sitting his horse awkwardly, a half dozen feet away, felt as old as the plains of Kansas.

Then, finally, Evelyn Slocum stopped sobbing and lowered her hands from a tear-stained face. "A person can live only so long with hatred," she said.

"Or with death," said Jim Dancer. "If it helps any . . . I never forgot. Not for one minute of these nine years."

"You were only a boy," Evelyn said "What did you know about it all? I—I thought of that and fought it and today . . . today, I learned that there are things stronger than hate."

Dancer stared at her.

"I'm going away," Evelyn went on. "Maybe I can forget all this after awhile and then perhaps I can live a normal life and see people . . . as they really are."

She picked up her bridle reins. "Maybe I'll even come back to Lanyard." She looked squarely into Dancer's eyes "Will you be here?"

Dancer said hoarsely: "I'll be here."

She rode past him then, and after a moment Dancer rode into the town.

THE END

WESTERN ODDITIES

Indian Canals

By MILDRED MURDOCH

MANY years before the white man came to this country there lived in the southwestern deserts a people who were far advanced from the savagery and barbarism commonly associated with the North American Indians.

The most amazing thing about these desert people is the wonderful irrigating canals they built in order to raise food for themselves. An incredible amount of work and time was involved to produce the results which have been discovered.

Their excavating tools were sticks of various shapes and sizes made from ironwood, and hoes made of stone. The earth was loosened with these tools, and then carried away in baskets.

Sometimes solid bedrock had to be dug out in order to get the proper grade. This was accomplished by building fires on the rock, then pouring water on to crack it.

The largest canals measured twenty-five to fifty feet across. Along the lower Salt River alone, these old-time desert farmers built irrigation ditches totalling two hundred and forty miles in length.