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SECOND FEBRUARY NUMBER

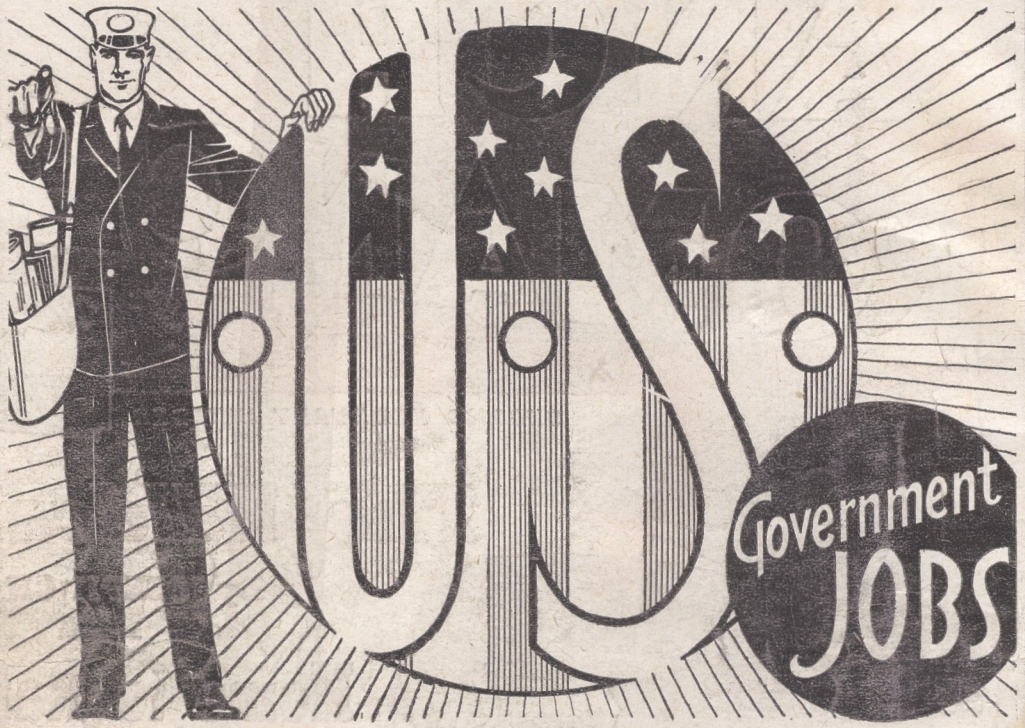
The Wildcatter

By JOSEPH CHADWICK

Home to Rafter C

By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

WESTERN MOVIE NEWS



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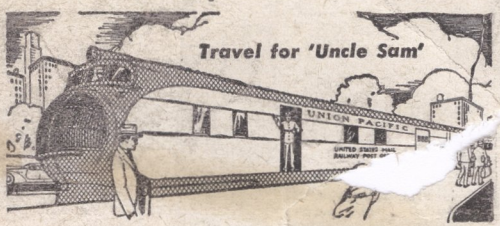

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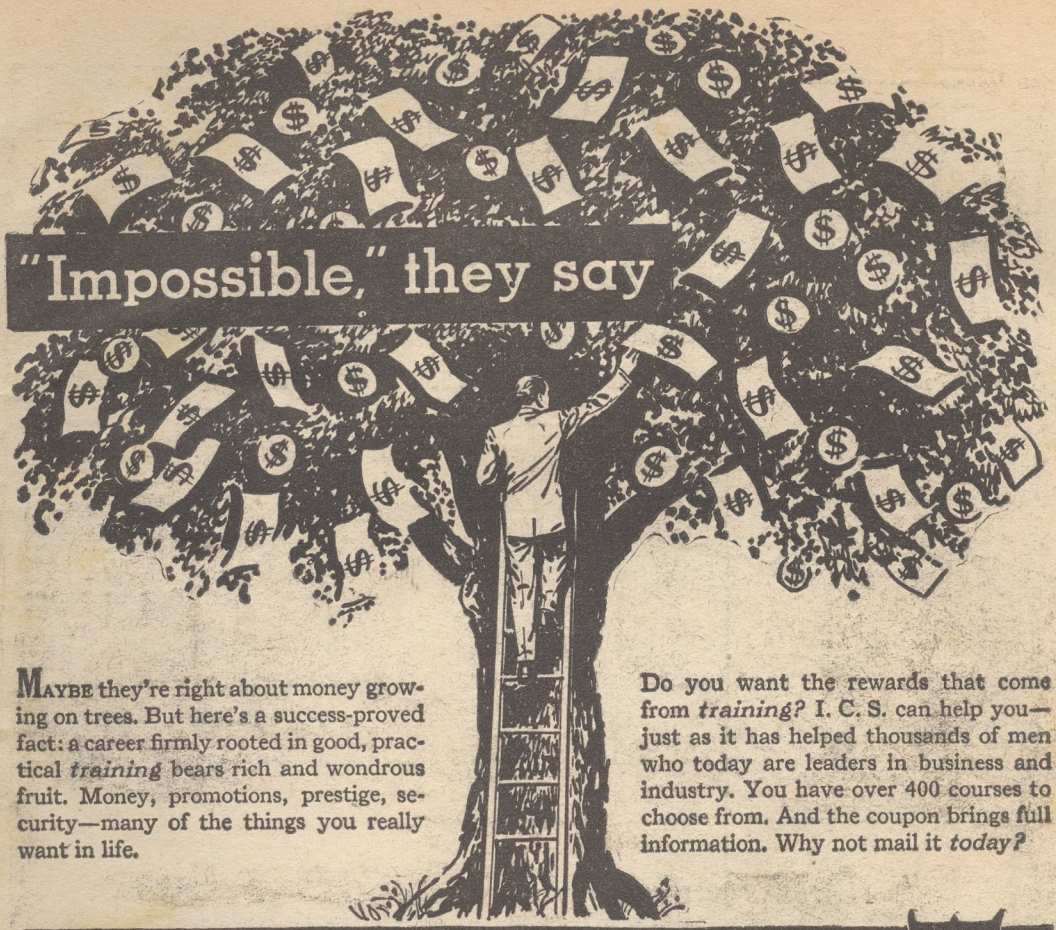

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SECOND FEBRUARY NUMBER

February 16, 1951
Volume 163, Number 3

RANCH ROMANCES

CONTENTS

ON SALE EVERY OTHER FRIDAY

FANNY ELLSWORTH
Editor

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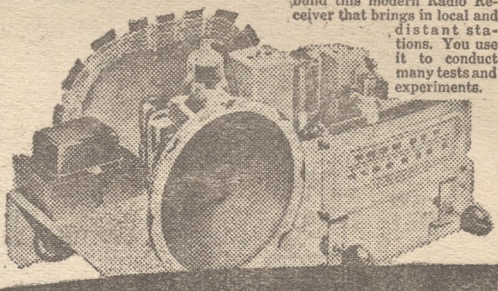

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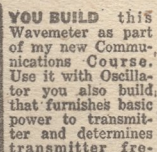

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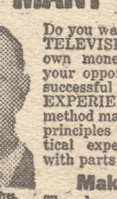

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Promise to Answer

Dear Editor:

Please do me a favor and enter my letter for OUR AIR MAIL. I would like very much to hear from any one, anywhere, as long as they are under 29 years of age. I am a girl of 16 years of age. I have been married. I have brown hair and eyes. I weigh about 126 lbs, and stand 5'5½" tall. I promise to answer all letters and will also exchange snapshots.

DOROTHY AVILLA
Route #1, Box 370-A
c/o J. M. Stinnett
Healdsburg, Calif.

Collects Star Pictures

Dear Editor:

This is my second attempt to get into your column and I hope it works. I am 13 years of age, stand 5'4" tall and weigh 125 lbs. I live on a farm 18 miles from town. Please, guys and gals, take pity and fill up my mail box. I have blond hair and blue eyes. I collect movie star pictures.

YVONNE HIGHLINE
Decora Route
Las Animas, Colo.

Plays Accordion

Dear Editor:

I am 15 years old, 5'6" tall and weigh 135 lbs. I have blond hair and blue eyes. My hobbies are playing the accordion, guitar and harmonica. I would like to hear from all boys from the ages of 15 to 20. I will answer all who write to me.

SIGRID OLSON
Route 1
Hatford City, N. D.

Teen-Ager

Dear Editor:

This is my first try to get into OUR AIR MAIL, so I'm hoping you will print my letter. I am 14 years old, have brown hair and brown eyes. I like to write letters, swim, and all sports. I will answer all letters sent to me.

PATSY BROWN
1255 South Steele Rd.
Route #2
Merrill, Mich.

Collects Poems

Dear Editor:

I love to get lots of letters, but have no one to write to. I am a girl, 16 years old with dark brown hair and dark blue eyes. I weigh 112 lbs. and am 5'5" tall. I like real hillbilly music. My hobbies are sewing, and I enjoy flower gardens.

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 26 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

I collect poems and songs. I will exchange songs and poems with anyone. I promise to answer all.

JANIE THORNTON
Route #1
Crockett, Texas

Ex-Country Girl

Dear Editor:

I am a lonely ex-country girl who hasn't found much to do in a town. I am 18 years old, stand 5'4" and am pleasingly plump in figure. I love to ride horses, dance, fish and hunt. So, everyone, please sling some ink my way.

LAVONNE MUNSINGER
General Delivery
Lusk, Wyo.

Interesting Magazine

Dear Editor:

I find RANCH ROMANCES magazine very interesting. I look forward to getting it every month. I am a lonely girl of 17. I have brown hair and hazel eyes. I weigh 110 lbs, and am in the 10th grade in school. I would love to hear from boys and girls about my age. Please write.

BETTY J. CLABOUGH
Route #2
Farmville, Va.

Third Attempt

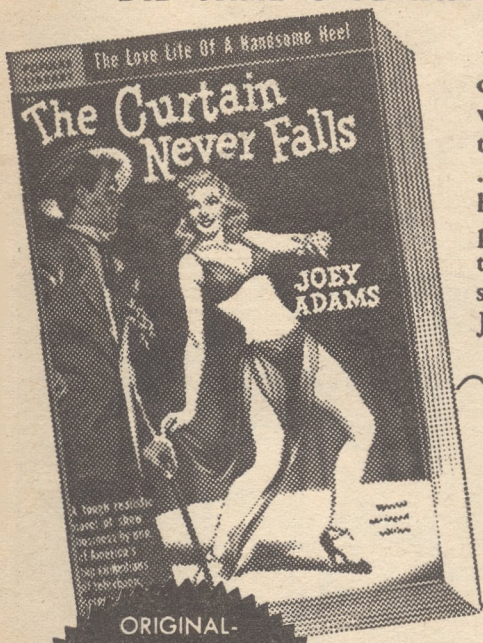
Dear Editor:

This is my third try at OUR AIR MAIL department. I hope I make it this time. I am 16 years of age and 5'4" tall. I have blonde hair and hazel eyes. So come on, boys and girls, drop me a line. My mother died last June, and I am pretty much alone and very lonesome.

JANIE STIMETT
Route 1,
Dardonelle, Ark.

HE RUINED A WOMAN'S LIFE!

DID FAME GIVE HIM THE RIGHT TO DO THIS?



We all know characters like Jackie, the comedian . . . ruthless, ambitious, not caring whom he steps on – just so he comes out on top. Love to Jackie was just lust and passion . . . and he never even waited long enough to hear the broken hearts crack. No punches are pulled in this fast-paced story about Jackie, the man who's on-stage all the time – and up-stage at that! Don't miss finding out why, for Jackie, the curtain never falls!

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They called her a tramp, but Helen was life itself to Johnny. Was she worth it?

LAURA
by Vera Caspary
The same mystery that made the thrilling movie! What drew men to Laura? And who wanted to kill her?

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by Millard Lampell
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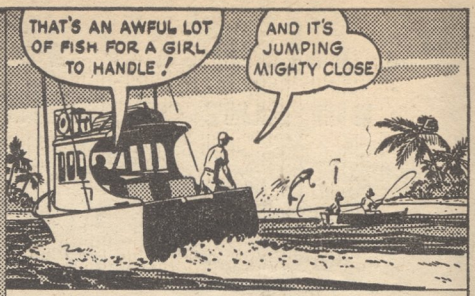
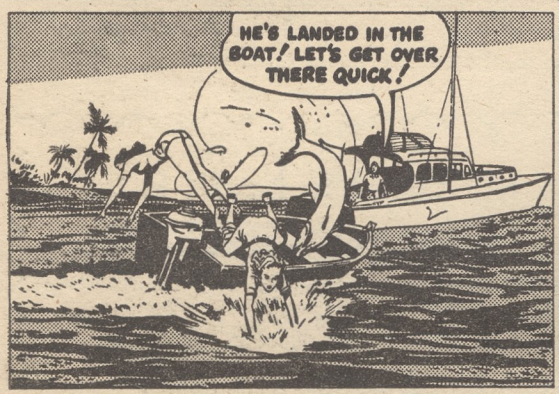


JERRY CANNON AND HIS BROTHER KIP ARE RETURNING TO PORT FROM A LONG DAY OF TROLLING FOR SAILFISH IN THE GULF STREAM. WHEN . . .



TRAIL DUST

THIS DEPARTMENT will endeavor to cut sign on some of the colorful happenings of today's West and haze the stuff along to you—twentieth century trail dust, stirred up by folks in the cow country.

IN CRAIG, COLORADO, when Aubrey Springer goes hunting he doesn't fool about it. One Sunday morning during the hunting season he shot and killed a 600-pound bear, a 700-pound elk, and a seven-point buck deer all within half an hour. Since that was his bag limit for the season, he was through hunting in a hurry. The noise heard in that section wasn't the wind blowing—it was the big game breathing a sigh of relief.

WHEN A COYOTE gets hungry out in Fort Worth, Texas, he is even likely to steal a schoolboy's lunch. At least that is what happened to a 12-year-old boy. Charley Harrell was carrying his lunch in a sack when a coyote grabbed it right out of his hand. The boy chased after the coyote. It leaped at him, but Charley knocked it down. A man came to the boy's rescue and drove the animal off, and in doing so he was bitten on the hand. A second man went hunting for the coyote and killed it with a pistol. The coyote never did get a chance to enjoy the lunch.

WHEN BOYS GET together they will trade anything, as a mother in Durango, Colo., discovered. Her son rode a burro to town and traded the burro for a friend's bicycle. The bicycle was returned but not the burro. We think it's hiding because it's mortified by being swapped for a more modern means of transportation.

EVERYONE KNOWS about the wolf at the door, but a fox in the basement is something different. Anyway that's what happened to an attorney who also happened to live in Durango, Col. The fox was too worn out to do any harm; he just remained at the foot of the cellar stairs. The attorney phoned everybody he thought might be interested in the fox, including the Fish and Game Department and a fox farm, but didn't stir up any interest. Eventually a friend of the attorney put the fox in a box, took him outside of town and let him go.

No one found the fox afterward to interview it on what it thought of city living.

EVERYTHING happens in Colorado. In Rocky Ford a 10-year-old boy has become expert in flat tire patching and fixes the bicycle tires of his friends. But he has discovered there is no profit in it, since he doesn't get paid.

"I'd be out of business in a week if I started charging them," he says. He is growing more and more convinced that patched tires do not repair his pocketbook.

RANCH FLICKER TALK

BRANDED

PISTOL-PACKING Alan Ladd's new Western for Paramount has the high-powered punch of a .45

ALAN LADD'S trigger finger isn't so much itchy as it is sticky. No matter how hard he tries, he just can't seem to drop the gun. Of course, he likes each of the tough, fighting parts he plays, but he wishes there weren't quite so many of them, or at least that there were a little comic relief in between.

His fans, though, are a stubborn lot. Ever since he literally shot up to stardom in *This Gun for Hire,* Alan's gun has definitely not been for hire—*not* unless Alan goes with it. His throng of admirers have insisted that the combination of Alan Ladd and lethal weapons is irresistible.

"The critics say I'm always deadpan," complains Alan. "How else can you look behind a revolver? Shy, maybe, or wistful, or comic or pitiful?" As he talks Alan holds an imaginary gun and goes through all the facial expressions he describes. You have to admit he's right—only a phlegmatic look is appropriate with a gun, but on him it looks good.

In his new movie, *Branded,* Alan's never far from his sixguns, but he likes Westerns because they're at least a change of pace from the city-bred triggerman he's played most often.

In *Branded* Alan is Choya, an outlaw who poses as the son of a wealthy Texas cattleman named Lavery, planning to kill the rancher in order to inherit his lands and fortune. Charles Bickford plays Lavery, Selena Royle his wife and Mona Freeman their pretty, bright-eyed daughter Ruth.

Choya has had a birthmark tattooed on his shoulder, and he knows the story of the lost son from the man who kidnaped him. And so the Laverys come to accept him and to treat him with more love and kindness than he's ever known in his life.

Choya realizes that he can't go through with the plot, and that the only thing he can do to make up to the Laverys for their kindness is find their real son for them.

Choya and Ruth Lavery—Alan Ladd and Mona Freeman to you!

A tense moment from "Branded"

From the kidnaper he finds out where the son is in an exciting scene in which Choya plays Russian roulette in reverse. With his pistol pressed to the man's temple he asks where the son is now. Three times he gets no answer and three times he pulls the trigger and the hammer falls on an empty chamber. The fourth time Choya asks, the kidnaper breaks down. The Laverys' son has been raised by Rubriz, a Mexican bandit leader, who now hides out in the mountains living on his loot.

We won't spoil the thrilling climax for you, but we'll tell you that it takes more than a gun for Choya to save them all.

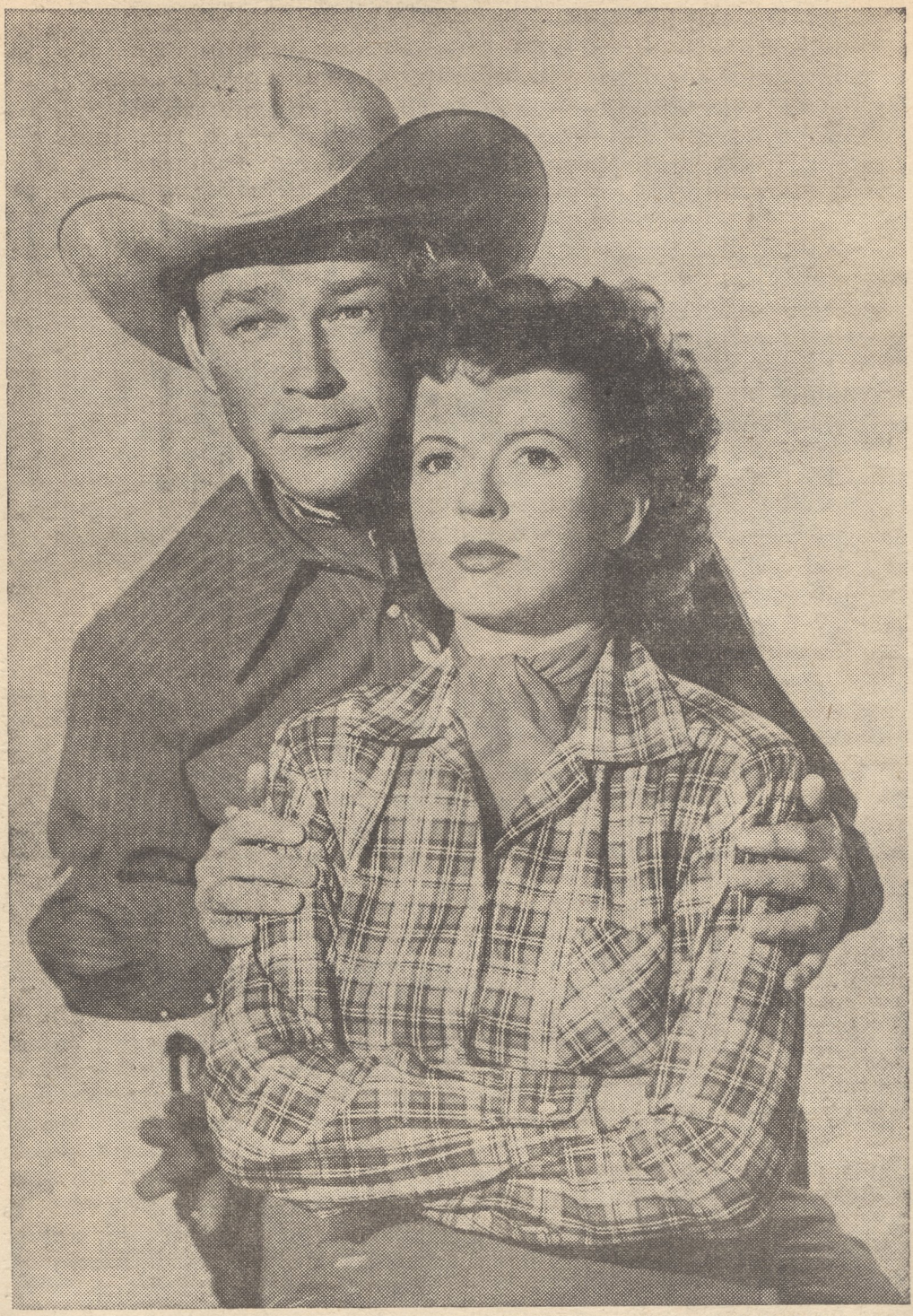
After seeing the rushes of *Branded,* Paramount announced that Alan will be making one Western a year from now on. Alan is pleased about it, but his two kids, Alana, aged seven, and David Alan, three, are thrilled. Dad took them along when the company went down to Globe, Ariz., to shoot the movie in Technicolor and the youngsters got the thrill of their lives when the San Carlos Indians made them honorary members of the tribe.

Alan was pretty serious about it. "It wasn't just one of those stunts where you put on a feathered bonnet and pose for your picture. The children and I were the first outsiders ever to be taken in. We're Apaches, you know, and we have a reservation of over a million and a half acres. It's all used for raising cattle, so you might say that Alana and David and I have a stake in the biggest cattle ranch in the world."

Being cattle-raisers the San Carlos Apaches naturally hold the cowboy in high regard, and so they gave their new members very important names. Alan is Chief Ma-Kashe-Na-Dized-D, otherwise Chief Cowboy. Put "Little" in place of Chief" and you have David's new monicker. For Alana, it's La-Ma-Kashe, etc., etc.—that's Cowgirl.

"The spelling is pure guesswork," says Alan. "In fact, my pronunciation is pretty much guesswork, too, but I do know our names are much easier to say if you sneeze."

BETH BRIGHT



Republic Pictures

Dale Evans and Roy Rogers—Western fans' favorite couple

Roy Rogers, Dale Evans and Little Robin Elizabeth

RANCH FLICKER TALK

THE BIG NEWS—the only news—around the Rogers household is several months old by now. Most news items that age would be pretty stale, but this one gets more interesting every day—at least to her proud parents. Her name is Robin Elizabeth, and the daily scoop is that she smiled, maybe, or a tooth's coming.

Roy has only one complaint to make about her. She should have been twins, so that young Dusty Rogers, who already has two sisters, Cheryl and Linda, could have a brother, too. In fact, Roy and Dale think they may adopt another baby, so they'll have two sons. "And besides," says Roy, "when you have five kids you're just starting to be a fair-sized family."

The only one who isn't rejoicing about the present state of affairs is Trigger. In fact, his nose was distinctly out of joint right after the baby was born, when Robin got so many gifts there was talk of moving Trigger out of his stall to make room for them. The crisis was averted, however, because Roy and Dale, knowing their little girl could never use all the presents fans sent, gave many of them away to less fortunate children.

As for Dale, she says she's happier now than ever before. She sometimes thinks about giving up her career and devoting herself entirely to the children.

"But I thought I wanted to quit when I married Roy," Dale laughs, "and I changed my mind. I probably will again."

Actually it was Dale's fans who changed her mind for her. They just rose up and hollered. Western fans don't go much for things they like being changed. They'd seen Dale with Roy in some twenty movies.

"I suppose I'm in Westerns for as long as Roy is," Dale sighs, and then she'll smile. "Of course, I love it really. Especially I love to meet the young fans. Once in a while a youngster will say to me, 'Gee, you're not like a movie star—you're not stuck up at all!' That's the biggest compliment I can get."

Once in her life Dale tried hard to look like a movie star and nearly kept herself out of films forever. It was her first screen test, and she arrived dressed the way she thought a movie actress should look.

"I had a slinky black satin gown, a huge floppy hat and some borrowed silver fox furs. Everybody looked at me in horror, except the casting director who laughed and said, 'You look just as my wife did when she first came to Hollywood.' "

She got a contract, but no parts, and to fill up the time she did some army camp shows and appeared on the radio with Jimmy Durante and Jack Carson.

"I sang some hillbilly songs, and I still had my Texas accent, so someone at Republic got the idea that I might do all right in Westerns." It was, of course, a fine idea from every point of view.

"The first thing I did," Dale remembers, "was to cancel my speech lessons. I wasn't getting anywhere trying to sound like a city girl anyway."

She'd long since got rid of the black satin number, but when she started making Westerns she threw away the rest of her wardrobe, too, and began to design and wear Western clothes entirely. The Rogers' home is all in a ranch motif.

Dale rides well enough to do all her own stunts in her pictures. "I'm glad because the kids wouldn't think it was fair for me to get the credit for something somebody else does."

That's Dale—fair and square, a real Western gal. Roy Rogers' permanent girl friend couldn't be any different.

ROWDY JIM KANE liked the boisterous life he bought with his hard-earned cash—until he met Tracy and learned the difference between price and value

THE WILDCATTER

by JOSEPH CHADWICK

THEY called him Rowdy Jim, and among oil field workers a nickname was not lightly bestowed upon any man. He'd come by his honestly enough, Rowdy Jim Kane had. Any driller, toolpusher or roughneck could relate the story of that brawl, in a Cherokee Strip oil town bar some years back, wherein he'd earned it.

He was an independent driller, one of those wildcatters who owned a drilling rig of sorts and who could make hole for shoestring operators and shady promoters able to pay the price. Not in stock, but in cold, hard cash. The terms lost a wildcat driller an occasional fortune, perhaps, but more often it kept him from holding the bag.

Despite the geologists, oil was where you found it.

A driller like Rowdy Jim seldom managed to get in on the opening of a new field. The big outfits saw to that, and, in fact, his sort seldom struck oil. If he was hired by a shoestring operator, bankruptcy usually kept the hole from going deep enough. If he was drilling for a shady promoter. . . . Well, there was quick money for such blacklegs in absconding with the money harvested from eager suckers in a stock swindle.

But Rowdy Jim sank the first test hole at Arroyo Blanco and brought in a gusher. He collected a five-thousand dollar profit when the well was spudded down, and his name was on every pair of lips in the big Espada field. For a night he was the biggest man in town, and it was his night to howl.

Espada, Arizona.

Until six months ago, when Globe-Pete's discovery well came in, Espada was a drowsy cowtown. The cowhands hardly knew it now. A lot of them were climbing derricks and digging sumps instead of riding broncs and chousing cows. Espada had mushroomed, boomed. Its business section was now five blocks long, and busy night and day. Hotels, restaurants, an opera house, stores and shops, rooming-houses, lunch-counters, saloons, gambling houses. A railroad was building in across the desert. There were people enough to keep every enterprise hustling, and beyond the swollen, swelling town was a forest of oil well derricks. It was a town to paint red, and Rowdy Jim Kane, with money in the pockets of his brand-new suit, wanted it a nice, bright shade.

He was doing the town high, wide and handsome. A crowd followed him, and he had a girl on each arm. One was a blonde, the other was a redhead. Rowdy Jim, his girls, and his fair-weather friends were drinking champagne. It wasn't really a man's drink, however, and if Rowdy Jim was drunk at all it was on his luck. By midnight, he was still celebrating and growing hungry at it. He led the way to the dining-room at the National House, which

catered ordinarily only to oil barons, and demanded steaks two-inches thick "for everybody." Despite the lateness of the hour, he got service. Rowdy Jim on a spree wasn't a man to take no for an answer. As he told the hotel manager, "Steaks, friend, or I'll tear this place down around your ears!"

Steaks he got, and more champagne. For forty-odd people, all as rowdy as himself.

Rowdy Jim and the blonde named Flo

and the redhead named Lou had a table to themselves. He was halfway through his two-inch steak when this girl came striding into the dining-room. She paused only long enough to have a disgruntled waiter point out the man she sought, then came striding to the table where Rowdy Jim sat with Flo and Lou.

She was wearing pants.

Now, oil field workers weren't accustomed to women who wore pants. They liked their women skirted and fancy. This girl wasn't fancy, and along with her pants she wore boots with spurs on them. She also wore a man's shirt, and a neckerchief about her neck. A broad-brimmed, flat-crowned hat hung at her shoulders by its chin-strap, and a quirt hung from her right wrist.

As she stopped by Jim's table, she caught the quirt in her hand and slapped it sharply against her thigh. She smelled of horses, not of perfume as did Flo and Lou. She looked at the two girls and sniffed. She looked at Rowdy Jim, and her eyes didn't like him.

She said, "Mr. Kane?"

HE NODDED assent with some reluctance, probing his memory in an attempt to recall if he'd ever given this girl reason to use a quirt on him now. He couldn't place her. He said, "You have the advantage of me."

"My name is Tracy Mason."

"Glad to know you, Miss—it is Miss?—Tracy."

Her eyes continued to dislike him. They were unusual eyes, Jim decided; they were grey, but not just grey—sort of silver colored. Her hair was jet-black, and she had a lot of it: It was tousled, and yet its very disorder became her. He was beginning to stare.

"I want to talk business with you, Kane," said Tracy Mason.

"Business?"

"About drilling a well for me."

Maybe it was the champagne. Maybe it was the girl herself who was giving Rowdy Jim that heady feeling. He said foolishly, "Look, Miss Mason; you've got me wrong. I drill oil wells, not water wells. If your cows are thirsty—"

She slapped her thigh with the quirt again, looking as though she wanted to slap him. Flo and Lou were becoming restless, and not hiding it. The others in the party were growing more noisy, more boisterous.

She said, "I'm talking about an oil well, Kane. I want to hire you to drill it."

"Sorry, honey—"

"Yes or no?"

"Now, don't try to pin me down," he said. "Maybe it's yes, maybe no. How can I say until I know you better?" He pulled a chair over from a nearby table. "Sit down, Tracy. Join the party. Have some fun. Maybe before the night is over I'll be saying 'yes' to you."

Flo and Lou looked daggers at the ranch girl.

She ignored them. "Yes or no, Kane?" she demanded—and slapping.

"You going to be unfriendly?"

"I'm trying to talk business."

Rowdy Jim shook his head regretfully. "I never talk business when I'm having a party," he told her. "Truth is, Miss Tracy Mason, I never take on a new drilling job while I'm in the money." He dug in his pocket, hauled out an untidy roll of bills. "See that? I've plenty of money, honey. And I won't work until I've gotten rid of it."

Tracy sniffed again. "The way you're carrying on, that stake won't last long," she said. "I've been told that you're a good driller, Kane. One of the best. I'd like to have you. . . ."

Her voice trailed away, for the blonde Flo was tugging at Jim's arm, trying to get him to take another sip of champagne. The redheaded Lou said out of the side of her mouth "Beat it, you. Can't you see you're not wanted?"

Tracy nodded coolly and said, "Sure, I'm going."

BUT she lingered a moment longer, a speculative look in her silver-grey eyes and a smile on her lips, gazing at Rowdy Jim. Then she said, "Sure, sure," as though she had made up her mind to something. "Sorry I bothered you, Mr. Kane," she added, with not much sincerity. She turned away.

Rowdy Jim said, "Wait—"

He started to rise, but Flo caught one of his arms and Lou the other. They kept him prisoner. Tracy Mason strode across the room, but not unnoticed. A burly roughneck named Hogan, a Globe-Pete man, grabbed at her as she passed his table. Hogan was grinning, and he said loudly, "Sweetheart, I don't like your clothes but I sure like what's in them. Now you and me could—"

The quirt slashed Hogan across the face.

He let out a yelp of pain, but he didn't let loose of the girl.

Rowdy Jim broke free and rushed at Hogan.

SUCH a party had to end sooner or later in a brawl. That was inevitable. Hogan was a fighter, and most of the crowd were, like him, Globe-Pete men. One man yelled a warning at Hogan, another thrust out a foot and tripped Rowdy Jim. Somebody flung an oath and a bottle at the tripper. Rowdy Jim didn't fall, but he staggered. And Hogan, jumping up, caught him under the chin with a hard knee. Rowdy Jim went down, his vision blurred. He wrapped his arms around Hogan's legs, however, and spilled him over backwards.

A table and a chair and the girl, Tracy Mason, went toppling over with Hogan. The girl sat down hard, looking outraged. It was bedlam from that moment on, with men yelling and swearing and swinging hard fists. Rowdy Jim had a swirling glimpse of the riot as he picked himself up. He started toward the girl, but two men he hadn't noticed before were ahead of him. Like Tracy, they were dressed in range clothes. They had come with her but had waited in the dining-room doorway until now. One helped her rise, the other laid a six-shooter barrel roughly across Hogan's head.

A chair wielded like a club crashed down upon Rowdy Jim.

Pain exploded in him. His knees buckled, and he fell to the floor again. There was a burst of brilliant light which faded abruptly, and he saw nothing at all. The blackness into which he sank was extremely peaceful. . . .

Rowdy Jim came to in a rubbish-littered alleyway that ran beside the National House. He was alone, so far as he could tell in the darkness, and he had no idea how he had gotten there. No doubt the hotel management had dumped him on that spot. He sat up, groaned, held his head in his hands. His skull felt as if it had been split open. He probed gently, found an enormous bump but nothing worse. Memory returned. It had been a lively brawl, if short-lived for him. Jim wondered about the girl, and was surprised that he should be concerned about her.

She had gotten out of it unharmed, he

was sure. The two cowhands would have seen to that. They'd been armed, as cowhands always were, and the one at least hadn't been timid about using his gun.

Jim picked himself up, stood swaying. A wave of sickness swept through him, and went away. His head continued to throb. He started walking on wobbly legs. Gaining the street, he found it no different from any night after midnight. The brawl in the hotel dining-room had created no sensation, and the people who had participated in it had gone their way. None of the people on the street wasted so much as a glance on Rowdy Jim.

He angled across the street to the watering trough in front of the feed store, and ducked his head. The shock of the cold water cleared the cobwebby feeling from his mind, eased the pain in his head momentarily. He squeezed the water from his hair, went to the store doorway and sat on the step.

He thought of his money then, and gave a start. Even before feeling in his pockets, he knew that he had been robbed. Rowdy Jim swore under his breath, and the next moment chuckled. It had been quite a party, although it hadn't been worth five thousand dollars. Still, he wouldn't shed any tears over the money. It wasn't the first time he'd been cleaned out in a hurry.

He found a cigar in his pocket, and it was only slightly damaged. He lighted it, and went through his pockets again. A couple dollars in change. He had that much out of his five-thousand dollars. And he'd paid a week in advance for room and board at Mrs. Gregory's. Jim stood up, steadier now, and headed for the rooming-house.

JIM AWOKE in the morning without feeling at all rowdy. He had a dull headache that two cups of black coffee at breakfast failed to help. He also had a memory of a girl with silver-grey eyes that he couldn't get rid of.

He was back in work clothes, and he had to think of landing another drilling contract. That made him think of the girl again. He recalled her name after a time: Tracy Mason.

He'd never made hole for a girl, and it seemed like an opportunity that wouldn't come again in a lifetime. He wondered where he could find her. He left the house to look for her, and he was lucky enough to come upon a rancher dismounting before Naylor & Dunn's general store.

"Tracy Mason?" the rancher said, in reply to Jim's question. "Sure, I know Tracy. She has M7 Ranch. Her pa was Sam Mason, a Texas man. Knew Sam well. No better cowman anywhere. Died about a year ago. Sam came to Arizona back in—"

"The girl," Jim broke in. "Where can I find her?"

"Well, her M7 spread is north of the Hatchet Hills."

"Thanks," Jim said and drifted before the rancher could get long-winded again.

He went to McDade's Corral at the east end of town, and told the liveryman, "I want a rig. Got to drive to M7 Ranch. You know how to get there?"

McDade told him to follow the north road for about five miles to where it forked. The east branch road would take Jim to M7 Ranch. McDade yelled for his hostler, and shortly Jim was driving a horse and buggy away from Espada. The road cut across flat country for some miles, then wound through the Hatchets which were low sage hills sprouting an occasional clump of piñons. Beyond was cattle range, and not an oil derrick in sight. It was peaceful looking country, and even Rowdy Jim Kane, who loved the shape of a derrick against the sky, reflected that it would be a shame if this range were ever blighted by a swarm of oil field workers.

He came to the fork finally and took the east branch. The road led through more hills and finally brought him to some log ranch buildings. Smoke curled lazily from the stone chimney of the ranchhouse. The girl, in men's clothing, appeared at the door. Jim wondered what she would be like properly dressed. She'd be a looker, he decided as he reined in his horse.

Tracy came to greet him, saying in her blunt way, "I didn't expect to see you so soon, Kane." Her lips weren't smiling, but her eyes seemed to be. And they were.

as he'd thought last night silver colored. "What happened? Did you squander all that money so soon?"

"I did some thinking about you," Jim said, stepping down from the buggy. "You were so worked up about having a well drilled that I figured I should give you a hand."

"Then you're not ready to work because you're broke?"

"Well, I wouldn't say I was broke," he said cheerfully.

Tracy's lips smiled now. "It was some party you threw last night," she told him. "A new experience for me."

"Just so you weren't hurt."

"Not even a scratch."

Jim eyed her warily, wondering what amused her. He was beginning to wish he hadn't rushed out here. She would think him too eager. He said, trying to show a lack of eagerness, "It depends on how soon you want me to start drilling. If you're in a hurry, maybe you'd better find somebody else. I can give you the names of a couple drillers. Maybe one will be looking for a job."

Tracy shook her head. "I asked around Espada," she said. "There is none available right now."

"Well, maybe we can do business."

"Maybe we can," said Tracy. "But I'm in a hurry."

"All right. Where's your lease, in the Espada field?"

"No lease."

"What?"

Tracy nodded. "I've got no lease," she told him. "I want a well drilled on M7 range. A discovery well." She didn't look at all amused now, but rather grim. "I want to strike oil here," she went on, her voice thick with emotion. "I want to bring in a gusher. In plain words, Kane, I want you to make me rich—outrageously rich!"

SOMETIMES Rowdy Jim Kane thought that everybody in the world, except himself, wanted to be rich. But he was shocked by Tracy Mason's admitting that she was like everybody else—and being so earnest about it. Jim looked around the ranchyard. Solid though not attractive buildings. A corral containing horses. A clearwater stream around back, shaded by cottonwood trees. He looked out across M7 range. Rimmed by low hills, it extended northward farther than the eye could reach. Whitefaced cattle grazed in scattered bunches. It was idyllic, or something. Too good to spoil, just to get rich, outrageously rich, on oil. He'd seen what oil had done to other ranches—and to other people. It hadn't been nice.

He looked back at the girl. "Why?" he asked. "Why spoil all this?"

"I've a reason. It needn't concern you."

"You've got everything here," said Jim, genuinely bewildered.

"Sure, the way it looks to you," Tracy replied. "But you're not a cowman. Besides, nobody can judge a range at a glance." She made an impatient gesture. "Let's talk oil, Kane."

Jim shrugged. "All right. What makes you think there is oil under your range? It's a long way from the Espada field.

In a way, he was hoping there wasn't oil here.

He wanted to save Tracy Mason from her own greed, for he was beginning to like her a lot. But he saw the calculating look in her eyes, and knew that she had reason to believe there was oil here. She was realistic, not a dreamer.

Tracy said, "I don't just think there's oil, I know it. I'll show you Kane." She left him abruptly, going to the corral where she roped and saddled a mount, a pinto pony, as expertly as any cowhand. Mounted, she called to him, "It's not far. You can drive there."

He got back into the buggy, and they headed east across the range. After perhaps a mile they left the bunch-grass flats behind and came to a hollow that was mostly sand and rocks. Jim had some trouble getting his rig through, for the boulders increased in size and number, and finally Tracy said, "You'll have to make it afoot from here."

He climbed out and walked beside the pinto, and shortly they came to a mesquite thicket and, beyond the brush, a grass-

fringed little stream. Tracy dismounted, and approaching the creek she picked up a long, slender pole that lay at the water's edge, and thrust it into the gravelly creek bottom. When she withdrew the pole, she said, "Watch," and Jim felt a sudden excitement course through him.

A black, greasy substance oozed sluggishly from the hole in the creek bottom. Jim had seen such seepages before at other locations, and often such a surface flow marked a worth-while oil pool at not too great a depth.

He tried not to be too enthusiastic. "It could be," he said.

"It is," Tracy said. "All I need is a well."

"You showed this to any oil men?"

"No."

"You just discover it?"

The girl shook her head. "I've known about it for years," she said. "My father found it, when he first settled here. When there's no water here during the dry season, the grease oozes out of its own accord and forms a little pool. Kane, I want that oil."

Jim nodded. "All right," he said. "But there's one angle you maybe don't know about. It'll take money. You'll have to get a contractor to build a derrick before I can start drilling. We'll need pipe and—" He hesitated. "Don't worry about the pipe just yet. My credit is good. I can handle the drilling, and get the well casing put in. But even with this seepage, we may have to drill down a thousand feet or more and then it'll take money."

"How much money?"

"It could run high into the thousands."

"Oh," said Tracy and suddenly looked worried.

"I'm being honest with you, too honest for my own good," Jim said. He gave her a rueful smile. "I could make a deal with you that would cut me in on this discovery—if it's any good. Force you to take me in as a partner, maybe. But I'll play square with you. Tracy, your best bet is to make a deal with a big oil company like Globe-Pete."

"I'll take a chance on you, Kane."

"It's a deal."

"How soon will you start drilling?"

"As soon as the derrick is up," Jim told her. "I'll see a contractor about putting one up, soon as I get back to town. You'll have to talk money with him, when he comes out here. And I'll tell you my terms before I start making hole. That all right with you?"

TRACY nodded. "I want things done businesslike," she said. Then the excited look that had been in her eyes ever since showing Jim the oil sign was replaced by a certain grimness. "There's just one thing more, Kane."

"Yeah?"

"Don't try to doublecross me," Tracy said bluntly. "I'm not just a helpless woman. I've been running this ranch for a whole year, and before that I learned plenty from my father. I'm not easily outsmarted. And if things ever get too rough for me— Well, I'm not entirely alone." Her gaze went beyond Jim.

He glanced over his shoulder and saw two horsemen approaching. They were the two men who had come to the National House dining-room with her last night. A tough-looking pair. He saw what the girl meant when she warned him not to doublecross her.

One rider was a leathery-faced oldtimer. He looked boot tough, and there was a definite shrewdness in his pale blue eyes. The other was a Mexican, much younger but no less tough in appearance. They had rifles on their saddles and six-shooters at their thighs. Oil field workers were a rowdy lot, but when there was trouble they handled it with their fists. At worst, a driller or a roughneck might use a wrench or some other handy tool in a fight, but seldom if ever did one use a gun. Cowhands were different. Jim Kane knew that a cowhand felt undressed if he wasn't wearing a gun-rig. And these M7 riders looked as though they would make use of their guns without much urging.

They reined in, eyeing Jim without much friendliness.

The old man spat, with a show of contempt, and the Mexican sort of sneered as

he took out the makings and started rolling a cigarette. Tracy introduced them. Ben Monahan and Miguel Gomez. The old-timer nodded briefly in acknowledging the introduction, and the Mexican grinned, still without friendliness.

"You come to terms with this hombre?" Monahan asked the girl.

"He's going to drill a well for me," Tracy said.

"Yeah?"

"He thinks the oil sign is good."

Ben Monahan said, "Yeah?" again. Then he looked at Jim once more, and growled, "He better not be wrong." He lifted his reins, turned his horse, rode slowly away. Miguel Gomez lighted his cigarette, smiled, said, "No, *Señor;* it will be better if you are not wrong," and rode after Monahan. Neither man hurried his horse.

Jim looked after them uneasily. "Nice boys," he said. "Very friendly. What happens if I drill all the way to China without finding oil?"

Tracy said, "Don't worry about that just yet, Kane."

She didn't even smile when she said it.

Jim Kane wondered what he had let himself in for as he drove away from M7 Ranch. The girl was wild to strike oil, to become rich, and those two gun-toting watchdogs of hers were sure set on seeing that she got what she wanted. A wildcat driller didn't lead a trouble-free existence, but it seemed that Rowdy Jim Kane was maneuvering himself into a tight corner. He had nobody to blame but himself, either. He wasn't satisfied to make hole for shoestring operators and shady promoters. He had to make a deal with a girl who was obsessed with the idea of becoming rich. Jim was beginning to wonder just what he was getting into, for he had a hunch that Tracy Mason's wanting to make a fortune in oil wasn't ordinary greed.

Jim told himself: "You can still back out, Rowdy.

Sure, he could. But he wouldn't, and he knew it. He'd fallen for that ranch girl, fallen hard. He didn't like it much, for a girl like Tracy Mason wasn't another Flo or Lou. Her kind played for keeps. Let

They knocked Kane sprawling and

gave him a dozen hard kicks

her get interested in a man, and she'd begin to dream of wedding bells. . . . Not that Rowdy Jim Kane had anything against marriage. It was fine—for some men. But he liked his freedom.

He told himself: Better back out while there's still time, Rowdy. But he kept thinking of Tracy. She was just what he had been looking for all his life—without knowing it.

HE'D SEE Ed Bateman, the contractor who had built the derrick for his test well out at Arroyo Blanco. Ed was busy, now that a new field was being opened out there; but he owed Rowdy Jim Kane a favor or two. Tomorrow he'd move his rig out to M7, overhaul it and start setting it up. He'd bring in a gusher for Tracy, sure, and then she'd owe him a favor or two.

Jim turned the horse and buggy in at the livery barn, and told McDade to carry the charge on his books until another day. The liveryman didn't object. As Jim had told Tracy, his credit was good.

There had been nobody outside the stable when Jim drove in, but now, as he left, he found Mike Hogan and four other Globe-Pete workers there.

Hogan had an ugly bruise on the left side of his face; the mark of old Ben Monahan's six-shooter, Jim supposed. A burly man, Hogan also looked as if he was in a bad humor. He was scowling as he stepped in front of Jim.

"Listen, Kane—" he began.

Jim looked beyond the man. The four other Globe-Pete men were casually circling so that they could jump him from the rear if there was trouble between him and Hogan. Jim looked back at Hogan.

"What's on your mind, Mike?"

"The girl."

"What girl?"

"Don't play dumb," Hogan growled. "The girl who started that fight last night. The one you just came back from seeing." He tapped a stiff forefinger against Jim's chest. "Stay away from her, Kane. Stay away from that ranch of hers."

"Who says so?"

"I say so."

Jim nodded. "I hear you saying the words," he said, his temper growing short, "but who put them into your mouth?"

Hogan's lips pulled back from his teeth in an ugly grimace. "Like I figured, boys," he said loudly. "He just won't take a warning. He'll have to be shown. Let him have it."

The odds against Kane were too great. The first blow caught him from behind, at the base of the skull, and staggered him. As he reeled, dizzy with pain, Hogan's men assailed him with a barrage of blows. They beat him to his knees, knocked him sprawling on his face, and gave him a dozen hard kicks before they quit.

He lay there dazed by pain, heard Mike Hogan say contemptuously, "Rowdy Jim Kane . . . he ain't so damn' rowdy now!"

Jim was lifted and helped into the stable by McDade and his hostler. They eased him down upon some sacks of grain, and the liveryman brought a bottle of whiskey from his office and dosed Jim with it. He sat up presently, full of pain and rage, and cursed Mike Hogan. Suddenly it occurred to him that Hogan must have been carrying out orders, and that those orders must have come from someone higher up in Globe-Pete.

Somebody wanted him to stay away from Tracy Mason. That somebody wasn't just satisfied with warning him to stay away from the girl, but had ordered him roughed up to discourage him and to let him know that something worse would happen to him if he persisted in seeing her.

Why?

Jim could see but one reason for it. Somebody besides the girl, her two riders, and himself had seen the oil sign at M7 Ranch and didn't want some wildcatter like Rowdy Jim Kane horning in on it.

Jim got up off the grain sacks, stood swaying.

McDade said anxiously, "Better take it easy for a little while, Jim." He was a fat man, and violence unnerved him. "Those Globe-Pete men weren't fooling. If I were you, friend, I'd steer clear of that outfit from now on."

Jim said, "I'm just getting ready to tackle that outfit," and walked unsteadily from the livery stable.

He saw nothing of Hogan and his companions, but there were plenty of other signs of Globe-Pete to keep his rage well fueled. The Globe Petroleum Company dominated the Espada field. Its mule-drawn wagons clogged the street; they were loaded with machinery and pipe and tools, and bound for the development south of town. The company had a big warehouse and wagon yard back from the main street, and an office building facing the street.

Jim headed for the office building.

A FANCY carriage with a pair of handsome greys in harness and a colored man in livery holding the reins stood before the building. It was Dan Marlowe's rig, and old Dan, another coal-oil Johnny was the big boss of Globe-Pete.

Jim strode into the front office where a dozen pale-faced clerks worked at desks, behind a railed enclosure. One of the men jumped up to intercept Jim when he made for the gate in the railing.

"Something I can do for you, sir?" he quavered.

Jim shoved the gate open, the man aside, and said sourly, "Not you. Dan Marlowe."

The office worker protested. "Mister Marlowe is not in, sir!"

Jim ignored that, strode to the door of Marlowe's private office and thrust it open. The office was empty. There were other doors to other private offices. Jim picked the nearest. A neatly lettered sign on it read: *Cole Avery, Superintendent.* Jim didn't knock on this door either. As the office force watched him with something like shock, he barged into Avery's office and slammed the door behind him.

Dan Marlowe wasn't there with Globe-Pete's handsome superintendent, but Dan's daughter, Louise, was—and intimately. The girl was in Avery's arms when the door slammed. She withdrew, not too hastily, from the embrace and smiled without embarrassment. Cole Avery looked somewhat flustered, however, and then angry.

He started toward Jim Kane, demanding "What's the idea coming in here like that?" The ugly look of rage on Jim's fist-marked face halted him. And he said, more calmly, "What's wrong, Kane?"

"You don't know?"

"I? How should I know?"

"You don't know about Mike Hogan and some other Globe-Pete men jumping me?" Jim demanded. Then he realized that Avery wasn't likely to know. The man had a high-sounding title, but he wasn't a genuine oil man and so was more or less a figurehead. "Where's Dan Marlowe?" Jim asked, more calmly.

"On a trip to California," Avery replied. "He left on the morning stage. What do you want to see him about? What's all this about Mike Hogan?"

"Somebody gave Hogan orders to give me a working over," Jim said sourly. "So I wouldn't drill a test hole where that somebody doesn't want one drilled. I've a hunch that somebody is Dan Marlowe."

"Nonsense. Dan wouldn't—"

"Wouldn't he, though? Listen, Avery, I know that old blackleg!"

"Blackleg? Now see here, Kane—"

Louise Marlowe laughed. "Never mind, Cole," she said. "Dan Marlowe has been called 'blackleg' before—and worse."

She stood by the window behind the desk now, a very attractive girl dressed in the height of fashion. She was a tawny blonde with green-flecked grey eyes and a provocative mouth. It was possible to see old Dan Marlowe in her. She had the same self-assurance, but in her Dan's blunt arrogance had been refined to sublety. Strong-willed was the word for the Marlowes.

Louise said, gazing amusedly at Jim, "I suppose you were simply given a warning not to do any wildcat drilling on some lease for which Dan is dickering."

Jim shook his head. "He's not dickering for this lease," he said. "If he tries, he won't get it." He looked back at Cole Avery. "You're Marlowe's lease man around here. You ought to know if he's out to grab this new field."

Avery didn't reply at once. He was busy lighting a cigar. He was a tall man of about thirty, handsome, well tailored and well

groomed. He was the perfect picture of a young executive on his way up, and he'd come a long way since the opening of the Espada field six months ago. Jim Kane had heard that Avery had owned and operated a general store in Espada when it was but a cowtown, and that he had bought up a lot of leases—with Globe-Pete money—when oil was discovered. In gratitude for his acting as a front for the big outfit during the scramble for leases, Dan Marlowe had given Avery a big-paying job and a high-sounding title. Gossip had it that Dan's daughter, taking an even greater interest in the man, was responsible for the oil baron's lavishness. At any rate, Avery was now a big man in Espada. He was playing the part now, lighting his cigar and looking gravely thoughtful.

He said, "What new field is this, Kane? Arroyo Blanco?"

"No. I'm through out there."

"Well, what other new field is there?"

JIM hesitated a moment, then decided that Tracy Mason's secret was already known. "Up at M7 Ranch," he said. "Plenty of oil sign. The ranch is owned by a girl, and she's made a deal with me to sink a test well. If Dan Marlowe figures he can strong-arm her into cutting Globe-Pete in, he's going to get the surprise of his life. Tell him that."

"I don't know a thing about it," Avery said.

"Tell me," said Louise, moving toward Jim. "Is M7 Ranch's girl owner named Tracy Mason?" She smiled mysteriously when Jim nodded. "I rather thought so," she said, then turned to Avery. Her voice took on a sharp edge of mockery, saying, "I didn't suspect there was oil on Miss Mason's land. Did you, darling?"

"No," he replied. "Of course not."

It was doubtful if Louise heard. She was walking out of the office. The door slammed behind her, showing that she was peeved about something.

Jim said, "Maybe you don't know anything about what's going on, Avery. But I'm giving you warning for Dan Marlowe and the whole blamed Globe-Pete outfit. There's going to be real trouble if anybody tries to interfere with my drilling at M7 Ranch!"

Avery smiled faintly. "I'll tell Dan when he returns," he said. "I'm sure, Kane, that your warning will make him shake in his boots."

"Funny," Jim retorted. "Very funny." He, too, slammed the door when he went out.

The carriage was still standing before the building, the girl now seated in it and holding a pretty parasol to keep the sun off her. She beckoned to Jim, and said, when he stood beside the rig, "Will you take my word for something, Kane?"

"Should I?"

"I've no reason to lie to you."

"None but to shield that blackleg father of yours."

"He doesn't need me to shield him," Louise said coldly. "Dan Marlowe isn't afraid of anything on earth."

"All right. I'll take your word."

"Good. Dan doesn't know that there's oil at M7 Ranch."

"Then, who—"

She didn't answer. She said, "Take me home, Henry," and the colored driver started his team, whisked her away from there.

Jim stared after the carriage, a scowl on his bruised face. He didn't know what to make of the girl. She wanted him to believe her father hadn't ordered Mike Hogan to give him that beating, had claimed that Dan Marlowe was unaware of the oil sign at M7 Ranch. And she certainly knew that by clearing her father, she was causing Jim's suspicions to be directed at Cole Avery.

Avery? Jim shook his head, doubting that it had been Globe-Pete's superintendent. Louise would have tried to shield him, if she thought he would be suspected, just as she had shielded Dan Marlowe. A woman didn't let a man hold her in his arms one minute and the next betray him, unwittingly or otherwise. Louise wouldn't have blundered like that. Dan Marlowe had raised a clever daughter, a very clever daughter.

There was only one explanation, Jim decided. The girl didn't know that Dan Marlowe knew about the oil sign at M7 Ranch.

He shrugged. It didn't matter. When he happened upon Mike Hogan again, he would find out who had given him his orders. Somebody was going to pay for that beating, and it wouldn't be Mike Hogan alone.

Jim headed for Ed Bateman's place to talk to the contractor about building the derrick at M7 Ranch. . . .

MINDFUL that he owed Rowdy Jim Kane a favor or two, Ed Bateman said he was willing to take on the job. He promised to drive up to M7 Ranch to discuss the contract with Tracy Mason, adding, "I'll see her first thing tomorrow, Rowdy." He was a grizzled old-timer, and he gave Jim a shrewd look as he said, "I'll give her a break on the cost, to help you along."

Jim laughed, said, "Thanks, Ed," and went out.

He got a ride out to Arroyo Blanco on a freight wagon that was hauling casing to the new discovery for Globe-Pete. The test well Jim had drilled out there on the sand flats had been on a lease owned by a speculator named Hayden who had made a deal with Dan Marlowe even before the gusher was capped. Globe-Pete was losing no time in developing the Arroyo Blanco field, and since the oil company favored a big drilling outfit, Jim had been squeezed out. Besides the one for the test well, two new derricks were already completed and three more abuilding.

A camp of tents and shacks had sprung up, and more than three hundred men were busy at work. There was a jam-up of big freight wagons waiting to be unloaded of materials, supplies, machinery, provisions. The ground for a mile around the test well, now called Arroyo Blanco Number One, was greasy black from the gusher that had spurted for three days before being brought under control and spudded down, a flow the wildly excited Hayden had estimated at twenty thousand barrels a day.

Jim's rig had been dismantled and stood idle and forlorn looking in the midst of all the activity. It was partly cleaned up, and Hank Boland, who was Jim's tool dresser, was still working halfheartedly at ridding the machinery of oil slick. The three men Jim had left with Hank were not in sight.

"Where are your helpers, Hank?"

"Take a guess, Rowdy."

"Globe-Pete hire them away?"

"Yeah," said Pete, and fished his pipe from his pocket. "Offered me a job, too. If I had any sense, I'd take it."

Jim grinned at him. They'd been together for years, more partners than boss and employee. Both were too easy going by nature, too independent of spirit, to work for a big outfit. Regular wages appealed to most men, but Rowdy Jim Kane and Hank Boland willingly exchanged a sense of security for freedom. Financially, they came out ahead of the drillers who held down the steady jobs. Jim usually paid Hank a bonus once a job was finished. He had no fear that the tool dresser would quit him.

Hank leaned against the donkey engine, chewed on the stem of his cold pipe. He was a lanky, lazy man, dour of face. "It kind of gets me, Rowdy," he said. "We bring in a gusher, open a new field, and then get the bum's rush. That Hayden will make a fortune in royalties, and Globe-Pete will grow fatter. Everybody getting rich but you and me. I've been thinking—"

Jim broke in. "You lose your money at blackjack again, Hank?"

Hank looked sheepish. "Don't I always?" he asked. Then he said, "I've sworn off, Rowdy, and I mean it. I'm going to save my money from now on. I'm going to buy me some oil stock and—"

"That's a gamble too, Hank. Riskier than blackjack."

"Not if you buy Globe-Pete stock."

"You could be right. Well, I wish you luck."

Hank said, "Thanks. But you better get smart, too, Rowdy. I'm twice your age, sure. But one of these days you'll wake up and wish you hadn't let opportunity slip through your fingers. Like me, you'll wish

you'd held onto your money instead of throwing it away on having a so-called good time. Maybe you'll meet a girl and want to marry her and settle down. Who can tell?"

Jim was beginning to understand what ailed Hank. Off and on for years the man had been talking about marrying a widow he'd met back in Texas, talking about it mostly when he was broke.

Jim said, "You get another letter from Mollie, Hank?"

"Yeah. Yesterday," Hank said gloomily. "You know, Rowdy, I ain't playing fair with her. There she is, waiting for me all this time, and I'm not any more able to support a wife now than I ever was."

"Worry no longer, partner," Rowdy Jim Kane said cheerfully. "A few months from now you'll be able to marry the widow in style. We're going to open a new field and we're going to cut ourselves in on it."

"A new job already? You broke, Rowdy?"

"Flat broke."

"What happened?"

It was Jim who looked sheepish now. "I was having me a time," he said. "The party ended up in a fight. I came to in an alley, with my money gone. I don't have any idea who picked my pocket. It was just money, anyway. And besides, I got this new job right away. If it's as good as it looks, we'll end up as oil barons."

Hank merely grunted, then said none too hopefully, "Since you're broke, you might as well pitch in and help overhaul the rig."

Jim nodded. "That's what I'm here for," he said cheerfully.

THREE DAYS later Rowdy Jim Kane took advantage once more of his good credit standing. He had a freighting firm send two big wagons to load his drilling rig for the trip to M7 Ranch. He went to town, made a deal for some well casing to be delivered, on credit, at the ranch. Then he went around to Mrs. Gregory's rooming house, washed up and changed clothes, and, after surveying himself in the mirror and seeing that the bruises were fading, set out for McDade's Corral.

He hired a mount instead of a rig this time, anxious to show Tracy Mason that he, too, could ride. It was sundown when he reached M7 headquarters, and he hoped Tracy would invite him to stay to supper. There was a buckboard and team standing before the ranchhouse, and as Jim crossed the yard he saw its owner come from the house. It was a jolt for Rowdy Jim.

The man was Cole Avery.

Jim's first thought was that Tracy had crossed him up, made a deal with Avery and Globe-Pete. Then he saw the wild look of rage on the man's face and knew he'd guessed wrong.

Avery must have been blinded by his anger; at least he gave no sign that he saw Jim. The Globe-Pete man strode to the buckboard, climbed to the seat, grabbed loose the reins from the whipstock, yelled at the team, and drove away fast.

Jim dismounted, walked to the open door, paused there upon hearing the sound of a woman weeping. He was surprised; Tracy was such a spirited girl that he had never imagined her giving way to tears.

It was a moment before his eyes became accustomed to the dimness of the room after the bright sunlight. She was seated at a table, her face buried in her arms. After a moment she became aware of him. She straightened, stifled her sobs. Little girl fashion, she wiped away tears with the sleeve of her shirt. She rose and faced him, but avoided meeting his questioning gaze.

"What goes on here?" Jim demanded. "What's Avery done to you?"

"It's nothing, really."

"Nothing, you say. But the way you were crying—" He broke off, frowning. Then he said, "I'm beginning to catch on. You told me that no outsiders knew about the oil sign at Brenoso Creek. Globe-Pete knew about it—or at least Avery did. His outfit had a bunch of hardcases jump me. I was told not to drill here, and then they roughed me up to make the order stick. I figured that Dan Marlowe had given them their orders, but now it looks as though that dude, Cole Avery, is my man. Dan Marlowe's daughter is stuck on Avery and you—"

"No!" Tracy cried. "It—it's not so!"

"Avery owned a store in Espada before the oil strike," he went on, shouting angrily. "You knew him then, before he became friendly with the Marlowe girl. You were in love with him."

He was hurting her. Tracy was crying again, silently, but letting the tears course down her cheeks. Jim held his tongue, sorry he had been so harsh with her.

"It's true," Tracy said thickly. "I may as well admit it. I was in love with Cole, and he— Well, I thought it was understood that we were to be married one day. Then an oil prospector found oil sign south of Espada, and Dan Marlowe approached Cole. Mr. Marlowe knew that a man like Cole could get oil leases at a better price than a man openly representing a big company like Globe-Pete. All at once Cole changed. He became greedy with ambition. He sold his store, took a job with Globe-Pete, and—and then he met Louise Marlowe."

Jim didn't say anything.

Tracy went on, "He came here today, the first time since he met her, to make me an offer. I'd forgotten that he knew about the oil sign at Brenoso Creek. Perhaps he'd forgotten it, too, until he learned that I was looking for someone to drill a test well."

"He wanted you to break with me and deal with Globe-Pete?"

"No. He wanted me to lease Brenoso Creek to him."

"So he's doublecrossing his outfit?" Jim said. He didn't wait for her to answer that. "He lost his temper when you turned him down, eh?"

SHE NODDED. "When I told him I wouldn't lease my land to anyone, he suggested that I take him in as a partner. He offered to form a corporation and sell stock, so there would be money—other people's money—to meet expenses. I told him I didn't want him for a partner, that I wouldn't have him for a partner even if I would go back on my word to you. I—I told him that I'd show him he wasn't the only one who could get rich."

"So that's it," Jim said. "Avery jilted you because he had a chance with a rich man's daughter. Now you hope to get rich, so that you have a kind of revenge."

"No!"

"What, then?"

Tracy dried her tears again. She gave her head a defiant toss. "I'm done with him, entirely done with him," she said. "I was crying for—well, for what might have been. Not because I still want him. He's not worth crying over, a man like that."

Jim didn't believe that. Cole Avery was attractive to women; it wasn't likely that this girl had gotten over him. It was more than likely that she still hoped to win him back. She wanted to strike it rich in oil to take Avery away from Louise Marlowe, and she had refused the deal he'd offered only because pride wouldn't let her appear too eager. Jim didn't like it.

[*Turn page*]

"You don't believe me?" Tracy asked.

"I think you and I had better talk business," he replied. "I don't want to come out on the short end of this deal. I was paid five thousand dollars above my expenses for bringing in that well at Arroyo Blanco. You can't guarantee me any money, and there's a chance that we won't strike oil here. But if we do, I want to be protected. A ten per cent partnership will make me as rich as I want to be. Ten per cent for me, ninety for you, and you pay for the drilling. We'll put it in writing. We'll have a lawyer draw up an agreement."

"Jim, I give you my word that Cole Avery has nothing to do with my wanting to strike oil."

"Maybe you think so at the moment."

"It's a much more important reason."

"All right," he said skeptically. "Tell me."

"I'll show you," she told him. "So you can believe me."

They rode across M7 range, traveling at an easy lope. They covered several miles, and to Rowdy Jim Kane, who was no cowman, it seemed that Tracy's ranch was a mighty big one. They came finally to an empty creek bed, and Tracy reined in. Jim looked at her curiously when she said, "What do you see?"

He loked about, saw nothing but a few scattered bunches of cattle.

Tracy said, "This arroyo, Jim." She pointed to the west, to the range of low hills there. The arroyo extended to a cut in the hills, a sandy gully twisting across the range. "Up until a few months ago," the girl explained, "this was a clearwater creek. It was a year-around supply of water for M7 Ranch, draining down from the San Juanitos. I depended on it. Then Espada boomed and needed a bigger water supply. The oil field needed water. So a dam was built up in the hills, and the water was piped south. And I was left with an arroyo."

"So what?" said Jim. "You've got other water."

"At the moment, yes," she replied. "But this is early spring. When summer comes, Brenoso Creek near my headquarters and the few water-holes will dry up. At the house I'll have to depend on the well, as I do every summer." She paused, and there was genuine worry in her eyes. "The range will be without water for three months at least, every year. You can't keep a single cow, let alone a couple thousand, without water. Do you understand now, Jim?"

He nodded. "I guess so. You want to get rid of your cattle before you're out of water, and so you need an oil well."

Tracy shook her head. "It's not that," she told him. "I was born on a ranch, and I've never lived anywhere but on a ranch. I couldn't imagine myself living in a town, or on land where there were no cattle." She smiled at him. "It's my way of life, Jim. Will you ride a little farther?"

IT WASN'T just a little farther, at least not to Jim Kane who was not used to riding horseback across miles of range. But at last, perhaps two hours later, they reined in atop a piñon-studded slope in the hills north of M7 range. Beyond was another range that extended on north in a vast sweep of grassland as far, and farther, as the eye could reach. Tracy had brought along field glasses, and now she handed them to Jim and pointed to a cluster of buildings in the distance. He focused the glasses, studied the buildings. A ranch headquarters, but such a one as seldom was seen on most southwest ranches. The buildings were big, freshly painted, well kept up, and numerous.

"Nice," Jim said.

He saw no cattle on the range, no riders, no activity about the ranch headquarters. He returned the glasses with a questioning look.

Tracy said, excitement in her voice, "It's the K Bar Ranch. A man named John Keith owns it. He's old, very old, and he's retired. He now lives in Phoenix, but he keeps his buildings in repair. When I lost the water from the San Juanitos, I was wild with worry. Then one day I rode up here—and got an idea. I went to see Mr. Keith, and asked him to lease me graze for my cattle. He refused, because he had

recently decided to sell the K Bar. Well, I wasn't very practical, I suppose. But I said that I would buy it."

Jim gave her a surprised look. "He must have asked a fancy price."

Tracy nodded. "But a fair one," she said. "I paid him a thousand dollars for a three months' option, Jim. Now do you see why I must have an oil well? I've got to have K Bar Ranch, Jim, or sell off my herd. I've got to own it for my future, for my way of life. I need twenty-five thousand dollars before I can get a bank to take a mortgage, and I need it soon!"

Jim tried to hide his feelings, saying, "I savvy now, Tracy." He knew what she didn't know, that even when there were oil signs, a well was still a gamble. Even if a well was brought in at Brenoso Creek, it couldn't be turned into money until it was delivered to some far-off refinery. He was relieved to know that it wasn't greed that was behind her desire to strike oil; he was even more relieved that Cole Avery had nothing to do with it, though he wasn't yet ready to count the man out entirely. He said, "Oil is your only chance, then?"

"Yes, Jim," she said. "Without water, the M7 is worthless. I won't even be able to sell it. And I haven't money enough to buy K Bar or any other ranch. Oil is my only chance. You'll strike oil for me, won't you?"

Jim said, "Yes," no doubt tempering his promise. He wished that there was no doubt in his mind.

They rode back down to M7 range, Tracy talking about K Bar Ranch and Jim lost in bleak thought. It was fine, he reflected; she had a dream, and she wanted to make it come true. He hoped that it would come true. He thought that Tracy was different from any girl he had ever known, or would ever know. Yes, she was sort of wonderful, and he was falling in love with her. But a lot of good all this would do him. Jim thought he understood Tracy better than she understood herself.

She wanted K Bar, as she said, because ranch life was her way of life. Her happiness depended upon her having it. More than that, she was planning for the future, and certainly that meant, though she might not realize it, a husband and children. Cole Avery might be a part of her future, but surely Rowdy Jim Kane the wildcatter was not. Tracy was too different, much too different, for him.

They rode to Brenoso Creek where a crew of twenty Mexicans labored to open a road through the brush and rocks so that wagons could get through. Ed Bateman had come to see Tracy, and it had been the contractor who had suggested the road. Miguel Gomez had recruited the workers.

"Mostly," Tracy said, smiling, "they are Miguel's relatives."

MIGUEL and old Ben Monahan weren't about, and Jim asked about them.

"They're driving a small bunch of steers north to Harbin," Tracy told him. "It's a bad time to market beef, for prices are pretty low. But—well, I've got to raise money to meet expenses here at the job."

"They're loyal to you, that pair."

"Yes. They've been here a long time."

"And they're another reason why you don't want to be forced out of the catle business?"

"Yes," said Tracy. "Ben is too old to land another riding job, which is the only kind he wants, and Miguel never worked for another outfit." She watched the Mexicans, busy with picks and shovels. "About the contract, Jim. We'll go to town tomorrow and have a lawyer—"

"Forget it," Jim interrupted. "Your word is good enough for me."

That was evidence that he had fallen hard for Tracy Mason.

Ed Bateman arrived with his crew and wagons piled high with derrick timber the following morning. The grizzled old contractor supervised the start of the job, then, being a busy man, he left the crew in charge of a foreman. It was a start, but a derrick wasn't thrown up in a day and even after it jutted toward the Arizona sky, completed, it took more days for Jim and Hank Boland to set up the drilling. There was more work for the Mexicans, too; Jim put them to digging sump holes.

Tracy was there every day, impatient, forever asking Jim and Hank when they would start to make hole. She was talking oil-field lingo now. The day the rig started its noisy pounding she was as excited, Jim reflected, as a little girl with a brand-new doll.

He was excited, too. It was a fascinating game, driving a hole deep into the earth on the chance that it would bring in liquid black gold. And this time Rowdy Jim Kane himself had a stake in it.

This was the most important well he'd ever drilled. Always before he had not greatly cared whether or not he brought in a well; just drilling the hole had been enough, for he knew that he would get his money whether the hole turned out dry or a gusher. This time he was a partner, with a chance to make a fortune. But that alone didn't make the Brenoso test hole important. Rather, it was what it meant to Tracy.

The old boiler kept up the steam, the engine purred smoothly, the big walking beam banged, the greased cable driving the drill rose and fell steadily day after day.

The hole grew deeper. It went down through sand and clay, the string of tools struck rock and the going was slower. Too slow, considering that Tracy must have money—a lot of money—before the option she held on K Bar Ranch ran out. Tracy showed Jim a letter she had received from K Bar's owner. John Keith urged her not to let the opportunity slip through her fingers. He told her that someone else was now interested in buying K Bar, but, since he had once been her neighbor and also had known her father well, he wanted her have the ranch. Tracy seemed worried.

Jim tried to reassure her, forcing himself to appear confident. He didn't tell her that the oil seepage in the creek might be a fluke, some trick of nature, and that the oil might lie far below the surface. He pushed the work as fast as was possible, having some of the Mexicans helping with the drilling. He put the others to digging more sump holes and banking them up high. He wanted to be ready in case the well came in a gusher; he wanted to waste no more oil than need be. If there was no gusher, if the well had to be pumped, the sump holes would serve as storage basins until the oil could be shipped out by tank wagon.

THE WELL went down five hundred, eight hundred, a thousand feet. There were delays, of course. Once a string of tools was lost when the cable broke, and it took Jim and Hank the whole of a day to hook and fish the string out. In rock, the drill went off at a tangent and they had to use a reamer to straighten it out. Then at twelve hundred feet, Jim had to cut off the rig for lack of pipe for casing.

The supplier who had promised to furnish more pipe, on credit, failed to keep his word. Jim sent Tracy to town to see the man, and she returned with a worried look on her face. She had ridden hard. Her pinto pony was blowing and lathered, and the girl herself was breathless. She came running to the drilling platform as soon as she dismounted.

"Jim, Mr. Nolan isn't sending you any pipe!" she exclaimed. "I tried to make him give me a reason, and he kept hedging. Finally he said that he just couldn't fill your order unless you paid cash. Then, when I came from the bank with the money, he said that he simply wasn't able to fill your order. His excuse is that Globe-Pete has contracted for all the pipe in his warehouse, and for all that he expects to get delivery on during the next month or more. What'll we do, Jim?"

"Why," said Rowdy Jim, "I'll go to town and have a little talk with Steve Nolan."

"You think—"

"I know," Jim said. "I've been expecting Globe-Pete—or your friend Avery—to pull something like this. The idea, honey, is to shut us down and run up the cost of the drilling. If this hole can be made expensive enough— Well, it's an old trick in the oil game—making a wildcat operator squeal for help." He patted her shoulder. "Don't wory. I won't let them make you squeal, not without a fight."

He went to the creek to wash up, feeling none too confident.

A wildcatter hadn't much chance when bucked by a big outfit like Globe-Pete. There were a thousand ways such an outfit could strike a foul blow, and this casing pipe deal was but one of the least dirty.

He still had his livery stable horse there at the camp, and he saddled it. Tracy said, "I'll go with you, Jim."

"No," he told her firmly. "There may be a little trouble."

"Then let me send Ben and Miguel with you."

"No," he said, mounting. "That pair would go off half-cocked and make more trouble than I could take care of."

He rode away, leaving Tracy looking desperate. He was surprised that she scared so easily. . . .

STEVE NOLAN was a pudgy little man. He squirmed in his desk chair, in his cubbyhole office, and sweated profusely. "Don't lose your temper with me, Rowdy," he said. "I was willing to supply pipe, even on credit. Shucks, you and I were always friends. But Globe-Pete is my biggest customer. Without Globe-Pete I wouldn't be in business. I was forced to sign a contract with that outfit for all the pipe I had in stock and on order. I—"

"Who forced you?"

"Cole Avery. But Dan Marlowe's signature was on the contract."

"All right, Steve," Jim said. "I know they had you in a corner."

He left the supplier's office, went to the office building of the Globe Petroleum Company. He barged in past the clerks in the outer room, and this time found Dan Marlowe in his private office.

Marlowe was a big man with a florid face and a lot of silver in his hair and in his neatly trimmed mustache. He'd gotten into the oil game during its early days in Pennsylvania, and before that he'd been a coal miner. Now, at sixty, nicely tailored and well groomed, he didn't look as though he'd ever been close enough to mine or well to soil his hands.

He smiled broadly, his manner friendly, but when he rose he kept his desk between himself and his visitor. He knew Rowdy Jim Kane's kind. He saw the angry look on Rowdy Jim's face.

"I'm too old to brawl, Rowdy," he said hastily. "Let's talk it over. What's sticking in your craw, anyway?"

"Pipe casing, at the moment," Jim said, facing him across the desk. "You forced a contract on Steve Nolan to tie up all he's got, even though he promised to supply me with what I need. I'm not taking that, Dan. You don't need all that pipe at once. Later, maybe. But not right now. I want the pipe Nolan promised me."

"Business is business, Rowdy."

"And making war on a woman is business, eh?"

"You mean the Mason girl?"

"Who else?"

Marlowe took a cigar from the humidor on the desk, lighted it. He was frowning. "You'll have to take my word for this, Rowdy," he said slowly. "I know no more about Miss Mason than what my daughter told me. I understand from her that you are drilling a test well on the Mason ranch. I am not making war on the lady. I'm not interested in her wildcat operation. I've got my hands full with the Espada field and the new discovery at Arroyo Blanco. I give you my word of honor on that."

"What about tying up Nolan's supply of pipe?"

"My local superintendent suggested that."

"Avery?"

"Yes."

"And he had Globe-Pete's interests at heart?"

Marlowe considered a moment, studying Jim shrewdly. "He led me to believe so," he said. "He argued that the Arroyo Blanco field would take an enormous amount of pipe, and that it would be good business to have it contracted for. You're suggesting that Avery had another reason?"

"Right. He's tried to force Tracy Mason into a deal."

"A deal with Globe-Pete?"

"A deal with Cole Avery," Jim said flatly. "My word against his, sure—and

he'll deny it. But you can question Tracy herself. He's using Globe-Pete to force her into a deal, Dan. The pipe contract is just one sneak trick he pulled. The day I agreed to drill at M7 Ranch, somebody had Mike Hogan and four other Globe-Pete men give me a beating and a warning to stay away from that ranch. I haven't run into Hogan since, but I will. And when I do, I'll make him tell who gave him his orders—Dan Marlowe or Cole Avery."

"It wasn't I, Rowdy," Marlowe said flatly. "And if it was Cole Avery— Well, prove that he's been using Globe-Pete to forward his own interests and—yes, damn it—I'll see that you get the pipe you need!"

Rowdy Jim grinned. "Call him in here," he said eagerly.

Marlowe went to the door, called to one of the clerks, and a moment later Cole Avery entered the office. In a way, Avery was a younger Dan Marlowe. At least, he was trying to model himself along the same lines. The imitation was good. His expensive gray suit matched the one the oil baron wore in material and styling. His manner was brusque. He moved with an aggressive air. He played the part well, but he still had a long way to go. To Rowdy Jim Kane he was just a fourflusher.

Avery ignored Jim. He faced his boss, and said, "You wanted to discuss something with me, Dan?"

"Rowdy here has a crow to pick with you," Marlowe said.

"Kane?" said Avery, slowly turning. "What about?"

Rowdy decided a bluff might do it. He said, "I just had a talk with Mike Hogan. He swears you gave him orders to rough me up and scare me off the M7 Ranch job."

AVERY LOOKED jolted. But he recovered quickly enough, and said, "Hogan probably said words you put into his mouth, Kane. You and he have some personal grudge, and Hogan worked it off." He turned back to Marlowe. "There was some trouble between Kane and Hogan one night over the Mason girl, Dan. It happened during a party at the National House. There was a brawl when Hogan made advances to the girl. Kane took offense. Now he's blaming Hogan's getting even with him on Globe-Pete. No doubt to force us into granting him some concession, maybe on well-casing pipe. Kane plays a dirty game and—"

Jim swore, lost his temper, lunged at the man.

Avery surprised him. Side-stepping, he drove a fist hard to Jim's jaw and staggered him. Before Jim recovered, he moved to the desk and grabbed up a heavy glass decanter from its tray. He wielded it like a club, aiming at Jim's head. Jim ducked, but took the blow on his left shoulder anyway. Glass shattered, water gushed. Pain knifed down Jim's arm to his finger tips. Avery never hesitated. He rushed, driving heavy punches to Jim's body. He drove the wildcat driller back against the wall, then grinned mockingly as he readied a knockout punch. Jim saw it coming, and knew a moment's fear. Then he jerked his head aside, and Avery's fist crashed against the wall.

Avery reeled away, hugging his hurt hand to his chest, and Jim, going after him, knew that he had won. He battered Avery with short, hard jabs until the man cried out, "Enough, Kane! Let up!"

Jim shoved him against the wall, poised his fist for another blow, and said savagely, "Who gave Hogan his orders?"

Avery flinched, and muttered, "I—I did."

Jim swung toward Dan Marlowe. "Well?" he demanded.

Marlowe nodded. "You'll get your pipe," he said. "And this doublecrosser is through at Globe-Pete."

Jim turned to the door. It was already open. Tracy stood there, gazing at the beaten Cole Avery with a look of horror in her eyes.

Jim brushed past her, went out to the street. Tracy's pinto was outside. So were her two M7 riders. Old Ben Monahan was chewing a tobacco cud. Miguel Gomez was puffing on a brown-paper cigarette. They sat their horses and stared at Jim with silent hostility. Maybe it was personal or

maybe they just didn't like any oil field workers.

Jim would have gone on to Nolan's warehouse where he had left his horse, but Tracy came from the Globe-Pete building and said, "One moment, Jim. I want to talk with you."

He faced her, frowning.

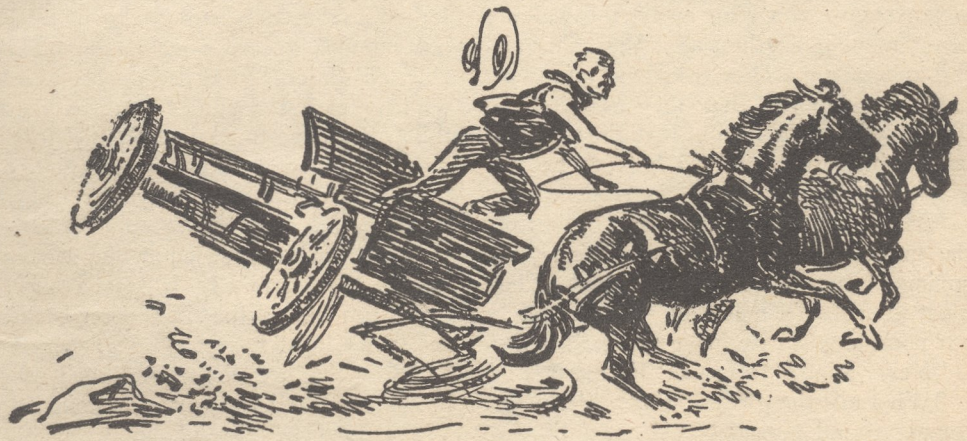
She was badly upset, sickened by what she had seen a minute ago. "Jim, if this is the way a person must make money in oil, I want out of it. I won't have people beaten because of me. I—"

tect you. He meant for me to see that you played it straight. You ain't backing out on this deal."

Tracy bit her lower lip, then said, "All right. I'll hold up my end of the bargain, but after what's happened I don't care if that hole stays as dry as it is right now."

She strode to her pony, mounted, rode away at a lope.

Jim looked after her bleakly, knowing that she meant what she had said. She didn't care now. Because Cole Avery had taken a beating, she didn't care. It looked



The wagon toppled, and Jim was thrown out

Jim said angrily, "Sure, I had to whip Cole Avery to get the pipe we need. I show him up for the fourflusher he is, and that hurts." He was jealous and he understood that, but he couldn't help it. "All right, call it quits. Throw away your chance of owning K Bar. Or maybe you'd like to make a deal with Avery and—"

"I want out of it for good," Tracy broke in.

She meant it. Maybe she just hated violence, but Jim, in his anger, thought it was because Avery had gotten hurt and she, for all her denials, was still in love with the man.

OLD BEN MONAHAN said, "Tracy, you made a bargain with this hombre. You've got to keep it. Your pa made me promise when he was lying on his death bed to look out for you. He sure didn't mean for me just to pro-

as though Avery was more important than anything else to Tracy Mason.

Jim said to Ben Monahan, "Thanks, friend."

The old cowpuncher scowled. "Don't think I'm doing you any favors," he drawled. "I'm just looking out for the girl's interests." He patted the gun at his thigh. "She needs an oil well," he added. "You see that she gets one—or it'll be too bad."

"Si," murmured Miguel. "It will be too bad."

They swung their horses around, rode after the girl. . . .

The drilling went on after Steve Nolan, on authority received from Dan Marlowe, made delivery on the pipe for casing. It went on day after day, from grey dawn until hazy dusk and often by lantern light, with Rowdy Jim Kane and Hank Boland driving themselves and working double

shifts. They'd let most of the Mexicans go to save money for Tracy, and kept only the cook and three others to keep the boiler fired and the steam pressure up. But it was different now, for Tracy no longer came to the camp.

Ben Monahan and Miguel Gomez rode up to the drilling once a day and sometimes twice. The cowhands watched the work without comment: Jim on the drilling platform, Hank up on the tower, the Mexicans toiling as roughnecks and becoming expert at it. They watched the steam engine chugging away, the walking beam moving rhythmically, the cable rising and falling. They asked no questions, and Jim doubted that they reported to Tracy. He had a feeling that the girl just wasn't interested, and all because he had given Cole Avery a well deserved beating.

"That pair," Hank told Jim, "gives me the creeps. Never saying anything, just spying on us. And packing guns. They must figure we'll make off with the oil in our pockets when we bring this well in."

"Never mind," Jim said. "Forget them."

"What ails the girl, anyway? She never comes around nowadays."

"She wants to call it quits."

"Now? With us cutting through shale?"

Jim nodded gloomily. He hadn't told Hank about his falling out with Tracy, but did so now. Hank shook his head, bewildered, saying there was no figuring women. He was keeping a close watch on the tailings from the hole, and they were drilling through shale. It was a good sign. The oil-bearing sand should lie just below.

They hit sand two days later, as the tailings showed, but there was no gusher. There was not even the slightest flow of oil, and Hank Boland said wearily, "We may as well shoot it, Rowdy. What do you say?"

Jim said, after considering a moment, "I'll go to town for the nitro." He noticed how done in Hank looked, and so told him to shut the rig down. "You and the Mexicans take it easy until we're ready to shoot it."

He washed up, changed clothes, then saddled his horse. He was just riding away from the camp when Ben Monahan appeared. The old cowhand reined in in front of Jim. He was scowling. "What's wrong now, hombre?" he demanded.

"Nothing is wrong," Jim retorted. He was losing his patience with this old rannihan. "You can tell your boss that we're going to bring in her well tomorrow."

"Yeah? Well, what's the idea of shutting down the rig today?"

"My business," Jim said, and suddenly crowded his horse in against Monahan's. He grabbed at the cowhand's six-shooter, jerked it from its holster, and grinned without humor. "Keep your hands off your rifle, old-timer," he ordered. He gestured with the captured gun. "I can handle this thing, if I have to. I just wanted to show you that I'm not scared of any gun-packing hombre who was maybe a bad man twenty years ago."

Ben Monahan scowled at him a moment longer, then grinned. It was a sheepish grin. Jim shoved the six-shooter back into the man's holster.

"Now that we understand each other," he said, "I'll tell you what I'm going to do. We're down to oil-sand, but we've got to do something to start the oil flowing. We'll shoot the well with nitroglycerine."

"Supposing that doesn't start it?"

"It will. You can tell Tracy that tomorrow she'll be an oil princess."

"She won't care much," Monahan said. "I don't know what ails that girl, Jim. She keeps to the ranchhouse and hardly ever talks to Miguel and me. Mighty unhappy. I sure don't savvy her."

"She's all broken up about Cole Avery."

"Nope. It ain't that. She's got over that no-good."

"What's wrong with her, then?"

Ben Monahan gave Jim a shrewd look. "Maybe you could find out if you stop by the house and have a talk with her," he said, and abruptly rode on toward the idle drilling rig.

JIM DIDN'T stop at the ranch headquarters. He was sure that Tracy didn't want to see him. He was also sure that Ben Monahan was wrong about

her. He'd changed his mind about Tracy Mason, Rowdy Jim had. She wasn't like the women he'd always known, the kind of women that show up wherever a town is booming and there is plenty of easy money. Money didn't mean much to Tracy, and she was a one-man woman. She had fallen in love with Cole Avery, and though she might be through with him because he was no good, she would remain in love with him forever. Tracy was, Jim had come to realize, the sort of woman a man believed his mother to be and wanted his sister to be: faithful in her love, even if that love was a mistake.

It was dusk when he reached Espada, and he entered Steve Nolan's warehouse just as the supplier was about to close up for the day. Jim bought twelve quarts of nitrogylcerine, a case of dynamite, and some fuse—on credit. He then turned his horse in at McDade's Corral, and hired a buckboard and team. He drove the rig around to Nolan's, and loaded the explosives onto it. Leaving the team tied to the warehouse loading platform, Jim went to a counter restaurant for supper.

After eating, he went to a saloon and listened to the talk of the oil field workers gathered there. It was mostly about the new Arroyo Blanco field. Jim told himself that soon he would have to pick up some contacts for future wildcat jobs, now that he was about through with the drilling at Brenoso Creek. A few acquaintances questioned him about the Brenoso Creek well, and, as was his fashion, he bragged a little, boasting that Brenoso Creek would be a bigger discovery than Arroyo Blanco. And he added, "We're going to shoot her tomorrow."

Rowdy Jim wasn't just bragging to impress the other oil men, however. He wanted word about the Brenoso Creek development to get around, to work up interest. He was well aware that if it shouldn't be much of a discovery—which was very possible—Tracy might have trouble cashing in on the strike. She would

[*Turn page*]

need financial help to get the oil to a refinery, and a deal with Globe-Pete would be her best bet. Jim wanted to get Dan Marlowe interested in Brenoso Creek, and it would be best if the oil baron was primed by gossip ahead of the time when Jim must approach him.

It was full dark when Jim left the saloon. He headed for his rig at Nolan's, passing the National House on the way. Louise Marlowe was just coming from the hotel. She called, "Oh, Rowdy—I've been wanting to see you!" She hurried toward him. Louise was as beautifully dressed as ever, but in the light from the hotel windows he saw that she was a little peaked and had dark smudges beneath her eyes. She wasn't smiling; rather, she looked unhappy and worried.

"Rowdy, will you tell me something?" she asked huskily. "Has Cole Avery been coming up to M7 Ranch to see the Mason girl?"

"Not that I know of," Jim said, and saw that the blond girl seemed somewhat relieved. "You still in love with him, Louise?"

"Yes. I can't help myself, Rowdy."

"He's no-good."

"That's not true," she said, quickly angry. "It's just that he's so ambitious, too much in a hurry for success. Dad says that Cole is clever enough, that he just made a mistake. Dad would give him another chance—for me—if he'd only straighten himself out. I've humbled myself and begged him to pull himself out of it and—"

"Out of what?"

"He's been drinking heavily ever since Dad fired him."

"Oh."

"And that's not the worst of it," Louise went on. "I had a talk with Mike Hogan today. Mike is still friendly with him, and Mike—well, it's easy to get Mike to talk. He told me that Cole has made some sort of a deal with a speculator named Maury Vance."

Jim frowned. He knew Vance, a crooked speculator, a promoter of oil stock swindles. Maury Vance acquired an oil lease, hired a wildcat driller, sold stock, and absconded with the money. He got away with it because he always maneuvered the various oil companies he founded into bankruptcy, so that it appeared like a legitimate if ill-advised deal.

Jim asked, "What's he up to with Vance?"

LOUISE SHOOK her head. "I only know what little Mike Hogan told me," she replied. "Mike says that they've got a scheme on to take over the well at M7 Ranch, once you bring it in. That's why I thought Cole may be seeing Tracy Mason. I—I guess I'm plenty jealous, Rowdy. But I just can't help it. I love that man."

"Well, I'm sure he hasn't been seeing Tracy," Jim said. "And I don't think she'd make a deal with him. More likely he and Vance are trying to find a way to get rid of me and force her into a deal. I'll have a talk with Mike Hogan."

He tried to find Hogan after leaving Louise, but after nearly an hour of visiting saloons, honkatonks, and gambling houses he was convinced that the man wasn't in town. Everybody had seen him "an hour or so ago." By chance Jim stopped in at the Jackpot Pool Room and found a man who knew Hogan well. He was a shifty-eyed little man, who whispered, "It ought to be worth something to know where Hogan is, Rowdy."

"Maybe."

"Fifty dollars."

"You're loco, Nick."

Nick grinned slyly. "Pay me if you think it's worth that much," he said, low-voiced. "Hogan's thick as thieves with Maury Vance and Cole Avery. They've got some kind of a big deal on the fire. A big-money deal. Hogan rounded up a bunch of plug-uglies after dark and they left town on the quiet. Hey, Rowdy—"

Jim was already heading for the door. He called over his shoulder, "I owe you that fifty, Nick!"

He left the pool room at a run, and he was scared. The Hogan-Avery-Vance crowd had seen him arrive in town early this evening, and no doubt believed that he

intended to make a night of it. They'd seen it as their opportunity to pull off whatever it was that they had planned for the drilling at Brenoso Creek. It couldn't be anything else.

Jim didn't want a case of nitrogylcerine riding with him, the way he intended to drive, for the explosive, unlike dynamite, was tricky stuff that was apt to go off with even a slight jolt. And if twelve quarts blew up, nothing would be left of man, horses or buckboard. Jim put the explo-

The fire was ruddy against the darkness

sives back on the warehouse loading platform, untied the team, jumped to the seat, and started the horses with a yell and a slap of the reins.

For a liveryman, McDade kept good animals. The horses were in good condition and eager to run. Rowdy Jim raced away from Espada, along the north road. It was dark, the moon hidden behind clouds, but he knew the road well enough by now, and besides his alarm made him reckless. He had the horses hitting a gallop.

Control of oil lands wasn't always obtained by scrupulous dealings, and there were times when tricky schemings weren't enough. Violence and bloodshed had won many a valuable lease, just as gold mines and rangeland had been so won. With a man like Maury Vance backing Cole Avery, and Avery hating Rowdy Jim Kane, anything could be happening at Brenoso Creek. Hogan hadn't taken a bunch of Espada toughs out there unless he meant to cause real trouble. Jim visualized his rig being wrecked, maybe dynamited.

IT WAS a nightmare, and, fast as the team was, he wasn't traveling fast enough. He hadn't realized that M7 Ranch was so far from town. He began yelling when he saw the lights of the ranchhouse, and when he rolled into the yard Tracy was in her doorway and the two cowhands came running from the bunkhouse.

"Trouble at the well, Ben!" he shouted. "Bring your guns!"

He drove on, though now the team, lathered and blowing, took it at a slower pace. He was still a half mile from the camp when he saw the glare of a fire, ruddy bright against the darkness. The flames blossomed hugely, spread a pink glow against the dark sky. The fire was some distance north of the well, back through the rocky stretch through which the Brenoso flowed. A brush fire. The wind was from the north and blowing hard, blowing the widening wall of flames toward the well. Hogan and his toughs had touched off their fire with the wind in mind.

A giant boulder had forced a hairpin bend in the road, and the racing rig didn't quite make it. The buckboard skidded, struck a rock with a noisy splintering of wheel spokes. The light wagon toppled and Jim was thrown from it. He landed hard, was dazed by the jolt. He picked himself up, forced himself into a staggering run. The team and wrecked buckboard had come to a stop just beyond. He passed them and ran on.

There were shadowy figures about the derrick. Jim was about to call to them when caution warned him that the men there couldn't be his men. Hank and the Mexicans would certainly have gone to fight the fire, to beat it out before it endangered the well.

He had guessed right. A voice called, "Hurry it up, Hogan!"

Jim knew that voice: Cole Avery's.

Anger drove him. He had recovered from the shock of his spill, and as he kept running, he caught his second breath. They'd set the fire to draw his men away from the well, figuring that the growth of brush close to it was too sparse to carry the flames to the derrick and the rig. So they were now free to wreck the job by some other means, by dynamiting it, Jim was sure. He was close when they heard him.

A man yelled, "Watch it! Somebody's coming!"

Jim lunged at the fellow, crashed into him, bowled him over backwards. The man grabbed Jim's leg, tripped him. Jim fell to his hands and knees, and when he rose three more of the crowd came from behind the boiler at a run and jumped him. He struck out, experienced a wild satisfaction at the feel of flesh against his fist. They crowded in close, so many of them, that he couldn't miss as he stood braced and slugged it out with them. He heard Mike Hogan yell something from the drilling platform beneath the derrick. He heard, too, a drumming of hoofs.

Ben Monahan and Miguel Gomez were coming, and for once he would be glad to see them.

Hogan yelled something again, and the toughs broke off their attack on Jim and scattered in sudden flight. Hogan ducked away from the derrick, and Rowdy Jim went after him. Hogan was fast on his feet, but another man, one that Jim saw now for the first time, retreated at a slower pace. In fact, this one ran with a lurching gait—like a drunk, Jim reflected—and screamed hoarsely for Hogan to wait for him. It was, of course, Avery.

Here was better game, and Jim jumped him with a wild shout. At the same moment, but some distance away, old Ben Monahan and Miguel Gomez at last had their opportunity. Shots crashed, and men cried out in panic.

Then the blast came.

There was a bright flash, a thunderous noise, a scream from Cole Avery, and a stab of pain for Rowdy Jim Kane. Then nothing at all.

FOR A long time Jim hovered on the borderline of consciousness, so that what happened to him was like a bad dream. He was convinced that the doctor from Espada took a fiendish delight in prolonging the business of digging that fragment of boiler plate out of his left side. He was equally sure that the wagon that hauled him to M7 headquarters went by way of the Mexican border. But finally he was abed in Tracy's house, no longer tormented, and he sank into a dreamless sleep.

When he awoke, Tracy was bending over him. It was broad daylight, and there was an anxious look in her silver-grey eyes.

"Jim, how do you feel?" she asked.

"Wonderful, with you so close," he said. "How bad is it?"

"Not too bad, the doctor said."

"Cole Avery?"

He watched her closely as he spoke the name, but saw no change in her expression. Tracy said simply, "About as badly hurt as you are, Jim. No worse." Then, as an afterthought, "He was here until an hour ago, then Louise Marlowe came in her carriage. She took him home with her. I guess she thinks that she can give him better care than I—than he'd receive from people who care nothing about him."

Jim thought: She means that. It was crazy of him to be jealous of Cole Avery. But her not caring about Avery didn't mean that she cared about Rowdy Jim Kane.

He said, "They dynamited the rig?"

"Just the boiler," Tracy told him. "Hogan had charges set for the derrick, but didn't get a chance to light the fuses. Everything is all right except the boiler. Hank and the Mexicans put out the brush fire. Ben caught Mike Hogan, and took him to Espada to the sheriff. The rest of the crowd escaped. I guess the sheriff will investigate and—" Her face clouded. "And Cole will be in trouble."

"Louise will get him off."

"I hope she can't. He deserves to be punished."

"I'm going to shoot the well as soon as I get back on my feet," Jim said. "You'll get your oil, Tracy. I'm sure of it now; I feel it. We'll force a deal on Dan Mar-

lowe, so you can cash in right away. We'll work through Louise. We'll offer to go easy on Avery if she gets Dan to handle your oil from Brenoso Creek to the refinery. You'll get your K Bar Ranch, Tracy."

Tracy nodded. She didn't look as happy as Jim expected.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I—I'm wondering what you will do, Jim."

"Yeah," said Jim, and he too began to wonder.

HE'D MAKE a lot of money out of the well, since he was a partner. And a man with a lot of money wouldn't want to go on being a wildcatter. He looked back on his past life and couldn't understand why he had enjoyed it so much. Work hard to earn some money, then squander the money and think that painting a town red in the company of fairweather friends and flossy women was fun. It had been kid stuff, and now he felt grown up. He'd changed. Because of this girl, he'd changed—and for the better. His past way of life had been no good.

He said, "Tracy, do you think you could make a rancher of me?"

"What—what do you mean?"

"Forget it. It was just a thought."

"What kind of a thought?" Tracy persisted. A smile tugged at the corners of her lips. "Rowdy Jim Kane. I never thought I'd see a time when you'd be afraid to say what was in your mind."

"I just don't feel so rowdy any more."

"Must I say it for you, then?"

He stared up at her, incredulous. "All right," he said. "You're asking for it. Honey, I'm crazy in love with you. I want you to marry me. If you think you can make a rancher of me—" He sighed. "I guess not. I'm not your kind. Forget it."

Tracy laughed. "Now you're making up my mind for me," she said in a tone of mock rebuke. "Jim, don't stop being rowdy. Don't be so blame tame!"

She bent over him, and if ever a man was startled by a kiss, it was Rowdy Jim Kane. He managed to lift his weak arms and put them about her. After a time he stopped marveling that such wonderful luck should happen to an oil-smeared wildcatter.

AN OFFICER is always under the gun. When he acts he has to move fast and while he has the law to go by it doesn't always fit; so he uses his judgment and does the best he can. I don't lose any sleep over what I did as sheriff, but I had one case that still bothers me a little.

It began during the campaign while I was running for office. We had a big rally at Lobo Springs and I went down there. The town wasn't much—but when we got off the train it looked like half the county was on hand. Hod Carter had arranged a barbecue and turkey shoot to go with the speaking, and everybody had turned out. I'd hardly hit the depot platform before Rod grabbed me, wanting me to judge the turkey shoot.

"It's good business, Bill," he said when I objected. "A sheriff is supposed to know guns and shooting, and it puts you before the public."

Naturally, I wanted to do anything that would put Bill Jernigan before the public just then, so I said, yes, and we went to the store where the crowd was.

Electioneering is the same any place. I buttonholed people and passed out cards and solicited votes. There was quite a crowd around the schoolhouse, too, so I went up there. Sue Oliver, the teacher, had an exhibit of the kids' work displayed around the room, and in the back, right opposite the door, was a big picture of the section house. Santiago Truba was standing by the picture, and I headed for him.

I'd been looking for Santiago. He was the section boss and the section hands were either his sons or sons-in-law. There were six votes in the bunch and, while I thought I had them, I wanted to make sure. Santiago saw me coming and grinned. There was a little girl beside him—one of his grand-children, I judged—and he had his hand on her shoulder. If ever a man looked proud, Santiago did.

"Hello, Mister Bill," he said when we shook hands. "What you think on this?" He gestured to the picture.

I said I thought that it was fine, and he looked prouder still; his old hawk face just beamed.

"I think pretty good, too," he said. "Magdalena, she do this thing."

Everybody knew Santiago Truba, and most liked him. The old-timers claimed that he was a Yaqui Indian who had wet-backed out of Mexico, and maybe he was. He looked it—straight as a string and not a grey hair. And he was like an Indian in one thing, sure: friends were friends, and enemies were enemies. We talked a while, Santiago praising Sue Oliver to the skies, and I gave him one of my cards. I was pretty sure he couldn't read so I told him what it said.

"You run for sheriff?" he said. "All right, Mister Bill, we vote for you."

Some more people came to look at the picture then, so I went on. Sue Oliver was in the door, and I complimented her on the exhibit.

"I can't vote, Bill," Sue told me, laughing, "but it's nice of you to tell me. I see you made a hit with Santiago. He thinks Magdalena is the finest ever."

"Maybe so," I said, "but from the way he talked, you're the high card. Tell you what, Sue. You get him to vote for me and you'll be a deputy when I'm elected."

OPEN

SUE laughed again. She was a pretty girl, Sue Oliver. I'd known her when she was Sue Whitfield and wore braids. Her daddy, old Paul Whitfield, ran cattle over east and everybody was surprised when Sue married Oliver and moved out on the dry land tract. She had been going with Scott Sergeant before that and

VERDICT

By BENNETT FOSTER

SHERIFF JERNIGAN knew who had killed

Nash Oliver—but how was he to get the proof?

we all thought they were a match.

"I'll consider the offer," she said. "Good luck, Bill."

At noon we all ate barbecue then had the speaking. The turkey shoot came after that. The targets were put up against a cut bank and the firing line was marked a hundred paces off. There was a man to mark the targets, it cost four bits to shoot, and there had to be eight entries for each round. I'd promised to judge the targets, so I did.

The first was easy. Santiago stepped up and plugged the bull plumb center. He had an old .40-82 rifle with the bluing all worn off but it shot good. The others didn't do so well but Nash Oliver was close. The next round was about the same, with Oliver closer still, and on the third target I had trouble. It was a near thing between Santiago and Oliver but when I measured, Santiago won.

"That's right," Oliver said when I made my decision. "Give it to your Mexican friend. He's got the votes." Oliver had been drinking and was mean as a snake.

"Ain't you satisfied?" I asked, keeping my temper. "You saw me measure."

"I'm satisfied you stretched the string," Oliver said. What he needed was a licking and he was asking for it.

Hod Carter butted in. "Hold it, Bill!" he warned. "If it's a tie let 'em shoot over. That's fair, ain't it?"

It wasn't fair, and I started to say so but Oliver beat me to it. "Not when I already won," he snarled and crumpled the target in his fist. "I can beat a Mexican any day in the week."

Santiago stood there, wooden faced like an Indian will get when he doesn't want to show what he's thinking. "*No le hace,*" he said, meaning that it didn't matter. "I got two turkey now."

He started to move off but I stopped him. It did matter. Fifty cents was a lot of money to him, and with the section house full of kids to feed a turkey meant a lot. I broke free from Hod Carter, got a turkey from the coop and handed it over. I wanted Oliver to start something so bad I could taste it, but he didn't. Sue had come up and had hold of him, and Preacher Groves and some more pushed in between us. There was a lot of talk, but finally Sue got her husband away and we went on with the match, only Santiago wouldn't shoot again. He took his turkeys and went home.

The Lobo Springs rally was the last we held. Election fell the first Tuesday in November and when it was over Woodrow Wilson was president and I was sheriff. I took office January first and we rocked along till spring.

Spring came early. The snow melted in February and no more fell. In March the wind blew out the moisture and there was no rain in April or in May. In June the cowmen put off branding, hoping for rain and stronger calves, but July was blazing and August was just hell. We were in the big middle of a drought.

Of course, as sheriff, I kept abreast of things. I went around the country, serving papers and checking up, and I had reports. There were always rumors floating, and men I trusted would come in and tell me what I ought to know. Along in August, when I was getting ready for the fall term of District Court, Hod Carter walked in on me. Hod had troubles.

"I wish you'd get down to Lobo Springs," he said, taking a chair beside my desk. "That deputy of yours ain't worth a damn."

I had appointed the deputy on Hod's say-so but I didn't remind him. Instead I asked what he had on his mind, and Hod unloaded. The Gerifalte was running just a trickle and the Y Cross was riding it, throwing cattle back off what grass they had. Lobo Springs was low, too, furnishing just barely enough water for the railroad, and that put a load on the Huevos tanks. Everybody's stock was watering at the tanks, and the nesters had fenced off the upper one to haul drinking water from.

"That ain't all," Hod said. "Scott Sergeant saw Nash Oliver chousing cattle and chased him into town. Scott caught him in the store and knocked him down twice. Oliver wouldn't fight back, and Scott told him to lay off them cattle or he'd kill him. You'd ought to arrest Oliver, Bill."

"What for?" I asked. "For gettin' knocked down?"

"No." Hod shook his head. "To keep him from killing somebody. He's ugly mean and he's drinking. Sue's quit him, finally. She's moved into the teacherage and I think she's going to divorce him."

"That'll be hard on Oliver," I said. "Where will he get whiskey money now? They've been living on Sue's salary."

HOD DIDN'T notice my interruption. "Scott stops by to see Sue whenever he's in town," he went on, "an' if Oliver was to kill Scott he'd plead that Scott was foolin' with his wife an' likely clear himself. You'd ought to throw Oliver in jail."

"I'm writing a scenario where we finally kill him!"

"You're justice of the peace," I reminded. "If you want Oliver arrested all you've got to do is issue a warrant. I'll serve it."

Hod hemmed and hawed about that. He lived at Lobo Springs, and all those people traded at his store. What Hod wanted was for me to do the dirty work while he steered clear. I told him that and it made him mad. He stomped out of the office, and I made up my mind I'd go to Lobo Springs as soon as I could.

That wasn't very soon. The district court convened next day and sat for nearly a month. I was busy with witnesses and subpoenas and prisoners and the jury. The lawyers got continuances and there were recesses and delays so it was nearly October before the session ended. I took four prisoners to Santa Fé and came home, cleaned up my work in the office and headed for the Springs.

The Coaldale mines were closed down and only one train was running on the branch, going out one day and returning the next. I was the only passenger on the Wednesday train and after we got to the top of Tramperos mesa the conductor came back and sat beside me. The grade up there was pretty steep and we crawled along through a cut. The bank of the cut was below the level of the window and here and there against the bank, new ties had been dumped off, replacement ties to take the place of old ones. Just west of the Huevos tanks the conductor leaned forward and pointed.

"Antelope!" he said.

I could see them, moving off from the track. They're pretty things.

"We see 'em nearly every trip," the conductor went on. "They're watering at Huevos tanks. Kind of a temptation." He looked sidewise at me. There was no open season on antelope, and a two-hundred dollar fine for killing one, but the conductor knew, and I knew, that some were killed. I didn't answer, and the Huevos tanks came in sight.

The tanks were about two hundred yards north of the cut, big pot holes in the lava cap that were fed from springs below. The upper tank was fenced and east of the lower tank, among the broken rock, I saw a cow. She faced the train and she was so thin she seemed to wave in the sunlight. She didn't move when the engine whistled. I'd seen a lot of droughted cattle but never one as bad as that cow.

Lobo Springs was six miles east of the

Huevos tanks and when we got in I took the mail sack to Carter's store. Hod seemed to have forgotten that he was mad at me. He made me welcome and said he had a horse and saddle I could use. We visited a while. I gave him the news from town, and he told me what was going on at the Springs. There wasn't much. Sue Oliver was living in the teacherage and Nash was leaving her alone. Scott Sergeant still came in to see her.

"They'll make a match this time, Bill," Hod told me. "As soon as Sue gets her divorce I'll bet they get married."

I was glad to hear that and glad to learn that things were peaceful. It looked like I'd wasted a trip but I didn't mind at all. I told Hod about the cow I'd seen, and he said she didn't belong to him, that he'd sold his cattle. After we ate dinner, I pulled out. I wanted to see Scott Sergeant and circulate around some while I was there.

Have you ever seen a dry land tract that's gone to pot? It's just pitiful. After the Coaldale branch was built a lot of folks moved in north of Lobo Springs, ambitious folks who planned to make their fortunes on free land. The years had killed them off. They had blown out, dried out, starved out. I rode along between what was left of fences, the tumbleweeds hiding posts and wire. I saw shacks, eight and ten years old, abandoned and their windows gone, their boards warped.

ONCE IN a while I'd see a place still occupied, all beaten up but with people still living in the house. Once in a while I'd see a windmill tower, the wheel broken and the vane sagging. I was glad to get out of the tract and on the prairie. It was dry and the grass was gone, but it hadn't been ruined by a plow. About five o'clock I reached Scott Sergeant's.

Scott's house was set in a cove in what we called the Pajarraco Hills. It wasn't big but it was tight and sound and so were his corrals and sheds. Scott wasn't home so I took the saddle off Hod's horse and turned him in to the pen. The house was open—nobody ever locked up back then—and neat as a pin and fixed up fine; there was even running water in the kitchen. Scott had built the house for Sue, and it made me feel good to think that someday she'd be in it. I stirred around, building a fire and getting supper ready and was almost done when Scott came.

He was glad to see me and wanted to know what I was doing. I told him I just wanted to get away from town. After we ate supper we washed the dishes and loafed. I told Scott about the cow I'd seen at the tanks, and he said that likely she was one of his, that he'd go get her in the morning. He talked about the drought and how tough things were, and I hinted a little about Nash Oliver but never got a rise. Scott shut off when Oliver was mentioned. After a while we went to bed.

In the morning, Scott said he was going to the tanks to see about that cow, and I started back to Lobo Springs. I wasn't in a hurry; there was no train back to the county seat until Friday, and I planned to spend the night with Hod. I swung east from Scott's place, planning to see the Whitfields but they weren't home, so I turned west again to the dry land tract. Around ten o'clock I stopped at Preacher Groves'.

Preacher Groves was one who had toughed it out since the development of the tract. He was a good old man. He got his name because he farmed week-days and preached Sundays. I refused his invitation to dinner and went on. Around eleven o'clock Lobo Springs came in sight and the horse pricked his ears and began to pick up. He figured he was going home.

Hod wasn't at the store when I got in, but I saw him running down from the teacherage. The Whitfield buggy was by the school and one of the horses was staked out. I didn't see the other horse and I knew something was wrong.

"Lord, but I'm glad to see you, Bill," Hod said when he came up. He was all out of breath. "We've got trouble!"

"What kind?" I asked.

"Nash Oliver," Hod said. "He came by last night, drunk and broke into the teacherage. He beat Sue 'most to death.

Magdalena Truba found her this morning when she went to school. She got me an' I sent for the Whitfields. They're up there now."

"Where's Nash?" I asked. I'd started for the school when Hod began to talk, and he was panting along beside me.

"I don't know," Hod answered, "but Paul Whitfield has gone looking for him. He started half an hour before you came."

We had reached the teacherage and I pushed open the door. She was on the bed, her mother beside her, sitting in a chair. Sue's face was bruised and the room showed there had been a fight. She opened her eyes when we came in and tried to smile and say something. Mrs. Whitfield bent close.

"What is it, dear?" she said. "Tell mother."

I took Hod's arm and we stepped back outside. "How bad is she?" I asked.

"There's nothin' broke that we could find," Hod said. "Just bruises and cuts, and she hit her head against something. Where are you goin', Bill?"

"Out to get Oliver," I answered, "and I hope I find him before Whitfield does."

Oliver's place was at the west edge of the dry land tract, about three miles from Lobo Springs. It was empty when I got there; nobody in the house or at the shed. The wagon was gone and there were wheel tracks through the gate, horse tracks, too. I followed the sign west toward the Huevos tanks and about a mile from them saw a rider coming toward me. It was Paul Whitfield.

"Paul," I said when we met, "have you seen Oliver?"

WHITFIELD'S face was gaunted and heavy lined. He was riding bareback on his buggy-horse and there was a gun strapped on him. He looked at me a minute, then jerked his head toward the tanks. "Back there," he said. He reined his horse around without another word.

When we crowned the rise I could see Huevos tanks. A short distance from the lower tank was a team and wagon hung up in the rocks. There were empty barrels in the wagon. Right by the tank was a cow on the ground, and Nash Oliver lay beside the cow. A loose horse, packing a saddle, stood looking at us.

"You'd better give me your gun, Paul," I said, and he passed it over without a word. I stuck it in my pants and got down. "And stay here till I call you," I went on. "I'm going to look around." He took my reins, and I walked down to the tank.

The hole in Oliver went clear through from front to back, and there was a hoof mark on his face. The tracks showed that the wagon had gone across him. The cow was dead, too, shot in the head. Her mouth was open and there was blood; her tongue had been cut out. It lay in the dirt beside her and her head was pointed toward the railroad cut, two hundred yards south. She was Scott Sergeant's cow; his Double S was on her hip. I went back to Oliver's body and when I moved it, found an open pocket. Then I made a circle, cutting for sign, but there weren't many tracks. It was malpais all around the tanks.

In spite of no sign it was pretty plain

[*Turn page*]

what had happened. Oliver, still half drunk, had come to the Huevos tanks for a load of water and had brought a saddle horse along. He had found Scott's cow, roped her, thrown her and cut out her tongue. While he was at that Paul Whitfield had come down on him and killed him. Then Paul had put the cow out of her misery. His shots had spooked the horses, and the wagon had run over Nash. That accounted for the hoof mark and the wheel track on the body. I called for Paul to come in and when he got there, sent him after the loose horse.

Paul caught the horse and helped me get the wagon free. The axle had high-centered on a rock but the tongue hadn't broke. The barrels were empty and Oliver's rifle was in the wagon box. I wanted Paul to help me load the body but he wouldn't touch it, so I put it in by myself. Then I climbed on the box and started, Paul following with the loose horses.

At Lobo Springs I drove around behind the store and Hod Carter came out. He helped me unload Oliver and carry the body into the shed. Paul Whitfield hadn't spoken a word and neither had Hod, but he was just busting. In the store Paul turned to me.

"I'd like to find out about Sue," he said.

"That's all right, Paul," I agreed. "Go ahead. Only you'll have to go to town with me, you know."

He nodded and left. I put his gun on the counter and told Hod what had happened.

"That damned Nash Oliver!" Hod said when I finished. "He had it comin! I don't blame Paul a bit. You can arrest him but you'll never make it stick. There ain't a jury livin' but what would turn him loose."

I thought Hod was right, but didn't say so. "We'll have to have an inquest," I told him. "This happened in your precinct and you're JP. Who can you get for a jury?"

"There's nobody around," Hod answered after he had studied a minute. "Just the depot agent. And I'd have to hunt all over the tract if I went out there. We'd better wait until the secion crew comes in. You ain't in any hurry anyhow; you can't go back until tomorow."

"That's right," I agreed. "I think I'll go up to the school. I'd like to know how Sue is myself."

"Scott Sergeant's up there." Hod followed me toward the door. "He came in just a little while after you left."

SURE enough, Scott Sergeant was in the teacherage, sitting on the edge of the bed. Sue looked a lot better. Her mother had fixed her hair and she was raised up on the pillows but it was Scott that helped her most. He had hold of her hand and the way she looked at him was something. She smiled again when I came in, one corner of her mouth all pulled down because of a bruise.

"I'll be all right, Bill," she whispered.

Someway that got me. Sue was comforting me when I should have been comforting her and couldn't. What I was going to do was hurt her; but not right then. "Sure, you'll be fine," I said. "You're all right now."

And that was so. She turned from me to look at Scott again and I got out of there. I squatted down beside the wall and rolled a smoke. I could hear Scott's voice, and I could hear Paul Whitfield and his wife talking in the kitchen. After a little Paul came around the corner of the house and stopped beside me.

"I guess you know what happened, Bill," he said. "There's no need tellin' you. I stopped Nash Oliver all right an' he had it comin'. Just leave it go at that. Don't go stirrin' things up." He wheeled and went back around the corner, and I sat there thinking and wishing I'd never run for sheriff. It wasn't but a little bit until Scott Sergeant came out.

"I'd like to talk to you, Bill," he said, so I got up and we walked off a little ways. When we stopped, Scott pulled out his gun and handed it to me.

"I guess you want that," he said.

"What for?" I asked.

"Because I killed Nash Oliver with it," Scott answered. "That was my cow, Bill. I came down on him when he was maimin' her and I shot him. I guess you'll have to take me in."

"Now, wait a minute—" I began, but Scott went right on talking. "Paul had nothin' to do with it. Nash was dead when Paul found him." He looked at me a minute, then started back to the house. "I'll be ready to go with you when you want me," he finished.

The door to the teacherage closed and I walked down to the store. Things were coming pretty fast, and I needed a little help.

"Somebody's lyin'," Hod said when I told him.

"That's right," I agreed, "but who?"

We didn't find an answer. There was a case against Paul Whitfield but there was also a case against Scott Sergeant. Either one was circumstantial except that both men admitted killing Oliver. They didn't just admit it; they claimed it. Hod and me threshed it over and finally gave up. It was past five o'clock and the section crew was in. Hod started down to get them for the inquest.

"The best thing to do," he said, "is to have an open verdict. 'Killed by a person or persons unknown to this jury.' Then you take Scott an' Paul both in to town and let the district attorney work on 'em a while."

WHEN HOD came back he had Santiago Truba and the section hands. He'd told them what was wanted and we went right to business. The jury looked at Oliver, and Santiago asked how come the hoof mark on his face. I said I figured the wagon had run over him after he fell. I told about meeting Paul Whitfield and finding Oliver and hauling him in. Hod said the jury should bring in an open verdict and wrote one out for them to sign. They went into the back room and we waited. We could hear them talking, and after a while they came back. Their faces looked like the butt ends of so many logs:—just wooden.

"You reached a verdict?" Hod asked.

"*Si,*" Santiago nodded. "This Nash Oliver is drunk. He fell off his wagon an' it run over him." Santiago held out a paper and Hod took it. Neither Hod nor me could talk. That verdict had knocked the wind out of us. Finally Hod got his voice back.

"You can't do that," he said. "You can't do it! Oliver was shot! He—"

"That is what we think," Santiago interrupted, gesturing toward the paper. He shrugged his shoulders. "He is drunk an' is run over by the wagon." He turned and started for the door, the others following in line like a bunch of cows headed for a water hole. The door banged shut and Hod began to cuss.

"Look here," he said finally, "they wrote it out."

Sure enough, they had. Somebody in that bunch had used Hod's sample and worked it over. The English wasn't much, but the meaning was plain, and everyone on the jury had signed or made his mark. I sat down on the counter and Hod paced around. He was mad. He talked some more about damned fool Mexicans. He kept talking and just to be doing something, I picked up Paul Whitfield's gun, opened the loading gate and jacked out the shells. There were five full loads and an empty chamber. I smelled the barrel *and that damned gun hadn't been fired!*

"Wait a minute!" I told Hod and took Scott Sergeant's gun. The same thing. It hadn't been fired either. I didn't have one liar to contend with; I had two. Neither Paul nor Scott had killed Nash Oliver and neither of them knew the truth.

Paul had ridden to the Huevos tanks, seen the cow and Oliver's body, and jumped to conclusions, just like I had. He had decided that Scott had caught Oliver maiming the cow and killed him for it. And, because Sue was in love with Scott, because he wanted his daughted to be happy, Paul had claimed the killing. That was the way I reasoned it.

The same was true of Scott. When Paul told Scott that Oliver was shot, Scott figured that Paul had done it. Scott knew how much Sue thought of her daddy and, to keep from hurting Sue, Scott claimed the killing.

Both men were lying, each to protect Sue. Each was willing to stick his head

into a noose on Sue's account. That was quite a thing to do, only both men were wrong.

"Where are you going now?" Hod asked.

"Down to the section house," I said. "I'll be right back."

Santiago's wife opened the door when I knocked. There was a lamp on the table, a big bowl of chili and another bowl of beans. There was a plate full of tortillas. Santiago was sitting on the bed, Madgalena beside him, and between Santiago's knees, it's butt resting on the floor, was his old .40-82. The action was open and a cleaning rod was half way down the barrel. Santiago sure took care of that old gun.

"Hello, Mister Bill," he said. "You have some supper?"

"No," I answered. "No thanks, Santiago," and I backed out and closed the door. I was a fool, I thought. I should have known to begin with.

THOSE new ties in the cut, the antelope watering at Huevos tanks, those things should have told me. I remembered how proud Santiago had been of Madgalena's picture and how sold he was on Sue. I thought about the kind of man he was; proud and fierce, loving his friends and hating their enemies. I thought about Santiago, waiting in the cut for antelope to come to water, and catching Nash Oliver instead. He must have seen Oliver rope the cow, throw her and bend over her. He must have seen Oliver maim her. Then the shots. One for his enemy; one for the cow to end her suffering.

Hod was pacing back and forth when I got back, jumpy as a cat.

"Well?" he said.

I told him.

"You're right," Hod admitted when I finished, "but you'll never prove it. The section hands are all Santiago's folks. They'll look you right in the eye and *no sabe'* you to death. They'll swear he never left them all day; that he was right there, bossing the job while they put in ties. A hand car don't leave no tracks and you'll never convict him. That old man's made a fool of you, Bill!"

"He's kept me from making a fool of myself," I contradicted. "I'd have arrested Scott and Paul. There would have been courts and lawyers and all kinds of stink. Maybe one of them would have got stuck. No sir! Santiago played it smart. He saved my bacon."

"But you can't convict him," Hod said. "Not in a hundred years you can't. What are you going to do?"

I SAT on the counter and looked at Hod. He was right. I remembered the faces of those section hands and I knew when it came to convicting Santiago Truba for killing Oliver I'd never do the job. I was sheriff. I was sworn to keep the peace and enforce the law. I could arrest Santiago, haul him into court and leave it for the court to decide. I could drag in the Whitfields and Scott Sergeant and wash a lot of dirty clothes in public. For what? For a skunk that needed killing? It was up to me.

"I'll tell you what I'm going to do," I said. "Do you happen to have a coffin in stock?"

Hod nodded.

"Well then," I went on, "we'll put Oliver in it. Tomorow I'll get Preacher Groves and we'll have a funeral. Anybody that wants to can come, but we won't open the box. The lid will be screwed shut. When we get Oliver buried I'll go to town and take that verdict with me for the record. You'll sign it as coroner and the whole thing's done. We'll straighten out Paul and Scott; we'll tell them what really happened, but no more."

"But—" Hod began. He was waving his arms and spluttering. "But—"

I stopped him. "There's no 'buts' about it!" I said, pretty sharp. "I'm sheriff and we've got a verdict. Nash Oliver was killed by accident. He got run over by a wagon. That's what the coroner's jury said and that's the way I'll handle it."

So that was how I handled it. What would you have done?

He Followed the Gold Call

—and wherever he went, the luck of the Irish was with Bill Cooper!

W. C. (BILL) COOPER will always remember the first time he saw Idaho City, Idaho; for it was at Christmastime in 1889 and for a present he was given all the glamor and romance of a gold boomtown.

After a train ride of several days from St. Louis, Missouri, and a twelve-hour ride by a bouncing stage from Boise to Idaho City, there it was—the fabulous scene that he had read and dreamed about, all wrapped up in Christmas magic. There was a huge tree in the Masonic Hall. There were gifts of candy, fruits and nuts. There was the bustling cheer of a town that never celebrated halfheartedly. All of it was eye-opening and nine-year-old Bill Cooper fell in love with the Boise Basin country, a love that is still with him after sixty-five years.

Bill's father had placer mine interests in Centerville, a small town a few miles from Idaho City, and it was here that Bill grew up, learning the business of mining and catching a case of gold fever that took him all over the West and still takes him back to the hills each summer.

The big boom in the Boise Basin had subsided, but there was still plenty of excitement and color for any boy—color in the parade of prospectors, gunmen, Chinese workers, placer miners, gamblers and dance-hall girls; color in false-front buildings and in tinny piano music in dozens of saloons; color in the meeting of hard, strange men, and the struggle of the new and the old.

Most of this young Bill saw from the outside, but the feeling was there, the supressed feeling of danger when men gambled with their lives and often lost, like the young man from Colorado, Jim Early.

Jim Early had been a hard-rock miner in Colorado. He wanted to try his hand at placer mining, so he came to Centerville. In the Gold Nugget saloon he met Walt

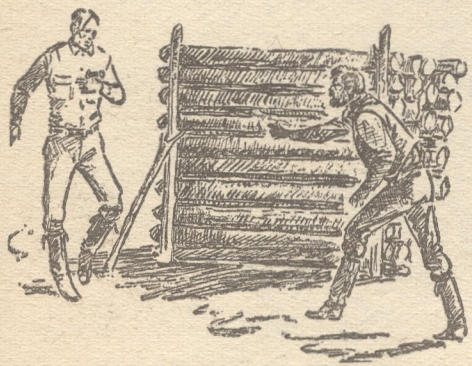
A True Story by Ferris Weddle

Carson, a meeting that was to be fatal for the Coloradan. Walt Carson had been looking for a partner to grubstake him in a claim in Clay Gulch. After investigating the claim and talking to the townspeople, Early put up the money for the stake.

"Better stay clear of Carson, stranger," several of the townsmen warned the young man from Colorado. "He's got a bad reputation for drinking, and he ain't too mild-tempered when he's drunk."

"I'll give it a try," the easy-going, likable Jim Early said.

For a time it seemed that Walt Carson



He faced a raging man

had turned over a new leaf. He worked hard that first spring and summer at his Big Chance claim. He even paid some attention to his seven motherless children. But then he started drinking. He began to resent his young partner and the fact that he had to give him half of the take from the claim.

Kindly Grandma Mason, owner of Centerville's only hotel and the town's nurse and adviser, warned Early. "Young man, you'd better get free of that Carson afore it's too late. I seen too many like him. You're gonna have trouble."

A big fat woman, Grandma Mason was about the oldest citizen of the town. She had come by covered wagon to the Boise Basin in 1865 and had been able to withstand the rigors of the frontier country as well as any man.

"I can't do it, Grandma," young Early said. "If for no other reason, I gotta look after those kids of his."

YOUNG Bill Cooper, who knew Jim Early, heard all the rumors flying around and he saw the affair reach its climax in Centerville in late summer of the following year. He saw Early and Carson enter the Mason saloon. Carson was speaking in a loud voice.

"Damn you, Early, you *will* let me buy your share of the claim or you'll be sorry! Plenty sorry!" They started through the swinging doors, and Carson's last words came to young Bill: "I'm giving you your last chance!"

"They been arguing all day, Pop says," a young friend of Bill's said. "That is, old Walt's been talking, but Jim don't say much."

Bill Cooper watched the saloon doors with bright eyes, and suddenly they swung open and Jim Early came out, followed by Walt Carson who was shouting foul names at him.

As quick as the flick of a snake's tongue, Jim Early turned on Carson and struck him with his doubled fist. The drunken miner stood still a moment. A crowd began to form, and several rough voices urged them to fight. Young Bill would have joined the crowd, but his father came along and told him to stay clear of trouble.

As though suddenly afraid that he had gone too far, Walt Carson started to run and disappeared behind a stack of cord wood down the street a ways. Jim Early followed, and just as he came around the edge of the woodpile he faced a raging man. In Walt Carson's hand was a gleaming knife, and he spun it through the air!

The watching boy paled as he saw Jim Early fall. In a few moments someone told him that the young miner was dead. The knife had pierced his heart.

As Centerville had no jail the angry citizens locked Carson in his home and posted a guard about the house. A messenger was sent to Idaho City for the sheriff. Lynch-talk flamed in the air. There was no doubt that it had been premeditated murder, for Carson had stolen the knife from a neighboring miner from whom he had borrowed some mining equipment.

Nine months later Walt Carson was

tried in Idaho City. Everyone expected a guilty verdict, but no one had counted on the influence of the criminal's five pretty daughters. The verdict was not guilty.

When Carson returned to Centerville, the angry citizens gathered in knots on the streets. But no one seemed willing to lead a lynching party, until a plump, white-haired old lady came forward—Grandma Mason.

With a blistering tongue she goaded them into action, while Carson cowered in his home. The necktie party began to get ready, gathering in saloons to drink and to talk themeslves into a killing mood. In the meantime someone had sent for the sheriff of Idaho City, and he and his posse arrived in Centerville just in time to stop the lynching.

But Walt Carson received a terse ultimatum from Grandma Mason: "Don't let the sun go down on you in Centerville!"

Such was the drama of the mining towns. And if there was no excitement, a young boy, with the help of his friends, could manufacture some. Like stealing rifles and revolvers for target practice on the chimneys of Chinese workers. Invariably, the Chinese would scatter from the houses like rabbits.

During the winter, unfortunately, there was school, a very dull condition unless one enlivened it with presents for the teacher; presents like frogs, snakes and mice; presents the pretty greenhorn teacher never seemed to appreciate. Then sometimes Miss Tacklott could be persuaded to go sleigh riding. These rides were always exciting, for there were long, snow-covered slopes to glide down.

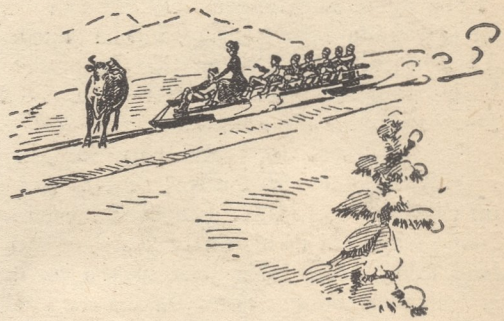
THAT some of these wild rides were dangerous made little difference. Like the time Bill was piloting a long sleigh loaded with Miss Tacklott and a half-dozen young people. He was really making the snow fly and bringing out screams of delight from the young people as he guided the sleigh down a narrow roadway.

Miss Tacklott wasn't saying anything; she was merely clutching Bill with a death-like grip. Then through the tears that came into his eyes from the sharp sting of the wind, Bill saw the cow. A placid cow, she was, standing crossways and completely blocking the road!

He thought fast. No time to waste, really. He could guide the sleigh into a bank, but someone might get hurt. He could—

"Duck!" he yelled.

Everybody ducked and they sailed on, right beneath the cow's belly! The cow didn't seem to mind, nor did Bill's young friends; but Miss Tacklott declared in no uncertain terms that she was not interested in riding again. Bill thought this a bit ungrateful since not everyone had ridden a sleigh beneath a cow's belly! But all teachers were kind of funny.



A placid cow was blocking the road

Summers were much better for an energetic young boy; golden summers when there was fishing and hiking, when he could work alongside his father at the sluice boxes. There was always a bit of magic about the sight of a stream of water hissing from a hose into a sandy bank, tearing out the earth and carrying it into sluice boxes, where, with the help of quicksilver, precious flakes of gold were captured.

To add even more spice to a life that brimmed with color and drama twenty-four hours a day, there were such badmen as Bartlett St. Clair.

St. Clair was a tall, red-headed man from Texas or New Mexico; a man whose reputation had preceded him to the small farming town of Lardo, in what was then Valley County. Accompanied by a fellow named Charlie Decker, he came to pros-

pect for gold in the Payette River and nearby mountains.

A few days later St. Clair returned to Lardo without Decker. People looked at the red-headed badman with questions in their eyes. Decker was known to have carried a great deal of money on him. No one said anything for a time; just watched St. Clair get drunk.

Then someone recognized the wallet that St. Clair was flashing; it was Charles Decker's. Noticing that he had been observed, St. Clair grinned.

"Don't think old Decker will be needing it any more."

The liquor had fogged St. Clair's brain and given him false courage, and he talked. Yes, he had killed Decker. No, he hadn't buried him; just rolled him over a cliff. Decker was too big a man to bury.

Someone sent to Idaho City for the sheriff, and Clay Moser was sent to pick up the badman. Moser had been born in Idaho City, and in his thirty years he had held many responsible jobs in the town and vicinity and was noted for his courage and fearlessness. He managed to get the drop on St. Clair and brought him back to Idaho City for trial.

When the outlaw was brought through Centerville, Bill Cooper got a look at him, though later when St. Clair was hanged in Idaho City, Bill's father decided the boy was too young to see it. But hundreds of people watched St. Clair hanged that spring day in 1897; and afterward the hangrope was cut into many small pieces which were carried away as souvenirs. A piece of the rope and the black hood that had been placed on St. Clair's head can be seen today in a small museum in one of Idaho's City's bars.

BILL was around nineteen when he left Centerville, lured by the promise of gold in a thousand different places. In the next ten years he traveled all over the West, almost always riding the rails and always just one jump ahead of the railroad dicks and one jump ahead of death.

Surely now he had the luck of the Irish or he would have been killed more than once. In Butte, Montana, he came very near it.

He was working in the Leonard copper mine, one of fourteen men on a shift that worked the 2,200-foot level. Bill didn't like the job, and he had asked the foreman for a job on the 1,800-foot level, pumping water. On this particular day the foreman told Bill to work on the upper level. Luck was his, for later that day a charge of explosives went off prematurely and killed the other thirteen men!

Old Lady Luck still rode by his side in Gem, Idaho, where he was working in the Frisco mine. He was on the 1,800-2,000-foot level. There had been a number of cave-ins in the mine due to air pockets. This day as he worked, he kept hearing the grinding noise made by the settling earth, and suddenly he spoke to his partner.

"Let's get out of here."

"Not quite time to eat yet," his partner protested. Then seeing Bill's face, he smiled. "Jumpy? Okay, let's go."

A few minutes later tons of earth showered down on the place where they had been working!

Wherever he went there was danger and adventure. His quest for gold led him to Goldfield, Nevada, where he saw a man killed over a twenty-dollar bet, a man who was well-liked and respected. But the murderer was set free because he owned some valuable mining property that several of the country's leading citizens wanted; their price for his freedom was the property. Such was the rough, tough life of a fading frontier, but Bill Cooper was able to cope with it. On he went, following the golden trail—into Utah, New Mexico, Arizona, Mexico, California and back to Idaho. Always, there was the end of the rainbow just ahead.

But in Missoula, Montana, he found his gold in the form of a lovely girl whom he married before she could think twice about a young man with gold fever. Once again he came back to the Boise Basin, back to a different Centerville, a near ghost-town; for the old hills were jealously holding onto their treasures.

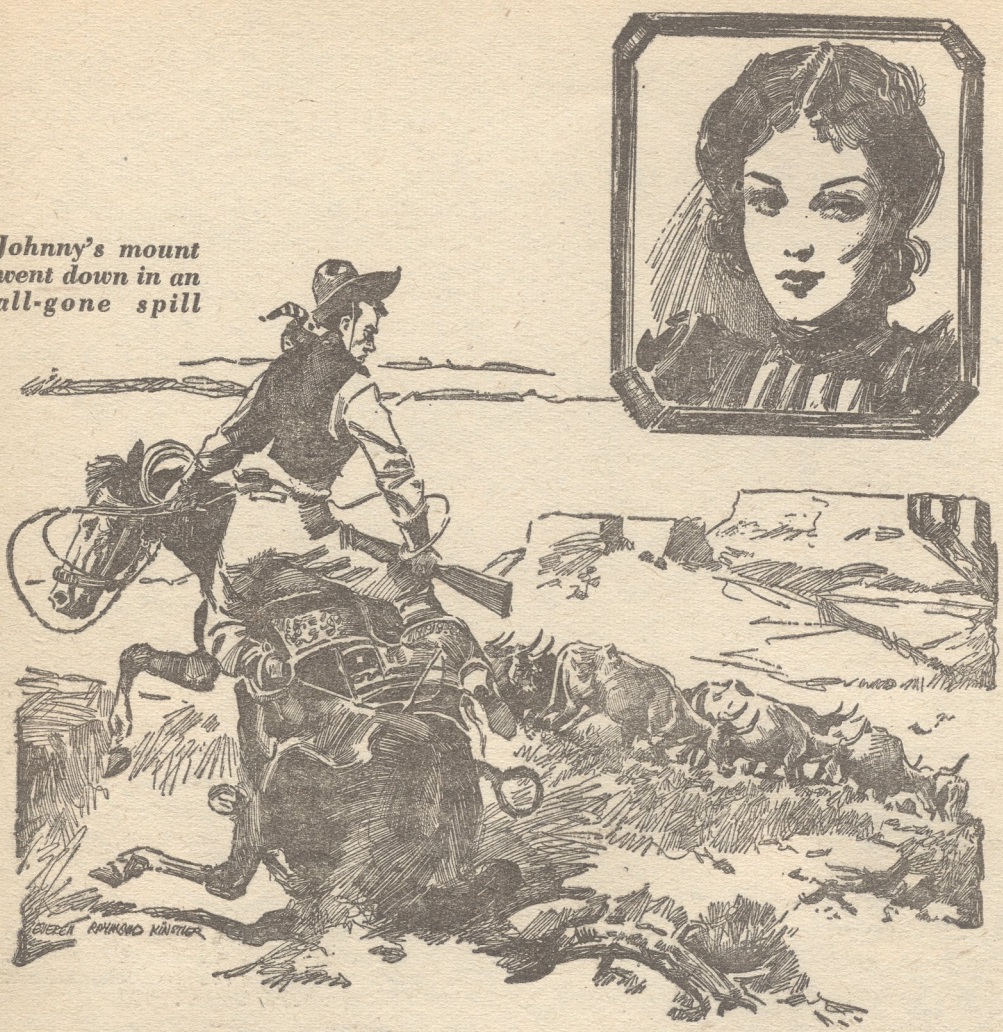
There were still mines in operation in Pine, Atlanta and Hailey. Bill Cooper still had the luck of the Irish. Work had temporarily slacked off in the vicinity of Centerville, but he heard that a number of men were wanted in Hailey. He prepared for the trip, then at the last moment decided not to go.

A FEW days later news was received that about thirty men had been killed in a snowslide at Hailey, and among these men were several who had gone from Centerville. Once again Bill had cheated death!

The Boise Basin country is comparatively quiet now. Old-timers still tramp the hills and run pay-dirt through the sluice boxes. But recent discoveries of thorium and uranium-bearing sand in the Boise Basin area and in Central Idaho give promise that once again there may be a large scale rush. For these are the elements that help make atomic power useful. Canada has recently had uranium rushes, and the same thing is apt to be repeated in Idaho. The old ghost-towns may glimmer with lights again.

But whether or not there is an uranium rush, Bill Cooper will be back in the hills again every summer, for the love of the hills is ingrained in him. The excitement of chasing the myth of sudden wealth in golden flakes still burns as brightly as ever.

He will certainly never like the fumes and confusion of the city for his home is in the quiet hills.



Johnny's mount went down in an all-gone spill

SCARED of His SHADOW

By Giff Cheshire

MAYBE it was the sultry weather that had made Johnny Shafter wake up with an uneasy feeling, or maybe it was the sense of premonition that for a long while had ridden him without mercy. He was the first one to stir and was washing the sleep from his young brown face when he noticed that the pasture below the ranch-house was empty.

It took a moment for the fact to register fully. The night before the pasture had held thirty of the shorthorns that Clyde Handel was buying with every cent he could raise, trying to grade up his herd.

Johnny swung over to the corner of the yard where he could see past the barn and calf sheds below the rise.

The steers weren't inside the fence anywhere. The old fear came up in Johnny then. Clyde Handel was off in town and wouldn't be home until that evening. Inside the house his wife and daughter apparently were still asleep, and Johnny was the only man on the place. He didn't have to be told what had happened. Word had been going around for weeks that a band of Piutes had jumped the reservation and were cutting vengeance licks at the cattlemen who had come in to claim the high desert. They weren't like the bold, open raids of destruction the old-timers talked about, but were more a sneak thieving of cattle and horses and the occasional ambush of some lone white.

Johnny steeled himself to face the thing. He was barely twenty, and if anyone had reason to dread Indians he did, having seen his parents die in an attack on the emigrant train with which he had come West two years before.

Knowing he had to do something, he went down and saddled his horse. The nearest neighbor was twenty miles away. If he went for help, he couldn't get back before the Piutes had driven the shorthorns too far to be recovered. If he waited for Clyde Handel to get home, it would be the same thing. He swung up and rode down into the pasture.

Even at this hour the sun's bright heat had an angry quality as it splashed on the ranch buildings and encircling meadow bottom and the distant rims. At the far end of the pasture Johnny found where the Piutes had broken open the barbed wire to run the steers out. The cattle's swinging hoof-cuts were plainly revealed. Johnny gave them a glance, noting they cut out toward the high rim to the north but he was more interested in horse tracks. From those scattered about, he decided there'd been at least half a dozen Indians.

Johnny sat his saddle a moment, staring hard into the distance. Maybe it was the old fear that made him pull his mount around and head back to the ranch-house. But he didn't have a gun with him, and he knew that before he set out he should tell Aelia Handel. There was every chance that a man stalking Piutes might not return. He'd have to leave something for Clyde Handel to work on when he got back from town.

Clyde's wife Aelia and his daughter Miriam were both up and in the kitchen. Johnny left his horse at the edge of the porch, and his strained face told Aelia Handel something was wrong.

In a sharp voice, she said, "Johnny, what's the trouble now?" The ten years she had put in out here in the wild country had taught her to expect the worst, and Johnny had often heard her claim that she was rarely disappointed.

"The shorthorns," Johnny said. "And Piutes. The pasture's cleaned out. Their tracks run toward the north rim. I'll take Clyde's rifle and see what I can find out."

Aelia Handel put a hand on the table to steady herself. She was a gaunt, weath-

COULD JOHNNY Shafter let fear of the Piutes rob him of romance?

ered woman who likely had been pretty when she married Clyde. But the desert heat and constant searing winds were rough on any human. Johnny knew she had a resentment against her husband for sinking every spare cent into expensive cattle.

"You can't go after them alone, Johnny," Miriam cried.

But the frank level eyes that met Johnny's shared his misery. Miriam knew about the fear that rode him. She also knew her father would be fit to be tied when he got home and found his shorthorns missing. He'd blame them all and mainly Johnny for letting Indians get that close to the house without anybody waking to challenge them.

"Figured I'd just trail a ways," Johnny said, "to get a notion of where they're heading."

Miriam nodded then. The flaring sunlight coming through the east window brought out the curve of her shoulders and breast. Her hair was the deepest black, her eyes so brown, they seemed nearly the same color. In those eyes, though she was a year younger, there had always been something special for Johnny since the day he had showed up here, alone and hurt and frightened in a way he had never fully recovered from.

Aelia Handel turned back to the stove, the tired resignation in her face deepening. She said, "Well, wait and have your breakfast, Johnny." Her voice held as much affection for him as for anybody else. Johnny knew it was only Clyde who wanted to get rid of him. "And don't you go trying to jump any Indians singlehanded, Johnny Shafter. Them shorthorns ain't worth it. They ain't even worth the sacrifice they've cost us. It'd serve Clyde right to learn how foolish it is to buy high-price stock for this wild country he claims is going to grow into a cattle empire."

JOHNNY wasn't hungry but he forced himself to eat breakfast with the women. Afterward he got Clyde Handel's rifle and checked it, then filled his pockets with extra ammunition. Miriam followed him out to the yard, and they both moved unconsciously to the blind side of the horse so Aelia Handel couldn't watch them. There were so many things they both knew and thought about but couldn't mention even to each other.

Miriam stood closer than she ever had and lifted her face and looked into Johnny's eyes. "I know how it is, Johnny. I'll think of you every minute."

He turned hastily and swung up to keep from blinking his eyes in front of her. He didn't look back and rode down across the pasture at a jog, his tall, lean figure sitting easily in the saddle. Beyond the pasture stood a thicket of ancient locusts, and on the far side of this Johnny picked up the cattle trail easily. The marks on the dry sandy earth showed that the Piutes had moved them slowly and quietly for a distance after cleaning out the pasture.

Johnny had no boot for his rifle, so he held it in the crook of his elbow. The horse was his own, the only wages he had drawn from Clyde Handel, and it was a good one.

In this part of the high desert there were only the brightness of the sky and the strength of the steady winds to hint at its elevation. All about ran a broad sage flat, which saucered gently to the high mountains in the west and on all other quarters was terminated abruptly by vaulting rimrock.

The trail ran north in the general direction of the Indian reservation, but Johnny didn't think that was where this party of Piutes was heading. The stock raids generally had two purposes: to furnish gorging feasts for the Indians after a lean winter on the government beef issue; and to bleed and discourage the scattered ranchers. Johnny had a notion that once the party reached a place where it could stop and fight if necessary it would halt for a camp and a feast. Thereafter the shorthorns would probably be scattered hopelessly and abandoned and some new depredation launched.

Johnny rode slackly and without effort, and though the wind was on his back the foreground seemed to fend him off with tangible force. It was raw, uncontrollable fear, and he had never called it anything

else. What he had overheard Clyde Handell tell Aelia was entirely true, "Why, that kid's even scared of his own shadow." To a giant of a man building a beef herd in the middle of Indian country the feelings that lived in Johnny Shafter were beyond comprehension. Clyde had had his own brushes with the Indians without getting a crimp in his steely nerves.

It wasn't that Johnny hadn't made himself into a good cowhand or that Clyde didn't want him working for him. The crux of it was Miriam and the fact that she thought more than a little of this stray from the emigrant trail. It puzzled Johnny that Clyde was just getting around to noticing that, for it had been clear, though unspoken, between Miriam and himself from the start. Clyde figured it was a thing to knock in the head, and the whole family knew he was seeking some easy, natural way of getting Johnny to find another job.

Johnny had come to know the country pretty well. His horse had wind and speed, and he trusted it. Clyde had seen to it that he learned how to use the rifle. But the heat bothered Johnny. Sweat began to stand on his face and bare arms and hands, and the desert wind was too hot to have a cooling effect. By the time he was half across the flat, Johnny was pretty sure that there were six Indians in the raiding party. The danger was that they would unite with some larger band lurking in the distance. That was a risk he had to take.

The trail began to climb with the lift of land, and Johnny slowed his horse to save it. At the top of the grade he found the band had gone through the rim notch, as he had expected, instead of swinging along the shale in an attempt to foul trail. Stunted junipers stood in here, forming a meager, pitiful shade. Johnny looked the ground over carefully before he entered, though the raiders were probably far enough ahead that there was little danger of stumbling onto a rear guard yet.

When he had climbed to the bench, Johnny got his first scare. Something cut into abrupt motion close to his right, turning him sick with apprehension before he realized he had himself frightened a shade-seeking coyote. He watched the animal scuttle into the distance and lose itself, and thought bleakly that most of the creatures inhabiting this country were afraid of each other.

But Johnny Shafter guessed he knew about a fear most creatures weren't forced to endure, a fear that was beyond reason and will and conquest. It was a fear that rose from a horror of life itself, a nameless terror that had been driven into him when he saw his mother's head split open with a tomahawk, when he saw his father trying for a brief instant to pull out the arrow that ran clear through his throat, when Johnny himself had lain so bloody and still and staring that the savages had given him up for dead.

Johnny had lain and watched their straggling emigrant wagon burn to the running gears after the Indians had ridden off with the looted trifles they wanted. He had had an arrow in his own chest. Later he had struggled on afoot, coming on Clyde Handel's isolated ranch by sheer accident.

This wasn't a natural fear in a normal life, and it was bad, all bad. Johnny Shafter jumped at his own shadow, exactly as Clyde claimed. And since he slept in a thin-floored attic where he sometimes eavesdropped involuntarily, he knew Clyde figured it was time to give Johnny his walking papers. . . .

The trail crossed the wide bench and began to fall away. The country ahead looked hard-broken, lying at jagged angles and painted in brilliant colors by the unobstructed sun. Johnny kept moving steadily, never held up longer than it took to circle an infrequent patch of rock-scabbed ground to pick up plain sign again. The very ease of it increased his tension.

BY THE time he was at the bottom of this grade he was resigned and settled to the task fate had assigned him. He was so familiar with the prints of the Indians' unshod ponies that he could have followed any one of them at a tangent had it been necessary. The sun steadily grew hotter, and the heat rose from the earth to increase the discomfort. The wind was most-

ly on his face now, parching him, and he flung an occasional unconscious glance at the brilliant sky as if in protest.

Three hours on the trail he got another fright when he grew aware that there were more Indian ponies than previously. While he stopped to blow his horse, he gave this careful thought, and presently rode back a distance to pick up the point where another half dozen ponies had joined the group following the stolen cattle. So a second raiding party, empty-handed, had joined with the successful one. That made a dozen bucks to think about.

Johnny pushed on through the steadily increasing heat. A little later heat lightning flashed ahead of him, and Johnny glanced up to see that a thin dark vapor had gathered. Soon an odd effect was produced on the reddish earth he traveled. The full brightness of the sun seemed to fall about him through smoked glass, giving an unreal atmosphere to these high roughs. Even the horse shied a little at the distant rumble of thunder.

Johnny had spent another hour in his dogged, lone pursuit when he decided the Indians were driving the steers hard enough so that he might be a long while yet in overtaking them. The distance between himself and home already seemed threateningly great. Each added mile increased the tension in him. Long afterward he came out into another high valley, stirrup high with wild hay. He pulled down his horse, both hoping and fearing he was close to the place where the Piutes would camp.

He could tell by the swing of the girding hills that he was in the smaller of two interlocking valleys. A half mile ahead of him, trees screened a narrows in which he could see nothing but dry, wind-rippled grass. Now the danger of stumbling onto a rear guard had become immediate. Johnny studied a while, and when he started again he quit the cattle trail, swinging left to keep to the brushy fringe skirting the hills.

He didn't try to go out through the neck of the valley, knowing there might be a sentry there. Instead he put his horse up a side ravine, climbing out at last upon the bald face of a high hill. He was instantly glad he had left the trail. A veritable sea of grass opened below him. Far out was a thin strip of bottom oak that ran the length of the big valley. He was high enough so that, through the trees, he could see the glint of water in a creek. Smoke rose from the thicket, but this was over a mile to his left. Because of the distance and denseness of the thicket he could make out neither cattle nor horses, but he knew that was the Indian camp. He surveyed the scene for a long while, fixing it in his mind. Then he led his horse back over the rise and left it, prowling forward on foot to search out the neck for a sentry.

Presently he had reason to be glad he had climbed up here rather than threaded the neck between the two mountain-looked valleys. Coming down on this fringe of trees in a careful prowl, Johnny caught sight of a half-concealed Indian pony. A brave had been left here to watch the back-trail, though he seemed to be doing his job with indifference. The fear mounted in Johnny then, and he halted. Presently he could make out the shape of the Piute, his back turned this way, ignoring the side slopes and expecting any trouble to appear from the little valley. Johnny could have dropped him with the rifle, but the wind blew toward the camp and would carry the sound.

Johnny's heart was slamming hard against his ribs. It would be only common sense to sneak off and hit for home as fast as he could travel. He would get there about the time Clyde Handel returned from town. Clyde would know how to manage this. He'd either scare up help from his scattered neighbors or he'd have Johnny guide him back here. Johnny wanted to do that more than he had ever wanted to do anything. But reason laid down another hard dictate. This was a highly mobile Indian party, organized for quick movement. There was a good chance that it would have gone on by the time Johnny got back with help.

Johnny Shafter, putting his fate in the hands of Providence, lifted the rifle to his shoulder, found his target and fired. The buck spun forward in an abrupt, clean drop.

In his mind Johnny saw the Indians he and his father had managed to kill, long ago, in that attack on the wagon. But somehow the panic of that hour did not rise in him now. Johnny reloaded and went for his horse.

He waited a while at the edge of the big valley to see if he had alarmed the distant camp. He could detect no threatening motion in the great sea of waving grass. Then he risked cutting out into it, heading for the bottom oaks and leading his horse to make himself less visible.

HE HEAVED a sigh of relief when he gained the shade of the woods. He went on to the creek, allowed his horse to drink, then stretched flat on a sand bar to quench his own thirst. Time after time fear went through him like a cold wind, but it wasn't panic fear, and he held himself to the job. He still could not tell if the gunshot had been heard in the distant camp. There was nothing audible now to disturb the peace of this sun-baked high valley.

Then, still leading the horse and keeping among the trees, Johnny started out in the direction of the Indian camp. When he judged he had covered the better part of a mile, he tied and left the mount. He went on, the rifle held ready.

He came to a place where the grove grew thinly, scowled at the added risk, then became instantly grateful for it. He saw why he had not detected any livestock when he took his long look from the high hill. The Piutes had moved it onto the blind side of the bottom oaks to hide them from anyone taking a stealthy look into the valley. Not five hundred feet ahead of him were Clyde Handel's shorthorns. At a distance beyond grazed a band of Indian ponies.

Johnny could see no herders. A wild hope flared in him that he dared not entertain. It was only reasonable that a buck or two had been detailed to watch the stock. Probably they were loitering in the shady woods ahead to escape the punishing heat of the open. If he tried to get in behind those steers and start them moving up the creek, he probably would be dropped in his tracks by a Piute's contraband rifle.

But the camp was still at some distance, and he could do a little investigating. He prowled forward, skulking from tree to tree. He realized the wisdom of his restraint so suddenly that it halted him in breath-caught surprise. So close that he could drop both easily with his rifle, if he dared to use it, were two lounging bucks, both naked save for breech-clouts. The opportunity threw Johnny into action before he had time to think and grow afraid. He moved with excruciating care, knowing he was up against the keenest ears in the country.

But the Piutes, careless in the knowledge that a sentry guarded the head of the valley, were talking and laughing in their strident voices. So the camp hadn't been roused by that shot. Johnny gained the last sheltering undergrowth, behind the two Indians and less than fifty feet away. He grasped the rifle by the barrel and swung the stock hard over his shoulder as he bounded forward. Both Piutes twisted their glistening bodies to look behind them. But Johnny was on them as they tried to rise. He swung fiercely, and the heavy stock of the rifle crashed against the head of the one on the right. Instead of letting out a scream of warning, as Johnny feared, the other snarled and sprang at him with naked hands. The swinging gun stock smashed him full in the face. The Piute gave out a grunt and went down.

Johnny whirled toward the other but found that the rifle stock had crushed his head. Johnny stood on legs that nearly buckled and caught his breath. Luck had been with him, but he knew how remote a chance he had of starting Clyde Handel's cattle up the creek, crossing the valley, and getting out and away without the main camp becoming alarmed.

He also knew he had to chance it, and there was no time to waste. His heart had nearly stopped when he stepped into the open meadow. He still couldn't see the camp, and he prayed that the camp's view of him was likewise screened. Bending as low as he could into the high grass, he

circled in carefully behind the grazing shorthorns. He knew them, and they him as well as they knew any human. He pressed in against them carefully, got the near animals moving, and after a few torturing moments had them all drifting idly in the way he wanted.

He slipped back into the woods when he came abreast his horse. He went to the creek and got a handful of pebbles. He didn't emerge again but led the mount through the woods, harrying lagging steers with the rocks. It worked better than he had hoped but it still seemed to take hours before they reached the point where he knew he would have to get the animals across the creek and drive them openly toward the little entering valley.

Again he allowed himself no hesitation. He mounted and swung out, rounding in the little bunch and forcing it to ford the shallow creek. He put it boldly into the open grass on the far side, aware that he had to cross the wind so that sound was more dangerous to him than the Piutes' eyesight.

Johnny was within a hundred yards of the neck opening into the little valley when he realized he was in for it. Keeping a steady watch in the direction of the camp, he saw two Indian ponies cut out of the woods toward him, naked bodies bent low on their backs. It didn't matter how they had caught on, they were coming. With caution no longer of value, Johnny hazed the shorthorns, lifting them to a faster and faster trot. When he knew they would pound on through the gap, he swung his horse. Behind the two oncoming riders he saw three others. It was likely the whole camp was mobilizing.

SWINGING from the horse, Johnny pulled out his match case. He struck a match, bent, and touched the flame into the matted grass. But the wind extinguished the match before the fire caught. Trembling, Johnny struck another. This time the grass seemed to explode as he touched it. The wind beat at the flames, driving them down the valley, concealing everything behind quick, heavy smoke.

Johnny had no hope of trapping the oncoming riders, but it would seal off this narrows for a time and force them to wait until the fire died down or detour into high, rough country that would work in his favor. He swung up again and cut out after the running cattle.

The steers showed signs of slowing, but he hazed them into a full gallop. Swinging a look behind, he saw that the fire had cut off the big valley. He heard shots in the far distance, beyond the smoke and fire, and knew it was only a display of temper. Johnny set to work to move his cattle as far along the home trail as he could before some of the more daring Piutes could manage to head and jump him.

The plunging cattle seemed to recognize their own trail and they followed it. Johnny had only to keep natural stragglers traveling. Clyde Handel had bought young stock, and Johnny kept up this hard gait the full length of the little valley. But on the climb he let the steers slow to a walk, and then it was that apprehension really hit him. There wasn't a chance he could get away with it. He had only a vague idea of where he was, while it was country the Piutes and their ancestors had prowled for generations.

But it was two hours before Johnny saw any sign of trouble. He was on a long, climbing bench formation with a drop off to his right, a climbing rim to his left, the distance ahead rising and falling roughly. Oddly he saw his horse twitch its ears, then it shied violently, and one of the ears lost a piece of flesh. It began to ooze blood before the sound of the rifle shot came up the wind to Johnny.

The little bunch had been moving at a trotting walk, but now it bolted forward. Johnny bent on the blind side of his horse only a split second before lead screamed above him, followed by the delayed rifle report. The Piutes were on the bench above him, and he had no chance to stand and fight. Only a miracle could keep his horse on its feet. He had scarcely thought that when the mount went down an all-gone spill, and flinging Johnny helplessly into the open with the rifle clattering away.

Johnny hit hard and fought blackness. He had the sense to lay still, and the shooting stopped momentarily.

Johnny figured it out. The Piutes would have to get down from the rim to head the cattle or come upon him, and he didn't remember a place where it could be done for a long distance back. He held himself motionless, knowing they would watch him a while before they pulled out. At last he tried stirring a little and when it brought no response he rose to his feet. The horse was dead.

The shorthorns had traveled out of sight. Johnny found his rifle, looked it over carefully, and started out at a dogged trot. He didn't know whether the Piutes would try going forward or back. It seemed likely that they would choose to go ahead since it would give them the chance to turn back the cattle. A glance at the hot sun showed it was a quarter down the flaming sky. He had gone a mile and still hadn't caught sight of the steers.

About now, he guessed, Clyde Handel would be getting home from town, and home was probably ten miles distant. When he heard what had happened Clyde would fog out on the trail, and he would ride it at breakneck speed. Johnny prayed that the Piutes had been forced to backtrack to get down from the high bench so that he could fight rear-guard action as long as possible. He planned to go on until he found a narrows a man might hold alone, letting the cattle jog on if they would, and try to keep back the Piutes until some kind of help came. He had no false dedication to Clyde's cattle in that; his own life depended on it.

Johnny had gone another mile when he found what was probably his best chance. The trail lifted sharply into a notch between two eroded, rock-studded hills. He could cover the trail, and there was not much chance of the Indians sneaking around and above him. He stopped there, dead beat, and carried rocks to build himself a fort in the center of the trail. Thereafter he stretched flat behind it, streaming sweat from the labor, turning sick from heat and exhaustion. He wanted to indulge his hope that the Piutes had given it up but knew he didn't dare. He could no longer hear the shorthorns, and the silence itself was frightening.

HE WAS fighting a drugging fatigue when the distance muffled sound of hoofbeats roused him. He was pretty sure it came from the rear, and there was no doubt there were several horses. Johnny readied the rifle, thrust the long barrel through the rocks he had piled up. After a dragging length of time a party of four horsemen broke over a ground swell, naked, bareback riders, driving forward at a hard pound. Johnny sucked in his breath. They clung to the trail, bunched together and confident. They had discovered the dead horse but no white man's body close by. They expected to overtake a foot traveler and finish him.

He let them come into range before he fired. The lead horse seemed to lose its hind legs. It skidded in a hunker and rolled over, the rider sailing straight ahead. The horses behind clattered over the still figure. Johnny jacked the rifle and shot again. This time he got a rider, but the horse pounded on. The other two Piutes had lifted their rifles and were returning his fire. Their bullets whined off the rock fort in the trail. The Indians came on fearlessly, swerving their mounts a little, firing steadily. Johnny kept himself cool. He shot another horse. It didn't surprise him when the remaining savage swung his horse in a wide turn, hammered his moccasined heels and cut out in the other direction.

Johnny pushed himself backward until he was over the crest of the hill, not certain one of the dropped Piutes wasn't playing 'possum. Then he rose, swaying, and plodded on after the cattle. He shoved in fresh loads as he lumbered along, doubting he had the strength left to make it home afoot. . . .

Dusk was coming over the roughlands when he met Clyde Handel. Johnny never had overtaken the cattle that had jogged steadily on a well marked trail that led to home, grass and water. So it couldn't have been concern for his shorthorns that

brought Clyde on. The man let out a joyous whoop when he sighted Johnny, who staggered drunkenly toward him.

"Johnny!" Clyde bellowed. "Are you all right, you doggone crazy galoot?"

Clyde swung off his horse and, without being asked, got his saddle canteen and offered it. Johnny took a careful pull on the tepid water, which tasted like nectar. He handed back the canteen, grinned and grunted, "Got a smoke, Clyde?"

"You need a drink worse," Clyde said. "Which I ain't got with me. But I can sure roll a smoke, while you try to square yourself for a stunt like this. There ain't another man in the country would have gone after them steers alone." But Clyde's voice was respectful.

Johnny didn't want to tell him that the steers were incidental. He didn't want to say he had known, as Miriam had, that if he backed down from the challenge he was as good as dead anyhow. He didn't want to mention that he had known Clyde was trying to get rid of him before things got too serious between him and Miriam. Clyde didn't know it had been serious from the time they laid eyes on each other.

"You're right, and it was plumb foolish," Johnny said. "But it happened the sun was straight overhead, when I found their camp, and I couldn't see my shadow."

Clyde looked at him in a strange way, then turned to loop the canteen over the saddle horn. He stood still a moment, and when he turned back he was grinning.

"If you chanced to overhear some of my talk to Aelia, it serves me right. Kid, I found out when I got home, this afternoon, that it was too late for me to break up you and Miriam. And I sure don't want to now. Johnny, can you forgive a man who ain't got the sense to read another right, and then can you forget it? You've earned yourself a interest in my shorthorns. You've got a lifetime job with me if you'll take it. But if you don't aim to, you better not come home with me, because my girl won't be able to hold herself."

"And I'll be too tired to run from her, Clyde," Johnny answered.

Clyde chuckled. "Then swing aboard. We might as well start off the partnership by riding home double."

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HOME

Sally watched Dave as he strode down the hill

DAVE CREGAR didn't know who the blonde girl was or what she was like—but he found out plenty when he went up against the boss of Wahoo

to RAFTER C

by Wayne D. Overholser

IT WAS not yet noon by the time Dave Cregar and Barney Ryan had delivered Dave's herd to Adam Bassett in Wahoo and Dave had pocketed Bassett's check for five thousand dollars. If they lit out at once, they could get back to the Rafter C by midnight and that was exactly what Barney wanted to do.

"It's your outfit," Barney said, "but I've listened to you talk all year about buying that white face bull. I know how it'll go if you hang around this camp. Bassett will get you into a poker game and before you slope out of town, you'll be plucked as clean as a Christmas goose."

"My business," Dave said.

Barney pulled worriedly at his wiry black beard. "Now look, son. I don't want to put in another winter hearing about that dad-blamed bull. If you keep your dinero, you can buy five bulls."

"Shut up," Dave said irritably. "Any day you don't want to hear me talk about a bull, I'll make out your time and you can get to hell off the Rafter C."

It was stupid talk and Dave knew it. He couldn't get rid of Barney Ryan if he put a stick of dynamite under him and blew him across the county line. Barney had ridden for Dave's dad when he'd been alive, and he'd stayed on after the old man had died. He was as much a part of the Rafter C as the one-room cabin and the pole corrals and the lush grass on both sides of Sundown Creek. Any other time Dave would have taken Barney's advice, but he wasn't listening today and he couldn't bring himself to tell Barney why he wasn't ready to leave.

Barney's black eyes showed his hurt. "You're the boss, Dave. I was just thinking of your own good."

"Sure, Barney," Dave said, "but I figure we've earned the right to blow off a little steam and this is the first chance we've had for a month of Sundays."

Dave turned toward his horse. It wasn't that he needed to blow off steam and he had a hunch Barney knew it. He just wanted another look at the blond girl. He had seen her a year ago when they'd brought a herd to the mining camp, and he'd seen her again this morning, driving down the road from Wahoo in a spanking new red-wheeled buggy.

If he'd told Barney that he'd spent most of his waking time for the last year thinking about a blond girl he'd never met and had seen only once before, Barney would laugh his head off. And he'd have a right to. Dave didn't even know her name.

Adam Bassett bustled up, calling, "I'll be right with you boys. We'll ride up the street to the Buckjack and I'll set up the drinks."

"And maybe you'd like a little poker game," Barney said sardonically.

"Why sure," Bassett said. "If you boys want a poker game, I'll be glad to oblige. Or I'll go over to Kelso's bank and identify you if you want to cash that check."

"I'll bet you'd be glad to oblige," Barney grunted. "I'll just bet you would."

Scowling, Barney stalked over to his bay gelding and climbed aboard. Dave had already reined into the street, wondering if he should send Barney back to the Rafter C. Barney wouldn't understand, and Dave had made up his mind a long time ago that the next time he was in Wahoo, he'd stay until he found out who the blond girl was.

Maybe she was married. Or engaged. Or maybe she was the daughter of some rich mine owner who wouldn't stand for a two-bit rancher like Dave Cregar coming around to spark his girl. Likely she'd have her nose in the air so high she couldn't see a man of Dave's caliber, anyhow. Those were things he had to find out. If one or more of them were true, he could quit thinking about her, but until he found out, he'd keep on mooning around like a fuzz-faced kid with his first case of puppy love.

A YEAR ago the blond girl had been riding a blaze-faced black. This morning she'd been driving a team of matched bays. Dave hadn't been able to tell what sort of dress she had on because she was wearing a tan linen duster, but he had paid special attention to her emerald green bonnet, and it had struck him as being mighty becoming.

They'd been a mile or so below Wahoo when she'd driven past at a smart clip. Dave had touched the brim of his Stetson and she'd smiled at him. That smile had not helped a bad situation. Instead, it had fanned the smoldering fire in him into a high flame. He kept telling himself that she'd smile at any cowhand she passed on the road, but telling himself that didn't put the fire out.

Any way Dave looked at it, he added up to a twelve-carat fool. There were a dozen girls on Sundown Creek who would welcome his attention with inviting eagerness, but he didn't have any time for them. He had to come up here to a mining camp and see a blond who set his heart to pounding so that it almost jumped out of his throat. Crazy, all right. Crazy as a man could get.

Dave glanced sideways at Barney's grim face. No, he couldn't say a word about it. The big Irishman was past forty, too old to understand. Besides he didn't like women, especially blondes.

Bassett had mounted and caught up with Dave and Barney. He asked, "Want to stop at the bank?"

Dave said, "No."

He didn't like Bassett very well. Not that he had anything against the man. Bassett had been fair enough both times Dave had driven a herd up here for him. He'd taken every steer and he hadn't haggled over price. It was just that the man was too handsome with his curly brown hair and white teeth and perfect features. Or maybe it was his eyes, as pale as ice, that made Dave instinctively distrust him.

Regardless of what Dave thought about him, Bassett was quite a man hereabouts. He owned the Buckjack, the most pretentious saloon in town, he bought cattle and

sold them to the local butchers, and he owned several mines. He was a kind of local kingpin, and because he was, he would know about the blond girl, but he was the last man in camp Dave would ask about her.

Wahoo lay in the bottom of a canyon, its false-fronted frame buildings crowding Main Street. The mines were on up the canyon above the town—the Empire, the Atlanta, the Lucky Lucy, and several others—the piles of tailings making the sides of the mountains look as if a horde of giant gophers had been working here. Now, coming into the lower end of Main Street, Dave could hear the pulsating beat of the great stamp mills that went on day and night, and he wondered how anybody ever slept in this town.

The street was crowded with freight outfits, four-team ore wagons, and burro trains bound for distant mines that were perched precariously above timber line near the top of the granite peaks. The deep dust, stirred by countless hoofs and wheels, hung motionless in the still air like sullen grey fog. Bassett had automatically taken the lead, skillfully threading his way through the traffic to the hitch rail in front of the Buckjack.

WAHOO had not changed, Dave thought, from the first time he had been here. It was a new camp, yet somehow it gave the impression of great age. Kelso's bank, the one brick building on Main Street was across from the Buckjack. The Mercantile was beside it. Across the front of a small building, wedged between the store and the hotel, there was a sign that read: Tom Lamont, Mining Properties Bought and Sold. There were the dancehalls and the small saloons, far less garish than the Buckjack, the hardware stores, the assayers' offices, and the blacksmith shops and livery stables.

A boom camp today, a ghost town tomorrow. As far as Dave was concerned, it all added up to a lot of damned foolishness. It seemed to him that a man had to be mighty hard up for gold to get down inside the earth and dig for it in the dark. Dave Cregar would take his on the hoof.

Dave reined in beside Bassett's horse, dismounted, and tied. He stepped up on the plank walk as Bassett said genially, "Come on in. I'll get out my private bottle. It's a good day for both of us to celebrate."

Barney came up, licking his lips. "Your private bottle, is it? Reckon we're good enough for that?"

Barney liked to fight and he hadn't had one for a month. Dave knew Barney didn't like Bassett, either, but this was no time for a ruckus. He wheeled to face Barney, demanding, "What the hell's biting you?"

But Bassett had taken no offense. He said easily. "Your boss is good enough, Irish, but I've got my doubts about you."

Mollified, Barney said, "Well then, we'll go along. Dave can drink out of your private bottle and I'll take ordinary rotgut."

There would come a day, Dave thought as he followed Bassett into the saloon, when he'd have to whittle Barney down. The trouble was that the big Irishman had watched him grow up, and the years had passed more rapidly than Barney realized. In his eyes Dave Cregar was still a kid who needed looking after. Dave bellied up to the bar beside Bassett, thinking sourly that if Barney knew about the blond, he'd be mighty sure Dave needed looking after.

Bassett motioned to the apron. "Set my bottle out, Mike."

At this hour the Buckjack was nearly empty. A couple of miners, one on crutches, were standing at the bar. Two more were playing billiards in the back, and several others had a poker game going at a side table. All of them eyed Dave and Barney with some curiosity, for cowhands were rarities in the Buckjack. Bassett filled the glasses. "Here's mud in your eyes," he said.

They drank, and Dave put his glass on the polished mahogany. Barney stood beside him, a head shorter than Dave and as thick-bodied as the trunk of a great oak. He raised a meaty hand and wiped the back of it across his down-curving mustache that was as black as soot, and pinned his dark eyes on Dave.

"That went down right easy," Barney said. "Now are you ready to ride?"

"You boys aren't in a hurry." Bassett filled the glasses again. "I don't mind taking your money away from you, Cregar, if you're looking for a poker game."

"Sure you wouldn't mind taking his money," Barney flared. "Make them steers free, wouldn't it? Well, you ain't pulling off."

"Shut up, Barney," Dave said.

Dave looked across the bar into the mirror and scowled. He was no beauty with his high cheek bones and long nose and wide chin. A lock of reddish brown hair was sweat-pasted against his forehead.

He cuffed back his dirty Stetson and felt of the two-day stubble on his cheeks. No sir, he wasn't any beauty at all, and a girl like the blond in the emerald green bonnet wouldn't cotton to a man of Dave Cregar's caliber. She'd want a pretty boy like Adam Bassett who smelled of cologne and knew all the right—

Outside a man yelled, "It's the Lamont girl."

Others began yelling in jeering tones. Dave, wheeling toward a window, saw that the blond girl was in front of the Buckjack in her buggy and men were crowding around her. For a moment he couldn't believe he was seeing right. There might not be much law in Wahoo, but it still was inconceivable that a decent woman would be subjected to insults on the street in broad daylight.

A burly man beside the buggy had reached up and gripped the girl's arm. As Dave ran toward the batwings, the burly man bawled, "Where's your dad? I've got a rope that'll just fit his neck."

SOMEONE else called, "A rope's too good for Tom Lamont. After what happened to Jake Dooley—"

Dave didn't hear the rest of it, for Bassett had grabbed his shoulder and spun him around. "Stay out of it, Cregar. They won't hurt her."

Dave broke loose and whirling back toward the batwings, lunged out of the saloon with Barney a jump behind. There were a dozen men around the buggy, all more or less drunk, their voices an ugly roar.

Spooked by the uproar, the horses began to plunge, and the burly man's grip was loosened. He fell back, swearing loudly. The girl had her hands full, sawing on the lines to bring the team under control.

The burly man let out a great bawl and crowding against the side of the buggy, tried again to grip the girl's arm. Then Dave had his gun out; he shoved one man out of the way, got the burly one by a shoulder and whirled him around. He let him have the gun barrel across the top of the head and with a grunt the man hit the dust. Dave jumped into the wagon beside the girl, waving his gun at the men around the buggy.

"Get clear there," Dave shouted above the clamor of voices. "Get out of the way or some of you will be getting lead in the brisket instead of a gun barrel across your noggins."

The girl was boxed in by a loaded ore wagon in front and a freight outfit that was headed downhill on the other side of the street. Neither was moving. The driver of the ore wagon was looking back, his weathered old face filled with bitterness. He shouted, "I ain't getting out of the way for no kin of Tom Lamont."

A man beside the bays bellowed, "She ain't moving till she tells us where Tom—"

"She's moving, bucko," Barney roared, "and so are you!" Grabbing the man, he lifted him and threw him over the hitch pole onto the plank walk in front of the Buckjack.

Dave motioned toward the freight wagon. "Start rolling. Give us room."

Dave still had his gun in his hand. When the freight wagon failed to move, he threw a shot that missed the driver's head by a foot and slapped into the front of the Mercantile across the street.

A man beside Barney bawled, "That's enough of that!"

"Is it now?" Barney yelled, and hoisting the man, sent him flying over the hitch pole to land beside the first.

The men wheeled on Barney as the freight wagon rolled down the street, clearing a path for the buggy. The girl had her team under control now, and she swung

the bays around the ore wagons as a knobby-faced little man with a star on his shirt ran down the plank walk, shouting, "Who fired that shot?"

"I did," Dave yelled at him.

"You can't tote your iron in town," the lawman bawled. "You're under arrest."

"I'll be back," Dave shouted. "I've got some things to ask you."

MRS. KILSO

The lawman said something Dave couldn't hear. He had his hand on his gun, but the look on Dave's grim face made him decide to leave it in the holster. Then the girl reached the corner and pulled sharply to her right.

The last Dave saw of Barney he was in the middle of the fight, huge fists swinging with devastating effect, men going down like pins before a bowling ball. Bassett had come out of the Buckjack and was trying to restore order. Dave had no worry about how Barney would make out. He liked nothing better than a knock-down-and-drag-out brawl, and he was as good as a dozen ordinary men any time. Besides, the marshal was there, so the fight wouldn't go too far.

Holstering his gun, Dave turned in the seat to look at the blond. She was pretty, prettier than he had thought. There were two bright spots of color in her cheeks, her chin was held at a defiant angle. Her nose had an upward tilt at the end that gave her face a sort of sauciness he liked.

The girl turned left after one block and went up a side street that paralleled Main Street. She pulled the team down to a walk and relaxed, laughing lightly. "Well, that was fun, wasn't it?"

She wasn't scared. Not a bit. Her bonnet had slipped off her head and Dave saw that her hair was the color of burnished copper. Her eyes were darker than he had supposed, not exactly brown but a sort of amber gold. He'd had the impression she was very blond, but he saw now that he'd been mistaken.

HE WAS wrong on another count, too. He had supposed she was soft as most girls would be who were wealthy enough to wear emerald green bonnets that were as expensive as hers and to drive a rig like this. But a soft girl would not have considered an experience like this fun.

"Not exactly my idea of fun," Dave said.

She turned her face from him, the smile still lingering in the corners of her mouth. "It was the most fun I've had for a while, seeing Jug Yager down in the dust like

that." She shrugged. "They wouldn't have really hurt me, but it's hard to tell just what would have happened if you hadn't bought into my trouble." She threw him a quick glance. "Why did you?"

"I'd have done the same for any woman." He swallowed, thinking that the time to strike was when the iron was hot, and it was probably hotter now than it would ever be again. "I was lucky, being in the Buckjack just then. I mean, having a chance to give you a hand."

"I don't savvy that," she said. "Why were you lucky?"

He took a long breath. "You'll think I'm plumb crazy, but I saw you last year when I was here, and I wanted to meet you. Then this morning I saw you again when we were below town. We were fetching a herd of steers up to Bassett."

She nodded. "I remember seeing you, but I—"

"I said I wanted to meet you, and there was opportunity, knocking on my door." He looked straight ahead, his hands fisted on his lap. He was going at this like a fool kid, but there was no backing out now. "I said I was going to stay here this time till I met you, one way or another."

She laughed shortly. "Mister, it's the kiss of death when anybody meets Tom Lamont's daughter. You'd best light out of camp as fast as you can."

"Why?"

"You mean you don't know?"

"How could I?"

"I thought even a stranger would hear about us. You know who Tom Lamont is, don't you?"

"Sure. He's got his name on an office downtown. Says he buys and sells mining properties."

"He's more than a name on an office," she said in a low voice. "He's the daddy of the town. Up until five years ago he was a prospector who didn't own anything but a burro and a pick. Mamma and I lived in Central City and took in washing to make a living. Paw was always after mamma for a grubstake. He'd had a lot of luck, all bad. Then one night his burro got away from him and when he found him, he was standing on a ledge of gold ore. That's how Paw made the strike. It's the Lucky Lucy."

Dave remembered the story, of how the prospector had picked up a piece of ore and got so excited he couldn't do anything for five minutes but look at it and yell "Wahoo," thereby naming the camp. Dave had always considered it one of the legends which inevitably spring up around new camps. He'd even forgotten that the man's name was Lamont. Well, that did it. He'd have about as much chance with Tom Lamont's daughter as a snowflake would in hell. Probably Lamont had been rolling in gold ever since he'd made the strike.

"I don't see why they want to hang him," Dave said.

"It's a long story."

She had been driving up a winding road. Now she stopped beside an iron fence. Here on a level spot above the town stood a big house, an ugly pile of stone with a lot of fancy colored glass windows and a mansard roof and a balcony across the front. There was a fountain in the front yard and a row of spruce trees on both sides of the walk that bisected the lawn.

IT ALL smelled of money, lots of money. Dave took a look, and his hopes struck a new low. The place suggested gewgaws and doodads that a man like Tom Lamont could afford, and Dave Cregar lived in a one-room cabin on Sundown Creek. He gulped and asked, "You live here?"

"I admit it," she said gloomily. "I live in Tom Lamont's Folly. Some of the folks like Adam Bassett think he should be hanged for building it. They claim that if he'd put his money into the Lucky Lucy instead of this pile of rock, Jake Dooley would be alive."

It didn't make any sense. All Dave knew was that in aiming at a star, he'd tripped and fallen on his nose.

He got out of the buggy and touched his Stetson. He said, "I'll be moseying on down the hill."

She leaned forward, a small smile touch-

ing her lips again. "Wait a minute, mister. I'm Sally Lamont. Who are you?"

"Dave Cregar." He motioned eastward towards the plains. "I own the Rafter C on Sundown Creek."

The smile left her lips. She asked softly, "Is it pretty there?"

"Pretty?" He had never thought of it that way. "Why, I guess so. The creek runs in front of my cabin. You can catch a trout for breakfast any day you want to, and when you go to sleep you can hear the creek talking to you. There's some pines around and a mountain right back of the cabin."

"It sounds like heaven." She glanced at the piles of tailings to the west and the mills that stepped down in descending levels. "At least it would be an honest way to make a living."

He looked at her, shocked by the sudden bitterness that crossed her face. It didn't make sense. She had everything and she talked about the Rafter C being like heaven.

"It's honest enough," he said. "You can say that for it."

"This is a phony world," she said, still bitter. "You live in a real one. Up here men worship the yellow witch. All they think about is cutting each other's throat to get her."

He still didn't understand it. There was no use wasting her time or his. "I'll be sloping back down."

"Mr. Cregar, you're a brave man. I can't thank you—"

"Don't try," he said brusquely. "All I know is that I'm a chuckle-headed idiot, or I wouldn't have kept my head filled with a lot of fool dreams." He couldn't tell her about his dreams when they were all about her. Not when he'd known her less than ten minutes. Maybe Barney was right. He needed to grow up. "So long."

This time he made his turn and had taken three steps back down the road when he heard her say softly, "You give up very easily, Mr. Cregar."

He wheeled, the tone of her voice filling him with quick anger. "Don't hooraw me, or I'll pull you out of there and paddle your—" He stopped. There just wasn't any use. Then he saw that she looked worried and troubled, and he had a sudden hunch she needed him. He said grimly, "I'll call on you tonight. If your pa tries to throw me out, I'll bust him one on the mug."

"Tom Lamont doesn't throw anybody out," she said. "I'm giving a party tonight. I think you'll be amused. Will you come?"

He looked down at the toes of his dusty boots, remembered his stubble-covered face. Amused, hell. He'd amuse everybody, including Sally Lamont. He'd be as out of place as a chicken in a skunk nest, but he wasn't backing down.

He cuffed back his sweat-stained Stetson and gave her a defiant grin. "You bet I'll be here."

Turning, he strode down the hill. He looked back when he reached the first switchback in the road. She was still sitting in the buggy, her eyes on him. She raised a hand and waved, and he waved back. He went on, wondering who would be amused the most, Sally Lamont or the fancy Dans she'd have at the party. It looked to him as if Barney Ryan was right about women, especially blondes.

DAVE REACHED Main Street before he realized that he didn't know why they wanted to hang Tom Lamont or what Jake Dooley's death had to do with it. Traffic in the street was still heavy, but there were a few people on the plank walks, and the fight was over. He felt a little guilty about going off and leaving Barney in the middle of it, then he forgot about Barney, for the marshal was waiting in front of his office.

When he reached the lawman, Dave said, "I told you I'd be back."

"I figured you would," the marshal said. "I'll take that gun now."

"The hell you will. When a man rods a town like you do, it ain't safe for nobody. I'll keep this iron."

The marshal got red in the face. "What're you driving at?"

"You ain't as slow in the head as you're letting on," Dave said hotly. "A woman

ought to be able to drive up Wahoo's Main Street without being stopped by a bunch of drunks. How come you stand for it?"

The marshal stared sullenly at Dave for a moment without answering. He was a little man with buck teeth and a pair of yellow eyes that smoldered with resentment. He carried his gun low on his right thigh, tied down in the manner of a professional gunslinger, and it struck Dave that here was a man who belonged to someone and that he had no business toting a star.

"She wouldn't have been hurt," the lawman said finally. "The boys were trying to find out where Tom Lamont is hiding out, and that was their way of getting the information. Besides, she'd been warned to stay inside after Jake Dooley got his skull cracked."

Here was the dead man, Jake Dooley, again. Dave asked, "What's Dooley got to do with Sally Lamont?"

"He's got a hell of a lot to do with her dad. Too many men like Jake have died in the Lucky Lucy because Lamont wouldn't spend money to make the mine safe, but he had plenty of dinero to build that rock pile on the hill. Well, the boys have had enough of it. If they catch Lamont, they'll hang him and I won't stop 'em."

"I don't know nothing about that," Dave said hotly, "but hitting at him through his girl is mighty poor business, and I didn't see you trying to stop it."

"She'd been warned," the marshal said. "Now you gonna give me your iron?"

"No. I don't figure you'll give me any protection and I'll be needing some if I meet up with any of them hombres I tangled with."

The marshal tapped his chest. "I'm Holt Meadows. That name mean anything to you?"

It meant something all right. There were dozens of Holt Meadows in the Colorado mining country, gunslingers who had made themselves a name and then managed to wangle a star-toting job to cash in on their reputations.

Dave was certain now that the marshal belonged to someone who ran the town.

The loyalty of men like Meadows could be bought. Dave knew how it worked. There was always profit in vice, especially when it was organized, and the one—some-

"Are you hurt, Dave? Are you hurt at all?"

one like Adam Bassett—who did the organizing and managed to pin the star on one of his hirelings could make a fortune.

"I've heard of you." Dave tapped his own chest. "I'm Dave Cregar. That name mean anything to you?"

It was plain bluff, for Dave was not particularly fast with a gun and he had no reputation as Holt Meadows did. Meadows probably suspected the truth, but he couldn't be sure and he was a careful man.

"All right, Cregar," Meadows said. "Maybe you will need your iron if you're in Wahoo very long, but I'm advising you to get out of camp. You made a mistake slugging Jug Yager. He's looking for you."

"I won't be hard to find," Dave said, and stepping past Meadows, went on down the street.

Dave went into the Buckjack, but Barney was not in sight. He wheeled back through the batwings, concern growing in him. For a time he lingered on the plank walk, rolling a cigarette and smoking it. Then he saw Barney come out of the hotel across the street and motion to him. Dave dodged through the traffic and came up to Barney who remained in front of the hotel, a toothpick tilted upward between his strong white teeth.

"I went ahead and et," Barney said. "Worked up an appetite in that tussle. Anyhow, I figured that purty girl would feed you."

Dave shook his head. "Don't reckon she ever eats."

BARNEY snorted. "Don't let a purty face fool you. Women are more like men than you'd think. They ain't made of bows and tassels. They've got stomachs." He took the toothpick out of his mouth and flipped it into the street. "Get her home all right?"

"Sure. I'm sorry about going off and leaving you."

"You can stop right there," Barney broke in. "The object of that tussle was to get the girl home, wasn't it? Hell, I didn't have no trouble. Bassett got things cooled off." Barney grinned broadly. "Quite a man, that Bassett."

"Might as well put the feed bag on," Dave said, knowing he was being rawhided. Barney had found out something he was holding back. "Come on and have another cup of coffee."

"Coffee," Barney snorted. "I'll have me another steak. I've had to eat so much of your cooking that I plumb forgot what real good grub tastes like."

Barney's sense of humor irritated Dave at times, and it did now, but he refused to let the Irishman goad him into an argument. Barney was probably still trying to get Dave out of camp before dark.

Dave walked through the hotel lobby into the dining room and took a table near a window so that he could watch the street. Barney sat down across from him and leaning back, patted his stomach. He said loudly, "They sure give a man puny meals in this place. The miners they feed must have pint-sized appetites, but I'm a two-quart man."

A red-headed waitress came up in time to hear what Barney said. "The miners we feed aren't hogs with a beard on their faces," she flared. "You couldn't eat another steak if it was on the house."

"On the house, is it?" Barney whooped. "Fetch me one. I'll eat it or pay double."

"Then you'll pay double." The redhead winked at Dave. "What'll you have?"

"Steak." When she disappeared through the swinging door, Dave said testily, "If you want to slope on home, go ahead. I ain't ready yet."

"I ain't going alone." Barney leaned forward, craggy face grave. "Listen, boy, when we horned into this deal, we bit off a hunk of trouble for ourselves. The Lamonts ain't got a friend in town. I got that straight from Bassett."

"He might be right," Dave said irritably. "That makes a damned good reason for me staying."

Barney shrugged. "Well, there's another thing. Bassett says that Jug Yager you slugged is a right tough hombre. You stick around this patch of hell, and you'll wind up like Dooley did or you'll have to beef that Yager fellow."

"Then I'll beef him," Dave said. "Did you ever know me to walk out just because I bit off a hunk of trouble?"

"Well, no," Barney admitted. "but strictly speaking, this ain't any of our trouble."

Dave was silent then, wondering what Barney would say if he told him how he felt about Sally Lamont. He knew, he thought sourly, without taking the trouble to find out.

The redhead returned with their steaks. "Pay up, Whiskers," she said, sliding one in front of Barney.

"Not me. It's on the house. Remember?"

Barney picked up his knife and fork and attacked the steak with the gusto of a man who hadn't eaten for a week. The redhead placed Dave's plate in front of him, shaking

her head. She said, "That man must come equipped with two stomachs."

After the waitress had gone, Dave said, "I'm going to a party at Lamont's tonight."

"A party, is it?" Barney's mouth sagged open. "Just tell me why you're going. Go ahead, tell me."

"I like the girl," Dave said shortly.

Barney snorted. "You know her about five minutes and she winds you around her little finger. I ain't saying it ain't a purty finger, mind you, but damn it, we're supposed to be raising beef, not sticking our noses into—"

"My nose, not ours. I ain't asking you to come in on this, Barney. Have I got to keep telling you that?"

Barney was working on his steak again. "Well, it finally hit you, did it? Funny how love works. A man meets ten women —twenty women—a whole damned crowd of 'em, and they all give him the eye, but it's just like looking at a bunch of yearling heifers. Then he meets up with the right one, and bang, he's nailed."

"That's the way it is, and I don't need your advice."

"You ain't getting none, boy," Barney said. "No sirree. I'm right there behind you."

THEY ate in silence, Dave's mind turning to Sally Lamont. He had no real idea what the trouble was, but he had a hunch he'd find out tonight. She hadn't invited him to a party just to amuse him. Then he thought of Adam Bassett, and suddenly some things began to make sense. When the ruckus in the street had started, and Dave had headed for the batwings, Bassett had grabbed his arm. He'd said, "Stay out of it. They won't hurt her." And afterwards Bassett had convinced Barney that the Lamonts didn't have any friends.

It struck Dave that Bassett didn't want the Lamonts to have friends. If that was true, he was up to his neck in Sally's trouble, whatever it was. Probably the business of stopping her buggy in the street was a rigged play to scare her, or perhaps Bassett actually wanted Tom Lamont hanged and was using Dooley's death as an excuse to stir the miners up.

Dave pushed back his plate, his steak half eaten. Another idea had come to him. Maybe Tom Lamont wasn't as wealthy as Dave had supposed. If money was his trouble, five thousand might help.

"Go ahead and wind up that steak, Barney," Dave said. "I'm going to the bank to cash Bassett's check."

"I'll go along," Barney said.

The red-headed waitress had been watching Barney eat. Now she pounced on him, saying, "I knew you couldn't do it. You're paying, Whiskers."

"All right, Red," Barney said, "but it ain't because I can't eat two steaks hand running. My partner got a sudden itch to move."

Dave tossed the girl two silver dollars. He strode out of the dining room and crossed the lobby to the street. A minute later he had stepped into the bank and shoved Bassett's check through the window.

The teller studied the check and then pinned his gaze on Dave. "We can't cash this. We don't know who you are."

Right away Dave knew that Adam Bassett's influence reached into the bank. Bassett didn't want anyone who had befriended Sally Lamont running around Wahoo with five thousand dollars in his pocket.

"I cashed a check here a year ago without no trouble," he said hotly.

"I wasn't working here then." The teller jerked a forefinger at the check. "It's a precaution we have to take. We don't know whether you're Dave Cregar or someone else."

Barney, standing behind Dave said, "Look, you dollar wart. I've knowed this boy since he was knee high to a four bit piece. He's Dave Cregar all right."

"Who are you?" the teller demanded.

"Barney Ryan. I work for Dave. We run the Rafter C and we drove a herd up here for Bassett. Now are you gonna pay or not?"

"Not," the teller said sharply. "You may be a pair of outlaws. Perhaps you held

this Dave Cregar up and took his check."

"I identified him," Barney bellowed. "What does it take around here—"

"And I suppose this man," the teller motioned toward Dave, "will identify you. It won't do, friend. If there's anyone in camp who knows you—"

"Bassett does," Dave said.

The teller hesitated. Then he said, "Get him."

Dave wheeled away, Barney muttering, "Outlaws, is it? Why, I oughtta poke a hunk of lead down that yahoo's gullet."

"I should have cashed the check as soon as we got here," Dave said. "Now we're in for trouble. Know why?"

"No."

"I don't, neither, but I've got a hunch that Bassett is pulling a sandy on the Lamonts, and he don't want nobody who's got money acting friendly to 'em."

They were in the street then, dodging traffic, Barney running to keep up with Dave's leggy stride. "You figure Bassett is fixing to crook us out of that dinero?" he demanded.

"No, but I'm thinking he'll tell us to return his check and take our herd and get to hell back to the Rafter C."

"Why, we ain't gonna do it."

"No," Dave said, "we ain't."

Dave shouldered through the batwings into the Buckjack, Barney following. Dave stood motionless, blinking in the thin light. He said, "Bassett ain't here."

"He's around," Barney said. "I'll bet on it."

Nodding, Dave went on to the bar. He asked, "Where'll I find Bassett?"

The barman was polishing a glass, bland eyes on Dave. "Why, I couldn't say. I reckon he's in town somewhere."

STEPPING close to the bar, Dave drew his gun. He said, "Friend, you're gonna have to be a little more exact, or you'll be surprised to find a little round hole in the top of your apron."

The barman's face lost its blandness. He worked on the glass for a moment, gaze sweeping the room as if seeking help. The billiard and poker games were still going on. If any of the players noticed the gun in Dave's hand, they carefully ignored it. The barman wet fat lips and motioned to the stairs.

"He's in his office. First door at the head of the stairs. It's marked 'Private.'"

"Thanks," Dave said softly, "and don't get no notion about grabbing that scattergun of yours, or you'll find that little round hole just north of your apron."

Dave took the stairs two at a time. Barney waited at the bottom until Dave reached the balcony before he followed. The bartender watched them worriedly.

Dave paused outside the door of Bassett's office and listened. Someone was talking, but the voice was not familiar to Dave. He gave the knob a quick turn, pushed the door open and went in, right hand holding his gun. Bassett was sitting behind his desk, swivel chair canted back. The burly man, Jug Yager, was across from him.

Bassett looked up, forced a smile to his lips. Yager turned his head and rose when he saw who it was, his eyes going to Dave's gun.

"Sit down, Jug," Bassett said easily. "Looking for that poker game, Cregar?"

"No. You said you'd identify me at the bank. I'm ready to be identified."

Bassett lowered his chair, the smile lingering on his lips. He said, "Maybe where you come from, folks go around ramming into people's private offices without knocking, but hereabouts they knock."

Dave moved to the desk, knowing that Barney was standing in the doorway. Yager had dropped back into his chair, big palms against his thick thighs.

Keeping his eyes on Bassett, Dave said, "Yager, I got word you was wanting to square up for me cracking you on the noggin. Before I leave town, I'll give you a chance, but right now I've got some important chores to attend to. Bassett, get up and go to the bank with me."

"I'm busy," Bassett said shortly. "Besides, I don't cotton to folks busting in on me this way."

"Get on your feet," Dave said, "or I'll mess up your pretty face so it ain't pretty no more."

"Do a good job," Barney said. "I've got Yager covered."

There was no smile on Bassett's lips now, none of the affability on his face that had been there when he'd accepted the herd and ridden up the street with Dave and Barney. Only his eyes were unchanged, pale and cold as chipped ice.

"We've got a jail in this camp," Bassett said. "I think you'll see the inside of it if you keep going the direction you're headed now."

"And you'll be in jail for stealing my beef. I want my money, Bassett."

"All right. I'll be busy here till three. Just wait outside. I'll go over to the bank with you then."

"And by that time the bank will be closed." Dave shook his head. "If you don't want to go with me now, cash the check yourself."

"I can't do that," Bassett said quickly. "I can't spare five thousand if our luck turns sour and the house starts losing. I tell you what you do, Cregar. Give me my check and you and Irish can take your steers back."

"No dice, Bassett. You bought 'em. I want my dinero." Dave motioned with his gun. "Now."

"Maybe you'd better give it to him," Yager said. "Five thousand ain't enough to do no hurt, and that iron in his hand is downright convincing."

BASSETT hesitated only a moment. Apparently he was convinced, too. Without another word he rose and went to his wall safe, opened it and counted out five thousand dollars. He brought the money back to his desk and laid it down.

"I'll take that check, Cregar, and you'll sign a receipt."

Bassett pulled a desk drawer open and took paper, pen and ink from it. Dave counted the money, then slid the check across the desk top and scribbled out a receipt. He said, "I reckon next year I'll find me another buyer."

"Next year might be different," Bassett said, "but now you're in a tight. You've got till sundown to get out of camp."

"Can't do it. Sally Lamont invited me to a party."

Bassett laughed shortly. "Won't be much of a party. Just you and Irish. Nobody else will go to a party at the La-nonts."

Dave had placed the currency in his money belt. Now he moved back to the door, asking, "What have you got against the Lamonts?"

"I'll tell you," Yager cut in. "Jake Dooley was my friend. We're seeing to it that Tom Lamont don't kill no more good men."

"I figured there was something else," Dave said.

Bassett shook his head. "We're fixing it so Wahoo mines are safe for men to work in them. Now was I you, Cregar, I wouldn't go to that party of Sally's."

Dave said nothing more. He backed out of Bassett's office, closing the door behind him. He said, "Go downstairs, Barney."

Dave remained by the door for a moment, his gun still palmed, but Bassett made no effort to stop him. Dave went down the stairs. Barney had moved to the batwings and stood there, motionless. The barman was industriously polishing another glass; the billiard and poker games were going on as if nothing had happened.

"Maybe they don't want no trouble after all," Barney murmured.

"They'll give us plenty if we're still here at sundown," Dave said.

He stepped outside and moved quickly away from the batwings. With his back against the saloon wall, he waited, eyes scanning the street. Holt Meadows was not in sight.

"You letting that tinhorn bluff you?" Barney demanded, "or are you going to the party?"

"Thought you wanted to leave town?"

"Not now. Not after that hombre started pushing. Never did like to be pushed."

"We'll need some new duds and a shave," Dave said.

"And I'm thinking the same thing you are. If we cross the street to the Mercantile, they'll plug us from Bassett's win-

dow." Dave nodded agreement, and Barney said thoughtfully, "If I recollect right, there's another store on this side. Seems like there's a barber shop right beside it."

"Let's have a look," Dave said and turned up the plank walk.

"I don't savvy Bassett," Barney said. "He was willing enough to go to the bank with you this morning."

"That was before we took chips in Sally's trouble," Dave said.

"I still don't savvy. He wasn't gonna give you the dinero, then he changed his mind. Why?"

"Maybe five thousand is just a drop in the bucket, the bucket being some swindling scheme he's cooked up. Or maybe he was afraid I would plug him." Dave stopped, fear of the unknown washing through him. "Well, I reckon we'll find out tonight what he's up to. I'm sure hoping it won't be too late."

DAVE and Barney each bought a complete change of clothes, Barney muttering that he saw no sense in sprucing up, that he wasn't invited to the party, that he wouldn't fit in with the Lamonts no better than a hog would make a go of keeping house in a parlor.

"You'll fit as well as I will," Dave told him, "and anyhow, I've got a hunch this is gonna be a funny kind of a party."

Barney muttered something about having to wear a store suit and subsided. They stepped into the barber shop for baths and shaves. Dave had always found barbers to be a loquacious lot, but when he threw out a few questions about Tom Lamont and Jake Dooley, and Adam Bassett's position in the town, the barber answered in grunts or meaningless monosyllables.

Dave was lying back in the chair, a hot towel over his face, when Barney, sitting directly behind him, said softly, "The marshal's here."

Dave came upright, jerking the towel from his face as he reached for his gun. Holt Meadows, standing in the doorway, laughed. He said, "A little proddy, ain't you, son?"

"Plenty. There's enough going on around here to make a man proddy."

Meadows came on into the shop, gaze shuttling from Dave to Barney and back to Dave. He said, "No need for anything to go on that concerns you. We like to settle our troubles without having a couple of cowpokes stick their noses into our affairs."

"Get on with it," Dave said, "if you've got anything to say."

"I've just got one thing to say," the marshal said. "It's come to my attention that you've got till sundown to get out of camp. So I'm telling you to be damned sure you are out, or you'll wind up in the jug."

"For toting a gun after sundown?"

"That'll do," Meadows said. "In case you didn't know, Adam Bassett's the judge hereabouts. There's times when he gets mighty damned rough on anybody who goes around breaking our laws."

"Or when anybody bucks his dirty little schemes. That it?"

Meadows' lips pulled away from his teeth in a derisive grin. "You can put it that way if you want to, friend." He nodded at the barber. "There's no law against your hand slipping when you're shaving under his chin, Topeka."

Meadows walked out. The barber stared at his back, his razor poised above Dave's face. Barney said, "Maybe there ain't no law against your hand slipping, mister, and likewise there ain't nothing to prevent me putting a window in your skull, neither."

The barber shoved Dave down in the chair and picked up the towel. "You don't need to worry. I don't like what's going on in this camp no better than a lot of other folks do, but the only thing that'll help is a few first class funerals and I ain't no funeral maker."

"What is going on?" Dave asked.

"I ain't no slush mouth, neither." The barber folded a hot towel over Dave's face again. "I ain't ready to go to my own funeral, and talking is a good way to send me there."

It was possible, Dave thought, that a good many people in Wahoo felt the way

the barber did, and that the Lamonts had more friends than they realized or Bassett let on, but when it came to a test between cowardice and friendship, cowardice usually won. It would be no great task for Adam Bassett, backed by men like Jug Yager and Holt Meadows, to intimidate the camp.

IT WAS almost sundown by the time Dave and Barney had been shaved, had taken baths and changed clothes. They took their horses from the livery stable and rolling up their range duds, tied them behind their saddles. Barney complained that he'd just as soon wear a set of armor as the store suit he had on, and besides, he'd got himself so clean that his horse would buck him off, thinking he was some Eastern dude.

He wound up allowing that no woman on earth was worth getting spruced up like this for.

"You don't know Sally Lamont," Dave said.

They rode up the street and turned left at the end of the block. When they were halfway up the twisting road to the Lamont house, they saw that Jug Yager was following.

"Let's swap a little talk with this yahoo," Dave said, reining up.

"Won't do no good," Barney said.

Dave hipped around in his saddle and saw at once that Yager had no inclination to talk. He too, had stopped, and was staring out over the camp as if enjoying the scenery.

"You see," Barney said. "Just trailing us."

The sun was not down yet, and Dave felt an urge to ride back along the road and have it out with the burly man, but nothing would be gained by it. Yager would say blandly that he was taking a ride. If Dave forced a fight and killed the man, he'd have Holt Meadows and the entire wolf pack after him. Bassett was the kind of man who wouldn't object to losing Yager if he could get Dave where he wanted him, and when he did, he'd have the five thousand dollars back to boot.

"All right," Dave said, and they went on up the grade, Yager following.

They reached the iron fence and rode through the gate. Barney clucked in admiration. "Quite a shebang," he said. "Ought to do for the governor's mansion."

"Sally called it Lamont's Folly," Dave said. "I've been wondering what kind of a fool would build it."

"You'll soon have a look at him," Barney said. "Kind o' curious myself."

Dave dismounted in front of the house and stepping up on the porch, jerked the bell pull. He heard the clamor of the bell inside the big house. A moment later Sally opened the door. She was wearing a leather coat and tan riding skirt; her hair was tied down by a blue bandanna. For a moment she stared at Dave, her lips parted as if shocked by surprise, then she looked past him at Barney and at Yager who had reined up in front of the gate.

"I—I didn't expect to see you again, Mr. Cregar," Sally said. "I thought you'd be on your way home by now."

"We oughtta be, ma'am," Barney said, "but this here Dave Cregar has got a stubborn streak down his back a yard wide."

Dave motioned to Barney. "This is my hired hand, Barney Ryan, Sally. He don't charge nothing for his advice."

Barney touched his hat. "Pleased to meet you, ma'am. You're right purty. I didn't get much of a chance to look at you down there in front of the Buckjack. I was kind o' busy, but now that I've got a good look, I don't blame Dave for going silly—"

"Shut up, Barney," Dave said.

Sally laughed. "Why don't you let him talk, Dave?"

"I don't trust him when it comes to talking. We came to the party."

"Aren't you a little early?"

"Not for this party." Dave motioned to Yager. "Was he invited?"

"No."

"I wasn't, neither," Barney said, "but I came just the same."

"You're invited," Sally said, tight-lipped, "but Yager never would be." She put one hand to her head and gripped the

door jamb with the other. "I guess there won't be any party, Dave. You and Barney better ride down the hill. I don't think you'll have any trouble with Yager."

"I ain't afraid of Yager," Dave said sharply, "if that's what you're getting at."

SHE glanced at the dying sun. "I didn't meant that, Dave. But you can't fight Bassett. I don't want you to—"

"You've heard we've been ordered out of town by sunset. That it?"

She nodded. "This isn't your trouble. You've got time to get out of camp before the sun's down."

Dave cuffed back his hat. "I didn't figure you'd do a dirty trick like this, inviting me to a party and then telling me to get out of camp."

She sighed. Her face was pale now, and her eyes were heavy. She said, "Come in. I told you today you were a brave man, but there is a difference between being brave and foolhardy."

Dave motioned to Barney. "Come on."

Barney swung out of the saddle, saying, "I'm coming. I sure love parties."

Dave followed Sally into the parlor, Barney a step behind him. Sally struck a match and lighted a lamp on the walnut table. She turned, her hand swinging out in a wide, inclusive gesture. "More of Lamont's Folly," she said in a tight voice. "I envy you, Dave, living in a cabin beside a creek. I envy anybody who can live without fear."

Like everything else about the stone house, this room spoke of money. There was a cavernous stone fireplace at one end of the room with filled book cases on both sides, a dark, deep-piled carpet underfoot. The big room seemed crammed with massive black furniture.

Fear! Dave looked at the girl's pale face. Those few minutes he had been with her in the buggy had given him the feeling that she did not know the meaning of fear, but he saw now that he had been wrong. He sensed that she had lived with fear for a long time and that it was close to winning the struggle with her stout spirit.

"Talking will be good for you," he said, and taking her hand, led her to a love seat near the fireplace. "Now what's this all about?"

She went without resistance, dropping into the love seat and putting her head back. "I did a foolish thing today. I was ordered to stay in the house until after midnight. If it hadn't been for you two, I don't know what would have happened."

"Bassett claims you and your father have no friends in town," Dave said. "I can't believe that."

"We have friends," she said, "but they're more afraid of Bassett than I am. I really intended to have a party tonight. I sent invitations out just after you left. To Pete Kelso and his wife. Pete's the banker. A lot of people like them. They've always come to parties here. But today they all turned me down."

"Bassett?"

"He's never invited. I guess we're snobbish, Dave. We have our social clique, you know. The top crust of Wahoo. It's phony, but I guess it's the same everywhere you go, and Bassett resents it because he's not accepted."

"You mean that's all this ruckus is about?"

She shook her head. "No. I just wanted to tell you about the party. I had a crazy idea that if we got these people together and I told them what had happened today, I could shame them with what you and Barney did. I thought we might be able to give Bassett some trouble, but they wouldn't come. They're afraid, Dave, they're afraid all the way down to their toes."

"I still don't see—"

She straightened and made a quick motion with her hand. "When Paw made his strike, he had more money than he knew what to do with. He built this place just to show off. Then the vein pinched out and he spent the rest of his money trying to find it. The Lucky Lucy's closed down now."

"Was it his fault Dooley was killed?"

She shook her head. "Jake was struck on the head by a rock. It could have hap-

pened in any mine, but it gave Bassett something to work on and he's got that bunch of toughs you saw in the street to see that anything he says goes."

"Your dad's broke?"

"He would be except for one thing. When the Lucky Lucy pinched out, he took a sixty-day lease on the Empire with a provision for renewal. The Empire belonged to the banker, Pete Kelso, but after Paw took the lease, Kelso sold out to Bassett. Two days ago Paw made a strike. It's worth at least two hundred thousand dollars."

"Then what in blazes are you worried about?" Dave demanded.

WITH a little smile she said, "It's worse to go broke when you can't do anything about it than when you've been lucky and still can't do anything. You see, Paw's lease on the Empire is up at midnight. The lease provides that ten thousand dollars must be paid to the owner or he loses the lease. Well, right now we can't raise ten thousand cents, and Bassett will commit murder to see that we don't."

"Where's your dad?"

"Upstairs in his room. A lot of threats have been made since Dooley died, most of them by Yager and his bunch. What they really wanted to do was to keep Paw from raising ten thousand dollars." She spread her hands. "They have. He's in bed with his Winchester beside him. He thinks they'll break into the house after him."

"You tell him what happened today?"

She shook her head. "It wouldn't have done any good. Everything he owns is mortgaged. If he could go ahead and work the Empire, he could pay off. If he can't, he'll be back where he was five years ago except that now he doesn't own the burro."

"I've got five thousand dollars," Dave said. "You're welcome to it."

"I know a young feller who wanted to buy a high-priced white face bull—" Barney began.

Dave rose and faced Barney. "So help me, if you don't shut up—"

"Dave." Sally was on her feet, both hands gripping his arms. "Even if your money was enough to help, I couldn't take it. You've done too much for me already."

"I couldn't ever do too much for you." He looked at her, smiling a little. "Sounds funny, don't it, but seems like I've known you all my life. There must be some way—"

"How'd you like a job cooking on the Rafter C?" Barney broke in. "Dave, there, is the kind of cook who gives you indigestion if he don't feed you nothing but boiled water."

"I'd like it," she said simply. "I'd like anything that would get me away from here. It would be like going home. Just being a hired girl—"

"Now you ain't talking sense," Dave said. "You've had all the doodads your dad could buy for you. Working on a cattle ranch wouldn't do."

"It would do, Dave, but—but— Well, I mean I owe something to Paw. In lots of ways he's crazy. He had to make all this splurge instead of saving his money. If I could just do something to help him now, he'd be all right again. I wouldn't feel that I had to stay with him and give parties and do things I hate to do."

Barney came around the love seat and looked down at the girl. "You wasn't out in that buggy just to make a show of not being afraid, was you? Didn't you have an idea you could raise that dinero?"

"I was going to Central City," she said. "My mother's dead now, but we lived there for a long time and we have some friends. I thought I might be able to get enough backing, but a couple of Bassett's men turned me back."

Barney motioned toward her. "You're all dolled up like you were going for a ride. What was in your purty noggin?"

"A last crazy hope," she said. "I was going to see Kelso. He could loan us the money. You see, Paw and Kelso and a lot of the other business men came here the first year. Bassett just showed up about a year ago and began getting control of everything. Folks hate him but they're afraid of him."

"Well then," Dave said softly, "we'll go see Kelso, you and me."

"It's no use," she whispered. "Yager will start shooting the minute we walk through the door."

"No he won't. Barney's going out to stand on the porch and smoke. He'll be out there in the light so Yager can see him. You and me are going out the back."

"But Kelso won't—"

"I think he will," Dave said quietly. "A man can stand being afraid for so long."

HE SAW color come back into her cheeks, saw the hope that blossomed there, and he thought how different she was from the girl he had supposed she was. Through all this past year he had known he must find out about her. Well, he knew now. The worst qualities he had feared were not in her; the best qualities he had hoped to find in her were there. If he threw away his five thousand dollars and if he never owned the white face bull he wanted, it would still be all right.

She rose, nodding. "It's worth trying, Dave. Somehow I believe you'll do it."

"I figure he will," Barney said. "He's quite a broth of a lad."

The sun was down when Sally and Dave went out the back door. Sally said, "We can take horses if you want them."

"No," Dave said. "Yager's got to think we're still here. The only reason Bassett wanted me and Barney out of camp by sundown was to keep you from getting help. He won't care what we do after midnight."

"I guess that's right," she said. "We'll go down the mountain on foot, but it will take some circling or Yager will see us."

He nodded. "Start circling."

She led the way past the barn and other outbuildings that lay behind the house. It was slow going with Sally taking the long way around and using the brush for cover. By the time they reached the road below where Jug Yager was watching, it was completely dark.

"I guess we can run now," Sally said. "I don't think he can hear us."

"Where's Kelso's house?"

"Below us. It isn't far if we went right down the mountain, but it's too steep. We'll make better time if we follow the road."

They ran, Dave moving clumsily in his spike-heeled boots. The lights of Main Street had come to life, and on both sides of the canyon lamps showed in the windows of miners' shacks. Directly below Dave and Sally were several sprawling, two-story houses. Here would be Wahoo's upper crust, Dave thought, Kelso and the rest of the business men.

They turned west when they reached the canyon bottom, the business section and cabins lying downgrade. From their front porches Kelso and the others could look down upon the rest of the town, and from his big stone house, Tom Lamont could look down upon all of them. That, Dave thought, was where Bassett aspired to be.

"Here," Sally said and opened a gate.

They followed a walk to the house and stepped up on the porch. There Sally hesitated, turning to look at Dave as if uncertain what to do. He said grimly, "Yank the bell. This ain't gonna be pretty. Make up your mind to that."

She jerked the bell pull, saying nothing. Dave sensed how much she hated Wahoo and the life that her father's desire for show had forced her to lead. Perhaps she even hated Tom Lamont. It would be impossible for her to forget that he had been a drifting prospector for years while she and her mother had eked out a living by taking in washing.

THE DOOR swung open and a small, pinch-faced woman stood there. She hesitated a moment before saying in an unfriendly voice, "Good evening, Sally."

"We want to see Pete," Sally said.

"He's busy."

"Not too busy," Dave said, shouldering past the woman into the hall. "Come on, Sally."

"You can't just break your way into our house," Mrs. Kelso cried. "I'll call the marshal and he'll—"

Dave wheeled to face her. "I got the

notion that Holt Meadows wouldn't come for nobody but Adam Bassett. That right?"

"You know it's right, Clara," Sally said.

Mrs. Kelso leaned against the wall, her face pale. She whispered, "I guess it is."

"Well then," Dave said sharply, "we aim to do something about it. Where's your husband?"

Mrs. Kelso motioned to a closed door. "In the study."

Dave turned from her and opened the door, saying, "Come along, Sally."

A man stood motionless across the room from them, his back to the fireplace. He was a big man with a strong, rough-featured face, the kind of man who would ordinarily be tough enough, but he wasn't tough now. A year of bucking Adam Bassett had beaten him down until he was a defeated, self-pitying man, willing to toe whatever line Bassett chose to draw.

"You're the cowboy who hit town this morning and you've been raising hell ever since," Kelso said in a low tone. "Well, I want no part of your hell raising. Get out."

Dave turned to Sally. "This Kelso?"

"This is Pete Kelso," she said, her voice heavy with scorn. "My father's friend."

Dave crossed the room to stand within five feet of the banker, gray eyes making a cool study of the man. He said, "How do you sleep, Kelso?"

The banker ran a tongue over dry lips. "Not very well. Why?"

"I'm fetching you a chance to start sleeping good again. You ain't a man no more, Kelso. You're just a sniveling pup with your nose in the dirt. When you quit hating yourself, you'll start sleeping good."

Mrs. Kelso, standing in the doorway behind Sally, cried out, "Don't listen to him, Pete. Send him away."

"Your man's going with me, Mrs. Kelso," Dave said. "Me and Sally and your husband are going to the bank. He's loaning me five thousand dollars and I'm giving him a mortgage on my spread. It's a good risk, Kelso. The Rafter C is worth twice that."

"I won't do it—" Kelso began.

"You'll do it," Dave said, "because you're afraid to die. And sure as hell that's what you'll do if you get ornery about this. Tonight you'll hate me, but when it's over, you'll laugh in Adam Bassett's face and be damned proud of yourself."

"Of course he's afraid to die," Mrs. Kelso said in a strained voice. "He's got a family."

"I wouldn't want a wife like you've got, Kelso," Dave said. "When I pick a woman, she'll side me when the going gets rough instead of pulling the little courage out of me that I've got."

"You don't know anything about what it's to live like we've had to," Mrs. Kelso screamed. "Pete's got a family, I tell—"

"Shut up, Clara," Sally said.

"I won't shut up. If Pete walks out of that door with—"

There was the sharp sound of Sally's hand on Mrs. Kelso's cheek. "I said to shut up, Clara. You've been nothing but a drag on Pete as long as you've been here."

Kelso took a long breath. "You're wasting your time, cowboy. As a banker, I couldn't loan you five thousand dollars on a ranch I have never seen."

"All right then. Loan it to Tom Lamont. You know about the strike he made in the Empire, I reckon. It's worth twenty times five thousand, ain't it?"

"Yes," Kelso admitted, "it is. All right, I'll loan you five thousand for thirty days."

"You'll make it sixty days," Sally said.

KELSO tipped his head slightly. "Sixty days then. In the morning—"

"Now," Dave said. "Sally, I hate like hell to ask you to go into the Buckjack, but you'll have to fetch Bassett to the bank. Tell him we've got the money to renew that lease."

"I'll tell him," Sally said.

Dave jerked his head toward the door and stepped to one side. Kelso crossed the room, Dave behind him. Mrs. Kelso still stood in the doorway. She put her hands out as if to stop her husband, her eyes searching his face, then she stepped back and stood there in the hall, trembling,

while Kelso left the house, Dave close behind him.

Sally lingered in the hall, saying softly, "When this is over, you'll thank me, Clara. We should have fought Bassett a long time ago. Now we've got to."

"You think I'll thank you when I bury Pete?" Mrs. Kelso cried. "I'll be a widow and I'll hate you, Sally. I'll hate you as long as I live."

Whirling, Sally caught up with Dave and walked in silence beside him. They reached Main Street and crossed it to the side the bank was on. When they reached it, Kelso unlocked the front door. He went in and fumbled his way across the dark room until he came to the gate at the end of the counter. He struck a match, pushed the gate aside, and moved on to his desk.

The match went out. Dave pulled Sally away from the door, uncertain what the banker planned to do. He waited, hand on gun butt. Kelso struck another match and lighted a bracket lamp above his desk. Dave had half expected Kelso to start shooting, but the banker showed no sign of defiance.

"Go get Bassett," Kelso said wearily.

Sally nodded and left the bank. Kelso unlocked the safe and counted out five thousand dollars. He said, "Lamont will have to be here to sign the note."

"Sally will sign it," Dave said.

Kelso shook his head. "Won't do. The Empire lease is in Lamont's name."

Dave saw it then. Kelso was certain that Tom Lamont would not leave his house, so he had been sure that he would not have to go against Bassett. Dave stood there, right hand tightening on his gun butt, staring at Kelso and realizing he had been outwitted.

There was one thing left to do. Dave moved through the gate and stopped a step away from the desk. Kelso had dropped into his swivel chair, giving Dave a thin smile. He said, "It just isn't good enough, cowboy. Bassett holds a pat hand."

Dave pulled his gun. "Then we'll call this a bank robbery. I aim to have that five thousand when Bassett comes in."

The banker shrugged and shoved the pile of currency across the desk toward Dave. "Then Meadows will throw you into the jug and you still won't have what you want. It takes ten thousand to renew that lease."

Dave grinned as he picked up the money. "I've got five thousand in my money belt. You ordered your teller not to cash my check, but that didn't do no good. Bassett cashed it himself."

Kelso's mouth popped open. He whispered, "You're lying."

"This ain't no time to lie, mister. When Bassett gets here, I'll show you the color of my money."

"Why did he do it?" Kelso whispered.

"A gun is a good persuader, friend. You and Tom Lamont could have done some persuading if you'd had enough sand in your craw."

"So you bluffed Adam Bassett." Kelso rose. "All right, cowboy. I am going to sleep tonight. I've bowed and scraped in front of Adam Bassett as long as I'm going to. I'll take your note for the five thousand."

DAVE laid his gun on the desk and put the pile of currency beside it. He picked up a pen, dipped it into a bottle of ink, and scribbled the date, the amount of money, and his name on the note Kelso gave him. Then he took the money from his belt and laid it beside the currency Kelso had given him.

The banker got up and walked to the safe. "The lease reads that if ten thousand dollars is deposited to Adam Bassett's credit by midnight, it is automatically renewed. I reckon you've saved Tom Lamont's hide. They'll forget all about Jake Dooley. That was just an excuse to scare Lamont anyhow. All we needed was somebody to lick Bassett once."

"But you ain't licked Bassett," a man called.

Dave grabbed up his gun and wheeled. It was Bassett who had called out, his handsome face dark with rage. Men were behind him, crowding into the bank, a lot of men it seemed to Dave—Holt Meadows and some of Yager's bunch who had

stopped Sally's buggy that morning. In the one brief instant that it took Holt Meadows to draw his gun, it struck Dave that he was a dead man. There were just too many.

Dave got Meadows with his first shot, his bullet striking the little man in the chest and sending him sprawling as if he had been knocked down by an invisible club. That shot blew it open. The bank was filled with the roar of a dozen guns. Dave got Bassett just as the man threw a shot at him that burned a white hot path along his ribs; he was vaguely aware that Kelso had found a gun and was using it with devastating results.

Another slug tore Dave's left arm. He brought a third man down, aware that someone in the street had bought into the fight, and then it was over as suddenly as it had begun. The remaining men in the doorway spilled into the bank, their hands up, and Pete Kelso shouted, "Get out of town, pronto. We'll hang the lot of you if you're in camp tomorrow morning."

THEY went like whipped dogs, and when the doorway was cleared, Barney walked in, grinning broadly. "Kind o' caught 'em between hell and a hot place, didn't we, boy?"

Another man was with him, a short pudgy man who was wearing a pair of pants pulled up around a nightshirt. He came toward Dave, his right hand out, a Winchester in his left.

"I'm Tom Lamont," the pudgy man said. "I'm pleased to meet you, Cregar, mighty pleased."

Dazed, Dave shook the hand, his gaze swinging to Barney who said, "We took care of Jug Yager. I told Lamont his girl was cleaning up the town and he'd better give her a hand. He done so."

Dave looked at Kelso. He said, "Thanks."

"Thanks! What do you mean!" Kelso shouted jubilantly. "We're thanking you, cowboy. It's a hell of a good feeling for a man to find out he's got guts he didn't know he had."

Barney said, "Sally's outside. I told her to wait for you."

Dave went out through the door, still dazed by the way it had gone. Sally ran toward him, crying, "Are you hurt, Dave? Are you hurt at all?"

"A couple of scratches," Dave said, and put his hands on her shoulders.

"The doctor's coming—" Sally began.

"He can wait." It was time to strike when the iron was hot, and it was red hot right now. "I ain't got much to offer a woman. Just a little spread on Sundown Creek, but I love you. Seems like I've loved you for a long time."

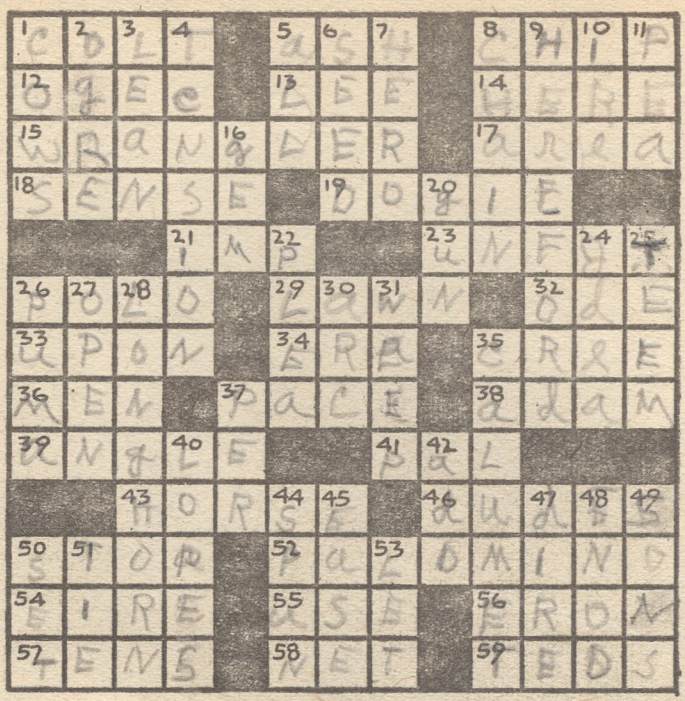
"You know, Dave," Sally said in a low voice, "I've remembered you from the time I saw you a year ago. I've done some dreaming myself. Crazy, isn't it?"

"We're both crazy, but I want to know if you'll come to the Rafter C."

"Of course I'll come. It'll be like going home."

He kissed her, kissed her so thoroughly that he forgot for the moment the throbbing ache of his wounds. He was not aware of the doctor who came bustling up with his black bag; he did not even hear Barney say in a pleased voice, "We won't have no white face bull, looks like, but we've got a cook. Now I'm going over to the hotel and show that redhead I can eat two steaks, straight hand running."

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

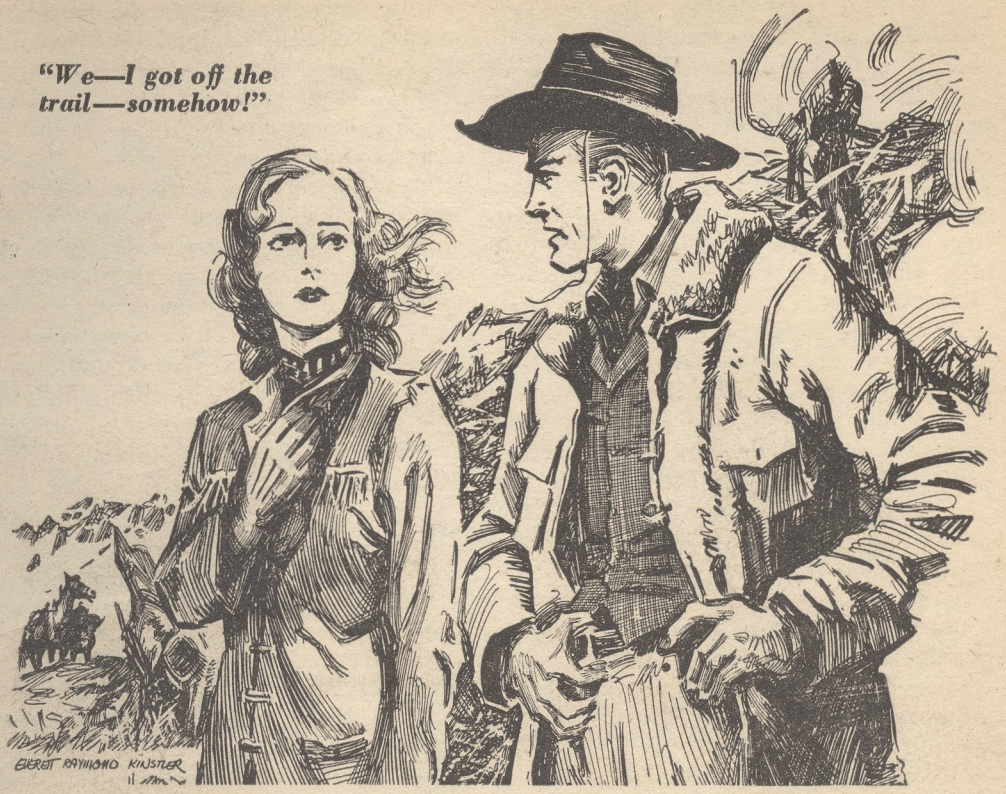
1. Young horse
5. Cigar remains
8. Fragment of wood
12. Curved molding
13. Civil War general
14. At this place
15. Cowboy
17. Region
18. Intelligence
19. Unbranded calf
21. Little devil
23. Not suitable
26. Game on horseback
29. Grass-covered ground
32. Poem
33. On
34. Before
35. Algonquian Indian
36. Males
37. Step
38. First man
39. Corner
41. Chum
43. Cowboy's companion
46. Would-be cowboys
50. To halt
52. Golden horse
54. Irish Republic
55. To employ
56. Emerald Isle
57. To care for
58. Meshed fabric
59. Spreads hay for drying

A	S	P		A	G	A	I	N		T	W	O
L	E	A		L	A	S	S	O		R	O	D
L	A	R	I	A	T	S		M	O	U	N	D
		D	O	M	E		L	I	N	T		
P	I	N	T	O		R	A	N	C	H	E	R
I	D	E	A		T	E	P	E	E		L	O
A	I	R		P	O	S	S	E		A	D	D
N	O		P	I	U	T	E		C	R	E	E
O	M	E	L	E	T	S		B	U	R	R	O
		N	A	B	S		F	A	R	E		
A	R	E	N	A		M	U	S	T	A	N	G
S	U	M		L	O	O	S	E		R	E	E
K	E	Y		D	R	O	S	S		S	E	T

Solution to puzzle in preceding issue

DOWN

1. Western cattle
2. Fabled monster
3. Thin
4. Condition of strain
5. The whole amount
6. Fruit pit
7. Villain's enemy
8. Series of links
9. White-faced cattle
10. Anger
11. Green vegetable
16. Jewel
20. Firearm
22. Entreaty
24. Notion
25. To abound
26. Mountain lion
27. Not shut
28. Breed of Texas cattle
30. Curved line
31. To sob
35. Indian pipe of peace
37. Through
40. Galloped slowly
42. Fuss
44. Whirled
45. Comfort
47. Dreadful
48. City in Oklahoma
49. Male children
50. To Place
51. Cravat
53. To allow



THE LAST DUDE

By William Freeman Hough

BIFF BUFFORD halted his weary horse on the slope above the C Star corral and stared with alarm at the dusty yard beyond. What he saw brought to him a quick surge of revolt.

"Oh, no!" he moaned. "Not another one. Not now. The season's over!"

Apparently Ann Chandler didn't consider the dude season finished. She was walking a tall stranger across the yard, holding his arm with one hand while she pointed with enthusiasm to the row of new, neat cottages with the other. He couldn't hear what she was saying to the fellow but he knew what it was.

"All new and quite modern for this country," would be her words. "I'm sure you'll be very comfortable, and the food is excellent. Our rates are not high, considering what we have to offer."

Biff had heard that same line of talk more than once this long, hot summer. Ann

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THERE WAS only one thing for Biff to do when

Ann got herself and the dude lost in a storm

could be very convincing, very insistent. And he, Biff, had wrangled dudes until he was sick of the sight of them.

Fat men and fat women, who clung to a saddle horn with both hands for an hour, and then came into Ma Chandler's dining room to add more lard to their frames. Kids who rode the tails off good cow horses and made more noise, night and day, than a band of war-bent Indians. And now another dude!

Something gnawed at Biff's vitals as he came down the slope and dismounted at the corral gate. He wouldn't stand for it. He would quit. It was just too much burden for soul and body. His loyalty to the Chandlers was being stretched too far.

He slapped his saddle across the top bar of the corral and started across the yard, hoping not to be seen. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a station wagon parked beyond the broad ranch-house porch. It wasn't a new car but it was big and looked powerful. From its condition he guessed it had covered many miles of rough road.

He meant to get into the house and make up his bedroll, for he was really serious about quitting the job. But as he laid a boot on the bottom step of the porch he heard, "Yoo hoo! Oh, Biff, just a minute, please."

Ann's lilting, enthusiastic voice came clearly across the yard, and he had to stop. She came back with the tall man beside her. His long, firm strides and swing of shoulders gave Biff the quick impression that he was no ordinary dude. Here was a man, he thought, who knew his way about. Not young, not old; a pleasant face but one with decision on it.

"Biff," said Ann, her wide blue eyes sparkling, "I'd like you to meet Rex Kirby who plans to be with us for a while."

Biff put out his hand and had it seized in a quick, firm grasp.

"Glad to meetcha, Mr. Kirby," he said, but his voice didn't support the affirmation.

"Mr. Kirby has come all the way up here to shoot deer, Biff. He wants to take home one of those prize mule deer that roam the back peaks."

Biff swung his gaze to the far distant hills and shook his head doubtfully. "I dunno," he murmured. "It's been a dry season and the bucks are way high. Awful rough going up there. And we're due for a storm any day now."

He caught Rex Kirby's quick, understanding smile and sensed that rough going would not be new to this fellow. As a matter of fact, there was an air of efficiency about the man that hinted strongly of the "law." Biff's stomach muscles crawled.

"Biff is just laying the groundwork to impress you with his guiding skill," said Ann Chandler.

"I'm already impressed," declared Kirby. "With everything."

"How nice of you," cooed Ann. "Now, Biff, you help him into cabin Four with his gear."

Biff walked around them and headed for the station wagon. "What a break!" he muttered. "Jack Chandler would turn over in his grave if he knew what the old C Star has come to."

HE'D MADE that same remark many times during the dude season and knew it to be true. Jack Chandler had been a good cattleman, and a dude would have affected him the same as a case of hoof and mouth disease.

But he helped Kirby get all the duffel into cabin Four, and at the door he said, "You really want to get one of those mule deer?"

"Sure do," was the quick reply. "Always did want to knock down one of those beauties."

"Well—" Biff stepped outside and gazed off into the distance. "I wasn't kiddin' about the weather, Kirby. There's been a ring around the moon for two nights now. We got a storm hatchin'."

"That's all right with me, Bufford. . . . When do we eat here?"

Biff sighed. "Supper follows right after the bell rings. You'll hear it."

"Sounds reasonable," said Kirby, tossing his hat on the bed.

As Biff marched back across the yard he thought of the guns in Kirby's welter

of equipment. Good guns they were, guns that some special officer might well carry with him. Biff's dusty brow wrinkled in a frown. This didn't look good, not one bit.

Ann Chandler met him on the porch. She'd had time to touch up her hair and lips, and she looked very fetching in her whipcord breeches and silk blouse. None of the enthusiasm had left her eyes as she said, "Isn't he handsome, Biff? Did you notice his crisp hair and the tiny wrinkles about his eyes? Strong, too."

"Nuts!" said Biff, the word pushed out by exasperation and worry. He would have walked past her, but she put out a hand and pressed it against his chest. He saw her nostrils begin to quiver and recognized the sign.

"Look here, Biff. You were none too cordial to our guest, and I don't like that."

"I've wrangled your dudes until I'm sick of 'em," he retorted. "I don't like that, either. The season is over and I'm finished."

"Oh no, you're not!"

"No? Well, if you think I'm goin' to guide this jasper up and around them peaks this time of year, you're crazy. It'll be snowing holy cats one of these days, and I don't aim to get caught in a blizzard."

"You'll do as I say," she cried, putting a foot down close to his toe.

Biff gazed into her flushed face. He'd always thought her the prettiest girl in ninety counties, and when she was mad she was twice as pretty. But he was steeled to his resolution.

"Look here, Ann," he said. "This ranch was never intended for dudes. This is a cattle spread pure and simple. If your pa knew what you'd done to the old C Star—"

"You've said that a dozen times this summer," she broke in.

"It's still true, Ann."

"My father would have wanted ma and me to run this place to the best advantage, no matter what we did."

"But—dudes!" he cried.

"And," she went on, after a quick breath, "you promised him on his death bed that you would stick by us no matter what happened."

"I sure did," he admitted. "But dudes was the last thing either he or me was thinkin' of."

"But Mr. Kirby is a special case," she said, her lips beginning to quiver.

"Special or no, I'm not nursing him on any deer hunt."

She backed away from him, really alarmed by his resistance.

"Biff Bufford, I hate you!" she gasped.

"That ain't what I've always hoped for," he said stiffly, and walked past her into the house.

Half an hour later, dressed in his town clothes, Biff entered the ranch kitchen where Ma Chandler toiled over the hot stove. She turned to smile at him, then her eyes widened.

"Biff, you're dressed up!" she exclaimed. "How come? Aim to spoil Ann's Western atmosphere at the supper table?"

"I'm quittin'," he announced. "Just came in to say good-by to you."

MA CHANDLER found a chair and sat down. She wiped perspiration from her wrinkled forehead and stared at him. "You're funnin', Biff!"

"Nope. I'm fed up with Ann's dudes."

"But—but the season is about over," protested Ma Chandler.

"She wants me to take this Kirby gent back in the hills on a deer hunt, but I won't do it. I know, Ma, that I promised your husband to stick by you and Ann, but there's a limit to a man's patience."

"I know, I know," said the older woman. "This dude business ain't been a roarin' success, Biff. We ain't much more than paid expenses, and them new cabins ain't settled for yet."

"And you've slaved like a dog all summer," he pointed out.

"And you ain't had one dime of your pay," she said. "Biff, it ain't right and I know it. We should never have gone into this dude business. This is a cattle ranch, and pa would have wanted us to keep it so even if we did have a couple of bad years."

"Well," he said with a shrug, "you know how your brother feels about it. He wouldn't stay here with the dudes."

"How's Joe doin' up there at the old line camp?" she asked.

"I just got back from there this afternoon, Ma. Joe seems to like his hermit setup. He growed quite a patch of corn and has it husked and stored now."

"Farmin'?" she sniffed. "Way up there on a itty-bitty bench. Growin' hog feed! What are we folks comin' to, Biff?"

Biff patted her bent shoulder, and noticed again the patched gingham. He thought of Ann and her whipcords, and bitterness filled him.

"You tell that girl of yours that this is the last," he said. "You tell her that from now on this will be a cattle spread. When it becomes that again, I'll be back to work for you."

Ma Chandler shook her head. "You know how stubborn Ann can be, Biff. I'll never make her change her mind." She dropped her hot, tired face into her hands. Through her fingers came the muffled words, "Biff, don't go t'night. Wait until mornin', please. You think it over, for my sake."

Biff was deeply touched by her plea. He put an arm about her and pressed her tired shoulders against him. "I'll stay till morning," he assured her.

Through the kitchen door came Ann's voice. "Ma, is supper about ready? I know Mr. Kirby must be hungry."

Ma Chandler did not answer, for she was weeping softly into her soiled apron.

When she got no reply, Ann came in. She saw Biff with his arm still about her mother and said, "Well, what do you know!"

"She's tired," spoke up Biff. "Tired, disappointed and sick of dudes."

"So?" A fresh storm gathered on Ann Chandler's face. "I guess that neither one of you realize what it means to us to have Mr. Kirby here."

"Mebbe we got ideas," said Biff and left the room. . . .

THE NEXT morning, with no early chores to disturb him, Biff took the luxury of an extra hour of sleep. When he wakened there was a deep chill about the house. And an unusual silence. He dressed and went out to the porch to find small flakes of snow seeding the dusty yard. Beyond the barn and corral was a grey blanket of weather. He went into the kitchen to find Ma Chandler seated beside the stove staring absently at a pile of dirty breakfast dishes on a table.

"Where are the rest?" he asked, reaching for the coffee pot.

"Ann and Kirby have been gone for over an hour," she replied.

"Gone! Gone where?"

"Well, I told Ann you wouldn't guide the man, so she saddled up some horses and went back into the hills with him. She aims to take him as far as Joe's line camp and try and talk my brother into the hunting trip further back."

"Holy old cow!" exclaimed Biff. "That's bad, plenty bad."

"Well, you know Ann," said Ma Chandler with a sigh. "She's bound to have her way about things. And Mr. Kirby was anxious to get started."

"He would be," nodded Biff. He swallowed a jolt of hot coffee. "Ma," he went on, "when I rode up to the line camp yesterday and came around the bluff trail up to the cabin, Joe Gates put a rifle against my belly."

"He did?" she gasped. "What's come over that old' coot?"

"He thought it was somebody else, one of them Indians from the Cooley Reservation. He says they can smell sour mash twenty miles off. Of course he don't want to fool around with Indians. Too risky."

"Whatever are you talkin' about?" she demanded. "What sour mash?"

Biff drew in a long breath. "Well, you might as well know it now, Ma. Joe Gates figured the only way he could help out, help you break even on this dude business, was to build a still. He's been sellin' a little liquor to the boys around the country and puttin' the money up against your grocery bill."

"A still!" she exclaimed. "Why, that's against the law, Biff."

"Oh, I've warned him enough times, but he said he'd rather take that kind of a

chance than fool with the dudes down here."

Moisture filled Ma Chandler's tired eyes. "The dag-nabbed old chump!" she cried. "So that's why he growed that patch of corn?"

Biff nodded. "Aimed to improve the stuff he's makin'." He tipped the coffee cup again. "And," he went on, "I don't figure this fella Kirby to be a dude any more than

BUCKAROO IN BOOTS

By Limerick Luke

A Panhandle puncher named Pete
Was proud of his very small feet.
In boots made to measure
It gave him great pleasure
To hear the gals say: "Ain't he sweet?"

I am. The word of what Joe's doing has leaked outside. Kirby is up here to investigate. Ann is leading him smack into what he wants to find. That means Joe is sunk. We're all sunk!"

Ma Chandler's lips began to quiver. "What'll we do, Biff?" she cried.

"I got to head 'em off if I can. Kirby must not get to that line camp." He glanced through a window. "The snow is getting worse and maybe it'll slow 'em down enough for me to catch up."

"I'll get you some breakfast right away," said Ma Chandler.

"No time for that," he said over his shoulder as he ran out of the kitchen.

Pausing only long enough to don his heavy mackinaw and saddle a horse, Biff rushed off up the hill trail into the teeth of the increasing storm. Already there was an inch of snow on the trail and the wind was whipping white whirls from the bench above the ranch. Ann and Kirby had better than an hour's start on him, and Joe's cabin was only seven miles back in the hills.

AS HE bent his head to the cold, wet blast, Biff considered his chances of catching them. Ann hadn't been so far back into the hills the whole summer long; too busy with her dudes. She hadn't visited the old line camp since her father had died. Maybe she wouldn't remember the trail. Perhaps the snow would blot out any familiar landmarks she might remember. But Rex Kirby had the appearance of a man who could make out a trail even though it was covered by a foot of snow.

"I should never have turned Ann down," muttered Biff. "I could have led Kirby miles off the cabin trail."

He pushed through a clump of vine maple, shielding his face against the whip of the stiff branches. He gained the top of a steep hill and met the rush of the higher, colder wind. What was he to say to them if he did catch up? Could he force them to turn back, using the storm as an excuse?

Kirby would protest, he knew, saying that the storm would drive the mule deer down from the peaks. Ann would insist that they go on to the cabin to wait out the storm. She'd declare that Kirby could shoot a deer from the doorway within two days. But somehow he, Biff, just had to argue them out of it. With Kirby back at the ranch there would be a chance to warn Joe Gates.

He saw not one sign of them in those first hard four miles. The snow was now

a swirling blanket that plastered him thickly and snuffed out any sign made five minutes before. The chill began to bite through his heavy mackinaw; time and again his horse halted and tried to turn about. Biff kicked him on, up and up, over one bench after another.

He came to the small creek a mile below Joe's cabin and dismounted in the scant shelter of a growth of scrub pine. After shaking loose his coating of snow, he stepped forward to examine the bank of the stream and noted that the fringe of ice along the edge had not been broken by hoofs. For him this was positive proof that the pair had not yet crossed the creek. His first reaction was one of vast relief; then he stiffened with a new fear. Ann was off the trail! She had missed it somewhere back. Which way had she turned, east or west?

Biff slapped a hand to his hip intending to blast out an inquiring shot, and it wasn't until that moment that he realized he'd come off without a gun. "Damn a fool!" he exploded and turned his back on the storm to think.

They'd be lost by now, he reasoned. Their horses would want to circle back, put rumps to the storm, but Ann was just stubborn enough to keep them heading into it. In which case they'd be bearing to the north and west. Biff got stiffly back into the saddle and swung westward along the edge of the creek.

His empty stomach did not help him fight the fear that built up as he fought his way along. Human beings could not live very many hours up here in the bitter cold. There was no shelter, save Joe's cabin, for twenty miles in any direction. Just how good was this man Rex Kirby? Would he have savvy enough to turn away from the storm and head for lower country?

Tormented by these and other thoughts, Biff pushed along, always keeping an eye on the bank of the creek. He drew up once when he saw that the fringe of ice on the south bank had been broken recently, but closer examination revealed the prints of a small, split hoof. Some deer heading downhill. At that moment he would have given ten years of his life to have heard Ann Chandler's cheery, "Yoo-hoo!" But there was only the whine of wind and the hiss of hard snow skidding over the frozen tips of the long pine grass.

At last, in his agony of apprehension, he blurted out, "If she dies up here, it's my fault! I should have been smart and played along with her. Just one more dude wouldn't have hurt me."

An hour later he gave up the direction, kicked his horse across the freezing stream and headed eastward. They couldn't possibly have come this far west and crossed the creek without leaving sign. He was growing more numb by the minute, and to put his back to the storm was pure physical relief. But his mental torment was growing.

The leaden sky was losing color when he came in around the base of a hill and worked his way into a stand of lodgepole pine. Here the biting wind lost some of its force, and Biff lifted his head to stare into the wilderness of white beyond. While he stared his lungs drew in a faint whiff of smoke. Smoke! Wood smoke!

IT COULDN'T be from Joe Gates' cabin chimney; that place was somewhere to the rear and higher up. He sniffed anxiously and smelled it again. Somewhere, not too far distant, was a fire. His heart leaped.

Like a hound following a scent he cruised into the wind, working through the stand of pine. Two hundred yards to the north a wisp of blue was born along with the snow. He sniffed it happily and drummed numb heels against his horse's ribs.

He saw Ann first. She was struggling with a hunting knife, cutting small branches from the pine trees and stumbling back to lay them on a small fire which had been built near the exposed roots of a blown down tree. Two horses stood with rumps to the wind, heads down. It took him another minute to locate a prone form lying beside the trunk of the tree.

Ann didn't hear him until he was almost upon her. She straightened wearily and

stared at him from under frost-crusted lashes. He saw her knees suddenly sag with relief, then stiffen quickly. "Biff!" she cried out. "Oh, I—I just knew you'd find us."

Biff dismounted and flailed the snow from his mackinaw. His stiffened lips managed an encouraging smile as he said, "Looks like a situation here. What happened?"

"We—I got off the trail somehow."

"You sure did," he agreed. "Plenty off the trail."

"Well," half defiantly, "I haven't been up this way in quite a while, and the storm made everything look so different. We were just about to turn back when Rex's—Mr. Kirby's—horse slipped and fell. I think he has a broken leg. Not the horse—Rex. He wanted me to go back for help but I just couldn't leave him here alone in the storm. Besides, I've had the feeling all along that you'd manage to find us."

Biff didn't take time to consider this backhanded compliment; he linked his arm through hers and supported her the short distance to the log where Kirby lay under saddle blankets. The man's face was a muddy grey, ample evidence that he was suffering, but his lips managed a smile as Biff halted beside him.

"You support Ann's faith in you, Bufford," he said. "She kept saying that you'd come. Also, she has a native resourcefulness, as witness the fire and this sheltered spot."

"Ann's all right," granted Biff. "How about you? How bad is it?"

"Both bones in the lower left leg broken, I think. It happened too fast for me to get clear. As a dude I'm a pretty poor risk, eh?"

"You're no dude," said Biff. He bent down to examine the leg, then straightened up and turned to Ann. "Use the knife to cut that saddle blanket into strips," he directed. "I'll find a branch to make a temporary splint."

"Do—do you think we can move him, Biff?" she asked.

"Move him? We've got to move him. Can't stay here and freeze, the lot of us."

"But he couldn't stand it to ride all the way down to the ranch."

Biff did not reply, for it was obvious that Kirby couldn't stand the jolting of all those downhill miles. It would be tough enough to get him to the line camp.

ANN had the strips ready when he came back with a limb the thickness of his wrist and four feet long. With her help he fashioned the splint on the man's leg, binding it tightly above the knee. Kirby lay there with lips between his teeth until it was finished, then he said, "I was wondering if you couldn't make a sort of pole sled for me to ride. You know, Bufford, some poles lashed together like a travois."

Biff shook his head. "No good, Kirby. This is rough country and you'd turn over and—"

"Break more of my fool bones, eh?" put in Kirby. "Well, of course you're right. So what now?"

"You've got to ride," said Biff. "No other way."

"How far must it be?"

Biff shrugged. "I don't know, exactly. I'll try and get you to the line camp. That's where you wanted to go, wasn't it?"

The man nodded. He said, "We'll leave my guns here. No use packing all the extra weight. Besides, I won't need them now."

"You didn't need 'em in the first place," muttered Biff.

It took him and Ann ten minutes to get Kirby up and astride a horse. The man swayed in the saddle, his jaws locked against the pain. His splinted leg stuck out at an angle that dictated careful going. When Biff would have mounted up behind him to hold him steady he declared that he would make it alone or not at all. The fellow had nerve, all right, and Biff grudgingly admitted it.

When they were ready, Biff led the way, with Kirby in the middle and Ann bringing up the rear. Slowly they worked their way out of the growth of pine and along a bench which curved westward toward the trail. Biff turned in the saddle to put a shoulder into the cold wind and watch the man be-

hind him. Kirby was not swaying now; he rode with hands about the saddle horn and head bent to the icy blast. Ann was keeping close behind, ready to lend a hand if her guest started to fall from the saddle.

"Worrying about him," said Biff to himself. "But just wait until she finds out what he's up to."

Biff wasn't very proud of what he was doing about this matter, but he had no choice. You just couldn't let a man stay out in this storm and freeze. He felt that Ma Chandler would understand and approve. It would be a lesson for Ann, too, a final lesson. And somehow Biff couldn't anticipate any joy in her disillusionment.

He found the snow-buried trail where it crossed a bleak and barren ledge, and turned northward. Kirby was now lying almost across the neck of his horse, the splinted leg sticking grotesquely out behind. Ann was a snow-covered figure at the rear, appearing smaller in the half light even with her body erect against the storm. They went up and up, and came to a flat bench with cornstalks sticking up through the snow. Beyond loomed a mound of white —the line camp. Blue smoke sifted upward from a rusty chimney.

Biff halted them before the cabin door, dropped to the ground and stumbled back to Kirby. With Ann's help he got the man down. As he steadied him Biff said, "Well, here goes everything all to hell."

Ann's cold lips moved. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"Let it ride for now. You go fetch your uncle to help me pack this man inside."

The noise they made had brought Joe Gates to his door. He stood there, staring with surprise into the fading light of the day, his mouth open and his grey beard bobbing. Ann called to him, and he came out to them. He needed to hear no directions, sensing the necessity of quick action. He took the other side of Kirby, and they carried him inside.

"Right here on my bunk," said Joe Gates. "Busted leg, eh?"

Biff nodded. He was sniffing the air for the scent of sour mash or moonshine. Just as soon as possible he would warn Joe about Kirby. He turned to see Ann reeling under the impact of sudden warmth and reaction. Leaping forward he caught her, lowered her into a chair.

"Just sit there," he ordered. "Relax."

Ann pressed her face against his cold, damp leg and her shoulders shook as she fought off emotions of relief. "Biff," she whispered, "you're wonderful."

"I could argue that point with you. Right now I'm more scared than anything else."

"Scared? Now? Why, thanks to you, we're safe here at the camp."

BIFF hurried to where Joe Gates stood staring down at the grey face of Rex Kirby. "Get some coffee, Joe," he said. "Make it hot and plenty of it. Nothing but coffee. Understand?"

"Sure," said the old man. "Got a pot of coffee right here on the stove, but what this man needs is—"

"Coffee!" snapped Biff.

Ann came forward to stand near the bunk. She watched Kirby manage a swallow or two of coffee, saw his eyes open and a faint smile come to his lips.

"I'm sorry I've messed up your visit," she said. "I did so want you to see the land and get a deer."

"Deer?" spoke up Joe Gates. "Shucks, if you'd waited a couple of days this storm would of drove the deer right down to the C Star corral."

"The deer doesn't matter so much," said Kirby faintly. "I've seen what I came for."

Biff swallowed stiffly. He nudged Joe Gates and said, "How about rustlin' a little grub, Joe? I ain't had breakfast yet."

"Sure thing," said Joe Gates cheerfully. "Have it ready in a jiffy. I've got to be quite a cook up here—among other things."

"You started out without breakfast, Biff?" said Ann.

"When your mother told me you'd started out I didn't wait for eats. I had to catch you if I could."

"Somehow I couldn't believe that you'd leave the C Star. That's why I had the feeling you'd find us after we got lost."

"Well, believe me, for a while I didn't

think I would find you. It got me to feelin' kind of sick inside. Mad, too. I wanted to turn you over my knee and paddle you for ever startin' out in such a storm."

"But you wouldn't take it on, Biff! I had to fetch Rex because it means so much."

"You don't know the half of it," he said under his breath. "If we're lucky, maybe—"

Joe Gates interrupted him by coming forward with a tin cup in his hand. "Got the stew cookin' up," he announced, "but before you eat here's somethin' to warm the cockles of your heart. Good for man or beast. Made it m'self and know whereof I speak."

"Oh, Lord!" groaned Biff. He was thinking of taking the cup from Joe and heaving it outside when Kirby stirred on the bunk, and propped himself up on an elbow.

"If what's in that cup is what I'm thinking it is, how about letting me sample it?" he said.

"Why, sure, friend," said Joe trustfully. "Brace yourself and take right aholt."

Rex Kirby sniffed at the cup's contents, put the edge of it to his lips and swallowed. His eyes flew wide open and then closed halfway.

Biff groaned again and Ann asked him, "What's the matter, Biff?"

"You'll know in a minute."

Rex Kirby said, "Whoosh! That's not bad at all. Just what a man with a broken leg needs. You say that you made it yourself?"

"Yep." Joe Gates bristled with pride. "Some of the neighbors say it's right good, too. They buy about all I can make up. Sort of helps the C Star with dude expenses."

"That sinks us," said Biff with a helpless shrug. "I didn't want this to happen whatever."

It took Ann Chandler half a minute to comprehend.

"You mean, Uncle Joe, that you've been making moonshine up here?"

"Why not?" he bristled. "The only way I could help out this summer. I wouldn't mess around with no dudes, so—"

"This," said Biff, "is the spot marked X on Kirby's map, and you were leading him right to it."

KIRBY, listening to the conversation, smiled broadly. "I get the drift of your thoughts, Bufford, but you're wrong. To prove it, I'm ordering two gallons of this stuff from Joe, when and if I ever get both legs to working again. I'll take it back to Texas and prove to some gents down there what real moon is."

"Texas?" said Biff blankly.

Ann took his hand and pressed it gently. "I was going to tell you if the deal went through," she said. "Rex owns a big ranch down in Texas but needs some summer range. He advertised for it and I answered, inviting him up here to see the ranch for himself, and said if he liked to hunt to bring a gun along."

"And I like the looks of the country, Ann," said Kirby. "So far as I'm concerned it's a deal."

Biff looked from one to the other of them. "Well, of course, I'm just a hired hand," he said. "I wouldn't know about a plan to give up dude ranching and go back to livestock."

Ann gripped his hand tighter. "I meant to tell you later on, Biff, if the deal went through. It was the easiest way to save my pride, admit that I was wrong for ever setting up a dude spread."

"I conspired with her," said Kirby from the bunk. "We thought it would be a pleasant surprise for you."

Biff could understand her desire to find an easy way to admit her mistake. What surprised and stunned him most was the fact that Rex Kirby was not an officer. He turned from her to stare out a window, into the bleak world outside. Ann followed him and again took his hand.

"Will you forgive me, Biff?" she asked.

"Listen," he said huskily. "For a while today I was afraid I'd never see you alive again. I don't reckon I could have stood that, Ann. Even if it had turned out the way I thought it would, I couldn't have stopped lovin' you. As it is—"

"You forgive me, Biff?"

He slipped an arm about her and drew her close.

"I reckon there's some forgivin' to do on both sides, honey."

"If both of us will always remember to forgive and forget we'll get along fine together, Biff."

"That's a deal," he declared.

Behind them Joe Gates was putting plates of food on the table.

"Hey you kids, come and get it afore it gets cold," he called.

When they didn't respond, the man on the bunk smiled up at Joe and said, "There's times, my friend, when food is a minor item of consequence. I guess this is one of those times."

Joe Gates stroked his beard. He said, "Yonder is somethin' I've been wantin' to see for quite a long time. Let's drink to it, eh?"

"Why not," said Rex Kirby. "And to the last dude on the C Star."

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. What are lady guests on a Western dude ranch frequently called?

2. In gearing up his mount, which does the cowboy usually put on the horse first, saddle or bridle?

3. In its turbulent history, what state had the following capitals: Washington-on-the-Brazos, Harrisburg, Galveston, Velasco, Quintana, Columbia, Houston and Austin?

4. Besides holding the bridle reins with his left hand while throwing the saddle on with his right, what does a cowboy often do to make sure a spooky horse will stand while being saddled?

5. Most chuckwagons carry a spade or shovel. What is its most common use?

6. What particular type of Western frontiersmen usually wore their hair long, and had fringes on their buckskin shirts?

7. The Tonto Natural Bridge is a scenic wonder in what state?

8. In proportion to the animal's own weight, which makes a larger track, horse or cow?

9. What is the most noticeable difference between a cowboy spur and a U.S. calvalry spur?

10. In which hand does the cowboy usually hold the bridle or hackamore reins while riding?

——*Rattlesnake Robert*

You will find the answers to these questions on page 118. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

They wheeled away from the stage, the posses' shots singing over their heads

Pearl Hart, Bandit

by Lou Hollie

EVEN FIVE years can sometimes mean death, and that was what people considered even a short sentence to the old Territorial Prison in Yuma, Ariz. Its walls were dank, dark and four feet thick, and a stay within them was thought to give a prisoner tuberculosis. Yet it was here that the West's notorious woman bandit served a five-year sentence.

Five years in the women's cell block—if it could be called that. It consisted of four holes, about five feet square, dug out of a clay and granite bank that faced the west and the terrific heat of Arizona's afternoon sun. The cells had no doors, their only covering steel lattice-work gates.

The girl who had the dubious distinction of being the only white woman ever to

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The True Story of a Bewitching but Deadly Outlaw!

serve time here was Pearl Hart. Chances are, she never gave the feared Yuma pen a thought when she began her career of crime, for her operations were far from Fort Yuma. Tucson was her stamping ground.

It was around 1890 that a bandit, who was thought to be a boy, began harassing the section around Tucson. It was Pearl, of course, in male attire. She began her outlaw life by holding up lonely travelers, then grew bold enough to rob isolated ranches and finally graduated to town robberies of cantinas and gambling houses. Before long she had accumulated enough money to outfit herself in the clothes she liked best: checked shirt, black boots, a big Stetson hat and pants that were held up by suspenders.

In those days such attire was reason enough to outlaw the girl, but Pearl cared nothing for the opinions of others. She acquired a rangy palomino and ranged through the area, worrying the residents and relieving them of their money.

It is said that she wore two guns, thonged low on her thighs, and that she was a dead shot with them. Sheriff J. K. Brown, who escorted her to the Yuma Prison after her capture and trial, reported that she boasted of this all the way to the prison. It is said that she could rob a cantina in a matter of moments, cleaning out the till and sweeping money from the gaming tables before anyone could even begin to think of what to do. Then she would draw her guns in a Border Roll, shoot out the lights and make a getaway.

"Catch that boy! Catch that boy!" men would shout.

They tried but never caught her, for Pearl was fleet as a deer.

She bragged of a hiding place, not too far from Tucson, where she would lie low until the turmoil died down. There she would count the money of the latest robbery, stuff some in her saddlebags and bury the rest.

In time she decided to use a partner. But the shrewd young delinquent changed partners often, using the same man only once or twice, then picking up a new one. In this way she was able to pull more jobs and confuse the victims more, too.

The once safe roads and byways of the area became almost deserted because of Pearl's ceaseless operations. The cry went out: "Get the boy bandit!" But this was much easier said than done, for Pearl knew every rock, cave and brushy hiding place.

Sometimes on Saturdays, Pearl would hide her horse in a thicket on the edge of an Arizona cowtown and walk in to shop. Regardless of danger, she had to spend some of her gold. Many times, while gentler women were buying lengths of calico, spools of thread and shiny buttons, Pearl would be in another part of the store, purchasing the best hand-tooled saddle, a concha-trimmed martingale or a braided bridle. In any case, Pearl roamed the streets unmolested and unrecognized. It is safe to assume, however, that not all the men of the Old West were blind to feminine allure. Probably more than one scratched his head in wonder as she crossed the dusty street ahead of him.

Then, during a stage robbery a big, husky ranch wife was enraged when her gold lavaliere was snatched from her throat. She reached out and grabbed Pearl's checked shirt before she could step away. The girl jerked the cloth back over her shoulder at once, but not before the ranch wife had discovered her secret. "The boy bandit is a girl!" she shouted. "Why, you little—" But before she could go any farther, Pearl began shooting the plumes from her fancy hat. The woman turned, screaming with fright, and clambered back into the stage out of sight. Everyone joined in the laughter, including the other luckless victims of the robbery.

EVEN in those days, when communication was difficult, the truth about the boy bandit spread like wildfire. Geronimo was no longer the main topic of conversation. Pearl held the spotlight. People sat around their warm, cozy fires and discussed the colorful girl. Before long, wagging tongues had it that pulchritudinous Pearl's partners all fell in love with her at first sight, and, even though their

past records were clean, were willing to do anything the slender little bandit asked of them. There was one qualification she insisted upon in a partner: he must be able to play the guitar. Pearl loved music, and nothing suited her better than to lie, head on saddle, listening to the mournful strains of a cowboy tune.

Indignation rose like a tidal wave, and before long steps were planned to capture the girl and her partners. Posses were formed and roamed the hills and the flatland in search of the now glamorous Pearl Hart. But legend has it that the posses were inexplicably ridden by bad luck and that before long it became almost impossible to

PEARL HART

find a half dozen willing men. Crime continued, and wherever two bandits were involved, Pearl and her partner got the blame. But that is the price of such fame as Pearl's, and she never denied anything that was laid at her door.

By this time, Pearl was literally straining at the leash to rob the famous Tucson-to-Benson stagecoach. So well was this stage protected with well-armed guards and a mounted guard following behind it, that no highwayman had yet attempted to hold it up. The stagecoach barreled its way between the two towns and delivered its passengers and rich cargoes safely each trip. But, like most criminals, Pearl was egotistical. She insisted on robbing the big stage.

Since Pearl's partners were always nonentities we shall call her partner for this holdup Harry. She refused to listen to his words of caution. The thrill-seeking girl was strong-willed and determined. She asked, "What's the matter? Don't you have the guts?"

How many men, since time began, have been able to withstand such a taunt from a beautiful woman?

Between Tucson and Benson there is a sharp curve, and on each side of the road heavy undergrowth and huge rocks. This is where Pearl and Harry hid. No one knows how many days they waited there for just the right moment, when the posse following the stage would be at its farthest point around the curve. But the day did come.

Pearl hissed: "Now! Fast! Remember the posse!"

The passengers and driver later said that they were taken completely by surprise.

Pearl and Harry quickly relieved the passengers of their wallets and jewelry. At a command from Pearl, Harry climbed to the deck of the stage and began kicking valises and boxes to the ground in search of gold. The clip-clop of the horses' hoofs was getting louder. The posse guard was almost on them.

"Let it be!" shouted Pearl, and Harry leaped to the ground.

They jumped to the backs of their mounts and wheeled away, shots from the posses' guns singing past their heads. They gained some ground, but after a time their horses began to lag. Down mountains, over shale cutbanks they went, traveling across the country as fast as they could go. But always they heard pursuit behind them, led by Billy Truman, the one man they were never able to rid themselves of.

The afternoon wore on, as the miles fell behind them. Their clothes were torn to shreds by the needle-sharp branches. Tight passages through rocks had burned their faces and arms. Their horses finally were spent.

Pearl later said that Harry grew frightened and whimpered, "Let's give up. We

can't get away. That stubborn hombre on our tail will git us sooner of later."

Pearl declined. "Maybe we could circle behind him," she suggested.

"I'm afraid it's too late," a new voice called.

Harry flung his gun away at sight of the man who had them covered and to Pearl's chagrin, jumped forward and knocked her to the ground, preventing her from starting any fireworks.

At a word from Billy Truman, Pearl Hart rose from the ground, unbuckled her gunbelts and let them fall to the ground. Harry sighed with relief; it was the first time he'd seen Pearl without her shooting irons. Guided by Billy Truman, they got fresh mounts at the nearest ranch, and he took them on in to Tucson.

THE TRIAL of Pearl Hart was sensational to say the least. Women of the West demanded justice and fastened implacable eyes on the jury and the judge. The word was out: Treat 'em alike. Don't give her any special consideration because she's a woman.

But the perceptive Pearl sensed the feeling of hostility. She sat through the long hours of testimony the picture of regret and docility.

While the jury was out, the women of the community went home to prepare their family meal, remaining dressed up, ready at a moment's notice to return to the courtroom.

When the verdict was read, both Pearl and her partner were found guilty. The women's faces relaxed into smiles, but any cheering they might have done died in their throats, for Pearl got a recommendation for mercy and a six-year sentence. Harry got thirty years! All this meant that, with good behavior, Pearl could get out in five years. But—five years at Yuma!

But even with the acquisition of a prison number, 1559, Pearl was not to lose her identity. The girl who had done an about-face in the courtroom, kept herself turned in the right direction. She was now a model prisoner, working steadily and uncomplainingly, patching, mending.

Pearl took up life in one of the small holes that faced the west in the women's cell block. When the winds blew from the west it is not hard to picture the girl cowering in a corner of her cell, arms across her face, in an attempt to protect her skin from the driven, stinging sand particles. Surely, then, her regret must have been genuine.

According to word and record, Pearl was never heard to complain or ask a favor of anyone. She took up each new task and completed it without comment. She went to chapel every Sunday, where she was the object of all eyes. It is said that many men within the grim walls lived for Sunday so they might once again see the beautiful sober-faced young girl who sang in the choir.

A length of old rotten rope, hanging from a ceiling in the men's cell block, brings forth the story that the man, secretly in love with Pearl and despairing of life without her, hanged himself one Monday morning, after viewing her in chapel the day before.

Since the prison cemetery is at a lower level and closer to the river, it was within sight of the inmates of the Yuma Prison wherever they went inside the walls. Each grave is covered by a mound of small rocks, and a wooden cross is erected above it. Some names are still legible. It is a dismal sight today, but it must have been almost impossible to look at at that time.

YUMA PRISON Museum contains many articles made by the convicts during their years of incarceration. Some are said to have been made for the lovely Pearl. Within the museum are photographs of Pearl—the only two in existence, and beside one is a poem which the girl composed while she was serving her sentence. Here it is:

The sun was shining brightly on a pleasant afternoon,
My partner speaking lightly said, "The stage will be here soon."
We saw it coming 'round the bend and called them to a halt.
And to their pockets we attended; if they got hurt, it was their fault.

While the birds were sweetly singing and the men stood up in line,
And the silver softly ringing as it touched this palm of mine,
There we took away their money; but left enough to eat,
And the men they looked so funny as they vaulted to their seats.

Then up the road we galloped, quickly through canyon we did pass,
Over the mountains we went swiftly trying to find our horses grass.
Past the Station we boldly went, now along the river side,
And our horses being spent, of course we had to hide.

In the night we would travel, in the daytime try and rest,
And throw ourselves upon the gravel, to sleep we would try our best.
Around us our horses were stamping, looking for hay and grain,
On the road the posse tramping, looking for us in vain.

One more day they would not have got us; but my horse got sore and thin.
And my partner was now a mean cuss, so Billy Truman roped us in.
Thirty years my partner got and I was given five.
He seems contented with his lot; and I am still alive.

Pearl entered the Yuma Prison when she was but seventeen years of age and served her full five years. But the old saying is true: Five years is life at Yuma Pen. At twenty-two Pearl was physically an old woman, thin, stooped and worn, her health gone. She died soon afterward in New Orleans, leaving her name and personality forever written on Yuma's fabulous old pen.

CONSIDER

LUCY'S ADVICE made no sense at all to Johnny

till he looked at himself from the pinto's viewpoint

THE HORSE

by HASCAL GILES

JOHNNY SAIN could lift a horse. He tried it the first time in Crowfoot Flats, the little cow-country trade center where he had grown up and had been almost forgotten after a five-year absence. The day Johnny rode into town and told a crowd loitering around the blacksmith shop that he could hoist a horse off the ground singlehanded, a man looked at him and said, "I'll bet you twenty to ten you can't do it, cowboy."

Johnny took the bet, and he took the man's money; and after that he got to thinking that people anywhere would give him the same odds. Most places he went they'd heard of Johnny Sain, and this made the grin spread wider across his long, melancholy face and added a swagger to his long-legged, easy-swinging walk. It also made it easier for Johnny to find someone willing to bet a sizable roll he couldn't do what advance notices claimed he could, and Johnny always rode away somewhat richer for his trouble.

Wherever he stopped, Johnny used the same approach to the inevitable climax. He used it in Claybank. It was about five o'clock on a Saturday afternoon when Johnny came slow-walking his pinto out of the rolling foothills and down the wagon-rutted main street that parted the weatherbeaten buildings of the business district.

Cowboys and miners lolled in conversing knots around the bars and livery stable, and Johnny saw right away that the busiest spot in town was the Chinook Saloon. He kneed the pinto that way, pulled up quite inconspicuously at the hitching rail and waited to be noticed. A tall, lean man with squinted black eyes looked over his shoulder at him. Johnny pushed his high-peaked black hat back on his sandy hair and grinned.

"I can lift this horse," Johnny said.

The man's jaw crunched rhythmically half a dozen times and he spat casually into the dust a few feet from Johnny's horse. Afterward, he turned back to the quartet of overalled men with whom he'd been talking.

"I'd bet you a week's pay I could do it, mister," Johnny said.

The squint-eyed man nudged one of the big-hatted men next to him and spoke out of the corner of his mouth. "I'd guess he's loco, Sebe. What do you think?"

They talked about Johnny among themselves for a few minutes. Finally they came down off the boardwalk and stood near him, joshing him. It was the way Johnny wanted it, and he just sat high in the saddle and grinned at them. When the guffaws and insults began to irritate him at last, Johnny reached into the waistband of his levis and came up with a handful of bills.

"I said I'd bet on it."

There was considerable argument for a while, but someone finally stepped forward to suggest that he hold the bets and give Johnny an opportunity either to lose his money or win theirs. Johnny didn't rush into it. He kept them talking until some of the odds reached three to one, and then he slid into the dust beside his horse and stomped around a little to work the kinks out of his legs.

"I ain't aiming to lift him sky high, understand," Johnny cautioned. "But soon as all four of this pinto's hoofs are out of the dirt, I aim to collect."

The crowd around Johnny had grown now, and somewhere in the milling group a man laughed heartily. Johnny grinned at all of them in general, bent down and walked under his horse. He shifted from side to side a time or two, measuring the distance between forelegs and flanks, and then he shoved his back into the pinto's belly.

Johnny Sain was not a big man, as Montana men go, but he was fairly tall with long, tenuous muscles ripping over his solid frame and he had the range rider's grace and coordination in his movements. But even this was not enough to accomplish what Johnny was trying here. It took knack and know-how, and special training. Johnny had all this, too.

As he braced his arms against his wiry thighs and heaved, Johnny's face turned the color of a hanging man, and heavy blue veins popped out on his corded neck. He stayed that way for what seemed eternity before he gave an almost imperceptible twitch of his hips, and the pinto's four legs rose barely above the red clay dirt of the street. Johnny held the horse that way for a full five seconds, waiting for it to flail its hoofs. When this finally happened, he dropped suddenly to the dirt on his all-fours and stayed there for a moment, his head drooping between his quivering arms and his chest heaving.

It was quiet in the street, as if a public prayer service were going on. Johnny crawled shakily out from under the pinto, straightened and walked over to the stocky, bald man who had held the money.

"Looks like I won," he grinned.

"Looks like that's right," the bald man said. He handed Johnny the wad of bills, keeping his eyes on the newcomer's face. "I'm Adam Burke, friend," he said, grasping Johnny's hand. "I'm thinkin' you're about the most man I ever seen in one piece."

Adam Burke's words turned loose a torrent on Johnny. Men pushed up to him to shake his hand. Others mauled him on the back and praised his strength. Will Combs, the squint-eyed man, said he would give a hundred dollars to see him lift the horse one more time, but Johnny shook his head.

"I've never lifted him more than one time a day," Johnny said. "He doesn't like it, and I know I wouldn't."

This gave the crowd an excuse to guffaw again, and the men laughed big and loud. They said Johnny Sain was a man to ride the river with and that he was all right. When the furor died momentarily, a voice spoke from behind the crowd. If it hadn't been a girl's voice, Johnny never would have looked around. But he did, and a small aisle opened up between the men so Johnny could get a good look at her.

She stood there like an Indian ready for a scalping. Her hands were on her hips, and her legs, clad in tight-fitting buckskins, were braced wide as if she were looking for a fight.

All this passed over Johnny's vision rather quickly, but he saw she had flaming red hair, and the way it tumbled down in shimmering curls over her green riding

blouse held his eye. He had red hair, and he knew his temperament, and he knew he ought to ignore her. But he didn't have a heart-shaped face with a dimpled chin or long-lashed green eyes, and he could never do quite so much for an ordinary riding habit as did her own full curves.

While Johnny stared boldly, she said, "You heard me, cowboy. I said what's wrong with Claybank now is we've got too many clowns and not enough men. I wouldn't give a plugged nickel to see you lift that horse again."

Johnny Sain's face turned red. He opened his mouth to speak, but the girl didn't give him a chance. She rushed forward and stopped right in front of him, her face thrust up so she could look at him. "You probably think you're about the biggest thing on two legs. A big, strong man. Huh! I'll bet you haven't done a day's work in a year!"

Johnny's face turned redder from the sting of truth in her words. He had left Crowfoot Flats exactly fourteen months ago, working eastward into Kansas, on into Idaho and back up to Claybank. He had more greenback in his moneybelt now than a cowboy would earn in a year, and twice that much in a Butte bank. But he couldn't tell a complete stranger his whole pedigree, and besides, he did not want to argue with her. He had a feeling she had never lost an argument.

Despite his melancholy blue eyes and his doleful grin, Johnny Sain was no tenderfoot when it came to sizing up people. He figured the girl had more bothering her than a nasty disposition when she set out to insult a strange man so thoroughly.

BEFORE Johnny realized what was happening, his left cheek felt like it was full of bee stings, and he involuntarily clapped his palm to it. The girl, goaded into fury by her own words, had slapped him. She looked as if she might try it again at any moment.

"There," she shouted. "And even if I were a man you wouldn't dare hit me back. That's what I think of your horse-lifting."

Johnny Sain had his patience, and that patience had its limit. His long left arm flicked outward, and warm flesh yielded under his thin fingers as they closed on the girl's shoulder. She had humiliated him in front of these men who had hailed him as a hero, and he deserved reparation. He meant to throw her across his pinto's saddle and give the seat of her buckskins a sound whacking. He meant to teach her that men were still men in Montana and that a woman didn't go about making men's talk.

He was reaching for her other shoulder when the girl lurched toward him, and Johnny felt a pricking pain run through his chest. He looked down. The girl held a gleaming bowie knife, and the point was biting into his skin.

"You take your hands off me or I'll—I'll—"

"Ma'am, I'd rather not go on with this," Johnny said shakily. Perspiration was dotting his knitted brow, and he hoped she wouldn't see it. "I'm sorry I got you so stirred up," he added, dropping his hand away and inching slowly backward.

With a deft movement of her wrist, the girl slid the knife back inside her blouse, and Johnny swallowed hard. "You won't work and you won't fight," she said. "I just wanted to prove a point."

Johnny felt trapped. He thought of two or three things to say, but finally ventured that he just hadn't been offered any jobs lately. That was the wrong thing to say.

"I've got a job for you," she replied, and there was a trace of a smile twitching the corners of her red lips. "But you can pass it up, and keep clowning if you want to. Most of your audience here has."

Johnny looked over her head at the men who had gathered around to see him prove he could lift a horse. He could read no help in their watchful faces.

"I'll take the job," he said.

The smile she had promised a moment before blossomed into full flavor now. Relief put a rightful youthfulness back into her eyes, and Johnny had the feeling he had done something good; and at the same time he had a feeling that he would regret it. She told him to meet her in half an hour

at New Farmer's livery barn, and walked quickly away from him, her gleaming hair swinging provocatively over her shoulders.

HER NAME was Lucy Dunlop, and she was the daughter of Ken Dunlop who had been buried three months ago on one of the grassy slopes of his Belt Buckle Ranch. The old rancher had lived a long and satisfying life and long before had repented a once expressed regret that his wife had not borne him a son before she died. He came to his end in a way that would have pleased him—at a poker table in the Chinook Saloon, with his boots on and a hole card good enough to claim the pot. For some time he had been confident that the Belt Buckle would be in capable hands when he went and that Lucy would never allow this monument to the Dunlop name to be absorbed by the greedy hands that had pestered him in his sunset years.

Four men had been riding for Ken when he died, but pleasant memories of him did not hold them when they decided to quit their jobs. It wasn't that they minded having Lucy, Ken's only heir, for a boss. She could ride and rope, bulldog a calf, or pop the head off a rattlesnake with a .45 Colt as well as they could.

But when a homesteader by the name of Fain Kerber drove his buckboard onto the boundary east of Crazy Creek and built himself a cabin and started plowing, the men began to worry. When, a few weeks later, another squatter started fencing part of the land next to the creek, the men started drifing away. Since then a third stranger had moved in on the creek, and most folks in Claybank thought they'd keep coming until half the graze and all the Belt Buckle water would be fenced in.

Johnny Sain heard all these things inside the Chinook Saloon, where he went for a drink with the men whose money he had won. He cursed them singly and collectively for not warning him before he told Lucy Dunlop he'd take the job, but the men just laughed at him. They did not like losing their money to a man who knew he was betting on a sure thing, and this was a way of squaring things with him.

On the way to the Belt Buckle, the red-haired cowboy kept at a polite distance behind the buckboard Lucy Dunlop was driving. He busied himself with his own thoughts while the miles passed behind them. Johnny had the feeling Lucy was laughing at his simplicity in falling for her challenge, and most of his thinking was of the things he should be saying to her about her tactics. But he kept his distance, and his silence. There would be a better opportunity to speak his mind.

The land reminded him somewhat of his own home—the rock and sand and red clay near Claybank, and then the tilting grasslands that led up in all directions to rolling knolls fringed with dark and fragrant cedars. Here and there he saw small bunches of cattle bearing the Belt Buckle brand, scattered and unattended.

It was almost dusk when they came up over a swell in the land and Johnny saw the ranch buildings ahead. A short, waddling figure moved about the back porch of the big L-shaped ranch house, and Johnny's sandy brows knitted in curiosity. When they arrived in the yard, he recognized the figure as a sturdy, sad-eyed Indian squaw.

"This is my cook, Woman-With-Eager-Hands," Lucy Dunlop said, speaking for the first time since they had left town. "We—I call her Handy."

Johnny touched his hat, grinning easily, and the old Crow woman's ebony eyes sparkled. "Me cook fine grub tonight," she grunted. She glanced at Lucy and then back at Johnny and said: "Shoot shotgun fine, too."

The veiled warning and the significance of her remark made Johnny chuckle. Lucy Dunlop silenced him with a fiery green-eyed glance and said: "Unload this where Handy tells you. You sleep in the bunkhouse, but you'll eat with us."

A CLANGING dinner gong brought Johnny out of his reverie, and he was grateful for the interruption. He had unloaded the wagon under the silent, gestured directions of Old Handy

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Johnny put his arm around Lucy's waist and pulled her toward him

and had thrown hay into the corral for his pinto and the three other horses he'd found there. Since then he'd been leaning against the top rail of the corral fence, chin on folded arms and his mind a hundred miles away and seven years in the past. Johnny had kept his mind free of thoughts of the past for two years, and he cursed the nostalgia aroused by these surroundings.

Johnny made himself the bright spot of the meal which they ate in the somber, high-ceilinged dining room of the old log house Ken Dunlop had built east of Crazy Creek forty years ago. He greeted Lucy with a mere nod, pretending not to notice she had changed the riding clothes and was now fresh and feminine in a tight-waisted gingham dress which rustled with her every movement. Most of his attention went to Handy, who, once the plates were filled, took her seat at the side of the long table and ate with all the delicate grace of a Denver school teacher.

Johnny told the Crow woman the food tasted like a prospector's cooking, but he kept piling it on his plate. He looked at Handy in surprise when she placed a whole apple pie in front of him, but he ate it down to the last crumb and thoroughly enjoyed it. When the meal was finished, Handy's coppery face shone like a mirror, and her eyes were filled with admiration for this grinning redhead who ate with more relish than a fighting chief.

Excusing himself, Johnny walked out into the gathering darkness and rolled a cigarette, savoring the fresh, sage-sweet air of the rangeland. Lucy Dunlop walked up beside him before the cigarette was half-finished. The swish of her skirt told of her coming before Johnny saw her, and the odd fragrance of her hair was wafted ahead of her. In spite of his awareness of her, Johnny continued to lean against the gnarled oak tree, his eyes on the purple horizon, and did not look around until she spoke.

"I thought I ought to tell you what your pay will be," she said.

It was a faltering start. The way he had been hired was disturbing her conscience now, and she was ready to arrive at a friendly understanding. A cowboy's pay was the same from the Canadian border to the Rio Grande. Forty and found, a drink on Saturday, and too much time for thinking about things you don't want to thing about. Johnny let smoke trickle through his nostrils, dropped the cigarette to the ground and ground it under his heel. He looked hard into her eyes, and for a moment it seemed that he had known her forever, and he was drunk with the sight and scent of her.

She was standing a foot away from him, and this time when Johnny reached for her there was no anger in his touch. He put his arm around her slender waist and pulled her gently toward him; but Lucy's muscles grew taut, and she stepped quickly out of his grasp.

"I'm no percentage girl," she said angrily, "and I didn't think you were this stuck on yourself. Don't you ever try that again!"

Johnny shrugged, but his eyes held hers. He wasn't drunk now. He was angry—angry at himself for forgetting the proprieties, angry at her for bringing him here. He laughed softly to keep her from knowing how he felt.

"Am I out of a job?" he asked quietly.

"No. When I want to fire you, I'll fire you."

"Then maybe you ought to tell me why I'm here," Johnny said. "Looks like I'm a one-man crew, and I ain't likely to be staging any roundups."

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the girl's lips tighten, and he knew she was thinking that it ought to be done, nevertheless.

The strongest woman sometimes looks pitifully weak in the face of a man's challenge.

"Tomorrow you'll spade out a water hole down near Elk Canyon. There's a spring that runs part of the year down there, and some of the cattle can't get to the creek any more. I'll keep you busy, and I'll tell you every day what's to be done."

The last words floated back over her shoulder, for she was already on her way to the house.

AFTER THE first week, Johnny Sain was beginning to think the boys at the Chinook Saloon had been hoorawing him, but he was sick and tired of the Belt Buckle. He had mucked out half a dozen small water holes, repaired a line shack which he figured no one would ever use again, and had choused out twenty strays from one of the roughest cedar brakes he had ever ridden. He had blisters up to his elbows, a bruised thumb he'd whanged with a hammer while trying to hang a door on the cabin, and a dozen scratches over his cheeks which had come from riding the brush. But during all the meals—where conversation since the first night had concerned chiefly the work he was to do or had done—there had been no mention of nesters or impending trouble.

But trouble was there, and Johnny found it. He stepped out of the bunkhouse one morning shortly before sunrise and found Lucy Dunlop waiting for him. She wore a pair of rough levis, high-heeled boots and a flannel shirt which threatened to throw its buttons every time she took a deep breath. With her were two cow ponies, a lass rope coiled on the horn of each saddle.

Recovering from his first shock at seeing her, Johnny went on to the washstand and doused his face with cold water. He remembered now that she had been more talkative at supper the night before than she had since he had been here, although her instructions to stay at the ranch and repair harness had been given in a hesitant manner. This, Johnny had thought at the time, was an indication she was searching her mind for a chore he would find particularly distasteful.

"I changed my mind about today," she said cheerfully, coming up behind him as he rubbed his face with a coarse towel. "I think we'd better brand those strays you rounded up. I'll help. Do you want breakfast?"

"Sure," Johnny said. "I ain't responsible for a thing until I've eaten of a morning."

He did not expect her to laugh at this, and the pleasant humor of her face when she chuckled made him grin in spite of himself. He was conscious of learning the first of her personal habits when she told him she never ate until noon, and then he went on to the house where Handy greeted him with a grunt and a scowl and a heaping platter of bacon and eggs.

"I never saw an Injun who knew as little about things as they pretend," Johnny said to Handy, "so I'd like you to set me straight on something. How come none of the men in these parts has offered to lend Miss Dunlop a hand here? Why does she have to go out and practically shanghai an innocent puncher like me?"

Behind him, the old Crow woman's shuffling movements were stilled, but the silence hung on for so long that Johnny finally turned to make sure she had not gone away.

Handy looked him straight in the eyes. "When two braves fight for one wolf pelt whole nation does not fight. Two braves fight, others watch. If braves have squaws, maybe squaws fight, too. Miss Lucy need squaw man."

Johnny turned back to the table and finished the meal in silence. Instead of reluctance, the Crow woman had shown eagerness in answering him.

Mellowed by Handy's devoted attention and warmed by the amount of rich black coffee he had drunk, Johnny returned to the bunkhouse with a resolution to be more amiable in his future relations with his employer. He did not get a chance to show his good intentions.

As soon as he came in sight, Lucy stepped into saddle and sent the big roan galloping away. Johnny mounted and followed at a casual lope behind her, wondering at her eagerness and admiring the lithe, easy manner of her riding. It was the first time she had permitted herself to be alone with him since he had tried to kiss her, but he knew it was not because she was afraid of him. She considered it a punishment for his impetuousness.

WHEN THEY reached the grazing grounds, Lucy ground-tied her roan alongside his pinto and helped him gather wood for a fire. When the em-

bers were glowing, she took the Belt Buckle iron from her saddlebags and tossed it into the fire. While it was heating, she mounted and rode swiftly toward the small bunch of cattle fifty yards away.

Johnny looked toward the fire, and then whirled toward the girl again as a hair-raising cowboy yell pierced the quiet air. Lucy rode into the midst of the white-faced cattle yip-yipping like a Comanche, and Johnny stared uneasily as a hard-running calf broke away from the herd and came charging straight at him. Close behind the charging animal was Lucy Dunlop, a lass rope hissing in a wide arc above her head. The calf was less than twenty feet away when the rope shot out, encircled the animal's forelegs, and sent it tumbling end over end on the ground. Lucy came out of the saddle in a flying leap, the rope tied hard and fast to the saddle horn. A few quick movements and the calf was helpless, all four legs neatly hogtied.

"Brand him," Lucy said, arising and throwing her hair back out of her eyes.

Johnny Sain did as he was told. Lucy stood close behind him, watching the operation carefully, and Johnny was pleased with her nearness. She flipped the rope free, sending the animal hump-backing and bawling into the brush, and headed for her waiting horse. Johnny called to her, saying he thought he ought to do the roping, but Lucy kept going.

"Never mind," she called. "I've changed my mind."

"That's getting to be a habit now," Johnny said. He was hoping to draw her into conversation by showing animosity, but Lucy ignored the remark.

"I just wanted to show you I can brand a calf," she laughed. "What I really want you to see is a little picture over on Crazy Creek."

Johnny did not reply, but anticipation was a spur on his spine as they rode away, with Lucy choosing the trails. He resented her sudden indication of friendship. It weakened the resolve in his own mind and made him uneasy. He had no intention of staying here until people forgot Johnny Sain could lift a horse. Just being near Lucy Dunlop these days worried him even more. A girl with her beauty could snare a man with it, as easily as she had snared him with a challenge the day she saw him in Claybank. He had been waiting for the one command from her that would let him accuse her of this deliberate trickery.

Sometimes the thing a man expects can surprise him most when it happens. It was that way with Johnny. He had been lost in his own thoughts for a long time when Lucy finally spoke to him and he became conscious of his surroundings. They were on a wooded knoll, and below them was a pleasant little creek which wound through a narrow arroyo and out into the plains beyond. Farther away, Johnny could see the half-finished outline of a log and sod hovel.

A black-bearded man and a slender, blond helper were still working on the building. Between the knoll and the creek gleamed the slick yellow hue of skinned cottonwood poles. Johnny could not see the barb-wire strands from here, but he knew they were there; and he knew that because of them he had been mucking out water holes for Belt Buckle cattle.

"I think I'd better tell you something about the Belt Buckle now, Johnny," said Lucy.

"I think I've heard it. Just tell me what you want me to do."

The girl misinterpreted Johnny's anger for anxiety. She turned toward him with a relieved smile. "Thank you for that, Johnny." She reined her horse close to his, leaned over and kised him lightly on the cheek. "That's for pulling a knife on you."

Johnny did not turn his head toward her. He said, "What do you want me to do, Lucy?"

"There's only one thing you can do, Johnny. Ride down with a gun in your hand and tell 'em to get off. You look like you can back it up and they'll believe you'll do it. They never would believe I could. I put a pair of wire snippers in your saddlebag before you got up this morning.

"You heard the story in town, I suppose, so you know you're in the right. It really isn't between the Belt Buckle and the

nesters. If it had been that kind of fight, my own men would never have quit. They would have enjoyed throwing lead at nesters, but they didn't want to mix with another cattleman and this is between the Belt Buckle and Sam Cooper. He's got the Circle C south of us. A week after father died he offered me a price—a half price. I laughed at him. But he's wanted the Belt Buckle for years, even before father died, and he put the squatters there to starve me off. When that happens he'll buy for less than half price or move in for nothing. The squatters will draw their pay and move on. This is not a fight; it's a freeze-out."

IT WAS more of a story than Johnny had heard before, so he let her go on with it. But when Lucy Dunlop had stopped talking, Johnny started. He told her he was an ordinary, peace-loving citizen, and that if four other men didn't want to fight her wars why should he. He told her she had shamed him in front of other men, knowing he could not refuse to take the job under such circumstances, but she couldn't trick him into getting himself killed. In conclusion he told her it wasn't very lady-like to go around threatening people with Bowie knives one day and kissing them the next just to get her own way.

"I've been waiting for this," Johnny said hotly, "because I knew it was coming. I've quit, lady."

Johnny never expected her to cry. When he looked at her and saw the moisture in her eyes a lump came up in his throat, and he almost jumped off his horse to apologize. At that moment, with the right words, she could have sent him charging off the hill with a gun in each hand and a knife in his mouth and she wouldn't have needed to promise a thing.

Such was the feeling of Johnny Sain when he found a woman whom he could make cry. It had never happened before. But Lucy Dunlop still had some things to say. She said them with tears rolling down her cheeks, but they were as biting and bitter as they would have been if she had been clutching the Bowie knife in her hand.

"All right, Johnny Sain," she cried. "You just saved yourself from getting fired. Any man who doesn't take orders on the Belt Buckle draws his pay. So go away. Go back to lifting a horse! Huh! You think that makes you a man; you think it proves you're strong. Well, you're weak. Lifting a horse only proves one thing, Johnny Sain. It proves you're a fool! Don't bother to come back to the ranch. I'll send your bedroll to the Wells Fargo office in Claybank, and I'll send your pay with it. But the

next time you're feeling big because you can lift something big, consider the horse!"

She flipped the reins angrily and a flurry of hoofs carried her swiftly away from the knoll. Johnny turned just in time to see her disappear over the near horizon. Then he looked back at the squatters across the creek. He couldn't quite decide if he had won anything.

STARLIGHT in the dome of the sky above you, the whisper of sage about you and the comforting stamp of a faithful horse grazing near by—that's all a man needed for a restful mind and strength to face the next day. Johnny Sain decided this while lying flat on his back, his head propped on his saddle and the campfire throwing flickering shadows against the horizon. He was twenty miles out from Claybank when he camped and cooked his supper, and he kept telling himself his mind was more at rest than it had been in many days. He had stopped in town only long enough to leave a forwarding address at the Wells Fargo office. He'd have his clothing sent on to Red Oak, and he'd pick his bedroll up there without the risk of ever meeting another woman such as Lucy Dunlop.

Johnny's sleep that night had about as much calm as a stampede. He kept dream-

ing he was in court, and every time he looked up at the judge's bench, there sat Lucy Dunlop. Strangely, Johnny was pleading in defense of his most cherished skill.

He told Lucy she would have to know all about him before she would be capable of judging him. He told her about the scrubby little ranch he grew up on just outside of Crowfoot Flats and how it grew more sand and rock than it did grass. They had a long drought, and most of the cattle died and others were sold for a little of nothing.

Johnny blamed the drought most of all, but guessed just plain hard luck had a hand in it, too. About the time they were flat broke, Johnny's mother became seriously ill, and she needed to get back East to a hospital.

"My old man tried to borrow the money to send her," Johnny said in his dream, "but the bankers in Crowfoot Flats laughed at him. We did the only thing we knew to do. We decided to steal it. We waylaid the stage, but we were greenhorns and we made a mess of it."

Tossing and tumbling in his blankets, Johnny went on with his story. The shotgun guard had killed his father and winged Johnny in the arm. He rode away with blood running down his saddle and went straight home. When he arrived he learned it would have done no good if the holdup had been a success; his mother was dead. Further effort appeared so futile he simply sat down beside his mother's bed and waited for the sheriff to come and get him.

Johnny's sentence was ten years, but he got out in five for being a good prisoner. The warden told him what he'd have to face unless he played a smart hand.

"First thing you've got to do is make people think of you as Johnny Sain, the man, instead of Johnny Sain, the convict," the warden had said. "So go back fighting or you've got a rough trail to ride for the rest of your life."

On his way back to Crowfoot Flats, Johnny Sain saw a circus in Butte. One of the acts had a strong man lifting two giant dumbbells. Johnny thought it was a fake, so he stayed after the show to find out. He went to the strong man's tent and asked to have a try at lifting the weights. He couldn't budge them. The strong man told him muscles alone could do nothing. It took balance, coordination and training.

Johnny got a job as the strong man's helper and stayed with the show three months. He learned the tricks, and he learned how to push himself into the public eye. When he left the circus, Johnny bought the lightest horse he could find, the wiry little pinto. He gentled the horse and taught it to stand until he could get balanced beneath it in such a way that he wouldn't have to lift the entire weight with any one set of muscles. That was the whole secret of the strong-man act. The horse went over bigger in the towns Johnny visited than the weights ever did. Nobody thought of Johnny Sain as a convict when he went home and lifted his horse.

THERE in his restless sleep Johnny told more than he would ever tell anyone. And he confessed that the Belt Buckle brought back too many memories to him. He never wanted to starve and suffer again. But when he had finished, Lucy Dunlop's green eyes beamed down from the judge's bench, and she said: "Consider the horse."

At that Johnny Sain woke up fighting mad. He sat up quickly, rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly and then sank back against the saddle, thinking of Lucy Dunlop. He hadn't made any more sense out of her words in his dream than he had when she first said them.

Johnny Sain was down on his hands and knees in the dirt outside a Butte saloon when the meaning of Lucy Dunlop's words at last seeped through the resentment that fogged his mind. He had just hefted the patient pinto up on his back, and the roar of an approving crowd was ringing in his ears. A few feet away stood Jake Boyd, the blacksmith whom Johnny had learned to know and trust on his many trips here. Jake had placed Johnny's bets and was holding a Stetson full of money.

Abruptly Johnny let the pinto down to

earth and getting heavily to his feet, rubbed the sweat and dirt off his forehead. This time he wasn't grinning. He climbed wearily aboard the pinto and said: "Hold on to that for me, Jake. I'll be back for it one of these days."

Jake Boyd's toothless mouth fell open, and he yelled, "Hey, Johnny, where in hell are you—"

But Johnny Sain was already spurring the pinto down the street, dodging around buckboards and staring pedestrians. It took him a day and a half to reach Claybank, and what sleep he had on the way was not worth mentioning.

The sun was directly overhead and the hot air was filled with the buzz of insects when Johnny came into the brush where he had left Lucy Dunlop a few days before. He sat on the slope and rested a while, his eyes squinted with thought while he stared at the squatter's hovel below him. Sweat poured out from under his hatband and left wet streaks in the dust on his brown cheeks.

He rode leisurely off the knoll and forded the creek without looking back at the drooping strands of barb-wire which he had cut with the wire snippers Lucy Dunlop had left in his saddlebag. At first the place looked deserted, but the black-bearded nester heard the slosh of the horse's feet and stepped out of the hovel to watch him approach. The man Lucy had called Fain Kerber was younger than Johnny had Judged from a distance, and the kinky black beard covered a hard jaw and square chin.

"Howdy," Johnny said. He brought his horse up five feet from the big nester and stepped easily to the ground. "Call out your partner."

The man's dark eyes narrowed suspiciously. "He's in town picking up some grub. I talk for both of us."

A tight grin cracked some of the dust around Johnny's lips. "Good. You listen for both of you. I just want to tell you I don't like paid poachers. You're on Belt Buckle land, mister, and Sam Cooper won't pay you to stay here any more after today. I thought I'd give you a chance to pull out on your own before I go down there and tell him to move you. It ain't my way to go behind a man's back."

The flat statement came as a shock to the bearded man, and he thought it over for a moment. When the meaning was clear to him, he wasted no words. Rolling muscles knotted his shoulders beneath the tight blue shirt he wore and his bearded chin sank down on his chest. He looked up from under dark brows at Johnny Sain and his deep voice was too controlled. "Maybe you never will see Sam Cooper, cowboy."

That's all he said before he shuffled in swiftly toward Johnny Sain. Johnny braced and waited, a cocky grin on his face. He had come here for a fight and he was getting one. The parting jabs of Lucy Dunlop were in his mind, and he wanted to hit someone just to prove a point.

HE WATCHED the man's angry eyes for a signal, and when they flickered brightly he threw up a guarding right hand. But he was too slow. The blow hit him on the chin like a thunderbolt, and he saw a flash of lightning. He tried to break his fall, and the nester's other fist jarred him before he felt the hard earth under him.

Shaking his head, Johnny pushed himself up from the ground. He didn't wait for anything now. He tasted blood in his mouth, and unbidden tears blurred his right eye where the nester's fist had landed a second blow. Johnny aimed a fist at the man's scarred nose and grunted in satisfaction when he saw blood spurt from it.

But that was all Johnny saw for the next few minutes. His mouth flew open in surprise as the nester suddenly ran straight into him. Sickening pain shot through him as the man's knee jerked upward and into his groin. Powerful arms grabbed him around the waist, pinning him helplessly, and he thought his ringing head was going to burst when Fain Kerber's brawny shoulder rose sharply and cracked him under the chin.

As abruptly as he had grabbed him, the nester released his grip on Johnny Sain and took a step backward. Johnny stood

there tottering, his eyes glassy and his stomach rolling. He tried to duck forward, but Kerber never gave him that chance. The nester rocked back on his heels and hit Johnny with all his might squarely in the face. The blow was like a numbing weight, and Johnny's only sensation was one of falling backward. He did not lose consciousness, but he was powerless to offer resistance when Kerber picked him up bodily and carried him toward the creek. Johnny felt the cold splash of water in his face, and he wanted to lie there and let it soothe his aching body, but he knew he had to get up or drown.

He slipped backward twice before he was finally able to stand, but at last he made it, and humiliation began to eat away the pain which had sickened him before. Without glancing at the bearded nester again, Johnny walked slowly toward his horse, mounted and went back the way he had come. The only point he had proved was what Lucy Dunlop had told him: A man is not big because he can lift something big. But he also thought of what the circus strong man had told him: Muscles alone could accomplish nothing.

This gave him a measure of comfort, even though he knew he would have to fight Sam Cooper with weapons of the rancher's own choosing. It was the simpler way, if less certain, and he should have tried it first. As he rode toward town, a plan more daring than Cooper's formed in his mind.

When he reached Claybank, Johnny rode straight for the Chinook Saloon. He pushed quickly through the swinging doors, and as soon as he appeared the tinkle of the piano stopped and someone yelled at him. It was one of the men who had seen him lift the horse, and they tried to turn his appearance into another celebration. The hollows in Johnny's thin face seemed to deepen a little, and his smile was more of a tight challenge than the cocky grin by which they remembered him.

Johnny Sain held up a restraining hand, and questioned loudly: "Anybody in here need a job? I'm running the Belt Buckle and I'm looking for a crew."

The yells and good-natured joshing stopped. Johnny returned the solemn looks of the men with a cynical smile. It was easy to see why Lucy Dunlop had tricked him. When nesters and cattlemen started throwing lead at each other there were plenty of willing hands. But to these men a job at the Belt Buckle looked like an agreement to wage a war with their own kind, and they wanted no part of it. This spidery line which a man could draw in his principles roused Johnny's anger, but he held it in check.

"Well, now," Johnny said, "it looks like work is right plentiful hereabouts. And you don't have to worry about the squatters out on Crazy Creek, either. They're pulling out tomorrow."

JOHNNY had saved his hole card, and he had played it well. All he had to do now was make it stick. It worked well enough at the Chinook. Fifteen minutes later, he came outside with five men behind him. He had chosen them from eight applicants, and they were clean-cut, hard-muscled men who could look you in the eye. They all wore guns.

Before mounting the pinto, Johnny opened one of his saddlebags and lifted out a cedar-butted .44 and strapped it around his waist. He always carried it with him, but this was the first time he had worn it since he had surrendered to the sheriff when he was a frightened, heart-sick youngster of eighteen. Strangely, he felt much the same right now.

As soon as they were out of town, Johnny swung off the trail and headed across country. He rode hard, enjoying the slap of chokecherry and sagebrush against his stiff levis. He looked over his shoulder at the procession behind him, and a long grin slit his face. They were wondering why he was riding toward Sam Cooper's Circle C instead of the Belt Buckle, but they asked no questions. He had made them a promise, and they expected him to keep it.

Johnny stepped down from his saddle at the Circle C gate and spoke to his men. Nodding silently, they sat their saddles and Johnny walked up on the porch of the big clap-boarded house alone.

Sam Cooper answered his knock, and stood staring at him in open curiosity. The rancher was short and thick-bodied. He had a broad, square-chinned face and big hands with black hair standing out on them like bristles on a wild boar's back. He would be a hard man in a fight, Johnny thought and was reminded of his visit to the squatter's camp a few hours earlier. Cooper's pale grey eyes lifted over Johnny's shoulder to the men at the gate, and a knot of muscle popped up along his craggy jaw.

"If you're Sam Cooper I'd like to talk with you a minute," Johnny said evenly. He introduced himself and held out a hand which Cooper clasped automatically.

Cooper invited him inside, and Johnny entered a big square room where the floor was covered with animal skins and the walls mounted with Indian relics. Cooper motioned him to a seat in a wicker settee, sat down opposite him and said: "I believe you're a stranger in these parts."

Johnny grinned and shook his head. "Not any longer, Cooper. I just bought the Belt Buckle ranch."

As his affable lie sank home, Johnny had to repress a chuckle. Cooper's big chest gave a noticeable heave as he sucked in air, and a flush spread over his weathered face. Cooper had just lost a prize, he thought, and it was filling him with defeat. Annexation of the Belt Buckle to his already prosperous Circle C would have made him one of the biggest cattlemen in Montana.

"I'm right glad to see it back in a man's hands," Cooper grunted.

"I aim to run that," Johnny said, " so I'll come to the point. I don't like people crowding in on my graze, especially paid squatters." Johnny turned a significant glance out the window at the five armed men. "I'd rather get rid of them without bloodshed," he continued, "so if they've got any friends around here somebody ought to tell them that. Unless they're gone by noon tomorrow, me'n my men are going down there and bury them."

"That's pretty strong talk," Cooper said. He had a six-gun belted high on his left side, and he kept moving his hand as if he wanted to grip it.

Johnny stood up and held out his hand again, and told Cooper he had enjoyed talking with him. He started toward the door with his hat in his hand, but when he was halfway there he turned and looked at Cooper again.

"You wouldn't want to get in a few shots at the squatters, too, would you, Cooper?"

The rancher shook his head. "No, I'm a good deal like you, Sain. Don't want any trouble. Matter of fact, I might send one of my boys over to tell them the Belt Buckle has a new owner. I don't believe they're the kind to want trouble."

Outside, Johnny Sain, with his back to Sam Cooper, winked broadly at his men and climbed into the pinto's saddle. They rode away from the Circle C in a cloud of dust, but they still did not go to the Belt Buckle. Johnny Sain led them to the ridge overlooking the nester camp.

They stayed well back in the timber, and Johnny kept a close watch on the creek. He did not have long to wait. At dusk Sam Cooper rode into the squatter camp aboard a big dun horse. The rancher talked a while with the black-bearded man and rode away. An hour later, Johnny saw Fain Kerber carrying parcels and crates out of the half-finished hovel. Kerber hitched two high-hipped horses to a loaded buckboard shortly after dark and drove away from the creek. Johnny knew he would stop along the way and tell two other men that they, too, were out of a job.

WHILE they had been on the ridge, Johnny's new crew had huddled together and he had heard their low mumbles of conversation. They had put up with all the mystery they were going to put up with, and he knew he had to tell them what this was all about.

They took it with good nature when they found out it was all a bluff. The way Johnny explained it to them, it was a double bluff. Cooper had been running one a long time, trying to force Lucy Dunlop to sell the Belt Buckle by making it a dangerous place to work. He thought he had failed when he heard Johnny Sain tell him the ranch had already been sold. Cooper

didn't think it would be worth a fight to get it, and Johnny's gun-hung crew at the gate had been a convincing argument.

"But it was no pretense when I gave you a job," Johnny told the men. "It's roundup time and the Belt Buckle cattle need to be shipped. There's a hard day coming up, so let's head for home."

There were stars in the sky and the moon was up and the sweet breath of the night range was blowing in Johnny's face when the Belt Buckle ranch came in sight. Behind him were five men who had cast their lot with his, but Johnny's heart was so light it was riding alone. He thought it strange, yet very simple, that a man was seldom what he thought himself to be and that it took someone else to see him as he really was.

Lucy Dunlop had made no more sense than a locoed Indian when she first told him to consider his horse; but when Johnny started looking at old Jake Boyd up there in Butte he remembered what she had said. Jake had never done more than shoe horses for other people, but those people swore by him and trusted him, and he had more friends than any man in town. That was what came of a way of life, of being a part of something that kept life going.

A man could get too old to lift a horse and live his latter years unknown and useless to anyone. It was hard to see this unless a man found the proper viewpoint, and it wasn't easy to swap places with a horse just to size yourself up. But Johnny had finally done this, and he figured he must have looked pretty stupid to the pinto who got as much attention as he did simply by standing still and letting a damn fool cowboy lift him off his feet.

It was long after the Belt Buckle's new crew was settled for the night when Johnny Sain finished saying all this to Lucy Dunlop. She had been silent through the long recital, and she said nothing now to help him.

Johnny went on soberly: "So I kept thinking about what you'd said, and I came back and did what I did because I want to spend the rest of my life here with you and—and—Lucy, I hoped you'd feel the same way. Do you?"

She murmured something that Johnny couldn't hear, but the way she moved into his waiting arms and lifted her lips to his was all the answer Johnny needed—or wanted.

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 98)

1. Dudeens or dudines.
2. Bridle.
3. Texas.
4. Hobbles the horse's front legs.
5. Used to dig a shallow hole or trench for the cook's fire. Also to shovel dirt on fire to make sure it is out when leaving and to bury garbage.
6. Scouts.
7. Arizona.
8. Horse track is larger.
9. Cowboy spur has a small wheel called a rowel. Cavalryman's spur has not.
10. Left hand.

The two tourists were in startling contrast to the old trading post

The Bells of Home

By Ann Meecham

MARCELLA tried not to stiffen when Jeff's arms went about her. When their lips met, she had to make sure her return kiss roused no suspicion that there was a serious conflict in the mind of his bride of a year.

It would be dreadful to burst into tears and confess that while his lovemaking sent fire through her, she hated the way they lived, hated everything associated with the business that held such interest for him. That this hatred had swelled and swelled until it was obscuring the fineness of their marriage.

Jeff had been excitingly different from the other men of Marcella's acquaintance. He was strong and sure of himself, but he had a refreshing ingenuousness that made him seem less than his twenty-eight years. His earnestness and simplicity had reached deep into her. But nothing in her experience helped her understand his back-

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THE NAVAJO BELLS tolled sheep to the grazing lands—

and rang out a message for the baffled heart of Marcella

ground or anticipate the kind of life she would have at a Navajo Indian trading post.

"Come on, boy!" Wade Bryson's voice broke into their good-by.

The car stood under an old cottonwood tree near the center of a yard enclosed on two sides by the huge, L-shaped building that housed the warehouse, store and living quarters for the family.

Lydia Bryson, pink-cheeked and capable, with glossy brown hair that showed only a few threads of grey, stood beside her husband.

Wade Bryson was an older edition of Jeff, with the same infectious smile and deep-throated laughter.

A SHADOW crossed Marcella's face as she caught a few words. The Brysons talked of the Indians as if they were regular people with affairs of real consequence. After twelve months, their attitude was still inexplicable to Marcella.

They had welcomed Marcella as a daughter, winning her affection at once. Now it took effort not to show strain when she was with them. She believed the elder Brysons sensed she wasn't fitting into her new environment with enthusiasm. Neither of them criticised or argued with her, but she had a suspicion that was because they thought her adolescent.

Resentment flared. She wasn't immature. She had earned more than a comfortable living for five years in New York and had resigned from a position of responsibility to marry Jeff Bryson.

Marcella wondered scornfully why Wade Bryson devoted his intelligence and abilities to the pointless life of an Indian trader. It was retrogression into a period when men were hunters, trappers, itinerant peddlers, far removed from present day occupations and opportunities. And he had encouraged his son to do the same.

With a feeling of relief she watched the car roll toward the Shiprock country. Without Jeff near to confuse her, she could be completely frank with herself, balanced in her judgment of the situation.

SINCE both men were away, there could be no lingering over household tasks with the girl who cooked and helped with general work. Marcella was needed in the store.

Once there, she was blind to the brightness of the sunshine pouring through the wide skylight. She saw that the once cheerful yellow paint of walls and ceiling was dimmed by smoke from cedarwood fires and the sticky adobe dust of the country. The floor, scoured clean at closing time the previous night, was already traced with dusty prints of boots and moccasins. The groceries, hardware, saddles, bridles and drygoods on long shelves behind the unusually high, wide counters were an irritating conglomeration.

Several Navajo women, fringed blankets over their heads, were in front of the notion case. As many young bucks lined the counter behind which the ready made shirts and pants and bright piece goods were stacked. Their faces looked alike to Marcella. They were just a bunch of grubby Indians.

Marcella's mother-in-law was weighing a blanket brought in by one of the weavers. A motion of Lydia's head indicated an old squaw who was staring at the cotton prints. Marcella went behind the counter, forcing herself to ignore the dirt-smudged features and the mingled odors that came from the dusty blanket, velveteen blouse and full, calico skirt of the woman.

A gnarled forefinger pointed to one of the bright colored bolts. As Marcella unwound the cloth the high, clear tinkling of a bell came from the front doorway. So it had sounded on the evening of her arrival at the trading post, when Jeff had lifted her slightly across the threshold.

The jingle, jingle of the metal clapper against the silver dome of the bell was a too poignant reminder of that moment. Of other moments, too, that were associated with bells. Their clamor, muffled by fog, the night she'd met Jeff, on a Staten Island ferryboat. The resonant notes of the Metropolitan chimes coming through the opened windows of her apartment while Jeff told her of his love.

A sharp click-click broke into her abstraction. Marcella glanced towards the doorway. Two girls had halted to look about them with frank curiosity. Bright light from a high window brought into sharp focus their glossy waved hair, striking make-up and smart clothing. Through the definitely Indian atmosphere spread a fragrance noted for its high cost per half ounce.

Marcella inhaled deeply. Scenes flashed from memory like a film unwound at top speed. The Rainbow Room, the Pierre, a French Maisonette in the Fifties. Broadway at midevening, the medley of traffic whistles, horns and backfiring motors. Clearest of all and bringing sharp nostalgia, were the offices of Burr, Lane and Mac Intyre, advertising agents. She saw the door into her own, private cubicle, her name stenciled on the glass panel.

"We were told in Gallup that we could get specially good Navajo jewelry here."

The throaty voice of the brunette brought tourists and room back into focus. Familiar types from life in which Marcella had recently been an active part, the two girls were in startling contrast to the old trading post. The Navajo women peeped shyly at them, the men stared openly, their features expressionless as if carved in oak. Marcella's hand was motionless over the calico she had been cutting for the old squaw.

LYDIA BRYSON came quietly from the other counter and took the shears.

"Run along and show them the jewelry, child," she said. "I'll finish with Ha-Bah."

Marcella led the two young women through an archway into the curio room. These tourists were from her own world, that gay, fast moving life she had thrown away with so little thought. The very essence of it clung to them, assailed Marcella through all her senses.

They deliberated critically over the hand-hammered jewelry she showed them. The soft gleam of silver set with turquoise, the exquisite patina of old bracelets seemed lifeless contrasted with the shining of the metal deer pinned to the brunette's jacket and the brass turtle on the blonde's sport suit. Marcella's hands faltered as she wrapped the purchases in small boxes decorated with a Navajo symbol.

She noticed their curious glances and was glad that her plain linen dress was from an exclusive Fifth Avenue shop.

As the brunette took her change, she said, "What brought a girl like you to this wild spot?"

"Let me guess!" the blonde exclaimed. "You're getting material for a book."

"No, this is my home," Marcella replied. She enjoyed the surprised arching of eyebrows as the girls gave her a final appraising look.

She moved in a daze until a young Navajo in paint-smeared satin shirt and corduroy pants, held up by a silver concha belt, came to the counter behind which she was standing.

"I finish paint doors," he said. "What you want me do now?"

"You'd better go over to the house and show him," Lydia advised.

Marcella followed him to a square house whose plastered walls were painted the same warm, golden shade as the main building.

Marcella's lip curled as her glance fell on their two shadows moving across the hard-packed sand. Just like a squaw, she thought. Esh-Kee-Yazzi goes ahead and I follow.

This seemed symbolic of everything she had done since marrying Jeff. She had meekly followed him into strange places, she had submerged her life in his.

When they arrived at the house she said with unusual brusqueness, "Varnish the kitchen and bathroom linoleum now. Tomorrow you can do the waxing."

She handed the Indian a can, and he vanished through a doorway. Marcella glanced slowly about her. Inside these four walls was to be her future home. Her neighbors would be the family at the main house and the Navajos living in the hogans scattered through the nearer country. Her occupation would be domestic work and whatever she did to help in the store.

Wide, shallow canyons stretched away in each direction from the flat where the trading post buildings were assembled. Their floors were sparsely covered with sagebrush. Cedars scattered over the side walls looked in the distance like currants stuck into the browned crust of buns. There was the rocky path to the mesa. Halfway up was a spring from which you couldn't drink because the water was alkaline. Sand and rocks, cedars and sage, Indians and scrubby horses. These in exchange for her perfectly equipped apartment, the throbbing, teeming city at its threshold.

MARCELLA took a letter from her skirt pocket and slowly re-read what she had scanned in haste the previous day. It bore the heading of Burr, Lane and Mac Intyre. It said:

"Darling:

Frightfully sorry I've been such ages writing you. We've hooked another big account—that string of southern hotels Tap was fishing for when you quit. The place is a madhouse. You really should be here.

Still think it's a tragedy that Jeff Bryson was on the ferryboat with you, the night it bumped in the fog. You were heading straight into Big Time. But that guy would positively be dynamite for any gal he wanted. Don't blame you for being exploded right out of New York. And according to your letter, after six months you are still sold on Western Scenery and Romance, with love still boiling.

When you pulled out and left us gals mopping our eyes, I said, 'If this marriage deal don't hold, Marcie will be back like a pigeon to the home roost.' And *would* Tap take you on! He's tried out three girls for your spot. The latest is Beryl Ditmar, so you know how desperate the case is . . . ."

The paper crackled sharply as Marcella's fingers tightened and crushed it. Sharp-eyed, needle-tongued Beryl Ditmar in *her* office! The mere suggestion was hateful.

Marcella darted from the house as if she were fleeing from prison.

Since she had left the store, more Indians had come in over the winding trails. Horses and clumsy wagons were tied here and there. Several women rested on a bench in the shade of the porch, damp faces and dusty moccasins indicating that they had walked far.

Two, Marcella recalled, had been with a party of Navajos who had arrived from Chinle several days before. The unusually pretty girl sitting in the center of the row was the recent bride of Big Joe, a silversmith, whose hogan was on the mesa.

Marcella felt sudden envy of the Indian girl. Her mode of life hadn't been changed by marriage. She had moved to a home practically identical with the one she had left. She need change no habit of her former life.

The long day finally ended. Marcella could tell Lydia goodnight and retreat to the room she wished held fewer reminders of intimate hours with Jeff. Something in Lydia Bryson's expression suggested that she suspected the troubled state of mind of her son's wife. But it wasn't her way to pry or force confidence.

Lydia had had no experience with Marcella's kind of a world. She wouldn't comprehend that a girl could have come from so different an environment, could hold viewpoints and interests that differed so radically from her husband's that staying with him wouldn't work out. Not with love alone for foundation.

Marcella had watched a number of marriages skid and crash because neither party had had courage to make a clean break when it became clear they hadn't sufficient in common for a successful partnership.

Separating from Jeff would hurt. She would miss him terribly. Merely picturing her life without him made her clench her fists so tightly her nails made crescent marks on her palms. She did love Jeff. But the emotional reactions he caused weren't enough. His arms about her, his kisses were a habit. Deprived of them, she could force herself to forget. At the first possible moment after Jeff's return, she would tell him of her decision, and she would leave quickly. . . .

When Marcella went into the kitchen the

next morning the set mask of her features betrayed the previous night's struggle. She was too self-absorbed to notice the concern with which Jeff's mother watched her.

THE DAY dragged heavily. Now that her decision had been made, the strain of waiting to tell Jeff was unendurable. She could have screamed with relief when at four o'clock Lydia said, "Why don't you take a walk and freshen up, child? I'll call Orda if I need help."

Marcella fairly flew along the road and turned into the path that slanted up the rock wall to the mesa.

At the top she headed for a lone pine

"There wasn't enough business in one place to keep me going, so I opened two more"

tree that perched on the rim. She had nearly reached it when she saw the Navajo girl who leaned against the trunk, staring fixedly down into the valley. Following her gaze, Marcella saw a wagon vanishing around a rocky headland. It was the wagon from Chinle. The Indian girl turned, and Marcella saw that tears were spilling from her dark eyes.

"My people . . . go home," she confined in a soft, sorrowful voice.

"Oh! I'm so sorry," Marcella told her, the quiet grief of the little bride rousing quick sympathy. She was very young and looked so pitifully alone "It's hard to have them leave you."

The girl's full lips formed the "O-oh," which in Navajo is assent. "I live there, Chinle, always, till I marry," she said. "I teach girls how to sew, like I have learn. New teacher at school cannot speak Navajo language. I help her to learn. There is ver' much for me to do at that school. I like, it was ver' nice."

Marcella comprehended that this Indian girl was a Navajo career girl. She had given that up to come with her husband into a strange land, to take on a different way of living, as Marcella had done when she'd married Jeff Bryson.

"Why doesn't Big Joe go to Chinle to live?" she asked. "He could pound silver just as well for traders there."

"He always live in this place. This is his country. He like it ver' much. He like to work for Hosteen Bryson. Him good boss. Why Big Joe go away from here?" The soft eyes gave Marcella a puzzled look.

"Big Joe, him tell me all about what his hogan is like. What there is at this place. What I will see. The mesa, the hills with much piñon and cedar for make fires, pools in rocks after rain, where women wash. I say I will marry with him and go to this place. Now I do not like. But by-'m-by, when I have stay more longer time, then it will be all right."

"You mean you will get used to it here?" Marcella said.

The girl nodded. "O-o. If her man is good, wife does not want to go back. Because now I am marry, this my place."

She gave Marcella a friendly good-by nod and started across the mesa. Marcella's gaze followed. The girl's step quickened as she went in the direction of the brush hogan where Big Joe was waiting.

Marcella watched until the slender figure vanished. Her eyes closed as her thoughts turned inward.

If your man is good, you don't turn back. You go ahead or stand still, but

you never go back to the same conditions you have left. Crude reasoning of a simple, inexperienced mind. And basically, how much did Marcella's situation differ from that of the Navajo bride?

She had known something deeper, more subtle than merely a new environment and occupation with Jeff. He had aroused in her new emotions that affected every facet of her character. A thousand new incidents had left permanent imprints on her. Going back wouldn't blot out these things. There would always be reminders.

Slowly Marcella's glance went to the wide flat, to the big trading post building and the square, sturdily built stone house at one side.

The store had closed for the day. Lydia stood beside the car, which seemed to have just arrived. Father Bryson was unloading stacks of folded blankets. Then Marcella's gaze centered on the third figure that had stood close to Lydia for a moment before turning and was now moving rapidly along the road to the mesa.

Marcella watched until Jeff started up the mesa path. Then she went to meet him.

THEY met on the small rocky terrace by the spring. He was smiling the crooked, little boy smile that tugged at her heart. But it was a man's questioning and searching look she read in the blue eyes, a look that went straight and deep into Marcella's thoughts. She went close to him, holding his gaze. Her mouth, that was made for tenderness and warmth and smiling, trembled and refused to release the words that hovered on her lips. Then his arms were around her.

"Oh, Jeff!" She clung to him, her body shaking with sobs. "I was going away... back to New York!"

"Yes?" He stroked her hair. "But you've decided not to, is that it?"

"Yes, yes!" she declared vehemently. "I couldn't go back. You can't 'if your man is good,' and if you love him." She was laughing and crying as she reached up to kiss him.

Presently Jeff said, "It's been tough for you lately. I'd guessed, though, that you'd have adjusting to do some time."

"You knew!" she exclaimed. "And didn't say anything!"

"I figured it was best to let you work it out for yourself. If you'd tried to go—" His voice deepened, and he held her tighter as he said in a choked voice, "I'd have talked, plenty. I wouldn't have let you go! I believed if you were here long enough, you would feel as I do. We may be the last of the Indian traders, but we've got something that can't be duplicated in any other place I've ever seen. No one crowds us, and we don't crowd anybody. And, my precious wife, any time you can spare from your husband and your home, this country offers you fine use for your talents."

Marcella laughed happily. "Let's settle our own home before you shove me into public endeavors," she said.

"I shall kiss you once more, then down we go to supper," Jeff told her. "Mother gave me orders to be extra good to you."

"She's a darling," Marcella said with a comfortable sigh. "Let's go."

As they went hand in hand down the path, her glances drifted contentedly over the wide flat. It was a vista of serenity. The air held the freshness of early evening, and the light was that peculiar clearness which precedes sunset in the mountains.

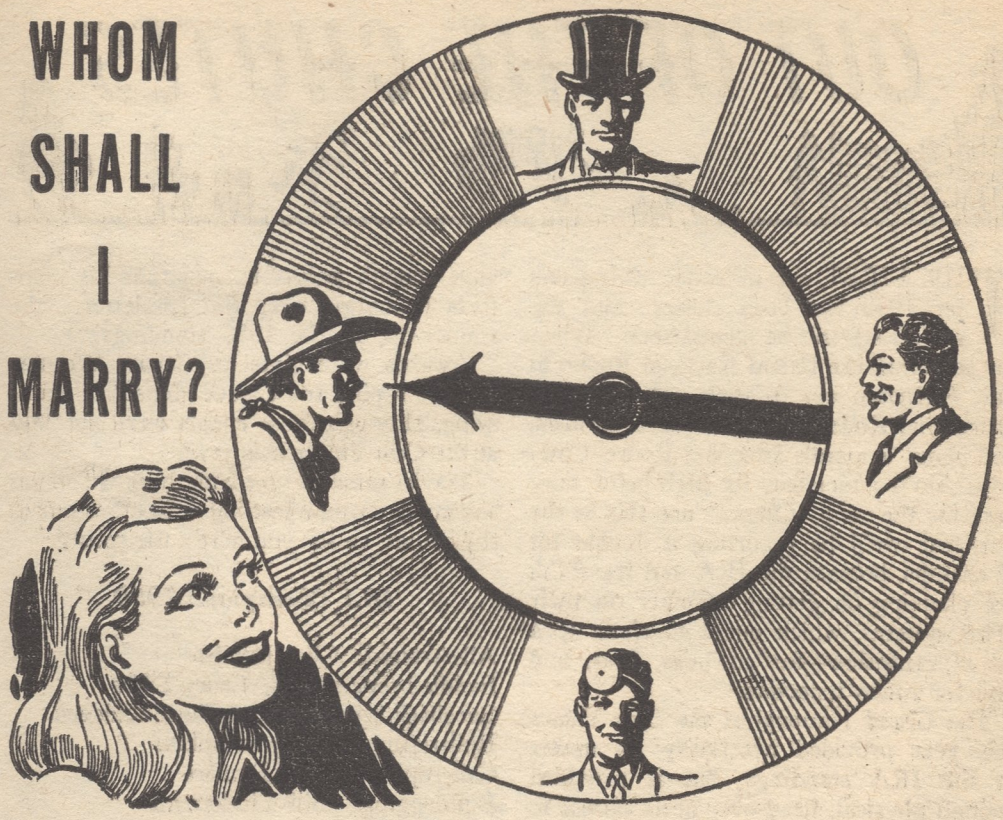
Around a low butte into the canyon straggled a herd of sheep, three small Navajo children urging them along. The musical tinkling of the leader's bell rose to the ears of the two descending the worn path.

"Listen!" Marcella said softly. "That's what I've heard every night and every morning since I came, their bells when sheep are moved. I'd have always remembered and missed that tinkle. If I'd gone back to New York, I'd never have stopped hearing those bells, and wanting you."

Jeff held her tighter. "They're as much a part of this country as the rocks and the sand," he said, "*our* country."

"Yes," Marcella murmured, "the bells of home."

WHOM SHALL I MARRY?



By Professor Marcus Mari

The Aquarius Man ***Jan. 21 to Feb. 19***

ZANE GREY, Max Baer, Thomas Edison, Babe Ruth, Clark Gable, Ronald Colman, Adolph Menjou, Edgar Bergen and John D. Rockefeller, Jr., were all born under this exceptional zodiacal sign. It is ruled by Uranus, the planet for which uranium, the atom-splitting metal, is named. Acording to astrology, therefore, Aquarians and what is today possibly the most powerful force in the world are both ruled by the same sign of the zodiac.

The Aquarian man likes new things, and has a quick mental and emotional reaction to them. He has little patience with old-fashioned notions. He feels the world is his, not his grandfather's. The girl he marries should not try to tie him down to slippers and a fireside stool. He needs to be active and wants to make himself useful to the world; his nature demands that he meet new people. He needs a mate who will keep step with him. If the girl understands this, she will have a rich life ahead of her.

As a husband, a friend or a business partner, the Aquarius man may, on occasion, be full of odd whims and strange notions, but he's never, all his life, a bore. He's entertaining, considerate, and a lot of fun. His enormous vitality and progressive energies will carry him over the rough spots of his life.

He may aggravate people, but he is so fair when he fights that almost all admire him. In all honesty, he's inclined to admire himself a bit—and who can blame him?

You may receive a personal reading by sending this coupon to Professor Marcus Mari in care of Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. ENCLOSE STAMPED AND SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE. (Canadians enclose 3 cents instead of stamp.)

Name..... Sex.....

Address.....

Exact date of birth: Year..... Month..... Date of birth.....

2-16-51

OUT OF THE CHUTES

THE FIRST set of rodeo champions for 1950 has been chosen, and the second set will be named soon. When the results of the Grand National Rodeo in San Francisco are in each year, the International Rodeo Ass'n makes its awards, and about a month later the Rodeo Cowboys Ass'n announces its high-point winners for the year. Chances are this is the last year we'll be reporting a double set of champs, because the IRA and the RCA are planning on getting together on their point systems, which ought to clear up a lot of confusion—for cowboys, fans, and also for rodeo reporters.

The Grand National at the Cow Palace this year provided practically no upsets in the IRA standings, but it provided enough physical, head-over-heels upsets to keep San Franciscans flocking up to the ticket windows all eight days of the run. An attendance record was set, in fact, with the Standing Room Only sign hung out for four performances.

All of the top-hands who were leading in the standings when the show opened came out on top, except Casey Tibbs in bareback bronc-riding. Casey got tossed on the final night of the show, which put Jim Shoulders ahead of him for the show and for the year. Curly-headed Casey had the consolation of winning the saddle bronc championship hands down.

Harry Tompkins in bull-riding, Bill Linderman in bulldogging, Gene Rambo in calf-roping, added enough points to the ones they'd accumulated during the year to win the IRA championships in those events.

Gene, for the fourth time—and the third in succession—won the IRA All-Around Championship for the year. He was not the champ of the show (Jim Shoulders took that honor away from him), but he won enough points to maintain his comfortable margin over Bill Linderman, the runner-up, in the 1950 standings.

Awards were given to Choate Webster in steer-roping and Claude Henson in team-tying, although those events were not held at the Cow Palace this year.

Maybe some of you fans think we've got too many champs jostling each other out of the chutes, so for you here's the record:

IRA Champions 1950

All-Around: Gene Rambo
Saddle bronc-riding: Casey Tibbs
Bareback bronc-riding: Jim Shoulders
Bull-riding: Harry Tompkins
Calf-roping: Gene Rambo
Bulldogging: Bill Linderman

Cow Palace Champions 1950

All-Around: Jim Shoulders
Saddle bronc-riding: Ross Dollarhide
Bareback bronc-riding: Jim Shoulders and Bill Lawrence (tied)
Bull-riding: Ray Beem
Calf-roping: Toots Mansfield
Bulldogging: Dub Phillips

THE championship cutting horse contest turned out to have a lot of appeal for the spectators. Even though it was held after the rodeo go-rounds, most of the folks stayed to see it. The winner was Skeeter, owned and shown by Phil Williams of Tokyo, Tex., with the California favorite Red Boy and his popular boss Wild Bill Elliott coming in second.

Skeeter, by the way, was sold on the final day of the show to Don Dodge of Sacramento, so it turned out that California could claim both of the winners.

It was a fine fast show and the only thing about it that saddened rodeo fans was the announcement made by Harry Rowell that he is retiring from rodeo. For years Harry has furnished the stock and served as arena director for the Cow Palace shows, and for plenty of others within a wide radius of his 20,000-acre ranch at Livermore, Calif. He's a very popular guy around the Cow Palace, where he has helped make a success of the Intercollegiate Championships as well as the IRA show.

Harry is an Englishman by birth, but he's a solid Westerner by adoption. He comes naturally by his cattle savvy, though, because his father was a stockman in Peterborough, England. Harry runs about 1500 head of Black Angus cattle, and he has a modern saddle factory at Hayward. However, his big enthusiasm is rodeo stock, and he has plenty to be proud of. Tops in his bucking string was Scene Shifter, who was still giving cowboys plenty of trouble when he was 23 years old.

The story of Scene Shifter is that when he was about a two-year-old and broken to saddle he was bitten by a horsefly. The horse figured that his rider was to blame for the pain, and promptly bucked him off. Apparently he's a horse that bears a grudge, because ever since then he's been convinced that no rider is up to any good. In one four-year period, before he joined the Rowell string, he bucked off 62 of the 72 riders who drew him.

Major Lou is another bronc that Harry is pleased with. He's Scene Shifter's running mate out on the range and about 14 years old. He was a horse that was broken badly and turned outlaw. For years he just didn't like people whether they were on his back or anywhere else. Harry's ranch boys, however, managed to take the killer instinct out of him.

"Now he's gentle as a lamb," Harry says, "until you get him into the chutes. Then he's hell for leather."

Harry's Brahma bulls aren't as famous as his broncs, mostly because they've only got numbers to be known by. But plenty of cowboys have a good memory for figures, especially after they've been tossed in the dirt by ol' No. 13 or ol' No. 40 a time or two.

If Harry really retires in 1951, that'll make an even 30 years he has spent in the rodeo business. And if you talk to him you'll think he's never forgotten a thing he learned in those 30 years. He loves to sit around and talk about the old days, remembering and arguing about great rides and great riders. He knows all the new crop of top-hands and they know him as a guy whose hand never comes out of his pocket empty when a cowboy is hard up.

HARRY has produced plenty of big rodeos, but the shows he enjoys the most are out on his ranch on a Sunday when they try out the new bucking stock. In the off season plenty of big-time rodeo hands turn up, partly to keep in practice and partly to earn a few dollars mount money.

The boss keeps his eyes on the stock. He's the one to decide whether a critter goes into the pampered rodeo string or not. And a horse or a bull has to show plenty of stuff to get by.

You'd expect him to have a pretty good eye for saddle leather, since he runs a saddle factory, but his favorite saddle is a squeaky, scarred old thing that no respectable horse would be caught dead in. And he traded a brand-new American saddle for it and figures he made a good bargain. Nope, he's not crazy either. That old saddle is the one Pancho Villa rode during the Mexican Revolution in 1911.

Once when Harry was down south of the Border hunting stock, he met Villa's nephew, who was using the saddle. Harry and the *vaquero* swapped saddles then and there, and each was mighty pleased with the deal.

If Harry really sticks to his intention of quitting, he'll leave a big gap in rodeo. But it's our guess that even if he has no official business at the Cow Palace next year, you won't have to look very hard to find a rugged, 200-pound six-footer with an easy grin somewhere around the arena.

Adios,

THE EDITORS

COWBOYS CAN'T QUIT

by ELSA BARKER

THE STORY SO FAR:

DIKE EVANS has been running the C Bar S since the death of BEN GILSTRAP, former manager of the big ranch, and finding plenty of trouble.

TOD MERRITT and his daughter LUCY, in the freight wagon business, arrive at the C Bar S with a load of goods. Dike finds some of the supplies ordered are missing from the load. Lucy and her father claim they know nothing of the missing supplies. TONK WALLENBERG, one of the C Bar S cowboys, gets fresh with Lucy, who resents it and blames Dike as much as Tonk.

ELIZA LOVELADY, an old maid who is the owner of the ranch, arrives with her nephew VENCIL BRISCOE and takes over. She has some unusual ideas about running a ranch. The men who work for her must not smoke, chew, swear or carry guns. The cattle must not be branded with a hot iron, but by a special branding paint.

"Tonk is teaching me to shoot," said Lucy

Dike discovers cattle are being stolen, and starts branding the rest of the calf crop. Miss Lovelady objects and decides the rustling should be handled by the Law. The local sheriff has been fired from the C Bar S and has no love for the outfit.

In the night Tod Merritt tells his daughter there has been talk that damages his reputation, and heads for the C Bar S to see Dike.

Merritt is shot and killed by the drivers of two mysterious freight wagons. When Lucy arrives on the scene, she learns from Dike that her father is dead. She believes that Dike killed him and covers him with a gun. He realizes the girl is excited enough to shoot.

DIKE DISREGARDED the gun Lucy Merritt was pointing uncertainly at him in the starlight.

"Your father's over here by this pile of lumber," he told her. "There's nothin' you can do for him now—but if you'll wait—I'll see if I can find our horses and help you take him back to town."

For a long moment she didn't say anything, then she sighed, and Dike saw the gun sag out of aim.

With a movement so quick that she didn't have time to jump away or bring the gun back into position, he was at her side. One arm went around her tight, the other twisted the gun out of her hand. Lucy gave a little gasp of pain. Dike released her and stepped back.

"You hurt me," she accused him, and Dike thought she sounded surprised.

"There've been times," he said dryly, "when I've wanted to hurt you worse than that."

He turned and went off into the dark.

It was nearly morning when the quiet, grim little procession stopped at the small Merritt house at the edge of Peñalosa. Dike helped the girl carry the body of Todd Merritt in and lay him on the bed.

They'd had very little to say to each other after Dike had taken the gun away from her. He started for the door, then turned to look back at her.

"Lucy—I'm out of .45 shells. The store ain't open yet—and if it was I don't know whether Sam Turner would sell me any. Have you got any more for your father's gun?"

She hesitated, and for a moment Dike thought she was going to refuse. "I think so," she said and went and got them.

There were only six left in the box. Dike

loaded the old gun's cylinder and put the other shell in his pocket.

"Thanks."

She followed him to the door, then impulsively put a hand on his arm.

"Dike—thank you for helping me. And—and I'm sorry for what I said to you out at Ojo Seco."

Dike looked down at her, hating the weakness in himself, that would still send the blood pounding like thunder in his ears at the voluntary touch of her hand on his arm.

"Sayin' you're sorry don't take the words back," he said curtly. "You thought it or you wouldn't have said it."

Color came up into her white cheeks. She bent her head so that he couldn't see her eyes, and dropped her hand from his arm.

"No—I didn't really think it." There was humbleness and a kind of shame in her voice. "I—I was just scared, and mad and half crazy. But I couldn't have really believed you'd killed Dad."

"It's all right," said Dike. "But in case you get mixed up again—I *didn't* kill him!"

She raised her head then, and her lips were quivering. Dike bent his head and kissed them once, lightly. Then before there was any chance that he might get his face slapped—or what was more likely—that he himself might do something crazier, he stepped out the door, got on his horse and rode away.

The late moon was up now, bathing everything in a soft, silvery glow. Dike headed his horse over the rough wagon road that led east, down over what they called The Breaks, where a half a dozen small homestead-ranchers had their scattered holdings.

He was remembering that the deep-voiced man on one of the wagons had called the other Bill. Bill was a common name. There were several Bills around Peñalosa, probably at least one on the regular crew of freighters hauling supplies into the C Bar S these days.

But he was also remembering that the owner of the Lazy Ant outfit, the brand with the suspicious extra curlicues, was Bill Campbell. And Campbell had seemed to be making money on his homestead without any of the hard work that usually went with such a start. He had wanted to investigate Campbell's layout for a long time. Now he wanted to see if Bill Campbell had a freight wagon—and if so, whether it had been out tonight.

Dawn was just breaking when he got down the winding, rocky road. There were plenty of fresh wagon tracks all along, but just before he reached the place where the roads began branching off to the various small ranches, he met a couple of empty wagons on the way up.

THE MAN DRIVING the first one was the owner of the G 8, a small, mild, sandy-haired man, with eight children. Dike spoke to him casually and let him go on.

The driver of the second team was Bill Campbell. He stopped when Dike waved him down.

"*All* you ranchers below the Breaks haulin' for the C Bar S?" he asked.

Campbell batted his big pale eyes at him and spat a sluice of tobacco juice over the wheel.

"That's right," he said. "Think we'll be through this week though. We're really haulin' for old man Merritt. He got the contract, and sorta lined some of us up to help him out."

"Just you six ranchers?"

The big man on the wagon seat batted his eyes again.

"Why, I dunno," he said. "Reckon maybe some others. Anyone with a wagon—and more time than money. There's a heap of freight goin' up there, and the old queen's in a hurry for it. What's botherin' you, Dike?"

"Nothin'," said Dike. "Just lookin' around."

"Help yourself," said Campbell cordially. "Stop at the house. My old woman's probably got the coffee pot hot."

"Thanks," said Dike, and rode on.

Those two wagons coming up had messed up his idea of finding out to which of the ranches the freshest wagon tracks went. Maybe Bill Campbell was the man who'd killed Todd Merritt. But maybe he wasn't. Just because a man's name was Bill and he owned a wagon wasn't any proof that he'd committed a murder. He'd have to have a lot better case than that to try it out before a jury. He had stopped to talk to Campbell, trying to compare his voice with the one he'd heard last night—and he wasn't sure. When guns were popping and a killing was being done, a man just naturally didn't notice every little thing like he ought.

He rode on, mainly to see if other freighters got out with their wagons this early, and found that they did. At the first ranch beyond Campbell's, the OH5, the owner was hitching up his team in the front yard. A little farther on he met two more wagons, starting out for the day.

It had been a long time since Dike had been on his land below The Breaks, and he was surprised to see how good it looked. Most of the places showed that a lot of hard work had been done, the grass was green, and motley herds of cattle were fat. It occurred to Dike that if a man wanted to be his own boss—if he really wanted to start in the cattle business on his own—this wouldn't be a bad place to come.

Bill Campbell's place was the shoddiest of the lot. The house, yard and corrals all showed neglect, yet his cattle were fat, good grade, and numerous.

Dike made a wide half circle around the ranches, learned nothing, and decided maybe he'd better quit detecting and get back to cowboying. He turned back. There was, he knew, an old short cut trail up over The Breaks that would save him at least five miles by not going back by the road through town. The trail had likely not been used much of recent years, but it should be passable.

It took some scouting to find where it started up, but once he was on it, it turned out to be surprisingly good, and showed plenty sign of recent traffic. Dike's suspicions of the small ranchers, lulled a bit by signs of plenty sweat, leaped up again.

HALFWAY UP, the trail leveled out into a narrow grassy bench with a clear spring bubbling out of the ground. Standing by the spring was a big red cow. She looked at Dike and bawled like she'd lost her calf, and thought he ought to do something about it.

Dike reined up, looking her over. She wore Bill Campbell's Lazy Ant brand. She was a big, good grade cow—like the C Bar S cattle.

Dike rolled a smoke while he sat there and thought it over. For two years he had wanted a good chance—and half an excuse to investigate that brand. This looked like it. The cow, he felt dead sure, was originally a C Bar S.

He drew his gun and shot her in the head. He whetted his pocket knife for a few times on his boot and started to skin her. If the brand was a burned one, it would show plainly on the under side. It would be sure evidence that Campbell was stealing C Bar S stuff.

He took pains with the skinning, intent on his job, wanting it to be clean enough that there would be no question of a burned brand showing. He had just made a good start, when a voice drawled slowly behind him:

"I've got you covered, Dike!"

The cowboy froze, his hand tightening on the knife in his hand.

"Go on and skin that cow!" It was Bill Campbell's voice. "I want that hide as much as you do—for evidence."

Dike straightened, and turned. Campbell grinned at him.

"I had a hunch you might be gettin' nosey—and I figgered you'd be comin' back this way—so I drove this old cow up to tempt you. Thought you was way off where nobody'd hear a shot or ketch you, didn't you?"

Dike eyed him narrowly, and decided there wasn't any chance of making a jump for that gun. Campbell would shoot him and have cow-country law behind him.

Campbell's pale eyes narrowed. His lips curled back over big tobacco stained teeth. "Skin that cow! Dammit—get busy!"

Dike turned, with the disgusted certainty that he had muffed this one. He'd big-footed himself into a neat trap. This cow would certainly show a clean brand.

That suspicion was right. An hour later he was on his way to jail, with Bill Campbell full of righteous indignation, holding a gun on him, and with the absolute evidence tied on behind his saddle that Dike Evans had been caught butchering a Lazy Ant cow.

FOR THE THIRD STRAIGHT day Dike Evans alternately sat on a narrow jail cot, and paced a narrow cement cell. The prospect didn't look good. Judge Crabtree, the Peñalosa J. P., was a mule-headed old muddle-head who'd thrown more than one C Bar S cowboy in jail after a mild spree. He had chosen to believe Bill Campbell's story that the big C Bar S outfit was trying to squeeze out the little ranches. He had bound the cowboy over for the next term of District Court—and set the bail higher than all reason—five thousand dollars.

Dike had protested—and been threatened with thirty days extra for contempt of court. So now he sat and scratched his head trying to figure a way out.

He couldn't expect Miss Lovelady to bail him out. He'd disobeyed her orders and she was a woman who knew her own mind.

Breaking out of this new, stone jail house was impossible without help. He didn't like the idea anyhow. There were several things he needed to attend to, and a hunted man wouldn't have much freedom of action.

He heard the young jailer chattering in Spanish to someone in the front office. The answering girl's voice was soft and full of laughter. She was arguing, he was protesting. Finally he laughed, too, then Dike heard footsteps coming down the hall.

The young *Mejicano* jailer stopped in front of his cell and grinned good naturedly through the bars.

"My *prima* come to see you, Dike. She claim she don' got no gun—and promise not to halp you make some getaway." He swung open the door and let the girl through. "Fifteen minutes, Mary," he said firmly.

Mary Gilroy smiled and said: "Thanks, Celso. That'll be plenty."

When he had gone back down the hall she said to Dike: "Celso Padilla is my cousin. I'd break my word and try to help you—but it would get him in trouble. He's a good kid—and he needs the job."

Dike shook his head. "I ain't sure I'd want out thataway anyhow."

She smiled at him. "I wondered why you didn't keep our date Sunday."

"I sure meant to. Nobody came in to see me. I couldn't send you word."

She put her hands on his arms, and her gay little face was sober. "Dike—they say Judge Crabtree set your bail at five thousand dollars. That's crazy!"

Dike shrugged and grinned. "I told him that."

"And he wouldn't listen?"

"He listened all right—and threatened to give me thirty days more for contempt."

"I'd bail you out, Dike—but I haven't got that much money. Everything we've got is Tom's—and he never gives me any."

Dike looked down at her in sudden surprise. "Why—I believe you would!"

"Of course."

"And without askin' any questions!"

She grinned. "I've done silly things myself, in my day." Then she sobered again. "But Dike—I think this is serious. A lot worse than you know."

"I know it's bad enough. Any time there's murder—of a harmless old man it's bad."

"Maybe some folks didn't consider him harmless. Like they don't consider you harmless."

"What are you driving at?"

Her hands tightened on his arm. "Do you like me, Dike?"

"I sure do," he said instantly.

"Enough to—enough to marry me?"

Dike swallowed. "Look, Mary, I—"

"If we were married—I know I could wrangle your bail money out of Tom. He

could get this foolish charge against you dropped. If you were my husband—he would take steps to protect you."

Gently Dike moved her hands from his arms. "I like you a hell of a lot, Mary—but I don't marry any girl on those terms."

She smiled and put the hands back on his shoulders, let them slide up around his neck.

"Maybe this kind of persuasion would be better," she said softly.

Dike couldn't help it. After all there are limits to how impolite a man can be—especially to a girl as cute and sweet as Mary Gilroy. He put his arms around her and drew her in tight against him.

The kiss was pleasant. Mary, Dike thought, had just about everything any man should want in a woman—but it somehow wasn't just right. It didn't ring any bells in his ears.

MARY BROKE IT UP. She pushed him away a little so that she could look up into his face. She smiled.

"It didn't quite strike fire, did it?" she said ruefully. "Do you think you could learn to like that, Dike?"

Dike was stirred, not from any strong physical attraction, but because she was such a damned nice person. Dike kissed her again. Not a long one this time, but with tenderness in it.

"You're sweet, Mary," he said. "Kissing you could get to be habit forming."

Mary Gilroy laughed. "What I like about you," she mocked, "is the way you just sweep a girl off her feet!"

They hadn't heard the jailer come down the hall again, but now he called cheerily as he put the key in the lock:

"More veesitors, Dike. Looks like you sure poppilar with the ladies."

He opened the door and Miss Eliza Lovelady sailed in. Behind her came Lucy Merritt. The red haired girl's face sort of froze over when she saw Mary Gilroy standing with one of Dike's arms still around her. Seeing it, Dike knew a moment of almost savage pleasure. He had made some impression on the little red-headed vixen after all.

Mary said breezily: "Hello, Miss Lovelady. Hi, Lucy." She called to the jailer: "Wait a minute, Celso. I'm leaving now." She looked up at Dike and gave his arm a little pat. "Think over my proposition. I'll be back to see you tomorrow."

After she had gone, Miss Lovelady tapped her parasol on the floor. "You disobeyed my orders, young man!"

"Yes, ma'am," said Dike. "And I sure got caught in my own bear trap. It's nice of you to come see me. I didn't expect you."

"Young idiot!" the old lady sniffed. "Of course I came! As soon as Lucy Merritt brought me word."

Dike looked at Lucy, but she didn't look back. Her chin was high and her lips didn't look much friendlier than usual.

"I'm surprised," said Dike.

Miss Lovelady frowned. "They've set bail at five thousand dollars, young man. Do you realize that's rather expensive beef? Next time it will be cheaper to buy the cow *before* you start to skin her."

Dike looked dazed. "You don't mean *you're* goin' to bail me out?"

SHE TAPPED the umbrella on the floor again. "Of course I am! They set the bail high to try to bluff me out. For some reason that I can't seem to fathom they seem to want you out of the way. And much as I disapprove of the way you've gone about this—I assume you thought you had my best interest at heart."

"Well—I'll be damned!" said Dike.

Miss Lovelady frowned at him, took the little black book out of one of the big pockets of her black dress and made a careful mark.

"You cowboys seem determined to work for nothing," she said severely.

Dike grinned. "You're a damned fine old gal, Miss Lovelady, and I'm proud to be workin' for you!"

She frowned again, but not quite so severely, and Dike noticed that this time he didn't get the demerit.

"Now then, as soon as Judge Crabtree gets back from a trip to the country—to accept the bail, we will go. Mr. McCanni-

gan has the buckboard here. You will ride out with us."

"I've got a horse here," Dike objected. "You go ahead. I've got a little business to attend to first."

"You will ride with us," she said firmly. "I don't intend for you to get in trouble again and lose that five thousand dollars for me. What's your business?"

Dike hesitated. "I'd like to know why Sam Turner sold me a gun that wouldn't shoot."

For the first time a trace of a smile curved the grim old lips. "Perhaps because I'd told him not to sell any guns at all," she said blandly, "to *any* C Bar S cowboy."

Dike swore again, not completely under his breath. Miss Lovelady didn't seem to hear. "You nearly got me killed," he said.

"You nearly got yourself killed," she corrected him. "I sent you to town to report some calf stealing to the sheriff—not to defend a load of freight at the point of a gun."

"If I'd had shells in that gun," Dike said grimly, "Todd Merritt might be alive today."

The old lady looked genuinely distressed, but the stubborn jut was still in her jaw.

"He was also acting outside the law," she said. "I appreciate what he tried to do—but saving that little bit of C Bar S property was by no means worth a man's life. He should have reported what he knew to the sheriff—or a sheriff's deputy."

Dike shook his head at her. "Ma'am—if you was twenty years younger, I'd try turning you across my knee and spanking you."

She sniffed, but a spot of color came into her old cheeks, and she almost smiled.

"Forty you mean, you young flatterer!" Then she sobered. "Dike—I am well aware that for years the C Bar S has seemed fair game to any chiseler who needed a little money. It's a big place. It represents a lot of money—and it didn't seem to belong to anybody. But now it's different. It's my home. I hope to live here the rest of my life—and Vencil after me. I want my neighbors to learn that I am kind and fair. I want them to learn to like and trust me. When that time comes—there will be no more stealing from the C Bar S. You understand? No firearms!"

"If you let me carry a gun," said Dike, grinning at her, "I'll promise not to use it until I'm shot at—or think I'm goin' to be."

"No!"

"Then you'd better leave me here in jail. I won't live to see the day when all's sweetness and light."

"Oh, you young idiot!" she snapped. "Lucy and I will be back with the buckboard in half an hour. Your bail will be arranged!"

LUCY MERRITT had been sitting on the jail cot, listening quietly, taking no part in the argument. Now Dike looked at her.

"Lucy going to the ranch with us?"

"Of course. Peñalosa is no proper place for a young girl to live alone. Since she is freighting for the C Bar S now—she can manage her wagons from there as well as here in town."

Lucy looked up, her gray-green eyes wide and innocent.

"I'm sure I won't have anything to worry about out at the C Bar S."

Dike couldn't quite figure whether she was being awful polite to Miss Lovelady, or whether she was ragging him a little.

"I will—with you there," he said.

Lucy had followed Miss Lovelady to the door as the jailer unlocked it. Now she turned and made a little face at Dike.

"I'll try not to bother you."

"You bother me without tryin'!"

Sunshine felt good to Dike as he came out of the stone jail house. Its warmth and the feeling of freedom it carried with it tingled through him from his finger tips to his toes.

Wagon-Bed was waiting with two seats on the buckboard. Miss Lovelady was on the front one beside him, Lucy Merritt alone on the back, about as close to the far side as she could get.

"You left room for a big fat man," Dike said.

Lucy's eyes were cool. "Maybe I was judging the rest of you by the size of your head."

Wagon-Bed turned to roll his crossed eyes warningly at Dike. With an almost imperceptible little jerk of his head he directed Dike's glance to the saloon down the street. Three of the little ranchers from below the Breaks were standing out in front.

One of them was Bill Campbell.

Dike got in. Wagon-Bed slapped the team, and said "Giddap!"

Lucy had seen the three men in front of the saloon. She suddenly moved over closer to Dike.

"Do you have to sit so darned tall?" she whispered. "Can't you shrink a little?"

Dike looked down at her for a moment. "Hide behind a woman's skirts?"

"Do you have to be so da-darned brave? Besides—I haven't got on skirts!"

"I hadn't noticed," lied Dike.

IN THE front seat Miss Lovelady was saying without turning her head, "Mr. McCannigan—there's a lump in your left jaw. What have you got in your mouth?"

"Chewin' wax," said Wagon-Bed, giving the horses another cut with the whip.

Miss Lovelady held out a black gloved hand. "Let me see."

Wagon-Bed coughed, turned his head and spat a hunk of tobacco over the wheel. Miss Lovelady ducked the black parasol a little, effectively hiding herself and Wagon-Bed as they sailed past the saloon. She didn't bother to take out her little black book.

Lucy Merritt was sitting straight, her small, rough, brown hands clenched tight in her lap. Dike wanted to reach out and close his own strong fingers about those frightened hands, but instead he said reassuringly:

"He had a lot better chance to shoot when he had me alone the other day."

"That plan misfired. He may try something different today."

"Shoot into a buckboard—with two women in it—in broad daylight?"

THE GIRL'S TENSE shoulders relaxed. Dike shot a quick glance back. Bill Campbell was gone. The other two ranchers still stood looking after the buckboard. Wagon-Bed kept the team at a stiff, steady trot, a cloud of dust rolling out behind them.

At the Gap that led down into the Rio Alumbre he slowed them to a walk, let them pick their way carefully down the steep, rocky trail. At the creek they stopped a moment to drink.

From around the next bend loped a horseman. It was Bill Campbell, riding easy, in not too big a hurry, like a man who knew he was riding up on four unarmed people.

"Gawdamighty!" said Dike under his breath, and wished for a .45.

He saw in an instant what Campbell had done. On a good horse it had been easy for him to cut around the mesa, down into the canyon, and head off the slower team and buckboard.

Dike thought he heard Miss Lovelady give something like a little sigh. Wagon-Bed grunted and straightened on the seat. The old lady, her eyes on the approaching rider, closed her parasol with an absent-minded gesture. She put up her hands and patted her white hair where the wind had disarranged it.

Lucy Merritt, with a little gasp, put a hand on Dike's arm.

"Change sides with me," he said.

"No!" she said flatly.

Bill Campbell was on them now. He had his gun out, waving it casually, taking in a lot of territory.

"Get out of that buckboard, Dike!" he said.

Dike figured that under the circumstances, he had to do what the man with the gun ordered. He stood up.

Without turning her head, Miss Lovelady said sharply:

"Stay where you are, Dike!"

Bill Campbell batted his pale eyes at her, then grinned.

"The man with the gun gives the orders, lady!"

His horse was big and prancy. His

short, sharp run had gotten him on edge, and now he fought at the bit, eager to be off again.

Miss Lovelady suddenly poked the parasol out, opened it square under his spooky eyes. At the same moment, almost as if they had rehearsed it, Wagon-Bed let out a wild cowboy squall.

The horse came undone, with a snort that almost matched Wagon-Bed's. In one long-legged jump, Dike hit the ground.

Taken by surprise, Bill Campbell had one boot out of the stirrup, and was grabbing wildly for the horn. As the horse lunged again, Dike reached, caught that boot and yanked the big man out of the saddle. Campbell hit the ground with a hard thud, started to gather his legs to get up—then Dike was on top of him.

His fist walloped the big man a hard one on the jaw. Campbell seemed to shrivel. Dike grabbed his gun, and hit him again. This time the big man lay still.

UP ON THE buckboard seat Wagon-Bed let out another squall.

"Get out of the way, Dike! I'll give it to the dirty so and so! By the holy dammits—I'll kill him! I'll—"

He was dancing up and down, still in the buckboard. His gray beard quivered with excited rage—and from some mysterious region there had appeared a gun in his hand.

With one quick movement, Miss Lovelady reached out and grabbed it away from him.

"You shut up!" she snapped. "Where did you get this gun?"

Wagon-Bed calmed down in a hurry. His eyes took on a puzzled look.

"Why, I dunno, ma'am. The Lord must have passed a miracle. I always told you He meant cowboys to tote gobangs!"

"Miracle, nothing!" the old lady snapped. "You had that gun hid under that disgraceful beard, you old faker!" She turned to Dike, her bright eyes gleaming approvingly. "Good work, cowboy! You see—you don't really need guns—even in a case of violence—if you use your head."

"The Lord didn't give everybody a head like yours, Miss Lovelady," Lucy Merritt said quietly.

The old lady passed the compliment right back at her. "He made some of them a lot prettier, my dear. You should carry a parasol, Lucy. It's good for the complexion—and I've found it has other uses."

Crazy as a loon, thought Dike, looking up into the old lady's bright black eyes—and smart as a whip. He suddenly realized that in the last few weeks he had developed a hell of a lot of loyalty to the C Bar S and the funny little old woman who ramrodded it.

"We'll take this polecat back and see if they'll jail him for armed assault," Dike said.

"I wonder," Lucy Merritt said thoughtfully, "how high Judge Crabtree will set his bail—and who will pay it?"

Dike looked at her, wondering if the same suspicion had crossed her mind that was in his. He wondered too, just how much old Todd Merritt had known that had made someone think he had to be killed—and what he had told Lucy before he went to Ojo Seco. Whatever she knew, she was certainly keeping strictly to herself.

Back in Peñalosa, holding impromptu court in the front room of his house, old Judge Crabtree was plainly disgruntled and angry about the case before him. Campbell had revived on the way in, and was able to walk in the house with Dike on one side and Wagon-Bed on the other.

Judge Crabtree bobbled his chin whiskers at Dike. "I knew there'd be trouble as soon as I turned you loose. I oughta set your bail at *ten* thousand dollars!"

"That's ridiculous," Miss Lovelady said calmly. "I'd have gone to the Governor about that." She shook her parasol at the old judge. "And now after hearing our story—if you don't bind this man over for District Court—and set a correspondingly high bail—I will demand an investigation of the way you conduct your court."

Dike held his breath, wondering just what she would do if *she* got thirty days in jail for contempt of court. Instead the old judge deflated a little before her, and

took his powders like the C Bar S cowboys had been doing. Bail for William Campbell was also set for five thousand dollars.

DURING THE NEXT few days things settled down to something like normal quiet on the C Bar S. Miss Lovelady was finally heeding a part of Dike's advice. She put a couple of cowboys on the Merritt freight wagons, and began hauling the loads that had been dumped at widely scattered spots in to the headquarters, where they could be safely stored until needed. It involved a lot of extra hauling and handling, but she had seen it was necessary.

At the same time the round-up crew went on with their work as fast as they could. Dike even found that he could make a couple of hands available to start building a chicken house and a barn.

Miss Lovelady continued to ride out on daily inspection tours, Wagon-Bed driving the buckboard. Frequently Lucy Merritt went with them, and sometimes Vencil Briscoe. Dike couldn't really find much to dislike about Briscoe, except that Lucy seemed to like him. As far as the rest of the cowboys were concerned, he was the "pale little man who wasn't there."

On the days that he didn't ride out in the buckboard, he went to town to look for more men, but he never found any. He came home late, bright eyed and soft spoken as always, smelling strongly of cloves and hair tonic.

Since the new milk cows had not yet been delivered, nor any additional broncs, Tonk Wallenberg was making a range hand, helping out wherever he was needed. And so, short-handed as they still were, slow as the work seemed to go, they were making some progress, catching up a little on things long undone.

Two quiet, hard-working weeks passed, and then one afternoon Dike was riding the rimrock amove the ravine that headed the Ojo Feliz, scouting out the best route for one of the new fences. Suddenly he saw a man on a big prancy bay horse come around the point of rocks and start down

the ravine. Behind him a dozen yards rode a smaller man on a gentle old white horse.

Dike watched them, not too surprised, that somebody had put up five thousand dollars to give Bill Campbell his freedom. He doubted if Campbell had that kind of money—or for that matter—if all the nesters below the Breaks put together could raise that much cash. But what the hell was Vencil Briscoe doing with him?

Dike sat quiet and watched. Campbell shook out his loop, gave a big red cow a run and dabbed a loop on her. The big horse knew his business. He plowed to a sudden stop that yanked her end for end. Before she could get to her feet again, Campbell was off and had her tied.

Vencil Briscoe got off his horse, holding something out away from him in one hand, but at this distance Dike couldn't see what it was. Dike's horse chose that moment to suddenly recognize the old white as a C Bar S compadre. He put up his head and nickered.

Bill Campbell straightened. Vencil Briscoe whirled around. This time, somewhat to Dike's surprise, instead of drawing a gun to do battle, Campbell took his rope off the cow in a hurry, got into the saddle and got to hell out of there. After an undecided moment, Vencil Briscoe followed.

Dike let them go. He had a light but usable .38 now, carried in a snug harness above his ankle inside a boot top, but the range was too long for sixgun shooting, and there was no way down off the rimrock.

HE HEADED BACK toward headquarters, riding slow, still spotting the new fences in his mind, stopping now and then to lay a marker of rocks to guide the fencing crew when they actually started work.

Within a mile or two of the C Bar S, he heard shots. Even in the first startled, shocked moment before he kicked spurs to his horse, he noticed that there was something a little odd about them. They were coming from down on Alumbre Creek, and were spaced slowly, in volleys of five, with

a minute or more between. It didn't somehow sound like the give and take of battle.

Dike came down the creek bank at a gallop. Where willow and plum bushes abruptly broke away into a little clearing, he saw a man and a girl, on foot. Tonk Wallenberg heard him coming, whirled, then as he recognized him, raised a hand in greeting.

As the hand came down, deliberately he let it swing a wide circle, reach over as if he was about to pinch the red-haired girl.

Lucy Merritt had turned too, when she heard Dike coming. She slapped Tonk's hand down, but she didn't look angry. It even looked suspciously to Dike Evans like she laughed.

She said something that brought a grin to Tonk's dark Indian face. Dike had thought it was sort of cute when Mary Gilroy had laughed and wisecracked when Tonk pinched her. On Lucy Merritt it wasn't cute—to him. He knew Tonk's opinion of most girls, and it aroused a cold rage in him that Tonk should think Lucy Merritt was that kind, or that she should in any slight degree contribute to that opinion. Dike got off his horse and stiff-legged it toward them.

"What the hell you two doin'?"

It was a silly question, considering that the girl had a gun in her hand, and down stream fifty feet was a big white cardboard marked for target practice.

Lucy looked at him wide eyed for a moment, then at the anger in his voice and eyes, her own temper flared up.

"As any fool ought to be able to see," she said coolly, "Tonk is teaching me to shoot."

"That ain't what it looked like to me," Dike said. Lucy's sassy answer had added fresh fuel to the anger seething inside him. "Tonk—I'm liable to try and beat hell out of you—if I ever see you try to lay a hand on Lucy again," he said grimly. "And that goes for her, too."

Tonk's easy grin faded. "Why, dammit, Dike—" he began.

But Lucy was in no mood for apologies. Her gray-green eyes blazed.

"Why—you great big, bullying dumbbell!" she flared. "Who are you to tell me what I can do or can't do!" She turned deliberately to Tonk. "Go ahead and pinch! We'll see how tough he is! I'll help you beat his ears down!"

Some of Tonk's grin came back. "Hunh-*unh!*" he said, shaking his head. "It ain't no fun when they're expectin' it!" He looked at Dike. "I'm sorry, big boy! I just didn't savvy how it was!" He started for his tied horse a dozen yards away. He took a few steps, turned and grinned back over his shoulder at Lucy. "Hey, whyn't you let Dike—"

Lucy suddenly backed away, even though Dike hadn't made a move. "Don't you dare lay a hand on me!" She sounded about equal parts mad and scared. "If you do—I'll—I'll bite your ears off!"

"I don't pinch," said Dike. "I spank! And if you don't quit flippin' your skirts so sassy around me—someday I'm liable to try it!"

"You—you—" Lucy suddenly gave it up, as if she had just about exhausted her name-calling vocabulary. She turned and stalked to her horse.

SHE RODE IN a hundred yards behind Tonk. Dike followed slower. He was calling himself a few names now—but still he didn't aim to take back anything he'd said. Maybe he was a damn fool—but he wasn't going to admit it to that sassy-tongued, flint-hearted red-head.

By the time he rode in, Lucy had had plenty of time to unsaddle and get away from the corral, but to his surprise she was waiting. She followed him into the corral, waited while he unsaddled. Then she said quietly: "Dike—we just can't seem to get along at all. Do you want me to leave the C Bar S?"

He looked at her, surprised. But he was still mad—or at least that's what he thought it was. He shrugged.

"That's up to you. You don't want to give up your whole purpose in coming out here, do you?"

"My purpose?" she said, puzzled.

"Sure. Wasn't the big idea to try an' snare Vencil Briscoe—if you could?"

She drew back as if he had struck her. Then she shrugged. "Oh, that," she said casually. "I've already done that. He asked me this morning."

That gigged him all right, But Dike sure didn't aim for her to know it. He wanted—almost worse than he had ever wanted anything—to know what her answer had been but he wouldn't ask.

After a moment Lucy turned and started for the house. She took half a dozen steps, then came back. Dike thought for a second there was a trace of tears in her eyes, but she bent her head quickly so he couldn't see for sure.

"Did it ever occur to you—that I might be interested in—in finding out who killed my father?"

In spite of all the big, fierce talk he had been making to himself for the last ten minutes, Dike Evans suddenly reached out long arms and put them around the girl.

"I'm sorry, Lucy. I'm damned sorry!" Then his voice roughened again. "But don't you ever let me catch Tonk cuttin' up with you again!"

She had let him put his arms around her. There had even seemed to be a momentary yielding in the soft slender body against his. But now she yanked herself away. She turned and walked to the house without speaking.

The cook was ringing the supper bell in the door of the chuck house. Dike started toward it, then instead went back in the corral, caught a fresh horse, saddled and rode to town.

He stopped at the little house where the county clerk lived. He was just getting ready for bed, but when Dike explained what he wanted, after some persuasion, he put his clothes on again, went down and opened up his office.

It took several hours of pawing through and poring over records, and when he had finished he didn't know much more than when he had come to town. The ranches below the Breaks were all owned by the men who lived on them, their taxes were

promptly paid, and as far as the county records showed there were no mortgages or indebtedness on any of them.

But still Dike was not satisfied. All the small depredations suffered by the C Bar S during the past two years began to take on a definite pattern. Suppose it wasn't just the scattered small-time thieving of a dozen different men who saw a chance to graft a few dollars from a rich syndicate—or more recently—a rich old maid from Chicago? Suppose it was all planned and directed by one man—somebody who wanted to so disgust the greenhorn owners with a ranch that showed a constant loss that in time they would sell out cheap just to get rid of it. He wondered just how much money Eliza Lovelady had—and how much staying power in a game that seemed to be a losing one.

LITTLE AS HE respected Vencil Briscoe, it had been a shock to him this afternoon to see the mild little man on C Bar S property with Bill Campbell. But now that he thought it over, it fit the pattern. It might even explain that "OHO SACO" message on the sandstone canyon wall. He must have been pretty dumb not to have suspected who had left the message there, before.

Briscoe didn't know Spanish. And if he had just heard the word pronounced without ever having seen it written, he would spell it that way.

Briscoe was the one man who knew just where all the freight loads were to be dumped every day. He would have known that the Ojo Seco load was to be unguarded that night.

The C Bar S was a good ranch. With proper management, and enough help, it would show a good profit. But it had always been bossed by absentee, greenhorn owners—despoiled by constant petty thieving and grafting. Now Miss Lovelady showed signs of some day learning the ranching business, but what she was building and saving, it looked like her nephew was throwing away.

It was late when Dike got back to the

ranch. Lights were out and the yards quiet. The two ranch dogs barked at him briefly. He spoke to them and they came to him for a brief petting before going back to their beds on the front porch.

Dike let his horse into the corral and started to unsaddle. Some sense of movement behind him, some slight noise whirled him around. Two shadowy figures sprang at him from the nearby gear shed. One of them hit him hard enough to knock the wind out of him with a whishy grunt. The other flung an arm around his neck, pressed a hand tight across his mouth.

Dike tried to jerk free, but the arm around his neck was like a band of iron. The other man clamped arms tight around his middle, squeezing like the hug of a grizzly bear. Boot toes kicked him behind the knees, and they had him down. He kicked wildly and hard. This brought a grunt of pain, but no slackening of their holds on him.

In a minute they had a gag tight in his mouth, his hands tied behind him.

One man tapped him on the head with something that might have been either a gun butt or a rock. Dike slumped over and quit struggling, but he didn't quite go out. They tied his legs and rolled him over against the fence.

They had horses in the corral, several of them, and they went to work saddling and bridling.

Dike heard them, but dimly, as if from a great distance, and as if it didn't matter to him at all. But some small, warning portion of his mind told him it did matter. He opened his eyes. His head ached sharply. The hurt was a good thing. It pulled him a little further back toward consciousness. He tried to breathe deep. He blinked his eyes open.

The men weren't talking much, and they were keeping their voices low, but now Dike recognized two of the new men Vencil Briscoe had hired, Abe Carnico and Cuff Stimson. They had Dike's own private horse saddled, a tall light brown horse that he called Honey. There was another horse with a pack on his back.

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Everybody wanted to help—brotherhood in action! See what I mean? — Mary Margaret McBride

ELSA BARKER

They led the horses out of the corral, and he realized that they had tied sacks over their feet to deaden the sound of hoofs wherever they might strike hard ground or rocks.

THEY UNTIED Dike's feet and helped him up. Dike aimed a kick that landed and brought a grunt and a curse. A fist like a mule kick hit him in the belly. Dike sagged. He started to swing a leg for another kick, then good sense came back and told him that with his hands tied, they had him considerably outnumbered.

He let them propel him out the gate to the side of the brown horse. There for a moment he hesitated.

Carnico prodded him in the ribs. "You want to ride like a man—or be tied on like a shot deer?"

Dike decided he'd take it right side up. With a boost on his elbow from one of the men he stepped into the saddle. They swung the horses around the back way, where sound of hoofs wouldn't carry to anyone who might be awake in either bunkhouse or big house.

Carnico led the pack horse, Stimson Dike's tall brown. They struck a swift trot as soon as they were a little distance from the house. They traveled without speaking, apparently following some well thought-out plan.

Dike's mind was clear now. He was estimating the distance, noting the direction, and what few familiar landmarks he could see in the dark. They followed little used roads and trails, heading for the distant foothills. As they approached the hills, where there were occasional little Mexican settlements, they skirted wide around these, still riding at a fast trot, like men who knew well where they were going.

Sometime after midnight, they stopped to let their horses drink at a little stream. Carnico came to Dike's side and said briefly: "You want that blab off now?"

Dike bent his head, and Carnico unknotted the double bandanna gag. The cowboy's mouth was dry and cottony, his lips bruised from the hard tight gag. For

a minute it was hard to talk, then he said:

"Where you takin' me?"

Carnico chuckled. "I can tell you this much, bud. After while it ain't goin' to hurt."

That could mean several things of course. Dike shrugged.

"I never figured I was that important."

"You're important, all right. For several reasons. One of 'em is that you ain't goin' to be around when next term of District Court is held. The old lady's pocketbook ain't as deep as most folk think. Payin' five thousand bail is goin' to hurt."

"I see," said Dike.

"Yeah? Maybe you won't very long."

"You're not fool enough to think you can get away with murder?"

Dirk sensed rather than saw the man shrug. "I don't know why not. The law says there's got to be a *corpus delicti*—before it's murder. Besides, buddy, ain't many folks goin' to be lookin' for you. We've got all your belongings here with us. They're goin' to think you jumped bond. Bill Campbell's got an open and shut case against you. Rather than face a sure pen sentence—you just run away. Savvy?"

"I savvy that like all pewee brains, you talk too much," said Dike dryly.

Carnico laughed. "Sometimes—I reckon it don't matter."

He got on his horse and they started forward again, climbing sharply for a while. After a half hour they stopped at a big covered wagon beside an old sheep corral.

Carnico motioned for Dike to get off. "The end of the line," he said.

Dike sat still, wondering what the "end of the line" meant. The gun in his boot had rubbed a sore place on his ankle, but it was a good kind of hurt. It was a comfort to have it, even though with his hands tied it was of no use. Carnico came and gave his belt an impatient yank.

"Off—I said!"

Reluctantly Dike kicked his boot out of the stirrup and stepped down.

(To be continued in the next issue)

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Show me how I can get started in my own business, full or spare time, selling your exclusive Velvet-eez and other shoe styles in my community. Please rush FREE SELLING OUTFIT to me right away. Send everything free and postpaid. My own shoe size is: .....

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MASON SHOE MFG. CO.

Dept. M-660, Chippewa Falls, Wis.

Be Protected in case of SICKNESS or ACCIDENT

HERE'S AN AMAZING NEW HOSPITALIZATION PLAN

NO TIME LIMIT
ON HOSPITAL ROOM AND BOARD
Policy Pays as Long as You Stay!

MAIL COUPON BELOW

Accidental Death and POLIO COVERAGE INCLUDED!

COSTS ONLY 3c A DAY

Individual or Family Eligible . . . Birth to Age 70

This is it! Sold only by mail! America's newest and greatest Hospitalization Plan. Amazing coverage! Lower cost! Good anywhere in the U.S. It's exactly what you need!

If you get sick or have an accident, you may go to any recognized Hospital (Rest Homes, Sanitariums, Government Hospitals excluded). Your NORTH AMERICAN Policy will pay for Hospital Room, Board and General Nursing Care at the rate of **$150.00** PER MONTH. What's more, you can stay as long as necessary. There's NO TIME LIMIT. Now, in case you need SURGERY, due to sickness, accident or disease . . . the Policy pays lump CASH for 74 specific SURGICAL OPERATIONS. What a help . . . what a blessing it is to fall back on this kind of coverage in time of need.

LOOK WHAT ELSE YOU GET!

For ACCIDENTAL DEATH Policy pays **$500.00** . . . with a special provision giving 4 times the amount — or **$2,000.00** — for death resulting from accident while traveling on a common carrier. But this isn't all. For still more protection, seldom included in ordinary Hospitalization — you and insured family members also get POLIO coverage — **$500.00** to cover HOSPITAL BILLS, **$500.00** for MEDICAL TREATMENT, **$500.00** for ORTHOPEDIC APPLIANCES.

Then, too, there are liberal Benefits for accidental LOSS OF HANDS, FEET OR EYES; Benefits for EMERGENCY HOSPITAL TREATMENT for accidents involving no confinement, etc. Imagine all this wonderful value and coverage at a rate for adults of only about 3c a day, 1½c a day for children to age 18 . . . and CHILDREN GET FULL BENEFITS. (Maternity Rider is available at small additional charge.)

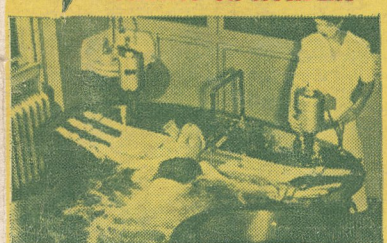
IMPORTANT — The NORTH AMERICAN POLICY pays you FULL BENEFITS regardless of money you collect from other insurance sources for the same disability, including Workmen's Compensation. WE PAY DIRECT TO YOU! This means, if you are already carrying Hospitalization — be smart . . . buy this additional Policy, with its extra cash benefits, to protect yourself against today's higher Hospital costs. Don't Delay! MAIL COUPON BELOW for FREE DETAILS. No Agent will call!

YOU CAN GET MATERNITY RIDER!!

SICKNESS OR ACCIDENT

SPECIFIC SURGICAL BENEFITS

LOSS OF HANDS, EYES, FEET



INFANTILE PARALYSIS BENEFITS

FREE! MAIL THIS COUPON

Truly this is a remarkable Hospitalization Plan. Investigate it! Buy it! Mail coupon for complete details.

No obligation. No agent will call.

North American Mutual INSURANCE COMPANY

Dept. 251—TG, North American Building, Wilmington 99, Delaware

Please send me without obligation full details about the new North American Hospitalization Plan. No Agent will call.

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... State .....

(Paste on penny postcard or mail in envelope)