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RANCH ROMANCES

25c

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FIRST JULY NUMBER

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by Theodore J. Roemer

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by Ray Gaulden

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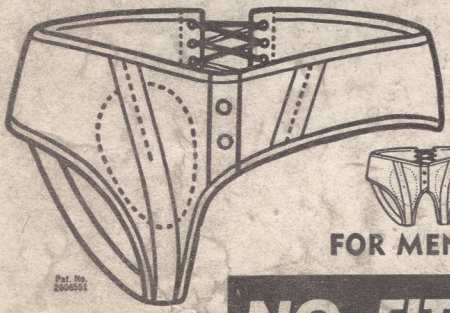

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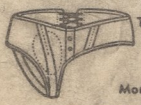

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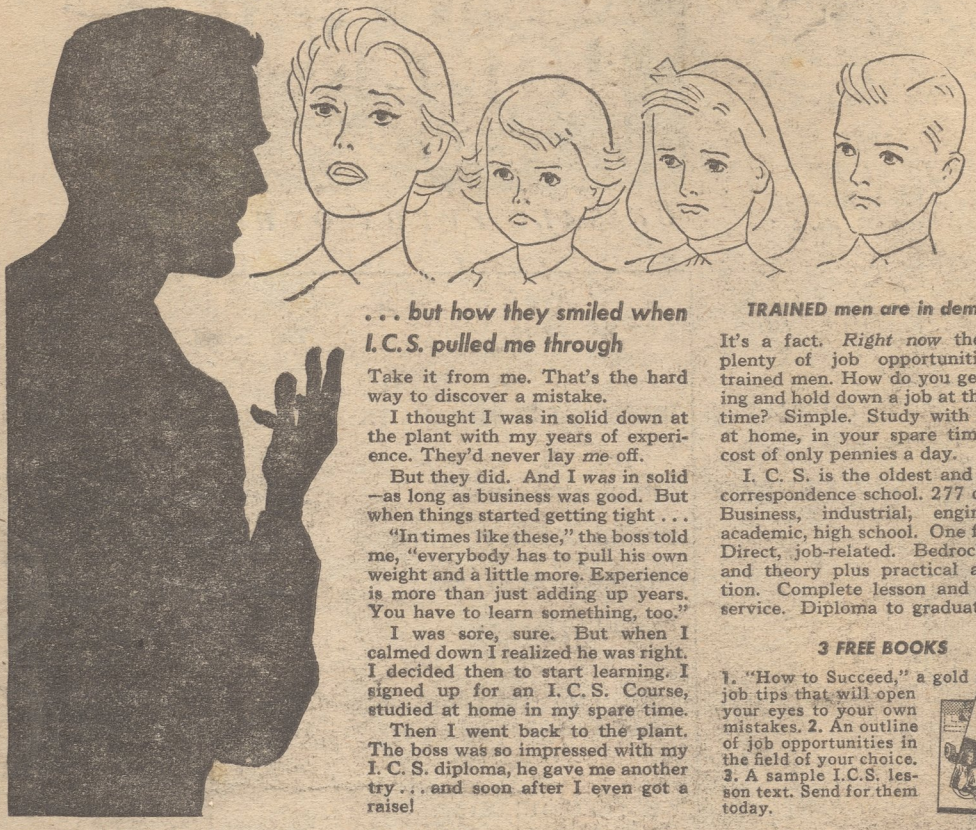

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31st Year
OF PUBLICATION

FIRST
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July 1, 1955
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RANCH ROMANCES

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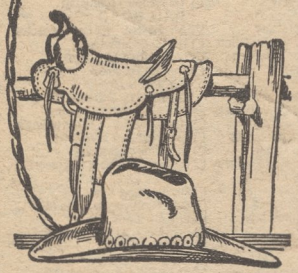

HELEN TONO
Editor

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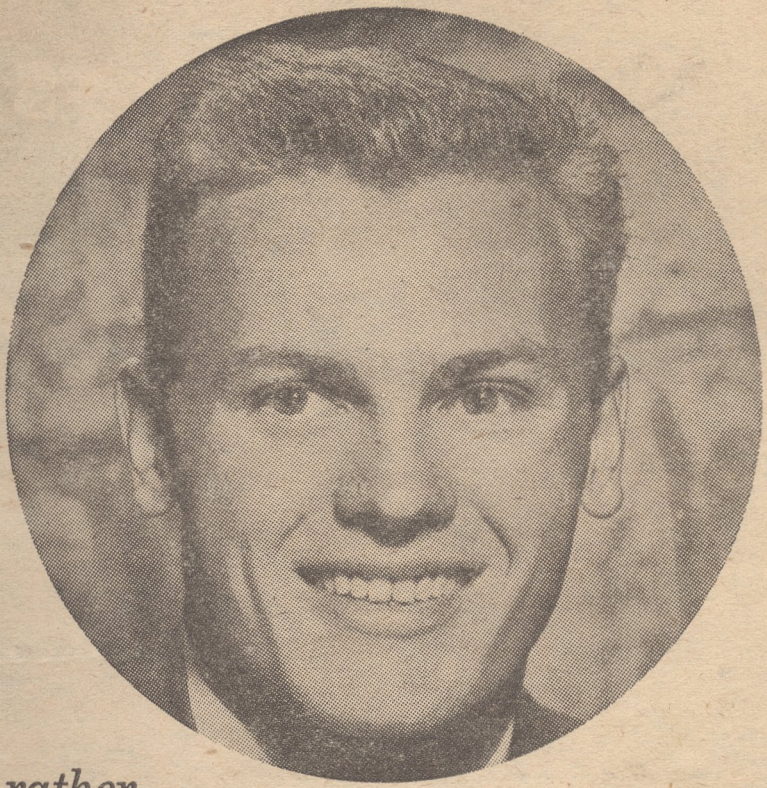

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There's Room

Dear Editor:

I hope there's room for me in your Air Mail column soon. I'm a boy of 13, with brown hair and eyes. I like baseball, also like to fish and hunt. I will be glad to get letters from anyone from 12 to 15, boys or girls.

LA VERNE BROOMHALL

General Delivery
Hallandale, Miss.

Specialist

Dear Editor:

I am a 14-year-old girl who specializes in hillbilly music. I have long light brown hair, dark brown eyes, and a dark complexion. I like sports of all kinds, especially hiking and dancing, and can play the piano and accordion. I'm a freshman in high school, and would like to hear from anyone aged 9 to 19.

SHIREY MORGAN

263 Lorane Route
Cottage Grove, Ore.

One Big Family

Dear Editor:

I'm 36 years old, weigh 175 lbs., have brown hair and blue eyes, and am 5' 7½" tall. I like sports, and all types of music. I'm an ex-G.I., and now drive a large truck. I also like writing letters, as I get very lonely. Would like to hear from anyone from 19 on up who wants to correspond. So come on, let's be one big family.

WILBUR HANSON

Continental Hotel
133 French Street
New Brunswick, N. J.

Canadian Teen-ager

Dear Editor:

Hope you'll print this in your next issue. I am a young girl of 14, have dark brown hair and brown eyes, stand 5' 2½" tall, and weigh 112 lbs. I like to play softball, ride horseback, and collect love books or comics. Would like to hear from girls and boys from the ages of 14 to 18, and will answer all letters received.

MONA CHRISTIAN

Ribstone, Alberta
Canada

From the Isle of Delight

Dear Editor:

Will you be kind enough to print my name in your Air Mail column? I would love to have pen friends in the U.S.A. and other countries, and I hope that Americans would like to have a pen friend in Ceylon, which is also called the "Isle of Delight." I'm 19 years old, and my interests include movies, photography, swimming, and collecting film stars' photos.

PHILIP DAVID ANTONY

Point Pedro
Ceylon, Asia

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 30 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.

Sisters

Dear Editor:

We are two sisters who would very much like some pen pals. We aren't lonely, but we love to write letters. Beverly is 15 years old, 5' 6" tall, weighs 134 lbs., has long blonde hair and gray eyes. Darlene is 17 years old, 5' 3" tall, weighs 115 lbs., has light brown hair and blue eyes. We both enjoy dancing, reading, roller skating and good music. Here's hoping we hear from one and all. Any age or nationality—it makes no difference.

DARLENE BARCLAY
BEVERLY BARCLAY

Tidewater, Ore.

Cowboy

Dear Editor:

I've been reading RANCH ROMANCES for over 15 years, but have never written to Our Air Mail before. I've been a cowboy all my life, and horses are my main interest. I live on a small horse ranch, and I'd like to hear from any woman about 35 who really loves horses. I'm 50 years old, 5' 10", weigh 150 lbs., have black hair and hazel eyes, and am very active.

C. M. PRYOR

Box 370C, Route #2
Monroe, Wash.

Farm Girl

Dear Editor:

I'm a 16-year-old girl, blonde and not bad-looking. I'm lonely, as I live on a farm, and I'd like to write to girls and boys about my age or up to 25. I'll answer all letters. My interests are skating, singing at different churches, and collecting records and salt and pepper shakers.

PATTIE A. STILL

c/o G. H. Cline
Route #2
Waverly, W. Va.

Buddies

Dear Editor:

We are two young men who are almost always together. We would like to hear from anyone from anywhere. My name is Robert Beers. I am 22 years old, 6′ 1″ tall, and weigh 175 lbs. I have blond hair and blue eyes. I like all sports, and would love to receive loads of letters. My buddy's name is George Lovette. He is 20 years old, 5′ 6″ tall, and weighs 157 lbs. He has brown hair and green eyes. He also likes all sports, and he would love to receive lots of letters too.

ROBERT BEERS
GEORGE LOVETTE

Robert—3706—49th Street
New Brighton, Pa.
George—513—7th Street
New Brighton, Pa.

Fill it Full

Dear Editor:

I am an 18-year-old girl, and a junior in high school. I have curly blonde hair and blue eyes, am 5′ 5½″ tall, and weigh 147 lbs. I love to cook and sew, and my favorite sport is playing softball. I live in a small town and there isn't much to do, so I get pretty lonely. So come on, all you guys and gals, write to me and fill my mailbox full.

DEAN MOORE

Box 336
Albion, Okla.

Lonely Canadian

Dear Editor:

I'm a lonely Canadian boy of 17, with light brown hair and green eyes. I'm 5′ 8″ tall and weigh 140 lbs. I'd especially like to write to boys and girls from the southern states. I like dancing, swimming, and writing, and popular Western music.

DANNY CUTTING

Zealandia, Saskatchewan
Canada

Hurry, Hurry!

Dear Editor:

I am 36 years old, 5′ 7″ tall, have brown hair and eyes, and weigh 158 lbs. My hobbies are photography, stamps, and collecting photos and cards. I will answer all letters, and will exchange photos. Do I need correspondence? Yes!. Rush me some letters, please.

HERMAN DITLOWITZ

631 N. Eleventh Street
Philadelphia 23, Pa.

Take Your Choice

Dear Editor:

I would greatly appreciate your entering these names in your Air Mail column: A/2c Frank G. Yeary, Jr.—19 years old, has brown wavy hair, blue eyes, and is 5′ 10″ tall. He will answer all mail as soon as possible. A/2c Karl W. Ockel—20 years old, has blond hair, is 5′ 9″ tall, and weighs 145 lbs. He was born in Germany. He will appreciate your writing, and will answer all mail received. A/2c Claude R. Furrow—20 years of age, has brown hair, is 5′ 8″ tall, and weigh 130 lbs. He was born in Richmond, Virginia. These men all have the same address.

A/3c Wayne A. Amann

5010th Supply Sqdn.
A.P.O. 937, c/o Postmaster
Seattle, Wash.

Sweet Sixteen

Dear Editor:

I will be 16 this summer, and a junior in high school next fall. I'm 5′ 3½″ tall, weigh 120 lbs., have blue-green eyes and medium brown hair. Horseback riding is my favorite sport, and my other interests include traveling, letter writing, and popular and hillbilly music. I'll answer all letters, but would especially like to hear from boys in the service.

SUE FRANCE

Pratt, Kans.

Calling All Girls

Dear Editor:

I've been reading RANCH ROMANCES for two years and have enjoyed it very much. Now I'd like to join the pen pal club. I'm 23 years old, 6′ tall, weigh 165 lbs., and have brown hair and eyes. I would like to hear from any young lady around my own age.

WILLIAM MANSFIELD

3350 So. Clarkson
Englewood, Colo.

Young Widow

Dear Editor:

I am 27 years old, have four children, and no longer have a husband. I would like very much to have some pen pals, especially shut-ins or handicapped people. I am 5′ 7½″ tall, weigh 120 lbs., have light brown hair and hazel eyes. I like to write letters, read and cook, and I enjoy country life.

BARBARA WHITTAKER

Route 2, Box 471
Grants Pass, Ore.

Solve his Problem

Dear Editor:

This plea is from a fellow who likes to write letters, but has no one to write to. I would like very much to have pen pals throughout the United States, as well as in other countries. I am 22 years old, have brown hair and blue eyes, stand 5′ 10″, and weigh 155 lbs. Please help me solve the problem of a very, very, empty mailbox.

VANCE JOPPIE

549 Michigan Avenue, N.E.
Grand Rapids, Mich.

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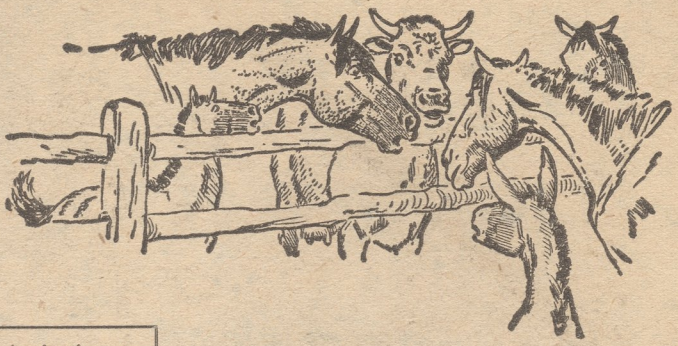


PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clippings to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found it. We'll send you one dollar per usable item; in case of duplicates, first come, first served!

THE ENGINEER of a Southern Pacific train must have had a lonely feeling when he pulled into the Oakridge, Ore., station recently. The coupling linking the engine to the passenger cars had broken, leaving several hundred passengers stranded up the road a piece.

REAL bees have joined the spelling bees at a school in Salina, Kans. So many bees have found a home there that honey is running down the walls.

A LOS ANGELES, Calif., man has found a way to shut off his neighbor's blaring TV set. A metal fishing pole stuck out of his third-story window and leaned against the neighbor's antenna short circuits reception beautifully. He reports that the TV repairman, unable to "fix" the set, is slowly going nuts.

A SENTIMENTAL impulse to visit the jail where he had spent some time in 1914 landed an Okanogan, Wash., man back in the clink. Unknown to him, the sheriff was holding a warrant for his arrest on a 1952 burglary charge.

ADD TO the hazards teachers face, the generosity of an Oklahoma City, Okla., child who, told not to eat candy in school unless everyone could share it, produced a sackful big enough for the whole class.

THE ONLY remaining member of the Lodi, Calif., pension board claimed he was lonesome, and passed a resolution asking that four new members be appointed to replace four whose terms had expired.

CHICAGO, Ill., police got a customer so tough they finally had to let him go. The lost 3-year-old boy they picked up kicked one policeman in the shins, slapped others with a metal rule and grabbed for their guns, then began to wreck the telephones. Police gave up and turned the boy over to an orphanage to await his parents.

CITIZENS of Tonapah, Nev., gave a surprise party for the recently-retired postmaster. The trouble was they forget to arrange for the guest of honor, who now lives 100 miles to the east, to show up in town.

A STOREKEEPER in Goshen, Ohio, sent the state tax bureau a check for 1 cent sales tax by registered mail. But the state lost on the deal—they had to pay 36 cents postage due on the envelope.

IN SAN DIEGO, Calif., a youngster got Sunday breakfast for his late-sleeping parents—scrambled eggs, garnished with ice cream and scorched marshmallows.

A BATON ROUGE, La., street has had a paving job done, but neither state nor city officials did it, and they can't guess who did.

RANCH FLICKER TALK

by movie editor BOB CUMMINGS

This famous top-hand of stage, screen and TV corrals the best of the Westerns

The Man from Laramie

Columbia's new Western has everything . . . from Cinemascope and Technicolor to fine performances by a veteran crew of actors

IT'S GETTING to be a habit with Jimmy Stewart to make a Western or two every year. He's a versatile guy who has been a hit in nearly every type of movie, but he now considers Westerns his stand-by.

His newest one, *The Man From Laramie,* released by Columbia, may be his best since *Broken Arrow.* It is certainly his most spectacular, filmed in Cinemascope and Technicolor, with a cast and crew of 142, all of whom went on location in New Mexico. About half of these, including the all-star cast, came by chartered plane; the other half made the 900-mile journey in three busses, part of a caravan of 18 vehicles that transported portable dressing rooms, kitchen, cameras and sound equipment, and also livestock.

Local ranchers were annoyed to hear that the movie company had thought it necessary to bring their own animals. Hollywood horses, maybe, were necessary, but it did seem silly to cart six mules to the state which is famous for supplying the U. S. Army with this critter. The movie company did hire eighteen mules from local folk, maybe to salve their feelings, but it turned out lucky they'd brought their own. Every one of the local product was too ornery to be ridden.

Maybe it would have been a little more polite of me to have described the people in the cast before I described the mules. Just don't think I'm discussing the players in the order of their importance, now that I'm getting around to the human actors.

Arthur Kennedy played the most villainous character of his career—and loved it. He and I agreed we'd never heard of an actor who didn't enjoy sin, in front of a camera.

If we're right about this, there must have been lots of happy actors in *The Man From Laramie,* because more than half of them are dirty dogs.

Alex Nicol plays a crazy villain, Chris Boldt a drunken one, John War Eagle an Indian one. There are a few other varieties in the picture, too, all of them played with relish.

One of the decent guys in the story is played by that fine veteran of films, Donald Crisp. I was thinking back over his career, and I couldn't remember ever having seen him in a Western before. But he assured me he had been in one.

I racked my brains again, but finally I had to give up.

"Did you never hear of *The Mountain Rat?*" he asked me indignantly.

I admitted I never had, and at that he grinned.

"I'm not surprised you never heard of it," he said, laughing, "for it was made by Reliance Pictures back in 1917. I not only starred in it, but I directed it as well, and I've never made a Western since, till now."

For once, the feminine parts in a Western are good ones. Proof of that is in the mere presence of Aline MacMahon, a successful Broadway actress who won't come to Hollywood unless she's offered a part she can get her teeth into.

In *The Man From Laramie* she plays a big-hearted and big-muscled Amazon, who owns a ranch and competes with men on their own terms.

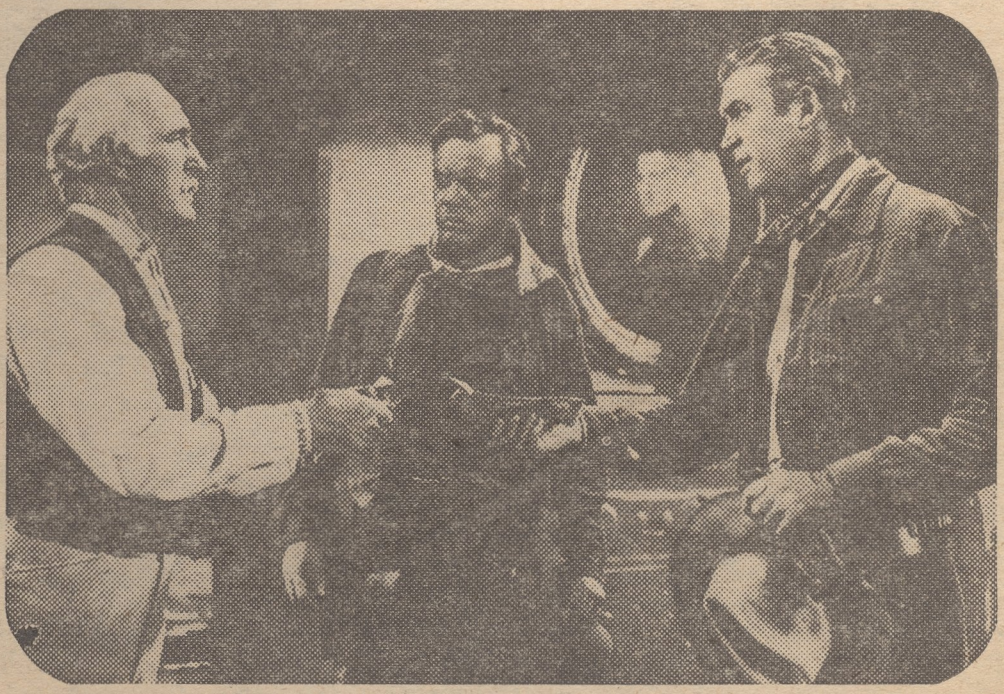
Cathy O'Donnell attends to the romantic interest in the movie, and she was as eager to defend her part as any one else.

"This heroine isn't one of those sweet, simple and girlish types," said Cathy. "She's a complicated person, trying to make a go of earning her living in a raw Western town, torn between blood loyalty and love loyalty, human enough to run away when she has to choose between them."

Jimmy's part was a special one, too. The characterization of a man who comes a thousand miles to kill somebody he's never seen was a challenging one. But the part was even more important as a milestone—Jimmy's 50th part and his 20th year in the movies.

"And a funny thing about it," said Jimmy, "is that the title of my first movie would have fit pretty well on my fiftieth. It was *The Murder Man.*"

The anniversary was celebrated not only by the company, but also by the Pueblo Indians whose town was part of the setting, and many of whom appeared in the picture. After a huge four-layer cake was cut with appropriate American ceremony, an Indian ceremony began. Pueblo musicians and dancers went through a complicated ritual, which ended with Jimmy becoming a member of the tribe, named "Na-na-sao-peen" for the mountain you'll see in the background of the picture.



Donald Crisp, Arthur Kennedy and James Stewart argue over money

MARA CORDAY
From Stills to Movies

RANCH FLICKER TALK

THE TITLE which Mara Corday held of "the most photographed girl in the world," didn't interest her very much, because all the photographs were stills. They adorned billboards, the front covers, the back covers and the insides of magazines. Mara could hold a pose for hours, but really standing still made her nervous and her secret desire was to move around in front of a movie camera.

This very secret desire had begun when she was a little girl in Santa Monica, Calif. But she was too shy to tell anyone, too shy even to try out for the high school dramatic society. She did have nerve enough, however, to try out for the chorus of a West Coast edition of Earl Carroll's *Vanities*.

"That didn't take anywhere near as much courage as playing dramatic parts on a stage where everyone knew you," she explained. "I figured I couldn't make a fool of myself if I had no lines to say, and I also figured none of my friends would know, so how could they come and laugh at me?"

By the time they did find out, Mara was an established dancer with the show, and she realized none of her friends had any desire to do anything but applaud her efforts. From the *Vanities* she went into George White's *Scandals*, and then after a fling as a nightclub entertainer, she plucked up enough courage to look for a speaking part.

She played small parts in a few little-theater ventures, and it was during this period that she became "the most photographed girl in the world."

Modeling was only a job to her, a means of keeping herself in nylons, for she lived then, as now, with her family. But all those pictures of Mara brought her face to the attention of Universal-International executives. In 1951 she spoke one line on the U-I lot in *The Son of Ali Baba*. This was *not* the turning point of her career. That one line didn't convince anybody—except Mara—that she was meant for a film career.

But slowly and surely, Mara was getting there. She played in 10 TV shows and in four movies the next year, and by 1953 Universal had finally made up its mind to sign her to a long-term contract, maybe because three other studios were bidding for her too by that time. Since then each of her parts has been more important, and finally she has reached stardom opposite Lex Barker in *The Man From Bitter Ridge*, soon to be released.

"I'm glad it happened that way," said Mara, "instead of all at once. So often when an actress is 'catapulted into stardom,' as the press agents say, she catapults right out of it just as fast. I went up slowly, and I certainly got impatient with one bit part after another, but I know I was learning all the time."

Her real name is Marilyn Watts, and she chose the exotic-sounding name of Mara Corday because she thinks it fits her better than her own. She comes from a typical American background, in fact, as I said, she still lives at home. Her father is an auditor for a life insurance company, and her ancestry is Welsh-French-English. But if she could change her nationality, she'd make it Spanish. She speaks that language fluently, loves Latin music, and hopes some day to live in Mexico or South America and have lots of children "to show her scrapbook to."

But that day is far ahead, she says.

She's just 23 now and she's hoping for a long career in the movies.

"After all," she said, grinning, "before I go showing off my scrapbook to my children, I'll have to have some exciting things to put in it."

Universal

Shy Mara thought her friends would laugh at her acting efforts

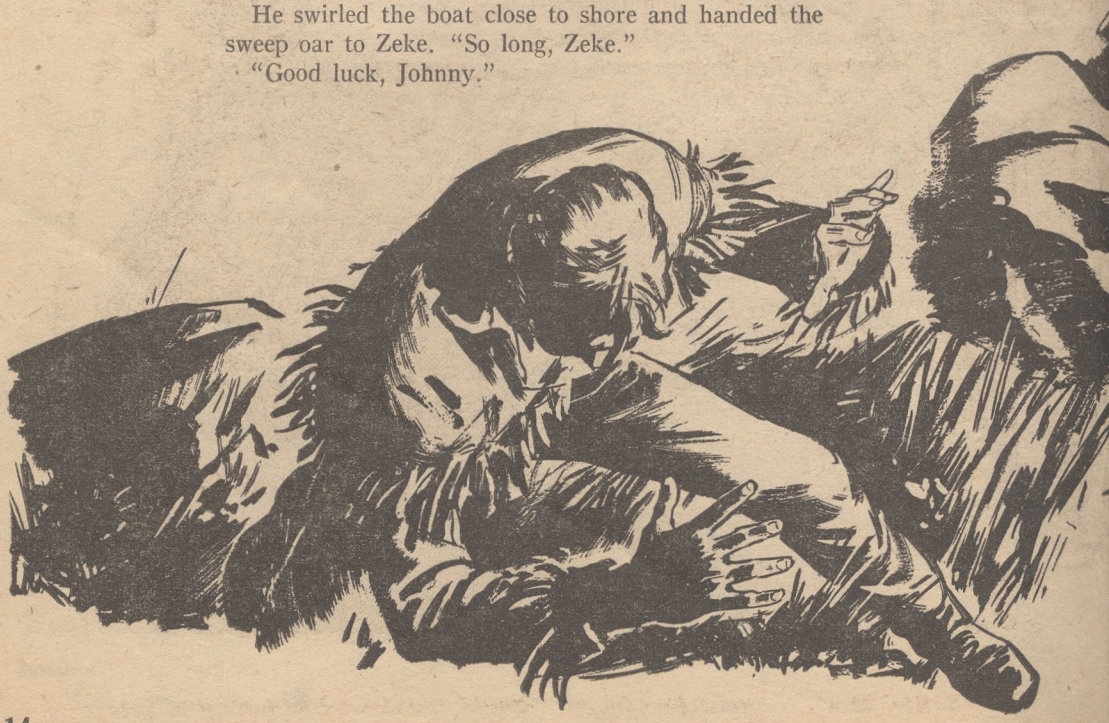
Rifles West

by THEODORE J. ROEMER

FINDING an eighteen-year-old girl bathing in a wooden tub was the last thing young Johnny Danzer expected when he got off his cousin Zeke's pig boat that raw, roaring night late in March, 1856. He had seen the winking campfires up on the river bank. He knew he was near Independence, Missouri, the jump-off spot. Those hundreds of yellow lights were like so many bright promises, each with its own little bit of glory.

He swirled the boat close to shore and handed the sweep oar to Zeke. "So long, Zeke."

"Good luck, Johnny."



JOHNNY DANZER'S TRAINING had prepared him for perils of every kind . . . except how to handle a fiery red-head like Lucy

Johnny leaped. He pulled his shaggy, winter-coated horse after him into the shallows. He waded across the sand spit, holding aloft his powder horn and his rifle, an old, reconverted Henry flintlock. Johnny had used the gun since he was ten; he loved it.

On shore, he turned and waved at the boat once more as it swept on into the blackness. Then, for the first time in his life, young Johnny Danzer was on his own.

He stood there a moment, gaunt and tall, in homespuns and buckskins. He was nineteen, and stood six feet in his stocking feet. Dark-eyed, acquiline-faced, with a coonskin cap and ragged black locks, he looked a handsome river ruffian.

He checked his bedroll. Only the ends had gotten wet in the river. He cinched the caricature of a saddle, made of wood and leather, tighter on the leggy bay, then headed up into the brush, leading the horse.

He crawled up through mud and clay and rain-spattered trees, and finally gained the summit of the river bank. The wind rolled woodsmoke into his face. He was in a camp of eighteen or twenty wagons, loosely circled. Several fires burned brightly in the center, and in their winking light Johnny saw that the wagons were new and big. Painted on them, in fancy gold lettering, was "Durand Party."

Might as well try 'em as any, for a job going West, Johnny thought. He ground-tied the bay in the shadows and started to go around the end wagon, which was a little apart from the rest, and beside which a small fire burned. And there was the girl!

Johnny Danzer stopped. In fact, he grew rigid. With the wagon drawstrings wide open, so that the canvas reflected light and warmth from the fire into the wagon, a girl was taking a bath in a wooden tub just inside the lowered tailgate of the Conestaga.

Her hair was upswept and tied loosely. It was a red-tinted profusion at the top of her head. Johnny had never seen such pretty hair. Her neck was slender, and above the wooden rim of the tub Johnny could see part of her firm, white breasts.

Physical reaction hit young Johnny Danzer. His breath exploded in a sudden gust.

INSTANTLY the young woman looked up. She saw Johnny there, saw the dark blueness of his hot, staring eyes. Twin spots of anger leaped into her cheeks.

She tried to speak. "You—you—"

One slender arm stabbed out, caught up the copper skillet which was serving as her soap dish, and, before Johnny could duck, sent the heavy skillet flying. It took him across the head and went whanging off into the darkness, spattering soap in all directions. Then she grabbed down the nearest drawstring, and the white canvas fell between them.

Now Johnny felt embarrassed. "Dawgone, lady, I didn't mean—"

"Who are you, sneaking up on me like this?" Her voice caught.

"I wasn't sneaking. I just came up the river bank looking for a job that would take me West."

"Get along, you nosey thing. You certainly won't get a job in this camp."

Johnny cocked his coonskin cap forward and spoke to the blank canvas wall, tersely. "We'll see about that. Maybe I'll be around for another look."

He turned and walked between two uptilted wagon tongues toward the men around the center fire. Three men were around that central fire, arguing about something in low intense tones. They didn't notice Johnny approaching.

"If we're going to keep our word to Bridger," a tall, middle-aged man said, "we've got to hire Prit and pull out now, Pawnee war or no Pawnee war. What's the matter with you, Spencer? What have you against Prit? Or are you afraid of the redskins?"

The wide man in heavy cowhide boots and red-plaid mackinaw kicked a stick into the fire with slow deliberation. "I got respect for Indians always, Durand. I've been out here too long not to."

"Then it's Jason Prit and his high-priced scouts you object to," a third, younger, man put in. He and the older man both were expensively dressed. They wore gold watches and Eastern-made boots.

"In a way, yes," drawled the stocky man, "and in a way, no. I made the contract with Jim Bridger, and he knows I'll keep it. I

realize, Durand, you have the most invested here, but we can't jump into things too fast. I have a feeling somehow the news leaked out. I don't like the Pawnee situation; I don't like Jason Prit's asking us twice scouting wages and ringing in a pard of his on the deal."

"What do you suggest?" Durand asked angrily. "You want to act as scout yourself?"

"No, I'll have my hands full acting as wagon master. I was hoping we could sign up Nick Foster or Luke Panter or one of those old regulars. We could trust them to keep their mouths shut."

The youngish man said impatiently, "I've checked Prit's record. He's the best in the business. He isn't afraid of the Indians. He gets his trains through. I say pay him his rates and let's pull out. If this wave of emigrants gets ahead of us, all the grass will be gone and the water will be polluted at every site. What are you so afraid of, Spencer?"

The wide man shrugged his shoulders. "It's a hunch, I reckon. Past the Pawnees there are the Sioux, and there's a renegade half-breed called John Catclaw raising hell around Laramie." He waved a blunt, hairy hand up and down the long river front where the fires winked among the trees. "I don't blame all the trains for holding up. They're all short of good fighting men."

"Then you're dead set against starting out?" Durand snapped.

"Hell, no! But high-priced scouts alone won't do it. We've got to have more fighting men than a driver for each of our twenty wagons. Balton, here, said to take along some good emigrant men so their wagons will sort of camoflage ours. By the way, Durand, that was a hell of a thing to do, painting our wagons up fancy and advertising like that. I told the men to paint 'em all gray first dry day we hit."

Durand scowled. He fingered his heavy gold watch chain. "A man ought to have some rights when he's got everything he owns in a venture going West."

The wide man drawled, "A man out here loses his hair fast if he keeps that sort of pride. Prit says he's coming over here tonight to see us."

ROCK SPENCER halted. He had seen Johnny's lean figure waiting behind Durand. Spencer's black-whiskered face hardened. "What do you want?"

Johnny, with three easy strides, moved forward. "A job, mister. Going west."

"You heard us talking?" Spencer asked.

"Some. Not much. I got the idea you need fighting men. Reckon I qualify there. I have a rifle, and a horse back there in the wood."

The two Easterners were staring at Johnny's get-up with a mixture of amazement and amusement—his long, mule-ear boots of homemade manufacture; homespun trousers; rough, cowhide belt with a sheathed knife dangling; a heavy, black homespun jacket; and topping it all, a ludicrous coonskin cap.

"Holy Jerusalem," the youngish man murmured. "Where did *this* come from?"

But the other Easterner's eyes at once fastened on the old reconverted flintlock. His stern lips parted for a moment in happy amazement. "What do you know? One of our first rifles!"

It was the Western trader, however, who saw the story behind the trappings and Johnny's powerful, big-knuckled hands, the marks of toil on a yellow-loan Missouri homestead.

Rock Spencer said, not unkindly, "Family got too big and your pa said to shove on, eh, son?"

Johnny shook his head. "Not exactly. I wanted to go West and get a job scouting with my Uncle Luke. I'm nineteen now, so Pa let me go. How about a job?"

The young man, whose name was Howard Balton, started to laugh. "Are you going to fight Indians with that relic?"

Johnny turned mild eyes upon him. "Put a cigar in your mouth, mister, and stand over by that wagon. Or better yet, just let me shoot off the end of that peaked nose of yours at that distance."

"I certainly am not going to be fool enough to let you try, with that ancient gun."

"Be quiet, Howard," Durand said sharply. "Here comes Prit now for our answer. Decide fast, Spencer," he added in a low voice. "My vote is to pay him what he asks and move out tomorrow."

"Mine too," Balton said.

The frontier trader shrugged. "So be it. Prit is a good man; we'll hire him and his partner." They faced the on-coming men.

Johnny turned and, with a slow thrill, watched the famed scout approaching. He'd often heard his Uncle Luke speak of Jason Prit. Tall, powerful, so big of shoulder that he seemed a little stooped, the buckskin-clad frontiersman came gliding across the opening on silent, moccasined feet. He had no rifle.

A sheathed knife was in his belt. A second man came behind him.

"Well, gentlemen?" There was a low-pitched intimacy to Prit's voice. He smiled around the group, at last fastening his bright eyes upon the stolid Durand. "Have you come to a decision?"

"Eight dollars a day is quite a price," Durand said.

"Not for two expert scouts."

"One man scouting is as good as two. One man can take a hundred wagons through—at three dollars a day."

"Not in these times. And surely, Mr. Durand, a man of your obvious wealth can afford that. Speak up. Mell and I have two offers from camps down the line, if you don't want us."

Durand nodded abruptly. The touch to his pride had done it. "We move first thing in the morning."

"Good." Prit smiled around the circle once more, his eyes lingering briefly on Johnny's ragged figure. Then both scouts turned to go back.

JOHNNY hadn't paid much attention to the second scout but now, as he turned, Johnny saw the handle of the Green River knife thrust into its sheath at the man's side.

"Hey," he blurted out. "Where did you get that knife?"

Both Prit and the man turned at once. "What knife?" Prit asked.

Johnny pointed to the other. "The knife he's got."

The man took it out. It was a long, powerful knife with a rawhide packed handle, the steel of the blade running full through to the hilt. "It's mine, youngster. Why?"

"My uncle had a knife just like that. Let me see it. He had his initials punched into the steel of the butt."

Prit's eyes were suddenly glassy-bright with intensity. "Who are you?"

But the other man, who was to the windward of Johnny, suddenly sniffed.

"A pig boy! I can smell him from here! And he wants a job, I bet. Ha, ha. Prit, you got a job for a pig-slopper?" The man slapped his greasy, buckskin-clad thigh and roared aloud.

JOHNNY DANZER

Johnny put down his rifle and took a step forward. Not one of the men in that circle dreamed he'd hit Snag Mell, but Johnny did. He smashed his right fist so hard against Mell's opened jaw that the man spun without a cry and went down.

Rock Spencer yelled, "Watch out, kid!"

Mell was coming off the wet earth in a running dive. And he had the gleaming eight-inch blade in his right fist.

Nobody saw the next move. The tall, ragged kid somehow went to one side, his right foot flashed out, and the knife went spinning into the darkness.

Mell was thrown into the fire from the force of that kick. Johnny yanked the astounded man from the embers with his left hand, and with his right fist knocked him off into the darkness in the opposite direction from the knife.

Silence fell upon the group. Then Rock Spencer drawled, "Say, it looks as if we've got a tiger in our midst."

Prit laughed and stepped forward. "Kid, you can fight."

Johnny was breathing hard now. He kept his eyes on Mell, who was slowly gathering his mocasined feet under him. Mell's round, greasy face was twisted with pain and fury; his hazel eyes blazed hatred.

"I'll get you for that someday, pig slopper," the man snarled.

Prit moved laughingly between the two.

"Enough of that, boys. We don't want any fighting."

"Then I go along? I get a job?" Johnny asked.

By intent or otherwise, Prit stepped close to Johnny, so close that Johnny couldn't see behind Prit nor move freely.

ROCK SPENCER

"Sure."

The next instant a rifle butt came around Prit. Johnny had a flashing glimpse of the

brass butt of his own rifle, then the stock caught him squarely above the temple. He felt numbness shoot over his body. He tried to rally, but he was going down. The rifle was swinging once more. He tried to roll away. His ears were ringing with a strange, far-off sound. Again Snag Mell swung the rifle. The blow struck full this time, and Johnny's eyesight faded.

"Stop! Stop it! Do you want to kill him?" It sounded like a girl's voice. That was all Johnny Danzer remembered.

HE AWAKENED to the musical "chuck, chuck" of wagon wheels in well-greased skeins. He lay with eyes closed, conscious of a gentle rocking motion, but the rocking, slight as it was, set up a terrible throb in his head. He struggled to open his eyes, and succeeded after a long effort.

He was in a wagon. Gray canvas stretched overhead. Light slanted faintly through on one side, and he knew it was near sundown. He lay for a long while wondering how long he had been there, then he turned his head and felt around in the growing dimness. He was lying on blanket-covered boxes, and there were sacks of grain around him. He was in a small, hidden nest.

He looked for his rifle. It wasn't there. He felt for the knife at his back and some measure of comfort came to him as he touched its cold steel. His Uncle Luke had taught him how to use a knife, and Luke Danzer was the best in the business in that respect.

The wagon stopped. He heard other wagons, circling. He lay there resting, wondering who had put him in here, hidden like this. He wondered how strong he was. Could he stand another fight? He wished he had his rifle. And where was his horse? He'd wait until dark, then scount around.

It was almost dark now. The smell of food coming on the cold prairie wind was finally more than he could endure. His head had cleared; it was his stomach that bothered him now. He crawled over gunny sacks of oats and corn and pulled loose the tight drawstring.

Another wagon was close behind; its tongue was lifted, the driver and mules gone. Johnny saw that the brightness of its once-red wheels was splashed out with grey paint; the gold lettering on the sides was obliterated. The paint looked fresh, as if it had just been put on that morning.

Johnny saw that there were a dozen or more wagons in the party. He saw women and children out there. Spencer and Durand had brought emigrants along. Why? What strange dealings were these men in?

Johnny dropped lightly to the ground and started to go to the dark side of the huge freighter, when a hand clamped around his neck. With the instinct of close-in fighting, he dropped to his knees, whirled with his shoulders, and pitched the man upward. The quickness of the surprise assault flung his assailant over his head, and the heavy man landed with a solid grunt against the spokes of the Conestaga.

Before he could move Johnny was at him, knife blade pressed against his neck. And then, in the fading light, he saw that the man was Rock Spencer.

Spencer's black eyes recovered from their shock. "Man, but you're quick, kid. Put that sticker away. I didn't know who it was—thought it might be some thieving Pottawatomie looking for a gun."

Johnny put back the knife. "Those are rifles in there?" He nodded toward the wagon.

Spencer gave him a long look, then got to his feet. "Where did you come from? I thought we left you back at Independence."

"I came from that wagon," Johnny said.

There was a light step behind them. Both whirled. The girl of the wooden bathtub was there. She had a pewter pitcher filled with steaming water, bandages on her arm, and a small covered kettle that emitted delicious meaty odors.

Rock Spencer got slowly to his feet. He was grinning. "We were wondering how he got into that wagon and so well hidden that the driver didn't see him. Now I understand."

Crimson flooded her cheeks. "I didn't do it! Do you think I could lift and handle him?" She gave a quick, scornful look at Johnny's long body.

The stocky wagon master shrugged, then his eyes sobered. "Better feed him and get him on his way back. If you don't, there'll be a killing in this camp." He turned and walked back into the lighted circle.

JOHNNY looked down at the girl. She was willowy, and yet there was a full-bodied look about her that caught a man's eye. Her red-tinted hair hung down her back now, and the perfumed scent of it made a new and different hunger in Johnny Danzer. He had never felt this hunger before. He dropped his eyes quickly. "Is that for me?" He indicated the kettle of stew.

"Yes. I thought you'd be killed back there. I didn't want anybody killed in our camp. I had Howard put you in that wagon."

"Howard? That skinny Balton fellow?" He was incredulous.

"I helped, of course," she said briefly. "Now eat this food. I found your rifle, but it is broken. Here's a cap-and-ball pistol of my father's. It will protect you till you get back to Independence—now that you are well enough to walk."

Johnny kept watching her eyes. They were just the right shade of blue to light up her beautiful hair. Her chin was dimpled, her face slender. Johnny thought of a blue creek in fall with the red oak leaves sifting into it.

He took the pitcher of now lukewarm water, lifted it and drained it. Without a word he took the kettle, found the wooden-handled spoon inside and hunkered against the wheel, he ate while she stood and watched in silence. He wondered what she was thinking, watching him.

Finished, he returned the empty kettle and the spoon, and got to his feet. "Thanks. You can throw the bandages away." He grinned and tapped his head. "Solid."

"Independence is straight back there," she said. "You can't miss the trace. And we didn't go too far this day."

He shook his head. "I'm going West—with this train."

Her face looked strange for an instant—he couldn't read it in the darkness—and then she said, her voice sharp, "I won't let you."

"You own the train?"

"My father does."

"Then I'll hit up Spencer for a job. He's seen how I can fight—twice. He says he wants fighting men. Thanks for the loan of the revolver. I'll return it as soon as I don't need it any longer."

She stood staring at him, and strangely he wanted to laugh and blow a kiss at her. But he didn't. He touched the revolver butt beneath the cowhide belt, felt to see that his knife was in place, and then walked between the emigrant fires to the camp of the wagon drivers on the far side. He saw Spencer and Prit and Snag Mell among the men.

Every man lolling around that fire saw him before he was halfway across the lighted circle. And more than half of them came up on elbows, their smokes dangling loosely on their lips. They'd seen the fight last night; they recognized him.

Johnny walked straight forward. He stopped on the outside of the circle, watching. He didn't know friend or foe among these men.

"Spencer," he said directly to the astounded wagon master, "I asked for a job last night. I didn't get any answer. How about it?"

Spencer said after a long pause, "Sure you want one here?"

"You heard me asking."

Spencer slid his eyes toward Prit, who was standing motionless. Then he moved his judging black gaze around to Snag Mell, pillowed against his saddle, his hazel eyes now flooding with incredulity, joy and hate. Mell's jaw was swollen like a mellon.

"If you want a job, I'll give you one. I saw your horse a while ago, in the bunch. If your saddle's gone I'll lend you one until the job's over. Hank, get the man some blankets and a rifle." Spencer's quick eye saw the revolver and recognized it, but he said nothing.

An angular, huge man came out of the blackness and moved toward a supply freighter. He said, "Come on, kid. I know Snag Mell. If you want to get killed, I reckon that's your business."

"My name is Johnny," Johnny said pointedly.

"All right, ki— What's the last handle?"

"Danzer."

The man stood stock still. He stared at Johnny. And Johnny said, "That's right. Luke Danzer is my uncle."

The man continued the rest of the way in silence.

LYING in his bedroll that night, Johnny couldn't help but think how fast the world moved once you got out into it. He looked up at the white, low stars, thinking of the years he had lived on his family's farm, following the plough, listening to Uncle Luke's tales of scouting during those winters when Uncle Luke came to stay with them. But Uncle Luke hadn't come home this past winter, and his father had promised Johnny he could go when he was nineteen. And so, only two days ago, he had set out to find his Uncle Luke.

And now, all of a sudden, he was going West. He had a job. And he had met a girl who put stardust, even now at the thought of her, all over that rolling prairie out there. Sure, she was silks and satin; her father owned a rich string of freighters carrying a high-priced cargo westward. But it didn't cost anything to dream.

Suddenly he sat up. What was that out there? A flicker, a pin-point, a quick reflection in the sky, and then it was gone again. No, it was over there! It was two fires over the brink of that distant rise. Curiosity brought Johnny silently out of his blankets.

Taking the revolver the girl had given him and the new rifle he'd acquired from Hank, he crept through the ring of wagons. Once on the open prairie, he broke into a swift-moving jog. He figured the fires must be about two miles away.

It was more than two miles. Coming around a hill, he saw the two blazes set in a shallow creek bed facing the west. He crept forward, frowning. The fires burned alone; the camps were empty. This was crazy. Why should anyone—

He was about to move from the creek thicket into the open, when his foot stepped onto a stick and it broke with a sharp snap.

"Who's there?"

It was a voice hissed out of the blackness to his right. Every sound of it was freighted with menace. Johnny felt a shiver run up his backbone. He recognized the tone. It was Prit's low, intimate purr.

Johnny crouched, unmoving, barely breathing. He couldn't figure this out. But he knew if he moved and were seen, he'd be a dead man. Something was wildly queer here. What?

There was a long, wearing silence. Then, from the other side of the draw, came Snag Mell's voice. "What was it, Prit?"

"I don't know. Wait." Again the voice was a low hiss.

Johnny's mind raced. Twin fires. An empty, watched camp. What was this? Was it some signal? Was Prit waiting for someone? Who? He shivered, suddenly.

Something moved at his left. His hand trembled on the butt of the pearl-handled Colt. And then a horse lunged up the creek bank and onto the prairie, its hobbles making soft noises.

An explosive sound came, as if quick breath had left a man. Then a huge buckskin figure arose out of the grasses and moved around toward Mell, Johnny was startled. Prit hadn't been forty feet from him!

"It was just your horse, Snag. Keep that damned thing hobbled tighter. I almost shot it."

"How about going back and rolling in for the night? I'm damn near froze, and he won't show up this soon. We've just started out."

"He'll be watching all trains, and we got to let him know this is it. They painted over their wagons and took on all those damn emigrants. I reckon it won't be the cinch it was last time. Well, let's go back."

The two men caught their horses, unhobbled them, and swung up. As they started away Johnny heard Mell say, "What about this young fool who's come into the train? They say his name's Danzer and he's Luke Danzer's nephew."

Prit laughed. "I'll take care of him this time, Mell. I'll—" Their voices faded off into the distance.

Johnny straightened in the willow thicket. He looked at the dying fires. He was sur-

prised to find himself sweating and cold at the same time, and it wasn't because of fear for himself. Those two men were planning for something to happen to the train—and the girl was there. Rock Spencer's hunch was right. Jason Prit could not be trusted.

FIFTEEN minutes later, under cover of the night, he crawled back into his blankets. But he could not sleep. The great camp lay silent all around him. There were a hundred people in this camp, he knew. But would any of them reach their destinations? What were Prit and Snag Mell up to?

Johnny watched the stars and chewed his lip. Should he tell someone? Spencer? Durand? Some of the men? He discarded the thought, for he knew they would not believe him. They would probably think he was trying an underhanded way of evening things up with Snag Mell.

He tried to puzzle out what his father would do in a similar circumstance, and he recalled a saying his father had once told him. "A man isn't a man until he takes on some responsibility—and then carries it like a man."

That decided Johnny. He would keep this thing to himself, at least for a while. He would watch Prit and Mell alone.

Hank woke him at four. "C'mon. Our watch, and time to get the herd in." Johnny slid into his boots and followed.

At the edge of the conglomerated herd, they relieved the watch. One of the men growled, "You'll have a hell of a time bringing 'em in."

Johnny walked to the horse herd and he whistled sharply. From the shadowy pack, his leggy bay came trotting. Johnny fastened lean fingers into the tangled mane and swung up. "You can go back with the others, Hank. Rusty and I will round 'em up."

In five minutes Johnny had the stock headed camp-ward. He saw that the emigrant families were awakening. Some had their names scrawled on the sides of their wagons—Bill Thompson . . . Guy Harper . . . Jake Westfall.

He came to two big wagons that had "George Waldoon" dabbed in green paint over the canvas, and in the dawn he saw a yellow-haired, chunky man working with bit and brace, repairing the rear brake of one of the wagons. His wife, a large woman who also had an abundance of yellow hair, had left her breakfast campfire and was trying to hold a block of ash wood steady while her husband bored a true hole through it.

Johnny saw their trouble. "Let me give you a hand there." He fastened his young, lean fingers to the block, and it became rigid as iron as the steel bit ate into it.

Finished, the man looked up. "Thank you." Then his light blue eyes squinted. "Aren't you the young heller of a fighter?"

Johnny smiled. "I reckon."

Mrs. Waldoon said, "One good turn deserves another. Send down your clothes tonight when we stop, and I'll wash them for you."

Johnny laughed. "All right." He stopped.

Awakening children's voices came from the closed wagon above, but that was no child looking down from the parted canvas opening. It was a yellow-haired, round-faced young woman. The unlaced bodice of her nightdress was open, and her skin was white, her breasts full.

She looked down at Johnny with frank, womanly interest. There was a smile on her wide, soft very red lips.

Johnny gulped and looked swiftly away before the girl's father and mother. And Mrs. Waldoon took the drawstring and angrily yanked down the canvas.

"Eva Waldoon! Have you no shame at all?"

Johnny touched a finger to his coonskin cap and leaped onto his horse. He rode up the line of white-tops, but his heart was pounding. There was no mistaking that girl's intentions. That had been an out-and-out invitation.

He was passing Durand's camp wagon when Durand's harsh voice stopped him. "Hey, you! Get off that horse and come here."

Durand was shaving, his mirror perched on the iron rim of a front wheel.

"What is it?" Johnny asked, not dismounting.

THE man's hard gray eyes fastened coldly upon Johnny. "I was told you were in camp. I was also informed how you came along. All right. If Rock Spencer wants to hire you from now on, that's his business. My point now is—and I make this final—stay away from us."

"Us?"

"Yes, us." Durand jabbed the razor around. "Stay away from this wagon. Stay away from me. Stay away from Lucy." His eyes caught the pearl handle of the Colt in Johnny's waistband. The lines around his mouth went white. "And I'll thank you for my revolver back," he said softly.

Slightly angered at all this, Johnny took out the gun. He tossed it negligently at the Eastern trader. "I lost my rifle, but I reckon it wasn't worth this. The favor is on my side, but I reckon I owe it to your daughter. It's to her I'll pay my debt."

Durand said tersely, "Stay away from my daughter, Danzer, or I'll kill you." Johnny stared. Why, the man meant it.

Johnny rode away. He was troubled. Why should Durand have such sudden, venomous hatred for him, when they had hardly even spoken to each other?

Spencer, the wagon captain, was furious at the breakfast camp. Three of the drivers—Buck Samse, Joe Young and Tom Wilder—had packed along, against orders, some whisky. To make matters worse it was the cheap undistilled whisky made in Missouri that, mixed with molasses, made a fearful combination known as "skull varnish." Now the three men were not only drunk from sipping at it all night, but they were deathly sick.

"Of all the damned knuckleheads," Spencer swore. "Throw 'em into the supply wagon! Let 'em rot there if they die! We'll have to double up, men. Hank, you take the lead wagon. Tie the second to yours. Danzer, you take over Balton's wagon and hitch his second one behind yours. Balton will drive Durand's camp wagon."

Thoughtfully Johnny sopped up the last of his beefstew with his bread, and tossed the tin pan into the cook's dish-washing tub. He had no liking to drive a wagon for Balton. He hadn't cared for the skinny young man that night in Independence, and his feelings hadn't improved toward the sharp-tongued young man since—in spite of learning Balton had something to do with his being here now. Still, Spencer had ordered it, and Spencer was his boss.

He walked across the trampled grass to where Balton was awkwardly trying to harness his mules.

"Here, you got that wrong."

He straightened the wheelers' tugs and backed the leaders into line. His big hands were swift and sure. The mules quieted down.

Balton scowled. "I'm not in favor of you driving my wagons, but I can't go against Spencer. He put me on driving Lucy Durand's."

Johnny nodded. Lucy Durand. He even liked the sound of her name. He looked at the thin, pale-faced young man. "Much obliged for helping her toss me into that wagon, Balton. If it hadn't been for you two, I wouldn't be along now."

Balton's lean jaw made a grimace. "Don't thank me," he said curtly. "And drive that lead wagon easy."

"What do you have in there that's so all-fired precious—guns and powder like Durand's and Spencer's wagons?"

"You know too much for the time you've been with us."

"What are they going to do with all this—outfit an army? Or are they supplying the Utes, as the Mormons claim? My Uncle Luke has told me things."

"He should have told you to shut your mouth," Balton snapped. "Drive that lead wagon carefully. I've got printing machinery in there, and I don't want it broken." He turned and walked away.

Up on the seat, Johnny watched the long line swing into the trace. His was the first wagon after Spencer's four, then behind him followed Durand's heavy freighters, followed by the trailing emigrant vehicles. It was a formidable train of white-tops, and with riders carrying rifles along each side they should be safe, in spite of what Johnny had learned last night.

He watched her reed-like figure disappear through the woods

JOHNNY sat back in the spring seat of the Studebaker and watched the clouds drifting by. This was the life, just as his Uncle Luke had said. And now he was joining his famous uncle to learn the ways of the frontier and the trade of scouting. Already he knew a great deal, but when he met up with Luke at Laramie, where he knew Luke had a cabin, his real schooling would begin. He was done with following a plough for all time.

A glimpse of a rider on a black horse pulled him around. He was surprised and pleased to see it was Lucy Durand. She came galloping up the length of the train. Johnny took one look at her, at the growing fullness of her erect breasts, the placement of her body in the saddle, and time stood still for him.

"Well, can't you even say good morning?"

Johnny awkwardly touched his coonskin hat. "Good morning—Lucy."

Her eyes widened at that. Then she smiled, a faint flush in her cheeks. "Howard tells me you think you are indebted to me for putting you in that wagon. I assure you that you owe me nothing. I did it as an act of mercy. They might have killed you."

He grinned. "They still might."

She looked worriedly at him. "This is a civilized train. Nothing should happen."

Johnny's pleasure increased. She *was* worried about him. Why? She was Howard Balton's girl, obviously. Was she trying to make Balton jealous? But why pick on him, even if he did like it?

He pressed back his personal thoughts and went after more pertinent information, his mind suddenly on Prit's plans for this train.

"Can you tell me where these rifles and this black powder are going?"

She frowned. "It's funny—it's supposed to be a secret that we have such a cargo, but everybody seems to know about it, even the emigrants. So I guess there's no harm in telling

you the whole story. It's going to Jim Bridger at the Black Forks. Spencer made the contract. He knew Dad, and closed the deal. We're from Middle Creek, Snyder County, Pennsylvania—Dad, Howard, and I. Howard ran the paper there.

"When Dad learned of the hugeness of the rifle order and the money to be made, he gave in to an old yearning to go West. He sold his share of the rifle company to his partner, Joe Long, took it out in rifles—in fact took every one they had in the place—and then we came West with Dad's entire fortune."

Johnny whistled softly. He looked back the long line of wagons. It would be a fortune, if they could get through and get paid for it.

Now it was obvious what Prit wanted—high-powered, latest-make Pennsylvania rifles, hundreds of them, and black powder to go with them! With a renegade Indian band, Prit could control the frontier. But how was he to get them? Murder the entire train?

"What are you frowning for?" Lucy Durand asked.

Johnny came back to reality. "Nothing. I was thinking of meeting my Uncle Luke."

"Goodness, he must be a terrible man, if he frightens you that much," she said laughingly, and sent her horse forward.

Johnny watched her slim, buoyant figure in the bright sunshine. God, what had Prit planned for this train. He bit his underlip. He wished Luke Danzer were there with him.

THEY camped on the upper Wakarusa river that night. Spencer was really shoving them, and Prit and Mell, to give the greasy devils credit, Johnny thought, knew the most direct way across these prairies.

Johnny was hunkered around the drivers' chuck fire after the evening meal, when he heard his name called by a woman. He turned and was surprised to see George Waldoon's yellow-haired daughter there.

"Ma sent me for your clothes. She said she promised to wash 'em."

Johnny remembered the look of this girl this morning. Her wide, blue eyes had that same look in them again, and then they left him and drifted around the circle of men.

One of the men, Buck Samse, who had recovered from his drunken sickness and was drinking black coffee, began to snicker.

"Sister, you can take mine too, and I'll go right along."

"In 'em or out of 'em?" Joe Wilder asked, guffawing.

Johnny began to feel embarrassed for the girl, but her smile widened around the circle. Joe Young, boldly sized up Eva Waldoon's faintly-hidden voluptuousness. "By golly, boys—"

"Shut up!"

Johnny turned in astonishment. It was big, angular Hank.

Johnny stood up. "All right, I'll give you the clothes—if I can borrow some to wear tonight. Can you help me out, Hank?"

Hank grunted, and they went to his wagon, returning in a minute, Johnny carrying his clothes to give to the girl. When she was gone, after another long look around at the young men, the conversation struck up along a certain juicy line. Johnny noted that Hank would have none of it. After a few minutes he arose and left the group, retiring under his wagon.

Johnny set out his bedroll beneath Balton's lead wagon in such a position that he could watch Prit and Mell, across at the end of the circled wagons, but neither stirred from his blankets. The fire died and the stars came out clear and cold. The camp slept.

Durand's train began to roll. Finally, after many days, they swung into the rolling hills and wooded valleys of the Little Blue, the paradise for all emigrants.

Here was water and grass and game, and if Rock Spencer weren't such a hard task master, the train could have enjoyed the beautiful valley. But Spencer had them rolling late and in the traces before dawn. The stock was hard put to keep up, and many emigrants growled at the pace, but no more than a few curses came of it.

Each night Johnny unrolled his blankets and lay in such a position that he could watch Prit and Mell, and twice caught them slipping off into the darkness. And silently as the gray wolves that dodged the train's heels across the prairies, he followed the two scouts.

Each time they built two signal fires, and waited. But each time no one came, and they returned to the silent camp, crept between the sentries, and rolled in again. Johnny did the same. He had no plan formed; when Prit and Mel encountered their man, then he would act. A bullet or a knife would secure the evidence against them and outweigh their word against his.

He liked the rifle Spencer had given him. It was a compact, hard-shooting gun, with no frills of silver or brass inlays. Johnny thought that all the rifles in those boxes must be like this—a hurried, mass-produced lot of good solid guns. Every mile West made this cargo of more inestimable value.

JOHNNY rode guard these days, up near the head opposite Spencer's wagons. He knew Spencer purposely kept him away from Durand and Durand's wagons. There was a reason. Johnny knew Durand had spoken to Spencer about him, not once but many times those first few days. Durand didn't want him along.

And Spencer had growled to Johnny, "You're a man good with a gun, and we need fellows like you. You stick. But take my advice—stay away from Durand's daughter."

It all seemed a little silly to Johnny. But two days later, when they were camped at Pawnee creek and Johnny was out in the evening barking squirrels in the oak grove a short distance from camp, he heard a soft step behind him and saw the girl there.

"Hello, Miss Durand," he said, a little hesitantly. In the weeks gone past, she'd never ridden alone. Balton was always with her. And she had become someone apart, on a higher level from him.

"I would rather have you call me Lucy," she said.

His heart moved with a strangeness new to him. "I don't think your father would approve of your coming out here alone."

"Because you are here?"

He shrugged. "I dunno. It's kind of got me puzzled. Spencer warned me, too." He felt her eyes on him, and dropped his to the gun in his hand.

She smiled. "You like the gun?"

"Yes. It's sharper-firing and smoother than my old one. I like it fine. Your dad's factory make it?"

"All of them. Dad likes guns. He has your old muzzle-loader—or what's left of it. It's one of the first type he and Joe Long put out."

He felt a little angry, and yet pleased. So he didn't ask for it back. He said, "Want a mess of squirrels?" Then he stopped. No, better not."

"Why not?" she asked. She was smiling, teasing him. He knew it, and the strange fires were roiling in his innards, deep down.

He clutched his rifle up and said, "It's getting too dark to hunt squirrels, or to stay out here. You go back to camp."

She smiled once more, and he watched her reed-like figure disappear through the woods toward camp. He removed his coonskin cap. His lean forehead was damp. He returned to the camp by a roundabout way.

A few nights later, Johnny was sitting on a wagon tongue eating his evening stew when Galler, a bachelor emigrant with two fine, heavily-loaded wagons, passed close by. Johnny's elbow was jostled, and the teetering plate of hot stew tipped and slid down Galler's short cowhide boots.

The thick-set Galler howled and danced, clutching his leg in the air. "You clumsy oaf!"

Johnny looked up, mildly disturbed. "It appears, Galler," he drawled, "that there's plenty of room on this prairie without you jarring into me."

Then he tried to duck the blow, but it came too unexpectedly. Galler's big fist hit him high on the temple, knocking him off the wagon and into the cook's pot and kettles. The entire camp looked that way at the racket.

Johnny crawled to his feet. He was conscious of the entire camp watching, especially those around Durand's fire across the circle—Durand, Howard Balton, and the girl.

"Galler, I don't know what you mean by this, but I'm going to make you say 'uncle.'"

The squat, black-bearded emigrant growled, "Come on."

"Kill him, Galler," murmured a voice off to the side, and Johnny recognized Prit's soft tones.

If Johnny, in his tense anger, needed any more goading, that was it. He went at Galler, evading his flailing fists with cat-like swiftness. He began hitting here and there, moving around, cutting the pitifully slow farmer down before the eyes of the entire camp.

In five minutes Galler was bleeding at nose, mouth and ears. He stood still and bellowed, "Stand and fight!"

"I will when the time comes," Johnny said, and he sent in a right that half turned Galler's bull-like head.

GALLER screamed a curse and rushed, trying to pin Johnny against the wheel of the cook wagon. Johnny evaded the rush like wind-driven smoke. He came up with his left, using his entire body, and slammed Galler head first into the wagon's lowered tailgate. Galler's head struck. He went down on his knees, grunting. Johnny leaped at him, yanked up his head by the thick, black hair, and sent his fist again and again into Galler's face.

"My God!" Howard Balton's voice cried. "Do you want to kill him?" Johnny felt Balton's weight on his right arm.

Johnny turned. He was panting and exhausted himself. "This your doing?"

Balton looked shocked. "Are you crazy, man?"

Johnny saw Prit standing there looking down at Galler, and there was a quizzical look on the tall scout's face. Other voices arose, but over them came Durand's harsh words by the cook fire.

"Spencer, you've got to kick that man out. He's a damned, fighting troublemaker!"

"Kick him out, hell!" Rock Spencer's voice came. "I wish I had a dozen more like him."

The train rolled on. Johnny found himself in a different niche in the caravan. The emigrants, who hadn't witnessed the first fight with Mell, looked a him with more than a little awe. Galler had been something of a bully amongst them. Durand regarded him with cold fury, and Balton showed his intense dislike with grim, pressed lips when they were in each other's presence.

Prit and Mell kept their distance, like two waiting, smiling jackals. But the rest of the drivers regarded him with new respect—all but Hank, who, from that first morning when they'd brought in the stock, had been sullen and aloof toward him. Johnny frowned as he rode guard and thought out all these things.

Spencer stopped him the first evening after the fight with Galler. "You been fooling around with Durand's daughter?"

Johnny started to shake his head, then remembered. "She came into the woods where I was barking squirrels back there at Pawnee creek. All we did was talk. Why?"

Spencer grunted. "I told you to stay away from her."

"So it was Durand who sicced Galler onto me. Galler did it for money."

"Never mind all that now. We're hitting the Platte tomorrow—pawnee country, and after that Sioux. That breed Catclaw, if he's learned of our cargo, will strike anywhere from here to South Pass. We've got to hang together from now on in."

Johnny looked steadily at the hard-jawed trader. Should he tell him now? Spencer was on his side. Could the two of them do something about it? No, he'd better wait until he saw Luke. Luke would have the answers.

They rolled along south of the great Platte, and though Johnny's eyes strayed a thousand times toward Lucy Durand, he never spoke to her; he avoided her. He knew she wasn't for him.

Still, it angered him that Durand should treat him like so much dirt. And who was needling Durand against him? Was it Balton? Johnny felt a grim anger. He hadn't believed it of Balton, but it must be so. Who else?

The battle up the Platte began. There was cold rain, tremendous lightning, freshets at every creek bed. Camp grounds had to be on hillocks, or in the morning the camp would find itself ankle deep in water. The work for the men was overburdening, and young, strong Johnny soon showed his worth in handling the animals, moving wagons, fixing gear. His farm experience stood him in good stead.

HIS Uncle Luke wasn't at Kearney—a sodden, dismal collection of sod huts, frame store, smithy, barns, and soldier

quarters. After a half-hour stop by Spencer to inquire of the commandant about Indians, the train pushed on. A peculiar thing, Johnny noted, was that the entire company—starved for new talk and new faces—pushed into Kearney, with the exception of two men, Prit and Snag Mell. Both of the scouts circled and rode ahead, keeping out of sight.

The train rolled on. Spencer drove them hard, and the stock herd grew thin and rebellious, the emigrants complained and held back, and yet the train held together and they made their twenty-odd miles each day.

Johnny marvelled at Rock Spencer, and he was at the man's side, helping, pushing, driving. There was a purpose in Johnny's slaving drive, for whenever he had time to think he saw in his mind's eye, Lucy Durand's reed-like form, the soft sheen of her hair, the milky whiteness of her skin in that wooden tub that first night.

He knew she'd had a birthday one day; there had been a little party at the Durand campfire that night. Lucy was eighteen. At the end of April Johnny would be twenty, but there would be no party for him. If they made Laramie and he could find Luke, that would be gift enough.

That he'd leave the train then was almost a certainty, he believed. Luke would handle Prit and Mell, and Spencer would be able to go on alone. As for Lucy Durand, the quicker he got away from her the better he knew it would be for him.

He still kept his vigil each night on Prit and Mell. Almost nightly of late they crept out of the circled wagons, lit their twin signal fires, waited a while, then crept back. Their man never came. Johnny exulted. It was now less than fifty miles to Laramie and Luke Danzer.

One night he was lying on his blanket in the evening hush when he noticed first Prit and then Mell move out and away. This was strange; they were early. He slipped out and followed them down through the brush to the river. In a grassy cove he came upon them and Eva Waldoon, and what he saw disgusted him. He knew she'd been having affairs with some of the young drivers, but with these greasy renegades—

He was trying to withdraw, when he sensed someone behind him, and his hand whipped to his knife hilt. It was Hank, and his face was ashen-gray. He, too, had seen.

Johnny started at the insane look in the man's eyes. And then he knew. Hank was in love with Eva Waldoon; he knew what she had been doing, and he had followed her many nights like this.

"I'll kill them," Hank said fiercely.

"No. They have to stay alive a while yet," Johnny whispered.

Hank didn't seem to hear. "Samse, Tom, Joey Young I didn't mind so much. But these greasy pigs—"

Johnny held him back. "Wait. I'll help you, later. As for the girl, a good strong husband like you will hold her down."

"I won't wait."

He broke away and ran down the path, but when Hank and Johnny came into the shadowy clearing the girl was lying on the grass and the two men were gone. At sight of them, Eva began laughing.

"Oh, no. Not two more." Then she recognized them, and her bubbling laughter came throatily. "Not you, Hank and Johnny?"

"Which way did they go?" Johnny asked sharply.

The girl pointed over the ridge. She held her arms out to Hank. He swore furiously, deep in his throat, yanked her to her feet, and led her roughly back to camp. Johnny, on foot, ran for the bridge.

After about a mile he spotted the two fires. They were beneath a rock escarpment. The stories he had heard about Catclaw made his breathing grow tense and his fingers tighten. Leader of a brand of vicious breeds and renegade Indians, he was feared from the Rockies to the Missouri.

JOHNNY snaked toward the escarpment, and suddenly terror gripped him. From the corner of his eye he saw a figure rise from the grass. Johnny rolled instinctively. It was the only thing that saved him. The blow missed his head by inches, and thudded against his biceps. It knocked the knife from his fingers. There was no time for anything now but to grapple. He lunged.

His head struck deep into belly. He swung with his good arm, caught cloth, and then they were rolling and clawing over the night prairie.

The man against him was trying to club him into the sod, but Johnny's right arm was reviving from the effects of that first blow. He broke the other's hold on him. His left hand found the man's throat, his right had hair and was pushing backward.

He bore the man down, and he was astounded at the weakness of the other. This was not Prit nor Snag Mell. He wrested the handgun from the other's fingers and raised it to strike. Then he saw in the faint starlight the white and terrified face of Howard Balton.

"What are you doing out here?" he asked, jerking the Easterner to his feet.

"I'll ask you the same," Balton said grimly, panting for breath: "Every night for the past two weeks I've seen you steal away from camp. Why did you build those fires, watch them? Who are you trying to signal and meet on the sly?"

Johnny listened. He heard the sound of two men retreating swiftly. That must be Prit and Mell going back to camp. Now they knew they had been watched! Now it would be his word against Prit's. And Balton would side with Prit. Johnny knew now he should have told Spencer.

He said, "Let's go back to camp. I'll tell what I know there."

Durand, Lucy, and Rock Spencer were around the Durand fire when Balton and Johnny approached. When Durand saw Johnny coming his hard mouth tightened. Lucy looked at him with wonder in her wide blue eyes, and Johnny thought the world was coming down. He hadn't been this close to her in weeks, and just the feel of her nearness awakened smouldering fires. And then Balton began speaking.

As the harsh words ripped out, Ed Durand's face grew ashen with fury. Beside him, Rock Spencer became very quiet.

Finished, Balton said, "I figure he was trying to get in touch with that Luke Danzer, an uncle of his."

Lucy Durand moaned. "Oh, no Howard. I'm sure Johnny meant nothing; let him explain."

Durand said tersely, "It fits in." He spoke to Rock Spencer. "I never told anyone this, but the commandant back at Kearney told me this scout Danzer has been missing since last fall. He went with a bunch of rich miners hitting for California. He hasn't been seen since."

"Luke—is gone?" Johnny blurted it, aghast.

Durand continued to talk to Spencer. "The miners had plenty of money with them. They never got through. No one has heard from them since. I figure this business has something to do with it." He faced Johnny.

"You trouble-making pup! You've come to the end of your rope."

Spencer said, "Let him talk, Ed."

Then Johnny told his incredible tale, way back to the night after they'd left Independence, of the scores of nights he'd watched Prit and Mell trying to signal someone ahead on the trail. But before he'd finished, Durand was laughing disbelievingly.

"Our scout, Jason Prit, a traitor? A man whose fame is known the length of the Missouri? Why, you scheming poor white trash—"

"What's going on here?" a low, intimate voice drawled, and Prit came out of the darkness behind the wagon into the firelight. "Seems I heard my name mentioned."

Johnny stiffened. The scout had been listening all the while from behind that wagon. Suddenly Johnny wanted to strike at that face.

WHEN Durand had repeated the story, Prit threw back his head and laughed easily. "The lad has quite an imagination, Durand, or else he's trickier than I ever thought. If there is something behind his actions, however, he's got to be done away with." Prit slid his eyes meaningfully toward the girl.

The glance toward the girl was enough. Ed Durand grew chalky. "He goes, Spencer. This time he goes."

Johnny said, "I have a horse, a saddle, a rifle—just what I started out with. You got

me within fifty miles of Laramie. I reckon I paid for my board and keep." He swung on his heel and marched across the trampled grass of the circled wagons to get his bedroll.

As he swung onto his leggy bay, Rock Spencer stepped out of the shadows. "You were telling the truth, son?"

Johnny looked down. "You know I was, Rock."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

They shook hands, then Johnny touched boot heels to the bay's flanks. The prairie wind grew about his ears. In the darkness he headed northwest for Laramie.

Johnny rode steadily. He had no hankering to lay over in the daytime, which he knew he'd have to do if he didn't make Laramie by dawn. A lone rider in that country, a roving no-man's-land for Pawnee and Sioux alike, wouldn't last until sun-up. And so he pressed the leggy bay onward, following the broad and shallow Platte.

And as he rode across the moonlit prairie, his mind went back over that final scene in Durand's wagon camp. He had wanted to ask Spencer outright why Durand hated him so, but in his heart he knew the answer.

Lucy Durand was attracted to him. She had saved his life, undoubtedly, back there in Independence; she had gotten Balton to put him in that wagon, had hidden him and brought him along. And her father, if he had not seen all this with his own eyes, had been told the details. Johnny remembered he'd at first thought it was Balton who was against him, but now he knew it was Jason Prit.

Johnny cursed softly. Prit had won out now—but not before Johnny had warned Rock Spencer. The safety of the train now lay in Rock's hands.

The bay was tiring fast. Then in the distance Johnny heard the clarion sound of an army bugle, clear, honey sweet in the Wyoming dawn. He had arrived.

A log store building was set near the river down from the rectangular buildings of the army post. With bone-deep weariness Johnny swung from the hard saddle and entered the dark, smelly store. He was puzzled at the general air of desertion about the settlement clustering around the post up there.

[*Turn page*]

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A gaunt, unshaven man came from a rear room. The man took one look at Johnny, saw he was a newcomer, and held up his hand, "Ride on, stranger. Cholera here."

Johnny stood stock still, and the blood drained from his heart.

"Bad?" he asked.

"Bad. Dying like flies around here."

Johnny wet his lips. "Is Luke Danzer around here?"

"I haven't seen Danzer since he went through here last fall with the Bucknell party."

Again Johnny wet his lips. Then those rumors were true, Luke Danzer *was* gone. "Where's his shack? He had a cabin here. He told me he had it full of junk and maps of trails and such things. I'm his nephew from Missouri."

The man squinted. "You do look like Danzer, all right. That half soddie up the hill is his."

In the cabin, Johnny took down his pack, started a fire, boiled tea, and cooked some bacon and a can of beans. Through the open door he watched the settlement. A few soldiers moved up there, bringing in the horse herd; otherwise the place was dead.

AFTER eating, Johnny rested on the sagging, buffalo-hide bunk and thought out his future. That he'd have to warn Durand's party of cholera there was no doubt. He'd have to risk a bullet, he knew, but there was no other alternative. And then what? Go on alone? Where was he going, and why?

His mind always came back to Durand's train and to Jason Prit. He owed Prit something. Maybe there was something he could do to even the score. And then there was Lucy. Always she came back to him, more than anything else, and finally he knew it was because of her that his mind continually went backward to that struggling train of rifles and gun powder and emigrants and children. His future was inextricably tied up with that wagon train.

In the half-ceilinged loft he found Luke Danzer's gear and many books and maps and writings, for his Uncle Luke was a very literate man. Johnny looked everything over carefully, but he could find nothing but a brief entry in a diary that said Uncle Luke was intending to scout the Bucknell party over South Pass this fall and they were taking the old Cherokee or Overland Trail.

Johnny studied the maps carefully. The Cherokee was rougher than the Oregon, but notations on the map emphasized that it was shorter and, more important, it kept south of the Sioux lands. Johnny made a careful copy of it, thrust it into his jacket pocket, went out, saddled the bay and rode back down the Platte eastward.

From a rock escarpment at dawn the following morning, he had no trouble spotting the Durand train wending its way around Names Hill. He waited, hidden. A point rider was coming his way. He didn't recognize the man, but he knew it wasn't either of the scouts.

When the man came around a rocky knob, Johnny saw it was Durand himself. Johnny would have chosen almost anyone else, but now he had no choice. Remaining hidden, he called out, "Durand!"

On recognizing Johnny's voice, Durand went for the pistol in his belt. Johnny said, "Leave your hand off that, Durand. I came back to give you a word of advice. Cut south at the head of this valley, leave the Platte, and skirt Laramie. It's full of cholera."

Durand looked slowly around, trying to locate the voice, but Johnny saw that the word cholera had left its effect on the man. With rifle half cocked, Johnny stepped forward.

"That trail will take you south. You will hit the Cherokee. Follow that west. Here, on this rock I will leave you a map. Give it to Spencer. Don't tell anyone about your change in plans or route, especially Prit or Mell."

Durand said, "How are we to believe this —cholera and a hair-brained new trail? It looks like a special trap to me."

Johnny put down the map, weighted it with a rock, and backed off, rifle still at half-ready. "You see, Durand, I don't trust you either. But when it comes to cholera, we have no choice."

He slid behind the protecting escarpment, and watched Durand pick up the map, scan it,

then turn and ride down toward the advancing wagons. Johnny prayed the hard-headed fool would have sense enough to show it only to Spencer. Johnny rode back west.

All that day and the next Johnny kept to the rocky country paralleling the route of the train, and he was pleased to see the long line of white-tops head south for the Overland. But the morning they camped south of Fort Laramie, he was puzzled. It was almost ten o'clock before the train got rolling, and that was unusual for driving Rock Spencer.

And then one morning on Bluegrass Creek, just short of Morton's Pass, Johnny, from his night camp on a cliff, noted a strange thing. The circled wagons didn't break camp. Through the trees he watched all morning. Then, leaving his horse, he slipped into the bottomlands and advanced through the timber of Bluegrass Creek. This was odd. It was almost noon, and Spencer hadn't moved.

He saw men talking—Samse, Joe Young, Galler—but neither Prit nor Mell was there, nor did he see Durand or Rock Spencer. The women seemed to keep to the wagons; they were heating and carrying water into the wagons a great deal. Fingers of fear grew strong in him. Johnny crept almost to the rear wagon, and in the brush came face to face to face with a man. Both reached for guns. Then they recognized each other.

GEORGE WALDOON said, "What are you doing here, kid?"

"Wondering what's wrong. Why aren't you moving?"

Waldoon's usually ruddy face twitched. "Cholera."

"Who came down with it?"

"Durand."

"Him alone?"

"Durand first, then Spencer."

Johnny shuddered. Spencer, the man they could least afford to lose. He asked, "Are they very sick?"

"Spencer will die before sundown. Durand—" Waldoon shrugged big shoulders.

Johnny said sharply, "I told you a good while back everybody should drink tea. Luke told me more than once that tea drinkers never get cholera."

Waldoon growled. "When a man's got a thirst tea won't do for him. You should know that, Danzer." He went back into the camp.

Johnny hesitated only for a second. Then he followed.

Tom Wilder spotted him and came running. "Get out! Get out before you have contact with it!"

Johnny ignored him. "Where's Prit and Mell?" he asked sharply.

"Ran out on us," Wilder said. "We don't know what to do. Half the men in camp are coming down with cholera. They're dropping like flies. Hank took sick an hour ago. Look, there's George Waldoon mopping his head and looking mighty green around the gills." Terror crept into his voice.

"Shut up!" Johnny barked it so savagely they all stopped and looked at him. "Listen, we're going to keep our heads. We're not going to frighten the women."

"I'm pulling out," a harsh voice cried. "Who's with me?"

Johnny whirled. Galler was hurrying toward his two wagons.

With the cat-like stride of an Indian Johnny caught up to him and felled him with one swing of his rifle butt. Then he swung the gun to cover the handful of drivers. The men stood motionless, watching him. He said with a cold deadliness, "That's better. Now bust up and spread the word around that there's a new boss in this camp, and his name is Johnny Danzer."

Johnny watched the drivers disperse. Oddly, their ragged, unshaven faces had regained some semblance of control. Johnny picked up a bucket and sloshed water onto Galler. Galler sputtered and crawled to his feet. Johnny said tersely, "I'm boss here now, Galler. One wrong move and you'll have lead between your ribs."

The man went toward his wagons cursing. Johnny turned to Waldoon, who was balancing weakly on the wagon tongue. Without a word Johnny put down his rifle, lifted the big man into his arms, and walked down the row of wagons. He carried Waldoon to his green-painted wagon.

"Here, Mrs. Waldoon," he said gently. "I believe you'll have a sick man on your hands

for a while." Mrs. Waldoon burst into sobs, and Johnny hurried away.

He was almost fearful to go to the Durand wagon, but he knew he had to. Judging from the women along the way, and the number of children, the disease had strangely struck down only the men. Once more Johnny wondered at the wisdom of his Uncle Luke. Tea—who'd ever think just the drinking of tea would keep away cholera!

What Johnny didn't know was that the tea itself hadn't done the trick. The simple fact that the tea water was boiled was the important thing.

A cold voice at the rear of Durand's wagon brought Johnny around sharply. Howard Balton stood there, loaded pistol levelled.

"I heard you talking to the drivers, taking over. I should shoot you dead."

There was a cold fury behind his slate-colored eyes.

"Why?" Johnny asked simply. "Don't you think I can help this train?"

"Why?" Balton echoed harshly. "Because you brought this cholera to our camp, that's why. You gave Durand that map. He and Spencer poured over it for hours. It came from that plague-ridden settlement, and who were the first two to get sick? Durand and Spencer. Now don't you think you deserve a bullet in the head?"

JOHNNY felt as if somebody had clubbed him in the belly. That map. He had made the map in Luke's cabin.

"Balton, it couldn't be! That paper was stashed away in the loft, touched by nobody for months. It was just a happening that Durand and Spencer came down first." And then in his horror a new thought occurred to him, and he said huskily, "Is this—does *she* think this?"

Balton said nothing. He only nodded slowly. And Johnny dropped his head and stood weak-kneed there in the crushed grass between the wagons. Finally he lifted his head.

Johnny said, "In my heart I don't believe I brought it, but guilty or not, I'll do anything to help her—this train. I'd cut off my right arm before I'd hurt her. Balton, do you believe me?"

The other man said bitterly, "I grew up with her, Danzer. I came out here on this wild, hairbrained thing because of her. I've loved her all my life—and then, since that night in Independence—" He broke off, and his laugh was a dry rattle.

"Balton," Johnny said slowly, "I reckon you hate me. But now that we're in this fix it's best we forget our differences—for a while anyway. I figure I'm the best man to take over here. If you don't maybe you'd better pull that trigger now."

Balton looked at him, then thrust the pistol into his waistband and turned back to the wagons.

At the drivers' camp at the head of the train, Johnny took stock of the situation. Half the men were down, some children, and one woman. Johnny looked around at the young drivers. If these fellows were faithful and did not desert, they had a chance of pulling through.

He asked, "Where's Hank?"

Tom Wilder nodded toward a lean-to tent by one of Spencer's wagons. At that moment a girl came out. Johnny stared. It was Eva Waldoon.

"Hank down?"

Wilder nodded. "She came and took care of him."

"Spencer too?"

"Up till an hour ago. She came and told me somebody had to lay him out."

Silence fell around the circle. At last Johnny said, "I'll go." He stood up, then said to no one in particular, "How's Durand?"

Samse sensed his real question. "I wouldn't go near her wagon if I were you. But I reckon Durand is still holding on."

Johnny went across the small piece of woods to Spencer's wagons, and entered the tent. The yellow-haired girl looked up from putting cold towels on Hank's forehead.

It was the spirit of Eva Waldoon that moved Johnny. Only a few short nights ago he had seen her as the Jezebel of Durand's wagon train, and now she was taking care of the only man who really loved her, and had never touched her.

That evening they buried Rock Spencer. And while Howard Balton read words from

a worn black Bible, Johnny watched the yellow and pink fade from the clouds floating southward on the western rim. The toughest, the hardiest, had gone first—Rock, the Missouri trader.

Others died in the days that followed, and it fell to Howard Balton and Johnny Danzer to do the laying out and the burying. Lucy Durand never attended these buryings; she seldom left her father's side.

Johnny glimpsed her only briefly, in the evenings or early in the mornings, when she was going about the necessary camp chores. Purposely he avoided her wagon. Balton was always around if she wanted anything. Her stony eyes told him how she felt toward him.

IN TEN days the cholera had run its course, and they broke camp. On a windy, bleak Sunday morning they rolled through the rock pass, winched the wagons down the bluffs, and hit into the wind-swept sand prairies of Wyoming.

The train was far from full strength. Durand and Hank had survived, but it would be weeks before they could get out of their wagon beds and do a hard day's work. George Waldoon had been one of those left back in the valley, along with Spencer and eight other men, and five children.

"You going to drag all these rifles and gunpowder along, as short-handed as we are?" Balton asked sourly.

"That's what I was hired on to do," Johnny said.

They rolled on westward, and found themselves in sand hills. Freighters bogged down. There had been no rain for weeks, and the wind had made every depression a trap for the heavy wheels. Mules were six-team hitched; men strained at the heavy freight wheels, and the emigrant men cursed.

"Leave 'em here. Let 'em rot." Galler was the worst.

Johnny faced them down. "Those wagons roll," he said. And none of the emigrants took up his challenge.

The following evening Tom Wilder came to him. "Danzer, you'll have to do something to that Durand girl. She's wearing herself to a frazzle, cooking, cleaning, and caring for her old man, and all the while driving her own wagon."

Johnny wet his lips. She believed he was the one who had brought disaster upon this train. Should he go to her, try to explain? Finally he said, "Maybe after supper I'll walk down and see her."

They were camped on Lodgepole Creek. Night closed in on them on the grass-bottomed canyon. Stars winked on the rock rims far above. The usual camp sounds were muted on the evening air. The wagoners had caught mountain trout in the sweet-water stream, and the frying pans of the emigrants gave off fragrant odors.

Johnny walked down the canyon, his work-scarred hands thrust hard into the pockets of his worn homespuns. What could he say to the girl he loved? He wanted to make up.

His morose eyes lifted in the mountain dusk. He grew motionless in mid-stride. Ahead, on a purple butte against a cardboard sky, two fires winked in the quiet blackness.

In the moment of bitter shock his mind already was leaping ahead on how to build a defense, how to attack and get the jump on Jason Prit and Snag Mell. Again those twin fires were lighting the way. Prit had not yet made contact with Catclaw.

Johnny had thought sure they would escape the renegade band by going this southern, more difficult route than his uncle had mapped. And, especially now that cholera had struck the train, he had thought that they'd be safe. Indians shunned cholera-stricken parties. But Jason Prit knew the stakes were high.

JOHNNY retraced his steps to the camped wagons and called the men together. He told them what he'd seen and what it meant. And the silent grimness of the men seemed to communicate itself to the big family fires blazing along the white tilts. The woman stopped singing to her baby. The children ceased their running and asked their mothers what it meant. An ominous silence fell over the grass-carpeted canyon.

When Johnny had finished, Galler sneered, "Why are you trying to scare us with this balderdash? Prit never did anything to us

but desert us. I still think Durand is right—you're a young ruffian who's got something crooked up his own sleeve."

Howard Balton said, "Whatever Danzer is, consideration of the train and its safety comes first. I've seen the fires before; we face trouble."

Galler snorted. "You traders and your rifles! You tricked us into coming with you, using us for protection. I say to hell with you and your rifles. If Prit and the Indian renegades want them, let them get 'em. They don't want our ploughs and harrows."

A grumble of agreement arose from the emigrant men.

Johnny stood up. He spoke to Galler. "Do you know what giving the Indians rifles would mean? No wagon train safe on these trails for years to come. With these latest model rifles the renegades could stand up against the best the army has at Laramie, Hall, Kearney, any of their posts. No, these rifles go through! We'll double the guard tonight. Samse, Young and Wilder will scout with me tomorrow. We don't move a mile without scouting every foot of the way."

They broke up. Balton held back and, when alone with Johnny, he said, "Is that the only reason you don't want the rifles left behind?"

Johnny whirled. "What do you mean?"

But Balton, with a cold, knowing look, walked away.

By Johnny's order, they broke camp late the next day. The emigrants grumbled at the late start, but Johnny wanted no attack in the morning mist. When the train rolled out every driver and emigrant was in the saddle with his rifle. At first their appearance, with the assortment of guns they'd produced, was ludicrous. Then Johnny broke out the new, short-barreled percussion-cap rifles they were hauling West. Armed with them, the emigrants looked more like fighting men.

The watchful days went by. The fourth day the trace led onward along a high, grassy shelf above a white-water creek. Johnny was struck by the beauty of the trail, but he had little time to admire the Wyoming wilderness. His eyes were alert to danger every waking minute he was in the saddle. Late the afternoon of the fourth day they entered a rock-strewn canyon that narrowed as it rose steadily. There were marks on the trail, not the old ones—a hoof print here, a rock overturned there. Johnny said nothing to the others. He walked his horse forward with caution.

The canyon turned. Johnny followed at the base of a great cliff of red crumbling stone, and the canyon turned again. A hundred yards farther, and the canyon walls fell away. In the hundred-acre field a huge, grass-covered hump, acres in extent, stood in the trail.

Johnny looked at the barrenness of the location, with the exception of strewn boulders and a tongue of rock leading up from the dwarf trees at the spring.

He said, "We camp here for the night." He didn't add that he could smell Indian in the air. There was no need of alarming the train.

With the wagons circled on the low rise, Johnny posted Samse, Young and Tom Wilder as sentries and once more swung to saddle.

Balton asked, "Where you going?"

"Down that west canyon a piece. We take out that way in the morning."

"I'll go with you," was the surprising answer.

Johnny nodded. In the last few days he and Howard Balton had strangely grown closer. No words had ever been spoken, but the feeling was there. In the fading light of day the two rode over the old trace.

"My uncle was supposed to have taken this trail last September, Johnny said. "He never came back."

SILENCE fell between them. The canyon walls came together once more; they rode through and pressed into the deepening gloom. The cliffs rose high and sheer on each side now; red and yellow rock blazed in sunlight up pine-crested rims. They could hear far behind them the pounding of tent stakes, the women rattling kettles as the evening meal was prepared, but here everything was deathly still.

"What a spot for an ambush," Balton muttered as they wended around huge fallen rock. At that instant both men jerked their mounts to a halt.

At the foot of a rock wall lay a skeleton, an arrow piercing the few rags that hung to it. And farther on lay another, and another, and then they saw the crushed tilts and warped sideboards of a wagon, canvas shreds still fluttering from its bows.

Johnny looked carefully around, then swung off his horse. He looked down at what the wolves and winter snows had lef of the bodies, and he counted them—eight. He stopped above the last one. It was long; it had been clothed in buckskin, for tatters lay about; a fringe of black hair showed still on the skull; it had a neat, round bulet hole entering the back.

Johnny took off his frayed coonskin cap. "Now do you think they'll believe me, Balton?" he said softly. "My Uncle Luke."

Howard Balton removed his hat in the silence that followed.

On the way back Balton asked, "You figured something like that all the time?"

"Almost since the night I first saw that knife in Snag Mell's belt."

Balton looked with new eyes at the man who rode silently beside him, but he said nothing.

Back in camp Ed Durand, for the first time since he'd taken sick, was out of his wagon and at his fire. Johnny was shocked at the appearance of the once-powerful man. His skin was withered, his flesh gone. He was a walking skeleton. Cholera was a terrible sickness.

Johnny saw Eva Waldoon helping Hank out of Spencer's wagon, and he felt cheered. At least both men were getting along, though Hank, being much younger, was not near in as rough shape. Johnny smiled at the girl's tenderness toward Hank. At least some things were turning out all right on this trip.

He looked back toward the Durand fire to try to catch a glimpse of Lucy Durand's slim figure. Then he caught the flash of a blue dress far down the creek. Johnny put down his saddle and hurried down the hill.

She was coming out of the trees carrying her bucket of water when he met her. She saw him and the old stoniness came into her eyes. Johnny disregarded it.

"You should not have left the camp. I told the men to get the water." He tried to take the bucket of water. She shoved him away and continued walking.

He started to say something more, then checked his words. She believed he had brought the cholera to her father. There was nothing he could say, and he followed her silently up the hill and into the camp. Hank and Eva Waldoon saw it, and so did Howard Balton and Ed Durand.

Johnny swallowed the sting before the entire camp's eyes, and ordered all the men to the drivers' fire. Tomorrow, maybe even this evening, they faced a fight.

He told them grimly, "We're sucked into a pocket. Prit trapped the Bucknell party just like this, and their remains lie in that west canyon, which we have to take tomorrow morning."

Johnny gave them instructions. He recalled every trick and device Luke Danzer had told him about Indian fighting, and he passed it on to this camp of green emigrants. The only other man who had known anything about this sort of thing was gone—Rock Spencer. The safety of the train lay in Johnny's youthful hands.

"In a few minutes it will grow dark. Put out your camp fires. Roll boxes, oat bags, saddles, anything up under your wagons for protection from their arrows. I don't think they'll have too many guns. All the women and kids keep well inside the ring of wagons; the mules and herd to the south side. Any questions?"

There was none. "All right. Jake Westfall, Bill Thompson, and Guy Harper stand the first watch."

The men dispersed, Galler muttering, "Damned foolishness. No Indians inside fifty miles, I'll bet. I can't see or hear a thing." He stared around and up the darkening cliffs.

BRIEF twilight, then night in the canyon, But no camp fires showed in the ringed wagons on the green slope. Mountain silence hung over that widening of the trail. In the distance the stream rippled, a gentle murmur of sound.

Beneath the cook wagon, Johnny sprawled with the rifle Rock Spencer had given him. There were three more guns primed and charged at his side. Most of the men had

their women behind them, ready to reload rifles if the need arose. He had nobody.

Johnny stared down toward where his uncle had been killed. If Prit had planned this second trap, it couldn't have worked any better. Johnny didn't know how the night would come out, or the morrow or the days after, but he knew he had to kill Jason Prit. The traitorous scout was a menace to every man, woman, and child trying for this new land.

A child whimpered in the darkness. Johnny heard the mother soothing it. An hour passed. It was pitch dark. Tom Wilder wriggled over. "No danger now until dawn. I've heard of fighting Indians."

"You haven't heard of fighting Prit and Catclaw."

A pin-point of light appeared, so close to the wagons that it shocked Johnny. Then, suddenly, a score of such lights flared all around the circle and in the same second they arced up toward the canvas-covered wagons.

"Fire arrows," screamed Tom Wilder.

Johnny yelled down the circle, "Everybody sit tight. If a wagon catches, one man jump up and kill the fire. *One* man, understand!"

Johnny tried to hold the terror from his voice. He saw what Prit was trying to do—light up the camp and then sit back and pick off the men. But what if one of those flaming arrows fell onto a wagon that had gunpowder?

Three wagons caught. Three men leaped upward. Rifle fire roared from the woods and a score of sibilant feathered arrows came out of the blackness.

Two of the men weathered the blast and tore down the burning shafts, but the third crumpled against the canvas and the arrow licked the canvas swiftly into flame.

"Get the man down!" Johnny yelled, "Watch those Indians!"

They hauled the man down. Arrows started streaking from behind every rock. A woman screamed back in the circle. The men ducked for cover, Tom Wilder cursing savagely. Above them the caught wagon began blazing as clothing, bedding and furniture kindled.

Johnny shouted, "Take the brakes off that wagon. Shove it downhill!"

Men leaped to the chore. The rain of arrows increased, and rifles now spoke again from the lower rocks by the woods. But the emigrant wagon was on an incline and it went ricocheting from rock to rock down the hillside. With howls the Indians, hiding behind the boulders, leaped and ran.

Johnny swung his rifle swiftly down upon a briefly-lighted figure. The powerful gun kicked solidly back against his shoulder, and with upflung arms the coppery-skinned figure went hurtling head forward into the grass and lay still.

Other rifles spoke along the wagon line, and three more fleeing Indians went down. The savages in the darkness howled their fury.

Rifles were crackling steadily from the woods and the tongue of rocks now. An emigrant let out a scream and went down. Johnny saw Ellen Thompson run sobbing to fling herself onto the ground beside the still figure of her husband.

"Stay down! Stay down!" Johnny roared. "They can't see anything to shoot at if you stay under cover!"

THERE was a second wave of flaming arrows, this time from the other side. One caught on a freighter that had rifles and gunpowder.

Johnny screamed, "Samse, Young, Wilder!" He leaped up and ran, carrying his rifle, toward the burning wagon. "Help me get this damned thing out of here!"

The three drivers and half a dozen emigrants put their shoulders to the wheels of the heavy freighter. Bullets and arrows splintered wood and hit iron on all sides of them. The Indians howled. But Rock Spencer's heavy wagon moved out of its blocks and started down the hill.

It gained momentum, then hit a boulder. It slowed down, its tongue whipping around and grooving the prairie sod. Then its front wheel hit a rock; it swayed up onto two side wheels and crashed barely fifty paces from the rim of the beleaguered camp. Fire and light spewed in all directions and then there

was a tremendous light flash and a roar that shook the earth.

Johnny, standing, was knocked flat. He got up on hands and knees, stunned. He saw other men crawling up. He heard the fiendish howl of savages coming in on the other side of the camp. Johnny grasped his gun and staggered toward the fighting.

A wave of hideously-painted bodies came out of the night, led by a giant, pock-marked Indian clothed only in loin cloth, with a single trailing eagle feather in his scalp lock. Johnny made for the man he knew must be Catclaw.

Emigrants and drivers emptied their guns, then rose swinging them. Indians and whites went down. The herd broke away, and mules and bawling cattle ran between fighting men, locked in death embraces.

Johnny saw Eva Waldoon swing a rifle by the barrel. She clubbed an Indian who was bending over Hank. Johnny stumbled over a fallen savage. Another saw him and shot point-blank. The lead tore through Johnny's coonskin cap, whisking it off. Johnny let him have the slug he'd intended for Catclaw.

He'd lost sight of the renegade momentarily. More Indians were pouring in. And then Johnny saw the Pawnee half-breed. He was heading toward Durand's wagon!

Johnny sprang over rocks and came around the Durand wagon in time to see the giant Indian swing a barrel at Durand's unprotected head. Durand was backed up against his wagon, holding a smoking rifle. Johnny heard Lucy scream as she ran forward, trying to protect her father, holding a smoking rifle in her hands. Johnny had no time to close the distance. He whirled his rifle and flung it.

The spinning butt took Catclaw across the right arm. There was a distinct "crack" and the Indian's gun went off into the darkness. Catclaw gave an inarticulate cry and whirled. He saw Johnny's lean figure flying at him, knife in hand, and Catclaw sprang back and grasped for his own blade, thrust in his loin cloth. In the faint, weird light, Johnny closed in.

He got in two strokes. His strength was wicked as he drove Catclaw back against a wagon wheel. Catclaw screamed something. His right arm was limp; his left, with the knife in it, was a blur of desperate motions. Johnny saw the man's face in a flicker of light, and then knew how the name had come. A cougar had once clawed Catclaw, leaving nose and eye and jawbone hideous. Johnny slashed again at the man.

And then a blow came out of the blackness behind, stunned his left shoulder, drove him half to his knees. Catclaw sprang at him, missed. Johny tried to whirl against this second Indian, and then a shot rang out against his ear.

The second Indian went down, half his face blown away. Lucy Durand stood there with a smoking gun in her hands. Catclaw gave another scream, leaped over the body, and ran for the blackness, calling his men to follow.

In seconds the Indians were gone, and the camp lay gasping like a stricken thing. There was a movement here, a moaning cry there, blackness with only the flickering light from the burning Studebaker halfway down the hill.

JOHNNY recovered his gun, primed and loaded it. He looked around at the men, and ordered them to do the same. He saw still figures lying among the gear—Tom Wilder, Bill Thompson, a red-headed emigrant who was traveling alone. Galler lay over a packing box, his round head bashed in. But in his great hands he held a dead Indian by the throat.

Johnny said sharply, "Balton! Where's Balton?"

"Here," a thin, dry voice said behind them, and Balton came forward. There were bruises and blood on his face, and he moved with utter weariness. He carried a tomahawk.

Involuntarily Johnny breathed a small sigh of relief. Then he looked away quickly toward the men. He said, "We've got to get ready for another attack. Clear the wounded to the center."

Buck Samse said, "My God, Danzer! We'll never last another one!"

"They won't come back. "We've beat 'em off," an emigrant cried.

"You didn't see Prit and Mell," Johnny said grimly. "They'll rally them. If necessary, they'll lead the charge."

"I hope I see Jason Prit coming," somebody said quietly. It was Howard Balton.

They cleared the carnage as best they could in the darkness, half the men remaining on guard. They had lost five men, and two more were wounded enough to put them out of action. Johnny was helping a very silent Balton cover the dead men with a blanket, when Buck Samse came to him.

"You're wanted at Durand's camp."

Lucy was waiting. She recognized him coming and stepped forward. Her voice was low, toneless. "The shock was too much for Father. He wants to see you."

Johnny went around the wagon. Ed Durand was lying on a blanket. He motioned Johnny down to him. Johnny saw he was near the end.

Durand whispered, "Danzer, I heard you talk of another assult. We'll never last another. There's only one way to beat them."

"What's that?" Johnny asked, surprised.

"The powder in the wagons. There's rope fuse in all the gear boxes. Set them, light them, and shove them down the hill. It's the only way. Spencer's wagon gave me the idea."

"But the rifles—"

"You won't have time to unload the rifles. Prit may be forming the Indians for another attack right now." His voice faded weakly.

"But your contract! Your fortune!"

"Where I'm going, I won't need any rifles or fortune. And it's the only way, if some of you are to live. For days I've listened to you giving orders, while I lay in that wagon. You're a good leader, Danzer. As young as you are, you use your head. So take this order."

Johnny stood up. Lucy came forward.

He asked, "Do *you* want me to do it?" It was her fortune, all she had in the world. When those freighters blew up with their barrels of black powder and their boxed Pennsylvania rifles, everything she had in the world would be gone. She would not have as much as Eva Waldoon.

"Yes," Lucy said, and knelt down to her father.

THE men fell to the work with a will. The rifles had been a chain around their necks, the powder an endless weight they'd had to drag over a thousand miles of mud and rock and hills and prairie.

Some men cut the fuses and fitted them. Others unlocked the huge brakes, while still others tied up the tongues, so the huge freighters would roll free, not stop on the edge of the camp as Spencer's wagon had. And then all seventeen freighters were ready.

Johnny lit the first fuse. "Roll it away," he said quietly.

All around the circle, fuses sprang to sputtering life. Men put shoulders to great wheels. One white tilt, then another moved off into the night, picking up speed gradually, disappearing in the blackness with growing rumbles.

The shouts of the astounded savages rose from down the hill on all sides. They didn't know what was happening. They saw the great wagons, and dodged behind rocks. Then they looked and saw others coming.

There was a great blinding sheet of light, a clap of thunder that rocked every vehicle on the summit. Then came roar upon roar. It was a chain reaction—one keg exploding another, then another, then all in one mighty blast. Thunder mounted; it piled into a deafening, horrible crescendo.

Fire flashed, and the jagged canyon walls flung back the brilliant red and yellow and white of their rocks. Trees shredded and waved, and Indian ponies went wild. And through all the red flashes, slim Indian figures could be seen running in all directions howling, flinging weapons, and trying to claw up the rock walls to escape the devastation.

With open-mouthed wonder Johnny stood and watched. The spectacle was awesome. He'd never experienced blowing powder before, and now he stood rooted to the spot, never dreaming the powder had such terrible might. None of the savages would escape, he knew; nor would Catclaw or Prit or Mell.

And then he saw one last wagon roll down. It weaved strangely, as if it were steered. It went to the lower mouth of the canyon and then went up in a sheet of fire, and slowly a greater, more terrible rumble filled his ears.

In the buprning wagon's light he saw the entire canyon entrance roll shut.

Buck Samse came running, breathless. "Danzer, that fool Hank steered that wagon down there. He got up under the reach and hung on. I tried to stop him, but he got away. He seemed crazy."

"But why?"

"I dunno. He yelled something about paying the train back for bringing the fever to us. He said he'd sneaked away to Fort Laramie that night we camped near, and he got drunk there. He took sick before Durand and Spencer did."

For a long moment Johnny stood motionless. Then he sat down on the tongue of a wagon. Sometimes he wondered at the way of life.

IN THE morning they found Jason Prit's and Snag Mell's bodies. Catclaw's body also was among the tangle of dead savages against the farther walls. The dynamite had killed them all. The emigrants buried the bodies, after caring for their own dead. Durand, who had died during the night, was buried on the summit, with a marker over his grave. After sealing the bones of the first ill-fated party in a rock cairn, the wagon train made ready for the trail.

Johnny fondled the knife he'd taken from Mell's body, and which had been his Uncle Luke's. But his thoughts were far, far away, wondering where he should go, now that his quest was ended.

He bumped into somebody. It was Balton —ragged, thin, a very different Balton from the well-dressed, haughty man of a month ago at Independence.

He said to Johnny, "Galler's got two big wagons here, crammed with good farm equipment. Everybody's got their own. It's a shame to let those two wagons stand and rot."

Johnny said, "Meaning what, Balton?"

"I used to hate you. I once thought you were after Lucy's rifles, her wealth. Remember when you refused to leave them behind, back there? I think differently now, Danzer."

Johnny frowned. He glanced at the waiting line of men and women up the hill, watching them. He saw one figure standing nearby, watching tensely.

"You mean—"

Lucy's free of her father now. She's willing to go farming, to go anywhere as long as it's with you. Her kind of love never dies. Damn it—go to her!"

Johnny shuffled his cowhide boots. He hooked his lean thumbs in his rough belt. Lucy had on her blue cotton frock. Her rounded, brown arms were bare. He looked at her hungrily, desperately, and then he saw she was looking at him. Her eyes were wide, with a softness and tenderness that no man can fail to read in the eyes of a woman —his woman.

In a dozen swift strides he was up the hill beside her. Their hands touched. There was need for no more.

The wagon train rolled West.

Coming up in the next issue

Stampede Valley

To help Linda, Webb was willing to shoot his best friend

A Magazine-Length Novel

By J. L. BOUMA

Renegade's Girl

Hollister had only one chance to find the outlaw's stronghold

An Exciting Novelette

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

WHAT CAN an impatient woman do with a husband who has no get-up-and-go . . . except learn to appreciate him?

BIG Somebody

By Dorothy Roseborough

WHEN Reza Ames received the letter from her aunt's lawyer, she merely told her husband Lee that Aunt Lizzie had left her a little money. She didn't offer to show the letter to Lee, and he didn't ask to see it.

He simply said, "Your Aunt Liz was a real nice woman. Guess everyone will miss her a lot."

Reza folded the letter and slipped it into the pocket of her apron. She said, "Hurry with feeding the stock, Lee. I want you to drive me into town when we're through eating."

She watched him go out to the farm yard. At the gate he stopped to fill and light his pipe. A couple of hunting hounds came to follow at his heels, and as he stooped to pet

them her usual anger at his slowness stirred within her.

Lee was a good man, she thought, and of course she loved him. But his deliberate way of doing everything filled Reza with a fury of impatience. She herself flew at her work; she could not understand Lee's slow and steady ways. And yet he accomplished more than she ever could.

He just keeps at it, she thought—the same old things, digging and farming and feeding the animals. And when he's not fussing over the horses he stands and watches them. It drove her crazy.

If only they had some money! Everyone liked Lee. He could be an important man someday, not just a dirt farmer—always in debt, never getting anywhere.

There's only one way for folks like us, she thought. We have to get to California and the gold fields. But, even if they could raise enough money on the farm, Lee wouldn't want to take a gamble.

She took the letter from her pocket and read it again. Wasn't it like Aunt Lizzie to leave her just four hundred dollars! But that would go a long way toward outfitting a wagon. Maybe they could borrow something on the farm. Maybe she could convince Lee—

He came in from the barn, went to the sink, and pulled off his faded blue shirt. "Pump some water for me, honey," he said.

She worked the pump handle and watched him as he leaned well forward, the water gushing over his sunbleached yellow hair and solid muscular shoulders. Reza pumped with the fierce impatience that had become part of her feeling for her husband. He was so big—so strong—so *dumb!*

"Hey, you're mad again!" he puffed. Snatching a towel, he rubbed his dripping curls. "There's only one thing to do about that."

Reza retreated. "You stop your foolishness, Lee Ames."

He advanced upon her, grabbed her, hugged her against his dripping chest, and kissed her soundly.

Reza screamed, but she returned the kiss. "You big lummox," she exclaimed. "Look at me—sopping wet! Give me that towel."

SHE faced him, panting and glaring, but at the sight of his laughing face she began to giggle. "Honestly, Lee, you make me so mad! One of these days I'll up and leave you."

"Goodbye," he said cheerfully. He pulled on his shirt. "What do you want to do in town?"

"Why don't you ask me about Aunt Lizzie's money?"

"Your business," he said briefly. He picked up the comb from the window sill over the sink, and tugged it through his tight yellow curls. "You know what you want to do with it." He grinned. "Besides, you won't be able to hold in too long. Guess I can wait."

"Well, you might ask me. But I know you won't," Reza said, discontentedly.

There was a pause. Lee watched her with a twinkle in his eyes. Although she had planned to be diplomatic and tell him kind of easy, she burst out with her news.

"There's four hundred dollars—enough to outfit a wagon, enough to go to Independence with Will and Jenny Brown when the spring breaks."

"The gold fields," Lee said slowly. "Some folks have lost everything they had in California."

"Some have made more money than we'll ever *see* if we stay home. With a little luck we could really amount to something, really get ahead."

She put a hand on his arm, but he pulled away and, as if her words had chilled him, crossed the room to the stove. He stood looking down at the glowing fire box.

"We have a good farm, Reza, and comfort, and things like—" he gestured, trying to put his thoughts into words—"like this fire, and warmth, and each other. What more do you want?"

"I want to get away. I'm tired of scratching and scrubbing and never getting ahead. I want you to be a big man, Lee, not just a nursemaid to a lot of cows and horses."

He reddened. "At least I make a living with the stock. You think money's so important? Does a man have to be rich to be a somebody?"

She didn't answer. Lee's shoulders drooped,

as if the weight of disappointment lay upon him. After a while he sighed and said, "What would we do with the farm, if we did go?"

She felt a strange pang of confusion and surprise. But it passed quickly as it came, and she forgot it. "The farm? We could sell it, I guess."

"That I'll never do. There've been Ames here for a hundred years and more." He paused, surprise and hurt in his eyes. "Reza, what's come over you? I never dreamed you felt this way."

There was no use trying to say what she wanted; it was too hard to explain. Thinking it over after Lee finally gave in and agreed to go West, Reza knew that she wanted to go, and also wanted to keep the home place.

Through the following weeks, as they waited for the end of winter, she struggled to think it out and be sensible. But deep underneath the urge to leave was too strong for her; she was bound to try something new and adventurous.

And so it was that Lee agreed, although he persisted in having his way in one thing—the old farm should not go out of the Ames family. He found a renter, a good man who would care for the stock almost as well as Lee himself could do.

FROM that day on there was no more argument about leaving. Seemingly Lee was content to fall in with Reza's plans. They lived in a flurry of excitement and preparation. Reza insisted that their wagon was to be outfitted in the best possible way. Their supplies were figured to the last allowable poundage; most important of all, their stock was to be the finest and strongest of any, and it pleased Reza that at least Lee agreed with her there. But he grew quiet and strangely serious. Reza thought he seemed tired and older.

"Are you all right?" she asked. "You don't feel sick, do you, Lee?"

He shook his head. "I'll be fine when we're on our way. There's been a lot of extra work, getting things together. Honey—" he hesitated—"Reza, are you sure you want to go?"

She nodded, and he fell into a thoughtful silence. She knew he didn't expect an answer to his question, and at once she felt the old rush of angry impatience. She could hardly wait to get away, and here he was, his mind still plodding miles behind hers.

It seemed like he thought more of the land and the animals than he did of her, she thought resentfully. He wouldn't even agree to take along his best horses. The high-bred mares would not be able to stand up under the journey, he said.

Reza frowned. She was proud of the team, but Lee's obsession for them struck her as being ridiculous. Then her sense of humor came to the rescue. She laughed. Very few women would be jealous of a couple of chestnut mares. If Lee thought it better to leave them at the farm, at least he wouldn't be fussing and worrying about them on the way.

And then, at the last possible moment, Lee turned right around and took them along.

Surprised, Reza asked, "What made you change your mind about the mares?"

He grinned. "I'm afraid they'd miss me."

"I guess you think you'd be lonesome without them," she retorted.

His smile faded. "Maybe you're right. Animals are mighty good company, sometimes."

Four families pulled out of Higgsville in the early spring. Lee and Reza took their place in the line directly behind their good friends, Will and Jenny Brown. Jenny drove an extra wagon, smaller and lighter than most, which accommodated their three children.

After the long slow journey to Independence, they made camp outside the noisy town to rest the stock and to replenish their supplies. Two of the Brown children had been down with the measles, and Will was weak and irritable after a siege of cold and fever. Reza helped as much as she could, and Lee took care of Will's work, but it was a hard trip and they were all glad of the chance to recuperate.

After a few days both Reza and Will were fretting at the delay. A bleak and cutting wind swept across the camp ground. To step out of the wagons was to step into melting snow, churned into a sea of mud by hundreds of wagon wheels. Grass was beginning to

show on the surrounding prairie, and every day impatient pioneers moved out, hurrying to be first so they could find forage close to the trail.

"Let's go," Reza begged. "The grass will be grazed down in a few weeks. Jenny says the children are better. This camp is horrible. We can't even keep clean."

Lee was doubtful. "Well, if the Browns are satisfied— But we're near a doctor here, and even if Jenny thinks the children don't need one, there's Will. He's still kind of sick."

"He says he's all right, so why should we wait?" Reza argued. "Where's the next camping place?"

"Blue Ridge. Don't reckon it'll be any dryer than it is here. It may even be damper."

"How far is it?"

"About fifteen miles. The oxen will make it easy. That's the place folks call Camp Forgotten."

"Camp Forgotten? Why give it a name like that?"

Lee chuckled. "Womenfolk get away from Independence a few miles and find out there's no corner store on the prairie. There's always something they want to send back for, while they're still near enough. You'll see."

"No, I won't," Reza said confidently. "We've planned on this journey for so long I'll bet I haven't forgotten one single solitary thing."

"Ha!" Lee snorted. "I'll bet you'll find out different." And when she shook her head he added, "You're always sure you're right, aren't you, Reza? Even in the smallest things."

SHE looked at him in some astonishment. They had been married a little more than a year, and Lee had never criticized her before. She said, "Of course I'm sure. That's how I know you're going to be a big man one of these days. I'm as certain of that as I'm certain we'll camp at Blue Ridge tomorrow. So let's get an early start."

"Just as you say," Lee agreed.

He climbed out of the wagon, and she saw that he took little notice of the mud, but clumped in his heavy boots to where the saddle horses were picketed. He stood there, absentmindedly stroking a velvet muzzle turned to nibble delicately at his hand.

For a moment Reza watched him, lonely looking in the steady-falling rain. As if she had entered his mind, she could see he was thinking of the farm back home, and coming into the warmth of the kitchen. She shivered, feeling the chill of the wagon, and smelling the rawness of wet and unseasoned canvas. Perhaps Lee was right. Perhaps she had made a mistake in taking a gamble on the future, when life already was settled and comfortable.

Her depression lasted only an instant. No, they were young and life should be an adventure. They would come back with their pockets full of gold, and all for the risk of her aunt's legacy. It was little enough, Reza thought to herself, although it was probably Aunt Lizzie's life savings.

How she must have skinned and scraped to get that four hundred together! If she knew what I was going to do with it, Reza thought, I'll bet she'd be mad. She said as much to Lee when he came in and they were getting ready for bed.

Lee looked grave. "Seems to me Aunt Liz was wonderful, saving that much money."

His glance took in the wagon, crowded and cluttered with their gear and supplies. There was scarcely room to lay a pallet on the floor. The inside walls and roof of the canvas top were sewn over with patch pockets full of the small things needed for their everyday living.

"It isn't too comfortable," he said. "Look at the way we have to pack and unpack all the time, just to have room to stand up and lie down. Aunt Liz lived better than that, and it's little she had in this world."

"That's right," Reza flashed back. "And yet she had more than we ever would, staying stuck in the mud at Higgsville."

"Looks like there's plenty of mud here," Lee said. "Want to go home, Reza?"

"Not me!" she cried, her anger spilling over in the tenseness of her voice. "You have to take a chance if you're going to get on in the world. Can't you see that?"

"Well, maybe you're right." Lee felt in his pocket. "Want to take a chance right now? Why not toss up and see if we'll turn back?"

He pulled out a copper coin and stood smiling at her, flipping the penny into the air and catching it again. "Come on, honey. I dare you. Heads for home."

He couldn't have said anything that would tempt her more. She stared at him, angry and undecided, unwilling to take that foolish risk of giving up the longed-for ambition. Yet, strangely, she half wanted to take the dare. This deadening, steady rain—

She missed the coziness of the farm house, and the rolling hills that shut in the sheltered valley. The first trees would be well into budding now.

This was the season she loved the most, when the first faint rose of apple blossoms showed against the windy blue skies of spring. She thought of the two tall pear trees by the kitchen window, their slender branches pointing straight upward, all covered with snowy white opening buds, and the hum of bees busy about them. . . .

REZA pushed the picture out of her mind. She said stubbornly, "Of course we're going on. We'll find gold. I know it. I can feel it, I'm so sure."

"If you're so sure, it seems as if you'd be willing to bet." Lee tossed the penny high in the air, then caught and held it in both hands. "What do you say, honey? Heads for home."

"I don't have to say. It wouldn't mean a thing." Reaching up, Reza slipped her arms round Lee's neck and put her lips against his. "It isn't as if I wanted to boss you, Lee. You know that. But you remember Jas Williams? He came back with his pockets full of gold."

"The gold didn't do him much good. He's broke again."

"He's that kind of man," she cried. "You're not like him. You're steady."

"I guess that's my trouble. I'm slow and steady—dumb, I reckon. Anyway, too slow for a girl like you, Reza."

He pulled away from her. It was their first real disagreement, and it ended in the deadly silence that leaves a raw scar. When they were in bed, Lee turned his broad back on his wife. She lay rigid and miserable, her eyes wide open and staring into the dark, until her unhappiness became unendurable and she sobbed out loud.

As if at a signal, Lee whispered, "Reza, honey—"

Her tears broke out then. They clung together, and fell asleep at last locked in each other's arms, like two tired children.

They awoke to a raw windy day, ate their early meal, and fell in with the line of wagons headed for the first camp out of Independence. As yet the people had not chosen a train masters. That usually came after some man had proved himself to be an experienced traveler, familiar with the trail and the problems of a wagon train or, lacking such a one, a man whose natural aptitude made him stand out above the rank and file.

There was no particular order in the group; those ready pulled out first, and others followed as was convenient for them, so that the line straggled at uneven distances over the prairie. A wagon far ahead of Lee and Reza mired down in a chug hole. Without a captain, no one felt the responsibility of helping, and the other wagons merely by-passed the stalled vehicle and went on their way.

Its driver was on the ground, strugging to whip his oxen into moving on. But he could not get them to pull together. After several unsuccessful efforts to get out of the mud they stood stubbornly, refusing to tackle work too heavy for them.

Lee pulled up alongside. "Hold on, friend. Let 'em rest awhile. I've got a couple of good mules that will help you out of there, if we can get some purchase to keep your wheels from spinning."

Together they broke branches from nearby bushes and laid them under the mired wheels. Then, hitching up the mule team with the oxen, they hauled the wagon out of the mudhole and onto solid ground.

The driver mopped his forehead, grinning. "I sure am obliged to you, stranger. Looks like some folks are in such a hurry to get to California they can't give a hand to a man in trouble."

Lee laughed. "I've never been that in big a hurry in my life. Forget it. You'll do as much for me someday."

"Maybe I will, at that," said the other. He

pointed with his whip at the northern range of mountains. "See that sky? Looks black enough for a cloudburst, doesn't it? Stormy weather coming, for sure."

He unhitched the mules. "Fine team you've got there. Well, thanks again. If there's talk of choosing a captain, I'll put in a vote for you. A man should be ready to pitch in for the other fellow, I think."

Lee nodded. "No trouble," he said good-naturedly. "Glad to help."

Reza had been standing nearby and watching. As Lee helped her to the wheel hub of their wagon she said angrily, "You sure wasted your time, stopping to haul that man

"What do you think of my garden?"

out of the mud. Now we've lost our place in the line."

"Aw, what's the difference?"

"It makes a difference when we come to camp," she retorted. "Those first will get the best places, nearer to the river and closer to good pasture. Now we'll be at the tail end of the crowd. Even the fellow you helped is ahead of us."

"It's a big country," Lee said. "Guess there'll be room enough for everyone."

THE storm from the mountains broke in a hammering sleet and rain, so their camp at Blue Ridge had the misery of cold meals and wet clothes drying in the wagons. The travelers huddled under damp covers that night in an attempt to get rest and warmth.

In the morning it was plain to see that there would be no crossing that day. The river had risen high over the trail, so that the wagons stood hub-deep in the rushing water. The exact location of the ford was uncertain.

There was nothing to do but wait. Most of the group took things as they found them; they settled down to repairing harness, drying clothes, and doing various odd jobs that had been neglected during the journey to independence. The women used what cold food they had on hand. Those fortunate enough to have dry wood cooked on the tiny iron stoves they had installed in their wagons.

There was much complaining about articles forgotten and left behind. It was hard for the women to realize that it would be many days before they could buy supplies.

Even Reza, who felt had sure she had everything they could possibly need, found she had nothing to relieve the pain when she developed an aching tooth. She spent the night tossing uneasily in her bed, holding against her cheek a bag full of salt that Lee heated in a frying pan over the reluctant and smoking stove.

"I'll ride back in the morning and get you some pain killer," he said. "Will's going in with me. He's burning up with fever. Maybe you'd better see the doctor, too."

"You think I'd go off and leave our wagon without anyone to look after our things?"

"Shucks, Reza! Nobody'll touch our stuff."

"Well, I don't want to go. I'll stay here and keep warm in bed. I'll be all right."

The next morning the river was still high, but the rain had dwindled away and Reza felt better. Lee rode back to Independence for the pain killer, and took over other errands for the campers.

They were anxious to move on, but for several days the river continued to run swiftly. It looked rough and dangerous. The wagons were still deep in water, and it was hard to say where the trail ended and the river began. Even Lee began to feel a frustrated impatience.

"We might be here for weeks," he muttered, "held up by a spring freshet we wouldn't take any notice of back home."

"We have roads back home," Reza said.

"Here there's nothing but mud. Who's to know where the trail is?"

Will Brown was standing near by, his eyes sick with fever. "We're wasting our time here. Why not try to cross? It doesn't look too deep."

"Maybe it doesn't," Lee admitted, "but we aren't sure. Better wait. What do you think, Reza?"

She glanced over the water-covered prairie. "Will's right. We're losing an awful lot of time."

Lee grinned. "Reza would say that. She can't abide sitting still and waiting. She has to be up and doing. Only trouble is—" he added thoughtfully—"there are times when being slow is a good notion."

Brown kicked at the wagon wheel with an impatient movement. "Won't hurt to try. I tell you, Lee, I'm plain tired of hanging around."

"If I were a man," Reza said, "I wouldn't be afraid of a little old river that's a bit over its banks."

She pulled the wagon canvas closed without waiting for an answer. But she heard one anyway. Will Brown exclaimed furiously, "No woman can call me a coward!"

"Now, Will," Lee said, "sometimes it takes a man to be afraid."

"I'll cross that river," Will retorted, "and right now."

Reza barely caught Lee's quiet reply. "Will, you're sick. Better wait another day."

That's like Lee, she thought. Wait, wait, wait—that's all I've done since we married. We can't even cross a river. No, we must spend our lives waiting.

REZA was not one to cry, but now the sting of tears came to her eyes. She wiped them away angrily. The tooth began to ache again, and she dabbed at it with the pain killer Lee had brought from Independence. Camp Forgotten, she thought. We'll be here days from now, unless someone dares risk the crossing.

There was a shout from outside, the creaking rattle of a moving wagon, the splash of hoofs, and the pistol-shot cracking of a long rawhide whip. She pulled back the canvas in time to see Will Brown lash his reluctant oxen full into the roaring stream.

Reza held her breath, watching as the animals balked and then suddenly plunged full depth, sank, and disappeared into deep water. The wagon pitched head first after them. It rose again as the team started swimming, their straining heads all that showed above the swift-flowing current.

"The fool!" Lee shouted. "He went clear off the edge of a bank!" Grabbing for the coil of rope hanging on the side of the wagon, he ran to where his mules were picketed on a little rise above the flood water.

"Lee!" Reza screamed, "come back! Don't try it! Come back!"

But he shook his head, and she fell silent. With her clenched fist pressed against her mouth she watched as he threw himself on one of the mules and, leading the other, plunged down the rise into the river.

A great log swirled downstream; he fought the mules back to let the threatening danger pass, then left their heads free. Will Brown's oxen swam steadily forward, but Reza could see that their heads were lower in the water and the wagon was being carried into a swift current.

Lee was shouting, "Point 'em up stream, Will. Upstream! Drive on an angle so they won't be swept away."

Will either couldn't or wouldn't hear; he tried to force the oxen straight across, and it was then Reza became aware of Jenny Brown and the high keening note of her agonized screaming. In the middle of the river a sudden roil of chopping waves caught the waterlogged wagon full force.

One of the oxen lost its footing; it disappeared under the torrent. The other fell, its head and heavy yoke twisted sideways. Tossing horns showed briefly, before it was pulled down by the weight of its team mate. For an instant the wagon pitched forward. Then it slowly turned on its side and crashed against a huge boulder, and was wedged against it by the furious force of the river.

Will Brown was thrown from the driver's seat. His flailing arms kept him afloat long enough so that he could clutch the spoke of an upturned and whirling wagon wheel. Lee

and the two mules flashed past him, but in the shelter of the great boulder Lee managed to turn them toward the surging current.

He was able to maneuver close enough to the stalled wagon so that Will could scramble astride one of the animals. There he lay like a man half dead, his legs gripping the mule's ribs, his fists twisted in its wiry mane, while Lee fought their way out of the center current.

A good half mile up the river they found a landing place shallow enough so that they could ride back to the encampment. Reza and Jenny splashed through the overflow to meet them, and Jenny clung to her husband in an agony of relief.

"Oh, Will, Will," she gasped. "Oh, thank God! I thought sure you'd be drowned."

"Might as well be," Will muttered. He stood shivering, the water streaming from his clothes. "I'm a fool, Jenny. You'd be better off without me. I've lost almost everything we owned."

"I don't care," she cried, hugging him. "We've still got you."

"Now then," Lee said, patting Jenny's shoulder, "things might be worse. You've got that extra wagon you can use till the river goes down. It's likely most of your gear can be dried out without being too much harmed. Don't you fret. Just take things easy. We can wait for you. There's plenty of time."

HE LOOKED at Reza, his eyes telling her to agree. She did so grudgingly, knowing that, if it had not been for her urging, Will would never have attempted the crossing. Suddenly she felt that the goldfields were not so important to her as she had thought. Lee might have been drowned if he had tried to ford the river too, if he had not been determined to wait. So she did her share in helping the Browns to settle as comfortably as possible in the small wagons, and for a few days was content because she was busy.

At last the Blue River began to go down. Every day it sank lower, in the new channels the rush of flood water had washed out. The banks rose again, slimey with mud that steamed in the thin sunshine. The evil smell of it was all around them; it tainted the very food they ate, and drink water had to stand overnight to let the dirt settle.

Even then the water was bad, so that many people came down with a kind of cholera. Reza and Jenny would only touch the water after they had boiled it and strained out the dirt and trash remaining in the kettle, and they escaped the sickness.

When the hulk of the wrecked wagon was high enough to be examined, the Browns decided it was too badly damaged to be repaired. Lee salvaged what he could, but all food was a dead loss. Will was obliged to replenish his supplies in Independence. Prices there were high, and Reza was convinced that Lee was lending him money, although he did not mention it to her. As the weather improved and the trail dried, wagons began to move out, and Reza could not stand it any longer.

"When will we be ready to go?" she demanded impatiently.

"Just as soon as the Browns get fixed up. That's a mighty small wagon for them all," Lee said. "It takes some thinking so they can pack in and have room enough. But Will and I are going to town tomorrow to bring out their last load."

Reza sniffed. "You're doing the paying for it, I suppose."

He looked at her as if he saw a stranger, instead of his wife. He said, "Reza, have I ever asked you to account for one cent of your money?"

She shook her head. "Of course not. It was Aunt Lizzie's money I spent on outfitting my wagon. You know that."

"Your wagon. And your money. That's right."

They were sitting by the campfire, after supper, and Lee was smoking his old corncob pipe. He took it from his mouth now and stared at it thoughtfuly. "Honey, I never thought to say this to you. But when you say 'mine' so big, I see you and I are thinking different. What's mine has been yours, always, since the day we got married." He leaned forward, knocking the ashes out of his pipe. "Well, let's have it your way. What I've lent to Will Brown has been *my* money. And if he can't pay it back—"

"He won't be able to," she interrupted. "It'll be a fine day before you see it again."

"If that's so, he's welcome to it."

Reza's temper flared. "I've got a right to some say about the money."

Lee shrugged. "This is going to be done my way." He got up. "I'm going to bed. Will and I have some tinkering to do with the wagon, and we want to start early."

Reza could not sleep. At first she was both ashamed of herself and angry with Lee. And then the more she thought of how he had helped Will, the shame grew and the anger died down. Or, rather, it turned in on herself.

Aunt Lizzie's painfully-saved dollars might have made things so much easier for Lee on the farm, and yet she had not offered him one cent, and he had not asked for any. He lay beside her, so still she felt sure he was awake. Yet never before had she felt so alone, so lost and longing for the comfort of his arms.

"Lee," she whispered, "I'm sorry. It was my fault about Will. I wish I could help."

"That's my own girl again," Lee said. He kissed her lingeringly. "Just be real good to Jenny when you can. That's all anyone can do now, I guess. You can help her a lot."

LONG after Lee was asleep, Reza lay thinking of Jenny and Will crowded together in the small wagon with the three children. And before she closed her eyes she knew how simple was the answer to that problem. In the morning, after the men were gone, she told Jenny that she and Lee would exchange their big wagon for the Browns' smaller one.

"With just the two of us we'll have all the room we need," was her reply to Jenny's faint objections. "You and I can get to work and have our things switched around before the men come home. There won't be any argument about it then."

Jenny hesitated. "Will won't like my doing that. Lee's been too good to us already."

"Who's got a better right?" Reza retorted. "We're friends, aren't we?"

A sparkle came into Jenny's eyes, and she smiled. "If you put it that way, we'd be obliged to you both."

Reza's spirits rose with a bound; she felt a satisfaction she had never known before, a puzzling something that gave her a strange pleasure as she and Jenny went to work. Even the children helped, glad to be busy after the long dull days of rain and mud.

When the men came home they were full of praise for the new arrangement. Will Brown was very quiet, but his drooping shoulders straightened as if a heavy burden had been lifted.

"We sure owe you plenty," he said. "Looks like we'll be able to get along just fine now. I don't know what to say, Reza, except that it makes a fellow feel pretty good—" He stopped, embarrassed by his own words.

Lee chuckled. "I told you she'd figure out something. Reza thinks quick, once she makes up her mind." He slipped an arm around her, squeezing her waist. "Of course, the trouble is a woman often doesn't know what she really wants."

But I do know, Reza thought, with a surge of secret emotion. I know at last. Lee had never wanted to leave home. He wanted, even now, to go back. And she was ready to go with him and do as he wished. She would tell him so tonight. Tomorrow the company would be pulling out on the long trail, but she and Lee would turn the small wagon toward Higgsville and the blossoming orchards of home.

It was dry and warm that evening. Most of the company ate their evening meal by their campfires, and shouting and laughter went back and forth between the groups. They were all glad that this was their last night at the Blue. The river was fordable now. Tomorrow they would make a safe crossing and start on the long trail to California.

The cry went up for a fiddler, for music and singing, and some even attempted to dance, but were soon discouraged by the deep wheel ruts of the cleared spaces. Then Will Brown stood up and shouted for silence. When at last the crowd quieted down, he climbed on a tree stump so that everyone could see and hear him.

"We're moving on tomorrow," he said, in his quiet, tired way. "We're all ready, I

guess, and anxious to be on the trail again. But there's one thing we haven't settled yet."

"What's that?" someone yelled. "How to keep out of the river, Will Brown?"

There was a shout of laughter. Will held up his hand. "You've hit it, friend. We need someone who'll stop the fools like me from killing themselves. We want a man who'll do his best for his neighbor. You all know who risked his life for me. I propose Lee Ames as captain of this company."

THERE was a moment of confusion, of talking and shouted suggestions. Will held up his hand again. "Who knows of a better man? Sing out, if you can name one."

A man pushed Will off the stump and jumped up in his place. "I was in trouble coming out of Independence. How many of you fellers offered to help? Who was willing to stop and haul me out of a mudhole? I'll tell you. Just one—Lee Ames. I second Will's vote. I'm for Ames."

Someone started a rhythmical stamping and a shout went up, "I'm for Ames. I'm for Ames." Soon they all joined in, as if the tagline had settled the matter. Lee stood up, looking very sober, and there was a silence.

He said, "I'm proud to be chosen captain. Guess I'll never be prouder in my life than I am right now. I'll do the best I know how."

"Give us your first order, Cap'n, before we break up for tonight," Will suggested.

"That's an easy one. Fires out and all ready to go by sunrise. Goodnight, boys."

Later, in the small wagon, Reza unrolled pallets on the floor and spread the blankets. She looked up at her yawning husband. "Lee, you hated leaving the farm, didn't you? Do you still want to go home?"

He ran his fingers through his hair. "Guess there isn't much I can do about it now."

"We can turn right around tomorrow. There's still time. We can let the Browns have Aunt Lizzie's wagon, and we can take this one and head for Higgsville."

"Well—I'll toss you." He took the coin from his pocket. "Heads for California."

"Ha!" Reza snorted. "You think I don't know about that old double-headed luck piece of yours? I'm asking what you *want* to do."

Lee put away the coin. He smiled at her, his eyes very bright and blue. "I'd like best to go home. But it seems as if these people need me. Maybe I'd better tag along and do what I can to help." He blew out the light and crawled under the covers.

Reza lay still, thinking of the orchard in bloom, and two tears ran slowly down her hot cheeks. It was seldom really dark under the white canvas top, and after a while she raised herself on an elbow to look at Lee in the dusky light. Lying so relaxed, his eyes closed, he seemed half man, half boy, and yet she could see the sweetness and strength in his face.

As she watched him, his eyes opened and he turned to her, whispering, "I guess I'll never be a big somebody, honey. But I sure am crazy about my wife."

She put out a finger, tracing the solid line of his jaw, and felt a joyous and lifting pride in her husband as he took her in his arms.

It doesn't make much difference where we go or what we do, Reza thought contentedly. Rich or poor, Lee Ames will always be one of the great.

RANCH FLICKER TALK

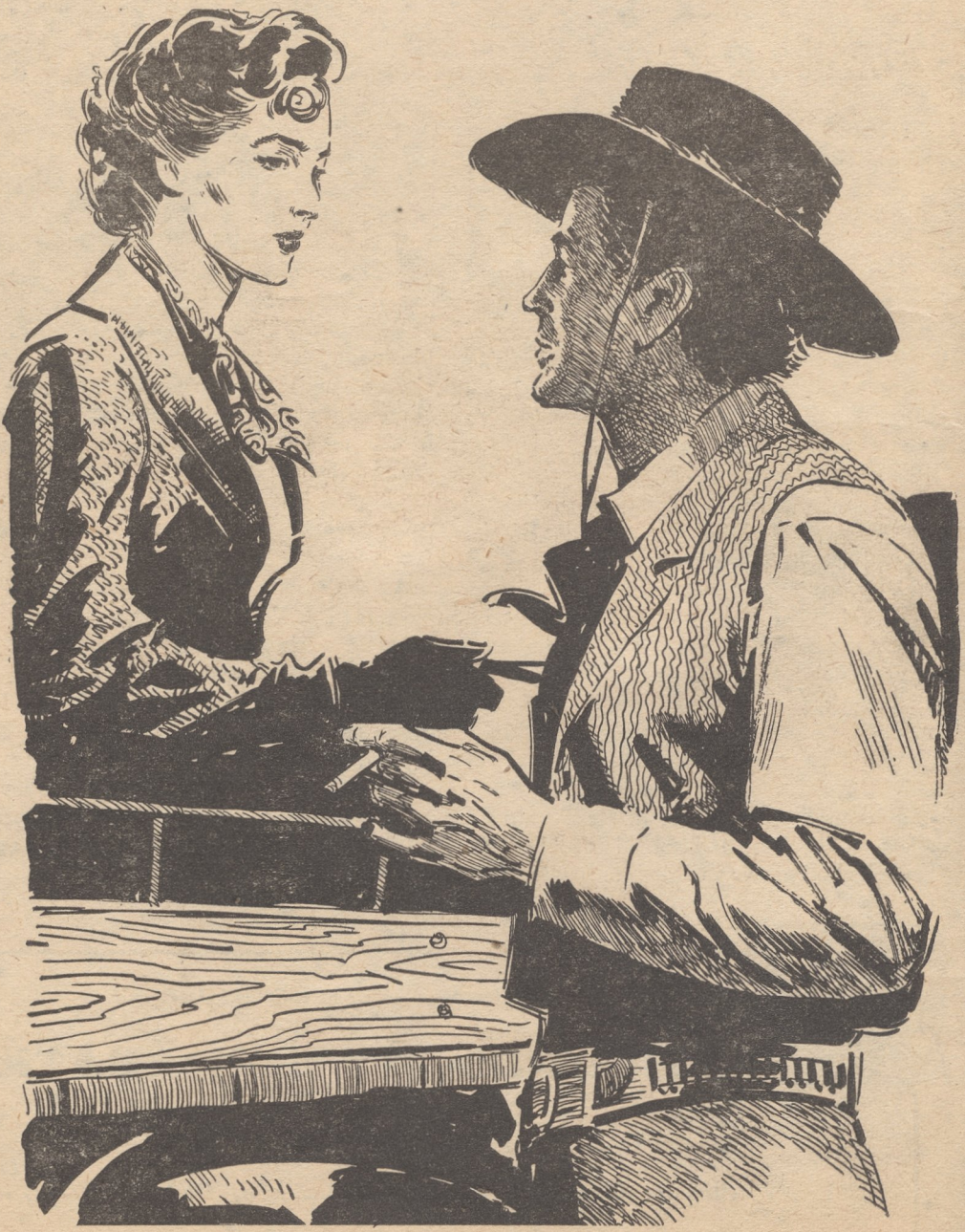
Next issue—a review of United Artists'

STRANGER ON HORSEBACK

with JOEL McCREA and MIROSLAVA

Plus an illustrated personality sketch of DENNIS MORGAN

Girl on the



Tomahawk

by RAY GAULDEN

CALLIGAN WAS THE KIND who always played it smart . . . till he fell for another man's woman . . . who could offer him nothing but trouble

WHEN the stage reached Mariposa, Ford Calligan got out, along with the other passengers, and stood beside the dusty Concord waiting for the driver to get his luggage. While he waited he scanned the wide and rutted street, lined on either side with frame and adobe buildings.

Somewhere in this town, he thought, he'd find Ellen Lambert—a girl he had never met, but one that he had traveled a thousand miles to see.

At the hotel, he rented a room and talked with the clerk.

"Can you tell me where I'll find the Lamberts?" Calligan asked.

The clerk, a small, sleepy-eyed man, didn't get out of

his chair, "They used to live on the edge of town. Folks name of Brown own the house now."

"The Lambert family move away?"

"The old man died some years ago."

"I know that," Calligan said. "But—"

The clerk went on as though he hadn't heard. "After the old man cashed in, there was Mrs. Lambert and her two kids, Jimmy and Ellen. Jimmy was always hard to handle, so it was no surprise to me when he ran away from home."

"I met Jimmy down in Texas," Calligan said. "We worked for the same outfit."

"Then maybe you can give me the straight of how he was killed?"

"We had a bronc that nobody could take the meanness out of, and Jimmy tried it."

The clerk shook his head. "Seems like that family had nothing but bad luck."

"What I'd like to know," Callagin said, trying to be patient, "is where Mrs. Lambert and her daughter live."

The clerk shifted in his chair as if he were trying to find a more comfortable position. "Mrs. Lambert died a while back. She never was well, and after Jimmy left she went from bad to worse. She worried all the time because she didn't hear from him."

"What about his sister, Ellen?"

"You got to hand it to that girl," the clerk said, smiling to himself. "She had it rough all her life, saw a lot of tough times. Used to stay home and take care of her ma while other girls were going to dances and parties."

"Is she working here in town?"

"Not Ellen. She won't never have to work any more."

Calligan frowned. "How's that?"

"Ellen found herself a man with plenty of money."

Calligan stared at him. "You mean she got married?"

"Yep, to Kane Ransome, biggest rancher in these parts. He owns the Tomahawk. After all she went through with that family of hers, I figure Ellen had a break coming."

Calligan turned away, a dull feeling inside him as he crossed the lobby.

"If you want to see her," the clerk called after him, "I can tell you how to get to Tomahawk."

"Forget it," Calligan said, without looking around.

IT HADN'T occurred to him that she might be married, he thought as he stopped on the porch to roll a smoke. He remembered Jimmy Lambert, and he recalled those times while they sat around a campfire and he listened to the kid talk of his family—mostly of his sister, Ellen. After a while she became very real to Calligan, a slim, dark-eyed girl that Jimmy said was everything a man could want in a woman.

Calligan saw a saloon and walked toward it, wondering why he hadn't written that he was coming, why he hadn't sent the things and let it go at that. But it wasn't that easy. It was crazy, perhaps, but he had fallen in love with Ellen. He made a sour face now when he thought about it. Why had he let himself get worked up over a picture painted with words by a young hellion like Jimmy Lambert?

He should have had sense enough not to quit his job. A man didn't land a ramrodding job like he'd had on the Bar 7 every day. But he'd had to get soft in the head and make a thousand mile trip to look at a girl he had never seen before.

The saloon was quiet. There were only a few customers at the bar, and several others sitting at the card tables. Calligan ordered whisky, hoping to wash the bad taste out of his mouth. When he finished the drink he held the empty glass in his hand and made an idle survey of the room.

His gaze passed a corner table and came back, lingering for a moment on a tall man with a bony face. The man was about thirty-five and he sat hunched forward, staring with brooding eyes into a whisky glass.

The bartender, a short, fat man called Benny, paused to wipe the mahogany with a wet towel. Following Calligan's gaze, he said absently, "That's Kane Ransome. Used to be about the most important man in this town."

"Looks like the booze has him now," Calligan remarked.

"Drinks the stuff like it was water," Benny said, leaning forward now with his elbows on the bar. "Got the biggest ranch in the coun-

try, but he doesn't seem to give a damn about anything."

Calligan started to turn back to the bar, then remembered that the hotel clerk had told him Ellen Lambert was married to a man named Ransome. He looked again at the card table, and it was still holding his attention when the slatted doors opened and a man came in. He paused a moment, squat and heavy-shouldered, while his hard eyes surveyed the room. When he saw Kane Ransome he didn't look at anyone else. Something hot and mean came into his eyes.

Kane Ransome had slumped down in his chair now so that his legs were sticking out. If he was aware that someone had entered the barroom, he didn't let on. He was staring with bitter eyes at the floor when the newcomer started on toward the bar.

Benny, the bartender, swore softly and spoke in a low tone. "That's Mel Torrey, and he hates Ransome's guts."

Calligan kept his eyes on Torrey, knowing the man could easily have stepped around Ransome's feet. Instead he pretended not to see them. He stumbled, caught himself, and whirled with an oath.

Ransome glanced up, muttering in a whisky-thick voice, "Go on and leave me alone, Mel."

"Like hell," Torrey said harshly. "I'm fed up with you throwing your weight around in this town."

It was suddenly quiet in the saloon, and Calligan could see that everybody was looking at the two men. He watched too, and saw Ransome turn back to the table and reach for the bottle as if that were all he had on his mind.

With another oath, Torrey reached down and jerked him to his feet, holding him with one hand while he slapped him with the other. They were back and forth, open-handed blows that rocked Ransome's head. The rancher made no attempt to defend himself; his arms hung at his sides.

The bartender called into the silence, "Why don't you cut it out, Mel? He's in no shape to take care of himself."

There was a cold wrath in Mel Torrey's eyes, and he gave no sign that he had heard the bartender. He let go of Ransome, flung him back against the wall, and started toward him, both fists cocked.

"I've been wanting to do this for a long time," he said.

Ransome stayed there against the wall, his face red from the blows, but if there was anger in him it didn't show. All that showed was the dull, beaten expression on his face.

CALLIGAN'S voice cut into the quiet like a whip crack. "Don't hit him again."

With his right fist drawn back, Torrey stopped and turned around, scowling as his eyes fastened on Calligan. "Who the hell are you?"

"The name's Calligan."

"Friend of his?"

"No, I've just got a weak stomach for some things."

Torrey hesitated a moment, his hand close to his gun as he eyed Calligan. Then, with a curse, the heavy-shouldered man reached for his weapon. It was half out of his holster when Calligan made his own draw. One moment he had been standing there, apparently relaxed, and now the gun was in his hand, pointing at Torrey's middle.

"Better forget it, fellow," Calligan said calmly.

Torrey's mouth was open a little in surprise. He let his own pistol fall back into the holster, and wet his lips as if he were trying to decide what to do now.

He said sullenly, "You're buying into something that's none of your business, stranger."

"Just didn't want to see you do something you might be sorry for," Calligan answered.

A man at the bar snickered, and Torrey turned to glare at him. Then, with another sharp glance at Calligan, the heavy-shouldered man whirled around and stalked from the saloon.

Benny, the bartender, let out his breath. "That was fast drawing, stranger."

Calligan put his gun away and turned back to the bar, as a rap came at the side door. Benny went over to it, looked out, and spoke to someone who stayed out of sight. Then, with a nod, Benny left the door and started toward Kane Ransome, who was slumped in a chair at the table again.

Benny called to Calligan, "Mind giving me a hand?"

Calligan followed him to the table.

"Kane," Benny said, "your wife is here after you. She's got the buckboard at the side door."

"Tell her to go on," Ransome muttered, without looking up.

"She's been waiting quite a spell," Benny said uneasily. "Why don't you go on home and get some rest, Kane?"

Ransome took a drink, spilling part of it on his shirt front. He looked down at the soiled spot and shook his head. "Maybe I better, at that."

He tried to get up, rammed into the table, and would have fallen if Calligan hadn't caught him. Between the two of them they got him out the door, where Calligan got his first look at Ellen Lambert.

She was standing beside a buckboard, looking exactly like the picture Calligan had in mind. She was slim and lovely, except that there was a trace of worry in her dark eyes. Glancing at Calligan without interest, she spoke to Ransome.

"Are you all right, Kane?"

"Kind of sick," he muttered. "Need to lie down."

Benny said, "Let's get him in the back, and he can sleep on the way home."

A bed had been prepared in the buckboard. Seeing it, Calligan knew that this was not the first time Ransome's wife had come to the saloon after him. When they had helped the rancher into the buckboard, Benny turned to Ellen.

"Hope you aren't blaming me, ma'am."

The girl shook her head. "He wants to drink, and nobody can stop him."

The bartender went back inside, but Calligan remained, looking at the girl who sat now on the buckboard seat with the reins in her hands.

She said, "Thank you for helping us."

Calligan's eyes stayed on her face, the same face he had seen in the flames of a campfire as he listened to Jimmy Lambert talk of his sister. The kid had brought her to life with his words, and he had stirred a longing in Ford Calligan. Now he looked at her and the knowledge that she belonged to another man lay heavy in him.

"I'm Ford Calligan," he said. "The man who wrote you about your brother."

She had lifted the reins, but now she lowered them and regarded him with interest for the first time. "You didn't say much in your letter, Mr. Calligan."

"Always was hard for me to write a letter. There are some things I'd like to tell you about Jimmy, and I brought a few of his belongings that he wanted you to have."

With a glance at Ransome, Ellen said, "If you'd care to ride out to the ranch with us, we could talk on the way."

Calligan told himself it would be best this way. He could get the things from the hotel, say what he had to say, and have it over with. After a night's rest he would take the stage back to Texas.

AS THEY were driving out of town, with Ellen handling the reins and Calligan sitting beside her, he noticed a woman standing on the steps of the general store. She was tall, full-breasted, and strikingly beautiful. Her eyes were on the buckboard and, as they passed the store, Calligan caught the contemptuous stare she gave Ellen Ransome.

Ellen stiffened a little, then spoke to the team. The buckboard rattled on down the street at a faster pace.

"That was Cleo Blair," Ellen said, looking straight ahead. "If you stay long in Mariposa you'll probably meet her."

Calligan didn't miss the note of bitterness in the girl's tone, but he let it pass and said, "I'll be leaving tomorrow."

Ransome, lying in the back of the buckboard, groaned, rolled over, then was quiet again.

When the town was behind them and the buckboard was rolling across the sage brush flats, the girl said, "I had a feeling when Jimmy went away that I'd never see him again."

"He wasn't a bad kid," Calligan said, "just a little rattle-headed and liking his fun. I know he didn't write much, but he was always talking about you and his mother, saying how next month for sure he was going to send some money home."

"That was Jimmy," Ellen said with a faint smile. "Always going to do something big, but putting it off or forgetting it because someone started a poker game."

"I think he would have got it out of his system after a while," Calligan said. "He was as good a hand as I ever had working for me—always laughing and joshing about something. But if there was a chore to do, you could count on Jimmy."

Ellen looked down at the things Calligan had laid on the seat—a pocketknife, a billfold, a pair of spurs, and a watch fob. She picked up the knife and her eyes were misty.

They rode a while in silence, and then Calligan talked again of Jimmy Lambert; telling Ellen of the night her brother died, answering the questions the girl asked him.

After another interval of silence, Ellen said, "In the few letters that Jimmy wrote, he talked mostly of his friend, Ford Calligan. He said that you were ramrod of one of the biggest ranches in Texas, that you had made a name for yourself."

"I tried to earn my wages."

"Jimmy said you had a way with men, that you were fast with a gun."

Calligan felt uncomfortable. "I'm afraid Jimmy was giving me a bigger build-up than I've got coming."

Ellen's face was serious. "Now that I've met you, Mr. Calligan, I'd say you were a man who could get a job done."

She glanced back at Kane Ransome, and Calligan saw the troubled shadows in her eyes.

"Tomahawk needs a ramrod to take Kane's place," she said. "We could make it worth your while, Calligan."

"I had in mind to take it easy for a while, ma'am."

They had turned off the main trail and then were traveling westward, following the course of a stream toward a low line of hills. Ellen kept her eyes on the ruts ahead, avoiding the rough spots as much as possible.

She said, "My husband is in no condition to handle the ranch any more. He's been this way for months now, not caring whether the work is done or not, leaving a man in charge who does little except sit around the bunkhouse with the crew."

Calligan frowned. "I heard that Tomahawk was the biggest ranch in these parts."

"It used to be," Ellen said, "and Kane Ransome was the biggest man. He spent most of his time in the saddle, driving himself and the men who worked for him. Now he either stays in the house or at the saloon in town, drinking himself to death while the ranch falls apart. I've tried to talk to him, get him to fire Guy Weems, but he just doesn't care what happens to Tomahawk. He just doesn't care about anything."

Calligan glanced back at the sleeping man, wondering what had made him turn to whisky. When he returned his attention to Ellen she was studying him, and those shadows in her eyes caused something to twist inside him.

FEELING the way he did about her, he knew he had no business taking a job where he would be near her, seeing her all the time. Why torture himself, when she was married to another man? Still, she was willing to pay him well, and he'd have to get a job somewhere.

An hour later they reached the ranch headquarters. Calligan was still considering the proposition, trying to make up his mind. He knew the best thing was to turn her down, but he wouldn't admit it. He looked at the buildings—the big log house, the barn, and the corrals, and told himself it was an outfit any man could be proud of.

When he had helped Ellen get Ransome into the house, he went out and stood on the porch, thinking of the girl. From the bunkhouse came the murmur of voices, and he remembered what Ellen had said about the crew sitting around, doing nothing.

Presently Ellen came out and stood beside him. At the same time a man stepped from the bunkhouse, a lanky, slab-muscled man, who stopped and leaned against the front of the building, assuming an indolent stance as he began to fashion a cigarette.

"Guy Weems," Ellen said with disgust.

"Why haven't you fired him?" Calligan asked.

"I've let it drift along, hoping Mr. Ransome would eventually take care of it. Yesterday I had a talk with him, and he told me to do whatever I wanted to."

"Then what are you waiting for?"

"Frankly, I'm afraid of him."

Laughter came from the bunkhouse and someone called, "Hey, Guy! Come in here a minute."

Weems was still leaning against the front of the building, a cigarete hanging in one corner of his mouth while he stared absently across the yard. Now he turned and went back inside.

"If you want to go back to town," Ellen said, "you can take one of our horses and leave it at the livery stable."

Calligan looked at her, wanting to stay, wanting to help her and knowing he shouldn't. He said, "I'll take the job."

The dullness went out of her eyes, and she smiled at him. "I'm glad."

He looked away from her, afraid that he might not be able to hide his feelings. With his eyes on the bunkhouse, he said, "I might as well start earning my pay."

When he started off the porch, she said, "Be careful of Weems."

Calligan nodded and went on, walking across the yard toward the bunkhouse. When he reached the low-roofed building, he glanced back and saw that Ellen was still on the porch, watching him. He wasn't pleased with the decision he had made, but he put the regret from his mind and walked into the bunkhouse.

Six men were in the room, four of them at a table playing cards, one lying on a bunk with his hands behind his head. Guy Weems was talking with one of the card players, and then the two of them laughed. They were still when Weems saw Calligan come in.

The foreman sobered, and his pale eyes gave Calligan a brief going over before he said, "If you're looking for a job, we've got a full crew."

"The names Calligan, and I've already got a job."

Weems began to scowl. "I do the hiring around here."

"Not any more," Calligan said steadily. "I'm taking over."

It was suddenly very quiet in the room. The man lying on the bunk got up slowly, and the men at the table exchanged glances. Weems's eyes stayed on Calligan, searching his face as if he were trying to find out if what he had just heard was on the level.

"Your say-so doesn't mean anything to me," Weems said with a sneer.

"You can talk to Ransome later," Calligan told him. "Right now pack your warbag and get out."

The men at the card table blinked in surprise, but Calligan's eyes stayed on Weems.

A flush crawled up the former's neck. "Like hell," he said.

CALLIGAN knew the best way to handle it. He moved forward, catching Weems before the foreman suspected what was coming. He hit Weems with a left and a right, hard blows that sent the foreman reeling back across the room. And Calligan followed him, giving the man no time to regain his balance.

Chairs scraped back, as the crew left the table in a wild scramble to get out of the way. They gathered in a corner of the room and one of them called, "Come on, Guy, show him how it's done."

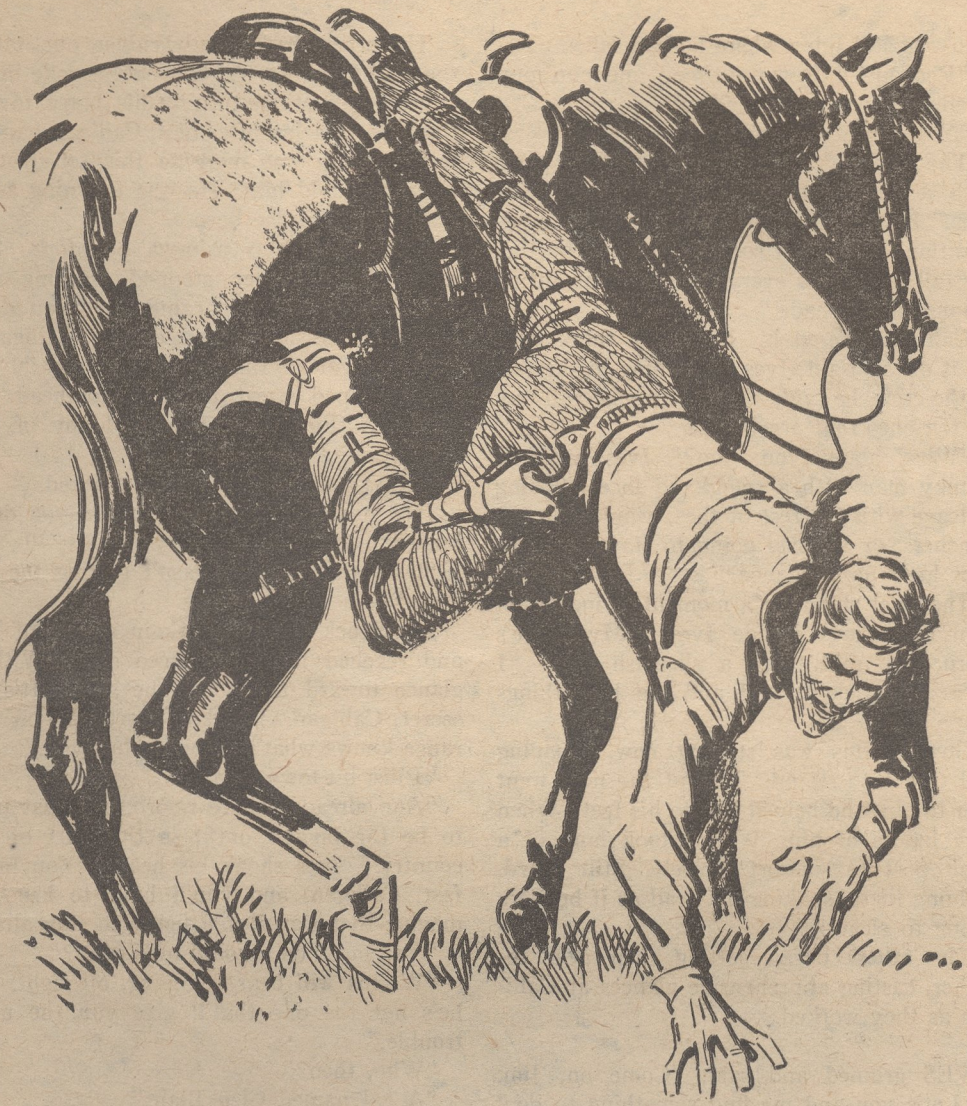
Weems had come up against the wall now, hitting it with a jar that caused the boards to rattle. He tried to lift his knee when Calligan came a him, but Calligan twisted away and then swung back, smashing Weems in the mouth and again on the nose.

With the lower part of his face turning red, Weems cursed and lunged forward, his head down in an attempt to drive Calligan back. Again Calligan, moving quickly, got out of his way. As Weems went past him, Calligan brought his fist down on the back of the foreman's neck.

Weems stumbled and went to his knees, grunting when Calligan reached down, got a handful of his hair, and pulled him to his feet. He held the man with one hand and hit him with the other, a powerful right that knocked Weems back against the table. He crashed into it with such force that the table overturned and Weems followed it to the floor.

Make it good, Calligan was telling himself. Leave him so there's no doubt in him that he's been whipped.

Weems got hold of a chair and pulled himself up. He stood there, breathing hard while blood dripped off his chin. Then, with an



"Nobody could ride that bronc," Calligan said, "but Jimmy tried. . . ."

oath, he lifted the chair over his head and started forward. Calligan smiled, and didn't back up. When the chair was thrown at him he ducked, and it hit the wall with a splintering of wood.

Implacably he moved in on Weems again, forcing him back against the wall, taking what blows Weems was able to land. He had the foreman pinned against the wall now and held him there, hammering him with both fists until the wall was all that was holding Weems up.

At last Calligan stepped back and let him fall to the floor. He stood looking down at him for a moment, then straightened and faced the crew.

"The party's over, boys," he told them. "Any of you that are afraid of work can pack your stuff and leave with Weems."

A tall, red-headed puncher grinned. "Looks like there's gonna be a change on the old Tomahawk."

The rest of the crew were ill at ease; they shuffled their feet and looked at Guy Weems,

who was still lying where he had fallen.

"Reckon I'll draw my time," one man muttered, not looking at Calligan.

"Yeah, me too," another one said.

The red-headed puncher moved from them with a contemptuous glance. "I'm Parker Ives," he said, looking at Calligan with admiration. "Couldn't see any sense in busting my tail as long as everybody else was sitting around in the shade."

Calligan offered his hand. "I think we'll hit it off all right, Ives." Turning to the rest of the crew, he said, "Mrs. Ransome will pay off the ones that are leaving."

"What about you, Jim?" Ives asked a chunky man with a round red face. "Going to leave with the rest of these would-be cowpunchers, or are you going to stay and earn your keep for a change?"

The rider stood for a moment in indecison, then came over beside Ives. "My name's Horn," he said, with a sheepish grin. "I guess I'll stick around and see how things shape up."

Guy Weems was stirring now, groaning and trying to sit up. Two of the men went over to him and helped him to his feet. When they let go of him, Weems took hold of a bunk post to support himself. Still dazed, he hung there, shaking his head as if he were trying to clear it.

The others began getting their gear together, casting apprehensive glances at Calligan as they worked.

IVES grinned and said, "Come on, Jim. Let's you and me find something to do."

"That won't be hard," Horn said, and followed him from the bunkhouse.

Calligan remained. He leaned against the wall, smoking and watching Weems. The ex-foreman had gotten his warsack now and was throwing things into it. When he finished, he put the sack over his shoulder, gave Calligan one last resentful glance, then tramped from the bunkhouse.

Calligan drifted outside, flexing the skinned knuckles of his left hand while he watched Weems go to the house. The man was only there a short time before he stalked out, his mouth sullen as he went to the corral and saddle a horse.

The others had already ridden out, taking the trail toward town, but Weems rode in the opposite direction, turning his horse toward the hills. Staring after him, Calligan had the feeling there was more to this set-up than Ellen had told him. He was frowning as he walked toward the barn.

Parker Ives was using a pitchfork. The red-headed puncher stopped working and smiled when Calligan came in. "You don't believe in messing around, do you, Calligan?"

"Can't get anything done that way."

Ives wiped sweat from his forehead and grinned. "First time I've shed any of this stuff in quite a spell."

"What's the deal?" Calligan asked.

Ives stared at him. "You mean you don't know?"

"Only that Weems wasn't getting the job done."

Ives stuck the pitchfork in a bale of hay and reached for his tobacco sack. With a glance toward the house, he said, "It's no secret, Calligan. I reckon everybody on this range knows what's going on but you."

"I just hit town today."

"And already you're ramrod of what used to be the biggest outfit in this part of the country." Ives shook his head. "You move fast, Calligan, and you'll have to keep on moving that way if you figure to stay alive."

"You mean on account of Weems?"

"Weems will bear watching, all right, but he's not the one that'll give you the most trouble."

"Who, then?"

"A gal named Cleo Blair."

Calligan remembered the woman standing in front of the store in town. He asked, "Weems working for her?"

Ives nodded. "Cleo is a lot of woman. Most of the men on this range would sell their saddles just to get her to smile at them once."

"Is she what's eating on Ransome?"

Ives nodded again. "He was in love with her, wanted to marry her, and for a while she let him get his hopes up. Then she told him it had been Lafe Torrey all along."

"Torrey," Calligan said thoughtfully. "I met a fellow named Mel Torrey in the saloon today."

"Mel is Lafe's brother. Both of them are about as mean and no-account as any two men you'll run across anywhere. But Lafe's the kind that some women seem to take to—women like Cleo, anyhow."

Ives paused to light the cigarette he had been rolling. Then he continued. "The story goes that Kane Ransome, figuring if he got Lafe out of the way Cleo would marry him, had Lafe sent up for rustling Tomahawk beef."

"You mean it was nothing but a trumped-up charge?"

"I don't know. A lot of folks figure it was. Most of them were glad to see Lafe get a year in jail anyway, but Cleo told Ransome right to his face that she knew he had framed Lafe, and it wasn't going to get him what he hoped for."

"And that's when Ransome turned to a whisky bottle?"

"Not right away. He started going with Miss Ellen, and while I had a hunch it was just to show Cleo that she wasn't the only woman around, I was hoping it'd work out. They don't come any better than Ellen Ransome. She let herself in for a heap of grief when she married Kane. Poor kid—as if she didn't have enough before."

Calligan glanced toward the house, remembering the troubled shadows in the girl's eyes.

"It hits you where it hurts," Ives said heavily, "when you see a man like Ransome who's always been a square shooter, going to hell on account of a no-good wench like that Cleo. And the thing that gets you is that he knows she's out to break him, and he won't do a damned thing about it."

"Rustling?"

"Making no bones about it," Ives said with quiet disgust. "She moved out to the Torrey place up there in the hills, and she and Mel, with the help of Weems, are building a big spread with Tomahawk cattle. Everybody knows what's going on, but the sheriff is over at the county seat and he won't do anything unless Kane makes a charge."

Calligan asked, "How'll I find this Torrey place?"

"Follow the creek toward the hills. You can't miss it."

CALLIGAN got gear, cut a horse from the corral, and saddled up. As he was riding out of the yard, he looked at the house and thought of Ellen, and knew he wasn't playing it smart. He could get plenty of good jobs where there was less chance of getting his ears shot off. The sourness stirred in him again, and he told himself a man ought to have a better reason for making a target out of himself than he did.

Still he rode on, following the stream, and two hours later came to a log house in the foothills. The house was little more than a shack. It was a run-down outfit if he'd ever seen one, he thought, as his glance took in the sagging roof on the barn, the corral that was in need of repair, and the littered yard.

As he rode past the corral, he looked to see if the horse Guy Weems had ridden was in the enclosure. It was neither there nor about the yard, yet Weems had headed in this direction. He rode on past the barn, alert and wary-eyed, but there was no sign of anyone about the place.

He was almost to the house when a woman appeared in the doorway, and he saw that it was Cleo Blair. She still wore the same silk blouse and riding skirt she'd had on in town. She was the kind of woman, he thought, that most men found exciting.

She stood there now with one hand on her hip and the other on the doorframe, regarding him with an unreadable expression.

"You're Calligan," she said with a faint smile.

He nodded and swung down, glancing about the yard as he walked toward the house.

"If you're expecting trouble," she said, still smiling, "there's no one around but me."

"Weems was headed this way when he left Tomahawk."

"Yes, he stopped long enough to patch himself up and to tell me what had happened. I'd already heard about you, though, from Mel Torrey."

He stopped in front of the doorway, noticing the way a faint breeze pressed the silk blouse against the provocative swell of her breasts, and he told himself it would be easy for some men to lose their heads over her if they did not take time to look beneath the surface.

With one hand still on her hip, she regarded him with frank interest and said, "You came to talk. We can do that better inside, out of the sun."

He was on the verge of telling her that what he had to say wouldn't take long, but she turned back inside, and after a moment's hesitation he followed her. The inside of the house was not as bad as the outside. It was clean, at least, and there were curtains at the windows, Indian blankets on the walls.

Cleo Blair had stopped beside a table in the center of the room and was watching him as he made a brief inspection. She said, "It's just a shack, Calligan, but before long a new house will be built here, to go with the ranch I'm building.

"With Tomahawk cows."

"It's not the first outfit that was started that way, Calligan."

He took out his tobacco sack, studying her as he shaped up a smoke. He said, "Folks have a habit of running into trouble when they go too far with a thing."

"I can handle any trouble that comes my way."

"Pretty sure of yourself," Calligan said evenly.

She smiled. "The fact that you're good with your fists and fast with a gun doesn't scare me at all, Calligan. You're still just one man."

"And you're just one woman."

"One woman can get a lot done, Calligan," she said, still smiling, "if she sets her mind to it."

"And one man can throw a lot of lead."

"Not if he's dead, he can't."

"Some men don't die easy."

She turned to the table, where there was a bottle and glasses. While pouring two drinks, she said, "You strike me as being a man who has always played it smart, Calligan. So why are you taking a hand in a game where the deck is stacked?"

"Maybe I like that kind of game."

She held a glass out to him and he took it, watching her as she lifted her own drink and said:

"Here's to a short but happy life."

"You're quite a woman," Calligan said, setting his glass back on the table.

SHE leaned against the table, her shoulders back so that her blouse pulled tight across her breasts. She said, "I can offer you more than you'll ever get on Tomahawk."

"You haven't got anything I'm looking for."

Anger showed in her eyes, a fleeting resentment, and then she was smiling again. "All right, Calligan. I suppose I'm wasting my time trying to be nice to you. Say your piece and let's have it over with."

"I just wanted you to know that I'm not going to sit around like Ransome and let you go on with this cow-stealing."

"How are you going to stop me?"

He touched the butt of his gun. "With this."

Her smile was thin and taunting. "One gun won't last long against a dozen, and I can get that many if necessary."

"You can't go too far without the law stepping in."

"The law doesn't bother me. I've started out to do something, and I'm going to see it through. I've lain awake nights thinking about it, Calligan." She looked beyond him, and bitterness crept into her eyes. "Kane Ransome framed Lafe Torrey into the pen, and this is my way of paying Ransome back."

"How do you know Torrey was framed?"

"His word is good enough for me."

"If he's anything like his brother," Calligan said, "I would need a lot more than his word."

"Don't start giving me a sermon on right and wrong, Calligan."

"I reckon it wouldn't do any good."

"You're right," she said in a low tone. "Lafe is the only man I ever cared about in my life, and I've done without him for a whole year while he was cooped up in jail for something he didn't do. But now he's served his time, and he's coming home. He'll be here, Calligan, today or tomorrow, and you won't find him as easy to handle as Mel and Guy."

Calligan turned and walked to the door. There he stopped and, facing her again, said, "We understand each other now. I guess we both know how it's going to be from here on out."

She nodded, and her eyes remained on his face. "There's just one thing bothering me," she said.

"What's that?"

"Why a man with your talents is willing to gamble his life on something that can earn him nothing more than wages."

Calligan smiled thinly. "A man can't always tell you why he does some of the things he does."

"If you change your mind," she said, and her eyes were half closed, warm with invitation, "come back and see me."

Calligan shook his head. "If I come back again, it'll be because I'm looking for somebody with a gun in my hand."

He went out and walked to his horse, glancing about the yard again as he stepped into the saddle. Cleo Blair had come to the doorway and was leaning against the frame, watching him with that faint smile on her mouth.

"So long, Calligan," she said softly. "It was nice meeting you."

He rode back the way he had come, knowing he had accomplished nothing by seeing her. Still, he had wanted to know what she could expect from him if the rustling didn't stop. She was a cool one, he thought, and felt a grudging admiration for her in spite of what she was doing.

He had hoped to scare her out, but he knew now she was a woman who didn't scare. Mulling over the situation, he saw what he was up against. What she had said about his gambling his life for nothing but wages made sense, he told himself. This wasn't any small-time rustling deal, and a man was a fool to get mixed up in it when he had nothing personally at stake.

HE RODE on, following the creek back toward Tomahawk. He knew that the thing to do was tell Ellen Ransome he was quitting. Let her find somebody else to pull her husband's chestnuts out of the fire. There was no use trying to kid himself—he had taken the job because he wanted to be around. But what good did it do you to look at a woman and know you never could have her?

The sourness stirred in him once more. He was supposed to be tough. He had always been able to take his women or leave them alone, so why couldn't he stop acting like a fuzz-faced kid who's been looking at the moon too much?

The shot came from the willow thickets lining the creek bank. He felt the hot lash of lead across his forehead, heard a second shot as he was leaving the saddle. He hit the ground and rolled, tasting dirt in his mouth. Then he was in the brush, with his gun in his hand. The ambusher was down stream from him.

It must be Mel Torrey or Guy Weems, he thought, and started moving through the thickets. Whoever it was had evidently seen him at the Torrey place and had come here to wait, knowing he would likely come this way on his return to Tomahawk.

He had his gun up and ready as he moved slowly, cautiously down stream. The ambusher cut loose again, but he was shooting wild now, not knowing Callighan's location. The shot echoed and died, and silence came back, broken only by the liquid murmur of the creek.

Calligan fired in the direction from which the sound of the shot had come, waited a moment, and then went on. Blood from the wound on his forehead was running into his eyes. He wiped it away with the back of his hand.

Up ahead, the gun was silent. Then came the fast, hard beat of hoofs, as a rider pounded away from the creek. Calligan plunged through the thicket, knowing the ambusher had decided to pull out. He broke into the open and had a glimpse of a rider racing away from the creek. He brought his gun up and then lowered it, realizing the distance was too great for a short gun.

He saw the rider disappear over a rise, and wondered if he was heading toward the Torrey place. He considered going after him, but he did not know this country and the ambusher would have no trouble losing him. He wondered again if it was Weems. If so, was the man working on his own, or was he carrying out the orders of Cleo Blair?

He was going back to his horse when he heard the drum of hoofs coming from the direction of Tomahawk. A moment later

Ellen Ransome came in sight, riding a mustard-colored mare. Her hair was loose and flying in the wind, and he saw the concern in her eyes when she recognized him.

"Callighan!" she cried as she reined up close to him.

"Don't let the blood scare you," he said. "It's just a scratch."

She left her saddle and came over to him, her forehead lined with worry as she inspected the wound. Calligan reached for his bandanna, but she took it from him and went quickly to the creek. He watched her kneel down and wet the handkerchief.

He found himself comparing her with Cleo Blair, and Ellen stood high in the comparison. How was it that Ransome couldn't see he had the best of the two? Considering it, he decided that Cleo was the kind who could get a hold on a man, but she did not have the inner quality that Ellen possessed.

Ellen came back and stood close to him while she wiped the blood from his face. Her nearness disturbed him, made him want to put his arms around her and let her know how it was with him, that he had come here because he loved her. But she wouldn't understand. He couldn't even savvy it himself—a man falling in love with a dream.

WHILE her hands were busy, she said, "I was looking for you, afraid of what might happen after Ives told me you had gone to the Torrey place."

Now was the time to tell her he didn't want the job. Let her think what she wanted to—that it was too tough for him, or that he was afraid. It didn't make any difference what she thought. All that counted was getaway from her before she found out why he had come here in the first place.

"I should have told you the whole story," she said, almost as if she had read his mind, "but I was afraid you wouldn't take the job if I let you know what you would really be up against."

"It's a rotten set-up," he said.

She nodded. "I asked you to take the job, Calligan, because I was desperate. I did it without stopping to think that I might be getting you killed. I don't want that to happen."

He looked at her, and there was something more than concern in her eyes, something that caused his pulse to start hammering. For one brief, thrilling moment she seemed to forget herself, and her expression told him that all he needed to do was reach for her and she would come into his arms.

She caught herself then and looked away from him, a flush of guilt touching her cheeks.

Calligan frowned, knowing she was a good girl, wondering why she would be attracted to another man when she had been married such a short time. He cursed himself for having let his feelings show, and at the same time he knew he couldn't leave her. He blamed Ransome for neglecting her, for brooding over Cleo Blair and paying little attention to his wife.

"We'd better get back," he said.

She spoke without looking at him. "The next time they may not miss, Calligan. You'd better leave Tomahawk before that happens."

He glanced in the direction the ambusher had gone. "I'm kind of curious to find out who took a shot at me."

"You're just using that as an excuse to stay."

"Maybe," he said, but he was thinking that it wasn't just the ranch she was worrying about. There was something else troubling her too. Whatever it was, she needed help, and he couldn't ride away and leave her with her worries.

When they reached the ranch headquarters, Jim Horn met them at the corral.

"Kane left right after you did, ma'am," Horn said. "Told me he was going to town."

"He promised me he wouldn't leave the house."

"I tried to talk him out of it," Horn said, "but he wouldn't listen. He said there wasn't any use in your coming after him before the saloon closed."

"Why don't I go in and see if I can talk to him?" Calligan suggested.

The girl nodded. "I'll get the buckboard ready and follow you."

Riding toward town, Callighan remembered what Cleo Blair had said about Lafe Torrey coming home today or tomorrow. Calligan wondered if Torrey would be satisfied to get his revenge on Ransome by steal-

ing him blind, or if Torrey was the kind who would want to settle it with guns.

It was dark by the time he reached Mariposa, and lamps had been lighted in the saloon. Remembering that he hadn't eaten since morening, Calligan started to stop at the cafe, then changed his mind and went on to the saloon.

Kane Ransome was in the barroom, sitting at the same table where Calligan had first seen him. He was staring at the bottle in front of him, but he glanced up when Calligan stopped beside the table.

"My new ramrod," he said dully. "Sit down and have a drink with me."

Calligan pulled out a chair.

Ransome looked at him from red-rimmed eyes. "Have you any idea what kind of a mess you walked into?"

Calligan nodded. "I got the story from Cleo Blair. "

Ransome's hand tightened on the glass he was holding, and a muscle twitched in his face. "So you've met her already?"

"I can see she'd hit a man pretty hard," Calligan said, watching the play of emotion on Ransome's face. "But I don't figure she's worth going to hell over."

RANSOME reached for the bottle and poured himself a drink with hands that weren't steady. He said without looking at Calligan, "She's no good and I know it, but that doesn't help me get her out of my mind." There was a dark, brooding expression in the rancher's eyes. "You couldn't know the way it is, Calligan, unless you'd loved a woman like Cleo once."

"Maybe you're right, but from where I'm standing it's kind of hard to savvy why a man get can't hold of himself when he's got a good wife."

Ransome's smile was dim and edged with bitterness. "What would you say if I told you she was my wife in name only?"

Calligan stared at him searchingly.

"It's not the booze talking in me, Calligan," Ransome went on, his gaze still fastened on the whisky glass. "My wife's got her room, and I stay out of it. Been that way from the first. You see, we had an understanding before we got married."

Calligan's smoke had gone, but he didn't bother to relight it.

"She married me for my money, Calligan, and I married her to spite somebody else. Not a pretty picture, but that's the way it is. Don't get the wrong idea about Ellen. She's as fine as they come, and I wish I had met her sooner.

"You said she married you for your money."

Ransome nodded, took a drink, coughed and wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. He said, "Her mother was sick a long time before she died, and it cost something to bring a good doctor here."

Calligan was motionless, watching him.

"Maybe you're wondering why I'm telling you all this," Ransome said. "But a man gets to the place where he can't keep it bottled up in him any longer. He has to talk to somebody."

Calligan was silent for a moment. Then he asked, "I hear that Lafe Torrey is due back. You think he'll try to kill you?"

"I know he will," Ransome said, without a trace of fear. "That's the thing Cleo hasn't counted on. She's been building him a ranch with my beef, hoping that will satisfy him, thinking he'll settle for that. But he won't. Not Lafe Torrey."

"Did you frame him like Cleo claims?"

"Yes, I framed him. I thought if he was out of the way she'd forget him and turn to me. But I was wrong." Ransome smiled his thin, bitter smile. "Shows you how far some men will go for a woman, Calligan."

The rancher poured another drink, slopping some of the whisky onto the table. He said, "Not that Lafe didn't deserve what he got. He'd been using a wide loop for a long time, but I couldn't prove it."

Calligan thought of Ellen, remembering she had said she would bring the buckboard. He couldn't blame her for marrying Ransome, but now that her mother was dead why did she continue to live with him? Regardless of what the rancher had been once, he was a weakling now, and Calligan could find little sympathy for him.

"Your wife's on her way in with the buckboard," Calligan said.

"Tell her I'm not going home," Ransome

said without looking up. "I'm sick of that house, sick of everything.

Calligan pushed his chair back. Ransome looked up at him.

"You don't think much of me, do you, Calligan?"

"I'm afraid I don't."

"Well, to hell with you, Calligan. To hell with everybody.

"Maybe you used to be a big man," Calligan said, his voice thin with contempt, "but I've got my doubts. I figure that a man who's sunk as low as you have had to be pretty weak to start with."

"It's easy to talk, Calligan.

"Sure, I know. It's easier to reach for a bottle, but nobody ever solved a problem with booze. The problem's still there, and sooner or later you've got to sober up and face it."

Ransome didn't answer. He was staring at the glass in front of him when Calligan turned and left the saloon.

OUTSIDE, he stood on the porch, watching the trail that led to Tomahawk until he saw the buckboard come out of the darkness. When it reached the saloon and Ellen had brought the team to a stop, Calligan went over to her.

"He says he's not going home," Calligan told her.

Ellen glanced toward the saloon. "He can't stay here. Lafe Torrey's on his way; he'll be along any minute."

"Ransome is not worth the worry he's causing you," Calligan said.

She gave him a close, searching look.

"I can't forget that he helped me when I needed it. My mother was sick and I couldn't find a job."

"He took advantage of the fix you were in, used you to try to make another woman jealous."

"I feel sorry for him, Calligan. I feel sorry for anyone who lets himself get in the condition Kane is in."

Impatience rose in Calligan. If she wants to make a damned fool out of herself, he thought, it's her own business and none of yours. But you don't have to stick around and watch her doing it. When he started to turn toward the cafe, she spoke again.

"I'm sorry I asked you to take the job, Calligan."

He stood there a moment, angry with her and angry with himself. Then he turned and walked toward the cafe across the street. At the door he stopped and looked back. Ellen was still sitting in the buckboard, her head turned in his direction.

The mutter of hoofs pulled Calligan's attention to the end of the street. Three men were riding toward the saloon, and in the moonlight he recognized Mel Torrey and Guy Weems. The third man, he knew, must be Lafe Torrey. Back from prison, Lafe was coming to settle with Ransome in his own way. The rancher wouldn't stand a chance against the three of them; they'd kill him. But Calligan told himself Ransome would be better off dead than the way he was, and Ellen would be better off, too.

Kane Ransome meant nothing to Calligan, and Calligan had no intention of siding the man. He stayed in front of the cafe, watching the three men ride up in front of the saloon. And then his eyes went back to Ellen. She was still sitting there on the buckboard seat, her gaze fastened on the three riders. Now she bent down quickly, and when she straightened a rifle was in her hands.

Calligan swore under his breath as she brought the rifle up and pointed it at the three men.

"Lafe," she said firmly, "I know why you're here, but I won't let you kill him."

The man to whom she spoke was big and dark and handsome. In the moonlight his face was like a rock, hard and unyielding. "You'd better put that gun up," he said, "before you get hurt."

The girl shook her head. "You're not going in there."

Weems and Mel Torrey looked undecided, but Lafe dismounted and started walking slowly toward Ellen. The other two followed him. Watching them, Calligan swore again. Concern for the girl took him away from the cafe and into the street.

The three men had spread out and were moving toward the buckboard from different angles. Ellen swung the barrel back and forth, not wanting to shoot any of them.

When Lafe was close to the buckboard, he leaped forward and grabbed the rifle barrel, twisting it out of Ellen's hands. He threw the weapon into the darkness and reached for Ellen, hate like a flame in his eyes.

"Leave her alone," Calligan called.

Lafe's head came around fast. While he was staring at Calligan, Guy Weems said, "That's the feller we were telling you about."

Lafe Torrey stepped away from the buckboard. Light from the saloon fell across his face, cold and set with purpose. He said harshly, "Let's take him!"

"No, Calligan!" Ellen cried.

CALLIGAN had a glimpse of her white face, but he kept his eyes on the men. He realized that he wouldn't last long against three men who had come to kill, and who were reaching for their guns now.

Calligan stepped out of the light, moving fast and drawing his gun. Weems cut loose at him first, a wild shot that sang past Calligan's head. Lafe Torrey fired next and then Mel, but the men were moving back toward the building and their aim was bad.

Above the pound of guns, Calligan heard a woman screaming, "Lafe! Lafe, stop it."

Cleo Blair was coming down the street on a running horse, her hair streaming out behind her. But if Lafe Torrey heard her, he gave no indication.

With his next shot, Calligan caught Guy Weems in the arm, putting the ex-foreman out of the fight. But there were still the Torrey brothers, and they were firing.

From the saloon came a man with a gun in his hand. It was Kane Ransome. He moved toward Lafe Torrey as though he was in a hurry to get it over with. At sight of Ransome, both the Torreys turned their guns on him. The rancher stiffened as lead tore into him. He staggered back, and then came forward once more.

Cleo Blair had reached the saloon now, and she was still calling to Lafe as she left her horse and ran toward him.

Mel Torrey had swung back to face Calligan now, getting in one shot before a bullet from Calligan's gun cut Mel's legs from under him. It was quiet again then, and Calligan looked at Lafe Torrey lying in the dirt and at Ransome who was standing over him.

With at least half-a-dozen bullets in him, Ransome stood there a moment before he turned around and started back toward the saloon. He hadn't gone far when he fell, turned over once, and lay unmoving.

"Are you all right, Calligan?" Ellen asked.

He nodded, and watched her drop to her knees beside Ransome. The rancher looked up at his wife.

"I'll get the doctor, Kane."

"Nothing he can do." Ransome's voice was just a whisper. He wet his lips and put dimming eyes on Calligan. "You left me something to think about when you walked out of the saloon, Calligan."

Cleo Blair was kneeling beside Lafe Torrey. Her arms were around him and she was saying his name over and over. Guy Weems had made it to his horse, and was holding his wounded arm as he rode away into the darkness. Calligan let him go, knowing there would be no more trouble.

Mel Torrey, with a bullet in his leg, was moaning and trying to get someone to listen to him as he put the blame for what had happened on Cleo and Lafe. Presently the bartender and a few townsmen came out and carried Mel toward the doctor's office.

Cleo acted as if she were unaware of anyone except Lafe Torrey. There was a dull, vacant expression in her eyes.

"She won't cause any more trouble," Ransome whispered, looking at Cleo. "She—"

He was gone then. Calligan looked at Ellen, watching her come toward him.

"I'm glad you came, Calligan," she said quietly, "but I want you to leave now."

"Yes, I'm going to."

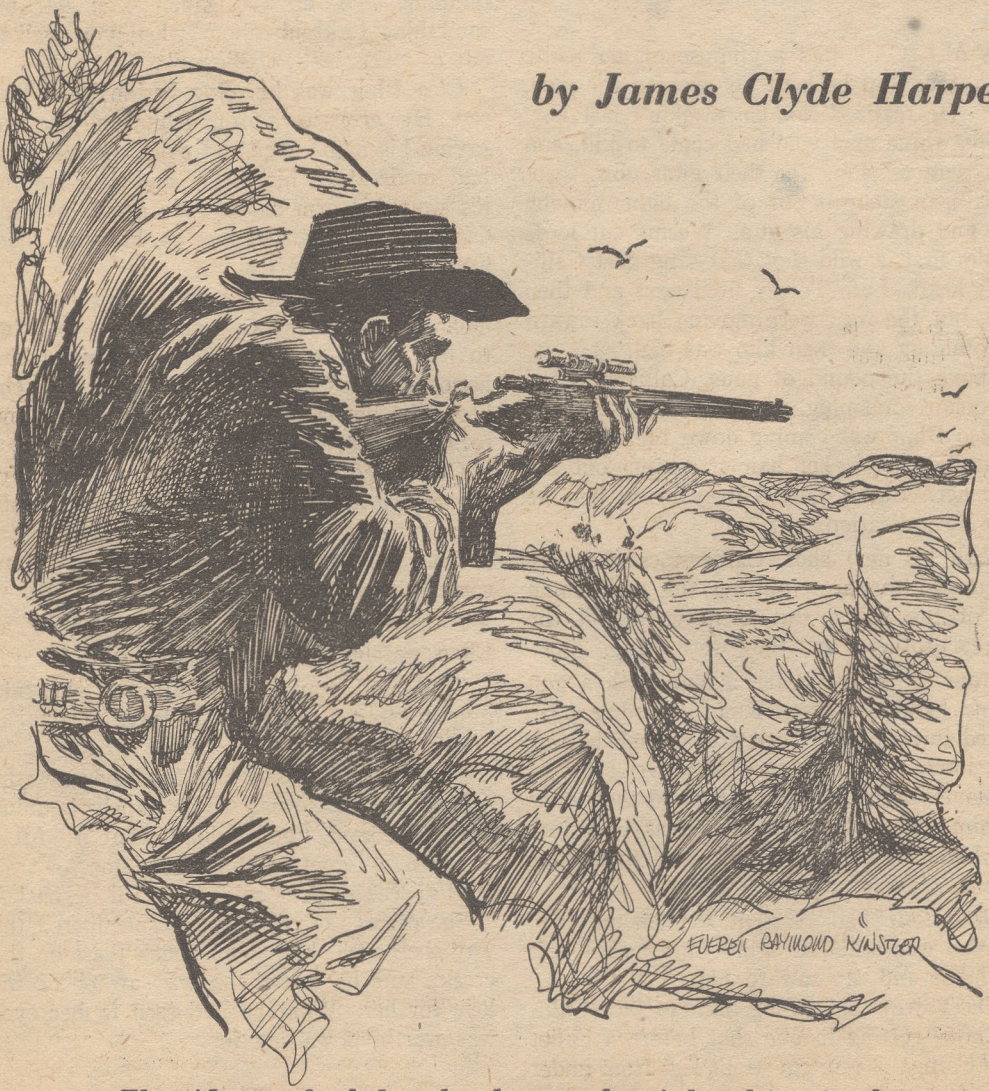
She looked beyond him, and he saw the sadness in her eyes. "The ranch is mine now," she said, "but I don't want it. All I want is to forget what's behind me."

"I'm leaving," he said, "but I'll be back."

She didn't answer, but he remembered the way she had looked at him back there on the creek, and he knew she was aware of his love for her. What he had seen in her eyes was worthing waiting for.

The Greater Wealth

by James Clyde Harper



The rifleman fired, but the shot was hurried and it missed

CLAUDIA WORTH HAD COME WEST

in order to see what kind of a man

would be able to scorn a

fortune . . . and she stayed

around to help him fight for it. . . .

WHEN Clay Olney got back from putting out the small brush fire, he found two sets of footprints in the dust before his cabin. Clay frowned, hitched Bess out of the way, and slapped Barney on his shaggy rump so the long-eared pet burro would not mar the tracks.

They were different sizes—a man's and a woman's. The tracks approached his cabin door, which Clay found slightly ajar. He had securely closed it when he hurried off to fight the fire.

Clay pushed the door open, and his lean face darkened with anger. The cabin was in wild disorder. Clay's books, his papers, the drawers of his homemade desk, were disarranged. Even the covers and mattress on his sturdy bunk were twisted askew by the hurrying searcher.

Thieves, thought Clay, then quickly changed his mind. For his gold watch and six dollars in change were unmolested in a top desk drawer, as were his rifle and revolver, his binoculars, and the expensive delicate instruments used to measure wind velocity and precipitation. All were choice items for a thief.

Clay pondered the searcher's objective, then thought, *that?*

He went to the box behind the stove where he kept wood, kindling, and scrap paper for starting fires. He rummaged among the rumpled papers, found a wadded letter he had tossed away several weeks ago.

He restored order to his desk and smoothed out the crumpled letter to read again. It was dated almost six weeks ago.

Written on a lawyer's letterhead, the missive announced that Clay's grandfather had died, leaving an estate of considerable value but apparently leaving no will. The letter advised that therefore, under the law, the estate would go to one Vernon Greer, a former ward whom the deceased grandfather had formally adopted in later years.

"But," the letter continued, "in going through your grandfather's files, we find an unsigned copy of a letter he personally wrote to you several months ago, asking your forgiveness for his belated communication, and assuming full blame for the ugly quarrel he and your mother had when she became the wife of a conservationist-woodsman."

Clay's mouth tightened as he read that

portion of the letter. He went on to the last paragraph.

"The copy we have found states that your grandfather wishes you to share in his estate, and asks you to write him. We find no evidence that you did. But we are certain that if you have your grandfather's letter, bearing his bona fide signature, it will suffice as his last will and testament. The unsigned copy does not bear a signature and therefore cannot be regarded as a legally executed instrument. We will appreciate your early advice."

The letter bore the lawyer's signature and, in good business form, his initials and the initials of the transcribing secretary—C. W.

CLAY OLNEY sat staring at the letter, a scowl growing on his tanned, not unhandsome features.

"Mother and Dad made it without help, and so will I," he grunted.

He rewadded the letter and tossed it back into the woodbox.

Clay began straightening up the cabin, but was interrupted by an unusual yet familiar sound from outside.

"Blurpp-haw. Blurpp-haw."

It was Barney's warning—partly snort, partly bray—that something was amiss. Perhaps it was a deer prancing toward the carefully nurtured tree seedlings; perhaps an ugly rattlesnake stalking one of the area's frolicsome chipmunks.

Clay grabbed his revolver and hurried out. But Barney did not indicate an interloper. Instead he stood several feet from the cabin, stolidly staring across the valley at an unfamiliar white object.

Clay returned to the cabin and exchanged his revolver for binoculars. Through them he saw that the object was a tent, apparently quite new. It was set up on the curve of a bubbly creek, where it twisted almost to the base of a rocky cliff wall. Two horses and a pack mule were staked out in the lush green grass along the creek, but Clay could see no one around the campsite.

Then a girl came from the tent. Clay carefully adjusted the binoculars to get a sharper focus. She was young, and had tawny shoulder-length hair caught back by a bit of bright ribbon. Her flat-crowned white hat was new, as were her levis, sturdy boots and open-throated shirt.

Clay wasn't surprised at the newness of the apparel, tent and other equipment. No seasoned woodsman would make camp that near the rocky cliff wall, where one small dislodged rock could serve to start a deadly avalanche.

Clay felt inclined to go over and advise them to move camp. Then he saw that the girl too was using binoculars, which she was training in his direction. He jerked his pair out of sight before she could see them. He remembered that one set of the footprints around his cabin had been those of a woman. That smothered his good intentions, and he stalked into his cabin.

She didn't finish her search and is spying to see if it's safe to come back again, Clay thought. Guess I know what she wants, all right.

He went to his extra clothing, took his "Sunday hat" off a peg, and fumbled in the sweatband.

He removed a folded letter, not put there at the time for safekeeping, but because it made the new hat fit better.

Thursting the letter into his pocket, he thought, with that destroyed, Vernon Greer, whoever he is—gets the estate. So she must be kin to Greer—maybe his wife. That's what it is, all right. Greer set the fire to get me away from here. Then she searched the place while I was gone."

But there had been a man's footprints in the dust, too!

Clay's frown deepened.

How'd he get back here so quick from setting the fire, he wondered. He couldn't have passed me. Barney would have spotted him.

Then Clay remembered that when Barney sounded his usual warning, he had thought it was because the animal had spotted the fire. But that was very unlikely, Clay now recalled, for there had been only a wisp of smoke. What Barney probably had noticed was the man creeping back after setting the pile of leaves, or the woman hiding in the underbrush until Clay was lured from the cabin.

Upon sighting the smoke, threat of a fire in the tinder-dry summer-parched mountains had so alarmed Clay he had hastily saddled old Bess and hurried off. He now recalled that Barney, after a moment's indecision, had followed reluctantly.

That's it, Clay decided. That's bound to be it! They'd like to search my cabin again. Well, I'll make it easy for them—they'll think.

Clay made elaborate preparations that could not be missed by the binoculared occupants of the new tent. He scrubbed and shaved, then went into the cabin and changed clothes. When he came out he was dressed in his "going-to-town" Sunday best. Even a rank greenhorn could tell the difference.

From a distance, Clay did not appear to carry a gun. At least he did not have his rifle. But, hidden from sight in his trouser waistband, he had a loaded revolver.

At an unhurried pace Clay skirted the edge of the timber, obviously taking a short-cut to the mountain pass through which lay the trail to town. But once out of sight in the pass, he rode faster until he came to an arroyo that angled up into the mountains behind his cabin. The footing was rough and rocky, but Bess had negotiated it before. She carefully picked her way.

ALMOST an hour later, Clay approached his destination. He tied Bess to a gnarled scrub cedar near the crest, drew his revolver, and peeked over the pinnacle.

His cabin was almost directly below, about five hundred feet away. Clay had a good view of one side and the back, but not the front, which faced directly west.

Clay saw Barney, and farther beyond a strange horse hitched to a bush. Barney was facing the front door, long ears flopping, stubby tail wagging, not unlike a happy dog who has found a new friend. Clay guessed that someone had entered his cabin. Judging from Barney's manner, it was someone who had found favor with the shaggy burro.

Clay scanned the terrain for a surprise descent to the cabin. A movement of color off to one side caught his attention. Clay stared in startled concern.

Fifty yards away, a brown-clad man was cruched behind a fallen tree. He had a telescope-equipped rifle across the tree trunk, pointed down toward Barney. He was squinting through the telescope with the manner of an expert marksman.

But his target was not Barney, apparently. The burro was in plain view, an easy mark at that distance through the telescope sight. So it could only mean that the marksman was waiting to shoot whoever came from behind the cabin.

Maybe he thinks it will be me, Clay thought grimly, and started to yell a challenge to the rifleman.

But Barney backed away, still facing the cabin, and the intruder came out. It was the girl in the white hat and new boots. The man behind the log carefully aimed and fired.

But the shot struck neither the girl nor Barney. Sand exploded near her feet. Barney threw up his head, then wheeled and galloped behind the cabin, his favorite retreat when faced with uncertainty or trouble. The girl spun around and glared upward. Clay found himself admiring her self-possession and courage.

She could not see the rifleman crouched behind the log. But she saw Clay.

"You!" she yelled, and shook her fist.

The rifleman followed the course of her jerked his rifle around, fired. The shot was hurried and it missed. Clay flopped behind a boulder, triggered his revolver. The distance was too far for accuracy, but the bullet kicked chips from the log.

He's got me cold, with a rifle, Clay thought. He tried to shrink his lanky frame into a balled knot behind the inadequate boulder.

But the man in brown did not choose to continue the fight. Crouched low, he slipped along behind the log, darted away into the underbrush. Soon there came the scramble of hoofs on rocks, as the man fled on his horse.

Clay Olney arose from behind the boulder, and stared down at the girl. Then he got old Bess and they clambered down the sloping mountainside. Barney came fror behind the cabin and stalked to the girl. She began to scratch his ear.

The girl now understood who had fired the

shot toward her. She stared in the direction in which the man in brown had fled.

"I didn't think Vernon Greer would try to kill," she said.

Clay asked, "That was Greer?"

"Yes." She smiled at him then.

Clay found her attractive, liked the warmth of her throaty voice. He couldn't keep his eyes from her hair, soft and shiny in the sunlight. He wondered how it would feel. She was aware of his scrutiny, perhaps the trend of his thoughts; for, with studied carelessness, she tucked a stray strand out of the way.

CLAY tore his eyes from her and spoke. "He didn't shoot to kill. Missing at that distance with a telescope sight is practically impossible. He hit his target all right—the ground at your feet."

"Why?" she asked, resuming the ear-scratching as Barney snuggled up close. She'd certainly won Barney over, Clay reflected, and found, much to his surprise, that he was glad.

He said, "To scare you, probably."

"But he shot at you, too."

"Surprised reaction at suddenly seeing me standing behind him with a pistol in my hand." Then Clay remembered something, and said bluntly, "But I saw two horses at your camp."

"My brother and I," she explained. "He came with me to relax after working so hard obtaining his degree in medical research. But apparently the altitude's got him. He's been completely exhausted ever since we reached high country. He's at camp now, taking a nap."

"He'll be all right in a few days," said Clay. Then he added with a rush, "You're CW!"

"Claudia Worth," she said. "I typed the letter you didn't answer."

Clay stated rather than asked, "Then it wasn't you who searched by cabin this morning."

"No. I was here, but I left a note pinned to your door, asking you to come down to our camp."

She went on to explain that they had outfitted in town two days ago, then had taken the trip in easy stages. They'd arrived in the valley early this morning, and set up camp. Then she had come to his cabin.

She added, "In addition to Henry's getting a vacation rest, we came here because I wanted to see the man who could ignore a sizeable fortune. No one else, I'm sure, would turn it down."

Clay understood now the two sets of footprints. She had come to leave the note. Then Greer came, searched the cabin, and destroyed her note, probably thinking Claudia had come on official business. Greer had intended to keep Claudia and Clay apart until he found and destroyed the letter. That was why Greer had shot at Claudia's feet, Clay reasoned—to scare her from the cabin. He must have been spying on Clay all along, waiting for him to leave the cabin again so he could return and continue his quest for the important letter.

Clay figured he now knew the reason for Greer's being here. But he wondered about Claudia. Had her coming been wholly to satisfy curiosity?

Clay studied her closely, and decided she was interested at least enough to make the long trip here. He wondered if she knew about his mother.

He said, "Come inside and I'll make coffee."

While the coffee was brewing, Clay told her of his mother and father meeting in the mountains here, when his mother came with her parents on a fishing trip one summer. She had fallen in love with the peaceful serenity of the mountains, the flowers in spring, the many colors in fall when frost touched the leaves with a magic brush.

"But," Claudia whispered, "doesn't it get lonely?"

He considered a moment. "Well, it hasn't been yet, for me. I have books, and my work—and then there's Barney. He can darn near do everything but talk, and he's always thinking up a new trick. Things are never dull when Barney's around, and he's around all the time."

She stared into her partly drained cup, as if seeing it all. A faraway look came into her eyes, and she spoke without looking up.

"Tell me some more about your mother."

He did, after refilling their cups. He told

of how mother had practically done the proposing, father being reluctant to ask her to give up the more glamorous life planned for her by doting parents. But she had never been sorry—except for being hurt about the way grandfather had acted. Mother had never wavered in her love, never faltered in helping father in his chosen work of conservationist and ranger.

Clay talked of his early days—of the deer and birds who were his friends, and of the burro that was Barney's mother. Then, when

"Reach for the sky, Pop!"

he became old enough to attend classes at the village school, there was boarding in town through the week and riding out to spend Saturdays and Sundays with his parnets in his beloved mountains.

HIS voice faltered when he told of coming one weekend, during the season of heaviest rains. Both his mother and father were gone. After a period of uncertain waiting, Clay started searching, and found them—drowned.

They had gone together, as they frequently did, to check dad's stream-flow and weather gauges. The deluge farther over the mountains had been heavier than they had thought. But instead of waiting a few hours for the streams to subside, they had tried to get back home before their son arrived. Mother always was there to greet him; she wanted to be there this time. They had made it safely until the last arroyo, where the churning wall of water had caught them.

Clay choked in recounting this. "So that's about it," he concluded hurriedly. "I'm carrying on where Dad left off. I don't reckon I'll ever quit, not even for a lot of money."

They were quiet then, staring at their partly-emptied cups. At length Claudia smiled fleetingly at Clay. Her warm voice held a tender note.

"No, not for all the money there is. Why should you, Clay Olney? You're already the world's richest man."

From outside, Barney interrupted with his warning blurt. But this time it held a more urgent note. Clay leaped to his feet and hurried out the door.

Barney was staring off across the valley. Clay looked in the same direction, and caught a startled breath.

"Good gosh! Your camp's on fire."

"Henry!" Claudia Worth screamed. "He's asleep in there!"

They raced to horses, flung themselves astride, and hurtled headlong down into the valley. But they could not arrive in time. Flames soared high, tent and equipment a red-hot mass. Even as they drew near, the tent collapsed in a shower of leaping sparks.

Clay thrust out his hand, caught Claudia's horse by the bridle, and slowed their mounts to a walk.

Claudia protested wildly, "No . . . no!"

"Look," Clay commanded, "over beyond the fire, against the foot of the cliff."

"Henry! He isn't burned."

"He's bound and gagged so he can't yell a warning to us. But he's very much alive," said Clay. "We're expected to rush to him, and when we do that'll be the end of us all. Unless I miss my guess, Vernon Greer is crouched behind a boulder on top of the cliff,

ready to roll it downward and start an avalanche of rocks and earth that would bury us forever. Greer has decided to get rid of all three of us. He certainly wants that money!"

As they slowly approached the dying embers, Clay grew rigid in sudden resolve. He had spotted a bucket of water used for cooking, a few feet from the burning tent. It gave him a daring idea.

"Don't look up," he said. "Act dazed, like you think Henry has been burned to death in the fire. I've got to get close enough. . ." He didn't finish, afraid she would doubt the wisdom of his plan.

Claudia put one hand to her mouth, as if fighting to control hysteria. Clay was proud of her efforts, and pleased that she had so instantaneously complied with his decision.

"You stay mounted," he said, and swung off his horse. "Keep up the act, and staring into the fire. There's a terrific updraft along the face of that cliff. Maybe I can smoke Greer from his hiding place."

Clay got a stick and poked around in the fire, as if searching among the embers. He wanted Greer to think that they believed Henry had been burned in the fire. But Clay gradually worked his way nearer the bucket of water. Suddenly he dropped the stick, and slapped his hands together as if showering sparks had burned his flesh. He moved toward the bucket as if to thrust his burned hands into the cooling water.

But, with a twisting leap, Clay dashed the water onto the fire. Instantly thick smoke arose, was caught by the wind, and surged up the cliff face in a blinding cloud.

From above came a cough, and the scrape of leather on rock as Greer tried to escape the smoke. Then there was an oath and Greer leveled his rifle.

Clay Olney dropped the bucket, and his hand was a blur as it dipped inside his unbuttoned shirt front. Almost together the two blasts of gunfire roared.

Embers leaped in the fire, where the rifle bullet struck. But Clay Olney did not miss.

Greer stiffened. His rifle clattered down the cliff, jarring rocks and brittle earth loose at every bound. Clay raced over and dragged Henry to safety. Almost on their heels the avalanche pounded, bringing with it the lifeless body of Vernon Greer.

Claudia got the horses out of the way, and they watched, awed, until the rumbling ceased and the dust cleared. The campsite was buried by a towering mass of rocks and earth. Somewhere beneath was the brown-clad rifleman.

"We'll have to notify the sheriff," said Clay, and led Claudia and Henry toward his cabin.

THE meal was finished, the finest Clay had enjoyed in a long time. It was the same bacon and beans, and dried fruit, as usual, but somehow it had tasted different. He wondered if it was the woman's touch.

For Claudia had prepared the meal, while Clay and Henry became acquainted. From the very first they had hit it off well. Both had similar ambitions. In his medical research, Henry wanted to benefit people like Clay did his mountains and trees.

Clay said, after they had finished their coffee and apple pie, "Why can't I give that money to you for a research foundation?"

"Huh?" Henry's mouth fell open. He swallowed and said, "Gosh!"

Clay handed Claudia the letter bearing his grandfather's signature. "Would it be legal?"

She glanced through the missive, then nodded. "It would be legal in any court."

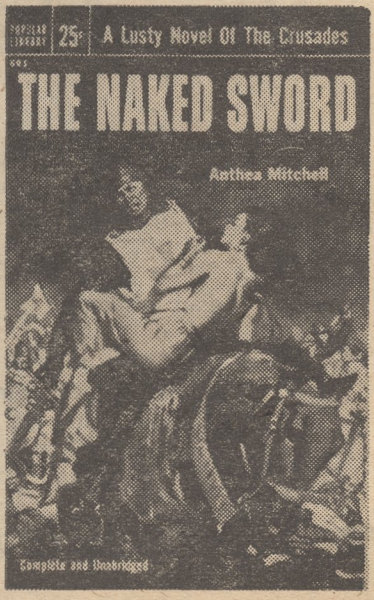
"Then it's yours," Clay told Henry. But Henry was in another world—of drugs, research, latest medical equipment. Clay looked at Claudia and grinned.

Her reply was a feeble smile. She was happy, of course, for Henry. But something was troubling her. Her eyes held a miserable look. Clay stared, wondering. Then she spoke.

"There's one thing Barney *can't* do—he can't cook."

With a joyous laugh, Clay Olney leaped around the table and swept her into his arms. From the open front door, old Barney purred. But preoccupied Henry didn't even look up when their lips met in a long, fervent kiss.

A SURGING NOVEL OF THE CRUSADES!



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Western Juliets

ITALY has its well-known Juliet of "Romeo and Juliet." We have the many unsung heroines of the West who have lived and died for love—love of man, of race, of children and of country.

Few people have ever heard of Emily, the little Apache Indian maiden of Fort Davis, Texas. She died back in 1868, for love of a white man and white friends in the Fort.

As a little child, Emily was along when her Apache Indian people planned to massacre the white inhabitants of Fort Davis. However, although the Apaches raided the Fort early in the morning, they were met by sufficient men to drive them away.

♥ *a true story of romance by* **Kay Heistand** ♥

When the Indians retreated, they left many wounded and dead behind. One was a little Indian girl, wounded and unconscious. A kind and gentle white woman, named Mrs. Ellsworth, took the little Indian girl into her home, and cared for her until her wounds healed and she was well. The Ellsworths called the child Emily.

As the years passed, Emily became like a daughter to the family. She grew adoring her handsome foster-brother, Lieutenant Thomas Ellsworth. She was shy and timid, and became his slave. But Lieutenant Tom saw Emily only as a little girl, a sister. He fell in love and became engaged to a beautiful white girl.

Little Emily grew thin and sad and wistful. When Lieutenant Tom's engagement to the white girl was announced, Emily disappeared, and was not seen again for many years.

At this later time, Fort Davis was still having trouble with the Apaches. Guards were on duty, constantly, night and day, and the soldiers never knew when to expect an attack. Late one night a sentry saw a figure slipping stealthily past him in the darkness. Confused, and worried at the unknown, the sentry fired.

A woman's scream rang out on the night air. Emily, the Apache Indian girl, fell to the ground, mortally wounded. She was carried to the commanding officer's quarters and Mrs. Ellsworth was called. In her kindly arms, Emily sobbed out her dying words. She had heard of a planned raid on the fort for the next full moon, and her fear that Tom and her other white friends might be killed, had brought her back to warn them. Thus she died—giving up her life for others, and leaving us a tale of selfless heroism and true love.

CYNTHIA ANN PARKER was a white girl who had been stolen away by the Comanche Indians while still a small child. Thereafter she lived as an Indian. She fell in love with and married Nocona, leader of the clan, and bore two half-Indian babies.

Her most famous son, Quanah Parker, grew up to become an Indian chief, attaining his rank through ability. However, when Quanah was fourteen years old, mistaken white people raided the Indian camp, separated Cynthia Ann from her husband and two little boys, and restored her to the home of white folks who were blood kin of hers.

Thus Cynthia Ann became the prisoner of kindly white people whose language she could not speak, whom she had long forgotten. Her heart was indeed red. She died of a broken heart, among those whom the whites misguidedly thought were her own people.

And there was beautiful Maria, the little Comanche Indian girl, captured during the Council House Battle in 1840. As the years passed, Maria's life became dedicated to being a friendly interpreter between the Indians and the whites.

It was a bitter day for little Maria when she was delivered, screaming, back to her own people. She had lived for three years among the white folks, had learned their language, worn pretty clothes, and learned to love her white foster-parents. Then she was given back to the Comanche Indians at a place near where the town of Lawton, Oklahoma, now stands.

On that day, according to terms of a treaty, small Maria was beautifully dressed in her best dress "lovingly made by her white mother" and handed over to old Chief Payhayuco of the Comanche tribe. The little girl screamed and cried and clung desperately to the white men. Her sorrow brought tears to the eyes of all present.

However, the Comanches were a noble and gentle race, and probably old Payhayuco tried to make Maria's life as happy as possible among her people. Her heart was white, although her skin was bronze.

The brief information we have of Maria during her later years reveals that she never loved or married a red man, but quietly devoted her life to increasing the friendly relations between the two races, never forgetting the love she bore her adopted people, the white nation.

Adina De Zavala was a tiny woman, delicate and finely strung, whose heart throbbed with love for her native state, Texas. Granddaughter of Lorenzo De Zavala, patriot and statesman, a leader of the Texas Revolution,

and first vice-president of the Republic of Texas, Adina grew up on Texas history, much of it heard from the lips of those who lived it.

Early in 1900 a large hotel syndicate obtained an option on the property where the historic buildings of the Alamo stands, in San Antonio. They intended to tear down the Alamo mission and fort and build a large commercial hotel on the grounds.

Adina De Zavala, horrified at this intended action, felt "possession is nine points of the law." Her lawyers were out of the city, so Adina hired three stalwart men to guard the old mission-fortress until legal action could be taken to prevent the razing of the buildings.

That evening the representatives of the syndicate arrived and threw out Adina's guards by force, ready to take possession of the Alamo. But Adina was in an inner room and hurried out to confront the men. They were taken aback at the fiery temper and patriotic fervor of the tiny woman, and retired outside to plan their next move.

When they stepped out of the building, Adina closed the doors and barred them. Inside the battle-scarred walls she remained, for three nights and three days. No one could persuade her to leave until she was sure the Alamo was safe. Patriotic Texans were aroused by this little woman's refusal to permit a blunder which would have been irretrievable. The move by the hotel syndicate was stopped.

The Alamo fortress and grounds were purchased by the historical society of Texas, of which Adina De Zavala was the founder and president. The historic fort where, on March 6, 1836, heroic Texans preferred an honorable death to ignominious surrender, was saved for Texas by the courage of a little woman who acted because of her love for her native state.

Many other examples could be cited, but it can be seen, even from these few, that woman's love has written many a poignant and enduring page in the history of our country.

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. What famous western freight trail was also once called The Mexican Trace?

2. The Pickens County Cowpunchers' Association limits its membership to persons who worked cattle before 1902 in Pickens County, which was part of the Chickasaw Nation in what present state?

3. Can armadillos be raised successfully in captivity?

4. A new highway from Nogales in Sonora State, Mexico to Mexico City can be reached from the U. S. through what Border town in Arizona?

5. What is meant by the rodeo term "bicycling?"

6. The first newspaper ever published west of the Pecos River appeared in Santa Fé, N. M. in August, 1834. You guess in what language.

7. If the government does build the controversial Echo Park dam in Dinosaur National Monument, in what state will the dam itself be located?

8. A cowboy and two jockeys on the same horse at the same time is not unusual. In fact it's customary. How come? (This one is tricky.)

9. What extremely low valley with a rather gruesome name is located in Inyo County, California?

10. If a *remuda* (ray-MOO-thah) is a band or bunch of cowhorses, what is a *remudero* (ray-moo-THAY-ro)?

——*Rattlesnake Robert*

You will find the answers to these questions on page 113. **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.**

She held the mirror for Pecos Dave, and seemed to enjoy it

The I.O.U. Rustler

By Ed La Vanway

***JOHNNY WANTED** a worthwhile husband for his sister . . . and he wished she would stop making eyes at that handsome outlaw*

HE WAS a serious-faced fifteen-year-old. Small-boned and short of stature, he had done a man's work this past year, but it hadn't been enough. Now there was no money at all—and Susie was a girl and Grandpa was bedridden.

Johnny Lansing followed the prints of his own run-over boots through the tall cottonwoods, seeing where he had left a trail of blood on the leaves. He told himself he had done a bad job.

Shifting the canvas-wrapped bundle from his left shoulder to his right, he refletced that it was the first yearling he'd butchered without help. When he'd stuck the critter, his knife had slipped. Veal that wasn't bled properly wouldn't keep too long, so he and Susie would have to get busy right away and make jerky out of it.

He was headed for the cave in the bluff where he'd left two quarters of the yearling. His gaze traveled over the boulders which

stood bare and weathered on either side of the cave. Skunks and rats and varmints of all kinds, except the eatable kind, denned among those rocks, so he would have to be sure to close this cave opening tonight. He didn't want to lose any of this meat, not after the risk he was taking.

Unwrapping the quarter of veal, he tossed it on top of the other two pieces, from one of which he had previously cut a huge chunk for Susie. Afterward he fitted a slab of rock to the opening, and thought, that ought to do for now. Then, gathering up his canvas, he turned back through the cottonwoods toward the white-topped old wagon parked not far from the spring.

The sun wasn't midmorning high yet, but it slanted through the trees onto the lard pails and skillets and other utensils he had hung from the branches when pitching camp last night. He and Susie and Grandpa had a big dry-goods crate with a hinged lid they used for a grub box and table.

Approaching camp, he could see Susie sitting on one of the rocks he had rolled up for seats. She was busy cutting up the chunk of veal. She was going to make broth for Grandpa, and that ought to fix the old codger up.

Wearing a blue-flowered dress with the sleeves rolled up, Susie had her bright gold hair braided down her back, and her face, lowered over her work, was sweet as all get-out.

She was his sister, but Johnny could see what Grandpa saw, why it was best for them to come back to Santa Rita where Susie had kinfolk to sort of acquaint her around, to tell her about men and introduce her to the right kind. Grandpa said that when you had something like Susie to give away, you wanted to be sure the feller you gave her to was worth it. There weren't any up at Iron Mountain, where they'd been living, who were worth her.

He had rolled a rock up to the back of the wagon, too. Now he dropped his piece of bloody canvas and climbed up to peer into the tunnel formed by the wagon sheet and at the white-haired emaciated oldster who lay on the bed.

"How are you feeling, Grandpa?"

"What's that? Feeling? Fine, Johnny. Oh, yes, I'm . . ." The old man's voice trailed off weakly. Then he muttered unintelligibly.

"Susie's stewing some veal. Think you could eat some good fat yearling stew?"

The old man moved his bony legs and arms, and sought to tilt his head far enough to see the youth who leaned over the tailgate. Mouth open, he blinked a moment, then asked, "Where'd you get yearling meat, Johnny?"

"I got it."

"You didn't have any money. You must of stole it."

Taking his crossed arms off the endgate, Johnny stepped down from the rock. But the oldster's querulous tirade made him climb back immediately.

"I won't eat stolen beef, Johnny! I just won't do it. I'm getting to where I can hardly swallow jackrabbit, but I'll stick to it before I'll gorge myself on stolen beef."

Lean young face sorely troubled, Johnny Lansing said, "Well, Grandpa, I guess you can call it stealing, but I don't look at it that way. That critter had a Circle L brand on it. I've marked down in my book here what I estimated its weight at, and when we get to Santa Rita and I land a job, I'll pay for it. The storekeepers'll know who owns the Circle L now. It's probably one of those foreign Englishmen, they're buying up all these ranches. One of those lords won't worry if I borrow a yearling for a few weeks."

Settling back on the bed, the oldster said, "All right, Johnny."

"You'll eat some of this broth Susie's fixing?"

"Yes," the old man said, and again began muttering to himself.

JOHNNY LANSING stood a moment watching his grandfather worriedly, and then he steppped down because Susie was talking to him.

She had gotten to her feet, her hands planted on her hips, and was regarding him accusingly. "You know what you did?"

Johnny shook his head.

"You forgot the ax."

"No I didn't," he said, "but you don't need

it. I'll build you a fire. I'm not in any hurry now." After he had the blaze going, he told her, "There's still another quarter of that yearling over there, but I hung it up in a tree where nothing could get to it. When I go after it I'll bring the ax." He headed for the spring then.

After quenching his thirst, he stood looking at the team of hat-rack-lean old horses he had staked out on the meadow. He was thinking now that if it weren't for the butchered Circle L calf, he would lay over a day or two and let the team chirk up a little. Without the yearling, though, they couldn't have stayed anyway. There would have been nothing much to eat.

Walking back to camp, he gathered Susie some more wood, then built up a sizable fire so there would be coals.

She had taken out the flour sack, which was almost empty. "Johnny," she said doubtfully, "I believe I'll use half of this."

"Why, sure. We want plenty of bread."

"Biscuits?"

Johnny nodded. "Hot biscuits and gravy and veal steak fried brown—that's what I want," he told her, and felt his face pucker at the thought of it. Well, at least Susie's face didn't have that pinched hunger look yet, and it wouldn't have if he could help it.

Shrewdly he watched her. He could remember, not so long ago, when she had been lean and hard-bodied and straight up and down. Now her bosom bulged and her hips curved out and she looked soft all over. She had a kissable mouth, too. Yes, he guessed that Grandpa was right; Susie had turned into a problem.

Picking up the old lever-action Henry rifle which he'd stood against a tree, and gathering up the bloody meat wrap, he paused at the wagon's tailgate to say loudly, "Grandpa, I'll go get the rest of that yearling. If you want anything, just sing out. Susie'll be right here."

The oldster only mumbled something Johnny couldn't understand.

"Want me to roll up the wagon sheet so you can get air, Grandpa?"

"No. Johnny, you be careful. Rustling is a hanging offense."

In subdued tone, Johnny said, "Uh-huh. But we're ten or twelve miles from any house or ranch buildings. Before I butchered that calf, I led it down into a little hollow where nobody's liable to be riding. There's no danger."

"It's sneaky," the old man said. "But if you're aiming to pay for it. . . ."

Heading north, Johnny strode rapidly out of the cottonwoods and turned west up a long slope, the sun hot now on his battered hat, hickory shirt and overalls. At the crest of the hill, he wound his way through scattered juniper brushes for a quarter of a mile. Then he became cautious, moving from one bush to another and reconnoitering the terrain ahead carefully, although he couldn't see for any appreciable distance in any direction.

He could hear, though. With scarcely a breath of air stirring, sounds carried far. Suddenly, then, Johnny Lansing came to a dead stop. Crouching behind a thick juniper, he pushed his rifle muzzle forward. The tinkling of metal had reached him, and it sounded like the noise of a spur rowel.

He had come now to the brink of the hollow where he'd butched the calf. He had roped the calf more than a mile away, then led it here. He was almost positive that no one had seen him do it.

ALERT and ready, Johnny moved forward from bush to bush, looking below him. He saw now that he was right; he had heard spurs. The man who wore them had found the veal Johnny had hung in the tree, and the kid watched him, surprised, for it was obvious that the fellow was preparing to cook some of the meat.

He's on the dodge, Johnny thought. The man was young and rough-looking, with a stubble of black whiskers. His long-shanked spurs were silver-plated; his fancy boots and high-crowned hat were fairly new, but his flannel shirt and denim pants were old, sweat-marked and dirty. All at once the man jerked around as though startled. Johnny saw that his face was well-formed, and while it wasn't vicious, it wasn't easy-going.

Johnny had eared back the hammer of his rifle.

The man's six-shooter was in sight now, jutting out from his hip. After a moment of standing in listening attitude, he shifted his boots, and in this instant his hand streaked for the gun.

Johnny fired. When the Henry roared the man again froze, and his dark eyes fixed grimly on the kid. Lifting his hands slowly shoulder high, he said, "You shoot damned fast and straight for your size."

Johnny jacked another cartridge into the firing chamber. "Yes, and that'll be a good thing for you to remember."

"I believe you'd kill a man."

"I would if I had to."

"Maybe you weren't shooting at my Colt. Maybe you knocked it out of my hand accidentally."

Johnny's blue eyes glinted. "Could be, but I might accidentally put one through your brisket, too, if you make another wrong move." He went around the man and got the sixgun, and at this closer range he didn't find occasion to alter his first opinion. This black-whiskered man was tough.

"Kid, you didn't even aim that rifle—you couldn't have, with that tarp under your arm."

"Never mind that," Johnny said. "Where's your horse?"

The man thumbed toward the southwest. "Back over yonder about five miles."

"Played out?"

The man nodded.

Johnny inspected the other's boots. "You haven't walked five miles."

"Damn right I have."

Johnny shook his head dubiously.

"It's true. My horse took a slug in Santa Rita this morning, and he finally keeled over."

"Santa Rita's thirty-some miles from here."

"Can't help that. It's where I came from. Busted out of the Santa Rita hoosegow."

Keeping him under the gun muzzle, Johnny tossed out the canvas. "Get that meat down and wrap it up. Then get my ax yonder and head in that direction." Gesturing in the direction of the wagon, he added, "We'll talk it over when we get down to the spring."

"Would you let me build a fire and cook some of this first?"

"You'll get something to eat down yonder."

The man was regarding Johnny intently, studying him and not approving of what he saw. "This your range—your folks', I mean?"

"No."

The man said gruffly, "You know who I am?"

"No."

"I'm Pecos Dave."

"I'm Texas Johnny. And get that meat wrapped up and get a move on, before I put a slug through your britches."

The man worked fast. "What are you trying to be—another Billy the Kid?"

"No," Johnny said, and gestured for the man to lead the way.

Susie was standing quite a distance this side of the wagon, in the edge of the cottonwoods, staring anxiously because she had heard the gunshot.

Upon seeing her, Pecos Dave stopped abruptly. "I didn't know you had womenfolks."

"That's my sister Susie. Go on, feller; she won't bite."

Pecos Dave stopped again upon reaching her. Dropping the ax, he touched his hat and said, "Howdy, ma'am. Your brother invited me down here, or I sure as hell—sure wouldn't have come without shaving and cleaning up a little."

Susie said, "I've seen whiskers before," and turned back toward camp.

The air smelled of fried meat, baked bread and boiled coffee. Pecos Dave sniffed. "That sure smells good."

JOHNNY explained who the dark-haired man admittedly was, although Pecos Dave, looking sheepish, objected strenuously.

He said, "Miss Susie, most of what they tell about me is lies. I've never done anything too bad. I never took anybody's life."

The girl was looking at Pecos Dave too interestedly, it seemed to Johnny, so he said to her, "Dish up the grub. We'll eat when we put this chunk of veal in the cave. Fix him a plate. Did Grandpa eat yet?"

"Oh, yes. He enjoyed it, too."

(Turn to page 84)

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"Good," Johnny said, and took Pecos Dave on at gunpoint to put away the quarter of meat.

When they returned, the three of them took seats around the grub-box table and ate in silence for a time. Susie picked at her food as though she weren't hungry.

"Mister, you know this is stolen beef," Johnny said. "You're welcome to it, but if you eat it you're just as guilty as I am."

Pecos Dave said, "I'm older than you are, kid," and turned his eyes back to Susie.

She had been cutting surreptitious glances at him, and Johnny noticed that when their gazes collided, both looked hurriedly away, embarassed as anything. That was the way most of these West Texas men were—tongue-tied and all hands and feet around womenfolk, even though they could cut a man's guts out without batting an eye.

Pecos Dave had found the quarter of veal in the tree, he explained, because he had come upon a coyote dragging off the hide, which Johnny hadn't flung high enough among the uniper branches.

"This stretch of country through here is the coyote-est place I ever saw, anyway," Johnny said. "That's why the jackrabbits are so scarce."

Neither Pecos Dave nor Susie were paying much attention to him; they were too interested in each other.

The dark-haired man got up from the make-shift table and rubbed his jaw. "Does your grandpa have a razor?" he asked.

Johnny nodded. "He's asleep, though."

Susie said, "I'll get it, Dave. I know where he keeps his shaving things."" The dark-haired man moved forward to help her into the wagon.

She gave him the mug and brush, razor and strop and the mirror, and when he headed for the spring, she went with him. Their voices didn't carry from there, but Johnny noticed they talked a lot. Pecos Dave, it seemed, couldn't find a limb where the light was right, so Susie took the mirror and held it for him. They lingered at the spring for a long time, well over an hour, and Susie seemed to be smiling most of the time. She hadn't ever done that before—at anybody.

It was all right, of course, so long as Johnny had his gun handy and his eyes on the dark-haired man, but what Johnny didn't approve of at all was the way Dave leaned forward and Susie rubbed her palm over his newly-shaven jaw. Susie was being much too friendly.

It was just like a fool girl, though, to fall for some man she couldn't have and then moon around with a broken heart when she had to part from him.

When Susie and the dark-haired man came back to camp, with Pecos Dave laughing, Grandpa woke up and called, "Johnny, who is that feller?"

Stepping upon the rock behind the wagon, Johnny explained.

Grandpa said, "Tell him to climb up here where I can look at him."

Pecos Dave had moseyed over now. Johnny stepped down to the ground, and then stood by, gun ready—the dark-haired man's six-shooter in his fist, and his own Henry under his arm.

Up in the wagon, Pecos Dave bent over the bedridden man and said, "Howdy, old-timer. What's got you laid up—rheumatism?"

"Old age, can't you see?"

"You're not old. You aren't seventy yet. If you stayed around me I'd have you forking a bronc inside of thirty days."

"Pshaw!"

His grandfather was sizing up the dark-haired man all this time, Johnny noticed.

"The law's after you and you have no horse? Don't figure on taking one of ours!"

"I know a gent back in the hills over yonder I can get one from. I'll hoof it that far, old-timer."

Grandpa groaned fretfully then, and Pecos Dave turned away and climbed out of the wagon.

The oldster said clearly, "He's all right, Johnny," and then began mumbling to himself.

SUSIE and Pecos Dave started to mosey off through the trees. Climbing into the wagon, Johnny said, "Grandpa, if he weren't an outlaw, would you think he was worth her?"

"But he *is* an outlaw."

"I know," Johnny said, "but I just wanted to know if we're anywhere near close in our thinking. He strikes me as worth her."

"You think I'm fixing to die, Johnny, and you're wondering if you can pick her a man when I'm gone, eh?"

Worriedly, Johnny said, "Grandpa, I just wanted to know if we think anywhere near alike. She'll meet her somebody in San Rita. You said so yourself."

The oldster grumbled for a moment, saying nothing Johnny could understand, and the kid moved off.

Susie and Pecos Dave stayed within Johnny's sight, but they spent the afternoon out of hearing distance. Now Johnny was waiting impatiently for the dark-haired man to make up his mind to leave. He had already told Dave he could have his six-gun back empty when he got ready to go, but it didn't look like he was aiming to leave.

That was Susie's fault, of course. The way she smiled at Dave and pretended he was just as welcome here as any law-abiding hand—it was enough to make you sick, Johnny told himself.

Still, Dave had really put himself out to be agreeable. He had done the dishes with Susie and dragged up firewood, and he had brought Grandpa a dipper of fresh water from the spring. Then all at once he became a different man. Stiffening warily, he turned his gaze north.

He said curtly, "Riders coming."

Susie said, "Hide in the wagon with Grandpa, Dave!"

"I'm not the hiding kind of a man," Dave said, and then added dourly, "and I'm not the running kind, either, after waiting too long."

Susie said, "Dave, if it's just spending a while in prison . . ." and her voice trailed off in a way that meant she would be waiting when he got out.

There were six of the mounted men, coming down the slope at a trot.

"That the sheriff?" Johnny asked.

"No. That's the Circle L outfit. That chunky man with the sandy mustache is Steve Gaylord, the foreman. That is, I think he's Gaylord. I've never met him—just heard."

Coming through the cottonwoods at a walk, hands on gun butts, the cavalcade drew rein, and the sandy-mustached man lifted his hat to Susie. Looking around slowly and carefully after he had spoken, he fixed his gaze intently on the dark-haired man.

He said, "I've seen you in Santa Rita."

"You probably have."

"I know you. They call you Pecos Dave."

The black-haired man said dryly, "Some folks do." Lifting his brows, he said, "Some of them call me things you couldn't repeat before Susie here."

Wearing a hard smile, the Circle L foreman swung down. "Let's palaver, feller," he said, and told his crew, "Keep him covered, boys."

Johnny said, "He's not packing a gun, mister. I've got it."

Gaylord said harshly, "Just a minute, kid." Then he took Pecos Dave out of earshot. They talked for quite a while, with Dave shaking his head emphatically several times, and both were hard-faced when they came back.

Dave went a little beyond the camp, and motioned for Johnny and Susie to join him. "They found my horse and tracked me, and saw where that yearling was butchered. I told them where the meat is, and I told them you folks didn't want me to kill it and wouldn't eat any of it. Don't say any different."

Susie said, "Oh, Dave—"

He caught and squeezed her hand. "You're not a crying girl, Susie, you said. Don't break down now or they'll suspect something."

Susie almost blubbered.

Gaylord had climbed back into his saddle. Two of the others, a hawk-beaked oldster and a slender blond man, had dismounted. Leading their horses, they closed in on either side of Dave and walked him south, past the spring. They continued down the meadow at the edge of the timber.

Touching his hat to Susie, Gaylord said, "Well, good day to you, folks."

Panic filled Susie, and she grabbed Johnny's arm. "What are they going to do?"

She saw one of the Circle L riders take down his catch rope and start fashioning a noose. "They're going to hang him! Don't let them, Johnny!"

"What can I do now? They're ready for me."

"You can try!"

Johnny sighed. "Sister, it's just one of those things that happen to people. I don't understand why, but they do. You and he just met each other too late."

A sob escaped Susie then, but just one.

JOHNNY couldn't see the men now. All but one of their horses were ground-hitched down in the edge of the meadow, and he knew what was happening.

"Yes," he said to himself, "that's what they're fixing to do." He started that way, six-shooter in one hand and rifle in the other.

Steve Gaylord, stepping into sight, raised his arm and pointed. "Take that girl back where she belongs!" Johnny saw that Susie was following him. "Go back to the wagon."

Her voice was choked. "I won't!"

"Dave won't like it if you beg for him."

Susie kept coming.

Steve Gaylord said harshly, "Go back, ma'am! You have no business witnessing something like this."

Hurrying past Gaylord and into the middle of the group under the cottonwood limb, Susie threw her arms around the dark-haired man and pressed her face to his shirt. In a voice so thick with tears you could scarcely understand her, she said, "I just found him and now you're taking him away from me."

Gaylord bawled, "He knew he was doing wrong!"

Johnny said, "And now you're doing wrong. You just wait a minute, feller. You're not the law. What's he done to you?"

"I'm not the law, but I'm foreman of the Circle L ranch. A rustler gets only one kind of treatment around here."

Johnny pointed with his rifle. "If you're speaking about that calf that was butchered over yonder in the hollow, he didn't do it. I did. I killed that yearling because grandpa needed meat. Here's my daybook, and you can see I wrote down what I figured I owe for that critter. As soon as I got settled in Santa Rita and got a job I was aiming to pay for it. But go ahead, damn you—just so you don't take it out on the wrong man!"

Pecos Dave stood under a limb, a noose around his neck and his hands tied behind him. Now he fixed his dark eyes on Steve Gaylord. "The boy's all right, Steve. At first I thought he was trying to be another Billy the Kid, but he's not. He just got a little desperate and made the wrong move."

Dave's hands were freed, and one of the men lifted the rope off his neck.

Quietly Steve Gaylord said, "Well, it's all up to you, Dave."

"Will pay for the yearling satisfy you?"

The Circle L foreman nodded.

"I'll settle with you, then, and he can pay me after he gets a job. How's that?"

"Your word's the law, Dave, not mine."

Johnny had kept looking from one to the other, and so had the Circle L riders. Susie had moved back toward the meadow. Pecos Dave, not even glancing at Johnny, walked over to her. He pulled his hand out of his pocket and showed her something. He said something in a low tone. Then his white teeth flashed in a laugh. Even from here, the kid could see how red Susie got. She stared at Dave, and then she slapped him, hard. After that she headed for the wagon.

Pecos Dave held out his hand so Johnny could see what he had shown Susie. It was a law badge.

Johnny said, "I knew you weren't who you claimed to be. But who are you?"

Steve Gaylord said, "He's Pecos Dave Weaver, sheriff of Santa Rita."

The kid said, "You were pulling my leg about that jail break."

"No, I just told it backwards. The man who shot my horse is still making tracks around here, and he's plenty dangerous."

"You'll get him."

The sheriff said, "Sure, I'll get him." He turned then so he could watch Susie's departing figure. "That's not what's worrying me, though, kid—it's getting your sister in a good humor."

"Want me to tell you how?"

Steve Gaylord said, "Don't help him, kid. Make him do his own courting."

"I ought to," Johnny said. "But if I were him, and wanted her, I'd talk to Grandpa. Susie listens to him."

OUT OF THE CHUTES

IN THIS column what we write is true, to the best of our knowledge, but every once in a while we have a story for you that sounds more like fiction than fact.

This is one of those times. Here is a real-life drama about a famous rodeo personage, Carl Dossey, who has appeared in these columns many times before.

He was a great top-hand once. In fact, he won the bareback bronc-riding championship in 1940. After that he gradually changed from contesting to judging, and devoted more and more of his time to building up his ranch at Chandler, Ariz.

His wife, Bernice Taylor Dossey, has also been described in these columns—as a beautiful and talented trick rider, as well as a famous flapjack flipper. Cowboys have found Chandler to be on their route from nearly every Southwestern rodeo to any other—just so they'd be invited to the Dosseys for flapjacks.

The Dossey's son, Eddie, completed the picture of Carl as a contented family man.

The last time Carl was mentioned in this space was when he introduced his invention, the Tru-Trip starting gate, to the rodeo at Madison Square Garden. This mechanical starter for calf-roping contests was a tremendous hit with the cowboys, because it eliminated the possibility of human error in flagging the calf and tripping the barrier for the rider.

With the Tru-Trip, the calf itself started the action by passing through an electric eye, which automatically tripped the barrier for the rider and dropped a flag above the gate to signal the timers to begin counting the seconds.

It wasn't surprising that Carl should be able to come up with a device like this. He knew the problems of the contestants, having been one himself, and he understood the difficulties of timing, having worked so steadily as a judge. For nine consecutive years, for instance, he worked the long and strenuous Madison Square Garden show in New York.

Everything was rosy for Carl until trouble set in last year. (And in telling this part of the story, we're taking no sides, only reporting it as we've heard it.)

Carl got into a dispute with the Rodeo Cowboy's Ass'n, and as a result was barred as a judge from several big shows, where he claims he was sure to be hired. Later in the year the trouble was ironed out and the blackball was lifted, but Carl felt that too much damage had been done to his reputation and pocketbook during the months that the RCA refused to approve him as a judge. He filed suit against the RCA for $37,000.

And there matters stood on a sunny spring Saturday. There was to be a rodeo in Chandler that day—not a big show, but naturally Carl wouldn't miss even a little rodeo in his own home town.

His youngster, Eddie, is eight years old and plenty big enough to ride in the parade too, though Carl intended to take no chances and to ride in front of the lad and see to his safety.

Everything was very gay. The high school band was tootling merrily. The riders and marchers swung jauntily through the streets.

Suddenly, as if out of nowhere, a pair of runaway horses was bearing down on Eddie. Like a flash, Carl swung his own horse into their path, catching the full impact of their headlong rush. Both he and Eddie were thrown to the ground in a terrible tangle of hoofs, teeth, reins, stirrups. Finally someone caught the horses and pulled them away.

The next day Carl Dossey, a handsome and prosperous man of 36 with much of his future still to be settled, had his future obliterated. He died of a brain concussion, happy to know that his boy Eddie escaped with only a broken leg.

Adios,

THE EDITORS

Cleo said, surprised, "When did you start to drink alone?"

THE FUGITIVES

By J. L. Bouma

IT'S been a long time, Jim," Ed Cole said. "Going on seven years, isn't it? You were no more than eighteen when you ran out on us." Cole was a big, blocky man. He had a broad face that was dark with beard stubble. His eyes glittered wickedly in the lamplight as he turned to his two companions. "Boys, this is Jim Hart that I was telling you about. Jim, meet Whitey and Surine."

Jim looked at them and said, "Howdy," feeling a sick pressure inside him.

At first glance, Whitey appeared small as a growing boy. But he had the tight, leathery face of an old man, and his cold blue eyes were wholly without expression.

The stout, youngish man with the loose mouth was Surine. The puckered scar that ran from his flat nose to the corner of his mouth gave him a sneering expression.

Jim looked again at Ed Cole, and there was no sign of welcome on his lean, ruddy face. No man likes to be roused from sleep

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JIM HART THOUGHT he had put the owlhoot trail behind him for good . . . till the Cole gang forced him into their murderous scheme

during the darkest hour before dawn, especially by someone he has hoped never to see again.

But he forced a smile just the same, thinking he might as well make the best of it. "I'm surprised, Ed," he said. "How did you ever find me?"

"Oh, I wouldn't say we found you exactly," Cole said. "You have to hunt a man to find him, Jim, and we weren't hunting you. I've known for a long time that you were living here."

"Oh?" Jim said.

"Ben let it out of the bag one day," Cole said. "But I didn't know you were running your own spread." He chuckled deep in his chest. "Makes me want to laugh. I can't imagine a Hart being interested in cattle, unless they're wearing another man's brand."

"I quit that long before Ben was killed," Jim said stiffly.

"You sure did. Ben was his older brother," Cole explained to his companions. "We were running beef into Mexico when Jim joined us. He was a sassy, stubborn kid, and dumb. He didn't know for months what was going on. We'd tell him we had contracted to drive the beef across. When he found out different, he tried talking the wrong kind of sense to Ben. But old Ben knew what he was doing."

"If Ben had listened to me he'd be alive today," Jim said angrily, "instead of getting himself shot in that two-bit stage holdup down in Arizona."

"A man has to take his chances, kid."

"I'll take mine right here—inside the law."

"That's one way of looking at it."

Cole's grin lacked humor, and his hard eyes showed open contempt. He would always be contemptuous of those who earned an honest living, Jim thought.

"We've been hanging around Laramie," Cole said. "Then it happened that we had to come out this way, and I thought we'd stop by." He added slyly "You don't mind, do you, Jim?"

"Nope."

Surine guffawed. "He doesn't sound happy about it, boss."

"Oh, Jim's all right, except he's still sassy."

The first gray daylight showed outside the window, and Jim could see their horses tied to the porch railing. Cole followed his gaze. "You two better put the horses in that shed out back," he said.

WHITEY and Surine went out. Jim felt suddenly sick. He took a long breath, wondering how he would explain to Cleo if she ever took it into her head to come out here. She wouldn't of course, not after they had quarreled and broken up. Right now that was a relief.

He looked at Cole and said, "What've you got in mind, Ed?"

"Oh, nothing to speak of. We might hole up here a few days, though. This is a nice place for it—no neighbors roundabout, and right up against the timber line. How're you doing, anyhow? Running a lot of beef?"

"Around three hundred head," Jim said.

"That all?" Cole chuckled. "We used to rustle that many in one night, remember? I don't know how you make out. How did you get started in this business, anyhow?"

"When I came here I went to work for Dan Carver, who owns the Circle-T. I made foreman and saved my money, and three months ago I filed up here and registered my own brand."

"I hear Carver's a big man around here. Owns half the town, including the bank, and carries a lot of weight with the politicians. Got a good-looking daugher, too. Seems to me you would have been better off to stick with him than to scratch for your own living."

"I make out."

"Sure." Cole's eyes glittered with secret glee. "But I bet if you had played it smart you would be waking up in Carver's big house about now."

Jim frowned at the big man. "You seem to know a lot about my business."

Cole started to grin, but suddenly the grin faded and he shrugged a shoulder. "I hear things and put two and two together. Been trouble in these parts, hasn't there? Something to do with the railroad building a spur out this way."

That wasn't news. Jim said, "We want the spur here at Pine. Rockville, thirty miles north, wants it too. Both towns can't swing it, so that's what the trouble has been about."

"So I heard," Cole said. "The town that

gets the spur will end up as a major shipping point, and the other town'll just die a natural death. Well, that's cause for a fight. Been some shooting already between the big outfits, isn't that so?"

"Some," Jim admitted. "It's been in all the papers."

"Yeah. And the way it reads, Carver's putting up a chunk of cash to settle the deal for Pine." Cole laughed. "He might do it, at that. Cash talks, kid."

"It helps."

"Sure does. And I'm surprised you aren't right up there with Carver. Didn't you spend time sparking that daughter of his?"

"Maybe," Jim said. And then, "What do you want here, Ed? Why did you come?"

"I told you. Business."

"What kind of business?"

"Nothing that'd interest you, kid."

"All right, Ed. And what's been between me and Cleo Carver is of no interest to you, either. Just remember that. I don't know how you found out all you did, but from now on keep it to yourself."

Cole yawned as though he hadn't heard. "How about fixing some breakfast?"

Jim turned to the stove. The shack consisted of two rooms, and was built of clapboard. There was a lean-to where Jim slept. It wasn't a very large shack. He had thrown it up in a hurry when he finally knew Cleo wouldn't live in it.

But right now the thought of Cleo scarcely bothered him. His mind was ducking this way and that, frantic as an animal caught in a trap. Cole knew too much about him—much more than a stranger to this country should know, unless he had made it a point to find out before coming here.

Jim put coffee to boil and cracked eggs in the skillet. He scrambled them with a fork.

Whitey and Surine came in and said the horses were taken care of.

Jim ignored their talk. He put the food on the table and poured coffee all around. They ate quickly, and Jim's mind continued to struggle for answers. Had Cole only been guessing about his interest in Cleo, or did the big man really know the truth? And if he did, how had he found out?

THEY finished the meal, and Jim put the dishes in the wooden sink. He said casually, "If you boys mean to camp here a few days, I'll have to drive to town for grub."

Whitey and Surine glanced uneasily at Cole. The big man pushed back his chair, reached in his pocket, and tossed a gold coin on the table. "Bring back some whisky and smoking tobacco, too."

"Keep your money," Jim said. He added dryly, "Consider yourselves my guests."

Cole laughed. "Jim, you're making me feel bad. Hell, we don't mean to cause you any trouble."

"I'll depend on that."

"You can. But I wouldn't mention in town that you got friends visiting. Not that we have anything to worry about, but the less said the better." He grinned syly. "Do folks around here know about you, Jim? Do they know you used to be a thief?"

Jim reddened. "That's a hell of a thing to say to a man."

"It's the truth, isn't it? But don't worry about it. We aren't here to get you in hot water."

"That's fine."

Surine guffawed. "He says it's fine."

Jim turned on him, jaw hard, eyes flashing. "That makes twice you've talked around me. Next time you got something to say to me, say it straight."

Surine's mouth pulled crooked, and Whitey became rigid and stared at Jim with eyes as unblinking and merciless as a cat's. Cole got to his feet. "Don't fool with those boys, Jim," he warned. "They won't like it."

Jim guessed as much. But Whitey was the one to watch, for he had all the earmarks of a gunfighter. Surine, on the other hand, was mostly bluff, and Cole was bossing the show. He was confident, and seemed to know what he was doing.

Jim thought of telling them to clear out, but he was curious as to what they had in mind. It might not amount to anything, so why prod them? In a few days they might be on their way, and he could breathe easy again.

As he reached for his hat, his hand hesitated near the holstered gun that hung from

the next peg. But he left it there and went out to tend to his chores. Then he hitched up his buckboard and headed for town.

When he was in a hurry and riding a fast horse, Jim could make it from his place to Pine within an hour. But this morning he kept his team at a slow trot most of the way.

The road wound down a series of gentle slopes eastward, and the climbing sun burnt his face. This was cattle country, rich in grass and water, broken here and there by willow and cottonwood stands along the bottoms. It was good country, where he had worked and built. Now a chill rage shook him at the thought that Cole could ruin it for him.

It didn't take brains to know those boys were up to something. The "business" Cole had mentioned could mean anything, but it was a sure bet that it was not legitimate. They would pull whatever it was they had planned, and then use the shack as a hide-out until the law got tired of looking for them. Or maybe they were already on the dodge. What other reason would they have for wanting to stay at the shack?

"Seems to me you would have been better off to stick with Carver than to scratch for your own living," Cole had said. Well, he wasn't the first to speak his piece on *that* subject. Cleo had said plenty about it. She had a mind of her own; she wanted her own way and usually got it. Jim had no trouble remembering the quarrel that had ended their engagement.

"You're not being sensible," she had said. A small, intense girl, she flushed easily when angry, and her black eyes would snap like twin devils. "We're to be married, and you're asking me to leave this house and live in a shack like a nester woman. Well, I won't do it, because it's foolish. Why should we start from scratch when we can build on what Dad has accumulated?"

"That's just what I'm trying to get away from doing. Your Dad's done enough for me, taking me on as a wrangler and then making me foreman. If I mean anything to you, it shouldn't matter if you have to live in a soddy. Your mother did when she settled here twenty years ago."

Cleo said, "Just because Mother had a rough time doesn't mean I have to have one. I don't need to prove anything to myself, even if you do."

HE WAS forced to admit to himself that she had a point. But still he had to try it on his own. "Dan started from scratch," he said. "I want to do the same."

"Honey," she said patiently, "you're just being stubborn. The ranch will be ours someday. And right now you're more than earning your pay. You're the best foreman Dad's ever had, and he needs you, especially now that he's spending all his time trying to get the spur through to town. But you want to walk out on him."

He told her he wasn't walking out on Carver. "I know of at least two men who can take my place. As for the ranch being ours someday, I hope that day is a long time coming. Meanwhile, I want to plow my own furrow instead of leaning on your Dad and living in his house. Make up your mind about that."

She had paled. "It's made up! I will not stew around in a two-room shack while you're out working. I told you I don't need to prove anything to myself."

"Maybe you do and don't know it." he had told her. "Maybe you need to prove that you're worthy of being a wife."

That had finished them. Her temper had snapped and she had told him plenty, before flouncing out of the room. She had been civil the few times he had seen her since, but that was about all. Well, there was nothing to be done about it, he thought now. Once Cleo made up her mind, nothing could change it.

His thoughts broke off as a turn in the road brought him in sight of Pine. It was a busy town of false-fronted buildings. He stopped in front of Hanson's grocery and went inside to give his order.

The storekeeper said, "Jim, that's enough grub to feed a family for a week. Did you hire yourself a couple of hands?"

"Just stocking up," Jim said, and crossed the street to the post office. A horseman took his attention, and when he looked a second time he saw it was Whitey.

Jim's eyes toughened. He went in after his mail. When he came out, Whitey was no longer in sight.

Jim walked on down toward the hotel saloon. There was quite a bit of traffic along the street, for this was Saturday, when most of the ranchers and farmers drove in for supplies. As he came up the steps, he was surprised to see Cleo on the veranda. He came to a stop.

"Hello. Kind of early for you to be in town, isn't it?"

"Dad went to Cheyenne the other day to talk to the railroad people, and he's due back either on the noon or the evening stage." She sat quietly in the big reed chair, her eyes on Jim's face.

"You think he'll swing it?" Jim asked.

"I think so. He's putting enough money on the line to practically build the spur himself." She looked at him intently. "What's the matter?"

"Didn't know anything was the matter," he said.

She frowned. "You sure are looking hangdog about something," she said. "Nothing wrong at your place, is there?"

It was the first time she had ever mentioned his ranch. "Not a thing."

"I'll have to drive out and look over what you've built," she said, as though it didn't really make much difference.

"Better wait until I get things fixed up right," he said. "There's a lot of work yet that needs doing."

"Are you coming to the dance tonight?" she asked.

"I guess not," Jim said.

They looked a long time at each other, and he saw her lips tighten. She was proud and stubborn, and mad now because he wasn't coming to the dance tonight. He supposed that, in her own way, she was still trying to make him do what she wanted.

"I have to get back." He ducked his head and hurried to pick up his groceries.

BY THE time he drove into his yard, Whitey was already back. The fellow had taken a shortcut, Jim thought, and decided not to say anything about seeing him in town. There's no point in putting a wedge in until you knew what you were doing.

He'd gone over it pretty thoroughly on the drive back, and had come to the conclusion that if Cole and his boys were here to stage a holdup, it must be the bank.

Cole had never been one to make a move without first figuring things out and planning in detail. It might be that one or the other of them had been hanging around Pine the past few days, learning what he could. That was probably how Cole had learned about Dan's owning the bank, and about Cleo.

He lugged the two big cartons of groceries inside, then unhitched and turned the team loose in the corral. Cole watched from the back door, a glass of whisky in hand.

"Whitey and I'll be leaving after a bit," he said, as Jim came over.

"Coming back?"

"Hell yes," Cole said, grinning.

Inside, Jim noticed at once that his holstered gun was gone. He glanced briefly at the three men, then went to the lean-to. His rifle was also missing. He stood there for a short moment. Then suddenly he cursed, and came back inside.

"All right, Ed," he said, "What's the idea?"

"I figured you were beginning to think too hard," Cole told him. "That's bad, Jim. From now on you'll stay here. Surine'll keep an eye on you. Do what he tells you and you'll be all right. You see how it shapes up?"

Jim saw, all right. If they took the bank and holed up here afterward, they would make damn sure before they cleared out that he was beyond the talking stage. He nodded.

"Sorry, but that's the way it's got to be," Cole said. "You should never have run out on me to begin with, kid. That was bad."

"Let me give it to him now," Surine said.

"I told you—no. Someone's liable to stop by here during the next few days, and if he doesn't show himself the law might get suspicious." He turned to Whitey. "Get the horses. It's time we were hitting the road."

It was getting on toward two o'clock by the time they returned, and Cole seemed pleased. He said, "Everything all right, Surine?"

Surine grinned at Jim. "He hasn't moved a muscle since you left. What'd you find out?"

"Tonight," Cole said.

He told Jim to cook up a meal, and he had

Whitey watch the road. Jim had just put a steak in the skillet when the gunman hurried inside. "There's a buggy coming up the grade."

"All right. You two get in the shed. I'll be in the lean-to." Cole looked at Jim as Whitey and Surine hurried out the back door. "Kid, whoever it is, I'll be watching. So don't move off your front porch. I want to hear what you have to say. And if I don't like it, there's gonna be shooting."

Jim did not answer. He stood at the front door, sickness churning in him, and he wasn't surprised when he saw that Cleo was driving the buggy. It was like her to come here, when he'd as much as told her to stay away.

MOMENTS later, she stopped the buggy below the porch. Jim gave a wave of his hand. "Didn't expect you so soon."

"Dad's coming in on the seven o'clock stage, so I thought I'd drive out." She stepped down and gave the shack a critical look. "You might try painting it."

"Give me time," Jim said, as she came up on the small porch. "I've been at it from morning till night, putting up fence, digging water holes and what not. That comes first, the house last."

She stepped past him in to the house, and he knew of no way to stop her. "This makes our bunkhouse seem like a palace," she said. Then she looked quickly at him, and her nostrils twitched. "What's burning?"

She turned to the kitchen. Smoke rose from the skillet. She grabbed a fork and turned the steak quickly. "Burned black," she said disgustedly.

"I forgot."

"It looks like you forgot to wash your dishes for the last couple of days, too."

The breakfast dishes. Jim glanced at them uneasily, then watched her move about the small kitchen. "Whisky," she said. "That's a surprise. When did you start drinking alone?"

"I keep it in case company drops in."

She looked at the doorway that opened on the lean-to. "Is that where you sleep?"

"Yes. There's only the bunk in there, and it's not made up." He moved the skillet and took her arm, an edge of panic making his voice rough. "Now that you've seen it all, I think you'd better go."

She looked at him quickly, her eyes half puzzled, half angry. "You're not being very hospitable, but if that's the way you want it, all right."

"That's the way I want it," Jim said, aware of her resistance as he pulled her into the front room. "You have no business being here in the first place. And you certainly haven't the right to belittle what I've done. We were through when you refused to live here, so please go and don't come back."

BEAR TAIL TALE

By S. OMAR BARKER

"Are the Rockies steep?" inquired a dude.
We trust our answer wasn't rude.
"So awful doggone steep," we said,
"That this is how bears go to bed—
Their tails, if ever you should look,
Have grown to be shaped like a hook.
This hook they snag around a tree
Whenever they lie down. You see,
That way a bear can take his nap
Without plumb sliding off the map!"

She jerked her arm free and stared at him. He saw her lips move a little before they pressed firmly together, as though to hold back the words she had meant to speak. Her eyes grew moist. Suddenly she turned with a rustle of skirts and climbed into the buggy. She turned the team and drove out of the yard, and she did not look back.

Jim took a long, shaky breath, feeling drained, yet aware of an immense relief. He did not turn as Ed Cole came up behind him and said softly, "That was real nice, kid." And then, slyly, "She's still got a hankering for you, hasn't she? Too bad you didn't marry her when you had the chance."

Jim turned back into the house without answering.

"Yeah, too bad," Cole said. "And you know why, kid?" He paused, a gleam of malice, of triumph perhaps, lighting his eyes. "Because you would have ended up owning Anchor. And not years from now either, but tonight."

"What's that?"

"It's simple. There was trouble out this way, and where there's trouble a man can usually sell his gun. That's part of our business, kid. It might have turned out different for you, except that the other people had a good reason for using us. Is it beginning to make sense?"

Jim nodded slowly and said nothing.

"Those people know that, with Carver out of the way, the deal will fall through as far as Pine is concerned. They hope so, anyway. There's millions in business at stake, and they want that spur line. So they hired us to help 'em out. Nothing unusual in that, is there?"

"I guess not."

"Not unusual," Cole repeated, "except, of course, that you were here. I've been counting on that. This country's gonna be hotter than hell after it happens. Your marshal will telegraph every lawman within 300 miles, and it won't be safe to travel for a spell. So you can see now why we came here."

Jim nodded. He saw it all now, and it sickened him. Cole and Whitey had gone to Pine at noon to check the stage. Had Dan Carver arrived on it, he would probably be dead by now. But he would arrive this evening, Cleo would meet him. Then, on the drive home. . . .

"We didn't figure on the girl," Cole said, as though reading his thoughts. "But that can't be helped."

The dance, Jim thought suddenly. Cole didn't know Cleo might stay for the dance. And if she did, Dan would no doubt spend that time at the Cattlemen's Club. He had done so before. And he and his daughter had often spent Saturday night at the hotel, so that they could attend church Sunday morning.

But Cleo had been angry and upset on leaving here, and she might very well decide not to stay for the dance.

Whitey and Surine had come back inside. Cole said, "Get some grub on the table, kid." Jim turned back to the stove.

JIM lay on his bunk in the lean-to. Whitey and Cole had been gone an hour, and they had tied his wrist and ankles before leaving. Surine sat in the doorway smoking a cigarette. The glow of it showed faintly in the gathering darkness. Cole had warned Surine against lighting a lamp, because someone might see it and stop by. He was taking no chances.

Jim brought his knees up. "How about a smoke?"

"Nothing doing," Surine said.

"You're not worth a damn, are you?"

"Watch your mouth!"

"Why should I? You figure to kill me, don't you?"

"It'll be a pleasure. But if you keep yapping at me, I'll give it to you in the belly instead of in the head."

"Your kind usually waits until a man's back is turned."

Surine leaned forward. "I told you to watch your mouth!"

"Go to hell."

"I see I have to close it for you."

Surine rose, lifted his gun, and stepped toward the bunk. Jim had been waiting for this. He had insulted and goaded Surine to this point for an hour. Now the gunman had had enough. Jim was ready. As Surine leaned over to hit him with the gun, Jim kicked out with both feet. The hard high heels exploded against Surine's jaw. He dropped the gun and staggered back, slumping against the wall.

Jim rolled from the bunk and got hold of the gun, as Surine staggered to his feet. The man uttered a hoarse cry and lunged forward. Holding the gun in both hands, Jim fired. Surine dropped without a sound as the bullet tore through his body.

The roar of that shot still filled the lean-to as Jim crawled to the kitchen. He raised himself at the sink and found a knife. By propping it up between his tightly-bound ankles, he was able to saw through the ropes at his wrists. A moment later he had freed his ankles and was out of the house.

Surine's horse was in the shed. Jim threw on the saddle and headed for town at a run.

By the time Jim rode up a side street and dismounted, the band was playing in the Odd Fellows Hall above the bank. He could hear the music faintly, as he tied the horse and hurried to the Cattlemen's Club.

Bancroft, who owned the Double-Y, said, "He was here for a while, Jim, but I believe he went to look in on the dance."

Jim went back to the corner and stood there a little while watching the lighted stores, the few people that tramped along the boardwalks in the darkness. They'll be watching the hall from across the street, he thought.

He hurried up the nearest alley to the next cross street. The bank building was the second from the corner. He moved forward, holding the gun against his thigh.

Then he saw the two horses tied near the corner, on this side street, and he stopped and studied them a moment. There was no doubt about it; the horses belonged to Cole and Whitey.

Three riders crossed the intersection as Jim approached the corner. He peered around it. Beyond the backwash of light that shone through a window, he saw two shadowy figures. One sat on the step of a darkened doorway; the other leaned against the wall and was smoking a cigarette. Jim saw the outline of that figure, and knew it was Ed Cole. He stepped forward.

They heard him immediately. But the shaft of lamplight that lay between them kept them from recognizing him right away. Jim stopped just this side of it.

"You boys have had it," he said.

Whitey lunged to his feet, and his hand streaked for his gun as Jim fired. In the bright yellow flame of that shot, Jim saw the gunman sprawl up against Cole, saw Cole push him aside and raise his weapon. The shot went wild. Jim fired a second time and Cole fell.

THAT'S the long and short of it," Jim said. He looked at Dan Carver's tough old face, then at the town marshal, and he glanced briefly at Cleo, who was watching him intently. "They had it all planned, even to holing up at my place. As for the rest of what I told you, about when I was a kid, I doubt if there are any dodgers out against me. I worked with Cole and my brother for about six months. Then I quit and came here. But I'll still pay for what I did if I have to."

"Nothing doing," Dan Carver said curtly. "There aren't many men in this country that haven't stepped outside the law at one time or another, and that includes me. Yeah, I beefed a few steers when the going was rough and there was no meat in the pan." He looked hard at his daughter. "We didn't have it easy in the beginning, and a man has to feed his wife and baby."

The town marshal said, "We'll forget all this. No point in raking the ashes. All I have to say is that Jim did a job."

"As far as the spur line is concerned, that was just about settled to our advantage, anyhow," Dan Carver said. "A surveying crew will be out this way next week. But killing me might have stopped it, at that."

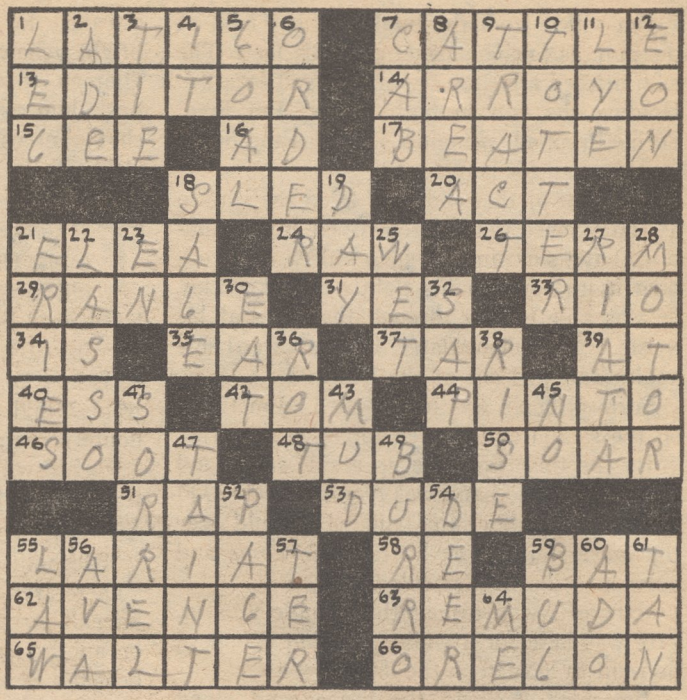
Cleo took a long breath. "Then they would have had to kill me, too, because I would have carried on where you left off." She looked at Jim. "I didn't mean to belittle the house, but I was jealous because you had the courage to start from scratch, and I didn't."

"It's not too late," Jim said.

Her face brightened. "In that case—" she began, and moved toward him.

Dan Carver looked at them, then at the marshal. "Let's go get a drink, Bill," he said, and opened the office door. "Maybe two or three drinks—because, the way it looks to me, there'll be a wedding tomorrow."

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



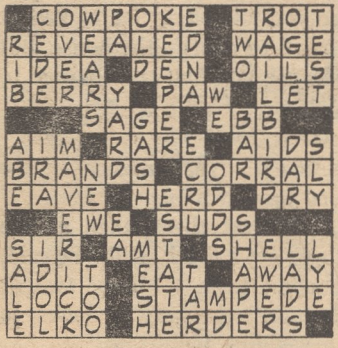
The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1 Cinch-fastening strap
7 Rancher's animals
13 Magazine manager
14 Western gully
15 Command to horses
16 Advertisement
17 Whipped
18 Snow vehicle
20 To perform
21 Dog's jumping insect
24 Uncooked
26 Period in office
29 Cattle land
31 Opposite of "no"
33 The —— Grande
34 Exists
35 Hearing organ
37 Thick black liquid
39 Near by
40 The letter S
42 Male cat
44 Calico horse
46 Smoky powder
48 Washing vessel
50 To fly aloft
51 To knock
53 An Easterner out West
55 Lasso
58 Concerning
59 Baseball club
62 To take revenge for
63 Group of saddle horses
65 Mr. Winchell, newscaster
66 Western state

DOWN

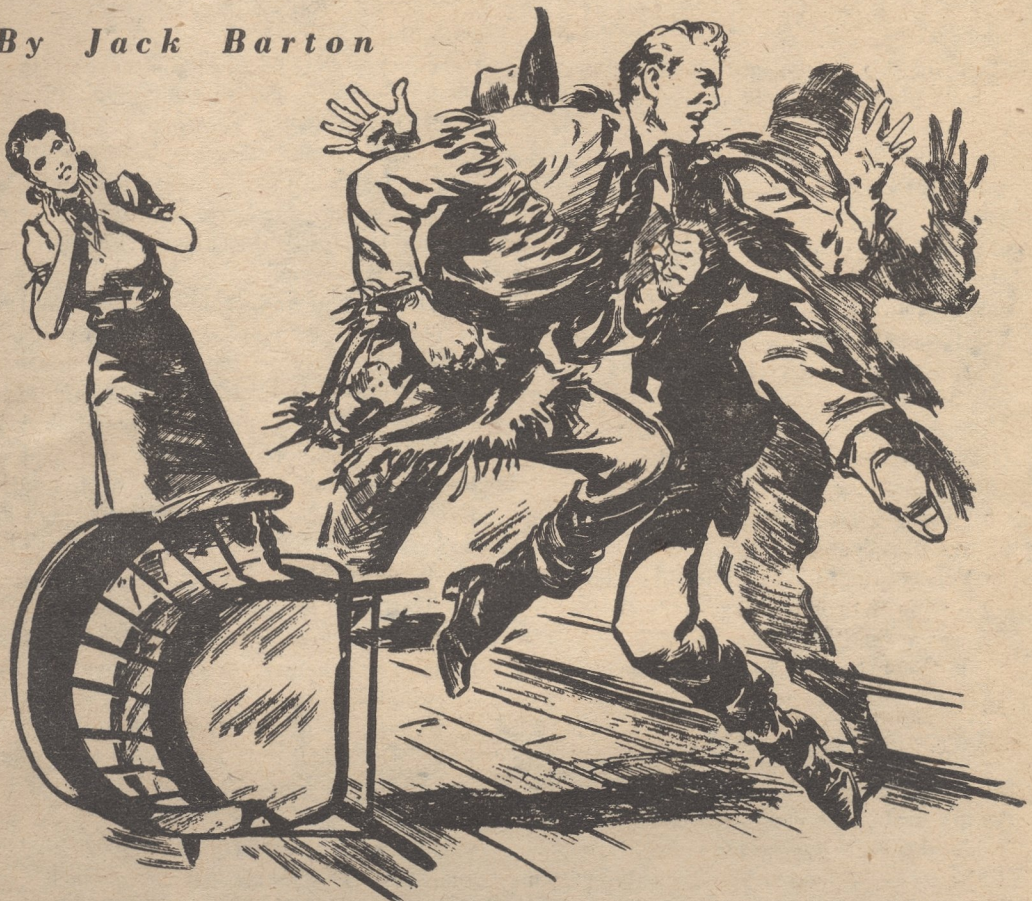
1 Lower limb
2 Orange drink
3 To fasten
4 Neuter pronoun
5 Destination
6 Command
7 Taxi
8 Surface
9 Region
10 To walk staggeringly
11 Alkaline solution
12 An eternity
18 Riders of the Purple ——
19 24 hours
21 Cooks in fat
22 Cowboy's rope
23 The letter N
25 Not dry
27 Lariat
28 Engine
30 Consume food
32 Tree fluid
36 To decay
38 To get up
41 Reddish-brown horse
43 Wet earth
45 Word of denial
47 To contaminate
49 Western pack animal
52 Part of a book
54 Antlered animal
55 Legal rule
56 Miss Gardner, actress
57 Territory (abbr.)
59 Beetle
60 Fuss
61 Light brown
64 Myself



Solution to puzzle in Preceding issue

The Vengeance Riders

By Jack Barton



McVey slammed into Jess and drove him backward against the wall.

THE STORY SO FAR: Banker GEORGE STACEY shoots RUSS BRANDON for raping his wife, CLARA. Stacey's friend TOM McVEY offers to take the blame, to protect Clara. He has had a quarrel with Brandon and can claim he shot in self-defence. MATTHEW BRANDON, Russ's father, brings his crew from Texas to get revenge. He learns accidentally that McVey is shielding the real killer. McVey meets Russ's widow, LINDA, and falls for her. Brandon's men try to force McVey to tell who he's shielding, but he escapes them. They then scare PAT HIGGINS, CHRIS NOLAN, and MILT JESSUP, the only others who know the truth, into hiding out. Meanwhile Stacey decides to ruin Matthew Brandon financially, and hires rustler JAKE RIORDAN to run off the Brandon herd, but McVey refuses to deal with Jake. McVey expects Brandon's men to come after him at his ranch, but it is Linda Brandon, alone, who appears.

PART TWO

McVEY rode back to his buildings and was standing before the cabin when Linda walked her paint pony into the yard. He knew the reason for her coming here; she wanted something he could not give. It could not be a pleasant meeting, but nevertheless there was an excitement in him.

Linda had discarded her widow's weeds, and wore riding garb instead—a brown riding skirt, a tan blouse, a bright green silk neckscarf, star boots. Her flat-crowned hat hung at her shoulders by its chin strap, and her

richly black hair was tousled by the wind. She was as relaxed in the saddle as any cowhand. On the painted pony she made a pretty picture, and he realized now that she was younger than he'd thought in Riverbend.

She met his gaze steadily, and said gravely, "I hope you don't mind my coming here, McVey."

"On the contrary, I'm glad to see you," he said. "Step down, visit a while." He stepped forward to take the paint when she dismounted. He led it to the shady side of the barn, where his dun stood, and left it ground-hitched there. Returning to her, he said, "You're at XO Ranch now?"

"Yes. I came up yesterday with Luke and Jess and some of the others."

"Matthew didn't come along?"

"No. He has two herds on the trail. He's waiting at Riverbend for them."

"I thought he might have been one of my visitors during the night."

"Your visitors didn't find you at home."

"No. Is that why you came? To find out if I was around here—for them?"

She shook her head. "I came on my own. So they won't have to come back here."

He smiled. "You'll have no better luck than they had," he said. "I have nothing to say to any of the Brandon crowd. But that doesn't mean that you're not welcome. Come inside and we'll have some coffee."

She accompanied him into the cabin without hesitation, but paused just inside the doorway and looked about in a questioning way. "Where is your squaw?"

"My what?"

"I understood that you are a squawman."

He shook his head. "A lot of untruths were thrown about in the Territorial Saloon the other day. That was one. I've got no squaw, and no white woman, either. Sit down while I make a fresh pot of coffee."

The cooking was done at the fireplace. He fanned the embers into flame, then filled the coffee pot. After setting the pot on the fire, he carried two tin cups to the table. Linda had seated herself there, and he stood there looking at her, thinking how lovely she was and wondering what it would be like to have such a woman for a wife. He found himself thinking that Russ Brandon had been a damn fool.

He said, "Something puzzles me. Why didn't your husband have you at XO Ranch with him?"

Her eyes clouded. "That's not easy to explain. Someone had to manage XO Ranch, and Russ was that someone. Of the three brothers, he alone was capable of operating a ranch. Jess and Luke are good cowhands, but they have no business ability. So, even, though Russ was the youngest, he was sent here to Wyoming.

"But he had one weakness. He would apply himself only when there was nothing to distract him. When he was courting me—" her voice broke, and it was a full minute before she could continue— "he would shirk his work. After we were married, he spent far too much time at home—or so his father thought. And Matthew decided that he would do better at XO Ranch if I were not with him at the start."

"Matthew Brandon is a fool. A man shouldn't be kept apart from his wife. Maybe with you here Russ would have kept out of trouble."

"What sort of trouble did he get in, McVey?" she asked. "It must have been pretty serious, to have caused his death. What was it?"

He lighted a cigarette, then shook his head and said, "Don't keep asking me such questions. You should know me well enough by now to realize it's useless."

She ignored that. "You make me feel that there's something I wouldn't like to know about my husband."

He made no reply.

She said, "I refuse to believe any such thing." Her voice took on a sharp edge of anger. "I insist that you tell me. If Russ did something wrong, I have a right to know. After all, I'm his wife—his widow."

HE TURNED away, walked to the fireplace, faced her from there. "I'm thinking of your feelings right now," he said. "Believe that much good of me. This thing should be dropped to keep from hurting a lot of people, including Matthew

Brandon—especially Matthew Brandon. Tell him that, Linda. Tell him you'll be hurt and he'll be hurt—along with myself and some others you and he don't care about. Will you do that?"

"I care about the others who may be hurt—including you, McVey," she said. "That's why I'm here. If I could get you to be reasonable, I could keep you from being hounded by the Brandons. But I won't accept your word that I will be hurt by knowing what caused my husband's death. As for Matthew Brandon, he's too tough-hided to be hurt by something you say against his dead son—something that may or may not be the truth."

McVey shook his head. "More than feelings are going to be hurt," he told her." Matthew Brandon has certain people scared, and they'll try to ruin him before he can hurt them—when he brings those two herds onto this range. You'd better warn him. Maybe he'll be reasonable and call it quits—before it's too late."

She regarded him with surprise. "Why should you give me such a warning?"

He was puzzled by that himself. He considered it for a moment, then said, "It's you. This is only the second time I've seen you, but somehow you've become very important to me. I've known other women, some of them attractive, but it didn't mean anything to me. With you, it's different. I don't need to know you half a lifetime to be sure of that. That's the reason for my warning you. I don't want to see you hurt in any way."

She regarded him with astonishment. "This is crazy, McVey," she said. "Next you'll be saying that you're in love with me."

"I think I am in love with you."

"I never heard anything so ridiculous!"

"Is it? Tell me, how long did you know Russ before you decided you were in love with him?"

"That was different. I was just a young girl, only seventeen."

"How long, Linda?"

"I—I suppose it was the first time I saw him," she said, then a look of pain crossed her face. She rose from the bench. "I don't want to talk about it, McVey. You and I can never be anything but enemies, unless you make up your mind to tell me what I've got to know."

"That I can't do."

"Then there's no use my staying longer."

He said, "Don't go so soon," and moved toward her.

She ignored that, turned to the door, then gasped, "Oh, no!"

McVey started toward her, then grabbed for his gun as three men crowded through the doorway. He was too slow. They closed in on him, Russ Brandon's two brothers and the XO hand Tip Ryan. Each had his gun drawn, and Ryan, the nearest, swung his like a club. As he tried to duck, McVey had the bitter thought that Linda's real purpose in coming here must have been to distract him so that these three could catch him off guard.

The Colt's long barrel shattered the thought the instant it formed, striking a terrific blow to his left temple. He was driven to his hands and knees, stunned to the point of utter helplessness. They gave him no opportunity to recover. Tip Ryan grabbed the gun from McVey's holster and threw it across the room. Then, having done his part, he stepped aside. The Brandons hauled McVey to his feet, each taking an arm. They released him and he stood swaying.

Luke said, "You know what we want, McVey. Do we get it the easy way?"

McVey said, "You don't get it at all," his voice a hoarse whisper.

The other one, Jess, said, "All right," and so it began.

McVey made a clumsy attempt to defend himself, but they easily got past his guard. They battered him with short, hard jabs: First one would hit him, then the other. He was sent reeling back and forth, more and more dazed, feeling as though he were being torn apart by their fists. It went on and on, the Brandons careful not to hit him so hard that he would drop unconscious. They wanted to hurt him, and they did.

AT LONG last his knees buckled. He fell against a bench, toppled it over, slammed against the table, then collapsed to the floor. He lay gasping, the be-

ginning of a wicked hatred for the Brandons coming to him at last.

Luke caught him under the armpits and pulled him erect, and Jess faced him. Both were breathig hard. As his vision cleared partially, he saw that sweat was trickling down Jess's tough, homely face. But neither Brandon showed any hatred or anger; they were casual about this as if it were but a chore that needed to be done.

"Had enough?" Jess asked. "You ready to name the man?"

Through bruised lips, McVey said, "Go to hell."

Behind him, Luke said, "He needs more softening up. Work him over some more. I'll keep him on his feet."

Jess started another punch, but checked it when Linda said, "No, wait!" and came between them.

McVey said hoarsely, bitterly, "You were the bait in the trap."

"No, I wasn't," she said. "I didn't know they were coming here." Then, defiantly: "Still, I'm not sorry they came. This had to happen sooner or later, and it might as well be got over with. Now be sensible, McVey. Don't take more of it."

At that moment he hated her along with the other Brandons. He said, "What I told Jess goes for you too."

Jess pushed her aside, saying, "Let me at him. I'll make him sing another tune."

"I don't want any more of this," Linda said. "Leave him alone."

There was indecision in Jess's manner for a moment. Then he shook his head. "If you can't stomach it, go outside. We're going to finish it."

He turned back to McVey, but during the brief respite their victim had rallied somewhat. As Jess drove a blow at his face, McVey rolled his head to the side and the blow missed. He jerked loose of Luke, slammed into Jess and drove him backward against the wall. Jess grunted under the impact, his gangly body going limp.

McVey dropped into a crouch, rammed his right shoulder into Jess's middle. The breath was knocked out of Jess, and he slid down the wall to the floor when McVey backed off and swung around to brace Luke. He hit Luke hard to the side of the head and staggered him. A second clubbing blow reeled Luke against the table, sprawled him atop it.

For an instant McVey thought he'd gained the upper hand, but he'd forgotten Tip Ryan. The XO hand leapt at him, striking out with his gun. Once more there was an explosion of pain for McVey. He dropped heavily to the floor and lay writhing in agony.

He clung to consciousness, however, and heard their voices as at a distance. Ryan was saying, "She's right. You'll never get that tough-hand to talk."

There was some arguemnt between them, Jess finally ending it by saying, "Next time it'll be different."

He and Luke went out, and shortly there was a drumming of hoofs as they rode away.

Linda said, "Tip, give me a hand with him," and McVey was half carried, half dragged to his bunk and stretched out on it.

Tip Ryan left then, but Linda remained. She found a cloth, wet it, and wiped McVey's face clean of blood, sweat and dirt. He lay staring at the ceiling, refusing to look at her. His battered face was rock hard.

Linda said, "Be sensible. Don't let this happen again."

He said, "This won't happen again—it's different now."

"What do you mean?"

"Before this, I was willing just to try to keep out of their way," he said. "Now I'm going to fight back."

"You can't win a fight with the Brandons."

"I'll win it. I'll break the back of the Brandon crowd. I'm going after the man who is its backbone—Matthew Brandon."

"You'll try to kill him?"

"What else," McVey said. "He's asked for it." His voice was thick with bitterness. "I've had a bellyful of the whole Brandon crowd."

Linda regarded him in silence for a long moment, a troubled frown on her face. Then she turned and walked from the cabin, and shortly after McVey heard her ride away. He remained on the bunk, too dazed and full of pain to move. He would go after Matthew Brandon all right, but it wouldn't be today. The way he felt, he wouldn't be able to climb

on a horse, let alone ride all the way to Riverbend.

TOWARD sundown he forced himself to get from his bunk. He kindled a fire and cooked his supper. Then he retrieved his revolver from where Tip Ryan had thrown it, put on his hat, went outside. He watered and grained the dun, which had stood saddled all day, then mounted and rode to the timber along the creek. By the time he had the horse unsaddled and staked out, he was glad to take to his blankets. He slept fitfully, but tonight no riders roused him.

When daylight came he rolled his blankets, saddled the dun, returned to his buildings.

Looking in the speckled mirror on the wall, he saw that this face was grotesque. He had a black eye and his jaw was badly swollen. There was a cut on his left cheekbone, a livid bruise on his right. In his eyes was an ugly look of rage and hatred.

Later, riding toward Riverbend, he felt pain in his chest and at his right ribs. The pain was worse when he traveled at a lope, so he held the dun to a walk and halted frequently to ease the hurt.

It was late afternoon when he came within sight of Riverbend. From the bridge at the edge of town, he saw a herd being driven across the bridge, about a half mile to the east. Coming to O'Leary's Livery Stable, he saw a half-dozen men at the side of the building peering toward the herd. They were all small ranchers like himself, and all were grim-faced. One was Burt Ivor, a stocky, red-faced man who'd been one of the first cattlemen to settle in the Powder River country.

Reining in, McVey said, "A Brandon herd?"

Ivor nodded. "A Brandon herd. There's another about five miles behind this one." He was staring at McVey's face. "What happened to you?"

"Three of the Brandon crowd stopped by my place yesterday."

"What did they use on you, a club?"

"A gun-barrel and their fists."

Ivor swore. "One more reason for us to run that bunch off this range," he said. Then, lowering his voice: "It'll come, McVey. We're going to break that outfit." He gestured toward his companions. "We've decided not to buck that Texan's gunhands. There are two many of them. The way to rid this range of Brandon is to make it too expensive for him to graze cattle here. And that we can do, without risk to ourselves."

McVey understood. "Riordan's been to see you, has he?"

"No, but he's in on the game."

"Who talked to you, Burt?"

"I'm not at liberty to say. He swore me to secrecy."

McVey frowned. He knew that George Stacey had talked with Ivor and got him to sound out the other ranchers. It hadn't bothered the banker too much when Riordan reported that McVey wouldn't go along with the deal; he'd simply found himself a man who had no scruples against making a bargain with the rustler.

Looking at the other five cattlemen, at their grim faces as they watched the Brandon herd making the river crossing, McVey suddenly realized that George Stacey had judged them accurately. Ivor and these five—and the rest of the Powder River ranchers—would rather give Riordan a free hand than share the range with the Brandon Cattle Company.

McVey said, "There's one thing you'd better keep in mind, Burt. Once Riordan cleans out Brandon, he'll not be satisfied. He'll turn against the rest of us. By that time he'll ramrod such a big bunch of thieves that we'll have a hard time stopping him. How do you take a range away from an outlaw, once you've handed it over to him?"

Ivor frowned, impressed by such reasoning and not liking it. Then he said, "We'll take care of Riordan when the times comes—somehow."

"Maybe," said McVey, and rode away.

HE WENT to midtown and saw a roan horse wearing the Brandons' Texas brand, a Slash-B, at the Territorial Saloon's hitch-rack. A lean, swarthy man was on the saloon porch, lounging against a roof post and watching him. McVey remembered seeing him with the Brandon crowd the day of the trial.

He swung over, reined in, said to the man, "Tell your boss McVey wants to see him—alone."

"He already knows," the Texan said. "He'll be along in his own good time." He left the post, descended the steps, went to the hitch-rack. "But I'll tell him you got here." He jerked loose the roan's reins, swung to the saddle. Then, with a grin, he added, "Better put your affairs in order while you're waiting, bucko. No man ever bucked Matt Brandon's gun and lived to tell about it."

"There's always a first time," McVey said. "How'd he find out I was gunning for him?"

"Russ's widow came back from XO Ranch to tell him."

"Where is she now?"

"Over at the Wyoming House, I reckon," the Texan said. He grinned again. "Jess and Luke sure gave you a working over, bucko. Your face looks like a mule kicked you." Then, turning sober, he added, "Why don't you be smart and admit you can't beat the Brandon's, McVey?"

"Never mind that," McVey told him. "Just go tell old Matt that I'm done fooling around with him. Say I'll be waiting here in town for him—and if he doesn't show up I'll come after him."

The Texan said, "All right, it's your funeral," and rode off, heading east out of town.

McVey left his horse at the Territorial's hitch-rack and went across to the Welcome Cafe for supper. He ordered ham and eggs, hungry when he gave the order but finding his appetite gone when the food was placed before him. He was no gunfighter; more, he believed in living and letting live.

Actually, he had done his best to avoid violence. He had faced Matthew Brandon and sworn to the lie that he had killed Russ in self-defense. He had pleaded with Linda to get the old Texan to call it quits. But they wouldn't have it that way.

So there was nothing left but to kill Brandon, or to be killed. This rotten business had to be stopped, McVey told himself, even if a gunfight were the only way to bring it to an end. He forced himself to eat, and lingered over two cups of coffee after finishing the food.

He had thrown a challenge at Brandon, and if the man went by the cow country code he would accept it. On the other hand, Matthew Brandon was a tricky old rannihan and McVey could not be sure that he would come alone for the showdown. In that case, he would have to avoid a fight, McVey reflected, and wait for another try at his man.

If Brandon came alone, McVey had no doubt that he would be a match for him. He had a queasy feeling inside him now, but it was not panicky fear. He would stand up to the Texan and know that they were on equal terms. He did not believe that Brandon was invincible with a gun.

McVey was just paying for his meal when Burt Ivor came into the restaurant. He said, "Been looking for you, Tom. A Brandon man gave me a message for you. He said to tell you that Matt Brandon would ride into town as soon as it's full dark." He stared at McVey. "What's up—a showdown between you two?"

McVey nodded.

"You trust him to meet you fair and square?"

"I don't know. I'll just have to wait and see."

"I'm the only one of our crowd left in town," Ivor said. "I'd offer to side you, but I don't see what help I'd be if Brandon comes in with a bunch of his gunhands."

McVey smiled thinly. "No, you wouldn't be any help in that case, Burt."

It occurred to him that George Stacey was right. The Brandon crowd had the Indian sign on this whole range; the little ranchers would fight Matthew Brandon in an underhanded fashion, by making a deal with Riordan or the devil himself, but they wouldn't buck him in a fair fight.

He added, "If Matt brings his gunhands with him, I'll clear out and wait until I catch him alone. I've a hunch he'll come alone."

LEAVING the restaurant, he stopped on the board sidewalk outside to build a cigarette. His gaze went automatically to the Wyoming House, and he saw Linda in the hotel doorway. She was watching him. He felt a quick anger, but it quickly passed.

He could not blame her too much. It was understandable that a woman would want her

husband's killer punished, and that she would go to any lengths to learn the identity of the killer. Too, she had tried to stop Jess and Luke when their beating of him became too vicious. No, he could not be angry with Linda. He knew that she wanted to talk to him, so he started toward the hotel. She crossed the porch to the steps to meet him.

She said, "I warned Matthew."

He nodded. "I know. And now you're warning me?"

"I suppose I am," she said. "I don't want anyone killed, McVey. I saw enough violence at your place. I'm not sure I even want to see the murderer of my husband hanged. There's nothing I can do about that, though. The Brandons will keep on like this until they learn who the murderer is. But I can at least try to stop you and Matthew Brandon from trying to kill each other. McVey, I really believe that it's you who will die tonight. So when I ask you to leave town, it's your life I'm trying to save."

"Well, thanks, anyway."

"You won't leave?"

"I won't run. What happened to me will happen again if I don't have this showdown with Matt tonight. And the next time I may be beaten to death. If I've got to die, I'd rather it be by a gun than by a beating."

"It needn't be either way. You could go away, far away."

He shook his head. "I won't let the Brandons or anybody else drive me off this range. I was the first cattleman to settle here and—well, this is where I intend to live out the rest of my days."

She regarded him despairingly. "Tell me this," she said. "Is he really worth it? Are you so sure you should give your life for the man you're shielding?"

He thought about that, dragging hard on his cigarette. Then he said, "This thing has grown bigger than that. At first it was just a matter of keeping the Brandons from harming a man who did only what he had reason to do. Now it's a matter of keeping Matthew Brandon from making trouble for this whole range. He's bringing in too many cattle. That will hurt the other ranchers—the ones who really belong here. They'll fight back, one way or another. It could get to be a bloody feud if I don't stop Matthew Brandon."

"You want it, then? You really want to kill or be killed?"

"No, not that. But it's something that has to be."

She looked at him in silence for a moment then said, "Then there's nothing more for me to say."

She turned and disappeared into the hotel.

McVey walked to the Territorial. Burt Ivor stood with a small group of townsmen in front of the saloon. They fell silent as McVey drew near. He felt them staring at his back as he went inside. Faro Ed Walsh sat at a table reading a Cheyenne newspaper.

He looked up, and showed that he'd heard of the planned showdown—from Ivor, McVey supposed—by saying, "Luck to you, McVey."

"Since when does a gambling man believe in luck," McVey said. "I had an idea professional gamblers only bet on a sure thing."

"In the game you're playing," Walsh said, "you haven't made sure the odds are with you. Have a drink on the house, McVey."

McVey said, "Thanks," and had the drink the bartender poured.

He then went to the rear of the place and sat at the deal table. He picked up a deck of cards, shuffled it, started a game of solitaire. Several men came in and lined up at the bar; they were townsmen, one of them George Stacey. The banker gave McVey a nod and a worried look.

Four cowpunchers for the big ML outfit appeared, their measured looks at McVey telling him that they'd already heard of his showdown-to-be with Matthew Brandon. Burt Ivor was in and out of the place, visiting the bar frequently. It was well past full dark when he came in with news.

"McVey," Ivor said, "he just rode in."

McVey threw down the cards. "Alone?"

"Alone," McIvor said. "He's tricky, though. I was watching for him to come from the east—out where his herd made the river crossing. But he circled around and showed up at that alley between the hotel and Sloane's general store."

His voice was loud with excitement, and

he had everyone's sharp attention. "The woman—Russ's widow—came from the Wyoming House and talked to him. Then he got off his horse and crossed the street. He's in the shadows alongside Humbolt's wagon shed, waiting for you."

"All right," McVey said, and rose.

The only sound in the Territorial now was that of his boot heels striking the plank flooring as he walked toward the door, but as he passed George Stacey the banker said, "Luck, Tom." He refused to meet McVey's gaze, however. McVey knew it bothered Stacey to see another man facing the consequences of an act of his.

McVEY stepped from the saloon's doorway. Several men on the porch moved aside for him. The wagonyard of the Humbolt Freighting Company was at an angle across the street, an easy gunshot away. There was a shack that served as an office facing the street; the corrals and the long shed stood farther back. It was inky black over there. Brandon had picked a good spot.

McVey descended the steps and went to his horse at the hitch-rack. He drew his Winchester from its saddle scabbard, levered a cartridge into its firing chamber.

A couple going visiting somewhere approached, and Burt Ivor called from the doorway, "Turn back the way you came, folks. There's trouble here." His voice was sharp with excitement. The man took the woman by the arm, and they turned hurriedly away.

At that moment Brandon's voice came from the darkness of the wagonyard. "How many in this with you, anyway, McVey?"

"Nobody's in it with me, Brandon," McVey called back. "I'm the one your sons beat up for you. And I'll square that on my own."

"All right. Just so I know."

McVey caught no shaky uncertainty in the Texan's voice. Rather, it seemed that there was a measure of eagerness in it. The man was an old hand at this sort of game, and he had the confidence that came of experience. On his part, McVey's confidence was a wobbly thing, and only his resolve buoyed his flagging spirits. He wasn't even sure of what to do, except that he must not do the foolhardy thing and go directly into he wagonyard after Brandon.

Brandon called, "I'm waiting, McVey." His tone was mocking. "What's the matter—lost your nerve?"

McVey drew a deep breath, and moved away from his horse to the middle of the street, with his rifle at hip level. He swerved abruptly, heading toward South Street, but kept his eyes toward the wagonyard. He'd taken but a half-dozen steps when Brandon opened fire on him.

He saw the muzzle flash, heard the heavy blast of the .45 cartridge. The range was a bit long for accurate shooting with a hand gun. Knowing this, he dropped flat to the ground and hugged his Winchester to him. He drove two fast shots at the spot where he'd seen the flash of powder flame. Nothing happened—no outcry lifted to tell him that he'd hit his man, no second shot was driven at him.

He waited briefly, then sprang up and, keeping bent over, ran around the corner of the building at the corner of Main and South. He drew up short at the side of the building, his breathing more rapid and his heart pounding harder than so short a sprint should have caused. Something at least akin to fear was at work on him.

He moved along the wall, came to the rear of the building. He peered around the corner, saw from there the back wall of the long, squat wagon shed. Moving warily, he drew close enough to the shed to make sure that Brandon was not hiding in its shadows.

He was about to move around the end of the shed, when there sounded behind him the rattle of an empty bottle accidentally kicked. He whipped around, caught a glimpse of the Texan's tall, gaunt shape. Brandon had circled and stalked him into South Street, and now was in the inky darkness at the rear of the corner building.

Brandon's gun opened up, firing once, twice and a third time as fast as he could work hammer and trigger. Having thrown himself flat again, McVey heard the slugs thump against the planks of the shed. He fired again, and

again missed. And he had another glimpse of Brandon, retreating now back into South Street.

McVey rose and moved toward the street, where he spotted his man on the opposite side, and still retreating. He brought his rifle up, tried to bead the Texan as he crossed a patch of lamplight from the window of a house. But Brandon abruptly altered his course, causing him to miss once more.

The Texan vanished now, his maneuvering taking him between two houses at the end of the street. McVey crossed South, moved along a narrow alleyway. He came to a small barn, halted in its shadows, waited for his quarry to appear behind the house between which he'd vanished. No more than a few minutes passed, but it seemed to McVey that he was waiting out eternity.

A dog started a ferocious barking by a shack along the river. McVey peered in that direction and saw a movement in the darkness between the shack and Tolliver & Mabrey's Lumberyard. He lifted his Winchester, but thought better of firing. The range was now long even for a rifle. The dog uttered a final bark, and then silence closed down.

Making sure that Brandon was actually headed for the lumberyard, McVey left the barn and aimed for the same place. He kept low, moved as silently as possible, but Brandon either had very keen hearing or possessed cat's eyes. For the man was aware of him.

HIS voice still edged with mockery, Brandon called, "Now I'm done running, McVey!"

With that he disappeared among the high stacks of lumber, still green from the sawmills in the nearby hills. The piles of lumber formed a maze. He had chosen the logical spot for making a final stand.

The advantage was all his, for he merely had to stay hidden there and wait, with his gun cocked and leveled, for McVey to walk into his line of vision. And McVey had no choice but do just that.

He put down his rifle, drew his revolver. He crept toward the yard and reached a pile of heavy planks without drawing Brandon's fire. He crouched by the lumber, peering back through the yard. He waited several long minutes, then, seeing and hearing nothing of the Texan, worked his way deeper among the towering stacks.

He was about convinced that Brandon was waiting motionless at the far side of the yard, when he heard a stealthy sound behind him. He faced about and lay flat on the ground, with his left side pressed against the piled boards. A shadowy figure appeared in the narrow aisleway between the towering stacks. It was Brandon, on the prowl.

The man took a few steps, then paused to peer about and to listen. He went on, then stopped again. He kept close to the stacks of lumber, never exposing himself in the center of the aisle. He drew close to where McVey lay, almost to within pointblank range. McVey's finger was tightening on the trigger, when Brandon abruptly turned and went back the way he'd come.

McVey called, "This way, Brandon—this way!"

Brandon whipped around, fired. The slug struck above McVey's head. Instantly after firing, Brandon swung about in attempted flight. McVey made sure of his aim, drove his shot home. He heard an incoherent cry burst from the Texan, saw him go down.

But Brandon was no sooner on the ground than he fired again. This slug came close. It knocked splinters from a board beside McVey, one sliver striking his face. He heaved over in a roll, kept rolling until he came up against another pile of lumber. Brandon fired twice more, wildly.

Crawling, McVey took cover behind the end of the stack. He lost sight of Brandon for a moment, then saw him crawling back through the runway. McVey left his cover, went after his man. Brandon heard him coming and pushed himself over into a sitting position, with his back to a stack of boards. He brought his gun to bear, squeezed the trigger. The hammer fell on a fired cartridge, and Brandon, with an oath, flung the empty gun from him.

"All right, damn you," he said. "Pull the trigger and get it over with!"

McVey was already squeezing the trigger, but now, without conscious thought, he eased up on the pressure before the hammer was

tripped. His hatred of Matthew Brandon was as wicked a thing as ever, but the man was helpless now and McVey couldn't bring himself to kill in cold blood.

McVey said, "You're not the mighty Matthew Brandon any longer. You've got a bullet in you. Your gun is empty. You're nothing, Brandon, nothing at all. With one finger I could take your life. But I won't."

"If it were the other way around, I wouldn't hesitate a second, McVey!"

"Don't talk me into doing as you would do, old man."

Brandon started to laugh, but instantly choked it off. A spasm of pain twisted his face.

He gripped his left thigh with both hands. His wound was several inches above the knee. McVey saw a spreading stain of blood on the pants leg. Brandon looked up at him, his bearded face stiff from pain.

"You're good, McVey," he said. "You're a better man than I figured. But what now? Are you going to stand there and watch me bleed to death?"

"I want you off my neck, Brandon."

"There are two ways you can get me off. Killing me is one way. Telling me the name of the man who murdered my son is the other."

"I'll tell you something. If anybody is to blame for Russ's death, it's you. You sent Russ up here without his wife. You wouldn't let him bring her to Wyoming. That would have been all right with some men, but Russ had a rotten streak. He rode up to a ranch one day and found a woman alone. He took the woman, Brandon—against her will, by force. If his wife had been at XO Ranch with him, he probably wouldn't have pulled a fool stunt like that. So the only one you can blame is yourself."

"You're lying!"

"I'm telling you the truth."

"Who's the woman?"

"You'll never know," McVey told him. "You don't need to know. Like I said, the blame is yours as much as Russ's. The woman and her husband—" He broke off, hearing someone behind him. He swung around and saw Linda.

SHE'D followed the sound of the shots, McVey realized. Concern for her father-in-law had brought her to the lumberyard when the guns no longer racketed. Now there was a stricken look on her face that told McVey she'd overheard what he had just said to Brandon.

He said, "I didn't want you to know."

There was still bluster in Brandon. He said, "Don't believe a word he says, daughter! He lied under oath the other day, and he's lying now!"

Linda went to him, sank to her knees beside him. "No, it's the truth," she said dully. "I don't want to believe such a thing of Russ, but—well, if there was ever an honorable man, it's McVey. He warned me not to try to learn the truth, because it would hurt." She sobbed, unable to say more. Then, getting hold of herself: "How bad is your wound, Dad?"

"I've had worse," Brandon said, and put an arm about her shoulders. His voice was gentle now. "You shouldn't have come here. This is something you shouldn't have heard."

"I'll be all right," she said. "But you—I'll have to go for help."

McVey said, "I'll send somebody to help you with him, Linda." Then, to the man, "What about it, Brandon? Do I get you off my neck? Are you calling it quits?"

Brandon looked at him, his bearded face scowling. He was slow to answer, but finally said, "You've got nothing more to fear from me, unless I find out that you're lying. And, damn it, I hope I do find that out!"

McVey said, "All right." To the girl he added, "I'm sorry you had to learn the truth."

Linda looked up at him, and even in the darkness he saw the tears on her cheeks. She said, "Thanks for not taking his life, McVey. Thanks for being the man you are."

He turned away without a reply to that, realizing as he left the lumberyard that he had ended the threat of the Brandons to himself, but the range itself was still at their outfit's mercy. He felt as though he had failed in what he'd set out to do.

But he knew that, given the same opportunity again, he still would not be able to kill

Matthew Brandon in cold blood. He retrieved his rifle, walked toward the lights of the town. The blasting of guns had aroused all Riverbend, and now people were in the streets to stare at him.

A man called, "You kill the Texan, McVey?" He answered with a shake of his head.

In front of the Territorial he was accosted by Burt Ivor. "You got him, eh?"

"I got him with a bullet in his leg."

"Why didn't you finish him off when you had the chance?"

"You ever try to put a bullet in a helpless man?" he asked, and saw Ivor turn shamefaced. "The girl is there. Send someone out to give her a hand with him, will you?"

He swung to the saddle and, not seeing George Stacey among the group in front of the saloon, turned in the direction of the banker's house. Tonight he did not take pains to avoid being seen, and he found Stacey at the door when he reined in there.

Stacey said, "It's over now, Tom?"

McVey dismounted. "He's not dead, but it's over. I've got to talk with you, George. Let's go inside, eh?"

They went in to the parlor. McVey explained what had happened in the lumberyard, and the explanation caused a look of annoyance to settle on Stacey's face. Clara came into the room while McVey was speaking.

She said, "You're safe, Tom. That's what counts."

But her husband said, "Nothing's settled. Brandon is still a threat to all of us. He'll not be satisfied with what you told him. He'll try to find the woman. And if he should find her —" he gave Clara a bitter look—"he'll get the idea that Russ wasn't so much to blame as you'd told him."

Clara looked deeply wounded.

McVEY said, "George, don't say such a thing—don't think such a thing—about your wife." He no longer had any doubt; Stacey was letting this trouble destroy all that was good between himself and his wife. "I've got Brandon's word that he'll drop the matter. Better still, Russ's widow will see to it that he does. So it's over. I've got nothing to fear now, and neither have you. That means you've got to let up on Brandon. You've got to give up your plan to ruin him."

"He's still a threat to this whole range," Stacey said. "You haven't changed that. If I can hurt him badly enough so that he'll leave the country, everybody will be better off—including you."

"George, I'm thinking of your welfare," McVey told him flatly. "You've made a deal with Jake Riordan, an outlaw. If that ever comes out your reputation will be ruined. If Brandon finds it out, he'll kill you. You've made plans to get at the Texan through manipulating his company's stock, according to what you told me the other day, and that too is reason for Brandon to come gunning for you. I'm giving you sound advice, George—drop it before it's too late."

"I can't," Stacey said, his face hardening. "It's gone too far. The matter's out of my hands. A half-dozen ranchers have already agreed to give Riordan a free hand, and by tomorrow most of the others will have been contacted by those six."

"You can drop the other part of the scheme."

"No. The Stacey banks in Cheyenne and St. Louis are already working on the stockholders of the Brandon Cattle Company. That's out of my hands, too."

McVey frowned. "George, the truth is that you hate all the Brandons, because of Russ. You want to ruin them." He shook his head. "It's no good, George. You're playing a dangerous game."

"I'll take my chances."

"All right," McVey said. "But I hope you don't end up with that crowd on your neck—now that I've got it off mine."

With that, he left the house and rode from Riverbend.

He rode without fear now. Too, his hatred for the Brandons was gone. But he had no real peace of mind. The feud wasn't settled, and for that George Stacey was to blame. Still, he was washing his hands of it. He wanted no part of what happened from now on.

He would return to his cow camp up in the

Crow Reservation and send Al Henry back to the ranch, and there he'd forget the whole rotten mess. And he would try to forget, too, a lovely dark-haired girl named Linda.

So McVey told himself, as he rode through the night. But the rhythmic beat of his horse's hoofs started a chant in his mind, *You can't forget . . . you can't forget. . . .* It wouldn't be ignored.

SUMMER was slipping away. The days were growing short; the nights were chill. The grass began to take on a golden hue. The M Bar V steers were fat and would soon be ready for shipping.

In the weeks since his showdown with Matthew Brandon, Tom McVey had lived a hermit-like existence. He saw Indians frequently, of course; sometimes a band of Crows would stop at his camp to beg food or tobacco. Twice during the summer he'd ridden over to the Agency, a dozen miles away, to visit with the Agent. But mostly he was alone at Deer Creek—alone and lonely.

He had never minded it in the past, but now loneliness bothered him. He knew the reason for it—Linda. He hadn't been able to forget her. Indeed, the memory of her became a disturbing thing.

He had come to know that he wanted for his own this woman he could not possibly have. The nights were the worst. He would lie sleepless in his blankets, thinking of her, wondering if she were in Riverbend, at XO Ranch, or gone back to Texas.

He returned one afternoon from driving the steers closer to camp, when they'd drifted too far west along the Deer, and found Linda there.

Al Henry had brought her. They'd off-saddled their horses, started a fire, cooked a meal. They were eating when he rode in. Seeing Linda made the blood flow faster in his veins. She seemed more wonderful than he remembered. But as her gaze met his, he saw anger in her eyes. He dismounted, walked toward them.

He said, "This is a surprise."

Linda said, "I had to talk to you. It's important."

He hunkered down, took out makings. "Something wrong?"

"I think you know there is," she said. "I believed that when Matthew Brandon gave you his word that he would give up seeking to avenge Russ's death there would be no more trouble. It hasn't worked out that way. He's kept his word, McVey, but you and your friends have been making war on him ever since that night in Riverbend."

He said, "Not me. I have nothing to do with whatever's happened."

"I can't believe that."

He finished fashioning the cigarette, lit it. "I came straight here after my fight with Matt," he said. "I had nothing to do with anything that's happened since. The truth is, Linda, Matt Brandon asked for trouble when he trailed in those two herds. That made every rancher on the range his enemy."

"It's open range," Linda said. "Free grass."

"Sure. But the other ranchers figure they have first claim on it. They feel that they can't afford to share it with an outfit as big as the Brandon Cattle Company."

"But that's no reason for their trying to ruin him," Linda said bitterly. "I think they've got another reason—or one of them has. McVey, I believe that the man you've shielded—the man who killed Russ—planned it. I believe he isn't satisfied with having taken my husband's life, but wants to hurt the rest of us Brandons. That's why I came to you.

"So far as Matthew Brandon is concerned, the feud ended that night in the lumberyard. I'll take your word for it that it ended then for you, as well. But this man you've been shielding wouldn't have it ended, even though he too should have been bound by the bargain." She was no longer angry. She regarded McVey pleadingly. "I'm right about him?" she asked.

"I guess you are, Linda," he said. "He has a hand in it. But the other ranchers are in on it, too. Just how bad are things for Brandon?"

"Worse than I can tell you. He recovered from his wound, but he's no longer his old self. Something has gone out of him. His

spirit is crushed. A part of it is what you told him about Russ. That tore him apart. Then Matthew has to face each day the knowledge that he is surrounded by enemies, men who want to ruin him."

McVey listened with a troubled frown on his face as she went on to explain how rustlers were running off Brandon cattle by the hundreds. Matthew Brandon was unable to stop the rustling. He was handicapped by a lack of knowledge of the country, and by the refusal of the other ranchers to help him deal with the thieves.

He was shorthanded, too. Besides his sons, he had only the six men in the XO crew to help him. He'd not been able to keep the big bunch of riders who'd come up the trail with him. He could not pay them. The Brandon Cattle Company was in financial difficulties.

ACCORDING to Linda, someone—she suspected the man who had killed her husband—had spread rumors among the Brandon Cattle Company stockholders that the firm was going broke and that Brandon's mismanagement was to blame. The stockholders had ousted him as company president, and the man replacing him had given the Texan an ultimatum. Brandon was to have ninety days in which to put the company's two ranches on a paying basis. If he failed in that time, he would be removed as manager—the only position he now held with the Brandon Cattle Company.

Linda said, "If that happens, he'll have nothing. He's far too old to get a fresh start. And it's no longer easy to start a cattle outfit. Range is too scarce. Nowadays it takes money to found a ranch. So he can't gather what cattle are left and move off this range. He has nowhere to take them. Tom, it's a terrible thing to see a man like Matthew Brandon being ruined."

McVey nodded. "What do you want of me?"

"I want the name of the man who planned this thing."

"I'm sorry, I can't give it to you."

"He's in the wrong now, if he wasn't before."

[Turn page]

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McVey shook his head. "I can't give him away," he said. "Matt Brandon would go gunning for him, or Luke and Jess would. No, I can't throw a friend to the wolves."

Linda was silent a moment. Then she looked at Al Henry. She caught his eye, and he, having finished his meal, nodded as though he understood what she wanted. He rose and moved out of earshot. Linda set her tin plate on the ground, most of her meal uneaten.

She said, "Tom, coming here was my own idea. Matthew had nothing to do with it, not directly. In fact, his pride made him argue against it. But I did come for him. I have no family of my own. My parents are dead. I've lost my husband. His father and brothers are the only people in the whole world who are close to me.

"I'm fond of Matthew Brandon. No matter what you think of him, he's a fine man. I believe he's a great man. He helped open the West. He was a frontiersman, a pioneer. True, he has his faults. He believes that a man, especially his sort of man, is a law unto himself. So you're right. He would go gunning for the man who's trying to ruin him, or send Luke and Jess.

"But I came here for help, and I intend to get it one way or another. I won't be turned away empty-handed—not by you, Tom. Since you won't tell me who the man is, I'm asking you to go to him and get him to let up on Matthew."

"It will do no good, Linda."

"I'm asking you to try. Do you know why I dare ask?"

He nodded. "Because you know I'm in love with you."

"So?"

"I tell you it would do no good."

She said, "Very well," and got to her feet. "If you won't help me, I'll do what must be done—alone." She stood before him, tall and defiant. "I'll find out who he is. I'll find him through his wife. I'll ride from ranch to ranch and talk to every woman on the Powder River range. The woman concerned won't admit that she was involved with my husband, but I'll know her. I'll sense it, when I find the right one. Then I'll know the man—and I'll tell Luke and Jess."

McVey rose, looking shocked. "You can't do such a thing, Linda—go around asking one woman after another if she's the one Russ attacked. You can't."

"I can and I will," she said. "It can't harm Russ now, and it will help Matthew. I'm in earnest, Tom."

He nodded. "I suppose you are," he said. "All right, you win. I'll have a talk with the man. It will do no good at all, but I'll try to reason with him."

He called to Al Henry, and when the man came limping toward him he said, "Al, you'll have to hold down the camp again for a while. I'm riding south with Mrs. Brandon."

THEY covered about twenty miles before sundown, then stopped for an hour to rest the horses and to eat the cold grub McVey had packed in his saddlebags. The set out again an hour later and kept on the move until nearly midnight, then halted by a lonely little creek. He kindled a fire after staking out the horses, then sat by it, his back to Linda as she spread her blankets and turned in.

Tonight his restlessness was gone. He had found release in just being with her. She was indeed good for him, even though he'd had no sign from her that she considered him as anything other than someone who could be useful to her. He had to face the fact that she was not interested in him as a man.

She broke in on his thoughts. "Goodnight, Tom."

He looked at her over his shoulder. "Goodnight, Linda."

It meant nothing, of course. But at least they were finally on friendly terms.

They were in the saddle again at dawn, then rode up to Bar Z Ranch at about nine o'clock. They were given breakfast by the rancher's wife. Clay Harmon owned the Bar Z; he was a middle-aged man, but his wife was no more than thirty. She was a buxom, blonde woman, friendly by nature and glad to have visitors.

McVey saw how Linda studied the woman. He knew that she came to the proper conclusion, that Nellie Harmon was not the one upon whom Russ Brandon had forced himself. The two women hit it off quite well after

Linda reached that conclusion, and they engaged in woman talk until McVey interrupted and said they had better move along.

They reached the Barton ranch at Granite Mound shortly after sundown. The Barton brothers were bachelors, and so there was no woman there for Linda to wonder about. They had supper with the Bartons, who were patently charmed by McVey's companion and curious as to why he was traveling with her. McVey did not enlighten them. He was sure that Frank and Len Barton were among those ranchers who had agreed that Jake Riordan should be unmolested while he raided the Brandon herd. They rode on at nightfall, and two hours later reached XO Ranch.

The windows of both main house and bunkhouse glowed with lamplight. As McVey and the girl rode into the yard, the bunkhouse door swung open and a man peered out at them.

"Red, that you?" he called. McVey saw that it was Tip Ryan.

Linda said, "It's Linda, Tip. Tom McVey's with me. What's Red doing out at this time of night?"

"He and MacGregor are prowling, hoping to catch some rustlers at work," Ryan said. "Why did you bring McVey here?"

"He's to do something for me," she said. "Put up our horses, will you, Tip?"

Ryan said, "Sure," in a tone that told McVey he would do most everything Linda Brandon asked.

They swung over to the main house, a small frame building, and dismounted. They entered to find Matthew Brandon sitting by the fire and another man, a stranger to McVey, at the center table with a ledger open before him and papers scattered about.

Linda introduced the stranger to McVey. He was Hal Everett, the new president of the Brandon Cattle Company. Everett rose, shook hands. He was a graying man of about fifty-five, and patently a townsman.

Brandon too had risen from his chair, but he did not offer to shake hands with McVey. There was hostility in his manner, but it was not expressed with his old bluster. The Texan had aged since McVey last saw him. McVey

[*Turn page*]

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found himself thinking that Linda had been right in saying that the man was no longer his old self.

Brandon said, "I didn't expect Linda to bring you here, McVey. I'd told her it would be useless for her to go to you. So I've been wrong about you again. Does your coming here mean that you're willing to give us a helping hand?"

"I promised Linda that I'd talk to the man behind the scheme to ruin you, Matt," McVey told him. "I doubt that it will do any good, though."

"That's all we can count on from you?"

"I'll never betray my friends. You know that."

Everett said, "Suppose we make it worth your while, McVey?"

McVey gave him a frowning look, said, "I'll never sell them out, either."

Linda said, "Talk it over in a friendly way." She seemed fearful that tempers would flare up. "Sit down, Tom. I'll make some coffee." She left the parlor.

McVey seated himself on the sofa and started rolling a cigarette. Everett returned to his chair at the table, but Brandon stood by the fireplace with his hands clasped behind him and his head bowed. The fire and brimstone had indeed gone out of the Texan, and to Tom McVey that seemed somehow sad. The old Matthew Brandon had been one man in a thousand.

Everett lighted a cigar, then said, "I've heard all about you, McVey, from Matt and Linda. I understand your position. Now I'd like you to know where I and a lot of other people stand. I'd like to discuss the matter without harsh words on either side."

McVey finished rolling his cigarette. "Go ahead."

EVERETT said, "I'll tell you to start with that I know little about the cattle business. I'm a merchant. I own general stores in Cheyenne and Denver. But I invested all my spare cash in the Brandon Cattle Company. I own twenty thousand dollars' worth of its stock. When I bought those shares, the cattle business seemed a sure thing. But now the Brandon Cattle Company is headed for the rocks."

He paused, puffed on his cigar. "A dozen other people own large blocks of Brandon stock, and about two hundred people each hold a few shares. I'm determined to protect my investment, and as president I'm duty bound to protect the other stockholders' interests.

"Now, sir, several months ago rumors were spread that the Brandon Cattle Company was mismanaged and in financial difficulties. Three weeks ago paid notices appeared in newspapers in Cheyenne, St. Louis, Dodge City, and several Texas towns, offering Brandon Cattle Company shares for sale at one-tenth of their par value. Interested parties were to write to a box number at the Cheyenne post office.

"I wrote, saying that I would buy the advertiser's shares. I got no reply. Those notices were fraudulant, McVey. They were inserted in the newspapers with the intention of scaring the stockholders. The ruse succeeded. Some of the stockholders are unloading their shares at a loss—out of panic. Who is buying them up I haven't yet found out. But it's the man who wants to ruin Matt, I'm sure—the man you insist on shielding, McVey."

McVey said, "You could be right."

"At the same time," Everett went on, "rustlers are making off with so many of our cattle that if they're not stopped soon the losses will break the company. The other ranchers on this range are in cahoots with the thieves, and that makes it difficult for Matt to put an end to the stealing. Right now, his sons are out—and have been for two weeks—trying to get a line on the rustlers. I doubt if they'll have any luck."

He paused, studied McVey intently for a long while. Then he said, "There's only one way to break this thing up, and that's by our dealing with the man who planned it. McVey, the company is in no position to offer a reward, but I, personally, will pay five thousand dollars to you—or anybody else—for the name of this man."

McVey started to speak, but Everett cut him short by adding, "Think it over. Don't make your decision on the spur of the moment."

McVey shrugged, said, "All right, I'll think it over."

"And if you decided you can't betray him because he's your friend," Everett went on, "you can still earn that five thousand by getting him to back down. I don't care how you do it."

"I'll do what I promised Linda, anyway," McVey said. "Talk to him."

Everett nodded, seeming satisfied. Matthew Brandon said nothing. Everett was pinning his hopes on his five-thousand-dollar offer, but the Texan obviously was convinced that McVey could not be bribed.

They sat in an uneasy silence until Linda returned. She carried a tray, upon which were four cups of coffee. She had changed from her riding clothes into a dark green dress, and fixed her hair prettily atop her head. She had a freshly-scrubbed look, a shining wholesome look. She smiled directly at him. Perhaps it was merely a friendly smile, but it seemed to McVey that it was more than that.

She'd fixed herself up for him, wanted him to see her most attractive self. And she put a promise in her smile. Violence hadn't worked with him. He'd come out on top in a gunfight with Matthew Brandon. He wasn't likely to give in for Everett's five thousand dollars. But she knew he wanted her, and now she was trying to convince him that he might have her—if he betrayed his friend.

That was in her mind, McVey was sure. And he was suddenly bitterly angry with her.

(To be continued in the next issue)

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 78)

1. The Santa Fé Trail.
2. Oklahoma.
3. Yes. The Apelt Armadillo Farm near Comfort, Texas, was featured in a recent magazine.
4. Nogales, Arizona.
5. When a bronc rider spurs a bronc first on one side and then the other, it is called bicycling.
6. Spanish.
7. In Colorado, close to the Utah line, near where the Yampa River flows into Green River.
8. The front and rear leathers on top of the skirt of a western saddle are called jockeys.
9. Death Valley.
10. A horse wrangler.

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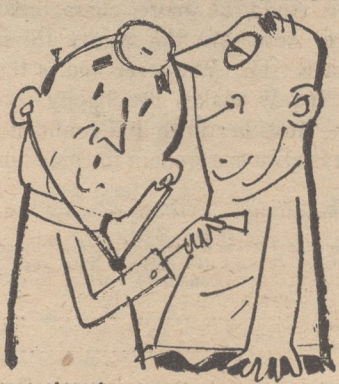

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The whole method can be learned in twenty minutes—twenty minutes of fascinating reading. All the extra equipment you need, you can buy locally at a cost of less than a dollar. Yet with it, you can come in after an hour or two of the greatest excitement of your life, with a stringer full. Not one or two miserable 12 or 14 inch over-sized keepers—but five or six real beauties with real poundage behind them. The kind that don't need a word of explanation of the professional skill of the man who caught them. Absolutely legal, too—in every state.

This amazing method was developed by a little group of professional fishermen. Though they are public guides, they rarely divulge their method to their patrons. They use it only when fishing for their own tables. It is probable that no man on your waters has ever *seen it*, ever *heard of it*, or ever *used it*. And when you have given it the first trial, you will be as closed-mouthed as a man who has suddenly discovered a gold mine. Because with this method you can fish with-in a hundred feet of the best fishermen in the county and pull in ferocious big ones while they come home empty handed. No special skill is required. The method is just as deadly in the hands of a novice as in the hands of an old timer. My method will be disclosed only to a few men in each area—men who will give me their word of honor not to give the method to anyone else.

Send me your name. Let me tell you how you can try out this deadly method of bringing in big bass from your "fished out" waters. Let me tell you why I let you try out my unusual method without risking a penny of your money on instructions or lures. There is no charge for this information, now or at any other time. Just your name is all I need. But I guarantee that the information I send you will make you a complete skeptic—until once you try it! And then, your own catches will fill you with disbelief. Send your name, today. This will be fun.

ERIK N. FARE

317 S. Milwaukee Avenue, Libertyville 2, Illinois

Erik N. Fare, 317 S. Milwaukee Ave., Libertyville 2, Illinois

Dear Mr. Fare: Send me complete information without any charge and without the slightest obligation. Tell me how I can learn your method of catching big bass from "fished out" waters, even when the old timers are reporting "No Luck."

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... **Zone**... **State**.....

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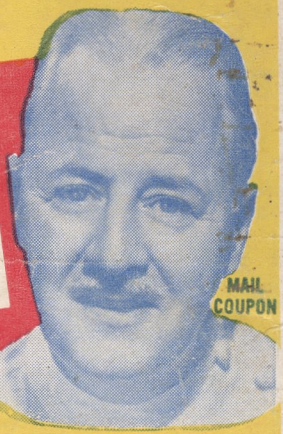

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IN ADDITION TO WHAT YOU MAY COLLECT FROM OTHER INSURANCE

Go to the Hospital for a day, a week, a month, a year or longer — your "NO TIME LIMIT" Policy pays Benefits for sickness or accidents just as long as you stay — *there's absolutely no time limit!* What blessed help! What's more, the "NO TIME LIMIT" Policy pays off in cash direct to you — regardless of what you may collect from any other insurance policy for the same disability, including Workmen's Compensation.

Policy Sold Only By Mail! Good Anywhere in U.S. & Possessions!

If sickness or accident puts you in a Hospital bed — you'll look back and thank your lucky stars you were wise enough to take out the "NO TIME LIMIT" Policy. It's the sensible, practical way to protect your own bank account against the onslaught of high Hospital costs. So ACT TODAY! Do it before trouble strikes.

YOU CAN GET MATERNITY

For slight extra cost husband and wife can have a MATERNITY RIDER attached to their regular Policy and this will entitle the couple to a liberal Benefit for childbirth confinement and care.

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Address .....

City ..... Zone ..... State .....

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