

L. Patrick Greene — James B. Hendryx — C. A. Seltzer

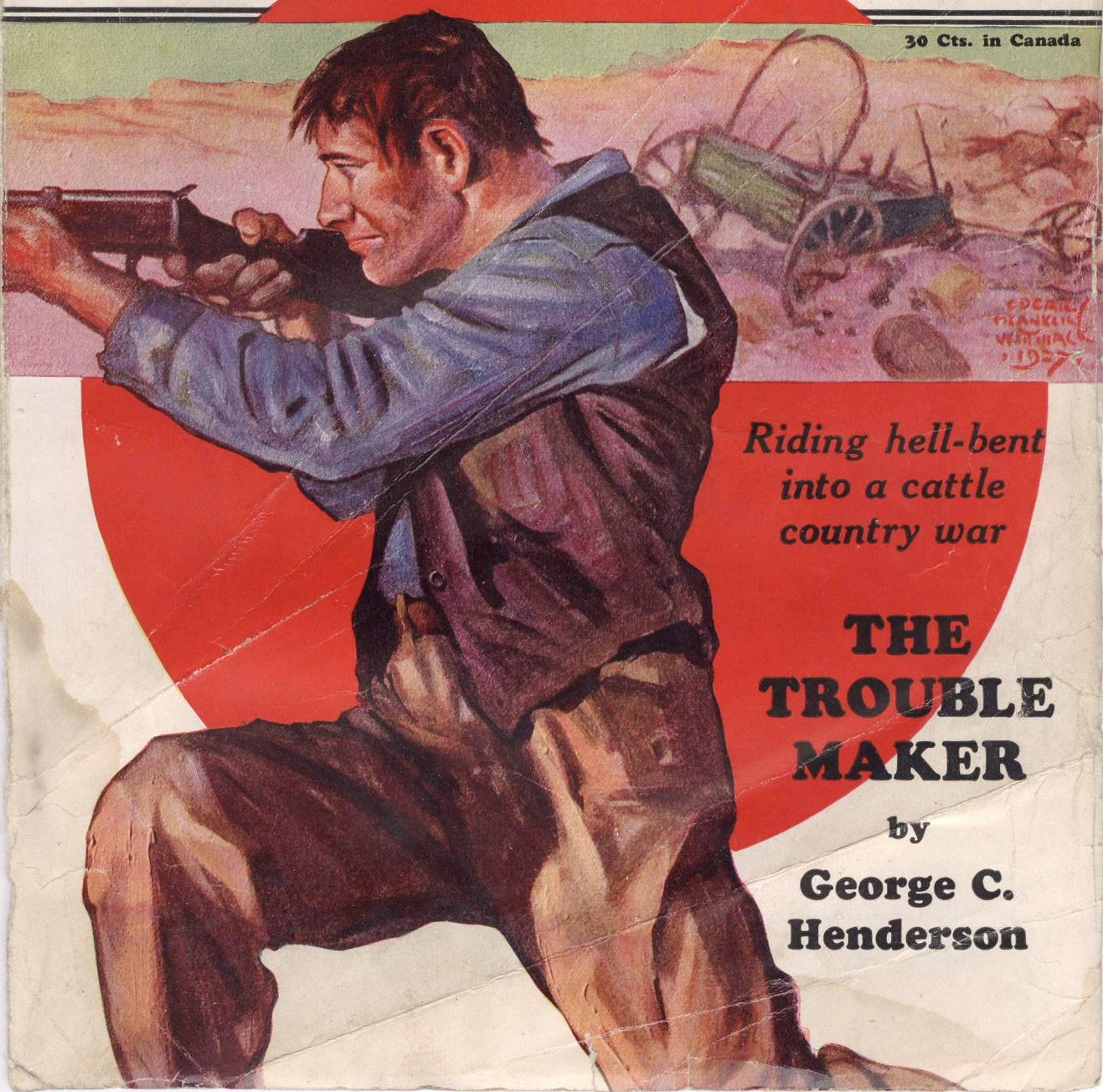
Short Stories

Twice A Month

MAR. 25th

25cts.

30 Cts. in Canada



*Riding hell-bent
into a cattle
country war*

THE TROUBLE MAKER

by

**George C.
Henderson**



Stop!
have you had
your WRIGLEY'S
today ?

"After every meal"



I-14

FREE

**This Genuine
Ivory Pocket
Rule**



Get out your
pencil and
copy the Jack
right now

← You get
this rule
for copying
this Jack →

Can you copy it? Try it. How you copy it may give me some idea of what kind of a draftsman you would be. If you are 16 years old or older and will mail me your sketch at once, I will send you, free, and prepaid, a draftsman's Ivory Pocket rule, shown here.

This will go to you entirely with my compliments.

In addition I will send you my book on Successful Draftsmanship. Don't wait. Copy the sketch now and mail it to me.

Draftsmen Needed In

Copy me
and get
Ivory Rule
Free. — Jack

Auto Work

The automobile industry is one of the greatest in America. Thousands of draftsmen needed. I'll train you for the work.

Electricity

Electricity is the coming motive force of the world. Draftsmen are needed in every department of this fascinating work. I'll train you at home. Get a job here.

Aviation

Aviation is just in its infancy. It is bound to expand to enormous proportions. Draftsmen are essential to it. I'll train you quick at home for drafting position.

Motor Bus Work

Motor bus building and motor bus transportation have become leading world industries. Hundreds of draftsmen engaged in this work. I'll show you the way.

Building Work

There will always be building. No structure can be erected without plans drawn by draftsmen. I'll make you an architectural draftsman at home.

Get My Free Pay-Raising Plan



Write to me. I will send you this new book. Not a catalog. My Pay Raising Plan and Money Making Advice. I can prove that John Savadge, trained by me, makes \$300 a month. Earl J. Dupree, trained by me, refused \$600 a month because he makes more in his own business. A. H. Bernier, trained by me, earns \$7000 to \$9000 a year. Arthur Dewalt, trained by me, makes more than \$400 a month. D. C. Stroop, trained by me, makes \$475 a month. L. V. Broughten, trained by me, makes \$300 a month.

I can give you many more names of Dobe trained draftsman who are making big salaries. They wrote to me just as I am asking you to write. They asked for my Free Book. They saw that opportunities in all of the great industries were tremendous for draftsman. Through drafting you can get into almost into any industry you want.

Money Back if Not Satisfied

What could be fairer than that? I don't ask you to take any chances. I train you under a positive Money Back Agreement. If my training does not satisfy you after you have finished you get every penny back.

Earn While You Learn

You can start earning extra money a few weeks after beginning my training. I give you special work and tell you how to make money.

Age or Lack of Education No Drawback

You do not need previous experience. You do not need to be a high school graduate. My practical, home study course gives you just the kind of training you need to become successful. Your spare time is all that is necessary.

Employment Service

After training you I help you to get a job without charging you a cent for this service. Employers of draftsmen come to me for men because they know that men I train make good.

I Train You at Home, New, Quick, Sure Way

My practical working method makes every step in learning drafting, as clear as a moving picture. That's why I train you so fast to be a draftsman.



You
get
these
tools
as my
student

YOU GET THESE FINE QUALITY, GENUINE, IMPORTED DRAFTSMAN'S TOOLS, just as soon as you become my student. No finer tools can be made for practical drafting work.

FREE RULE COUPON!

ENGINEER DOBE

1951 Lawrence Ave., Div. 15-03 Chicago

Here's the sketch. Send me free rule; also send me free of all cost books "Successful Draftsmanship" and "My Pay-Raising Plan" — how to earn money while learning and proof of big money paying positions.

Name.....Age.....

Address.....

Post Office.....State.....



"I will train you
at home." —
Engineer Dobe

**If You Earn
Less Than**

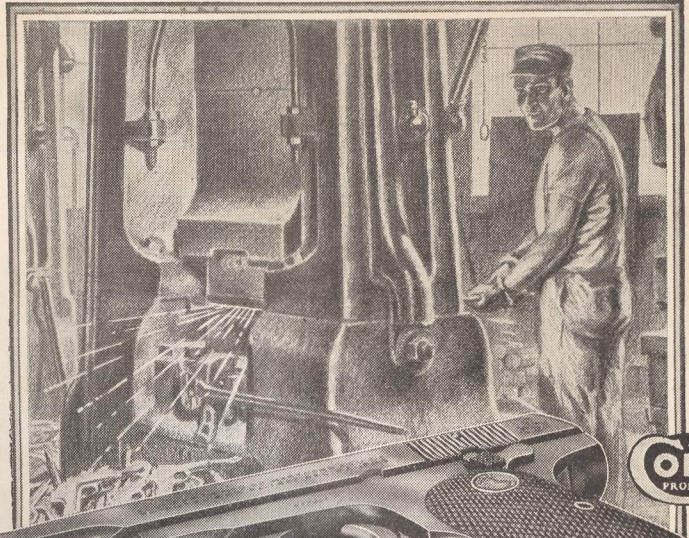
\$70 a Week

Write Me Today!

ACT NOW Before You Put this Magazine Down. Let me send you my books "Successful Draftsmanship" and "My Pay Raising Plan". Remember Draftsmen are needed everywhere. That's the kind of profession to get into. Get started now. Get into a better position, paying a good straight salary the year around.

Engineer Dobe 1951 Lawrence Avenue
Div. 15-03 Chicago, Ill.

In Colt's forging department batteries of giant hammers rain many ton blows on bars of glowing, red-hot steel, beating into shape and knitting firmly the fibres of the special steels.



"In what a forge and what a heat, Were shaped the anchors of thy hope"

LONGFELLOW

NO castings are used in COLTS. When you realize that the normal load of a modern revolver develops a pressure of fifteen thousand pounds per square inch there is an added satisfaction in knowing that COLTS are made to withstand this terrific strain with an extra fifty per cent safety margin. Hence you can readily appreciate why a drop-forged COLT "stands-up" and gives years of honest service. That's why a COLT costs more and is worth more.

The same exacting care, plus expert craftsmanship extends to all COLT manufacturing processes. The production of one COLT alone requires 564 machine operations, 124 hand operations and 332 visual and gauge inspections.

If you would like to start or join a local Revolver Club, send us your name. Women, too, may enroll.

Catalog No. 34 is ready.
Want it?

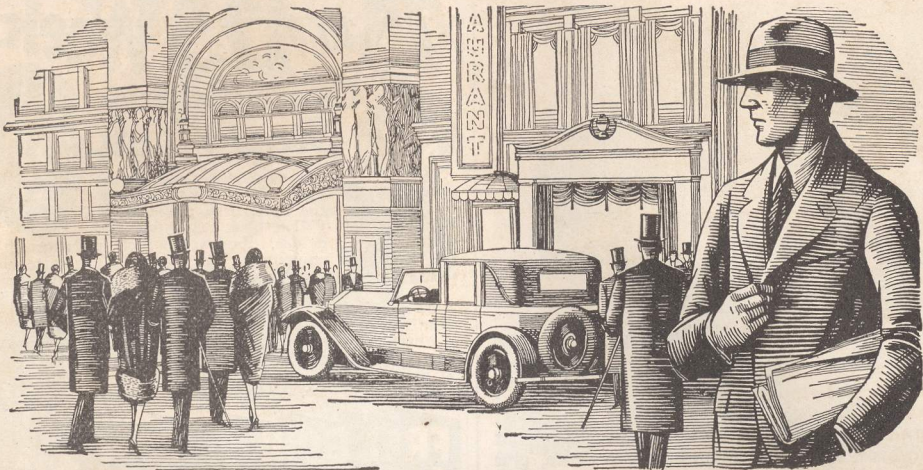
Every act performed in the manufacture of every COLT firearm is on the side of safety—your safety.

COLT has but one grade of quality—the highest possible to attain.

**COLT'S PATENT FIRE ARMS MFG. CO.
HARTFORD, CONN.**

Phil. B. Bekeart Co., Pacific Coast Repr., 717 Market St., San Francisco, Calif.

COLT • The World's Right Arm



Always outside of things—that's where I was just twelve short months ago. I just didn't have the cash, that was all. No theatres, no parties, no good restaurants. No real enjoyment of life. I was just getting by, just existing. What a difference to-day! I drive my own car, have a good bank account, enjoy all the amusements I please.

I Couldn't Get The Good Things of Life

Then I Quit My Job and "Found" Myself!

HOW does a man go about making more money? If I asked myself that question once, I asked it a hundred times!

I know the answer now—you bet. I know the way good money is made, and I'm making it. Gone forever are the days of cheap shoes, cheap clothes, walking home to save carfare, pinching pennies to make my salary last from one pay-day to the next one. I own one of the finest Radio stores you ever saw, and I get almost all the Radio service and repair work in town. The other Radio dealers send their hard jobs to me, so you can see how I stand in my line.

But—it's just a year ago that I was a poorly-paid clerk. I was struggling along on a starvation salary, until by accident my eyes were opened and I saw just what was the matter with me. Here's the story of just how it happened.

ONE of the big moments of my life had come. I had just popped the fatal question, and Louise said "Yes!"

Louise wanted to go in and tell her father about it right away, so we did. He sort of grunted when we told him the news, and asked Louise to leave us alone. And my heart began to sink as I looked at his face. "So you and Louise have decided to get married," he said to me when we were alone. "Well, Bill, just listen to me. I've watched you often here at the house with Louise and I think you are a pretty good, upstanding young fellow. I knew your father and mother, and you've always had a good reputation here, too. But just let me ask you just one question—how much do you make?"

"Twenty-eight a week," I told him. He didn't say a word—just wrote it down on a piece of paper.

"Have you any prospects of a better job or a good raise sometime soon?" he asked. "No, sir, I can't honestly say that I have." I admitted, "I'm looking for something better all the time, though."

"Looking, eh? How do you go about it?" Well, that question stopped me.

How did I? I was willing to take a better job if I saw the chance all right, but I certainly had laid no plans to make such a job for myself. When he saw my confusion he grunted. "I thought so," he said, then he held up some figures he'd been scribbling at.

"I've just been figuring out your family budget, Bill, for a salary of twenty-eight a week. I've figured it several ways, so you can take your pick of the one you like best. Here's Budget No. 1. I figure you can afford a very small unfurnished apartment, make your payments on enough plain, inexpensive furniture to fix such an apartment up, pay your electricity, gas and water bills, buy just about one meager outfit of clothes for both of you once a year, and save three dollars a week for sickness, insurance and emergencies. But you can't eat. And you'll have to go without amusements until you can get a good substantial raise in salary."

"I began to turn red as fire."

"That budget isn't so good after all," he said, glancing at me, "maybe Budget No. 2 will sound better—"

"That's enough, Mr. Sullivan," I said. "Have a heart. I can see things pretty clearly now, things I was kidding myself about before. Let me go home and think this over." And home I went, my mind in a whirl.

AT HOME I turned the problem over and over in my mind. I'd popped the question at Louise on impulse, without thinking it out. Everything Mr. Sullivan had said was gospel truth. I couldn't see anything to do, any way to turn. But I had to have more money.

I began to thumb the pages of a magazine which lay on the table beside me. Suddenly an advertisement seemed almost to leap out at my eyes, an advertisement telling of big opportunities for trained men to succeed in the great new Radio field. With the advertisement was a coupon offering a big free book full of information. I sent the coupon in, and in a few days received a handsome 64-page book, printed in two colors, telling all about the opportunities in the Radio field and how a man can prepare quickly and easily at home to take advantage of these opportunities. I read the book carefully, and when I finished it I made my decision.

What's happened in the twelve months since that day seems almost like a dream to me now. For ten of those twelve months, I've had a Radio business of my own! At first, of course, I started it as a little proposition on the side, under the guidance of the National Radio Institute, the institution that gave me my Radio training. It wasn't long before I was getting so much to do in the Radio line that I quit my measly little clerical job and devoted my full time to my Radio business.

Since that time I've gone right on up, always under the watchful guidance of my friends at the National Radio Institute. They would have given me just as much help, too, if I had wanted to follow some other

line of Radio besides building my own retail business, such as broadcasting, manufacturing, experimenting, sea operating, or any one of the score of lines they prepare you for. And to think that until that day I sent for their eye-opening book, I'd been walling "I never had a chance!"

Now, I'm making real money. Louise and I have been married six months, and there wasn't any kidding about budgets by Mr. Sullivan when we stepped off, either. I'll bet that today I make more money than the old boy himself.

Here's a real tip. You may not be as bad off as I was. But, think it over—are you satisfied? Are you making enough money, at work that you like? Would you sign a contract to stay where you are now for the next ten years, making the same money? If not, you'd better be doing something about it instead of drifting.

This new Radio game is a live-wire field of golden rewards. The work, in any of the 20 different lines of Radio, is fascinating, absorbing, well paid. The National Radio Institute—oldest and largest Radio home-study school in the world—will train you inexpensively in your own home to know Radio from A to Z and to increase your earnings in the Radio field.

Take another tip—No matter what your plans are, no matter how much or how little you know about Radio—clip the coupon below and look their free book over. It is filled with interesting facts, figures, and photos, and the information it will give you is worth a few minutes of anybody's time. You will place yourself under no obligation—the book is free and is gladly sent to anyone who wants to know about Radio. Just address J. E. Smith, President, National Radio Institute, Dept. 2-A, Washington, D. C.

J. E. SMITH, President,
National Radio Institute,
Dept. 2-A, Washington, D. C.

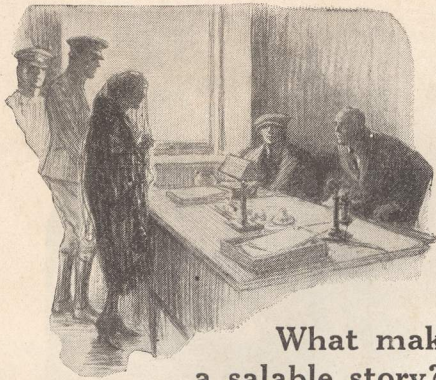
Dear Mr. Smith:

Please send me your 64-page free book, printed in two colors, giving all information about the opportunities in Radio and how I can learn quickly and easily at home to take advantage of them. I understand this request places me under no obligation, and that no salesmen will call on me.

Name

Address

Town State



What makes a salable story?

ONE good idea (how many fine ideas have died in your mind this year?) or one interesting experience, plus the ability and NERVE to write it.

Nerve is capitalized, because lack of nerve—lack of confidence—is the steel chain that fetters many a natural born writer to some dull, uncongenial task. "Maybe I haven't got it in me" brings many a potential best-seller to a premature close. Ability without enterprise seldom finds its target.

Have you ever noticed that every year scores of young men graduate from the newspaper profession into the ranks of successful writers? Why? Most newspaper men know that writing "salable stuff" is no dark and mysterious secret. Day after day, they write—and write. The very nature of their calling crowds their minds with ideas. Their copy is painstakingly corrected and criticized—by experts. Occasionally, friendly (or threatening) advice is thrown in. And gradually, fewer and fewer corrections are necessary. Astonishing how quickly an intelligent man can learn to write by writing.

An inspiring reproduction of a big-city newspaper office

The Newspaper Institute of America has perfected a course of training based on the New York Copy-Desk Method. The essence of this method is to start and keep you writing in your own home on your own time. Your work is watched, edited and guided just as if you were working for a big metropolitan daily. Experienced New York newspaper men are in direct charge of your instruction. Working definite assignments. talking things over (by mail) with oldtimers. trying, failing—then succeeding. writing, writing, writing. a man soon finds himself and his confidence through the N.I.A.

Our interesting Writing Aptitude Test will reveal your ability, gauge your possibilities—measure you exactly for the training you need. Send in the coupon and get it. Fill it out and return it to us. Our editors will analyze it for you and tell you exactly what it shows. It's free; there's no obligation. Send the coupon now. Newspaper Institute of America, 25 West 45th Street, New York.

Newspaper Institute of America
25 West 45th Street, New York
James McAlpin Pyle, Pres.

Send me your free Writing Aptitude Test and further information on writing for profit, as promised in SHORT STORIES March 25

Mr. }
Mrs. }
Miss }

Address.....
(All correspondence confidential. No salesmen will call on you.)
56C228

\$75 to \$125 Weekly

Charging Batteries Starts You



Let me show you how to make big money right from the start. I've prepared a FREE book explaining all details. First week's profit pays for all equipment. You can get all the battery charging business in your community with my Service Station Charger—it's



years ahead of ordinary chargers—handles 50% to 70% more batteries. I explain everything—start you in a business of your own and put you on the way to big money. Write for FREE Book.

C. H. HOLMES, Chief Engineer, Dept. S, H
Independent Electric Works, 5115 Ravenswood Ave., Chicago



FREE BOOK—Just Out

Sell Tailoring

Full or part time. Represent \$4,000,000.00 firm. Earnings start BIG and grow LARGER. Alluring price attracts all. High quality brings steady repeat orders.

NOTE These Records

	1925	1926	1927
C. Sorter	\$3,470	\$5,206	\$5,340
R. Davis	1,300	2,638	4,320
H. Begrow	945	2,770	6,500
P. Leavitt	5,700	6,200	8,500

*Saves Time Man. *Now Branch Mkt. 20 records like this in one city alone.

YOU CAN DO AS WELL AS OTHERS

No experience needed. We teach you the business. Our plan lets you start part time, prove merit, and build up trade. Mail coupon or write a letter for FREE samples and full information.

J. B. SIMPSON INC. Dept. 1459
843 Adams, Chicago

Name _____
Address _____
Town _____ State _____

Photos ENLARGED

Size 16x20 inches
Same price for full length or bust form groups, landscapes, or pet animals, etc., enlargements of any part of group picture. Safe return of your own original photo guaranteed.
98c
SEND NO MONEY Just mail photo or snapshot (any size) and within a week you will receive your beautiful life-like enlargement size 16x20 in. guaranteed fadeless. Pay postman 38c plus postage or send \$1.00 with order and we pay postage. **SPECIAL** With each enlargement we will send 38c hand-tinted miniature **FREE OFFER** reproduction of photo sent. Take advantage now of this amazing offer—send your photo today!
UNITED PORTRAIT COMPANY
1652 Ogden Ave. Dept. 763 Chicago, Ill.



LAW STUDY AT HOME

Become a lawyer. Be independent. Earn \$5,000 to \$10,000 annually. We guide you step by step—furnish all text material, including fourteen-volume Law Library. Degree of LL.B. conferred. Low cost, easy terms. Get our valuable 108-page "Law Guide" and "Evidence" books free. Send for them NOW.
Loisale Extension University, Dept. 375-L, Chicago
The World's Largest Business Training Institution

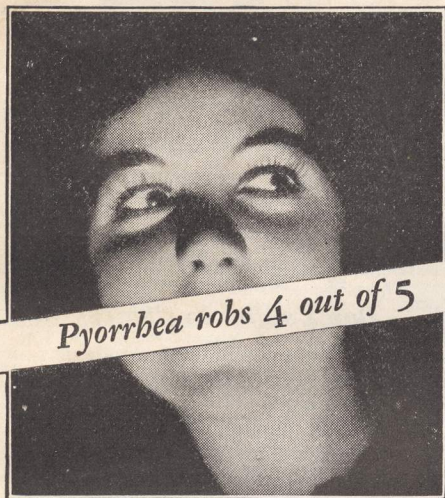


GET RID OF YOUR Free Trial Treatment

sent on request. Ask for my "pay when-reduced" offer. I have successfully reduced thousands of persons, without starvation diet or burdensome exercise, often at a rapid rate. Let me send you proof at my expense.

DR. R. NEWMAN, Licensed Physician.
State of N. Y. 286 Fifth Ave., N. Y. Desk M

TEETH ARE WHITE BUT...



Pyorrhea robs 4 out of 5

So good to look upon, teeth of flashing whiteness adorn personal charm. But they do not safeguard health against Pyorrhea.

Unaware of this fact, 4 persons out of 5 after forty and thousands younger pay Pyorrhea's price. They sacrifice health.

Take this precaution: See your dentist regularly. Use the dentifrice that not only cleans teeth white but also helps to firm gums. Pyorrhea seldom attacks healthy gums.

Morning and night, every day, use Forhan's for the Gums. It does all a dentifrice should do. Get a tube from your druggist—35c and 60c.

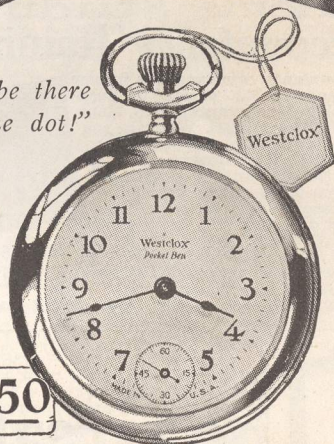
Formula of R. J. Forhan, D. D. S.
Forhan Company, New York

Forhan's for the gums

YOUR TEETH ARE ONLY AS HEALTHY AS YOUR GUMS



"I'll be there
on the dot!"



\$1.50

New Model Pocket Ben

You can be on time if you have a sturdy, reliable watch.

The new model Pocket Ben is that sort. And he's mighty good-looking, too—a favorite among busy men.

Sold everywhere for \$1.50. With night and-day dial, \$2.25.

Built by the makers of Big Ben and other Westclox

WESTERN CLOCK
COMPANY

La Salle, Illinois



\$2.50

New Auto Clock

Attractive, convenient, reliable. Fits any car. Quickly attached on dash or above wind-shield. Price \$2.50.

WIN \$3500.00!

To advertise our product we are going to give over \$8700.00 in prizes. Have already given away thousands of dollars. Virginia Umbarger won \$1445.00. Effie Swearingen, \$1500.00. Louis Siltberg \$2000.00, and others. Addresses on request. You can win \$3500.00.

Can You Find the Twins?

No, it's not as easy as it looks because two, and only two, of the hats on the girls pictured to the right are exactly alike. Find them—mark them—send your answer today. 350 big costly prizes will be given and duplicate prizes will be paid in case of ties to those tying. Costs you nothing, now, later, or ever. All who answer can share in cash prizes. Everybody rewarded. Send answer—learn how to get this prize.

\$1000.00 Extra for Promptness

—or \$500.00 and a New Model Ford Sedan. Send no money, just find twin hats, mark them, answer today.

**G. A. Culver, Advertising Mgr., Room 458
500 N. Dearborn St., Chicago**



Home Study Accountancy Training

Accountants command big income. Thousands needed. About 9,000 Certified Public Accountants in U.S. Many earn \$5,000 to \$20,000. We train you thoroughly at home in your spare time for C. P. A. examinations or executive accounting positions. Previous bookkeeping knowledge unnecessary—we prepare you from ground up. Our training is supervised by Wm. B. Castenholz, A. M., C. P. A., assisted by staff of C. P. A.'s. Low cost—easy terms. Write now for valuable free 64-page book.



**This Book
FREE!**

LaSalle Extension University, Dept. 376-H Chicago

PILES?

Don't suffer in silence!

End misery now, this modern non-surgical way. *Unguentine Pile Cones* check itching, bleeding. Same healing powers as Unguentine. At your druggist's, 75c. Send for trial FREE. Address *The Norwich Pharmaceutical Co. Norwich, N. Y.*

The Great Spring Tonic Peptona



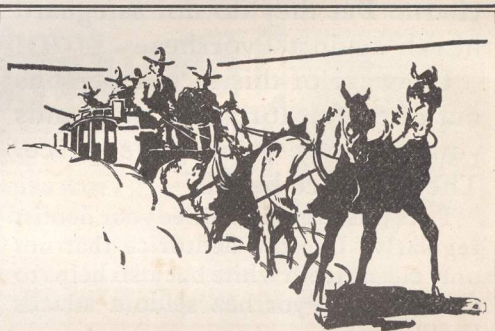
Peptona will enrich your blood; give you new vigor, new life; nourish the tissues weakened by the drain of winter. Try one bottle. It will do you a world of good. Sold only at Rexall Drug Stores. \$1.

SAVE with SAFETY at your

Rexall

Drug Store

You will recognize it by this sign
Liggett's are also **Rexall** stores



*Great Western books
by William MacLeod RAINE*

**BONANZA
THE DESERT'S PRICE
TROUBLED WATERS
ROADS OF DOUBT**

Doubleday, Doran Company, Inc.

Stop Using a Truss



Awarded
Gold Medal

STUART'S PLAPAO-PADS are different from the truss, being mechanico-chemico applicators, made self-adhesive purposely to hold the distended muscles securely in place. No straps, buckles or spring attached—cannot slip, so cannot chafe or press against the pubic bone. Thousands have successfully treated themselves at home without hindrance from work—most obstinate cases conquered. Soft as velvet—easy to apply—inexpensive. Awarded Gold Medal and Grand Prix. Process of recovery is natural, so no subsequent use for a truss. We prove it by sending Trial of PLAPAO absolutely FREE. Write name on Coupon and send TODAY.

Plapao Co., 668 Stuart Bldg., St. Louis, Mo.

Name.....
Address.....
Return mail will bring Free Trial Plapao.



I'll Pay YOU \$100 a Week

Sell tailored-to-measure all wool suits and overcoats at \$23.50 and \$31.50. Liberal commissions paid in advance. They sell on sight—steady income from repeat orders—extra bonus money. Complete sales outfit FREE including big cloth samples. All you do is sell. We deliver and collect. Great opportunity—write NOW.

W. Z. GIBSON, Inc., 500 Throop St., Dept. Q-403, Chicago

PIMPLES

Cleared up—often in 24 hours. To prove you can be rid of Pimples, Blackheads, Acne Eruptions on the face or body, Barbers' Itch, Eczema, Enlarged Pores, Oily or Shiny Skin, simply send me your name and address today—no cost—no obligation. CLEAR-TONE tried and tested in over 100,000 cases—used like toilet water—is simply magical in prompt results. You can repay the favor by telling your friends; if not, the loss is mine. WRITE TODAY, E. S. GIVENS, 413 Chemical Bldg., Kansas City, Mo.

Learn to PAINT
SIGNS and SHOW CARDS



We quickly teach you by mail, or at school, in spare time. Enormous demand. Big future. Interesting work. Oldest and foremost school.
EARN \$50 TO \$200 WEEKLY
John Vasson, N. Y., gets \$25 for single show card. Crawford, B. C., writes: "Earned \$200 while taking course." Don't delay. Send today for complete information, samples and guarantee.
DETROIT SCHOOL OF LETTERING
160 Stimson Ave. Est. 1899 DETROIT, MICH.

FOREST RANGERS

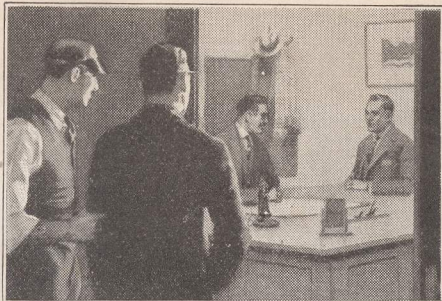
Do you enjoy outdoor life close to Nature? Get Forest Ranger job; salary \$125-\$200 month and home furnished; plenty fishing, hunting, trapping; no strikes or shut-downs; vacations on full pay. For further particulars, write
NORTON, 2865 TEMPLE COURT
DENVER, COLORADO

Your OWN
WITHOUT CAPITAL

I'll Start You NOW.
Represent E. C. Harley

Company, 34 years leading distributor of purity products. Take orders and deliver. You need no investment. Earn \$50 to \$150 a week. Write for FREE portfolio. No investment. Samples furnished.
E. C. HARLEY CO., C-944 Harley Bldg., Dayton, O.

GROCERY
STORE



"I'll Bet Bob Gray Gets That New Job"

"There he is now—in there talking to the Boss. I guess there isn't much chance of my getting that new job now. And I told Mary just the other night I was sure I would be picked for it.

"Bob Gray is the third I. C. S. man in this office to be promoted in the last year and I'm beginning to see why. The Boss has confidence in them because he knows they've been preparing themselves to handle bigger work.

"From now on I'm going to quit being one of the men who just wish for a bigger salary. I'm going to take an International Correspondence Schools course and make myself the first man the Boss thinks of when the next good job is open."

Is your employer watching you too? Has he sized you up as a man worth promoting, or will he pass you by because he's afraid you aren't trained to handle bigger work?

To earn more you've got to learn more. And to learn more you must study in those odd moments after supper that most men throw away.

One hour a day spent with the I. C. S. in the quiet of your own home will prepare you for the position you want in the work you like best. At least find out how by writing for full details.

Mark and Mail the Coupon Today!

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

"The Universal University"

Box 3778-D, Scranton, Penna.

Without cost or obligation, please send me a copy of your booklet, "Who Wins and Why," and full particulars about the subject before which I have marked X in the list below:

BUSINESS TRAINING COURSES

- | | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Industrial Management | <input type="checkbox"/> Advertising |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Personnel Management | <input type="checkbox"/> Business Correspondence |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Traffic Management | <input type="checkbox"/> Show Card and Sign Lettering |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Accounting and C. P. A. | <input type="checkbox"/> Stenography and Typing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Coaching | <input type="checkbox"/> English |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cost Accounting | <input type="checkbox"/> Civil Service |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bookkeeping | <input type="checkbox"/> Railway Mail Clerk |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Secretarial Work | <input type="checkbox"/> Common School Subjects |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Spanish <input type="checkbox"/> French | <input type="checkbox"/> High School Subjects |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Salesmanship | <input type="checkbox"/> Illustrating <input type="checkbox"/> Cartooning |

TECHNICAL AND INDUSTRIAL COURSES

- | | |
|-------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Electrical Engineering | <input type="checkbox"/> Architect |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Electric Lighting | <input type="checkbox"/> Architects' Blueprints |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Mechanical Engineer | <input type="checkbox"/> Contractor and Builder |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Mechanical Draftsman | <input type="checkbox"/> Architectural Draftsman |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Machine Shop Practice | <input type="checkbox"/> Concrete Builder |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Railroad Positions | <input type="checkbox"/> Structural Engineer |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gas Engine Operating | <input type="checkbox"/> Chemistry <input type="checkbox"/> Pharmacy |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Civil Engineer | <input type="checkbox"/> Automobile Work |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Surveying and Mapping | <input type="checkbox"/> Airplane Engines |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Metallurgy and Mining | <input type="checkbox"/> Agriculture <input type="checkbox"/> Navigation |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Steam Engineering | <input type="checkbox"/> Mathematics <input type="checkbox"/> Radio |

Name.....

Street Address.....

City..... State.....

Occupation.....

Persons residing in Canada should send this coupon to the International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Limited, Montreal, Canada



Its purity protects them both

With complexion as smooth and delicate as her baby's tender skin, this lovely mother entrusts her own beauty and her baby's comfort to the protecting purity of Ivory.

And when her hands busy themselves with daily soap-and-water tasks—cleansing his little woolen shirts and sheer dresses, her own

silken stockings and lingerie, making her bright china and silver gleam after every meal—she uses Ivory, too, to keep those slim hands soft and white.

Because of its purity and economy, Ivory is the only universal soap we know of

PROCTER & GAMBLE

Ivory Soap

KIND TO EVERYTHING IT TOUCHES

99 ⁴⁴/₁₀₀ % pure • It floats



Short Stories

Vol. CXXII, No. 6

HARRY E. MAULE
EDITOR

Whole No. 534

D. McILWRAITH
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

AUGERIN'



"THEY'S one popular bunkhouse pastime that don't nowise appeal to me," said Hank Hardrock the other night as he shuffled the cards for a quiet game of solitaire on the battered old table where the boys played penny ante of an evening or banged out their vociferous arguments. "What's that?" we asked. "Why augerin', partner, is the indoor sport I had in mind. It's one of the worst breath wasters a man can take up."

"How's that, Hank," we replied. "Discussion is a fine thing and is likely to bring out new ideas and brighten up a man's mind." Hank scowled at the cards as he laid them out. "Yeah, that's just it. An exchange of ideas, sure, but how many men go into an argument ready to listen to any ideas? Most times the feller who augers is just tryin' to convince the other one that he's right and the other man is wrong. He's got a case to make whether it's true or not. He will put over his own idea by hook or crook

and he will bully the other feller out of his position if he can. Natcherly the other feller ain't a goin' to stand for that and he pulls back the other way like a balky horse. New ideas don't have much chance in a

shindy like that. They's plenty fellers that has it like a disease and most of 'em haven't learned a new thing since they learned to rope a bronc. Seems to me the less a feller's seen and the less he knows, the more he augers that his way and his ideas is right.

"An exchange of ideas—that's different. If a man is lookin' for help by talkin' over problems with another man and can do it with an open mind, why that's discussion and a good thing. But the one who augers only wants to hear himself talk."

"Hank," we asked him, "are

you augerin' now?" In reply there was only a grunt as the game of Canfield got under way.

THE EDITOR.



CONTENTS



March 25th, 1928

COVER DESIGN - -	EDGAR F. WITTMACK	
THE TROUBLE MAKER - - - -	3	GEORGE C. HENDERSON
THE REVENGE OF FLORIDA JACK	40	ERNEST HAYCOX
BURNING THE SNOW - - - -	50	JAMES B. HENDRYX
THE OPTIMIST (Verse) - - - -	58	HENRY HERBERT KNIBBS
FOOL'S FOLLY - - - - -	59	L. PATRICK GREENE
MYSTERY RANGE (Part II) - - -	80	CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER
PROOF - - - - -	103	H. A. WOODBURY
VIA NEFARIOUS JONES - - - -	112	ALBERT WILLIAM STONE
PURDEE'S LAST STAND - - - -	122	JACLAND MARMUR
THREE GATS - - - - -	137	ALLEN S. JACOBS
WHEN LAW RIDES WEST - - - -	145	H. C. WIRE
THE STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE -	173	

YEARLY SUBSCRIPTION PRICE, PAYABLE IN ADVANCE

Postpaid in United States, and to all Possessions of the United States, and Mexico	\$5.00
Postpaid to all Foreign Countries	6.50
Postpaid throughout Canada	5.80

The entire contents of this magazine is protected by copyright, and must not be reprinted. Entered at Garden City Post Office as second-class mail matter. Issued semi-monthly by Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., Garden City, Long Island.

F. N. DOUBLEDAY, *Chairman of the Board*
NELSON DOUBLEDAY, *President*
GEORGE E. DORAN, *Vice-President*
S. A. EVERITT, *Vice-President*

RUSSELL DOUBLEDAY, *Secretary*
JOHN J. HESSIAN, *Treasurer*
LILLIAN A. COMESTOCK, *Asst. Secretary*
L. J. McNAUGHTON, *Asst. Treasurer*

The next issue **Short Stories** for April 10th

SHOOT!

A novel of quick action and excitement on the high trails with considerable mystery thrown in.

by

Stephen Chalmers



HANK POTTS —PEACE PROMOTER

A Tuttle short with a chuckle in every line.

by

W. C. Tuttle

SILVER BOB RIDES WEST

yes; but his most bitter enemy rode in the same direction.



by

Ernest Haycox

THE BLIZZARD'S TEST

The ice-coated ranges furnish luck and danger.

by

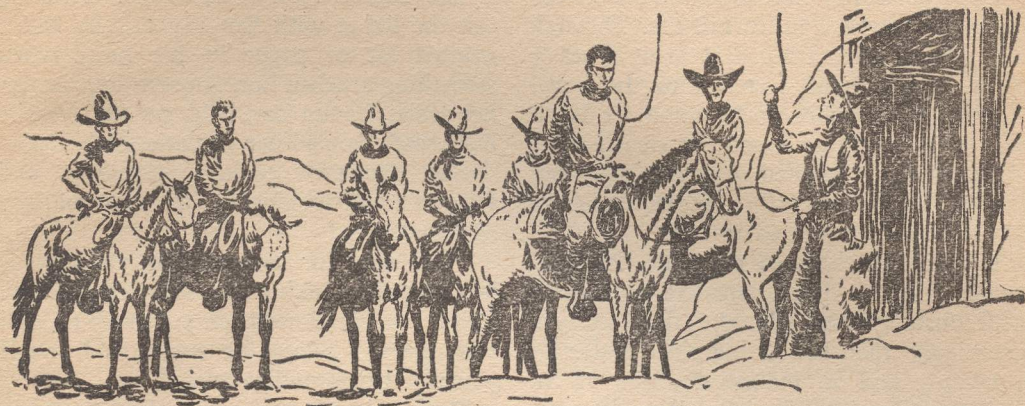
**Frank C.
Robertson**



Doubleday, Doran
& Company, Inc.
MAGAZINES
COUNTRY LIFE
WORLD'S WORK
GARDEN & HOME BUILDER
RADIO BROADCAST
SHORT STORIES
EDUCATIONAL REVIEW
LE PETIT JOURNAL
EL ECO
FRONTIER STORIES
WEST
THE AMERICAN SKETCH

Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc.
BOOK SHOPS
(Books of all Publishers)
NEW YORK: LORD & TAYLOR
PENNSYLVANIA TERMINAL (2 shops)
GRAND CENTRAL TERMINAL
38 WALL ST. & 526 LEXINGTON AVE.
848 MADISON AVE. & 166 W. 32ND ST.
ST. LOUIS: 223 N. 8TH ST. & 4914 MARYLAND AVE.
KANSAS CITY: 920 GRAND AVE. & 206 W. 47TH ST.
CLEVELAND: HIGBEE CO.
SPRINGFIELD, MASS.: MEEKINS, PACKARD & WHEAT

Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc.
OFFICES
GARDEN CITY, NEW YORK
NEW YORK: 244 MADISON AVENUE
BOSTON: PARK SQUARE BUILDING
CHICAGO: PEOPLES GAS BUILDING
SANTA BARBARA, CAL.
TORONTO:
DOUBLEDAY, DORAN AND GUNDY, LTD.



THE TROUBLE MAKER

By GEORGE C. HENDERSON

Author of "The Painted Stallion," etc.

WHAT WAS THE SECRET OF LOST CORRAL? WHO WERE THE RUSTLERS OF THE WHITE MASK WHOSE DEPREDACTIONS HAD CAUSED GRIM-FACED VIGILANTES TO GATHER AT THE DOUBLE CROSS RANCH? "HARMONIKY DICK" KING SET OUT TO SOLVE THE MYSTERY, BUT DESPERATE TRAILS WERE TO BE RIDDEN AND MANY TRIGGERS PULLED BEFORE THE SECRET WAS EXPLAINED

I

THE GATHERING OF THE VIGILANTES

SHE hid in wait for him in the spiney desert garden. The tinkle of a spur, dulled by the adobe walls, warned her of his coming. Slipping behind a waxy blossomed plant, she peered over bristling beds of barrel cactus toward the patio gate. Through this gate he would come in answer to her summons.

The night shadows thickened. An owl whisked by on whispering wing and disappeared among the blurred outlines of the hacienda. Beyond a skeleton cluster of ocotilla a dark form appeared, halted, head up, listening.

She waited a moment; long enough to take in every detail of the man who, with hat pushed back from his forehead, was looking around expectantly. Straight and lean and strong, high of brow, face chiseled

from bronze—the very sight of him set her heart beating rapidly.

Her eyes dropped lower. She gave a little cry. Two black-handled six-shooters swung low on the cowboy's hips in holsters tied down to his dark leather chaps. It was war after all. War—and maybe death for him. He had put on his guns. Those guns made a different man of him. They seemed to take away the kindness from his face; to dim the humor in his quizzical eye. They gave him a sinister aspect which was increased by the unrelieved blackness of his clothes, the efficient deadliness of long brown fingers hanging close above battered gun butts, of movement that flowed, of toughened, puma-like body with muscles rippling just under the fabric of his shirt. Black was his hat, his shirt, the handkerchief knotted around his neck. Part and parcel of the ebony night he seemed now to the girl who studied him in the nocturnal obscurity.

He turned impatiently toward the gate and uttered a thrilling, birdlike whistle. "Powder," he said softly, and whistled again.

As if pushed by unseen hands the swinging gate described an inward arc. Through the opening came a horse, wearing a heavy stock saddle, reins fastened to the horn. Against the sombre background its black and white markings stood out clearly even in the gloom, a painted pony in a phantom garden, an unreality that might vanish at any moment, it seemed to her.

Up went the head of the pinto. Its neck arched, fuzztail lifted, sensitive nostrils of wild mustang blood dilated, it fixed its eyes unerringly upon her hiding place and with a whinny and an indignant shake of its head daintily picked its way along the path toward her.

After Powder came the man, humming a derisive air—the "cheese song" his fellow cowpunchers called it. It was like "Harmoniky" Dick King to sing such a song.

*Mucho me gusta el queso;
El Queso de mi rancho.
Mas me gusta un beso;
De ella del sombrero ancho.
Much I like the cheese,
The Cheese of my ranch.
More I like the kiss
From her of the broad hat.*

RUTH tossed her head at the mockery of it and moved to another hiding place. Stooping so that she was completely hidden by a saw toothed bed of maguey, she remained perfectly quiet, hardly breathing. From the direction of the bushes she heard an impatient snort and gave a silent chuckle as the paint horse blew through his nostrils with a loud fluttering noise. The mild strains of a harmonica came to her ears.

"He thinks he is so smart with his song about cheese and a kiss," she thought. "Let him find me if he can."

Facing the approaching horse, she backed slowly from cover to cover until she could retreat no farther. The pinto, coming into view, regarded her reproachfully; then muzzled gently at the pocket where she always kept the cactus candy she fed him. Ruth gave him the sweets and then

hunted through the mane for something she thought might be concealed there. Dick often sent messages concealed in the horse's mane. Presently she found what she sought, a full loaded .30-.30 cartridge. Twisting out the bullet with her fingers, she had a printed bit of paper in her hand when something touched her. An arm imprisoned her waist, bound her, held her helpless. A hot breath fanned her throat and cheeks.

She squirmed about vigorously and found herself looking up into Harmoniky's smiling face.

"You sent for me and then ran away," he charged, speaking in a slow, easy drawl. "So I just put Powder on yore trail to hunt you down. I believe he would find you if you was twenty miles away."

Ruth held up the paper she had taken from the brass shell. She could make out that it was a printed clipping, but could not read the words in the dusk.

"What is this?" she asked.

Harmoniky's grin broadened.

"I clipped that from the *Argus*," he replied. "It is a printed notice of the registration of my DH brand. It means I'm a cattleman now with a brand of my own—our own. And when your dad makes me foreman like he promised——"

The paint horse, exploring with his cold nose for more cactus candy, gave Ruth a shove that upset her completely into Harmoniky's arms. After a moment's confusion she extricated herself, and became very busy feeding the mustang, holding out the *miel de tuna* on the palm of her hand for him to pick up with careful velvety movements of his lips. When all the candy was gone they led Powder outside the gate, tied him to the hitchrack and then climbed to their trysting place atop the moss-covered adobe wall under the overhanging branches of a live oak.

Ruth's mood had turned suddenly serious. She remembered now that what she had to say to Harmoniky was in deadly earnest.

She raised an arm stiffly, like an exclamation point, toward the big adobe.

"We must not talk too loud," she whispered. "They are in there."

He nodded agreement. "Waiting for me," he assented. "I shouldn't keep them waiting." But he did not attempt to leave.

The charm of her was upon him. Her straight slim form, her black hair that gave off the clean odor of ripe apple, the pansy face uptilted to his, limpid with sudden anxiety, banished all thought of the serious affairs at hand.

RUTH'S gaze lowered from his face to the squat outlines of the rambling ranch house and its inclosed garden and then settled on a moving blotch among the shapeless sand hills to the north. The dark shadow, approaching swiftly, changed to distinct figures of horsemen. From out of the sage and mesquite issued other ghost riders. Silently the spectral shapes swept up to the very wall at their feet, dismounted, as silently stalked into the house. Stern, tired, wordless men gathering quietly on a grim mission.

Ruth caught her breath. Her hand gripped the arm of this man as if to hold him back.

"Vigilantes," she whispered.

She knew the reason for the meeting. She realized the significance of the black-handled guns at Harmoniky's sides. Ruth's father had returned recently from the East to find that a bandit gang, led by a man known as the White Mask, had been making successful raids on herds on the Sangre de Dios range. She suspected also that Dick was to be the hired killer of this organization because of his reputation for fast gunplay, because he had gone across the border single-handed and captured the notorious Capitan Rojo.



"They are sending you to take the White Mask," she charged abruptly.

He nodded, his eyes on her face.

"It's a man's work," he said simply.

"Why doesn't dad send Durkin, the new gunman that he brought back from Texas with him?" she protested. "He knows how I feel about it. Why does he pick on you?"

Harmoniky remained silent. She dropped from the wall to the ground and he followed. Her hand reached out to touch the cold stock of his gun; her fingers closed

over the butt, lifted the blue-steel weapon half out of the holster, dropped it back with a grimace of distaste.

"You don't answer," she continued. "Well, I'll answer for you. The reason dad won't send Durkin is that this is some kind of a trick. It is part of some game that Durkin is playing. I asked you to come here to tell you what I have found out. To warn you!"

Dick leaned closer to look into her eyes. They were serious eyes, serious to the very black depth of them.

"Warn me about what?" he asked gravely.

"You know the two Mexicans Durkin brought with him?"

"Yes, Rojas and Quirarte."

"I overheard them talking. They thought I could not understand Spanish. They were talking about you."

Dick could not repress a smile.

"That is shore complimentary."

Ruth looked up sharply, her lips compressed.

"It is no joke," she asserted. "They said you would never come back. They were sure of it. They talked as if it had been arranged for the White Mask to kill you. I told dad and he just laughed. But you must believe me and take warning. Someone is plotting against you here—in this house—a spy."

HARMONIKY'S face twisted into an expression of distress. He took up one of her hands impulsively and drew her close to him.

"I've got something I want to tell you," he blurted out. Then he stopped, frowning. "No; I can't tell you after all. You'll just have to believe me. I ain't gettin' killed this trip nor any other. I know they's something up, but I'll outfox 'em. Just forget the danger and think of what it will mean to us. I'll get a reward and we can buy Ladrone water hole from your father and make my little herd of dogies a real one. We'll get furniture for the old adobe on Mesa Prieta an' with me foreman——" He let the picture of this prospective wealth for her to finish.

"But if you do not come back?" she said heavily. Walking by his side now toward the house, she noticed how boyish he

looked, how the wavy hair curved over his high, smooth forehead under his tilted black sombrero; and the mere thought of sending him to fight sent a sharp twinge through her heart. The pain added a sharp note to her tone as she continued. "I know who is back of it all. Dad would never send you against my wishes if it were not for Durkin."

Harmoniky looked his surprise.

"Why for Durkin?" he asked. "Does McClelland like him so well——?"

"Are you blind? Don't you see that he has some strange influence over my father. He——"

Her speech ended in a low cry. Harmoniky, following the direction of her gaze, saw a dark object move behind the plumed topknot of a palm yucca. Ruth's hand was on his. He could feel her trembling against his firm muscled body. Never had he seen her so unstrung.

"Someone—spying on us," she whispered.

Dick's hand dropped suggestively toward a gun butt.

"Come out, hombre," he requested in a conversational tone.

SILENCE greeted his words, silence mysterious with uncertainty. From behind the chalky gray trunk of a *palo blanco* appeared a new gray Stetson, an eye that twitched spasmodically, a pock-marked face. A middle-aged man, dressed as a cowpuncher, stepped into the open, exposing his teeth in a smile.

"Durkin," said Ruth.

Durkin, a paunchy person of medium size, approached at a pigeon-toed gait and bowed to Ruth. His brown eyes gleamed with admiration as he swept them over her from head to foot. And Harmoniky, following the glance, suddenly found pangs of jealousy shooting through him. He had never noticed she was quite so beautiful before. Dressed in a Spanish costume with her black hair held in place by jeweled combs, a vari-colored silken mantilla draped over her shoulders, Ruth was like a wild desert plant suddenly come to bloom in an exotic setting. The red rose in her hair, the dainty slippers encasing her small feet and the bright merging colors of her dress gave off a sense of fragility, an impres-

sion contradicted by her rich olive cheeks, lithe, muscular body and firm characteristic expression of eyes that flashed and glinted and smoldered with hidden fire. Harmoniky saw that Durkin's eyes missed none of the picture, and it filled him with a sudden desire to take the fellow by the throat.

"Excuse me, ma'am," Durkin apologized "but King is wanted inside."

Dick's feeling of hostility increased as he noted that the imported gunman's hair was slicked back, his scarred cheeks shaven and scrubbed and his boots newly greased.

"That's all right, Durkin," he drawled. "Your apology is accepted."

Durkin's thin lips parted in a sneer.

"I wasn't talkin' to you," he said loudly. "Mebby you'd like to know, hombre that I'm foreman on this ranch now."

"I wouldn't *like* to know it," retorted Harmoniky.

"There must be some mistake," said Ruth. "My father promised to make Dick foreman."

Durkin tried to look contrite.

"I'm sorry ma'am," he replied, "but Mac asked me to take the job, and I done so. They're waitin' for King inside. I think he'd better go in."

"After you," replied Harmoniky with a grin.

Durkin's face flamed.

"I don't stand no sass from my men," he snapped, raising his voice. "Do as I tell you."

Harmoniky made no move to obey. Durkin turned suddenly from Ruth and faced Dick squarely. From the door opening into the garden appeared other persons attracted by the loud talking. Harmoniky



made out Andrew McClelland, Jess Rankin, and several cowboys he knew. And he realized now the meaning of Durkin's loud talk. He was trying to get a crowd to witness a fight. The new fore-

man either wanted to brand him as a coward or shoot it out with him.

"No fake mankiller can bluff me," Durkin was saying. "Obey my orders. I'm foreman here. Ain't that right, McClelland?"

A group of men closed in around them. McClelland, big and bulky, stepped forward, caught his daughter and pulled her back out of danger.

"You must stop this at once, Dad," said Ruth. "Dick will not fight while I'm here. What is Durkin trying to do?"

McClelland turned half way from her.

"I've made Durkin foreman," he grumbled. "Dick will have to work under him."

Ruth swung on her father angrily.

"After you promised the job to Dick you gave it to this quarrelsome stranger," she cried. "There is something wrong, Dad. I cannot understand it."

Harmoniky looked Durkin over as if he were an insect. Then he burst out laughing.

"You remind me of a Tularosa snoozer who had a rattlesnake name of Percival," he said. "If the sidewinder didn't give a quart of milk every day this shepherd got mad as a hydrophoby skunk and bit holes in his ears."

"Yeh?" sneered Durkin. "How could a man bite his own ears?"

"He clumb a ladder," replied Harmoniky gravely.

THE loud laughter should have warned Durkin that he was beaten. In the Sangre de Dios country if a cowboy got a laugh on another, it was a victory and hostilities ceased. But Durkin for some reason was looking for trouble. He was bent on provoking a fight with Dick King. He dropped his hand to his revolver. The right side of his face twitched violently, but his beady eyes were cold and steady.

"I can't have any man workin' for me that won't take orders," he said.

Harmoniky ignored the foreman's threatening gesture.

"That opens up another subject I wanted to ask you about," he pursued good-naturedly. "Mac and you has been tellin' around that you come from the Panhandle. Now I never seen no Tejaner ride a double-rigged saddle like youn. Furthermore, I've been watchin' you fork your brone and the way you stick your feet out front reminds me a lot more of them Pendleton busters at the Hopen than of a straight-up ridin' Texan. I'm glad you give me the public chance to ask them questions some

of the boys has been pinin' over."

McClelland's voice cut in, harsh and peremptory.

"That will do, Harmoniky," he said. "I don't want my choice of foreman discussed by you."

Durkin's fingers closed over the stock of his gun. The quick thump of feet and rustle of bushes told Dick that the spectators were scurrying for cover. Ruth, trying to reach Harmoniky, was pulled back by her father. A sinister silence settled over the garden as the two men faced each other.

Harmoniky, smiling, pushed back his black sombrero from his brow. He noted that Durkin followed the movement, and it told him something of the character of the man, something he wanted to know. Durkin was not sure of himself.

Suddenly Dick's grin vanished. His eyes widened. A startled look crossed his features. Staring through Durkin at something behind him, he opened his mouth.

"Don't slug him, feller!" he cried.

Durkin turned half around. Dick's hands shot out as a rattlesnake strikes. He jerked the new Stetson tight over Durkin's eyes. His foot clamped on that of the foreman, pinning it to the ground, and as he caught the stumbling figure, he deftly extracted his gun and threw it into a cholla clump.

"Careful now, Mr. Durkin," he drawled. "Desert flowers ain't petikeler who they lays on."

A SHOUT went up. The crowd surged forward. In a moment all was confusion. Harmoniky stood grinning among uproarious friends who slapped him on the back and howled their delight. Durkin, struggling to push up his hat, hopping around on one leg to favor his crushed toes, forgot Ruth's presence and fell to cursing.

McClelland released his daughter who went at once to Dick's side. Durkin vanished through the garden gate. The others moved toward the house.

"You have made a bitter enemy, I'm afraid," Ruth said. "Why did he force the fight, do you suppose?"

"Now, I wonder," mused Harmoniky. "And why did your dad make this fellow foreman all of a sudden?"

"I'm afraid something terrible will come

of this," continued the girl. "Tell them you won't go, Dick. Tell them!"

Harmoniky changed the subject.

"Will you do something for me?" he asked.

"Anything I can," she replied simply.

"All right then," he continued. "I want you to cut holes in an old pillowslip and make a white mask. I'll get it when I come out of the meeting."

He left her, gazing after him in astonishment, hurried through the arched passageway into the cavernous hall of the big adobe, not halting until he reached a cloister door which he pushed open roughly. He did not see the girlish form that darted out through another door to a spot beneath a deep-embraused window, through which presently came to her harshly pitched voices of determined men.

II

THE WHITE MASK WAS ABROAD

HARMONIKY halted just inside the room. Curiously he stared about the cavelike interior of the white-walled, bare-raftered room, a place at once barbaric and civilized, with its enormous fireplace, wild animal skins on the floor, cushions made by girlish hands thrown into deep window seats formed by the three-foot width of adobe walls.



Then he turned his attention to the men who filled the place, ranged in seats, in window ledges and along the wall. They were a hardlooking, tanned-faced crew, all heavily armed. Night and day work at the spring roundup and fighting the White Mask had left its mark upon all of them. Shadows under their eyes, bristly beards, unwashed faces, soiled clothing, told of war conditions.

McClelland, owner of the Double Cross, a big gray-haired, sandyfeatured man of fully two hundred pounds weight, stood in the center facing the others. There was Ed and "Shorty" Showwalter of the Cinnabar

mine, founders of the vigilantes; Jess Rankin, Circle Bar proprietor; Sheriff Al Boyes, a tall, skinny elderly man with deathshad face and gray mustache; "Stutterin'" Steve Hardy, his short-bodied, black-bearded deputy; Tex Cantrell, tenderfoot owner of the Hogpen ranch, dolled in his usual dude get-up of silk shirt and silver fittings; and Eben Holden of the Stockmen's Bank, among others. While the men were getting settled and lighting pipes and cigarettes, Pete Durkin slipped in through a side door, took a seat and began rubbing the skin where cholla needles had stung him when he went to get his gun.

"Sit down, King," commanded McClelland.

"Thanks," replied Dick, but remained standing.

"You men all know Harmoniky," continued McClelland. "You seen him bring in El Capitan Rojo single-handed. He's agreed to go after the White Mask."

A murmur of approval rose from the hard-eyed cattlemen. They looked upon Dick and were pleased. His easy composure combined with a certain modesty impressed them. The dexterity and coolness with which he had beaten Durkin inspired still further confidence. They had seen quiet, humorous, gray-eyed men like him before, and they knew the breed.

"Well, get busy," insisted Jess Rankin. "I'm damned tired and want to get home. The main thing is to plan what we're going to do tomorrow. A sandstorm is coming on, and that's just the time the White Mask strikes, so's the drifting sand will cover over his tracks."

This was true. The White Mask invariably took advantage of a storm or of darkness or both. His raids had been timed so cleverly that not one of his men had ever been shot. Silently he swooped down on horses and cattle, drove them through McClelland pass into a natural cup in the mountains called Lost Corral, and here they vanished. There was only one other pass out of Lost Corral, at Gila Junction, and this was watched constantly. The surrounding walls of the cup were impassable for cattle and in many places for humans. Yet, in spite of this, horsemen pursuing the thieves into Lost Corral never found any

trace of them after the sand had drifted over their tracks.

"I'm getting damned tired raisin' disappearing cattle," McClelland was saying. "It ain't natural for critters to vanish and leave no trace like they been doing in Lost Corral. Cows ain't got wings. Steers can't go diggin' holes to hide in like prairie dogs. We want to know where our cattle and hosses vanish to when they enter Lost Coral. I think Harmoniky can get a answer to that question and bring in the White Mask to boot."

SHERIFF Boyes got up, cleared his throat and allowed his cavernous eyes to travel over the gathering.

"You fellers can go on with your round up," he said. "This masked man ain't likely to make no daytime raid and tomorrer evenin' I'll have a posse in Lost Corral that'll stop critters vanishin' whether on wings or hoof. I think Mac is right sendin' Harmoniky out freebootin' to ketch ol' white-face where he has holed up."

"If it's all settled, let's go home," suggested Rankin.

Ed Showwalter, rising, stopped the homeward movement before it had started. Ed was a great, potbellied, unwieldy fellow with small blue eyes, red face, and immense hands covered with cornsilkly hair. He and his brother Shorty had once owned the Hogpen ranch, but had been ruined by range wars and rustlers and forced to sell out to the tenderfoot, Tex Cantrell. With the proceeds of the sale they bought the Cinnabar mine, but they still threw in their guns with the cattlemen and at roundup time hired out to Cantrell to do his share of the work at the general camp.

As founder of the vigilantes Ed was first in the cowmen's counsel.

"The vigilantes has voted three thousand dollar's reward for the man that gets the White Mask," said Ed, addressing Harmoniky. "But besides that we want to hire you as our special agent at one hundred dollars a month. McClelland has consented to let us have you if you agree, Dick."

Harmoniky did not reply at once. This was an unexpected move. Why did the

vigilantes want to hire him for something he was already bound to do? And why was McClelland willing to have him quit the Double Cross ranch? These two questions popped into his head, but he did not utter them.

"You want to put me under vigilantes orders to do as you say?" he asked instead.

Showwalter nodded. "That's right. The sheriff will deputize you. We will pay you."

AGAIN Harmoniky hesitated. Every eye was on him. He knew that every man jack of them expected him to accept the generous offer.

"I can't do it," he said abruptly.

There was silence for a moment. Then several men started talking at once. Showwalter's voice burst out above the others and drowned them.

"What do you mean, you can't do it?" Ed demanded.

"I'm not strong for lynch law," replied Harmoniky Dick.

"Don't be a fool," said McClelland. "You might as well get the extra money. There'll be no trials when we catch the White Mask—or his gang, either."

Harmoniky regarded his boss fixedly.

"I'm taking orders from you, Mac," he said. "I'll get this pillowslip totter, but any prisoners I bring will be turned over to the sheriff for fair trial."

A sullen murmur of disapproval greeted this astonishing statement. The vigilantes had just voted the death penalty against



all cattle thieves and gunmen. Even the sheriff and his deputy had not objected but had stepped outside during the balloting.

None of them relished Dick's announcement for constitutional law.

Stutterin' Steve Hardy got up on a chair and raised his hand for attention.

"I—I—I—uh—uh—uh—Di—di—di,"

"Set down!" roared a dozen voices. "Whistle it."

Tex Cantrell, tenderfoot owner of the Hogpen brand, next got up to speak. Pink of cheek and haughty of manner in a lady-

like fashion, he puffed out his chest, the better to reveal his violently colored silk shirt and thrust out a beringed hand, upon the wrist of which glittered a steel-studded cuff. With an actoresque gesture he smoothed back his hair.

"It is presumptuous in a hired hand telling his employers what he will and what he will not do," announced Tex. "Let us discharge this fellow at once and secure another."

Harmoniky laughed derisively.

"While you're standin' up, tenderfoot," he said, "just explain to these gents how thieves can run stolen herds past your Hogpen ranch out on Lost Corral without you seein' 'em."

THE question, voiced in a slow drawling voice, was a deliberate insult. Cantrell's cheeks whitened. His long white fingers dropped to the stock of a pearl-handled gun which was cinched, tenderfoot fashion, high up around his waist. Not a man moved. They hardly breathed. Cigarettes burned down to tense fingers, unnoticed. Cantrell's lips trembled over words that would not come. Harmoniky's voice, soft and insinuating as his tempting smile, again broke the stillness.

"And while you'all are talkin' Tex," he pursued, "satisfy our curiosity on a few more p'int's. Seems today is my time for askin' fool questions. Fust place what is a tenderfoot like you doing running a stock ranch and, second, why did you'all have to send clear to Pendleton to get busters when they's plenty good peelers right here in Mingo Country?"

Cantrell, struggling with a strange fear, suddenly turned and walked out of the room.

Sheriff Boyes shook his head reprovingly at Harmoniky.

"Son, you make war talk too sudden and promiscuous," he remarked. "I've had depities and posses watchin' Tex Cantrell for a long time, and I never found nothin' wrong with him nor his brands."

Dick nodded in sarcastic assent.

"His brand couldn't be beat—for some purposes," he retorted.

"Just what do you mean by that?" interrupted Ed Showwalter, who always took

charge of the Hogpen ranch during roundup and who felt responsible in a way for the tenderfoot owner.

THE argument was interrupted by a loud pounding on the outer door. Dick flung it open and in came Slim Holtz half carrying a feeble, white-bearded man in faded flannel shirt, overalls, and hob-nailed shoes. The silvery hair was stained with blood, the withered features twisted with pain, and in the light of the coal-oil lamp his face showed chalky white. Dick helped Slim carry him to a lounge where they laid him down and examined his wounds. His skull had been creased, and he had been shot through the chest. Crimson bubbles appeared on his lips when he attempted to speak.

"Found him down near McClelland pass comin' back from Lost Corral," panted Slim.



"Who is he?" asked some one.

Ed Showwalter shouldered his way through the crowd and stood over the old man. His voice shook with emotion when he spoke.

"I'll tell you who he is," he said. "That's an old prospector just come into this country; a feller I hired secret for the vigilantes to guard McClelland pass and fire off his gun in case of rustlers. His name is Wolf. I call him 'Lobo' Wolf."

"Is he bad hurt?" asked some one.

"I can't tell," replied Holtz. "He ought to have a doctor."

"I'll take care of him," said McClelland. "Three four of you fellers help carry him into the bedroom. Durkin, you send Clem Creswell to Tonto for Doc Handford."

Ruth came hurrying in carrying white cloths, followed by the Chinese cook, Moy Yen, who had a basin of water, and immediately took charge of the patient.

"I'll have a room fixed up for him at the bunkhouse," said Durkin. "You can send him down there in the morning."

Ruth looked up with an angry glance.

"That is a fool idea," she retorted. "This poor old fellow stays right here in the house until he is well."

When the excitement had died down, the vigilantes gathered again, looking grimmer than ever.

"This settles it," said the sheriff; "I hate to say it, but there's a spy amongst us. Nobody but a few cattlemen know'd this old pilgrim was hid up there. Somebody told."

An air of restraint settled over the group. Several men asked for Tex Cantrell. What had become of him?

"I don't think we ought to say anything," cautioned McClelland, "'cause we can't prove anything, and it's jist like the sheriff said. The party in question is clear so far as we know. They's never been a sign of anything wrong accordin' to what the sheriff's men could discover. What did you mean Dick, talkin' thataway to Tex?"

"I was jest curious," replied Harmoniky, "like everybody else, about a man so plumb tender going into the cattle business. How did this jigger come to buy you out, Showwalter?"

Ed Showwalter's small blue eyes flashed angrily.

"After I'd been ruined it was easy enough to buy me out," he retorted. "I don't figure Tex Cantrell has got sense enough to be crooked. And I ought to know. I work for him spring and fall roundup, and there's mighty little goes on at the Hogpen I don't see."

"Just the same," said McClelland, "I'm going to give Harmoniky his orders privately and personal. Come into my office, Dick."

DICK moved leisurely after the cattleman. Durkin scuttled to Showwalter's side and whispered to him earnestly.

"Hold up," said the vigilante leader. "As head of this organization I want to be in on the palaver."

McClelland turned his cold, sand-colored features toward the big miner.

"I don't care who you are," he retorted. "I talk to Harmoniky alone." And turning his back on the others left the room, ignoring the anger that empurpled Showwalter's features.

III

SANDSTORMS WIPE OUT TRACKS

IN McCLELLAND'S room with the door shut the two men stood for a moment in the darkness in perfect silence. Then the cattle owner said, "The situation is very serious. It is certain now that the rustler gang has a spy among us. What did you mean castin' them slurs at Tex?"

Harmoniky lighted a candle on McClelland's work-table and drew pencil and paper toward him. First he drew two crosses, the brand of McClelland's outfit. Then he drew the Hogpen symbol.

"This is what I've been pinin' over," he said, and with two swift-drawn lines he transformed the Double Cross into a Hogpen brand. "See how easy?"

"Hell's afire," remarked McClelland, "Funny nobody ever thought of that."

"Here's another thing," Dick pursued. "You remember when Showwalter sold out to Cantrell? At that time the herd had a Bar T brand. It was Tex who had that changed over to Hogpen."

"What are you tryin' to get at?"

"That's what I'd like to know," replied Dick. "And I've been honin' to know it so bad I've done considerable unofficial snoopin'. They's a pretty young lady works in the postoffice at Gila. You've seen her, ain't you?"

"What's she got to do with it?"

"She's a student of human nature," replied Dick. "She calls herself a fillyossifer."

"A what?" McClelland looked up from lighting his pipe.

"I understand the filly part, but where she gets the ossifer beat me. Howsumever she spends her time thinkin' up reasons why folks do things and where they come from. Innocent like I turns the talk around to tenderfoots that take up the stock business, and she right out and tells me where Cantrell comes from and who he gets mail from. He ain't from Texas at all."

"The hell you say!" exclaimed McClelland, growing more and more interested. "Where's he from?"

"New Orleans," answered Dick. "I kept gettin' more and more curious and fin'ly the post office girl wrote to New Orleans to somebody she know'd there, askin' special about Tex——"

"And what did you hear?" interrupted the cowman, eagerly.

"I heard aplenty," admitted Harmoniky. "When Cantrell left that town he was a store clerk—and broke."

McClelland digested this information in silence. Harmoniky did not interrupt him.

"Where did Cantrell get money to buy the Hogpen then?" McClelland finally asked.

"I'd like to know," retorted Dick. "I'm layin' blue chips that a Sangre de Dios man anted up, which narrows it down to only three, four fellers who has that much money. If we could cut out and brand this secret jigger who's hidin' behind a tenderfoot, we shore would know a lot more'n we do now."

McCLELLAND paced up and down the room for several minutes, puffing vigorously at his pipe. At last he reached a decision.

"We'll keep this to ourselves," he said. "Don't seem possible Tex can be rustlin' cattle. We've had watchers checking brands of shipped cattle at Gila, and the sheriff



sent in a spy to work at the Hogpen, and besides everybody knows that feller spends all his time in Tonto showin' off his fine duds to the Cantina Hidalgo girls. The vigilantes will take this up later on. Just now I want you to go into the Jardin del Muerto and ride sign on the White Mask."

"The Jardin del Muerto!" Dick's voice expressed his disapproval. Beyond the Sangre de Dios mountains the Jardin del Muerto stretched away in lifeless desolation to the border, a land of grassless sand dunes, barren rocks, and canyon hideouts for outlaws.

There was but one nearby opening into the Jardin and that was through Ladron canyon, where no stolen cattle had been run. It was not a good route for rustlers because their flank was exposed at so many

places in the passage. The other route lay due southward over a level plain visible for scores of miles to pursuers and for that reason seldom used by cattle thieves. No one had ever intimated that rustlers could have made the border through the Jardin by either route.

"You heard me," said McClelland; "the Garden of Death."

"The Indians prophesy a sandstorm for tomorrow," said Dick. "If the rustler gang runs true to form they will raid after night-fall. Seems to me we ought to watch Lost Corral."

"The sheriff will take care of that," interrupted the cattleman. "Before dusk he'll send enough trigger fingers into Lost Corral to stop 'em. I agree with Durkin and Showwalter that you ought to hit right at the White Mask's camp, which must be somewhere out on the Jardin or over the border. You bring this Mask feller in like you did Rojo, and I'll give you Ladron water hole and the cabin on Mesa Prieta. With the three thousand dollars reward you can make a real herd of your little DH brand and then—" McClelland left the rest unsaid.

"Jardin del Muerto," mused Harmoniky. "So Durkin and Showwalter think the Mask holes in out there?"

"I'd like to have a cavalry troop to ride across the Jardin and wipe out every outlaw gang in it," growled the ranch owner. "There was a time when I'd done it, too, without cavalry. Well, git goin'. Did Durkin bring yeh them catridges like I told him?"

Nodding affirmatively, Harmoniky indicated his well-filled cartridge belt and followed McClelland through the hallway toward the outer door. Inside the big living room they could still hear some of the vigilante members arguing.

THEY found the pinto and beside it, tied to the hitch post, a long lean, black mustang, bearing Dick's bed-roll and slicker fastened in a light pack with a squaw hitch; also his longest stake ropes of plaited rawhide and picket pins. Harmoniky untied the squaw hitch, threw a one man diamond and looked to his cinches. The cattleman stood staring out

at the vast expanse of desert, swimming in a sea of darkness, at the shadowy outlines of the Sangre de Dios foothills, at the distant night sky filled with countless star worlds, and for once he seemed to sense the brooding presence that hovered over it all. A cloud of pain crossed his eyes.

"My boy—" he began, in a softer voice; then stopped, stiffened turned away.

Durkin emerged from the shadows. Beside him was a girl; Ruth. She lingered there for only a moment. Then her voice came to them clear and sharp.

"I think you are a trouble maker and an insufferable bully," she said distinctly. "I don't want you ever to speak to me again."

Harmoniky took up the lead rope. Ruth ran to his side. She had made the pillow mask for him.

"I can't let you go without a bite to eat," she said. "Come into the kitchen."

Dick glanced at McClelland. The cattle-man nodded a brief assent. In a few minutes Harmoniky found himself sitting at an oilcloth-covered table before a platter of fried steak, with a cup of aromatic coffee at his elbow, and a pretty girl across from him with chin on her hands. She had chased out Moy Yen and served him herself.

"You are sitting on the thing you asked for," she said. "I'm just dying of curiosity, but I suppose I dare not ask what you are going to do with it."

He flashed her a grateful smile.

"You'll know why I wanted it mighty soon," he said, hiding the white mask in his shirt bosom under cover of stooping to pick up a fallen spoon. "Mebby they's other eavesdroppers besides Mr. Durkin, you know."

"I have something more important to talk about than my curiosity, Dick," she returned. "Do you know where Tex Cantrell went when he left the meeting?"

"I couldn't guess."

"I saw him ride out into the sage," she pursued. "I saw a man with a steeple-crowned hat join him. Then they both disappeared. I tell you, Dick, you are in deadly peril," she continued with suppressed vehemence. "You must tell dad what we know. You must not go."

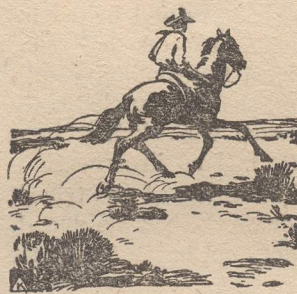
Harmoniky got up and walked toward the door. At the entrance he stopped and faced her, his face very grave, eyes tender.

"I hate to go agin' you, Ruth," he said, "but I cain't stop now. Wouldn't it look fine for the future foreman of your dad's ranch to go yaller account a few sneakin' cow thieves?"

THE paint horse reared, snorting with fear. Dick felt the thud of his boot-leg striking a soft, yielding object, and a shapeless bundle floundered on the sand before him. For an instant he merely stared, pulling down his horse; then as a grunt issued from the recumbent form he leaped to the ground beside it.

Black beady eyes in a swarthy face peered out at him from beneath the folds of an Indian blanket. It was Gordita, Ruth's Apache servant woman.

"Did I hurt you, Tze-go-juni?" he asked in Apache, hoisting the fat squaw to her feet. He did not call her Gordita. That was her *cholo* name. He bestowed upon her the full title of the Apache medicine woman, which was hers by reason of being struck by lightning, maimed by a cougar, and bitten by a rattlesnake.



He remembered that he had a present for the squaw and, fishing in his pocket, he found it.

With the toe of his boot he made the sign of the cross on the ground at her right foot, and where the lines joined he dropped a beautiful clear crystal of quartz. When he spoke it was still in the Indian tongue.

"Great medicine for Tze-go-juni from the sacred caves of the high mountain," he said. "The medicine woman of the Apache may speak with it to the rain-cloud, the serpent lightning, the rainbow, the cross of the four winds."

The squaw made no answer. Instead she produced from her garments a belt of rawhide, decorated with colored Indian designs, and handed it to Harmoniky, lifting her head to confront him, her bronze face

stolid with impressive dignity.

"To the white friend of the Apache, Tze-go-juni gives the sacred medicine sash, a protection against arrows and bullets," she intoned; "a protection to the Indian's friend when death rides in the sandstorm."

Turning away she faced toward the moon.

"*Gun-ju-le klego n-a-ay*," she implored in deep, resonant tones. (Be Good, oh moon! Be Good.)

HARMONIKY, following her gaze, chilled with the sudden sense of drama, raised his own face and responded:

"*Gun-ju-le chil jilt su chi zi. Gun-ju-le inzayu ijanale.*" (Be good, oh night. Twilight be good. Do not let me die.)

As Harmoniky disappeared in the gloom, the squaw crept into the shadows of an old adobe wall and stood waiting, her eyes on the stables. In a moment her vigilance was rewarded. From one of the corrals emerged a horseman, whose steeple-crowned hat and homemade sandals marked him for a Mexican. He rode after Dick King.

Tze-go-juni made a clucking sound with tongue against palate. A tall Indian boy, mounted bareback on a skinny mustang, emerged from the shadows and halted by the medicine woman. It was her son, Flight of the Eagle, a fine-looking youth, straight as a sapling, slender-muscled body bare to the waist, coarse black hair bare of any covering. He had no firearms.

"Follow the white brother of our tribe," commanded the squaw. "Shed no blood, but see that harm does not befall the Great Heart."

The young brave's eyes glinted with pleasure. For many moons he had dreamed of repaying the freckle-faced cowpuncher for his simple acts of kindness to his mother. With a grunt of satisfaction he prodded his horse into a gallop that quickly carried him out of sight.

Keeping to the soft sand that dulled the hoofbeats of his mustang, he followed the Mexican until the steeple-hatted one dismounted at a water hole. Creeping forward, Flight of the Eagle whipped out a knife, cut the saddle cinches on the Mexican's horse and vanished into the darkness as quickly as he had come.

IV

OVERLOOKING LOST CORRAL

THE blackness of the night lay like a shroud over the Sangre de Dios mountains. So dark was it that Harmoniky, sitting astride his painted pony atop a rocky ridge behind a giant sahuaro, peered between the ears of his horse in vain at the shadowy riders flitting in the cover of cactus and yucca.

Long hours of night riding had carried him through Ladrón canyon and out onto the Jardín del Muerto. Southward the way lay clear to the border, but he did not follow the southward trail. Instead he dodged into a cleft in the hills to deceive any pursuers, doubled back and before morning had reached this high ridge commanding the entrance to Lost Corral and an expanse of the McClelland range so vast it appalled the human eye. He did not know, of course, that in dodging his enemies he had also lost his protector, the Indian boy.

Dick had no qualms about disobeying McClelland's orders, for if his plans worked out he felt sure he would meet and capture the White Mask before he returned.

Chuckling, he watched a distant group of riders vanish among the hills. He leaned forward and patted the pinto's smooth neck with a gesture of satisfaction. Friend or enemy he had a shock for them. By this time every one believed him well on his way to Mexico. What a surprise it would be for the night prowlers if they knew he was here, entrenched in their midst, protected by the very obscurity which covered their own movements! He had guessed correctly that they would come to this point, the key position governing entry and exit from Lost Corral to the big range.

Spectral and black above a bristling cactus appeared a head. Harmoniky raised his rifle, dropped it again. He could not shoot a man from ambush. Besides, to fire a shot would reveal his secret hiding place from which he expected to see all that might happen in Lost Corral on the morrow; perhaps even the secret of cattle that vanished in thin air.

The man's head was followed by a body;

then a horse. Moving ghostlike along the hillside, not a half mile away the rider came steadily toward Dick's hiding place. His features were invisible at that distance in the darkness.



Noiselessly Dick slid from the pinto's back and led the horse down into a little arroyo, fed by a spring, where the pack-horse, bridle free, now grazed contentedly. By stretching a stake rope from a Joshua tree to mesquite at the lower end of the cut, he had made a small corral from which neither of the animals was likely to stray. He removed Powder's bridle, but not the saddle. He might have to move quickly if one of these night prowlers surprised him.

To all appearances the rustler gang was getting set to strike. The master mind that had directed the movements of the thieves was putting his men in position under cover of darkness hours in advance of the time. By daybreak the rustlers would command the pass wherever man might cross. Dick figured that they would remain as the storm neared until night fell again in readiness for the foray. If he had waited a few hours longer he would never have been able to reach this point unchallenged.

Suddenly he lifted his head, listening intently. To his ears came the distinct ring of metal horseshoe against rock. The rider was getting nearer. If it was a mere lookout he would let him pass, but if it was the White Mask himself—Dick thrilled at the thought.

THE silence was broken only by the click of steel against steel as he levered a cartridge into the rifle chamber. Quietly he climbed out of the arroyo.

Stars glimmered distantly. Eastward loomed the black bulk of the Sangre de Dios; to the west the unseen prairie swimming in a sea of darkness; below was the cleft in the rocks called McClelland pass, while far off to the northeast lay the giant inclosed cup, Lost Corral, fenced by impassable stone barriers except at two openings.

The sky lightened. Facing the McClelland rangeland, Dick's eyes lighted on a scene that quickened his pulse and warmed his blood. On a wide, level, bushless area on the plain a brown, compact mass made a splotch against the desert gray. From it emanated an obscuring cloud. Around it moved dots that Harmoniky knew were horsemen. It was the main herd of the spring calf roundup. Farther, much farther to the northwest, a dimly seen semicircular ring of dust was approaching mile by mile, concealed by the billowing sand cloud were cattle, and behind the cattle mounted men urging them over the plain to the central point, the main herd.

It was the last drive of the calf roundup and the biggest. From the good feed of the northwest range came the fattest steers and the largest calves of the Double Cross ranch and of such others as had strayed. Thought of the stray herd brought a broad grin to Dick's face. Out in that line of dust would be fifty-odd head of his own brand, the DH, the small beginning of a ranch of his own and independence.

THE pounding of hoofs brought Harmoniky alert, rifle ready. With the abruptness of a desert dawn the rider topped the rise and was silhouetted before Dick against the dark hills as if by magic. But it was not the manner of his appearing that caused Harmoniky's breath to quicken. He could hardly believe his eyes. What was it obscured the horseman's features and gave them a spectral cast? No man ever had a face like that, shapeless, dead-white, inhuman, masklike. It was a mask—a white mask.

Coolly Harmoniky swung up his rifle and aimed, not at the man but at the horse. Squinting along the barrel he fixed the sight upon the mount. He waited until the mustang had turned broadside, brought the bead upon the heart and pulled the trigger. To his astounded ears, prepared for a sharp detonation, came only a *click*. Quickly he threw in another shell without taking the gun from his shoulder, and still another. *Click click* sounded the hammer descending upon unresponsive brass butts of dead shells.

Now the rider was upon him, slouch-hatted, overalled, wearing gauntlet gloves,

rifle in scabbard and six-shooter in holster. Try as he would, Dick could find no identifying mark upon him or his equipment. The bay horse he rode, scenting a man, threw up its head and swerved. The rider cursed and flicked the redding flanks with his spurs.

Flinging the rifle from him with an oath, Harmoniky leaped onto the trail, hands diving for guns in girded holsters. Back on its haunches reared the bay, snorting with terror. The White Mask went for his gun. Dick abandoned his idea of unhorsing the bandit. Aiming both guns at the rider he yelled a command to surrender. "Halt! Put up your hands."

Despite the plunging of his horse, the White Mask fired. Dick leveled both his six-shooters and pulled the triggers. Dead silence followed. Again and again he attempted to fire. No explosion came; only the clear snap of the mechanism and then the whisk of a bullet past his ear, the repeated roar of the bandit's weapon and the hoarse shout of triumph from the White Mask as Dick dodged for cover behind a cactus clump.



The bandit trained his gun on the cactus. "Come out!" he ordered in a harsh, disguised voice.

Harmoniky flattened himself against the ground. A sickening sense of defeat had come over him, but he was not yet beaten. Some one had given him worthless cartridges or had tampered with his guns.

THE masked rider spurred his horse toward the concealing shrubs. Harmoniky, wriggling flat on his belly, rose on his knee and leaped suddenly for the mounted man. Frightened, the horse reared backward. The bandit's bullet whistled overhead. Jumping to one side, Dick caught the rider's belt and pulled with all his strength. At once he was sensible of the outlaw's weakness. The man was not very strong or he would have jerked free. Harmoniky felt the fellow slipping, saw the

revolver muzzle lowering toward him, and he suddenly gave the horse a tremendous slap with his open hand. As the horse jumped, the man came free of the saddle, his gun hand jerked upward, the bullet whistling harmlessly into space.

Down in a heap went the two men, the bandit on top. Harmoniky tried to hold on, but when the muzzle of the .45 almost reached the level of his head he let go his grip and struck out at it. The White Mask seemed light for his height. His ribs were bony. There was no great strength in his arms. Dick caught the odor of whisky as he quickly closed in again, gripping the wrist that held the gun with one hand and striking out with the other. Suddenly the outlaw's muscles relaxed. Harmoniky relaxed his grip. A knee came up and struck him so hard he reeled, gasping for breath, paralyzed.

Both men were on the ground now. The rustler's breath came in loud gasps. Through the slits in the white cloth Dick saw savage eyes gleam at him over revolver sights, saw the muzzle come level with his chest and it steeled him to enormous effort. Rolling over, he kicked out, the deafening explosion beat on his eardrums. Rising, he saw the rustler on his knees, reaching for the gun that lay a few feet from his finger tips. A leap carried Dick to the spot. His foot crunched down upon fingers just closing over the gun. Shapeless, masked features glowered up helplessly.

With a flash of triumphant joy, Harmoniky realized that he had conquered the White Mask. He had but to reach out and pull aside the pillowslip to reveal the identity of the terror bandit.

Still holding the fingers fast to the gun with his foot, he stretched out a hand to touch the mask. A form loomed alongside. Lightning pain shot through his head—he felt himself sinking into space.

V

THE OUTLAW'S PRISONER

INTOLERABLE heat, choking thirst, stabbing needles of pain! Consciousness returned slowly, consciousness and agony. Harmoniky opened his eyes and closed them again against a swirl of sting-

ing grit. In his ears was a roaring, a rushing beating noise like the thunder of stampeding cattle.

Dust stifled him. Alkali burned his eyeballs. His head ached dully. Vainly he tried to lift his hand to brush away salt moisture that flowed over his forehead, across his cheek and into the corners of his mouth. His hands were a dead weight, held in an awkward position, bound behind him. He felt his back against a tree trunk, and he could not move away from it.

Cautiously he opened his eyes again to mere slits. He could see the rope around his ankles. Memory flooded back over him. He remembered reaching for the white-masked face—something had hit him——

Abrupt realization dawned in its full bitterness. The outlaw he had come to capture had captured him. Angrily he tore at his bonds. Lightning flashed before his eyes; sharp pains seared his brain. He closed his eyes and slumped back panting.

The roaring noise thudded against raw nerves like the beating of hoofs. Again he looked out. This time through the haze of the storm he could see the lookout a hundred yards from him perched on a tall rock, a man in slouch hat and overalls, a bandanna handkerchief covering the lower part of his face, rifle resting across a forearm. Something was about to happen; the man's alert attitude revealed it as he shifted his gaze from Dick down upon Lost Corral Pass and the McClelland pass.

Harmoniky followed the direction of his gaze and saw something that brought a groan to his lips. Even the ever-thickening sand fog failed to obscure the sight. Very close along the foot of the hills on the McClelland side, came cattle, driven straight for the pass, running.

There! A steer had sighted the opening and made a break for it. Two jumps behind flew a cowhorse, belly to the earth, rider leaning slightly forward, sitting loosely like an expert cowman. Now they dipped into a ravine. Now they appeared atop it. The horseman was gaining. He was almost abreast of the steer. Other steers were following the runaway. If the cowboy could head this one, the others would be more easily turned back.

"Go to it, cowboy!" murmured Harmoniky thickly and then held his breath. The horse and rider went down in a cloud of dust. The steer plunged ahead. Dulled by the intervening rocks came the report of a rifle. Down there a mannikin jumped from the side of his fallen horse and sprinted for cover. Death thundered after him; death in the form of hoofs and horns. The stampeding steers became a long, brown sizzling streak against the desert gray, through the shimmering haze, gathering force and quantity and momentum like an avalanche.

THREE horsemen appeared riding like mad from the direction of the home ranch. Suddenly there were but two. Again came the belated crack of the rifle. It was followed by a volley that kicked up little spurts of sand around the riders. The cowboys picked up their dismounted companion and fled.

Groaning, shuddering at his own helplessness, Dick turned his eyes on the pass below. Billowing dust, tossing horns, contorted brown bodies, cattle, cattle, cattle! Cattle driven through the pass in broad daylight under cover of the storm! Before his very eyes hundreds of cattle were being stolen. The irony of it made him want to laugh, to shriek aloud.

The White Mask had struck. He had made a fool of Harmoniky. He must be laughing among his pals right now over the trick they had played.

A gun spat viciously. It was followed by a rattle of musketry. Dick's tortured gaze on the lookout saw the masked man rest his rifle on the rocky finger against which he leaned, cheek against stock, aiming carefully. Against his ear beat the reverberating echoes of the report. To his senses came the realization that he was seeing his own friends shot down.

Stronger and stronger the sense of failure swept over him. It was his own fault. He had been overconfident. In his delight at playing a trick on his enemies, he had let them disarm him. As his brain cleared he had plenty of time to take stock of his situation while he worked ceaselessly to free his hands and feet and hopelessly watched the cattle grow dimmer and dim-

mer in the distance until the swirling dust storm swallowed them up.



His wrists were a raw sore. His stomach seemed to turn over at intervals. Acute pains bit into his brain. He was obliged to settle back against the cat's-claw trunk and

rest.

He fell to wondering why the White Mask had not killed him. Taking him prisoner must be some trick. Several things were now clear in his mind. One was the definite certainty that the White Mask had a spy among the vigilantes. And the other was that Durkin was mixed up in it somehow.

THAT night in the garden had revealed the reason for Durkin's personal hostility. The foreman was after Ruth. But it would hardly account for such bitter enmity as Durkin had displayed. There must be some other reason. Durkin might be the White Mask's spy.

Harmoniky again began to look around for a means to escape. Powder! Why hadn't he thought of the paint horse before? Glancing toward the guard, he found him barely visible now in the blinding storm.

After several tries he managed to give the bird call. The first was weak; the next stronger. Finally he sent one out that was shrill enough surely for the pinto to hear.

Dick waited for what seemed an interminable period. Perhaps they had tied up Powder or taken him away. A noise in the brush caused him to turn his head. Something moved toward him. The *clump, clump* of hoofs, the creaking of leather told him it was a horse. But friend or enemy he could not know. The lookout turned, saw the horse, lifted his rifle. Harmoniky's heart stopped. The lookout stared again and, seeing the horse was riderless, lowered his weapon.

Something pushed roughly against Dick's shoulder, sending cutting flame through his head. Powder lowered his velvet muzzle

to the pocket where Dick always carried candy for him and snorted his disapproval at finding none.

"Powder, old hoss, help me get out of this," begged Dick.

The pinto shook its head up and down and pawed the earth.

Harmoniky lunged at the ropes which held him to the tree; then dropped back faint, dizzy. Moisture ran over his forehead and into the corner of his mouth again. He pressed his cheek against Powder's face and left a crimson imprint there. Sight of it stirred him. Deliberately he leaned forward and wiped the blood upon the white markings of the tame paint horse.

"Git goin' now, Powder!" he commanded. "Git for home. Go find Ruth, and when she sees that blood on your muzzle, she'll send me help. Andale! Yip, yip, yipee."

POWDER jerked up his head. Many times Harmoniky had sent him to Ruth before. He knew exactly what was wanted of him. With a temperamental toss of his mane he pricked up his ears, backed away and trotted off down the trail toward the McClelland rangeland.

A horseman emerged from the murky depth of the obscuring sandstorm. Harmoniky looked up at a white-masked face, straining his senses to identify it—the man he had fought with—a tall man, but weak, with skinny ribs and poor wind. The White Mask pointed a finger at Harmoniky, laughing softly, triumphantly. There was something about that laugh also; it was the mirth of a man unused to laughing; the tone of it was cracked from long disuse.

"Guess we've kind of wiped the grin off this feller's face," he growled, as two men picked Harmoniky up and fastened him into the saddle of a spare horse.

Harmoniky smiled through the blood that trickled from the wound in his head.

"Whitey," he said, addressing the leader, "you put me in mind of a snoozer who owned a rattlesnake, name of Percival. This sheepherder ordered a shroud, but it was so durned small he never could get it any farther than jest over his head. He cut holes in it for his eyes and nose, and they buried him thataway. He was a

nice-lookin' corpse, 'cept he was slightly soiled where the bullets hit him."

The bandit leader swore angrily and struck Dick's horse. The abrupt jerk of the plunging animal sent a vague buzzing through Harmoniky's head. He reeled, slumped forward in the saddle and when he came to they were descending a steep, narrow path single file onto the plain of Lost Corral. He went out of his head again at the jolting he received when one of the outlaws whipped up his horse, and for some time he had no idea of the passage of time or distance.

PRESENTLY his brain cleared again. His arms were loose. That was the first thing he discovered. Then his legs; all the ropes had been removed. Still more amazing, when he dropped his hand there were guns in holsters, his own black-handled sixshooters. He wondered at this dully as he peered through the obscuring sand fog to make out the forms of others riders. They were nowhere in sight. Again he looked around to make sure.

Whirling dust particles cut the back of his neck and filled his lungs. So thick was it that he could not see two hundred yards ahead. He had lost his bearings completely. He did not know whether he was headed toward Gila or the McClelland range. And he was alone. They had set him free. It was too good to be true. Had his mind not been dulled by pain he might have guessed the trickery of it, but now he only realized that he was no longer a prisoner.

He gave the horse its head, and the skinny animal, staggering under his weight, turned at an angle and plodded forward, head down, evidently in the last throes of exhaustion or old age.

Harmoniky traveled like this for hours it seemed. The storm lessened. Ahead of him appeared an uneven black line which changed slowly into the saw toothed ridge of the Sangre de Dios foothills. He recognized the contour as that above the Cinnabar mine. Glancing at his horse's ears he noted for the first time that they were marked like the Showwalter remuda, and he understood why the animal had brought him here.

A shout, the dull roar of a six-shooter, the quick dash of horsemen, and mounted

men ringed him about. The hollow barrel of a revolver loomed in his face and over the sight hard eyes bored into his. The face twitched. It was pockmarked. Durkin!

"Hist 'em!" grated Durkin's voice; his triumphant sneering eyes told Dick what would happen if he did not comply.



With an effort Harmoniky raised his hands. The other riders closed in. A loop fell over his head, tightened about his chest. His guns were jerked from their holsters.

Rankin's voice burst forth in a loud roar of angry surprise.

"Dick King," he cried with an oath, "what're you doin' here?" Rankin and Dick had always been friends, but Dick knew by the tone of that voice they were friends no longer.

They kept riding ahead. Horsemen crowded close on all sides of him. Harmoniky, still too stunned to speak, accompanied them without protest or explanation. To his ears came vague phrases. "And he's riding a stolen horse—old nag rustled from Ed Showwalter——"

"Will they give him a trial?" asked a voice. "Hell no," said another. "Ain't he caught in the act?"

Another rider spurred close to him.

"Fuh fuh-funny he stayed behind," stuttered the deputy sheriff. "Don't sound reasonable them thieves would desert a pal when all the rest vanished plumb into the air, hide, horns, and taller. That orter be took into account."

THE words of friendship, mild as they were, thrilled Dick as much as he was capable of feeling just then. He heard some one say that after the fight at McClelland pass, the Double Cross owner had ridden back to the ranch to send a rider for the sheriff.

"It's blamed oncanny," burst out the

voice of Slim Holtz, "to have stock fade away like them longhorns done. It kind of sends shivers up yore back. But I cain't believe Harmoniky's in on it. I reckon he'll have a story to tell when he comes out of his dizzy spell."

Durkin, who had taken the lead, halted at the mouth of the Cinnabar mine, unloosed his rope and threw it over a bit of timber that projected from the rocks fifteen feet overhead.

"Ride the pris'ner right under here!" he called out, with a loud laugh. "Everything's ready. The place is jest made to order for rustlers."

Harmoniky's dulled, pain-stricken eyes, alighting on the improvised gallows, suddenly became alive. In a flash he realized his predicament. Caught among rustlers, on a stolen horse just after a cattle herd had been driven off, he was marked as a thief. Unless he talked and quickly, Durkin might get his own way.

Fully alert now he glanced around from one face to another of his former friends. Averted eyes greeted him. Slim Holtz looked down his nose and turned his back. Stutterin' Steve flushed and twisted his face into a grimace of distress.

Harmoniky's grin broke out.

"Mebby you gents would like to hear the story of a innocent babe who has just escaped from a band of thieves," he suggested.

"We've had enough gab out of you," snapped Durkin, quickly. "Ride him under here, fellers."

Stutterin' Steve suddenly spurred his horse to Dick's side.

"Hu-hu-hold up now," he stammered. "Spuh-spuh-speaking for the law I duh-duh-duh—"

"The deputy sheriff is right," said Slim Holtz. "Don't you say so, Mr. Rankin?"

"He's a slick one," protested Ed Show-walter. "He'll talk you right out of your eyeteeth if you let him."

Rankin's leathery face gathered a ferocious frown. He was thinking, and that was difficult for the Bar Circle Bar owner.

Harmoniky hung on the words that were to come from his lips. What Rankin said, might decide his fate. If Rankin agreed with Durkin and the Showwalters and the

others, they would hang him at once and riddle his body with bullets.

"I reckon Harmoniky's entitled to a hearin'," said Rankin. "Bring him over here front of the mine."

VI

AN OFFICIAL MEETING OF THE VIGILANTES

IN THE grim silence the men gathered in a circle around Harmoniky near the mine mouth, some squatting on their heels, others sitting on overturned dump cars and piles of tailings, and still others standing. They were uneasy. They glanced about nervously. They did not look one another in the eye. A sense of shame was upon them for what they were about to do.

The Cinnabar mine, which had been worked and widened and deepened for twenty-five years by as many different mining men, ran straight into the hillside for quite a distance. But the mouth of it was now closed by a mass of brush and none of the interior could be seen. The dump had a rusty look as if no slag had been unloaded there for a long time, and the high fence which inclosed the works was down on the upper end and was broken in some other places by the trampling of cattle and horses, the marks of whose hoofs in spots were thinly covered by drifting sand.

The approach to the mine offered a protection against the waning storm that still whipped sand and grit uncomfortably against cheek and eyes, and it was here the posse gathered.

Harmoniky took a position with his back against the wall of the country rock and thus, half sitting and half standing, awaited developments. Although he was still weak,



his brain had cleared, and he was prepared to take advantage of any opening that might occur.

Shorty Show-walter, one of the owners of the Cinnabar, moved about fussily. He was a small,

timid-appearing man, spotted as a leopard, and he seemed very anxious to please every one.

"While we're at it, we better do things regular," he suggested. "Steve, you go over to the cabin and git Ed. We cain't have no official meeting of the vigilantes without Ed. Be careful, Slim, about sittin' on old boards. Watch out fer rattlers, all you fellers. We ain't operated the Cinnabar for quite a spell, and they's liable to be pizen reptiles about."

STUTTERIN' Steve rode away toward the Showwalter cabin, ignoring Durkin's protest over the delay. The others waited in sullen silence, motionless, looking down their noses. Only Harmoniky seemed unimpressed by the seriousness of the occasion. His eyes, passing from face to face, finally alighted on Shorty.

"Why did you close up the mine, Shorty?" he asked.

Shorty's eye brightened. He was always eager to talk geology.

"Lack of capital," he replied. "We had to brush up the mouth to keep critters out."

"Don't talk to him, Shorty," growled Durkin. "He'll git the better of yeh."

The little man ignored the Double Cross foreman. He rubbed nervously at his hair and moved toward Dick.

"This is going to be a great mine some day," he asserted. "We got shale and porphyry sheets impregnated with gold, associated with realgar and cinnabar. The porphyry is soft and makes it easy to mine. That's why the tunnel has been dug so all fired big."

"You shore know your stuff, Shorty," said Harmoniky admiringly. He kept his eyes on Shorty's face, but his thoughts were on the big gun in Shorty's holster. He had a definite plan now; something that held out hope. Carelessly, yet with infinite care, he ruled his words and actions to an end.

Stooping, he scooped up a handful of the very white sand which lay in patches about the tunnel mouth. These patches were different in appearance from the rest of the soil, as if they had been carried here by some means.

"How do you geologists figger this out?" he asked casually. "This sand don't

look like it belonged here at all. Did it come out of the mine?"

Shorty's face flushed with pleasure. Dick had called him a geologist. He picked up a sample of the soil. The movement brought his gun temptingly within reach of Harmoniky's fingers. Out of the corner of his eye Dick saw Durkin's gaze fixed on him intently, and he closed his eyes as if in weakness and brushed his hand over his forehead. A moment later he slid heavily to the ground and was thrilled with a sudden sense of elation when Shorty followed the suggestion and dropped beside him. His problem was solved for a moment. Shorty was left-handed, and his gun lay almost against Dick's leg.

"I've took you on trips with me quite a few times, Dick," Shorty was saying. "You ought to begin recognizing some of this geology."

"Where did you ever see sand like that before?"

"On the Jardin del Muerto, across the mountain," responded Harmoniky promptly. "How does it git over here?"

"Shut yore trap, Shorty," snarled Durkin. "Ain't you got no sense."

"That sand blows over the mountains," asserted the miner. "Like I told you, the soil here in Lost Corral is silica. It sparkles. In the Jardin it is gypsum. The grains are dull, even in the sunlight." He moistened some of the white sand and held it under Harmoniky's nose. "See when you wet it, it turns yaller. But here's Ed now." He started to rise, glanced up suddenly, turned pale. His upper lip quivered.

"Jest sit tight, Shorty," whispered Dick, pressing the revolver muzzle against the little man's back. "Long as you don't move or say anything, you won't get hurt."

ED SHOWWALTER stormed up, his fat paunch quivering, face purple with excitement. He stood for a moment looking over the crowd, picking nervously at his cornsilky hair.

"I'll appint a jury fust," he said. "Durkin, foreman, Quirarte, Jess Rankin, Steve Hardy, Shorty, Slim Holtz, six is enough. I'll be prosecutor. Who do you want to defend yeh, King?"

"I'll defend myself," said Harmoniky. The case against Dick was quickly pre-

sented. McClelland had sent him to the Jardin del Muerto to get the White Mask. And here they had found him at the tail end of a band of rustlers and stolen cattle

in Lost Corral riding a rustled horse.

"He must have been fightin' our men 'cause he's wounded in the head," concluded Pete Durkin, who had proved



to be the star witness for the prosecution.

In reply Harmoniky told all that had happened to him from the time he had left the Double Cross ranch until they had found him wandering in the sandstorm.

"Do you mean to say the White Mask turned yeh loose after he took yeh prisoner?" demanded Durkin,

"I do," replied Dick.

Durkin threw back his head and laughed heartily.

"Are you fellers goin' to believe that?" he snorted. "Even if these other lies was true, are you goin' to believe the White Mask would set King free and give him back his guns?"

Dick, watching Rankin, saw the conviction sweep over the Bar Circle Bar owner's face. He glanced toward Slim Holtz, but the Double Cross puncher refused to look at him. Stutterin' Steve, Dick's other champion, seemed to be in the deepest misery.

His story didn't sound reasonable. Suddenly Dick realized that, but he was fighting for his life now, and he kept at it.

"As I told you I didn't go to the Jardin because I was sure the White Mask would come to Lost Corral," he said earnestly. "And I was right. I lost out, men, because of a spy at the home ranch, among the vigilantes."

"Yeah," jeered Ed Showwalter; "and you're that spy."

Dick ignored the interruption.

"This spy planned to send me out of the country," he persisted. "He loaded me up with shells that wouldn't shoot." He turned and faced Durkin directly. "And then, at the Double Cross ranch, this spy tried to

make me fight with guns, knowin' he could shoot me down in cold blood without any danger," he concluded in clear deliberate tones.

EVERY eye turned on Pete Durkin. The foreman's pockmarked cheeks reddened. The side of his face began to twitch violently. But his laugh was triumphant as he held out Harmoniky's cartridge belt and holstered guns to Showwalter.

"Bum catridges, eh?" he jibed. "Well, try 'em, Ed. Try 'em."

Showwalter lifted one of the black-handled .45s, pointed the muzzle at the ground, pulled the trigger. A spurt of sand answered the explosion.

"Nothing wrong with them shells," he said.

Harmoniky's jaw dropped. He saw every face about him harden with anger and suspicion, and he knew that there could be but one verdict. He had not realized before the cleverness of the plot against him. The White Mask had reserved this death for him, the disgrace of trial by the vigilantes; the horror of hanging instead of the cleaner death by rifle or revolver bullet. That was why the White Mask had set him free. That was why the bandit leader had given back his guns.

And now this masked assassin sat before him, among these lynch-law fighters, calmly waiting the execution of his devilish scheme; chuckling because he had been clever enough to make the vigilantes kill their most expert man hunter.

Rankin stepped forward impatiently.

"Have you anything more to say, Mr. King?" he demanded, formally.

The words burned into Dick's brain like a red-hot knife. It was as much as to say, "Are you ready to be hanged, Mr. King?"

Knowing that words would not serve him any longer, he rose easily and placed his back to the rock wall where an outcropping half protected his body from those on his left flank. Then he sparred for time.

"I've got one more thing to say," he declared. "I was mistaken about the White Mask having a spy among the vigilantes. The feller that disarmed me, left me planted out here to be hung by my friends, done better than that. He jined the vigilantes."

Rankin's head snapped up. Ed Show-

walter turned suddenly and took a step toward Dick, his small blue eyes flashing a strange fire. Durkin's mouth popped open; and then he gave voice to a raucous laugh. The others merely stared, unbelieving, incredulous. This was the most outlandish of all the incredible things Dick King had told them.

Rankin recovered his voice.

"Point out the man," he said. "Point out the man and prove your charge."

"Give me time and I will," replied Dick, quickly. "Have them turn me loose with two of your men, you and Deputy Sheriff Hardy, and I'll prove every word of it."

ED SHOWWALTER'S loud voice interrupted him.

"Have you gents reached a verdict?" he yelled. "We don't want to listen to no more lies. What is your verdict?"

"Huh-huh-hold up," stuttered Steve Hardy. "I ain't agreed with myself, let alone nobody else."

"Me neither," said Slim Holtz.

An overpowering roar of voices drowned them out. "Guilty" was the cry. "Guilty as hell!"

Dick saw the sullenness fade from the men's faces; saw the gleaming blood lust take its place, and he realized that he was not dealing with normal human beings but a mob; a mob filled with the urge to kill; a human wolf pack gone mad for vengeance.

Durkin came toward him, a looped rope in his hand. He thrust his face close to Dick's just as Harmoniky hoped he would do. To one side he saw Holtz make a move to interfere. Several men blocked his path. Deputy Sheriff Hardy's protest went unheeded. Stutterin' Steve was trying to tell them this was against the law; that he as an officer could not stand for it. But instead his voice rose merely in staccato utterance like a machine gun.

"I—I—I— wuh-wuh-wuh— duh—duh—duh—"

Durkin was speaking. His voice was purring, low, exultant.

"The jury says you're guilty, feller," he said, holding the rope before Dick's eyes, "and I've got a little present for you."

Harmoniky's mouth stretched in a wide grin.

"And I for you," he replied.

DURKIN'S gaze had barely time to focus upon that smile when it vanished. Shorty's revolver appeared in Dick's hand, jabbing Durkin's solar plexus, doubling him up with pain. One continuous rapid movement, and Dick twisted the foreman about as a shield, flipped Durkin's gun into his other palm and pointed the weapons at the vigilantes. Protected by the foreman's body and by the rock outcropping, he offered a poor mark while every other man there was fully exposed.

"Stretch yore hind laigs and raise yore hands," he drawled.

Arms leaped skyward like a magic forest. There was something terrible, something compelling about this man whose smile changed to sudden ferocity, whose teeth gleaming with mirth were now drawn back in an animal snarl; who, thought unarmed a moment before, had



lived up to his reputation by magically producing a deadly weapon that held a dozen men at bay. These men had seen Harmoniky shoot before. The trace of

steel in his tone bit fear into their hearts like an auger, and they did not care to dispute him.

Ed Showwalter, glaring at the wild-eyed, bloody-faced cowpuncher crouching behind the cowering foreman, lifted his left hand tentatively. The right dropped downward.

Durkin's shriek of protest was buried in a roar of the revolver shot that boomed and echoed back from the mine walls. Ed dropped to his knees, clutching at his shoulder. His gun fell from nerveless fingers to the sand.

Dick's eyes swept to the other cowmen. He ignored the wounded man completely. Durkin trembling with fear, clung to a bit of rock for support. "He'd 'a' shot me," he mumbled. "Ed would 'a' shot me through. I'll get even with him."

Harmoniky's smile flamed again.

"Any more customers?" he asked derisively. "I never kills a man but once."

No one answered, and he continued.

"Now you lynch-law gents listen to me. You have got me on the prod. I'm through with the vigilantes, through with the whole dirty bunch of you. I was going to tell you about the White Mask. I was going to show you the stolen cattle. But I'm through with you now. From here on I play a lone hand, and every time I see a gun lifted against me I shoot—to kill."

DURKIN, his hands in the air uttered a blustering protest.

"You cain't get away with it!" he stormed. "They's too many of us."

Harmoniky brushed his blood-stained forehead with a shirt sleeve. Face splotched with brownish streaks, eyes hollow and blazing, hair rumpled and sticking out from beneath his hat brim, dirty and bedraggled, he looked like a wild man.

"They's too many of us," assented Shorty Showwalter.

Harmoniky laughed uproariously.

"Well, they won't be so many if any of you start throwin' lead," he said.

The silence that followed was interrupted by Stutterin' Steve.

"Lu lu-look who's comin'," he said. "It's the shu-shu-sheriff."

A gangly cadaverous figure on a hammerhead horse approached rapidly from the direction of McClelland pass.

"Don't try to warn him," ordered Dick. "The first man that squawks get's leaded proper. Put down your hands quick, but keep them away from your shootin' irons."

The sheriff needed no warning. Before the words had been uttered, he had stopped out of revolver range. He had seen the upraised hands suddenly lowered. He had noted the detached figure against the rock wall. And he acted promptly.

Dick saw him unstrap his rifle, and he knew the game was up. The rifle barrel pointed toward him.

"H'ist them there, fellers!" shouted the sheriff.

Dick hesitated. He could feel Durkin's body begin to tremble. He could see the satisfied smiles on the faces of the posse.

He estimated the distance carefully and realized the .45s were useless.

"Raise yore hands," reiterated Boyes and fired to emphasize the order. The bullet ricocheted off a rock like an angry hornet.

"Don't make him kill me!" pleaded Durkin. "You better surrender."

The sheriff dismounted and dropped to one knee. Dick saw him snuggle the gunstock into the palm of his left hand, saw the hollow steel barrel come to a steady focus upon him; waited until the eyes gleaming out of the death's head face were visible along the sights, and then as Durkin slid limply to the ground he raised both guns over his head.

VII

BACK AT THE RANCH

ANDY McCLELLAND halted in the doorway of the sick room. Old Lobo Wolf, tucked between white sheets, turned uneasily at the sound and half raised himself from the pillow. Ruth, a glass of water in her hand, supported him; made him drink and then pushed him down with a gentleness which the old prospector probably had never encountered before.

"Where's Creswell?" asked McClelland sharply.

Ruth glanced up. Her father's face startled her. She saw the rifle in his hands, the two full cartridge belts slung over his arm, and she instantly realized that something was wrong.

"What has haperrred?" she asked. "Why, you are drenched with perspiration! You must have ridden like a madman."

"The White Mask raided that drove of choice steers I had brought in for shipping north and got away with the whole bunch of them," asserted the cattleman grimly. "Shot two horses and stood off my men at the pass by rifle fire. Durkin and Steve and Rankin led a posse into Lost Corral after the raiders withdrew, and I came home to send some one for the sheriff. I didn't think there was a chance of the posse catching the rustlers or I'd 'a' gone in with them. Where's Creswell?"

"I don't know," she replied. "Where's Dick? What happened to him? Is he all right?"

The sound of voices began to disturb the

wounded man. He stirred and mumbled to himself. From one corner of the room arose the Indian squaw, Gordita. She laid aside the basket she had been making out of yucca fibre and crooned to the old fellow in a soothing tone.

"Go find Clem Creswell, Gordita," commanded McClelland. "Tell him to come here, *muy pronto*." And to Ruth he added, "I s'pose Dick is across the border by this time. You don't have to worry about him. He missed the battle."

"He warned you," asserted Ruth. "If you had listened to him——"

Impatiently McClelland turned away; halted, raised his head, glanced sharply at the bed.

Lobo Wolf's mumbling had become audible. "Phoebe," he muttered. "Phoebe—stop—Durkin."

McClelland took a step toward the bed, hesitated, eyes attentive, brow puzzled.

"What is he saying?" he asked. "What is he talking about?"

The old man raised himself on the pillow and stared at the cattleman with unseeing eyes.

"Phoebe!" he wailed. "Phoebe—my—my child."

McClelland was at the bedside in an instant, his eyes fixed keenly on Wolf's face. The hands that pressed the old man back onto the bed were not gentle. The gaze fixed upon the prospector's wrinkled white-bearded face was stern. Impatiently the ranchowner brushed the hair back from the old man's forehead.

"Phoebe!" he murmured, speaking to himself. "I wonder—But no—it can't be."

RUTH stood behind her father silent, moving, trying to conceal her amazement. McClelland turned on her, and she reflected that she had never seen that bewildered look in his face before.

"What has this old man said—about Phoebe—about Durkin?" he asked. "What is he to Durkin?"

Ruth regarded him gravely for a moment before replying.

"Durkin must know him," she said. "He sent one of his men here to help care for him. Rojas, I believe the *vaquero* is called."

Only a slight widening of the eyes betrayed McClelland's emotion.

"Don't ask any questions," he said curtly, "but when he comes to, try to get Wolf to talk. Find out who Phoebe is. Get him to tell you what he knows about Durkin."

Ruth halted the question that came to her lips. She merely nodded and followed her father through the door.

"Pardon, señor!" A Mexican *vaquero* stood in the big living room.

"What are you doing here, Rojas?" demanded McClelland.

Rojas gave a deprecatory shrug of the shoulders and lowered his head in mock humility.



"Pardon, El Señor Durkin send me," he replied, "for help weeth seek mans."

McClelland's face darkened.

"Oh, he did, did he? Well, what did he do that for?"

Rojas lifted his eyebrows and again shrugged his shoulders as if to say that the way of the gringo was beyond comprehension. He did not meet McClelland's intent gaze.

"*Quién sabe?*" he answered in the smooth patois of the border country. That easy flowing "Who knows?" was the first expression that came to the lips of a Mexican when he did not wish to talk. And it was evident that either Rojas knew nothing or did not wish to tell what he knew.

McCLELLAND paced back and forth across the room several times while Rojas waited patiently and Ruth looked on, more and more bewildered. Presently the ranch owner reached a decision.

"Ruth, will you see if you can find Gordita—and Clem Creswell?" McClelland requested.

When Ruth had gone he turned to Rojas. "All right," he assented. "If Durkin told you to take care of Wolf, go on in there and do it."

The Mexican made his way into the sick room with catlike tread. McClelland strode out of the house, banged the door behind

him and broke into a run. He did not stop until he had reached a place beneath the deep-embrasured adobe window. Creeping noiselessly but quickly up to this window he peered in.

The light that filtered into the sick room through a lattice revealed a strange sight. On the bed the grizzly bearded prospector moved back and forth continually while his lips muttered a jumble of words. In the doorway stood Ruth, wide-eyed, pale-faced, one arm raised in protest. While creeping toward the bed was Rojas with a naked blade gleaming in his right hand.

McClelland's hand came up with a gun. The explosion of the shot and Ruth's loud scream sounded simultaneously. Rojas dropped to the floor, clutching a becrim-somed mangled hand. Ruth ran to the bed and caught the delirious old man just as he was about to plunge to the floor. McClelland, tearing aside the screen, jumped through the window and caught Rojas as he was trying to drag his gun from the holster with the other hand.

From the kitchen came loud shouting in Cantonese. Moy Yen, the cook, bounded into the living room, pigtail flopping at every jump. Clem Creswell burst in, gun in hand.

"What happened?" he demanded.

McClelland dragged Rojas out of the sick room and thrust him into a chair in the living room.

"This skunk tried to knife Lobo Wolf," he declared.

CLEM'S face went blank with astonishment. That any one should try to stab a harmless old man to death was beyond his comprehension.

"Wal, the ornery sidewinder!" he commented, stepping forward with lifted hand as if minded to strike Rojas in the face.

Ruth, having quieted the sick man and turned him over to Gordita's care, came out to them.

"What is the meaning of this, Dad?" she asked. "Why should Rojas attack that poor old man?"

"Guess we better ask him," replied McClelland grimly. "I knew he was up to something dirty, but I didn't suspicion murder. After I sent him to the sick room I ran around to a window. I just got

there in the nick of time. He was standing over Lobo with his knife raised ready to strike. I plugged him."

Ruth turned to the Mexican, her eyes flashing.

"Well, what have you to say?" she demanded.

Rojas lowered his eyes. The stolidity of the Indian was on him. He was not going to talk.

"He said Durkin sent him," continued Ruth. "Do you think—? No; it can't be—Dad, what hold has this Durkin got on you?"

The question acted on McClelland like a blow in the face. His cheeks reddened. His hard gray eyes narrowed.

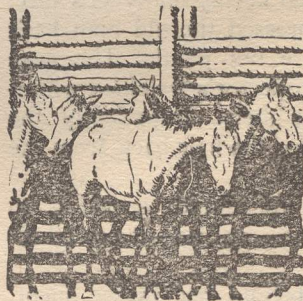
"You forget I am your father," he said sternly.

Ruth met his gaze squarely.

"You forget it is my happiness you jeopardize as well as your own," she retorted.

McClelland turned away ponderously. His shoulders slumped a little. Despite his arrogant spirit, age was beginning to tell on him.

"Bring Rojas out to the corral, Clem," he order. "Mebby we c'n coax him to talk if we act real polite."



Ruth brushed between her father and the prisoner.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

McClelland's grin was sardonic.

"We'll only make him squirm a little," he promised. "Don't worry your head about what is strictly a man's business." And he followed Creswell and the prisoner out of the room.

An hour later McClelland, looking haggard and hollow-eyed, returned alone.

"Clem's holding Rojas a prisoner," he said quickly, in answer to Ruth's questioning look. "With a little urgin' he coughed up the whole story. Durkin sent him back here to kill Wolf."

"But why?" demanded the girl, incredulously.

"Let me ask you a question first," was

the reply. "Did the doctor say Wolf would get well?"

"With good care, yes."

"Then give him the best care in the world, for my life depends on Lobo Wolf."

Ruth shook her head hopelessly.

"I don't understand."

McClelland gave her a kindly smile.

"Of course you don't," he admitted. "Come into my room, and I'll explain."

VIII

"MY LIFE DEPENDS ON THE LOBO WOLF"

McCLELLAND'S room reflected something of the lonely character of the man himself. No skins were on the floor, no pictures on the wall, no cloth spread on the pine affair that served as table and dresser. Piled in one corner was a saddle. Under the wooden bed were boots, trousers, shoes and other articles of apparel. Behind a door stood a collection of rifles, shotguns, smaller arms and cleaning rods, a sheaf of branding irons and several worn leather scabbards. Upon the table was a kerosene lamp, a pile of twenty-dollar gold pieces, pipe and tobacco, a half dozen .44 calibre cartridges, and a report of the Cattlemen's Association.

McClelland had resisted all Ruth's efforts to civilize this room. It was the only part of his old, hard life that he had held intact, this undecorated, uncarpeted room.

As the door closed on father and daughter, the big ranch owner turned suddenly and faced her, his arms outflung in an emotional gesture.

"Thank God I'm soon to be free!" he said. "If Lobo Wolf lives—Providence sent him to help me—" He halted frowning, his eyes held by the calm strength of the girl who stood watching him.

"I will tell you everything," he said more slowly. "I owe you an explanation."

Ruth made a quick gesture of dissent.

"You owe me nothing," she declared.

"No girl ever had a better father."

McClelland lowered his head.

"You are like your mother," he said in a low, rumbling voice. "I loved your mother, Ruth. I never talked about it, never told her. I thought she would understand. She did understand, but it was hard

for her. A man's ways are rough ways, and the desert makes savages of men. Sometimes I—I forgot she was only a woman. And now I've come near forgetting you are a woman, too, doing you and Dick dirt to save my own hide."

"Dad!" Ruth's cry was sharp with protest.

"Even your mother never knew what I am about to tell you," he continued. "It was my intention to carry the secret to the grave. Then Durkin came. He knew. Even then I hoped I might be able to cover it up but—I guess I'd better start at the beginning."

McClelland cleared his throat and saw his daughter seated on the edge of the bed before he continued:

"It happened more than twenty-five years ago in Pendleton. I was a young man then with a reputation for recklessness. Pete Durkin was a bully hired by a competitor to put my faro layout out of business. He never dared go up against me on the square. But he got me just the same. Five days after he started workin' for the other outfit, I was a fugitive from justice with a price on my head."

Ruth's eyes fixed on her father's face, wore a pained look now, but she gave no other sign of emotion.

"One day I happened to be passing Durkin's place when I heard a scream," he continued. "I ran into the saloon which was nearly deserted owin' to the early hour. I saw a girl fightin' with Jake Teslan, a barroom bruiser. He was trying to kiss her. Pete Durkin was looking on, laughing. I grabbed Teslan and pulled him away, but my eyes was on Durkin expectin' him to draw. He just kept smiling, and when I glanced at the bruiser the fellow was diggin' for iron. I beat him to it."

McCLELLAND ceased speaking and began pacing back and forth. Ruth sat perfectly still, her eyes closed tight to keep back the tears.

"It was a fair fight," continued the ranch owner. "He had his gun half out before I started. It was his life or mine. But when the sheriff took it up, he heard a different story. The man and girl left. Durkin was the only witness. He—he blamed me," McClelland finished as mildly as he could.

Ruth's eyes flamed with anger.

"I saw I could never get a fair trial, and I left town," pursued McClelland. "They indicted me. Warrants were issued for my arrest. They sent notices everywhere. They were stuck up at post offices, saloons, and trading posts. I grew a beard, and no one

recognized me. For more than a quarter of a century I fought man, beast, and the weather to conquer this country, and during all that time I never heard of the old

charge against me. When I married your mother I thought so little of the affair that I never told her about it at all. Then one day about a month ago I met a man on the street at Gila."

"Durkin," said Ruth.

McClelland nodded.

"Durkin," he admitted. "You can guess the rest. My first thought was to kill him. But I never had murdered a man, and I couldn't. He promised to keep my secret if I made him foreman—at two hundred dollars a month. You understand now why I turned Dick down. I had to do it."

"Yes, yes; I understand," declared Ruth. "I never doubted you."

"No; but I could see you were unhappy," he replied. "And it made me plain loco. Durkin never know'd how close he come to death a good many times. Still I couldn't do it. Besides, he said he had planted the evidence where it would be found if he died and that I would go up just the same for—murder."

His voice lowered at the word. The color flocked from Ruth's cheeks. Murder! Now that it menaced her father, the word had a sinister significance which she had never felt before.

"Then in Lobo Wolf's sick room I got my first ray of hope," said the ranch owner.

"What did he say that gave you hope?" asked Ruth.

"I forgot to tell you that when I killed Teslan, the girl's father called the girl's name. He yelled for her to run for it. It was the only sign I had to tell her by, just

a girl's first name. That name was Phoebe."

"Phoebe," exclaimed Ruth. "Why, then —Wolf—"

McCLELLAND'S great hand caught his daughter's shoulder and held them while he looked into her face.

"Yes!" he exulted. "Fate tossed me an ace. I had a sudden hope when I heard him mumbling the name that it might be—*her*. That would make Wolf the man with the girl at Durkin's saloon——"

"Her father," breathed Ruth.

McClelland nodded.

"I wasn't sure until Durkin sent Rojas to kill Wolf. Then I knew. Girl, we have found the man that can clear my name. I see through the whole thing now. Durkin shot Wolf to keep him from me. But he went too far. I'm free from him now. I'm free. Lobo Wolf's testimony will save me from trial for murder."

The ranch owner got to his feet suddenly. He pulled his battered revolver out of the holster and examined it.

"What are you going to do?" asked Ruth.

"I'm going after Durkin," he answered. "The rustlers can escape for all I care. I'm going to get Pete Durkin before another day."

An excited figure burst into the room without knocking. It was Clem Creswell.

"Something's happened to Harmoniky!" he cried. "His horse just come in without bridle or rider, and it's got blood all over its face."

Ruth gave a repressed cry. Before either of the men could move she darted out into the hall ahead of them, and when they emerged she was running her fingers through the pinto's mane, searching for the message which Dick often sent her concealed in this fashion. But there was no message. Nor did she find any about the saddle.

"This blood on the pinto's face looks fresh," said Creswell.

Ruth ran to the horse's head and passed trembling fingers over the brown splotches on the white face. McClelland, glowering darkly, examined them also.

"It's blood all right," he admitted. "But if Dick was shot there'd surely be blood on



the saddle, too. And there ain't none."

"I know!" exclaimed Ruth. "Dick has been wounded. He marked Powder with that blood and sent him to me. We must go to him."

"But where?" protested her father. "You don't know where he is?"

"Get horses!" Ruth commanded Creswell. "Get a bridle for Powder. Hurry, please."

"What did you do with Rojas, Clem?" shouted McClelland, as the cowboy ran toward the corral.

"Spread-eagled him on a wagon wheel!" yelled Clem.

"What makes you think this paint horse will take us to Dick?" McClelland asked as Ruth hurried toward the house. She did not stop to answer but ran to her room where she hurriedly slipped into her riding habit and adjusted belt and holster for her long-barreled .32. By the time she appeared at the hitch post, Clem was there with Ruth's long lean roan and was adjusting the bridle on Harmoniky's pinto.

"That paint horse will never play dog," asserted the cattle men, as he finished tightening the cinches on a fresh horse he had just saddled. "I never saw a fuzztail yet that would go trailing his owner around the country."

"Powder will," asserted Ruth, confidently. "We've trained him that way."

AND Powder did. He balked a little at first at leaving the water, feed, and comfort of the ranch. But after Ruth had led him for a mile he was as eager as they to be on the trail. Ruth leaned forward and hit him a sharp blow with her quirt. The calico pony threw up its head, struck out with its heels, and headed toward the Sangre de Dios foothills at a gallop.

"He's going now!" cried Ruth, putting spurs to her roan. "He needed a little coaxing."

McClelland roweled his horse to catch up with her, and together they raced across the plain in pursuit of the black and white mustang. For an hour they kept up the pace; then slowed down to allow the paint horse to select the trail. Powder was working in earnest now. Once away from the allurements of the ranch, his sole thought was of Harmoniky. His trail led

into Ladron canyon and up a steep path into the hills overlooking Lost Corral.

At last McClelland rode to his daughter's side and voiced a protest.

"This is a wild-goose chase, he said. "Dick never come up here. He was headed for the Jardin del Muerto."

She silenced the objection with a word.

"Perhaps he followed the White Mask here," she replied.

AT LAST they came to the summit and Powder halted under a cat's claw tree. Ruth dropped to the ground and hurried over to the horse. One glance told the story.

"Here!" she called. "Dick was here. He was tied up to the tree. There's blood on it, and here's a piece of a rope. They've taken him away. We're too late."

She stood up and gazed at her father tragically.

"He's gone!" she repeated dully. "Gone!"

Sight of her grief drove McClelland to action.



"Don't give up," he boomed, in a hearty voice. "We've only just hit the trail. Let's look around for signs."

But they were saved this trouble.

The roan suddenly raised his head and whinnied. There was a moment of silence. Then from a little gully came an answering neigh. A few minutes later McClelland emerged from the draw leading Harmoniky's pack horse.

"Dick's alive," he shouted. "You c'n bet on that. The rustlers made him pris'ner and took him along with them down in Lost Corral. There's signs of them going down that trail. I'll lead, you foller."

For the next fifteen minutes Ruth's mind was occupied keeping the roan on his feet on the steep path. The sandstorm had died down and only a slight breeze tempered the torrid heat of the sun. Ruth and her father dropped into Lost Corral and

headed toward the farther side of the giant cup.

Not until they came within view of the Cinnabar mine did they see any sign of life except a few stray cattle.

"Something's going on over at the Cinnabar," asserted McClelland, shading his eyes with a hand. "We'll hit for there."

Ruth looked in the direction indicated and made out a group of men, looking like pigmies at the distance, who seemed to be very busy at the mine mouth. She turned her horse in that direction and forced the roan ahead in spite of the roughness of the ground.

Presently they came to a rise that commanded the country beyond them and revealed the group at the mine in plain view. In one glance Ruth took in the significance of the activity—a man on a horse with a rope around his neck, two riders crowding close to him to drive his horse under an outjutting timber, other horsemen sitting around with drawn guns waiting to fire into the dangling body. And she voiced her horror in one piercing scream.

A pistol shot could not have had more effect. Plenty of shots were heard on the plain. There was nothing unusual about them in the eyes of these men. But a woman's scream—it stopped their every movement. It astounded these men so that not even when Ruth quirted her horse through the ring of riders did they realize what was happening.

What she had seen gave Ruth the courage of desperation. Above the milling horsemen surged up the head and shoulders of Dick King. She saw the bloodstains on his face. She saw his hands bound behind his back. And with a sickening feeling she saw the rope noosed around his neck.

IX

POWDER DOES HIS JOB

WITH a gasp of horror Ruth rode straight for Harmoniky's horse, straight at the drawn guns of the two men guarding him. Dick's head came up. The old smile flashed forth. "Ruth!" he shouted. "I knew Powder would bring you."

Rearing, Ruth's roan evaded outstretched hands; cleared a path with menacing steel-

shod hoofs. Powder ran beside her. The guarding horsemen gave a little. Ruth's hand shot out for the rope and flicked the noose from Harmoniky's neck. The paint horse on the other side nuzzled him roughly and snorted.

Uttering a sharp cowboy cry, Ruth struck Dick's mount with her quirt. The horse lunged ahead, but was stopped at once. Strong hands ripped the reins from Ruth's grasp. Her horse's head was dragged down, and she was forced from Dick's side. Pete Durkin's pockmarked face was thrust into hers. The odor of whiskey came to her nostrils, strong, nauseating.

"What do you mean, interferin' with justice?" Durkin demanded.

"Stop a minute, boys!" It was McClelland's voice, cool and commanding. "We got some new evidence in this case. What you doin' to Harmoniky?"

"I'm guest of honor at this necktie party," said Dick, grinning wryly.

"Ain't you got sense enough to be serious even at a hangin'?" demanded the Double Cross owner. "I sent you to the Jardin del Muerto. What you doing here?"

"Well, you see it was thisaway—" drawled Harmoniky.

"That'll be enough gab!" yelled some one. "Boys, are we going to let Mac stop a legal execution?"

"No!" cried another, and a half dozen men took up the chorus. "Take Mac's gun. He ain't got no call to step in. Get the rope."

THE horsemen crowded close, jostling McClelland who glared about him angrily. His eyes alighted on the sheriff with a ray of hope.

"Sheriff," he yelled, "I ask you to protect this pris'ner in the name of the law."

Sheriff Boyes compressed his lips. It had the effect of making his skeleton face look more like a death mask than ever.

"Harmoniky's been duly tried and condemned," he said.

"A lynch trial ain't legal," retorted McClelland. "I demand a legal hearin' for this pris'ner. He's my hand. I ought to have something to say about it."

Durkin rode close and stared insolently into McClelland's face. Slim Holtz rode to his boss's side, but behind him crowded

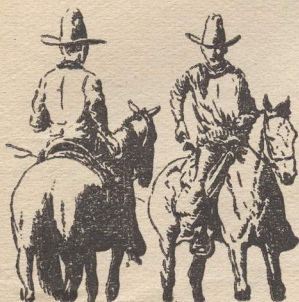
other men, guns in hand, ready to thrust them into the cowboy's ribs if he interfered.

"A cattle rustler is nobody's hand," sneered Durkin. "We caught him with the thieves, and he gits a thief's medicine."

McClelland's heavy face twisted into a grimace of rage. He controlled himself with difficulty.

"You're my foreman," he said in a strained voice, "and you're takin' orders from me, Durkin. Cut Harmoniky loose."

The two men glared at each other, hands poised over their weapons. Ed Showwalter's voice broke the tension.



"You don't know what you're doin', Mac," he protested, looking up from the bed several men had made for him out of blankets at the foot of the cliff. "Dick

shot me. But he done worse than that. You sent him into the Jardin after the White Mask. Instead of goin' he joined the White Mask. When we fin'ly broke through the pass and took after them rustlers, who should we come onto at the tail end of the stolen herd but this skunk Harmoniky. He'd been shot fighting our men, and his pals had left him. He couldn't keep up."

McClelland gazed from one face to another blankly. He read assent in every eye. When he looked at Dick he saw a cowpuncher had slipped the noose on his neck again and was flinging it over the projecting timber. Others forced Dick's horse under the gallows. The men's faces wore a look of deadly determination.

"Speak up, Dick," said McClelland. "Explain this."

"I came back because I saw the White Mask," said Harmoniky calmly. "I hid alongside the trail, covered him with my guns—and he beat me to it. He made me his prisoner instead of t'other way around. They tied me up while the fightin' was going on and then brought me down here and left me. I was lost in the sandstorm;

didn't know which way to turn until the posse found me."

"How did the bandit come to whip yeh?" asked McClelland.

"Somebody loaded my guns with blanks—"

THE rope, drawn suddenly tight choked off the words. The black-clad cowpuncher made a convulsive movement with his body. A cowboy with one end of the rope dallied around the horn of his saddle, slowly backed away, tightening the noose, partly lifting Harmoniky from the saddle.

"Durkin did it!" Ruth's voice was shrill with terror at the sight. She struggled vainly to go to Dick's side, but was held back by rough hands. "Durkin bought the shells."

McClelland whirled on Durkin, his face livid.

"You dirty snake!" he cried. "You black-mail me, and you frame Harmoniky. I'll kill——"

His right hand dropping swiftly to his gun, halted suddenly. His body stiffened. Slowly he raised his hands above his head. Durkin's gun had leaped first. Its deadly nose prodded him in the stomach.

"Don't git nasty, Mac," jeered Durkin. "I'm playin' upper hand now." The foreman waved his hand toward the hangmen. "Git it over with," he commanded. "What yeh waitin' for?"

"Ruth must not see this," said McClelland. "Take her away." He glanced around and saw that his daughter had left the crowd. "Where has Ruth gone?"

The riders looked around with one accord. Ruth's horse stood a hundred feet distant near a pile of rocks, but Ruth was nowhere to be seen.

"Never mind about that!" bellowed Durkin. "Drive Dick's horse from underneath him."

A rifle roared. The hills gave back a billowing echo. The hangman uttered a loud yell as he tumbled off his horse. The rope around Dick's neck had parted, dropping him back into the saddle, throwing the man who was holding it off his balance.

"Here I am, Dad," called Ruth's voice cheerily. "Just stay where you are. I can cover everyone."

The crowd turned as a man. From a crack in the big rock near Ruth's horse protruded a rifle barrel. That was all they could see, but behind it they knew was a determined girl.

"Raise your hands, Durkin," continued Ruth. "I've shot rattlers before, I'll do it again."

DURKIN lifted his hands over his head with alacrity. He had seen her rifle bullet cut the rope. That was evidence enough of her marksmanship.

"Every one else in favor of woman's rights, raise his hands," she continued.

There was a moment of hesitancy.

Shorty Showwalter shouldered his way to the front, blustering in a cracked voice.

"See here, no bluffin' goes. You——"

The vicious crack of the rifle interrupted his words. Shorty ducked suddenly, grabbing at his head. "She creased me!" he shouted. "The gal shot me." Two holes had appeared in Shorty's hat, front and rear.

"Hands up!" insisted Ruth. Her voice rang clear as a bell. And every man there caught the savage note in it. They realized that here was a girl fighting for the man she loved. She would not stop at killing to free him.

Sheepishly the vigilantes raised their hands above their heads.

At the act McClelland let out a yell of triumph, pulled his own six-shooter, stuck it inches deep in Durkin's stomach and took the foreman's revolver.

"Line up now, you fellows," he commanded. "Backs to me. Keep 'em up!"

"Steve and Slim are square shooters," croaked Dick who had dismounted. The noose around his neck had nearly choked him. He was just beginning to get back his voice.

"All right," said McClelland. "Slim, you cut Harmoniky loose. Steve, as deppity sheriff, you take charge of the weapons."

NOT until all the men were disarmed did Ruth rise from behind the rock and run toward Dick, who, gone suddenly weak, had slumped on the ground in a sitting position and was rubbing his bruised throat.

"Dick, Dick!" she cried, dropping to her knees by his side. "Why, you are

wounded." Her hands went swiftly, tenderly, to his head and then to the raw marks on his neck. She brushed the hair back from his eyes and wiped the blood from his forehead, cheeks, and mouth.

"It ain't so much," he said. "Just a scalp wound." The touch of her fingers acted like wine on his senses. He felt life surging through his veins in a strong flood. When he looked up at her the old-time grin twisted his pale face a bit wryly.

"Put her there, partner," he said, extending his hand. "You ol' gun fighter! I might 'a' knowed a McClelland would beat all tricks."

Partner! The word, carrying with it a world of praise and approval brought a great light to Ruth's eyes. She extended her hand and gripped his, too moved for words.

Harmoniky struggled to his feet. He rocked back and forth dizzily. He still had a dazed look in the eyes. His hands strayed to his waist, and suddenly he was fully awake.

"Where's my guns?" he asked.

"Slim, get me my guns."

Slim brought them and strapped the holster belt around Dick's waist. It made Harmoniky feel more like himself. His step was almost brisk when he walked over to McClelland, who had forced all the vigilantes to obey him except Sheriff Boyes. The old sheriff was protesting stubbornly at the indignity.

"Now that you've stuck a lawful posse up agin' the law, what are you going to do about it?" Boyes demanded. "You got yourself in a pretty mess, Mac. You better back down while your hide's whole. If you stick to what you're doin' now the Sangre de Dios country will be too hot for you. You'll have to leave."

MCCLELLAND'S gaze wavered. There was much truth in this. Now that he had taken these men prisoners, what was he going to do about it? His eyes alighted on Dick, who had seated himself on a rock near the mouth of the



mine and was rolling a cigarette.

"You better do some fast talking, King," he said. "How come you to have your guns if the White Mask made you his pris'ner? How did you escape from him?"

"I didn't escape," replied Dick. "He turned me loose. And he buckled the guns on me before he left."

A look of disbelief crossed McClelland's face. It brought a roar of jeering laughter from the vigilantes.

"I guess you won't swallow that lie," said Shorty Showwalter.

"Beginnin' to see through him now, Mac, ain't you?" asked Rankin. "We gave him a trial, and he lied right and left."

McClelland's eyes flamed with sudden anger at Harmoniky.

"You can't make a fool out of me, King," he said. "Why would the bandits turn yeh loose? Tell me that. It's more likely they'd 'a' killed yeh."

"Father," Ruth's voice cut in on the tirade, "don't you see why they freed Dick?"

McClelland shook his head.

"No; I don't," he said stubbornly.

The girl made an impatient gesture.

"Why, it seems to me it ought to be clear as crystal," she continued. "The whole thing is part of a planned conspiracy. These outlaws gave Dick blank shells, lured him on to a fight, captured him, brought him down here in a dazed condition, freed him, gave him his guns, *loaded*—why? So that the vigilantes would take him and hang him; that is why."

McClelland's eyes brightened.

"Is that so, Dick?" he demanded.

"It is," admitted Harmoniky. "But it's a long story. Gather the boys around and I'll tell the sad, sad tale."

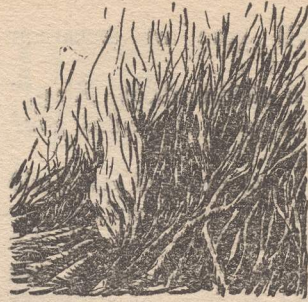
X

EVIDENCE

LEANING against the rock cliff, Dick confronted the men grouped about him; men who a moment before had been about to hang him. Casually he stared into the eyes of them; then negligently rolled a cigarette and flipped the match into the brush at the mine mouth.

A flame flared up in the dry brush.

With an oath the sheriff stepped forward and quickly stamped it out.



"Ain't you got no more sense than to set fire to a mine?" he growled.

Dick ignored the reprimand, ignored the hostile stares, the impatient frown that gathered

deeper and deeper on McClelland's face. Squatting on his heels, he did another odd thing. He scooped up a handful of the white sand over which he and Shorty had had the argument and regarded it gravely.

"Shorty says this sand blows across the mountains," he said with apparent irrelevance.

"Get down to business," interrupted McClelland. "What's this damn foolishness —" He caught Dick's eye, saw one eyelid droop slightly and ceased speaking. He would give the boy a chance. "Well, go ahead," he assented grudgingly; "but talk fast."

"Gents, I'm plumb curious about settlin' this argument," Dick continued. "Sheriff, what do you think? Did this gypsum sand blow 'cross the mountain from the Jardin, or did it git in—some other way?"

At the question Boyes glanced at the sand. Then he turned away with a contemptuous look.

"You can make a jackass of Mac, but not me," he growled.

"What do you think, Rankin?" asked Harmoniky.

"I don't know what you're talkin' about," said the Bar Circle Bar owner. "Do you?"

"Well, Shorty, do you still stick to your idee?"

Shorty's speckled face took on a bluish cast. He plucked at the silky yellow hair of his mustache and cast an appealing glance at his brother. Ed merely glowered savagely.

"Come, Shorty," insisted Dick. "Speak up."

"I told you once," blurted out Shorty. "The sand blows across the mountaintops

from the Jardin into Lost Corral and drifts up agin' the hillside."

MCCLELLAND gave an impatient snort.

"What are you talkin about, King?" he demanded. "Explain, if you're goin' to, and if you ain't, shut up."

"I'd rather show you than tell you," said Dick, grinning at the cattleman's angry expression. "I'd rather show you your lost cattle and mebbby the White Mask. But fust off we should go into the Cinnabar mine and find some of this yere white sand Shorty talks so much about."

McClelland's glare changed to a look of puzzlement. It began to dawn on him that perhaps the blow on the head and the attempted hanging had unseated Dick's reason. Ed Showwalter, watching McClelland's face from his cot on the ground, read his thoughts and interpreted them in words.

"Harmoniky's gone loco," he said. "You can all see that. We can't noways string up a crazy man. Sheriff, I guess you better take the pris'ner into Tonto to jail. You win, McClelland. Boyes, we all agree with Mac to give Dick King a legal trial."

"That sounds reasonable," admitted Rankin.

McClelland looked at Dick doubtfully. Then his eyes turned on Durkin and the sight of the blackmailer put the steel in him. Whatever else might be said, Durkin was a killer and a crook. And these vigilantes were his friends. He decided to play Harmoniky's game for a few minutes longer.

"How come you to be tricked by the White Mask so easy, Harmoniky?" he asked. "Don't sound right to me somehow."

Dick did not look at his boss. Instead he swept his eyes over the prisoners and finally allowed them to rest upon Durkin.

"Who proposed sendin' me to the Jardin?" he asked.

"Durkin and Ed Showwalter."

"Who bought my cartridges?"

"Durkin."

"Who was in charge of the drive when the White Mask run off them cattle?"

"Durkin and Showwalter," repeated McClelland.

Harmoniky's smile was triumphant.

"Now I want you to make one guess why these gents was so all fired anxious to send me out of the country before the White Mask's raid; why they drove that herd near McClelland pass so they could be run off easy; why they put blank cartridges in my guns. You tell us, Durkin."

DURKIN advanced on Dick, his chin outthrust belligerently. His pock-marked face was pale. The right cheek twitched violently. He seemed to be steeling himself for a final effort, so tense was his body. Although unarmed he said the fighting word. "You're a liar, Dick King. We tried your guns and found the shells good."

Harmoniky's head went up at the insult. Red flooded his pale, bloodstained cheeks. His hands closed into balled fists, and he took a single step toward the foreman. Durkin stood his ground, though his eyes wavered for a moment and a lump kept rising in his throat.

"You're a' scairt to fight a man without your guns on," he sneered. "Take 'em off, and I'll wipe the ground with you."

Harmoniky's head cleared of momentary anger. Durkin's sudden bravery puzzled him. It was not like the foreman to welcome a fist fight. He had challenged Harmoniky in the McClelland garden only because he knew that his gun held blanks. There was trickery in this.

Dick's glance fell on Durkin's fingers and rested there for a flash. Those fingers kept moving upward. They seemed eager to reach for something, and it was not Harmoniky's throat.

Harmoniky dropped a hand to unbuckle his gun belt. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Durkin's arm lift to his shirt front. It was time to act. Turning slightly, he struck; a short-handed jab to Durkin's solar plexus. His other hand dived for the foreman's shirt front even as the fellow doubled up with a grunt of pain.

Durkin staggered back. From Dick's fingers dangled a small-calibre nickel-plated revolver.

"You gents shore are honin' to stop me talkin'," Dick observed. He jacked the shells from the weapon and tossed it to-

ward the pile of guns. "Any one else want a try?"

McClelland, who had looked on in amazement, picked Durkin up by the collar and shook him as if he were a wet rag.

"Lay hands off of me, Mac," protested Durkin. "I'll tell what I know about you."

THE ranch owner shook his foreman again until it seemed the man's teeth would fall out. Durkin tore free, ran back a distance and confronted the vigilantes. From a concealed pocket in his undershirt he produced a parcel wrapped in buckskin. Out of it he brought a paper, faded and yellow with age. Clearly visible to every one there were the huge letters—"\$500 Reward" and "Wanted for Murder." In smaller type was the name, "Andrew McClelland."



Durkin handed it to the sheriff.

"That tells the story of Andy McClelland," he snarled, pointing an accusing finger at the Double

Cross ranch owner. "He is the murderer named there. Read the description, and you'll see. He's under indictment in Pendleton for killing Jake Teslan twenty-five years ago. Let him deny it. Ask him. You can put him under arrest, sheriff, right now and make him give up his gun."

McClelland stood before them waiting, not denying the charge. The others eyed him in silence. It was Sheriff Boyes who first spoke.

"Is this so, Mac?" he asked.

The cattleman nodded.

"I was indicted for murder," he admitted.

Boyes took a step forward.

"You're under arrest, Mac," he said. "And I demand you give up yore gun and submit. If you resist the whole country will be on yore trail."

McClelland raised the muzzle of his six-shooter. The sheriff halted.

"No hurry, sheriff," said the rancher. "They's another pris'ner you can take into custody first. I charge Pete Durkin with

blackmail, attempted murder, and conspiracy to kill Lobo Wolf. And I've got witnesses to prove it."

DURKIN did not move, but his eyes darted around him like those of a trapped animal. Every escape was cut off. If he ran for it he would be shot down before he had gone ten steps.

"That's some more lies," he declared, but his voice did not carry conviction.

"Lobo Wolf can testify that I killed Jake Teslan in self-defense," pursued McClelland. "It was Durkin who shot Lobo while he was lookout. It was Durkin who hired Rojas to finish the old man with a knife. Clem Creswell and me caught Rojas in the act and made him confess. I've got witnesses, sheriff, to prove anything I say. Arrest Peter Durkin."

The sheriff glared at Durkin and then back at McClelland uncertainly.

"I can't arrest nobody until you give me back my guns," he complained. "I'm shootin' square with everybody, Mac. I ain't holdin' no grudges. Be reasonable, and we'll all go into Tonto and thresh this out in court."

"That's certainly fair enough," said Rankin.

"Will you gents promise there'll be no lynchin'?" asked McClelland.

"Shore!" shouted several at once. They had cooled off now and were not nearly so anxious to hang Dick King.

"I'll promise you that," said the sheriff.

The men began moving toward the pile of guns. McClelland half lowered his weapon.

"Don't trust them, Dad." It was Ruth's voice, shrill with a renewed fear for Dick. "Don't trust them. It's a trick. You've got the winning hand, Dad, keep it."

Harmoniky's voice amused, drawling, cut in on the tumult.

"I'd like to whisper one word in your ear, Mac," he said. "I think maybe you might be interested in the white gypsum sand of the Jardin del Muerto, too."

SOMEWHAT doubtfully McClelland permitted Dick to draw him aside.

They held a whispered conversation while Slim Holtz guarded the prisoners. When they came back to the crowd the big Double

Cross owner seemed transformed into a veritable dynamo of energy.

"First we'll clear away the brush from the mine mouth," he bellowed. "Come on now, you fellers. Harmoniky and me has decided to go mining for white sand."

"What did he tell you, Mac?" demanded Jess Rankin.

"Wouldn't you like to know? Well, if you would, you and your men hop to work. Did I ever do anything unless I had a good reason for it, Jess?"

Jess admitted that Mac never did, and finally he and his men joined Steve Hardy, Holtz, McClelland, and Dick at the work of clearing the mine mouth. Despite bantering questions, Dick and Mac refused to reveal their plan. Only the sheriff, Durkin, the Showwalters and several of the men refused to help.

Presently Harmoniky was forced to rest. The labor made him faint. He was elected guard to watch the prisoners. Ruth, sitting by his side, with one hand on his arm, could restrain her curiosity no longer.

"What in the world is your idea now?" she asked. "You do the oddest things. Surely you don't expect to find all those cattle in the mine?"

Dick grinned tantalizingly. He was idly picking up blank .45 shells that some one had ejected from his revolvers.

"Surely you don't think the White Mask would hide in there?" persisted Ruth.

Harmoniky shook his head in the negative.

"Hardly that," he said.

"Well, then, what in the world is the idea?"

"I don't want to spoil the surprise for you or I'd tell you," he answered.

XI

THE POSSE GOES MINING

THE Showwalter boys made no protest at the liberties taken with their property. Ed's face was apoplectic, his lips blue; the pupils of his eyes protruded. Shorty slumped on the ground near his brother, all the fight gone out of him, and

watched the others listlessly. Durkin stood a little distance away from them, alert for an opportunity to escape, glancing about furtively under his brows.

"You talked your damn head off, Shorty," complained Ed. "If you'd only kept your trap——"

Sheriff Boyes turned on the speaker.

"Just what do you mean by that?" he demanded.

Harmoniky gave a loud chuckle.

"You beginning to wake up, Sheriff?" he asked.

Boyes looked at him stolidly.

"I believe I am, Harmoniky."

Dick went over to the pile of guns, found that belonging to the sheriff, plugged some cartridges into it and handed it to the officer, who slipped it into his holster.

"Thanks," said the sheriff simply. "Reckon I was too previous judgin' you the way I did, Dick. 'Pears to me they's another nigger in the woodpile somewheres. Jist what're you up to?"

Before Dick could reply, McClelland came up on his horse.

"We're all ready to go minin', Dick," he said. "You too done up to go along. You stay and guard the prisoners. And no arguments," he added sternly as the young cowboy started to protest.

"Father is right," said Ruth. "You have had enough fighting for today. You stay right here with me."

"All right," assented Dick, "but you better take the sheriff."

Sheriff Boyes looked up sharply.

"You don't make no fool of me," he said. "I stay here with my pris'ners. I still got Harmoniky under technical arrest, and mebbey there'll be others."

McClelland's thin lips parted in a smile.

"Well, we'll take Shorty and Durkin anyhow," he proposed.

"Oh, yes; you got to take them," assented Dick, grinning back. "Put them right up in the front row—so they can see everything that goes on."

SHORTY jumped to his feet, a whine on his lips. "No, you don't!" he yelled. "I won't go."

"Well I've gone blind so far," remarked Rankin, as he mounted his horse. "I s'pose

I might as well see the thing through. Good thing this old mine was dug, high, wide, and handsome. It's big enough to admit a cavalry troop."

"Porphyry's soft and easy to dig," remarked Dick. "And they've been workin' this old hole off'n on for fifty years."

A row broke out when the cowpunchers tried to force Shorty and Durkin to mount. The two vigilantes seemed in mortal terror of this venture. They were overpowered finally, tied to their horses, and driven in ahead of the others.

When the cavalcade entered the tunnel and disappeared from view, the cursing of the pair could still be heard.

A quarter hour passed. Ruth, who had been talking in low tones to Dick, ceased speaking. Sheriff Boyes continued to stare into space, but with his face toward the mine mouth. Ed Showwalter, breathing heavily, groaned at the pain of his shoulder and cursed at intervals.

To their ears came a flat, crashing sound as if one pile of boards had fallen on another. It was followed by a roaring and crackling of revolver fire.

All but Ed Showwalter were on their feet at once. Ed had become perfectly quiet. He neither swore nor groaned, but merely listened with a desperate light in his eye.

"I didn't think they'd shoot!" exclaimed Dick. "I thought Shorty and Durkin would make them hold their fire."



"Hadn't you better go, Sheriff?" asked Ruth. "They've caught the rustlers, inside the mine. But you said they were not inside the mine, Dick?"

"They're not," answered Harmoniky. "Wait and see."

The sheriff made no move to go; merely stood there motionless, apparently stunned.

The firing ceased. Silence came for a

moment. Then there issued from the mine a different sound, a rumbling noise that swelled until it resembled the beating of many hoofs upon hard ground.

From the mine issued a brown creature, long of horn and lean of frame, a snorting wild-eyed steer. After it galloped others. The noise increased to a steady rumble. Dust filled the air and blinded and choked them. Bawling and kicking and tossing their horns, the endless stream of livestock poured out onto the open plain and spread away over the area of Lost Corral.

"That is what tracked the white sand of the desert to the mouth of the Cinnabar Mine," said Dick.

"Why, then—why—the tunnel runs clear through!"

HARMONIKY nodded, his eyes glad with triumph. He had turned defeat into victory with the help of McClelland and Ruth. Half of the task he had set himself to do was performed—the recovery of the stolen cattle.

"This is the narrowest point in the Sangre de Dios hills," he explained. "The mine tunnel runs through the hills into a box canyon on the Jardin del Muerto side. The rustlers drove their cattle through the mine mouth into the canyon and then closed up the mine opening. That is how they vanished in thin air."

"A wonderful idea," remarked Ruth. "But how in the world did you know?"

"It was a good idea," Dick admitted. "You see they could rebrand the stock, hold them in the canyon until the brand had healed and turn them loose right under our eyes without any one being the wiser. Pretty neat, sheriff, eh?"

Sheriff Boyes looked at Dick with eyes that were opaque from intensity of thought, but he did not reply.

"Oh, Dick, you have lived up to your reputation," Ruth rejoiced. "I think what you did was wonderful. But how did you guess it?"

"There were only three openings out of Lost Corral," he answered. "The two others were watched. It had to be this one. But I wasn't sure until I found the white sand at the mine mouth. Then when Shorty told me the cock-and-bull story about its

blowing over the hills, I knew the Showwalters were in the plot."

Ruth looked from Dick to the sheriff.

"And didn't you ever suspect anything like this, Mr. Boyes?" she asked.

"What say?"

"Did you ever suspect such a thing?"

"No, ma'am," replied Boyes. "I reckon I'm gettin' too old for this job. Looks like I might resign before long."

A MAN appeared at the mine mouth. It was a stranger, a Northerner by every token; a bearded fellow riding a double-rigged saddle, not straight up, but with his feet thrust slightly forward after the fashion of the ranges farther north. The man's hands were bound to his sides by a riata. Behind him came two others of the same same breed and also bound. After these rode the captors.

Jess Rankin came over to Harmoniky, jumped down and thrust out his hand.

"I 'pologize," he said heartily.

Others followed him, a whole row of horsemen like folks at a reception. Some one gave a cheer for Dick, and the crowd took it up. Only Durkin, the Showwalters, and the northern riders were silent.

McClelland indicated the bound horsemen with a calloused finger.

"Know who them are?" he demanded.

"Shore," replied Harmoniky. "Them are Tex Cantrell's Pendleton busters."

"Then Tex is the White Mask?" asked Ruth quickly.

"That's it!" exclaimed Rankin. "Good for the girl! Why didn't we think of that? Don't you imagine she's right, Sheriff?"

Boyes shook his head.

"I'm gettin' too old for this job, Jess," he said. "Reckon I'll step down for a younger man. This has got me plain flabbergasted."

McClelland stood gazing about him thoughtfully. The victory had taken years off his shoulders. He seemed like a young cowboy who had just won a roping contest. Several punchers were busy tying the prisoners, including Shorty and Durkin, to their horses. Two others were taking Ed Showwalter to the cabin where he would be held for the doctor. There was no talk of lynching. Harmoniky had come out flat against lynch law, and McClelland

had been brought to agree with him. Several of the cowboys prodded their ponies into bucking and fired off their guns. It was a time for celebration. Miraculously, unexpectedly, the White Mask's gang had been taken and the stock recovered. There remained but one detail to work out, one problem to solve. Where was the White Mask himself? Some one suggested Tex. McClelland objected.

"Tex is too tender," he protested. "I can't believe it's him."

A cowboy came up dragging a steer after him.

"Look at this, Mr. McClelland," he said. "This tells the whole story."

THE men crowded close to the steer upon whose side was the red inflamed marking of the Hogpen brand. The heavy brand had failed to obliterate the older Double Cross, and the earmark was McClelland's.

"It's just like Dick said," admitted the Double Cross owner. "He warned me that Cantrell had changed the Showwalter Bar T to the Hogpen to make it easier to blot the two crosses."

"Certainly Dick knew," said Ruth, proudly. "Only you wouldn't admit it."

"Come on, fellers. Let's get Tex Cantrell," shouted some one. "There's three thousand dollars reward for the man who takes the Mask dead or alive."

Men began mounting hastily. Slim Holtz asked McClelland to relieve him of guarding prisoners so he could try a hand for the prize.

Dick, mounted on his paint horse, rode into the crowd. Ruth was at his side.

"Wait a minute, boys," he said. "I claim the three thousand dollars."

Every one stopped. All faced him. If any one else had made such a statement they would have scoffed, but Harmoniky—well, he was different. These men were half inclined to credit his words now, however incredible they seemed.

"The White Mask is here," said Dick, not looking at any one in particular.

Absolute silence greeted this remark. Men glanced around them frankly doubtful. Who could it be? All the men had proved loyal in this last fight but Durkin and the Showwalters. Certainly neither

of these in any way answered to the description of the White Mask. It was even less likely that the low-browed busters could be leaders.

"Well, speak up," said McClelland impatiently. "Who is it?"

"Guess I better whisper his name to the sheriff first," said Dick. "Sheriff, come over to one side with me."

The sheriff hesitated. But on being urged by every one he followed Dick to a point a little distance from the others. If it had been Harmoniky's intention to escape from his friends at this moment he could have done so. A dozen jumps of



a horse would have taken either him or the sheriff into a series of low hills that would have enabled them to avoid even rifle fire. But of course flight was the

last thing in Dick's mind.

Harmoniky rode close to the sheriff. He reached a hand quickly inside the officer's coat and plucked forth a white object which he waved in the air. It was a white pillow-slip with holes cut in it for eyes and nose. A mask!

"The White Mask!" shouted some one.

RUTH saw the sheriff glance frantically about him; saw him take the bait of a chance to escape, and she gasped as the sheriff's long, black six-shooter glided snakelike from nowhere and prodded Dick's breast bone. A little cry of anguish escaped her in the moment that Boyes thumbed back the gnurly hammer and pulled the trigger of his revolver. He had fired point-blank. Yet there came to their ears no explosion, only a *click*. *Click, click, click* sounded mechanism as the sheriff vainly

snapped the gun in Dick's face.

Harmoniky's black-handled guns flipped from their holsters and, as Boyes slowly raised his arms, Dick threw back his head and burst into a hearty laugh.

"Cross and double cross sheriff," he said. "The White Mask loaded my guns with blanks. I returned the compliment. March feller, march."

"He planted that mask on me," squeaked Sheriff Boyes, moistening his dry lips with his tongue and glaring around at the stern faces of the posse. "He planted it on me."

"I shore did," admitted Dick. "And he fell for it. I never took that mask off'n the sheriff, boys, but I made him think I did for a minute, and that was just long enough for him to lose his head and go for his irons. If he wasn't the White Mask, why did he try to shoot me?"

"He tried to shoot yeh all right!" yelled a cowboy.

Boyes lowered his head.

"I guess you got me," he admitted. "You grinnin' hyeeny—"

"I guess I did get yeh!" exulted Harmoniky. "I got yeh so tight that Tex Cantrell will realize yo're broke and will confess that you only hired him as a blind to run the Hogpen ranch for you so you could steal Andy McClelland's cattle."

"Then Harmoniky gets the three thousand dollars reward," suggested Rankin.

"Yeah; Harmoniky gets it," yelled a voice, and others took up the chorus.

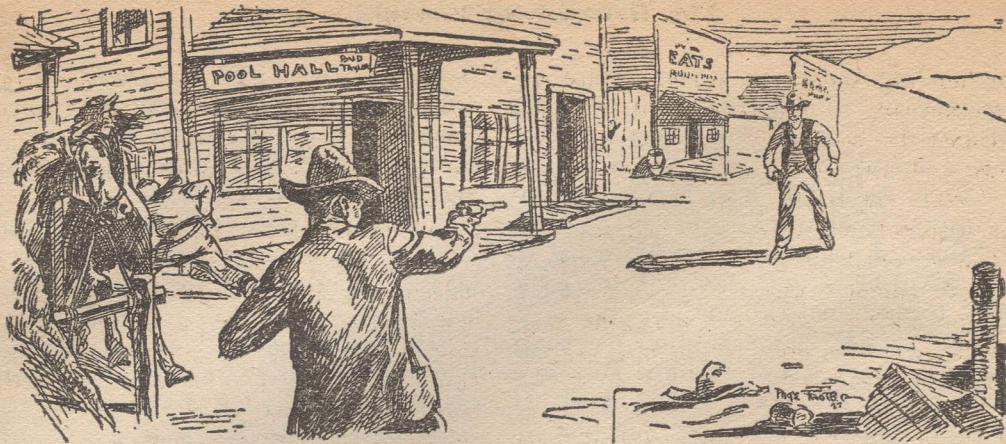
But Dick King was not thinking about rewards just then. He had turned and was riding by Ruth's side. And what he saw in her black eyes caused his gray ones to light with a great joy.

As the others stood watching the man and the girl ride away, there drifted down wind to their ears the strains of harmonica music and then the wail of a cowboy voice, singing the cheese song:

"Mucho me gusta el queso—"

HISTORIC FORT HALL

THE site of Fort Hall, the most historic spot on the Oregon Trail, is to be commemorated by the erection of a tall monument which will serve the double purpose of marking the trail of the pioneers of yesterday and guiding the pioneers of the air today. From the center of a lake formed by a government irrigation and hydro-electric dam to be built at American Falls, Idaho, will rise a slender shaft of marble, adorned by powerful searchlights to guide the pilots of the night Air Mail Service. The monument will be placed on the exact spot where the historic old fort stood at the junction of the trails from California and Oregon.—J. R. J.



THE REVENGE OF FLORIDA JACK

By ERNEST HAYCOX

Author of "The Octopus of Pilgrim Valley," "The Man from Montana," etc.

FLORIDA JACK WAS A SORT THE WEST SELDOM KNEW AND NEVER WANTED TO KNOW. BUT FLORIDA JACK KNEW HOW TO MAKE TROUBLE—TROUBLE THAT MADE GUN-FLAMING HISTORY THAT DAY IN WOOLVILLE'S DUSTY STREET

EVERY man in the yard knew the sky was about to fall on Florida Jack. Even Florida Jack, coming up the trail to the ranch-house, must have known it, for Jim Kitchin's feet were planted athwart the trail and his great kettle-like head rolled slowly around the axis of his huge neck as if accenting the fury that blazed out of his eyes. One of Jim Kitchin's immense fists—a fist large enough to maul a steer, folks of the county maintained—gripped the loose neck skin of a sheep dog, the other was jammed in a pocket. And never for an instant did his attention stray from the advancing herder. The half-dozen men of the place draped themselves around the yard with a studied carelessness, lids narrowing, and wondered just how hard the big boss would hit Florida Jack.

It was a scene worth remembering; the later recounting of it in Woolville would be certain to draw an audience, for Jim Kitchin was a figure of importance and Jim Kitchin loved to be at peace with his fellows, loved to laugh at the world. The thunder of his glee, it had often been said,

was so powerful that the furthestmost sheep on his range laid down its ears and stopped browsing. A huge, rollicking creature he was, who treasured a practical joke and who, even in the fist fights of his earlier days, could never bring himself to punish a man after he had delivered the first few stunning blows. Yet there he was, boiling mad.

Nor did he delay. As Florida Jack opened and came inside the ranch gate, Jim Kitchin jerked his free fist forward, stabbing at the herder. His first words fell on the man with all the force of a black snake whip.

"You gimlet-eyed, halfbreed galoot, yo're fired! After you walk down this trail don't you never set another foot on my land or I'll wring you like a dishrag."

Florida Jack stopped. His dusky eyes ventured a single glance at the big boss and slid evasively away. Some expression flared and subsided on his lank, copper colored face. And thus he stood, a saturnine, shambling figure shifting from one foot to another as if the weight of his body hurt him; he was the image of indolence and instability. The very sight

of him was enough to waken distrust, an emotion sure to be strengthened from the manner he constantly twitched his thin nose and snapped the muscles of his jaws.

"What yuh talkin' at me thataway fer?" he inquired, his words soft and slurring. "Did yuh hail me in clear from the herd just to gimme a sassin'?"

Jim Kitchin nodded toward the dog. "What you been doin' to this here animal, you slab-faced trout?"

FLORIDA JACK looked at both man and dog from the corner of his eyes, much in the manner of a vicious horse. "Nuthin'," he grumbled.

"Nothin'? Hell, you know better'n that! Look at the welts acrost his back! Look at the tooth you busted outa his jaw! You son-of-a-jackass, don't stand there an' tell me you didn't do nothin'. A week ago when he come lopin' home with his tongue hangin' out I figgered mebbe he was turnin' bad. But I ships him back to you for another trial. Here he turns up this mornin' lookin' like what's left of a hamburger steak. You doggone fool, I got a notion to lick you!"

It seemed further to arouse Jim Kitchin's anger. He hated cruelty with all his jovial soul; and here was evidence of extreme brutality right under his big paw.

"He's ornery," said Florida Jack. "He wouldn't mind my orders. He ain't no account. He's bull-headed."

"You lie," snorted Jim Kitchin. "I trained this dog. He worked fine with every herder in my outfit—nary a complaint. If he don't work with you it's because he knows yore blood's rotten! Listen, peon; I took you because I was short on herders. But I know yore kind and I don't like it, none whatsoever. Ain't harborin' no blackhearts. You git to hell outa here! Sudden, see? Draw yore money in town."

The verbal lashing stung Florida Jack. He attempted his first direct look at Kitchin, the yellow anger churning up. "Don't take it han'some to be laid on like that. That damn dog made me mad, understand? I don't allow no animal to be smart with me."

Jim Kitchin released the dog and rolled

along the trail until he stood within arm's reach of the herder. He didn't lift his hands, but such was the expression of his face that Florida Jack's right arm began to slip inside his coat. Jim Kitchin grinned ironically. "Don't draw no steel on me, you yellow belly or I'm apt to squash you. Any man which mistreats his best friend—and that's a herder's dog—ain't got no call on anybody's respect. Now, light outa here before I tear the hide offen yore carcass."

The assembled spectators were both astonished and disappointed at Jim Kitchin's restraint. Florida Jack, studying the big one through half-closed lids, thought he had scared the man with his motion. It made him a little contemptuous; he spat on the ground, swung about and delivered a last phrase. "To hell with yore ranch, yore dog an' yore woollies. Never did like this cheap John outfit, anyhow."

Jim Kitchin had blown the steam out of his system and the words amused him. He chuckled and trudged back toward the house, hearing one of the men speak.

"Why didn't yuh belt him acrost his greasy smeller?"

"Naw," said Jim Kitchin. "I ain't got no call to go bullyin' with my strength. Mebbe I was a leetle harsh, but it's only a skunk which'll lam a dog. Reckon I'll put a little arnica on the mutt's hide. It shore does look tough."

FLORIDA JACK went down the trail with big Jim's chuckle in his ears.

It was like his kind not to show anger where it would be dangerous; but now that he was out of Kitchin's sight he gave free play to his temper, kicking at the stones, cursing the sky, the fence, Jim Kitchin, vilifying everything that occurred to him. Also, like his kind, he was as proud as he was shiftless and the farther he walked the more did his secretive sullen nature feed upon its injuries. Each mile magnified the force of Jim Kitchin's violent epithets; he recalled the faces of the men who had stood about and listened to his humiliation and he was well aware that they would spread the tale until it was common knowledge throughout the sheep range. Everywhere

he might go, they would be remembering what Jim Kitchin had said; and in their hearts they would be laughing.

Thus he reasoned as he shambled along. Reasoned rightly, too, for many men disliked Florida Jack for many different reasons. The effect of it was to inflame Florida Jack beyond reason. He took to swinging his arms back and forth; his eyes grew bloodshot and his tapering jaw worked spasmodically. From time to time he opened his mouth to display a row of white teeth and to say, "Ah, the man says I ain't nuthin' but a breed, a no-good breed. Jus' another crazy shepherd."

Florida Jack had met that ridicule often, and always it enraged him. He did not understand wholly the attitude of the country toward his kind. All mixed breeds were not shiftless and tricky; all sheepherders were not queer. This was the matured opinion of the land. But it well knew that some breeds, like Florida Jack, were very bad; it also knew that the nature of herding attracted some unique types and upon these the long and lonely vigil acted almost like a poison. It had seen men very much like Florida Jack, muttering queer things along the bench, sharpening their knives by the night fire and eventually coming out stark mad. Therefore it avoided all Florida Jacks as much as possible.

And this Florida Jack fulfilled their suspicions to the last degree. By the time he reached Woolville he was a murderer at heart; the light of it was in his eyes and the purpose of it in his knife hand. Still, he was sly and already he had struck upon a method of revenge that would appease his burning hatred of Jim Kitchin and yet leave no telltale mark at his door.



a street corner concealed in the shadows

It was quite after dark when he entered town. He ate at the restaurant, lit a cigarette and for the better part of a half hour lounged on

and watched men drift by. He seemed to be busy studying them; some he spent no more than a glance on. Others he watched until they had disappeared into the saloon doors or rode away. But there came a figure presently that entered the Fannie Bell with a rolling step and a shrewd, twinkling face. On seeing him, Florida Jack dropped his cigarette and followed.

HE WAS shiftless, worthless, this Florida Jack; but when his passions were touched he had all the cunning of a stalking animal. His man stood at the bar, but Florida Jack took his time in approaching. He watched a poker game, idled over to a session of a game of "twenty-one," and then, in the course of his wanderings, arrived likewise at the bar, beside the one he had followed. And when Florida Jack named his drink in a soft, slurring voice the man swung about and grunted:

"Hell, where you been, Florida? Ain't seen you long time."

"Howdy, Slim. Me? Oh, I been herdin' fer Jim Kitchin."

"Ol' Big Jim, eh? That white-haired grizzly. Well, how's tricks over there?"

It was noticeable that Slim did not offer to treat Florida Jack. It was a matter of caste with Slim. Florida was only a passing acquaintance and his greeting had been entirely casual, entirely without warmth. Florida Jack understood this very well and his resentment glowed. But he drank his whisky and wiped his mouth before answering the question. Then his glance slid across Slim's face and one lid dropped suggestively. "Oh, good enough."

He had judged his man correctly. Slim's attention was arrested by the air of mystery. He shoved himself closer. "Huh?"

Florida Jack muttered, "It ain't none of my business, Slim. I'd oughta keep my trap shut, see? But if you hear about a bust of gunplay any time now, jus' remember I winked my eye."

"Get out. Listen, have a drink. Now was you namin' names, amigo? What's itchin' Jim Kitchin?"

Florida Jack refused the treat, turning away. "He's heard a certain party's been sayin' things about him. Yunnaw. Talkin' about certain crookedness back in the early day. See?"

"Fightin' talk, eh?" murmured Slim. Light flared in his shrewd eyes. Here was something to think about during the long rides across country, something he could darkly hint to others. Feud—the one electrical impulse that would stir a country from end to end overnight. He bent still closer. "Did you mention a name, Florida?"

"Why should I?" parried Florida, shrugging his shoulders. "I've said too damn much now. Listen, you ain't heard me say a word, Slim. It's none of my business an' I'm like to get my head shot off if Big Jim sh'd hear. He'd natcherly deny anything. You ain't heard me say a word, understand?"

"Shore, shore. Nary a word," agreed Slim. And Florida Jack knew Slim had, by those few words, bound himself to silence. It was a matter of code. So he started off; but he swung about swiftly and leaned very near the man, whispering a name.

"Belisarius Tuggs."

That was all; but it was enough. He went out of the place hurriedly, as if afraid of what he had disclosed. Once outside he took a position and again watched the men drifting by. Twice again that evening he repeated this same ceremony in different saloons, varying the manner of his tale according to the temper and character of the men he approached. After that he left town and made his camp beside a near-by creek, not wishing to be seen.

THE hints he had dropped were pure lies. Jim Kitchin had no feuds; he had never heard that Belisarius Tuggs was passing remarks about his character. It made no difference. Florida Jack was creating the machinery of his revenge. He meant to establish a feud between these two men, a feud that would result in gunplay and the death of his former boss. And he had chosen Belisarius Tuggs to be the second man in the affair for

several good reasons, the first of which was that Tuggs had the reputation of being the deadliest shot in the country.

As for himself, Florida Jack was out of that affair. In each of the three instances he had asked that his own name be withheld; and he knew enough of the country's ethics to understand that pledge would be well kept. None of the three men was an intimate of Tuggs. He had taken care not to go too near the principals of the plot. But these three would spread this yarn quietly from friend to friend and in time it would reach some one who was close to Tuggs. Then Tuggs would hear it. He would be warned, not once but perhaps from several sources; it would come at him from different directions and with each warning the thing would be stronger, more definite. Florida Jack's few dark hints would grow and amplify as they passed from mouth to mouth, obtain veracity and reach the dignity of a challenge. By that time the original spreaders of the tale would be forgotten.

The halfbreed stuck to his camp for three days, warming himself with the ever glowing embers of his anger, nursing them, constantly reviewing the scene of his humiliation. Meanwhile, he knew the story had gone abroad and on the morning of the fourth day he judged it was time for him to stir the pot again. So he started away into the hills, traveling in a direction that took him something like ten miles from Jim Kitchin's place. It brought him to the very ceiling of the county; into a country bare and rugged along the major part of its surface, but here and there spreading out in a natural meadow or falling into a stand of pines.

About evening he rounded the trail and found himself before a small shanty. It seemed deserted; but he had not arrived within a hundred yards of it when an extraordinarily tall man ducked through the open door and stood watching for him. As he got closer he saw the grim, gaunt face of Belisarius Tuggs; and though Florida Jack was never a man endowed with outright courage—for all he knew his scheming might be leading him

straight into a trap—he experienced a quick, vicious pleasure at the certain knowledge that this mountaineer could put a ball through Jim Kitchin before the latter could so much as reach his gun.

He stopped ten yards off, waiting. Belisarius Tuggs studied him through and through before announcing in a grave manner, "Whar y' from?"

"Woolville," said Florida Jack. "Hit-tin' acrost the hump fer Two Pass. Guess I'll have to hit right along or I'll never make it by dark."

Tuggs seemed to weigh each word and decided upon their truth. "Shepherdder?" "Uhuh."

"Well, y' kin drag a chair to my table, friend. Never want to see a herder go 'thout a meal. But you ought to git plenty to do over this side, 'thout havin' to walk down Two Pass way."

"Oh, I been workin' a-plenty," said Florida Jack. "Jus' wanted a change of scenery. Herded a long time fer Jim Kitchin."

"Then," grunted Tuggs, "you ain't welcome around my place. I'll feed no Kitchin man."

"Hell," said Florida Jack, "don't judge me by him. I seen a-plenty and I've heard a-plenty."

"I guess you have, feller. When a man goes to spreadin' false words agin another, like he's doin', it must be 'cause he's lookin' for a fight. He'll shore git one, if he's so minded."

FLORIDA JACK grinned. "Well, he's a great hand to want more land. Mebbe he's aimin' to run yuh off an' take yores."

Tuggs spat on the ground and hooked a long arm inside the door. It reappeared with a rifle. "If it's fight Jim Kitchin hones fer, let him come. He may be a big moul, but he won't git my six-forty."

His hazel eyes darkened as he looked upon Florida Jack and he seemed to feel the

same distrust that all men felt when they saw the halfbreed. "Mebbe yo're agin Jim Kitchin' an' mebbe you ain't. If yo're a spy, you go tell him what I said. Now go along an' don't come back, or I'm apt to take a shot at yuh."

Florida Jack studied the gun for a moment, making note of its kind and calibre. Then he shrugged his shoulders and continued up the trail. Out of the corner of his eyes he swept the house, the adjacent barn and the wire fence inclosing a part of the field. Presently he was down-grade and out of sight, grinning maliciously. "Well, he's been warned all right. Now the news'll go back to Jim Kitchin."

He had chosen well. Belisarius Tuggs was Tennessee born and understood something about feuds. The warning which had been passed along to him had all the earmarks of an affair trumped up for some ulterior motive. Since he had not said the words which Jim Kitchin had attributed to him, it must be that Kitchin was manufacturing trouble to overrun his place and put him out of the way. He had said as much to Florida Jack, which was just the reasoning Florida Jack wanted him to adopt.

Now the same willing couriers of suspicion would spread the fact that Belisarius Tuggs was waiting for Jim Kitchin. And the jovial ranchman would receive it from his friends. Florida Jack, cunning in the ways of words and men, was seeing the prospective duel right before him. And once the two men met nothing could keep Kitchin from being killed.

Of course it was still possible for Belisarius to take his gun, ride over to Kitchin's and explain he had never harbored ill feeling or spoken the words he was supposed to have said. But Florida Jack knew Tuggs would do no such thing. The Tennessean would not willingly enter enemy territory; since he believed Kitchin had created the whole thing out of spite he would fall into no traps, but wait and meet the issue halfway.

As for Kitchin, he would roar his amusement; then he would grow sober at the thought of the garbled tale coming through the air. But for him to visit



Tuggs and try to clear away the trouble would be a confession of fear, a lowering of himself in the eyes of the whole country. First and foremost he was a Westerner. He would accept the situation, shoot it out and do his explaining later.

ALL this Florida Jack knew. He didn't reason the matter, for his head was not built for reasoning. Inside that narrow sloping cranium was nothing but ignorance, fear and hate. And animal cunning. Instinctively he understood. The time for reconciliation would soon be past, even if the principals involved wished to be peaceful, which was doubtful considering Tuggs' suspicions. In another twenty-four hours the whole country would expect a duel as the only proper solution and if either of the two men wished to retain the respect of their friends and the whole region in general they could not back out. And in that twenty-four hours Florida Jack expected to add fuel to the fire.

One incident transpired as he was trudging into Two-Pass Valley which he had not expected. It was dusk and as he entered a stand of pine he heard the thudding of hoofs. A rider reined in right before him and leaned down in the saddle. Florida Jack, not knowing the man, felt a fresh recoiling of nerves, a quick fear. But it passed as the fellow spoke.

"Hoofin' it over the hill?"

"Uhuh. How far to town?"

"Six miles, friend. Come by Tuggs' place?"

"I saw him."

The rider's countenance freshened with interest. "What was the old geezer doin'?"

Florida Jack groped for words. Something barbed. Something that would spread like fire in dry pine tops.

"He was a-polishing his gun fit to kill," said Florida.

"The hell!" murmured the rider, straightening. "Well, ain't that excitin'? I guess it's shore enough, then."

He was off dodging through the trees. The herder listened until all sound of the rider had vanished in the night air. "That'll reach Jim Kitchin before mornin'," he mumbled. "The fat, pot-bel-

lied——" Other words, vicious and unprintable trailed in his throat.

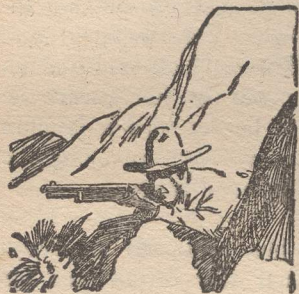
A quarter mile on he saw the glow of a herder's fire and he stopped and hid himself in the trees. At any other time he would have gone forward and been welcomed with both bed and meal. Every sheepherder in the hills would have been glad of his company, not for the conviviality there was in Florida Jack, but for the sound of his voice to break the spell of loneliness; no questions asked, no inquisitiveness shown. Yet, hungry and tired as he was, Florida Jack ventured no closer. Stretching out in his covert he slept fitfully. That herder was a Kitchin man, tending Kitchin sheep out along the far edge of the big boss' range.

IN THE rose-blue light of morning, Florida watched the herder get his breakfast and follow the sheep away through the trees. Long after the leader's bell had ceased to echo, he crept to the camp. There was coffee still in the pot and a biscuit or two. Florida Jack ate greedily whatever he found, eyes darting through the lanes of the forest. Going to the tent, he found the herder's rifle proper in the corner and he studied it for some time, recalling that the gun Belisarius Tuggs carried was the same calibre and make as this one. It made no great difference to Florida; he would have taken the weapon anyhow, but it seemed an omen to him that all his plans would succeed, all his steps be covered. Throwing back the bolt of the rifle he found cartridges in the magazine, four of them. As a matter of precaution he rummaged around the herder's war bag until he found a box of shells. Putting a half dozen extra in his pocket he inspected the clearing again and went out.

He wasted no time in getting on the herder's trail. For an hour he dodged from tree to tree, following the plain path of the band of sheep. The forest thinned and Florida Jack began to plant his feet flat on the ground with each forward step. Somewhere echoed the tinkle of a bell and within a hundred yards Florida Jack was down on his stomach, peering across a natural meadow.

The herder sat on the ground, his back propped against a rock, reading something. Florida Jack could even see the man's lips now and then spelling out a word and the cigarette smoke spiraling in the crisp air. The sight of the peaceful, unsuspecting figure made him grin evilly. Pulling up the borrowed gun he took sight along the barrel, aiming at the rock and slightly beside the herder.

It was his purpose to scare the herder away, send him back to the Kitchin ranch. Big Jim would lay the blame on Tuggs, and thus the feud would be made the more bitter.



But Florida Jack was a poor hand with the gun. It was not his kind of weapon; realizing this, he aimed very close to the herder, expecting the bullet to go wide of its mark. There was a flat detonation in the thin quiet air. A wisp of smoke trailed out of the muzzle and when Florida Jack lowered the gun he saw the herder slipping sidewise along the rock and doubling over in a grotesque heap.

"Damn 'im!" he grunted. "Why don't he run?"

Not for several moments did he realize he had struck the herder. Then all the craven, slinking instinct of his nature took hold of his nerves, shook him from head to foot. He heard a thousand stray sounds among the trees and the echo of the shot seemed to roll farther and farther over the hills, warning every living soul. And he saw how deathly still the herder lay, he shrank back, swept the forest with terror in his saffron eyes and began to run. He had killed the man, not intending to.

HE RAN for half a mile before his reason exerted itself; the very first thing he thought about was the bullet which doubtless had lodged somewhere in the dead herder's body. It would be the same kind of a bullet that Tuggs owned. When some of Kitchin's men or a pas-

serby discovered the murder it would be immediately laid at Tuggs' door. Then and there Big Jim, always a man to settle his own quarrels, would look to his revolver and be ready to shoot it out.

That brought Florida Jack to a halt. Crouching against a tree, he got the cleaning brush and thong from the butt of the rifle, ran it through the barrel several times and refilled the magazine with a shell out of his pocket. For several minutes he remained immovable, groping along the succession of incidents that had already transpired, trying to discover if he had at any point left himself open to suspicion. As far as he could judge, only one single thing went against him; that man he had met on the road the night before might remember he had said he was going on into Two Pass; if the fellow were inquisitive he might go down to the hamlet and ask questions. Florida Jack's face wreathed itself in scowls. By and by he rose and with less caution than before, headed for the herder's camp. "They can't prove nuthin' about me," he muttered. "Nuthin' at all. Anyhow everybody'll be thinkin' of Tuggs."

Big fires obscured little ones. Florida Jack reached the herder's camp, circled about to see if anyone had approached meanwhile, and put back the rifle. In a place or two the earth had received the deep imprint of his shoe and he spent some time in stamping them out. After that he left the camp hurriedly, striking back toward Belisarius Tuggs.

Far up in the hills he found a convenient shelter and for the rest of the day he rested. Toward evening he got out the stub of a pencil and a piece of paper, writing a note in huge, scrawling letters. What he meant it to be was something that would seem like a challenge from Jim Kitchin and when he had composed it he re-read it, grinning spitefully:

Tuggs. Damn a man which talks beyond folks backs. That goes for you. I'm in Woolville Saturday and Ill be wating for you.

He had done no guessing. It was big Jim's habit to visit Woolville of a Saturday, striding up and down the street with

his kettle-like head bobbing forward and back, booming out his greetings. And like all others, he carried a gun. Florida Jack, seeing night fall, approached Belisarius Tuggs' place, using infinite caution. He knew the Tennessean would be on the alert and though he very much wanted to pin that note on the shanty door he could not bring it about. But he did the next best thing. He transfixed it to the barb-wire fence near the barn. Tuggs would see it, would read it. And if the mountaineer didn't show up in Woolville on Saturday, which was two days ahead, then he had changed his nature. Which wasn't possible. The duel was practically assured now; and as far as Florida Jack was concerned, the result of the duel was equally assured. No man in the county could measure up to the swift accuracy of Belisarius Tuggs.

He crept away and struck away over the hills and down toward Woolville.

THE air had borne many a tale abroad in those two intervening days and Woolville held a greater crowd that Saturday afternoon than it had contained since the Hayes-Tilden contest. Greater even than the time Black Bruce was hung back of the court house. But though the crowd was larger, it was also in a different temper. This was no holiday; men walked very quietly up and down the street, seeming to have interest in nothing save the path ahead of them. Yet from the most important rancher down to the most shiftless stable loafer, there was a suppressed excitement, an ill-concealed expectancy. It sparkled in their eyes and showed in the manner they snapped the muscles of their jowls. Friends, meeting at the saloon bars raised their glasses, winked significantly, saying perhaps, "Here's to a certain party." Or, if they were partisans of neither side, "Well, let's drink to crime. May she flourish." The saloons were full, the hotel porch crowded.

Now and then a rider, hoping to get advance information would gallop out of town along the road to Kitchin's or in the opposite direction, from which Belisarius Tuggs was expected, and when these couriers came loping back, the town

experienced a sudden tightening of nerves. So the day wore on; the restaurant did a land office business, the poker tables flourished and the gentlemen in the white-boiled shirts made their profits.

Apart from his fellows, surveying the ends of the street with a hot, yellow glance, was Florida Jack. He had come to Woolville early that morning with the dust of travel on his clothes. Since then he had scarcely moved from a little alcove near the Herder's Resort. Passersby shouldered him, sometimes glancing incuriously his way, at other times dropping a stray word of greeting. His answer was always a short monosyllable that discouraged further parley. He wished to be inconspicuous, to have no finger of curiosity pointed toward him. And up in the high hills he had debated long and somberly whether he should come to town this fateful Saturday or not. In the end the fever of his passionate hatred overcame his fear; he wanted to be in at the kill. He wanted to see Jim Kitchin sprawl forward in the dust, wanted to hear that last hiccupping breath. Then he would slip quietly away and Woolville would see him no more.

Anybody might have read the seething traitor of blood lust and revenge in Florida Jack's muddy eyes. Standing there he was a figure such as the country seldom knew and never wanted to know. All the solitary days of herding, all the natural animus of his warped nature, and all the moody, outraged promptings of his pride had fused to create a state of mind not far from insanity. Florida Jack had gone utterly bad. And each time he scanned the street ends his thin lips stretched back from his teeth and a kind of gray pallor overspread his dusky features.

Thus he waited until he saw Big Jim Kitchin ride in from the south. Dropping his cigarette he drew back and the breath whistled through his mouth.

IT WAS as if an electrical current had passed through Woolville, touching each man with its shock. The gaming tables were deserted, the street cleared and Jim Kitchin passed down the dusty way as if on parade. Usually he had a great shout for his friends and a broad, beam-

ing smile. Today he was serious and as he examined the faces along the walks his face was grim and oppressive. In front of the Herder's Resort he dismounted, laid the reins across the hitching rack and stepped to the middle of the street, arms held out a little from his sides, looking straight ahead, an open target. This was the man's way.

And before the crowd quite realized it,



Belisarius Tuggs appeared at the other end of the street, likewise advancing, his gaunt frame erect and hostile. Florida Jack, noting the man, gripped

his fists tightly together when he saw that Tuggs had abandoned his rifle and on this occasion had a revolver strapped to his waist. Here was a change. The revolver was not the mountaineer's favorite weapon.

How he had got into town, nobody knew. Nor did anybody know when he had arrived. But here he was, facing Big Jim Kitchin, advancing neither faster nor slower than Jim Kitchin, his shuffling feet creating little eddies of dust behind. And all of a sudden the crowd had gone indoors or sought better shelter. As far as either of the contestants was concerned they might have been alone in Woolville. Florida Jack crushed a cigarette between his fingers, every muscle rigid; he was breathing as if from punishing labor and a maniacal glare glittered through the muddied windows of his body.

It was Big Jim Kitchin, following the dictates of his aggressive nature, who started hostilities. His right arm dropped and rose again while the two of them were hardly within good range. The heavy silence was shattered with the roar of his gun and a ribbon of dust kicked up in front of Belisarius Tuggs, short of its mark.

Tuggs never stopped, nor made a motion toward his gun. Ten feet closer Kitchin's gun spoke again and a second time

a small streamer puffed up in the street. Tuggs' feet lifted a little higher and his knees seemed to spring with the weight of his body; his hard black eyes were pinned to the bulky figure in his path; his lean face seemed cut from stone.

As for Kitchin, he had thrown back his head, shaking it like an angry bull. It even appeared he was enjoying the duel from the manner his whole countenance blazed with the light of battle. But for the next few yards he held his fire, waiting for Tuggs to draw.

FEW men saw Belisarius reach for his gun, but no single soul within Woolville missed that flaring crack and spat of weapon answering weapon. Not once but several times. It reverberated down the narrow street and rattled the loose window panes. Dust rolled up and a great booming cry filled men's ears. Then an unnatural silence descended. The dust subsided and exactly one-half of Woolville's epic had passed into memorable history. Tuggs and Kitchin were a few scant yards apart, staring at each other, expressionless, wordless. The mountaineer's gun had veered from its mark and swung downward. As for Kitchin, his weapon had fallen to the dust; he stood with his feet wide apart while the blood streamed along his arm, making a crimson reservoir of his hand.

"Hit, by Godfrey!" he roared. "Tuggs, I allus knew nobody could touch you with a gun!"

Tuggs held a piece of paper in his hand. He advanced within arm's reach of the big rancher and spoke softly, coldly. "If I'd had my rifle you'd been dead now, Kitchin. Here's yore challenge. I take nobody's defi an' I ain't backin' down, hear? But if you want to know the truth I never said nuthin' behind your back, see? If I got anything to deliver offen my chest I'm old enough to say it to a man's face."

Kitchin took the paper. "Knew it was a cock-an'-bull yarn somebody started. Who's got a grudge agin Big Jim Kitchin? Nary a soul, Bel. But I had to meet it, didn't I?" He held the paper in his hand and wrinkled his face over it. "This ain't my work. No, sir, it ain't no literary

composition of mine. Hell, I can spell 'Saturday' better'n that. But who shot my herder, anyhow?"

"Didn't know nothin' about it," stated Tuggs. "You better wrop them there fingers, Jim. Yore a-bloodin' the street." His black eyes returned Kitchin's speculative stare. "Mebbe you know the writin'?"

Kitchin scratched his whiskers with the active arm. "Who told you I was out to get yore hide?"

"Friends," said Tuggs, softly, briefly.

"Sometimes friends is a man's worst enemies," grumbled Kitchin. "Just a cock-an'-bull yarn."

FLORIDA JACK'S heart swelled with the overflowing bitterness of frustrated hate. He had come to gloat, to witness the death of Kitchin. And now the big one was gravely explaining away the grudge he had so carefully nurtured. Florida Jack felt his security threatened. If once they should start tracing back—

A cowhand had crowded beside him, watching the scene with close interest. The butt of his gun swung high and clear of the holster, not a foot from Florida Jack's rigid body. The renegade's muddy eyes fastened themselves upon it and through the narrow, sloping head there was a sudden overthrowing of caution and fear. Panic rode him, Panic and the livid, burning thirst of revenge. Never for a moment understanding the danger of his act, he hitched one shoulder forward and his right arm crept out toward the gun butt.

"I had a man workin' for me once," murmured Big Jim, seeming to see nothing but that provocative slip of paper. The words barely reached Tuggs. "Seems like I sh'd know the writin'. Bel, lemme



see the gun what could dent my tough hide."

Tuggs proffered it gravely.

Kitchin hefted it in his left hand, spun it around smiling.

"I give you the palm for shootin'—"

The rest of it was whipped from his mouth. Once more the insecure peace of Woolville was broken and men were ducking out of range. The renegade had wrenched the gun from the puncher's holster and was firing doggedly, his thin body weaving as if in a strong wind. Dust kicked around Kitchin's feet; something like grim pleasure flashed across the big man's face as he whirled toward the Herder's Rest. And it seemed to Woolville that the single explosion of his revolver was twice as shattering as any that had gone before. Florida Jack wavered, showed his teeth in one awful grimace and pitched forward, stone dead.

"I was a-hopin' the fool would give me an open, above-board chance," said Kitchin, handing back the borrowed gun. "I guess I can still shoot left-handed. Let's you an' me git a drink. We've furnished plumb enough entertainment to this town for one day. After which mebbe the sheriff might want to ask a few questions."

BUT the sheriff was not that kind of an official, nor was Woolville that kind of a town. It constituted itself a jury box and a witness stand en masse, arriving at a remarkable unanimity of opinion regarding the demise of Florida Jack, the whole proceeding being very informal and taking less time than any single man of them would have used in changing his shirt. Briefly, Florida Jack had died as the result of an act of God.

It was some weeks before all the evidence drifted in, yet at no stage did they repent their opinion. And during the hour or two that Florida Jack's body lay in the street, like nothing so much as a stray dog in the gutter, it served as a warning, a sermon and a sound corroboration of the land's matured opinion regarding sheepherders and breeds. All breeds weren't bad and all sheepherders weren't queer. But, according to a reflective oldtimer, "All Florida Jacks were shorely of no account."

That evening Woolville celebrated handsomely the passing of a notorious citizen.



BURNING THE SNOW

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

Author of "The Tenderfoot," "A Black Night on Deadman's Creek," etc.

IT WAS A THEORY OF CORPORAL DOWNEY OF THE ROYAL CANADIAN MOUNTED POLICE THAT THE MEN OF THAT FORCE WOULD TAKE JUST AS MUCH TROUBLE TO PROVE A PRISONER INNOCENT AS TO PROVE HIM GUILTY. THAT BITTER NIGHT WHEN THE CORPORAL WAS SHOT AT ALONG A FROZEN TRAIL WAS TO GIVE HIM A CHANCE TO PROVE HIS THEORY

CORPORAL DOWNEY, veteran officer of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, swung easily along the trail, his snowshoes fitting almost exactly into the other tracks that followed the interminable windings of a small stream. It was November, and the unseasonable fall of soft loose snow made particularly bad going. The officer knew that he must be traveling much faster than the man who had broken the trail. It was a fresh trail. In a few hours, at the latest, he should overtake the man.

Suddenly, as he stooped to pass under a tangle of willow-tops that arched the frozen creek, a rifle roared, and a twig half an inch thick was clipped off not six inches from his face. Dropping to his knees, Downey brought his own rifle to position, and peered cautiously between the thick butts of the stunted willow tangle. He could see no one. The plainly marked trail disappeared around the next bend some fifty yards farther on.

It was nearly four o'clock, and a blanket of heavy clouds hastened the early darkness. For ten minutes the officer knelt mo-

tionless. Then, very cautiously, he edged forward, rose to his feet, and swiftly covered the distance to the next bend. He substituted gloves for mittens, and traveled with finger on trigger. Peering around the bend, he scanned another straight stretch of snow-covered ice, with its plainly marked snowshoe tracks. Advancing a few steps he paused to examine the tracks in the snow. It was here the man had stood when he had fired the shot that came uncomfortably near to mustering Corporal Downey out of the Service. A few feet to one side Downey stooped, brushed away the snow, and retrieved an empty cartridge which he examined and slipped into his pocket.

HIS snowshoes no longer fell naturally into the tracks of the other, as he took up the trail. "Panicky," he grinned. "He won't run very far through this." The trail was visible only a few feet ahead in the fast gathering darkness, and at the next bend, Downey halted in the shelter of a thick bunch of willows, seated himself and filled his pipe. "He'll camp pretty quick. Won't dare to take the chance of a duckin' by holdin' to the crick, an' half an hour,

from now it'll be so dark no one could travel through this willow swamp. If he thinks he got me back there, he'll build a fire, but if he don't, the chances are he'll camp cold."

No glimmer of starlight relieved the intense blackness as Downey again took the trail, feeling with his snowshoes for the tracks in the soft snow. He rounded one bend, and another before the glimmer of firelight caught his eye. Instantly he froze in his tracks, his eyes on that tiny glint of flame. It was an old trick—to build a fire and back-track to lie in wait for anyone following.

For several minutes the officer stood motionless, then he pushed unhesitatingly forward. The light had been momentarily cut off and then a shower of sparks had shot upward as the man had added dry willow branches to the fire. He had evidently camped on a bend at the head of an unusually long straight stretch. Downey estimated the distance to the fire at a hundred yards, and being careful to make no sound, pushed on to within twenty yards of the camp, then removing his pack and his snowshoes, he crept ten yards farther. He could see the man distinctly in the firelight, sitting close to his little fire over which was suspended a pail. Now and again he added snow to the contents of the pail, and after a while threw in a handful of tea. Between times he sat alternately staring into the flames, and gazing intently into the darkness straight toward Downey who lay in the snow not thirty feet away.

THE tea boiled and the man set it aside, threw a slab of salt pork into a small frying pan, and when it was done, ate it with bannocks which he produced from his pack. He added dry branches to the fire and filled his pipe. Half an hour later he spread two blankets, heaped more wood on the fire and, with his rifle beside him, slipped between the blankets. The light dry wood flashed up and burned quickly to a bed of glowing coals.

"Wish he had more beddin'," breathed Downey to himself. "It's gettin' colder, an' them blankets ain't goin' to let him sleep sound." Dressed warmly as he was, the forced inaction had sent a chill to the offi-

cer's bones, and he wriggled his toes in his moccasins..

The softwood coals died to a faint red glow. The figure in the blankets stirred, shifted about uneasily, and sat up cursing. There was the sound of breaking twigs, and before the flames leaped up, Downey crawled close behind a willow clump and shortened his distance by half. More fuel was added and the man huddled close into the blaze. For fifteen minutes he hugged his fire, then yawning prodigiously, drew his blankets to him, heaped on more wood, laid the blankets together as close as possible to the blaze, and lying upon them, grasped an edge and rolled himself up tightly.

Fifteen feet away, Corporal Downey grinned, and by the bright light of the flames studied every inch of the ground that separated him from the recumbent figure by the fire.

When the light wood had burned to coals Downey wormed his way around the willow clump, being careful to avoid the brittle dry twigs the snapping of which in the still air could not fail to awaken even a sound sleeper. Within six feet of the man he paused. Further progress was barred by a tangle of dry branches through which it would be impossible to proceed noiselessly. He could creep around and approach from the farther side of the fire, but decided against it. The maneuver would take time. At any moment the uneasy sleeper might awaken and heap brush on the fire and in his present position concealment was out of the question.

Laying aside his rifle, Downey gathered his legs under him and leaped. There was



a crashing of dry twigs and branches as the officer landed squarely upon the sleeping man. A hoarse, startled cry, half-intelligible curses, a moment of futile

struggling, and the man lay still, staring wide-eyed into the face of his captor.

"It's no use, Caswell. You hadn't ought to roll up in your blankets that way if you expect to do any fightin'."

"It's you, Downey? I might of know'd. No other damn' police could of took me alive."

DOWNEY laughed, "Any ten-year-old kid could have got you the way you're wound up in them blankets. The jig's up. You goin' to be good, or have I got to put the irons on you?"

"Oh, I'll come along, all right."

"You got a pistol or knife on you?"

The man scowled. "I give you my word, didn't I? No, I ain't got nothin' but my rifle. Hell, Downey, I wouldn't knife you nor shoot you neither. You know that."

Downey smiled grimly. "You didn't come so damned far from it back yonder."

The man appeared suddenly relieved. "Was that you? Then, I didn't croak anyone! I'm damn' glad of it! But I didn't know it was you, Downey."

"Or you wouldn't have shot?" The old officer was studying the man's face.

"No, by God! I wouldn't have shot if I'd known it was you. I ain't forgot what you done for me when I was tryin' to get into the police."

"You're under arrest, Caswell. An' it's my duty to tell you that anything you say may be used against you." As he spoke Downey rose to his feet, unloaded the two rifles and placed them side by side against a willow. As the other wriggled from his blankets Downey spoke again. "We'll build up the fire an' then go an' get my pack an' snowshoes. They're down the trail a piece. Then we'll set on a boilin' of tea. Gosh! I'm chilly an' hungry, an' it didn't help my case any to have to lie out there in the snow an' watch you eat, an' drink that hot tea, an' hug that fire."

Half an hour later the two sat close to the blaze and guzzled tea between puffs of their pipes. Out of the corner of his eye Downey studied his man. Suddenly he spoke. "Suppose you come right out an' tell me why you done it, Caswell. You know I've be'n a friend of yours, an' you know that, right now, I ain't an enemy. As I told you, anything you say can be used

against you, an' by the same reasonin', it can be used for you, too. You know me well enough to know that I play the game square. I'm not out to convict any man for only just what he's guilty of. I'm as much interested in searchin' out evidence for a man as against him."

CASWELL nodded slowly. "Oh, I know you're square, all right. I suppose I was a damn fool fer tryin' to pull out in the first place. But I can't figger yet, what in hell you was doin' up on the Limestone this time of year? It's jest my damn' luck! If you'd of be'n a week, or even a half a week later, I'd of be'n plumb acrost the line; or if it had be'n some rooky constable that run onto—him, he couldn't of follered me, an' he couldn't of took me if he had. Believe me, I've be'n burnin' the snow!"

Downey agreed. "You have. But you had to break trail an' I didn't."

"What was you doin' up there? Did you know I had a shack on the Limestone?"

The old corporal grinned. "Who's supposed to do the talkin', me, or you?"

The man drank some tea, and puffed at his pipe, still speculating. "No, sir—I can't figger it. If you didn't know it was my shack how did you find out? How come you to dig him up? An' how did you foler me? It didn't snow till the second day after. How in hell could you pick up the trail on frozen sleet?"

"There's tricks in policin'," reminded Downey. "I've had tougher ones than that to chew on."

"Oh, I'm goin' to talk, all right! An' I'm glad it's you an' not some damn' rooky that figgers he's got to get a conviction to make a record for himself."

"Our men ain't trained that way——"

"I know they ain't trained that way—but I'll bet there's damn' few of 'em that wouldn't rather get a conviction than not, onct they've made an arrest. But so help me God, Downey, I ain't guilty of a damn thing—except losin' my head an' tryin' to make a get-away from somethin' I never done! It's like this:

IT BEGAN down in Winnipeg, five, six years ago. I was railroadin'—firin' a freight run, an' drawin' down good

money—an' she slung hash in the North Star Restaurant. You might of seen her, at that—big, swell lookin' jane, always



smilin', yellin' hair, blonde, that's what she was—an' always a quick come-back when any of the boys would try to get fresh. There was plenty tried to make her—me along with the rest. But nothin' doin'.

She'd go to the movies, an' the dances an' the like, but outside of that, one round gold weddin' ring was her idee of playin' the game—an' she wasn't in no hurry to try it on, neither.

"I'd fell for her—an' fell hard. I ett all my meals at the North Star, an' had a room upstairs. A lot of the railroad boys ett there, too, bein' handy, an' it got so I hated to see her joshin' back an' forth with anyone else but me. I'd asked her to hitch up with me half a dozen times, but she wouldn't—told me an earful about myself that was a damn' sight truer than pretty—an' while she never come right out an' give me the air, she made it good an' plain that I needed a hell of a lot of revampin' before I stacked up much higher'n a nine spot in a pinochle deck.

"I seen she meant it, an' I got to stayin' in some nights. There was a bunch of us used to play poker, an' low-ball, an' rummy in Ed Tanner's back room, when we wasn't lappin' up Hog Bennett's bootleg hooch. You'll remember, maybe, when they pinched Hog. He'd ought to've stuck to the railroad boys, an' some other high class trade he had, but he was a hog like his name, an' when he got to sellin' to them Bohunks, they got him.

SHE seen how I was kind of easin' up on the rough stuff, an' it win me a couple of extra smiles, an' a little conversation that didn't have no stingers in it while I ett. She'd go to the movies with me a couple of nights a week, too. An' when my birthday come she give me a

book. I tried to read it, at that—but, hell!

"Well, anyways, one night I was up in my room dealin' poker hands to myself. It was winter, an' colder'n hell outside. Viola, that was her name, she was on nights that week. They wasn't much doin' that night, on 'account of the weather, an' I'd be'n down stairs about three different times fer a piece of pie, or a sandwich or anything that would give me an excuse fer bein' in there. Clevenger, he run the dump, an' he didn't allow no loafin' in the restaurant. He'd bawled Viola out a couple of times already fer me hangin' around too steady. Eat an' get out was Clevenger's idee of runnin' an' eatin' joint. An' I guess he was about right, at that.

"I heard No. 27 pull in an' the boys come acrost an' ett, an' went out. It must of be'n about midnight an' I was figgerin' on slippin' down fer some coffee an' sinkers, when I heard the door open an' shut, an' then I heard voices. They got louder, an' I heard her voice kind of high-pitched, an' then somethin' hit the wall, an' a chair tipped over, an' she screamed.

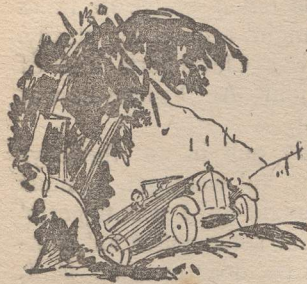
"When I busts through the door big Ollie Penthrope, that fired on 27, had got her crowded into a corner an' was tryin' to kiss her. There was a busted cup on the floor an' coffee splashed over the wall where she'd throwed it at him an' missed. Well, I busted Ollie one, side of the head, an' he drops her an' comes after me. Believe me, there was somethin' doin' in there fer the next five, ten minutes! Ollie, he'd stopped in to Hog's an' got hisself a quick bun on. He sure did scrap an' finally I got him with a chair, but not till after we'd tipped over the tables an' busted all the dishes, an' chairs, an' the show-case, an' a winder.

CLEVENGER, he lived upstairs, too, an' he heard the racket an' come down with his nightshirt shoved into his britches, an' begun raisin' hell. When he started in bawlin' out Viola I ketched him side of the head with the nickel-plated dingus they make the coffee in. The hot coffee run all over Ollie an' woke him up an' he went out through the busted winder howlin' murder—told me afterwards how he'd dremt he was in a wreck an' his boiler'd busted. He was in a wreck, all

right, at that. We brung Clevenger to, an' then beat it, an' I took Viola to her aunt's, an' the next day we got hitched.

"Come summer, I'd got me a passenger run an' I was to home half the time, but the other half I was kind of steppin' out a little. I wasn't foolin' Viola none, an' she wasn't none backward about lettin' me in on the secret.

"It was 'long about then that Kester come to town. We'd run acrost him at dances now an' then. He was sellin' auto-



mobiles — swell dresser, an' new cars to ride in all the time—plenty money—plenty time on his hands, an'—well, you can guess the rest of it. Not that I

was no saint, as the feller says. Even the nights I was in off'n the run, I spent about half of 'em around town—poker, an' now an' then a booze party; jane or two, maybe, an'—oh hell, you know how it goes!

"Then, one night in August I come in off my run an' found a note instead of a wife. She was gone—an' Kester was gone. I throw'd up my job, stored the furniture, got me a rod, an' went on a still-hunt. Foltered 'em to Chicago, an' then lost 'em.

"I hung around till I was broke an' then drifted north. I passed up Winnipeg, an' got a job on the Hudson Bay division. But I'd kind of lost my appetite fer railroadin'. You remember, it was then I tried to get into the Mounted. When that fell through, I stuck till I'd got me a stake an' quit an' went to tradin' in a small way, an' trappin' a little. Worked fer Gaunt one year—rod-man on that road he's surveyin' through.

"This fall I built me a pole-an'-mud shack up on the Limestone an' figgered on puttin' in the winter trappin'. I went down to end of steel to get me some supplies, an' who should I run onto but this here Kester! Grinnin' an' laughin', an' joshin' he was, like always, like nothin' in the world bothered him.

"Well, sir. I thought I'd got all over thinkin' about—about—her. But the minute I laid eyes on him it all come back! He was in the commissary talkin' to old

Grigsby an' Grace. I stopped jest inside the door, an', man, I'm tellin' you I seen red! I come damn' near pluggin' him right where he stood. They looked at me when I come in, an' then went on talkin', an' I seen that Kester didn't know me. Whiskers makes a difference in a man. I got holt of myself, an' went out an' walked quite a piece down the track an' back. An' I done some pretty hard thinkin'.

THE whole thing come back to me like it happened yesterday. Seemed like I could remember every little thing—like I was livin' it all over again—only different. I kind of seen myself like I was someone else—an' what I seen didn't make no pretty picture. Near as I could dope it, the fireman that was Joe Caswell back there in Winnipeg had got just what was comin' to him. I says to myself, she's got a right to be happy, an' if she's happy with Kester—all right. God knows I never done so much to make her happy when I had her, an' now if I should bump Kester off—but I've got to find out if she's happy. By God, if she ain't, if he ain't done right by her—well, I was grippin' my rifle pretty hard when I walks back to the camp.

"I goes back to the commissary an' they're still talkin' an' I finds out how Kester an' his pardner, which was a friend of Grace's, had come up fer a moose hunt, an' his pardner had took sick sudden, an' the camp doctor had rushed him down to the hospital at The Pas fer to operate. Kester, he figgered that long as he was up here, he'd try to get him a moose, an' Grace an' Grigsby was tryin' to figger who they'd get fer a guide, the Injuns mostly havin' quit an' gone out on the traplines.

"Here's my chanct, so I steps in an' offers to guide him. He jumps at the idee, an' while Grigsby's gettin' the outfit together, Grace calls me to one side. 'What's your game?' he whispers.

"'What do you mean—game?' I says.

"'Jest what I say,' he comes back, 'I happened to notice you when you come in that door a while ago, an' if I ever seen murder in a man's eyes it was in yours.'

I LAUGHS. 'Yes,' I says, 'an' if he'd be'n who I thought he was, you'd of seen a real murder right there on the floor.'

I thought he was a feller that used to brake down below. He got it in fer my engineer an' spiked a switch on us one night, an' only fer luck he'd of piled us in the ditch, passengers an' all. I've swore to get him if I ever see him. But this ain't the feller. Anyone can see he ain't no railroader, an' he don't even look like him now I've seen him plain.'

"That satisfies Grace all right, an' early in the mornin' me an' Kester pulls out. I takes him to my shack on the Limestone, an' we makes it in two days.

"Well, you know that kind—they'll talk. He did. It's sort of sleetin'—the front end of this snow storm—an' we're settin' in the shack next day, an' I sort of mentions Winnipeg. Yes, he's lived in Winnipeg, long with about half the other places in Canada an' the States. He starts in to tell about how many cars he's sold, an' how much money he makes, an' I says how I be'n to Winnipeg onct, an' how I seen more good lookin' women than I thought they was. Well, that started him off, an' before he'd finished he'd spilt the whole

story about how he'd copped out Viola, an' all. I let him go on clean to the end, how he'd ditched her in about a year fer another one in Detroit. He bragged about it, an'



laughed like it was somethin' a man should be proud of.

"Where is she now?' I says, managin' somehow to keep my voice steady.

"How the hell do I know?' he says. 'Slingin' hash in some restaurant, I suppose. I seen her once after that, about a year ago in a restaurant, but I ducked before she spotted me.'

"All the while he's talkin' I'm cleanin' my rifle, an' oilin' her up good, inside an' out, an' by the time he's through, I've got her full of shells, an' one in the barrel. 'That's a good story,' I says. 'A damn' good story. An' the best part of it is, there ain't no one but me an' you goin' to know the finish of it.'

"WHAT do you mean,' he says, lookin' at me kind of curious.

"Figger it out fer yerself,' I says. 'Did you ever see me before?'

"He looks closer. 'No,' he says, 'I can't say as I have.'

"I can,' I says. 'An' maybe I can help you out a little. My name's Caswell, Joe Caswell, an' I used to fire a passenger run out of Winnipeg, five or six years back. I was married, then—married to a woman I loved. I ain't claimin' I used her right—I didn't—but I loved her. I didn't rightly know how much I did love her till a damn' skunk stole her off me an' took her to the States.'

"Well, sir, his face had went white as new snow. He was settin' in a kind of chair I'd made beside the table, an' his jaw sort of sagged open an' he didn't say nothin' only his lips kep' movin' kind of stiff like, an' his hands was openin' an' shuttin', slow. I had the gun on him an' his eyes was on the muzzle of it, all kind of wide an' starin' an' glassy like. He was breathin' kind of heavy an' catchy, an' the sweat from his forehead run down onto his cheeks. He never said a word—not a damn' word—jest set there starin' at the end of the gun that was about six foot from him an' pointed right at his middle.

"I NEVER said no more neither. Onct in a while his face would git red like all the blood in him was rushin' into it, an' then it would turn kind of purple like, an' then git white agin'—white like a dead man's face. I set there an' watched him. He had it comin' to him. I wasn't goin' to be in no hurry. At the most, it was only seconds fer him, agin the days an' the weeks an' the months he'd made her suffer! I was takin' my time. An' so we set there—an' the alarm clock on the shelf tickin' an' tickin'. I don't know what it was sayin' to him, but over an' over to me it ticked off the words: *'he's got to pay—he's got to pay—he's got to pay.'*

"Maybe he didn't hear the clock, I don't know. He set there with one shoulder kind of slunched down agin' the edge of the table, an' one hand on the table, an' the other hangin' sort of loose, an' his jaw sagged down onto his vest. A canvas shell vest it was, an' I remember when I wasn't

listenin' to the damn' clock, I was countin' them yeller shells, all in rows acrost his front. I never seen a man like that before—an' I never want to agin. If they hang me, Downey, I'll take it like a man, anyhow. Lookin' at a feller like him makes a man kind of ashamed to be borned into the same breed.

"I MUST of be'n a couple of hours I set there, listenin' to the clock, countin' them shells, an' figgerin' when he'd make a play fer me—reach fer his rifle or jump onto me. When he did, I aimed to plug him—an' I wasn't goin' to listen to no beggin' off, neither. I figgered he'd had a fair an' square trial an' convicted hisself.

"But he never made a move, an' then it begun to git dark, slow an' little by little like it does on cloudy days, an' the shack with only one small winder. I figgered his game was to wait till it got plumb dark, hopin' I might miss. But I wasn't goin' to let him git away with nothin' like that, so I says, 'Why don't you laugh now about the way you put it over on the boob fireman back there in Winnipeg? For I was a boob, all right,' I says. 'Fer not realizin' what a good woman I had when I had her! But I've had plenty of time to think about it since. Anyways, I loved her—an' that's a damn' sight more'n you ever done.'"

"Well, he don't say nothin'—jest set slunched down starin' at the gun. I don't figger on lettin' him stall along into the dark on me, so with my finger on the trigger, I reaches over an' prods him in the ribs with the muzzle, figgerin' he'd



grab the gun, an' when he did I'd pull the trigger. But he don't grab it, an' I give a harder shove, an' his chair moved a little, an' his head rolled kind of sideways over onto his shoulder, an' his hand slipped off the table an' hung kind of limp an' danglin'. First off, I thought it was a trick, so I held the gun on him, an' stepped closter.

He was dead. So help me God, Downey, he was dead as a herrin', settin' right there in his chair—jest plumb scairt to death. I never plugged him, never laid a hand on him. An' he was dead. I would of plugged him. I figger I had a right to. But, somehow, it seems better the way it is. He had it comin' to him. He died the horriblest I ever seen a man die—an' I've saw 'em scalded to death in their cab in a wreck.

"WELL, when I seen he was dead, I didn't know what the hell to do. First off, I figgered I'd load him on a sled an' haul him back to the railroad. Then I got to figgerin'. There was bound to be an investigation or an inquest, or whatever, they do, an' then where'd I be? Grace would claim he'd saw murder in my eye when I first come in that door, an' there's plenty of the railroad boys knows about what he done to me. The police would figger I'd choked him to death, or poisoned him—I'd bought plenty of strychnine fer poisonin' baits.

"I figgered the only thing to do was jest like I'd planned to do if I had plugged him—pull out; pull fast, an' hit fer the States. I figgered I could make it easy before he was missed, an' I could be to hell an' gone before the police could find him an' come back. It wasn't hardly no risk at all. So I drags Kester out an' rolls him into a cache I'd scooped out of the bank, an' covers him up with poles an' dirt. Then I packs my sled, an' hooks up my dogs an' hits out. I didn't dare go back to the railroad where Grigsby or Grace could see me, so I figgered I'd hit fer The Pas. My sled didn't leave no trail on the frozen sleet, but even at that, I was nervous an' jumpy, an' when the snow come, I got worse—that's why I lost my head back there an' shot, when I seen a police on my trail."

THE man tossed some brush onto the coals, and relighted his pipe. "Well, that's all there is to it. I've come clean, Downey—everything, jest as it happened. But, there's one thing I wisht you'd tell me—how come you was up on the Lime-stone? An' how in hell could you foller my trail—before the snow come?"

Corporal Downey grinned broadly. "I didn't," he said. "I ain't be'n up on the Limestone. An' I hadn't no notion of trailin' anyone. I was hittin' fer The Pas, an' I ran onto your trail about noon today. It beat breakin' trail, so I fell in on it. First I know'd anything was wrong was when you took a shot at me—after that, I had to get you. Figured it was someone had gone crazy, an' didn't want to hurt him fetchin' him in."

Caswell was staring. "Well, I'll be damned! You mean, when you asked me to tell you why I done it you didn't have nothin' to go on—you was bluffin'?"

"Well, I told you there was tricks in policin'."

"An' you mean, if I hadn't took a shot at you—"

Downey interrupted with a nod. "Yup. We'd be campin' together jest the same."

"An' in a couple of days I'd of be'n headed fer the States with no chance of bein' caught!"

"Yup. But I guess it's best things worked out as they did."

The other shook his head dejectedly. "Not for me, Downey. They'll hang it on me, somehow. You see, there's plenty of the railroad boys can testify I had reason to bump him off. An' there's Grace, he'll tell how I give him a murderin' look. They'll figger I poisoned him, or choked him, or rapped him on the head, or somethin'."

Corporal Downey knocked the ashes from his pipe. "That ain't jest the way I figure it. Fact is, I believe you've told me the truth. If you ain't you're a good liar—but it won't get you nothin'. In the mornin' me an' you are goin' to hit the back trail to the Limestone an' dig up this

Kester. If there ain't no bullet hole in him, nor no strangle marks on his neck, we'll take him down to detachment where

Corporal Kin-kaid will look him over fer fatal bruises an' examine his stomach fer poison. He's

got his outfit there fer just such investigations—used to be in the C.I.B. If you've come clean on your story, I'll report the case myself, an' there won't be no further investigation."

Caswell was leaning close, staring unbelieving into the eyes of the old corporal. "Will you do that, Downey—after—after me takin' a shot at you?"

"Didn't I tell you I was as much interested in searchin' out evidence for a man as against him?"

THE voice of the other was not quite steady as he reached for the officer's hand. "By God, Downey, you're a white man! An' I'm willin' to do a stretch fer shootin' at you. Make it as strong as you want to—assaultin' an officer with intent to kill, or some such, ain't it?"

There was a twinkle in the gray eyes as Downey answered, soberly. "Anyone that can't shoot no straighter'n what you did, son, can't rightly be said to have committed an assault. Leastwise, if I don't figure it worth reportin'—that's my business. By the way, where's your dogs an' outfit?"

"Lost 'em through thin ice on a rapids. I stopped at Split Lake an' got these blankets an' enough grub to take me to The Pas."

"We can stop at Split Lake an' get some grub, an' maybe pick you up an' outfit of dogs, so you can go to trappin' as you planned."

A long pause, and then the voice of Caswell from beyond the fire, "Never mind the dogs, Downey. I won't be needin' 'em."

"You can't winter up there without dogs."

"Maybe not. But if I winter there, there'll be two of us. An' we can pick up some dogs comin' back in. As soon as your C.I.B. man says the word, I'm pullin' out."

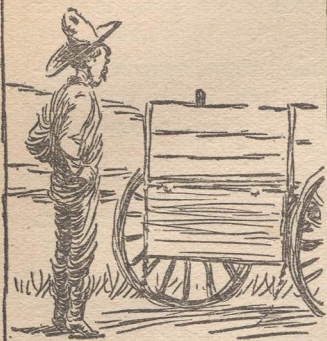
"Where to?"

"Detroit. Chances is, she's slingin' hash down there somewheres. Maybe—if I can put it acrost to her right—she'd be willin' to—to kind of—start all over."



The Optimist

By Henry Herbert Knibbs



OLD Bill Bliven was a right good hand,
He owned some cattle and he owned some land,
He worked like a gopher from mornin' till night,
But somehow, nothin' that he done went right.
He was always steppin' on a barrel hoop,
Or gatherin' in a sliver on his old front stoop,
Or reachin' for a stick for to kill a snake,
And pickin' up another one by mistake,
Or loadin' up his wagon with goods in town,
And arrivin' at his diggin's with the tail-gate down,
Then he'd say, plumb cheerful, "Now that's right strange!
Somethin's goin' to happen if my luck don't change."



Once he laid off ridin' and a punchin' cows,
And rustled up a woman and some marriage vows,
Took his honeymoon in town and was drivin' back,
When he seen a bolt of lightnin' hit his darned old shack.
He built him another and all went well,
Trouble quit a ridin' him for quite a spell.
Then things they started for to slip and slide,
His wife had triplets and his tame cow died;
He sat down thoughtful and he rubbed his shins,
And says, plumb cheerful, "Well, it ain't six twins,
Three little squawkers. Now that's right strange!
Somethin's goin' to happen if my luck don't change."

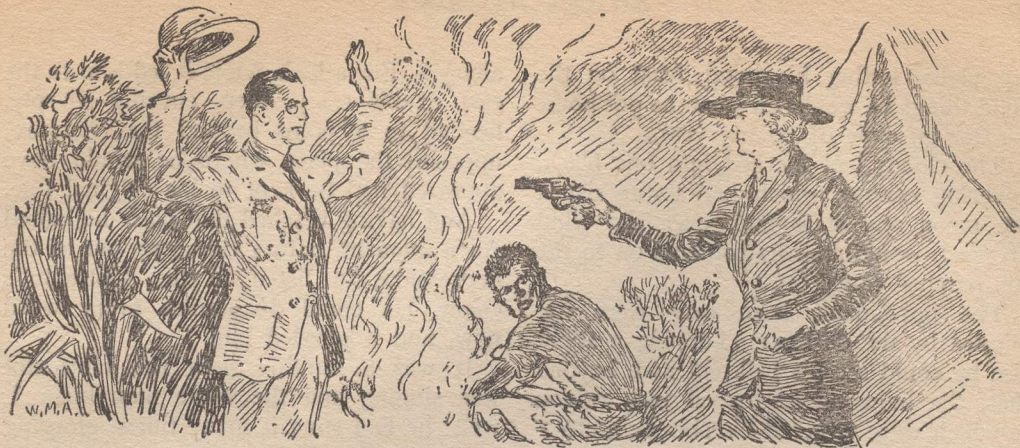


The kids had measles and the whooping cough,
He was drivin' for the doctor when a wheel come off.
Not long after he was mowin' hay,
When a jack scared his hosses and they run away,
And Bill went with 'em at his own expense,
Till they left him danglin' from the barb-wire fence.
Next, he set to diggin' of a bran' new well,
He was workin' at the bottom when the bucket fell,
He got patched and mended and around ag'in,
When an earthquake started and the well caved in.
Then he says, plumb cheerful, "Now that's right strange!
Somethin's goin' to happen if my luck don't change."



Then the oil boom struck us and they leased his ground,
They was drillin' and a pumpin' for a mile around,
But they weren't expectin' what was on the card,
When they opened up a gusher in Bill's back yard.
They was strugglin' for to cap it and Bill struggled too,
When the gusher took to buckin', and the darn thing blew:
And Bill left sudden for his Home on High,
And we heard him talkin' as he hit the sky:
"They must have struck it! Now that's right strange!
Somethin's goin' to happen if my luck don't change."





FOOL'S FOLLY

By L. PATRICK GREENE

Author of "The Trout in the Milk," "Blue Mongrels," etc.

THE MAJOR HAD FACED MUCH IN HIS TIME, BUT NEVER HAD HE FACED SUDDEN DEATH FOR HAVING MADE AN I. D. B. OF A YOUNG MAN WHOM HE HAD NEVER HEARD OF. HE HAD TO DELVE DEEP INTO THE DARK UNDERWORLD OF DIAMONDTOWN BEFORE HE AND THE GRIM HARVESTER SET THINGS RIGHT BETWEEN THEM

GRAY clouds scurried across the face of the moon, dimming its white splendor. One by one the stars were blotted out; a piercing wind swept its way unchecked across the open veld. The temperature dropped. By comparison with the heat of the noonday sun, a heat which had sent all white men to the fancied coolness of the bars and the drinks purveyed there, the cold was intense, freezing, chilling heat-thinned blood.

South Africa is like that: Charming by reason of her whimsical vagaries; damned because of her hell inspired changes.

The horseman, riding back from Diamondtown to his camp on the veld beyond the commonage, turned up the collar of his heavy coat and blew on his numbed fingers.

"Judging by the blaze," he muttered, staring ahead at a yellow pin-prick of light which shone through the swift gathering gloom, "Jim's got a good fire goin' an' it'll be bally welcome. Jove! If I were at home, I'd prophesy skating in the morning, or at least a good, old-fashioned snow-storm. Instead of which—" he sighed—

"it'll probably rain all the night through, making the veld a bally quagmire. But by noon it'll be steaming hot an' dust devils'll be dancing everywhere. What a country! An' what a fool I am to stay in it. Specially when I don't have to. I could go home an'——"

He shrugged his shoulders and rode on for awhile in moody silence, the bridle reins hanging loosely about his horse's neck, flapping his arms to promote warmth.

Suddenly he broke into song, hummed a Yule-tide carol:

"I saw three ships come sailing in——"

As if choked by Africa's unsympathetic alien atmosphere the song ended as abruptly as it had begun.

"But, my word!" exclaimed the horseman, giving voice to the thoughts which had prompted the song, "I've made up my mind. Rather. I'm going home for Christmas. If I start in the morning I can get the *Ghoorka* at Cape Town. She'll get me home just in time. But what on earth will I do with Jim? Take him with me, or——"

Again he was silent, making and reject-

ing plans, letting his mind feast on the good things he would do when he got home—after an exile of twenty years.

The clouds had merged into one black, lowering canopy which had extinguished the moon and stars and, once the wind dropped, would spill its contents on to the sun parched earth.

The horseman's keen eyes were not blinded by the darkness. Topping a slight rise he could see his bell-tent and, beyond that, the light canvas-topped trek wagon to which were tethered his sixteen mules.

To the left of the tent was a native, his Hottentot servant, squatting before a fire, a blanket thrown over his shoulder, intent on stirring the contents of a big "kettle"; intent on that, oblivious to all else save, perhaps, the words of the song he was singing.

The white man reined in his horse and listened, but he was still too far away, and the wind was in the wrong quarter, to get anything but meaningless words. Meaningless because isolated, not because they were spoken in the harsh, clicking guttural of the Hottentot.

HE RODE on again slowly, choosing his way with care, concentrating on getting as close as he could to his camp before being challenged by the Hottentot.

It was a game which had never failed to delight these two—white master and black servant—in all the years they had been together. It was a matching of bush-craft against bush-craft.

"Of course," the horseman mused, "Jim, the bally old heathen, knows I'm on my way. He must have heard me singing, he must have heard the jingle of Satan's bit." He patted his horse's arched neck. "But if I can get a little nearer before he hails me I shall score one to myself. Only," he concluded ruefully, "the deuce of it is, he'll probably wait until I ride up to him and then—and, my word, how sarcastic the old lad can be:—he will tell me all my movements since I left the dorp: here I lighted a cigarette; there I turned to avoid a gully; here I drew rein to listen to him sing— But speaking of gullies—"

He turned his horse into a deep hollow, one of the wave-like billows which broke up the level expanse of veld, and rode

along it. For a little while it led him to the east of his camp, then, curving sharply, headed to a point beyond the campfire, opposite the place where he would have appeared had he kept to his original line.

And having reached that place he halted for a moment, before riding up out of the depression, to listen to the Hottentot's chant. He could distinguish every word now, and it puzzled him.

It was a hunting song the Hottentot was singing and the white man knew it well; he had sung it many times, glorying in the words of the savage saga and the elemental, barbaric rhythm.

Yet his attitude now of intense concentration was of one hearing the song for the first time. He was endeavoring to find the clue to the puzzle it presented him; wondering what had destroyed the regularity of the rhythm.

Suddenly he understood: The Hottentot was interpolating isolated words, sometimes whole sentences, into the age-old, tradition-sanctified chant.

The white man, listening breathlessly, separated those words and sentences, put them together, shuffled and rearranged them, finally obtaining this:

Go back. Oh, man who comes riding a black horse. Oh, man who waits in a donga to my north. In the white hut evil waits. A woman waits with death in her hands.

"I suppose by 'White hut' Jim means the tent," the horseman mused. "And the old boy's clever, deucedly clever, to get over a warning like that. But then I've



come to expect that of Jim. One might catch a weasel asleep, but never Jim! So he thinks I ought to go back, eh? And simply because a woman waits to — er — interview

me. Granted the well known weaker sex is much too strong for me, I do not feel inclined to show my heels tonight. No. Tonight I must pack and whatnot. Also, I'm curious. This must be looked into."

HE FUMBLLED in his tunic pocket and, producing a monocle, fixed it in his eye. Even in the darkness one would have been aware that that monocle had a magical effect on him. From the moment he wore it he seemed to emanate "silly assisms," seemed to surround himself with the personality of a vacuous, inane fop.

Then, whistling gaily, he rode forward, up out of the hollow, and into the circle of light cast by the fire.

The Hottentot looked up swiftly, an expression of reproach, warning and despair on his ugly, good natured face. Then he turned his attention again to the stuff he was stirring in the kettle and continued his song.

The white man dismounted.

"Take care of Satan, Jim," he ordered and, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his white drill riding breeches, sauntered lazily toward his tent.

As he neared it a woman suddenly appeared in the opening, and, levelling a revolver at him, commanded sharply, "Hands up, Major!"

With a wondering, vacuous expression on his round, smooth-shaven face, he removed his hands from his pockets and raised them above his head, removing his helmet with his right and bowing profoundly, as he did so.

"And now what, dear lady?" He asked in a pleasing drawl.

She looked slightly nonplussed for a moment but answered stoutly enough, "We are going to have a little talk together, you and I. And then——"

"And then?" He prompted, noting her hesitation.

"That all depends," was her cryptic answer.

The Major laughed gaily.

"That all depends," he echoed. "Bally lot of meaning in those three words. On them you can hang all the law and the prophets—what?"

"You would try to make fun of a woman," she remarked sourly.

"Oh, I say," the Major exclaimed, "that's not fair, really. Such a thing was far from my thought, 'pon my word, yes. I was only tryin' as it were, to make conversation. This is a deucedly awkward position, you know. Oh, very. You see I

don't know you—or your—er—errand. And my arms are aching, you know. And, yes, I'm in a very awkward position."

"You are," the woman agreed grimly. "Well, you're going to listen to me and agree to a proposition I'm going to make. If you don't, you'll be in a much more awkward position I assure you. Ever seen a man drop with a bullet in his brain?"

The major fidgetted.

"Oh, I say!" he murmured. "What a ghastly sense of humor you've got."

"It isn't humor——" the woman sniffed—"I'm just letting you see I'm here on serious business and not to be put off by any of your smart-aleck tricks."

HE LOOKED covertly over his shoulder, wondering what the Hottentot was doing; surprised that he had not, before this, made some move which would have helped the Major turn the tables on the woman who was holding him up.

But Jim had not moved from his place by the fire and, apparently, had not the slightest interest in his Baas' welfare.

The woman laughed coldly.

"You needn't look for any help from Jim," she said. "I can speak the lingo—well enough, at least, to convince him that at any false move from you or him I shoot. And I don't miss what I aim at. Yes, your nigger's convinced I mean business. That's why he didn't warn you I was here. He knew he'd get a bullet in his yellow hide if he did."

"But he did, dear lady," the Major murmured. "And very cleverly too. Oh, never mind," he continued with a shrug of his broad shoulders, answering her look of scornful disbelief. "The only thing that counts is that I disregarded the warning and you have me—er—where you want me. Yes, very much so, by Jove!"

She eyed him narrowly, but, because his back was toward the fire-light, failed to read the expression on his face.

He continued easily, advancing toward her, she backing slowly into the tent, "Because my bally arms are tired I'm going to take them down and if you must shoot—why, I suppose you must. Only, reflect, dear lady. Murder's a beastly occupation for a woman."

He lowered his hands as he spoke, took

a cigarette from his case and lighted it calmly.

Then he held the flickering match between his cupped hands so that it illumined his face; held it until the flame reached his fingers, searing them. Then he dropped it, but with no show of nervous shock invariably exhibited by smokers so caught. As an exhibition of nerve control it was masterly, taking into consideration the fact that, at the same time, a revolver was pointing at his vitals—and that revolver in the hands of an overwrought woman. Her forefinger was alternately straightening and crooking about the trigger.

"And now," the Major continued softly, "I think we'll have a little light on the subject."



He reached for a lamp which hung from the tent pole, and a moment later the tent was illumined by its soft, yellow

light.

Besides a camp bed with snowy linen, the tent contained a table, two deck chairs and a number of black, uniform-sized cases. On the floor was spread a number of well tanned skins—that of a magnificent black maned lion being the most conspicuous.

"Jim killed that laddie, alone, with a spear," the Major remarked casually, much in the manner of a host making conversation with his guests. "It was quite an affair! I had a—er—worm's eye view of it all. You see, I was under the lion at the time. But—" he drew a chair forward—"won't you sit down? Unpardonable of me to keep you standing so long. Please sit down."

There was a world of courtesy in his voice, and of sincere sympathy.

It startled the woman. A look of doubt crept into her faded gray eyes; sorrow softened the hard lines of her face into what they really were, the wrinkles of age.

She tried desperately to pull herself together, and failed; she looked helplessly

at the Major then back at the revolver she held in her hand.

SUDDENLY the revolver dropped with a dull thud to the ground and she collapsed into the chair the Major had pulled out for her, covered her face with her hands and wept noiselessly, rocking ceaselessly to and fro.

The Major looked down at her uneasily; his hands, firm, white, capable, fluttered helplessly before him. He made a motion as if he would pat her reassuringly on the back, thought better of it and, instead, toyed nervously with his monocle.

Then he stooped quickly, picked up the revolver, placed it on the table close to her, sat down in the other chair, waiting for the woman's outburst of grief to wear itself out.

And while he waited he eyed her keenly, endeavoring to find a clue to her presence at his camp and her violent antagonism toward him.

Her face had seemed vaguely familiar, but his unusually keen memory failed him for once and he could not place her.

She was, he judged, a woman of fifty-five or thereabouts and had once been, undoubtedly, beautiful in a hard metallic way. Her hair, what little of it showed beneath the wide-brimmed hat she wore, was a nondescript, rusty brown, lifeless, dull, indicating that for many years it had been a peroxide blond.

Her ungloved hands were large, and the stumpy red fingers were covered with tawdry rings.

Presently she raised her head and looked across the tent at the Major, furtively dabbing at her eyes with a much belaced handkerchief, straightening her hat, patting a stray wisp of hair into place.

"And now what, dear lady?" the Major asked softly.

She started at his voice, confusion for a moment took possession of her and the fingers of her right hand played a nervous tattoo on the top of the table which stood by her side. And so they came in contact with the revolver, closing convulsively upon its butt. Its cold metallic touch acted like a cold douche upon her, shocking her into a state of self control. Once again her eyes glittered with a hard light.

"Better begin at the beginning, don't you think?" The Major murmured.

"There's no beginning," the woman said harshly, "where the likes of me's concerned. My name's Jane Brunton—Joburg Jane. You've heard of me, no doubt. There ain't many men in South Africa who haven't."

She paused defiantly, waiting for some comment from him; steeling herself against an expected coarse insult.

"Yes, Mrs. Brunton," the Major replied gravely. "I've heard of you. And, if all I hear's true, I'm probably one of the few men in South Africa you haven't helped with a grubstake. There are a lot of men who owe their present success to the start you gave them."

Jane Brunton laughed harshly.

"It's always easy for my sort to be generous. It's the only virtue we possess."

THE Major was silent. He knew Jane Brunton's reputation; knew of all the evil credited to her when she was a leader of South Africa's feminine underworld. But all that belonged to the past, to the days when she had been an autocratic beauty. Of the woman she now was he knew nothing, save that she was undoubtedly in great trouble. And nothing in his expression or the tone of his voice when he again spoke indicated that he thought of her other than he thought of any woman: an unexplainable mystery and therefore to be feared; a woman and therefore to be held in great respect. It was this fear, this respect which explained his awkwardness in the presence of women, reduced him to a state of inanity which matched his monacle-masked face.

"We're goin' to have a most bally frightful storm," he remarked helplessly, "an' it's getting cold. Would you like some coffee? Jim makes——"

He half rose from his chair intending to go to the Hottentot to give directions.

He collapsed, gaping foolishly, at Jane Brunton's terse command. Once again the revolver, held in an unwavering hand, was levelled at him.

"Don't want any coffee," she said tonelessly. "Now just you listen to me. What are you going to do about my boy?"

The Major stared at her wonderingly

and passed his hand over his smooth, jet black hair in a puzzled gesture.

"Your boy!" he murmured. "But I don't understand. I didn't know you had a son. And, in any case, what have I to do with him?"

"A damned sight too much," she snapped angrily, but there was despair too in her voice. "Listen: I sent him away to school



when he was only a brat of eight. I sent him to England and kept him there so's he wouldn't never know what sort of a woman his mother was. Get that: *was*.

For nearly fourteen years I didn't lay eyes on him. For the last eight I been making myself respectable, making myself the sort of woman he ought to have for a mother. And I done it. Damn it—I done it!"

She repeated the assertion passionately, challenging him to contradict her.

"I'm sure you have," the Major murmured with a gentle courtesy.

"A year ago," she continued in a softer vein, "he came back to me on the farm I'd bought, fifty miles north of Diamondtown. Red Drift it's called: You've heard of it?"

The Major bowed.

"It's one of the best stocked farms in the country I'm told."

"It is. I got three thousand morgen of land an' most of it's prime grazing ground; an' I got a couple of hundred acres under cultivation an' one of the best homesteads in the district. An' I did a lot of it myself. Wouldn't have a white man near the place lest people 'ud talk. Worked beside my niggers, I did." Her eyes glowed with the pride of achievement. Then they faded; misery clouded them.

"But Frank," she continued, "didn't care for farm life. He was young, needed company, an' maybe I was wrong to try to pin him down so soon. After all, you're only young once, an' it's best to make the most of it. But, I wonder!"

She paused, considering the wisdom of that age-old, easy philosophy.

"Frank is your son, I suppose?" the Major commented.

"YOU know damn' well he is," she retorted savagely and continued, ignoring his protests; "of course you know, an' you know all the rest, an', in a way, I'm wasting time goin' through it all now. But it helps me think out what to do.

"Well, Frank got restless—missed the company of youngsters his own age; no wonder, with only me to talk to. My God! An' the way he used to talk to me of parties he'd been to in London. He hinted at things that he said 'ud make me blush if I was to hear the whole story. Make *me* blush. God! If only I could. But that was the way I wanted him to think of me: a mousey, quiet, little woman who didn't dream how bad men could be. I used to laugh and cry myself to sleep over his tales. He was so damned innocent, an' young, for all his talk!

"But, as I say, he got fed up with the farm very soon an' got into the habit of riding into the dorp every Friday an' coming back Monday. It was no use my saying anything, I felt sure of that. He was a man in years, anyway. An' I couldn't warn him, as I ought to have warned him. That was the hell of it! How could I, a quiet little homebody, warn him, a man of the world, against all the things he was likely to run up against, an' did run up against, in Diamondtown?" She laughed mirthlessly. "Maybe, I'd have held him better if I'd made myself out to be more of a woman of the world. I've paid and I'm paying for that mistake."

She was silent for a little while. The revolver was lying now unheeded in her lap, her hands were clasped loosely about her knees and she stared dull-eyed before her.

The tent bellied as a shrieking gust of wind swept by, threatening to break it from its moorings. There followed a dead oppressive calm.

Outside, Jim, the Hottentot, was passing swiftly amongst the animals, soothing them, looking to their lashings, for they sensed the impending storm.

The woman continued abruptly, ignoring the period of silence which had interrupted her narrative.

"Yes, Frank wanted life an' he went to Diamondtown for it."

"And he found it—the old, bad kind?"

the Major hazarded. "Women, wine, an' that sort of thing?"

"You know he didn't," the woman replied shortly. "Frank's clean, I'll gamble on that. No. He found a hero. Only, because he's young, he didn't have the sense to see his hero's got feet of clay. So he dresses like a Bond Street dandy, an' talks as if he got a plum in his mouth, a hot one at that, an' wears a monocle, an' brushes his hair back in a pompadour an' acts like a silly, stage door Johnny. Do you recognize yourself, Major?"

The Major moved uneasily.

"But that, alone, wouldn't be so bad," the woman continued relentlessly. "Everybody knows—everybody who really knows you, that is—that your silly ass ways are only a pose; knows that for all your soft, womanish ways you're all steel underneath. They say you're the best shot, the best horseman, the best trekker in South Africa. An' Frank, poor lamb, he's taken you as a model. An' you're a good model up to a point. I'll admit that. From what I hear you don't booze or run after women. But inside you're rotten."

"Oh, I say!" the Major protested feebly.

"YOU are," the woman continued. "You play your own game in your own way; you got the reputation of being the best of good fellows; but you play a rotten game an', because you are what you are, my boy didn't see how rotten it is. He thinks you a Robin Hood—an' is bent on playin' it with you."

"And my game is?"

She snorted indignantly.

"You're an I.D.B.—a man can't go any lower than that; Nöt in this country. Because an I.D.B.'s got to lie, an' cheat his best friends. God! He ain't got no friends. He don't trust nobody nor nobody trusts

him. He tempts niggers to steal stones from their masters an' buys them, like as not, with a bottle of rot gut booze or a farthing gilded to look like a quid. Hell! Don't



I know what the game's like? Me as saw

so much of it in the years gone by. An' folks think because you're clean outside you're clean inside an' ain't tarred with the same brush as all the others of your kind. An' my boy Frank he's taken you for his hero!"

She laughed bitterly.

The Major was about to make some comment, thought better of it and, frowning thoughtfully, waited for her to continue.

"Yes," she said, "you're his hero an' you're going to make him your assistant—he's full of it—make him the rotter you are. Are you though?"

She sat suddenly erect, the revolver grasped firmly in her hand once again. "Not if I know it. An' this little affair you an' him are pulling off—day after tomorrow, ain't it?—ain't goin' to happen. Planning to rush a 'parcel' of stones, Frank tells me. God! To hear him tell it it's clean adventure.

"'It ain't really stealing, Mom,' he says. 'We're only taking stones from people who have no right to them. At least we've got as much right to them as they have. An' we'll most like give all we make to a mission or something.'

"That's the way he talks! It ain't stealing, eh? But he'll get ten years hard labor if he's caught. An' maybe you'll fix it so's he is caught with a few stones, leaving you free to get away with the rest. That's just the sort of thing your sort does. I know. There ain't a straight thought in your body.

"But you're scotched, Mister Major. You're not goin' to ruin my boy."

"I don't suppose you'd believe me," the Major said wearily, "if I told you I'd never done any of the things you accuse me of. Of course I have the reputation of being an I.D.B.—"

"The cunningest one in the country!" the woman snapped.

The Major bowed.

"It's hardly an honor," he murmured, continuing, "I've never bought *stolen* stones from natives. And though, technically, I may once or twice have—er—overstepped the legal line, most of my operations have, as it were, been forced upon me and my dealings constituted acts of self defence. I have, you must believe me, dear lady, merely pilfered the pil-

ferers, returning, where possible the stones to their legal owners, retaining only a small percentage for my labors; retaining merely sufficient to outfit for a trek way up country—to hunt an' so forth—where Jim an' me are far happier than in the dorps."

"EVEN if that was true," the woman said slowly, "that don't clear you. Because of you an' your reputation I'm in danger of losing my boy. An' it ain't true! You're a dirty hound. But I'm going to scotch you. You're goin' to promise to send my boy back to me or——"

She indicated her revolver with a threatening gesture.

The Major laughed softly, sadly, at her illogical words.

"Would you," he drawled, "accept the promise of a dirty hound? A promise extracted under the threat of death?" Before she could reply he continued swiftly. "An' as a matter of fact—you'll have to believe this—I don't know your boy Frank. Wouldn't know him from Adam of Eden."

She sneered wrathfully.

"I expected something like that. Here—look what I received just when I thought I was making headway with my boy, getting him to see sense. What's your answer to that?"

From a pocket hidden deep down in the folds of her voluminous skirt she produced a note which she handed to him.

Unfolding it, he read:

Dear Joburg Jane:

Me and your boy, Frank, are great pals and I don't like to hear that you're trying to persuade him to have nothing to do with me because I'm a danger to his morals. That don't sound nice, coming from an old friend who knows all about your morals.

So this is a sort of warning-like: If anything should happen—and I ain't going to bother trying to find out what—to make young Frank double-cross me on this little scheme we're in, or if he should suddenly show more pleasure in my room than my company, why then he's going to know what sort of a woman his mother was, and still is for all I know.

If you feel like calling in to talk over old times you'll find me at Tikkey Ike's place most nights.

Yours,

The Major.

The Major read this through twice, carefully noting the ornate flourishing handwriting, then folding the paper handed it back to the woman.

"Well!" she demanded, her wrath mounting as she detected, as she thought, a sneering smile on the Major's face. "What you got to say to that?"

"There doesn't seem much I can say, only——"

"There's no only to it," she interrupted hotly. "It proves you're a liar, saying you don't know my boy. It proves you a dirty dog threatening to throw a woman's past before her son if she don't agree to stand by an' see him ruined. If——"

"Why did you come here to see me——" his drawl, calm, assured, overpowered and silenced her tirade—"when the note said I'd be found at Tikkey Ike's?"

"I went there." Her voice was toneless now again; all spirit seemed to have left her; she looked old, tired, spiritless, beaten. "And they told me you were out here."

"And you've been here—how long?"

"It was noon when I came."

He whistled.

"You've had no food—nothing?"

"Nothing. But what the hell's that to you? I was watching to see your nigger played no tricks, and thinking about my kid."

"Jim!"

"Yah, Baas?"

the Hottentot called, answering the Major's shout.

"Make skoff. Hot stew, coffee, quick. Get——"

"**B**LAST you!" the woman screamed. "Are you trying to play a trick on me? Tell your nigger to stay where he is by the fire. An' don't you call him again until me an' you have settled this business."



The Major rose quickly from his chair, deep concern on his face. He realized that the woman was reaching the end of her strength, mental and physical. Worry over her son, distress at the fear that her past might be raked out into the light—and that, too, she dreaded for her son's sake—lack of nourishment, all had taken their toll of her.

"First we will eat," he said calmly, his eyes fixed upon her.

"Sit down," she screamed again. "You won't? Then take that!"

But the Major, reading in her eyes the order her brain was sending to her stiffened fingers, reading it a fraction of a second before the fingers could carry out the brain's command, flung himself to the ground. Even so the bullet from her revolver tore its way through the shoulder of his coat, grazing his skin and drawing blood.

Before she could fire again he had reached up and snatched the revolver from her just as a deafening clap of thunder, following a brilliant lightning flash, made the earth vibrate.

Outside, Jim's voice sounded eerie as he called soothingly to the animals, then demanded anxiously, "Is the Baas all right?"

"All right. Make haste with the skoff, Jim, before the rain comes."

"The food is ready, Baas. In a minute I will bring it—and the rain is here."

As he spoke a cold, wet gust of wind swept into the tent; the canvas throbbed to the heavy beat of the rain, the air was filled with the sound of falling water, water cascading from the skies, churning the hard red earth into an oozy quagmire.

The Hottentot sidled into the tent enveloped from head to foot in a tarpaulin sheet from which descended rivulets of water.

He looked enquiringly at his Baas, then at the woman. She was sitting back in her chair now, covering her face with her hands, moaning despairingly. Her attempt had failed. But—she vaguely resented this—the woman she had *been* would not have failed. *That* woman had been harder.

"Is the Baas all right, truly?" Jim asked again. "I heard a shot——" He glared angrily at the woman.

"It was the thunder you heard, Jim."

The Hottentot's eyes turned to him, noted the tear in the Major's coat and the dull stain around it.

"And doubtless," he commented dryly, "it was the thunder which tore your coat, Baas, and drew blood from your shoulder."

"You talk too much," the Major said curtly. "The food—where is it?"

From under the tarpaulin Jim produced a food laden tray which he put down on the table and then, at a sign from the Major, withdrew.

A LITTLE while later the Major joined him, running swiftly through the downpour to where he sat under the canvas shelter of the wagon.

He swiftly discarded his soaked garments, stood out for a moment in the rain, glorying in the invigorating lash on his naked body, his muscular body which had looked slightly obese in the garments he affected, then climbing back into the wagon he briskly towelled himself and dressed again in patched, formless khaki slacks and a tattered gray shirt. On his head he put a battered felt hat, his uncombed hair stuck out, looking trampishly unkempt, and a pair of veld *schoens* covered his sockless feet.

Jim watched the preparations uneasily.

"The Baas plays a game?" he asked suddenly.

"Yah, Jim," the Major replied absently.

"And at the woman's bidding?"

"Truly, Jim. Aiming a gun at me she said I must do thus and so. And, to preserve my life, I obey."

"What folly, Baas!" Jim exclaimed. "The gun is no longer threatening your life, then why obey? For the matter of that, had you listened to my warning——"

"I didn't, Jim. And I'm glad I didn't. So now I go to do what I have to do for my name's sake." He wrapped himself in the tarpaulin Jim had been wearing and climbed down to the ground, slipping in the ooze.

"The Baas goes like that—and on foot?" Jim asked incredulously. "He will get wet——"

"And also dirty, Jim. But it is part of the game. See that the woman is made in all ways comfortable, Jim. She is my

guest, my honored guest. You will stay here to protect her. It is understood?"

"Yah! But, Baas, is there no part for me in this game you play?"

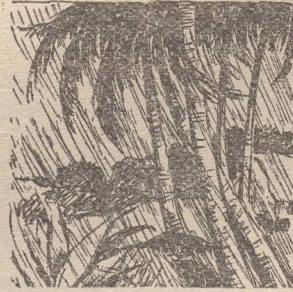
"None, Jim. Filth has been thrown on my name. I go to wash it off."

"But the Baas will take care?"

"Great care, Jim." Then, with a mirthful chuckle, the Major said, imitating Jim's voice, and almost exhausting Jim's knowledge of English, "If I don't see you. S'long. Hullo! Damme, yes, no."

Then he trudged off through the darkness, heading for the township.

An occasional lightning flash which



turned the leaden rain to ribbons of gleaming silver, made him visible to Jim's keen eyes. Then came a flash and Jim saw nothing but a waste of water.

"*Wo-we!* What a man," Jim breathed softly. "But he is also a liar! For his name's sake, he would have me believe, he dresses in rags and goes on a night like this to the dorp of evil men. But I, I who have known him these many years, I know better. A woman's tears—*wo-we!* I have seen it before—blinds his eyes to caution. Into the darkness he goes, and in the darkness how can he see the snares which may be set for him.

"*Wo-we!* I, Jim, the Hottentot, I am his servant, therefore it is my part to follow and see he comes to no harm. Yah! That is my duty. I am his servant."

His mind made up on that point Jim jumped down from the wagon and was on the point of following in the direction taken by the Major when the woman's voice, raised in a shout of, "O-he, Jim!" brought him to a confused halt, brought to him a remembrance of the Major's orders.

"Au-a!" he muttered. "But he is my Baas, and my Baas gave an order. So—Coming Missy!" he shouted and slithered his way through the mud toward the tent.

THE Bodega Bar at all times fully lived up to the evil reputation of its proprietor, "Tikkey" Isaacs.

It was a place where the scum of humanity which flocked to the Diamondtown could pander to their perverted vices, unmolested, provided they paid tribute to the fat, greasy, sycophantic Tikkey.

A hard visaged woman, dressed in tawdry finery, pounded waltzes and barn dances on a tuneless piano and to its labored rhythm others, their partners men of color if not of substance, danced with an affectation of gaiety.

Whites and full-blooded negroes, and all shades between, coolies and Malays, were welcomed by Tikkey; the possession of money broke down all color bars and the oily Tikkey waxed fat, financially as well as physically, on the shortcomings of his fellow creatures.

Around the walls tables were placed and about each table sat men and women, drinking heavily, not daring to object to the vile doctored stuff served to them or the exorbitant price they had to pay.

And Tikkey Isaacs, the evil genius of the place, constantly circulated about the room, his pasty face appearing ghoulis through the haze of smoke; his ears strained to hear any scrap of conversation which might be of value to him, frowning heavily whenever his eyes alighted on a group who talked in whispers and whose glasses were empty.

In a far corner of the room sat two men quite alien to the rest of the motley crowd. They were clean; their garments were immaculate and somewhat foppish; specially was that true of the younger man; and they both wore monocles.

But whereas the younger man seemed to find the atmosphere of the place distasteful, the other evidently revelled in it, exchanging coarse jests with the dancers as they pirouetted by.

"This is the life, eh, Frank?" the older man said suddenly in a harsh voice. "This is better than helping the old woman run a farm, ain't it?" Then he continued, after a furtive look at his companion, in a labored drawl which seemed more in keeping with his clothes and monocle, "My word! It's simply rippin', what?"

"Oh, rather, Major," the other replied. "Quite." And he laughed self-consciously. "Just the same, old chap, I'll be beastly glad to get away from the dorp. I can

hardly wait for the time when we——"

"Ssh, you fool! Not so loud. Don't want to let everybody know." The man who called himself "the Major" looked around uneasily. "Don't mention diamonds here."

"I wasn't going to, dear lad. What a sell for you. I was—er—merely goin' to refer to our hunting trip. But really, dear old lad, I'm beastly fed up with this place. Bad gin, fearful noise, smoke and what not. It isn't necessary, surely, for us to wait here? It isn't the sort of place I'd expect to amuse you, and——"

"It doesn't amuse me, Frank. But it's a safe place to come and transact business. Don't you see? You know my reputation? Well, remember that."

"Ah, I see. You're just pretending to enjoy all this so you can get on the trail of some stolen stones. Is that it?"

"My word! What a brain! Now, look here: you see that woman over there? No, not that one. The half-caste with a red flower in her hair. That one. Now you go and dance with her. Do the pretty with her. She's one of the gang I'm after and, if you handle her cleverly, you may get some useful information out of her. Go on. I'm trusting to you."



HE WATCHED the youth reluctantly make his way through the crowd to the woman he had indicated; watched, with a contemptuous, sneering smile, Frank's elaborate bow and the gallant way in which he offered his arm to the more than willing girl.

Once the two had started to dance, he took out his monocle, emptied his glass with a sigh of relief, and, shouting an order for another, slumped back in his chair, his feet resting on the table top.

Tikkey himself brought the drink and eased himself gruntingly into the chair Frank Brunton had just vacated.

"Vell! How goes it, me poy?" he asked, rubbing his hands together.

"I'm getting damned sick of it, Tikkey," the other growled, holding his drink up to

the light. "What's this, more rot-gut?"

"It's some of my special whisky. Real Irish that is, mister. But you ain't yet answered my question: How goes it?"

"And I'm telling you I'm damned sick of it. I ain't had a real drunk since we started this damned game, and I've been living like a bally monk. The bally— Oh, hell! That's what I mean. I've been talking like a—dude so long I've forgotten how to talk any other—way. An' look at me get up! It's God's truth, Tikkey: I been proping me eye open so long with that blinkin'—*bleedin'*—piece of glass that I can't shut it at nights. I——"

"I ain't asking 'ow you feels, mister," Tikkey interposed sourly. "You ain't got no grounds fer complaint. I've fed yer vell and dressed yer—an' oy! How I've dressed yer! But all that's no never mind. Fer the third time I ask yer: How goes it?"

The other flinched slightly and was unable to meet Tikkey's basilisk stare.

He pointed to Frank Brunton who was talking earnestly to his dancing partner.

"That answers you, don't it?" he asked. "The kid don't like the women you keep here, Tikkey. But he's dancing with her because I told him to. I told him he might be able to get some information from her that 'ud help me. She'll keep him busy 'til I call him off. He'll do anything I tell him, for the present. But just the same he's getting restless; beginning to have doubts I'm the sort of man he thinks I am."

"Vell! Vat of it?" Tikkey rubbed his hands gleefully together. "You ain't, are yer? My vord! You an' the Major are as different as chalk an' cheese; you ain't any more alike, less than, a diamant an' a piece of filth. An' you ain't the diamant. You wouldn't be any good to me if you vas. I like you just as you are. Hell, yes. So the dear poy's getting restless, is he? Vell, vell! An' maybe you are too?"

"That's right, Tikkey. An' I'm wondering what my rake-off'll be. It ought to be a big 'un, considering all the risk I take."

"Risk!" Tikkey almost squealed his contempt. "Vot risk do you take? Not a penny of money do you risk. But me: I risk much. Free food an' drinks, an' clothes, an' lodgings I give you. Vhy! But for me, you'd be sleeping out on the veld. An'

it's raining like 'ell. So much I give you, an' maybe I get nothing back."

"You'll get plenty back," the other grumbled. "I've done everything; it's my plan; I get the kid where we want him; I take the risk. An' you, you dirty little money-grinder, take all the profits."

"I'LL be generous, my poy," Tikkey promised grandly, but the expression on his face, shaded from the other's observation, belied his words: Tikkey, a physical coward, never openly resented insults, but he generally made the insulter pay.

"I'll believe it when I see it," the other commented incredulously, adding. "Just the same, things wouldn't be so nice if the Major happened to show up. He don't like people borrowing his name."

"He ain't likely to come here, so vhy vorry? Besides, if he should come poking his nose vhere it ain't wanted, he'll get a knife in his gizzard afore he can get up to any of his monkey-shines. I've arranged with one of the girls to see to that. It's funny—" he chuckled evilly—"get the right kind of hold over a girl an' she'll do anything you tell her."

"So, you got no cause to vorry about the Major. All you got to do is keep your eye on Frankie. That's all. An' then, by day after tomorrow, we'll know where we're standing, eh? We'll be on our way to being rich. That's a good farm old Joburg Jane's got, but there's better stuff under the soil than she knows of, I'm gambling. An' if there ain't, we're sure to get enough out of her to clear expenses."

"An' over, blast you."

"Sure! Why so fierce? An' over, of course." Tikkey rose awkwardly to his feet. "I got to go an' talk with Jake now. Don't keep that monocle out of your eye too long or you'll be forgetting vot sort of a man you're supposed to be. Ta-ta, Mister Major."

He grinned derisively and insinuating his way through the dancers joined a thickset, red bearded Dutchman who was standing at the bar clamoring for a drink.

The man who, in order to win the admiration and confidence of young Brunton, was impersonating a renowned char-

acter of the diamond fields, glared resentfully after Tikkey.

"Wonder," his thoughts ran, "if it 'ud besafe to double-cross the dirty fat swine? Suppose I went to Joburg Jane an' told her the tale, an' told that damn' young fool, Frank, all about it too.

God! What a fool he is, acting up the way he does. At that, he comes by this dude pose easier than what I do. Comes natural to him, almost. Well, suppose I gave the game away, Joburg Jane ought to be damned grateful; reckon she'd treat me well. Probably I could get a couple of hundred quid from her and she'd be on hand to bleed any time I wanted more capital—which 'ud be often."

He licked his thin lips with wolfish greed and, for a while, let his fancies revel in an anticipation of the good times he could have on money obtained by blackmail.

Conscious, suddenly, that Tikkey's eyes were focussed on him, menacing him, seeming to read his inmost thoughts, he started uneasily. Instantly his dreams of luxurious ease vanished and, instead, his mind was filled with memory of the fate of others who had thought to double-cross Tikkey.

He shivered slightly, fixed his monocle in his eye and with an outward appearance of calm assurance watched the dancers.

The music ceased with a discordant crash and the dancers returned to their tables, talking and laughing noisily as if by noise they wished to prove that they were thoroughly enjoying themselves.

YOUNG Brunton, having ordered refreshment for his partner, bowed elaborately, ignoring her invitation to sit and drink with her, and rejoined his former companion.

There was a puzzled look of indecision in his eyes as he sat down at the table. Presently he laughed.

"What is it, old chap?" The other queried in an affectation of good humor.

"I was laughing at what that girl said—the girl I danced with."

The other looked at him sharply.

"Oh! And what did she say?"

"Why—er—that she was due to have a busy night if a certain party you reminded her of showed up, but she guessed she could stop any harm being done, at that. I asked her how, and she said, 'Why, easy enough; I got orders to knife the Major before he can do anything.' And when I asked her what she meant and that if she planned to knife you she'd make a mistake in confiding in me, she looked at me oddly, then suddenly colored up, as if she were embarrassed, and said I wasn't to take any notice of what she said, that she was only spoofing. Oh, and before that, she said my mother came here this morning! My word! That's too funny! The idea of my mother coming to a place like this! She was looking for the Major and this girl sent her away to look for you on the veld. That puzzled me for a time, but I see it now. She was making a game of me. My word, yes!" He laughed heartily. "But where are you going?" he asked as the other rose to his feet.

"Just to have a few words with Tikkey; I'll be back in a moment."

He was back again, as he promised, in a very little while and they sat, in silence, sipping their drinks and staring with an assumption of boredom about the room.

Two men, two of Tikkey's bullies, went up to the girl who had been Brunton's partner and for a time the three conversed together, the girl shouting shrill refusals to the low-toned orders of the men. But presently she rose and walking between the two men—each had a firm, brutal grip of her wrist—made their way to the door of a room leading off the big one. There Tikkey joined them and the four passed on into the inner room.

As the door closed behind them the pianist commenced another noisy, jangling tune and the dancers took the floor again, singing raucously to augment the tiny tune of the piano; while those who preferred to sit and look on, stamped their feet and banged their glasses on the tables in order to accentuate the beat,

The din was overpowering, but the man who sat with Brunton seemed unconscious of it. To his ears, because he knew what to listen for, came the thud of a lash on



naked flesh and the moans of a woman, muffled by a heavy, closed door. He smiled cruelly, knowing that Tikkey was rewarding, in his own peculiar way, the girl who had talked too much and far from wisely.

EVENTUALLY the door opened again and Tikkey came into the room, escorting the girl with an air of paternal solicitude. On her cheeks were heavy tear marks. He took her back to her table, saw her seated, brought her a drink and then, after a few whispered instructions to which she listened apathetically, went back to the door leading to the inner room and motioned Brunton's companion to join him.

"Mister," he said as that man lounged lazily up to him, "ain't you got no brains at all. What are you hanging about here for? Get under cover, quick; an' take that Brunton kid with you."

"But what for?" The other protested.

"Because, you fool, seeing as that fool girl Belle sent Joburg Jane out to the Major's camp—an' Jane already to raise hell—I wouldn't be a bit surprised if the Major don't pay us a visit."

"What if he does? You say you got it fixed for Belle to take care of him. But maybe she ain't to be trusted now, and——"

"Ach! Just like a fool you talk! She'll obey orders now, the fool! She's had her lesson. And even if she did fall down,



there's plenty of others ready to do a bit of knife sticking in return for a bottle of whisky. But that ain't it. Suppose the Major turns up an' the kid sees him! Vell! The kid

knows right away vich of you two's the Major; it ain't going to take him more than two-three minutes to tell the real Major from the false. Vell! An' that means he ain't a-goin' to play with you any more, ain't it? Who the hell's that?" He broke off suddenly.

As Tikkey spoke the street door opened and a rain soaked man stood swaying on

the threshold blinking owlishly at the lights.

"Only a drunk kopjie walloper," the pseudo-Major said contemptuously. "Better kick him out Tikkey. He don't look as if he had the price of a drink on him."

As if answering the statement he could not have possibly overheard, the newcomer slammed the door behind him and swaggered up to the bar.

"All the drinks on me," he invited hoarsely. "What'll you have?"

Men and women crowded about him, shouting their thirsty desires. But the barmaids made no move to serve the thirsty ones; instead they looked contemptuously at the newcomer: Tikkey had trained them well. They wanted to see the color of the generous stranger's money before they poured out the drinks.

And presently, now that all the bar's habitués were looking at him significantly, the bedrabbled one realized what was expected of him.

"Hell!" He bellowed loudly. "Think I ain't goot for it, eh? That's a good 'un. Me—I'm I.B.D. Owen—maybe you've heard of me, maybe you haven't. And if you haven't, look at me well 'cause you're going to know me a lot afore I'm done with this dorp. Hey! Do you think that'll pay for a round of drinks?"

From a small canvas bag he extracted a stone about the size of a marble and flicked it into the hands of one of the barmaids.

"Do you think that'll pay for a round of drinks, hey?" He asked again, winking at those around her, stowing the canvas bag carefully into the breast pocket of his tattered coat. "And there's a plenty more where that came from. I buy diamonds cheap. Yeh! I buy diamonds. See? That's my nickname: I.B.D. And if you switch the letters round some to I.D.B. you won't offend me none."

TIKKEY came up to the bar and under cover of the loud laughter which greeted Owen's labored wit, examined the stone and whispered instructions to the bar-maid.

When the drinks were served he took his stand next to Owen and grinned ingratiatingly at him.

"That'll pay for two more rounds yet," he shouted. "I'm fair, I am. I give good value always. No stinting about Tikkey."

"No," growled the man who called himself Owen. "You're—generous. That stone's worth two or three hundred quid, easy. So, as you say, it'll pay for two more rounds, all right. However——"

He shrugged his shoulders and, taking a bottle of whisky from the counter, retired with it to a table on the opposite side of the room. Sitting there, he drank with noisy ostentation and glared insultingly at Brunton and that man's evil genius.

They ignored him, and this seemed to anger him for presently he rose and lurched over to their table.

"And who the hell are you pretty darlings?" He hiccupped. "What are you sitting here for like stuffed dummies. Why ain't you drinking my health? You——!" He struck the self styled Major across the cheek with the palm of his hand and laughed harshly as the man cringed.

Young Brunton looked in amazement at his companion, wondering that his ideal should submit so tamely to such an insulting blow.

He rose to his feet.

"If you're wise, my good fellow," he said firmly. "You'll get down on your knees and apologize. The gentleman you have insulted is the Major. Maybe you've heard of him."

"Gor lumme!" Owen exclaimed. "You don't say? The Major—an' me playing with death, I was!" He held out his hand. "Shake Major an' let's be friends. Us I.D.B's. ought to stick together. You do things your way an' I do things my way. But the end's the same, ain't it? We get the stones. I'll gamble we do."

He held out his hand, a grimy, mud-encrusted hand.

Hesitatingly the other responded to the gesture.

"Yep." Continued I.B.D. Owen, retaining his grip on the other's hand. "I've always wanted to meet you, Major. I've heard a lot about you. Ain't you the man what got some niggers to swallow some stones, so's you could smuggle 'em out of the compound, and then cut the niggers open to get the stones out? Sure you are.

Smart trick that—an' dead niggers tell no tales. An'—ain't you the man——"

He related with great gusto, incident after brutal incident; stories of the I.D.B. fraternity, stories of callous cruelty, of honorless men, of white-livered cowards. And the leading rôle of all these stories he attributed to the man whose hand he held in a firm relentless pressure.

The narrative was finally halted by a scream of pain and helpless range.

"Let go of my hand, you great oaf!" the "Major" wailed. "You're breaking my fingers; you're——"

"Blimey!" I.B.D. Owen exclaimed reproachfully as he released his hold and,



with wondering eyes, watched the other massage his numbed hand. "Blimey! I was only just pressing a little." "Pressing, you dam'n' fool! You——"

Then, catching Tikkey's warning eye the speaker rose hastily.

"Come along, Brunton old chap," he drawled slowly. "We'll toddle along an' leave this chappie to stew in his juice. He's filthy!"

He led the way out of the place followed closely by the youngster, on whose face was a look of relief that his hero was at last acting up to true form. At the same time Brunton was puzzled; his loyalty had been shaken by the things he had just heard and seen. There were a number of things he meant to ask the Major, and, if that man failed to answer them to his satisfaction, he intended to go no further with the scheme they were planning.

I.B.D. OWEN, laughing noisily, returned to his table and there was joined by Tikkey. "What's the idea?" he growled. "That fool ain't the Major. An' you know it as well as I do."

Tikkey looked keenly at him.

"Then you know the Major—nor?"

"Course I know the bloody hound! He's crossed my path too many times. But he's too *slim* for me to lay hands on. Up to now, that is. Up to now!"

"You don't seem to be friendly toward the Major, Mister."

"I ain't, and neither, I take it, are you. So, come on now, tell me the lay of the game. What's that fool playing the Major for? And who's the kid he's got in tow?"

Tikkey rubbed his hands briskly together.

"Let's have a drink," he said. "Talking's dry work."

He poured out two drinks. A big one for his companion; barely a swallow for himself.

"Maybe, mister," he resumed presently, "maybe you've got some diamonds to sell."

I.B.D. Owen's hand instinctively clutched at his breast pocket.

"Maybe. Maybe not," he growled.

"You better let me keep 'em for you," Tikkey said persuasively. "It ain't safe to carry 'em about like you do. Suppose a detective should take it in his head to search you? Why, you'd be booked for a long stay at the Breakwater. Better give 'em to me. I'll take care of 'em for you. Have another drink!"

They emptied their glasses once again.

"Look here," said I.B.D. Owen after a moment's heavy thought, "the stones I got in here—" he produced his canvas bag and tossed it on the table—"ain't worth a damn. They're mostly borts. I just carry them around so's I can pay my way. Take 'em if you want 'em. They're no never mind to me."

He grinned as he watched Tikkey empty the contents of the bag on to the table. He laughed softly as Tikkey, after one swift, appraising glance, picked them up and returned them to the bag which he pocketed.

"It's as you say, Mister," Tikkey sniggered. "They ain't worth much. Them as ain't splints are off-colored an' no size."

His tone was casual, yet inwardly he was elated for amongst the "stones" was one of value.

"Never mind them." Owen's voice matched the casualness of Tikkey's. "I reckon you can feed and booze me for a time in return. Later we'll talk about bigger stones. I've got a big parcel safely cached out on the veld. But you ain't answered my question about this fool who's aping

the Major. What's the game? Let me in on it. Maybe I can help you."

Tikkey looked at him dubiously, thumbing his thick, protruding, lower lip.

"You're a fool if you don't take me in with you," the other continued. "But you don't have to tell me anything. I can guess a lot. Come to think of it, that youngster favors Joburg Jane. He's the dead spittin' image of her; damn me if he ain't. You remember Jane, don't you? Ah, yes! I sees you do. And Jane's goin' straight now and she's well off. Might be possible to do a little blackmailing there, eh?"

"It's you vot's guessing," Tikkey replied ponderously. "I ain't saying a 'yes' or 'no.'"

"It's 'yes' all right," the other said confidently. "But that dolled up fool—Blake's his real name, ain't it? He's the man who split on 'Red' Rankin an' got him put away. Squealed on his pal, he did, and cleared off with all the takings. And he'll do the same with you, Tikkey. I don't want anything out of this play you're making, but I'd like to get even with the chap who split on my pal Red Rankin."

Tikkey thoughtfully pulled his bottom lip.

"BLAKE'S getting too big for his boots, Mister, an' his mouth's too noisy. He'll be getting me into trouble if I ain't careful. Maybe you can help me, maybe not. We'll see. The Reef gang are running a parcel of diamonds day after tomorrow. Blake an' the kid's goin' to hold 'em up. Robbing the robbers, see. That's all. Vell! Supposin' you take a hand an' see as Blake don't run off with the parcel. 'Course, I shall have men watchin' him too. I'll be on hand meself. But supposing you should find a vay of putting a bullet through his brain, vhy, I'd considered you'd elected yourself a member of the club I'm running."

He laughed harshly.

The other frowned.

"I'll take you up on that," he said slowly, "only I got to have something more to go on. Where's this hold-up goin' to take place?"

"That, Mister," Tikkey grunted as he rose to his feet, "is something for you to

find out. It'll be good exercise for your wits, not? S'long!"

He waved his pudgy hands and made his way across the room to where a group of men and women argued noisily.

The other sat for a while, toying with his drink, then rose, lurched his way to the door and passed out into the night.

The rain had ceased; the sky glowed with the light of a million stars; the air was clean, invigorating.

The man inhaled deeply, luxuriously.



Then he straightened himself and, walking fast, made a bee-line for his camp on the veld; the camp of the Major.

"I must have a talk with Mrs. Brunton," he muttered as he walked.

"Must calm her fears. By

Jove, yes! And tomorrow I'll have Jim scout about with his ears open. It's remarkable what the old lad can pick up in the way of inside information. Yes, indeed. An', come to think of it, I'll do a bit of scouting myself. 'Pon my soul, yes."

FROM the south of the town crawled a wagon, loaded with kaffir trade truck, drawn by sixteen oxen. An undersized, pockmarked native, the "leader," walked ahead of the span. He was naked, save for a scanty loin-cloth. In his left hand he held the leading reins, in his right, over his shoulders, a bunch of knobkerries. He suggested, above all things, a hunter; his roving eyes were on the lookout for game to kill.

On the driver's seat sat an uncouth Dutchman who occasionally flourished his enormous whip and shouted harsh, guttural expletives at the slow plodding oxen. But for the most part he sat dourly silent, scanning the veld ahead of him.

The morning dew was still on the grass, a white mist shrouded the far distant hills, the sun was not yet above the horizon, but rising fast. Everything was very calm, peaceful, the veld seemed deserted, void of all life.

Occasionally small game and birds were flushed by the native. He always gave chase to them, throwing his knobkerries at them, crowing with delight whenever his

aim proved true. Then, recovering his sticks, he would return soberly to the place at the head of the oxen. Strangely he never retrieved the game he knocked down. Apparently he killed for the sheer love of killing.

THE sun rose, dispelling the mist. For a little while the grasses steamed then snapped dryly as the wagon passed on.

An hour passed, two.

The Diamondtown was no longer in sight, hidden by the billows of the seemingly flat veld.

Ahead, to the right, to the left, was only a yellow-red expanse of dreariness; a dreariness accentuated by the dump and ruined hovels of some long since deserted mine which presently, as the wagon tipped a slight rise, appeared close at hand.

"Pas op!" Almost coinciding with the Dutchman's "Take care" warning, the native apparently flushed a small buck, for with excited shouts he threw his knobkerries into a clump of grass.

The last one had barely left his hand when two men, Blake and young Brunton, both elaborately dressed, rose from their hiding place backing up their commands to halt with the threat of leveled revolvers.

The native, with the fatalistic resignation of his race, squatted silently on his haunches whilst the Dutchman stared at the two in resentful silence.

"Come on now, Van Hess," Blake said irritably. "You know what we're after. Hand over."

The Dutchman spat.

"Almighty!" he said. "If you know what you want, come and get it. You are so *slim*: Maybe it is my trade goods you want."

Blake laughed.

"Yes. They're trade goods, all right. But not the kind you sell to niggers, but the kind you buy from them. But to hell with all this chatter. I know you, and you know me. I know you're running a parcel of diamonds out of the country, and I want them. Do you give 'em to me, or do I have to look for 'em?"

The Dutchman shrugged his shoulders. "I am in no hurry," he said. "It is no

use telling you I have no *gonivas* (stolen stones); you would not believe me. So-a! Outspan, Hans."

The native jumped to his feet.

"Tie up that nigger, Brunton." Blake ordered. "And you Van Hess, you sit still."

"Almighty! There is no need for you to get mad, man. I was only going to outspan. I am in no hurry and can as well wait here while you look for what you want as anywhere else."

Blake scowled angrily.

"Tie the nigger to the wheel, Brunton," he said harshly, "and don't be so—squeamish. Pull the ropes till they cut into the rascal's flesh."

Brunton, white faced, shaking with nervousness and distaste of his task, made a feeble protest, which Blake silenced with a curse.

"Now you, Van Hess," Blake continued, "get down. And mind I'm watching you. Stand with your face to the hind wheel, your hands stretched out. That's it. Now lash him up, too, Brunton."

"Are we going to search the wagon now, Major?" Brunton asked breathlessly.

"No, you fool!" Blake answered roughly. "It'd take the best part of a day to go through that lot of stuff. Besides, the 'parcel' we're after may not be in the wagon at all. The nigger may have swallowed some, or Van Hess. Or maybe they've hid 'em in the oxen somehow. There's ways of hiding stones you'd never dream of. No. We don't waste time searching."

"Then we give this lot up?" Brunton said hopefully.

"Like hell we do! We're going to make Van Hess, or the nigger, tell us where they've hidden 'em. On second thoughts I don't reckon it's any good questioning the nigger; he ain't likely to know anything. So we'll confine our attentions to Van Hess—unless you want to give the nigger a few for love."

AS BRUNTON stared at him in puzzled wonder he laughed and, picking up Van Hess' driving whip, lashed the Dutchman across the shoulders, cutting through his thick flannel shirt, drawing blood.

Van Hess yelled at the pain of the lash, Brunton looked as if he were going to be sick.

A second and a third blow followed the first.

"You can't do this sort of thing, Major,"

Brunton protested disgustedly. "It isn't done. It's——"

"Shut up! Van Hess! You damned Dutchman! Where've you hidden the stones?"



He made the whip whistle about the Dutchman's head.

"Almighty!" Van Hess was almost sobbing. "Some day you shall answer to me for this."

"Where's the parcel?" Again the lash cut into Van Hess' back.

"It—you *verdoemte gonoph*—is in the water keg."

Blake grinned.

"Get it!" he said, turning to Brunton.

Quickly Brunton obeyed and a few minutes later, having knocked in the top of a water keg he had found in the wagon, he handed to Blake a chamois leather bag bulging with "stones."

Blake emptied them onto the palm of his hand, examined them swiftly, then returned them to the bag—all but one, the largest, which he cleverly palmed—and tossed the bag to Brunton.

"You keep it, kid," he said. "And now let's get our horses."

"But you're not going to leave these two tied up like this, surely?"

"Why not? Someone's sure to be along soon and set 'em free. Now, come on."

He led the way at a run toward the deserted mine.

TEN minutes later they rounded the dump where two horses were tethered.

"You go and get the packs while I saddle up," Blake ordered.

Obediently Brunton went over to one of the tumbled down shacks and opening the door entered.

The door forcefully closed behind him and, blinking with astonishment, he found

himself confronted by two men in uniform while Tikkey Isaacs, leering triumphantly, hovered in the background.

Before he could make any move to escape or to shout a warning Brunton was bound, gagged, and searched.

With a squeal of delight Tikkey pounced on the bag of stones.

"This is mine, officers," he cried. "This is what them other thieves stole from me; an' the Major an' this youngster stole it from the thieves, an' now it comes back to me. Vell, vell. That's as it should be."

Brunton glared at Tikkey, but could say nothing. In a way, he was not at all distressed by the predicament in which he found himself. This, he thought, was the sort of problem which would show the Major up in his real colors. With much inward contentment, he waited for his idol to appear and neatly turn the tables on his captors. That was just the sort of thing which the Major was famed for.

He had not long to wait.

Footsteps sounded outside and Blake's voice shouting, "Hurry up, Brunton. Have you gone to sleep in there?"

Then the door opened and Blake entered.

"What's the meaning of this?" He gasped.

"Simply," replied one of the uniformed men, "simply that this *yonker* is an I.D.B. We've caught him with the goods."

Blake nodded.

"'Course I'm not surprised," he said. "I warned you about him, didn't I, Tikkey? The silly young fool! Well, well! He'll get a long stretch at the Breakwater unless his mother comes across with a little palm oil; eh, officers? But here—what's the idea?" This last exclamation was one of indignation as the two men commenced to search him thoroughly.

"It's alright, Mister." Tikkey said soothingly. "You've been with this youngster and he might have slipped a stone in your pocket."

"Gee—he has!" One of the uniformed men handed Tikkey the stone Blake had held out from the bag. "The cunning devil!"

Blake swore and looked nervously at Tikkey.

"Oh, that's all right, my boy." Tikkey

said soothingly. "You're innocent. I know that. You ain't no I.D.B. But it's a good job I had you searched, ain't it?" He laughed loudly. "Now you," he continued, addressing the two uniformed men, "you take young Brunton into the back room an' put the fear of God into him whilst me an' the Major here have a little business talk."

As he spoke he emptied the stones from the bag onto a black velvet cloth he took from his pocket and, spreading it out carefully on the ground sat down with a grunt of satisfaction.

"Yah!" he exclaimed. "Now we can talk, Mister. And, first of all, let me say I don't like the way you tried to hold a stone out on me."

"An' let me tell you, Tikkey, I don't like the way you're talking."

The two men glared at each other and Blake's hand rested near the butt of his revolver.

SHORTLY after the departure of Blake and Brunton from the wagon the Major, smiling, debonair, rode up on his black stallion.

With exclamations of concern he dismounted and cut loose the two men—the Dutchman and Hans.

"I am sorry I am late," he said to Van Hess. "I knew those chappies were after you and I meant to forestall them. But—er—I was unavoidably detained. I suppose they got what they were after?"

"Ja!" Van Hess replied stolidly as he climbed into the wagon. "But it is all no matter. Today, for them; tomorrow for me. Let us trek, Hans."

"Yah, Baas!" the native replied. "But first I get my knobkerries."

"Move quickly then, you black rascal." And, turning to the Major, Van Hess continued: "I'm too soft with my niggers. I let them do as they like. So much time I waste because Hans there—" he pointed to the native who was searching in the long grass for his knobkerries—"is always playing the hunter—throwing his sticks at anything that lives. The *schelm!* *Pas op, Hans!*"

"Ready, Baas. Only one more stick—the big one to find. Ah! Here it is. Now we can trek, Baas."

With his bundle of knobkerries over his shoulder he placed himself at the head of the span of oxen.

The Dutchman's big whip cracked, and the interrupted trek was resumed.

The Major stood motionless and watched the wagon until it passed out of sight, hidden by a dip in the veld.

Then he whistled softly and Jim, the Hottentot appeared, grinning widely, as suddenly as if materialized from thin air.

"It was very easy, Baas. And all was just as you said."

The Major nodded absently.

"What now, Baas?" Jim continued.

"Go back to my camp, Jim, and tell the white woman I will be with her soon—bringing her son with me."

"Yah, Baas. And the stones?"

"Keep them until I ask for them. Now go."

"Be careful, Baas," Jim warned, and started off across the veld at a steady, space destroying jog-trot.



The Major waited until Jim was a good mile distant then he mounted and rode slowly up to the mine.

There he dismounted and crept noiselessly up to the shack from which sounded the voices of men raised in heated altercation.

"This is better luck than I had any right to expect," the Major muttered. "If I wait, they'll probably do my work for me."

He listened intently.

"I tell you, Tikkey," Blake was saying hoarsely, "that I've played straight with you. Them are the stones I got from Van Hess. If they're false 'uns, then let me get after Van Hess an' I'll make him pay for putting a trick like that over on me."

"Is it likely," Tikkey's voice sneeringly answered, "is it likely I'm goin' to let you go until you've told me where you've hidden the real parcel? Is it likely now, you double-crossing——!"

"And I tell you I'm playing straight, Tikkey! Use sense. That stone I held out now—you say that's false, too. Well, don't

that show you? Look here——" a note of suspicion now showed in his voice—"how do I know you ain't trying to double-cross me. I don't believe it. I ain't examined 'em closely—didn't have a chance before an' you've kept your paws on 'em since. They looked good enough to me."

"Sure! They look alright. But see here."

AND the Major, peering through a crack in the door saw Tikkey smash a stone into powder with a blow of the butt of his revolver.

"And you can do that to all of them," Tikkey remarked. "Now then: hand over the real 'uns an' let's talk business."

"An' I tell you you've got the parcel I got from Van Hess. An' you've switched 'em you double-crossing Jew. You——!"

"Pete! Snyder!" Tikkey's call was one of fear.

A shot sounded, the fall of a heavy body, another shot—then two in quick succession.

Revolver in hand, the Major burst into the shack, almost pitching headlong over the prostrate, lifeless body of Blake.

Recovering himself, he saw two men in uniform, smoking revolvers in their hands, bending over Tikkey.

They straightened themselves at the Major's terse command.

"Well, well, my dear lads," he continued. "So you kept your uniforms when you were discharged from the force, eh? And now what?"

They looked sheepishly at each other. Merely Tikkey's watchdogs, they at least had the good sense not to endeavor to match their wits against the Major's.

"Blake shot Tikkey, and Tikkey shot Blake—they killed each other," one muttered.

"Very convenient, very," the Major murmured. "And so the world is rid of two most horrid villains. Well—that is only just. And now, if you're wise, you two gentlemen will make yourselves very scarce. Yes, I should leave the district entirely if I were you. You might find it hard to convince the real police, who are on their way here, that you did not murder these two men. You see, the fact that you are wearing a uniform you're not entitled

to— What I mean is, the police chappies are very touchy about things like that."

"We're going, Major," one of the men said. "Come on, Snyder." And they hurriedly left the place, mounted their horses which were hidden in another shack and spurred swiftly over the veld.

The Major stooped over Tikkey, saw that he still gripped his revolver. Aiming it through the open doorway he pressed the trigger twice.

"That'll do to explain why Blake's got three bullets in him. And if I leave the stones where they are, that'll make the police think they fought over the division of the spoils. And they did. Most horribly. Of course what happened, I suppose, was this. Tikkey called for his two bullies, and Blake gets in his first shot which fells Tikkey. Then Tikkey, in a sort of dying muscular contraction fires a shot which, by chance wounds Blake and Tikkey's two men finish him off.

"Well, all that's not worth thinking of. Just the same I'm glad it happened that way. I rather funk the idea of killing them myself. And I would have had to in order to free Mrs. Brunton of the fear of blackmail.

"Oh, well! Never would killing have been more justified. And now for young Brunton. The silly young ass!"

THE sun was nearing its setting. Young Brunton and Jim, the Hottentot, were saddling the horses on which the Bruntons were presently going to ride back to their homestead.

The Major and Mrs. Brunton were standing by the tent.

"I can never thank you enough, Major," she was saying. "And Frank will thank you some day."

"You think," the Major drawled, "that he's cured of wanting to be a famous I.D.B.?"

She nodded confidently.

"He was ready to back out, I think, when Blake flogged Van Hess. By the time Tikkey framed that arrest on him he was sick of it all. But it was the way you talked to him afterward——"

"After all," the Major demurred, "I did nothing."

She laughed softly.

"I know better. But there, I can't talk of that now. Look! They're ready. Good-by, Major, and—God bless you!"

He bowed.

A few minutes later they had mounted and had ridden off.

He sat down moodily in a deck chair, cursing himself, calling himself a quixotic fool.



Tomorrow the boat sailed from Cape Town and he would not be on it. He would have to spend yet another Christmas on the veld alone!

He cursed again.

Jim, good old Jim, was preparing the evening meal.

Perhaps it was just as well he was not going home. Jim could not have stood the cold, damp English houses.

And yet—Christmas! Carol singers, holly, youngsters laughing, plum pudding! "Oh, Major!"

He looked up with a start. Mrs. Brunton had returned.

He rose and waited for her to continue.

"I'd forgotten," she said breathlessly, "I'm giving a big party at Christmas. All the young people for miles round will be there. We'll have all the old dances on. You'll come, won't you?"

"You'll have plum pudding?" he asked anxiously, "with brandy sauce?"

"Of course—yes," she laughed. "And snapdragon and everything."

He took a deep breath.

"Then I'll come. Thanks most awfully."

She waved her hand, and rode off again. The Major returned to his chair, singing softly.

Presently he called, "O'he', Jim!"

The Hottentot came running to him.

"You wanted the stones, Baas?"

"Yes, Jim."

"They are in the wagon, Baas. I will get them."

"No—never mind, Jim. They are good stones, Jim?"

"Yah, Baas. Twenty of them, all of good color and size. It was clever of the Baas to know they were hidden in the hollowed head of one of the knobkerries. *Wo-we!* And the right one was not hard

to find. The stones rattled in it. I found it whilst the man Blake and that other tied up the Dutchman and his 'boy.' The top screwed off, Baas. I took out the 'stones' and put in pebbles in their place. *Wo-we!* There will be much trouble for the Dutchman by an' by."

They both laughed at the thought.

THEN said the Major, in a slow affected drawl, speaking his thoughts aloud, addressing them to Jim although that man understood but a scattered word in a hundred:

"It's quite a bally problem, really it is. Undoubtedly the stones are stolen ones. Van Hess' crowd bought them from natives who stole them from their Baas' claims; and I—er—pinched them from Van Hess—just as Blake, had he had any brains, would have pinched them. And it

doesn't really alter the fact that no one can possibly know the legal owners of these stones. Actually, I doubt if the legal owners know they've lost any stones from their claims. If I keep them, I'm a bally thief. And there you are."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"There seems only one thing to do and that—hand them over to the police and claim a reward. Yes. I think I might safely do that—my word yes. And quite ethical, too. But I'll bargain for the reward first an' insist on it being a healthy one. My word, yes. An' with the proceeds we'll take a trip to Jo'burg an' do a little Christmas shopping. And what do you say to that, Jim, you grinning heathen?"

"Me!" exclaimed Jim with a start. "If I don't see you, s'long! Golly damme yes."

"An' that's that," said the Major with a chuckle.

In the next issue

*A complete novel of a cattle country
mystery and a wandering cowpunch
who headed straight into trouble*

SHOOT!

by

Stephen Chalmers

You'll remember Chalmers as the man who wrote "Come-One-Come-All McCluskey," "Don Quickshot of the Rio Grande," etc.





MYSTERY RANGE

A Cowhand Plays a Lone Hand in Battle's Basin

By CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER

Author of "West!", etc.

PART II

CHAPTER VIII

ELLA COMES; HER ASSAILANT GOES

THE rider's horse had moved toward him as if curious over what had happened. For a short time Brazo stood at the edge of the timber, peering about him into the luminous haze in an effort to discover if the rider had been alone. He saw no other rider; heard no sound. Then he placed his rifle on the log, drew his six-shooter and moved forward. He went first to the man, turned him over and looked at him. He was Wolf Wilson, an outlaw who was notorious in the section. He was tall, smooth of face, dark. There was a long white scar on his left cheek which had evidently been made with a knife. Brazo's bullet had gone through his chest above the heart. He was still breathing, but he would probably die.

Brazo drew a gun from a holster at the man's right side and slipped it into a pocket. Thereafter he did not look again at the man, but went to the girl and knelt beside her.

She was lying flat on her back, her arms outstretched, her body relaxed. The light was not good and so Brazo could not determine if the man's blow had marked

her. But there was light enough for him to see that she was arrayed in a white dress of some soft, flimsy material, which had been torn in her struggle. Her hair was in wild disorder.

These details Brazo observed while he was lifting her in his arms. She was unconscious and obviously injured, and Brazo wanted to get her to the cabin as quickly as he could.

He did not look again at her assailant as he carried her across the shallow waters of the stream and walked with her toward the cabin. She was passive in his arms, every muscle was limp and inert, her face white. She was not heavy, and Brazo carried her as he might have carried a child.

When he reached the cabin he carried her into the addition and placed her upon the new bed that he had brought from Cooney. How he knew that she was the girl who had signed the name "Ella" to the letters to Henley he could never understand, but it seemed to him that it must be she for he had waited so long for her.

After placing her on the bed he went into the main cabin and got the lamp, carrying it into the addition and placing it upon a small dresser.

HE DID not linger long after he observed that the girl's breathing was slow and regular. He went out into the kitchen, brought in a wash basin filled with fresh water, and a towel. He soaked the towel, squeezed it until it was merely damp and laid it upon her forehead. To do this he had to brush her hair back. It was wavy and abundant and in color a glistening, golden brown. On the left side of her head, just above the ear, was a lump. That was where the pursuer's fist had landed.

The girl did not respond to the damp cloth, so Brazo got a tablespoon from the kitchen, dipped it into the fresh water, lifted her head and forced a few drops between her lips. There was no response and for a time Brazo sat on the edge of the bed, impotently watching her. There was no doctor in the country, so far as he knew, and even if there should be one he could not leave the girl to go in search. The rider who had pursued her might not have been alone. Also, she did not appear to have been greatly injured, although of course her assailant had struck hard.

She was breathing with some difficulty, now, and Brazo wondered what a doctor would do. He loosened her clothing, and then for a long time stood beside the bed, watching her.

She was more beautiful than his wildest dreams had made her. Perhaps the dignity of sleep may have accentuated her serenity, but Brazo felt certain that she would lose none of her placid calmness with animation. There was a revelation of her character in the words she had written to Henley: "I do not tan easily." Confidence. Something in the set of her lips expressed it. There was a suggestion of self-reliance in the shape of her chin and in the smooth, unwrinkled forehead.

Brazo stooped and gently touched a firm satiny cheek. He could not resist that impulse.

Then he went out of the room and stood for some time in the main cabin, his arms folded, one hand caressing his chin. The lamp from the addition threw its yellow rays across the floor and upon the north wall of the room in which Brazo stood, and some of the reflected light disclosed objects near him.

The cabin did not seem familiar to him. Something had gone out of it; something had come into it. A new atmosphere enveloped him. The yellow light from the lamp in the other room seemed to fill the entire cabin with a soft radiance. The bareness which had offended him seemed to have yielded with magic suddenness to a satisfactory fullness. There was grace in the lines of the crude table. The benches

MYSTERY RANGE

CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER

Something about the story and an account of the previous chapters

CHARLES Alden Seltzer's name stands high among writers of Western stories—exciting, stirring, human, full of the thrill of hair trigger action. "Mystery Range" lacks no element for an out-and-out, double-action mystery story of gold, cattle, a man on the dodge, a secret valley, an assumed personality and the exciting adventure bound to follow in the wake of all these.

The hero of this story is a cowpuncher, Brazo, wandering loose through Arizona. He gets involved in the killing of an army paymaster and the attempted robbery of the pay bag. He shoots up the two robbers, but one of them falsely accuses him to the storekeeper of being the robber and killer, the robbers supposedly being innocent wayfarers. Brazo feels that his only safety is in flight and makes for the hills. In an isolated basin he discovers a secret valley reached through a tunnel in a cliff. The pursuers pass by, and Brazo discovers Jim Henley sick in a cabin there. Brazo stays with Jim all winter in Battle's Basin, Jim being the discoverer of a bonanza gold pocket in the hidden valley, which he had worked out, and also a hermit because of unjust suspicion of murder years before, like Brazo. Jim writes to his sister Ella, then dies. Brazo waits for the sister to come in response to Jim's letter, meaning to turn over Jim's fortune to her, though Jim has left half of it to Brazo. On his few brief visits to town for supplies Brazo, with a new-grown beard, impersonates the little-known dead hermit.

After some months the sister, Ella, arrives in the basin, chased by a horseman, and Brazo shoots the man just as he overtakes the girl.

were rough, but they were symmetrical and substantial. The shelves, teeming with their burden of canned goods, canvas sacks, canisters and dishes, suggested opulence. Even the cast-iron stove contributed something to the homey atmosphere.

But although all these things were good, there was something else. Brazo filled and lighted his pipe and sat on the edge of his bunk smoking while he tried to define it.

"Sure," he said firmly, aloud, "it's her!"

HE WAS strangely elated. He felt that all the romance for which he had hungered during the empty years through which he had roamed since the final breaking up of his father's home had come to him suddenly, to submerge him with happiness. He gravely regarded the pipe in his hand and observed that it was shaking.

He got up, knocked the ashes into the stove and stood in the open doorway, gazing out into the starlit basin.

He was excited, eager; for once in his life his capable lungs seemed unable to exhale quickly enough the air that he drew into them.

"Lordy!" he ejaculated. "I'd never have thought that a woman could do that to a man!"

He turned back into the cabin.

He had bought some cloth from the store at Cooney; some white muslin which some day he had meant to use as curtains for the windows. He had put off the task of hanging them because he had expected to be apprised of Ella's coming. He had also bought stove polish, a table cloth and a roll of grass matting.

For the next hour, working in the subdued light, he did his best to change the appearance of the cabin, to give it a final touch of completeness. And when he had

finished he stood near the table, now covered with the first cloth that had ever been on it, and smiled with satisfaction.

"That ought



to make her feel at home," he decided.

He silently entered the bedroom addition and critically regarded the girl. She was breathing regularly, without effort, and some color was stealing into her cheeks. When he observed a slight fluttering of her eyelashes a queer panic seized him, and he escaped from the cabin, suddenly realizing that he had forgotten the girl's assailant.

He went into the timber, found his rifle and walked across the level to where the tragedy had been enacted. While he had been in the cabin the moon had come up from behind the mountains, and he was amazed to discover that both man and horse had vanished. He could see no sign of horse or rider in the basin or upon the moonlit ridges that surrounded it.

One of two things had happened, of course. The man had friends who had come and taken him away, or he had not been badly wounded and had helped himself off.

How the man had escaped made little difference to Brazo. He was curious about the girl's experiences before she had suddenly appeared in the basin, but no doubt, if she cared to, she would tell him what had happened whenever the impulse seized her.

He wasn't worried about her assailant; his concern was entirely for the girl. She had been unconscious for a long time, and if she didn't revive presently he would take her to Cooney. Once in town he would send for a doctor. He would certainly not leave her in the cabin to be further abused in his absence.

BEFORE he returned to the cabin he stood for a long time at the edge of the timber intently examining the ridges and the basin. When he entered the cabin he closed the door and barred it.

Leaving the doorway, he crossed the cabin and went to the door leading into the addition. He halted on the threshold and stood rigid, though almost yielding to an impulse to take a backward step.

The girl had recovered consciousness. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, her hair hanging in heavy waves, her eyes wide with a strange mixture of apprehension and bewilderment.

Brazo's embarrassment was as great as her own; greater, in truth. For while Brazo could not summon his voice in this crisis, hers came cold and sharp, seeming to add frigidness to the reproach and accusation of her eyes:

"Will you be good enough to tell me who you are and how I got here?" she demanded.

CHAPTER IX

HIS VISITOR HAS A NAME

"I'M BOB ADAMS," answered Brazo, "and I carried you here."

Brazo's voice was very gentle. And yet, having recovered from his amazement over seeing her sitting on the edge of the bed when he expected to find her still unconscious, and having also become convinced that her injury was not as serious as he had thought, there had come into his voice a lightness which the girl seemed to interpret as impertinence. She could not know that relief was responsible for it.

"Oh," she said. "So you are Bob Adams! And you carried me here! From where, may I ask?"

"From where you were when I found you," replied Brazo. "That was where you fell when a man hit you behind the ear."

The girl's eyes grew larger. There was still bewilderment in them. "When a man hit me?" she questioned. And then she seemed to remember, for she shuddered and exclaimed, "Yes, yes! I had escaped from them! One of them followed me! A man named Wolf Wilson! The brute! Oh, I could have killed him!"

"I tried to, ma'am. I shot him just above the heart with a rifle. I sure thought it would finish him. But I just came from there and he's gone. He's either pretty tough or some of his friends dragged him away."

"Then you are not one of them?" she asked, appearing to make a second inspection.

"I never heard of a man named Wolf Wilson, ma'am," he lied. "No, I reckon I'm not one of them."

"Then who are you?"

"Bob Adams. Better known as Brazo."

"I mean what are you doing here?"

"I live here."

"And where is 'here'?"

"Why, in Battle's Basin, ma'am. Right here in this cabin."

She sat silent for an instant, appearing to consider his words. Then some of the new color left her cheeks.

"Did you ever hear of a man named James Henley?" she asked.

Many times Brazo had mentally enacted this scene. He had decided that he would break the news of her brother's death as gently as possible. But now, with the girl looking at him in a manner that seemed to command instant and direct answers, he realized that he could not hope to equivocate.

"Yes."

"I was trying to reach his place," she said. "Does he live in Battle's Basin?"

"He did live here, ma'am."

"Here. Do you mean in this basin or in this house?"

"In this house."

"Why then——" She paused, caught her breath seemed to brace herself. "Do you mean that he has left here?" she added steadily.



"Jim Henley is dead, ma'am," he returned gently.

"He died some time ago."

THE girl's body went limp; she bowed her head and sat there dejectedly gazing at the floor. Brazo was relieved to perceive that she was not crying. Her pallor indicated, however, that the news had shaken her. She must have loved her brother, after all. Brazo was accusing himself of taking snap judgment against her. Once he had condemned her for not hastening to Henley.

After a while the girl appeared to have accepted the blow that had been dealt her. She sat erect again and looked at Brazo, and the latter felt that he was again being subjected to a searching inspection. Her eyes, which were hazel-gray and glowing with a strange mixture of won-

der, inquiry and doubt, grew soft with embarrassment as he watched them.

"Will you please tell me what you know about my brother?" she asked.

"Why sure, ma'am. But there ain't a great deal to tell. I came here about a year ago. There had been some trouble just over the border in Arizona. A United States Army paymaster had been killed, and I was accused."

"Were you guilty?" interrupted the girl.

"No. But I had to pull my freight. I got away. Several days later I reached this cabin. I came at night, and found Jim Henley sick. I stayed here with him until he died. He just wasted away. I reckon that's about all."

"Why did you stay?"

"I had to, ma'am. There was men out hunting me. Then, after Jim died, I stayed on because I had to. There was no way of finding you, and Jim expected you." He got up, went into the main cabin and returned, silently handing the girl Jim Henley's writing. He went out again, opened the outside door and stood for a time scanning the moonlit country. When he felt that the girl must have finished reading he closed the door again, barred it and appeared in the doorway of her room.

She was sitting where he had left her. The letter was crumpled in her lap and she was crying. Brazo turned away.

A few minutes later she called and Brazo again stepped into the room.

She looked up at him.

"You were good to Jim," she said. "I want you to know that I appreciate what you did for him. Jim died before he had time to tell you his real name, didn't he?"

Brazo nodded.

"His real name was James Wainright. I am Ella Wainright. Oh, I wish he had let me know that he was sick."

The tears came again and Brazo was dismayed.

"Now, ma'am, there ain't nothing to cry about. Jim was well taken care of. And you hadn't ought to worry yourself, after what has happened tonight. You just stretch out there and have a good sleep. Tomorrow you'll feel a whole lot better."

The girl straightened; into her eyes came a gleam of apprehension.

"You——" she began tremulously, "you are not going a—away?"

"Not far, ma'am. I've got a bunk over against the wall, there." He pointed. "You don't need to be afraid. There ain't any chance of Wolf Wilson and his friends bothering you. And if you're scared of me, why I reckon you can bolt your door. I built it that way, purposely."

"You expected me to come?" she asked, astonished.

"Why sure."

"You waited for me—is that it? Why, there was nothing to stop you from taking all of Jim's gold! I would not have known anything about it!" She gave him a quick, appraising glance.

"I reckon that's right, ma'am."

"Are you certain the gold is where Jim says it is?"

"It's here, ma'am."

"Aren't you interested?" This time she looked longer at him.

"Why, I don't know. I reckon I am interested. But I wasn't interested enough to lug it off until the real owner came."

"You built this room—this addition—yourself?" she asked.

Brazo nodded.

"After Jim died?"

"Yes."

"For me?"

Brazo nodded.

"Why?"

BRAZO flushed, but gazed straight at her. "I thought maybe you would want to stay here a while," he answered.

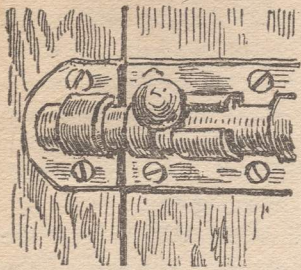
If she had now asked him why he had expected her to stay in the cabin Brazo could not have given her any reason except that he had wanted her to stay. And that reason, he knew, would not have been sufficient.

Ella did not answer, nor did she ask the question. But Brazo observed a tint of red slowly rise from her throat to spread and deepen until her cheeks were crimson.

She drew the bed quilt closer about her.

"I thank you for your thoughtfulness," she said coldly. "Will you please close the door when you go out?"

Brazo bowed. His face was as red as hers. He closed the door. He had taken only two or three steps into the main cabin when he heard the bolt on the bedroom door snap with a sound that seemed almost eloquent with defiance.



CHAPTER X

A MAN WITH NO CURIOSITY

BRAZO went outside the cabin and stood in the cool night air. In the presence of the girl he had been embarrassed; now he was filled with an emotion that bordered upon elation. Yet there was a certain gravity in him.

"She ain't to be trifled with!" he told himself as he stood at a corner of the cabin. "I reckon I *am* a box head for not thinking she might not like to live here alone with a man. And she certainly was some flustered when she happened to get to thinking about who had undressed her."

"I reckon she wasn't in any real danger," was his mental decision to a million stars. "But how was I to know? And I wasn't intending to mention it to her."

When the thought occurred that he had not mentioned it he felt a pulse of perturbation. She'd leave him now, perhaps, just for that. He'd made a mess of things!

He kicked savagely into a windrow of dust and saw it erupt at his feet. The contact of his booted foot with the dust had created a thudding sound; but a second thud which he heard was not caused by his boot. Listening intently, he heard a sound as of some one running; and he leaped around the cabin, away from some heavy brush that grew in a great, long clump near where he had been standing, drawing his six-shooter as he moved. He had cleared some ground in the vicinity

of the spot where he had built the addition, and when he reached this open space he saw a man running away from the cabin.

The man was some distance away; too far for accurate shooting with a pistol, but Brazo turned sideways, crooked his left arm and rested the heavy weapon on it, sighted quickly and pulled the trigger.

The man fell, got up again and ran on. Twice more Brazo fired at him. He missed, for the man continued to run. He disappeared into a depression and reappeared almost instantly, riding a horse. He was half a mile away by this time, but the moonlight was so strong that Brazo could see him wave a hand with a derisive motion.

Brazo grimly loaded his gun.

"One of that Wolf Wilson gang, I reckon. Hellions!"

He knew of their reputation; had met some of them. He knew Wolf Wilson and had been disappointed when he had discovered that the rifle bullet he had shot from the edge of the timber hadn't killed him. He had not admitted his knowledge of the man to Ella for fear of frightening her still further. He was now certain that one of the men had been standing under a window of the addition, listening; and of course if he had been listening he must have heard the conversation about the gold.

THERE was another thing to be considered. If the man had listened long enough he must have heard Brazo tell Ella his real name, and had probably overheard the conversation about the killing of the paymaster.

Brazo heard Ella calling to him and he went around the cabin and found her standing in the outside doorway.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "I—I thought some one had shot you!"

Brazo observed that her face was very white and that she was holding tightly to one of the door jambs as if a sudden weakness had seized her. She was trembling.

Brazo laughed.

"Shucks. I reckon I sure am a box-head, shooting that way and not thinking

that maybe you'd be scared. But it wasn't anything. Not much. A coyote. I was scared he'd go to yowling and disturb you."

She did not speak but stood, looking at him. Suddenly she turned and went back into the cabin. Brazo heard the bolt on the door of her room click as she shot it.

Brazo did not go to his bunk. Instead, he got his rifle and pipe and went into the timber close to the house, where he sat until daylight.

He was frying bacon when he heard the door of the girl's room open. He did not look around until she spoke, greeting him with a low "Good morning."

"I'm famished," she declared, looking at the bacon. "And you know how to fry it crisp. And the coffee!" She smiled at him.

SOMEHOW, she had repaired the rents in her clothing. Her hair was looped in soft coils and waves. Her eyes were shining and her color was high. She went to the open doorway and stood, gazing out.

"This is wonderful!" she declared. She saw the water of the river gleaming in the sun and she nodded to it.

"I think I remember now," she said. "That is where it happened, isn't it? I was just stepping into the water when Wolf Wilson reached me." She went outside and Brazo saw her take a clean towel from a line he had stretched from a corner of the cabin to a tree. He stepped to the door and grinned at her.

"The water is clearest over by the butte," he suggested. "But don't be too long or the bacon will get dry and cold. It's a lot better when it's just a bit moist."

He had the table set when she returned, and she took a chair opposite him with a grace and unconcern that could not have been more natural if she had been sitting opposite him in that manner for years.



Brazo kept both his admiration and his elation invisible.

"She's thoroughbred!" was his thought.

She ate lightly, and when she finished she folded her hands in her lap and looked straight at him.

"I suppose the sensible thing to do would be to get Jim's gold, load it into a wagon and get to the nearest town as quickly as possible," she suggested. "Would you advise doing that?"

Thinking about Wolf Wilson and the man who last night had obviously been listening to their conversation in the addition, Brazo reluctantly replied that he would.

"This is no place for a woman," he added.

"Then it wasn't a coyote you were shooting at last night," she said.

"I reckon you know it wasn't or you wouldn't have suggested taking the gold away right away," he answered. "Part of it was the truth, anyway," he added. "I didn't want you to get scared." He smiled gravely at her.

"You knew all along that it wasn't a coyote," he went on. "You knew it was a man."

She nodded.

"Twice while you were talking I heard some one moving outside, near one of the windows. He must have brushed against the wall; the noise sounded like that."

"Yes; he was listening," said Brazo, as if to confirm his mental decision of the night before. "If he was listening he must have heard me telling you my real name."

"I expect he did." Her gaze was steady. "So you have another name," she said.

"After your brother died I took his name," explained Brazo. "We looked alike. If you look at that tintype he had taken in Cooney soon after he got here you will see what I mean. I didn't like the idea, and I had no notion of trying to fool you when you came. You see, I felt I had to stay here. There was nobody around to know the difference. Jim wasn't very well acquainted and so I didn't have any trouble. I've been over to Cooney a couple of times. Without any explanations they took me for Jim."

SHE seemed to understand that he had done this thing for her as well as for himself. She got up, went into the addition, returned with the daguerrotype, sat down beside the table and studied her brother's face, occasionally looking up at Brazo.

"The resemblance is remarkable," she finally declared. "But," she went on, hesitating a little and regarding him with narrowed, appraising eyes, "there is some difference, of course. Jim wasn't a bold man. You are."

Brazo wondered if she was referring to his action in undressing her. Shucks. That hadn't been boldness. But of course, she didn't know how embarrassed he had been. And of course he would never tell her, because that would mean re-opening a subject which she had dismissed last night. He had bungled. He had antagonized her right in the beginning.

"No," she added still seeming to study him, "you are not like Jim. I don't believe you really resemble him. I am sure that if you were to remove your beard there wouldn't be any resemblance at all. Your chin is more aggressive than Jim's. Your face is longer, your forehead is higher, broader, and there is a different expression in your eyes. Jim was gentle and self-effacing, and quite self-conscious." She shook her head with a slow, negative motion.

"If I hadn't read what Jim wrote about you I should be inclined to be afraid of you," she went on. "You have a way of going right ahead and doing things you want to do without any consideration for the opinions and desires of other people. For example, you built that addition. Last night when I regained consciousness I heard you out here tacking up curtains, putting down this new matting, polishing the stove. Whatever made you think I would stay in this cabin with you?"

"Why, ma'am, you had to stay some placed!" he answered, so embarrassed that he did not look at her, but sat staring at the new matting.

"I reckon, now that I come to think about it, that I didn't have any thoughts at all. I just fixed up, thinking you would like it. I wanted to have you comfortable."

THERE followed a long silence. Brazo continued to gaze at the matting, while Ella watched him, her gaze severe.

"Where did you learn to put up window curtains by tacking them as you would tack a carpet?" she asked.

He grinned shamefacedly. "I never put up any before," he returned, still not looking at her.

"That is evident. They are terribly crooked, too."

"There wasn't any light in here," he defended.

"And of course they had to be put up last night!" she said. "You couldn't wait until morning."

He had no defense for that.

Her voice was low and impersonal, as if she had no interest at all in the curtains but was merely calling his attention to them because there seemed to be nothing else to talk about.

"To polish a stove correctly you have to spread the polish on evenly," she said. "Is that the first time you ever polished a stove?"

Brazo nodded.

"You have had no experience whatever in keeping a house?"

"I've spent most of my time out in the open, ma'am."

"Yet you knew that women like to have a house look neat," she said.

"I expect that's right, ma'am."

She sat, watching him. And while he still gazed at the matting on the floor, filled with amazement that he should feel so embarrassed in her presence, she smiled enigmatically and looked at her torn dress. Then she got up and walked around the room, examining the shelves, peering into corners; halting before Brazo's bunk.

"How did you sleep last night?" she asked.

"Pretty well," Brazo did not look up.

She glanced at the bunk, which had not been slept in, and again she smiled.

She walked to the door and looked out. The basin was slumberous, and beautiful in its sheath of green. The great buttes above the river rose to majestic heights, the peaks of the mountains beyond them providing a mighty background. A faint

breeze sweeping into the cabin stirred her hair, and with a feminine movement which brought a sudden ache into Brazo's throat she tucked in some stray wisps at the nape of her neck.

"Jim must have loved this place," she said suddenly.

"I reckon he did, ma'am."

"He must have loved it to have lived here ten years," she added. "And I believe I can see—I can understand—why. It's so quiet and peaceful. And so beautiful. Where is Jim's—Jim's——" She did not finish.

"In the timber, ma'am. It's quiet in there."

"May I see?"

Brazo got up and followed her outside. She permitted him to take the lead and he took her to the spot where he had buried Henley.

IN ANTICIPATION of her coming he had mounded the soil and had erected a small wooden cross. He did not linger there but returned to the cabin and stood in the doorway, watching her.

She was gone a long time, but when she came toward him out of the timber she said nothing.

Brazo stepped aside and she entered the cabin. She went into her room and closed the door. Brazo left her there and went into the timber, seeking the fallen log upon which he had sat last night watching her as she ran toward him from the darkness of the basin.

He sighed, filled his pipe and smoked. And smoking, he meditated.

Well; what had he expected? He didn't know. He knew, now, that he had expected nothing. His hopes had been wild ones, with no foundation except his own grotesque fancy. In one respect only had they turned out as he had expected—she was as he had pictured her.

She was afraid of him; she distrusted him; she disliked him. Would he require more proof of her dislike than a recollection of how she had criticized his efforts to make the cabin habitable for her? She hadn't wanted to come right out with it, to express her dislike; she had taken it out on him by expressing disapproval of the curtains, the stove and the matting.

She'd do as she had suggested, of course. She'd have him load Jim's gold into the wagon and take it direct to Cooney, where it would be shipped. She'd go with the gold and that would be the last he'd ever see of her. She would take all the gold, though; he wouldn't keep any of it, not even if Jim had wanted him to take it. After she'd gone he'd get out of the country.

He did not see Ella again until just before the noonday meal. He was standing beside the stove mentally debating an impulse to call to her when he heard the door of her room open.

She came into the kitchen and seated herself in a chair near the table, and he did not turn until an errand sent him to the cupboard. Then he met her gaze and observed that she was watching him.

"Your work here keeps you very busy, doesn't it?" she asked.

"Well, no; it's just the other way around."

"But you haven't been in the cabin all morning. You must have been doing something."

"Sitting on a log in the timber," he said, "thinking."

"Oh. Thinking." She gazed out of the window; then at her hands, which were clasped in her lap. Apparently she spoke to them for she said slowly, "He was sitting on a log, thinking."

She looked up at him. It was a glance; nothing more, and yet felt he had been again appraised.

"They were ponderous thoughts, of course?" she suggested.

"They were about you," Brazo flushed.

"In that case you may tell me what they were, I suppose?"

"Sure. I'd been thinking about what you said about getting away from here. You'd better go. We'll load the gold into the



wagon right away. I'll drive you to Cooney and see that you get started right, and that the gold is safe. I can see, now, that you can't stay here. You don't trust me, and you don't like me. So you'd better leave."

She smiled.

"What were you intending to do after I left?" she asked quietly.

"I was heading for Lincoln County when I came upon Jim," he answered. "I'll keep going until I get there. I reckon."

"What about your share of the gold?"

"Shucks. I don't want it. I never intended to take it. It belongs to you."

SHE was silent and her gaze was meditative as it rested on Brazo, who would not look at her. Meeting her gaze was like looking at the sun. She was twenty-two and that made her three years younger than he; and yet in manner she was years older. In addition there was wisdom in her that he had not yet acquired, and there was a strong maternal atmosphere about her, a calm and contemplative gleam in her eyes which made him feel like a child in her presence.



"When I was in the timber today I came upon a fallen tree," she said. "It was lying near the edge of the timber, right near the spot where Wolf Wilson caught me. Its surface is worn smooth and it looks as though some one had been sitting on it a great deal. Do you remember it?"

"That's where I was sitting last night when I saw you coming," answered Brazo.

"Have you sat there often?"

"A whole lot. First I used to sit there and watch for the sheriff's men. That wore off after a while, after I became Jim Henley."

"But you still continued to sit there?" she said. "That was habit, I suppose?"

"Not entirely," confessed Brazo, reddening again. "After Jim died I used to sit there and wait for you to come."

"You felt certain I would come?"

"Yes."

"And I did come," she said. "And after I came—after you had been sitting there for months, waiting for me, you did not feel interested enough in me to ask what had happened to me. You were not interested enough to ask me how it happened that Wolf Wilson was pursuing me?"

"I expected you'd tell me when you got around to it," he returned.

She tapped with the tips of her fingers on the table edge.

"You are not a very curious person, are you?"

"I put in a lot of my time trying to mind my own business," he replied soberly.

"Well," she said, suddenly lowering her lashes, "you succeed remarkably well." She sat very still and went on quietly:

"Nothing much happened to me, I suppose. I got off the stage at Cooney. There was a man there who was sitting on one horse and holding the reins of a led horse. I asked this man where I would find my brother, Jim Henley. He told me Jim had sent him to meet me, and that I was to get on the led horse and go with him. He carried my suitcase.

"I went with him. Of couse I don't know where we went, for soon after we started it began to get dark. We rode the biggest part of the night and got to a cabin near a river.

"There were several other men there. I asked them where Jim was and they said Jim would be along presently. They put me into the cabin but kept my suitcase. I felt there was something wrong, but I did not dare ask any questions. It was Wolf Wilson who had taken me to the cabin, for I heard some of the other men speak to him.

"I didn't go to bed, but sat up, listening. I heard the men talk about Jim, and about some gold that Jim had brought to Cooney. Jim had paid for a lot of supplies with gold nuggets. The men must have thought I had gone to sleep for they talked a great deal. They looked through

my suitcase and some of Jim's letters to me, which I had brought with me. Of course I knew they were trying to find out something about Jim's gold, and they thought, perhaps, that Jim might have mentioned it in one of his letters to me.

"Toward morning they went away and I opened the door of the cabin. I knew I had to get away. When I opened the door I saw a man sitting on the ground near the door with his back against the wall of the cabin. They had evidently left him there to guard me. But he had gone to sleep.

"I got out and found a horse. I rode down the river into some timber. Jim had written me that Battle's Basin was straight north from Cooney, so when the sun came up I rode east, remembering that during the early part of the night before, when I had been riding with Wolf Wilson, the moon had been at my back. Of course that meant that we had been riding west.

"I tried to keep close to the river, but there were places where that couldn't be done, and so after a while I got lost. But I kept going east. Half a dozen times during the day I heard and saw some of the men. They were searching for me, but I eluded them until just after dark.

"Then I had to cross an open stretch of level ground and one of the men saw me. It was Wolf Wilson.

"After that things are just a little difficult to remember. I rode as fast as I could for a good many hours, I thought. The man who had seen me was getting closer. Then, riding a ridge, I saw a light at a distance. That was the light in this cabin, I suppose. I headed my horse toward it. He had got down the slope of the ridge and was running through the grass when something happened to him



and he stopped. Then he went on again, limping. He couldn't go as fast as I could walk, so I got off and started to run.

"I ran a long while, and thought I would be able to get away. Then I heard Wilson's horse behind me. I felt him seize

me. That must have happened just as you saw us. I have no recollection of him hitting me with his fist. Everything just went black."

BRAZO said nothing. Ella got up and walked to the door. She turned when she reached the opening and looked back at Brazo.

"Are you afraid of Wolf Wilson and his men?" she asked.

Brazo met her gaze, and now there was no embarrassment in his eyes.

"Meaning that if I ain't you'll stay here?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered quickly, decisively.

"Then you'll stay," returned Brazo. He got up, walked to the door and held out his hand.

"Shake, ma'am," he said gently, gravely.

Glancing quickly at him Ella observed that he was not looking at her, but that his gaze was upon something outside. He dropped her hand and stepped over the threshold of the doorway, where he stood motionless, his arms hanging rigidly at his sides, his back to her.

Ella stepped forward and peered over his shoulder. Not more than a hundred feet distant were two riders. They had evidently come out of the timber and they were headed straight toward the cabin. They were cowboys, for they wore the picturesque regalia of the period, and they were lean, bronzed, capable looking. Ella observed rifles in their saddle sheaths; she saw the somber stocks of heavy six-shooters projecting from the holsters that swung low on their hips. She feared they might be some of Wolf Wilson's men, but she could not be sure until they came closer. And so she stood, staring intently at them as they continued to approach.

CHAPTER XI

THE GOLD CACHE

THE riders drew their horses to a walk as they came close to the cabin, and when they were within a dozen feet of Brazo they halted and dismounted, dropping their reins to the ground.

Both the riders were young, and both were grinning as they moved forward toward Brazo. Ella Wainright thought their

grins were strangely arrogant, for she could see no occasion for mirth. Then she observed that Brazo was also smiling and that his rigidity had gone.

"Shucks!" exclaimed Brazo. "It's Lafe Anderson and Clay Hardin!"

Friends!

For friendship was speaking. It was in the tone of their voices, in the broad smiles that were wreathing their faces; she perceived it in a certain reserve and embarrassment which kept them from betraying too much delight in the meeting. They evidently had not expected to see Brazo at the cabin, and if their friendship had not been sincere they would have been more vociferous. They were amazed to see a young woman with their friend, and yet after the first glance they did not look at her, but talked with Brazo and turned their flushed faces away from the doorway.

Ella went to her room. It was not until she felt herself trembling that she realized how fearful she had been that the two men would prove to be members of Wolf Wilson's band. She was certain she would have recognized them if they had been Wilson's men, for she had seen all the men who had been with Wilson on the night she had escaped from the cabin to which they had taken her.

Now she was relieved, and reassured. For she was aware that kindred traits drew men together, and she felt that Brazo's friends were like him. In fact, she had already had been given evidence that they were. For like Brazo, they had been embarrassed in her presence, and she had little doubt that they would be as tractable as he had been.

She came out of her room presently and standing well back from the outside doorway of the cabin she saw the three men seated upon the smooth log at the edge of the timber. There was no laughter; their voices were low; they were serious.

She watched them for an hour, and when she finally saw Brazo rise and start toward the cabin she again went to her room and closed the door. She did not want Brazo to know that she had been watching him.

She heard Brazo enter the cabin and step across the door. Then his knock.

She opened the door and confronted him.

HE WAS smiling and his manner was Apologetic.

"Those boys are my friends," he said. "The tall one is Lafe Anderson and the other is Clay Hardin. I rode with them for three years at Slim Hellman's Bar H ranch near Tombstone. They're good boys. They're drifting, looking for a job. I didn't introduce them because I didn't know whether you'd care to meet them. They're bashful, not knowing much about women. I expect, if I'd have introduced them, they couldn't have said anything to you. Likely they'd have stood there, bobbing their heads and trying to swallow their tongues."

"Well," she said, "it's a mighty good thing they have a friend to do their talking for them."

"I expect I ain't much better at talking than they are," answered Brazo. "Maybe I ain't so much scared of you, having been around you longer. But they're good boys, ma'am. They're square, and they ain't scared of anything on legs!"

"Yet they are afraid to meet me," she said.

Brazo scratched his head. "Well, they seem to be, for a fact," he admitted. "You see, they ran out of grub. I wanted them to come up here and eat, but they insisted that I bring some grub to them. They claim they don't want to bother you, ma'am."

"Why, how ridiculous!"

She walked past Brazo and went

straight to the edge of the timber, to the log upon which the two men were sitting. She stopped near them, and both rose and stood, their hats in hand, their



faces red and their eyes drooping.

"Are you boys afraid I am going to bite you?" asked Ella.

Lafe Anderson, the taller of the two, a young giant with blue eyes and skin bronzed to the copper hue of an Indian, answered huskily.

"Why, no, ma'am. But you see, we wasn't somehow expectin' to see——" He paused, swallowed hard.

"Brazo," interjected Hardin, whose mind, evidently, was at this minute more active than his friend's.

ELLA'S gaze went to him. It was so direct that, trying to meet it, Hardin failed and grinned vacuously.

"And so, not expecting to meet Brazo, you were afraid of me," said Ella. "I expect Brazo has told you how he happens to be here with me?" she asked, her voice more serious.

Both men nodded affirmatively.

"We're sorry things turned out like they did for you," said Hardin.

"We wouldn't wish for anything like that to happen to a woman," added Anderson.

"I am sure you wouldn't!" declared Ella. "And now," she went on, "do you think I would allow such sympathy to go unrewarded? I can't promise you much, but we will do the best we can. Won't you come in and have dinner with us? It will be nicer than eating out here."

"If you put it that way, ma'am," said Hardin.

They followed her to the cabin.

Brazo was filling the coffee pot with fresh water, for it had boiled once and had not been used.

Ella discovered that she had to make the conversation. Brazo was silent and the guests were self-conscious and diffident, replying only when directly addressed and offering no comment. The two were, Ella felt, even more abashed in her presence than Brazo; and Brazo looked at her only when he was certain her gaze was not upon him.

And Brazo, she knew, was bold and aggressive. She had divined his confidence in himself when he had stood just outside the door of the cabin awaiting the coming of the two men. Before he had

recognized them he had been prepared to defend her, and there had been no hesitancy in his manner. She had felt the imminence of tragedy and she had known that he was prepared for it. She wondered, glancing beneath her lashes at the youthful, though rugged faces of the three, what experiences were concealed behind their grave and abashed eyes. Certainly none that lay very heavy upon their consciences. They were wholesome, clean, dependable. Brazo had told her they were square. She believed him. She knew Brazo was square, for he had already proved himself.

When they had finished they would have immediately left the cabin, but her voice restrained them.

"I think I understood Brazo to say that you men were looking for a job?" she asked.

Both nodded.

"Do you think you would care to work for me?" she added.

She was looking at Anderson and Hardin, but she felt Brazo's gaze upon her. He had straightened a little. He was astonished.

"Why, ma'am, we'd be glad to," answered Anderson. "But—but——"

"But you don't see anything here to do," smiled Ella. She now glanced at Brazo and observed that he was frankly amazed.

"I know something about cows," she went on. "This is a good country for cows. I am going to stay here. I am going to build a nice, big ranch-house, some corals and—and other things. And I am going to raise some nice cattle—Herefords, I think. Do you think you could stay here and help me?"

"Ma'am," said Hardin, "you've hired us."

THE men were elated. They went out mounted their horses and rode away, evidently to inspect the country in which they were to work. Brazo got up, went to the door and watched them. He turned when after a little while he felt Ella standing close to him.

"You know why I have decided to stay here," she said.

"I've got an idea. It's because Jim lived here."

"Yes. Do you mind riding around with me a little? I should like to see some of the things Jim looked at."

Brazo regarded her gravely.

"Jim's writing puts the gold under the floor of the cabin," he said. "It was a mistake to put it there. That's one of the first places a man would think of if he had an idea there was gold anywhere around. I've moved it. If you'll come with me I'll show you where it is. After that we'll go riding."

Ella followed him into the timber and to the edge of the river. On the bank he paused and gazed about. There was no one in sight except Anderson and Hardin, and they were riding slowly down the basin toward the cliff dwelling.

Brazo looked at the rocks of the crossing.

"Do you think you can make it?" he asked. "We have got to get to the other side."

She nodded and he led the way, reaching a hand to her to help her over the widest jumps. She followed him without question to the other side; stopped and gazed inquiringly at him when confronted by the somber darkness of the subterranean passage; then tightened her lips and took the hand he offered her.

When they finally reached the outlet and the beautiful hidden valley was disclosed to her view she caught her breath and stood rigid.

"Oh!" she exclaimed at last.

Then she stood silent, her eyes glowing. She turned to Brazo, her lips parted, her face pale.

"Oh!" she exclaimed again. "It is glorious! Did Jim know of this?"

"Jim found the gold here," he told her.

He led her over the crest of a small hill and down into a little gully close to the base of the gigantic wall which shut the valley from the outside world.

"Right here is where Jim did his digging," he said, pointing out the spot. "He

didn't have to dig much. A pocket, but a big one. I've dug around a lot, but there doesn't seem to be any more. Jim came upon it by accident. Likely there's more around."

HE LED her back toward the entrance to the cavern, perhaps a hundred feet from the river, and showed her a crevice in the huge wall behind a thick clump of brush.

"Jim's gold is in there," he said. He parted the brush, reached into the crevice and drew out a small bag. He drew out several others and piled them on the ground at her feet.

"We'll take this over to Cooney and turn it over to the express company. There's no assayer at Cooney, but the express company will ship it on to Deming and give you credit for it. You'll have more credit than any one in the country, once this gets out. You'll have more. In a week there'll be a rush to the basin. There'll be a stampede. Had you thought of that?"

"I have read of such things. But Jim owned this land and nobody has a right to trespass upon it!"

"They'll settle all around. They'll swarm all over the country. Likely they'll start a town."

"Let them. There is plenty of room. They can start their town at the farther end of the basin. But they shall not trespass upon my land."

"I reckon they won't," conceded Brazo, observing the flash in her eyes.

"Well," he added, "if you're going to start to building there's no time like the present. We'll get this gold to Cooney." He picked up the bags and led the way back through the cavern to the river. Once in the timber he stalked ahead of her toward the cabin. He placed the bags in a corner, went outside again and stood for some time gazing speculatively at the wagon. When he became aware that Ella was standing near him he spoke to her.

"It's likely you're thinking of going to Cooney too," he said.

"Yes."

"That's what I thought. Well, we might run into Wolf Wilson and his friends.



But maybe not. Wilson won't get over that hole in his chest soon. But we've got to put that gold where it won't be found so easy." He scratched his head and then gravely stroked his chin. Ella watched him silently.

"Sure," he said after a time. "Cooney." He gazed quizzically at the girl.

"Do you know what a 'cooney' is?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"Well," he said, "I'll make one. Jim's got a dry hide."

He went into a shed and brought out a dried cowhide which he suspended under the bed of the wagon, securing the hide by the corners. The result was a rather spacious, hammock-like pocket under the bed of the wagon.

"Some cook with an idea of saving his legs invented this," he told the girl. "There's times when wood suitable for fire building ain't to be had. The cook who first built a cooney picked up dry wood as he drove along in the chuck wagon on a drive. He put the dry wood in the cooney, where it stayed dry. But a cooney will carry gold, too, with dry wood piled around it."

THEY decided they would start at dawn the following day in an attempt to make the trip without a night camp in the open. So Brazo concealed the bags of gold in the wall of the cabin with the one he had previously placed there.

Anderson and Hardin returned late in the afternoon. Both reported good grazing in the vicinity. There was a great deal of timber in the section, but it was mostly fir and spruce, and if cattle got into it they could be driven out easily.

After supper they all went to the edge of the timber. Hardin and Brazo had drawn apart from Anderson and Ella, for the girl had seemed interested in Anderson from the beginning. She now sat beside him on the fallen tree trunk talking with him, and apparently paying little attention to Hardin and Brazo.

Brazo could not hear what she was saying, nor could he hear Anderson's replies to her questions.

"You recognized Brazo quickly," she said. "How was that? I understand he has changed quite a little in appearance. He has grown a beard, for one thing."

"Shucks, ma'am," grinned Anderson. "I rode with Brazo for three years. I'd know him, first pop, if I couldn't see anything but his eyes an' his forehead."

"Yes," returned Ella musingly, "I suppose you would. He really has fine eyes, hasn't he? But isn't he bold, Mr. Anderson?"

"Bold?"

Anderson seemed puzzled. He glanced sharply at Ella.

"That's a word I never rightly understood, ma'am. I reckon you've got to put it some other way."

"Forward then," she went on. "He depends upon himself. He goes right ahead and does things without asking anybody's opinion."

"Well, maybe you're right. Brazo don't ask many questions. Seems he knows what he's doin' all the time. Seems to think things out in advance."

"Why did he quit Mr. Hellman?"

"Said he'd got tired of seein' the same things all the time. Same as us. Wanted a change."

"Weren't there towns near?" she asked. "I thought I heard him mention Tombstone."

"Sure. But Brazo wasn't interested. The other boys would hit town, an' Brazo would hang around the ranch-house doing some fool thing that could have been put off."

ELLA meditated. "Did Mr. Hellman have a family?" she asked.

"A wife an' two boys."

"And they kept house alone? Didn't Mrs. Hellman have any servants?"

"A Chink."

Then it wasn't a daughter or another girl that kept Brazo from going to town with the other men. But Ella hadn't finished.

"Do you think Brazo killed the paymaster?" she asked.

"Shucks, no!" scornfully declared Anderson. "Brazo says he didn't, an' that's enough for me—for anyone that knows

him. I reckon Brazo wouldn't lie to save his skin!"

So Brazo had told the new men about the incident of the killing. She had wondered just how much Brazo had confided to his friends.



"But he killed Wolf Wilson," she said. "That is, he thought he had killed him."

"That was different," defended Anderson. "Wilson was chasin' you, wasn't he?"

"That's so," she agreed. "But I really don't know for certain that the man he shot was Wolf Wilson."

"Would that make any difference? It sure was one of the gang that took you to their shack."

She gravely contemplated the soft colors of the afterglow.

"And do you think it was one of Wilson's men who was listening outside the cabin after—after we went inside?"

"Sure. They'd heard about your brother buyin' stuff in Cooney with gold nuggets." And now Anderson asked a question. "You told Brazo that the man who took you to the shack where his gang was had been called Wolf Wilson. Didn't you take a look at him after Brazo shot him?"

"No," answered Ella.

"Scared of him, eh?" he grinned. "Well, most women would have been. But Brazo said that after he shot the man you went straight to the cabin without waitin' or askin' any questions."

SHE was relieved to discover that Brazo had not related the final episode of her adventure. Brazo and Hardin had walked away. They reached the river and stopped. Evidently they were talking about the water; for if a ranch was to be established here plenty of water was a necessity.

"Brazo cannot ride around the country very much," remarked Ella to Anderson. "He would be recognized and arrested.

Some one would be sure to discover that he is masquerading as my brother."

"They sure would. Maybe not a stranger. But anybody who saw Brazo before he got that beard on would be sure to know him with it. That stableman at Bain's. Bain himself. Brazo told me he stayed at Bain's overnight. If he did, Bain would know him."

"The safest place for Brazo is right here," said Ella.

"Right here," agreed Anderson.

"He wants to go to Cooney tomorrow, and I think I shall not let him go!" declared Ella.

"He'd ought to keep himself away from towns," said Anderson. "Folks drift in. Maybe he'd run into Bain there."

"Would you and Mr. Hardin ride to Cooney with me and some of the gold?" questioned Ella.

"Sure!"

Ella did not apprise Brazo of her selection until just before dawn the following morning. Anderson and Hardin had slept in the timber, and had been waiting just outside the door of the cabin when Brazo opened it.

"You're up early," suggested Brazo.

"We're travelin' at daylight," answered Anderson. Hardin nodded when Brazo's gaze went to him.

Ella had opened the door of her room. She was ready to travel also, and had put on one of her brother's coats. She had none of her own and there was a chill in the air which was felt in the cabin in spite of the fact that there was a fire in the stove.

"You leaving us?" asked Brazo.

"Goin' to Cooney," answered Anderson. "Me an' Clay."

"Have you been dreaming, Lafe?" asked Brazo.

Ella stepped forward, met Brazo's wondering glance.

"I thought it best to have Anderson and Hardin go with me, Brazo," she said. "I have been talking to Anderson about the new house and he tells me he knows exactly how a house should be constructed. He is going to tell me what to buy. He is also going to buy some cattle for me. He knows several ranchers in the

section; and he thinks he can get a few men to work here."

Brazo met Ella's eyes.

"Lafe's a good man," he said.

HE TURNED to the stove, took up the coffee pot and poured the amber liquid into the cups on the table. Later he carried the bags of gold out and packed them into the cooney. He spoke occasionally to Hardin, less often to Anderson, and not at all to Ella. And when they left—Ella and Anderson riding horses, and Hardin seated on the wagon—he abruptly turned and went into the cabin, not even looking after them as they went southward.

But he thought he knew what had happened. He had not failed to observe how Ella and Anderson had sat together on the fallen tree the night before. He remembered that they had talked in subdued voices. They must have arranged the details of the Cooney trip then.

Anderson was a good man. Anderson had not lied if he had told Ella that he knew how a house should be built, for he had helped to build several. Likewise, Anderson knew cattle and quite a number of cattle owners. He also knew a great many men in the section, for he had worked all through it. In addition, Anderson was big, manly and good-looking.

Quite a combination.

Brazo's smile was a trifle crooked with cynicism, but his chief emotion was that of resentment over the fact that he had not even been consulted about the details of the trip. They had left him entirely out of it.

CHAPTER XII

BAGGAGE CALLED FOR AND DELIVERED

BRAZO'S resentment did not last. He kept seeing Ella as she had appeared to him when she had emerged from the cabin wearing one of her brother's old coats. The garment was far too large for her. It unfolded her like a blanket. It was too broad in the shoulders. The sleeves were too long and she had turned them back so that the lining was exposed. But

to Brazo she had seemed more beautiful than ever. The contrast of the smooth, firm skin of her throat and face with the rough man garment was startling. And yet Brazo saw something pathetic in it. She was trying to carry on a task that a man had started. She hadn't the stature or the strength of her brother, and yet she had the courage and the determination to emulate him.



There had been a challenge in her eyes when she had emerged wearing the coat.

The garment had seemed to accentuate the appeal of her. Brazo's resentment could not last because his deep sympathy for the girl overwhelmed it. She had spoken of a suitcase which she had brought with her and in her recital of her adventures she had told him that the outlaws had taken it from her. Undoubtedly the suitcase contained articles of wearing apparel which were invaluable to her, which she could not replace in the store at Cooney, and which, if the suitcase were not recovered, she would have to do without. She had not mentioned the suitcase, she had made no reference to its loss after she had related what had happened to her. But her forlorn appearance had mutely advertised her need of its contents. And now Brazo remembered the challenge in her eyes as, wearing her brother's coat, she had stood in the cabin looking at them all. Brazo remembered that her gaze had rested upon him with a peculiar intentness.

She had been silently telling him that she needed the contents of the suitcase.

Brazo went into the hidden valley and caught Blinky. He led the horse to the door of the cabin, saddled and bridled him, slipped his rifle into the sheath, mounted and rode down the basin.

He did not know exactly where to look for Wolf Wilson's shack, but he remembered that Ella had told him that she had ridden east after escaping and therefore Brazo rode west.

AFTER he got out of the basin he came to a level stretch of sand. The river had doubled sharply northward, into a gorge. He was certain that Ella had not followed it there, so he kept going straight westward. Two nights and a day had passed since the girl had had her experience with the outlaws and Brazo had no hope of finding any tracks that her horse had made in the race from the outlaw shack. But Brazo rode several times across the level and presently he was leaning over examining a set of hoof prints that seemed to come in a straight line from a southwesterly direction.

Brazo followed the tracks for a mile. They were not always visible, but where he could see them at all they were deep, and he knew from the way the prints were grouped that the animal which had made them had been running fast. He followed them to the edge of the level and then lost them on a rocky slope. But half a mile farther on he came upon them again. And now another set joined the first. Brazo decided that here Wilson had lost the girl in the darkness. He had probably not caught sight of her again until she reached the crest of the ridge above the basin, where she would be for an instant on the skyline.

The two sets of tracks vanished down a dry arroyo to a flat. Here the river doubled back again, and for a time Brazo rode along the banks, under some trees. The two sets of tracks were here deep and well defined. He lost them again in some hills. But beyond the hills he picked them up and followed them across another sand level.

Here they separated. One set came straight from the west; the other came angling into them from the southwest. This must have been about where Wilson had caught his first glimpse of the girl after she had escaped.

Brazo decided that in his search for the girl Wilson would have ridden south, toward Cooney, thinking that because she had no knowledge of the location of Henley's cabin she would have tried to reach town. So Brazo followed the tracks that came out of the west.

AT A little distance from the point where the two sets of tracks converged Brazo lost the set he was following. He did not see them again. But he had no doubt that Ella had kept going in an easterly direction as straight as the character of the land would permit. Naturally, unless she had caught sight of the men who were searching for her, she would have chosen the open spaces and the levels. But he remembered that she had told him that she had ridden for some time in some timber, and in that case she had wandered much from a straight line. The chances were that Wilson's shack was not as far from the Henley cabin as Ella had thought; and toward noon Brazo yielded to a conviction that he was not far from it. The shack would be near water, he was certain, and shortly after noon, vindicating his conviction, he was



sitting motionless on his horse on a wooded knoll, behind a great clump of wild brush, looking down up on a small cabin.

The cabin sat near the edge of the river in a flat which was not more than a quarter of a mile wide. It was perhaps a mile long and its westerly end narrowed into a canyon which seemed to be cut through a plateau. The floor of the flat was covered with a wild growth of trees and brush. There was no defined trail through it.

Near the shack was a small corral in which were several horses. A saddle was hung on one of the corral posts, near a gate. There was no smoke coming from the chimney of the shack, and no human form was visible to Brazo. Apparently the shack was deserted.

BRAZO waited. For an hour, after dismounting, he stood in the brush peering down into the flat. He heard no sound, saw no movement. Convinced that none of Wilson's men were in the vicinity he at last tied Blinky to a tree and descended the hill to the floor of the flat.

The shack was only a few hundred feet from the bottom of the slope, and when Brazo reached it after a cautious approach through some thick underbrush he heard no sounds from within. But he had drawn his gun as he neared the shack and he moved stealthily around the nearest corner until he reached an open doorway.

Standing there, listening, he heard a groan.

Wilson, he decided. Wilson, badly hurt by the bullet he had received after striking Ella. They had got him here. Assuredly there would be one of the men with him, taking care of him.

Brazo stepped into the doorway. He was rigid, crouching, for he expected to kill the man who was with Wilson. To his amazement Wilson was alone. He was lying flat on his back in a bunk, his feet toward the doorway. He was staring straight upward and apparently had not seen or heard Brazo.

However, as Brazo moved toward him a board in the floor creaked sharply.

Wilson raised his head. His face reddened; he glared at his visitor.

"You, eh?" he said.

"Yep." Brazo walked close to the bunk and gazed down at the outlaw.

WILSON cursed. Then he became silent.

"That's the way you feel, eh?" said Brazo. "Well, I don't blame a man for getting tired of working for forty a month. It's a slow way of getting rich. But if he has to go around hitting women he ought to expect somebody'd try to pulverize him."

"So it was you!" said Wilson. "I wasn't sure. One of the boys was listenin' an' heard you tell the Wainright girl your name. You didn't pulverize me—not near. Your bullet hit a rib an' glanced off. But it cut a hell of a hole in my side. It knocked me. I knowed if I'd show life you'd mebbe finish me. So I lay there an' let you take the girl away. Then I got up an' lit out."

"Shucks. I was aiming with good intentions, Wilson," Brazo smiled faintly. "Tombstone got too hot for you?" he inquired.

A hatred so intense that it drove the blood from Wilson's face now glared from the man's eyes.

"You always was a damned meddler!" he said, his voice thick and heavy with passion. "Down at Tombstone, an' now here! One way or another I'm goin' to kill you for interferin'!"

"You've tried twice," said Brazo. "The next time I won't do any missing."

Brazo saw a six-shooter on the floor beside Wilson's bunk. He reached down, picked up the weapon, removed the cartridges and tossed it upon a bench. He dropped the cartridges into a pocket. A rifle stood in a corner. He went to it and found it empty. He tossed it through the doorway.

Wilson watched him with cold, impotent fury.

Brazo saw a suitcase of the telescope type in a corner. He went to it, opened it, looked inside, closed it. It was Ella's and although he had no way of knowing whether anything had been taken from it, certainly much was left.

Brazo carried it to the door, then returned and stood near Wilson.

"I'm warning you, Wilson," he said.

"Want the gold for yourself, eh?" jeered the other. "Well—oh, go to hell!"

WILSON turned his head toward the wall.

Brazo picked up the suitcase and went out. He heard Wilson blaspheming, raging. Apparently there were none of the outlaws in the vicinity or Wilson would have been calling to them.

Brazo carried the suitcase to the clump of brush where his horse was tied, fastened it to the cantle of the saddle, mounted and started over the back trail.

Until today he had never spoken a dozen words to Wilson. The enmity between them was a silent one, to be expressed in violent action whenever they met. It had come because of a mutual dislike upon the occasion of their first meeting and had grown with each subsequent meeting until with their first clash Brazo had sent a bullet into Wilson's shoulder. Wilson had escaped a fatal wound because a fool in the guise of a

peacemaker had struck Brazo's arm just as the latter's gun exploded.

The second meeting had been bloodless. It had occurred in a saloon in Tombstone when Wilson, drunk and ugly, had drawn a gun when Brazo's back was turned. An alert town marshal had disarmed Wilson before any damage had been done. They had not met again until now.

Brazo was elated. The task of recovering the suitcase had been an easy one. As he rode he kept seeing mental pictures of Ella's astonishment and pleasure when he should show her her wardrobe. She would know then he had interpreted the look she had given him when she had appeared arrayed in her brother's coat.

And now he wondered if she had purposely left him behind! Had she expected he would interpret her glance? Certainly there had been a challenge in the look she had given him!

He thought it entirely possible. Women were like that. Deep, subtle, shrewd, saying more with their eyes than with their lips.

Brazo was in no hurry to get back to the cabin. There was no telling how long Ella would stay at Cooney. She would buy certain things at the store there, and she would probably wait until Anderson bought some cattle from ranchers in the vicinity. Also, there was the building material to be thought of.

Brazo thought of the building material



now, as he walked his horse slowly over a level that bordered the river. He drew other mental pictures in which Ella and Anderson were sitting close together glancing at each other and smiling. That picture was strangely annoying. He tried to banish it but it persisted. It even grew more vivid. It changed, merging with others. They were standing, looking

straight into each other's eyes and laughing. They turned, and both were facing him. It was strange that he had not realized that Anderson was handsome! He had never thought of Anderson in that way. Anderson had been his friend for some years and it had never occurred to him to wonder how Anderson would look to a woman.

A WOMAN would see things in a man that a man wouldn't see. She'd observe, for example, that his eyes were a deep, glowing blue—like Anderson's. She'd observe his mouth, which had good lines—like Anderson's. She'd detect a dimple that a man would never notice. She'd see a characteristic quirk of the lips that would interest her. Anderson had a queer way of drawing one corner of his mouth inward. It was when his thoughts were wayward; when he meditated mischief. Now that he was on that subject he reflected that Anderson had a bold way of looking at women. Somehow, without seeming to try, Anderson attracted women.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SHOT FROM AMBUSH

TWICE during the afternoon Brazo had watered Blinky at shallows in the river, and just before dusk when he reached a swale about half a dozen miles from the cabin he dismounted, threw the reins over Blinky's head to permit him to graze, and stretched himself out upon a clump of grass under a gnarled juniper.

Brazo's thoughts were still centered upon Anderson. He gloomily reviewed the year that he had passed in Jim Henley's cabin. He was aware at this minute that although in the beginning he had stayed there to do what he could for Henley, the conviction that he would finally meet Henley's sister had kept him there after Henley's death. There was no use in trying to delude himself into the belief that he had stayed merely to turn the gold over to her, for he could have taken the gold, had it assayed, shipped, and held in trust for her until such a time as she appeared to claim it. He could have left word for

her with Thomas, the storekeeper, at Cooney.

No; there was no use of his trying to fool himself. He had stayed there because he had fallen in love with Jim's sister—had fallen in love with her without seeing her, by idealizing her from his imagination. He had not been disappointed. That, however, was not what was bothering him. What was bothering him was the irritating conviction that after having waited for her all these months she had been instantly attracted to Lafe Anderson.

He had mistaken the challenge in her eyes. Instead of daring him to go after her suitcase she was daring him to say anything to her about going away with Anderson. The chances were that she hadn't thought about the suitcase at all. She had just wanted to be with Anderson!

Brazo got up, stretched himself, grinned grimly.

Well; if he had to face that fact, he had to face it, that was all. No use trying to make her like him when she wanted to like Anderson.

But he had certainly dreamed a golden dream during all the months he had waited. That he was never to realize the dream made little difference. There had been other dreams that had not materialized. A great many of them. Life was like that.

Something struck him in the shoulder and knocked him flat upon his back. An excruciating pain, and a sudden numbness. He caught a glimpse of a man on a horse not more than a hundred feet from him, westward. The man was leveling a rifle, and as Brazo rolled over the weapon crashed twice more.

The bullets missed Brazo. He lunged desperately and threw himself behind the juniper tree as the bark was splintered beside him.

BRAZO had got his gun out. The rider had wheeled his horse and the animal was making an infinite small pause while gathering his muscles for the initial leap away from the scene, when Brazo fired. A spot of dust erupted upon the rider's back low on his vest. He straight-

ened, toppled backward out of the saddle. One foot caught in a stirrup and the horse galloped out of sight over a low hill, dragging the rider after him.

Brazo got to his feet, stood for a moment swaying back and forth and then began to walk toward Blinky. Blinky had moved away a little distance during the shooting, but he was now grazing as though nothing had happened.

Brazo reeled and swayed as he walked toward the horse. There was no feeling in his left side; he had little control over his legs, for they seemed to waver in spite of his attempts to keep them rigid. They bent at the knees and he could not place his feet where he wanted to place them. Also, his whole body seemed to be in the grip of a deadly nausea. When he reached Blinky he stood for some time leaning against the animal.

Presently the effects of the first shock



wore away and he felt a new strength flowing through him. He looped Blinky's reins through his right arm and led the horse down a dry

arroyo to the flat, broad bank of the river. Standing on the bank at a shallow he opened his shirt and examined the wound. The bullet had entered his chest about two inches from the left armpit and had gone out through his shoulder, penetrating the major muscles.

Not dangerous, perhaps. An inch or two further toward the center, though, and he would not now be standing on the bank of the river.

He pulled the shirt down, knelt at the edge of the bank and washed his neckerchief. Then he soaked the neckerchief in the sparkling water and bathed the wound. It had bled much, staining his shirt and vest. He tore the neckerchief in two, soaked both portions in water and applied one to his back and the other to the front of the wound. He could not keep the one on the back in place so he stuffed some of it into the wound, where it presently

stayed. He had little trouble with the front one.

He felt a great deal better after dressing the wound. He got his shirt on again and led Blinky back to the scene of the shooting. He found his assailant's rifle and stuck it under the straps of Ella's suitcase. It was not until he tried to get into the saddle that he discovered how weak he was. He could not swing up, so he led Blinky to a low rock escarpment, where he succeeded in mounting.

HE SENT the horse westward, into a growing darkness. As he rode he managed to reload his six-shooter, by sticking the muzzle against the saddle horn and pressing his body against the butt.

He had no reason to speculate upon the identity of his assailant. One of Wilson's men, certainly. He had probably reached the shack soon after Brazo had departed and Wilson had sent him on the trail.

It had been a near thing. His own fault, too, for he had not exercised even ordinary caution. He should have anticipated what had happened.

He rode on into the darkness, Blinky still in a walk. There was little need for haste. He would be only a little better off in the cabin than in the saddle. To be sure he would be able to rest once he got to the cabin, and he knew he was going to require a great deal of rest. For while he was aware that the wound he had received was not dangerous, he discovered that he was swaying back and forth in the saddle and that he was steadily growing weaker.

Lack of food, he decided. But he reflected that he had often gone without food for days at a time without suffering much inconvenience. Was his wound more severe than he had thought? If it was he was in for a bad time. There was no one at the cabin, and possibly Anderson and Hardin would not return for three or four days. He could not ride to Cooney if the wound was bad. If it wasn't bad he would not need to ride there. He decided the wound was bad, for it was bleeding again. He could feel a warm stream stealing down his back and his chest. His swaying grew more pronounced,

so that in order to keep from falling out of the saddle he was compelled to steady himself by holding to the pommel.

A full, brilliant moon had come up by the time he reached the high ridge that fringed the basin. He almost fell out of the saddle when Blinky tilted to go down the slope, but he gained the level, smiling cynically over his weakness.

Blinky halted at the river and drank. Brazo must have drowsed, for presently Blinky was standing before the door of the cabin, obviously waiting for him to dismount.

Dismounting was not so easy. He seemed to have no strength left. But he finally got a foot out of the stirrup and swung the leg over. His left arm seemed dead and his right slipped from the pommel. He fell backward into the deep dust of the door yard and lay flat on his back for a time looking up at the stars and the moon.

"I never knew you to do that before, Blinky," he said aloud.

THE dust was soft and cool. He wanted to lie in it, but decided he ought to go to bed right in his bunk. So he got up and walked to the threshold of the doorway, where he sat for a long time leaning against one of the jambs.

When he felt a fierce white light shining against his eyelids he opened his eyes and saw that day had come. He saw Blinky in the timber, so he got up and went to the horse, staggering, almost falling, and unstrapped the suitcase.

"She'll need it, you old coyote," he said to Blinky. "First thing you know you'll be rolling on it and spoiling things."

He couldn't get the saddle off; he was too weak. So he left Blinky and started for the cabin with the suitcase.

Somewhere between the edge of the timber and the cabin he stopped. He could carry the suitcase no farther. He decided that presently, when he had regained some of his strength, he would complete the trip.

He sat down beside the bag and rested himself against it. Later he opened his eyes and with some bewilderment observed that the moon was shining again.

There was a sharp pain in his shoulder

and his face was hot. But the sun was shining then. But later, when the moon rose, he was as uncomfortable as ever.

He was thirsty and he tried to get up to go to the river. His legs would not support him, so he went on his hands



and knees over the deep sand and through the tall grass of the level until at last he leaned forward and plunged his face in the stream.

HE TOOK the two pieces of neckerchief, soaked them in the water and bathed the wound in his chest. He could not reach the place on his shoulder with the water, so he ceased trying.

"You've no business bein' around so far," he said. "But if you like Anderson there's nothing wrong in going away with him."

He knew he was talking "flighty," so

he grimly set his lips and started back to where he had left the suitcase. "You can't get away from me now," he said. "I've got you too far to leave you."

But when he again saw the suitcase the sun was shining on it. He started toward it, but the sun would blot it out and he would have trouble finding it again.

"You've been sleeping," he said accusingly. "The moon has come around again. But there's no use trying to find a suitcase that whirls around like that."

He found it, though, and laughed at it.

"Why shucks," he said, "you ain't so little! And your hair! Why, it's just what I thought it ought to be! But that's twice, Wilson. I'm warning you!"

There was a period of blankness during which he answered somebody he felt was talking to him, although he did not know what he was saying.

"Talking to myself about nothing," he decided. "Well, there's nothing to talk about, is there, ma'am. I've brought you the suitcase."

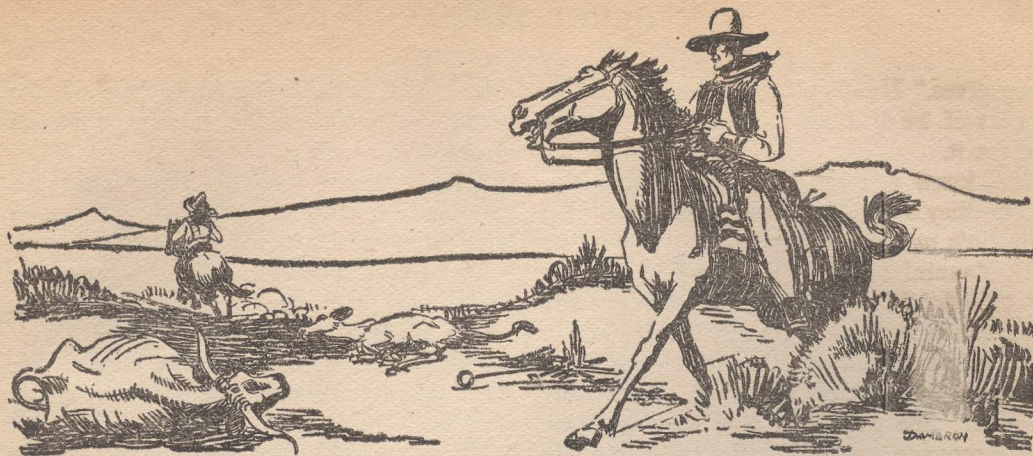
"Oh! Oh, my God!" came a voice—Ella's voice. "Anderson! Hardin!" she cried.

But it wasn't Ella's voice. It couldn't be her voice. Ella was in Cooney—with Anderson.

(Part III in our next issue.)

OVERLAND STAGE STATIONS

THE stations upon the Overland Stage Line of the 'Sixties were of two kinds: swing stations and home stations. The swing stations, solely for the purpose of changing teams, were kept by only a stock-tender or two. The home stations provided meals as well as horses, boasted of keeper and family, as a rule, and quite often were ranches. Stations were ten to fifteen miles apart; when these were swing stations change of team was made in five minutes or less and the stage was upon its way again. Every second or third station was a home or meal station; here drivers were changed also—say after having driven thirty miles—and thirty minutes were allowed for meals. Between Atchison and Denver, 653 miles, there were twenty-five home stations. The meals averaged very good. In the prairie country of Kansas and Nebraska of the Eastern Division, ham and bacon, buffalo and antelope steaks, eggs, chicken, even cream and fresh butter and fresh vegetables; upon the plains buffalo meat, ham and pork, biscuits sometimes rather dubious, range beef, condensed milk, canned vegetables and dried apples and dried peaches. Coffee was the staple drink, tea being rarely called for and of poor quality. Now and then there was a station noted for its dirty service. Prices started at fifty cents in the east, rose to seventy-five cents en route along the Platte, and increased to a dollar and a dollar and a half in Colorado. Occasionally a passenger tried to subsist upon bologna and cheese throughout the six days of travel—much to the discomfort of his seat mates.—E. L. S.



PROOF

By H. A. WOODBURY

MA MCLEAN'S COWS WERE BEGINNING TO WEAR A STRANGE BRAND. AND FOREMAN SAM BARKER WAS SO CAUTIOUS ABOUT ACCUSING A CERTAIN PARTY THAT HIS FRIENDS BEGAN TO THINK HE WAS GUILTY HIMSELF. AND THEN, TO MAKE UP FOR LOST TIME, SAM KILLED TWO BIRDS WITH ONE STONE

SAM PARKER took the proffered seat on the wide, screened veranda. He accepted gratefully the tall glass of lemonade which Ma McLean had poured for him.

"Well, Ma," he exclaimed, "danged if it ain't good to see you back!"

The foreman of the Bar X spoke genuinely. His brown eyes softened with a little warmth. Ma McLean had mothered the ranch for so long that the past six months without her had given the boys a queer, lost feeling. Though it was only natural, of course, that she should have taken this six months' vacation. To have plunged into ranch routine immediately after the funeral of her husband would have been difficult. No one begrudged her her absence.

"And," said Ma, "danged if it ain't good to be back." She was fifty, perhaps, but tensely alive. Her mild blue eyes sparkled vibrantly as she looked into the bronzed, youthful face of her foreman.

"We was afraid," put in Sam, "maybe you was gonna sell out to that cousin that's been wantin' to buy the other half."

"Him!" said Ma scornfully. "Well, he's

caused me enough worry, all right." She did not immediately go into detail. "No, sir, Sam," she said, "I wouldn't of sold to nobody. This place's home to me. It's been home for thirty years." Her smile softened. "I was seventeen, Sam, an' as pretty as that little school teacher yore rushin', when Ike first come courtin'." For a second, her eyes grew slightly moist. She swept a handkerchief across her perspiring forehead.

Sam noticed the swift motion of the handkerchief.

"You mighta waited till October, though," he said; "pretty hot, steppin' into this here valley in the summer time—after you've been baskin' in sea breezes over Long Beach way."

Ma grimaced.

"When you spent as many summers in this here basin as I have, you git used to 'em. Besides, I had to come back. I got yore letter about them calves—er, gettin' lost."

Sam looked at her earnestly.

"DIDN'T want to alarm you, though," he said, "not many of 'em gettin' away. Not enough to be serious, anyways. We could of tended to that all right by

ourselves." He dismissed the subject lightly as if he had no wish to talk further about it.

"I know you could," acknowledged Ma, "but they's another thing, too. This here cousin's on his way out."

"Meanin' what?"

"Well," Ma went on, "he's owned half the ranch right along, jest like you know. Never would sell out, though dad an' me's offered him twice what his share was worth." She paused to pour another glass of lemonade. "All of which is within his rights if he wants to act that way. I ain't hankerin' to make him sell. But now he says he's comin' out here an' help manage. Says he don't figger a woman's got any business sense."

Sam set his lips.

Ma went on. "So when I heard that, I aimed to be here on the job. He ain't never been west of the Chicago River, an' they ain't no tellin' what trouble he can raise here. He's a'ready raised plenty, by the way."

Ma handed Sam a letter, "Read this."

Sam ran his eyes through an intensely legal looking document.

"Well," he said presently, "I ain't sure I git all them big words, but they's somethin' about the court's threat'nin' to put us in jail if we interferes with his exercisin' his rights."

Ma nodded.

"It's a injunction," she explained, "meanin' that if we don't treat him right, an' that if we don't let him do what he pleases to 'protect his rights,' we're in contempt of court, which means a fine er jail, er both."

Sam let his eyes travel out over the gaudy landscape. The ranch yard wilted in the late afternoon sun. The heat fell in a sizzling torrent mercilessly over the baked 'dobe outbuildings. Umbrella trees, stuck here and there, belied their name and offered a doubtful shade. The cottonwoods whose bright leaves drooped in the stillness were only a little more useful. It was summer, full-flung unbridled summer. Beyond, waves of heat curled up visibly from the low, rolling foothills which mounted in a series of bright, orange undulations, their rocky slopes dotted with

the faded, weather-beaten green of the giant sahuaro and the darker green of the spiked ocotilla.

"You mean," inquired Sam, after his moment's meditation, "that if we was to give him a rip-roarin', honest-to-goodness, oldtime, tenderfoot's welcome, he could send us to jail?"

Ma nodded.

"Jest that. That hombre's clever. He ain't takin' no chances of gittin' his feet shot at."

"Well then," demanded Sam, "if we can't run him off, what are we goin' to do?"

Ma answered his puzzled frown.

"That's what I come back to figger out," she said.

SAM drank the rest of his lemonade at a gulp. Excusing himself, he rose to saunter out into the ranch yard. He had hardly taken a couple of steps from the porch, however, when he saw Red coming toward him from the bunkhouse at a run.

"Hurry up, Sam," Red hailed him, "Jim Brady's been shot."

Sam wasted not a second. In an instant he was in the bunkhouse. Here he found an excited group gathered in one corner. Jim lay stretched on the bed while two of the men were bandaging a flesh wound in his shoulder.

The wounded man sat up a little as Sam came over.

"Well, Sam," he said, "reckon I found out who's doin' our rustlin'. It's Newt Turner's Flyin' M outfit." The boy's eyes were intensely earnest.

Sam took a seat beside him.

"Jest like we thought, then. You got proof?"

Jim patted his fresh wound.

"Ain't this shoulder proof enough?"

Sam gazed round at the group. The rest of the boys were girding themselves with artillery.

"Well," said Sam, "maybe it is, an' maybe it ain't. Tell me what happened."

The boy straightened himself up.

"I was ridin' over by La Barge Canyon," he said, "an' I thought I seen a little smoke jest up the box. Didn't take me

long to git to it, but I reckon I oughta been more cautious. First thing I knowed, I was shot. But I seen who done it. It was Juan Gonzales, that Mexican vaquero of the Flyin' M's. An' I seen why he shot an' lit out so quick. There was one of our cows tied up—an' not ten feet away, her calf, a fire, an' a runnin' iron."



Sam nodded.

"That's the way they been doin' it. Sneak thievin'—catchin' a calf in some outa the way place, slappin' their brand on it, an' then headin' it off to wean it in their corrals." Sam hesitated a moment. "Jest low-down sneak thievin'," he repeated, "they ain't even got guts enough to run a herd off. But any time they run across a lone cow in some likely place with a calf we ain't got round to brandin', they'll take a chance on puttin' their brand on first, an' then sneakin' it off till it fer-gits its ma."

The rest of the boys had by now finished arranging themselves.

"Comin'?" they demanded.

"JEST a minute," said Sam. He turned back to Jim. "It was a runnin' iron Juan had, you said. Well, Turner would be smart enough not to let one of his men git caught with a Bar X cow, an unbranded calf, an' a Flyin' M iron. But did you examine that there calf?"

Jim nodded.

"Juan hadn't got no mark on him yet. I'd interrupted him, you see, 'fore——"

"Jest like I was afraid of," cut in Sam. "Then we ain't got proof yet. If you'd a waited till he'd got a Flyin' M on that there calf, we'd have the goods on Turner. As 'tis, all we got's a charge against Juan. That's the way Turner works it. Cagey. A Flyin' M iron'd convict him. A running' iron don't convict nobody but the man that's got it. We can't prove, you know, that Jim was goin' to make a Flyin' M with that there runnin' iron."

Jim's eyes blazed.

"Proof, hell," he shouted, "Juan works fer Turner, don't he?"

Sam nodded thoughtfully.

"But I don't think the sheriff'd swear out a warrant with no more'n that to go on. What's to prevent Juan doin' his own rustlin'? Slappin' on some phoney brand?"

"Lots of things," said Jim, "we'd notice any phoney brand that was runnin' round this range. 'Cause them calves they're gittin' is too young to sell right away. Whatever calves is gittin' branded is spendin' a few weeks in Turner's corrals an' then is trottin' right back on this here range. An' they're only three brands here—all of 'em registered."

"Yes, but what's to prevent Juan's workin' that gag fer the Lazy A?" Sam demanded. "You could run a Lazy A with a runnin' iron jest as easy as a Flyin' M."

Jim snorted disgustedly.

"You know damn well what's to prevent it. The Lazy A shoots square."

Red's impatient voice interrupted the discussion.

"Sam, are you comin' or ain't you?"

Sam turned to the group.

"Fer what?"

"Why, you pore idiot, to take Turner an' his outfit in to the sheriff."

Sam drew himself up.

"Don't you see," he demanded, "we can't do that yet. We may be dead sure it's Turner, but we gotta have more proof."

Jim blazed up.

"Sam," he said, "a guy might almost think you was a friend of Turner's."

It was a nasty insult, the product, probably, of the pain in the boy's shoulder. Sam went pale under his tan. He kept his temper, however.

"Don't you see," he began quietly, "if we go ridin' over there an' they's a shootin' scrape, we can git Ma into a lot of trouble—that is, if it should turn out we was wrong?"

"But we ain't wrong," protested the boy, "we can't be."

"I DON'T think we are, either," acknowledged Sam, "but I'll put it another way. Suppose we couldn't prove we

was right? That's the same thing as bein' wrong, as fur's the law's concerned."

Another man lifted his voice excitedly. "Aw the hell with the law," he said, "the law's too slow."

Yet on the whole, Sam's words seemed to have made an impression.

Sam went on in a moment.

"They's another reason why we gotta keep in good with the law," he said slowly, "that cousin' of Ma's is comin' out here to try to prove she's managin' the ranch all wrong. If he could prove she'd got into trouble with Turner an' couldn't back up her claims, it'd be a feather in his hat. That's the real reason I wanta go easy."

Sam turned back to Jim.

"But we can git Juan arrested fer assault, an' fer ownin' a runnin' iron," he said, "an' if we git him threatened with a stiff enough sentence, maybe he'll squawk about Turner. So if Red an' a couple of you boys'll come along with me, we'll go git a warrant an' be sworn in as deputies. Then we'll amble over to the Flyin' M, an' arrest mister Señor Juan Gonzales."

IT WAS evening by the time Sam and his men approached the tumble-down group of buildings which sheltered Newt Turner's outfit. With 'dobe walls entirely collapsed, here and there, the shacks took on in the moonlight an almost ghostly appearance.

Newt Turner himself came out to greet them. He was a powerful man with a face reminiscent of the prize ring or the faro table, cold and hard.

"Yer too late fer chow," he greeted them inhospitably.

"We ain't come fer chow," said Sam. "We come to arrest

a vaquero of yourn. You'll save time an' trouble if you turn him over, pronto."

Newt demanded to see the warrant. He examined it carefully. Then he laughed.

"Funny thing," he said, "Juan quit this

afternoon. Took his wages, an' said he was going back to Mexico."

The man's ugly lips grinned in triumph. Sam answered his smile.

"We believe you, of course, Newt," he said, "but you don't mind if we look around a little—jest to—well, to satisfy the sheriff."

"Look all you want," laughed Newt.

IT WAS obvious enough that Turner was telling the truth in Juan's regard. Gonzales might very well have decided that the climate in Mexico was superior to that in Arizona. And Turner, no doubt, had been anxious enough to help him in that opinion. But the boys of the Bar X were anxious to look over the Flying M.

Newt hung close to the group in their tour of inspection.

As they turned one dark corner, there came to their ears, suddenly, the plaintive bawling of two or three calves.

Red turned abruptly to Newt.

"Ain't it expensive," he demanded, "keepin' them calves in a corral, an' weanin' 'em on hay? If your cows is so pore, you gotta wean the calves, I'd think you'd save money, jest blabbin' 'em, an' lettin' 'em stay on the range."

Blabbing a calf, incidentally, meant attaching a board to the calf's nose, in such a way as to permit grazing but prevent suckling. But, of course, a blabbed calf would have lingered near its mother. And a Bar X mother with a Flying M offspring would have been hard to explain.

Newt whirled to face Red.

"You ain't insinuatn' anything, are you?" he snapped. His eyes shone like a coyote's. His hand settled slowly toward his hip.

Red's hand settled with equal deliberation to his own hip.

"If the shoe fits, wear it," he said.

The air grew tense. For a second, the two men glowered, each awaiting a move from the other.

But Sam stepped suddenly between them.

"Forgit it, Red," he whispered.

So the matter dropped for the moment.

Sam and his men left, presently, with no sign of Juan.



"WELL," said Sam, as they jogged over the desert, "reckon we can't hope to pin it on Turner through Juan. Juan's safe the other side of the fence, if you ask me."

"Listen, Sam!" Red's voice suddenly cut like a knife. "Why didn't you let me have it out with Turner? I was ready to end our rustlin' in jest about two seconds."

"Or git pumped full of lead, yourself, instead," said Sam. "Turner's no slouch with a gun. If you'd started anything, more'n likely we'd all of us had to shoot our way outa there."

"Well," snapped Red, "would that of scairt you?"

Sam's lip quivered. But he controlled himself.

"I wasn't thinkin' of that, though, to tell the truth. I was thinkin' of you. Suppose you had got him? It ain't so easy to explain a killin' now's it used to be. With four of us there, an' jest him alone, you might of had a hard time convincin' a city jury that you shot in self defence. It'd be apt to look more like you'd taken him down there an' ambushed him."

But Red was not to be calmed by logic. His fiery nature was at fever heat.

"Sam," he went on, "if you ask me, it looks jest like Jim suggested this afternoon—that you're pretty friendly with Turner."

This time, the lash stung.

Sam's voice rose a dangerous octave.

"That's a remark that calls fer provin' with yer fists," he snapped.

He pulled up his pony and vaulted out of the saddle.

Without wavering, Red accepted the challenge.

A moment later, the two men, having cast aside sombreros, guns and chaps, faced each other with bare knuckles in the moonlight. About the same height and weight, they seemed as evenly matched as possible.

Red struck the first blow, catching Sam with a smarting slash in the face. He followed with a jarring right to the jaw.

But Sam, thoroughly aroused now, followed with a hail of rights and lefts which drove Red backward. His great arms

moved like windmill sails. Red, even though originally the aggressor, found himself powerless. He dropped suddenly to one knee, groggy and faint.

Sam, puffing hard, walked away. He climbed once more into his saddle.

"Take that back, Red?" he demanded curtly.

Red answered nothing for a second. Then, sullenly, he mumbled something about maybe being mistaken.

After a moment, he picked himself up, adjusted his dishevelled clothing, and got aboard his own horse.

The rest of the ride back to the Bar X was accomplished in silence.

BUT the next morning, tongues began to wag. Red and Jim put their heads together.

"Looks to me," repeated Jim, "like he was pretty anxious to see nobody got anything on Turner."

Another of the men wandered up.

"But remember what he said about Ma. With this cousin comin', we gotta be sure she's on the right side, if they're any rows."

Red faced Sam's defender.

"That makes a convenient alibi, jest now," he said. "But this here rustlin's



been goin' on fer some time, remember. An' Sam ain't done any too much to stop it."

"Nothin' much could be done," attested the newcomer, "jest sneak thievin' this-away. You can't put a guard over every cow that's got a calf."

"Well," said Jim, "you might keep cows from wanderin' into likely places."

The other man laughed. "On some ranges, maybe, but not on this here one. They's a million an' one little pockets an' canyons. You know yourself how hard it's been. You been ridin' every day jest like the rest of us. An' 'twarn't till yesterday you saw smoke an' run into Juan."

Jim nodded.

"But remember," he said, "we all of

us ride where Sam tells us to." His blue eyes gleamed as he delivered this broadside.

BY NOON, the constant argument caused by the fight had reached Ma's ears. She called a meeting in the bunkhouse.

"Now first of all," she said, drawing herself up regally, "I want you to understand I'm runnin' this here ranch, not Sam, an' not Red an' not Jim, nor anybody else. We've all lived happy fer a number o' years. An' if losin' a couple of calves, thisaway, is goin' to cause sech a row, I'm willin' to fergit 'em fer the sake of peace." She paused for breath. "From now on, everybody keeps hands off this rustlin'. I'll git a detective down from Tucson, an' turn that job over to him. But jest now I got a lot bigger job that none of you's helped with at all. Tomorrow night at ten, that cousin comes in on Number Two. Now jest tire yore brains on that one."

Having delivered this parting shot, she vanished. There was a precipitate hush in the bunk house.

Though actually, of course, the matter was not banished so easily. Accusations having been hurled back and forth so continuously, with demands to prove this or to prove that, the men went on thinking, dividing into two groups. The fight was hardly over.

Sam's group was the smaller one. He had his staunch supporters, but the men in general fell into line with Red and Jim. To them, Sam talked logically enough, to be sure. But, on the other hand, they recalled that it was the business of some men to talk glibly.

The men put their heads together. You didn't catch rustlers by talking. You caught them by acting. And Turner was guilty—guilty as all hell. Anybody could see that. What did it matter if they didn't quite have a case against him, if their actual information convicted only the escaped Juan? Sam's argument about the law— The men grinned. It came in very conveniently.

Though, of course you did have to figure the law to a certain extent, especially

since it was no longer administered by cattlemen, but was in the hands of those, who, if they weren't actually out of sympathy with the range, at least didn't quite understand it. Yes, you had to figure the law. Maybe Sam was only playing things safe to keep them all out of jail and to make Ma's management of the ranch meet the approval of the Eastern co-owner.

TWO of the men, however, did very little vacillating in their opinions. Jim still nursed a wounded shoulder which was to make his movements too stiff for working for several weeks. And Red remembered through a veil of rankling shame a shower of sharp blows which had forced him to eat his words.

No man enjoys being forced to retract. Subsequent logic or generosity may frequently cause a man to alter an opinion and admit a previous error, but a forced confession of error is seldom genuine. Nor can it be genuine, unless the man's beating came through cowardice instead of through overwhelming odds.

And Red was no coward. Sam had beaten him, fairly enough, to be sure. He had no false illusions, there. Yet, on the other hand, the remark which had prompted this beating returned again and again. And each time it assumed more important proportions. At the time, he had spoken more through anger than through conviction. He had repeated Jim's words with no especial thought of meaning them.

Now, however, he began to wonder whether a chance remark had, perhaps, hit the truth. He saw, of course, every reason against such an idea. Until this present matter had come up, Sam had administered his duties faithfully and in such a way that there had been unusually good feeling between foreman and men. It hardly stood to reason that he should forfeit all this to enable Turner to sneak off a half-dozen calves. The prize wasn't in proportion to the risk. It was like a bank cashier absconding with fifty dollars.

Nevertheless, the thought persisted, demanding proof one way or the other. Conflicting emotions in Red were such that when Sam set out alone the next afternoon Red resolved to follow him. Might not

prove anything, he realized. Probably wouldn't, as a matter of fact. But it struck him that there was something a little suspicious in Sam's get-away. He had saddled his pony before lunch and had leapt into the saddle as soon as the boys came out of chow.

Red kept, then, at a respectful distance as Sam set out across the desert. It was easy enough to do. At a walk, his pony made very little noise. And the country rolled so that it was nearly always possible to keep a rise between himself and the other rider. Also, as the hills gave way to flatter country, the mesquite and greasewood came to his aid. The name desert is frequently almost a misnomer. And here, at least, Red found sufficient green screen in the form of trees or bushes.

Red held his breath, finally. Sam's trail was unmistakable.

AND, very presently, he found himself nearing the Flying M's disorderly ranch yard. Here, he dared advance no further. But from the shelter of the feathery leaves of a mesquite he watched Sam ride into the enclosure.

Newt Turner came out to meet him.

And as Sam swung off his pony, Red



heard Sam say: "Well, Newt, old man, I've got some news that might interest you."

With that, the two men went over to the porch to converse in tones which failed to carry. But the upshot of their conversation was that they parted, shaking hands.

Sam once more climbed into his saddle.

And Red beheld him set off in a direction which would take him to town.

Red himself reined his pony back toward the Bar X, a bit jarred, as a matter of fact, at what he had just witnessed.

He had hardly expected to find such

complete vindication of his suspicions. And now that he had found it, he was not altogether certain whether he was happy or not. After all, Sam had been a good boss, better than most.

He did not at once confide his information, even to Jim.

When Ma inquired as to Sam's absence from dinner, Red was forced to tell her what had taken place in the afternoon.

"Red," she said, "I don't believe it. You musta been dreamin'."

He shook his head solemnly.

"I wish I had been," he said.

"Well," said Ma, "I'll shore hate to fire him. Danged if I won't." She drew a long breath. "But let's fergit that till he shows up. I got other things on my mind, jest now. Go hitch up the buckboard, will you?"

Red set off to obey.

Ma called after him. "We gotta meet that train at ten o'clock, you know."

Red grinned suddenly.

"Why don't you let this-here cousin walk out to the ranch?"

Ma shook her head.

"Maybe," she suggested, "he could use that there injunction, if I did." She laughed suddenly, "Naw, as ornery a critter as he is, I'll be nice to him. Only I could be a lot nicer, if he'd jest stay East an' be content to bank my check fer his profits, every year."

A LITTLE before ten, then, Ma accompanied by Red and a couple of the other boys sat in the buckboard awaiting the arrival of Number Two. The moonlight fell over a rambling frame station painted an unimaginative yellow. The long brick platform dozed in the shade of half a dozen china-berry trees. It was summer night, soft and balmy. A summer day in the Southwest may be a blistering ordeal. But Arizona night is nature's recompense. Once a man has glimpsed moonlight on the desert, he realizes that his wanderings are over—that he has found home.

Conversation for the moment centered on Sam.

"I don't quite understand it," Ma repeated.

But conversation came almost at once to an abrupt end as half a dozen riders suddenly dashed up to the other end of the platform at a mad lope. Shouting, cursing, they swung off their horses.

"Who is it?" Ma demanded.

Red shook his head.

"Can't see from here," he said, "prob'ly a bunch of drunken punchers come down to watch the limited pull in. Only," he added, "that's sorta lost its kick fer most of us, the past few years."

Anything further he might have had to say was drowned out in the shriek of a locomotive whistle. And a moment later a cone of light brought the station into such a blinding glare, that Red, looking against the light, was less able than ever to make out the identity of the group at the other end of the platform.

"Jest on time," he commented to Ma.

The train drew to a long, grinding halt.

"We'll wait here," said Ma, "till he gits off. I don't aim to do no more walkin' than I have to."

They watched intently as the porter at the far end put off several bags. Then they beheld a man of about thirty-five descend. Faun colored spats adorned his ankles. He carried a cane debonairly on the arm of his checked suit.

"Oh, my gosh," groaned Red, "an' you say we can't even throw him in the horse trough?"

Ma shook her head.

"That there injunction's got us hog-tied, hand and foot, Red."

The newcomer lifted his voice imperiously.

"Here you, boy," he called, addressing the punchers at the far end, "I want service. Get me a taxi. I'm going to the Bar X ranch, and——"

His next words were drowned out in a sudden volley of curses.

FROM the buckboard, Ma and Red looked on open-mouthed as the riders down below suddenly encircled her cousin. There were oaths, blows, and more oaths. One of the punchers was tossing the cousin's bags back on the train. Another was shouting, "we won't hurt you, this time. But if you ever show yer face

here again, you'll git pumped full of lead."

A moment later, and the punchers were heaving their torn and dishevelled victim after his bags. Number Two pulled out, carrying Ma's cousin on to California.

Ma and Red gulped, scarcely able to believe what they had witnessed. The miracle had been so swift, so complete.

"Well," said Ma, after a long breath, "he'll prob'ly like it better in Pasadena, anyways. But who do you suppose——"

Voices were again drowned out, this time by shots.

"By gosh," exclaimed Red, "that's the sheriff an' a bunch of deputies comin' to arrest them guys! Seems like we oughta help 'em after the favor they done us." He stopped short. "An'—— Why look! Sam's ridin' as a deputy!"

Almost at the same moment, Sam shouted toward the buckboard.

"Come on, Red—Bill, Curly—you guys," he called. "If you're hankerin' after action, here's where we git it!"

Red remained rooted to the spot.

Shots were now zipping in all directions.

Sam's voice came again with a commanding ring. "Red, you git Ma inside, and then come help clean up them rustlers."

Abruptly, Red understood. Or rather he understood in part. He saw simply that the punchers who had beaten up Ma's cousin were Newt Turner's outfit.

How or why, he did not stop to consider.

Emitting a wild coyote shriek of joy, he called to Bill and Curly. His call was unnecessary. Bodily they carried Ma into the station. And a moment later they were in the ranks of the sheriff's outfit, besieging Newt's men who had taken refuge amid the scattered freight farther down the platform.

Side by side, now, Red and Sam sent their shots crashing into the tumbled bar-



ricade of merchandise. Or, side by side, they exchanged grins as an answering shot missed one or the other by inches.

THERE were, however, very few shots fired. When Newt's men saw the size of their opposition, they surrendered, coming forward with hands raised.

The sheriff faced Newt.

"Well, Turner," he said, "you an' yer gang's under arrest. For assault in the first place. Beatin' up that there pore man. Also fer resistin' arrest. An' last but not least fer rustlin'. After you all left the Flyin' M, we went over yer place, an' we found runnin' irons in yer equipment. An' I guess some o' them calves in the corral might still know their own mothers if we was to turn 'em loose."

Turner had come forward, hands above his head.

He whirled now to face Sam, his features distorted.

"Why you dirty, low-lived——" he began. One hand dropped with lightning accuracy to his hip.

A flash of flame stabbed the night.

But the flash was not from Turner's gun; it was from Red's.

Turner dropped, wounded.

Sam strode over to Red. "Thanks, old man," he said simply. The two men shook hands.

"An' now," said Red, "now that the shootin's over, maybe you'll explain. I reckon I'm thick-headed, but some things has moved a little too fast fer me."

"Just as soon as we git Ma," agreed Sam.

But Ma had already joined them.

"You see," said Sam, "I got to worryin' an' worryin' 'bout this here cousin comin', an' 'bout that injunction preventin' us from givin' him the bum's rush like he deserved. But it occurred to me they warn't nothin' in that injunction to prevent somebody *else* urgin' him to drift." He grinned. "Git me?"

Red scratched his head.

"Can't say I do—quite," he admitted.

Sam's grin widened.

"Well," he went on, "that bein' the case, I ambles over to Turner's this afternoon. Told him I'd been fired an' was sore at

the outfit. He believed it, you see, 'cause he'd heard about my scrap with you, Red, an' about most of the boys turnin' agin me. So with him believin' that, I added that Ma'd sent to Tucson fer a detective, which was true enough. An' then I said somebody was arrivin' on the ten o'clock train tonight." Sam smiled. "I didn't say it was the detective, but if Turner wanted to think it was, I didn't urge him to go easy when he said he'd tend to him.

"THEN I went in an' talked turkey to the sheriff. Asked him if Newt's attackin' a man he thought was a detective'd be enough to pin that rustlin' on him. He said he thought it would be. But jest to make doubly sure, we searched the Flyin' M as soon as that gang pulled out, an' found runnin' irons. You see," Sam added, "I wanted to go slow, so Turner'd come out an' declare himself. An' he shore done it."

Red hung his head.

"Gosh," he said, "an' me half thinkin'——"

"Fergit it," Sam cut him off. "We was all of us tryin' to help Ma, only we done it different ways."

Ma nodded in approbation.

"An' now we're all friends again."

TWO days later, Ma called in Sam and Red for a conference.

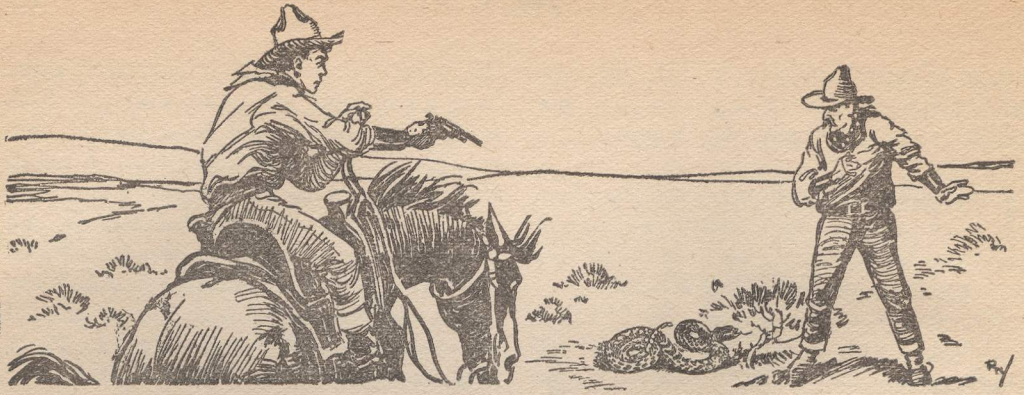
"I got a letter from this cousin—in California," she said, "an' he says he's telegraphed the sheriff to use that injunction agin us——"

Sam's jaw dropped.

"But how," he began, "I thought——"

Ma smiled.

"You ain't heard it all, though. He goes on to say that the sheriff tells him it warn't us that cleaned up on him. So he says if the country's as wild as all that, he reckons he'll stay in Pasadena, an' buy a orange grove, instead—that is, if I'll buy him out, so's he'll have money enough." She smiled. "I could buy him out if I wanted to, but it jest occurred to me that you two boys has got some money saved. An' if that ain't enough I'll lend you some more. How'd you two like to buy into the Bar X?"



VIA NEFARIOUS JONES

By ALBERT WILLIAM STONE

NEFARIOUS JONES, AS TOUGH AS CASE HARDENED STEEL, AS UNYIELDING AS WEATHER-SHRUNK RAWHIDE, HAD SWORN REVENGE ON THAT ORNERY, MURDERING LOBO, SURE SHOT FORTUNE. YET THE REVENGE DID NOT WORK OUT IN JUST THE SURE-FIRE WAY ONE WOULD HAVE EXPECTED IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD OF THE LAZY Z RANCH AND THE RIOTOUS TOWN OF SOAP WEED

THE first meeting between Nefarious Jones and "Sure Shot" Fortune, the killer, occurred in the public horse corral just outside the town of Soap Weed. It occurred to the tune of barking six-guns and thick growls from the throat of Sure Shot, who was rather more than half drunk and therefore underestimated by Nefarious. Sure Shot's prowess with a forty-five was in no wise impaired by his indulgence in red-eye; and when the smoke of battle cleared away there lay Nefarious, too badly punctured even to curse, his mahogany-colored countenance turned up to the sky and a red stain on the front of his shirt.

When he regained a semblance of consciousness he discovered that somebody was giving him first aid. That somebody was a boy apparently about seventeen years old; an eager-eyed boy, sharp of feature, thin to the point of emaciation, ragged as to clothes. A boy who might have been handsome if he had more meat on his frame.

He was washing the hole in Nefarious' chest with water he'd dipped out of the horse trough. Nefarious breathed with difficulty; a dull haze was over his vision, so that he could not make out the boy's fea-

tures very clearly. Save for these two, the horse corral was deserted of human occupancy, it being the time of day when travelers were all in town.

"He—got me," grunted Nefarious faintly.

"You're gonna be all right," the boy assured him. He worked industriously at the cleansing job. "Think you can get up now—if I help you?"

"Oughta—git—back to the—ranch." Nefarious was astonishingly weak, considering the normal toughness of his body. The boy straightened up and looked around the corral. His eyes were blue.

"They's a buckboard over there," he said. "I can hitch a pair o' brons up to it."

"Go to it," groaned Nefarious, and promptly slid back into insensibility.

IT WAS an hour and a half later that he came to the second time. He was lying between sheets, and presently made out that he was in one of the bedrooms of the Lazy Z ranch-house. Old Man Rawkins, the owner, was bending over him anxiously. Nefarious was by way of being an old friend of Old Man Rawkins.

"I've sent for Doc White," the rancher said. "He'll be out in two jerks. Hang on,

Nefarious. You're a long ways from bein' a dead man yet."

Nefarious realized afterward that he had felt peculiarly detached from it all. There was a pain deep down in his chest, to be sure, but so faint was it that it might have been in somebody else's chest. He seemed to be looking at Old Man Rawkins through a long tunnel, at the other end of which the rancher's countenance danced and leered. The walls of the ranch-house might have been miles away.

He sank into a coma, and aroused to find Doc White's ancient whiskers hovering over him. Doc did things to his chest—things that ordinarily would have started personal hostilities then and there. But Nefarious cared not at all. He even went to sleep in the midst of the probing, or thought that he did. In reality he plunged a long, long way down into the valley of the shadow, dimly conscious of voices that floated through the gloom and caressed his unheeding ears.

"Close call," he heard, in a voice he vaguely recognized as Doc White's. "Nasty hole" was another statement that came his way. Then, "Boy's all right. Saved his life—if he lives."

If he lives!

Something stirred the lethargy into which Nefarious had slipped. He began to wrestle his way back to the consciousness that he thought he had abandoned for good. He had to live, he knew. There was something that needed to be done, for one thing. The snarling countenance, the thick oaths of the man who had shot him—what about him? He *must* live!

THE struggling upward process was a hard one, involving terrible effort and incredible pain. His chest seemed to be on fire. The snarling, bearded face of the man who had shot him danced continually before his mind's eye; a mocking face, lightened with a pair of evil eyes and topped with a shock of greasy hair. Nefarious groaned with a mighty reaching downward for strength, and opened his eyes.

Two cowboys were in the room, in addition to Old Man Rawkins and Doc White. And—yes, there was the kid, too, cowering

over in a far corner and watching the bed with scared eyes. Nefarious grinned a ghastly grin.

"Don't worry none," he said to no one in particular. He could scarcely hear his own voice; but Old Man Rawkins nodded, and the kid's blue eyes gleamed suddenly. "Don't worry—none." He tried to draw a long breath, touched the spring of a hidden pain infinitely worse than any he had yet experienced, and let it slip again. "I'm—gonna—live."

This time when he closed his eyes Doc White grunted with satisfaction.

"He's asleep," he reported. "Let him sleep all he wants to. Do him good."

"The danged old rawhide!" he heard the rancher exclaim. Then he faded away into a blissful unconsciousness, with his vague plans for a ruthless revenge left unformed in the nethermost depths of his subconscious mind.

When he awoke the pain in his chest did not reach quite so deep. He twisted his long body experimentally, found that he could do it, and by degrees turned over. Seeing no one, he essayed a call. Old Man Rawkins came hurrying in.

"Where's the Kid?"

"Who—that boy?"

"Yeah."

"He took that team o' bronses and the buckboard back to Soap Weed. It belongs to Sid Heather."

"He comin' back here?"

"Didn't say," said the rancher. "Why?"

"Cause he's gotta come back," insisted the wounded man. His voice was astonishingly weak. "He's—gotta."

"All right," the Old Man hastened to agree. "Just as you say, Nefarious. Reckon I can find work for him somewhere."

"Pay him out o' my wages if yuh want to."

"Sure. How you feeling?"

Nefarious stirred, just to see if he could do it.

"G o o d enough," he returned, "to be on Sure Shot Fortune's trail inside of a



couple o' weeks." There was indescribable venom in his tone, and poison in his eyes. "Good enough to travel from here to hell and back, if I have to."

HIS recovery was slow; for the bullet from Sure Shot Fortune's deadly gun had gone very deep indeed. Nefarious Jones willed to recover, however, and recover he did. The thing was inevitable, to anyone who knew Nefarious. He was a gentleman who subscribed literally to the Bible Doctrine, "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." He had lived to reach middle age through a tumultuous youth, sign-boarded liberally with gun-spouting incidents. He was as tough as case-hardened steel, as unyielding as weather-shrunk rawhide.

As soon as he was able he bestrode a horse and rode into Soap Weed, where he fraternized grimly with certain associates and made elaborately casual inquiry after Sure Shot Fortune, only to learn that Sure Shot had disappeared the day of the shooting in the corral at the edge of town. At Belmont's livery stable he learned that his horse, in the saddle of which he had been seated a moment before Sure Shot began shooting, had disappeared also. That the two had gone away together was obvious. Nefarious Jones uttered no audible threat, but in good time fared back to the ranch-house of the Lazy Z and ate a reasonably hearty supper. The next morning he announced himself as ready for duty.

The Kid, he found, had been detailed to attend to sundry light duties about the ranch, such as mending small breaks in fences, greasing leather trappings, etc. The Kid was taking on flesh. That he had not been eating regularly enough to keep the wrinkles out of his belly, prior to his meeting with Sure Shot's victim, was obvious. But Old Man Rawkins fed his hands generously, and with solid provender. The Kid owned an impressive appetite, as is apt to be the case with seventeen-year-old, growing boys in the cow country.

"What's yore name?" Nefarious Jones asked him, the first day of his resumption of active labor.

"Smith," the Kid answered after some

hesitation. Nefarious stared at him keenly. He knew the kid was lying. Why?

"Where yuh from?"

"From—Texas."

"Huh. Texas's a right sizable state. Come from the Big Bend country myself."

"I come from below San Antone."

"What——"

Nefarious caught himself. If the Kid wanted to keep his identity a secret, whose business was it but his own? He rolled a cigarette with a hand that still trembled considerably, and lighted up.

"You done me a good turn, Kid." There was gratitude in his voice, gruff as it was. "I won't forget it."

"Aw, I didn't do anything," protested the Kid bashfully.

"Yuh done enough. I'm here, which I wouldn't be if you hadn't come to the front, Kid." Nefarious removed the cigarette and blew his nose. "When I let daylight through that skunk of a Sure Shot"—rage flashed in Nefarious' eyes for a brief instant—"I——"

He did not finish the sentence.

THE attachment between the Kid and Nefarious grew noticeably as the days went on. Nefarious gained in strength steadily, until he was to all intents and purposes the same healthy cowman he had always been. He always wore a gun; now he began to practice with it considerably, something he had not done for some years. He bought several boxes of cartridges and used them up, one by one, shooting at various still and moving targets.

Nefarious had never been a garrulous individual, but he became positively taciturn after his recovery. His bronzed face was set like a mask, lightening up only when the Kid was around. And even the Kid was not always successful in breaking down his taciturnity.

It was some two months after the affair in the Soap Weed corral that the Kid piled up the score in his favor by again saving Nefarious from what might have been a fatal accident. A huge rattlesnake, not less than four and a half feet in length and as thick through its ugly body as a small man's arm, was the cause.

Nefarious and the Kid were riding

over a hilly part of the Lazy Z range and had come to a prairie dog village on the side of a knoll when it happened. They had been detailed by Old Man Rawkins to search out several groups of cattle in distant gulches and drive them back toward the home ranch, in order to facilitate the circle drive when it started with the fall roundup.

Everybody knows that rattlesnakes frequently infest the holes of prairie dogs. This village was no exception. Nefarious' horse snorted as they approached the knoll and began to rear. With a quick oath Nefarious sank his spurs into the animal's flanks, and the horse plunged forward. The next instant it reared almost straight up, in such fashion that the only possible thing for the rider to do was to slide out of the saddle to escape being crushed.

The rattler was coiled almost under the spot where Nefarious landed on the ground. Its angry whirr mingled with the snort of the frightened horse. The queer, half-sick feeling precipitated by the sinister sound in every human consciousness instantly assailed the cowman, and he looked down at the squirming body and flat, three-cornered head with its lidless, glittering eyes, momentarily struck into frozen immobility.

That the snake could with ease sink its deadly fangs into the cowman's leg above the tops of the short boots was obvious. That it would do so was indicated by the height at which the ugly head was waving above the coiled body. Nefarious knew the futility of any movement what-



ever; the reptile would strike at the precise instant he abandoned his frozen posture. The horse had already sprung out of harm's way; the rattler's slimy black tongue was darting in and out of its wide open mouth in a fashion horrid to behold.

The threatened man did not dare draw his gun. Not so the Kid, however. In considerably less time than it takes to tell it he had jerked his weapon, leveled it at the

coiled body and pulled the trigger. His horse was dancing at the smell of the snake but the shot went true. The headless body of the reptile uncoiled and began to thrash about in the sand, black blood spouting from the severed neck.

NEFARIOUS managed to recapture his frightened horse a quarter of a mile distant and remounted. He was trembling with the reaction, a certain sign that he had not yet entirely recovered from his recent wound.

"This puts me pretty far in with yuh, Kid," he said presently. "Makes twice yuh've done it. You're all right."

Again the Kid disclaimed any credit.

"You kin shore use a six-gun, too," Nefarious went on admiringly. "Doggoned if that wasn't a real shot, Kid. Where'd yuh learn to handle a shootin' iron like that?"

"Aw, I ain't so much of a shot," the Kid protested. "You kin beat me all hollow."

The grateful wrinkles around Nefarious' eyes disappeared, and hard lines showed themselves at the corners of his mouth.

"Didn't look like it, way that skunk of a Sure Shot Fortune beat me to it," he asserted.

They rode in silence for the next ten minutes, while Nefarious was busy with his plans for revenge. Then, quite suddenly, the Kid spoke.

"You—better not," he said.

"Better not what?"

"Why, what you been sayin' about—about Sure Shot Fortune."

Nefarious stiffened in the saddle.

"Better not *talk* about him, yuh mean?"

The Kid's reserve went by the board. "Listen, Mr. Jones," he begged. He never, by any chance, addressed his friend by the sobriquet that had fastened itself to him a generation before. "Don't figger on gettin' even with Sure Shot. He's bad, I tell yuh. He's awful bad."

"How do you know?"

"Didn't I see what he done to you?" The Kid shuddered, and Nefarious laughed. It gave him a warm feeling down around the region of his heart to know

that the Kid felt that way about him. But he shook his head.

"You ain't seen what I'm gonna do to him," he retorted.

They rode in silence for another five minutes before the Kid spoke again.

"You said the other day," he said, "that I'd—done you a—good turn. Didn't yuh?"

"Well, what of it?" Nefarious was growing suspicious. If this Kid thought he was going to drop his plans for reprisal he had another think coming; that was all.

"I'm askin' yuh"—the Kid choked a little, and swallowed convulsively—"to promise not to git into no mixup with Sure Shot. I'm askin' yuh!"

Nefarious reined in and looked the youth straight in the eye.

"Look here, Kid," he said kindly. "I reckon I know how yuh feel. Maybe I wasn't a very inspirin' sight, back there in the Soap Weed corral. Guess maybe it was a pretty tough sight for a kid to look at. But that ain't no reason——"

"I'm askin' yuh!"

The Kid was almost tearfully insistent about it. Nefarious considered. He owed the Kid a lot. That rattler meant business. The Kid had qualified as a cool, accurate shot. Maybe he was entitled to a hearing.

"Oh, well," he said finally, "if that's the way yuh feel about it, all right."

"Yuh promise not to mix up with Sure Shot?"

"I promise not to go gunnin' for him, if that's what yuh mean."

WITH that the Kid had to be satisfied. From then on the bond between them seemed to grow stronger than ever. The Kid slept in the bunk just above Nefarious, having induced Slim Corson, the wrangler, to trade with him. The other members of the Lazy Z outfit laughed at the Kid's aggressive way of showing his regard. He was growing hard as nails, physically, but softer than ever where Nefarious Jones was concerned.

"Reckon it must be because he saved Nefarious that time Sure Shot punctured him," Slim Corson remarked to Skinny Mullins, one of the top hands. "Feels like he's sort o' responsible for Nefarious."

"The Kid's all right," retorted Skinny

warmly. "Wouldn't mind havin' a good kid on my trail thataway. Make a feller feel his responsibilities."

"It's about time Nefarious had a few, at that. The ol' maverick's been runnin' wild long enough. Oughta git married."

"He's too old an' ugly, now. Who'd marry a hunk o' dried out rawhide like him?"

The Kid's affection was, to tell the truth, more or less embarrassing for Nefarious; but he gave no sign. The Kid was developing into a first class cowhand, despite his youth, and the fact was due in large part to the rigid training his middle-aged friend was giving him. Old Man Rawkins raised his wages twice, and promised that the following season he saw no reason why the Kid should not be drawing the regulation forty a month.

THE beef roundup season arrived, and for several weeks the outfit worked steadily at circle riding, bunching, roping, branding, cutting and all the other manifold activities of cowmen at such times. The Kid became an expert horseman and roper. Nefarious Jones saw to that. He taught his young protege all he knew, which was not inconsiderable. The last work on the roundup was completed late in August, and the last "rep" took his departure.



Several of the Lazy Z hands drew their time and left to enjoy the venturesome uncertainties of chuck line for a spell. The ventures started with sundry carousals in Soap Weed, in which summer wages vanished like smoke under the assault of a stiff breeze.

With the cessation of hard work, Nefarious and the Kid went to town occasionally, where Nefarious engaged in a few unpretentious games of draw poker and emerged with more money than he entered with. Nefarious was no saint, and didn't especially care who knew it. But the Kid had the effrontery to take him to task about it.

"Gamblin' is bad," he declaimed. Nefarious looked at him.

"Now you looky here, Kid," he said sternly. "We ain't in Sunday School, are we? An' if we was, you ain't my Sunday School teacher. You 'tend to yore own business. What do you know about gamblin' anyhow? You ain't nothin' but a kid."

"I know enough," replied the Kid darkly.

The cowman studied him. He ought to know more about this youth, he reflected. A boy was different from a man.

"Learn it down in Texas?"

The Kid swallowed.

"I didn't come from Texas," he confessed. "Traveled through there some, but——"

"Down around San Antone?"

"Never seen San Antone."

The Kid admitted it doggedly, and Nefarious drew his mahogany countenance down into stern lines.

"Then yuh lied to me," he accused.

"If I did, it was my own business," flared the Kid. "Ain't nobody got any right to ask about my past."

THE next moment, however, he had seized Nefarious by the arm in agony of remorse. "I didn't mean that, exactly," he said. "I'm plumb sorry, Mr. Jones. But you better leave gamblin' alone jest the same. That's where so much shootin' happens."

So that was it. Nefarious grinned quietly, secretly gratified. The Kid didn't want him to get into any more shooting scrapes. Doggone it all, this havin' a kid trailin' a man's actions all the time had its drawbacks; nevertheless the warm glow around the heart of Nefarious quickened pleasurably.

"I'll be careful," he promised. Seemed like he was always promising this insistent Kid something. "I'll look out for myself."

Fall drew on, and winter was in the offing. The cattle began to show a disposition to keep closer to the home ranch, where huge stacks of feeding hay dotted the broad valley, each stack surrounded with barbed wire fence. Snow might come at any time now, and the hay would then be pitched over the fence by the cow

hands. There was a chill in the air. The brilliant colors of autumn were fading noticeably. The bright yellow of the aspens on the mountain sides had disappeared entirely, and only the dull green of the pines, spruces and cedars relieved the dull monotony of the landscape.

Fire burned nightly in the bunk house stove, and the heat felt good. Saturday night sorties to town became the regular thing. Weekly dances were given at the school house, where a battered square piano supplied the music and the shuffling of booted feet almost drowned out the tin-panny notes. Belmont's livery stable sheltered scores of cow ponies, and the Green Light Saloon did a land office business. The cow country was more nearly at leisure than at any other time of the year.

The Kid was growing positively good looking these days. The other members of the outfit bantered Nefarious about it.

"One o' these times he'll come up missin'," Curly Deever told him. "I seen half a dozen gals makin' eyes at him at the dance last week. The Kid'll fall some day; you see."

"Let him fall, then." Nefarious professed a vast disdain, which he was far from feeling. The Kid had a tight hold on his heart-strings by now. "I reckon that's his business."

"Wait 'til he elopes with one of these young heifers," jeered Curly. "You'll go cryin' around here like a cow that's lost her calf."

"If I do," retorted Nefarious, "it won't be no skin off'n yore nose!"

But the shot told just the same. The Kid *was* growing good looking. He had curly brown hair and very blue eyes; eyes that had a habit of widening when the Kid was interested or surprised. He also had a shapely mouth and white, even teeth. The glow of perfect health had reddened his cheeks, now tanned a deep brown where they were not flushed with crimson.

NEFARIOUS took to keeping closer tab on his protege, striving to appear elaborately unconcerned with the Kid's movements. He hadn't attended a dance in many years; now he began to appear at them, usually remaining in the background

and watching the festivities with a jaundiced eye. The eager regard of the girls did not escape him. He grunted in assumed disgust which was more than half trepidation. The Kid had sense, he told himself doggedly; he wouldn't fall for one of those designing young females. Women, he growled inwardly, were never satisfied without they had some unsuspecting member of the opposite sex dangling at the end of a string.

And the Kid was hardly less earnest with reference to the well being of Nefarious. They rode to town together, and they rode home together, their mounts' noses more often than not in intimate juxtaposition. They put their horses in the livery stable together.

Under the Kid's insistent protests, Nefarious gradually grew to eschewing the society of the Green Light Saloon. If he went there at all he seldom took a drink, and almost never engaged in a game of poker. He even took to getting periodical haircuts and shaves at Raines' barber shop, more because his wages were accumulating embarrassingly than for any other reason. His associates accused him of saving his money for the Kid's marriage dower, and he invited them, one and all, to go to a place hotter than any they had ever thus far visited.

RUMORS that Sure Shot Fortune was heading toward Soap Weed made their appearance early in the winter. Nefarious Jones heard the news without visible reaction, save a slight tightening of his



lips and jaw muscles. Sure Shot was that kind of a man; besides, no one place would tolerate him more than a few weeks at a time,

and the time would inevitably come when he would have made the rounds, and would perforce have to start over again.

The rumors did not escape the attention of the Kid. He spoke to Nefarious about it. One would have gathered that he was

almost frightened at the possibility that the two might come together.

"If he comes, we'll stay on the ranch," he confided to Nefarious. "That'll be the way to handle it."

But Nefarious drew the line there.

"I've promised you I wouldn't mix in with the dirty coyote," he told the Kid. "An' I won't. But I ain't stayin' on no ranch on his account. No, sir. Want folks should say I was afraid of him?"

"I don't care what folks say!" cried the Kid. "He's bad, I tell you. He's *awful* bad. I don't want you an' him even to see each other."

"Huh!" grunted Nefarious. "He got the drop on me that time because I wasn't payin' attention like I should." The outcome of the shooting in the corral was, to tell the truth, a constant thorn in the flesh of Nefarious. "Thought he was too drunk to shoot straight."

"When he's drunk, he can shoot straighter than when he's sober."

"That so?" Nefarious glanced keenly at the Kid. "How come you know so much about it?"

The Kid swallowed. "Didn't I see the way he pulled down on you? Just like a rattler strikin'. Just like that. We both better stay on the ranch if he comes to town."

"Look here." Nefarious grabbed the Kid by the shoulders and looked him squarely in the eye. "You ain't actin' jest right about this Sure Shot thing, Kid. You shore ain't. I'm plumb ashamed o' you, way you're carryin' on. Like an old woman; that's what you're actin' like. Like a snivelin' old woman. What's got into yuh?"

"I don't want you to get hurt again."

But the Kid wouldn't look Nefarious in the eye when he said it, and the old cowman shook him a little.

"That won't go down," he asserted. "You know dam' well I can take care of myself, Kid, when it comes to a showdown. Sure Shot got the drop on me before——"

"He'll kill you next time, sure!" exclaimed the Kid, almost in a panic. "I tell you he's bad, clear through. You—you gotta keep out of his way!"

NEFARIOUS dropped his hand from the other's shoulders.

"I want you should tell me jest what you saw, that time in the corral," he commanded.

The Kid told him, hesitatingly. Sure Shot had come staggering into the corral, he said, apparently looking for his horse. He was preparing to depart from Soap Weed at the time. He saw Nefarious and began to hurl drunken maledictions at the Lazy Z man. Nefarious had paid only scant attention until the gunman called him an especially opprobrious name.

"Then you went after your gun," the Kid recited.

"I did. I remember that much." His journey down into the valley of the shadow had left Nefarious hazy on the events immediately preceding the shooting.

"But Sure Shot was a little mite faster. You both shot together, looked like. Then—you went down on your face."

"An' what did Sure Shot do?"

"He kicked you, once. Then he jumped into your saddle and galloped away."

"Kicked me," repeated Nefarious grimly. "Jest like a yellow coward of a killer, at that. Well, I reckon I didn't know it."

"You didn't," agreed the Kid eagerly. "You were plumb out, Mr. Jones." He shuddered. "He's bad, clear through; that's what he is. You gotta stay away from him!"

But Nefarious didn't, however good his intentions might be. He and the Kid rode to Soap Weed the following Saturday afternoon, as usual, parting at the public corral while the Kid went to the general store to make some personal purchases, and Nefarious pulled down some hay in the rack. It was a pleasant day, and shelter in the livery stable was unnecessary.

Nefarious recalled that something had been said about the Kid hiding behind this same hay rack, the day of the shooting. What had he been doing there in the first place? Where had the Kid come from, anyway? Who was he?

NEFARIOUS strode down Main Street, thinking hard. The heels of his short boots clicked on the plank side-

walk as he walked. Several cow ponies were standing before the rack of the Green Light Saloon, and sounds of revelry came through the swing doors. The Green Light was doing business as usual. Nefarious hesitated before the swing doors; then, running his hand over the stubble on his chin, he crossed the street to where the faded striped pole stood in front of Raines' barber shop. He would get a needed haircut and shave.

Raines, the barber, stretched him out in the chair and tucked the end of an all-enveloping apron under his chin. He worked up a thick lather and began to smear it over the cowman's leathery face; when he had rubbed it in thoroughly he produced his razor, stropped it and made an experimental scrape over the exposed side of Nefarious' cheek.

"Pull any?" he inquired.

"Not any worse'n usual," Nefarious mumbled through the smother of lather that covered his mouth.

The shaving process occupied fifteen minutes. There was no one else in the barber shop. Suddenly the barber straightened up and stared through the window.

"There's that Kid friend o' yours," he announced. "Headin' into the Green Light. Must be lookin' for you."

"He is," mumbled Nefarious. "He'll be out in a minute when he finds out I ain't there. Call him over when he comes out, will yuh?"

The barber grinned behind his customer's back, but Nefarious saw the grin in the fly-specked mirror.

"An' if yuh think it's so all-fired funny," he began, "I——"

The barber uttered a sudden exclamation. Something in his expression gave Nefarious pause.

"What is it?"

"That Kid!" the barber breathed. "He—hell!"

With a spasmodic movement Nefarious jerked the enveloping cloth from his neck



sprang out of the chair, landing on the floor like a rubber ball.

His eyes took in the scene in front of the Green Light in one swift appraisal. Without further pause he yanked open the door, jumped through it and was half way across the street before he could get his gun out.

He fired one shot from the hip. The bullet clipped a heel neatly from the right boot of a man whose back was toward him; a thick-shouldered man whose greasy hair shone in the sunlight as it hung down on his neck; a man whose broad back and thick legs betokened enormous muscular development.

The man was standing on that foot as Nefarious' shot roared. The other was raised to repeat a kick he had just landed on the form of the Kid, who had been knocked sprawling with the force of it. With the unexpected loss of the sustaining heel the man lost his balance and stumbled to one side.

Cursing volubly, he regained his equilibrium and whirled like a cat. Nefarious' gun smoked at his hip. The other made a movement as if to draw his own gun; then, quite suddenly, he raised his thick arms above his head.

"That's right," Nefarious approved grimly. His eyes glittered as he watched. "Took you a long time to come back, Sure Shot, but I see you're here. What's the idea, kickin' that boy?"

THE gunman's little eyes, twin points of evil, darted about as if seeking a means of escape. His heavy jowls hung down from his neck like a swine's.

"He needs kickin'," he growled. "He needs——"

"Well, he won't get any more of it from you, Sure Shot. I reckon some kickin's in order, all right, but you won't do any of it." Nefarious stepped closer. The Kid was getting up from the plank sidewalk. "Come here, Kid."

The boy crossed over to Nefarious' side, keeping his eyes on the gunman as if fearful of another outbreak on the part of that greasy individual.

"Turn 'round, Sure Shot."

The gunman turned, cringing like the

rat he was. Nefarious motioned with his head.

"Lift him a good one, Kid," he commanded in a hard voice. "Somethin' he'll feel as long as he lives, the skunk! Take a good run an' jump, if yuh want to. Kick him till you're tired. An' if he makes a move, well——"

He did not finish the sentence. The gunman kept his hands in the air and waited. A dozen men who had emerged from the saloon looked on.

"Go on—kick him!"

"Land some good ones, Kid!"

"Here's yore chance!"

The Kid advanced obediently, poised himself and raised one foot in the air. The marks of the gunman's boots were still on his coat and shirt. He hesitated.

"Kick him!" shouted Nefarious, his voice breaking into a shrill falsetto. "What yuh waitin' for?"

The Kid lowered his foot and stepped back. He turned an appealing face to Nefarious, standing there with his gun poised, ready for instantaneous reprisal if the need arose.

"I can't!" he exclaimed.

"He can't hurt yuh," the cowman said. "If he makes a move, I'll make him look like a chicken fence, the ornery, murderin' lobo. He jest kicked you, didn't he? Well, now's yore chance to git even. Kick him, I tell yuh!"

"I tell you I can't!"

Nefarious' hard countenance grew perceptibly harder.

"Can't!" he sneered. "An' why not?"

"Because he's my father," the Kid said, his lip trembling.

FOR the space of a full minute nobody made a move. Beyond two or three smothered exclamations from the spectators there was no sound. Then Nefarious Jones spoke; and his voice had no change in it.

"I've been pretty sure of it for some time," he said quietly. "If I hadn't, Sure Shot, you'd be ready for plantin' by now. Does that soak into yore thick hide?"

Sure Shot mumbled something that sounded like acquiescence.

"Yuh dam' near killed me," continued

Nefarious. "If it hadn't been for this kid o' yores, I'd 'a' trailed yuh long before now. He didn't want to tell me, but it's out now. A hell of a father, ain't yuh? Turn around here!"

The gunman turned around, his face twisted with chagrin.

"This kid's too decent to have to carry an ornery turkey buzzard like you around for a father," said Nefarious in a curiously soft tone.

"By rights I oughta put you out o' yore misery right now. I don't reckon these boys would object none."



An affirmative growl from the assembled cowmen caused the gunman to shrink.

"I'll give yuh one chance," Nefarious went on. "They's legal ways o' fixin' these things up. There's a lawyer up at Wolverine City that can show us how." Wolverine City was the county seat, eight miles to the north. "We'll go up there, the three of us, an' you kin sign the Kid over to me, all right an' proper. Then you can vamose out of this part of the country, pronto. Yuh hadn't better come back, either."

"I'll be damned if I do!" snarled Sure Shot.

"What—come back?"

"Give the kid to you, or anybody else."

"All right." Nefarious pulled back the hammer of his gun and began to draw deliberate bead. "Yuh tried to kill me, an' now it's my turn. Say yore prayers, Sure Shot! I'm countin' three——"

He had got as far as two, and the gun sights were unerringly pointing straight at the killer's forehead, when he capitulated.

Sweat was beading his swarthy face, although the day was not a warm one.

"You can have him!" he exclaimed. "He ain't——"

"Yes, go on."

"Well, he ain't no kin o' mine anyhow." Sure Shot was gulping with relief, now that the gun no longer menaced him. "I married his mother when she was a widow. This brat belonged to her first husband."

"We'll jest sign them papers anyhow," ruled Nefarious, smiling for the first time.

SURE SHOT FORTUNE disappeared, according to agreement, and two weeks later was killed in an argument over at Bad Lakes.

After that Nefarious Jones revealed the fact that he had some money. Perhaps he should have had, after thirty years riding the range at forty a month, to say nothing of what he had won from time to time at poker.

"I'm sendin' you up north to that college," he told the Kid. "You git an education, savvy? Then you kin maybe take care o' me when I'm old."

"But I don't want to go to school!" declared the Kid. "I'm gonna stay right here with you."

"You're gonna do what I tell yuh!" exclaimed Nefarious sternly. He tapped his breast pocket, where the adoption papers were deposited. "Am I yore father, or ain't I?"

"I guess you are," admitted the Kid with a grin. "But——"

"No buts to it," ruled Nefarious. "I'm yore boss from now on. You mind what I say."

He got away with it. And what was more to the point, none of the boys dared let him see them laughing at him.

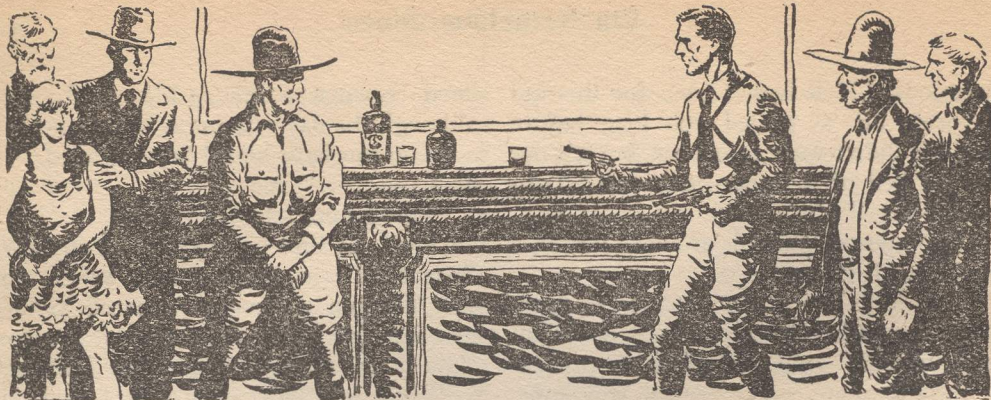
In the next issue

HANK POTTS— PEACE PROMOTER

A peace celebration may well end in something else

by W. C. Tuttle





PURDEE'S LAST STAND

By JACLAND MARMUR
Author of "Ecola!", "China," etc.

AT ONE TIME GAINES PURDEE WAS A FUGITIVE FROM THE SWIFT AND SPEEDY JUSTICE OF THE WILD BONANZA TOWN OF SNAKE BAR. AND AS PURDEE HAD "A GUN EYE LIKE AN OWL," THE VILLAINS OF THE TOWN BREATHED MORE EASILY ON THAT ACCOUNT. BUT A SURPRISE WAS IN STORE FOR THEM BEFORE PURDEE WAS TO MAKE HIS LAST STAND—A STAND FOR LAW AND JUSTICE

BELOW the wild mining town of Snake Bar that clung dangerously to the side of the ragged Sierras in a gesture of complete abandon above the famous Tin Cup Diggings, on a fork of the turbulent Yuba River, the wild scramble for mining stakes was on. The Carson Bridge, thrown hastily across the raging stream, teemed with life. Before the Last Chance Saloon and Dance Hall, Steve Lorry leaned idly against a timber of the veranda and blew smoke up at the clear mountain sky. His shifty, beady eyes eagerly watched the stream of heavily laden, rough miners and prospectors, men eager for the conquest of a new freedom, or men greedily rapacious after the easy gold and fortune of a lawless country. They tossed their burdens on the wooden walk for a moment of relief, for the alluring peace of a quiet drink in his saloon before their mad rush began. A short man and heavily set, Steve looked contentedly up at the sign over his head. "Last Chance, Steve Lorry, Prop." it read. The loud, blatant music that came from within calmed his spirit into contentment. He adjusted his holster more comfortably and went calmly on with his smoking and survey of the busy, hectic scene

that spelled riches for him—and perhaps for his henchmen. He nodded idly as a long-legged fellow dismounted at the hitching post and strode toward him.

"Hello, Pete," he said.

Pete Barlow nodded and sat down on the steps at Lorry's feet, stretching his long legs before him carelessly as he took to silently whittling a charge of tobacco for his pipe. He inhaled great drafts of the pungent smoke and tossed the match into the road.

"Hear Pop Gordon's made a strike, Boss," he murmured finally in his purring voice.

Steve looked down at his henchman and grunted.

"Rocky Gulch," Pete added shortly by way of explanation.

"Good?" Lorry inquired tersely, still staring up at the peaks of the hills across the river.

Pete shrugged his shoulders. "Dunno. Slow old cuss. Old woman and his daughter still up in the hill cabin. Slow old cuss, Pop. Good?—Yeah. Guess so."

STEVE tossed his cigar stump away without making any comment and turning, shouldered his way through the

door of the Last Chance Saloon and Dance Hall. Pete Barlow remained sitting on the steps, staring at his boot tips intently for a moment as though there was something about them he hadn't noticed before. Then he carelessly tapped out his pipe, yawned and rose to his full, lean height. He stretched himself luxuriously in the sunlight, felt of the gun at his hip and then quietly edged his way after Lorry. Through the noise and hilarity of the great room he wound himself toward a door at the rear which bore, painted in white on its pine surface, the notice, "*Steve Lorry, Private.*" He opened the door without knocking and closed it softly behind him.

POP GORDON, whom Pete Barlow had described as a "slow old cuss" was indeed that—a lovable old man with a fringe of white hair growing like a halo about the top of his head and enclosing the bald top like an inland sea. He lived on a hilly quarter-section of wooded land in a rude log cabin, high above the turbulent waters of the Yuba and the greedy passions of men. There he was safely guarded with his "old woman" and daughter Polly by the tall, heroic pines. Here he eked out an existence frugal but sufficient for his needs, like an old patriarch of the hills, seeming safely secure from the wild, teeming life of the Bonanza country that lay so enticingly and beckoningly below him. And yet, as he sat smoking his evening pipe before his cabin with the women at work in the kitchen, staring down at the glistening lights of the lively town, I have no doubt there stirred at times in his old breast, the age old desire for the security, if not for the glory and the adventure of the "great strike." He used to come slowly into Boylson's general store in Snake Bar for his marketing and for an idle pipeful.

"Well, Pop," Old Boylson would jibe at him from behind his counters stacked high with the grim necessities of that stern life. "Well, Pop, and when you gonna grub up and hit the prospects?"

Old Gordon would scratch his scraggly gray stubble of a beard with a huge, gnarled hand and smiled. Then as he caressed the bald center of his great head

he would murmur, "Wal, Boylson, now to tell 'e the truth it means nothin' to me—all this here muckin' fer gold. The gold'll go but my land'll be thar allus." He would stare sadly down at his ungainly boots. "But ef I *could* hit it," he would raise his sad, wise, old eyes to the store proprietor, "y'know, it'd make the old woman easier, an' Polly, too." Then he would suck at his aged pipe and stare at the littered shelves. "Pah, Pop!" Old Boylson would jibe. "Like as not you'd never find nothin' no-how."

"Mebbe so, Boylson. Mebbe so. Gimme two slabs o' bacon to-day, heh?"

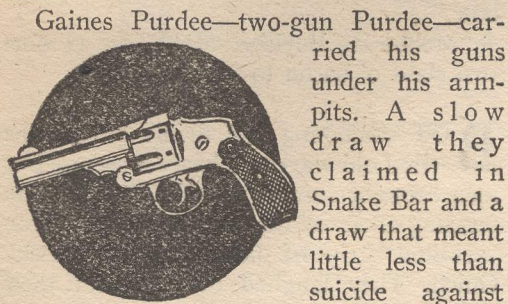
BUT something had finally stirred the tired old warrior's heart it seems. For men brought rumors of silly Pop Gordon messing about on the worthless rocky God-forsaken strip of land close by Rocky Gulch. They laughed over it over their whisky at the Last Chance. They told it in drunken, guttural laughter to the girls of the honkytonk. But they soon tired of the badinage, and in seeking newer jests old Pop Gordon was forgotten. Forgotten, that is, by all but Steve Lorry and his henchman Pete, who now brought the mysterious news to the boss that Pop had found something.

That the news stirred the owner of the Last Chance saloon and dance hall was apparent. That still, mysterious room with the "private" sign in white paint was hallowed and reserved for conference and manipulations of only the most important kind. Important, that is, to Steve Lorry and his little known purposes.

One thing was certain. Two things Steve wanted more than anything else in the world—Polly Gordon, and a rich strike. The strike would never be his. He was not of the calibre that braves the faithless hazards of fortune. He sat rather with the sure thing, waiting for that great stroke of luck that always somehow seems to elude those who only sit and wait. The other—Polly—he had ostensibly given up all hope of. And yet even that is doubtful. For the beady, shifty eyes gleamed with unfathomable lustre when she came down the main street of Snake Bar on her occasional trips to the town, and the purpose beneath

the great five gallon hat that covered his sleek, black hair no one could divine.

But that his desire still smouldered was certain. Not even that sortie with Gaines Purdee had effaced it. Suppressed it possibly, but it still lived in his great, fat breast. He never forgot the swiftness of Purdee's draw, and it is hardly likely that he ever would. For he carried an eternal testimony of it in the lurid, red scar that flamed across the back of his right hand.



Gaines Purdee—two-gun Purdee—carried his guns under his arm-pits. A slow draw they claimed in Snake Bar and a draw that meant little less than suicide against such a man with a gun as Steve Lorry. And so when Purdee came stumping into the Last Chance that eventful evening, anger flashing from his clear, gray eyes as he confronted the owner of the honkytonk, a quick hush fell over the noisy roomful of revelers and gamblers. For Purdee stood squarely before Lorry with clenched hands, the muscles rippling beneath his heavy woolen shirt, bareheaded beneath the lurid lights of the place that flashed ominously along the rows of glittering bottles behind the suddenly hushed bar. Between the two the ground cleared as though by a miracle, and they stood facing each other not more than a dozen paces apart, Purdee with his guns audaciously strapped beneath his arm-pits, Steve smirking easily and confidently back at him and puffing idly at his cigar stump.

"I'M TELLING you, Steve Lorry," Purdee said in an even, tense voice, "I'm telling you to leave Polly Gordon alone."

"That, Mister Two-gun Purdee," Steve smiled tauntingly back at him, "is strictly my business."

The crowd backed instinctively, without definite motion being visible, like a receding tide, and the quiet of the place became more intense. The tobacco smoke drifted

up in clouds toward the one great, lurid kerosene bracket of lights. A nervous old fellow in a corner somewhere upset a bottle and it crashed to the floor. No one stirred. The awful quiet after that one crash was like something tangible, something you could feel.

"I'm a'making it my business, Steve Lorry," Gaines spoke, now in a terrible, low voice.

"And I say it's none of your damned business. You hear? I take no orders from——"

"You'll take this one from me!" thundered Purdee.

Then no one remembered exactly what happened. Steve reached for his gun. That was the last thing any one saw clearly. For in a flash quicker than the eye could follow, one of Purdee's guns spoke. No one ever knew how it happened. A bright flash, a loud report, a cloud of rising, pungent, powder smoke and Steve's gun clattered to the sawdust of the floor as he clutched at his right hand. Steve, the fastest man on the draw in the whole of Sierra County! And then they saw Purdee standing there as the smoke rose, both guns in his hands, a thin trickle of smoke still rising from the barrel of one, his eyes glaring furiously across at his opponent. As he straightened slowly, it seemed impossible to believe that action so swift, so deadly could possibly have been caused by this huge, muscular man who now calmly tucked his guns away, turned on his heel, and strode from the place.

"Don't you ever think this is the end, Gaines Purdee!" Lorry called fiercely at his back.

Without a word, Purdee pushed open the swinging doors and strode out into the night.

THAT was like Purdee, they said in Snake Bar. To say his say and do his work and then silently have done. A figure coming to the diggings from no one knew where—folks didn't ask your past pedigree in those days—always clouded in something of mystery, two-fisted, two-gunned and upright. But the wise ones shook their heads when he turned his back on Steve Lorry in the Last Chance

Saloon that night and strode away scornfully. A brave man does not resent that; a coward never forgets or forgives.

But at the moment Steve made light of his hurt. The music started again, the glasses clinked. The faro dealer pulled down his eyeshade and resumed his interrupted game. From across the unlit street came the sound of a tinny piano and a woman singing in a raucous voice. Heavy boots thudded on the wood sidewalks. The clutter of a pony's hooves scattering pebbles sounded down the road in the starlit night. Snake Bar resumed the evening's hilarity and amusements.

That was how that long feud between Steve Lorry and Gaines Purdee started, between Lorry, the fastest man with a gun in Sierra County and Two-Gun Purdee, the only man, men whispered, who had ever been known to beat him to the draw. And they marveled that he was still alive.

Whether the poignant memory of that bitter defeat still rankled in Lorry's fat bosom as he sat tapping his desk in that private room, smoking his inevitable cigar and waiting for the appearance of his henchman Pete Barlow, no one of course, can say. For no one ever knew what transpired behind the locked secrecy of that room. Those who entered never spoke. They came out and went about their tasks, silent, morose, or wreathed in smiles, according to the success or failure of their talk with the boss. And no one asked questions. Curiosity was the unpardonable sin. You might look at Pete Barlow as he came carelessly out of that locked door and nod. But it was wise to smile.

II

THE next morning, the old-timers of Snake Bar gathered hurriedly in an anxious cluster about the door of Boylson's general store. Good old Pop Gordon had been found dead at Rocky Gulch, shot through the back!

When Augie Peters, the sheriff, came galloping up to the scene of the murder, he found Pop lying evidently where he had fallen, his fingers clutching at the loose, small rocks, his face upturned to the early sun, staring with peaceful, unseeing eyes

at the impeccable, blue heavens. Close by lay a pearl gray handled six-gun, one chamber of which had been discharged. Augie came back with a Chink in tow.

The Chinaman lived in his hut, close to the scene of the murder, by the river's edge. He was one of the many of his race who had quickly learned something of the cunning of the white man and eked out



their livelihood from the rushing waters with pan or crude rocker, gladly taking as their privilege, the fine dust that the dominant white man as yet thought of too

little consequence to bother about. Augie shook his head in his mournful, comical way as he passed Boylson's store with Lu Fung trotting obediently by his side, no flicker of emotion or dismay betrayed on his bland, yellow countenance.

It wasn't the death of a man that caused the anxious, sullen stares in the eyes of the old-timers at Snake Bar, gathered now about the door of the general store. Dead men were not new or novel in the Bar region or in any part of Sierra County, for that matter. No, not even if it was good, lovable Pop Gordon who hadn't ever harmed a soul. No, it wasn't that. That he had been shot—well, that was tragedy. But that he had been shot in the back—that was dastardly. A killing was one thing to those stern, unflinching pioneers, but murder, cold blooded murder—that was another matter entirely! Old Pop Gordon had merited something better than that, surely.

Good-natured, jovial, fat Augie Peters was in a quandary. He tugged at his gray mustache and frowned across his desk at the Chink. Lu Fung knew nothing, or at least would tell nothing or very little. The crowd of sourdoughs had left Boylson's store and now stood clustered about the sheriff's office, a sort of impromptu grand jury. Augie confronted the Chinaman with the pearl handled gun.

"You savee gun, Lu?" he demanded gruffly.

Lu Fung looked at it calmly, betraying no emotion.

"Savee kill," he murmured.

"Yea, but savee who belong?"

"No savee," Lu answered shortly and stared blandly back at the harassed face of the sheriff.

PETE BARLOW edged his way to the front of the crowd, stared at the gun lying peacefully on the desk, and said suddenly in his soft, purring, drawl:

"Augie, I reckon that thar iron looks a powerful lot like it had a mate under Purdee's arm."

"What?" Augie demanded, whirling swiftly on him.

"Ask Steve Lorry," suggested some wise old-timer banteringly, "he'd like as not remember."

A ripple of suppressed laughter ran through the crowd. Steve frowned fiercely and edged forward.

"Well?" Augie demanded of him.

Steve reached his right hand for the weapon. As he did, Lu Fung's narrow eyes seemed to gleam suddenly for a brief instant as that lurid scar across the back of that hand came within the range of his vision. But the flash of emotion passed from his inscrutable face in an instant and he sat there immobile and emotionless as Lorry carefully examined the gun.

"Well, Augie, it sure looks a powerful lot like one of Purdee's irons."

Augie banged a fat fist on the desk.

"You fellows are crazy! What the hell would Purdee want murdering Pop Gordon? You know purty well, Steve, that ain't his style!"

Steve shrugged his shoulders.

"Ol' Pop struck it pretty rich they say," he murmured vaguely.

"They was good friends, ol' Pop and Gaines," Augie burst in angrily, "an' you oughta know it ain't his style shootin' folks in the back!"

"There ain't no one else but him knew Pop hit it rich on Rocky Gulch!" Steve answered hotly.

Augie thundered a denial, and pounded his fist on the desk again.

BUT the seed of suspicion had been sown against the mysterious stranger and the men went muttering out of Augie's office with vague, sidelong glances at Steve Lorry and Pete. Justice, of necessity, was swift and terrible in those hectic days. The safety of the true pioneer depended entirely upon his own strength, his own judgment and his own resourcefulness. And an honest fight to the death was bad enough, to be sure, but the killing of Pop Gordon, shot by a coward in the back, had roused the entire lawful element of Snake Bar.

Late that evening, Gaines Purdee came galloping madly along the main street of the town and drew up sharply at the government registrar's office on the ground floor of a small, wooden shack. He strode into the place, scene of so much hope and failure and folly. Old Parkinson pushed his glasses up on his forehead and stared at him in amazement from behind a pair of great assaying scales that stood on the counter. Purdee took a sheaf of papers from his belt and laid them on the table.

"Want to register Pop Gordon's claim, Parkinson," he said.

Old Parkinson stood up, his hands on his hips.

"You—you want to *what*? I reckon you know Gordon is—is gone!"

Purdee reached across the table and seized the wizened old fellow by the shirt collar.

"Pop Gordon is—*what*?" he demanded.

"Leggo me! Dead, I said. Shot through the back by a skunk. *You* had oughta know!"

Gaines slowly released his hold and stared at Parkinson.

"What do you mean, Parky, I ought to know?" he asked very quietly.

"Folks is sorta saying that that thar gun, which I see is missing from your left breast, had somethin' to do wi' it," he shrugged his bent shoulders.

"You're a old man, Parky, or you'd be a dead one," Purdee answered in that low, quiet voice of his anger. Then he added



slowly, "I'll register the claim in Polly Gordon's name then, Parkinson."

"Cain't be did!"

"Why not?"

"Claim's been filed a'ready o' thet stake."

"By who?" Gaines demanded slowly.

Parkinson shrugged his shoulders again.

"Who?" Purdee demanded again in a terrible, sibilant whisper.

"Pete Barlow and Steve Lorry. Cain't help it. It's open land. You'd better go see Augie, Gaines," Parkinson said in a softer tone and turned back to his desk, adjusting his glasses on the bridge of his lean, thin nose.

Purdee turned slowly on his heel and left the office. Outside, he linked the lines of his mount over his arm and walked thoughtfully down the dirt street toward the Last Chance Saloon.

III

WHEN Gaines Purdee slowly pushed open the swinging doors and stood just inside the luridly lit saloon, a sudden hush fell over the assembled crowd and the men at the bar turned as one, to face him. Up on the balcony, directly opposite the entrance, two girls looked at each other, pointed stealthily at him and started whispering tensely. Augie Peters, who was sitting at a far table with Steve Lorry, came reluctantly to his feet and took a step forward.

"Gaines," he said across the suddenly quieted room, "where's yore other shootin' iron?"

"I gave it to Pop Gordon, Augie," Purdee answered quietly from his point of vantage, with his back against the wall, "I gave it to Pop two days ago afore I went into the hills. He wanted it—" he added meaningly with a glance at Steve—"he wanted it to ward off a couple o' coyotes who's been snoopin' around too close of late. You know Pop never toted a gun o' his own."

"Gaines," the sheriff said seriously, "Old Pop Gordon's been murdered, shot through the back, an' we found yore iron by him. An' this afternoon Pete Barlow here found two o' yore saddle studs in the brush close by."

"Steve Lorry an' Pete Barlow have jumped the Gordon claim on Rocky Gulch, Augie. I calls that a dirty, low-down trick. Thet there claim belongs to Polly Gordon an' the old woman an' I mean to see thet it gets there."

Steve rose swiftly from his chair but the sheriff waved him sternly away. The crowd stood clustered, breathless and expectant about the great room.

"Gaines," Augie said, "when did you get back from the hills? Is there anyone kin prove yore alibi?"

Purdee shrugged his powerful shoulders. "I reckon not, Sheriff. Leastwise not that I know of. You have my word."

The old-timers looked seriously at each other. Steve leered. Augie Peters took a step forward.

"Gaines," he said in his earnest, serious tone, "I ain't a'sayin' nothin' ag'in' you. You always played square around these parts so fur as I cud see. But it shore looks bad. An' I got to do what's my duty. Everythin' will be fair an' square, thet I reckon you know. I got to take you, Purdee. I'm sorry."

He took a step toward Gaines. Purdee's face hardened into grim lines.

"Augie," he answered in that low, tense voice Lorry knew so well, "I ain't aimin' to resist the law. But there ain't no one o'puttin' me behind bars till I find the skunk what killed poor old Pop. And that claim is goin' back to who it belongs!"

PETE BARLOW, leaning against the far corner of the bar, reached stealthily for his hip. And then things happened quickly.

Purdee's one gun leaped like a live thing from its holster and spoke twice in rapid succession. The great kerosene bracket, hanging suspended from the center rafters, crashed in a loud shattering of glass and fell in sudden darkness. Pete's gun barked a livid flame of red into the blackness. A dozen voices were raised in anger and a woman screeched in terror. Then the kerosene, igniting the rude planks of the floor, luridly lit up the confused scene.

Two men leaped for the doors, the rest scrambled to battle the flames. But Purdee was gone, vanished in the night in the

noise of clattering hoof beats and scattering pebbles. Pete Barlow stood cursing at the bar, clutching his right shoulder, while poor Augie Peters stood where he was, tugging at his great mustache and frowning intently and fiercely at the scene of mad confusion.

Thus Gaines Purdee became suddenly a fugitive from the swift and speedy justice of the bonanza country. Until far into the night the impromptu but intensely serious "grand jury" of Snake Bar, composed of all the old-timers and a goodly number of the younger bloods, the real lawful element of that wild and hectic little city of rude pine houses, talked and argued it all out in Augie Peters' office. The air was thick with their tobacco smoke. And now and then they drank from a glittering bottle that stood poised on Augie's desk. These men were not intent on the letter of any law. No. They were concerned with crude, honest justice and cared nothing for wordy technicalities. They wanted only to know who had foully murdered an innocent man—shot him in the back, a dastardly deed! Steve Lorry and his henchman were outlawed from that meeting. For these men had little respect for claim jumpers, even if the thing had been done so apparently within the full protection of the law.

OLD Augie Peters sat far back in his chair, his booted legs stretched well before him. Augie was a big man with a rotund stomach and a great chest that carried well the



star of authority. And the men of Snake Bar had grown to love and respect him, huge, jovial, stern in his idea of execut-

ing the justice that had been entrusted to his care. But Augie was worried, and he voiced his fear into the thick smoke haze of the room. When he spoke the rough men were silent.

"I tell you fellers," he said tugging furiously at that mustache, "I tell you fellers, Gaines never done that. I dunno why,

Burns," he added, speaking directly to a withered, old sourdough, "it shore looks mighty bad, but—I just cain't believe Gaines Purdee'd shoot a man in the back like a damned dog!"

"Wal, Augie," Burns drawled, "we shore respects yore opinion. But there ain't no tellin' what a man'll do with a good claim fer stakes in the game. I reckon Gaines meant to get that claim fer his own if Steve Lorry hadn't 'a' beat him to it. Not that I'm a defendin' Steve, Augie, but why'd Gaines clear out so sudden? Why wuz he afeared to stand up and face it?"

Old Augie was silent, staring down at his boots with a harassed look on his round, honest face. A silence fell over the assemblage. Much as they hated to believe it, the men had gradually been forced to the conviction that Gaines was the murderer. But the time for decision had arrived and they looked to honest Augie. He rose at last and stood there with his fists resting on the edge of the desk.

"Wal, boys," he said at length in a low, serious voice, "I reckon we gotta fetch him in. An' ef I know him at all, he'll be right close about. I'm deputizin' you all. We'll meet here at daybreak. Better get a few hours' sleep now, boys."

IV

IN THE early dawn of the next morning, before the red sun had yet cleared the snow capped peaks of the high Sierras, a small group of stern and silent men, headed by Augie Peters, rode quietly down the dirt street of Snake Bar on their hunt for two-gun Gaines Purdee, murderer of lovable old Pop Gordon. They made straight up into the hills toward Purdee's cabin. He was gone, of course, but Augie planned to start the search from there. The cabin gave evidence of a hurried departure, and a goodly store of provisions had evidently been taken.

All day the stern men trailed the hills and late afternoon found the hunt centered around the old, deserted cabin of Tom, the trapper at the base of Goodyear's Hill. Here they found Purdee entrenched and Augie circled his men in a cordon about the rude shelter. It lay at the base of the hill with a clearing of perhaps sev-

enty yards before it, strewn with boulders and young scraggly pine. Below it the great Yuba thundered by. Old Tom had deserted the cabin after that terrible winter of '54, when the snow slides had threatened to wipe out the whole rude countryside. Here Gaines Purdee made his last stand against the stern justice of the early West.

Augie waved his men back and strode into the open toward the barricaded door alone.

"Gaines," he shouted, "come out! It's Augie. I want to talk to ye."

A moment later Purdee opened the door and stood facing the sheriff in the light of the lowering sun.

"Gaines," Augie said, "'tain't no use. I got a whole posse back thar. We come to take ye back. Ye know everythin' will be fair an' square, Purdee."

"Ain't no man goin' to take me back, Augie, till——"

"Don't be a damned fool, Gaines!"

For answer Purdee turned and disappeared within his stronghold. Augie turned sadly and rejoined his men.

"I reckon more blood's gotta be spilt," he said in answer to the inquiring looks that welcomed him.

THAT was the beginning of that short and terrible siege that lingers still in the memories of some of the old-timers of that early country. Each man that stepped into the open within the range of the terrible guns of Gaines Purdee, came crawling back with a limp hand or shattered shoulder, for it soon became evident that for some mysterious reason, he was not shooting to kill. The quiet air hung heavy with the acrid powder smoke and the hills sent the echoes of the shots reverberating back and forth across the Yuba canyon and mingled their noise with the steady roar of the mighty river below.

Darkness threatened the besiegers and it was Augie himself who crawled stealthily toward the cabin with a torch of pine in readiness, seeking what shelter he could. He lit the dry needles when as close as he dared approach and with a sweep of his arm flung the lighted brand at the dry wall of the shack. And as his arm swung

in the air in the wavering, eerie light of dusk, Purdee's gun spoke for the last time.



The sheriff's arm fell limp and useless at his side. He crawled back to the shelter of his huge boulder, cursing.

"The man's got a gun eye like a owl!" he muttered angrily at old Jake Burns and nursed his crippled arm.

But the brand had taken swift and sure effect, for the dry, old logs of the cabin soon began to crackle and then to blaze, lighting up the whole unreal scene in a ghastly light.

"Now he'll show hisself," muttered old Jake, squatting behind the boulder as he shot the cartridges home into the chambers of his gun.

High up to the heavens the sparks shot, while the dim stars came idly out in the sky and hung there like small, ineffectual candles. Slowly the men crawled forward toward the flaming cabin, certain now of their prey. But Purdee did not appear. The heat grew intense. The flames licked the roof in eager leaps and the sparks scattered wildly, lighting up the whole empty clearing before the hut, casting a ghostly light upon the boulders and the stunted pine growth. Still Gaines refused to show himself.

"My God!" Augie muttered. "Is the damned fool going to burn his self to death?"

And as though in answer to his voiced thought, came a faint cry from the heart of the seething, burning cabin now a mass of licking flames.

"Never!"

SOME swore they heard that one cry of defiance. Others refused to believe. But certain it was that Gaines Purdee, rather than face the terrible justice of those stern, relentless men, faced a death twice as horrible within the terrific heat of that seething mass of flames. The men rose up carelessly from their shelters in their utter amazement at such a heroic gesture

and stood clearly revealed in black silhouettes by the light of the burning cabin. But no shot cracked out at them. Two-Gun Purdee was at last beyond that. And the men huddled silently together before the conflagration, staring somberly at the funeral pyre of the man who was to have been their prey.

They waited far into the night until the flames died down in a series of short hisses and crackles. Far below them, the waters of the Yuba roared swiftly on. Then they went among the charred ruins of old Tom's cabin without a word and scattered the glowing stumps of what had been the last stronghold of Gaines Purdee. They found no sign, no remnant of what had once been a man—only black, charred timbers and glowing, white ash.

Silent and saddened, they retraced their steps and slowly mounted their ponies, many an arm hanging limp and painful by the side of its owner. Without a word, the silent procession rode slowly down into the dirt streets of Snake Bar, each man busy with his own thoughts.

AFTER the posse had left, Lu Fung, the Chinaman, materialized like some yellow ghost out of nowhere and stood silent in the center of the clearing in the full light of the moon. From a safe point of vantage, this wise Celestial had watched the mysterious actions of the ununderstandable white man. His yellow slant eyes blinked behind the boulder he had used as a refuge, but whether in amazement or derision, no one can say. And when they had completed their purpose, so unknown to him, he stepped into the light of the moon and shrugged his thin shoulders. They had left him alone, that was his main concern and he was well satisfied.

Without any apparent effort or motion, he seemed somehow to move closer to the charred remains of the trapper's cabin. There he busied himself about the ruins in a most mysterious manner that no white man could possibly have understood.

AND in his office in Snake Bar, Augie Peters sat, with his one good arm propped on his desk by the dim, smoky

light of his dying kerosene lamp, staring blankly at the opposite wall hung with notices of various rewards, trying to fathom something that troubled his honest soul deeply about this, the queerest and most unwilling of all the manhunts he had ever engaged upon.

But Purdee was dead. Of that concrete fact at least there was no question. His had been a terrible, just death, some thought, a death that alone saved him from the ignominy of the hastily gathered posse's wrathful noose. And yet, such was the power, the force of the man, that many still swore, in the cool evenings over their pipes and glowing log fires, that Purdee was guiltless, a figure to be prayed over rather than calumniated. But the fact of his death was irrevocable. He had gone, whatever the manner of his living, in the only way the strong men of that time could meet their destiny.

V

THE months rolled by. The lustre of life's tragedies faded very soon in Snake Bar in the hectic excitement of new fortunes scooped from the turbulent river or scraped feverishly from the rocky brown hills. Lu Fung and his yellow breed squatted silent and enigmatic along the river's edge, pan in long thin hands, patiently washing for the luring, yellow dust. And what dreams or aspirations each added ounce spurred within that passive, expressionless face, no one knew, nor no



one cared. Pop Gordon's strike at Rocky Gulch had dotted that rocky corner of the Sierras with fierce, bearded men eager for the yellow gold. And Pete Barlow, lean and

deadly, worked the original jumped claim, while in Snake Bar, Steve Lorry leaned idly against the timbers of his porch and watched the stream of rude miners pour their hard won gold into the lap of his voracious Last Chance Saloon.

Another spring came, draining the hills

of their mantle of white snows and filling the eager breast of the Yuba with a mighty roar of high waters. Purdée and the murder of Pop Gordon faded from the memory of men. But high on the side of the hill, Polly Gordon and the "old woman" still remembered with sorrow and bitterness.

One afternoon in May, Steve Lorry, dressed in his best checkered waistcoat, rode slowly up the road to the Gordons. For months Lorry had been riding regularly to the Gordon home and the constant rebuffs he had received seemed only to whet his appetite for the slim, spirited daughter of old Pop. For Polly had never forgiven what she still called the down-right theft of her father's rightful mining property.

"Why don't you marry me, Polly?" he pleaded. "We'll stage to the city and live right decently. I've enough to give you anything you want, Polly. You hadn't ought to be wearing out your pretty hands up here."

And Polly looked at him with bitter scorn and went silently about her work.

"Some day, Polly, you'll regret this," Lorry said, jamming his great hat savagely on his head.

"Only thing I'll ever regret, is seeing you again, Steve Lorry," Polly flashed back at him and made for the door with a water pail. Steve laughed and went down the kitchen steps before her.

"You reckon this here bearded farm hand of yours would do, Polly?" he asked in a bitter, bantering tone.

"A mighty sight better'n you, Steve. Good-by."

STEVE sprang on his pony and galloped madly off. The farm hand came around the corner of the house just as Steve vanished down the road in a cloud of dirt, lashing his pony mercilessly. He was a tall and powerfully built man, his face almost completely covered in a short, thick, black beard and as he looked at the disappearing figure of Lorry, his right hand nervously stroked his chest beneath the left arm-pit.

"Fetch me a pail of water, will you, Jake?" Polly asked him, and as he reached

for the bucket the muscles rippled beneath the light, cotton shirt he wore.

He brought the pail to her in the kitchen, but before he left, he stopped at the door and turned to Polly, scratching his jet black beard with his hand.

"I wish you'd let me go down to town 'stead o' you, Miss Polly," he murmured vaguely in his low, musical voice, "I ain't got much trust fer this Steve Lorry."

Polly whirled from the sink and looked at him, arms akimbo.

"Now I hope you won't take no offence, Miss Polly," he added hastily, shifting from one foot to the other, "I—I——"

Polly dropped her hands and burst into a good-natured laugh.

"Now, Jake, don't you go to worrying," she told him banteringly. "Ma'll get the supper ready while I'm gone." Then she grew suddenly serious. "No, Jake, I'm not afraid of him. And believe me, Jake, I've sure learned how—how to take care of myself and ma since dad was—since dad died."

Jake stood framed in the doorway against the background of rolling hills and sturdy pines, caressing his left arm-pit and nodded. Then he mumbled something in his beard and went quickly out into the sunlight. Polly stared after him for a long time through the open doorway before she shook her head and went back to her tasks.

That evening, before Polly Gordon went into Snake Bar, after he had saddled her mare and led it in readiness to the door of the farmhouse, Jake Born, the Gordon's farmhand went quietly to his room over the little barn and rummaged in an old carpet bag. He took out a holster and gun and after examining them carefully, strapped the belt to his hip and went out. He saddled a pony and after Polly had disappeared, he could be seen far behind her and out of sight, following her into the town that lay below the Gordon homestead.

PETE BARLOW had struck a rich pocket on his Rocky Gulch claim and on this particular evening when he came out of that mysterious room of Lorry's at the rear of the Last Chance Saloon, on

which was written the awe inspiring word, "*Private*," it was very evident that he had been celebrating at the bar over his good fortune. His usual quiet, evil drawl had changed to a boisterous guffaw as he came up to the bar and banging on it heavily with a dirty fist called for drinks for the house. Steve Lorry, coming slowly out of his office, watched the hectic scene idly for a moment and then shrugging his shoulders, sat at a far table smoking his inevitable cigar. The bar flies and honky-tonk girls needed no second urging and clustered eagerly about Pete. He set the drinks up twice and then with a loud guffaw tossed a small pouch of dust on the bar. Then with many a great back-slap, he edged his way out of the crowd and staggered for the swinging doors just as Polly Gordon walked by on the wooden walk on her way to Boylson's store.

Pete stopped just outside the doors and swayed drunkenly back and forth as he saw her approach.

"'Lo, Polly," he said thickly, doffing his five-gallon hat and sweeping the ground ridiculously. "Goo' evenin'."

Polly made as though to step off the walk and pass him by unnoticed, but inflamed by the red liquor and his sudden good fortune and riches, he reached out and grasped her by the arm.

"Wassamatta, li'l gal?" he demanded drunkenly. "Don' be afraid o' ol' Pete. He

won't hurt ye. If thet ol' fool Steve ain't to yer fancy—how's ol' Pete Barlow look, heh?" and he guffawed as though he thought it a great joke.



Polly struggled ineffectually to free herself. Just as Pete was about to encircle her in his lean arms, a dark shadow leaped from across the road and caught him squarely on the chin with a mallet-like fist. Pete staggered back sharply and came up forcibly against the wall of the saloon. Polly, in the meantime, had hurried away and disappeared within the shelter of the

doorway of Boylson's store.

PETE braced himself, cursing furiously and quick as a flash reached for his gun. The black bearded rescuer, who turned out to be Jake Born, made a ludicrous attempt to draw. It seemed as though he didn't know quite where his weapon hung for before he had so much as touched the butt of it, Pete's six-gun spoke. The crowd that had quickly gathered sprang at him as his shots went wildly up in the air and backed him into the saloon, for in his drunken rage, he was mighty dangerous until disarmed. From behind the swinging doors he could still be heard cursing furiously. Outside Jake nursed a scratch on his shoulder.

"Pardner," one of the old-timers told him, "if you don' savee gun play, fer yore own health, I'm a-tellin' you, stop a-pack-in' one in these here parts. Ef Pete thar warn't so drunk he can't hardly stand, we'd be totin' you to the graveyard now." And the old fellow turned away in disgust.

Poor Jake left with downcast head and slowly led his pony down the road, all the while stroking his left arm-pit in that curious, nervous manner of his. He led his mount carefully down the trail to the river bed. Here he sat on a boulder, staring solitary and idle at the racing waters as though he had long waited for such an opportunity at peaceful reflection.

Jake had wandered into Snake Bar from somewhere about six or seven months after the Purdee affair, as the old-timers described that famous siege in old Tom's deserted cabin. He had wandered aimlessly about the streets, disheveled, powerful, a ridiculous figure, strapped to his side, a gun which any sourdough could see at a glance he knew nothing about drawing. He had tried panning the river for a while and at length gave it up for the safer and more secure livelihood of farm hand to the small Gordon homestead on the side of the hill. Once or twice he had been seen of an evening in the Last Chance Saloon, staring quietly at Steve Lorry and Pete Barlow at the gaming tables, a silent, quiet figure whom no one paid much attention to. And for some peculiar reason he had struck up a friendship, if such it can be called, with

Lu Fung, the Chinaman. It was surmised that perhaps it was because Jake, an outlawed soul of some sort, felt a kinship in a way, with the despised, yellow shadow.

At any rate on that evening, after sitting for a long time in the gathering dusk by the roaring river, Jake Born rose slowly and made his way toward the solitary hovel of Lu Fung, leading his reluctant pony carefully over the loose stones and boulders of the river's edge.

WHAT transpired that evening between the black bearded stranger and the imperturbable Chinaman sitting smoking so peacefully before his hut, only the river that roared steadily past them knew. And the river was a jealous guardian of secrets. But one might have noticed that as the black bearded Jake spoke earnestly, the yellow man started once very suddenly and shook his head vigorously as though he had at last been startled out of his inscrutability by Jake's words, whatever they might have been. But in a twinkling his face resumed again the yellow mask that betrayed no emotion. Finally Jake Born rose from beside the Chinaman, rolled himself a cigarette and mounting his pony, rode into the night.

When he came into the kitchen of the farm house, Ma Gordon was bending her huge old body over a great, aromatic venison steak. When Jake entered she looked up quickly and peered at him over the tops of her spectacles.

"Lo, Jake," she said in her thin, aging voice. "Whar ye been? All the chores to be did yet, ye know." And then she promptly turned her attentions to the sizzling venison.

"Evenin', Ma," Jake answered quietly, "I'd like to borrow a kettle o' hot water an' a pair o' shears."

"Well fer the lan's sakes," Ma Gordon said into the hot pan, "whatever for? But go help yerself. Ye might find a pair o' scissors on that shelf there in the cupboard."

Polly came into the kitchen at this moment from the living-room, a pretty, slim figure in a gingham work dress. She threw a swift glance at Jake as he stood there, kettle in one hand, scissors in the other.

He shifted his weight nervously from one foot to the other and edged for the door.

"Jake," Polly said dryly over her shoulder at him, "I'm mighty obliged to you for this evening, but for God's sake stick to your fists. An' throw that ancient gun of yours into the river before you get yourself killed!"

"I'm sorry, Miss Polly," Jake mumbled. "I can't seem——"

"Where you going with the kettle and shears?" she interrupted him shortly. The farm hand's face tightened suddenly into hard, grim lines.

"Got a little—a little shearin' to do," he answered in a low, calm voice. Polly turned on him swiftly.

"Where you going, Jake?" she demanded and stepped up in front of Born.

"I'm sorry, Miss Polly," he answered, looking down at her pretty face, "I'm sorry—but I got a—a little debt to see about in Snake Bar this evenin'. I'll do the chores when I get back."

"No, you won't, Jake Born," she answered, her pretty mouth drawing into a



straight, tense line. "Put that kettle away!"

"I'm sorry, miss, I gotta go now!"

"Well, I can't stop you from getting yourself killed if you're fool enough to,

Jake. But you'll not go till after supper and the chores are done."

JAKE looked silently down at the slim, pretty form of Polly Gordon standing so defiantly before him, for a full minute. Beneath that great, black beard the muscles of his face were tensely drawn in some powerful emotion and the lips made a straight thin line through the black of his beard. When he spoke finally it was in a voice low and vibrant with pent up passion.

"Sorry, Polly," he said to the girl in a commanding voice she had never before heard from him. "I'll have to quit now, then. I gotta go right away. It won't wait no longer."

And with that he turned silently from the kitchen and strode through the open doorway into the dark. Polly stood there and stared after his dark shadow as 'he picked his way through the night like a strange, silent ghost. He made his way toward his room above the little barn, kettle in one hand, scissors in the other.

"Now fer the lan' sakes, Polly," Ma Gordon complained in her high pitched voice, "see what you've gone an' done! A finer lad fer work we'll never find in these Godforsaken times. An' him wantin' nothin' but his keep, too. What are we ever goin' to do now?"

VI

THE blatant music of the Last Chance Saloon tore out rudely into the quiet night and the streets of Snake Bar. The horses at the post before the porch drooped their muzzles sadly and huddled together for comfort. And as the doors swung open now and then, a garish patch of light bit into the night for a moment and was quickly blotted out. Inside was smoke, noise, loud guffaws and the steady tinkling of glasses. Pete Barlow leaned at one end of the long bar, still drunk and merry, holding a dancing girl tightly in the circle of his left arm while he raised his glass with the other to her painted lips. Steve Lorry sat calmly at a far table, smoking his cigar and smirking happily at his tremendous good fortune.

A spirit of even greater recklessness than usual seemed to hover over the noisy, glaring place. Even wizened, shriveled Lu Fung, the Chinaman, appeared imbued with the fever of reckless abandon. For, strange to say, the imperturbable Celestial was seen sitting calmly alone at a table near the door, his long queue hanging ludicrously over the back of his chair. Such a thing had never before been heard of at the Last Chance and poor Lu had stood for quite his share of drunken banter.

"Wassa matta, Lu? Made a big haul? Gonna spill a celebration? You'll never scare together enough dust to return to China thataway, Chineese," they bantered at him.

"Yes," Lu answered calmly and evenly,

his yellow face betraying no sign of anger or emotion, "me savee plenty. Feelee fine, t'night. Like have wiskey. Can do?" and he calmly sucked his long, bamboo pipe.

They roared their laughter, pulled his queue and poked the thin ribs of the mysterious Chinaman until finally they tired of their sport and Lu Fung was left forgotten and alone. He sat there silently like a yellow idol, smoking his pipe and sipping his drink,

THE doors swung open and Augie Peters came in, older, whiter and much sterner than a year ago. He strode straight toward Steve Lorry.

"What's goin' on here tonight, Steve?" he demanded of the proprietor of the Last Chance Saloon.

"Nothin', Augie," Steve answered.

"Someone left a note on my desk, Steve," the sheriff answered. "Said there was most likely goin' to be a killin' here. I tell you, Steve, you gotta quit the rough stuff!"

The townspeople of Snake Bar had been growing more intolerant of Steve's pernicious saloon, but nevertheless he now lifted his sleek, black head and laughed.

"Ha! Ha! Augie, someone has shore pulled yore leg. There ain't nothin' stirrin' here tonight. Leastwise, not unless some o' these here hombres gets nasty amongst themselves. Forget it, Sheriff. Set down an' have a drink. Jimmy, see what the sheriff'll have."

Augie stared down at Lorry in distrust for a moment and then his old face wrinkled in a slow smile.

"Well, Steve, mebbe so, but I reckon it won't do no harm to hang around for a bit."

"Yea," laughed Steve, "an' you can have a round or two while you're waitin'. Set down, set down." He laughed loudly again, banging the table with his fist as though he greatly enjoyed the sheriff's discomfort.

AT THAT moment the doors swung slowly open and a stranger entered the noisy, smoke filled room. He wore a short mackinaw jacket such as the far lower Joaquin Valley cattlemen wear. It reached barely to his hips at which hung

no gun, and his boots were not those of a miner. He wore a great hat pulled well down over his eyes and held his head down so that only the lower part of his face was visible. But it was visible that the clean shaven chin was marked by scars.

No one noticed his entrance in the general hilarity and tinny music. Only Lu Fung glanced quickly at him and quietly

put his pipe down on the table in front of him.

"I want Steve Lorry!" the stranger thundered in a booming voice that filled the big room. "I want



Steve Lorry!"

All eyes turned to the intruder. The emaciated man at the tinny piano suddenly stopped playing, his rolled cigarette hanging limp from between his thin, weak lips. The couples on the rude floor stopped their dancing as though by some signal and edged away. A sudden swift hush fell over the place. Behind the bar, the barkeep stood as though turned to stone, one hand, holding a bottle, arrested in mid-air. Steve Lorry tossed his cigar stump away and stood up slowly. Augie Peters edged forward, tense, expectant.

"What the hell do you mean buttin' in here thataway? What the devil do you want?"

"I want you, Steve Lorry!" the booming voice spoke again, vibrant with passion.

Then the stranger calmly took off his short mackinaw coat and tossed it aside with his hat. He stood revealed there, this mysterious stranger who took death in his hands so lightly, his entire smooth shaven face one mass of scars. And strapped to his arm-pits was a double holster. One of the cases was empty, but from the other peeped the pearl gray handle of a wicked looking six-gun.

"You want me, heh!" Steve shouted in a fury. "And who the hell are you?"

"Jake Born," the stranger answered very low and quiet now, "the Gordon farm hand, Steve. And I'm a-callin' you a low-

down sneak and a coyote and a murderer, Steve Lorry!"

A swift gasp of horror came from the crowd. Steve reached like a flash for his gun. But he was too slow. Like a streak of lightning, that pearl gray gun leaped to life in the hands of Jake Born, and a streak of fire and smoke came from its muzzle. Steve's gun clattered helpless to the floor as a red gash showed quickly on that scarred hand of his.

Pete Barlow dropped his arm from the waist of his partner, paling swiftly. The exchange of shots had sobered him miraculously and stealthily he reached for his own weapon. But Jake was not to be caught unawares; hardly a moment after the first shot had been fired, that deadly gun in his powerful hand barked again a message of grim death.

Pete pitched forward on to the sawdust-covered floor, clutching frantically at his right breast and gasping heavily for breath. Steve had recovered from the shock of his flesh wound by now and was reaching for his fallen weapon, but Augie Peters kicked it away and strode into the deserted center of the great room.

"You!" He started toward Jake but Born interrupted him.

"Hold still, Augie!" he said.

Then Jake strode to the fallen Pete who lay clutching at the floor in the agony of death.

"Lu!" Jake called to the Chinaman.

All eyes turned astounded toward the yellow man as he came forward slowly, very dignified, as though nothing untoward had happened and stood quietly by the kneeling Born and the outstretched Barlow.

"Look at me!" Jake demanded of the stricken man in his tense voice, "Look at me well, you claim-jumpin', lyin' murderer! You don't recognize me, heh?" He turned to where Steve Lorry stood by Augie Peters. "You, Steve, look at me!"

Steve stared at the scarred and seared face of the stranger, and as he did, his oily face paled slowly and the corners of his mouth twitched.

"My God, Purdee!"

Augie could only gasp an echo.

"Yes, Purdee!" said the kneeling man

fiercely. "Gaines Purdee! You forgot the snow-slide cellar old Tom had dug under that cabin. But you gave me plenty to remember by as long as there's mirrors," he laughed bitterly. "If it hadn't been for Lu Fung, I'd have roasted or smothered like as not. Even he didn't recognize me in Jake Born till I told him after he let slip what he knew." He turned to the impassive Chinaman who stood there peacefully with folded hands, staring calmly at the mad scene as though he didn't understand what they were talking about. "Now, Lu, talk! for God's sake, talk!"

PETE BARLOW, stretched on the floor, stared up with rapidly dimming eyes as the Chinaman spoke in calm, measured tones.

"Yes," he said. "Me savee plenty—" He broke off and pointed with a lean finger at the ashen face of Steve Lorry. "Me savee man with big scar across light hand there shoot old Plop Glodon long time 'go. Vely dark, but savee scar plenty." Then he pointed down at the prostrate form of

Pete Barlow. "Me savee him there, too. Plop shoot gley gun but no savee how make kill. Me no likee talk blefo. White man likee too much put



rope around Chinees neck. Me talk now. Pludee here, he my flend. He say no hurt Lu Fung. Savee?"

The quiet that fell after that impassive testimony was so intense that a pin might have dropped and been plainly heard. Steve, shaking horribly, started edging for the door, but a dozen eager hands grasped him tightly.

And then all eyes centered on Pete Barlow:

He raised his head with a mighty effort and stared with rapidly glazing eyes at the scarred and seared face of Gaines Purdee bending over him.

"Augie," he muttered in a rattling voice, "Augie, c'mere. I'm goin'. He got me right that time. The Chink's tellin' the truth.

Steve—Steve an' I planned—planned the hull—thing." He broke off and coughed feebly, blood flecking his dying lips. "We—knew Pop—had struck—it—" His voice died in a horrible rattle.

Gaines lifted the dying man's head in his arms.

"And this claim, Pete," he said. "Come clean, Pete!"

"Yea," Pete spoke barely above a whisper by a superhuman effort. "Pop—Pop had—it all—all to rights—but—we—we burned his—markers. We—"

Suddenly his strength gave out altogether and his head rolled back lifeless on Purdee's arm.

The doors of the Last Chance Saloon burst open suddenly and the crowd turned. Polly Gordon stood there with wild, staring eyes, hair disheveled, dress torn.

"I couldn't stand it!"

"Jake! They've killed him! Oh, Jake!" she sobbed.

Gaines rose and walked slowly to her grief shaken form. And that crowd of rough miners and gamblers looked for a second and then turned its back.

GAINES PURDEE and Polly Gordon walked together the next day into the office of old Parkinson.

"I—I come to register a—a claim, Parky," he said.

Old Parkinson took off his glasses and smiled broadly.

"Yas, Gaines," he grinned, "I reckoned so. I got 'em all made out and proper in name o' Polly Gordon. If she'll jest only sign—"

"Name's wrong, Parky," Purdee answered examining the official looking papers.

"No, 'tain't, Gaines," Parkinson said, and started to adjust his glasses on his lean thin nose.

"Yep, 'tis," Gaines answered with a broad grin while Polly blushed a bright crimson. "Name should be Polly Purdee. Be back later, if you'll change 'em."

"Wal, I'll be bit by a ten-foot rattler!" exclaimed old Parkinson, while Polly and Gaines Purdee walked together out of the rude office, arm in arm into the light of the brilliant and warm afternoon sun.



THREE GATS

By ALLEN S. JACOBS

AS THE HARD-BOILED TAXI DRIVER WHO TELLS THIS STORY SAYS, "TO BE HELD UP TWICE IN ONE NIGHT IS APLENTY, THREE TIMES IS THE LIMIT." BUT IT WAS A VERY UNUSUAL NIGHT WHEN UNUSUAL CROOKS WERE ABROAD

DRIVING taxis I've seen some queer things happen, some of them no reasoning can explain. But there ain't nothing about the load I pick up at the Ferry to make me give him a second look.

He's sort of slim and dapper, well dressed, round forty. That's what a casual glance registers, and it can be used to describe a couple of million more or less.

When he gives me an address in St. Francis Woods, which is way over at the other side of the city, I tune up the old blimp with a feeling of relief. All evening I'd been hauling stiffies on two-bit jerks and my pockets is riding light. What with the new efficiency experts the company's put on to us pilots, our lives ain't worth living. Say, they jack a guy up in a regular classroom and tell him what kind of breakfast food he's ate from the number of miles he's getting out of a gallon of gas. And if what he brings in for the company ain't a hundred times his weekly pay they show him the rear exit.

So I begin to feel perkier when he gives me the address out in St. Francis Woods, which is one of them exclusive residence districts clear into the sticks. Cruising slowly up the dark street I call over my shoulder through the open glass partition,

"This is Wedgewood Avenue. The house we just passed was thirty-four."

But if I'm hoping to get any help finding thirty-eight, I don't get it. Pulling into the curb just below the next house after a bunch of lots, I hop out, taking my flash with me. After hunting all around the door I find it on the stoop. Returning to the blimp I tell my load through the partition, "There ain't any thirty-eight far as I can make out. This one's forty-two and the one below the lots was thirty-four."

"Are you sure this is Wedgwood Avenue?" he inquires.

"That's what it said on the corner post which I last climbed," I inform him dryly. The Woods is so poorly lighted I'd had to get out and use a flash to read the streets. The city sees to it that taxi pilots earn their keep.

"Very well. This will do," he replies, reaching for the door handle.

SNAPPING off my engine, I throw my meter flag, grind out the bad news for my load and open the door. He digs into his pocket, flashing a quick suspicious glance about him. A startled look crosses his face and he stares hard across the street about fifty feet below us.

With a curse my load pushes something

back through the open door of my cab and leaps into the eucalyptus shrub in the lot. A bullet burns the air by my left ear. But even if it'd been my right ear I'd of known it was bad news. A second shot clips the leaves of the thick shrub as my load plunges deeper, then the creepy silence that often follows explosions. Looking around me I can't see a soul up or down the street. Still someone hidden somewhere across the street has a grudge to pay the bozo I've hauled from the Ferry.

"Hey, you ain't paid your fare," I complain aloud. "You owe me three ninety-five."

Something warns me too late. As I start to swing around, steel rams into my ribs.

A voice at my ear says, "You'll collect that fare when you meet him in hell, brother. Move up a bit. I wanta take a squint inside your cab."

Since I value my ribs I move. The door being open, the light is on inside. Now, I saw my departing load make a motion like he slid something back onto the seat inside my cab, but there ain't nothing there far as I can see.

"Thought he threw something inside," the bimbo with the gat grumbles behind me.

"Say, you scared off my load. You ought to come across with his fare," I tell him, taking a squint at him over my shoulder. He's not a bad looking chap, though he's hard-boiled plain to see.

"Sorry you're stuck, but you'll have to write this fare off in red ink," he tells me. "And if you know what's good for you, you'll keep your trap closed about what's happened here. Get going."

NEEDING no further urging I crank the blimp and climb into her. Turning in the center of the street, I catch the glint of his gat still trained on me, and I step on the gas.

Swinging round the corner I jam my brakes as a guy dances out in front of me. In a flash I recognize my lost load minus his hat. He must have crashed through to the next block to catch me on the way out.

"Did he find it?" he demands quickly, leaping to the running board.

"Did he find what?"

"Never mind. Just step her up if you want to see your wife and children again," he retorts, my question having told him what he wants to know.

For the second time I feel a gat rammed into my ribs. He climbs up beside me.

"What other ways of getting out of San Francisco are there besides the Ferry and the Townsend Depot?" he inquires.

"Well, there's the Golden Gate Ferry to Sausalito at the foot of Hyde Street."

"All right. You're taking me there."

"Say, this ain't a jitney," I growl. "It's a taxi. I've got to kick in for every mile this blimp does."

"If that's all that is worrying you, don't lose any hair over it. You'll get paid every nickel coming to you and a five dollar tip besides. But you'll have to cross the ferry with me. I can't take any chance of you reporting this night's doings before I get into the clear. See?"

"My time's up at two A.M., and I wouldn't be able to get a boat back till morning 'cause we'll just about make the last one tonight."

"Sorry, but you're working overtime tonight. Five dollars will buy baby a pair of shoes, but it won't be enough for your widow to plant you with."

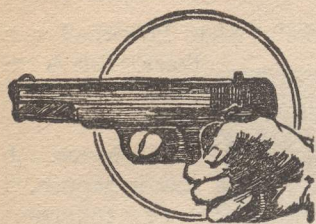
I don't think it'll do anything but harm to explain I just got my sixth final with nary an offspring to shed tears over my corpse, so I close my trap. There's something in this bozo's eyes that warns me he won't take argument. I've a hunch he'd just as soon lay me out cold, dump the remains and take over the cab himself if he thought it'd be any safer for him. He's got a long hard jaw with a flinty look and mean eyes that watch me under tight lids, I see now on close inspection. If he ain't committed murder I'll lay a two to one bet he will before his days is over.

MY LOAD begins to get curious to make sure what he threw inside the cab is still there. He keeps craning his neck back to look. Since the bozo who stuck me up and looked inside my cab in the Woods hadn't attempted to search it more carefully, I guess that whatever it is they're fighting over must be somewhat bulky.

"Pull up to the curb a minute," he orders suddenly.

Jamming the brakes I swing in.

"Climb inside the car and look in the side crack of the seat for a thin package," he directs, tickling my ribs with his automatic.



Not feeling in a mood to argue, I open the door and run my hand along the crack. My fingers are stopped by

something half way along. Pushing it up, out comes a thin oblong package about three and a half inches wide by eight in length wrapped in ordinary brown paper. I notice with some surprise that it's unusually weighty for such a skinny package, which accounts for the ease with which he had slid it out of sight into the crack when the other guy started popping away at him.

I begin to wonder what it is that two men are staking their lives for its possession. A bar of bullion? Not likely. A bar of such size ain't worth more'n a hundred kopecks and men aren't getting violent over chicken feed these days of payroll and bank robberies.

Reaching past me the bimbo snatches the package and slips it into his coat pocket.

"Hands up!" It's a woman's voice that sings out the sudden command. "Drop your gun, Tripper. I've got the drop on you and I'm desperate. You know that!"

I DRAG in a lungful of air to steady my nerves. This is getting monotonous. To be held up twice in one night is aplenty, three times is the limit—and the third by a woman at that. It's plain she knows my bozo with the gat cause she's calling him by name.

He swings round with a hot curse. A shot rings out and Tripper tumbles face forward on the pavement, his gun sliding from his hand across the walk.

"Keep back," she warns me. Bending quickly she searches his pockets with one hand, keeping me covered with the other. She pulls out the thin package with a gasp

of triumph that suddenly turns into a whimper. To my surprise tears roll down her cheeks.

"Say, lady," I speak up. "I don't know what this is all about, but I'll tell the world I'm getting the dirty end of the deal. You've killed my fare what owes me over five dollars and a tip."

She stifles the scream that rises to her lips, clenched fist pressed hard against her mouth. "No, no! He's not dead," she protests wildly. "Please look. He can't be dead. I never meant to kill him. I just had to get it back, and I knew he'd kill me first."

Bending over the prostrate man I feel for his pulse. It's so strong she must only have creased him, though there's a stream of blood gushing from the side of his head. She stares at me with white face and burning eyes that beseech me not to tell her the worst is happened.

In that moment I get a hunch. This woman ain't no ordinary murderess. There's more'n just a package worth cash behind this strange affair. She has been hardy enough till she puts hands on the package, then she breaks. A woman just naturally lets down when she thinks her task is accomplished. I ain't had six wives without learning something about janes, and I know this one doesn't belong to the seamy side of life. Looks more like a little homebody with a pretty house full of sofa cushions she's sewed herself, and a couple of half grown kids racing in for sugar on bread while she's doing the weekly vacuuming.

BY THIS time heads are hanging out the windows and lights is coming up. This district is a live one, and its curiosity is growing with the seconds.

"Listen, lady. You got what you're after? Then hop in and we'll beat it. The cops'll be here on the double quick any minute now. That shot of yours has woke the neighborhood."

Lifting her by the elbows I plant her in the front seat and climb in beside her. As we shoot away from the curb, two men rush out of the house before which we've staged our ruckus, and pick up the wounded man.

A couple of blocks further I ask, "Where do you want me to take you?"

"To some deserted pier."

"Holy Cat, lady! You don't have to jump in the bay. The bozo you shot up is only out temporary. Tomorrow he'll be mighty alive, though he'll probably wish he was dead with the splitting headache he's gonna have."

"It's not that. I want to drop this into the bay where it never can be recovered." She holds up the skinny package round which tonight's whole ruckus seems to have been waged.

I let out a low whistle. "What is it? Dynamite, if you consider the effect it has on people."

She draws away from me with a quick intake of breath. Giving her a look, I read suspicion in her face.

Smiling, I says, "Lady, that gold brick you're toting could be solid platinum studded with ten carat diamonds for all of me. The company I drive for has my picture, fingerprints and life's history in its personnel file. Besides, I'd rather drive blimps than ride on the rear seat of one of the company's new limousine cabs."

"You mean the company that employs you knows all about its men before they hire them?" she demands unbelievably.

"Lady, they even know the last names of my six wives, and when I want to recall them I has to ask Dutch Romer to let me peek inside his files."

SHE'S silent, thinking hard. After a moment she says, "I suppose I'll have to tell you."

"No, ma'am. I let it up to you. If you want to sink that jonah there I'll help you do it with no questions asked, long as I get paid my meter fare. I'm a taxi pilot, not a dick."

"You really mean that?" she inquires doubtfully. "Why are you doing all this for me?"

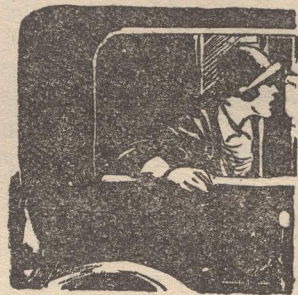
"Maybe because you look like a lady with a couple of kids waiting for her to come home."

"O-oh!" she wails and begins to cry. "How—how'd you know? It's true. It's for them I'm doing this terrible thing."

She takes a quick look behind us. "You don't think we're being followed?" she asks nervously.

"The bozo you clipped was out proper, if I'm any judge. But there was a guy who attacked him out in St. Francis Woods."

I tell her briefly what happened out there. But she ain't surprised none.



"I know. I saw it happen. I was following you in another taxi—one of those pirate cabs I knew wouldn't be too curious if I paid him well. When you turned off the main thoroughfare in the Woods, I made him put out his lights and follow. Then when you stopped in front of the lot, I directed him to run into a driveway and park there so we'd look like a private car belonging to the house."

As she tells it I recall glimpsing a car standing in a driveway when I swung back down the street. She must have followed me and saw Tripper board my cab again.

"So that's how you come to be right on the job when my bozo with the convincing gat was urging me to dig out that there hoodoo package."

"Yes. I've followed that man Tripper all the way from Washington. I paid the driver when I saw you stopping, and sent him away. I slipped back to where your car was standing, circled the cab and held you up."

I'M BEGINNING to realize more'n more this ain't just a feud among crooks I've got mixed up in. This jane beside me hugging her precious package is no crook, but neither is she a female detective. So I've a hunch it's gonna be a heap healthier for both of us if we don't run into too many cops on our joy ride to the bay. The two men who ran down the steps of the house before which the jane staged the shooting party may have managed to take my number. That street was light enough. Anyway they are gonna turn

in a report—most likely the second—of a Crown Cab speeding away from a shooting, and even my own company will be hunting me down. So I begin to cross-cut over toward the bay, using the rough cobbled streets instead of the paved well-traveled arteries.

"What must you be thinking of me?" she asks suddenly. "Oh, I'll have to tell you to prove I'm not the terrible person you must be thinking me. This package contains a government plate for striking off twenty dollar bills. That's why I want to sink it in the bay."

"A government plate? You mean a plate made by clever counterfeiters?"

"No. This plate was engraved in the treasury department at Washington. It was smuggled out by my dead husband. Before he died he confessed the whole story to me and begged me to get it back and destroy it."

"But how could a man, even a trusted employee, get away with a currency plate and them not miss it?"

"My husband was an expert engraver employed on the currency plates. The one he smuggled out had already been canceled. When the treasury department is through striking off an issue of currency, a deep cross is cut into each master plate in the block with a sharp instrument, and then it's set aside till time can be taken to melt them up for new forms. It was one of these master plates, the front and back for striking off a twenty dollar bill, that my husband saw the opportunity of getting away with without detection."

"But if it was mutilated, what good was it to him?"

"I've told you he was an expert engraver. He filled in the cut and tooled over it so skilfully that no one would suspect the plate had ever been canceled. His next step was to procure some of the government's own paper with its revealing silk threads to print the bills on. For this he found he'd have to take in a partner."

"Tripper," I guess. "The bozo we left lying with his head pillowed on the sidewalk?"

"Yes. He had charge of the supply room. With caution he managed to smug-

gle out sheets of paper cast aside because of imperfection, and a little ink at a time."

CAN you imagine anything cleverer than that? They were striking off twenty dollar bills from a real government plate on real government paper with Uncle Sam's own ink. No bill coming out through the doors of the treasury could be realer!

"When he married me, my husband decided not to go through with his intention and begged Tripper to destroy the plate," she continues. "But Tripper refused. And when he tried to break with him, Tripper threatened to expose him, giving evidence in purchase of immunity. You see, Tripper was just an office man. Without my husband's skill and knowledge of lithography he knew he couldn't strike off the bills well enough to escape detection. So, under threat and in daily fear of what it must mean to his family if he were caught, my husband was forced to continue counterfeiting for fifteen years, though he refused to profit by it."

"And in all these years they were never suspected?"

"No, not until a few months ago. A cashier in one of the banks noted that bills of this obsolete issue kept coming in looking as if they'd never been handled, though they should have been in circulation for fifteen years. Becoming suspicious he turned over several bills to the Department of Justice for investigation. Under the microscope a minute break in a corner etching was discovered. It seems the baser metal my husband had used to fill in the cut had cracked."

She catches her breath to keep back a sob. I wait for her to go on.

"When my husband discovered he was being shadowed, he knew the game was up and urged Tripper to destroy the plate. He refused, endeavoring to persuade my husband to make a getaway with him and continue counterfeiting. Desperate for the sake of his children and myself, my husband tried to take the plate from him. In the fight that followed Tripper struck my husband over the head. He died three days later. But in a lucid moment he confessed the whole thing to me and begged me to

get back the plate and destroy it for the sake of the name our children bear."

From the little lady's story I make a good guess at the identity of the man who shot at Tripper in St. Francis Woods and who searched my cab. I'm betting all I own he's a Department of Justice operator what has followed both Tripper and the little lady.



MOST likely the only reason why he hasn't hooked both of them long ago is because he ain't taking no chances of nabbing his quarries without the plate. He had shot at Tripper only when the crook attempted to escape. But why had Tripper made the mysterious trip to St. Francis Woods under cover of darkness? In a flash I have my answer—to meet some crook who understands how to print counterfeits, of course! And the D. J. man must have frightened him off when he shot at Tripper.

A shiver runs down my spine. Man, I don't mind bucking the cops, but I'm a bit superstitious about bucking Uncle Samuel. I've got a heap of respect for whiskers.

"Lady, don't you think it would be a whole lot wiser to turn that there plate back to the treasury department?"

"I was afraid you'd say that!" she cries. "But they could only destroy it as I intend doing. And I wouldn't be saving my children from the terrible stigma that must attach to their name—perhaps ruin their whole futures! I can't have my boys branded publicly as the offspring of a counterfeiter and a thief!"

"And meantime Tripper gets off scot free," I remark.

"No. If he's ever taken, he'll go to trial for the murder of my husband. He made a statement charging Tripper before he died, though he refused to tell what they quarreled about."

No wonder the D. J. man shot first and left his arguing for some later date. He knew Tripper wouldn't be taken alive

since he was a doomed man anyway. But I will say that D. J. man is a rotten shot. He ought to try practicing a bit.

I'm feeling right sorry for the little mother beside me, bucking a desperate murderer and the Department of Justice single-handed. Funny how the fall-guy gets under your skin. The under-dog is a lucky person sometimes. Gets your sympathy.

THINKING it over I decide Fisher-man's Wharf is about the best place to dump that package from. It ain't likely there'll be a soul stirring at this time. The fishermen won't be bringing in their catches for at least a couple of hours. And the pier runs out into deep water. Since the package is thin and heavy, it'll sink into the mud and sand and never see the light of day unless it goes clean through to China. The sand in the ocean has a way of swallowing thin heavy objects. Ever lose a fifty cent piece at the beach?

The little lady grips my arm suddenly. "I'm sure we're being followed. That touring car has been behind us for the last three blocks and it's gaining on us."

Shooting in the gas I roar up the hill and over the top. "If we are I'll give them the ride of their lives," I reply grimly. "Sit tight and hang onto your teeth. I'm letting this blimp out."

Down Jackson we speed, then skim the tops of the cobbles with brakes screaming down the fifteen per cent. grade to Pacific. The streets here for at least three blocks either side ain't navigable because of the grade, and unless the bird following us decides to risk coming down this one behind us, I got a good chance of losing him.

"Anyone following?" I shout at her.

"A car hesitated at the top and sped on," she yells back. "But we are being followed. I'm sure now. Hurry. Go faster!"

Faster? We're doing more'n I thought the blimp had in her, and more'n is healthy down grades. But if that guy thinks he's gonna circle the three blocks and catch up to us, he's got another think coming. I cut across the street, hoping no one meets us at the intersection, and as I take the

hill from Pacific down to Broadway I pray my brakes is in good condition. I ain't never known but one car that ever took this hill and it had a eight cylinder engine and special tested brakes for the demonstration.

Holy Cat, but she rocks as we tear down over the cobbles, skidding on the weeds that's overgrown them. The brakes don't mean a thing. I begin to understand how a condemned man feels taking his last supper. I've got a queer idea this is my last ride.

AT THE bottom I jam her for all she's worth in a desperate effort to slack her speed on the next hill, which ain't very steep I happen to know. If we only stay right side up we may live to tell the tale after all. I tell you I'm weak all over when I feel the brakes taking hold and the scenery makes shape out of the blur. I just manage to swing her round into Vallejo, two wheels fanning the air.

"Is anyone behind us?" I inquire, feeling a heap of respect for this little lady sitting tight beside me.

"No," she replies, and I chuckle grimly. I've yet to meet the man that can out-drive me, blimp or racer.

When we come to Van Ness Avenue I'm worried we'll get picked up. It's a main artery and well lighted. But I've got to cross it. To my relief there's no one hanging about and I shoot over without any alarm following us far as I can judge. Circling Russian Hill, I keep above Columbus Avenue all through wop town, and bring up at Fisherman's Wharf.

The little lady leaps out and hurries toward the pier, clutching her jonah package. A high powered car roars up the street, comes to a screaming stop behind me. Out jumps the driver and makes for the little lady. He grabs her just as I reach them.

With a quick lunge I catch him one on the button that send him reeling backward. In the moonlight I recognize the D. J. man I had encountered in the Woods.

"Run!" I yells to her, planting my feet for the bozo's rush.

But he tries to dodge me to stop the little lady. I close with him.

"You fool!" he snarls, trying to loosen my hold and reach for his gat. "You're interfering with the United States Department of Justice!"

"Now I'll tell one!" I laugh in his face and give him a jab in the bread basket where he don't like it so well, though my heart sinks at the news. As I've remarked, I got a heap of respect for our Uncle Sam.

OVER my shoulder I see the little lady reach the end of the pier and start down a ladder there. I wonder why she doesn't just throw it instead of climbing down to the water edge to drop it, but women do funny things sometimes just to see they're done thoroughly.

"Now, now," I soothe the excited D. J. "If you'll be good I'll let you loose. I don't wanta play with you no more. I'm tired and wanta go home."

Realizing the show's over he eases up. I step back from him. The next moment



he grabs my wrists in a way I admire, snaps a pair of bracelets on me and drags me out on the pier toward where the little lady went down the ladder.

Coming up over the top again, she takes in the scene and comes running up. "Don't take him!" she cries. "It's me you want."

"Lady, be wise," I warn her. "He can't do a thing to either of us, long as you don't convict yourself. We ain't done nothing he can prove except break the speed limit."

"You've interfered with a Department of Justice operator in the prosecution of government business," he snaps.

"In what way?" I inquires innocently.

"You've given aid to a fugitive from justice."

"A which? Where?"

"This woman threw a counterfeit plate in the water and you aided her in doing it. But I'll have divers recover it soon as it's daylight."

I got to admit this floors me. I hadn't

figured on divers, because I hadn' figured the D. J. man to see us drop the plate in the bay. But the little lady begins to laugh hysterically.

"Better to try dredging the whole bay," she tells him. "I set the package you're interested in adrift in a little row boat with a hole in its bottom. I put the hole there with a boat hook, and dumped in a lot of old chain. Do you see which way the tide's going? Out, and it's taken the sinking boat with it! You couldn't find it in the darkness before it goes to the bottom if you had a whole fleet of boats ready to search for it right now."

"Good girl!" I exclaim admiringly. So that's what she was doing below the pier. "Now, Mr. D. J., where's your evidence against us? How you going to prove what was sunk in the bay?" I demand with a lot more confidence than I'm feeling. Without doubt the bulls must have picked up the unconscious Tripper by now and Tripper will squeal for spite.

BUT the bozo looks green at the gills to me. I get a sudden suspicion. "Say, didn't you pick up Tripper after we left him laying pretty for you to come along and gather in? Man, he didn't get away from you?"

He turns a shade greener.

"He did!" I accuse him, hope rising—for it is of Tripper's confession alone we need fear, with the plates safely buried.

"No. We came along just as you tore off around the corner, but he had already regained consciousness and picked up his gun. He dropped three of my men and a

bystander, but I got him in the end."

I let out a yell to hallelujah. With Tripper's lips sealed forever there's no one can testify the little lady ever had the plate in her possession or that she and her dead husband knew a thing about it. Certainly it couldn't be proved they'd ever profited by the counterfeiting.

"Then you ain't got no evidence at all to hold us on! Take your jewelry off my wrists, Mr. D. J."

A grin breaks over the D. J. man's face. He grips my hand. "Put it there. Duty is duty, but even the chief'll be glad to know Tripper's dead, the plate's sunk and he won't have to prosecute this lady here. You see, he dangled her on his knee when she was the kid next door."

The little lady gives me the name of the hotel she's staying at and I take her there so she can get a little rest before she gets the next train back to Washington and the kids. Suddenly realizing I must be in Dutch with the company for failing to report my movements all night, I break away from the little lady's overflowing gratitude. As I speed away she tries to call me back, but I keep on going.

At the nearest box I hop out to ring in. The click of my meter still registering the mileage traveled, gives me a jolt. Weak in the knees I throw the flag and grind out the bad news.

Twenty-four dollars and sixty-five cents, including the bill Tripper never lived to pay!

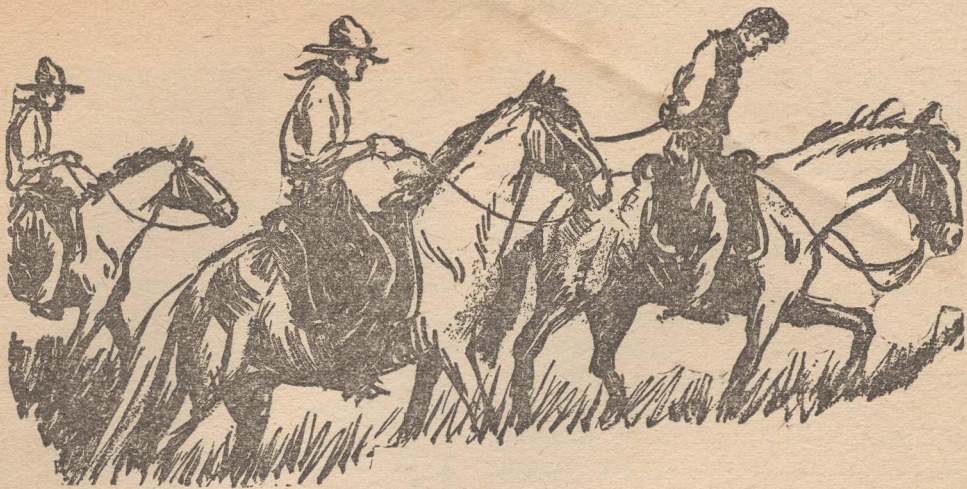
Holy cow, I'd get better fare in Federal prison than I'm going to be able to afford after I put up for this night's joy ride!

GOOD WEATHER PROPHETS

LONG before weather bureaus were thought of, gifted individuals were able to predict sudden changes in weather. And long before that, wild animals were good at it. Range cattle and horses still retain some measure of this valuable instinct.

On the open stretches of range in high altitude, where water evaporates before it is hot enough to boil beans, there are two seasons; "nine months of winter and three months of late in the fall." Here it is that "only two kinds of people ever try to predict changes in weather; fools and newcomers."

But horses and cattle are able to sense certain subtle warnings which are beyond the reach of human perception. There comes a day in September when the sun is warm and assuring, the sky cloudless, and some of the wild flowers still in blossom. That is the day when cattle and horses hit for lower country. And the next day—two feet of snow and still coming.—J. H. H.



WHEN LAW RIDES WEST

By H. C. WIRE

Author of "The Tunnel Mouth Killer," "The Feud at Freedom," etc.

YOUNG JEFF GILLAM, RIDING INTO THE ROARING GOLD CAMP OF TONAPAH, DIDN'T KNOW WHAT OF STRUGGLE, FEUD, BULLETS AND HAIR BREADTH ESCAPE LAY BEFORE HIM THERE. BUT EVEN THEN THE LAW WAS RIDING WEST TO THE TIME WHEN FIFTY THOUSAND DOLLARS IN GOLD WAS TO BE GAMBLED ON HUMAN NATURE AND A WILD TOWN WAS TO FEEL THE POWER OF MIGHT THAT WAS RIGHT AS WELL

CHAPTER I

ONE MAN ALONE

JUST as "Oh, Susannah!", sung in every Eastern cafe during those feverish months of '49, put more men on the California trail than all the gold nuggets ever exhibited, so, early one spring evening, a song drifting from the open door of a log cabin on the road to Tonapah, began at once to alter that gold camp's future history and the immediate lives of three of her citizens.

Young Jeff Gillam, riding alone in the dark, came abreast of the cabin door and halted. His horse relaxed instantly, having come forty miles that day, and stood with head lowered, weight shifted to three legs. But Jeff remained upright in his saddle, alert, listening to the song. It was a sentimental ballad in which "waiting" rhymed with "mating," and "years" with "tears," yet he was unconscious of the words and heard only the voice of the singer.

For a moment he hesitated, then with

sudden decision swung to the ground. There he stood full in a path of light from the doorway, a tall, straight figure, young but not boyish, dressed in a cowhand's traveling outfit of hickory shirt, and blue denim breeches left outside his high-heeled boots. A white silk handkerchief, knotted at his throat with loose ends blowing over one shoulder, gave just enough swagger to his costume. When he removed his hat upon approaching the door, it uncovered short reddish hair clustered over a high forehead and underneath, intent blue eyes.

The song was cut short as his boots crunched into the gravel walk, and within the cabin he saw a girl rise sharply from where she had been sitting at a piano. With only a glance in his direction, she called, "Father, is that you?" Then she continued toward an adjoining room.

Jeff could not answer. Until this minute he had not thought of what he would say; in fact he had realized nothing save an overpowering desire to see the woman who owned that voice. The loneliness of ten

months on a southern cattle range had swept all else from his mind. Now he groped for an excuse.

He was aware that the girl had stopped halfway across the room and was looking toward the door. A lamp on the table behind her cast a golden mist through her light hair and showed only the soft round lines of her face. Otherwise she seemed to him small and neat, a pretty figure in a blue apron without sleeves.

HE GLANCED away and up the road. A reflected glow along the canyon-side not far beyond told him plainly the location of Tonapah. But he had to say something at once, so began with, "Good evening. Can you tell me how far it is to town?"

A quick tension came upon the girl as she turned, with shoulders drawn inward. She seemed on the verge of retreating, yet remained motionless and stared his way with a little frown.

"I'm a stranger here," he assured her, moving closer to let the light shine onto his face. "Don't mind me. Is it far to town?"

The girl surveyed him in one all-seeing look and needed no more to conclude her judgment. She came to the door, met his eyes and smiled.

"Do you mean Tonapah?"

"Yes, how far——?"

"This is it."

Jeff smiled back, wondering if she had seen through his bluff. Yet the eyes looking into his were serious even in their smile, and showed no hint of mockery. He waved a hand toward the reflected canyon glow. "The camp is in there?"

"Yes. About an eighth of a mile to the first saloon."

Jeff scowled. "I'm not looking for a saloon."

The girl was laughing now, in a low, musical voice that recalled her singing and brought a surge of the the old loneliness upon him.

"I'm looking for a fellow," he lied deliberately, "named Dorn. Jimmy Dorn, sort of a partner of mine. Maybe you know him here. It's important. That's why I stopped."

The reason sounded plausible enough in his own ears. The girl too had become thoughtful.

"Jimmy Dorn?" she asked. "Why, no. I've never heard of him." She paused, seemed to weigh her next words, then added, "My father keeps a store in town. He knows everybody. I expect him home any minute now, so won't you come in and wait?"

"I'd like to," Jeff admitted. "Like to, I mean, find my pal."

HE TOOK his horse to one side and dropped the reins. The girl was waiting for him when he came back and led the way into her cabin.

The room was long and low, with cheerful color in curtains at the windows. A piano and music rack filled one end. At the other was a fireplace with a log burning now and kettles hung on a crane. Jeff noticed at once that the kettles steamed and gave off smells to goad his appetite. A table set with supper dishes stood nearby.

"Won't you sit down?" the girl asked.

He dropped upon a bench near the wall, spread his booted feet in front of him and smiled. "Aren't you afraid to bring strangers in?"

"Some," she answered frankly, "but not you."

Jeff gazed at her. She wasn't flirting. Her eyes were innocent of that. He could see the color now—brown, with gay lights dancing in them, and he thought her face the most beautiful he had ever seen.

Love may not come at first sight amid the complexities of steam-heated apart-

ments, theater tickets and millinery bills, but at that moment, in the humble log cabin on the road to Tonapah, it came to Jeff Gillam unreserved. Life for him and all of his kind was like that. Swift. You couldn't count on tomorrow. It might not dawn.

He looked at the girl and tried to speak



calmly. "I hear Tonapah is a wide-open camp."

"Too wide," she answered, sitting on the piano stool not far from him. Suddenly her eyes clouded. "No law abiding man is safe there any more, since Flash Lenner got control of the town. Because father keeps a store he tries to stand in with everybody. But he says that can't last. He can't straddle the fence always. There are other men like him—lots of them, but the decent element is hard to find. The trouble is, Flash Lenner's gang has the miners all buffaloeed."

A kettle boiled over and she jumped up to move it from the crane. Jeff followed her.

"Can't I help?" he asked, reaching to take the hot kettle bail. But his hand touched the girl's and swiftly his fingers closed upon hers.

FOR a moment she seemed not to notice. Then suddenly she drew from him, straightened and stared into his face. Her own cheeks were flushed. Yet her voice said coolly, "Put it on the hearth, please."

Jeff placed the kettle on the stones. When he looked up she was watching him with a tense, half-frightened expression. She walked to the table, paused and glanced toward the door, then back to where he still knelt near the fire.

All at once she smiled again, saying, "You're hungry, aren't you? Father's late tonight. Won't you have something now?"

It was an easy invitation to accept. Jeff washed in a bowl just outside the rear door, then came back and sat at one end of the table. The girl served meat stew from the kettle, but left her own plate empty and perched herself on a chair across from him.

"Aren't you going to have some?" he asked.

"I'll wait for my father."

"Oh sure."

Jeff tried to eat. Somehow his appetite was gone. His throat was already choked. The supper steam came up in tantalizing smells, yet after one bite he put down his knife and fork and gazed at the girl so close across from him.

"I throw up my hands," he admitted

helplessly. "You've got me going. You're the girl I've been looking for!"

He paused, groping for words, his hands clenched at the table's edge.

Already that night the girl had taken her moment to judge the man. She looked now into clear blue eyes, saw the honest flame within them and the clean-cut lines of his tanned face, and knew her first conclusion had not been wrong.

"I don't even know your name," Jeff went on, "or anything about you. Me? I'm just a drifter, floating around the country at any job. But I've been on the level—the dead level, girl—and I can keep on it. I'll get a steady job. I'm a good hand. I'll quit driftin', and work for you, sure I will."

He stopped, breathless, surprised at his own flow of speech. He thought the girl might stand up and leave him. But she didn't.

"My name is Jan," she offered quietly. "Jan Wilton. You don't need to know anything about me. Men can tell pretty much about a girl by looking at her. But what do I know about you, Mr.—"

"Gillam," Jeff supplied quickly, leaning nearer. "Jeff's the front handle. Use it, won't you Jan? Can't a girl read anything in a fellow by looking at him too? Sure thing. I'm giving it to you on the dead level—I'm straight. I know when I've found the girl I want. If I stay here in town, and work, will you keep company with me? I'd do anything, Jan, to show you I'm the real stuff."

FOR a time the room seemed tense with the silence that settled within it. At last the girl spoke. "I think you would," she replied. "But do you really like me? Or is it because you haven't seen dresses for some time?"

Jeff bent over his neglected dinner-plate, folding his powerful bare arms in front of him. "It's a fact I haven't seen a girl for ten months. But I've known a plenty before that. They never heard me say the things I'm saying to you. I've never felt this way, honest. Will you keep company with me, will you, steady?"

"Is it straight what you said about always being on the dead level?" Jan asked.

"The straightest thing I ever said."

"It's got to be, Jeff, because here in Tonapah you'll have hard enough time keeping that way. I know." She lifted her head eagerly, making no attempt to hide the happiness upon her face. "Then you may see me often."

An elated sense of possession swept over Jeff. Then a quick jealousy. "You won't be courtin' a lot of other men?" he blurted.

The girl laughed him into a shame-faced grin, but the next moment turned solemn eyes to him with the promise, "I might not want to see another man. It all depends on you."

Both became silent, sat leaning with elbows on the table and stared thoughtfully into the glowing log.

OUTSIDE a shuffle sounded along the gravel walk. Jan stood up. "It's father," she said. "Just sit where you are. We'll all have supper now."

She started across the room, but halted abruptly as the shuffle became a tramp of many feet, mingled with a low muttering. Then someone knocked on the door, calling at the same time, "Miss Jan!"

She opened it. Jeff had risen from the table and now stood not far behind her. He saw a man's face in the lamplight, with several more around him.

"Miss Jan," this one was saying, "your dad's hurt."

For one instant the girl's face blanched. No other sign of fear came into her expression. Even that vanished as she opened



the door quickly, then turned and entered another room at the cabin's end. Jeff saw her light a lamp and throw a red patch quilt over a bed.

By that time a crowd of men had surged after her, two of them carrying a motionless form.

The cabin became filled with figures—miners, storekeepers in their black sleeve-protectors, and some Jeff could not place. Presently came one whose entrance made all the rest seem insignificant.

He was very tall, six feet four at least, and thin. From his shoulders to his knees hung a gray frock coat, carefully pressed and held with ivory buttons. As if his natural height were not enough, he wore a gray silk hat which he removed upon entering. It was then that Jeff became aware of the man's singular force.

The head was bald and hard, like a dome of polished granite. It bulged over heavy gray brows and deep-set eyes, breaking into sharp-lined features. They too seemed chiseled from rock. His nose was long, his mouth wide but firm, his jaw angular. He looked more like Abraham Lincoln than anyone Jeff could think of.

When he entered, stooping in order to clear the doorway, other men moved aside to let him pass. He walked with dignified authority to the small end room and stood looking down at the bed. From someone nearby, Jeff heard the name, "Doc Randall."

PRESENTLY the doctor's deep voice rumbled out into the cabin. "Not seriously hurt, Jan. No, nothing to worry about. We'll pull him through. Now, a basin of hot water, please. And cloths."

Assurance was in his leisurely manner. He removed his long frock coat, folded it across the back of a chair and began to roll up his shirt sleeves. As he did this, he seemed to become aware for the first time of the men crowding the main room. He stopped with one sleeve half rolled, looked once over the throng, and said:

"Gentlemen, you will oblige me by your absence."

Not a voice was raised against him, though all eyes were glittering with curiosity. Obediently the men filed out into the night. Departing with the rest, Jeff asked a man near him, "What happened, an accident?"

They had come to a point just beyond the cabin. Others were all about them. This one turned with a quizzical gaze. "Yes," he answered, "an accident. That's exactly it. You speak well, friend. Accident!"

Jeff knew better. He had merely offered the remark to open conversation. "Accident hell!" he scoffed now. "I saw that bullet hole. Who did it?"

The man's expression turned from quizzical to a warning scowl. "No one. Take my advice and shut up!"

Jeff faced him angrily. "Ain't safe to be asking, eh? All scared off, that it? Well, here's one that was born plumb curious. I want to know!"

The stranger shrugged and moved away, as if from contamination. Jeff stood glaring at the backs of retreating men. Yellow! Afraid to ask! Jan's father was shot, of course. Carried home with a bullet hole in his back—and you musn't ask who did it!

His rage was still boiling as he walked to where he had left his horse earlier in the night. The animal lifted a weary head when he approached. Jeff reached to take up the reins, turned, and stared into red glowering eyes at his back.

"I hear," said a taunting voice, "that you're one of these curious sort. Got to have your damned nose in other people's business. Well let me tell you——"

But Jeff didn't care to be told. Disgust, anger, contempt for the whole lot of Tonapah weak-bellies surged over him. He swung his fist upward against that wagging jaw and the man dropped limp. Without a further glance he mounted his horse and rode on. He knew the power of his own fist; the fellow would only sleep a while, or until friends found him. He wouldn't be hurt much.

A willow-grown creek cut across the road halfway to town. Jeff turned into this, came to a waterhole with a patch of grass nearby, and decided to make camp. He picketed his horse at the end of a lariat, spread his blanket roll and soon turned in.

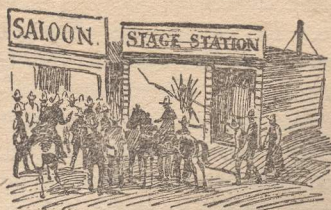
Yet excitement drove sleep from him. He thought of Jan, of his promise to her and her reply. He was on the dead level for sure; he'd show her that. He'd work now, steady. Thoughts of the girl filled his mind completely, leaving no room to consider the consequences of his hasty fist.

CHAPTER II

KIT MONROE

ALONG the five blocks of Tonapah's main street there were sixteen saloons. Each occupied a corner, and each had

its own section of wooden awning over its own section of board sidewalk. Space between corners was filled with low-fronted



shacks and tents, and were merely places where men might eat and sleep, except for one building

towering from the exact center of town.

Its white-painted front rose above all others; while in width it extended half the block. In contrast to such huge size its signboard was almost invisible, as if everybody would know anyway, and said simply in black letters: ROONEY'S RECREATION HALL.

Over a distance of many miles, into the hills and along the freight trail to the railroad at Mina, it went by the name of Rooney's Place. One man seldom said to another, "Meet me in Tonapah." But, "Meet me at Rooney's."

On the corner diagonally across from it was the most prosperous-looking of the saloons; a building made of adobe bricks, with windows set in two-foot recesses and a heavy plank door that could be closed inside of the usual swinging ones. There was good reason for such security, for Kit Monroe's saloon was also the town bank, where miners stored their gold dust and gamblers kept their winnings.

A little after six o'clock in the morning the heavy door swung inward and a man sauntered out, looked up and down the street, then paused on the sidewalk. He was not more than thirty-five, smooth-faced with blond hair showing under his black stiff-brimmed hat. From a distance he might have been mistaken for a miner, but closer observation would have shown that not much desert sun had ever touched him. His face was round, white and good-natured, though with slate-colored eyes that surveyed the street pointedly.

Having observed the further ends of town, he looked across to where a knot of men had gathered near Rooney's. Interest turned to an intent scrutiny of the figures, then the good-nature of his face darkened into a frown. He sauntered over, his hands

in his pockets, his manner wholly indifferent.

"Hello, Kit," one of the men called. "Heard about last night?"

"I was there." For a time he stood at the throng's edge. An argument was in progress. Occasionally a question was directed to him, and then all others stopped talking and waited for his answer. Eyes were leveled at him in hard demanding glances. Yet each time he would not be drawn in and merely shook his head.

Presently he strolled on, going in his leisurely fashion as if this early morning gathering was none of his affair. Yet he did not turn back at the end of the street, but continued along a road and reached the creek with its willows. Not far off a bit of smoke was rising over the tree tops. He climbed down the bank and walked in that direction.

JEFF looked up from his breakfast fire at the sound of someone approaching. He first saw a miner-like figure; then his glance rested upon the gun holster with ends tied down, pistol butt protruding for ease of reach, belt sagging to let the weapon come nearer to the right hand. This was no desert man.

He sprang up from the position over the fire, thoughts of the fellow he had knocked out last night coming to his mind. The man approached casually until he stood at ten paces; and all the while Jeff felt that he was being measured in every way by a pair of keen slate-colored eyes.

The man halted. "Stranger?" he asked bluntly.

As bluntly, Jeff countered, "Then what?"

"From down below, I take it. Cow range. Am I right?"

Jeff returned his gaze rigidly. "You are, mister. Is it unlawful for a cattleman to enter your mining district? If it is I'll sure turn right

around!"



A flicker of approval passed across the other man's face. He waved a hand toward Jeff's gun. "You can fan that, I suppose. Fast, are you?"

"Fast enough," Jeff answered guardedly. He was puzzled more than angered. He imagined this was a friend of the one he had slugged last night. Yet there was no look of vengeance on this man's face. Stalling, maybe. Well, he could stall too. He had never considered himself a gun-fighter. The weapon he carried was more to kill predatory animals on the cattle range—bear, mountain lions and wolves—than to be used on men.

"Fast enough, eh?" the man repeated. "Well suppose we see just how fast that is."

Jeff's eyes met the slate ones and locked. Somehow he sensed a smile lurking behind the intent light of those others.

"Draw when you're ready," said the man.

INSTANTLY, without a betraying first move, Jeff reached his gun. Yet the barrel did not clear its holster. At ten paces a round black bore was leveled at him. Behind it the man was smiling.

Jeff relaxed his grip. "You're good," he admitted coolly. "But what's the game?"

"Not bad yourself," the man replied. He slipped his gun back in its holster and approached the fire. "Breakfast? I'll have a cup of coffee with you." Without further word he squatted on the ground, his back against a willow.

Jeff studied the amazing stranger openly, wondering if he were not a little off his head. Yet a head must be clear for a man to draw with such speed. He kicked up the fire, deciding to let things develop in their own time, and remained silent while he boiled coffee. Still without comment, he handed the stranger a cupful.

"Thanks," said the man, "I'm Kit Monroe." He spoke as if the name would explain much.

"I'm Jeff Gillam," Jeff answered. "You've got me. I suppose Monroe means something here in Tonapah."

With no signs of boastfulness, Kit answered, "It does."

Again Jeff felt the slate eyes measuring

him as the man went on, "I was up to Wilton's last night—helped bring old Sam in. I talked with his girl afterwards."

Jeff remained standing, leaned against a willow trunk and let the coffee grow cold in its cup. He knew the truth was coming now; something about last night after all.

MONROE drained his cup quickly, placed it on a rock and seemed to launch into a new subject. "You're from the cattle country—I knew it. I'll bet, now, you can shoot straight, and at some distance. That's the way down there. You practice on a small mark like bottles and the ace of spades." He wagged his head gravely. "That won't help you much up here. You want speed—never mind distance. Your man won't be more than five paces off."

Monroe stood up, unbuckled his belt and held it out. "Here, put it on and try your draw."

Jeff obeyed. With amazing ease the gun seemed almost to fall into his hand as his finger tips touched the butt. He stared at the weapon, learning much. Its sight had been cut off, leaving the barrel end smooth. No danger of its catching on the holster. The holster, too, had been remodeled; with the front leather slit part way down and the tip padded with something to make the gun ride high.

He looked up at Monroe and nodded. "Neat work."

"Not only neat, but necessary. It's a system of mine. I don't show it off to everybody."

Jeff returned the outfit, asking earnestly, "Unload yourself, won't you? What's this all about?"

"Just a little friendly service. If you want to fix your gun like mine and practice up, you're welcome to the idea."

"I'm going to need it?"

"A lot. The man you slugged last night was Flash Lenner."

Jeff nodded. "I see." He felt the need of coffee and poured a fresh cup from the pot. Inwardly he saw more than he expressed in words. Flash Lenner. The boss of Tonapah. The man who had this camp at his heels. He saw himself mixed in a

fight with Lenner, now, of all times, when he wanted most to go about his own work. Make something of himself—that was what he had promised Jan Wilton last night.

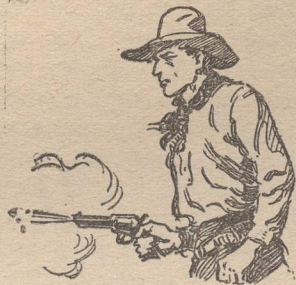
"Of course," Monroe was saying, "You can leave camp."

Jeff faced him quickly. "Do I look like that? I'll not sneak out!"

"Then you had better spend the day practicing your draw."

"You seem to be considerable on the inside," Jeff observed. "Maybe if I knew you better, Kit Monroe, I'd understand things. Where do you come in?"

"I don't, not any. But I talked with Jan Wilton last night. I got it from her that you have a real purpose for being here in Tonapah—a straight honest to God ambition. That's the kind of men we need, Gillam. Men with lawful plans. There are a good many of us, but there are a lot of the other sort too, and you can't tell which is which. I'm making it my business to get us law-abiding ones acquainted. On the side—see? In camp I'm a saloon owner."



MONROE paused to shove the stiff-brimmed hat up from his light hair. His eyes had narrowed and glittered with the heat of his interest.

"There's this shooting of old man Wilton," he went on at last. "Most of us know who did it—one of Flash Lenner's men—but we don't dare try him. We've got a miner's court that is scared to convict any man, even for an open attempt at murder like this. But if Lenner was to be knocked off, well, that would start something. It looks as if the good Lord had sent you here for a purpose. I'll say again, though, you can leave town early and I won't blame you a bit. Lenner is after you for a double reason; you slugged him, and he's been holding everyone off from Jan Wilton. Besides that, you're up against a fast gunman."

"When will it be?" Jeff asked.

"You'll get the details within an hour. I couldn't learn very much this morning. Would you recognize Lenner?"

"I had a close look at his face," Jeff answered grimly. "I'd know him again."

Monroe stood up. "Well, all right. Now you had better knock the sight off your gun and slit the holster. Stuff a rag in the tip." He held out his hand. "Good luck to you, Gillam."

FOR a time after Monroe had moved away through the willows, Jeff sat staring at the coals of his fire, thinking of Jan Wilton. No use going to see her this morning as he had planned. No use seeing her at all until after he had met Flash Lenner. His own hasty fist had let him into this, yet he did not regret it. Without knowing it, during his hard young years on the range he had picked up the philosophy of a fatalist. Things happen. You accept them.

He drew his gun from its holster, examined the barrel then knocked off the sight against a sharp-edged rock. After that he found a piece of sandstone and began to smooth down the barrel where the stub had been. The job was not yet finished when, half an hour later, three men approached through the trees.

Jeff slid the gun back into place and stood up, one hand braced against the willow trunk, his body relaxed in that ease which allows for quickest movement. He surveyed the leader of the three, a burly red-faced man with a dirty brown hat crushed upon his beetle brows. The other two, walking slightly behind this one, Jeff dismissed as unimportant.

All three halted at the further side of his little camp clearing.

"Mornin'," the leader began.

"Well?" Jeff countered. His habitual air of young friendliness had left him; his eyes were cold, his face set.

"Are you the fellow that slugged Flash Lenner last night?" the man asked.

"Does that make any particular difference to you?" Jeff dropped his hand from the tree trunk, hooked a thumb into his gun belt and stood with shoulders slightly hunched forward.

"None at all," the leader answered, shrugging, and next his voice took on a tone of mock politeness. "We just happened to come through town and ran into Lenner and he asked us to bring a message—sort of a favor to you. He says he'll be at Rooney's at seven this evenin'. He wants to know if you'll be there too, ready on sight."

Jeff nodded and assumed the same studied civility. "Thank you, gentlemen. If you should just *happen* to see Lenner again, tell him yes I'll be there at seven—ready on sight."

Without further word the three moved back toward town.

Jeff resumed his work, finished smoothing his gun barrel, then slit the front of his holster and padded the tip in the way Monroe had advised. For an hour after that he practiced his draw, standing five paces from a tree and trying only for unbroken action. After ten minutes he would rest for an interval, limber his wrist by vigorous shaking, then begin again.

A LITTLE after noon he walked into camp to familiarize himself with Rooney's and its surroundings. As he passed along the street where men were loafing in the shade of wooden awnings, he saw heads nodded in his direction and caught a mumble of, "That's the one." Some glared at him tauntingly. There were a few further on who offered a tentative, "Howdy." Jeff nodded to these and approached Rooney's.

The gambling hall had very few customers at this time of the day. He paused in the wide front entrance and swept his eyes around the huge room, where only half a dozen men played at the games without

interest, while keepers sat on their high stools and yawned.

He observed the bar running full length of the back wall, noted



the cleared area in the center of the floor, then let his gaze rest for some time upon the rows of roulette wheels with their discs of polished silver. Studying that part

of the hall, he tried to visualize each move he would make tonight. Once he stepped a little further inside to get a better view of the roulette games. Presently he turned away and walked back to his camp.

TWO men were there in the willows to meet him; Kit Monroe, squatting on his heels with his usual expression of casual interest; and the doctor, dignified in his frock coat and silk hat, with alert attention marked upon his hewn face.

Without rising, Monroe waved a hand as Jeff approached. "Gillam," he said, "meet Doc Randall."

The doctor extended hard bony fingers in a firm clasp. "We heard," he began solemnly, "that you had accepted a challenge, and I am here to offer my services—if they be needed afterwards."

"Aw go on, Doc," Monroe grinned. "Gillam here isn't going to need any of your swabbin'. Isn't that right friend? How have you made out with the new draw?"

"I'm better," Jeff admitted. "But I don't know if I'm very fast yet."

Monroe sprang up. "Let's see. Here! Give us the word, Doc." He stood facing Jeff, his face suddenly animated, his slate eyes narrowed.

Doctor Randall waited an instant, then snapped, "Draw!"

Two barrels glittered in the sunlight. But Monroe's was leveled before the other had completed its upward arc.

Jeff scowled. "I've got to do better than that."

"A lot," Monroe agreed. "There's something wrong." He screwed up his mouth, frowned thoughtfully at Jeff's holster, then burst out, "Drag your gun! Don't lift it. That's why the holster is slit down the front. Dragging is the way. Watch. Shoulder, arm, hand, all move forward at the same time and *drag* your iron straight out!"

Jeff nodded. "I'll work on it."

"Yes," said Monroe intently, "You'd better practice some more!"

Beside them Doctor Randall made a muttering noise in his throat. "A lot of dam' foolishness, I'd say," he grumbled. "This Flash Lenner is a cur that ought to

be killed. Why risk a young man's life doing it? Why don't some of you give Lenner a bullet in the dark?"

"And gain what?" Monroe demanded. "We've had bullets in the dark long enough. What we want now is things done lawfully. The first law this camp can understand and respect is a gun-fight held according to its own rules. If we can get rid of Lenner like that, the next step is written law and jury trial."

The doctor shook his head dubiously. "We aren't ready for book laws and weak-kneed juries!"

"Don't mind him," Monroe said good-naturedly, turning to Jeff. "He isn't anything but a dam' good medic. Now you go ahead with your practicing. Didn't Lenner say he'd meet you ready on sight? That means you've got to see him first."

The two men departed, the doctor grave and silent, Monroe still arguing about written law. Mechanically Jeff faced the willow trunk and let a hand flash to his gun.

CHAPTER III

SEVEN O'CLOCK AT ROONEY'S

AT TEN minutes before seven, Kit Monroe stood near one end of the long bar in Rooney's Hall, watching the crowd that had filled the room. A glass stood near his elbow, but he had not tasted the drink. A few other men lounged near the bar, yet most of the patrons gathered at the gambling tables, or were seated against the three vacant walls, like spectators around a prize ring.

Although Rooney's Recreation Hall seemed little more than a huge barn-like structure from the outside, within, it was every miner's dream of elegance. Out of San Francisco when the boom of '49 had passed, went great mirrors, mahogany tables, velvet-covered chairs, all scattered to newer camps, packed over mountains and down valleys, to be gathered at last in one magnificent collection when Dan Rooney put up his house in Tonapah.

Six ball-in-a-bowl roulette games stood in a row near the right hand side. Four of the upright, spinning disc sort occupied a space at the rear directly in front of

the bar. Faro, monte and poker tables completed the equipment at the left. The whole arrangement was in the shape of a U, with the open end toward the main front entrance. It was this section that held Kit Monroe's gaze.

He looked at his watch. Five minutes to seven. Then his eyes returned instantly to the doorway. Jeff Gillam had appeared in the entrance, stepped to one side, and stood now with his back to the wall. He was bareheaded and encumbered only with the pistol and belt, which Monroe noticed, sagged to drop the holster close to young Gillam's palm.

It seemed to Monroe that a momentary hush had come over the house, rising again to its pitch of many voices as the new comer paused. He remained motionless, save for the deliberate glance of his eyes that went from group to group among the roulette tables, then traveled along the bar and rested a second with the slightest show of recognition. In response Monroe gave him a slow nod and watched almost breathlessly for the next move.

Presently, having finished that calm survey, Gillam sauntered across the clear area in the center of the room, seemed to be deciding which game to try out, then halted at a table in front of the bar. Until this time no man had paid direct attention to him, but as he stopped at the roulette wheel and asked for chips, all other patrons moved aside.

Monroe smiled grimly at this retreat from the danger area. Gillam was left the sole player, yet stood with seeming indifference and studied the upright wheel a moment before he placed his chips.

Suddenly Monroe's smile died. Gillam's back was to the entrance. The whole center of the room, now entirely cleared, lay behind him. Again Monroe looked at his watch. Two minutes to seven. Scowling, he stared at Gillam, his fists clenched. This show of indifference could be carried too far! Between gritted teeth he muttered, "Fool! Turn around!" But the tall, hard figure, too far off to hear and ap-

parently too absorbed in his bet to care, proceeded in his own way.

OTHER games continued with all places taken. The house rumbled to many voices, soon becoming filled with a cloud of tobacco smoke struck through by long yellow shafts from oil lanterns overhead.

Monroe stood with his watch in his hand. Seven o'clock. He looked up. Flash Lenner, appearing as Jeff had appeared, paused in the entrance, stepped aside and stood against the wall. His eyes too, traveled over the different groups, only they went with quick nervous haste and came at once upon the lone figure at a roulette table directly in front of the bar.

Monroe reached for his whisky glass, but his hand shook and he withdrew it. He stared at Gillam, who, hesitating over his second bet, stood gazing at the wheel with a thoughtful frown. In his left hand he clinked together a pile of coins, while his right held one chip above the numbered squares of the table top.

Flash Lenner was moving forward. The noise in the house had not abated, yet heads were turned and eyes glittered. Slowly, with body a little crouched, Lenner advanced, crossed the center of the room and reached a point not five paces behind Gillam's back.

It was then, in the instant when his hand started to his gun, that the house turned deathly still, only to have the silence shattered by a revolver's roar.

It all happened in the time of an eye-wink; too swift for Monroe to follow. He saw Flash Lenner lying motionless on the floor, and young Gillam, pistol still leveled, facing that figure.

His even voice filled the room. "Any of you here," he demanded, "want to take this fellow's part?"

No one answered. For a second he remained with pistol slowly sweeping the crowd. Every man stood fixed in his tracks. Presently he dropped the gun into its holster, turned with his old deliberation and faced again toward the roulette wheel.

"There's my bet," he said. "Let her spin."

The operator obeyed, whirling the wheel



with his left hand, while his eyes rested upon the lone player with silent approval. The house burst into its clatter of business. Two men came to the limp form and carried it away. Monroe, at the bar, gulped his whisky in one fierce draught. "Oh Lord!" he gasped.

HE SHOULDERED a path through the crowd and reached the table just as Gillam had cashed his chips and was turning to leave.

Monroe clutched his arm. "You young fool! He almost got you. Why in the name of hell didn't you watch?"

Jeff smiled, though without mirth and with the tension of this ordeal showing upon his face. "I was watching all the time," he said. "In that wheel. Look."

Monroe faced the roulette wheel and saw in its silver disc a reflection of the doorway and the whole center room. When he turned again to Jeff, his eyes had taken on a look of new admiration. "That," he offered, "is what I call using your head. Come on, let's get out of here."

He started toward the door. "I've got something to talk over with you. Business. I want to grab an advantage quick before the gang gets reorganized."

Jeff said nothing until they reached the street. There he halted, asking, "Can your business wait an hour? I've got some of my own that comes first."

Monroe smiled wisely. "Of course. Go and see Jan Wilton then come to the little room back of my bar. I'll wait for you—and say, ask if Wilton needs anything. I didn't go out to the house today. Thought it best to keep Jan ignorant of your trouble until it was all over."

A FEELING that strength had gone from his muscles came upon Jeff as he reached his horse in the willow camp. He realized that he had not eaten since morning and had lived only for this moment when he should either walk from Rooney's, or be carried out. Now all life spread before him again; and in it the most important thing was Jan. In spite of the weakness from hunger and the day's waiting, his desire to see her came before all else.

He had left his horse saddled in camp, and mounting, rode down the canyon at a run. There was no lamplight in the cabin as he approached. His eagerness sank into disappointment. He had not doubted that Jan would be there. Her father, wounded, could not go far.

As he came close to the cabin, his horse suddenly shied at something on the ground and stopped with ears pointed, nostrils quivering. Jeff swung off, saying, "What is it, boy?" The animal backed away, snorting.

He was not the kind to give a false alarm. Jeff understood him. There was something wrong. He tied the rope around a post then returned to the house afoot. At the place where his horse had first halted, he stooped and picked up a piece of red cloth. It had a familiar look. Then he knew. It was from the patch quilt he had seen Jan arrange for her father.

Instantly he was alert, and advanced with fear for the girl driving off his natural caution. The door stood open; the cabin within was soundless. He entered abruptly, paused with gun drawn, not knowing himself what he expected. At once his eyes fell upon an overturned chair.

Now in the dim light he could see that the whole room was in disorder as if from a hard scuffle. Unwashed dishes, too, were



lying on the table, and at the further end of the cabin lay the patch quilt, torn and shredded, with cotton showing where sections of the red cloth had been snatched

away.

For a time he stood motionless with thoughts confused. He was certain only that Lenner, or Lenner's men, were accountable for this empty house. Blind fury surged upon him. It drew his body tense and filled him with a swift grim purpose that banished all other emotions of this day. Suddenly he ran to his horse, flung himself into the saddle and whirled back to the Tonapah road.

CHAPTER IV

A DEAL IN GOLD

KIT MONROE sat waiting in the little room at the rear of his saloon. A huge safe occupied one wall, while a round table and four chairs filled the center. It was Monroe's private meeting place, reserved for the few friends he cared to trust in intimate talk. Doctor Randall sat across the table from him now, being the closest of his cronies, though they differed in opinion on all things from liquor to how the camp should be run.

They were in the midst of their endless argument when a fist pounded hard upon the small rear door. Monroe unbolted it, but planted his boot against the bottom to allow only a slight opening.

"Quick!" came Jeff's voice from outside. "Let me in."

He burst into the room and stood with eyes flaming, hands clenched. "There's no one at Wilton's," he began breathlessly. "They've been taken off! Some of Lenner's gang has done it and I'm going—"

"Now look here," Monroe interrupted him quietly. "Sit down. Take it easy. Have a smoke."

"Yes, my friend," Randall put in, nodding his bald angular head. "Excitement is bad for the arteries." He extended one hand, saying gravely, "You are to be congratulated. I witnessed your performance at Rooney's. While we mourn for the deceased as the man he was born to be, we rejoice, considering the man he was, in seeing him sent to his proper doom."

Jeff shook the doctor's hand in a distraught fashion, wondering what was meant by this stilted speech, then all at once he slumped into a chair, relaxed and took a deep breath. Doc Randall turned to Monroe.

Monroe nodded. "That's better. Now then, Gillam, tell us what has happened."

Jeff explained what he had discovered at the Wilton cabin.

"That is serious!" Doc Randall exclaimed. The ponderous dignity had left him. Tense white spots appeared over his cheek bones. He stood up suddenly, searching in the pockets of his long frock coat.

"Kit," he asked, "have you been to Wilton's today?"

MONROE shook his head. "I didn't go out either," Randall continued. "I received this note from Jan early this morning. It said her father was sleeping comfortably and I needn't come."

"Who brought it?" Monroe asked.

"I don't know. It was on my office table."

Monroe extended his hand. "Let me see." For a time he examined the paper. Two deep creases came between his eyes. At last he looked up, saying, "You're right, Doc, this is serious. I've seen Jan's writing. It was never as uneven as this." He paused, glancing again at the note. "That girl was forced to write it!"

Jeff had listened silently, but sprang from his chair at Monroe's decision. "Why are we wasting time?" he demanded. "I'm going!"

"Where, Gillam?"

Jeff scowled into Monroe's impassive face. "Going to find Jan; wherever she is."

"Sit down."

There was a force in Monroe's unperturbed manner that could not be denied. Jeff obeyed him.

"Now then," Monroe offered, "let's figure this out before we go off half-cocked. Flash Lenner was behind it, of course. Looks as if he thought there would be trouble for him after he killed you—which he expected to do. He was getting ready to pull out, I'd say, with what he owned and with one thing he just wanted to own. Meaning Jan Wilton. But now Lenner is dead; and Jan is planted somewhere not too far off."

"That's just it," Jeff broke in, "and we ought—"

Monroe silenced him with a wave of his hand. "You fear for the girl. Lenner's men know where she is but they won't harm her. See what I mean? They won't want her just for a woman—easy enough for them to get that here in town. They'll use her to a lot better advantage."

"For ransom?" Jeff asked.

"Perhaps. Or something even better. I don't know. But they have brains in that crowd. Don't you think they haven't. They'll use them and we've got to use ours."

If you start off on a blind trail you'll just get yourself shot and help nobody."

"Maybe so," Jeff answered doggedly, "but I can't sit here. What do you suggest?"

"That we go about our business and let them make the first move. We don't even know who belongs to Lenner's gang—though we have our suspicions—but now someone has got to show his hand if they gain anything by this kidnapping." Monroe paused, then looked at Jeff with that keen calculation in his slate-gray eyes. "I say we go about our own business. Have you any?"

JEFF shook his head impatiently. "No. I came to Tonapah looking for work."

"Then I've got a job for you! I've known you only two days, but I'll gamble a fortune that you're the straight goods." The man turned to survey the huge safe behind him. "I'd hate to have the town toughs know how much gold is stored in this place of mine," he continued. "These



adobe walls are thick, but even adobe can't protect half a million dollars."

"Half a million!" Jeff repeated, momentarily aroused from the swift planning within his own mind.

"Yes," Monroe agreed, "half a million. I bank for a dozen people. The dust has piled up beyond what I expected and for some time I've had a contract with the railroad express company at Mina for them to take it off my hands. But Mina is fifty miles north of here. I've got to carry the stuff that first fifty."

With an abrupt movement of his head he turned squarely to Jeff. "Do you want the job?"

Jeff sprang from his chair, answering as he crossed to the outer door. "You can't talk to me of any job now! This sounds like my style of work, I hate to turn you down, but I've got to go. You may be

right. I'm on a blind trail, sure; I've got to try it."

Hot color surged into Monroe's face. "Don't be a fool! I know what I'm talking about. You don't know the country, you don't know the people; you haven't got a thing to start with!"

"I've got a little something," Jeff countered. "This." He drew a patch of red cloth from his shirt pocket, unfolded it and explained, "I found it tonight in front of the cabin. It may have been dropped by accident. But maybe not. It might mark Jan's trail. Anyhow I'm going to find out. I've got to! Don't you understand?"

Monroe shrugged. "Go ahead, then. This job of mine can wait—if you get back to take it."

JEFF'S first preparation upon returning to his camp was to give his horse a hatful of grain and fortify himself with bacon, sourdough biscuits and coffee. By that time daylight was breaking over the hills and he mounted and rode to hunt the trail from Jan Wilton's cabin.

Beginning where he had picked up the red patch, he circled around the countless prints of boots and horses' hoofs until he came at last to where three sets of iron-shod tracks led away. Directly behind the Wilton cabin was a shallow coulee. He followed the three trails in that direction. There in the sand bottom they were plainly marked and he rode rapidly up the winding course to its head in the foothills half a mile distant.

So far the way was easy. He was certain that this was the trail he sought, for the tracks were fresher than any others around the cabin. Besides, he reasoned, men didn't usually go under cover without some good purpose. But then having come fully into the flanking ridges of the hills, the tracks left the sandy bottom and now on the rock slope, became indistinct white scars. He dismounted, and leading his horse, went up afoot.

The first gray of dawn turned to a band of pink above a higher mountain range to the east, became a fan of gold, then burst into the white heat of a rising sun. It flooded the world about him suddenly. Cool night breezes vanished. He moved

in a breathless swelter of the desert.

His way led at an angle for more than a mile up the hillslope. Scars of the iron-shod hoofs grew less distinguishable as they came to the harder crest of the ridge, until they disappeared entirely on the barren, windswept granite. Jeff halted. "Up or down?" he asked.

DOWN would lead into a rough broken country that formed a plateau some miles to the north of Tonapah. Plenty of hiding places there, he observed, but no sign of water. That was the thing to mark any man's camp. Up would lead into a nest of brush-covered peaks which stuck like fangs from the darker fringe of growth. They were steep-sided, gouged by ravines, strewn with granite boulders. From his position they seemed unworthy of even a jackrabbit. Carefully he went back, picked up the trail and tried again to calculate its direction.

Half an hour's search brought no clue. It occurred to him also that the red patch in his shirt pocket was the only one of the sort he had found. Apparently it was not a trail-marker. He decided to continue up the ridge. Where this first one joined the main rank of hills was a high sentinel knob from which he might get a good view of the whole surrounding country. He was more than an hour in reaching the base of the knob, where he dropped his horse's reins and scrambled up the steep slope.

A midmorning sun burned down upon him as he gained the peak and climbed the last fifty yards hand over hand. There he was not disappointed. All Tonapah Valley lay below him; and all the hill ranges for endless miles in each direction. Brown desert crests ran to the east. Red ones cut across to the south. Northward stretched gray crags of granite, while to the west, after the broken expanse of tableland, rose the snow caps of the Sierra Nevada.

Looking down upon such an unlimited area, he felt for the first time a sense of bewilderment. Nothing to mark a possible camp to his eyes. There was no bit of green to show the location of a spring; no smoke to betray a man-made fire. With no more knowledge than he possessed now,

it would take him months to cover this country. He stood on the peak and tried to figure some other way. There seemed none. Reluctantly he came to reconsider Monroe's advice. Perhaps he could do nothing until the other men made the first move. It seemed so now. Maybe that was the quickest way to Jan after all. Suddenly he turned and strode in great steps down the rock-slide of the mountain.

"WELL?" was Monroe's short greeting, when, toward evening, Jeff again stood before him. "Did you find anything?"

Jeff dropped into a seat at the opposite side of the table. "Nothing," he offered, "except a hell of a lot of country! I'm cow-dog tired. If you've got anything to say, you'd better do it quick."

"You mean about the job? You've come back for that?"

"I don't see any other way. You seem right so far, but I'll tell you now, if I get any tip about Jan Wilton, I'm off this work of yours."

"Good Lord, Gillam!" Monroe explained. "Can't you see yet that I'm doing the best thing I know for her?"

"All right. Then what's this business of moving half a million in gold dust?"

Monroe nodded, and wagged his head wisely. "I wouldn't have gone off alone the way you did this morning, Gillam. It was a dangerous stunt, and worthless too. Just the same I'm glad you did it."

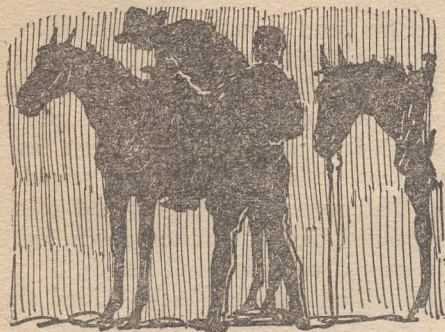
"Now let's talk business. We'll not move the whole pile of dust at one time. I figure to send it in say a dozen loads. You can carry it in saddle bags and on a good horse you'll make Mina in ten hours. We'll do everything to keep these shipments unknown—but this is Tonapah town. Understand?"

"Yes," Jeff replied. "I do. I'll take the job."

Monroe's face lighted. "Good! It will pay one hundred dollars a trip, and you ought to make two trips a week. Go back to your camp now and for the Lord's sake sleep! You'll need it. Come here in the afternoon tomorrow and I'll explain the system I've worked out. Then if you feel like it you can leave at night."

Jeff stood up, tense with anticipation when he considered the work ahead, yet troubled by thoughts of Jan Wilton.

Monroe seemed to read his mind, for he



said, "Trust my judgment, Gillam. We'll be doing two things at once. In my day I've seen more than one man bring the rope to his own neck!"

CHAPTER V

THE CAPTIVE

LATE the next afternoon, again in Monroe's private office, Jeff received his instructions for the gold express.

"Forty pounds will make a good load," the man observed, "But I have a light saddle with four pouches, so you can distribute the weight."

Jeff nodded his approval, though he hated to give up his own saddle that had carried him so many miles.

"There are five possible routes," Monroe went on. "You'll change off each trip, go a different way and start at irregular times. The main thing is to get through this first stretch of hills before daylight. You'll be safe enough when you come near the railroad and your job ends when the agent there accepts the bags."

"Sounds easy," Jeff declared, resting back in his chair across the table from Monroe.

"It is, until someone learns what you are doing."

"Leave that to me."

Monroe smiled grimly. "Oh, you're all right Gillam. But see that brick over there?" He pointed to a section of the adobe wall. "It has ears on all four sides."

Jeff laughed confidently, knowing tricks enough to be used on this trail.

"Feel like starting tonight?" Monroe asked.

"Sooner the better."

"All right. Get something to eat, then come back here as soon as it's dark."

Jeff sauntered out through the main room of Monroe's bar, aware that heads were nodded to him with considerable friendliness. But outside, along the walk, he encountered other men who gave him only hard stares. Near the cafe where he intended to have his meal, one man blocked the sidewalk with purposeful insult. Jeff ignored him. This was no time to be drawn into a quarrel.

In the cafe he treated himself to venison, steak, took half an hour over it and left only when night had fully come. He went at once to his horse at Rooney's tie rack, rode down the street to its further end, turned toward the desert and circled back to the little door behind Monroe's place.

Kit was outside in the dark, waiting for him. "No use showing a light from the door," he explained. "Everything is here."

Jeff swung off and changed saddles. Monroe tied on the four saddle bags of gold. It was done in less than three minutes, silently, quickly and with a wordless parting Jeff moved into the night.

He came at once to the desert hills, turned northward and settled himself for the long ride. When the stars hung low at midnight and the Big Dipper had swung with its handle over, he had passed the crest of the range. From there on his way was downward. He descended the slope rapidly and by dawn had come onto the flats beyond.

It was still early morning when he reached the railroad station and was met by a tall, taciturn man, with fearless black eyes and a turned-down black mustache. He accepted the gold bags without comment, wrote out a receipt for them, then asked Jeff to have breakfast. The first trip was done.

EIGHTEEN hours later Jeff strolled casually into Monroe's bar, nodded to the keeper and passed on to the private rear room. There he stood before Kit with a grin of satisfaction.

Immediately the man reached into a

tablet drawer and tossed out a pile of bills. "There's your hundred."

"Keep it for me," Jeff asked. "Let 'em stack up."

"All right," Monroe agreed, putting the money back. "Well, how was everything?"

"Too good. Any news here? Anything at all about Jan?"

Monroe pressed his lips together and sat for a moment without answering. "Nothing definite," he said at last. "Eight men that I think are Lenner's old crowd have been gone since you and Flash met. But today they showed up. They came in

here and had drinks, which hasn't been their custom. After that they hung around the place." Monroe shrugged. "May be nothing in it. When do you want to go out



again?"

"Tomorrow night," Jeff said promptly. "That gives my horse time enough to rest."

The second trip passed as the first, the only difference being in the route. Jeff felt a tinge of disappointment. Leaving for the third time, he said laughingly, "Three is the charm; something's got to break!"

On this night he headed north by a longer trail, bearing up the hills a little to the westward, then climbed through the notch of Piute Pass. Steepness of the ascent forced him to take the hairpin way, though there were cut-offs between the points.

Midnight came, bringing to him a sense of drowsiness that he realized would last but a few minutes, when renewed energy like a runner's second wind, would carry him through the remaining hours.

Yet it was a forward flick of his horse's ears, rather than this second strength, that suddenly aroused him. He shifted the reins to his left hand, dropping the other toward his gun. In the same instant, with no betraying sound, a rifle blazed from the hillside, stabbing the night with its spurt of red.

ON THE trail, Jeff fell face-downward and lay in a motionless heap. His horse jumped away, moved off a few steps and stood looking back. For a time the animal remained in that position, then lifted his head abruptly. A man was coming down the brush-covered slope.

He went first to the motionless form, stooped and reached to take the gun that protruded from the belt. Even as he leaned over, his right wrist was seized in a grip that opened the fingers and released his weapon. He was jerked down, lost his balance and sprawled full length.

Jeff rolled onto his back. "Good shot," he remarked, "if it had come an inch closer!"

He thrust his pistol into the stranger's face. "Turn over now, I'll just see who you are."

In the starlight he saw a familiar red-bearded cheek and a pair of glowering eyes. It took him a second to place the fellow. Then he knew. It was the one who had given him Flash Lenner's message. For a time he sat astride his prisoner and gaped up the slope, until, as no other sound came from there, he became satisfied that this man had played a lone game. Trying to get a jump on the rest of the gang, perhaps.

"Get up," he ordered, rising. "Now walk."

Prodding the fellow's ribs to get quicker obedience, he forced him some distance down the trail, then turning from it, proceeded to a patch of brush at one side. He halted there and gave a low whistle. In a moment his horse came out of the dark and stood with its muzzle close to his shoulder.

"That's a good boy," Jeff said quietly. "Whoa now. There." He loosened a coil of rope from his saddle, flipped it over his prisoner's head, then tightened the loop. "Sit down."

The man obeyed, uttering the first words since he had been trapped. "You're slick all right, but you'll get yours for this!"

"I expect to," Jeff answered.

The other lost his bold front. His voice turned to pleading. "Say now, what's the way out? We're all after a pile in this damned country. What's your price?"

"I don't happen to be selling tonight!" Jeff retorted. He rove the rope around the brush trunk, secured the ends and soon had the fellow bound in a sitting posture. "Now," he went on, "I don't think any friends will look for you, so you'll be here for some time. What were you aiming at—trying to double cross them? Well, never mind answering. If you want a drink say so now. Not talking? Then sit there; also, go to the devil!"

Turning away, Jeff mounted, reached the trail and pushed his horse to a lope. At Mina he allowed the animal only a short rest and was on the return road by noon. By nightfall he was again in the notch of Piute Pass. He found his prisoner in the brush, gave him water, which was now readily accepted, then with the rope still about his shoulders, drove him on.

HIS return to Tonapah was necessarily slow; no faster than the captive could stumble down the darkened trail. A little after three o'clock he came up behind the rows of silent buildings, picked out a familiar one and halted at the door.

Monroe opened it almost instantly. He had the touseled look of having been asleep, yet was dressed in all save his boots.



He presented a gun in Jeff's face, but withdrew it as recognition came. "What the hell!" he demanded. "You back already? Something happen?"

"Come out here," Jeff answered. "I've got a prisoner."

Monroe bent down from the doorway. "Prisoner? What did he do?"

"Tried to strip me," Jeff explained what had happened. "Do you know him?" he finished.

Monroe moved nearer, saying at once, "Mojave Red—so you're here, eh?"

"Sure I'm here, Kit," the man growled, adding angrily, "Tell this dam' fool to take the rope off my neck! You've got better sense yourself. Come on now. I ain't goin' to stand here all night. Take it off! I

guess you know where to stop."

Without reply, Monroe turned into the room, found his boots and drew them on. Then he came back, saying to Jeff, "Give me the rope. I'm taking him to the lock-up. You go and get Doc Randall."

"Say—" Red burst out.

"Shut up!" Monroe warned him.

They vanished into the night. Jeff walked in the opposite direction, following along behind Tonapah's buildings until he came to a small shack with a tent roof. There he scratched on the canvas. A hard boney head popped up to an open window. Two unblinking eyes stared out.

"Doc Randall," Jeff said softly. "Monroe wants you."

"Gillam?" the doctor asked. "I thought you had gone—" He checked himself abruptly and disappeared from the window. In a short time he came around to where Jeff waited and walked by his side without comment.

THEY reached Monroe's room, entered and seated themselves in the dark. Neither spoke. Jeff could hear the doctor breathing deeply. Only that showed the tension aroused by this early morning summons.

Monroe was a long time in returning. When he did appear he showed the effects of having walked fast, and upon joining them, sat for several moments out of breath.

"Well," Randall began impatiently. "It must be something grave to arouse a man at this hour."

"It is," Monroe agreed. "Gillam has just brought in Mojave Red. Red tried to lay him out."

"Then by the gods why do you hesitate, Kit? Hang the scoundrel and leave him as a warning when the town wakes up! If you called me for that, why certainly, I'll assist."

"I just wanted to let you know what I'm doing," Monroe explained. "Red is going to be tried, convicted and hung according to law." He made the statement pointedly, paused, then added, "It will be a jury trial."

"Jury!" Randall scoffed, "We're not ready for that. We all know Mojave Red

is backed by the gang. Where can you get a man with nerve enough to preside over a court? He wouldn't dare sentence this fellow!"

"There is one," Monroe stated evenly. "I have already talked with him and put the whole situation up to him just now. The president of our miners' court will do it."

"Tom Dowling?"

"Yes."

The doctor passed one hand over his bald head. "Tom is taking a big chance with his life. They'll make an example out of him if he tries to convict Red."

"Tom's willing," Monroe answered doggedly.

"Who will act as witness?"

From this corner, where he had remained a silent listener, Jeff replied, "I will."

"Fools all of you!" Randall exploded. "You've got your man. There's a tree behind the lock-up. Why wait?"

"I'm afraid, Doctor," Monroe replied, "that you don't understand the finer points of the law I'm trying to put in this camp."

"No, sir," Randall agreed hotly, "I don't! But I do understand the lower points of the human race!"

Monroe remained firm in his decision.

Dawn was coming up swiftly, showing in a gray patch through the room's single window. Jeff could hear boots clumping along the board walk in front. Two men passed in the alley, going toward the town lock-up. They conversed savagely, muttering Mojave Red's name. Somehow the news was already out.

CHAPTER VI

ONE KIND OF LAW

THE trial took place in Rooney's Recreation Hall, where a rail stretched across one corner formed the jury box, and the judge presided behind Rooney's mahogany bar. All morning knots of men had gathered along the street, the lawless and law-abiding elements being hard to identify, for all kept to their habitual low tones and guarded manner.

But at one o'clock word had been passed that trial-time had come, and now, as Rooney's place filled, it was easy to see

how the camp was divided.

With Monroe and Doc Randall, Jeff stood in a throng that had congregated to the right of the entrance. Here were men with hard grim faces, though for the most part they were silent and kept their guns out of sight.

To the left, and separated by a vacant aisle which ran from the front door to the rear bar, were men who milled restlessly, glared across the open space and wore knives and guns uncovered.

Jeff nodded in that direction, saying to Monroe, "We've got them outnumbered two to one."

"More than that," Monroe replied. "If you made a poll of that crowd over there, you'd find that half of them are simply standing in with the toughs for the looks of it. They're afraid to do anything else. We've got this trial all our way—not one of that bunch will get on the jury."

Beside them, Doc Randall shrugged his lean shoulders. "What of that? What if our miners do make up the jury?"

"They'll convict Red, that's what!"

"Just you wait," Randall answered.

The clatter of voices that had filled the room suddenly died. Mojave Red had been brought to one end of the bar. Through a small door near the opposite end, the judge was now entering.

Tom Dowling was a man of sixty, tall and straight as a youth, with white mustache, gray eyes and a stern though friendly face. By profession he was a miner, with law on the side; that primitive, rock-bound law based on the code that might makes right. He advanced fearlessly to his position behind the bar, swept his gray



eyes over the left-hand gathering first, deliberately ignoring the muttered threats that arose there, then turned to the citizens on the other side and throughout the meeting addressed all his remarks to them.

MONROE touched Jeff's arm. "You're looking at one of the finest old men in the West!" he asserted. "It won't hurt

you to make friends with him after this show."

Jeff nodded and centered his gaze upon Tom Dowling.

The president explained the case briefly, then called for votes on the jurymen. As Monroe had predicted, the miners refused to endorse any of the known toughs and completed the panel from among their own numbers. One by one the men took their places in the jury's corner. A lawyer was appointed for Mojave Red. The miners' court already had their representative.

"Now," said Doc Randall ironically, "we shall witness the process of law!"

"Meaning what?" Jeff asked.

"You'll see."

He did. At once the lawyer for Mojave Red began to harang the jury, with subtle phrases giving them to understand what they could expect if they voted for conviction. It was all done in the guise of pleading the prisoner's case, yet the truth was not lost to any of the men standing behind the rail. Their faces showed that. Back of the lawyer, giving concrete support to his words, were the toughs where guns showed in obvious threat.

In turn the attorney for the miners' court gave a dispirited, forceless argument, mentioning, but not pressing, the death penalty.

As Jeff listened, a sullen disgust grew within him. "The white-belly!" he muttered.

Contempt was still smouldering when he heard his name called. He had almost forgotten his own part in this trial. He walked up now to take the witness stand and was aware of the glowering faces turned toward him. In giving the details of his encounter with Red, he avoided any mention of why he was on the little-used Piute Canyon trail. When he came back, Monroe said approvingly, "Good work."

Soon the jury filed out of a rear door to cast their ballots, and at once the bar became lined with men. Whisky helped to bridge the time while the jury deliberated. It also loosened tongues and brought open threats, with guns brandished and voices raised heatedly.

In an hour no verdict had been returned. Rumors began to drift about. No one

knew how word came from the rear room, but all believed each fresh report. The jury was tied. No; eight for acquittal. Half an hour later it was established that only one man still held out for conviction.

"Gillam," Monroe said at this point, "We had better move toward the front door. Just easy. Come on, Doc." His voice was low.

"What's up?" Jeff asked guardedly.

"Look around."

CASUALLY, with seeming disinterest, Jeff turned and let his gaze drift over the left hand side of the room. It was evident that a distinct segregation had come about there. A large group still occupied most of the floor near the front entrance. But eight men had moved off to a space between the bar and the roulette wheels, and now stood together, talking.

Jeff returned his glance to Monroe. "Do they mean to rescue Red?"

"I don't think so. It's something more. If we can believe these rumors, Red is safe already. Come on."

All three went slowly toward the front door, halted there and stood waiting. It was almost dark by the time a verdict was reached. Rooney's attendants had begun to light the oil lamps. Then the jury filed in.

Jeff looked for Tom Dowling. The man was not in his place midway along the bar. But as the jury entered and waited through a time of silence while the foreman scanned a slip of paper, Dowling's tall, straight form appeared in the further rear door. He took a step inside and was met by the foreman's crisply-given words:

"Not guilty."

Watching, Jeff saw the old man halt as if struck in the face.

"For God's sake!" Monroe gasped.

Doc Randall nodded his hard bald head. "There now!"



Rooney's place was filled instantly with a bedlam of shouts, as the eight toughs rushed to Mojave Red and released him from the prisoner's stall. They roared for

drinks and barkeepers sprang to serve them. Jeff paused to watch, but beside him Monroe ordered, "Get out of here! Get into the street."

HE OBEYED, hardly able to do otherwise as a tide of men poured from the hall. Night had come, shot through with only an occasional glow from stores which had remained open during the trial. The street became a dark canyon filled with a human stream that flowed toward either end, decreasing as men turned into corner saloons.

Jeff let himself be pushed along in the direction of his camp, going silently, for neither Doc Randall nor Monroe seemed willing to speak. He knew what was in Kit Monroe's mind. The trial had failed; court law was further off than ever.

Suddenly a pistol cracked some distance behind them. All three halted, turned and stood rigid. That portion of the street had grown still; tense with expectancy. Then a man shouted, "Doc Randall! Get the doctor!"

Even before Randall could respond, another voice called back, "It ain't no use. Never mind now."

Monroe grabbed a boy who came running from the direction of Rooney's. "What happened?"

"They've killed him, Mister."

"Killed who?"

"Old Dowling."

Monroe released the boy and faced Jeff gravely. "Gillam, you had better stay in my room tonight. Doc and I will both be there."

But Jeff shook his head. "I know what you mean. Tom Dowling was president of that court, and I was witness. Just the same I'd rather stay in the open."

"You know your own way best," Monroe admitted. "Then go to camp right now before that gang gets too drunk."

JEFF went without a word, reached the edge of town and continued on to his willow camp. He walked with one hand on his gun, yet was certain that none of the gangmen had followed him. Upon entering the dark growth of willow trees he saw the mottled whiteness of his horse

and heard the animal's friendly call. That reassured him.

It was not until he had come within a few steps of his blanket roll, that he saw the square brown wrapping paper speared onto the canvas with a pointed stick. Stooping, he read the black uneven scrawl: "*You're next.*"

CHAPTER VII

AN OFFER

AFTER the first instinctive tension had passed, Jeff stared at the paper, puzzled by two things. Some man had delivered it, then had gone off at once. What was the hurry? He knew there was no one near his camp now, for his horse would not be grazing so peacefully if a stranger were hiding in the brush. And if this threat were not to be carried out at once, what did the gang expect to gain by waiting?

Some inner reasoning made him feel safe for the night, though for added precaution he moved his bed to a new spot at the gulley's crest. There he partly unrolled his blankets and propped himself against them, remained fully clothed and expected to doze only a short time. For an hour he was aware of the canyon below, of his horse grazing and of a dull light straight ahead toward Tonapah. Then he nodded. He had already spent one night in the saddle. His eyes closed. Next the sun was shining in his face.

He opened his eyes with a start. Morning was at least an hour along. Instantly he was awake, and raising himself from where he had toppled onto the blankets, stared down upon his camp. His horse was still grazing there in the little grass plot, but he stood now with head lifted, ears pointed up the opposite gulley bank. Jeff followed that direction, squinting almost into the sun.

He caught a metallic glint first, then he saw the man sitting less than fifty yards from him, a rifle across his knees. Direct sunlight hid his face. He stood up as Jeff looked, dropped the rifle into the crook of his elbow and said, "If you're awake now, come back to your camp. No use layin' up there."

Jeff rolled his blankets casually, his

mind alert. Was this the beginning? He thought so. He met the stranger down in the willows, a tall, lean man with a miner's hat and boots. But the hand that clutched his rifle showed no recent contact with pick and shovel, nor was his thin face hard and tanned. Instead he had more of a gambler's soft look, without the steadiness of a gambler's eyes.

He shifted his glance once about Jeff's camp, then asked, "Got the time?"

Jeff drew his watch and pointed to the face with the barrel of his six-shooter. "Six o'clock," he said gravely.

"Oh hell!" the stranger burst out. "Put away that gun! I could have potted you ten minutes ago while you was asleep. But I didn't."

"Yes," Jeff agreed, "you could have. What's the answer? Why didn't you?"

"Because I've come to talk business."

JEFF nodded, holstered his gun and leaned over the fireplace where he cooked his meals. "Can your business wait till I've boiled some coffee?"

"No," came the sudden retort, "It can't." The man looked swiftly up and down the willow bank, then whirled, demanding, "What's the game? I've come to talk, and talk now!"

"Then, stranger," Jeff observed, feeling an inward satisfaction at the other's uneasiness, "you'll not find me in a very good humor. But go ahead."

"You're makin' trips for Kit Monroe," the man said pointedly, "Carryin' out the dust he's been bankin'. Ain't you?"

"Go ahead," Jeff repeated.

For a moment his visitor paused, seemed to grope for his next words, then suddenly leaned his rifle against a tree and stood with both arms folded. "Look here

now. I can see you ain't no fool. You're young and just startin' in to make your way. A neat little pile right off would help some, wouldn't it?

Specially if you could get it without havin'

to leave the country afterward?"

"Yes," Jeff agreed. "A neat pile would sure help."

"There now, sure, I knew you had good sense. Then here's the lay-out. You're carryin' anywhere from thirty to sixty thousand dollars a trip. We've figured it up."

"We?"

"Sure. We. The men who'll run this camp from now on."

"Lenner's old gang?"

"Just a few hand-picked ones. After yesterday's show it ain't hard to see we've got things all our way. Now you're bright enough to throw in with the best bunch, I can tell that."

Jeff smiled inwardly at the fellow's method of smoothing him down. But he kept a serious face.

"When things get quiet, or maybe right off," the man went on, "Monroe will be sendin' you on the road again. You'll take a new trail—say the one through Granite Canyon. You let us know when, see? That's all."

"You're putting it straight enough," Jeff admitted.

"I'm givin' you a chance, that's what. Take it or leave it. In a week we'll have the whole town, Kit Monroe's dump and all. It ain't no secret. This way we let you in with us."

JEFF pondered with eyes scowling. "I'm to take the Granite Canyon trail—tell you when—and I'm in on the split. What will it be, even all around?"

"Just about."

"Making how much for me?"

"Five thousand."

Jeff calculated rapidly, concluding from this fellow's offer of about an even split, that there were around eight or nine in the gang.

"We do all the work," the man was urging. "You're safe. All you do is tip us off."

Jeff continued to stand with his gaze fixed up the canyon. He could tell from the other's indecisive voice that this was only an opener. There might be something else offered—something a lot more valuable to him.

"I've got an enemy in your gang," he



stalled. "It might not be healthy for me if I throw in with you."

"You needn't worry about Mojave Red," the man observed confidentially. "Red was a fool—tried to get in before the rest of the bunch had a chance. We don't stand for that. It's even up all around with us. Red he met with an accident this morning. Tom Dowling and Red—both accidents. Bound to happen." He paused, squinted hard, then asked, "Well, what do you say?"

"I say you and your accidents don't worry me none," Jeff retorted. "I'm not throwing up a good thing for any five thousand."

"So that's it? Price too cheap? Then how about this—sort of my trump card, I'll bet—how about Jan Wilton?"

Jeff stiffened, facing the stranger swiftly. "What do you mean?"

"I thought so!" the man chuckled. "That's better. Comin' to it, ain't you? Well, Jan Wilton and her father aren't so far off but what we might help bring 'em back. Safe and sound guaranteed. You just say the word. To show we're not short horns, we'll lump 'em both together—five thousand and the girl."

Jeff had already reached a decision. "When do you want the tip?" he asked.

"Right away. Say now, you're no fool!"

"I don't know when I'm to make another ride," Jeff went on. "I'll have to see the boss."

"Sure. But listen to me, friend. Don't hash up no trick with him. We'll have that Granite trail guarded. You just make up your mind right now to bring the dust, come alone, and don't let anybody follow!"

"You just said I'm no fool," Jeff reminded him.

"Sure you ain't. When will you see Monroe?"

"I usually go up in the morning, about now."

"All right. I'll wait."

JEFF found Monroe and Doc Randall in the back room, and knew from the sudden brightening of their faces that they were relieved to see him.

"Anything turn up?" Monroe asked at once.

"Enough to work on," Jeff asserted, then told of the warning note and the offer today. "I think the note," he finished, "was to get me ready for this other business. Sort of letting me see the best way out."

"So they want fifty thousand," Monroe said quietly, pondering to himself. "Granite Canyon trail—I've thought that was about their country. Some caves up there—can't get to them except afoot. They aren't riding men."

He paused and remained silent for some time, his head sunk between his shoulders.

Doc Randall had risen from his chair. He stood now with his hands clenched behind him, his lank body drawn up rigidly. "It seems to me a time for action has come," he offered. "There's that girl, you understand."

"That's my thought," Jeff agreed. "I've got something definite to go on now. I've waited long enough!"

Monroe lifted his head. His face had changed utterly. It was hard-set, determined, with slate eyes turned cold and grim. Suddenly his hands gripped the table edge. "You're right," he said savagely, facing Randall. "The time has come to

meet that gang in their own way!"

"What do you intend to do?"

"String up every last one for a public example—that's



what!"

The doctor arched his shaggy brows with slight sarcasm. "Is the time ripe for that now any more than yesterday when I suggested we hang Mojave Red?"

"Ripe!" Monroe retorted. "We're going to ripen it!"

He turned to Jeff. "Go back to your man. Tell him you're going to make a trip tonight. Tell him I believe no one would expect another shipment now, so am running this through on that hunch. Use your head. Agree to the Granite Canyon trail and make the time before midnight."

"How much of that is straight?" Jeff asked. "What will I carry?"

"It's all straight," Monroe replied.

CHAPTER VIII

ONE WAY OUT

OBEYING orders, Jeff made a bargain with his man, then remained in camp the rest of that day. Under cover of night he saddled his horse and rode to the usual meeting-place behind Kit Monroe's.

Monroe was waiting for him in the dark, exactly as he had waited on the previous trips, but Jeff saw at once that the gold was not in the customary four pouches. Instead, Monroe stood over two long objects about the size of a man's leg from the knee down.

"What have you got?" Jeff asked, dismounting beside him.

"Gold," Monroe replied. "Here, give me a hand—they're heavy. We'll tie one bar on your saddle skirt. The other can ride across the bows."

"The gang expects dust," Jeff offered.

"Of course—and that's part of my game. This is gold, isn't it? They can poke a hole clear through and see that. Then do you think they'll turn down forty thousand?"

Jeff said nothing. Then both lifting on a single bar, they placed it on the saddle skirt behind the seat, securing it there with a length of rope. Likewise, they fastened the second bar on the bow.

"Now listen, Gillam," Monroe said, "you've got to work fast. Cut these ropes and dump the bars on the ground as soon as you reach your meeting-place. Then start in demanding the girl."

"They have Jan Wilton and her father, I'm sure of it, but those two won't be there. I'm not big enough fool to think that. They're too valuable—worth another haul like this at least. So you'll make a row when they aren't delivered. Talk fast, keep the gang on that; in the end let them bluff you out. You'll have to use your own way. Then ride back, ride like hell! Understand?"

"That much;" Jeff agreed, "and I can play up all right. What comes next?"

"Doc and I will be working up a party

here. Keep on the Granite Canyon trail. We'll probably have someone there to stop you."

Jeff had learned to accept whatever explanation Monroe chose to offer, then trust his own judgment in the rest. Without further question now, he mounted and vanished into the night.

AT ONCE Kit Monroe began his strategic move as if he commanded an army. There were in town, he knew, just fifteen men to be counted upon in the thing he planned. Through Doc Randall and one of his barkeepers, he sent word to each of the fifteen. Having done that he saddled a horse for himself, secured two extra ones, and leading them, rode some three miles north to the mouth of Granite Canyon.

There he built a small fire in a screen of oak, then walked back to the trail and sat waiting. In about half an hour two horsemen came rapidly up the slope. Monroe sat motionless, giving a low whistle that imitated the trilling note of a night bird. Immediately the horses were reined in and with a natural movement one of the men lighted a match, touched it to a cigarette, reaching then toward his companion.

Monroe stood up. "All right, Cotter. Hello, Williams. Get off and follow my marks to the left. You'll come to a fire directly."

The two men obeyed. Monroe continued his watch by the trail. Two by two others appeared out of the dark, halted at his whistle, identified themselves and were



given the same directions. Within a short time he had counted fifteen; then came one alone. Doc Randall rode up on a black mule, riding bareback, his long legs almost touching the ground.

"Why did you come?" Monroe demanded. "You can't ride that thing any farther."

"Don't intend to," Randall answered. "I'm just here for the meeting, to see there's considerable talk about ropes and less of law!"

Monroe led the way up to his screen of oaks. "Someone kick up the fire," he asked, "So's we can see each other."

A BRANCH of dry leaves was tossed onto the coals. In its short flare the men turned swift glances about the circle. The majority were store-keepers, some were miners and two, whose presence brought surprise to several faces, were faro dealers from Rooney's Hall. But Monroe knew his gathering. Every one here had, at various times, shared the intimate talk of his private back room.

He stood alone across the fire from them and summed up his case. "You all know that Sam Wilton was shot several days ago," he finished. "But so much has happened in camp lately that you might not have heard that he and Jan were taken off the next morning."

Heads lifted sharply at this. Monroe nodded his satisfaction. "I guess that means something," he observed. "You, Fred, with your fever last spring, wouldn't be here now if Jan hadn't helped you out. And your smash-up in the tunnel, Crawford. I could go down the line and tell what we all owe that girl."

"Now she's being held somewhere above this canyon. I've been working on it, but haven't had anything definite until today. That's what I called this meeting for. I'm going to start a clean-up—get the two Wiltons first then give the whole camp something to watch. How many of you are in on it?"

Monroe hesitated. The men stood with hands locked behind their backs, heads lowered as they stared into the fire. No one raised a dissenting voice.

"I've got it all worked out," Monroe went on, "but there's no use explaining until Jeff Gillam gets down from the Pass." Again he paused and looked gravely around the group. "I want you all to understand how serious this is. It may end tonight and it may not. Now's the time to stay out if you want to. That'll be all right. Only keep your mouths shut."

Still no one spoke.

"Cotter," Monroe asked, "go watch the trail, will you?"

RETURNING down Granite Canyon a little before midnight, Jeff halted suddenly as a figure appeared in his path. He dropped a hand to his gun, but remembering that Monroe had said someone might stop him, he sat with the weapon only half-drawn.

"Gillam?" asked a voice.

"Yes."

"Get off and follow me."

Jeff swung to the ground, and leading his horse, walked upward into the dark canyonside. Only moonlight reflected from the round gray knobs of granite broke the slope. There were no signs of a gathering ahead. But presently the man leading him stopped and muttered something, apparently a password, for another form moved from the brush and fell in behind. Soon Jeff discovered the faint glow of a fire; they came into the screen of oaks.

Monroe stepped forward to meet him saying, "How did it work?"

"About as you said. I dumped off the bars and threw away the ropes. That left nothing for them to work with but their bare hands."

"How many men?"

"Four there, and the one that met me first, made five. I know there were others covering me from the brush. Then they must have had one or two guarding the trail. Must be the same eight."

"Any holler about the gold?"

"They expected smaller bags of dust, sure, but I set up my own yowl about the Wiltons. Nothing doing of course. They gave me the laugh and said the best thing I could do was go back and keep my mouth shut. They'd make another deal with me later. I guess they thought I was the easiest fool on earth. On the way down I stopped to hear what direction they took. They climbed straight up the north side."

"Going very fast?"

Jeff smiled. "Not very. Those bars weighed about seventy-five pounds apiece, didn't they?"

"Exactly. Were they examined!"

"One man poked a few knife holes."

"Good," Monroe turned to the other men. "This is Jeff Gillam, if you don't recognize him already. He's just back from delivering forty thousand in gold to Lenner's gang. Two bars of it. Now here's my game. They're not riding men. They've got a camp somewhere up in the granite caves and that's where they will try to take the gold. They'll all be sticking tight to it—none of that thieving outfit would trust his closest partner. About now I figure the guards are in from the trail and the whole bunch is struggling up the mountain with those bars. See what I mean? They can't go fast. This is our chance to corral them all together."

HIS men began to move from the fire toward their horses.

"One thing more," Monroe added. "Listen to this." He unfolded a sheet of paper and read, "*We the undersigned, considering ourselves law-abiding citizens of Tonapah Camp, do hereby agree to stick together, avenge the death of any one of us and not lay down our guns until said camp is made a place for decent men.*"

He spread the paper on a rock in the firelight. "Now boys, this is dead serious. We aren't much on religion, but an oath seems kind of binding and we've got to promise. Jeff Gillam, come over here."

Jeff walked to where Monroe leaned over the paper. He had never thought of Kit as being in any way a God-fearing man. But the gravity of Monroe's face now and the low earnest tone of his voice filled him with a warm reverence. It gave him a feeling of closer kinship with each of these men who were to take the solemn vow.

"Do you, Gillam," Monroe asked, "sign this document as a man of honor, so help you God?"

"I do," Jeff answered, and



taking a pencil, placed his name below Kit Monroe's.

One by one the men stepped up and affixed their signatures, each taking the oath first, and turning away afterward with his jaw hard-set.

"Now then," said Monroe when the last one had signed. "Let's get to it."

"THIS moonlight helps some," he observed a little later, when, with Jeff leading, they turned their horses up the Granite Canyon trail. Behind them, the fifteen men were riding in single file. Only Doc Randall stayed back, being, as he said, no gunfighter but a good hand on the rope. It was not his place anyway, Monroe had argued, since he was the only doctor in town.

After the first few minutes, no one spoke. They moved upward with only their horses' hoofs giving sound to the night. When the trail came at last to where the high rock-strewn walls of Granite Pass rose on either side, Jeff raised one hand and the procession halted.

"Send the word back," he said to Monroe. "We'd better tie up here and go on afoot."

The order was passed from man to man. They dismounted, tied their horses and followed Jeff's lead. Now only the crunch of boots gave warning of their approach, and that would not carry far. Halting often, Jeff listened, squinting through the dim light for a familiar tree.

Presently it came into view, seeming no more than a dark blob against the grayer mountain side. Almost at once there sounded a mutter of voices from somewhere above. A loosened rock thumped down the slope. There arose a metallic clatter of granite chips and a man's curse.

"How far?" Monroe asked softly.

"I left the gold by that pine," Jeff answered. "They have climbed straight up. From the noise I'd judge they haven't made more than five hundred yards."

"That's my guess," Monroe agreed. He turned, waved for the men to come nearer and gave them his plan.

They spread out at once, forming two parallel lines that began to creep up the mountain. Each line moved with some thirty yards between—seventeen dark forms surmounting brush and granite

rock, climbing steadily toward the struggle going on ahead of them.

"Almost there now," Jeff observed.

"Hey!" a voice called suddenly. "That you down there, Buck?"

"Me? Naw," came the answer. "I'm above you."

"Then what the hell—? Here! Someone take this dam' load off my back!" There sounded a dull thud. Then the same voice again, "I'm going to see——"

Rising, gun levelled, Monroe began evenly, "Stay where you are! We've got you covered. You might as well give in."

THERE was a moment of silence, followed by low tones. Suddenly half a dozen rifles blazed across to where Monroe had been. But he was no longer in that spot. From higher up he returned the fire, saying to the men nearest him, "Give them one round."

In the flare of rifles, Jeff, crouched beside Monroe and using a pistol, saw a group of eight men standing over the gold bars. They stood there even in the face of cross fire from the opposite line of Monroe's party; huddled over the treasure the way a mountain lion will cling for a moment to the carcass of a deer it had killed before leaping up to fight.

He saw two men fall. The others hesitated stupidly.

"Had enough?" Monroe demanded. "I'll give you one more chance."

His voice seemed to arouse them to action. They sprang from the gold and headed toward a rock, only to meet a second fusillade that cut them off. The mountain swarmed with Monroe's men. They no longer waited for his command, but leaped each to his own battle.

In five minutes it was all over, and Jeff, finding himself off to one side with a prisoner standing with arms raised, came to a sudden realization that the thing was done. No more rifles flashed on the slope. The night was quiet again.

Monroe called his name, shouting to others when he had answered. Presently all were gathered about the gold bars, with five prisoners among them. They found three forms motionless on the rocks.

Monroe faced one of the captives. "Any more of you?" he demanded.

The fellow surveyed him sullenly. "What do I get by answerin'?"

"Nothing more or less than your friends," Monroe replied decisively. "You're all going to be hanged."

"Then go to hell!"

Monroe shoved him back with the others. "Come on, Gillam," he ordered, turning up the mountain, "and you too, Cotter. It's easy enough to follow their tracks. The rest of you wait below. Pack these bars down as you go. Get those two extra horses ready too; we'll have riders for them in a minute now."

AN INDISTINCT trail led upward for some distance, then turned along the mountain flank, at last approaching a cleft where water trickled out. A clump of trees grew in the hollow of moist earth.

"Their hole is likely behind that," Mon-

roe offered. "I don't think anyone stayed up here—not with forty thousand down below, but we might as well be——" Suddenly he reached out with one hand, saying, "Gillam, come back here! Go easy."

But Jeff had already started around the trees. All the long delay swept over him now in a surge of impatience. He thought only of Jan Wilton. With gun drawn he passed the trees, hesitated, saw the yawning mouth of a cave behind them and walked toward it. Nothing moved in there. He crouched near the side wall of granite, protecting his body. For a time he listened, then called, "Jan. Jan Wilton?"

There was no answer. Filled with a sudden cold fear for the girl, he stepped to the opening, heedless of the fact that he showed himself plainly against the stars.

Even as he moved, a voice that had haunted him by day and night came in all reality now. It was weak but unshaken. "Gillam. Jeff. Here!"



CHAPTER IX

THE LAW

IN THE gray of morning a long line of riders came down from the mouth of Granite Canyon and descended toward the camp below. By full dawn they had reached the first cabin on the Tonapah road, where three dropped out, while the rest went on.

Jeff helped Jan Wilton from her horse, then together they supported her father on his way to the house. There the man forced a smile and said bravely, "We're all right now. I'll get over it. Just let me lie on something besides granite rock!"

They helped him into the main room, where Jeff built a fire then moved back to the door. Jan came to him and they stood close just outside.

"Must you leave me?" she asked. "Do you have to go?"

Jeff looked into her eyes and knew the full meaning of what she said. "I hate to," he admitted, "now, just when you've come home. But I have to help Monroe. We're not through yet. I'll come back to you—I'll come soon!"

Impulsively in the instant that he turned away, he took both her hands, pressed them tight then leaped upon his horse.

He raced into camp to find the streets crowded and rumbling with excited voices. About halfway down, across from Rooney's Hall, he saw Monroe's men dismounting and rode to join them.

They had gathered in front of a new building, where the windows were without panes and the scaffold still stood against the outside wall. By the time Jeff shouldered his way through the mob, he found that Monroe had dispatched most of his men to the open windows, where they were now with rifles trained over the street. The five prisoners were lined on a plank which lay across the tops of two nail kegs. Ropes were being let down from the scaffolding above their heads.

"Here, Gillam," Monroe called. "Take one end of this lariat." He tossed a loop toward Jeff. "Now stretch it tight and we'll string in on the ground in front of the building."

When the rope was in place it marked

off an area half the width of the street. Monroe faced the throng with a warning: "There, folks, is the dead-line. Don't any of you cross it. We have a murder charge against every man you see up there, and we've got half a dozen other charges against them as part of Flash Lenner's gang. They're going to be hanged, and that's not all, this town is going to be made a decent place to live in!"

At Monroe's command, Jeff took a position in one of the second-story windows. From there he had a clear view of the street. More than two hundred men milled in front of the half-completed building, all of them dark-faced with the realization that this was no bluff. A few called aloud their threats, yet from the safe cover of the mob.

MONROE walked out in front of the prisoners. "If any of you want to make a last wish," he offered, "I'll give my word that it shall be granted."

One with a black, bearded face and red-rimmed glaring eyes, snarled, "To see you in hell! That's my wish."

"For God's sake," another pleaded, "isn't there some way out of this? I've got a wife on the coast. Think of her."

"Yes," a voice hooted from the crowd, "like you thought of Tom Dowling's widow!"

"Time is short for all of you," Monroe said soberly. "I'm giving you a chance."

From down the line one raised a whimpering plea. A man standing next to him, moving his own head uncomfortably in the knotted rope, growled, "Oh shut up! You deserve it. We all do."

Jeff looked from his window to see several men shouldering their way about, talking savagely, moving from group to group. The sympathizers were counting their strength. It looked like an attempt at a rescue. He glanced down at Monroe, trying to signal with his gun. Yet that was unnecessary.

Monroe turned to the building with a slight wave of his hand. Fifteen rifles were aimed from the windows and down upon the crowd. In the same instant Kit himself kicked away the plank.

All at once a hush came over the street. For a full minute not a voice was raised. No one moved. Every man's eyes were upon the scaffold and its burden.

Monroe broke the spell. "Citizens," he said clearly, "this afternoon the books will be open for you to nominate your town officers. Tomorrow we'll have an election according to law. In the meantime—" he scanned the throng, letting the purpose of his words reach them—"in the meantime, here is an example from the past. We've reached a new day."

A muttering of approving voices began in the crowd, gathered, and became a triumphant babble. No need now for any man to guard his tongue. The few threatening toughs were soon put down, for the camp had found itself and was no longer afraid.

Jeff leaped from his position and started

at once toward his horse. Monroe ran to him, clutching his arm.

"What's the hurry, Gillam? Get out in the street and make friends. I'm nominating you for a good job this afternoon.

This town ought to pay back what you've done for it."

"The town?"

Jeff asked in open surprise. He hesitated, grinned, then suddenly burst out, "Do you think that is what I've worked for?"



He strode away, a knowing smile on his young face, and the last Kit Monroe saw of him that day was a figure astride a pinto horse, sweeping toward Jan Wilton's cabin.

SHAKES

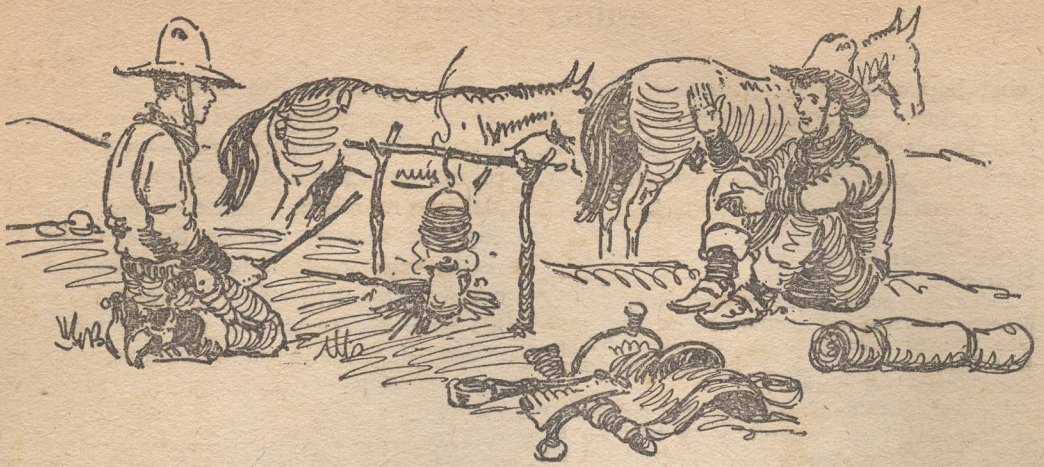
IF YOU ask an honest carpenter whether shakes are not cheaper than shingles, he will state without hesitation that they are not. In localities where it is possible to buy shingles it is cheaper to buy them for shingling a cabin than it is to make shakes. But many a good cabin has been put up in localities where it is not possible to buy shingles, and where they could not be packed in from the nearest lumber yard without absurd expense. Frequently, too, it is less trouble to make shakes enough for the roof than to pack in shingles from a great distance, even when the cost would not be a very serious obstacle. Cabins of the West are more frequently covered with shakes than with shingles, and shakes seem to serve the purpose fairly well.

It requires considerable skill to make shakes for the roof of a cabin. First, select a tree, not less than two or three feet in diameter, which appears to have perfectly straight grain. Any of the species of conifers that split easily will serve the purpose. Western yellow pine is admirable for the purpose, but even with this species care must be taken to select a tree with straight grain. Douglas fir will sometimes do, but it is hard to find trees with straight grain, and even then Douglas fir does not split easily. After selecting the tree and felling it, saw off a bolt from the butt end, about eighteen inches long, split it with wedges, and see if it is satisfactory. If there are knots, defects, or spiral grain, as is often the case, discard the tree and cut down another.

It is difficult to split off the shakes without the use of a tool designed for that particular purpose; a long, narrow, straight knife with one handle. And a mallet is also necessary. They should be about a half inch thick, and should be split out radially, cutting from the surface to the center, instead of slabbing off the side, tangentially.

Of course, there is a great deal of waste in the process. Sometimes three or four trees have to be felled before one is found that is suitable, and it is difficult to decide whether the grain of a tree is straight without cutting it down to see. But in the hands of a skilled workman, and in a region where timber has no market value, the job of splitting out shakes for a cabin and nailing them on presents few difficulties. And anyway, it doesn't take very many shakes to cover the surface of the average cabin.

J. H. H.



The STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

WHY RUNNING IRONS ARE TABOO

ONE sure way to start a lead-flavored ruckus in the cattle country is to ask a rannie at a round-up where he's hid his running iron and not to grin plumb open-faced when you ask it. H. A. Woodbury, a new hand among **SHORT STORIES** writers, who gives us "Proof" in this issue, brings the use of a running iron into his cattle yarn, and we asked him to tell the Circle something about the why and wherefore of this outlawed branding tool. From his own years in the Arizona cattle land he writes:

"In the earliest days of the range, the running iron was an innocent little tool, apt to be the only method used in applying a brand. For if the branding iron had to be home-made, it was much easier to forge a running iron—that is, an iron with but a single dash—than it was to make the more complicated iron with a complete fixed brand.

"The running iron was adaptable—almost any brand could be made with it. Yet it was from the very first inefficient. With a brand such as the Flying W, for instance, ten imprints of the running iron were required to make the symbol where one of the fixed-brand iron would have sufficed.

"Then, with the advent of hungry railroad camps and the beginning of rustling, the running iron proved *too* adaptable. A brand such as the H— could easily be touched up to become the B—, or better still, the B cross. A 3P became an 8R, etc.

IN SPITE of all this there might be occasions when the running iron could have a distinct advantage. Riders at round-up time might encounter wanderers from a range so distant that the branding outfit wouldn't be carrying the fixed brand required. In this case, a running iron would do the trick. Or perhaps the round-up would be in a range populated by so many brands that it would be inconvenient to carry irons for each one. Moreover, a lone puncher working at some distance from camp might find it much easier to carry along one iron than to burden himself with a dozen unwieldy instruments.

"There is, I'm willing to admit, logic in such a plea for the running iron.

"But in my own experience in central and northern Arizona I haven't ever run across punchers who availed themselves of such logic. Rather, in those cow camps I've visited, to impute the possession of a running iron to a man was a pretty sure way of suggesting that you'd like a scrap.

"Cowpunchers to whom I have talked have mentioned the implement in the same tone they use for a black-jack or brass knuckles. It was, to put it mildly, not considered one of the accoutrements of a gentleman."

A SOURDOUGH PRIZE-WINNER

WHEN a cold and lonely sourdough finds a new friend right in the heart of the icy North—and that friend stays with him—he counts himself lucky. That's

what happened to G. A. Pease, and the interesting way he tells about it wins him this issue's \$25 prize. We're glad to be sending a prize check to a sourdough, Mr. Pease—write us again sometime.

Editor, *SHORT STORIES*,
Dear Sir:

I don't see many letters in your *Story Tellers'* department from old sourdoughs, so here goes. The unusual manner in which *SHORT STORIES* first found its way into my hands is interesting. This is how it happened.

In the interior of Alaska, my prospecting pardner and I were traveling by boat up the Forty Mile River (one of the tributaries of the Yukon), belatedly following a latter-day gold stampede. After a long hard day of poling against the swift current and lining up rapids, we pulled ashore to make camp just as dusk was closing in. While Pard unloaded our camp outfit, I started rustling wood for a camp fire. Gathering an armful of dry branches from under a giant evergreen, I raised up and turned when something slapped the side of my head. It was dark under the trees, yet I could make out a white object silently swaying back and forth before me. For an instant I was startled, then I realized that the white object was hanging from a low branch of the tree.

With a fire started, the bean pot and tea kettle beginning to simmer, I returned to investigate my ghost, and found a small oblong package securely wrapped with white birch bark, swinging at the end of a string. By the light of the fire I examined my find. Upon removing the wrapping I found a fairly well-preserved, year-old number of *SHORT STORIES*. Written with lead pencil around the margin of the first two pages were these words:

"This magazine was handed to me by an old friend (as I was leaving Skagway) with the remark, 'Here's something good. The pleasure it will give you makes it worth packing over any old trail.'

"And I'll say that sourdough was not spouting idle words. I've packed this friend many miles, read it from cover to cover again and again. Even now I part with it unwillingly, but I'm overloaded, so I'm leaving it (securely protected from wind and weather) where it can be readily found by some lucky sourdough.

"It will rest you when you're weary
When dull you'll be entertained
It will cheer you when despondent
And will always be A FRIEND.

"If you don't care for reading, please rewrap, and hang as before. Someone, sometime will chance along, find it, and be thankful to you and to me for some good reading. Yours truly, A sourdough musher."

I don't think Sourdough Musher is much of a poet, but his meaning is O. K. I enjoyed reading that number of *SHORT STORIES* more than I had any other magazine theretofore. Since that time the only numbers I've missed were issued when I was out of reach, in far places. I find them all like that first one, good from cover to cover.

G. A. Pease,
Twin Bridges, Mont.

Next issue's prize letter will be the tenth we've printed, and it's sure to be a pretty slick piece of writing—they've been coming in faster and better every time the mailman rounds up a passel of 'em. There's \$25 just waiting for the *SHORT STORIES* reader who wants it bad enough—and he can write about anything he wants to, from his own experiences to why he likes, or doesn't like, the magazine. Who's going to rope it, readers? It's roamin' loose!

SPEED AND ACTION COMING

BUCKAROOS, fork your ponies! Rake 'em once, then ride like hewolves! You can count on salty doings—got your cannons loaded heavy? Any cowpoke wants to slope, he better do it now—for hell's agoing to pop. Rip across the desert—

What's the racket? Must be peace—the way Hank Potts promotes it in San Pablo! Hank, one of W. C. Tuttle's funniest waddies, does his stuff next issue in "Hank Potts, Peace Promoter." Hank gets to hankering for a peaceable Fourth of July in San Pablo town, and he invites the neighboring municipal outfits in on it. That's his mistake—that and letting the husky Mrs. Potts be the Goddess of Liberty. The celebration stays peaceful for just three minutes—and then it sure gets to be a Glorious Fourth!

Then there's Stephen Chalmers' fighting novelette next issue—"Shoot!" it's called, and that's just half of it. Shoot Holliday, rambling rannie, up and sashays into other fellows' business—and then he makes it his. He says it rains wherever he rides, but when he leads his pack hoss onto the range of the Circle H it starts araining lead. It's a trouble-breeding, brand-blotting story, and there's nothing in it for the hombre that wants to side-trail action!

Fast and fightin', too, is "Greater Than the Code," a yarn by Albert William Stone. It tells of Curly Rowan, ranch foreman, who has to kill a man he doesn't want to quarrel with. Then that man's doctor-father saves Curly's life—and, true to the cowboy code, forces him into a second gunfight he'd sure like to miss. And when—well, it's a surprised lot of punchers that

comes fogging up after the shooting!

Keep on riding—that's not all. Frank C. Robertson puts the SS brand on "The Blizzard Test" and takes you along with two brave men in a desperate drive through a Western winter storm. Stephen Payne tells a rib-tickling tale of old-time waddies, and Ernest Haycox makes you smell the gun powder that blazes past the nose of a cowpoke who, his jeans sagging with back pay, does his best to find a peaceful place to spend it.

Young Brazo and "Mystery Range" are there, with guns and men who make 'em stutter. Charles Alden Seltzer brings rattling action into Part III of his serial.

There'll be other fast-striding stories, too—a crackling lot of 'em. Yes sir—SHORT STORIES' next issue will bring *some* riding to you, folks—the kind that keeps you going like a posse gettin' warm! Be sure you're set to get in motion right with the rest of the outfit.

HENDERSON—AND HORSES

WHEN George C. Henderson, cowboy-writer, started hazing his yarns our way, we kinda thought we'd tied up with a new tophand you readers were going to like. When the letters came stampeding in after his first story, "The Painted Stallion," we blamed well knew it. It's rare that a new story-teller ropes and hog-ties an audience as fast as did the author of "The Trouble Maker," the thrilling novelette that opens this issue.

"Mr. Henderson's 'Painted Stallion' is one of the best short stories I ever read—if his future yarns are as good he will be in my select circle of writers," says Mr. Fred Boyce of Morgantown, Virginia. F. D. Hopley of New York, himself a writer, tells us, "A great many so-called Western stories ought to be labeled 'Western' so that there might be no mistake; but Mr. Henderson's story is so accurate as to detail and breathes so strongly of the West that it was a pleasure to read it."

Those are two out of many. G. C. Boyd, of Omaha, Nebr., takes a slightly different tone, then tells an interesting horse yarn:

"Mr. Henderson perhaps knows more about capturing wild horses than the story shows. It

seemed to me that his hero had too easy a time of it in coming up to the Painted Stallion. Here's a true tale of my own about capturing a wild one.

"Up in the Tonto Basin above Roosevelt is the Bar B Bar, a big cow outfit. A fine wild stallion roamed with his bunch of mares near this ranch, and the owners wanted him. He had been chased for a couple of years, and they knew that if they could get him he would make a capital racing cowpony and perhaps a good roping horse. Like all stallions of that sort, this fellow, a beautiful sorrel, knew every inch of his range, every turn and crook and hideout. That gave him a big advantage over riders.

"After the spring roundup one year, the Bar B Bar owners asked a young horse hunter who was in the crew of twenty punchers to go after the stallion. As soon as the crew got back from the beef drive he did. He organized the men into four squads of five each, and sent them to the four corners of the small valley in which the stallion and his band of forty mares grazed. Eighteen of the men formed a cordon around the valley; the other two took turns hazing the stallion back and forth, up and down and across the valley. Every time he came near the edge some one or two of the riders at the outpost would turn him and his band back by shooting and yelling. Several times he broke through the ring, but he always came back to join his 'harem.'

"The men changed horses when needed, and took turns sleeping and cooking. They kept that stallion on the go most of the time, often cutting him off from his family circle and running him alone. At night, each rider built a fire at his station, and the horses shied clear of them. The stallion was not allowed to stop for rest or sleep.

"And it took the best part of four days and three nights for the men to wear him down enough to permit a cowboy, mounted on one of the fleetest ponies in the remuda, to approach near enough to rope him. Incidentally, the crowd of punchers was as badly played out as the horse was. He made a fine roping animal after he was broke and trained, and won many contests."

HERE'S ALLEN S. JACOBS

WE'RE mighty glad to be bringing Allen S. Jacobs around to sit in the Circle in this issue, readers. Mr. Jacobs is a young story-teller everybody's glad to know. Here's what he says about "Three Gats," his first yarn in SHORT STORIES:

"That plate in the story got me into as much trouble as it did Shorty. I knew how a secret service operator had helped run down a government employee in the mint who had smuggled out a canceled plate and actually struck off his own money for twenty-one years.

"But I wanted to make sure of a few facts before I completed the yarn, so I sallied forth to the United States Mint here in San Francisco. It seems that at this time they were preparing to strike off cur-

**DON'T FORGET THE COUPON! CUT IT OUT TODAY AND LET US KNOW YOUR
OPINION OF THE STORIES IN THIS NUMBER**

READERS' CHOICE COUPON

"Readers' Choice" Editor, SHORT STORIES:

Garden City, N. Y.

My choice of the stories in this number is as follows:

1 _____ 3 _____

2 _____ 4 _____

5 _____

I do not like:

_____ Why? _____

NAME _____ ADDRESS _____

rency for the first time, and I came making inquiries regarding the printing of currency at just this psychological moment. As you suspect, I did not get one iota of information though I was sent to many departments, including the Federal Reserve Bank. When I left the bank I felt as if I was guilty at the very least of intent to commit counterfeiting, and I can write feelingly and vividly forever after of how a shadowed crook feels. For days I had the conviction I was being shadowed. I would give a year's time to know."

ALASKA WANTS TRAIL POLICE

CORPORAL DOWNEY, the sourdough favorite who has figured in so many of James B. Hendryx's Mountie yarns and who gets a man he isn't after in "Burning the Snow" in this issue, would find a worth-while job on his hands in Alaska this winter, according to a letter we just got from Clem Yore. Mr. Yore, who is hibernating in the deep snows of Estes Park, Colorado, gives a glimpse of the adventure and romance that every Alaskan winter brings to its scattered residents:

"Word comes from Anchorage, Alaska," he writes, "that the mysterious disappearance of Kris Kline and Mike Trapke, sea-

soned sourdoughs, on the sixty mile trail from Talkeetna to Susitna has aroused the people to demand a Territorial force like the Royal N. W. Mounted Police of Canada which will be available to send out after lost men, and do other difficult duties which marshals and deputy marshals are not allowed to do at this time.

"Marshals cannot leave beaten highways to which they have been assigned to trace lost travelers or investigate crime, unless under orders from a U. S. District Court, and sequestered districts have little or no men available to do this duty.

"Kris Kline was followed over a glacier trail to a deep crevasse, where his trail crossed it; there his 'sign' was lost. Mike Trapke simply vanished and no one can trace him anywhere. That these two old prospectors should have met their fates without leaving evidence has inflamed the thin population of Alaska to such an extent that it is moving for a mobile police force which can go anywhere, on any duty, at any time.

"If the right pressure is directed toward this end in Washington, so say the Alaskans, the police force will be formed. Then we shall see some valiant work performed by rangers similar to those of Texas and much like the Mounties of Canada."

THEY CERTAINLY DO KNOW THEIR
CIGARETTES, THIS YOUNGER CROWD!



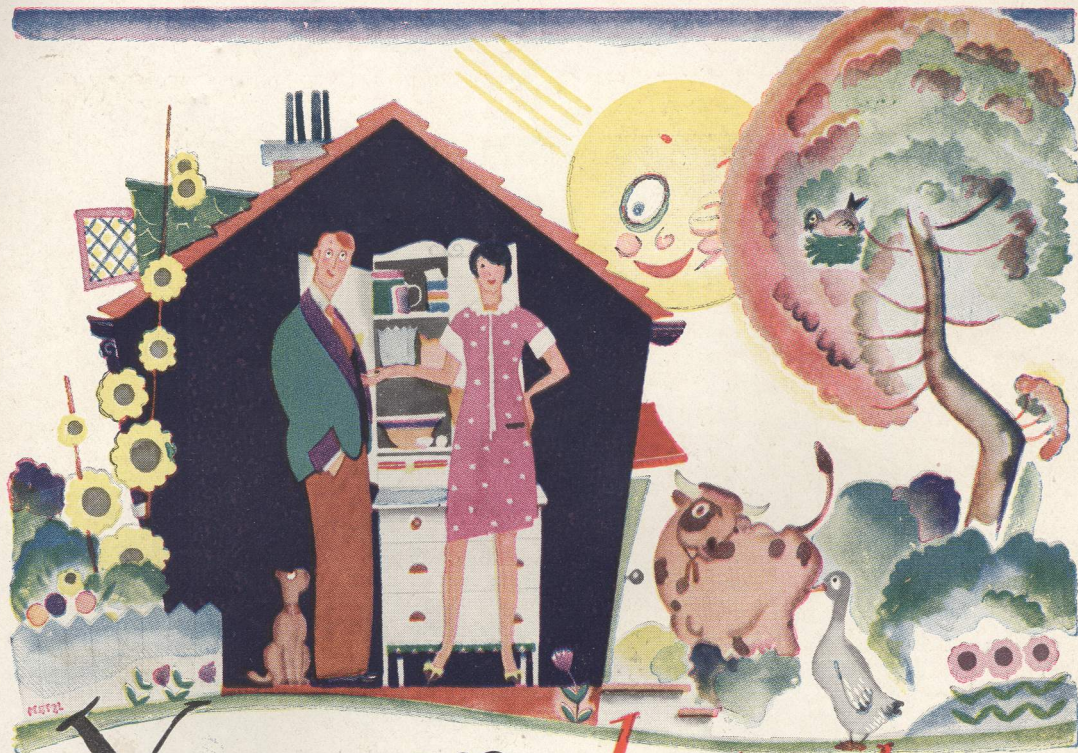
© 1928, LIGGETT & MYERS TOBACCO CO.



SOMETHING ABOUT FATIMA-
ITS GREATER DELICACY, ITS
MORE SKILLFUL BLENDING
OF FLAVORS — HAS MADE IT,
AS IN OTHER DAYS, A CON-
SPICUOUS FAVORITE WITH
THE YOUNGER SET.

FATIMA

OUTSTANDING FAVORITE AMONG HIGHER - PRICED CIGARETTES !



You can, *but why* *should you* make HOME-MADE CANDY?

We
make it **THIS**
way

FUDGE CENTER: 1½ cups pure cane sugar; ½ teaspoon creamery butter; 1 cup rich, full cream milk; 1 cup corn syrup; white of one egg.

CARAMEL LAYER: 4 teaspoons creamery butter; 1½ cups corn syrup; 3 cups rich, full cream milk; ¼ teaspoon salt.

PEANUT LAYER: 3 cups prime No. 1 Spanish whole nuts, roasted in oil (hulls removed).

CHOCOLATE COATING: Melt one pound pure milk chocolate.

Here's OhHenry! all ready to eat, and made that home-made way. Why wrestle with pots & pans? 'Cause you know home-made candy's best? So do we! That's why we stick to this good old home-made way in producing OhHenry! for you.

LOOK!—you'd make it of the very things we use!

So when you want home-made candy just save time & trouble—say

OhHenry!

Look for the new
Gingham wrapper



A message to every ball player from BABE RUTH

"YOU'VE got to hand it to this Reach crowd. When I told them what I figured was needed in major league mitts and gloves—I knew they'd do a good job of making them. But I didn't know *how* good till I saw the gloves they turned out.

"I stuck my hand in the different models. And they are great. Big and roomy, like you need, yet fitting just right. I bent and twisted my hand and fingers, and these gloves moved as natural and easy as an old shoe. When a new glove does *that*—you can take it from me, it's a *real* glove.

"And how these gloves snare a ball. A specially formed pocket does the trick, Reach tells me. Whatever it is, any ball that smacks into one of these gloves sure does stick!

"I'm ready to recommend them to any fellow who plays ball—in the field, on the bases, or back of the bat. They got a pretty low price on them, too, for major league gloves."

Babe Ruth

REACH Major League Mitts and Gloves

DESIGNED BY BABE RUTH

The nearest Reach dealer will be glad to show you the Babe Ruth Line of mitts and gloves. See them. Try them. And you'll know what we mean by *Major League* gloves.



RF1—\$5.00



RF2—\$3.50



RFO—\$8.00



RB1—\$5.00



RC2—\$5.00

FREE BOOKLET... "Playing Pointers"

A. J. REACH, WRIGHT & DITSON, INC.
Tulip and Eyre Sts., Philadelphia, Pa.

Please send me, free, your booklet
"PLAYING POINTERS", together with
leaflet describing fully every glove in
the Babe Ruth Line.

Name.....

Street.....

Town..... State.....

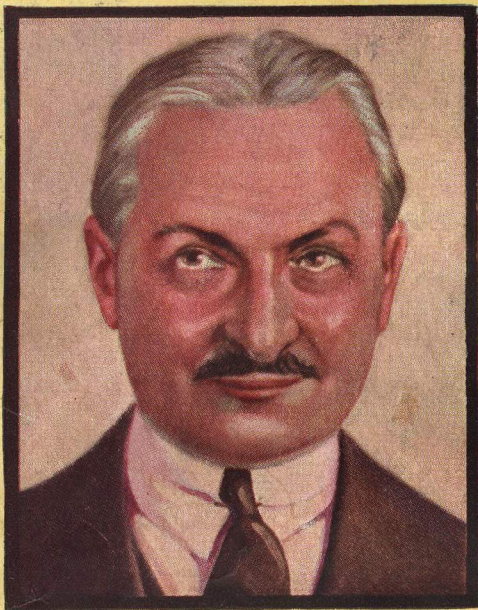
A. F. F.—3-28

© 1928, A. J. R., W. & D., Inc.



"I got the idea from Florenz Ziegfeld"

Said Gladys Glad to Flo Kennedy
behind the scenes at The Ziegfeld
Theatre between acts of The Follies.



Florenz Ziegfeld,
famous theatrical producer, writes:

"As the producer of 'The Ziegfeld Follies' I know full well how important it is for my stars to have clear voices at all times. Several years ago, when I first began to smoke Lucky Strikes, I noticed that my voice remained un irritated after a most strenuous time directing rehearsals. I passed this information on to my stars and now we are all agreed: Lucky Strike is a delightful smoke and most assuredly protects the voice, eliminating any coughing, which often interrupts a perfect performance."

Florenz Ziegfeld



"It's toasted"

No Throat Irritation - No Cough.