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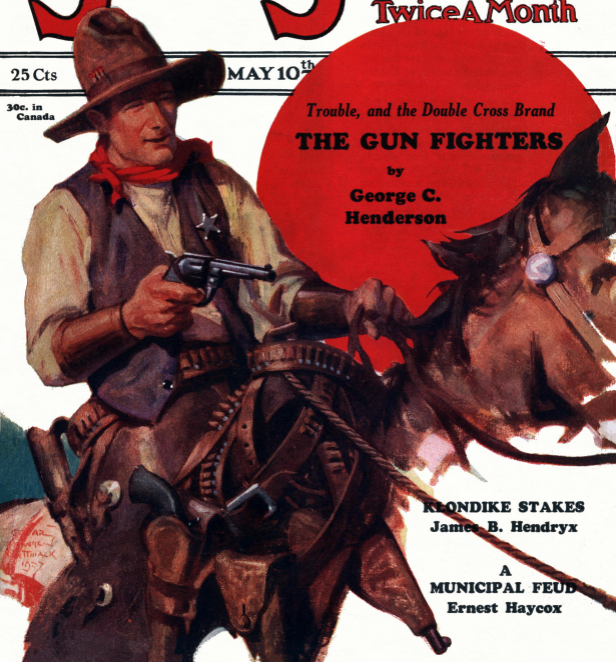
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THE GUN FIGHTERS

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**George C.
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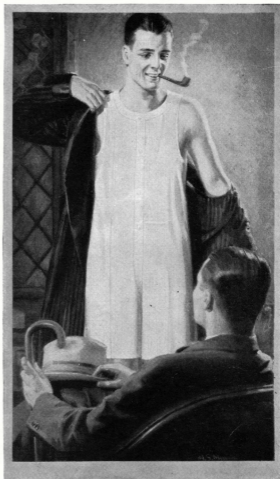
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Short Stories

Vol. CXXIII, No. 3

HARRY E. MAULE
EDITOR



Whole No. 537

D. McILWRAITH
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

SAVE THE NATIONAL PARKS



THE beautiful Yosemite National Park in California is threatened with spoliation, according to Nicholas Roosevelt, writing in the New York Times through the cutting of timber by private companies operating within the boundaries of the reservation. This is bad news for everyone who has the beauty of the country at heart. The national parks are beauty spots set aside by the Federal government so that they may remain for all time unspoiled for the enjoyment of the whole people. That is the pledge and that is the obligation of the government at Washington. Anything less than that is a violation of our faith, and we have a right to know the full facts. The Park Service has done and is doing, by and large, a fine work in the preservation of our national monuments and beauty spots, but any further encroachment would be an unthinkable outrage. Private interests have no place in the parks, except as they aid

the public to enjoy them. The Yosemite, the Yellowstone, Glacier Park, the Grand Canyon, etc., must remain in their original wild state.

The case of the Yosemite, we fear, is not the only one.

The fact seems to be that private interests owned timber rights within the park at the time it was created and they are now cutting down the forests. True, they have kept their operations back from the roads where the public have not seen the devastation. But what of next year, or the next, and what of the preservation of wild life which finds sanctuary in these forests? And how much land in other parks is owned privately, or subject to private interests? We urge you who love the wild to take this up with your local papers and with

your Congressman. The Park Service has pledged something to the people; that pledge must be kept.

THE EDITOR.



CONTENTS



May 10th 1928

COVER DESIGN	-	EDGAR F. WITTMACK	
THE GUN FIGHTERS	- - - -		3
		GEORGE C. HENDERSON	
KLONDIKE STAKES	- - - -		47
		JAMES B. HENDRYX	
A MUNICIPAL FEUD	- - - -		60
		ERNEST HAYCOX	
THE NET	- - - -		71
		H. BEDFORD-JONES	
BOSS OF THE CIRCLE BAR	- - -		100
		ALBERT WILLIAM STONE	
MYSTERY RANGE (Conclusion)	-		111
		CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER	
OLD-TIMERS PLAYED STRAIGHT			130
		HARWOOD STEELE	
PHIL COMES TO STAY	- - - -		140
		H. A. WOODBURY	
THE FIRST KILL	- - - -		149
		CHARLES TENNEY JACKSON	
DEAD MAN'S POCKET	- - - -		162
		STEPHEN PAYNE	
THE STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE	-		173

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The next issue

Short Stories

May 25th



Beginning

MESQUITE JENKINS

**A worthy successor to Hopalong
Cassidy hits the ranges when rust-
lers were riding and long loops
being flung by desperate men**

by

**Clarence
E.
Mulford**



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THE GUN FIGHTERS

By GEORGE C. HENDERSON

Author of "The Trouble Maker," "The Painted Stallion," etc.

IN GEORGE C. HENDERSON'S STORY "THE TROUBLE MAKER," HE INTRODUCED HARMONIKY DICK KING, AND TOLD OF HIS TROUBLES IN CLEANING UP THE SANGRE DE DIOS RANGELAND. NOW HARMONIKY HAS ANOTHER FIGHT ON HIS HANDS BEFORE THE OWNERSHIP OF CERTAIN CATTLE IS ESTABLISHED AND VARIOUS THINGS BROUGHT HOME TO THE OWNER OF THE NOTORIOUS HOG PEN RANCH IN LOST CORRAL

FROM out of the sea of tossing horns and moving brown bodies emerged first a tall, gray sombrero, then a graven stone face and finally the bulky figure of Andrew McClelland astride a bay stallion. McClelland's face, always grim, was molded in an angry scowl. He had just convinced himself of something he did not want to believe. His judgment of a man had proved wrong. In all the years that Andy McClelland had been virtual king of the Sangre de Dios rangeland, he had never been deceived so badly in a man before. What made it all the worse was that this man was to be his son-in-law.

Branding on the open range was under way. Held together by a few horsemen, prevented from stampeding by the presence of cows with calves, the vast

horde of the main herd boiled and bubbled against the confining lines.

In the herds were hundreds of Double Cross cattle belonging to McClelland and many burned with Jess Rankin's Bar Circle Bar or "Dude" Dupree's Hogpen brand. Besides the strays, there was one other brand almost too insignificant to mention. That was Harmoniky Dick King's DH, which could muster about fifty cows and the same number of steers. It was upon the handicraft of Harmoniky that Andy looked with disfavor.

Through the swirling dust, through a bedlam of bawling cows, blatting calves, hissing ropes and thudding bodies, McClelland made his way toward the tally man. A little distance from the main herd was a group of men around a piñon fire. Jess Rankin, short, bowlegged, leather

faced, sat on his heels with a pad and pencil in his hand, checking off the critters as they were branded. Nearer the fire stood another cowboy with a sheaf of branding irons of various designs. A third man was sharpening the knife used for making earmarks on the branded stock. The fire tender lifted one of the irons out of the fire. It glowed cherry red.

SWINGING to the ground, McClelland strode to the tallyman. Dude Dupree, in a fifty-dollar Stetson, came over and stood by his side. Dude was a big blond man, almost as large as Andy, but of a different build. McClelland was all muscle and bone. Even Mac's cheek bones were high and tight skinned. Dude was inclined to fat. He had just the hint of a double chin. Of all those present he alone smoked a cigar.

Dupree was a newcomer in the Sangre de Dios country. With the break-up of the White Mask gang of rustlers and the passing of Sheriff Al Boyes and the Showwalters, the Hogpen in Lost Corral had been sold to satisfy damage claims against it by ranchers who had lost cattle. Dupree had bought it, shipped out the grade stock and brought in white faces. He had even begun to challenge McClelland's leadership in the range country where Mac had been an undisputed power for a quarter of a century.

McClelland motioned with his head to Rankin.

"I follered that calf," he said significantly.

Rankin regarded the Double Cross owner fixedly, a question in his brown eyes.

"Yeah?" he inquired.

"It went right back to a Double Cross cow."

Rankin looked down his nose. Rankin was sensitive that way. He disliked to think ill of any man.

"I never thought that of Harmoniky," he said.

"And here comes another," said Dude Dupree with a flicker of amusement in his blue eyes.

Out of the herd trotted a cow and calf. Behind them rode a cowpuncher, twirling a rope. Even as the riata flickered and

curved and darted around the calf's hind legs, the three ranch owners read the signs. The cow bore the Double Cross brand. But the calf was sleepered with a DH earmark. The DH was Harmoniky's brand.

DOWN on its side in a cloud of dust went the calf, sliding along over the rough ground, dragged by the trained pony toward the fire. With a dexterous movement one man twisted its head sideways and sat down on it. Another cast free the rope, pried its legs apart and clamped them to the ground with iron hands. Dimly seen through the dust haze, the expert brander darted forward, stamped glowing metal on twitching hide, held it until the nauseating odor of burnt hair and skin filled the air, until the convulsed body was strongly marked, until the little calf bawled loudly.

The puncher with the sharp knife stood idly by. Already the ear was slit with Harmoniky's mark.

"DH one calf," called out Rankin.

"With Double Cross cow," growled McClelland. "Put that down."

Rankin walked over and looked at the cow, which was licking its trembling, benumbed offspring and mooing faintly. Unmistakably there on its flank was the Double Cross brand. Just as surely on the calf's ear was the damning slit of the DH herd.

Rankin glanced toward the branding crew. The men had turned away, pretending to be very busy. None of them cared to look at each other at that moment. A sense of shame was upon them. One of their number was being accused of the worst crime in the cattleman's lexicon. They all liked Harmoniky and none were willing to bear witness against him.

Dude Dupree's voice broke the silence.

"I have checked forty calves with the DH mark on them," he declared, "and King's got only fifty cows. The natural increase is but fifty per cent. I don't like to say anything against a friend of yours, McClelland, but——"

"I don't stand for no cussedness," burst out McClelland. "Unless Harmoniky can explain this, him and me are quits."

"Here they are now," cut in Rankin,

"and Stutterin' Steve Hardy's with 'em. Wonder what the sheriff wants out here?"

THREE riders were approaching rapidly across the level plain. They rode abreast and as they came closer the strains of a mouth organ came to the ears of the roundup crew. Between the smiling, freckle-faced Harmoniky, lounging on his paint horse playing a French harp, and the bearded sheriff, rode a slender, black-eyed girl. She bestrode a rangy roan and wore a riding skirt, boots and a wide brimmed hat. This was Ruth McClelland, Andy's daughter, and bride-to-be of Harmoniky Dick King. Her face was turned toward Dick, with whom she was joking and her merry laughter sounded like a tinkling bell compared with the harsher noises.

A film had crept across the turquoise sky and the widening ring around the sun marked the coming of a storm. From the heat-baked sand, little eddies of dust sprang up. A breeze fanned their cheeks.

Harmoniky called out a greeting. Several men waved. Most of them ignored him. McClelland's heavy face curved in a frown of displeasure. His keen eyes, squinted from long gazing at the semi-tropic sun, narrowed and the cords of his neck stood out with suppressed anger.

Harmoniky saw at once that something was wrong. The smile on his face vanished.

"What's up?" he asked, glancing around with a puzzled look. Sheriff Hardy had drawn Dude aside and was talking to him, but Dupree seemed more interested in Harmoniky than in the sheriff's conversation.



McClelland fixed Dick with a piercing eye.

"I don't know how you can explain things I can see with my own eyes," said McClelland, "but maybe you can. Take a look at them stock of yours."

The Double Cross owner waved his hand toward a huddle of calves that had been bunched together with their mothers. All bore the DH brand. Harmoniky rode among them.

"Why, what is the matter, Dad?" cried Ruth. Her face expressed bewilderment and alarm.

McClelland did not answer. Instead he faced Harmoniky, who had made a quick inspection and was returning.

"Why did you run Double Cross cows with my calves?" Harmoniky demanded.

"Calves generally run with their mothers, don't they?" retorted Andy. "Didn't you see them little fellers with the DH ear slit huggin' the bellies of Double Cross cows? Maybe you can explain how come we already have cut out forty calves that you sleepers when you got only fifty cows."

HARMONIKY'S face whitened. He felt every eye upon him. There was no mistaking the deliberate accusation in McClelland's words. The big cattleman had called Dick King a thief.

Red surged before Harmoniky's eyes. Blood beat at his temples. Flexed just over his black gun butts, his long, hard fingers twitched toward the deadly weapons. Something touched his arm, gripped it, held him firm.

Close to him he sensed the perfume of her hair, and heard the soft murmur of Ruth's voice saying in an undertone, "Please! Please! He is my father."

McClelland's right hand rested upon the bone handle of his old .44, the gun which had served him through Indian battles and sheep wars, the six-shooter that had helped make him king of the Sangre de Dios. Out of his gray stone face gleamed two narrowed points of fire, the flame that years had failed to quench. Unafraid he waited with eager savagery the first move of the younger man.

Men ringed them about. Stern drawn faces stared up at them. At any moment they expected to see guns flame and a man fall. Yet no one intervened. There could be no peace now between McClelland and Harmoniky King unless Mac apologized. To call a man a cattle thief in the Sangre de Dios country meant bloodshed. And between two fearless gunfighters like Mac and Harmoniky Dick this was more than ever true. Each had his reputation to uphold. If Dick King failed to fight, it was equivalent to an admission of his guilt.

ALL work had ceased. Cut horse and circle horse alike abandoned the task. Cowboys remained fixed in their saddles like statues, awaiting the outcome of the age-old drama, hot-blooded war between strong men.

Harmoniky crouched slightly forward to a better balance, elbows bent, body tense. His steely gray eyes bored into those of the Sangre de Dios king. Like a coiled spring he poised there, with fingers spread, right hand hovering over revolver holster, a deadly fighting machine, waiting to strike.

CHAPTER II

HARMONIKY BATTLES

A SMALL hand slid into Harmoniky's big calloused palm and gripped his fingers tightly. Ruth McClelland, too choked with terror to speak, uttered a little sob. Dick's body slowly relaxed. A shudder shook his frame. Reaching down with an impulsive movement, he swept the girl into his arms.

McClelland's face became suddenly sallow. He had been keyed up to such a point that the reaction left him limp. He made no effort to separate Harmoniky and Ruth, but stared about him dully like one who had looked into the face of death and has suddenly been reprieved.

"Oh, Dick!" exclaimed Ruth. "I don't want you ever to fight with guns again. I had no idea what a terrible thing it was. I want you to promise me. And you, too, Daddy."

"I'm not a gunfighter by matter of choice," replied Harmoniky. "I never provoked a fight in my life. I don't want you to think I'm a killer, Ruth. But what can a feller do——"

"Oh, to think that you almost killed my father," continued the girl, becoming more and more excited as she realized the narrow escape McClelland had. "You are all gun fighters, all of you. I don't know why you keep it up. It means just tragedy and death."

"What I want to know is, who done the sleeperin'," said Harmoniky. He glanced at the branding crew. No one met his eye. Dude Dupree's face wore a satirical smile. When he glanced at Steve Hardy, the sheriff looked sheepish and shuffled his feet.

Dick realized that he had branded himself as a coward and a thief by not fighting McClelland.

"Somebody sleepereed Mac's calves with my mark to convict me," he snapped. "You fellows ought to see that."

No one answered. Rankin turned away and ordered the branding crew to resume work. McClelland stood looking across the vast expanse of prairie toward the Sangre de Dios foothills with his lips compressed. Dupree went over to his claybank and began taking up the cinches of his saddle.

Harmoniky watched Dupree with sudden interest. The claybank was one of the few horses on the range that Dick had gentled in his own peculiar way and, like his pinto, was a pet when treated well, but could be as savage as any wild mustang



when abused. Now Harmoniky's eyes detected signs of abuse on the pretty little mare. Blood from a cruel Spanish bit reddened the foam that issued from the pony's mouth. Along her flanks were scars, several of which ran crimson and sore. He had sold the mare to Dupree because Dude had given him a big price for her, now he was sorry.

Knowing the wild nature of the mare he was not surprised when she pulled away suddenly and kicked at Dude Dupree, missing him narrowly. She had been a hard one to gentle, that mare. Several cowpunchers had been hurt trying to break her in the usual way. Harmoniky had busted her only by kind treatment.

Dupree swung into the saddle and began rowelling the animal ferociously. Gleelessly Harmoniky waited for the maneuver he knew must come. The wise little mare would stand so much cruelty but no more.

THE move came with the uprearing of the claybank on her hind legs. Ruth screamed and clung to Dick's arm. Dupree's lips whitened. Toppling almost erect like a statue, steel cord muscles rippling

under her yellow coat, ears flat, eyes glaring, mouth open, the mare pretended to fall on the man; then as he loosed his seat she sprang forward with back arched and head down, jumping stiff legged, sunfishing as wildly as an untamed stallion. Dupree shot out of the saddle and landed, a tangle of legs, in a creosote bush. Dick, with a flick of his magney rope, captured the trembling claybank and brought her back to the group.

Dupree, on his feet, came a running, revolver barrel lifted to strike. His lips were drawn back from his teeth in a snarl.

"I'll tame you, you hellion," he shouted as he struck the claybank squarely in the eye, so that blood spurted from the wound.

Even as the mare's scream sounded, Harmoniky leaped. Down he came upon Dupree with a double-fisted blow. The big blond man reeled backward, gun falling from his hand, and sprawled to the ground. Harmoniky's gaze centered on Dupree's other hand, saw it fumbling toward his second gun and he sprang just as the muzzle came free of the holster. The toe of his boot caught the gun and sent it flying. Grasping the prostrate man by the collar, he pulled him to his feet and stood him up. A grin was on Dick's face.

Dupree's wabbly gaze had barely time to focus on that smile when like a flash it vanished and a hard fist, crashing into his face, again hurled him to earth. There he lay trembling for a moment, so beside himself with rage he could not rise. There was something terrible about this man who grinned as he fought, whose smile changed to sudden ferocity, who scorned to use weapons on an enemy that had tried to draw on him.

ONLY for a moment did Dupree hesitate. Then he lunged erect and weaved toward the freckle-faced cowpuncher. A horse appeared between them. It was Ruth's big roan.

"Shame on you, both of you," she cried. "Stop it at once."

The sheriff caught Harmoniky's arm and pulled him back. McClelland stepped close to Dupree as if to perform a similar office, but he did not venture to touch the Hogpen owner. Dupree picked up his gun.

A crimson trickle came from his nose and he spat blood from bruised and battered lips.

"Get away from him, Sheriff," he commanded, "and we'll finish this right here."

"Nu-nu-no you don't," stammered Stutterin' Steve. "Gun fightin' in the presence of the sheriff is cu-cuh-contempt of law. Put up yore gun."

Dupree stood looking from Harmoniky to the sheriff uncertainly. One of his eyes had begun to close. Suddenly he spat out a tooth.

"If you get your just deserts, King, I won't have to shoot you," he continued. "I don't know what they do here, but in a real cattle country they stretch calf thieves to a tree."

Harmoniky glanced toward the mare which had run a quarter of a mile and was standing with her head down, evidently in the throes of the most intense suffering. Dupree had hit her squarely on the eye.

"She'll have to be shot now," he said in a low, tense voice. "By God, Dupree, I should have killed you for that. They never was a better pony than that little mare. Shoot her for me, will you, sheriff?"

"Wait a minute now," snarled Dupree. "She is my property. I'll shoot her when I get damned good and ready."

"Mr. Dupree!"

IT WAS Ruth's voice. She stepped close to the Hogpen owner and regarded him wonderingly.

"Surely, Mr. Dupree, you do not mean to be cruel."

Dude Dupree's eyes dropped. He passed a hand over his forehead.

"Pardon me, ma'am," he said. "I'm not myself. Go ahead, Sheriff. I was wrong to hit that little beauty. Why, I gave King one hundred and fifty dollars for that mare and I thought a lot of her."

Dupree made no move to resume hostilities. They were all silent until the sheriff returned. The Hogpen owner had suddenly become very docile. He watched Ruth covertly.

"Nuh-nuh-now," stuttered the sheriff, "let's get to the bottom of this calf business." He looked at Harmoniky. "What do you know about it?"

"Not a thing," said Dick.

"If you don't, who does?" put in Andy. "You're the only one that would gain anything by it."

"Dad," said Ruth sternly, "I thought you were a judge of men. You ought to know by this time that Dick would not stoop to such a thing. Why, it is absurd!"



"Who the devil would do it, then?" demanded McClelland. "Mebbe I did it myself. Mebbe I sleepered my own calves so this grinnin'

red head could take 'em."

"It was a put-up job," declared Ruth. "Some enemy of Dick has done this to discredit him. I'm sure of it."

McClelland shook his head. He was a stubborn man, and once he made up his mind he was not easily turned.

"How are you going to prove that?"

"Give me time," suggested Harmoniky.

McClelland pondered the proposal. At last he reached a conclusion.

"I'll give yeh time, King," he said, "before I pass judgment. But I can't keep yeh on as foreman at my ranch. You'll have to go out to your own place and live."

"Why, Daddy!" exclaimed Ruth.

"What's more," continued the cattleman, "you better keep away from the Double Cross ranch and Ruth altogether until you can show a clean bill of health."

Ruth pushed the big gray hat back from her forehead and stared at her father.

"If Dick can't come to the Double Cross ranch then I'll have to go and see him," she declared, "because we are both going to the Old Settlers' ball in Tonto."

Dude Dupree gave a short laugh.

"Did you consider, Miss Ruth," he said, "that mebbe this fellow won't be welcome at the Old Settlers' ball after being marked as a cattle thief?"

A FEW hours later as he was riding into town with Sheriff Hardy Harmoniky remarked, "By jing! Funny what

loco critters human bein's are. Seems they're jest rarin' to make themselves miserable. Now just look at this country around here. Plenty for everybody, plenty of water to drink, plenty to eat, plenty houses, plenty beef, and still some folks ain't satisfied. They just got to fight. A little while ago I was happy as a medder lark. I had a good job, a good reputation, and the best girl in the world. Now I ain't got nothing, and every man in the Sangre de Dios will look at me as a cow thief. I'm branded, Sheriff, and by the father of the girl I love. Roped, throw'd, and branded!"

"Who do you blame for it?" asked Steve Hardy.

Dick shook his head.

"I dunno," he replied. "That is something I've got to find out."

CHAPTER III

THE SHERIFF SHOOTS

THE white haze of a sandstorm darkening the sky still rested heavy over the Sangre de Dios land when a slight girl on a roan horse made her way in the face of it toward Tonto town.

As her pony covered the miles at a brisk enduring trot, Ruth McClelland pondered deeply the happenings that had sent Harmoniky out of her life so suddenly. She had not seen him for a week. Her only word from him had been a note reminding her that she was to meet him in Tonto for the Old Settlers' ball. He had not said what progress he was making toward clearing his name and so she concluded that no news was good news.

Just before she reached the trail that turned off to the left toward the Hogen ranch, she saw another rider emerge. Ranchmen coming in on the train frequently followed this trail from the station at Gila Junction. On closer approach Ruth observed that the rider was a woman, tall, angular, sharp-featured, with a face that once had been pretty, but which now showed the effects of dissipation. Dressed in man's clothes and wearing a belt with a gun girded high on her right hip, she looked thoroughly capable of taking care of herself. She returned Ruth's greeting with a

curt nod and looked her over critically before speaking. Ruth noted that she rode a livery stable horse and that she was a stranger in the Sangre de Dios country.

"I'm hunting a party name of Dupree," said the woman, in a high-pitched nasal voice. "Perhaps you can tell me where I might find him."

Ruth gave her directions to find the Hogpen ranch.

"It is not likely that you will find Mr. Dupree home now," she concluded. "Nearly everyone has gone to Tonto town for the big dance tonight."

"Huh," snorted the woman impolitely, and after hesitating a minute, wheeled her horse and without a word of thanks rode toward the Hogpen ranch.

PUSHING her roan to a gallop, Ruth soon reached a cluster of flat adobe buildings that marked the outskirts of Tonto. Parching in the center of a vast rolling prairie, within sight of the snow on the Sangre de Dios peaks, Tonto town consisted of one hoof-torn main street, bisected by several very short cross alleys; gray mud houses with dirt floors and slits for windows; frame buildings with false fronts and a squat stone structure in the center of a big lot—the jail. Towering above all the other buildings in the center of the city was the yellow painted Cantina Hidalgo, Art Faraway's saloon, dance hall and gambling den, flanked on either side by the blacksmith shop and the harness maker. Across from the cantina was the Full House saloon and hotel and nearby the post office, served twice a week by the lumbering Concord coach that tore into town behind Lon Kinney's four matched broncos with the mail that came to Gila on the narrow gauge.

Tonto town surged with life. So thick was the crowd that Ruth had difficulty getting to the livery stable. Mounted men, buckboards, spring wagons, freighters, even an occasional canvas-covered prairie schooner traversed the streets. The sidewalks were alive with men, women and children dressed in their best bib and tucker. Horse wranglers, gamblers, mule skinner, cowboys, half breeds—men of almost every hue and garb mingled with

the eager ranchwomen and curious, crying, shouting children to fill the narrow cowtown thoroughfare to overflowing.

AT THE main hotel she found that all the rooms were taken. She went across the street to the United States house and found the same condition. She had never been in this hotel before. As she glanced around her she realized that its unsavory reputation was probably justified. Evil-eyed men watched her covertly as she went to the desk. When she started down the narrow hallway toward the front door, one followed her. She quickened her step. He broke into a run.



Before she could move, a strong hand caught her wrist. Ruth McClelland was not the kind of a girl to scream. Instead she brought up her free hand and crashed it

into the man's face with a force that staggered him. Her other hand came free of his, but only for a moment. Then he was upon her. She gave a cry then, while her fists flew. She kicked at his shins until he struck back at her, a swift blow to the jaw that stunned her. She felt her senses reeling. She tried to scream. A hand closed over her mouth. The pockmarked face was close to hers now. She saw the fellow was reaching out to open one of the hall doors.

"Drop it."

SHE staggered free. A roar beat upon her ears. The odor of powder smoke filled her nostrils. She saw the man with the pockmarked face running down the hall holding his arm; she saw faces all around her and she recognized the big, blond owner of the Hogpen ranch, Dude Dupree.

"Just in time, Miss McClelland," said Dude, taking her arm. He smelled of the barber shop and she noted that he had on store clothes. "It's a bad place, the United States Hotel."

"I certainly owe you many thanks," she

said, when they were standing on the sidewalk amid a curious crowd. Everyone was looking at her and asking questions.

"Might I see you to the *baile* tonight?" asked Dude, who believed in taking advantage of all the breaks in his favor.

"I'm sorry," replied Ruth, "but I'm going with Mr. King. I hope to see you there."

"I'll be there," replied Dude, "and I'll be asking for a dance. You know, Miss McClelland, I'm your friend, and I don't want you to get mad at me, but I've got to say something that's on my mind. If Dick King goes to that dance tonight he's likely to get a cold shoulder."

Ruth threw up her head. Her eyes met Dupree's squarely.

"Why?" she demanded.

Dude made a wry face. It was a disagreeable subject to discuss with Harmoniky's sweetheart.

"That sleeperin' story is all over the country," he said. "Everybody is talkin' about how your old man called him on the deal and he took water. Personally, I think Dick is innocent, but the folks around here don't know him. In fact, there's been talk of—well, perhaps I better not tell you."

"What is it?" insisted Ruth. Her face was pale and her lips set.

"Well, er—you see—some hotheads has been making threats—"

"I understand. But it will make no difference to me. I know Dick is innocent. And I am going with him to the *baile*."

SHE went to the sheriff's office and found Steve Hardy with his feet stuck up on a chair, contemplating through grave eyes the emptiness of the three cells of his new jail. A short, heavyset, black-bearded man with small black pinpoint eyes, Sheriff Hardy was known throughout the Southwest as a swift avenger of the law. The triggerless gun in its worn holster bore on the stock a sinister row of notches. In the days when men died hard, at the time warriors went trooping to Pecos from the Rio Grande, when maverick runners from the Nueces flourished with hungry loop and Winchester, and bearded buffalo hunters from the Staked Plains fought in the Lincoln County wars, Steve Hardy had

been a kid outlaw. No man ever got from his lips the story half revealed by the grimly notched revolver.

The sheriff hastily took his feet down and Ruth told him first of her encounter in the United States Hotel and of Dude Dupree's fortunate arrival.

"Was this pockmarked feller kind of snake headed with a scar acrost his forehead?" asked the sheriff, when she concluded.

"Yes, yes. Do you know him?"

"That was Joe Garn," said Hardy. "Bu-bu-but I allus thought him and Dude was pretty thick. I guess you broke up a long-standin' friendship. You want to swear to a warrant?"

"Oh, no," replied Ruth. "I guess he is punished enough. Mr. Dupree winged him. I have something more important to tell you. Dude says folks have been making threats against Dick."

SHERIFF HARDY cleared his throat. "Thu-thu-the pore damn' fool," he snorted. "What did he mean tellin' you that?"

"But is it the truth?"

"There is a wild element here," Steve admitted. "They stir up trouble just for the excitement. I always classed Dude with that bunch. I think he is summot of a trouble-maker hisself."

"Has he ever done anything?"

"No. No, he ain't never done nothin', but I've got my eye on him, jest the same."

"Are these men really dangerous?"

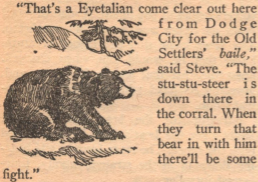
"No, no, I wouldn't call 'em dangerous."

Loud yelling sounded on the street. Ruth and the sheriff walked to the door and gazed out at a lively scene. Country folks from ranch, farm, hamlet and mines for miles around filled the streets.

The crowd parted. From it emerged a whooping cowboy on a bucking horse, jabbing with his spurs, beating his quivering mount with hat and quirt. Behind him plodded a little dark-haired, olive-skinned man, and attached to this man by a rope was a bear, an ambling, amiable brown bear that responded to the squealing of women and the shouts of children by turning to look at them with very small pig-

gish eyes. On the side of the bear was tied a sign which said:

FEE-ROSHUS BEAR FITE WITH STEER
TONIGHT
BARN DANCE CORRAL
\$2 American
\$4 Mex



"Dick said he would meet me here," said Ruth. "I wonder what is keeping him. You don't suppose——"

"You wouldn't know that barn, neither," asserted Steve Hardy. "All clu-clu cleaned up. Seats fixed around the wall and in back a table to eat on and a big straw bed for the babies. Mrs. Rankin, Mrs. Hardy and them Kansas girls are dragging hay bales around and cutting up candles on the floor to make it slick. Want to go down and see?"

HER answer was a gasp. "Look!" she cried. "Look. It's Dick! Oh—oh——"

A man stood on the very edge of a roof not two hundred feet away—a black-clad cowboy of medium size with narrow waist and sturdy-muscle body. His legs were spread apart. His knees were bent. His head was hunched forward. And from the palm of each hand protruded the deadly black barrel of a big six-shooter, set close to his hips, pointed at some unseen foe.

Even as they watched he jumped backward, pulling up his legs to catch the weight of him when he hit the ground.

A revolver cracked. Figures appeared on the roof. A gun came up and pointed at Harmoniky, who was just scrambling to his feet.

Ruth did not see the sheriff move. She heard the swish of a moving shirt sleeve, she heard the roar of his guns at her very elbow and, as in a dream, she watched the man on the roof, who had pointed the gun at Harmoniky, crumple and pitch forward on his face. Those with him dropped out of sight like frightened children.

Harmoniky was walking calmly toward them. Ruth hurried to meet him, with the sheriff at her side.

She went straight to his arms with a happy little cry.

"My heart was in my mouth," she declared. "I saw that man aim at you and I felt paralyzed. Sheriff Hardy saved your life."

"I know he did," said Dick. "Are we all ready for the *baile*?"

She drew away from him then.

"Dick, Dick," she protested. "Don't you ever take anything seriously? Why, you have just escaped death and you talk about going to a dance! Tell me what this is all about? Now please do not try to deceive me. I have been told that you are in danger. Why are people trying to kill you? Who were those men on the roof?"

Harmoniky grinned into her flushed, excited face.

"That's another story," he replied enigmatically.

Sheriff Hardy came back from examining the victim of his marksmanship.

"That was Big Foot Owens," he said. "One of the Joe Garn crowd. I'd like to know what them fellers are up to.

CHAPTER IV

THE FEE-ROSHUS BEAR FIGHT

HARMONIKY'S freckles glowed, red and shiny in the torchlight. The scrubbing had done that. His hair was plastered down. His boots glistened from new polish and a white silk handkerchief around his neck relieved the habitual blackness of his attire.

Ruth was lovely in a filmy dress of lace and ruffles and dainty slippers. Her black hair, combed back tightly from her forehead, gave to her full olive cheeks a madonna look. Her dark eyes were shining with excitement. As she had not been able

to secure quarters at a hotel, Mrs. Hardy had taken her in for the night and there she had been able to change from riding clothes into dance costume.

As they approached the big barn where the Old Settlers' ball was being held, the crowd about them increased. The yells of the hilarious, the cries of vendors of food and novelties and the music of the fiddlers mingled with the loud braying of a donkey in an adjacent corral.

Down by the corral back of the barn figures outlined by bonfire and torchlight flitted here and there. The high fence of the corral was fringed with human forms. Harmoniky found the Italian fight promoter and bought two tickets which entitled Ruth and him to a seat on high. From this vantage point they could look down on the bewildered steer in the enclosure and identify many of those in the crowd that thronged about them.

The crowd was beginning to get nervous at the delay. "Bring on that b'ar, yeh little yellin' coyote," yelled a voice. "Go chase yourself," retorted the Italian, never letting up on his ticket-selling activity. "Two dollars American, four dollars Mex," he chanted, "to see the greatest performance ever put on in the United States."

A revolver cracked close to the Italian's ear. The showman jumped. A group of cowboys, paying out their money, burst out laughing and added the explosions of their own weapons to the bedlam.

AT LAST when he had secured all the money available, the showman returned to the gate where two Mexicans had been holding his bear.

"Ready!" he shrieked.

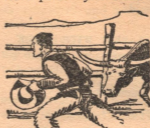
Silence fell. Every eye turned toward the gate.

"Watch out for the bear!" cried the showman, as he shoved the brown animal into the enclosure and closed the gate after him.

Ruth uttered an exclamation. "Why, the poor thing! It seems bewildered," she said.

The bear, thrust into the limelight, stunned by the yelling of the multitude, frightened by the snorting, horned creature that glared at it from another corner,

stood perfectly still and waited. Not so the



steer. Head and tail up, nostrils dilated, eyes wide, the longhorn pawed the earth and shook its head in rage. A bottle hit it on the flank. Rev-

olvers began to pop again. A man dropped from the fence and waved his sombrero. The steer knew this two-legged creature, knew that he would run when charged, knew the fear that was in his heart, and, lowering its head with a bellow, flew toward him.

Straight for the bear ran the man. Right over the bear's back he leaped and onto the fence. The steer found itself bearing down upon the strange, woolly, four-legged intruder.

A steer, unlike a cow, does not stop in its headlong onrush to dodge this way or that. It closes its eyes and plunges ahead. Bruin shambled out of the way and the steer piled up against the fence. Raising a cloud of dust, the longhorn struggled to its feet and gave chase. Faster and faster went the two animals around and across the corral. Then, suddenly, the bear changed tactics. Coming to the gate he jumped, caught his claws in the crossboards and went over the top, carrying two yelling burpunchers with him.

BEDLAM broke loose. The air was filled with human arms and legs and bodies as men leaped from the high fence.

"There he goes out across country," yelled someone, and gave chase. "Come on," cried another voice. "Git horses."

Everybody was laughing or yelling. Ruth, holding tightly onto Harmoniky's arm, rocked back and forth with glee as the chase began. Bruin was headed for the hills. After him on foot and horseback went cowboys, skimmers, gamblers and ranchers.

"What are they going to do to the poor showman?" asked Ruth.

A group had surrounded the Italian, who strove valiantly to break through after his pet. Several men were shaking their fists.

One produced a rope and dropped it around the Italian's neck.

Harmoniky dropped to the ground and helped Ruth to descend.

"They're carrying it a little too far," he said. "I can't see that poor devil hurt."

In spite of Ruth's protest Dick went closer to the crowd that surrounded the showman. She stopped him before he broke into the ring.

"Don't you see who that is?" she asked. "That is Joe Garn and his gang. Those are the fellows the sheriff says are causing trouble. I believe they are responsible for the attacks on you. Dude Dupree shot Garn in the arm——"

She halted abruptly. Garn was waving both hands over his head. Apparently both of them were sound. Yet she had clearly seen him holding his right arm after Dupree fired that shot in the United States Hotel.

"That is him," she exclaimed in amazement. "I would recognize that pockmarked face anywhere. But his arms seem to be all right. I wonder——"

Harmoniky laughed shortly. "The sheriff and myself have been wondering the same thing," he interrupted. "I think you're right. Dupree is connected with Joe Garn's gang. The Hogpen seems to be plumb unlucky as to owners."

"Then you think perhaps Dupree watched for me——" Ruth suggested.

"I think it was a scheme to make you like him," said Harmoniky, firmly. "I didn't want to believe there was anything bad about that fellow, but when he hit that clayband mare——! Say, I ain't got over that yet."

"I suppose one of his men shooting at you doesn't make so much difference," suggested Ruth ironically.

"I don't know that he did shoot at me," retorted Dick. "Joe Garn and I were never enemies. And he has no reason to try to get me."

"Unless he is working for Dude Dupree."

HARMONIKY whistled softly. He gazed intently at Ruth, grinning.

"Why should Dude Dupree want me killed?" he asked.

Ruth tossed her head. "Your guess is as good as mine," she replied. "I think you are just teasing me now."

The crowd scattered. Women squealed. "The bear! The bear!" yelled someone.

A brown shape darted out of the mesquite into the light. It was the bear. The pursuers had driven it back. Harmoniky thrust Ruth behind him. There was no telling what a frightened and enraged bear



might do. Several men were firing at the poor creature. Above the noise of their shots came the wailing voice of the showman, the alleged Italian, "Oy, Oy, my

poor Rachael! They will kill my poor Rachael!"

A loop settled over the bear's head. Another caught a hind leg. Sixty seconds later the bear was hogtied and being hauled before a tribunal.

Above the uproar sounded the bellowing voice of Joe Garn.

"What will we do with this skinflint, fellers?" he yelled.

Silence followed the question. The proposition required thinking and thoughts did not come readily to their befuddled senses. Many of these revelers had been making a holiday of it since morning.

"Run him out of town," piped up a voice.

"Let him go if he returns the money," shouted Harmoniky.

"No, no, let's have some fun," proposed another. This proposal was greeted with a roar of applause.

SOMEONE produced a blanket and onto it the helpless showman was dumped. Soon he was shooting up in the air under the dexterous direction of four husky men, one at each corner of the blanket. The entertainment came to an end when one of the cowboys dropped his corner of the blanket to scratch his head.

The showman was ready to quit on any terms.

"I tell you vat," he cried. "I gif you de

bear, eh? Blease you take de bear and let me go."

"Fair enough," said several men.

Joe Garn raised his hands.

"We'll put it to a vote," he said. "All in favor of keeping the b'ar, whoop 'er up."

The crowd whooped 'er up. Joe Garn stepped up to the little showman and handed him his derby hat. The crown was missing, but the brim was still there.

"Clear a way for this feller," he commanded. "Git back."

The crowd parted, clearing a lane, sensing that more fun was to come.

"Now run for it," cried Joe.

Spurning the sand with his feet, the showman fairly leaped to freedom. Yells followed him. Revolvers roared. And at each explosion he leaped high in the air. Not until he was out of sight did the laughing crowd turn its attention to the bear.

There followed a spirited debate as to what should be the bear's fate. Some were in favor of putting bruin back in the corral for another try at the steer. Others suggested that the town adopt him as a mascot. It remained for Tiny Armstrong to say the word that met with universal approval.

"Le's take him down to the Cantina and trade him for the drinks."

A PROCESSION formed. At the head of it went the bear. Art Faraway, behind the bar at the Cantina Hidalgo, stared at a waddling, hairy creature that burst through the swinging doors of his establishment. Women screamed and rushed for safety. Art rubbed his eyes. He glared suspiciously at the glass of whisky he had just poured and pushed it away from him. He closed his eyes tight and then opened them again. The hairy thing was still there and behind it a jostling crowd of men.

"I don't want no bear," said Faraway firmly, when told of the intention of the crowd.

"You've got to take him," insisted Joe Garn, and the others yelled approval. "We'll take it out in trade."

There followed a long argument about the value of the bear, which was finally

fixed at one hundred dollars. Sheriff Hardy came in, calm and unperturbed, and was dragged up to the bar to drink with the others. He noticed that many of Garn's men were getting drunk and it made him uneasy. Garn's pockmarks had turned a bluish color; his eyes were mere slits; his mouth was twisted to one side. That was a bad sign.

When the price of the bear was exhausted in trade, a collection was taken up and the men bought bruin back. Then they proceeded across the street toward the Full House saloon to repeat the performance.

Sheriff Hardy left them and went back to his office. The little joke with the bear might turn out seriously after all. If all these unruly men got crazy drunk, blood might be shed in Tonto town before the night was over.

CHAPTER V

TRAPPED

FROM the big barn resounded the wail of fiddles and at intervals the sound of a stentorian voice calling, "Salute your partners—first lady center—grand right and left." The shuffle of feet, the trill of girlish laughter, the low hum of voices, the cry of babes and the repeated shriek of a mother, "Come 'ere, Regi-nawld," came softly muted to the man and girl, standing under a cottonwood tree near the rear entrance.

"That gang has gone uptown now," said Harmoniky, "so you needn't be afraid to go into the dance now. Come on, let's try a step."

"Oh, very well," Ruth assented.

She took his arm and they made their way into the place. The rear door through which they passed brought them directly into the nursery, where, on a great bed of straw, were laid out in rows the various sleeping, snoring, whining or howling offspring, as the case might be. About a long table hovered big-bodied, full-breasted women, pouring coffee, cutting off slabs of roast beef, serving hungry men who growled at their b'iled shirts and store clothes.

Belle Hardy, wife of the sheriff, swept up and welcomed them with loud words.

Mrs. Hardy was a buxom woman, red of face and mighty of arm. What she had to say she said forthright.

"You come right in here, Ruth, and try some of my cake," she cried. "My, Harmoniky, ain't you handsome with your hair all slicked up! Have you seen that good-for-nothing husband of mine? Reckon he's gone off with them bear hunters. It was outrageous the way they treated that pore Eye-talian. But I had to laugh when he ran fer it. You won't have any cake? You say you are going to dance. Well, jest you polka right along. I'll ketch you later on."

A NUMBER of people glanced toward Harmoniky and Ruth, attracted by Mrs. Hardy's loud talking, but none of the others came forward to speak. Harmoniky cared little for that. His thoughts were all on the dainty bit of finery that he carried out onto the floor and into the swing of a lilting waltz. The floor was almost deserted. Many of these folks knew only the quadrille, schottische and polka and they did not attempt the waltz. Harmoniky was correspondingly proud of the step which he had learned in a trip to Fort Worth. Once or twice Dick bowed to acquaintances. He noticed that they were not very cordial, but he thought nothing of it. He had attention for nothing else but his partner.



Ruth saw it first and held her head a little higher. Dick began to understand when, time after time, people gave him stony glances. He remembered, then, the unresented stain McClelland had put on his character. The whole country had heard about that. Quite a few of the punchers had seen the branded and sleepers calves. For the first time in his life Harmoniky felt the pain of keen contempt.

The end of the dance found them almost facing the hostess of the evening, Mrs. Jess Rankin. Ruth bowed and Mrs. Rankin smiled.

"Howdy, Mis' Rankin," said Dick. "Howdy, folks."

The woman's face froze. Her eyes turned suddenly cold. She looked at Harmoniky steadily for a moment, lip curling; then deliberately turned her back. It was a signal for the other women to do the same.

Harmoniky's cheeks burned. Ruth's warm hand, reaching out suddenly grasped the cold fingers in a firm grip.

"I didn't mean to bring this down on you," said Dick, in a low voice. "I'd better go. Some of the women will insult you."

Ruth's lips set in a line. Harmoniky could see the McClelland iron in her come to the surface.

"I won't let you go now," she said. "We will stay until the very last dance. Keep your head up and we will see it through, together."

Harmoniky looked at her steadily, a catch in his throat.

"You little thoroughbred," he said reverently.

SHORTLY after midnight Sheriff Hardy came into the place. He came over to Dick, who was watching Ruth as she talked to Mrs. Hardy.

"The bu-bu-boys are getting worked up, Dick," said Steve. "I reckon you better hit it out of town for the night."

"What do you hear?" asked Dick.

"They's a lot of gab about that sleep-er-in' deal," admitted the sheriff. "Some think as you ought to be made an example of. The plain fact is the boys are hankerin' for excitement and somebody is keeping them pointed toward you."

Harmoniky looked thoughtful. Instinctively his hands wandered down over his hips, which were bare now of the accustomed holsters. It was the rule at Tonto dances that gentlemen must leave their firearms outside. His eyes seeking the doorway saw the straggling crowd there grow more dense. Mrs. Rankin was leading Sheriff Hardy away to sample her cake. Bud Belew, the deputy sheriff Hardy had stationed at the door, disappeared. A tall, pounchy figure with a pockmarked face suddenly stood out on the dance floor. Cries of the women and astonished oaths of men drew every eye to him. It was Joe Garn, and in his hands he held a rifle. Behind him moved other men, armed with revolvers.

"Ladies and gents," bellowed Garn, his eyes on Harmoniky.

Talk ceased. The air became still. The indignant chatter of the dancers broke off abruptly. All gazed at the menacing armed figure with the bluish pockmarks and twisted mouth.

"I apologize for interruptin' you," said Garn, "but I am here to get a cattle thief. When I git him, me and my men will leave, quiet as we come."

Again he hesitated. His eyes and gun were trained on Dick King, leaving no doubt as to whom he meant.

"I don't need to mention his name," said Garn. "You all know him. Everybody stand away from him."

Like scared rabbits, people near Dick scuttled for safety. Men and women dodged through doors and vaulted out of windows. One of the fiddlers ducked down behind the box he had been using as a chair.

Harmoniky took a step forward.

"Don't do any shootin' in here," he requested coolly. "I'm not totin' guns."

"Come on out here, then," commanded Garn hoarsely.

HARMONIKY appeared to study the fellow for a few seconds as if he were some strange animal. Then his face broke into a smile.

"Close yore mouth, Joe, so's I can see yore face," he jibed, amiably. "You stand-in' there kinda pop-eyed with your jaws propped open makes me think of a railroad tunnel with red warnin' lights on each side of it——"

"Cut the funny talk," snarled Garn.

"Don't like that, eh?" asked Dick. "What can I do for you, then? Sing a song?"

He was not speaking idly, but sparring for time. He knew that every minute he could put off his capture made it more and more likely that someone or something would intervene. He did not dare make a dash for fear the drunken rowdies would fire into the crowd. Sheriff Hardy, holding a large piece of frosted cake in his hand, ate it calmly as if he had no intention of lending a hand.

Joe Garn's face took on a sicklier hue. He showed his teeth in a snarl.

"Come a walkin' now," he ordered. "Andale! If you try to hide behind women's skirts, we'll drag you out with a rope."

All of Harmoniky's senses, concentrated in the direction of his enemy, suddenly became attentive to another sound, the noise of light feet tapping the floor. A soft body collided with his, and Ruth stood in front of him, shielding him from the menace of the rifle. Not a word came from her white lips, but her tense muscles did not hesitate, her eyes did not flicker as she fixed them upon the town tough.

BEFORE she could voice her defiance, Sheriff Hardy moved. He finished his cake. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he started leisurely across the floor of the wide barn. His short figure



stooped slightly forward as he stumped along in his tight-toed boots. The old slouch hat, pushed back at a rakish angle on hair that refused to

turn gray, the faded blue shirt, unbuttoned at the neck, his wrinkled talon fingers and the bony protuberances that showed at every angle of shoulder, knees, and hip, marked him to all outward appearances as a derelict.

But his eyes were young, gleaming in their deep sockets, steady, unflickering. His face was calm and stolid as he proceeded with a certain dignity which caught the breath of every man and woman there. Many had made fun of his defect of speech, but none ever doubted the bravery or honesty of Steve Hardy.

He made no move toward the gun which he still wore by virtue of his office, but with thumbs hooked lightly in his belt marched straight toward the armed intruders. Harmoniky, unarmed though he was, put Ruth gently aside and fell in step beside the sheriff.

Stunned by the appearance of the old highwayman, fearful of the deadly menace of his notched and battered gun, the mob

flinched before him. Memory of old "Fool" Hardy's killings, dimmed by passing years, came back. No man who crossed Steve Hardy had ever lived to tell the tale.

Garn swung up the barrel of his rifle. It pointed directly at the sheriff's chest.

"Stop!" cried the gangster. "Don't come no farther."

The black-haired, black-bearded old gun-fighter gave him a glance, unemotional, unyielding. He was not afraid.

All about him faces turned gray with terror. A woman clutched her baby so tightly it whimpered. Members of the mob shifted their feet uneasily. Killing a sheriff in cold blood with a rifle was not to the liking of these cowboys, many of whom had thought this was to be a lark.

STRAIGHT toward Joe Garn went the sheriff, never wavering, never altering the slow, even cadence of his clinking boot-heels. Keeping pace with him went Harmoniky, offering comradeship in death. Joe's face shaded off into purple. His veined hands trembled on the gun stock. With one wild look about him, he cocked the rifle and aimed.

Ruth, giving a gasping, shuddering sigh, sank to the floor in a heap. No one ventured to assist her. Not even Mrs. Hardy was aware that Ruth had fainted. She was paralyzed at seeing her husband approach that rifle muzzle.

The sheriff's measured tread was like the rhythm of a dead march. It was as inexorable as death, as resistless as fate. Every brain there held the thought that nothing could stop this man. The force of it crept into the whisky-crazed senses of Joe Garns. His mouth quivered, his glance wavered. He saw before him an iron man, feelingless, adamant, overpowering. In the cadaverous eyes he saw his fate written. He could kill the sheriff, but before he died Sheriff Hardy would take Joe Garn with him. And Joe was not ready to die.

The sheriff's silence was stonelike. Now the muzzle almost touched his chest, but he made no move toward his six-shooter. Casually he stretched out a gnarled hand and took the rifle from Joe's numbed fingers. A tremendous sigh escaped the crowd. Mrs. Hardy burst into tears. Ruth

came suddenly to life. Blood flowed into her cheeks. Jumping to her feet she staggered across the room and threw herself in Harmoniky's arms.

Sheriff Hardy threw down the lever on the rifle repeatedly. Glittering yellow shells flew here and there on the floor. Still in silence he handed the weapon back to Joe Garn. When he finally spoke there was not a sign of stutter in his speech.

"Now you fellers go home and sober up," was all he said.

CHAPTER VI

A SHOT IN THE DARK

SHERIFF HARDY followed Garn outside. Belle Hardy awoke and pounded after him, shaking the building by her weight as she ran. A woman burst out crying hysterically and for a moment a buzz of voices rose from the crowd. Then, as if by one accord, talking ceased and silence again fell, an expectant silence, the silence of people who were waiting for something to happen.

Ruth slipped from Harmoniky's arms and shot one appealing glance around her before she lowered her eyes. The fiddlers, back in their places, sat hands idle. The dancers waited, waited for them to go. They had been able to ignore cold glances and averted eyes, but this they could not escape. They were outcast. A few days before they could have mingled with the laughing throng, part and parcel of the happy *fiesta*. Andrew McClelland's words had changed all that.

Into Ruth's heart flooded an overwhelming sense of bitterness. She brushed her hand across her eyes and gripped tighter the arm she held. Steady as a rock was that arm. Cool as tempered steel were the fingers pressed against hers.

"We can't stay here now," said Dick.

Jess Rankin was coming toward them. He held Harmoniky's black sombrero in his hand. Dick, rooted to the spot, waited stiffly for the man's approach, wordlessly he took the hat. Without looking at either of them, Rankin turned and walked quickly back to the encircling crowd.

A sharp oath, a bellow or rage, sounded in the stillness.

The doorway framed a big man in a

Stetson hat, a bulky cowman, booted, spurred and armed. Without removing his sombrero, he strode out onto the dance floor and glared about him like an angry bull. It was Andrew McClelland, and behind him came Dude Dupree, still wearing his store clothes, but with his guns strapped on.

"Dude got me here just in time, I see," said McClelland in a voice that was cold with suppressed rage. "Who is responsible for this insult to my daughter?"

NO ONE answered. Andy McClelland was not king of the Sangre de Dios for nothing. Many a man had felt the weight of his fist. Not a few who had resisted him lay under cactus beds in the Tonto cemetery.

"Dupree was good enough to warn me what would happen here tonight," continued McClelland. "I could hardly believe him. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes——" His glance sought out Rankin and he stepped toward the Bar Circle Bar owner. "Stand here, Jess," he commanded.

The little bowlegged cattleman confronted McClelland.



"Don't try to order me around, Mac," snapped Rankin. "I offered no insult to your daughter. Everyone has been friendly with her. It's King we object to. Respectable folks don't hanker to associate with stock thieves. He should have had more sense than to come here. He was warned. He deliberately brought this down on Ruth."

McClelland glared at Rankin for a moment, then turned toward Harmoniky who had approached with Ruth on his arm.

"I told you to keep away from my daughter."

"You said you'd give me a chance to prove my innocence," retorted Harmoniky.

"Well, can you prove it?"

"Not yet."

"Well, then, you keep away from Ruth till you can."

Mrs. Rankin came forward, adjusted a pair of pinch-nose glasses and gazed through them at McClelland.

"We are deeply sorry for Ruth," she said in an affected voice. "I think your cause for annoyance is over. Mr. King has his hat. He is going. I hope both you and Miss McClelland will remain."

EVERYONE turned toward Harmoniky, who fumbled with his hat. For once in his life he was a thoroughly miserable young man, but suddenly he extended his hand to Ruth.

"Good night," he said in a low voice. "I'll see you later."

She held onto his hand tightly. Her face was flushed and her head high when she looked at her father.

"Dick is innocent, and everyone should know it," she declared. "I won't have him treated this way. We are both going now. I hope you have a wonderful evening. Good night."

McClelland's voice rose in an astonished roar. He caught his daughter by the arm and whirled her over to his side.

"That's enough of this foolishness," he stormed. "You're coming home with me, young lady."

With a quick movement Ruth jerked away from him.

"I'm not a child any more," she said calmly. "I am of age and I can do as I please. Now I will tell you what I am going to do. Tonight I will stay with Belle Hardy. Will that be agreeable, Belle?"

Mrs. Hardy had come back into the room. Now that she was addressed, she brushed forward vigorously, arms akimbo, her face red with indignation.

"Bless you, child," she cried, "you're always welcome to my place. I'd jest like to see anybody try to impose on you when I'm around."

Ruth flashed the big woman a thankful smile and continued.

"I will stay at Belle's tonight. And in the morning I am going to be married."

"What?" The exclamation came from a dozen lips.

IT WAS Harmoniky's turn to stare. Ruth's resolution took him completely by surprise. They had not discussed such a thing. They were engaged, but he had intended to postpone the marriage until he

could offer something better than an old adobe line rider's shack on the border of the Jardin del Muerto.

McClelland shook his head stubbornly.

"Yo're still my child and you obey me," he said coldly. He looked Harmoniky contemptuously up and down. "This is some more of your slick work," he charged, "but you cain't get by with it."

Harmoniky reached up and tore the white silk handkerchief from around his throat. He stepped closer to McClelland, fists clenched, body drawn tense, his freckled face white with anger.

"If you want words with me, step outside," he snapped. "I've stood all the dirty hints from you I'm goin' to."

McCLELLAND drew his face in a satirical smile.

"Oh, you have, have you?" he sneered. "Well, come on outside, then," and he turned on his heel.

Ruth caught Harmoniky's sleeve.

"Please, please," she begged. "Don't do anything rash. We will prove he is wrong. We will work together to prove your innocence."

Dick pulled away from her. His upper lip twitched. His eyes were clouded.

"I can't stand this any longer," he mumbled, and ran after McClelland.

McClelland waited for him under the cottonwood tree back of the corral, where a stiff wind, whistling across the desert land, whipped up columns of sand and filled the air with grit and dust, obscuring the sky. The ranch owner's form was a mere blur in the gloom.

Harmoniky confronted him, savage as a cat.

"What the hell you ridin' me for?" he snapped. "I told you I'd prove my innocence. If you had any more sense than a half-baked leppy I'd smash you, even if you are an older man."

"What?" shouted McClelland. "You threaten me, you tooth-grinnin' whelp! Go get yore gun. Get your shootin' irons and we'll settle this right here."

TWO hundred feet away from them a crowd began to gather just outside the dance hall. Harmoniky could see the white

dress of women outlined amid the darker forms of men and he wondered what Ruth was doing at this moment.



"You suck wind like a blabbed calf, McClelland," he said coolly. "If you'd learn to think before you speak you wouldn't make mistakes like

this. Don't you see how much harm you've done Ruth——"

"Damn you," bellowed McClelland. "Don't try to tell me——"

The words ended in a gurgle. Harmoniky heard something thud against human flesh. The roar of a weapon sounded in his ears. An object struck against his own legs, a hard object that sent a pain through his body. McClelland swayed before him, his head shot back, a gasping sound came from his throat and he pitched sideways to the ground.

Harmoniky gazed down at the ranchman, too stunned for a moment to move. He heard the loud shout that went up from the crowd, the scream of women's voices, the cry of men shouting for the sheriff and then a white form darted by him and fell by McClelland on the ground.

"Dad! dad!" cried a voice. "Speak to me."

Ruth was shaking her father, trying to make him speak. His head lolled from side to side helplessly. The crowd came on with cries and tramping of feet. From somewhere came a mounted man on a black horse, who rode in front of the crowd. It was Dude Dupree.

"Stay back!" he commanded. "No closer. Wait until the sheriff gets here. If you rush up there, all the evidence will be destroyed."

A torch appeared, illuminating the scene, casting figures into ghostly relief. Harmoniky dropped by Ruth's side and took her shoulders in his hands. One look at McClelland's face told him that the man was dead. He lifted Ruth to her feet. She struggled feebly, suddenly raised her head and pulled back fiercely. By the light of

the torch he could see suspicion gleaming in her eye.

"You!" she gasped. "You——"

"I had no gun," protested Harmoniky.

"The shot came out of the dark."

SHE gazed up into his face steadily. Her eyes dimmed, and he felt her grow limp. As the sheriff came up, Mrs. Hardy ran to Ruth, picked her up in her strong arms and carried her away, crooning to her like a babe.

"What happened?" asked Sheriff Hardy. The light from a dozen fagots illuminated the scene, bringing out every detail clearly. The sheriff could see every line in Harmoniky's face.

"I came out here to talk to Mac," said Dick. "I heard a shot. I felt something hit my leg. Then Mac dropped."

"They were cussin' and holler'n' at each other," said a voice from the crowd. "King went after Mac, threatenin' to get him. They was fightin'."

"Is that true?" asked Steve Hardy.

"We had a row," admitted Dick, "but I didn't have no gun."

There was a sudden movement in the crowd. The mob parted. A black-clad man carrying a case approached. It was Dr. Handford, who made a quick examination. He got up, wiped his hands and looked at the sheriff.

"Dead," he said. "Shot through the right lung. Who done it?" His eyes wandered to Harmoniky, who stood by the sheriff, gazing dazedly at the bulk of clay that a few minutes before had been a live, pulsing human being. He noted that Dick wore no holsters or cartridge belt and that he was bare-headed. Dr. Handford had been coroner of Mingo County for many years, and he was quick to grasp the details of a crime.

"Du-du-don't know who done it," said the sheriff. "Stand back there all you folks. Somebody give me a torch. Hi, there, Bud Belew, come here and help me look for sign."

THE sheriff and his deputy began to examine the ground around the body. The crowd increased. The newcomers asked questions and those who had wit-

nessed the quarrel and killing answered. The murmur increased in volume. Angry voices were raised. "A rope would do him good," said someone, and a score of others voiced their approval.

Dude Dupree dismounted and joined the sheriff. Harmoniky recognized those who crowded close as Joe Garn and his crowd.

The sheriff gave a grunt. When he straightened up he held a gun in his hand, a long-barreled Colt .45 with black handles. In these handles were carved initials, R. K. The sheriff flipped open the cylinder and ejected the shells into his palm. One had been fired.

"This shell has just been fired," said Dude Dupree, taking it in his fingers. "It is still warm."

Steve Hardy's face took on an expression of ludicrous surprise and pain. He extended the revolver to Harmoniky without a word. Dick gasped aloud. The color faded from his cheeks. The fingers that held the revolver trembled.

"Why—why, this is my gun," he said.

CHAPTER VII

"Hands Up!"

THE shock set every nerve in Harmoniky's body atingle. His brain cleared. The shifting sands under his feet became firm. Every faculty was alert now to what was taking place about him. Ruth had been taken care of. McClelland was dead. There was no disputing that. And his gun, just fired, lay at his feet near the body.

The torchlight illuminated Sheriff Hardy's black-bearded face and gimlet eyes and revealed there a deep suspicion. It played across the features of Dude Dupree, disclosing a triumphant smile. It



showed the pockmarked features of Joe Garn with lips twisted away from the sharp, rat-like teeth in a smirk of beast-like satisfaction.

"Will you let me have this feller now, Sheriff?" asked Garn. He had come closer, leading Dupree's black horse. His eyes were on Harmoniky and one hand rested on the butt of a gun. "You ain't got no excuse for defendin' a killer."

"Whu-whu-where do you get a license to horn in, Garn?" demanded the sheriff. "Seems to me yo're bent on making Harmoniky a lot of grief lately. What's the idee?"

Garn's eyes shifted to Dupree for just a flash. Then came back to the sheriff.

"I'm like the rest of the folks around here," he said. "We don't want no truck with cattle thieves and murderers. And the quickest way to get shet of them people is to string 'em up."

A chorus of assents went up from the crowd. Men pressed closer. The black horse became restless and tossed its head. Harmoniky watched the animal as it sidled toward him. He did not minimize his danger. He knew that blood lust might overcome the better judgment of the crowd at any moment. And he did not want to be present when that happened.

"Watch him now," growled one of Garn's men. "Don't let him get away."

Joe Garn patted his gun. "Trust me," he boasted. "If he tries to run he won't get fur. Pull down, you son-of-a-gun, or I'll beat you to a pulp." This last was addressed to the horse which, snorting with fear and excitement, was edging nearer to Dick and the open space beyond.

"Clear the way now," ordered Sheriff Hardy. "I'm taking King to jail. Anybody that tries to take him must answer to me."

THE crowd gave a little, but did not clear. Harmoniky saw Dupree's grin widen and heard Garn laugh hoarsely. Suddenly he leaped, straight at Joe Garn. His hand snatched Garn's gun and yanked it away. Garn dropped the reins of Dupree's horse and Harmoniky grasped them even as he swung into the saddle and stuck his heels into the flanks of the spirited black.

For one moment Dick was there in plain view, in easy gunshot of any man quick witted enough to draw on him. It was a tense second. Any instant he expected to hear bullets sing past his ears; to feel one

thud into his flesh. Then darkness and the storm swallowed him up. Leaning far forward in the saddle he dashed down the main street of the town, zigzagged up and down alleys and finally headed toward the Sangre de Dios Mountains.

Once outside the town he halted his horse and listened. From the direction of the twinkling lights and glowing windows came shouts and the report of revolver and rifle. The place was in an uproar. In a few minutes horsemen would be scouring the country, but just now all was confusion. Dick decided to make the most of his time and when he headed toward Lost Corral, Dude Dupree's ranch, he sent his horse into a swift run that defied chuckhole and prairie dog den.

Dick's first sense of elation died away, to be succeeded by despair and sorrow. What a tragedy he had brought down upon Ruth McClelland! He had caused her to be disgraced before all her country folks. He had been the reason for a scene that had shaken her to her depths; he had quarreled with her father in the most vicious manner just before he died. His reflections were bitter, and he did not spare himself. But he could not help but wonder if Ruth would believe in his innocence. Things looked black against him, he had to admit. Yet surely she must realize that he would never have shot down her father in cold blood.

Dick had a plan now which it seemed to him was his last chance of proving his innocence. He had a good reason for heading toward Lost Corral. Out there he expected to find evidence. And if not, at least he would encounter the man whom he held responsible for all his recent misfortune. Also it seemed likely to be the last place they would be likely to look for him.

AFTER hours of riding he dropped into a low, broad water course, followed it into a box canyon between ghostly rim-rock and at last came to a dilapidated ranch-house, a tin-bestrewn yard, ramshackle barns, and a series of corrals. Some of the tin cans he saw were full of holes. Dude Dupree and his men kept up their gun practice, he thought.

There was no sign of life around the

ranch except a thin line of smoke rising from the cook shack and it was toward this that Dick directed his mount. He halted the horse just out of view in the gloom, dropped the reins to the ground and walked toward the kitchen. A shaggy form leaped at him out of the darkness, but he was ready for it. His upraised gun descended on a skull just as sharp teeth reached for his throat. The crunch of steel on bone, the death snarl of the brute and the thud of its body hitting the ground alone broke the stillness.

Harmoniky walked forward gingerly, gun in hand. The usual harmless, barking hound pack did not make its appearance. Apparently the silent, effectual killer-dog was the only one kept on the ranch.

He halted at the door of the kitchen, through the windows of which came a faint light, and knocked. There was no answer. Again he knocked. This time he heard



thumping of a peg-leg on the floor. A besotted, flour-covered face appeared in the doorway. Its owner wore an apron and hence Dick concluded this must be the cook.

"Who the hell are you?" the man demanded.

Harmoniky grinned from ear to ear.

"I'm a top hand, lookin' for a job. Do yeh s'pose you could stop lookin' beautiful long enough to tell me where I might find the boss?"

The cook's eyes bugged out. His face relaxed into a sheepish, intoxicated grin.

"Come in and have a drink," he invited, flinging wide the door. "Come into my parlor shed the spider to the fly. What yeh say yer name was?"

HARMONIKY entered and gazed around at the dirtiest kitchen he had ever seen. The stove was rusty and covered with unwashed pots and pans, the table and sink were littered with soiled dishes, the floor was covered with ashes and shavings and sand. Only the wood box was empty. The cook sat down on a pine box and offered Harmoniky the only chair.

Then he took the lid off a teakettle that was within reach and brought forth a bottle of yellow fluid.

"Have one," invited the peg-legged cook cordially.

Harmoniky put the bottle to his lips and pretended to drink. Then he choked and sputtered and slapped himself on the chest.

"What was that? Horse liniment?" he demanded.

The cook burst into a loud laugh.

"That's the genuine old yeller mule with a kick fore and aft," he said. "What yeh say your name was?"

"Never mind the name," said Dick. "Call me Red. Where is the boss?"

"Bosh gone to dansh. Ev'body gone to dansh but me. I'm the li't feller got to stay home."

"What's the chance to get on here?"

The cook gave a snort of disgust.

"Don't never tie up with this outfit," he advised. "Ever since Dupree bought this place it has been going from bad to worse. All I got to cook for now is a bunch of dirty oilersh, that always holler'n' fer garbanzos in their roast and chili-garlic in the stew. Dude ain't got a white man ridin' for him now. I ain't heard no 'Merican talk fersh s'long I feel plumb foreign."

THEY talked and the cook drank and Dick pretended to drink. Harmoniky was alert to every sound. He had timed himself well, and felt that he had at least an hour's start of his pursuers, if they did track him to Dupree's headquarters. But he was wasting precious minutes now. Presently he began to get more boisterous. He got up and waltzed around the room.

"I wanna dance," he shouted.

"Gwan and dance," mumbled the cook.

Harmoniky danced in the kitchen. Then, as he found the space too narrow for him, he threw open a door and danced into the big living-room. Off of this living-room opened the doors of a number of bedrooms.

The peg-leg cook staggered after Harmoniky and applauded wobbly as Dick kicked up his legs and galloped around the room. He opened the door of one of the rooms and danced in and out again. When he was about to repeat this performance at

another door, the cook bestirred himself.

"Thash the bosh's room," he growled. "Keep out of there."

Harmoniky sulked.

"If I can't dance in the bosh's room, I'm goin' to bed," he said, "Where can I sleep?"

"You go down to the bunkhouse," said the cook. "We don't want no gringo top hands here."

HARMONIKY bolted out of the house. He made a great noise getting into the bunkhouse, then very quietly turned back and ran to the side of the dwelling. With the splay blade of his knife he lifted the window. Something on the sill clattered to the floor as he pulled himself through. Backing up into a corner, he waited discovery, but the cook had not heard. There was no noise from the kitchen.

With a blanket from the bed he covered the window, then he lighted a match and touched it to a candle on the dresser. In sharp contrast to the rest of the house, Dude Dupree's room was neat and orderly. On the dresser was an expensive military set of brushes in a leather case. A quilted spread covered the bed. Rugs lay about the floor and Dupree's clothes were hung carefully along the walls and in a closet. The usual accumulation of boots and socks and old chaps and pants to be found under a cattleman's bed were missing. Instead Dude's boots stood in a line along one wall, all neatly greased. On the rack back of the door were two rifles, a scatter gun, a number of revolvers and ramrods and taw for cleaning the weapons. At the foot of the bed stood a big iron-bound trunk.

Harmoniky knew he was looking for evidence, but that was all. He had no idea of the character of the evidence he might find. It was simply that he suspected Dude Dupree of being at the bottom of all his recent woe, and he was hopeful that Dude might have left a sign lying around for him to read. First he searched the dresser drawers, but without success. Then he went through all of Dupree's pockets. Still no evidence. At last he turned to the big iron-bound trunk. When he tried to lift the lid he found it locked.

HARMONIKY wasted no time in considering the ethics of the matter. First he put out the candle and went to the window to look out. All was quiet. There was no sign or sound of approaching horsemen. He was convinced that Dude Dupree would not now come home until morning. The rancher would be first in the hunt for him, and if Dick's trail to Lost Corral was not found, Dupree would be tired enough to retire to a hotel bed and rest.

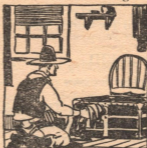
With these thoughts reassuring him, Dick again lighted the candle. From the closet he secured a heavy blanket, and this he wrapped around his revolver in such a way as to leave the hammer and the muzzle free. Having muffled his gun as much as possible, he placed the revolver against the trunk lock and fired. The roar of the weapon sounded deafeningly in his ears. Still holding the revolver, he ran to the dresser and blew out the candle. Crouching at the foot of the bed, he waited with his eyes and ears alert.

For what seemed a long time there was no movement at all, then a voice broke the silence sharply.

"Peg Leg," yelled the voice. "Wake up, you old fool, and get me some coffee. Peg Leg! Get up before I boot you."

It was Dude Dupree's voice. Dude had come home early after all. Dick wondered why he had not heard him come, why Dude had not heard the crack of his gun, why the Hogpen owner was not in his room now with drawn revolver to investigate. He finally concluded that Dupree had come home by the side trail and had been making too much noise himself to hear the muffled explosion.

Harmoniky considered what to do. He might stay here in the room and hold Dupree up. But the chances of finding anything on the fellow that might incriminate him would be very slim and he would betray to Dude his suspicions. Dick decided



that the best plan was to leave before Dude came in. Peg Leg would be too drunk to give a description of him. Dupree might guess who had rifled his things, but he would have no proof.

Cautiously Harmoniky slipped to the window, pulled back the blanket and slid through to the ground. It gave him a thrill when his feet touched the ground. A sense of freedom. Now he would—

"Hands up!"

Something hard prodded his spine. A hand roughly snatched the gun he had placed in his belt. Someone laughed harshly. He recognized Joe Garn's voice.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MYSTERY WOMAN

THE wind had died down. The sand fog had vanished leaving the sky clear and the earth an area of windswept terraces and drifted designs. The sun, poking a great red eye over the crest of the Sangre de Dios Mountains, turned the gray-blue to rainbow colors and made the land of cactus, sand, volcanic rock and dead desert into an azure tinted kingdom of enchantment.

From the kitchen of the Hogpen ranch came the fragrant smell of wood smoke, the aroma of coffee, the appetizing scent of sidemeat sizzling in a hot pan.

Harmoniky was conscious of all these things as he stood there with his hands in the air and the feel of the steel barrel against his spine. They increased his desire to live. He realized that he was hungry and that a cup of coffee would hit exactly the right spot. Had he been miserable and cold and desperate, he would surely have whirled on the gum wielder and tried to snatch his weapon. But under the warmth of the early morning sun, Harmoniky felt expansive and friendly. When he turned on Joe Garn, he was grinning his old, familiar, wide-mouthed, freckle-faced smile.

"Last time I seen you, Joe, you was makin' motions like a ol' cow tryin' to kick a fly off her back," he remarked.

Garn's eyes narrowed. His Adam's apple jiggled up and down. He looked from Harmoniky to the surprised Mexican

vaqueros, who had never seen a burglar caught red-handed before.

"I guess yo're a nateral-born crook," opined Garn.

"None of us are perfect," Dick reminded him mildly.

"I s'pose you'd have some slick joke to crack if you was about to be hung," said the gunman. "You even surprise me. I never know'd you was a all-around crook. I didn't put cattle rustlin' past yeh, but danged if I thought you was a killer and a sneak thief."

"You got a lot to learn yet," admitted Dick. "Where's yore boss?"

Garn stepped back from Harmoniky and lowered his weapon. All around him were Dupree's cowpunchers. Some of them had revolvers in their hands. Harmoniky could not escape from them very easily.

"I ain't got no boss," said Garn. "Where did you get the idee that I had a boss?"

"I understood you was workin' for Dupree."

"Who told you that?" snapped Garn quickly.

"When I see you doin' his dirty work, I naterally figger yo're gettin' paid for it."

GARN started to reply, but Dupree, appearing at the window, stopped his words. The Hogpen owner tore the blanket from his bedroom window and poked his head out.

"Who was the thief?" he asked. Then he saw Harmoniky and his eyes widened. "How the devil did you get here?" he demanded. "And what do you want?"

"I come to visit you, but you wasn't home," said Harmoniky.

Dupree looked Dick up and down, and an unwilling smile crossed his fat features.

"You got nerve, King," he said. "I admit that. You got nerve. But I'm afraid it won't do you no good now. Why, even if you got off for cattle stealin' and murder, I've got enough on you for this job to send you to prison for life."

Harmoniky's grin broadened.

"I'd never live to serve half that long," he declared. "In fact I'm likely to die on yore hands onless I get something to eat. The smell of that coffee and sidemeat is liable to ruin my sweet disposition unless

I get a chance to lay alongside some of it."



Dupree's blue eyes twinkled. He could be a generous enemy when victory lay in his hands.

"That's all arranged," said Dude. "You're

to have breakfast with me."

"What?" cried Garn.

"You heard me, Garn," snapped Dupree. "King will eat with me. I have some talk to make with him. You fellers go to the bunkhouse until the cook calls you."

Garn's face twisted sideways. He made no attempt to obey.

"You promised me——" he began.

But he did not finish the sentence. In one continuous movement, Dupree turned, drew, and fired. Garn jumped and let out a yell. His gun, battered by the .45-caliber slug, fell to the sand. He grabbed his torn fingers with the other hand and danced around in a paroxysm of pain.

DUPREE turned away carelessly, motioning to Harmoniky to follow. Nothing was said by either of them until they were seated at a small table in Dupree's room with a breakfast of wheat cakes, eggs, sidemeat, and hot coffee steaming before them.

"You see how I handle men," said the rancher.

"They's an old saying on the range that I think fits the case," returned Harmoniky. "Never shoot a rattler unless you kill him; he can pizen you as long as there's a wiggle in him."

"When you shoot them, they stay planted," admitted Dude.

"Ain't you scared to be alone with a man killer like me?" jibed Dick. "There's no tellin' when I might take a notion to tear yeh limb from limb."

Dupree produced a six-shooter. It had been laying on his knees.

"If you think I might be scared, start something," he challenged, good-naturedly. "Even if you got by me, it wouldn't do you no good. Every *vaquero* on my ranch has guns and can shoot. Listen to that."

The sharp crack of a rifle broke the early morning quiet. It was followed by a clatter of revolver shots and the shouting of men in Spanish. Harmoniky remembered the tin cans he had seen in the yard. They had been shot full of holes. The Hogpen punchers certainly had plenty of ammunition to waste.

"I suppose you call'ate on turning me over to the sheriff," suggested Harmoniky satirically.

Dupree glanced at Dick keenly.

"What makes you think I won't?" he asked.

"Judgin' from what I've seen of you, that wouldn't be quick enough."

DUPREE grinned appreciatively. Harmoniky was a likable fellow, even as an enemy. Dick reached for the salt and sprinkled his food with it liberally. Then he looked around the table as if something was missing.

"What do you want?" asked Dupree.

"If they's such a thing as pepper on this ranch, I'd like to have some."

Dupree called to the cook, who appeared with a big pepper shaker. Peg Leg gazed at Harmoniky curiously, but it was plain he did not recognize him as the strange visitor of the night before.

Harmoniky manipulated the shaker, pounded it against the table, cursed it and unscrewed the top. He spilled some of the pepper on the table, but he finally got his eggs flavored to suit. He burst out sneezing much to the amusement of Dupree, who did not notice that Dick managed to pour nearly all the pepper out in the palm of his hand.

Harmoniky finished eating. He produced a pipe and started to pack it down with his thumb. Then he changed his mind and smoked a cigarette instead of the pipe. By swift and careless movement, he had managed to conceal the pepper in his pipe, under a layer of tobacco, without Dupree being aware of it.

Dick blew a smoke ring and grinned at Dupree.

"Now what is the proposition?" he asked abruptly.

Dupree's blond face reddened slightly. His blue eyes turned cold.

"Who said I had a proposition?"

"You didn't invite me in here because you love me," retorted Harmoniky, "and I ain't expectin' to be kissed, but I would like to know the game."

"I don't know what you mean by game. I come home and find that a murderer and hoss thief has burglarized my house and got caught. I invite him to have breakfast with me because—well, because I am sorry for him, I admire his nerve, I like his wit. I hate to see a good man go for coyote bait."

"And you are willing to help this young man out," suggested Harmoniky, "for a consideration."

"Well, what of it?"

"Since I'm one of the parties to the transaction, I'd like to know more about it."

DUPREE got up from the table. Harmoniky took a step toward him with his pipe in hand. Dupree's gun came up. He spoke no word, but the glint in his blue eyes held its own warning. Harmoniky slipped the pipe back in his pocket and sank down on the bed.

"You're in pretty deep, King," said Dupree presently; "so deep you can never dig out. If we forget all about this burglary, you've still got that murder hanging over your head. You was pretty careless to drop your gun so near the body after shootin' the old man. If it hadn't been for that, you might claim the shot had been fired from ambush."

Harmoniky nodded grimly.

"That was a big mistake," he admitted.

"Now I hate to see you strung up."

"You do?"

"It would just about break the heart of Ruth McClelland. I might kill her. There's no telling what the shock might do, right on top of



the murder of her dad."

Harmoniky's eyes turned cold, the grin vanished from his face. The big freckles on his cheeks glowed red.

"The skunk that shot Andy McClelland certainly ought to be hung," he remarked.

Dupree passed this off with a wave of his hand.

"I have told you why I won't turn you over to the sheriff," he continued. "It's a damned good reason. The same reason stops me from standing you up against an adobe wall. Either way, she would suffer. On the other hand I can't let yeh go scot free."

HARMONIKY gazed at Dupree attentively.

"You ain't so dumb as I thought you was," he assented.

Dupree ignored the jibe. His mind was all wrapped up in the idea he was about to formulate.

"If you were to disappear, that would make it easier," said Dupree. "I am willing to let you vanish on one condition."

"And what is that?"

"You must sign a confession admitting you rustled stock and killed Andy McClelland."

The room was tense with silence for a full minute after that. Harmoniky leaned slightly forward, his gray eyes narrowed upon Dupree's face, his fists clenched and buried in the quilt of the bed, his whole body throbbing with the desire to hurl itself at the cool scoundrel who stood by the window. Dupree half turned away from him with a careless gesture. But when Harmoniky rose silently to his feet, the cattleman turned quick as a cat with revolver muzzle leveled.

"And if I don't sign?" suggested Dick softly.

"Then you will be like the tin cans—full of holes. It is the easiest way out for you. All you have to do is to sit down at this table and write out a confession, stating that you are guilty and are leaving the country. Then my men will escort you over the mountains and you are free."

"After you have my confession, what would prevent you killing me?" demanded Dick.

"I would have no reason to do that."

"You would have every reason. That would make it a deathbed confession. And would protect you against my vengeance."

DUPREE lifted his eyebrows. "Why should you wish vengeance against one who is saving your life?"

"It is 'time to stop beating about the bush," snapped Dick. "I know your game and so does Sheriff Hardy. Even if you kill me, you will have a hard time to get away with it. You have framed this whole thing up on me to get me out of the way. You sleepered those calves. You had Andy McClelland shot. And you did it all to get rid of me so you could get Ruth McClelland."

HARMONIKY ceased speaking. He saw Dupree thumb back the hammer of his revolver. The movement of the cylinder as it turned a fat brass shell into position for firing was like the creeping of something deadly into his heart. He saw Dupree's eyes become savage, saw his chest begin to heave, his lips part, red streaks appear in his blond cheeks, and he tensed for a leap.

"So that's the game!"

A woman's voice, shrill and cutting, broke the tense stillness. A figure stood in the doorway of one of the rooms, a tall, angular, sharp-featured woman, dressed in men's clothing and wearing a belt with a gun girded high on her right hip. Her seamed and wrinkled face showed marks of dissipation and her eyes were clouded.

She strode across the room with the long steps of a man and confronted Dupree.

"Seems I got here just in time," she sneered. "Just in time to save my husband from a female vampire. Who is this hussy you're talking about?"

Dupree's jaw dropped. Beads of perspiration appeared on his forehead, and the hand he raised to wipe the moisture away was trembling.

"Peg Leg," he articulated at last, "tell Garn to come in here and get this pris'ner and tie him up. Then don't bother me until I call you. I'm going to be busy."

CHAPTER IX

THE MORNING AFTER

IT WAS early morning. The scorching sun from a cloudless sky beat down upon shifting sands and curling grama

grass and fell athwart the adobe walls of a small dwelling where it thrust a hot finger through climbing sumac vines to caress the olive cheeks of a girl.

Even in her grief she was beautiful as she sat wide-eyed and stunned in a window embrasure, gazing out sadly across the treeless plain. Her black eyes were swollen with weeping. The red-lipped mouth drooped pitifully. The brave lift of her head, with which she had defied the people of Tonto at the dance, was gone.

A great quiet reigned all about. The noise and bustle of the night's celebration was gone. Tonto Town slept. In the kitchen Mrs. Hardy moved about with silent tread. The sheriff had not returned. Ruth McClelland was left alone with her sorrow.

The bewilderment, the numbness, began to leave her brain. She still found it difficult to realize that her father was dead. She had heard the doctor's words. She had



seen the coroner take him away. But it all seemed like a dream. She had been in a daze. Dimly she remembered being led home by Mrs. Hardy, who put her to bed and remained with her until she finally fell into a troubled sleep.

At thought of the big woman's kindness, tears sprang into her eyes. It took trouble to bring out true friendship, and Belle Hardy, for all her loud talk and crude ways, had a heart of gold.

"Now, child, you come right on out here and have a bite to eat," cried a hearty voice.

Belle Hardy, her cheeks glowing red and perspiration beading down over her forehead, stood, arms akimbo, in the kitchen doorway smiling at her.

"You're too sensible to let yourself moon over something that can't be helped. You can drink a cup of coffee, at least. These are things that come to all of us. I'll never forget when my first husband died. They never was a better man nor Charley Reed

in spite of the fact he was drunk half the time. Him and me had just had a fight the night before. It wasn't nothin' serious. I throwed him down the steps, and he took a shot at me, but didn't hit me. Charley was a grand man, though kind of peevish when boiled. But, law me, child, here I am talkin' like a chatterbox. You jest set right down here. Do you want milk in your coffee. No? That reminds me of my Charley. One day he decided it was beneath his dignity to have anything to do with milk. And he set himself agin' having it in his coffee. We had a argiment about that. That's how I got the knife slash on my right arm. Did I ever show it to you?"

"Has the sheriff come in yet?" asked Ruth.

MRS. HARDY'S face became grave. "No, he hasn't showed up. But don't you worry. It will all come out right in the end. I've seen some strange things happen in my time. If I was you I'd never believe a thing against Dick King until I heard it from his own lips."

Ruth pushed aside her coffee and leaned back in her chair.

"It all seems like a horrid nightmare," she said heavily. "I expect any minute to wake up and find it is not true. How quickly our lives can change! Only yesterday morning I was so happy getting ready for the dance. Now——" She smothered a sob and buried her head in her hands. The sound of a door opening jerked her erect again. She jumped to her feet to face the sheriff.

"Steve!" she cried. "What is it? Did you find Dick?"

Sheriff Hardy threw his hat in a corner and plunged his face into a tin wash basin.

"Nu-nu-not yet," he stammered. "But he can't get away. We got men stationed at his ranch, and every outfit on the Sangre de Dios is on the lookout for him. I wouldn't be surprised if he came into town of his own accord. It's my theory that he jumped out of here jest for the time bein' to escape Garn and his gang."

Ruth's face brightened.

"Oh, do you really think so?"

The sheriff came over and sat down heavily. He had been riding all night and he was dead tired.

"I've known Harmoniky for a long time," said Steve slowly, "and if he's a hoss thief and a murderer, then I'm a locoed prairie dog."

RUTH brightened at the words. She began pacing up and down the room, clicking her bootheels against the floor. In dressing she had discarded her ballroom attire for riding costume, and the hard McClelland strain in her seemed to be gaining the ascendancy. She inherited much of her father's sternness and strong will, and as she walked back and forth, the droop disappeared from her lips and her black eyes cleared.

"I'm going up town to look for Dick," she announced abruptly.

"Now, gal, jest be patient——" began the sheriff.

"I'd do the same thing myself," piped up Mrs. Hardy. "I remember the time poor Charley Reed laid out all night——"

"Damn Charley Reed!" Steve exploded. Mrs. Hardy burst into tears.

"You never talked to me like that before," she wailed. "You're callin' down the wrath of Providence on your head, speaking disrespectful of the dead."

The sheriff looked sheepish. "Nuh-nuh-nuh—I—I—I," he stammered. He ended precipitately by grabbing his hat and following Ruth outside.

"Women's strange critters," he announced. "Jest when I begin to think I savvy Belle, she goes and knocks all my ideas skyfalutin. I don't reckon we'll find Harmoniky uptown jest yet, but we can look. I figger the best thing fer you to do is go out to the ranch. Belle can go with you. And I'll attend to all the necessary business."

"You are too good to me," said Ruth feelingly.

TONTON was just beginning to stir feebly as they entered the main street. Swollen-eyed bartenders stood in wide doorways yawning drearily and squinting their eyes against the reflection of sun on sand. A Mexican woman, with a black

mantilla over her shoulders, came from the direction of the mission with a troop of half-clad children at her heels. A nondescript vagabond waddled out of an alley, peered up and down the street, and then staggered through the door of the Full House Saloon.

Sheriff Hardy stopped in front of the Cantina Hidalgo. A horseman trotted into view and swung his horse to a stop near them. It was Bud Belew, one of Hardy's deputies. Bud had no news. He had just come from afar and he, too, was thirsty.

Leaving Ruth outside, the two men entered. A strange sight met their eyes. On top of the bar stood Art Faraway, proprietor, gesticulating, protesting, imploring, swearing at something behind the counter.

The sheriff, leaning across the bar, saw what had disturbed Faraway, and he burst out laughing. Bud Belew also satisfied his curiosity and doubled up with mirth.

At the sound, a long brown nose poked around the end of the bar. It was followed by a great hairy body. Instantly the two men joined Art on the top of the bar. The showman's bear looked up at them inquiringly and growled.



"It was a dirty mean trick," declared Faraway indignantly. "Last time I took that bear in trade they never bought him back."

"We cain't stay up here," growled

Sheriff Hardy. "You got to do something, Art."

"Me?" shouted the bartender. "Why me? Do something yourself."

"Can I shoot him?" asked Bud hopefully, pulling his gun.

"No, no, no!" protested Faraway. "That's all I got to show for a hundred dollars' worth of good likker."

"He duh-duh-don't look vicious," suggested the sheriff. "I think I know what's the matter. He's hungry. Why don't yeh give him some meat?"

Faraway visited upon the sheriff a ferocious stare.

"Meat!" he snarled. "I've give him five dollars' worth of meat now. He'll eat me out of house and home. I'm sorry I ever had any truck with him. I'll make Joe Garn pay for this."

THE sheriff sat down on the bar and dangled a foot experimentally within reach of bruin's nose. The bear licked the boot and gazed up expectantly. Thus encouraged Hardy dropped to the floor, and, keeping his face toward the animal, departed backward through the swinging doors.

"You fellers stay there," he said. "I'll rescue yeh."

Sheriff Hardy motioned for Ruth to approach, then swung the door open so she could look in. "Jest take a peek at that."

Ruth looked into the saloon, and saw two frightened men crouched on the bar gazing fixedly at a hairy creature on the floor. As she watched, this hairy thing suddenly reared on its hind legs and placed its front paws on the bar. Bud Belew and Art Faraway drew back to the far end of the counter.

"Why, it's the showman's bear!" exclaimed Ruth. "What is it doing in there?"

"It's got them two fellers cornered," said the sheriff gravely. "But that ain't the funniest part of it. They think I'm going to rescue them. Come on, we'll mosey along and look for Harmoniky. Mebbe they know something about him over at the Full House."

AS THEY angled toward the other saloon, a rider whirled onto the street and slid to the ground in front of the Full House bar. It was Joe Garn. A moment later a swarthy man in a steeple-crowned sombrero appeared from the same direction Garn had come and halted his mustang in the middle of the thoroughfare. He gazed about him until his eyes lighted on Garn's horse. Then he dodged into a side street where he dismounted and tied his own mount. Glancing around furtively, the swarthy one slipped into a doorway and lounged there with his eyes on Garn's pony.

The sheriff took Ruth's arm and piloted

her swiftly in the direction of the Hardy home.

"You better get under cover," he said mildly. "This has all the earmarks of a leadswappin' contest. I don't know that Mex, but it looks like he's layin' in ambush for Joe Garn. An' I'm honin' to take Garn up to the county jail entire and complete without no holes in him."

Ruth started toward the Hardy home as the sheriff turned back toward the Full House Saloon, but she did not continue on. Instead she slipped between two buildings and watched Steve Hardy.

The sheriff stubbed along unconcernedly in his tight-toed, high-heeled boots until he came opposite the Mexican. Then he turned suddenly and faced the skulking figure. The act thrilled Ruth to her very depth. She stood there tense, dry-throated, hardly breathing, waiting for the next move. Nothing happened. She saw the sheriff's hand poised over a gun butt, relax. She saw the Mexican move away, teeth showing in a grin. And then Sheriff Hardy disappeared into the saloon which Joe Garn had entered shortly previously.

Ruth stepped from her hiding place and drew nearer to the saloon. Fear gripped her. Garn was a venomous killer, she was sure, one who would not hesitate to shoot the sheriff if Hardy interfered with him. Perhaps at this very moment his gun might be pointed at the old sheriff's heart. Minutes passed. The suspense became intolerable. The pounding of her heart filled her ears. She moistened her dry lips. With an impulsive movement, she started toward the saloon.

THE swinging doors opened, and Joe Garn came out. His pockmarked face was twisted to one side. And his gun holster was empty. After him came Sheriff Hardy, looking as unruffled as if nothing at all had happened.

The sudden revulsion from fear to relief brought a hysterical laugh to Ruth's lips. The girl was more unstrung than she had thought, and realization that she had almost reached the breaking point filled her with a stern determination to bear up. Without a word to the sheriff she went quickly home to Belle Hardy.

Here Mrs. Hardy jabbered away at her work while Ruth waited impatiently for the sheriff's return. It was her firm belief that Garn was responsible for the death of her father and Dick's other troubles. If Steve would make him confess, that would clear up the terrible mystery.

The sheriff came at last.

"He wouldn't tell nothin'," he admitted, "so I had to turn him loose. You know the sayin', 'Give a crook enough rope and he'll hang hisself.' He did make one remark that he might have something important to tell me later on."

"And what could that be?" asked Ruth eagerly.

Sheriff Hardy shook his head. "I dunno, child," he replied. "You quit fussin' now and let yore head cool off. I've put Weasel in charge of the office and I'm going to take a snooze."



The morning passed uneventfully. About two o'clock in the afternoon Weasel Nickerson, the deputy in charge of the sheriff's office, came to inform Hardy that the coroner's inquest

was to be held in half an hour.

"I must go to the inquest," said Ruth. "I know what they will do unless someone tells Dick's side of the story. I am going to testify."

"What can you testify to?" asked Hardy.

"Why, I can tell them that Dick did not do it," declared Ruth. "I can tell them that we are engaged to marry. I can testify that Dick had no firearms."

STEVE Hardy cleared his throat.

"Yuh-yuh-you'd do him more harm than good, Ruth," he said slowly. "You better stay here."

"How could I do him harm?"

"Just s'posed the curriner asked you if you had heard your dad and Dick quarrel, what would you have to say?"

Ruth gazed at the sheriff wide-eyed, her breath coming quickly. Her thoughts

flashed back to that terrible moment when Harmoniky, facing her father, had dropped his hand toward a black gunstock when Andrew McClelland had branded him as a cattle thief. Then she saw them under the cottonwood tree at the barn dance, and Harmoniky's harsh words seared through her brain like a red-hot knife.

"You see how it is?" put in Belle Hardy, taking advantage of Ruth's indecision. "Steve is right fer once in his life. You stay right here to hum with me, and I'll show you my crochet work."

Ruth questioned the advisability of remaining, but finally she yielded. Mrs. Hardy and the sheriff engaged in a hot argument as to whether Steve should wear a tie. Steve took the negative side and lost.

Again Ruth was waiting. She was not accustomed to this feminine rôle, for hers had been an active life. Where there was excitement, she had been in the thick of it. To have to sit and listen to Mrs. Hardy and pretend to admire her fancy work was almost more than she could bear, yet she knew it was much better for her than lonely brooding. Uptown there, in a smoke-filled room, men were passing judgment on the man she loved. She knew the verdict in advance. There was no escaping it. She did not even have to ask when Steve came home at six o'clock, and the sheriff did not meet her eyes. He looked away, out of the window when he spoke. The coroner's jury had accused Harmoniky Dick King of the murder of Andrew McClelland, and Dick was now a legal target for any man's bullet.

It was decided that Ruth was not to go back to the Double Cross ranch until after the funeral and Mrs. Hardy tucked her in bed early. After the good woman had gone, Ruth lay dried-eyed, gazing unseeingly into the darkness, her body shaking from repressed sobs.

SHE went through the ordeal of her father's funeral as if in a stupor. The muscular arm of Belle Hardy was ever around her waist. Not until they were leaving the cemetery did she realize that she had gazed upon her father's face for the last time, and suddenly burst into tears.

In the afternoon Belle packed her up

and took her out to the home ranch in the buckboard. Nothing had been heard of Harmoniky. Even the horse he had ridden in flight had disappeared. Nearly everyone believed that he had made good his escape.

Ruth went about the familiar house in a daze. She avoided her father's room, but she plunged into the business details of the ranch to take up her mind. For a long time, now, she had been her father's bookkeeper and accountant and she knew the work as well as he. Only when it came to a question of range work was she at a loss. The foreman and her father had attended to the cattle, and she had always supposed a ranch would run itself with the proper number of hands. A fight in the bunkhouse disabused her of this idea. Clem Creswell and Slim Holtz battled over the question as to which one should clean out the water holes that had been filled up by the sand storm.

No sooner was the Creswell-Holtz battle over than a serious engagement began in the kitchen between Mrs. Hardy and Moy Yen, the Chinese cook. Entrenched behind a kitchen table among his pots and pans, Moy Yen flourished a cleaver and shouted his defiance in a mixture of Cantonese and English. In the center of the room stood Mrs. Hardy, feet spread wide apart, long brawny arms upraised, brandishing a befloured rolling pin. She had driven the Chinese cook to the last line against the wall and here he had entrenched himself, his slant eyes gleaming with anger, pigtail flopping around with each jerk of his head, teeth bared at the intruder who had routed him from his domain.

"One more yelp out of yeh and I'll blast yeh," yelled the woman. "No sawed-off, pounded down, stringhalt hydrophoby skunk can tell me how to bile water. Git them knives and forks around."

Mrs. Hardy opened an oven door, pulled out a pan of biscuits, turned the pan around and closed the door again. Moy Yen, behind his defense, made no move, but his slant eyes followed every gesture of the husky ranchwoman.

"Stlove him cook one side quicker than other side," he informed her.

Hands on hips, Mrs. Hardy came erect. Her big cheeks glowed from the heat and

exertion. Her eyes snapped.



send this yeller heathen away while I'm to stay."

RUTH made a gesture of desperation and turned to the door to hide the tears in her eyes.

A handsomely dressed man in a big white sombrero, silk shirt, faultless corduroy riding pants and shiny boots darkened the doorway, and Dude Dupree removed the sombrero from his sleek blond head and bowed gravely.

"I'd like to help you out a bit, ma'am, if I might," he said. "I got nothing special to do out to the Hogpen, and I could kind of look after things until you get straightened out."

Ruth looked at Dupree suspiciously. She had half suspected that the man was responsible for Harmoniky's misfortunes. After the attack in the United States Hotel, she had come to believe that Garn was in Dupree's employ. Now she wondered if she had been too hasty in her judgment. Dupree looked very straightforward, standing there in the kitchen fumbling with his hat like any honest puncher, embarrassed, awkwardly awaiting her command. His blue eyes were clear and guileless. There was nothing revolting about this big blond man, this neighbor offering aid. She did not want to hurt his feelings and she wanted help, oh, so much!

"Thank you, Mr. Dupree," she said simply. "I wonder if you could straighten out some difficulties among my men. Tell them that I asked you to act for me."

Dupree's eyes lighted up.

"Thank you, ma'am; I will," he said, and went out.

MRS. HARDY stared after Dupree in amazement. "That was right decent of him," she remarked. "I think I'll have to

change my opinion of that young man. I never know'd he could be so quiet and so sociable-like."

From the direction of the *patio* sounded a loud clanging noise. It was Moy Yen, hammering on the iron triangle to call the cowboys from the bunkhouse for the evening meal. Presently the men began filing in—Tiny Armstrong, Pop Weaver, Skeeters Hall, and Clem Creswell. Clem had a black eye. Slim Holtz sent in the excuse that he wasn't feeling hungry.

"Where is Mr. Dupree?" asked Ruth, who was determined to keep up her father's custom of eating at the same table with the help.

"He stayed outside on the porch," said Clem.

Ruth went out, and in a chair on the veranda Dude sat smoking a fragrant cigar. He got to his feet quickly at sight of Ruth. "Won't you come in and eat with us," Mr. Dupree?" she asked.

The blue eyes that rested on her were filled with admiration.

"Thank you, ma'am," replied Dupree. "I ate before leaving the ranch."

Ruth went closer to him. Kindness at this moment stirred her deeply, and Dupree had been kind.

"I wish you would come in and have a cup of coffee," she continued.

Before Dupree could reply there sounded the clatter of swift-running hoofs and a horse came to a stop in front of them. From the back of the horse dropped a Mexican in peaked hat, red sash, and homemade *sapatos*. He bowed low before Ruth, but did not look at Dupree.

"I bring the word to you from Señor King," said the Mexican in a low voice. "I come to take you to heem."

CHAPTER X

"You'll Hang for This!"

RUTH gave a little gasp. She took a step toward the *vaquero*, then halted to gaze at him suspiciously. The little brown man in the big hat with the tiny cigarette in his mouth waited politely, after the fashion of his race in the presence of women. His face was grave now, and he watched her out of smoky black eyes that never wavered.

"You—you—come from Mr. King?" stammered Ruth.

"Si, señorita," said the *vaquero* softly. "The Señor King want talk weeth you."

"Where is he?" Ruth's voice held a sharp note. "Why didn't he come himself?"

The Mexican shrugged his shoulders. "*Quién sabe! Who knows?*" It was no concern of his. "You come weeth me."

Dupree stepped forward briskly. His manner was full of suspicion. It was plain he did not trust this messenger.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "I've never seen you before around here."

The *vaquero* smiled with a show of teeth that gleamed white in contrast with his sun-baked skin.

"I, señor, am Teofilo Maria Agramonte. I am American mans born in Nogales."

"And where is Dick King?"

"Aie, señor! I cannot tell you that. The *señorita* have to come weeth me."

Dupree glanced questioningly at Ruth. She looked at him uncertainly for a moment, then shook her head.

"This is not like Harmoniky," she said. "I cannot believe it."

DUPREE acted swiftly. A gun slid into his hand. Its muzzle pointed straight at Teofilo Maria Agramonte. The Mexican's hand settled uncertainly on a knife hilt in his sash.

"Put up both your hands, hombre," said Dupree.

The Mexican complied and Dupree searched him swiftly for weapons. He found only the knife, which he slipped into his own belt. His hand encountered something that crinkled like paper and in another moment he produced a note written on brown wrapping paper with pencil. The note was folded and, on the outside, it was addressed to Sheriff Hardy.

Ruth, standing at Dupree's elbow, saw the handwriting and she snatched the paper from Dude's fingers. Feverishly she opened it and read its contents. Then with a shuddering sigh she turned and staggered toward the house, where she collapsed into a chair with her head in her hands.

Dupree, with his gun still covering Agramonte, went to her side.

"I'm holding this fellow prisoner," he said in a low voice. "You must decide now



what you want to do. I can tie him up and keep him here or I can take him to the sheriff, whichever you prefer."

Ruth looked up dully. She passed her hand before her eyes and stared at the note in her hand with unbelieving horror.

"He wrote it," she muttered. "It is in his handwriting. And yet I can't believe. I can't! I can't! Look at that. Read it."

Dupree read the message aloud. It said:

To the Sheriff of Mingo County:

I am writing this so no innocent person will get in trouble for something I done. I'm leaving the country. I killed McClelland. I had a gun concealed in a shoulder holster under my shirt.

(Signed) Richard King.

Dupree whistled softly.

"Are you sure Harmoniky wrote this?" he asked.

Ruth scanned the pencil-written lines again. Perhaps she had been mistaken. Some other person might have faked the confession. But no, it was impossible. The writing was too familiar. The broad sharply defined, masculine letters could have been made by no one else than Dick King.

The paper fluttered from her nerveless fingers. Dupree picked it up.

"Do you want to go and see King?" asked the Hogpen owner.

A sudden sharp feeling of anger smote the girl. She threw up her head and her eyes blazed.

"No, I never want to see him," she cried. "Not after that. He wrote that. There can be no mistake. I believed him innocent to the very last, but now— Oh, what a fool I have been!"

DUPREE folded the note again and slipped it into his pocket. He turned away toward the prisoner.

"I'll hold this fellow here tonight," he said. "Then I'll take him to the sheriff and see if we can't make him talk. Hardy may be able to figure out the mystery. Good night, Miss McClelland."

Ruth entered the house and went to her room. The world about her had collapsed. She felt now that she had nothing to live for. She had been buoyed up by her faith in Harmoniky and now that this was gone, nothing more remained. She dropped face down on the bed and lay there like a stone in a dead silent heap. It was thus Mrs. Hardy found her a little later.

"I fixed that heathen Chineese," Belle announced. "When he started gallivantin' I tied him up by his pigtail to a nail in the wall. He's in the kitchen there now, spoutin' his crazy lingo and clawin' at the air. You should of heerd the boys laugh!"

Ruth sat up. Belle Hardy had a way of making her forget herself by presenting another problem for her to solve.

"You must not treat Moy Yen like that," she protested mildly. "He is the best cook in Mingo County. He has been with my father for twenty years."

Mrs. Hardy chuckled to herself.

"Well, now, child, jest don't you fret yoreself," she said. "Yore Aunt Belle is inclined to spread things on thick onc't and a while. I cut the yellor devil down long ago. The holy holler he's got is that I took a nice dab of hair off'n that pigtail when I done it. If Moy Yen was white he might make a right pert human bein'. Why didn't you bring Mr. Dupree in for grub and where is he now?"

Ruth related what had just happened. Belle Hardy sat on the edge of the bed with her mouth gaping and her eyes bulging out.

"An' that oiler had a note from Dick, shore enough?" she cried, when Ruth concluded her story. "You mean to say that message was in Harmoniky's handwritin'? It must be a mistake."

Ruth shook her head hopelessly.

"It is no mistake," she said in a dead voice. "He wrote it."

Belle Hardy slapped her leg with a resounding whack.

"I'm goin' to send fer Steve," she said. "He'll git to the bottom of this. Clem Cres-

well is in there gorgin' hisself yet. Clem!" She raised her voice so it could have been heard a mile away. "Clem, you come in here."

A DOOR opened and a mumbling noise came to them. Clem slouched in the doorway.

"You saddle up and ride to Tonto fast as you can tear," commanded Belle Hardy. "Tell that good-for-nothing Steve Hardy that Ruth is in trouble and wants him, right now. If he don't git here in two hours, I'll yank every hair in his head out by the roots. Now don't stand gawkin'. Move yore pegs or I'll blast yeh where yeh stand."

Belle Hardy's vigorous words stirred Ruth from her lethargy. She followed Belle outside and watched the big woman as she pursued Clem toward the corral, hurling epithets at him at every jump and emphasizing her meaning here and there by a well-rounded oath.

Dude Dupree came from the direction of the bunkhouse.

"I've got the greaser tied up," he said. "I'll take him into Tonto in the morning. By that time Harmoniky will be suspicious and when the sheriff goes after him, he'll be gone."

"Gone!" said Ruth. "You think he will — Oh, I don't know what to do. I told Belle. She has sent Clem for Steve. I don't know what to do."

"Do you think that note was on the level?"

"Dick wrote it. I know that."

"And do you think Agramonte was sent here to bring you to Harmoniky?"



Ruth gazed at Dupree thoughtfully. The ranch owner was helping her, helping her to think. His attitude was that of a man who was disinterested, but kind. Yet she

knew what was in his mind. He was thinking that she ought to see Dick King.

"Here's the way it looks to me," pursued Dupree. "Harmoniky done something

he is sorry for. He was seeing red. When mild-tempered men like him get angry, they go crazy. Maybe he wasn't just responsible. I'm that way myself. I don't get sore easy, but when I do, it seems like I see blood. I wouldn't be surprised an' Harmoniky has something to tell you."

"I'll go," said Ruth, abruptly. "Right now. Tonight."

"But what will Mis' Hardy think?"

"I won't tell her. I will say I am going for a ride—with—with you. Will you help me?"

"If you're set on it, I will," Dupree assented reluctantly.

HALF an hour later Ruth, Dupree and Agramonte quietly left the Double Cross Ranch and rode toward the Sangre de Dios hills. Night had fallen. A gentle breeze cooled the cheek and brought to the nostrils the fragrant odor of greasewood. Overhead the stars came out like far-off candles in a dream world. Across the rolling valley the curling grama grass was dotted with the dimly seen shapes of cattle and horses. The black mountain flung up a barrier to the east almost in their very faces. It seemed that at any moment they would run against the impassable rock wall, yet, riding as fast as they could, it continued to recede.

A coyote barked sharply near by. The bark trailing off into a weird, mournful howl, seemed filled with the story of the futility of life. Vast, vague, mysterious, in a silent, deserted world the foothills stretched before them. The horses' hoofs rang clear on a hardened stretch of alkali.

Agramonte, riding ahead of them, halted suddenly. A pin point of light gleamed in his hand as he flourished his cigarette.

A shot rang out. The roar of a six-shooter sounded in Ruth's ears. Shapes sprang up from the earth. She saw Dupree tugging at his revolver and then something thudded on the back of her horse. Steely fingers grasped her arms and pinned them behind her. Something dark and smothering enveloped her. She tried to cry out, but a hand closed her mouth.

Stirred by fear and anger, she struggled fiercely. But with each turn of her body the hold on her wrists tightened. She felt

her arm twisted, and it drew a smothered moan from her lips. Near by she could hear Dupree cursing, calling down threats on their captors. Then she went limp with fright.

Semi-conscious from fear and pain, Ruth dimly realized that they were riding along now at a swift trot. The loud beat of hoofs as they hit a lava cap and the chatter of voices in Spanish told her that there were a number of men in the band.

SHE did not know how many hours they rode before her horse stopped and strong hands lifted her from the saddle. The lemonlike smell of crushed creosote bush and the fragrance of a dry wood fire came to her nostrils. Suddenly the blindfold was whisked from her eyes and she looked around.

She stood on the bare, hard, clean-swept floor of an adobe house, the thick, mud walls of which imprisoned her on every side. In a doorway, outlined by the moonlight she saw dark faces and gleaming teeth. A swarthy little man with a big hat, smoking a tiny cigarette, advanced into the room with a revolver in his hand. It was Agramonte.

"Do not be alarm, *señorita*," he said. "You understand the ransom, eh? Well, we hold you for the ransom. Nothing of harm will be done to you, if money come."

"Damn you! You'll hang for this."

The grating voice, coming from the shadows back of her, caused Ruth to turn quickly. Dude Dupree, his hands bound behind his back, sat on the floor in a corner beneath a small window.

"You are reech mans also, Señor Dupree," continued Agramonte in the same soft voice. "We keep you here with the *señorita* until money come."

TWO Mexicans entered and cut the ropes that bound Dupree's hands. Dude seemed to slump to the floor, then he leaped forward. One fist crashed into a Mexican's body, but figures poured into the room, Dupree went down. The captors drew off, laughing, and Ruth heard them close and bar the door.

She looked at Dupree who had risen and was wiping the blood from his lips. He

came over and took her hand reassuringly.

"I'll get you out of this," he said solemnly. "Just be patient and keep your head."

He drew her to a cot that had been spread up in one corner of the room and forced her to sit down. Ruth gazed about her in stunned wonder. Her glance took in the bare, one-room place with its single bed, the *olla* hanging by a window, and then she glanced back at Dupree, who had sat down beside her on the cot.

"They won't hurt you," said Dupree, reassuringly. "They're just after money."

Ruth McClelland scarcely comprehended the words. She was wondering how long she would have to live in this one room with Dude Dupree.

CHAPTER XI

THE PRISONER STRIKES BACK

HARMONIKY rolled over and over on the floor. For hours he had been trying to get loose of his ropes, but without success. He had only succeeded in rubbing the skin off his wrists and ankles. Those knots had been tied by cow-punchers and they would not come loose.

Dick ceased his movements for a moment and stared up at the ceiling. Since he had signed that confession for Dupree he had been kept tied up in this room without seeing a single soul. He had heard the vaqueros laughing loudly at the dinner table. Then he had heard them ride away, and the only sound that came to him after that was the clatter of pots and pans as Peg Leg and his helper finished their work of the day. Finally this noise had ceased also.

Harmoniky's plans had gone wrong. He had figured to get Dupree close enough to him during the writing and signing of the document to slug the Hogpen ranch owner. But Dupree had been too circumspect. He had filled the room with his men and stayed at a safe distance. Dick had finally decided to go through with the scheme anyhow, to bring the matter to a head. He was tired of being a prisoner, tired of delay. He wanted action.

A door creaked. Joe Garn's pockmarked face appeared in the opening.



"You don't look happy," jeered Garn.

"Has yore boss gone?" asked Dick.

Garn's face flushed.

"I told you I ain't got no boss," he replied. "I'm my own boss. Dupree and me are jest working together, that's all."

HARMONIKY'S eyes rested on Garn's bandaged hand. Dupree had done that, shooting the revolver out of Joe's hand.

Garn noted the look and his flush changed to a scowl, but he said nothing.

"If the boss was here, he'd invite me to eat with him like a gentleman," pursued Harmoniky. "There's one thing about Dupree, he's not scared of anybody."

Garn stepped into the room.

"Mebbe you think I'm scared of you," he snapped.

Harmoniky laughed aggravatingly.

"Oh, no, Joe. You wouldn't be scared of me when I'm tied up like this."

"Nor untied either," retorted Garn.

Harmoniky chuckled. It expressed disbelief and scorn. Garn colored darkly. He wrinkled his brow in deep thought. Suddenly he stooped down and cut Harmoniky's bonds. Then he stood away while Dick struggled to his knees and began to kick the circulation back into his numbed legs. Harmoniky finally stood up.

"What's the idee?" he asked in affected surprise.

"Yo're going to eat your last meal with me," said Garn, backing away as they entered the big living room. "I'll make Peg Leg cook something before you go on a long, long journey."

HARMONIKY sat down at one end of the long board table. He had selected the end nearest Dupree's room. If by any chance he could make a dash for it, he knew he would find weapons in Dude's

quarters. He knew right where to lay his hands on guns and shells.

"You think I'm going on a long, long journey, Garn?" asked Dick, after Peg Leg had been called in and given Garn's orders. The cook received the instructions blackly, but he was afraid to protest.

"It's my job to send you there," said Garn, with evident relish.

"Oh, yes, I understand. Dupree promised I could leave the country. You're going to show me the way."

Garn moistened his lips. His eyes glistened at some pleasurable thought.

"You'll leave the country all right," he said, with a short laugh. "And you'll never come back. You're a worse fool than I thought. Did you think Dupree would run the chance of you showin' up here and spillin' all his plans?"

"What plans?"

"For takin' the girl, of course. He made up his mind the first time he laid eyes on Ruth McClelland that he was going to marry her. That's why he sleepers them critters with your mark. Oh, he's slick, Dupree is. He put you out of the runnin' good and quick."

"So Dupree framed up on me?" demanded Harmoniky, as if surprised. "And all with the idee of gettin' me out of the way so he could take Ruth. What about his wife?"

Garn laughed disagreeably. Harmoniky noted that the man's teeth were sharp as those of a flesh eating beast.

"Never mind her," he said. "She has been taken care of."

HARMONIKY repressed a desire to shudder. This man made him feel clammy. It gave him the same sensation as that of touching a snake. Garn was the kind of a fiend who would kill for the mere love of it, who would have shot Andrew McClelland down in cold blood.

"Dupree is the slickest man that ever walked this earth," continued Garn. "I s'pose you're thinkin' right now that your gal won't have him. But if you think that, you don't know nothing about Dupree."

"Force won't work, either," said Dick. "Not in this country. He might take her,

but the whole country would rise up and get him."

Garn's face twisted into a more than usually evil grin, and he gave an extraordinary chuckle of glee. With his left hand he raised a revolver barrel so it pointed straight at Dick's chest.

"He's got her," he announced. "He's got her right now."

Harmoniky jumped to his feet, his face tense and drawn, his fists clenched.

"You—you lie," he said.

"And the funny part of it is that him and her are still friends," pursued Garn. He had plunged in the knife, now he was twisting it around. "She's stayin' with him out on the desert. They're in pretty close quarters—one little room—and she may have to stay there a good many days. She's his prisoner, but she don't know it. That's why she's still Dupree's friend."

Harmoniky stood rigid as a statue, his narrowed gray eyes boring into Garn's features. The man was speaking the truth. Dick was sure of that. Joe would not be clever enough to invent such an idea.

"Oh, mebbe she won't take to him for a while," continued Garn, "but him and her are supposed to be in trouble together. When the Mex goes into the room at night to get her, Dupree will take her in his arms——"



"Damn you," groaned Harmoniky.

Garn laughed loudly with a whistling intake of breath.

"She'll marry him after that,"

chortled Garn, "and she won't get a bad feller neither. But here comes the victuals. Let's see yeh eat now. I like to see what kind of a appetite a man has jest afore he's about to die. Them as is scared don't eat much. Them as it brave, pitches right in."

SIGHT of the food nauseated Harmoniky, but he sat down to it and began to eat. He would not give Garn the satisfaction of seeing how he felt. Resolutely he steeled himself to a cool frame of mind.

When finally he looked up from his plate, it was to grin broadly at his jailer. He found the killer gazing at him fixedly, perspiration standing out on his forehead. The muzzle of Garn's gun was elevated slightly so that it pointed at Harmoniky's head, and then Dick saw that the hammer had been pulled back. The six-shooter was at full cock. Garn had been ready to shoot him, and he had looked up just in time.

"Mind if I have one last smoke, Garn?" he asked casually.

Garn's throat worked convulsively. "Go ahead," he said huskily.

Very deliberately Harmoniky fished out his pipe. With a thumb he explored the bowl of it and found that the pepper was still there. He explored his pockets for a match, while Garn watched every move.

"Got a *fosforo*, Garn?" he asked easily.

Garn hesitated a moment. He was deciding in his mind whether to play with his victim longer or to kill him at once, and just then Harmoniky leaned toward him across the table, his pipe extended.

Suddenly he flipped the pipe up. The fine pepper flew into Garn's face, and Harmoniky flung himself to one side just as the roar of the revolver beat upon his ears. A dull pain shot through his shoulder, but it went almost unnoticed as he leaped across the table and on top of the blinded man-killer.

GARN pawed at his eyes and howled, while Harmoniky snatched the six-shooter from the helpless man and trained it on the kitchen door. A frowsy head appeared around the jamb, and Peg Leg wobbled into the room.

"You didn't shoot 'im, did yeh, Garn?" mumbled the cook. "Why, it ain't Garn!"

"You're right, Peg Leg," said Harmoniky. "It ain't Garn. It's me. You bring that riata off the wall there and tie up your friend."

Tears were running down Garn's cheeks and he glared at Harmoniky from reddened eyes like a beast at bay. When Peg Leg started to tie him he threatened the cook with death in every conceivable form. He was tied, nevertheless, and after Dick had tested the knots, he forced the pair of them to accompany him into Du-

pree's room, where he secured cartridge belts, holsters, and another gun. Dick's left hand was useless. He couldn't move his fingers or lift his arm, but he put on the extra gun for good measure.

Next he drove his captives into the kitchen and hunted around until he found a running iron. A bed of coals still glowed in the kitchen stove and into this he thrust the iron. Peg Leg and Garn watched him intently.

"What yeh goin' to do?" asked Peg Leg presently.

"Im going to make Garn talk," said Dick coolly, wetting his finger and touching it to the sizzling running iron.

THE proposed victim cowered back into a corner and tore vainly at the ropes that bound his hands behind him. As Harmoniky thrust the white-hot iron closer and closer, he wriggled with terror. The heat of it was against his cheek. He dropped to the floor in a quivering heap when Dick lifted it to the level of his eyes.

"Don't, don't!" he begged. "I'll talk. I'll talk. Don't torture me."

"Talk then," snapped Dick. "Where is she?"

"At the old Trufador adobe near Arroyo Farillon."

Dick turned to Peg Leg. "Are you and Garn the only ones on the ranch?" he asked.

"They ain't no others," admitted Peg Leg. "They've all gone with Agramonte."

"Get outside, then, both of you."

Harmoniky drove his captives into the ranch yard. It was quite dark, as the moon had not yet risen. Prodding the men with his gun, Harmoniky sent them toward the barn. There he made Peg Leg rope out Garn's horse and another and saddle them. Then he changed clothes with Garn and helped Peg Leg lift the sullen killer into the saddle, after which he spread-eagled the cursing cook on a wagon wheel.

TWO hours' swift riding brought them to the crest of a ridge from which they could look down upon Arroyo Farillon. Harmoniky pulled Garn from his horse and tied the animal to a bush.

"Now where is the Trufador adobe?"

he demanded. "And remember this, Garn. If you have not told me the truth I'm coming back here and take you apart. And I've got a good sharp knife to do it."

Garn faced southwest.

"See that kind of black spot down there?" he asked. "Well, that's the adobe. Dupree said he was going to take her there. That's all I know about it."

After getting a few more directions from Garn, Dick gagged him and tied him to a stunted tree. Then he rode boldly toward the house where Ruth was imprisoned.

CHAPTER XII

"We're Lost Now!"

MOUNTED on Garn's horse and dressed in Garn's clothes, Harmoniky spurred into the midst of his enemies. As he came out into the open he heard



someone cry out, saw forms darting here and there and then several horsemen emerged from the shadows and came to meet him.

Pulling his hat lower over his eyes, he spurred his horse to a faster pace. He was counting on Dupree's men recognizing Garn's dapple cayuse. That would make them hesitate to shoot, and while they were getting over their surprise, he would be jumping inside that adobe and to Ruth's side. After that, he had no plans. Once he could reach her, he would trust to providence and his fighting luck.

Suddenly the dappled mustang stumbled and fell, but Harmoniky swung free just as the horse would have pinned him to the ground. With a gun clutched in his good right hand he started toward the adobe. A Mexican who had been sitting against the mud wall, smoking, got up at his approach and regarded him intently.

The guard at the door made no move for his own revolver, but he shouted a warning in Spanish. Harmoniky crouched suddenly and leaped. A rifle cracked, and he heard the thud of the bullet in the wall just over his head. At the same instant his

gun barrel crunched against the guard's skull and the man went down in a heap in front of the door.

Bullets sang close to him as he threw his shoulder against the panel. The door gave. It had not been locked on the inside. He plunged into the room on his face. He was up in an instant and had kicked the door shut behind him. The firing ceased at once.

Blinded by the sudden darkness, Harmoniky hid his face from the sight of anyone within the room and waited silently for Dupree's move.

"Garn," said a voice. It was Dupree speaking. "Is that you? What are you doing here? Did you come to rescue us?"

"Come out of there, Dupree," Dick snarled in an imitation of Garn's voice. "Come here."

HARMONIKY could see dark forms on one side of the room now. His heart leaped as he caught a glimpse of light-colored clothing. That would be Ruth. And the bigger, darker bulk was Dupree.

Dupree advanced reluctantly. Harmoniky, keeping his features concealed, led him to the far end of the adobe.

"What do you want?" demanded Dupree in a suppressed whisper. "I thought I told you to stay away from here."

"Well, I'm here," growled Dick. "I wanted to see how you was gettin' on with the girl."

"It will take time," said Dupree. "She don't seem to like me very well."

"No; and she never will."

Harmoniky's voice rang out clear and loud. The muzzle of his gun settled against Dupree's stomach. Dude's gasp was echoed by the cry from Ruth's lips.

"Dick!" she said. "Is that you, Dick?"

The great emotion that welled up in Harmoniky's heart made him careless for just a second. In that second Dupree acted. His fist, shooting upward, caught Harmoniky squarely on the jaw. As he staggered back on his heels, he heard Ruth's shrill cry of fright, yells of the Mexicans outside, and then Dupree's low tones:

"I've got yeh covered, King. Don't move."

HARMONIKY dropped flat to the floor like a flash. At the same instant the gun muzzle in his hand lifted, and he fired. The powder from Dupree's flaming weapon burned his cheek as he fell, but he felt no pain and concluded he had not been hit.

Quickly he rolled over, and, as he went, his revolver spat lead. Dupree's bullets seemed to fill the air about him, yet none touched him. He had counted the shots as Dupree fired, *one, two, three, four, five, six*. And at the sixth he leaped in, gun raised to strike.

A terrific blow on his wounded shoulder sent him reeling, blinded with pain. His own weapon, flailing downward, hit something soft and brought a cry from Dupree's lips.

Then they clinched. Harmoniky had no idea how badly Dupree was hurt. The Hogen owner had not let out a call for help. Apparently he thought he could win the battle alone. A powerful arm gripped Dick around the waist and a hand caught the arm in which he held the six-shooter. With one arm dead, Harmoniky was almost helpless.

Dupree rushed him about the room, trying to trip him, to batter his head against the wall, to lay him out on the floor. The pain of Harmoniky's wound was intense now. It seemed to grip at his very vitals, and each time Dupree struck him there, lights flashed before his eyes.

For just a second Harmoniky went limp, then he threw all the strength of his body in a gigantic convulsion. Down came his arm and head, up came his knees. The force of the motion drove Dupree back. Dick reached for his other gun. It was awkward to get at, hanging there beneath his injured arm. But he grasped the butt and pulled it free of the holster. Then, just as the weapon came out, something struck it and hurled it from Harmoniky's benumbed fingers.

BOTH men dived to the floor after it, Dupree first and Harmoniky on top of him. In the darkness neither could see it. Dupree went flat on the floor under Harmoniky's weight. Dick could see the six-shooter now, lying a short distance

away near Ruth. With a quick movement he reached for it. Dupree arched his back and sent him over on his head.

Both came up together then. Dick struck out with his right hand. He could hear Dupree's breath coming in gasps. Despite his faintness from loss of blood, Harmoniky had the exultant feeling that he was going to win.

Then Dupree did a surprising thing. He jumped away from Dick at the next blow and ran. It was a second before Harmoniky saw what the rancher was going to do. Then it was too late.



As Dupree swung the door open, moonlight flooded the room and glinted against the weapon on the floor. Ruth's cry of encouragement in

Dick's ear echoed Dupree's shouts for help. Harmoniky flung himself at Dude, but the ranch owner leaped outside, crying at his punchers to shoot. Dick had barely time to kick the door closed when a volley of bullets thudded into the rough boards.

Now that the tension of the man to man struggle was over, Harmoniky slumped toward the spot where he had seen the gun. A hand gripped his. A warm body swept into his arms. He felt the butt of a gun pressed into his fingers.

"Dick, Dick!" sobbed Ruth. "I knew you would come. I knew it."

Her words acted like wine on Harmoniky's senses.

"We've still got a fight on our hands," he said. "There's an empty gun on the floor somewhere, two of them, and I've got shells. We'll give these devils a dose of hot lead. We'll make 'em think this ain't no Alamo."

BULLETS began to drone through the one window. Ruth, whose eyes were more accustomed to the gloom of the adobe, soon found the two revolvers and Harmoniky loaded them. It made them feel better to get the weapons in their hands.

"We got a big chance of beating them, partner," Harmoniky exulted. "Somebody is bound to hear the firing. A party will be sent out to investigate and we will be relieved before our ammunition gives out. Unless they rush us, we got a good chance. They couldn't shoot through these mud walls with a cannon."

Ruth caught Harmoniky's limp hand. Suddenly she realized that something was wrong.

"You are wounded!" she exclaimed. "Oh, your arm is broken! Does it hurt you much, Dick? Let me examine it."

"It's not broke," replied Harmoniky, "and looking at it won't help none. Garn binged me in the shoulder."

Ruth made him sit down on the cot where they could watch the window and door, and she wiped the blood from his face where he had been battered by Dupree.

A voice spoke loudly outside the door. It was Dupree.

"We got you surrounded, Harmoniky," he said. "If you want to save the girl from getting killed, you better surrender."

The door was slightly ajar. They could see the dark outline of a figure in the moonlight.

"Do you want to surrender, my dear?" asked Harmoniky.

Ruth's answer was to fling up her weapon and fire at the crack in the door. A sharp cry and then loud cursing told her that the bullet had found its mark. Dupree went away yelling threats.

"That made him good and mad," chuckled Dick. "Was he mean to you—or nice?"

"He was really nice," Ruth admitted. "He was playing a very, very clever game."

"Well, if he was nice," said Dick, "I won't bury him quite so deep."

He moved to a window and looked out. Something moved behind a bush and he fired at it. Slinking shadows vanished. All became quiet. It was as silent as if the besiegers had gone.

Harmoniky took Ruth's sombrero and pushed it out of the window. A sharp tug at it and a loud report told him that the enemy was still there.

They sat down again upon the cot to talk. Harmoniky told Ruth all that had happened and she gave him the news of town and ranch.

The air became heavy. Breathing seemed more difficult. In their absorption they had paid little heed to their surroundings. Now as they glanced around they saw a bright tongue of flame dart from the roof. Smoke was filling the room.

"We're lost now," said Ruth; "they're burning us out."

CHAPTER XIII

MRS. HARDY RIDES

BACK at the Double Cross ranch Tiny Armstrong, Pop Weaver, and Skeeters Hall saw Belle Hardy bearing down on the bunkhouse like a big battleship and they made their escape out through a rear door. Slim Holtz was too miserable to move, and when she burst through the door, he got the full effect of her charge.

"Slim, I want you to saddle up and follow Ruth and that Dupree," said Mrs. Hardy. "They's something up, and I want to know what it is."

Slim rubbed liniment on his swollen jaw and bathed his blackened eye with a handkerchief dipped in water. In his fight with Clem, Slim had come out second best.

"I ain't goin' nowhar tonight," said Slim.

"You ain't?"

"No, I ain't. And that's final."

Mrs. Hardy strode over to the afflicted cowpuncher and confronted him with her feet spread apart and two closed fists resting on her hips.

"Then you saddle me a horse or I'll make a greasespot of yeh," she bellowed. "I don't 'low no two-bit chuckawaller to sass me."

"Why don't yeh ask one of the other boys?" wailed Slim. "Can't you see I'm wounded?"

"You'll be worse wounded than that if you don't saddle me a horse."

After some further argument Slim saddled an old swayback mare, that was about ready to die of old age, and assisted Belle to mount. The sway in the mare's back became even more pronounced when Belle's

two hundred pounds settled into place.

"Steve will be here in a little while," she said. "If he comes before I git back, you tell him to foller me. Ruth headed off along that trail to the Hogpen. I'm going after her."

THE old mare jogged off the ranch road and onto the Hogpen trail without difficulty. Once in the open country Mrs. Hardy began to crave more speed and she applied the quirt. The mare paid no heed to it. If anything, it slowed



down.

She had not gone far when she heard shots. They came from the place where Ruth and Dupree would be if they had kept on the trail. Mrs. Hardy's imagination was stirred violently. She pictured Ruth attacked by villains and her escort shot down. She visualized death and destruction for the girl and the man. And she was roused to still further exertion with the quirt. She wanted to dash up there and plunge into the fray, to the rescue.

The mare refused to plunge. She slowed to a walk. And the more Belle Hardy swore at her, the slower she seemed to walk. After the few shots were fired, everything was quiet. An owl hooted presently close by. Far off toward the mountains there drifted down to her on the wind the wail of a coyote. But so far as untoward noise was concerned, there was nothing except her own breathing and the wheezing of the old mare.

Mrs. Hardy finally resigned herself to the old swayback's pace. With a big tengallon hat shoved back from her forehead, she jogged along, swaying to the motion of her mount and waiting for what fate might bring her.

Farther and farther into the sage she rode. The character of the country changed from sand dunes to hills and the vegetation from bushes to brush and trees. The plain stretched away for limitless miles on every side.

Soothed by the rocking motion of the mare, lulled by the fragrance of the desert air, the unbroken silence and the sahara-like solitude, Mrs. Hardy began to feel that she could ride on like this forever when she again heard firing. She halted the mare and listened intently.

"That comes from the direction of Farillon Canyon," she remarked. "I got it, you old crowbait," she continued, addressing the horse. "They branched off this trail about a hundred yards ahead of us and went down the arroyo. And they're having a battle. Jest hear them guns poppin' now. Giddap."

BUT the mare did not share her excitement. She refused to move. Mrs. Hardy flogged her mount with the quirt. It did no good. She cursed her steed and she cursed Slim Holtz for a blackguard, which did no good, either. Finally she dismounted and sarcastically offered to carry the mare. She tried to lead the animal and she got behind and tried to push.

Finally she sat down on a rock and cried.

Down there in the arroyo a battle was going on. The sharp crack of rifles and the duller roar of six-shooters came plainly to her ears. She longed to fly to Ruth's assistance. Mrs. Hardy always wanted to be in the thick of any fighting, and here she was prevented by the stubbornness of an old swayback mare.

Suddenly the mare turned around and started for home of her own accord. Mrs. Hardy jumped up and pursued her. The mare broke into a trot. Mrs. Hardy speeded up. Her hands were almost on the reins. The mare broke into a gallop. It was the first evidence Mrs. Hardy had seen that the animal was capable of galloping, and it brought a fresh flow of denunciation from Belle's lips.

"Wait until I git my paws on that white-livered cowpuncher," she wailed. "I'll do a dam' site more to him than Clem Creswell done."

The mare halted at last. With new hope in her heart, Belle put on full speed ahead and bore down upon the doughty steed. The old mare glanced around at her and broke into a gallop again.

Mrs. Hardy's breath was coming quicker

and quicker. Her vocabulary was bare. She had used up all the words she knew and was repeating on herself, when Sheriff Steve galloped into view.

MRS. HARDY let out a wild yell and ran toward him. The sheriff stopped the runaway horse and waited for his wife, with a broad grin on his face.

"You slab-sided, dough-headed, flat-footed nincompoop," cried Mrs. Hardy, when she was within earshot. "Why didn't you come when I sent for you? Where have you been loafin'? You call yourself a man and yet you sit there laughin' at yore lawful wedded wife in such a predicament. Murder is being committed. Folks is bein' shot up. Ruth's been kidnapped. But a lot you care. Don't you hear them shots? It's down by the old Trufador place."

"By jing," said the sheriff. "Yo're right, Belle. You rush back to the ranch and get a posse. Tell Clem Creswell to take charge and give all the boys guns and ammunition. Sounds like pretty heavy firin'. Guess my ears is kind of goin' back on me. I never heard that afore you mentioned it."

"Help me on this crowbait, then," requested Mrs. Hardy. "And if you want me to rush, put a stick of giant powder under her."

The sheriff put his horse to a swift gallop. The moon was out and the trail was well defined. An hour's riding brought him to the edge of Arroyo Farillon.

Below him unfolded a startling picture. Shadowy figures were moving swiftly around a squat shack down there in the arroyo bed. Flashes of light leaped from these figures and there came wafted up to him the crackle of firearms. But it was

not upon the besiegers that the sheriff fixed his startled eyes.

From the roof of the shack a flame rose. At first it was a mere tongue of fire, but even as he watched it, it



spread into a bigger blaze and smoke poured forth from the doomed building.

A flash of light shot from the window of the adobe. It was followed by the report of a pistol. The besieged were firing, too, now. The sheriff did not have to waste any time picturing that scene. He felt sure that Ruth was in that adobe. Who the besiegers were he could not guess, but if he was to rescue her, he had not a moment to lose. He could not wait for the posse.

WITHOUT thought of his own safety Sheriff Hardy rode right into the mêlée, reins thrown over saddle horn, rifle to shoulder, firing and working the lever of the Winchester. Straight up he rode with his keen old eyes seeking out the skulking figures and his steady, iron hands training the accurate rifle upon them.

In plain view he stopped to reload. The moonbeams glinted on the star he wore on his vest.

"I'm the sheriff of this county!" he yelled. "And I'm calling on you to surrender."

A shot was his answer. The rifle dropped from his hands. He made a futile effort to catch it; then slumped forward on his horse.

A cheer went up from Dude Dupree's men. Bullets rained toward the sheriff. His horse jerked up its head, stumbled and sank to the ground, throwing Hardy free.

The Hogen crew closed in, yelling like wild savages, firing at random. Smoke was now pouring in a great volume from the adobe and the whole roof, aflame, seemed ready to fall in at any moment.

"We got them now!" yelled Dude Dupree. "I'll make that red-headed coyote pay for the beating he gave me."

CHAPTER XIV

"I Killed Him"

TWO minutes after Harmoniky saw flames licking through the adobe roof, he was busy on a plan of escape. The flames served one good purpose. They illuminated the room so that everything in it was visible. And after a short search Dick came upon the very thing he wanted, a prospector's pick.

With this pick he attacked the mud wall

at the back of the house where no one would be looking for them. Dupree's men were concentrating their attention on the door and window. Harmoniky drove the rusty pick point into the wall at a point near the big fireplace, where he was sheltered from bullets, both direct and ricochet. He had made a barricade out of bed and table for Ruth, and she sat behind this.

Working with one hand, Harmoniky cut away the wall steadily. Perspiration beaded out on his forehead. He could feel blood running down his arm and chest, and as the fire increased the heat became intolerable.

"Keep near the floor," he warned Ruth, as the flames began licking all about them. "I'll soon be through."

A flash of fire singed his hair and burned his cheek. His shirt got ablaze and he beat it out with his hands. Suddenly a stream of air flooded through at his feet, and desperately he enlarged the hole till it was wide enough for Ruth to crawl through.

Just as he knelt to follow her, the roof caved in. Coals fell on his legs and as he pulled himself out into the open, he rolled over and over in the sand to smother the blaze.

Stooping low to keep under cover of bush and shrub they climbed swiftly upward until an upreaching outcrop of country rock protected them from view. Here they halted to look back down on the scene.

"We're safe now," Harmoniky exulted, holding Ruth tight in his right arm. "Our troubles are all over. By morning we'll be home. Even if they find out we skipped they never could find us in the chapparal."

"Did you get the evidence you went after?" asked Ruth.

Dick gave a disgusted snort.

"I forgot about that," he said. "I was so tickled at finding you that I plumb forgot about that coroner's jury. I've got to go back down there, get hold of Dupree and make him confess. You wait right here."

Ruth laid a restraining arm on his sleeve.

"Please don't go now— Why, look at that!" she broke off.

"It's Sheriff Hardy," said Dick. "And he's riding right into them."

RUTH suddenly hid her eyes. Harmoniky jumped up with drawn gun and started down the hill. Under their very eyes, the sheriff had been shot, and his horse had gone down.

Harmoniky ran straight for the fallen sheriff. In his mind's eye he saw Hardy that night in the dance hall, walk up to a cocked rifle to save his life, and it spurred him to like effort. Dupree's men all had their eyes fixed on the door and window of the adobe. They were waiting for Harmoniky to come out. They could not understand how he had remained in that roaring furnace this long.

Dupree did not see Dick until he had emerged into the open and started running, bent low, toward the sheriff. The Hogpen ranch owner started toward Harmoniky, six-shooter lifted, just as Dick caught sight of him.

Harmoniky experienced a feeling of admiration for Dupree. The rancher had accepted the challenge. He was coming forward in the open without an outcry to pit his gun against Dick's. With a sinking sensation in his stomach Harmoniky realized that if he killed this man, he would be destroying the one person who might testify to his innocence. Yet there was no way out of it.

Dick brought up his gun and fired as Dupree weaved toward him. He missed. In the uncertain light a dodging man made an uncertain mark. Dupree fired. The shot whistled over Dick's head. Both men disdained to seek cover. They rushed at one another, firing as they came. Harmoniky exhausted the shells in one gun and reached for the other.



He tugged at the weapon with his one good hand. It stuck. He saw Dupree raise his revolver and deliberately take aim. A shot rang out.

Dupree's arm dropped. His gun fell to the ground. He spun around on his heel and dropped to the ground.

"I got him," yelled an exultant voice.

Harmoniky glanced down. Sheriff Hardy had fired one shot, crowed over his victory and then fainted away. Harmoniky dropped behind the dead horse beside the sheriff and examined Hardy's wounds. An occasional bullet sang past him, but they became fewer and fewer, until suddenly the air was split by a deafening crackle of musketry and the war cry of victorious cowboys.

A SQUAD of horsemen swept down from the hillside toward them, howling at the top of their lungs and firing at anything that moved. Harmoniky lay down beside Sheriff Hardy and remained perfectly quiet until the horsemen rode past. He did not want to be shot by his own friends. Then he raised Steve up and dragged him toward the cabin. Weakened as he was and with only one good arm, he struggled along with his burden until someone came to relieve him. It was Slim Holtz, who had entirely forgotten his black eye and swollen jaw.

"Harmoniky King!" cried Slim. "Why you ol' tarantler. Let me hist Steve on my shoulders. Is he bad hurt?"

"He's got a bad wound in the head. The bullet glanced off his skull, but it laid him out. And he's liable to be sick for a spell."

The horsemen returned from their pursuit of the attackers. They brought back no prisoners, and it was noticeable that some of them produced knives and started cutting knots in their guns. The men were Clem Creswell, Tiny Armstrong, Pop Weaver, Skeeters Hall, Weasel Nickerson, who had followed the sheriff out from town, and Jeff Brainard, cattle buyer, who had just come to pay his respects to Ruth.

RUTH came hurrying down and everybody listened to her story and to that of Dick, while Pop bandaged the sheriff's head and doctored the wound in Harmoniky's shoulder.

"Then everybody's happy again, the mystery's all cleared up, and Dick can come back to the Double Cross Ranch," suggested Clem. "We know in our own mind that Dupree was responsible for the dirty work. Ruth can testify to that. I guess even a persecutin' attorney ought to be able

to figger out that Dude was back of the whole business. Come on, Harmoniky. You're goin' back with us."

Dick made no move to accompany them. "You boys are sure true friends," he said, "but I ain't cleared yet. I'm goin' now to get the man that shot Andy McClelland. And before I bring him in, I'm going to make him confess he done it."

"I'll go with you," said Clem. "I brought an extra horse for you."

"And I, too," said Ruth.

Harmoniky led Ruth gently to her horse and helped her to mount.

"This is no business for a woman," said Dick. "You ride on in to the ranch. Clem and me will be home in a few hours."

Harmoniky and Creswell rode away to the ridge where Dick had tied Joe Garn to the straggling tree. They found the killer hanging on his ropes, silent and venomous. He had seen the defeat of his friends and he knew what to expect. Dick removed the gag, but left him tied.

"What do you figger on doing with him?" asked Creswell.

Harmoniky considered this gravely.

"As long as they's just the two of us, why not take him down and throw him in the fire?"

"Oh, that wouldn't be no fun," retorted Creswell. "I'm in favor of heating libiate thorns and driving them under his toenails."

"My God, you wouldn't do such a thing!" burst out Garn.

Neither of the men paid any attention to him.

"Where can we get the thorns?" asked Dick. "We might roll him in chollas and then throw him in the fire."

A loud groan escaped Garn's lips.

"Don't torture me, fellers," he begged "I never done nothin'. I swear it."

"What did you do with Dupree's old woman?" asked Dick.

"I never done nothin' to her. You can't fix that on me. Dupree took her away hisself toward Deep ravine."

"Put a rope around his neck, and we'll skull drag him," said Clem suddenly. "If they's any life in him after we drag him down to the fire, then we'll roll him in chollas and throw him in."

CLEM produced a rope and dropped a loop over Garn's neck. Harmoniky cut the man loose from his other bonds, avoiding touching him. The very feel of the assassin's flesh sent a shudder through him. This murderer was worse than a snake.

Clem mounted with the rope and started off down the trail, dragging Garn after him. The killer ran as fast as he could to keep his feet, and Clem did not really try to throw him until they were off the rocks and on the level ground. Then he gave Garn a little whirl in the sand to tame his spirits.

"Are you ready to talk yet?" demanded Dick.

Garn tugged frantically at the rope about his neck.

"What do you want to know?" he demanded.

"Who killed Andy McClelland?"



"Dupree done that."

"You're willing to swear to that?"

"I swear he did."

Harmoniky produced a pencil and paper and

handed it to Garn. "Now write on that: '*I solemnly swear that Dupree killed Andrew McClelland,*' and sign it."

Garn complied. He signed the statement, and then both Harmoniky and Clem Creswell affixed their names as witnesses.

Harmoniky handed the document to Clem, who put it in his pocket. Then he suddenly produced his other gun and slipped it into Garn's holster.

"What in the hell yeh givin' Garn a loaded gun for?" cried Clem Creswell. "He's our pris'ner."

Harmoniky faced the killer. His own weapon also was holstered.

"Now, Garn, you got an even break for your life," said Dick. "By rights I ought to shoot yeh like a dog. But I can't do it. I know who killed Andy McClelland. It wasn't Dupree. It was you. Now go for your gun."

GARN'S face turned a sickly yellow. The side of his mouth twisted upward and pulled his entire countenance awry. The murderer who had shot many a man in the back was afraid to take his own medicine.

"I'm waiting," said Harmoniky. "If yeh don't draw, I'll kill yeh anyhow."

Harmoniky half turned his back as if inviting the assassin to take advantage of him. Garn's narrow, animal eyes followed his every movement, but he made no motion to draw the six-shooter in his holster. His knees were shaking so he could hardly stand and his face was ashen.

"You killed McClelland, didn't yeh?" snapped Dick.

Garn nodded. He was too frightened to deny it.

"Speak up," commanded Harmoniky. "You did kill him."

Garn's lips barely moved.

"Yes, I killed him," he said hoarsely.

Harmoniky reached out and took back his gun.

"All right, Clem," he said; "we got the right man now. He's too yeller to kill. Guess we'll have to save him to hang. Bring him along."

Ruth was waiting for Harmoniky when he returned, and in a few words he told her of Garn's confession. Then arm in arm they walked out across the sand dunes in the moonlight.

PENNSYLVANIA GUNSMITHS

JUST why, during colonial and early national days, Pennsylvania furnished such a preponderance of American gunsmiths will probably never be known. Many of the settlers in that colony, particularly in its western reaches, were of German or Dutch extraction, but it is not certain that they brought their trades with them from the old countries, while it is sure that their product resembles in no way the European gunmaking influence.

It seems very probable that a popular demand, created by the success of the work of some early gunsmith, made the trade—often combined with general blacksmithing—a paying one and attracted large numbers of apprentices who continued in the trade after completing their time, and set up in business for themselves.—M. L. W.



KLONDIKE STAKES

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

Author of "Burning the Snow," "Frozen Inlet Post," etc.

WHEN RENE MEDARD TOOK THE TRAIL INTO THE HEADWATERS OF THE BLACKSTONE, HE BEGAN TO WONDER REALLY WHY HE WAS THERE, CAMPING IN THE SPRUCE SCRUB, WHEN HE MIGHT HAVE BEEN DEALING FARO IN WARMTH AND COMFORT. BUT IN HIS HEART HE KNEW HE WAS FOLLOWING THE CODE OF THE NORTH; MOREOVER HE WAS PLAYING FOR STAKES EVEN HIGHER THAN HE HAD EVER KNOWN BEFORE IN THE GOLD FRENZIED KLONDIKE

IT WAS midnight, and behind its heavily frosted windows, Cuter Malone's Klondike Palace blazed with light. Great roaring stoves defied the strong cold, and four or five gaudily clad girls grouped near the piano at one end of the dancehall bickered querulously among themselves.

Upon a revolving stool a pasty-faced youth lolled against the keyboard, quite drunk.

The bartender listlessly rearranged glasses and bottles upon his back-bar, his every movement followed by the wistful gaze of a half-dozen pairs of eyes whose owners lounged dejectedly upon chairs drawn close about one of the roaring stoves—the down-and-outers, and the temporarily broke, passively grateful for the privilege of nodding the night through beside the stove.

At a table toward the rear of the big room six men played poker, the progress of the game marked by the soft click of chips, and an occasional low-voiced, short-clipped word or sentence.

Seated behind his layout, also toward the rear of the room immediately beyond the end of the bar, Rene Medard, the faro

dealer, lighted a cigarette, and deftly riffling the cards, spread them for solitaire.

The bartender, surveying his handiwork with professional approval, selected a cigar from a box, sniffed it audibly, clipped the end with his teeth, and rolled it with apparent relish from one corner of his mouth to the other. Strolling to the end of the bar he leaned on his elbow and with jaundiced eye, surveyed Rene's spread of cards 'Black nine plays on the red ten an' gives you a turn,' he advised. Rene nodded without looking up, made the suggested shift, and dealt from the deck. "Hell of a night, ain't it? We ain't took in enough to pay fer the heat them bums soak-up."

RENE shrugged indifferently, and went on with his game.

"I bet there's a play on Stoell's layout tonight," the bartender went on gloomily. "There's some of the high-rollers in from the diggin's. I seen Camillo Bill an' Ace-in-the-Hole this afternoon, an' Bettles an' Jimmie-the-Rough come in yesterday. It's a damn' wonder they wouldn't come down an' give you a play. They all know they ain't a better dealer on the river, an'

they know you're square."

Again Rene shrugged, penciled a notation of the number of plays he had made, and gathered the cards to shuffle. His dark eyes swept the room with a glance that lingered for a fleeting moment upon the shrill-voiced group near the piano and the half drunken, pasty-faced youth. "Stoell has no dancehall. No women drink at his bar, nor do they appear at his tables unless accompanied, or actually playing. Men go to Stoell's to gamble; they come here to carouse."

The other noted the well modulated voice, and his eyes rested with genuine admiration upon the carefully groomed tapering fingers, slender as a woman's that handled the cards with a caress. "It's a wonder you'd be dealin' in a dump like this—what with hatin' the women, an' all."

RENE smiled. "A job is a job." He indicated the nodding group beside the stove. "You would not have me as one of those?"

The bartender laughed. "Guess they wouldn't be no danger of that. You could make good money playin' poker. An' they say them dogs of yours is about the fastest outfit on the river."

"About is right. A month ago, down at Circle, I bet all I had on them in a matched race. I found out, as you say, they were *about* the fastest team—but not quite. That explains why I am here, and also why I am not playing poker."

"Hell! Any of the sourdoughs would stake you."

"I don't play borrowed money."

"Why not?"

"No reason. Just a hunch of mine, and I ride it."

"Why didn't you hit Stoell fer a job instead of here?"

"I did."

"An' he wouldn't hire you!" The man was staring incredulously.

"Oh, yes. He wanted me to start right in that night. But how about the other fellow?"

"What other feller?"

"Why, the man Stoell would have had to let out to put me in."

"That ain't none of your business."

"Sure it is. I happened to know that the man needed the job. This place was open and I took it."

"That's what they all say, yer square as hell. 'Tain't hurtin' Cuter none to have a square guy dealin' his game, an' he knows it. Seems kind of funny, though—you hatin' women like you do—you that could have yer pick of 'em. I s'pose, though, one done you dirt sometime er other."

Rene laughed lightly. "No, no! None ever had the chance. It is not that I hate them. Only that they do not interest me—that is all. It is that I have stuck by my first and only love—the cards."

The bartender shook his head in lugubrious foreboding. "Well, take it from me, brother; sometime yer goin' to fall fer some jane—an' fall hard."

II

THE door opened and Cuter Malone entered, swathed to the knees in a cloud of vapor. Scowling, he advanced to the end of the bar. "How's tricks?" he snapped.

"Nothin' doin'," answered the bartender.

"I jest come from Stoell's. His games is full—an' believe me, they're bettin' 'em high."

Rene Medard despised his employer, and was at small pains to conceal it. He glanced up, rifling the cards

with his thumb. "Perhaps," he said, "you would prefer another dealer in my place."

"Hell no! Don't I know you're the best dealer on the river? It ain't that. But, the facts is, there's a lot of dust changin' hands in this camp, an' I ain't gittin' my share."

"Maybe, if you got rid of the women, and the piano——"

"To hell with that! Men wants the girls, an' they ain't goin' to spend no money over a bar where they can't dance."

"They spend money at Stoell's."



"That's a gamblin' crowd."

"Is it not, on the whole, a more desirable crowd than the other?"

"I'm aimin' to git both crowds! I want it spread around that when a man comes into the Klondike Palace he kin git anything he wants—a run fer his money, er a drink, er a dance; anything, jest so he's got the price."

"That's right," agreed the bartender. He, too, despised his employer, but he assented as a matter of policy. Rene rifled his cards.

MALONE stepped behind the bar, removed his outer garments, and poured himself a stiff drink. As he returned the glass to the bar his eye fell upon the half dozen men who dozed in their chairs beside the stove. "Stoell's place bilin' over with live ones, an' mine's full of chair-warmers!" he growled to the bartender. "Kick 'em out!"

The white aproned one rolled his unlighted cigar reflectively. "You don't mean that, Cuter. Yer a little sore on account it's a dull night. Them boys ain't botherin' no one. They happen to be broke jest now. A many a time I've been broke an' nothin' between me an' freezin' but a saloon stove. Any of 'em's apt to make a strike in the spring—an' men don't fer-git things like that. Even if they don't never make no strike word would pass around the camp that you'd kicked 'em out——"

"This is my place, ain't it? I can run it the way I want to, can't I?"

"It's your place all right, an' I s'pose you kin run it the way you want to. But you got to remember that men spends their dust where they want to, too. An' besides, them lads pays their way, all right. They ain't hardly no one comes in but what buys 'em a drink, an' is glad to. They all know their turn might be next. Ain't that so, Crego?" he appealed to a large man who had just entered in a cloud of steam and stamped to the bar.

"Ain't what so?" the newcomer demanded, shaking off his mittens and loosening the ear-flaps of his cap.

"I was jest sayin' to Cuter, here, how everywhere I've been, the boys that's got

it—them that's worth a damn of 'em—always buys a drink fer them that ain't. That's the truth, when you come to study it over, ain't it, Crego?"

RENE MEDARD suppressed a smile as he noted the scowl with which the big man greeted the words, and the swift, appraising glance he shot toward the little group beside the stove. The bartender's face was guileless as he awaited the reply.

Crego cleared his throat. "Why—sure." Then, raising his voice to a bellow, he shouted, "Come on, let's licker! Crego's buyin' a drink."

The chair-warmers, the girls, and the pasty faced piano player lined up at the bar where bottles and glasses were already arrayed. The lookout and the case keeper sauntered over from the table where they had been watching the poker game. Only the players and Rene Medard retained their places. "Four—an' two seegars," announced the lookout, acting as waiter for the poker players.

"Drink hearty," bellowed Crego, and returning his glass to the bar, singled out the piano player. "Here you, perfessor, throw another slug into you an' give us a tune—somethin' lively. This place is so dead it stinks."

As the piano crashed into a discordant "Happy Days in Dixie," Cuter Malone strolled to the end of the bar and Crego followed, standing half facing Rene Medard. "So that's Crego," thought the dealer to himself, as he spread his interminable solitaire.

Cuter Malone was speaking, and Rene caught the words blended with the crashing of the piano. "You said a mouthful—about this dump bein' dead. I know I ain't gittin' my share of the dust that's floatin' around this camp. What's the answer?"

"Well," began Crego, in the manner of an oracle, allowing his gaze to travel slowly about the room. "Trouble is, you're jest betwixt an' between. You ain't got outfit enough to ketch the big gamblers, an' you ain't got gals enough fer the others. Take Nolan, down to the Nugget, he's got eighteen gals. I slipped him in

six fresh from Seattle on the last boat, an' a few days ago I fetched up three from down Forty-mile way. You got floor enough fer twelve, fifteen couples, an' you ain't got only four, five gals an' they're second raters that's been here till folks is tired of the sight of 'em."

"They ain't so bad lookin'," defended Cuter. "'Couse, if I had some more— Too late to figger on that this winter, though."

"Oh, I don't know. 'Cordin' to how bad you want 'em. 'Course, you couldn't git none in from the outside, but I know where I could git holt of three, four, down-river." The man paused as though a sudden thought had struck him, and leaned closer, resting his elbows on the bar. "Say—I know where's one that'd knock yer eye out! Run you up into money, though—you bet. If you had four, five more—an' her! Nolan could jest as well close up. Purtiest thing y'e'ver clapped an eye on—ain't a day over twenty—black eyes—and a bushel of black hair. Never seen a minin' camp in her life——"

"Never seen a camp!"

"Never seen nothin'."

"Where is she?"

"That's my business. She lives way back off the river. Old 'Dolph Moreau's gal. Hell of a trip to go out there an' fetch her back. Take it from me—she ain't

never been nowhere's nor seen nothin'."

Malone shook his head. "I ain't huntin' trouble."

"'Trouble—hell!" sneered the other.

"When Crego

delivers, he delivers 'em broke."



SCARCE, two steps away Rene Medard's deft fingers fumbled the shuffle. A card dropped to the floor and his chair rasped as he stooped to recover it. Both men turned quickly at the sound, and as the dealer returned the card to the deck, his eyes met the eyes of Crego. For a moment their glances held unwaver-

ing. Then the big man spoke, a note of truculence in his voice. "Didn't see you up to the bar when I bought a drink."

"No." Rene spread his cards, scanned them carefully, and made a shift.

"Say, Crego's talkin' to you! Don't you ever take a drink?"

"Only with friends," Crego's eyes blazed but the dealer was studying his cards. Just the suspicion of a smile quivered at the corners of the thin lips.

Cuter Malone, sensing the possibilities, spoke. "About that little deal we was talkin' over—come on in here an' mebbe we kin fix it up."

Without a word Crego stepped around the bar and followed the proprietor through a door that led into a room of which only Malone held the key.

III

THE ethics of Rene Medard were of Rene Medard's own fashioning. He scorned to turn a dishonest card. He knew all the tricks of the crooked gambler, but refused to use them, except against the crook himself. He would bet on anything, carefully calculating the odds. He would stake money on a fixed race, but would have nothing to do with the fixing. His wits were his sole capital, and no bit of information was too trivial to be stowed away for future use. That this information was at times obtained by questionable methods bothered him not at all.

Thus it was, having noted that Cuter Malone held numerous conferences in the little back room, he had contrived to bore a hole through the partition, which hole was convenient to the ear of one seated behind the faro table over which he presided, and was concealed behind a gaudily lithographed calendar. Upon the other side it was concealed by a heavy iron safe.

So, when the door closed behind the two, Rene yawned, tossed his cards upon the table and tilted his chair against the wall. The piano was silent, and in silence the bartender mouthed his cigar.

From beyond the partition sounded the voice of Crego "Cocky kid you got dealin'. Where'd you pick him up. He's too damn' slick lookin'. Needs mussin' up a little."

"Name's Medard——"

"Medard! Not Rene Medard!" Crego's voice sounded almost thin.

"Yes, but——"

"My Gawd, an' I was jest about to reach fer him! Why'n hell didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you what? I seen you was goin' to rough him up. That's why I butted in. When I found out Stoell tried to hire him I give him a job. If he's good enough fer Stoell, he's good enough fer me. He's got the name of bein' square, an' I sort of like him. He ain't no booze fighter—spends all his time when he ain't workin' er sleepin' out on the river with them dogs of his'n. Quiet, an' minds his own business. I didn't like to see him git hurt."

"What you doin'—kiddin' me?"

"Kiddin' you? What do you mean?"

"Didn't you hear about Tanana?"

"What about it?"

"Couple of drunken soldiers made a killin' in one of the games an' started back to the fort. Four pretty hard hombres undertook to rob 'em. Three of 'em had guns an' the other had a club. This here Medard come along jest as they knocked one soldier down with a sled stake. They said they was four shots so clost together they sounded like one. Next mornin' they was four funerals. An' me figgerin' on jerkin' him acrost the table! I've had clost calls, but never no closter'n that one. I'm a gambler, all right—but I want a run fer my money. There's one feller that Crego don't want none of his meat! I might of known by his eyes—did you see his eyes when he looked at me?"

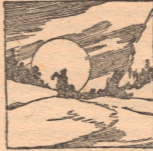
A smile flickered on the lips of Rene Medard. The smile faded, and for half an hour he listened with a face as expressionless as the lithographed face on the wall.

When the two returned to the room, Rene was spreading his cards. He did not look up, and a moment later the door slammed behind Crego.

IV

RENE MEDARD camped for the night. It was his fourth night on the trail. Tomorrow he would cross the divide onto the headwaters of the Blackstone. He unharnessed and fed his dogs, cooked

and ate his supper, and set a pot of rice and meat aboil. Rene believed in cooked



food for his dogs. As the pot boiled he lay back on his blankets and smoked cigarettes. Idly he wondered who was dealing faro at Cuter Malone's. He won-

dered what Cuter had said when he hadn't showed up the evening following the visit of Crego to the Klondike Palace. He wondered why he was here, camping in the scrub spruce when he might be dealing faro in warmth and comfort. He smiled cynically as the words of Cuter Malone recurred to him—"minds his own business." Whose business was he minding now? What business was it of his—to be camped on the trail of Crego?

"He could have brought up a dozen of them, or a hundred, from down-river," he muttered, "and it would have been all the same to me. One camp or another, it makes no difference. But going out into the hills—after a girl like her—that does make a difference."

Crego had told Malone that the girl would be alone at the cabin on the Blackstone, as her father, 'Dolph Moreau, the trapper, would be at Fort McPherson for the winter trading. Medard pictured the terror of the girl when Crego, probably in the guise of a traveler who had lost his way, should gain entrance to that cabin. Once more the cynical smile twisted his lips. "Rene Medard, gambler—known where he is known, as a hater of women—on the trail in defence of a woman he has never seen or heard of until four nights ago! Of such stuff are reputations made! It is to laugh."

He replenished his fire, and as the red sparks showered upward from the rim rocks came a long-drawn howl, and another, and another. "Wolves," he muttered. "Game is scarce in the hills. As the belly-need grows greater, the spirit grows bolder." He stirred the mess in the pot, slipped between his blankets, and slept.

NEXT morning he breakfasted leisurely. There was no hurry. Crego had borrowed Cufér Malone's dogs—a fine team, but nowise comparable to his own. He had no wish to overtake Crego on the trail. He must come upon the man at precisely the right moment. It is no crime to plot a thing. Only in the overt act that is the culmination of the plotting lies the crime. A man's nerve might fail. Or at the last moment, his better nature might assert itself. Any man, even Crego, should have his chance.

The wind rose, grew fitful, coming in icy gusts that whipped the smoke of the fire now here, now there. From the peaks of the mountains toward the divide, long streamers of snow dust floated against the sky. Even here in the valley icy particles were in the air, and as Rene harnessed his dogs, the storm thickened. And hour later he could not see the mountains, and the trail of Crego was obliterated. The air was filled with a fine powdery snow. Ten feet ahead of the lead dog the world was a whirling white void.

Rene did not know that the head of the North Fork branched. The walls of the narrowing valley were invisible as, with head lowered to the storm, he held to the bed of the river. Hours later upon the edge of darkness he camped. He had not reached the divide.

Next day the storm subsided, the air cleared of snow, and Rene pushed on confused by the innumerable branches of the river. Several of these he followed to their source, only to be confronted by insurmountable barriers of rock and snow. Which one led to the divide? Which one had Crego taken?

THE following day he spent hours in vainly brushing the new snow from forks of creeks, hoping to discover the man's trail. That night he cursed himself for a fool. "If I'd minded my own business, I'd be dealing the cards right now, instead of fighting these damned mountains for a pass that isn't here." Then the picture of a little cabin somewhere in those hills, old 'Dolph Moreau returning home from his trading trip to find the cabin empty, the terrified girl, the

bullying, gloating Crego. He shook his fist toward the mountains and aloud he cursed Crego with a vehemence that astounded himself. From the rims, and from the valley above and below, wolves howled. "They're getting thicker," he muttered. "He's nothing but a wolf, himself—a damned wolf!"

In the morning Rene evolved his plan. It was evident he had overrun Crego's trail at some fork of the river. Thereupon he headed back down river, stopping at each fork and carefully brushing away the new snow. In mid-afternoon he found what he sought, miles on the back trail. Crego had taken the right hand fork that had been invisible in the seething smother of snow.

Swinging his dogs up river, Rene crowded them to their utmost. They were great dogs, noted for speed and stamina, and they were well fed and fresh. Rene had purposely held them down for fear of overrunning Crego, and the workout had put them in the pink of condition.

THAT night he camped on the summit of the divide. And that night, for the first time, the wolves, crowding closer, showed themselves. Picking up his rifle, Rene fired at a shape that showed indistinct against a snowdrift sixty yards away. There was a rush of shadowy forms, and grim sounds rent the air as the pack ripped the quivering flesh from the bones and fought to the last mouthful. And with back hair abristle, and low throaty growls the dogs devoured their supper, pausing now and again to glare hatefully toward



the sounds that drifted in from beyond the circle of the fire-light. "Wolf eat wolf," muttered Rene, as he carefully cleaned his rifle. He shot no

more wolves.

Long before daylight Rene took the trail. Descending a gulch that gradually widened into a valley, he pushed on. The dogs were in good heart and he urged

them on, running lightly, with a grip on the tailrope. From time to time on the ridges, and far on the backtrail, he caught a fleeting glimpse of a gaunt gray shape.

At noon he camped for a hasty luncheon and pushed on. The low-hung sun sank behind a ridge, the long twilight faded, a few stars glowed wanly far overhead, other stars appeared, and yet others until the whole night-sky was studded with gleaming, glittering points of light. Rene tightened his grip on the tailrope and ran on. The daily run with the dogs on the river before going to work, had kept him fit, but even youth and trained muscles cannot run on indefinitely. A few more miles and he would camp.

IT GREW lighter. The stars paled and above a scrub-capped ridge the moon showed. Rounding a bend, Rene halted the dogs. A short distance ahead, from a thicket of low spruce, a flash of light had caught his eye. He stood staring toward the thicket that showed black against the snow in the white moonlight. Surely he could not have been mistaken! No, there it was again—a peculiar light, lurid, fleeting, like the thin ghost of a flame in the dense blackness of the scrub. Again it appeared and a shower of red sparks shot upward. Then it was that Rene guessed its source—flame from a stovepipe that did duty as the chimney of a cabin.

Taking his place ahead of the dogs, he approached cautiously, swinging to the side of the narrow valley into the shadow. It might be the cabin of a trapper. And it might be—Crego. The thin lips set firm. If it was Crego he was coming back. Halting his dogs on the edge of the scrub, Rene proceeded stealthily. He was in luck that Crego had borrowed Malone's dogs—he knew each by name and they knew him. His own dogs had been kenneled with them for the month he had been employed at the Klondike Palace.

He could see the outline of the cabin beneath its roof piled high with snow. Here and there a faint streak of light showed where the chinking had fallen from between the logs. The cabin, like most of its kind in the far outlands, was windowless. A low growl greeted him,

dark shapes arose from the snow, and the next moment Cooter Malone's seven big huskies were crowding about him, soundlessly welcoming him as a friend.

Pushing his way past them, Rene knelt in the snow and applied his eye to a broad crack between two logs. The interior, lighted by means of a kerosene lantern, was devoid of any furniture save a pole bunk built against the wall, a rickety pole contraption that evidently served as a table, and the dilapidated stove in which Crego had kindled a roaring fire.

THE two occupants of the cabin had evidently just arrived. A girl, bound hand and foot, sat upon a bed roll with her back against the wall, while Crego busied himself with the contents of several packs that lay strewn about the floor. The man spoke, his voice half sneering, half conciliatory in tone. "Good thing I stopped on my way in an' stacked up some nice dry wood in here. Figgered we'd put in the first night here. Wood enough to keep us warm an' cozy all night, eh? I'll have supper cooked in a little bit, an' then you'll feel better."

"Untie me!" demanded the girl, and although from his position Rene could not see her face, he noted that the voice was low and throaty, and vibrant with suppressed passion. "I—I'll kill you!"

"Sure, ontie you so you kin kill me, eh? That's a good un. I'll ontie you right enough, when I get damn' good an' ready. An' that'll be when I've got the grub all cooked, an' nothin' else on my mind. An' you ain't a-goin' to do no killin'. You might think you be, but you ain't. You tried it onct, an' it didn't work. They ain't no use in your ra'r'in' up an' raisin' hell. It won't git you nothin' but the worst of it. I've handled spunky ones before—tamed 'em, too, every time. I've got you, an' when I git 'em I hang onto 'em till I git ready to git red of 'em. They ain't no use figgerin' on help from old 'Dolph. He ain't due back from McPherson fer a week or more, an' by that time the trail will be gone. He'll figger you met up with some accident on the trapline—won't never figger you've crossed the Yukon."

As he talked, the man sliced some

pork, threw some flour into a pan, added baking powder and grease and proceeded to mix baking powder bread.

THE girl had remained silent, and noting that the door on the opposite side of the cabin was held shut only by means of a stick of firewood, Rene slipped away, drew his outfit into the scrub, unharnessed his dogs, and passed silently around the cabin.

Pausing for a moment he removed his mittens, then pushing the door open, stepped into the room. Crego whirled from the stove at the sound—whirled, and then froze rigid as one petrified when he found himself staring straight into the dark eyes of Rene Medard who stood beside the table above which hung the kerosene lantern. For tense moments they stood thus in silence. Outside, beyond the scrub a wolf howled, and another took it up, and another until the horrid ululation filled



the little valley from rim to rim. Even Rene Medard felt the hair prickle at the base of his skull. Crego shuddered visibly. On the bedroll the girl gave no sign, but sat staring wide-eyed, as at an apparition.

Still staring into the dark eyes, Crego's mouth opened, closed, then opened again as he found voice. "God—they wolves!"

"Your brothers—calling." Rene's voice was low, almost caressing in its softness. It reminded Crego of the way his fingers had caressed the cards as he dealt his interminable solitaire.

"What you mean—brothers? Callin'?"

"They are calling, Crego. And you are going. You are going just as you are. The knife in your hand you may keep. But you are going out to them—there in the moonlight. Even now they are waiting for you."

WITH an oath Crego lunged forward, knife upraised. And once again, he froze in his tracks. Rene Medard had made no perceptible motion, yet

in his right hand, raised scarce above his hip a blue-black revolver covered Crego's heart. Instantly, into Crego's brain flashed the story of the four who would have robbed the drunken soldiers in Tanana. His mouth shaped a sickly grin. "What's the big idee? I didn't mean nothin', back there in Dawson—only kiddin', that's all. I didn't know you was you. They ain't no reason we shouldn't be friends. We're both workin' fer the same boss, you might say—I'm makin' this trip fer Cuter. Them's his dogs I got out there. He loant 'em to me. They're faster'n mine. I know they all say how you're a hater of women, but look at this one. No man livin' with red blood in him could hate one like her. Tell you what I'll do; show you I'm right, I'll go half-an-half with you, Cuter, he's payin' through the nose fer her."

Not a muscle of Rene's face moved, nor did his voice lose one whit of its gentle softness. "It is time for you to go," he said.

Crego's eyes widened, and he seemed to pale perceptibly. "What—what d'ye mean—go?" he faltered, as his glance shifted from the dark eyes to the gun, and back to the eyes again.

"It is this way, Crego. I overheard you tell Malone that you are a gambler. You lied. You are no gambler. No gambler worthy the name would wipe the mud off his boots on you. You're a wolf. You're worse than a wolf—you're the slime in the bottom of the human pit. But at your own valuation, you are a gambler. I should kill you where you stand, but I had rather not. I am offering you a gambler's chance. You can walk out that door, just as you are. That's all."

"Good Gawd! Them wolves! No grub, no blankets, no outfit! It's five, six days to the river if I had grub! I wouldn't have one chanct in a thousan'."

RENE pointed toward the girl. "Just that one chance more than she would have had if your rotten plan had carried through."

"I won't go; I'll be damned if I do! It's murder, that's what it is—murder!"

Rene shrugged. "As you please." Slipping his hand beneath his parka he unsnapped his watch and laid it upon the

table. "It is four minutes to ten," he said. "At exactly ten o'clock I am going to shoot at you from where I stand. I will not miss. I shall kill you surely, and swiftly—which is better than you deserve. It is an unpleasant duty, but a duty none the less. It will save others—like her. You have your choice—swift, certain death here; or what you may find on the trail. You have three minutes."

Crego stood, as though weighing his chances—started to speak, but no words came from the sagging jaw. He stared wildly into the dark, hard eyes that returned the stare from features emotionless as a stone. His glance shifted to the gun and to the delicate, finely chiseled fingers that curled about its butt. He knew that Rene Medard would not miss.

"You have two minutes."

From her place upon the bedroll the girl stifled a hysterical cry. Rene turned his eyes upon her, and she covered her face with her arms and sobbed.

"You have one minute."

Crego's voice rose shrill with terror. "My Gawd, I can't stay an' git shot down like that!" Rene answered nothing, and slowly dragging his feet, Crego moved toward the door. He stepped through, and whirled to shake his knife at Rene. "Damn you! Damn you to hell! If I git through I'll kill you!"

Rene bowed. "That, too, is a gambler's chance." Gun in hand, he followed to the edge of the scrub. In vain Crego tried to call Malone's dogs to follow. Then he turned, and Rene watched him disappear in the moonlight up-river. As he turned back into the cabin the horrid chorus of the hills broke out anew, drowning the low sobbing of the girl.

V

SWIFTLY Rene cut the thongs that bound the girl and taking her hands in his own, examined them intently. "Had

sense enough to tie you without cutting off circulation," he said. "It's a trick."

"Who are you?" she asked, and Rene felt a strange new thrill shoot through him as he gazed into the wondrous eyes upraised to his own. "And how did you happen to come here? So few people come to the Blackstone—ever. Is it that the good God sent you to me?"

The eyes were eager, questioning, and the red lips were parted as she waited for him to speak. Rene, trained by his profession to mask his emotion, felt himself suddenly confused. "Well—maybe some might call it that. It's according to how you believe about such things, I suppose. The fact is, I happened to hear that scum bargaining to deliver you to another of his ilk, and I followed along to catch him at it. I got lost in the storm and wasted a couple of days." He paused suddenly and when he spoke again, his voice sounded hard. "Tell me—when did you leave your home?"

"This morning. He came when I was getting breakfast, and told me my father had been hurt and wanted me. I knew that he lied, and reached for my rifle, when he leaped on me. He tied my hands and feet, threw me on his sled, and came here. He was in a great hurry, and we did not camp at noon. We had been here only a short time when you came."

Rene laughed lightly. "Well, you're all right now. All is well that ends well, they say. And now let's get supper. I'm hungry. Did considerable traveling myself today."

"But you have not told me your name!"

"My name is Rene Medard."

"And mine is Marie Moreau. And now we are, what you call, introduced."

"Yes," smiled Rene, "now we're introduced. And now we shall eat. The bread will soon be done."

HE THREW a handful of tea into the pot and rummaged in Crego's outfit for cups and knives. The girl rose to help, and as she gained her feet a sharp cry escaped her and she would have fallen had not Rene caught her. His arms were about her, and at the feel of her firm young body against his own the strange thrill once more seemed to vibrate



through every fibre of his being. One swift moment he held her, then carefully lowered her to the bedroll.

Dropping to his knees he drew off her moccasins and vigorously chaffed her feet. "Try to move your toes," he commanded, and when she complied he breathed a sigh of relief. "I thought possibly they were frozen. But they're not—only numb and cramped from being held in one position. They'll be all right in a few minutes. Stay where you are and move them as much as you can. You've got to start the circulation. I'll attend to supper."

TEN minutes later the girl crossed the room unaided, and, lacking chairs or benches, they stood beside the table and ate. The meal over, Rene unrolled Crego's blankets and robes and spread them upon the single bunk, while in silence the girl washed the few dishes. This done, he picked up the ax and, stepping outside, returned a few moments later with a stout bar of young spruce which he fitted to the crotched brackets of the door jamb. "There," he approved, laying the bar aside. "When you drop that bar into place you can sleep without fear of interference."

"But you?" she asked quickly. "Where will you sleep?"

"I have my bed outside."

"But—the wolves—and that terrible man!"

Rene laughed lightly. "Surely those are not the words of one who has lived her life in the North. You know the wolves will not harm one in full vigor. And as for Crego—he will not come back." He paused and, stepping to the man's rifle, inspected it, and threw a fresh cartridge into the chamber. He placed it beside the bunk. "If he should," he said, and his face was very grave. "If he should return, and—anything should happen to me, do not parley with him for one moment. Shoot him as you would shoot a wolf. That bar will give you time. Shoot through the door—between the logs—anywhere—but shoot to kill! I know what I am talking about."

The girl nodded slowly, her eyes meeting his unflinching.

"You are a good man. In my prayers

I shall ask the good God to keep you safe."

"Thank you," answered Rene Medard gravely. "Good night." And the next moment he had passed out the door. He heard the bar drop into place, and for a long, long time he stood, his eyes on the distant rim and the silvery moon beyond. But his eyes did not see the rim, only the face of the girl in the moon. Then he loosened the pack from his sled, and as he slipped between his blankets, faint and far, from the direction of the divide, sounded the howl of a wolf. Others joined in until the distant rims reechoed the eerie chorus.

VI

IT WAS daylight when Rene awoke to see smoke streaming from the stove-pipe of the cabin. When he entered the door, the girl greeted him with a smile. Never, thought the man, had he seen a



woman so beautiful—the rich coloring of her cheeks, the deftly caught-up mass of dark hair, the eyes with wondrous liquid depths that gazed straight into his own, the full rounded curves of her body, every movement of which bespoke youth and health, and the consummate joy of living.

"See, I have breakfast all ready."

"Surely," he said, "you did not wait for me! Why didn't you wake me up?"

"You were tired. You had a hard day on the trail. There can be no need to hurry—now."

"No," answered Rene, "no need to hurry—now."

Breakfast was eaten almost in silence, and in silence Rene packed his outfit. Crego's outfit he cached. When all was ready Marie pulled on her parka and stepped out into the snow. Rene headed his dogs down-river, on the back-trail of Crego and the girl.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

Rene glanced at her in surprise. "Why,

to take you back, of course."

"Back—where?"

"Why, home—where you live, where you belong."

THE girl seemed about to speak, thought better of it, and together they worked the outfit out of the scrub and onto the snow-covered ice of the river. They made good time on the wind-packed trail, the girl astonishing Rene who was himself an expert dog racer. She scorned to ride the sled, but swung along, mile after mile at his side, running easily—tirelessly.

It was late when they reached the cabin far down the Blackstone. Six dogs lay dead before the door, their blood staining the snow in crimson splashes. The dogs of Cuter Malone, running free, minced up, stiff legged, hair a-bristle and sniffed at the carcasses. Settling on to his haunches the leader pointed his muzzle to the moon, and gave vent to a long-drawn, bell-like howl, then straightway he turned tail and sped away on the back-trail with the rest of the team at his heels. Soon they were but specks in the moonlight.

"He shot them just before we started—my dogs—while I lay helpless upon the sled." There were tears in the girl's eyes, as she stepped past the dogs and pushed open the door of the cabin.

A light shone through the window, and while she kindled a fire and set about the preparation of supper, Rene dragged the dead dogs from sight, covered the blood stains with fresh snow, unharnessed and fed his own dogs and fastened them in the warm, moss floored kennel he found behind the cabin.

As he finished, Marie called him to supper. "Four days ago I was lucky and shot a moose. I had a nice stew all cooked when—when he came. And I had bread all made—good sourdough bread, not the baking powder stuff that he made."

SEATED across the oilcloth-covered table, Rene's eyes took in the details of the cabin—whitewashed walls, curtains of bright calico at the two windows, a gaudy calendar or two, and a lithograph

of the Christ upon the cross. Two doorways, with blankets in lieu of doors, gave evidently into sleeping rooms. A home-made chest of drawers, chairs, also home made, but comfortable—and cleanliness, absolute, immaculate.

Marie set a plate heaped high with savory stew before him. "I hope you will like it. I think it is good."

"I'll love it!" he answered, and flushed at the vehemence of his reply. He looked up into her face with a quick, boyish smile and the blood seemed pounding his temples as the wondrous eyes smiled into his own.

She filled her own plate, and seated herself across the board. "Your eyes," she said, "I like them when you smile like that. But oh, so terrible they were, as you looked at him—back there in the cabin. So hard, and so cold, and so terrible! And your face—so calm and so still that only your lips moved when you spoke to him. It was then I cried out. I could not help it. I think, for a moment, I was sorry for that man—for the soul-terror that showed in his eyes as he stood staring into your face. You must never look at me that way, or I shall die."

Rene answered gravely, "No, I shall never look at you that way—" He paused abruptly, and once more he felt the hot blood rush to his face. He, Rene Medard, hater of woman, had almost added "dear!"

THERE was a long silence, during which the girl refilled both plates. Then Rene lighted a cigarette and regarded her through a thin blue haze of smoke. "Why did he kill the dogs?" he asked.

"He said when my father returned from Fort McPherson he would have no fresh dogs to take up the chase. He did not know that my father is dead."

"Dead!" The word rang like a shot.

"Yes, he died in the fall. It was here, in the chest, a great pain, and then for days a difficulty in breathing—pneumonia, I think. I did what I could. But he died. Then I buried him, there at the bend of the river."

Rene was staring wide-eyed as the girl

told her simple narrative. "But you have not lived here alone—all this time!"

"Yes, all alone. There was nothing else I could do. The traps must be set out. I did not go to McPherson for the Christ-



mas trading, because we had laid in food enough for two, and I know it would last me till spring. I could not afford the time. I am not as good a

trapper as my father, and if I am to have enough fur in the spring to buy supplies for another year, I must work hard at the traps."

"You poor kid!" Rene felt a thickening in his throat, and his words sounded hoarse and unnatural in his ears.

"What is that?" The girl, too, had noticed, and her eyes were questioning.

Rene cleared his throat harshly. "I say it's too bad. You've had a tough break, and it's—it's too damned bad! I'm sorry—awfully sorry. You don't deserve a run of luck like that—you're game clear through. You're fine!" He rose abruptly and turned to the peg from which depended his parka. "I—I'll be turning in, now. I want to think."

She slipped past him and stood with her back to the door. "You are not going away?" The dark eyes were looking straight into his own.

"No—that is—not——"

SHE took a step nearer and laid her two hands upon his shoulders. He saw that the dark eyes were very near to tears, and that the parted lips trembled ever so slightly. Then words came in a torrent, an outpouring torrent that was the bursting flood-gate of a soul. "I do not want you to go—ever! It is the good God who has sent you to me! You are good—like my father and Father Giroux and McTavish, the factor at Fort McPherson! Stay with me here. We will trap, and we will live here always—just we two. I know—I have read of it in books. It is love! I loved my father, and

the good Father Giroux, but this is not a love like that. I can feel it in here—in my heart, and in all my body. You are my man, and I will be your woman until we die. And you love me, too! In your eyes I have seen it, this great love. You are fighting against this love, but you cannot kill it. I am for you, and you are for me. It is meant to be so. It is stronger than we are—did not the good God send you to me? They call you a hater of women, and I am glad! Me you cannot hate—because in your eyes I have seen this great love."

THE words ended in a low sob, as the man's arms closed about her, and she felt herself drawn close against his pounding heart. Then, his lips were upon hers, and his voice low and vibrant with passion was in her ears. "Yes, darling, I do love you. I loved you the moment I saw you, only I—I didn't know, at first, what it was. Then, when I did know I—I was—afraid——"

"Afraid! Afraid of—me?" Her eyes were upturned, laughing into his own.

"No, darling, not of you—of—of—oh, I can't explain. It's all so new, so big and so wonderful. We must think it out."

"And you will stay—always?"

"First, dear, we've got to get married. Where is this Father Giroux?"

"Oh, he is far away, very far. Clear down on the Athabasca. It would take weeks to go to the mission. I have never made the trip in winter—only in summer, by canoe."

"All right, then. There is a priest in Dawson—two or three of them. We hit for Dawson in the morning."

"Dawson! Is that not very far? And—oh I do not want to go to Dawson. I do not want you to go. That man, if he got through, he will kill you. He said he would kill you!"

Rene laughed. "He's all bluff and bluster, dear. He'll never kill me. The minute he hears I'm back in Dawson, he'll burn the snow to get away from there—if he got through."

"And will we come back here?"

"Well, that's one of the things we've got to work out. You see, I know noth-

ing of trapping. I'm a gambler."

"A gambler? What is that? It was of a gambler you spoke to that man."

"I make my living at cards. I have been dealing faro in a Dawson dive. But that's ended. I will never turn another card for Cuter Malone. I'd fire a steamboat first. Maybe Stoell will give me a job, got to, now there's two of us!"

THE girl's lips were smiling, and she was regarding him with a puzzled frown. "I do not know a thing you are talking about—broke, and faro, and dives, and turning cards! Why should one pay you money for turning cards?"

Rene laughed. "You'll catch onto it all. Men bet gold on the turn of a card, and some one has got to turn them. The dealer is paid for his work—salary and commission. Maybe I'll quit, sometime."

"But—why should you quit? Is the work very hard? Do they pay you much gold?"

"I make good money. The work is not hard. It had always suited me. I love it. Only—I can't just explain that, either. But some day you'll know. It don't make any difference in a camp like Dawson—now. But if things pan out the way they're headed Dawson will be a city and—well there'll be lots of women there; good women and I don't want you to have to ask odds of any of them."

"Ask odds? What is ask odds?"

"I mean that I want my wife to be able to look any one of them in the eye and tell them to go to hell!"

"But I do not understand! Why should I tell the good women to go to hell?"

Rene laughed happily, and hugged her close. "That is just a way of speaking, dear—you'll understand it all soon enough. You have always lived here; how will you like to live in Dawson?"

The girl answered him gravely. "I have always lived here, except for the time I have lived at the mission. But I do not want to live here now. I want to live where you live—always. I do not care where I live, if I have you. We will have our home in Dawson, is that not so?"

"Yes, my darling, that is so!" cried Rene, crushing her to him.

VII

IT WAS the day after his wedding that Rene Medard met Cuter Malone on the street in Dawson. "Where'n hell you been?" asked Cuter. "An' when you goin' back to work? I ain't had no play to speak of sence you laid off."

"I'm going to work tonight—at Stoell's."

"Stoell's! Seems Stoell's got all the business now! Don't I pay you enough?"

"You couldn't pay me enough, Malone, to hire me to work for you again. I'm glad I did work for you though, damned glad."

"What you got agin me? What's Stoell givin' you that I didn't?"

"For one thing, Stoell don't traffic in women."

"What 'ya mean—traffic? There you go about the women! What d'you hate women fer? If you'd step out an' git you a woman——"

Something in Rene's eyes caused the



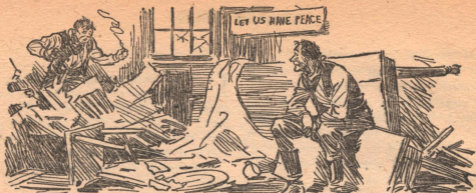
man to stop abruptly and stare into his face. "That's just exactly what I did, Malone. She's the most beautiful woman I ever saw. She's never seen a camp be-

fore. She's never been anywhere, nor seen anything. She's not a day over twenty—black eyes, and a bushel of black hair. She lived way back off the river. Her father's name was 'Dolph Moreau. She is my wife!"

As the man talked, Cuter Malone stared spell-bound into his face and a look of terror crept into his eyes. Unconsciously he took a step backward, and his jaw moved uncertainly before he found voice.

"Whur's—whur's Crego?" he stammered. "He's got my dogs."

Rene's eyes stared straight into his, as they had stared into Crego's eyes in the little cabin on the Blackstone. "Crego? Why, I haven't seen Crego in quite some time. And your dogs, Malone—your dogs may be running loose in the hills."



A MUNICIPAL FEUD

By ERNEST HAYCOX

Author of "Bound South," "Starlight and Gunflame," etc.

WHEN ONE DESCRIBES A DESERT TOWN TO ITS ENTHUSIASTIC INHABITANTS AS A "SHRIVELLED UP GOPHER HOLE," PERHAPS IT IS JUST AS WELL TO PUT YOURSELF RIGHT WITH THEM LATER ON BY STAYING FOR THEIR FIGHT WITH THE RIVAL METROPOLIS, WHICH, IT WAS FELT, WOULD STEAL ANYTHING THAT WASN'T RIVETTED TO THE LANDSCAPE. BUT WHEN STEPS COME TO BE TAKEN FOR CIVIC HARMONY, THEN'S THE TIME TROUBLE IS HELL-BENT AROUND THE CORNER—SO TWO WELL TRIED PARTNERS DRIFTED SOUTH

JOE BREEDLOVE and his newly found partner, Indigo Bowers, halted on the ridge to survey the country below and beyond them.

The chariot of dawn thundered out of the east and every peak and bluff stood in clear outline, flaming with the careless interweaving of the raw primary colors; silver sparkled along the creek bottoms, scarlet and chrome ran side by side on the butte faces. Away in the remote distance a bright blue sky fused with the earth's dun margin. It was like a bird's-eye map splashed with pigment and Joe's eyes kindled at the sight of so much prodigal beauty.

"Providence rises, and the earth is filled with light," he murmured, rolling a brown paper cigarette.

"It just looks like another hot day to me," grumbled Indigo Bowers. Indigo was a thin, undersized bundle of nerves. Upon his wizened face—where little wrinkling crow's feet loved to dwell—was an abiding distrust of the world as he found it. His past life was a page written with the red ink of battle, feud and sudden violence, for Indigo was constitutionally unable to keep out of a quarrel, whether of his own

making or somebody else's.

"Take the beam out o' yore eye, Indigo," said Joe, smiling. No man on earth could withstand that smile; it was the shrewd, tolerant smile of a man who very well knew how devious were the ways of a wicked world and yet would not let that knowledge sour him. Joe Breedlove was tall and lean and as bronzed as the cigarette papers which came attached to his sack of smokin' tobacco. The hair showing beneath his stetson was prematurely silvered, his eyes were quite blue and mirroring an easy-going philosophy of existence.

"I ain't got nothin' in my eyes but sand an' gravel," retorted Indigo, "and I've swallered enough alkali water to corrode a boiler."

They were a strangely mated pair and the wonder of all wonders was that they managed to endure each other. Joe Breedlove had met Indigo a month back on the trail when Indigo was in one of his characteristic difficulties—being chased by a posse. Joe had helped him out of it and a little later had in turn been given an assisting hand by Indigo. After that some chemical affinity had drawn them together.

And for a month they had ridden southward, bound nowhere in particular, with nothing much in their minds.

JOE BREEDLOVE stretched a long arm to the southeast. "Over yonder is a town. I was raised in it. There's a piece of business I've got to finish up. Let's ride."

"Wait a minute," said Indigo. "What town is it?"

"Big Elk."

Indigo shook his head decisively. "I can't go there."

"Why not?" asked Joe.

"I was there once," explained Indigo, and for some reason he felt called upon to draw his pointed features into a poker expression. He saw Joe grinning at him and he flared up. "Laugh, you idiot! You know blamed well I'm a peaceful man. I nev' do butt my head into trouble unless I'm invited. But it is shorely funny how folks pick on me."

"Well, that makes the fifth town hand-runnin' we've had to circle because you'd been in 'em before," mused Joe Breedlove. "If this keeps up we'll have to go east o' the Mississippi. It's a mercy how you can develop friction in these municipal corporations. They see you an' they start shootin'."

"I'm not a hand to be picked on," started Indigo with dignity.

"Guess we've got to separate for a couple days, then," decided Joe. "I've got a chore to finish in Big Elk. Supposin' I meet you here two sleeps from now?"

"If it's a fight you aim to finish," began Indigo wistfully. "I wouldn't mind travelin' along with you—"

"No, it's peaceful."

"All right, then," decided Indigo. "Two sleeps from now, at this very spot. I'll mosey around somewhere and fill up on ham an' eggs."

Joe Breedlove turned down the ridge side. "Try to keep out of trouble, Indigo."

"I won't start nothin'," promised Indigo. "But I won't avoid nothin', either."

THE last part of the sentence was mumbled to Indigo's own self. He watched Joe descend the slope and thread

a patch of pines; then he turned toward the east and began a day's wandering across a series of blistering hot upland pastures. At noon he stopped to eat a cold snack and inhale a brown paper cigarette, feeling somewhat bereaved. After this, he forged on, his horse casting longer shadows to the fore. And in that gloaming hour betwixt sunset and dark he sighted the scattered lights of a town bearing a little to his starboard quarter. He tacked and drifted down upon a street-end, stopping in the shadows. There was something Napoleonic in the manner he sat on his horse and memorized the relative positions of the livery stable, the hotel, the restaurant and the saloon—as well as the second story porches and those little niches of darkness wherein a man might find shelter in time of stress.

"Well," said he, advancing on the restaurant, "mebbe nothin' will happen."

He posted his horse and went inside, ordering a goodly portion of those comestibles which had haunted his imagination during the past month of wandering. He also ordered a brace of eggs—but he didn't eat them. He merely summoned them out of the kitchen so that he might not forget what eggs looked like. The rest of the meal vanished and was duly paid for, though Indigo never got so engrossed in his feeding as not to observe certain other patrons closely examining him. It was not a new experience to Indigo; he stared grimly at the bottom of his coffee cup and reminded himself that Joe had bade him be peaceful. Having polished off a second mug of coffee, he repaired to the sidewalk and aimed his footsteps toward the mellow lights of the saloon.

"It don't tickle my humor none to be gawped at," he grumbled.

"Just a minute, brother."

He had arrived in front of the saloon. A pair of fellows slipped through the shadows, flanking him. He saw others standing on the porch, watching this move.

"Step inside a minute. We'd like to pass a few words."

"My time is my own," stated Indigo, with commendable restraint. "If you got anything on yore chest, boost it off."

"Step inside."

"Why should I?"

"Why shouldn't yuh?" Something unmistakably metallic kissed Indigo's back-bone. Always recognizing the moral force of the drop, Indigo stoked his temper with a few inflammable thoughts and passed into the hotel room, to be quickly surrounded by a small crowd. One particular individual with General Grant whiskers and a pair of gimlet eyes addressed him bluntly. "Where you from?"

THIS sort of thing touched Indigo to the quick. "You kinda annoy me," said he. "Yore eyes interfere and yore nose is too short to reach into my business. Back up."

The self-elected spokesman worked his jaws for a moment and looked significantly about. "It won't help you none to stir up the vinegar," he warned Indigo. "I'm askin' you once more—where you from?"

Indigo cocked his head at an angle and began nodding it from side to side as the words poured out of him. "Listen, Albert

I've rode into better towns than this, but I don't recollect havin' entered any worser ones. You gents think yore pretty smart, pickin' on a stranger thisaway. Jus' let me assert yore tamperin' with high explosives. I'll pull this shebang to its rotten foundations an' let in a little air, which is some badly needed. You make me sick. What's the name of this shrivelled up gopher hole?"

"That's what I thought," boomed the inquisitor. "You got a lot of brass, comin' over here from Big Elk to spy us out! All right, boys, we'll hang a few signs on 'im and send 'im back with our compliments!"

"You shore will suffer from plague and sudden decimation if you do," stated Indigo severely. He saw that this agitated the crowd, which was curious, considering he had spoken only the literal truth. Civic pride was an unreasonable thing. "Just another imitation town," he continued. "I ain't from Big Elk if that will help you

any. The farther south I rides the worse these corporate junk heaps get. What're you so daggone proud about? I don't see nothin' to stimulate me none."

The spokesman stepped forward, shaking his finger. "You'll be humble——"

He was shoved aside by another man, who looked searchingly at Indigo. "Listen, ain't yore name Indigo Bowers?"

"Yeah," agreed Indigo sourly.

The new spokesman grinned. "Thought so. You was the fella that wrecked the Gloria saloon over at Big Elk, three years ago July."

"Well, they tried to pick on me," grumbled Indigo. "I ain't the kind to stand that."

The man turned to his partners. "We got him wrong. He ain't no Big Elk boy."

THE atmosphere clarified instantly.

Any man who had done property damage to Big Elk was among friends. They said as much; they shook his hand, they slapped him fraternally on the back. Indigo thawed, his volatile anger departed. "Well," said he, "Mebbe I was harsh. Jus' a mistake. I can see yo're gentlemen o' parts. What's the name o' this thrivin', hospitable little city?"

"Jingle Bell."

"And I takes it Big Elk has done you injury? Mebbe you'd like to return the same? Uhuh, the story is familiar to me. I nev' took no stock in Big Elk myself." He veered toward the gimlet-eyed gentleman who hung aloof, nursing suspicion. "What's yore name, mister?"

"Gabe Wales. I ain't ashamed to announce my handle."

"Neither'm I," was Indigo's over prompt answer. "Only, I'm modest."

Somebody discerned that the cordial atmosphere was about to be dissipated and stepped in to prevent it. "Let's all amble over to the Geyser an' gild the lily. Any man that can deflate a little hot air from that cross between a hog-waller and a rabbit hutch known as Big Elk is certainly deservin' of——"

The speech was neatly sheared in the middle by a high screech and the accent of a revolver shot. A cavalcade poured through the street, the furies broke loose;



guns flamed, the hotel windows tinkled with breaking glass. To a man the cohorts of Jingle Bell rushed toward the exits of the hostelry and moved in the direction of the Geyser, which seemed to be the point of attack.

Indigo stood alone, greatly agitated with conflicting emotions. The sound of battle rang up and down the narrow thoroughfare, the smell of burnt powder was in the air. Indigo sniffed it and shook his head. It seemed a shame for him to be idle. "I'd ought to lend a hand. Still, nobody invited me."

There was a noise in the adjacent dining room and presently Gabe Wales crept out, a gun swinging from each fist. Yet though he was laden with the armaments of war, he seemed singularly lacklustre. Indigo surveyed him up and down and with that glance had completely measured and docketed the man. "Wasn't you the fella who wanted to fight, a minute ago?"

"I'm protectin' the hotel," explained Wales taciturnly.

"It's yore hotel, huh?"

"I got an equity in it," was the morose rejoinder.

"You got an equity in a damsite hotter place, too," jeered Indigo, and forthwith ran from the hostelry. He had feared he was too late, but a glance dispelled the notion. Down in front of the Geyser, men and horses were jammed in a whirlpool of conflict. Jets of light traced across the darkness; voices shrilled defiance and counter defiance. And from sundry rending, smashing sounds, it was plain that the Geyser was being competently wrecked. Half of the invading party was inside, the other half standing guard along the street, while the outraged citizenry of Jingle Bell sniped at them from all angles. Indigo added his falsetto crow to the confusion and looked about him with the air of a tactician. "Why stand in the street an' get a lead irrigation?" he wanted to know. "These boys must be green."

HE CAME against four Jingle Bell men huddled in a patch of shadows, firing alternately. "Foller me," said Indigo. "We'll blast 'em. Come on." He ducked along the street until he reached a rickety

four-by-four pillar supporting one end of a second story porch. Up this he shinned, with the Jingle Bell cohorts behind. "Now," breathed Indigo, "fly at it."

The entrance to the Geyser was across the street and a few doors westward. From the porch Indigo and his volunteers commanded a clear sweep of the indistinct horsemen. Methodically they went to work. This concentration of fire quite immediately disturbed the invaders; it likewise warned them that Jingle Bell was organizing its resistance. A yell called the wrecking party out of the saloon; they milled, throwing lead in all directions, and galloped into darkness. A last shot echoed from the open prairie and a last ribald yell ricocheted back. The men of Jingle Bell ventured into the Geyser. Indigo dropped from the porch and followed suit.

Indigo was not a hand much given to bothering about property values; he had broken many a plate mirror himself and scarred many a mahogany bar top. Nevertheless, the utter devastation wrought within the saloon absolutely shocked him. And while the crowd took nourishment, he stood gloomily aside and listened to the dictates of his conscience. It wasn't his fight, it wasn't his saloon—and it wasn't his town. Still—At that point Indigo's guardian angel turned a fresh page and reached for the red ink. He heard someone calling. Already his dash for the second story porch had been heralded and the townsmen were regarding him as if he had established himself as a definite personage. He moved up, drank, and continued to brood as the talk eddied over his head. There was a scuffle at the saloon door; in came a brace of men bearing a fellow somewhat wounded, yet still fighting back. The invading party had left at least one hostage.



"Throw him in the cooler," said Indigo. Meanwhile, he had something else on his mind.

"Where was those gents from, anyhow?"

"Oh, it's the Big Elk bunch again. It's

allus the Big Elk bunch."

"Well, I'll be singed," grunted Indigo.

"How long's this been goin' on?"

"Blamed if I know. It was a habit when I come here ten years ago."

"Think of that! An' when was the last time you returned the visit?"

The crowd had closed around him. Someone else took up the story. "Well, Indigo, Big Elk's sorter outgrown us. Las' time we sashayed over there was two years back, an' we like to got all killed. They're twice our number."

"Think of that!"

AT THIS point there was a diversion. Through the door galloped Gabe Wales, bellowing like a bull. The guns still dangled in his fists, his gimlet eyes were aflame with mighty wrath. "Come on, boys, le's go get 'im! Le's wipe Big Elk offen the map!"

The proper response was lacking. The assembled force of Jingle Bell looked toward Indigo. Indigo twitched his nose at sight of Wales and spoke soothingly. "If here ain't little Albert again."

Wales turned on him furiously. "I'll bet you know somethin' about that bunch!"

"Listen, Albert, you got an awful habit of comin' into the picture a little late. You was pickin' yore teeth last I saw, and not very anxious to find trouble, either."

"A dam' spy!"

"Hush," said Indigo. And, unaccountably, Gabe Wales hushed. Indigo's eyes were a bright green and wrinkles splayed across his face. Thus for a moment he surveyed the gentleman, then swung and ignored him. He addressed the crowd. "One thing's certain. They'll be back after the partner they left behind."

"Then," spoke up a bystander, "let's get busy to meet 'em."

"They won't come tonight," said Indigo. And the deliberateness of each word gave him immeasurable authority. "They've had ample for one night. Prob'ly they'll come tomorra."

"Then le's be ready to watch 'em arrive."

"There you go again," grunted Indigo. "The habit o' receivin' trouble has sorter grown on you. Look what they did! Why, it bruises a man's instincts. It shore does.

It makes me so mad I could fry aigs on my bald spot! If they's got to be a lot of furniture busted, why not mosey over an' bust some o' their furniture for a change?"

Silence. Indigo shook his head. "Yore thinkin' they're too many. Shucks. I stood off that daggone town by myself once. Don't tell me you can't pulverize Big Elk."

He waited for this to penetrate, seeing here and there a glimmer of heat. Of a sudden he struck the bar with his fist. "Tomorra I'd like fifteen men to ride out a ways with me. We'll set a deadline. When they try to cross it we'll give 'em an education in manners. I'm drinkin' with those fifteen. Who are the said gents?"

A yell went to the roof. Collectively, Jingle Bell moved toward the mahogany. Indigo nodding, noting from the corner of his eye that Gabe Wales alone stood back. He beckoned the man. "You—come here. Yore goin'. Oh, yes you are!"

BEYOND noon of the following day, Jingle Bell men rode across the prairie; the distance to Big Elk was approximately twelve miles, the riding a piece of hot and sultry business. For part of the way it was a rolling land, then it fell into a series of pot holes and broken arroyos scattered with ancient rubble. To left and right were miniature bluffs! Indigo's attention was immediately drawn to them and he turned to a near man. "Henry, you strike off there an' see what's to be seen."

"It's all dum foolishness," grunted Gabe Wales. "They won't be comin'. And we can't go into Big Elk by daylight."

"Don't worry none, Albert," murmured Indigo. "I'll satisfy yore cravin' for lead candy."

"My name," snapped Gabe Wales, "ain't Albert."

"What an awful mistake yore mammy made."

Henry, the flanker, was about five hundred yards removed when he wheeled and came racing back. Indigo stood in his saddle, to find dust kicking up along the western horizon; a compact body of horsemen advanced at the trot. Indigo pointed to a small depression directly ahead that would serve as a line of defense. "There's

our deadline. Now we'll give these boys lessons in geography."

The men of Jingle Bell raced for shelter, dropped to the ground and, at Indigo's order, spread out. Big Elk's partisans came forward at redoubled speed and Indigo's green eyes flickered with a rare joy. "Now, take it easy. Aim low—we ain't awful mad. Not yet. Let 'em see the dust kickin' up. That provokes mature reflection."

ABURST of shots shattered the sultry silence of the prairie. Streamers of sand flicked across the earth, considerably short of the charging party. It didn't hurt any body, but Indigo saw them flinch. He warned his men a second time. "Keep it low. We don't want blood, we want to educate 'em. Now—let 'em eat more gravel!"

The sputter of gun fire spread along the arroyo's rim. This time the sand sprayed beneath the traveling hoofs; and then the Big Elk party swept down into a depression less than fifty yards removed. Dust billowed high, as if from ponies stopping on their haunches. Nor did Big Elk's cavalry rise and come on. They had taken shelter. Stetsons bobbed up and down.

Indigo nodded to his companions. "Petey an' Ort, snuggle up to yore rifles. Lay a little dirt down their necks."

The two gentlemen designated went to work with pleasure and alacrity. Indigo saw a rifle of dust rise beside an exposed stetson; saw that stetson drop like a plummet. "Not too close, Ort. Just sorter close."

Indigo, however, forgot that he was as plain as any bull's eye target. In a moment he toppled backward into the arroyo with his eyes full of sand and a weird string of words in his mouth. The Big Elk contingent had returned compliments. Gabe Wales grinned surreptitiously, at which Indigo asked the man why he didn't go live in Big Elk if he liked those folks so well. Gabe muttered something that Indigo didn't hear. For the military chieftain of Jingle Bell saw a figure rise and drop away over to the south of both lines. It looked as if a flanking move was in progress. Crouching, Indigo raced along the arroyo,

past his men, and a good hundred yards farther. The arroyo made a gradual turn, approaching nearer the depression in which the Big Elk party was stationed. Now and then Indigo hooked his chin over the parapet, at intervals catching sight of the stetson still going south. Each time he ducked back and ran parallel, until the sound of firing grew fainter and he lost sight of his men. Coming to a shallow stretch, he discovered a convenient boulder ten yards removed and made for it on his stomach. The stetson bobbed up again; Indigo put a shot over there and reached the rock's substantial shelter. A bullet promptly came back to him, as close as any bullet could reach without turning corners. Indigo swore mellifluously. "The gent means business. Oh well——"

He stuck out his hat, and immediately lost a piece of the brim. "I give him credit for good shootin'," was Indigo's wrathful observation. "But if he's pickin' on me——"

He was diverted by the sight of the Big Elk cavalcade spurring out of their stronghold, in full retreat. A few shots burst across the still air—then they were gone, with Indigo trying to count them and thus reassure himself no trickery was in the air. "I guess they got the lesson. Well, by golly!"

FOR no sooner had the representatives of Big Elk abandoned the scene, than the Jingle Bell party followed suit, riding with equal rapidity in the opposite direction. It looked to Indigo almost as if his companions had developed a chill. Such haste was unseemly, and he expressed himself to that effect. "Now it's a private argument. That gent is a persistent cuss. Why don't he go home?" Almost immediately Indigo conceived the idea of taking a roundabout pasear and catching his man by surprise. He retreated from the rock, crawled along the depression and traveled some fifty yards before sighting a cluster of rocks ahead. With commendable alacrity he made for this shelter. But when not quite ten yards away, the hungry aperture of a gun barrel popped into his face, grasped by a set of lean fingers. A stetson rose up, and Joe Breedlove's

familiar features confronted him.

"Well—uh——" wheezed Indigo.



Joe's face was coated with dust. It was Joe's fighting face, grim and flinty. But that expression remained but a moment. A light sparkled

deep in the blue eyes and of a sudden Indigo felt extremely guilty. Joe always made him feel guilty in a situation like this.

"Picture of a man keepin' out of trouble," murmured Joe gravely.

Indigo defended himself hotly. "Don't look like yore doin' needlework, either. Did you happen to ventilate my sky piece?"

"I guess so. It must've been yore artillery that breezed me, likewise."

"Good gosh!" said Indigo, a trifle shaky. "Le's smoke."

They manufactured their cigarettes in complete silence. Joe was matchlessly serene; presently he began to smile. "Old Home week. I'll bet you organized this picnic, Indigo."

"Say, that was a fine ruckus you boys staged las' night in Jingle Bell!"

"Me?" countered Joe. "I wasn't there. I come over today with the bunch to see if I couldn't help rescue the lad lef' behind. Also to spread a little peace talk."

"Jingle Bell," maintained Indigo with dignity, "has suffered long enough. Why, that nice little town has been a vale o' tears goin' on twenty years now. All because o' Big Elk—" He bogged down there and had to lean on Joe for data. "Say, what caused this scraffin' in the first place?"

"Don't you know what yore fightin' for?" demanded Joe.

"Oh," said Indigo, waving an arm vaguely, "it looked 'sif they needed help."

"Listen," drawled Joe, grinding his cigarette into the earth. "Thirty years ago, Big Elk took the county seat away from Jingle Bell——"

"A blamed outrage!" broke in Indigo.

"—and the towns have been scraffin' ever since. But lately it'd have died down if certain parties hadn't sorter fed the flames to keep it goin'. Savee? Well, the

sheriff is naturally a Big Elk gent. His life wouldn't be worth a plugged dime in Jingle Bell. So every time any son-of-a-gun wants to escape the wrath o' justice he hides out in Jingle Bell. These certain parties know that. They need this kind o' protection."

"What parties—what for?"

"Rustlin'," murmured Joe. "They's two jaspers at the top o' the heap. One is a fella by name o' Sweeny, from Big Elk. The other holes up at Jingle Bell. Monicker's Gabe Wales."

"That hop-toad!" snorted Indigo. "Allus shootin' off his face about Big Elk."

"Shore. Pays him to."

NOW Indigo was a forthright soul. Having once discovered an error in the universe, he was all for righting it. So naturally enough his first suggestion was for action. "Why not get these gents?"

"It would've been difficult—up to this mornin'," answered Joe. "Only a few folks knew about it. I got good friends, which is how I knew. But this mornin' Mister Sweeny made the mistake o' venturin' into Trent county an' the sheriff nails him on an' old charge. Before Sweeny dies he makes a complete statement of what it's all about. Namin' Gabe Wales. Of course, Jingle Bell wouldn't believe the yarn if a Big Elk sheriff happened to tell it—so the Trent county sheriff is moseyin' over to Jingle Bell to explain. Prob'ly there now."

"So that caused all this ruckus," murmured Indigo. "Well, it's over now. I ain't sorry. I'm sorter fatigued with fightin'."

But Joe Breedlove was not finished. Whereas Indigo always wanted to wind up a matter as abruptly as possible, Joe loved to hemstitch a few artistic posies into human relations. Said he, "Yeah, it's over. Now we'll get both towns together at some place, have a banquet and formally bury the hatchet."

Indigo looked coldly at his partner. "It won't do. Nossir, it won't do."

"Why not?"

"I dunno why not," said Indigo, not

given to analysis. "But it won't do."

Joe, however, was set on his point. "It'll be an experiment in the mutability o' human nature."

"I don't reco'nize the word," grumbled Indigo, "but it shore sounds harsh."

Joe got up. "Of course, if you ain't with me on the idea——"

"Who said I wasn't with you?" barked Indigo—testily. "I only said it was an awful idee. If yore so daggone bound up in it, all right, I'm in. But you bet I'll be ready to duck."

They parted, each going to his horse and riding off. On the solitary trip to Jingle Bell, Indigo shook his head more than once. "Sometimes it seems to me Joe gets unnecessarily sentimental. It'll be an awful bust."

IT WAS sunset when Indigo reached town. And before he could get off his horse, Petey and Ort came up to explain their retreat. "We figgered mebber them Big Elk boys was tryin' to run a whizzer on us. So we dusted for town. Didn't know what had happened to you, anyhow. Say, heard the news? Gabe Wales is in jail, complicated with rustlin'."

"Sad—very sad," said Indigo, though he seemed to bear up well under the news.

"Sad?" snorted Petey. "Huh! You know what he an' Sweeny of Big Elk was a-doin'? A-fomentin' trouble between the two towns, so's their crew o' rustlers could have a safe harbor in time o' trouble! Ain't that sweet, now?"

Indigo nodded and went to the restaurant. After that he repaired to the saloon where a royal greeting awaited him. He took the acclaim with due modesty—tinged somewhat with gloom. For he



heard the sacred precincts of the Geyser echo with sentiments hitherto alien. Men were discussing the town that for thirty odd years had been poison and plague to them; and they

were admitting, with a magnanimous show of impartiality, that perhaps Jingle Bell

had harbored unjust suspicions. The feeling seemed to be that although Big Elk had practically stolen the county seat and would likewise steal anything else that wasn't rivetted to the landscape, yet there might be a few decent people over thereabouts. Anyhow, this fighting business had gone on too long; it was time to quit—to live and let live. Thus the spirit of fraternal concord rose from the ashes and became a pale and fluttering ray, which in time and with careful nursing might actually generate heat and energy. Indigo shook his head. It looked as if a banquet was inevitable.

"It'll be awful!" said he, to himself.

BIG Elk's formal invitation to the banquet reached Jingle Bell the next day, borne by Joe Breedlove and three others. An equal number of Jingle Bell dignitaries was hastily got together and the two parties convened at the Geyser where a judicious amount of liquid was imbibed to remove vocal impediments. Observations were made as to the weather and the state of the beef stock; after that Joe Breedlove, unmistakably the guiding spirit of his delegation, rehearsed a little past history and proposed the banquet. The Jingle Bell committee returned adequate compliments, promised to consider the matter and referred to that remark made by the governor of North Carolina to the governor of South Carolina. Immediately upon the departure of the Big Elk delegation a convention of the citizens was summoned.

There were certain benighted gentlemen who saw no good in the proposition, but the forces of progress gradually won. After all, it wouldn't be seemly for Jingle Bell to back down from any proposition Big Elk made and the meeting got down to particulars. Obviously, the affair couldn't be held in either town—that would give one party too great a bulge on the other. It was also suggested that the number of each side should be the same, to wit, fifteen. Phil Layton, a veteran of the country, set this number; and it is to be believed that he did so after calculating the number of good shots available.

That was the sense of the convention. In due time it was conveyed to Big Elk with

congratulations, best regards, and all good wishes. Big Elk thereupon called another convention and discussed Jingle Bell's amendments at ample length. Every comma, period and ink spot was scrutinized for possible double-meaning and guile. But no colored man was found in the woodpile. Presently it was decided that the Three Pines ranch-house would make a suitable point at which to hold the banquet, being situated midway between towns. It was further decided that if Jingle Bell was so suspicious as to limit the number, then fifteen tried and true stalwarts only should plant their boots under the table on each side. And this was transmitted back to Jingle Bell with felicitations, the greeting of the season, and happy sentiments.

IMMEDIATELY Jingle Bell, in convention assembled, tore the latest proposals quite apart, suspected trickery but could not find it, and reluctantly assented; adding the further proviso that all guns should be checked outside the door and that there should be one extra man from each town to guard these weapons. Nor were there to be any other kind of death-dealing instruments to be carried inside the house. Pocket knives, it was agreed after considerable debate, would not be considered as weapons. At this point Indigo left the Geyser and studied the stars. "Civic harmony? It sounds like trouble hell bent around the corner to me. Somebody's goin' to get shot yet."

AFTER that a kind of grim silence settled over the county for thirty-six hours. On each side, fifteen men and a gun guard were chosen. Certain other arrangements, not exactly in the compact and somewhat shrouded by obscurity, were made. And at exactly seven o'clock, as twilight fell, the two parties met, dismounted together, gave up their guns together and passed inside the Three Pines ranch-house, Stoic gravity marbled each swart face; and the feast of amity began in silence, with potato soup. Indigo had chosen the seat nearest the door; but observing Joe Breedlove watching him from the remote end of the room, he sighed gently and moved on

down until he was across from his partner.

There was a hitch right at the beginning. It was discovered that an extra plate had been laid on each side of the table. The assembled gentry of Jingle Bell looked gravely at the assembled Big Elk partisans. Joe Breedlove rose up and said, "I reckon they misjudged the number we wanted. Let it slide. No harm done."

But a Big Elk man murmured, "Jes' a minute," and went outside. A soft whistle cleft the darkness; the gentleman presently returned with a recruit who took the empty plate on Big Elk's side. At this Joe Breedlove frowned upon his own townsmen, but nobody returned his glance. A Jingle Bell cohort vanished into the shadows with equal promptitude and had the same measure of success in finding another man. A certain reserve contaminated the atmosphere, a certain regrettable chill came at each wary eye. Indigo drank his soup dourly. It may have been that there was an ironic flicker in his green orbs when he looked to his partner; it may have been that Joe Breedlove dropped a lid in reply. At any rate the tall partner rose, his silver hair gleaming in the lamplight and a mellow smile on his bronzed and handsome face. The very sight of him there was enough to thaw the atmosphere; it was a rare time when Joe could not bend men with the charm of his genial assurance, the quizzical humor of his eyes. He looked from man to man and

waved his arm across their heads as if in benediction.

"Boys," said he, drawing each syllable, "it does me good to see this. They was some carp-



ing critics that maintained no good would ever come of it. They was some gents that misdoubted these two nice, upstandin' little cities could ever meet in polite palaver. Those fellows had the beam in their eyes." He looked cheerfully at Indigo and appeared not to see the leer of doubt upon his partner's wizened features. "Yeah, the beam in their eyes. Now me, I'm a son of Big Elk. But I set a great

store by the prosperity o' the county. It has shorely grieved me two such fine cities couldn't abide in peace an' put the civic shoulders to the wheel o' the progress. After all, it was the work of gents who wanted trouble for their own ends. It's settled now. We want to bury the bone o' contention so deep that old Nick's own dog Nero won't ever scratch it up. Now, I see a man over on the Jingle Bell side that I used to punch cows for. A square, upright gent who has always got a sensible word dangle on his tongue. Rise up, Phil Layton, an' pour a little oil."

THE designated personage looked as if somebody had caught him in the act of stealing sheep. He said something like, "I'll be gug-gug—" in a strangled voice. But the eyes of the multitude were upon him and so he stood up, a slab-sided fellow with a hatchet jaw and no amount of fraternal cheer on his leather jowls. He opened his mouth, closed it, picked a knife from the table and ran it across his coat sleeve. "Well, I dunno," said he. "Mebbe we-all have been sorter careless. Not that I'm apologizin' for Jingle Bell y'unnerstan'; ner condemnin' Big Elk. Anybody's apt to shoot off a few poisonous remarks. It's possible both sides was rash. Seems to me the side which is biggest was the most rash—which might be natural. Of course all this how-do started thirty-one years ago, come July, when the county seat was boldly stole—"

At this point a remark seeped out of some gentleman on the Big Elk side. It had no precise meaning, but its intent was distinctly ribald, distinctly challenging. It sounded like "Rats," though, of course, there were no rats in that room. A noticeable livening of interest passed along the festive board. Every man but one stopped eating, the exception being Indigo, who was doggedly determined to fill up before trouble started. Joe Breedlove hastily interposed. "You was sayin', wasn't you, Phil, that it was time we sh'd quit fightin'."

Phil Layton grimly faced the serene Joe. "Yeh," he grunted. "Them was my words—if I said 'em."

This might have saved the evening and

the general meeting of minds might have gone on undisturbed had not another skeptic on the Big Elk side muttered, "Huh!" in a very suspicious manner. Phil Layton swung angrily. "What was yuh gruntin' about, yuh moon faced sheep-eater?"

The Big Elk partisan was not reluctant about entering the parley. "I was wonderin' how many extra men Jingle Bell has got hid over by the poplars."

"Oh, is that bitin' yuh?" snapped Layton. "Well, probly we ain't got half so many as you boys have cached out behind the barns."

"Who said we had any fellows hidin' behind the corrals?" countered the Big Elk gentleman. "It's a dam' lie. And even if it aint' a lie, we knowed blamed well you fellas would try a stunt like that."

"Like I was sayin'—" interposed Joe Breedlove; but the tide rushed in and bore him out of the scene. Indigo tilted his head toward the ceiling, appearing to see nothing, hear nothing. Yet he saw and heard everything; and his relaxed attitude was only a mask. He was ready to jump.

PHIL LAYTON hammered the table, his words smacked the air resoundingly. "If they's any rannies pulled around here it'll be on the Big Elk side. Yuh couldn't no more help bein' crooked than a snake could help crawl. Yuh stole the county seat—yuh'd steal offen yore own grandfolks, providin' yuh had any, which I doubt. I don't want to git personal none, but I will observe somethin' in this room smells an' it comes from yore side o' the table!"

Forthwith a Big Elk stalwart rose to his feet. "The atmosphere is some tainted all right. But the breeze is blowin' from yore direction. Jingle Bell has been dead thirty years—an' it ain't been buried yet."

Chairs flew back; up rose the assembled gentlemen. Indigo sighed and shrugged his thin shoulders. "Jes' a minute," pleaded Joe. "They's a mistake——"

"You bet they's a mistake!" bellowed Phil Layton. "The mistake is tryin' to get sixteen mutton lovers to eat beef! I ain't a proud man, but my ears shore do burn

to think what a disgraceful night this is for me."

"Nothin' ever comes from Jingle Bell but dust," jeered another Big Elk partisan. "Dust an' hot air!"

"Yeh? Well, they's plenty o' Big Elk boys that's proud o' Jingle Bell when yore tinhorn sheriff gets busy."

"Aw, go home to yore cemetary!"

"Cemetary? I'm sayin' Big Elk's cemetary will do some business before this meetin's adjourned!"

"Yeh?"

"Yeah!"

"Yuh lie!"

"Who lies—yuh liar!"

UP ROSE the long table, born by thirty-odd pairs of contesting arms; up and over with a rending and a crashing of dishes. Down went the lamps. The spilling kerosene flamed a bright blue, reared and whipped out. In the darkness words flailing back and forth across the table and then a moment of deceptive silence descended, in which Indigo could be heard muttering, "Awful. Somebody's goin' to get hurt yet. I wish I'd held on to that dish o' hominy."

He said something else, but it was lost in the roar of a gun. That shot was a signal. Instantly the place was aquiver with the blasting report of guns as sundry unarmed men discovered weapons from queer sources. A torrent of poisonous epithets, rocketing yells—and the Three Pines ranch-house shivered with the

shock of bodies hurling toward the exit. Window panes jingled and the firing dropped off. Some thirty men had arrived at the doorway about the same

time; and the grunting and the heaving—with all its by-products—was something fearful to hear. It seemed as if the whole

wall was about to burst asunder. From the outside came the crackling of other guns in other hands, appearing to rise out of two distinct places, the corrals and the poplars. And it continued until the contending factions had fought out of the door. Hoofs drummed around and around the house, there were other bludgeoning words and a further spattering of bullets as the two parties withdrew and raced in opposite directions. Silence reigned in the house.

But not for long. After a decent interval someone swore placidly. A match flared, revealing Indigo's gloomy countenance down behind a pile of chairs. And from an opposite corner rose the familiar drawl of Joe Breedlove. "Well, Indigo."

"Well, Joe."

One of the Three Pines women ventured in, bearing a lamp. The yellow rays gleamed on utter ruin. More than that, they gleamed on a pocket pistol in Indigo's fist. Joe challenged him then and there. "Didn't you know this was to be an affair o' peace, Indigo?"

"Uhuh," said Indigo, a little sheepishly. "But, you see, I wouldn't of had it, if it'd been a peaceful affair."

This reasoning seemed to be both devious and open to certain errors of logic. But Joe let it pass. "Let's smoke," said he.

"I wish I'd kept aholt of that bowl o' hominy," grieved Indigo.

"You got any further business in Jingle Bell, Indigo?"

"No, sir. I'm a singed cat an' I got to grow my whiskers before I go smellin' any more trouble."

"That's my identic idee," said Joe, casually. "I think you'n me had better get our hosses an' sift."

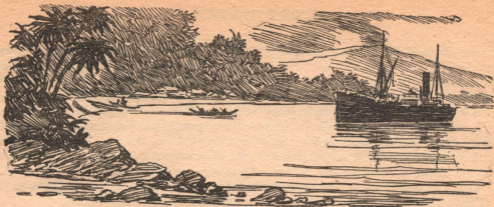
"Where to, Joe."

"South."

"It sounds reasonable," muttered Indigo. They rose and went outside. Starlight had come and the bosom of the prairie was filled with peace. "Human nature," said Joe Breedlove, sadly, "is plumb immutable."

"I could say it in shorter words," replied Indigo, "but they couldn't sound no worse. Le's ride."





THE NET

By H.BEDFORD-JONES

Author of "Brassbound Nerve," "A Letter for Saigon," etc.

MORTON WAS TO LEARN MORE OF THE MAN WITH THE INHUMAN SMILE WHO CAME ABOARD THE OLD HOOKER MAKING HER WAY IN THE CHINA SEAS. A DRAMA OF VENGEANCE, CRUELTY, POWERFUL HUMAN EMOTIONS AND THE NET OF FATE WAS TO BE PLAYED OUT ON HER SUN WARPED DECKS AS SHE SLIPPED ALONG OVER DESERTED TROPIC SEAS

MORTON first saw Crane and his curious follower outside the imposing palace of the governor-general. Morton, who was leaving Tonkin next day, was taking a snapshot of the tremendous building—a bit of the Champs Elysées set down here in Annam, and enormously out of place, too.

He noticed the sardonic, rather seedy white man with his nearly naked attendant—a tall, stalwart Annamite who might have been a fisherman by his looks. A queer couple. The natives, staring at the palace, made a remark in French.

"It looks like a falling net."

The white man laughed, his gaze going to the tremendous splay-sided shell or canopy of glass over the entrance. Morton, too, glanced at the thing, and smiled. This monstrosity of French civilization in contrast with the waving banners of the Annamese and Chinese streets.

The two others passed on. The white man gave Morton one swift, incisive glance, and it was a thing to remember. However, Morton thought no more of the odd pair for that day, nor ever reckoned to see them again.

He did see the white man next morning, however, and met him to boot.

The *Fei Wen*—a wallowing old tub scarce justifying this name of "Light-flying Swallow"—was to sail at noon. Morton was enjoying an after-breakfast pipe in the hotel veranda when Captain Bray dropped in with word that the stuff was all safely aboard. This was his excuse. In reality, the fishy-eyed, bleak-nosed skipper was making a final effort to wangle a bit of help out of Morton for his own private graft, and Morton knew it.

Morton's position was a bit exceptional. An ethnologist, emissary in Annam of an American museum, he had secured a very fair collection from the up-country tribes—everything from weapons to seeds—and the French lent him every aid and courtesy. The *Fei Wen* had no business taking passengers at all, but Morton had a letter from a slant-eyed millionaire in Hong Kong who owned this and other coasters, and that made all the difference.

Bray sat down, puffed, accepted a drink and lighted a cheroot. He was a stooped, wide-shouldered man. His rather weary, washed-out blue eyes held a sharp glint at

times, but he had the air of being oppressed by life.

"Now, then," he said carefully, after disposing of his errand, "I'm not the man to argue off a decision, Mr. Morton. Once a thing is done with, that ends it. But touching the matter I mentioned to you day before yesterday—well, certain things have come about, putting a new light on it. I hope, since you're an open-minded man, I may broach them."

MORTON glanced around, saw they were quite alone. He was not irritated; rather, he felt a vast contempt for the man across the table from him. Morton, who was in his late thirties, had seen a good bit of the world and had studied more of it, and regarded such things with tolerant and dispassionate detachment. Captain Bray was a rascal, but that was nothing against him in Morton's sight; given the necessity, most men were rascals.

"Thanks for the compliment," he said, a flicker of amusement in his steady gray eyes. "I appreciate your confidence in my discretion. Go ahead."

Bray nodded. He took himself very seriously, and this was the chief thing Morton had against him.

"Well, I know one or two people here, and my mate, Mr. Chambers, knows one or two," he said. "When I got orders at S'pore to pick up the Manila cargo here I didn't know you'd be along. We arranged with a chap here to give us two suitcases of the stuff, and paid by cable. Now we find he's been put in the cooler. His wife has the stuff for us, but can't get it aboard. Nor can we. The French are watching things mighty close, Mr. Morton, and for some reason or other seem to have their eye on us."

Morton repressed a smile at this naive confession. It was true that the French kept a close eye on the opium traffic. Since the big scandal broke in Paris regarding the administration here, every official had been on his toes.

"We can get the stuff, but we can't get our money back," proceeded the skipper plaintively. "Nor can we get the stuff aboard—it's remarkable how every man

jack of us is watched! We've got to open every parcel we bring down to the quay, and the mere hint of a bribe makes those frogs throw their hands in the air and chatter. Now, as one white man to another, would you see us lose all that money? We're not rich. We can't afford it. All you got to do is let those two suitcases go aboard with your stuff, which won't be examined. You don't have to do a thing."

Morton tamped down his pipe reflectively.

"My dear Captain Bray," he said, "I'm sorry for you and Mr. Chambers. You're in a hole, and from what I know of the price of opium, an expensive hole. As I've previously made clear to you, I have no high moral sentiments in the matter; whatever may be my private view of dope traffickers, it's immaterial to me how much of the stuff gets on the market or how soon dope fiends smoke themselves into Elysium."

Captain Bray dimly perceived irony in this, and his fishy eyes narrowed.

"I don't get your point," he said with some asperity. "You'd see white men lose out?"

"Are you referring to the color of skins or of souls?" asked Morton smoothly. "But to the point, as you request. It's very simple. The government here have accepted my inventory of my things without examination; they have waived formalities, treating me with magnificent courtesy. For this very reason, it's impossible to add your suitcases to mine."

"But they wouldn't know it, even!" said the skipper.

Morton smiled. "That's why. Over your head? Nonsense! But it's quite settled, so we may dismiss any further argument. Besides, I have to finish packing and get my grips aboard——"

IT WAS here that Crane appeared, just as a dark flush came on the skipper's face. Crane came striding up the steps, saw them, and approached.

"Cap'n Bray?" he asked in a quiet, restrained voice. "Heard you'd come here, and came for a word with you, if you can spare a moment. My name's Crane."

Captain Bray gazed up at the visitor. Crane had features not distinguished in any way, not singled out by any particular oddity; they were regular and rather gave him the air of a cleric, with their thin-nostrilled touch of asceticism. His eyes were remarkable, but Morton, watching him, could not tell why. They were cruel eyes, he fancied, yet level and queerly piercing.

"Yes?" said Bray, almost grudgingly, as he ran his eye over the seedy garments. "What you want of me?"

"I hear the *Fei Yen* is going direct to Manila," said Crane. "I want to go on her."

"No," said Bray curtly. "Don't take passengers."

"But you're taking passengers," said Crane. "A Mr. Morton—this is he, perhaps?"

Morton, for no reason except Bray's churlishness, rose and held out his hand, and indicated a chair.

"Yes. Glad to meet you. Sit down—have something?"

Crane gave him a swift, firm grip, shook his head to the question, and took the chair.

"Can't take passengers," said the skipper. "Mr. Morton's a scientist, a friend of the owners. Makes it different."

"Yes?" said Crane. He got out a cigarette and lighted it. "There are two of us. Mien is a native—very useful. You can put him in the black gang. I'll pay my passage, of course."

"Look here! I've told you already—" began the skipper, then stopped abruptly, and stared at Crane with a puzzled air.

"If you'd give me a moment in private," said Crane, "I might be able to convince you that I'd make a good passenger, cap'n."

"In private?" Bray flushed angrily. "I've got no secrets Mr. Morton or anybody else can't hear, and you needn't try any bribery either. By the lord—I've placed you! You're the chap who was at Pak-hoi a while back, got mixed up in that opium scandal, and went to prison for it! Busted ship's officer, weren't you? Some talk about being a pirate, too, but no proof. The blasted cheek of you, com-

ing to me! Ex-convict like you! Nothing doing."

CRANE, to the surprise of Morton, took all this with an air of sardonic coolness.

"Well, well," he returned easily, "I haven't denied my record, have I? But I s'pose it does irk you to associate with an ex-convict and so forth."

"Yes, it does," said the skipper flatly, and with entire seriousness. "I couldn't afford it, not with my position. And besides, I don't hold with crooks. We don't need to mince bones about it, I guess. Out here in these waters, a white man's got to go straight or else he'd better go native and be done with it."

"There's some truth in that," agreed Crane gently. He looked up, met the twinkle in Morton's eye, and smiled. Morton had a startling impression, as though beneath this smile were terrible things. It jerked him up, made him watch Crane more closely, as the other now addressed him. "You wouldn't have offered me that drink if you'd known—eh?"

Morton took the pipe from his mouth.

"Why not?" he asked. "I never saw a pirate before."

Crane chuckled. "Well, I'm going to show you that Cap'n Bray's bark is worse than his bite," he returned. "You see, this honest skipper of ours, when it comes down to hard tacks, won't go back on another white man." Morton could not repress a keen amusement at this throwing back of Bray's argument on himself. Crane continued, while the skipper glowered at him. "—especially out in this country. You see, Cap'n Bray has a very soft heart under his bluster, Mr. Morton. A very soft heart! When it comes to charity and good works, his right hand never knows what his left hand does. Eh, cap'n?"

Bray growled something about blasted flattery. He did not see, as Morton began to see, a frightful and merciless irony creeping into Crane's words and tone. He perceived it sharply enough an instant later.

"You see, Mr. Morton, this good seaman of ours is very tender beneath his

outer crust. Why, I've heard tell that up in Pak-hoi, when he and his chief officer were appealed to by a poor French girl in trouble, who had only a native woman for friend, they——"

Captain Bray's washed-out blue eyes widened, and at the same instant all the color in his face seemed to flow away, leaving the bronzed skin a queer mottled gray.

"That's a damned lie!" he exclaimed sharply.

Crane glanced at him in surprise. "Oh, not at all, cap'n! Not at all. I heard how you helped them away on the *Fei Yen*; it was really most generous of you, since the authorities were trying hard to locate that



girl. You ran big risks to help her. And you landed her and the native woman safe in Singapore later, I hear. Yes, that was a generous deed,

cap'n. Two years ago, wasn't it?"

"Yes, S'pore," muttered Captain Bray. The mottled hue had vanished and his face was nearly normal now, but the cheroot had cracked and broken in his fingers. "Never mind all that—so you want passage, huh?"

Crane smiled at Morton. "I told you he was kind-hearted! Yes, for myself. For Mien, a berth somewhere. He's a useful hand. He was in prison with me, cap'n. He speaks French very well."

"I'll manage it." Captain Bray was breathing heavily. "Get aboard before noon—I can fix it all right."

"Thank you," said Crane. "I was sure you could. Your ship is beautifully named, cap'n—Light-flying Swallow! Did you ever hear who the real *Fei Yen* was? She was an Imperial favorite a long time ago, when Chang Ngan was the capital of China; the most famous beauty of all times, a regular Helen of the Orient. But they didn't name her 'Taker'—that's the meaning of the Greek beauty's name, you know—they called her Light-flying Swallow, because of her dancing. She was a magnificent dancer, they say. Of course

it wasn't what we would call dancing—like a French girl would dance, for instance ——"

Crane's voice died away politely, for Captain Bray had risen and was dabbing sweat off his forehead with his handkerchief.

"No time for this gabble," said the skipper. "You'll be aboard, then? All right. Mr. Morton, I'll send two men up for your luggage in an hour—suit you? Good. See you later, gentlemen."

He took up his cap and departed.

Crane rose. "I'll be off, too. Glad to have met you, Mr. Morton. See you aboard."

Crane strode off, unhurried. Morton gazed after him and, down the street, thought a second figure joined his—a nearly naked, bronzed Annamite figure.

"Queer!" thought Morton, reflecting on the scene and what was behind it. "Black-mail? Perhaps. Bray helped that girl clear, Crane knew of it—hm! Perhaps. Bray isn't that sort, though; he's a hypocrite, a cold-hearted rascal, a pretty devil in man's shape. Crane—well, Crane——"

He could not make up his mind about Crane.

II

NOON had sounded. The steamwinches were rattling and clanking, and the *Fei Yen* was about to haul out. She was not pretty, but this was not entirely her fault; a man with half an eye could see that her officers were a slovenly lot.

Morton stood at the rail, watching a native craft swinging out into the tide and go slipping away before the wind, her three sails bellied out. A quiet voice at his elbow, and he glanced over his shoulder to see Crane there, also looking at the craft.

"Remarkable grace about her, eh?" said Crane. "Half junk, half prau—these Annamese coasters have the best features of each. She seems to glide over the water rather than pass through it."

"What's the crowd over there at the wharf?" asked Morton, pointing to a long, low dock at one side, where a throng of natives and Chinese were gathered. Crane

stared, and then a low, queer laugh came to his lips.

"Moving picture chap—that fisherman is performing for him. Ever see it done? Then watch! It's a marvel. You never saw anything to equal it, except a stage magician. Watch!"

Morton watched. A camera-man on the wharf, turning his crank; beyond him, over the water, a motionless bronze figure—a native fisherman. In his hand the native held a coiled net—apparently a small one. He stood for an instant, statuesque in the sunlight. Then, so suddenly that the eye could scarce realize it, the whole bronze body seemed to contort in a muscular ripple. The net flew out, spread in a perfect circle fifteen feet in diameter on the water's surface, and settled from sight. The native drew it in, slowly.

"Poorly done," said Crane. "He was slow about it."

"Slow?" exclaimed Morton. "Man, the thing was like a flash!"

Crane smiled. In his eyes Morton surprised that odd cruel glitter noted previously.

"A delayed flash, then. You'd see it better done out among the islands, where it's an art. Well, see you later! Must slick up a bit for luncheon. You haven't met the officers yet? It'll be a pleasure to remember."

Morton frowned after the slender, graceful figure. More irony! A queer man. Well, any man would be queer after doing time in a French jail out here.

A HALF-HOUR later, going down to the mess-call, Morton met the officers. Captain Bray performed the introductions, then went back to the bridge, where the pilot was taking the ship out. His manner to both Morton and Crane was cheerful, as though he had forgotten how one had refused to help him run opium, and how the other was an ex-convict. Morton rather thought he had somehow contrived to get the opium aboard after all.

So far as the officers were concerned, one and all had abandoned shore-clothes with the blast of the whistle, and wore pajamas at best. Mr. Chambers, the mate

and partner of the skipper in the dope business, was a sheer brute—powerful blue-jowled, heavy of jaw and hard of eye. He was, obviously, the efficient driving force aboard the old hooker.

The second officer was nominally an Englishman, sufficiently so to let the *Fei Yen* answer the board requirements at Hong Kong. His name was Smithers. He had sandy, nearly colorless hair, which gave him the appearance of being without eyelashes, a dusky skin and odd frightened dark eyes. His face was weak, his mouth very bad, and whenever he opened his lips he vented a chuckling obscenity which would have won him honors in Sodom and Gomorrah. Morton put him down as the product of a Cockney father and Japanese mother.

The chief engineer, Maquorrie, and his assistant, Saunders, were on extremely bad terms with the bridge staff. Maquorrie was a grizzled, blear-eyed, unshaven old man; his assistant was unclean in more ways than one, and matched the second officer's ribaldry with an aggressive flood of billingsgate appalling to hear. Morton gathered that Mr. Chambers had infringed upon the rights of the old chief, and bad blood had risen between the two shipboard authorities. It was certainly at danger-



point now. From the unchecked comments of Mr. Smithers, the whole crowd had apparently plumbed the depths of dissipation in Tonkin, and every-

body was at a keen edge.

The presence of the two passengers caused a nominal restraint and prevented trouble. Once or twice Morton surprised upon the face of Crane that same flicker of a cold and cruel smile as the man regarded those around; insensibly, before this first meal was over, Crane and the mate together were dominating the table.

Captain Bray had blabbed—even Morton could see it, as they shook hands with Crane, eyed him, glanced one at another.

Half way through the meal, indeed, Smithers became emboldened by the atmosphere of familiarity his general obsecenity induced, and gave Crane a leer and a grinningly offensive word.

"Ain't you the chap who piled up the *Emily Jane* near Zamboanga four-five years back? And been enjoying French hospitality lately?"

At this direct insult, there was a growling oath from the others

"Shut your damned mouth," snapped Maquorrie. Crane, however, merely gave Smithers a level look, not at all unpleasant or angered.

"Why, yes," he said. "And you, if I mistake not, are the gentleman who cut the throat of a woman in Pak-hoi two years ago?"

Morton was slow to credit the frightful accusation as sober earnest, but he was swift enough to read the truth in Smithers' distended eyes and livid lips. There was a tense silence for a moment, then the second officer forced a smile.

"Lor' bli'me, if you ain't ready with the comeback!" he said, and that was all. All, except the one look of distilled venom his lidless eyes shot at Crane.

MORTON presently sought the deck and watched the receding mountains of Annam with a singular sense of oppression. The yellow men working about the decks were far and away cleaner company than the rascally pack of officers, he thought; and he looked forward to the succeeding meals aboard the *Fei Yen* with something very like distaste.

Not that company or environment mattered much to Morton. He had plenty of work to keep him busy, and was impervious to distasteful surroundings. In fact, he began to laugh at the mess-table gang, once the hot afternoon sunlight had cleaned out his brain, and in the cool rush of wind he came back to his usual poised self. Yet something lingered—something he could not explain.

Oddly enough, it was nothing he had noticed at the moment, and only now did it come back to him. Not the exchange of courtesies between the chief and the after-guard, not the startling repartee between

Crane and the second officer, not the looks or the words or comments of the others. Just the way Crane had smiled when introduced to Mr. Chambers, the burly mate—that queer, inhuman smile! Crane had smiled the same way at the skipper, on the hotel veranda, Crane had smiled the same way at the portal of the governor's palace, when the native said it looked like a net.

What did this smile mean?

"Waiting!" Morton's brain flashed to the meaning suddenly. "Waiting—for what? Here's a mystery—or do I imagine it all?"

THERE was little enough comfort for passengers aboard the old *Fei Yen*, but there were two or three unbroken Singapore chairs, and Captain Bray had rigged a flapping sort of awning abaft the bridge and chart-house. Morton got Wang, the steward, to take a small table up there. With his notebooks and pencils and brain, he had plenty to do, and was left to himself for a time.

Later in the afternoon the mate and two naked saffron men from forward came into sight, the men unlashng the tarpaulins over each lifeboat, while Mr. Chambers made an inspection of the regulation Board of Trade contents, from sail to stores, and substituted a keg here, a box there. When it was finished, he came over to Morton, dropped into a chair, let the cool breeze blow upon his hairy chest, and lighted a cigarette.

"I'm the only seaman aboard this here blasted craft o' perdition," he said profanely. "Didn't get anything stole at Tonkin, anyhow, but I'm takin' no chances. Bray's got a bottle on the bridge—blast his dirty old soul, I expect he wants to forget things! He's a soft 'un, he is."

"Doesn't look soft," said Morton, amused, studying the brute.

"What's rotten is allus soft," said Mr. Chambers profoundly. "You're a scientific chap—why is it, huh? Apple or mango or man, don't make no difference."

"Decomposition," said Morton. "It's merely a chemical change, Mr. Chambers—an organic change. Whether in the fibers of an orange, or in the moral fibers of a

man, it's the same thing."

"Huh!" Mr. Chambers scowled, dark eyes glittering from beneath shaggy brows. A long shadow fell across the deck between them, but neither man noticed. "Huh! I s'pose death is the same thing, huh? Worms—it all comes to worms, huh? Well, there's more'n one man aboard here got worms in him, lemme tell you! Yep, I guess death's the same thing."

The shadow lengthened, spoke, and Morton looked up to see Crane there, smiling.

"No, no, Mr. Chambers," said Crane in his level, restrained voice. "Death is not the same thing at all. It's the same thing so far as the body's concerned—but when the heart stops, something leaves the body. Something goes out of it that worms can't touch, that dissolution can't affect, something invisible and beyond comprehension. And that's death."

"Huh!" said Mr. Chambers, looking up with a sidelong glance. "I know what you're driving at—preachers' talk, huh? Soul! That's all bosh, same as heaven and hell. You can't hand me that sort o' slaver. Don't believe it. Nobody else does neither. You ask Morton, here—he's a bug-hunter. He knows better."

CRANE took the third chair, stretched out easily, yet carefully, as though—as though waiting, it seemed to Morton. Odd fancy! Amused, Morton eyed the other two. Crane was mouthing a cheroot critically, before lighting it. Mr. Chambers stared at the horizon and his squat, heavy fingers played with one of the gorgeous buttons of his pajamas.

They were very gorgeous, those buttons, and caught Morton's eye. Strange contrast, gold and lapis buttons and cheap cotton cloth! An impossible thing in any town, but quite possible here aboard ship, where Mr. Chambers had his washing done by the steward and so could indulge his fancy for expensive trimmings.

Crane glanced at the mate, looked for a moment at those gold and lapis buttons, and Morton could have sworn that in this instant the man's eyes flickered as though from some swift and intolerable anguish. Then Crane smiled and turned.

"Well, Morton, how about it? You're a

scientist, so back up Mr. Chambers with sound reason in his denial of heaven and hell."

Morton laughed. "Unfortunately, I can't," he said. "My little fund of science tells me there's something everywhere I can't understand."

"Bah!" growled the mate, giving him a scornful look. "Twanging harps and shoveling coal—huh! What factory turns out them harps, huh? Where's the devil's coal come from?"

"You don't get me," said Morton. "As you said, Crane, there's something that escapes from the body. And hell or heaven is the condition of that something, I think. Call it a state of mind. Call it what you like. But what matter? We'll learn some day."

"Oh, hell!" said Mr. Chambers, and heaved up his hairy bulk. "You chaps can talk it out all day if you want. I know what I know—there ain't any such bunk."

"Those are fine buttons of yours," said Crane. "Chinese work?"

"Huh, them?" Mr. Chambers twiddled a button in his fingers and inspected it as



though for the first time. "I dunno. Found 'em in a bazar up to Canton. Well, see you later."

"Wait!" said Crane. His voice leaped out suddenly, sharply, and the mate turned about in surprise. But Crane was smiling up at him. "Don't you know what those buttons are? Where they came from?"

"Huh?" Mr. Chambers scowled, and Morton was aware of a deep-flaring menace in his gaze, and perhaps a hint of fear as well. "Huh? What you mean?"

"Why, there's a native story," said Crane easily, "about a set of buttons like those. I don't know the details. Something about a native woman, very highly born, and a splendid set of gold and lapis buttons denoting her rank. I heard a lot of talk about it while I was in that up-country jail of theirs."

"You did?" said the mate, staring down at Crane and fingering the button. "You

did?" He paused. He seemed fascinated by the story. "What was it?"

Crane squinted out at the horizon. "Hm! Hard to recall it now—seems to me this princess or whatever she was had got into some sort of a fuss with the authorities, and skipped out, and tried to get out of the country but drowned herself. Her body was recognized by the buttons, if I remember rightly."

"Huh!" said Mr. Chambers, and looked down with conscious pride at his ornaments. "Well, these ain't the ones, sure. Reckon I've had these all of three-four years now— and they couldn't ha' got from there up to Canton, huh? Lots o' buttons in the world."

"I'll give you an English sovereign for one of them," said Crane. "For a souvenir."

"You will?" Chambers stared at him again, and grinned suddenly. "Done. I got two-tree extry ones anyhow. Done with you, here and now!"

His powerful fingers twisted one of the buttons around and around. It came loose, and he held it out. Crane motioned Morton to take it—he was trying to extricate the coin from his trousers' pocket. He pulled out the gold coin and Mr. Chambers pouched it with a grin.

MORTON examined the button. It was certainly handsome, being a stud of true lapis set in Chinese-worked gold. He glanced up, and saw that the mate had disappeared. Crane shook his head as Morton extended the button; the man's face was, of a sudden, all wet with sweat.

"No—wait," he said. "Do you read Chinese, Morton?"

"Unfortunately, no."

"You think I'm a fool to pay five dollars for that thing? Well, it's worth a good deal more than that price—not intrinsically. Upon it hangs the life of more than one man. I've gambled carefully for this bit of evidence, Morton; more carefully than you'd ever believe. I've gambled with time, with money, with careful planning. Upon what you're about to tell me, depends success or failure."

Morton frowned slightly. For an in-

stant he wondered if Crane were a bit off—then he knew better. For Crane was smiling at him—that same terrible thin smile with its hint of inhumanity, of merciless precision. And under that smile Morton felt a tingle of fear.

"Look at the back of the button," said Crane. "If it's an ordinary button, nothing is there—and I lose. If it's the button of that native woman I told Mr. Chambers about, it will bear two very tiny Chinese ideograms—and I win."

Morton held up the button and looked it over. He shook his head, then frowned and looked more closely. Sure enough, he saw two very small ideograms, beautifully chased in the gold.

"You win," he said, and held out the button.

Crane took it and stuffed it into a pocket, then relaxed in his chair. He opened his mouth and exhaled a deep breath, gazing out at the sky and sea. When his eyes came back to Morton, a flame was kindled in them. The hint of sardonic mockery was clear fled out of his face; it had become resolute, hard, bitter hard.

"I lied to Mr. Chambers about that native woman," he said softly.

Morton gave him a casual look. "You seem to have a lot of information handy today about native girls," he said. "And I'm sorry to see you're beginning to take yourself very seriously. I thought you had more sense."

Crane looked astonished, then broke into a laugh, got out a fresh cigarette, lighted it. Amusement wrinkled the bronzed cheeks about his eyes.

"I like you, Morton!" he exclaimed. "Sensible—that's the word for you. Dead right, too; I musn't take myself seriously or I'd go mad. Would you like to hear about that native woman?"

"Very much," said Morton, looking at him.

"Good. She was the native ruler of a little up-country state in the hills. A white man was there with his wife—just married. She was a French girl. He had located some very good sapphire ground and was taking out stones. The French got wind of it and came down on the place

like a ton of brick. The princess got into a whale of a row with them, and a French officer slapped her face. Oh, yes, the French do that sometimes—you know the life of a Frenchwoman of the lower classes, don't you?

"Well, the princess took some of her jewels and skipped out. She went with the white man and his wife, who had to skip also. They took their sapphires as well.

They got to the coast and a native boat took them up to Pak-hoi, en route to China and safety. But on the way, the white man came down with fever. He was out of it, clear out of it."



Crane paused, and puffed at his cigarette for a long moment, his eyes narrowed at the horizon.

While the man spoke, Morton had a twinge of memory. Where was it he had heard of a French girl and a native woman—why, in connection with Captain Bray, of course! Bray had taken them aboard at Pak-hoi and had landed them at Singapore. That was what Crane had blackmailed the skipper with—forced him to grant passage. Was this some other fact of the same story? Very likely.

"The three of them got to Pak-hoi all right," pursued Crane, cocking up his feet comfortably. "But the white man was clear out of it with fever, and his wife was down with it, too. They had to keep clear of the authorities, of course, and the princess, who had only one man with her, did not speak French and was pretty well up against it. However, a ship was in the harbor bound for Singapore, a tramp steamer, and she heard it was a ship from Hong Kong, and she knew all Englishmen were good men. So she went to the skipper of the ship, she and the man who served her, showed him their jewels, and asked for passage to Singapore. She gave him one of the jewels, and he agreed."

Crane paused again, and seemed rather uneasy for a moment.

"I remember now you mentioned it to Bray," put in Morton, but the other seemed not to hear the words.

"This sea captain, this bluff, honest, good English soul," Crane went on, "saw no earthly reason why he should not benefit from the situation in more ways than one. He and his chief officer put their heads together. They got the four fugitives safe aboard—the white man was delirious, the French girl, his wife, was little better. The two women were given one cabin, the white man another. That night they knocked the native chap in the head and dropped him over-side, and took the white man ashore. It was not difficult to rig up a charge against him and make it stick; they hired a few gentlemen to attend to it, and make sure the white man would go to prison for a good safe term. At midnight they hoisted the hook and left Pak-hoi with their loot of women and jewels."

MORTON was startled by this turn to the story, and somewhat incredulous. He did not put such an action past Captain Bray, but the thing seemed impossible.

"Bray said," he put in quietly, "that he had taken the French woman to Singapore."

"No, I said that—he agreed, in much relief," and once more Crane, turning his face full to Morton, smiled his queerly inhuman smile. "Mr. Chambers agreed, in much relief that the native woman, the princess, had been found drowned. In actual fact, neither of these things happened. The French girl never reached Singapore, nor did the princess ever show up again."

Morton stirred restlessly.

"I'm not protesting the story—I know nothing about it—but it hardly sounds very logical," he objected. "That the white man should be clapped into prison, for example."

"Read life, my dear chap, is it ever logical?" and Crane laughed curtly, sharply. "He was going under a French name at the time. It reality, he was an American ne'er-do-well, an adventurer, who had previously been sentenced at Pak-hoi for smuggling opium and had escaped from prison up-country. He was not a good

man at all, but he did love that French girl, and had married her. These two honest seamen knew nothing about him, thought him a Frenchman, in fact, and did not go near him on account of his fever. They never even clapped eyes on him! But when the French got their hands on him, they juggled him right. It goes to show how those two honest seamen fell into luck without knowing it."

"Hm!" said Morton, thoughtfully. "You knew the man in prison?"

"Yes," Crane looked out at the horizon, and fell silent.

"Well," said Morton at last, when he felt the silence awkward, "what's the rest of the story? What happened to the two women—French girl and princess?"

"Nobody knows. I fancy Bray took the French girl, and Mr. Chambers the princess—our good chief officer is not particular as to color. Of course, this is only guesswork. Since neither of the women showed up at Singapore and had vanished on the voyage, and since neither was of the type to accept undesired love, it may be taken for granted that they committed suicide. This, at least, is the kindest solution."

Crane fell silent again, a sombre quality in his voice at the final words. Morton stirred a little.

"Look here, man—is this a fairy tale? Or do you know these things to be true?"

Crane held up the button, taking it from his pocket.

"What more do you need? There's the evidence."

"You say it is. There may be dozens of buttons like this."

"No. Specially made. However——"

"And," broke in Morton, uneasy before all the bald stark ugliness of it, "you say this happened a couple of years ago. If these two men ever hauled in a fortune in stones, would they stick right along on this old ship? Not much. They'd clear out, dissipate it, invest it—do something with it!"

REAL amusement wrinkled Crane's eyes.

"Logic! Well, that's true. But they didn't get the jewels. The French girl had

her husband's sapphires, and the princess her own stuff. Those women either hid the jewels here aboard, where they've never been found, or else chucked 'em over the rail, once they got on to the skipper's game. They were that kind, Morton. Shall we look-see? If we found the stuff, I expect that'd be the best sort of evidence, wouldn't it?"

Morton was silent for a moment, staring at Crane. Those words showed him something.

"Are you looking for evidence?" he demanded bluntly.

Crane shrugged. "No. I don't need it. I'm amusing myself, that's all."

"With what end in view?" snapped Morton. Crane gave him a slow look, half sardonic, and the man's face had become masked.

"Oh, mere distraction—passing the time! By the way, you have the cabin of those two women—suppose you look around. You're intelligent. Neither Bray nor Chambers have any imagination. Find those jewels. Might give you something to think about. Well, see you later."

Crane rose lithely and strode away.

III

TWO days passed, in which Morton saw very little of Crane.

The story Crane had told grew and grew in his mind, with his daily and hourly contacts with the officers of the ship. Captain Bray might be drinking, but did not show it. Mr. Smithers continued his obscene comments, and seemed to have all sorts of startling information as to the private life of his colleagues, nor were his jests resented. In this happy give-and-take came out hints here, a word and a look there, which touched upon the women sometimes carried unofficially by the *Fei Yen*.

Morton, usually so impassive to any such external things, found it all reaching into him. Talking with Bray, he would discover himself thinking about that French girl. Across the table, the brutish blue jowl of Mr. Chambers would remind him of a slim brown native woman who preferred death to shame. The chuckling comments of Mr. Smithers would strive in his

mind for some double meaning, some connection with the story—and once or twice he found it beyond any doubt.

On the third day out, early in the morning, there was trouble. How it started, Morton never learned—the causes went far back and deep. The finish was a mad conflict on the forward well-deck between Mr. Chambers and Saunders, the assistant engineer. The mate, blood running down his face from a clip with a spanner, bent Saunders back across the hatch-cover and hammered him, and Saunders died



that night of a broken back. Old Maquorrie cursed the after-guard with flaming and terrible blasphemy and threatened to have them all up in court, but the skipper took him below and drowned his anger in liquor.

At the burial of Saunders, next morning, Morton for the first time caught a full sight of the native, Mien, who had come aboard with Crane, entering the black gang. Mien stood at the rail, watching the body go over as Captain Bray read the service; naked, tall, straight as an arrow magnificently powerful in every muscle and line. The man's eyes were ugly and smoldering, and Morton was startled by their vicious look.

However, there were other things to ponder. Morton wondered much about Crane, about where Crane came in on the story and why Crane was interesting himself in the lapis button and the evidence in general, but the more Morton thought of the whole thing, the more he became impressed with the possibility of finding the jewels.

He cared nothing about them as jewels, and less about their probable value. If they were here, however, they would stamp Crane's story true; the incredible would become the proven. About this possibility hovered the horrible fascination which invariably lingers around a gruesome mystery. Had this skipper, this mate, calmly going about their duties, actually done

these things? Possible enough. Mr. Chambers was no more worried over the broken back of Saunders than if he had killed a fly. But then, that was hot-blooded fight. This other was cold, deliberate inhumanity, cruelty planned for gain and lust.

SO MORTON, intermittently, began to look about his cabin. He began, in fact, soon after his talk with Crane, but did not go into it very earnestly until the following day. That night after he saw Saunders' back broken, he was stirred, his imagination was at work, he sat down and concentrated on the thing. After all, it must be simple—if true! Or was it all a wild-goose-flutter? Had those women been here in the cabin?

Then he remembered that Crane had not seen the reverse of the lapis button until after asking about the two ideograms. This was a bit startling.

Morton looked around. He had already searched, vainly enough, everything in the two-berth cabin. Granted the story was true, then; either the jewels had gone out through the port, or they were here. Where? Where could a woman hide such things? Where might they lie for two years undiscovered? The cabin was bare enough. Steel walls, iron berths, two old gray life-jackets in the rack overhead—not a hiding place of any kind visible! Then the jewels must have gone out the port, to keep them from falling into the hands of the fishy-eyed skipper and the burly mate.

Perhaps—and yet—Morton's glance roved around. What had he overlooked? What, so simple, so impossible, that men of no imagination would pass it by? Where, undisturbed and undiscovered during two years?

He rose and locked the door. Then, standing on the berth, he searched for crannies in the wall, searched the rack of the life-jackets, found nothing, no place of hiding. He was folding the life-jackets to replace them, when he halted abruptly. Two of them lay there side by side on the berth—what was that hint of red against the canvas of one? The other did not match it. He looked closer and saw one of the seams sewn with red thread, red

silk thread. The other was not, certainly—

Morton got out his knife and ripped open the seam of the life-jacket, got his fingers into the powdery cork within, felt a hard object. In two minutes he had the thing wide open. Out across his bunk spilled a dozen hard little bluish polished pebbles—were they sapphires, then? No matter. With them were other things—stones in fragments of their mountings. Pearls, a diamond, several rubies, jade, three necklaces of pearls and two of fine deep green jade, not the poor light article of commerce but old and valuable jade.

Morton stared at them all, then gathered them up and put them into his pocket. The fact hammered at his brain, hammered remorselessly at him. The blood of women was on these stones, the crimes of men—lust and gain! Their value was nothing to him. He saw only the greater and more important thing. Evidence!

A KNOCK sounded at his door. Swiftly, he turned over the ripped life-jacket, flung the second above it, and opened the door. Captain Bray came in, genial and friendly, a breath of liquor on his lips.

"Well, are you getting settled, Mr. Morton? Sorry I haven't had much time to give you so far—papers, you know, details, charts and so on," he said. "Are you comfortable here? Anything we can do for you?"

"Oh, everything's fine, thanks," said Morton, and wondered why.

"I dropped in to see if maybe you'd splice the main brace with me," said the skipper. "As a matter of fact, that business down for'ard got on my nerves—poor Saunders! My officers have been with the ship for years, most of them—" He produced a bottle, and laid it on the table. Then he saw the life jackets, and his eyes widened on them. "What's the matter? Afraid we're going to strike an iceberg?"

"Trying the things on," said Morton uneasily conscious of the spilled cork-powder.

Captain Bray said nothing more. In this fleeting quarter-minute, however, the color of his face changed. His eyes narrowed slightly, and took on an unguessed preda-

tory expression; his large nose tautened and quivered.

The drink, the discussion of Saunders' death, was mechanical. Presently Captain Bray departed with his bottle, and seemed glad to get away, as though something inside were hurrying him, spurring him off. Barely had Morton settled down over his pipe when Wang knocked at his door and came in, staggering under a load. He brought a brace of white and shiny new life-jackets, and word that new ones were being issued out to all the cabins to replace the old jackets.

Morton let him take the old ones away, fold and place the new ones in the rack, without comment. In this ten minutes before his pipe was lighted, he had worked. The canvas was sewed up. None the less, he knew they would know. "They"! Morton, for once, was conscious of a criminal guilt. The stones in his pocket weighed down his conscience. What should be do about it? No doubt now, no doubt whatever!

"They" would know he had found the stuff. He could fancy the skipper and Mr. Chambers over a bottle, glaring, cursing their own bad luck, their own vain searches. After two years! The stones lying there all the while in the most conspicuous and yet the most inconspicuous of all places, under their very noses, unseen and unguessed! Perhaps they had even poked around in those same life-jackets, without ever seeing the tiny glint of red silk thread!

THEN poise returned, gradually working back, and Morton laughed whimsically again as he thought of it all. What matter if they did know? They would glare at him, and not dare breathe a word. And what would he do about it? He did not want the cursed stones, the price of blood. Well, wait and see! He got out his notebooks and worked late, but when he turned in, he locked the door and left the key in the lock.

He wondered, next morning, how they would look, and to his surprise they looked just as usual; neither skipper nor mate seemed to have any ulterior thought when they regarded him. He could not

imagine the least thing in the exchange of words at breakfast, and cast his half-worry aside. There was the burial to be attended to, and much talk of Saunders and past dissipation ashore, and old Maquorrie with senile tears on his eyelids.

Morton did not see Crane at the burial service, but he saw Mien there among the other men, and it seemed to him that this brown native, distinct from the yellow Chinese, was more of a man than these others who stood around while the skipper prayed and assumed a gravity they did not feel.

Under the makeshift awning on the bridge-deck, he found Crane sitting.

"You didn't attend the ceremony?" he asked, dropping into a chair. Crane looked at him briefly, sardonically.

"Let the dead bury their dead," he said, and no less bitter than the words was the inhuman smile touching his lips and not his eyes.

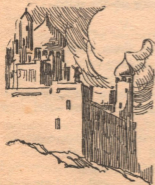
Morton fumbled for a cigarette; he was tired of his pipe.

"What a blast in those contemptuous words!" he said, though he had not meant to voice the thought. Crane looked a trifle startled.

"Eh? Well, I suppose so. I've no use for the gang. They've no use for me, but they're a bit afraid of me."

"Why?" questioned Morton. He lighted his cigarette, and wondered how he would get around to the weighty subject in his pocket, what he would say about the stones.

"They know my record." Crane laughed frankly now, in real amusement. "You see, they know I lost my master's ticket for piling up a ship. They know I went to prison for dope-running in Pak-hoi. But—" He hesitated here, dwell-



ing on the word with a certain relish, a deepening of his amusement.

"But—but!" and he laughed again.

"You see, Morton, they don't know a thing more about me! They don't know where I've been the past two or three years, they don't know what name I was under, they don't know one solitary blessed thing! And how they'd jump if they did know!"

"You're a queer man," said Morton reflectively. "I've seldom met a man I couldn't understand, but I don't savvy you a bit, Crane. I would, perhaps, if I knew all that lay behind you, behind your presence here this minute. No, no—I'm not inquiring; I don't mean it that way. I was thinking out loud. This white man whom you knew in prison, the one they sent there—what was his name?"

"Delattre," said Crane. "A French name he had taken."

"You hate this crowd for what they did to him. Then why come on this ship?"

Crane gave him a slow, cruel look. "You'll know that soon enough. My one worry is about you, Morton—you're a man. A clean man. I like you."

"Eh?" Morton frowned at him. "And I worry you?"

Crane flung out his hand with a laugh, dismissing the query.

"Let it go! We'll find a way. Done any looking around for that evidence?"

Morton nodded. "Yes. Do you know what the stuff was? Did Delattre describe it?"

Crane looked at him for a moment.

MENTAL suggestion is a queer thing. Perhaps the recent burial had quickened brain and nerves, perhaps not. Morton, in this look, knew suddenly, without words, that his question had given him away, had told his secret to Crane. He could not read it in Crane's face at all—he just felt it inwardly, knew it with absolute conviction.

"Why, yes," said Crane in a low voice. "There were three chains of very fine pearls, belonging to the princess, with a diamond, one or two rubies, and some odds and ends—all heirlooms. Worth a lot. Delattre had about a dozen sapphires, I understand; uncut stones, but picked for quality. I suppose the lot would be worth a pretty large sum, Morton."

"Is Delattre alive?"

Crane's head jerked assent.

"Yes. I'm the only one who knows where he is, who he is, what his story is."

"Then——" Morton hesitated, but his brain drove him on. Crane knew. Crane had the inventory of those stones down pat. There was no longer any possible doubt about the crime of two years ago. "Then—in case the stones were found——"

"They belong to Delattre," said Crane incisively, curtly. For an instant he was silent, then added, "Not that Delattre would want them or keep them. The price of blood, or his wife's blood—no, no! He's a queer sentimental sort, Delattre. He'd fling the things into the ocean rather than keep them or profit by them, even if he was starving. You can understand that."

"Yes," said Morton. "Yes. I'd feel the same way. Here, you'd better take them."

Crane watching him, without any surprise, he scooped the stones out of his pocket and extended them, in both hands. Crane took them and put them in his lap, without the least visible emotion.

"Found them, eh? Where?"

"Sewed into a life-jacket. The last place anyone would look."

CRANE laid both hands over the stones and stared out at the horizon. Morton watched him. The man was absolutely impassive, did not move a muscle, did not so much as move his eyes; he stared at some point on the skyline, unseeing. He was seeing something not there at all, something no one else could see. And, as the bronze of his face slowly whitened and died into pallor, Morton's brain hammered and clicked again. He knew exactly what the man was seeing, out there on the whitish blue sky-line above the sea, knew as clearly as though he himself were seeing it.

Crane was looking at the two women locked in their cabin, desperate, facing death and lust, sewing those jewels into the life-jacket. And Morton did not disturb this mental vision.

Mr. Chambers disturbed it. In pajamas and sneaks, the burly mate bore down on them and grinned. Crane did not move at all—his hands quite concealed the jewels.

"Well, Dad Maquorrie has got to work double now," said the mate. "Real powerful prayer the skipper put up, huh? You two gents still talking about death and hell?"

Crane looked up, gave the mate a full, deliberate regard.

"Do you know how the Annamese catch fish, Mr. Chambers?"

"Huh?" said the mate. "Catch fish? Same as everybody else, I reckon. Why?"

"No. A different way. You'll know one of these days." And Crane turned back to contemplate the horizon once more. Somehow, in this cold, deliberate regard, Mr. Chambers had been stirred and touched, and showed it.

"By the lord, I think you're daft," he said, and went away again, growling.

Morton might have thought the same thing, and was tempted to think it still more, a moment later. For Crane uncovered the jewels in his lap, took up one pearl necklace, and put it in his pocket. Then, filling both hands with the stones, he rose from his seat, took a step to the rail—and flung them out into the ocean.

He stood there, his back to Morton, until the latter spoke, half rising, incredulous.

"Good lord! Crane—did you mean to do that?"

Crane looked at him, made a little gesture, started away, then turned, pausing.

"Wouldn't you, if you were me?" he said, and then went on, walking slowly away.

Morton sat in paralyzed comprehension, a little chill creeping up his spine.

IV

MORTON sat there until the noon mess-call, looking out at the sea, smoking, thinking, readjusting himself. He was no longer facing a quiet, peaceful crossing to Manila, but action—and very deadly action.

Crane, of course, was Delattre in person. Rather, had borrowed the name of Delattre for a time, under this name had met and wooed love and fortune—and lost all again, all and more. No one knew he had been Delattre, thus far. Morton mulled this over thoughtfully.

"Neither the skipper nor the mate know him for the fever-stricken Frenchman they sent to prison and robbed of everything," he reflected. "Hum! Is that possible? Perhaps. They'd been afraid of the sick man, afraid of contagion, had not looked at him, knew him as a Frenchman named Delattre. So they framed him, robbed him, knocked his native man on the head, and sailed off with his wife and the native princess. Now they've been talking with him every day, eating with him, living with him—and never knew it. My lord, what a situation!"

Comprehension beat in upon him, wave after wave; understanding of little things he had passed by unseeing at the time. He had never dreamed of Crane being that man, so fearfully and mortally injured by these two! Now he remembered that cruel, inhuman smile, and it lingered before his mental vision.

He could interpret the smile, with what he had just learned. He saw why Crane had come aboard this ship, why he had spent time, money, brains, toward this end. He could perceive why the lapis but-



ton had been one definite scrap of evidence, and why the jewels had completed the work, making this chain of evidence dam-

ning beyond all words. On and on came the waves of comprehension, reaching ever farther back—back to that morning on the hotel veranda where Crane had spoken of a French girl and Captain Bray had turned white as a sheet for an instant.

Bray had been afraid then—not of the French authorities, perhaps, as much as of something within himself. Remembrance? Conscience? Well, so much for Bray. It was far different with Mr. Chambers, who probably had neither regret nor conscience. And what did Crane intend to do?

Morton's reflections settled into a repetition of this mental query. What did Crane intend to do? Why had he come aboard here, bringing the stalwart native with him? Did he intend vengeance? Na-

turally, yes—but in what way? Evidence, this evidence which he had sought and then flung away—he could not bring Bray and Chambers to the gallows with it alone! What on earth did the man intend?

That he intended something, Morton was convinced.

The odd part of it, Morton recalled as the mess-call sounded, was that Crane had not flung the lapis button overboard, and had not flung all the jewels overboard, but had saved out one string of pearls. Why? This inconsistency loomed and bulked larger, until upon it Morton began to hang the other question—what did Crane intend?

He went down to mess hoping to find out, but failed. Crane was there, whimsical, sardonic, quiet as usual.

In the bursting light of this amazing discovery, Morton had temporarily forgotten his own share in the matter. Mr. Chambers had the deck, the skipper was presiding over the table; although he searched probingly enough, Morton could not unearth anything the least unusual in Captain Bray's words or attitude. Yet it flooded back on him how Bray must know he had the stones. What, then, did Bray intend? And did the mate know?

With a shrug, Morton forced away the whole thing, refusing to let it weigh further on his mind. He went back to his notebooks that afternoon and saw nothing of Crane.

THE watches were changed at eight bells, four o'clock. Aroused by the voices, the tramp of feet, Morton left the shade of the awning and went forward to the break of the bridge. Down on the forward well-deck, the watch just up from below, naked yellow men and one lean bronze figure, were hauling in buckets of water and sluicing it over themselves.

Off to one side, by the forecandle head, Morton saw Crane standing, watching the men. Presently he saw Crane make a slight gesture. Mien, the bronzed Anamese, came over and joined him. For a space the two stood there talking, none near them. Crane put something in the hand of the brown man, took it back, tossed it over the rail. He put something else in the brown

hand, and Mien drew himself up. This other object, too, went over the rail, but as it went, Morton watched it, and saw a slender uncoiling line of white. The two men below separated.

Here was a new query, and a most puzzling one. He hesitated to broach the whole thing to Crane, shrank from it—yet, toward sunset, did just that. He was standing at the rail in the stern when Crane came along and halted, and Morton turned to him abruptly.

"Why?" he asked. "Why? I don't understand it. Why drag Mien into it?"

"Eh?" The gaze of Crane bored into him for a moment. "Oh! You saw me, did you? Yes, I remember you were at the bridge-rail. You don't miss much, by the lord you don't!"

Morton smiled. "Well, why save the pearls to show Mien?"

"So he would recognize them and the button. His brother was the native servant of the princess. Both of them were boys in the palace. Mien knew all those jewels by heart, every one of them. That was another link in the chain—" Crane broke off, uttered a short laugh, corrected himself. "Rather, another mesh in the net."

"The net of evidence?" said Morton. "Then you intend—"

He paused. Crane shook his head quietly.

"My friend, what I intend is strictly my own business—without offense. But I've been keeping my eyes open, Morton. I saw something this afternoon just before watches were changed. Bray and Chambers were at the port side of the bridge, looking back at you, and there was an odd look in the mate's face. Could Bray or Chambers, by any chance, suspect you had found those stones?"

Morton's brows lifted. "If they did—would it be another mesh in your net?"

"Naturally. If they suspected—"

"They don't suspect—they know," said Morton calmly.

HE TOLD of Bray's visit to his cabin the previous evening, of his conviction that Bray had guessed, of Wang's visit with the new life-jackets.

Crane squinted out at the water and

nodded slowly. "I expect they're on to you, right enough," he said. "I noticed Bray was smooth as butter to you this noon. Hm! They'll think you still have the stuff."

"Naturally they don't connect you with it," said Morton.

"Hm!" Crane scrutinized him. "I don't know about you. You're an aloof sort, Morton—watch things going on and hold out of it. If I intended to punish those swine myself—"

Morton smiled. "You? Punish them? When we get to Manila, you mean. Well—"

"I didn't mention Manila. The point is, is it any of your business?"

"No." Morton was tempted to parry, but gave honest answer. "I have no concern in it, of course. And I don't believe in personal vengeance. Oh, I'd be quick enough to knock a chap down—I mean other things—"

Crane broke into an amused laugh, a real laugh.

"My dear man," he said with just a hint of deep mockery, "you're too intellectual to lose your temper—and when you lose it, heaven help the other fellow! You don't believe in personal vengeance—from ignorance. You know nothing about it. Any idea of what vengeance means to a man is far from you. You should be a judge and sit on the bench to sentence criminals with whom you have nothing in common. Then, you're really too lazy to work up enthusiasm over anyone else's wrongs—you have your own work to do. You're incapable of hitting a man unless he slapped you across the face and stung you. You—"

"Just what's the idea of all this analysis?" put in Morton stiffly. He was a little red, feeling within himself that perhaps Crane was right. "What are you driving at?"

Crane reached out and tapped him on the breast.

"Just this," said he. "If you've got a gun, you dig it out and carry it—and watch your step!"

With this, Crane turned and strode away, leaving Morton very much confused.

"Confound the fellow!" he thought. "He rattles off character and motives like one of these imitation psychoanalysts who milk the innocent public—and yet I've half an idea he may be right. What of it? I'm not ashamed of myself or my character, and if he doesn't like it he can go to the devil. But carry a gun, eh? Nonsense; Not a word will ever be said by the skipper about those jewels. They might try to steal them—nothing more. Bah! There's nothing for me to worry over. The point is—what's going to happen? Crane and Mien had a purpose in coming aboard here, and they weren't looking for evidence either."

Here was the thing Morton was really



worrying over, and now he faced it as he looked out at the white tumbling wake of the *Fei Yen*, faced it squarely. He was no fool. He

could see how everything had come to a focal point on Crane's words—"What business is it of yours?" This had really been a polite inquiry, not a brusque turning away.

Where did he stand, where must he stand? Morton put the question to himself and strove for honest answer. No blinking it—Crane and Mien were here for action. To put it in fantastic melodramatic fashion, for vengeance. And where did he stand? Must he stand motionless and look on? Crane meant killing, or worse, and was unhurried about it; his attitude gave that same singular appearance of waiting, waiting, as a cat watching a mouse!

"But where do I come in?" Morton demanded of himself. "Do I stand apart, detached, unconcerned, and let Bray and Chambers be killed? Warn them—no, that's unthinkable! They deserve all Crane can do, and more. Join Crane? No; that were insensate folly. It's none of my affairs. Yet it is my affair, from a standpoint of self-preservation! I want this ship to reach Manila, and I've no altruistic interest in seeing a pair of scoundrels receive their just deserts—particularly at my own expense. Hanged if I know what to do!"

HE WENT down to dinner, still wondering. The same unshaven faces, the same obscene jests, the same growls and oaths swirled about by the old-fashioned strumming electric fan. Not the same, though, for Saunders was missing.

For a moment, just after the second officer came in, Morton saw him glance at Crane. He started slightly with remembrance. Mr. Smithers had not forgotten, then! Morton remembered that Crane had spoken out before them all, asking who had cut the throat of a woman—had Mr. Smithers done this thing? In this one swift glance from the venomous lidless eyes, Morton had an awakening.

He began to see Crane in a new light, as it were, bathed in the glare of hatred from all sides. Bray and Chambers did not know him for Delattre, true, but they knew he was in some measure aware of the story of the two women—since this knowledge was responsible for his having got passage. They would fear and hate anyone who knew this story. Mr. Smithers was certainly not anxious to be published to the world as having cut a woman's throat; his darting eyes said as much, though his tongue dared no longer touch on Crane. Whose throat had this Eurasian cut? What dark story had Crane picked up in prison? No matter.

"I'm sick," groaned old Maquorrie in the middle of dinner. "I'm main sick, cap'n—I'll be gae'ing tae lie doon a bit, a wee bit——"

The old man rose, and his face was a livid gray. It was the heat down below, he said, and the good Lord must look after the engines, but they were in fair shape enough—So he went out, mumbling words that came to nothing. Captain Bray looked after him uneasily. Mr. Smithers caught the look and instantly pounced on the skipper, with a giggle.

"It always comes that way—less'n five days out!" he said with profane emphasis. "It always comes that way! Mr. Morton, I s'pose you know all about plague?"

"Shut your damned mouth, mister!" cried out the skipper in a burst of passion, his pale eyes opened wide at Smithers, and sudden cholera purpled his cheeks. "I've had about enough of you and your ways.

Any more of your smart talk and——"

"And what?" demanded Mr. Smithers, as Captain Bray paused. His demand was impudent, cheeky, brazen. "And what, hey? What'll you do? Not a thing, and you know it. You dare to threaten me, and you know what!"

Watching them, Morton saw clear as a bell that Mr. Smithers had the whip-hand here. For all his bluster, the skipper was inwardly cringing before this threat. He sat silent, looking hard at the second mate, licking his lips, seeking words to save his dignity. He was helpless, afraid of the little man with the evil, lidless eyes.

THEN, abruptly, Crane's voice cracked upon the silence—drove out scathingly, sharp and bitter as acid, untouched with anger yet biting like a lash.

"What? Speak it out, you little devil! Think you know something on your captain, do you? Well, he knows something on you. He knows about that woman in the singsong house, savvy? He knows how you cut her throat and all about it."

Captain Bray evidently knew nothing at all—he jerked his head around and gave Crane a sharp look of astonished gratitude. Mr. Smithers did not see this, however. He, too, had turned upon Crane, his teeth showing in a snarl.

"What the hell you talking about?" he cried.

Crane sat there and smiled at him, and under the smile his soul crawled and his voice died. Then Captain Bray, who was sharp enough, perceived the chance afforded him to escape and seized it with both hands and a roaring voice.

"You this-and-that little Eurasian rat!" he bellowed profanely, pounding his fists on the table. "I've had enough o' your back talk. Aye, mister, I know all about that there girl. And you can take your choice—jump ship at Manila with your pay, or do your talking to the French consul there! Understand?"

Mr. Smithers seemed to retract into himself, to coil like a snake.

"You better look out—you and Chambers both!" he shot forth. All his anger turned from Crane to the skipper, yet his eyes were furtive and fear-filled. "You

know cursed well I can tell about them two women who killed themselves and why——"

"What's that to me, hey?" stormed Captain Bray. Obviously, he had now determined to rid himself of this incubus once and for all. Morton shrewdly suspected that Mr. Smithers had presumed on his knowledge ere this—probably had turned it to profit.

"Yes, mister, you go to Manila, and you go blasted quick!" proceeded the skipper boldly. "I've had enough o' you aboard this hooker, and now you're done. You and your talk about them women—all nonsense! A pack of cursed lies, and you ain't got a smidgeon o' proof to back 'em up. You just let me hear that you've done any talking about me or about this ship—understand? Just let me hear it!"

"Aye," said Mr. Smithers in sulky, wide-eyed fear.

Captain Bray leaned over the table. "Aye—what? Out with it, blast you! Learn some respect aboard here or I'll iron you this minute!"

"Aye, sir," replied Mr. Smithers, and blinked rapidly.

"As for your plague talk, that's nonsense too," went on Captain Bray, determined to assert himself to the full once he had taken the bit between his teeth. "The chief is done up wi' the heat. He ain't got a symptom o' plague. So keep your mouth shut from now on."

Mr. Smithers did so, but his eyes were eloquent of the fury in his heart, and when he met the deliberate smile of Crane, he shoved back his chair and left the table muttering. When he had gone, Captain Bray beamed genially at Crane.

"Well, sir, I owe you thanks for the tip," he said. "Did he really cut a girl's throat?"

"He did," said Crane calmly. "He and another chap did it for her jewelry. The other man didn't

know Smithers by name, but described



him to me—we were in the same prison. Smithers had got away. When I saw him, I recognized the description at once. There you are."

"Any man who'd do a thing like that," said Morton, looking at the skipper, "ought to be disemboweled."

"Right you are, Mr. Morton," said Captain Bray warmly.

CRANE lighted a cheroot in the darkness. The reflected flame from his cupped hands gave his face an odd highlight, illumined it with an unguessed strength, mastery. Morton puffed at his pipe and looked out at the blazing stars and the white-tipped sea. The *Fei Yen* was shoving ahead through long rollers that made the stars swing, when one looked up at them.

"Our friend Mr. Smithers," and Crane uttered a soft laugh, "seems to have been doing a bit of blackmail. Didn't the skipper jump to get rid of him, though!"

"You inserted that remark very cleverly," said Morton. "Why? To make use of him?"

"To weave another mesh in the net—perhaps the last mesh," said Crane. "Now we've learned the fate of those two women, haven't we? That's why I did it, my friend."

"And what next?" asked Morton, though his pulse leaped with the query.

"How do I know?" said Crane, in a tone of surprise. "There's no hurry. It's amusing to watch and wait. Everything turns around you now, also; you're the pivotal point of the next little scene."

"I?" said Morton.

"Of course. You've been standing aside, looking on at my little game. Now I'm standing aside in the same detached way, and looking on at yours. I'm curious to see what'll happen, what Bray and Chambers are thinking of doing, how they'll try to get those stones from you. If they haven't searched your cabin yet——"

"My things were badly tumbled about today," said Morton. "So that was it, eh?"

"That was it. And now you'd best watch your step," said Crane.

Morton laughed amusedly. "Confound you! I'd wish you'd finish up your game,

whatever it is! I don't relish this a bit—it's interesting, fascinating, but I don't enjoy it."

"Well," said Crane, "I didn't make you find those stones and then tip off your hand to Bray, did I?"

With this he turned and walked away.

Morton was tempted to anger at this cool thrust, then it only added to his amusement. The subtle irony of Crane's words appealed to him. He appreciated the quiet, dominant way Crane was pulling string after string—literally enough to make up the meshes of his net.

And now, though he did not like it, he knew he had bungled that business of the jewels, and he must see it through. Despite himself, he was being dragged into the affair, while Crane stood off and watched with a sardonic grin.

THE watches were changed, Mr. Smithers taking over the deck from the mate. Morton was pacing up and down the bridge-deck, enjoying his pipe and the cool of the breeze and the swaying stars. At each turn aft, he could see the glow of a cheroot and a white shape down below, at the rail of the after well-deck; but he left Crane alone.

From the chart-house drifted sounds of a furious altercation. Captain Bray had come up. He and Mr. Chambers and Mr. Smithers were all three at it, to judge from the storm of oaths and imprecations, but what it was all about Morton did not know or care to know. Of a sudden the figure of Mr. Smithers appeared, glided past him, and vanished aft. A moment later Mr. Chambers came out to the side of the bridge, bawling after the second officer.

"Smithers! Come back here, blast your dirty soul—I want my dinner! You take the deck—where ye think we are, huh? On a railroad train? Get back here!"

Smithers had vanished, and made no response. Captain Bray stepped out and spoke to his furious mate.

"Go on," he said wearily. "I'll take the deck, mister. Go on."

Mr. Chambers crossed to the port ladder and descended. Captain Bray stood looking at Morton as the latter ap-

proached, and then spoke.

"That you, Mr. Morton? A fine evening, very! I suppose you heard this unfortunate scrimmage of tongues?"

"I heard the sounds of it, at least," said Morton. "We all have our troubles, I expect. How are we making the road to Manila?"

"Oh, fairly, fairly," said the skipper. "I hope Maquorrie will come about in the morning. None of these yellow devils know a thing about engines. The old man is in a bad way, though—his heart, I think. Know anything about such things?"

"Little," said Morton. "I—what's that?"

Both men turned, startled, senses taut. A wild, shrill cry came from somewhere below, a queerly panting, inarticulate cry. Then, as they listened, it burst into words.

"Chambers! He—he done for me—he done——"

It fell silent abruptly.

"My good lord—that's Mr. Smithers' voice!" cried the skipper. "Come on, Mr. Morton!" Something's happened down there——"

Morton was already on the ladder, and Captain Bray almost on his shoulders. There at the ladder's foot, under a deck-light, lay the second officer on his back, dead. Blood was still streaming from a jagged, terrible wound across his left breast; and above him, knife in hand, stood Mr. Chambers.

The mate lifted his blue jowl as the other two approached.

"Here's a hell of a note!" he cried out. "Smithers comes along the port passage



hollering, and staggering like he was drunk, and then lets out a yell at me about some him—and there he is! Here's the knife——"

Abruptly, Mr. Chambers stood silent,

his heavy voice dying out, as he looked from one to the other. Morton said nothing.

Captain Bray broke the silence. "It didn't sound that way, Mr. Chambers," he said in a quavering tone, as though he

must speak against his will. "Is he dead? Yes, yes. Dead enough, poor devil! It sounded like he said you had done for him, mister."

The mate was not a man of great imagination, but had already read the accusation in both their faces. Now he burst forth and swore a great oath, and held out the knife.

"It ain't so, it ain't!" he roared. "It's a cursed lie, I tell you! That ain't my knife—you know blasted well I don't carry any knife! It's like I said. I seen him running, and caught him, and there he is. I s'pose because we had that fuss up above you think it was me—but it ain't so, blast it! Don't be a durned fool, cap'n——"

"What's all this?" said a quiet voice, and Crane strode up along the passage from aft, and joined them. His voice shrilled as he saw the prostrate figure. "Eh? Murder? Who did it, Captain Bray?"

The skipper glanced around, saw one or two figures, and mopped his sweating face with a shirt-sleeve.

"For the love o' heaven shut up, all hands!" he exclaimed irritably. "Most of them chinks know English. Go down in my cabin, all of you—I'll be right along. Wang! Where the devil's that steward? Boy! Wang!"

"My come topside, cap'n," came the response, and Wang pattered up. The skipper ordered him to have the body of Mr. Smithers carried below and prepared for burial, then wiped his brow again and went below, and so to his own cabin.

Mr. Chambers sat there burly, scowling, furious at the whole affair and yet oddly dumb before the startling evidence damning him so clearly. Crane was chewing an unlighted cheroot, impassive, frowning a little as he looked at the reddened knife from one to the other, unable to balance fact against fact, unable to see where truth lay. Chambers must have done the murder; yet apparently no one remembered how Mr. Smithers had gone aft instead of descending at the break of the bridge.

"Well, gentlemen, this is a hell of a mess," said Captain Bray, his face mottled

and streaming perspiration. As he looked at the knife, his big nose quivered. "This has got to be logged. We can't get away from it. Mister," he said, as Chambers looked up, "mister, you keep quiet. I'm master o' this ship."

He cleared a space at the table, well away from the red knife, and got out his rough log, and sat down, Mr. Chambers was staring at him, hard.

"Somebody did this," said the skipper. "Maybe it was you, mister, maybe it was one of the hands. Nobody ever seen this knife before? Nor did I. Now, mister, speak your piece."

MR. CHAMBERS growled out his story without variation, and anger grew upon him against the unbelief all around. Morton thought his attitude rang true. He finished with a glare and another burst of gusty oaths. The skipper looked at Morton.

"You were with me, Mr. Morton. There's bound to be an inquiry about this," and he paused for an instant, wetting his lips, "unless—unless it's cleared up in the log. Did it look to you like Mr. Chambers had done it?"

"Yes," said Morton quietly.

"Blast you——" cried out Chambers, but the skipper silenced him.

"Did it look to you like Mr. Smithers said Chambers had done for him?"

"Not necessarily," said Morton. "The words might be so construed. On the other hand, they might refer to a third party—someone whom Mr. Chambers had seen running away, perhaps."

"Blast it, there wasn't no one else in sight!" growled the mate, glaring. Then he started. "But look here, cap'n! Mr. Smithers didn't go down the ladder ahead o' me—he went aft! Right past Mr. Morton!"

"Yes," said Morton.

To save his life he could not help a glance at Crane. The latter sat looking on, listening, a cynical lift to his brows, the slightest shadow of his inhuman and terrible smile touching his thin lips.

"What d'you know about it, Mr. Crane?" said the skipper. He seemed in difficulty, perplexed and troubled. His

breathing was laborious.

"I?" Crane shrugged. "I came up, saw Mr. Chambers there with the knife—that's all I could say about it. Very likely his story is true. I'd been down in the after well-deck. I think you saw me down there, Morton?"

"Yes," said Morton.

"Blast it!" said the skipper fervently. "If you didn't do it, mister—and I don't think you'd lie to me—then one o' the hands done it. If I put down this sort of a yarn, there'll be an inquiry sure. And I got to log it, mister. Here's two witnesses."

MR. CHAMBERS looked from one to the other of the witnesses. His scowling gaze spoke tacitly but very clearly. His eyes said he wished most devoutly both of those witnesses were out of the way. Under Crane's smile of comprehension, blood rushed to his face.

"Blast you, all of you!" he exclaimed, and came to his feet. "I want some dinner. If I'd knifed that red-haired fool, I'd ha' done it proper, without all this monkey-work! And you can take it or leave it in your blasted log."

He stamped out. Captain Bray wiped his face, and left his pencil untouched. Crane fumbled for matches and lighted his cheroot.

"You're up against it, cap'n," he said, as though he enjoyed the words. "Mr. Chambers may be an old shipmate and all that, but it looks bad. It'll look worse if you don't log what happened, and do it tonight. Tomorrow you can look for the owner of that knife among the crew."

"I hadn't thought o' that." The skipper brightened visibly. "Good for you, Mr. Crane! I'll do it. We're in for hard times this voyage—lucky thing there's good weather ahead, with everything gone wrong like this! A drink all around, gentlemen. We need it, eh? And I'll have to get up to the bridge now."

The drink was provided, then the three departed. Captain Bray turned in at the chart-house door, Morton and Crane walked aft along the bridge-deck.

"You did it well," said Morton.

"Eh?" Crane looked sideways at him

in the starlight. "Eh? Did what?"

"Why evade? I'm not a fool," said Morton, quietly. "Smithers came down the after ladder, and ran slap into you. The rest was coincidence, but you played it well. Your net has gone tight on Chambers, and no mistake. He can't possibly get his yarn believed by any court. It's the truth, but it's too improbable."

"Hm!" said Crane. "You're that *rara avis*, a well-balanced man with clear vision, my friend! Perhaps you deceive yourself. At any rate, except for you and me being on hand, it would be logged as an accident or direct mutiny, like the death of Saunders. Wouldn't they like to be rid of you, though! Yours is the damning evidence against Chambers, and you're the one who has the stones—presumably. Look out for yourself."

Morton laughed softly. "Dragging me in deeper and deeper, eh? No use, Crane. I'm a detached onlooker."

"The bystander always suffers," said Crane. "Good, night."

Morton paced the deck a long while. He thought he understood Crane's whole game now—first Chambers netted, and then Bray! Crane had killed Smithers, beyond doubt. Perhaps the second officer had attacked him, furious, wrought up, blinded to everything. Coincidence or fate had done the rest, and Chambers was in the net, due for a murder charge and a stiff prison sentence at the very least.

"Clever man!" thought Morton. "I wonder how he'll enmesh the skipper?"

He went to the rail, knocked out his pipe, turned to go below. At the third step, the stars rushed at him and the heavens fell.

V

THE *Fei Yen* took a long, smooth roll up the breast of a wave. The body of Morton slid half over the edge, beneath the iron pipe-rail which was not intended to hold back prostrate figures but erect men. Captain Bray grunted, caught his coat, dragged him back, and then bent over him, breathing hoarsely.

After a moment the skipper straightened up, and an oath of astounded incredulity escaped him. He swore violently.

Once more he leaned over, searched the body anew, and broke into fresh curses. What he sought was not here.

Abruptly the skipper turned and rushed away. He did not enter the chart-house, but made for the ladder and went down hurriedly to the deck below. Turning into the passage, he strode to Morton's cabin, switched on the light, and began a swift but thorough search of everything here, from trunk to mattress. He spent a good fifteen minutes at it, prying, poking, testing, and found just nothing.

"I'll be blowed!" he observed, and stared around with bloodshot, baffled eyes. "What's he done with the stuff?"

Another long roll—the sea was mounting, he noticed. His gaze stabbed about the cabin savagely; with an air of helpless futility, he swore again and went back to the passage, and sought his own cabin. There he got out the bottle and poured himself a drink, seized the glass in shaking fingers, drank the liquor.

He caught a sound from the doorway and turned. Crane was standing there, smiling.

Captain Bray opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again, wordless. Crane held a pistol, covering him. The skipper's face was slowly drained of its color. Crane



stepped into the cabin, put a hand behind him, closed the door, turned the key in the lock. Then he spoke:

"Sit down, cap'n. Sit down. You didn't get the stuff off Morton, eh? Killed him for

nothing. You didn't find it in his cabin, eh? Sit down and talk it over."

Captain Bray put out a hand, felt blindly for his chair, and lowered himself into it. Crane came forward and took the other chair, across the table. His eyes and his pistol did not waver.

"Now, cap'n, looks like you and Mr. Chambers are in the same boat, eh?" observed Crane, no longer smiling. "You lost

your head when you killed Morton. You forgot he's no beachcomber, but a well-known man, a man of standing and position. There'll be stuff in the newspapers about it, and a whale of an inquiry. You can't possibly dodge it."

Captain Bray licked his lips. The whisky was putting color into his cheeks again, but could not put color into his brain. To find that Crane knew everything was worse than staggering—it was paralyzing, held him stupefied. He wakened to the accusation of murder, however.

"It's a lie!" he said thickly. "I—I didn't kill him!"

"You did," said Crane coolly. "You lost your head. Before I could get to him, his body slipped over, slipped under the rail, was gone."

"My lord!" said Captain Bray in a strangled voice. "You—you——"

"Yes, I was watching you," said Crane. "And of course my evidence must go in before the court."

The skipper was more or less himself again, with the first passing of the shock. He broke out harshly.

"Ex-convict like you? Man with your record? Who'd believe it? Your evidence ain't worth a hang!"

"In that case, explain Morton's death—as balanced against my poor evidence," and Crane was smiling now, coldly and terribly. "Convict or not, I was a witness. The man at the wheel knows when you left. Besides, my evidence will be pretty good. It'll show why you killed Morton, skipper. Wang will back it up."

"Wang?" Captain Bray started. "Wang?"

"Exactly. The steward. He took those new life-jackets to Morton's cabin, if you remember, at your order. We'll bring out the whole story of those jewels, and that'll bring out the story behind the jewels—about the French woman and the native woman. What was the French girl's name—Delattre, wasn't it?"

CRANE put away his weapon. He had no further need of it; his words had driven deeper than any bullets could drive.

Captain Bray sat with his hands outspread on the table, and once more his

face had taken on a horrible ghastly expression—dead white about the eyes, and the veins of the cheeks standing out clearly, and the nostrils quivering. It was not fright; it was an incredible and fearful horror at finding these details known to Crane.

"Yes," went on the latter calmly, "there'll be a lot come out at the inquiry, cap'n. If you hadn't let Morton slide over, things might have been patched up, but he's too important a man."

"How—how d'you know about—about——?"

The skipper's voice died on the word.

"Oh, about the native woman and Madame Delattre? Well, cap'n, I know a good deal more than you think I know, even about that! However, it's not to the point just now. Let's go back to the case of Mr. Chambers. You've been dead anxious to figure out some way of logging Mr. Smithers' death so the mate would slide past the inquiry, eh? But it just can't be done. You even wanted to put Morton out of the way, only you were afraid to do it right. And you were afraid Chambers would do it—afraid he would find those jewels, eh? Cap'n, it doesn't pay to be afraid, to do things half-way! If you're not efficient in this poor makeshift world, you sure as hell go under."

CAPTAIN BRAY pulled himself together. His upper lip drew back from his teeth in a snarl, a grimace most unbecoming.

"What you driving at?" he snapped. "What are you in this for, hey? What's it to you?"

Crane smiled at him amusedly.

"You can worry over that for a while, cap'n. Let's put it this way for the moment—self-preservation! Here you and your chief officer have apparently gone crazy. Mr. Chambers has killed the second engineer and the second mate, and you've murdered a passenger. Lord help you before the court, cap'n! Naturally I mean to protect myself. You don't speak Chinese, cap'n? Well, I do. I learned it in prison, where I learned a lot of things. And let me tell you, this crew of yours has the jumps! They know what's been

going on, never fear. So does Wang, the steward."

"Huh!" Captain Bray grunted, and his fishy, light-blue eyes drove out hard at Crane. "You're no blasted angel. What you want out of it?"

"Ah, now we're getting down to brass tacks!" said Crane, with an air of satisfaction. He produced cheroots, clamped his teeth into one, extended the other. "Here, smoke up, help yourself to a drink! What do I want out of it? Well, never mind that either for the moment. I'm going to get what I want, never fear. Have a drink, and we'll talk it over."

Captain Bray reached out shaky fingers, poured a drink, downed it, and lighted the cheroot. He was recovering, now.

"Get your rough log—still on the table, eh? Well, suppose you enter up this case of Mr. Smithers, just as it happened. You know what store the court sets by the log, cap'n. First thing is to protect yourself."

"But——" Captain Bray hung fire on this. "But—Mr. Chambers——"

"Oh, you mean he'll split on you? Tell about those women and so forth? Nonsense. His word's worth nothing, and if I keep quiet, who'd back him up?"

"Ah!" said Captain Bray, and took up his log and pencil. He crowded forward above the table, writing busily. Crane smoked calmly and watched him. When the skipper looked up, Crane held out his hand, took the log-book, and read over the entry.

"Fair enough," he said.

"Now what?" said the skipper a trifle anxiously. "What about this—this——"

"This affair of Morton?" Crane prompted him. "Well, cap'n, what do you think? Suppose Morton, who is no seaman, was at the rail when a big roll came and tipped him—eh? You grabbed for him, nearly went over yourself, missed him and were knocked silly for a moment. Then it was too late."

"Hm!" The bleary eyes of the skipper searched his face, half suspiciously. "If you'd stand by me—eh?"

"Why not?" Crane waved his hand. "Don't you see—that'd insure my safety! I take no chances on you, cap'n. You'll

need my testimony. If I swear I was there, saw it all——"

"Wouldn't do," said Captain Bray. "Admiralty courts or any other kind are hell on detail, Crane. Did we stop the engines, put about, do a blessed thing? We



did not. No, that story wouldn't hold. Not that sort of an accident."

Crane smiled. He seemed to be thoroughly enjoying himself.

"Suicide, then—that happens all the while," he suggested. "If you'd think back, you might recall remarks Morton had made—despondent remarks, wishing it were ended, and so on. Why, I could remember things myself! Only tonight after dinner, he was saying that he wished he were dead, and he'd like to be buried at sea like Mr. Smithers! If he was at the stern rail last we saw of him, and hadn't occupied his berth, and never showed up in the morning but was clean gone—wouldn't that be a clear case of suicide? And no court asking questions."

Captain Bray drew a deep breath, and his eyes glinted.

"By the lord, if you ain't a smart 'un!" he exclaimed briskly. "Here, lemme see that log, now——"

He seized his pencil, opened up the book, and dashed to work. Under date of the following morning he wrote a spirited account of Morton's mysterious disappearance, with a note of the search made, and the various remarks Morton had passed. He read it aloud to Crane, and it was a veritable masterpiece, describing the whole affair clearly, neatly, efficiently.

"How's that, now?" he said genially, looking up, and passed over the log-book.

Crane read it over carefully, and smiled as he read.

"This," he returned, "is excellent, cap'n! It describes everything in fine shape. I

suppose you'd like me to witness it?"

"You'd best," said Captain Bray.

"All right." Crane rose. "I'll just keep the log until tomorrow—look it over a bit tonight. May think of something more to add. Well, good night and pleasant dreams!"

He unlocked the door and passed out.

Ten minutes later, Crane might have been observed—but was not—at the foot of the port ladder on the forward well-deck. He stood there some time in quiet talk with a naked bronzed figure, and finally sought his own cabin. And, as he passed beneath the deck-light in the passage, he was smiling.

VII

MORTON wakened to a rift of sunlight slanting in above his head, and opened his eyes to see Crane dressing. He himself lay not in his own cabin, but in that of Crane. He swung his legs over to the floor and sat up, astonished—then groaned. Blinding swirls of pain stabbed through his head.

"Hello—awake?" came Crane's voice.

"Well, sit tight, old chap. You're supposed to be dead. The cap'n has no great remorse over it—confound this razor!"

Now Morton remembered how the heavens had fallen upon him. He sat motionless until the worst of the pain occasioned by his first movements had worn away. He drank in the import of Crane's words slowly enough, but was confused by discovering himself here, not in his own cabin.

"There's a tray waiting for you—I had Wang fetch it," said Crane. "Swallow that coffee and you'll be in better shape to talk business."

Morton found himself still in shirt and trousers, his other garments lying in the rack. He gladly fell to work at the tray and was feeling almost himself by the time Crane finished dressing.

"Suppose you tell me what happened?" he said, leaning back. "Who hit me? Bray?"

"Just so," said Crane. "He thinks you're dead—went overboard. When he learned that I saw the whole thing, he was much disturbed."

Morton's eyes widened. "You—you devil!" he said, and laughed a little. "Only a minute before it happened, I was wondering what sort of a net you'd catch Bray in!"

Crane chuckled. "You do me too much honor, Morton—I've merely taken advantage of circumstances. I'd have spared you this nasty crack on the head if I'd known; as it was, I warned you to watch your step, and I was too slow to intervene when it happened. The ship is being searched for you this minute. Since you're dead, and therefore a detached spectator once more, will you be content to follow my advice?"

Morton, fumbling for pipe and pouch, was slow to respond. Crane was making use of him; he sensed the fact, resented it, yet was powerless to avoid it. He was, momentarily, in no condition to make any use of himself or his faculties—his head throbbed intolerably. The maelstrom of human passions had engulfed him.

"So you've dragged me in, eh?" he said angrily. "No—confound you, that's not fair. I'm to blame for my own fix. Well, I'm in it up to the neck—"

"Exactly," said Crane. "The skipper and Mr. Chambers are in much deeper, however; they're between the millstones of the gods, and are feeling the pinch. You've got to do as I say, trust to me, let me do the whole thing. If I don't suit you, no matter; things have gone too far. Those two men don't dare let you set foot ashore, now! So speak up—time's short. Yes or no?"

"What do you mean to do?" demanded Morton.

"In brief, take command of the ship. The crew will remain passive. They know Chambers has killed two men, they distrust Bray, and they've been told I had master's papers—once. They're safe. Maquorrie will be safe, down below, Yes or no?"

Morton threw up his hands.

"I don't want to, frankly—but I must. Go ahead. What shall I do?"

"Nothing, for half an hour. Then, unless I come back to change directions, come up to the bridge deck. I'll have a chair waiting for you at the top of the port ladder. Think you can make it?"

Morton nodded. Crane glanced at himself in the glass, adjusted his necktie, and went out with an admonition to lock the door behind him, lest anyone try to enter. Morton accomplished it, then lowered himself into his chair, barely repressing a groan, and got his pipe alight.

HE WAS distinctly not in good shape, either physically or mentally. He was confused by this turn of affairs, yet recognized clearly that his own life was now at stake. From the moment when, on the hotel veranda, he shook hands with Crane, he had gradually been drawn further and further by the influx of the maelstrom.

The pain caused by movement ebbed away again. Morton had no idea exactly what Crane intended to do, and did not care particularly. He was by no means in sympathy with either Bray or Chambers—had the best of reasons to lack any sympathy for them—and yet the idea of Crane deliberately killing them repelled him. Still, what was there to do? Nothing. The whole affair was in Crane's hands, and Crane was capable enough. Thus Morton was divided among doubt, perplexity, futility. Also, he felt a certain admiration for Crane, despite everything, and he was curious, very curious in a fascinated way, to see whether the man meant to push his vengeance. Perhaps, after all, he merely meant to take the *Fei Yen* into port and break the two officers—but no! Hardly that. It was not like Crane.

Time was slipping fast. Morton rose, managed a wash, swallowed the dregs of coffee, and went to the door. Every step brought torture at first. Outside, he found the passages empty. The port ladder, Crane had said; Morton headed for it, and emerged blinking into the hot, white morning sunlight.

A knot of men were gathered forward, by the fore-castle head, but seemed not to observe him. He turned to the ladder and began to mount. This was work—each upward heave sent throbs over his head, and halfway up he perforce paused. They were looking up at him from below, strange yellow faces in the sunlight. He waved his hand and then went on again, and heard Crane's voice greeting him.

Crane's hand caught him, helped him up. "Come along—just right, Morton! Settle down and keep quiet, now."

Crane moved off, standing at the bridge rail just before the pilot-house, waiting.

MORTON, sinking into his chair, sighed with relief. He was at the head of the ladder, and the well-deck was outspread below him, the two yellow cargo-booms lashed together over the tarpaulined hatch. The men were still staring up. Then Morton saw a naked bronze figure walking out along the booms and come to a stop. It was the Annamese, Mien.

Mien threw down something across the booms—it looked like a net. In his hand he held a second net, small, far-folded. Watching, Morton remembered that fisherman he had seen on leaving port—Mien stood in just the same stalwart, poised effortless manner. The sense of something impending tugged hard at Morton. He leaned forward, watching for he knew not what, waiting.

Abruptly, the knot of men broke apart. From the fore-castle hatch emerged the burly figure of Mr. Chambers, coming out into the sunlight and staring around in his aggressive, menacing way. Mr. Chambers saw the two figures on the bridge; shielding eyes with hand, he stared up at Morton, amazement filling his face.

"I'll be blowed!" he cried out. "Morton! If that ain't him——"

It was so swift, Morton did not see it done—actually saw only a flash of brown limbs on the boom above Mr. Chambers.



Far outspread in a perfect circle, the net dropped and clung all about the mate's huge figure. After it, the naked Mien also dropped, and landed lightly on the

deck.

From Mr. Chambers erupted roaring, furious curses; he lashed out at the net with both hands, kicking at it, strove to rid himself of the clinging, baffling meshes and

only wrapped himself in it more tightly. He stormed oaths and orders, but the impassive yellow men had scattered, and now looked on curiously, silent, without emotion. Mien calmly came in behind him, stooped, struck one hard, arm-long blow across the back of his knees, and Mr. Chambers toppled over.

This was all Mien needed, since the net had fallen from above. The bronze figure moved with agile precision, caught at the net, whipped it in and around and under; then, draw-string in hand, made a leap and swung up astride the boom, hauling taut his catch. It all passed in perhaps fifteen seconds—no more. So swiftly, that Morton scarce realized what he was beholding.

Mien stood up on the boom, then advanced over the hatch, and Mr. Chambers reposed on the hatch-cover, fighting, struggling, cursing, Mien drew in his slack; the native's betel-stained teeth showed black in the sunlight as he grinned. He wrapped the line about the boom, made it fast, Mr. Chambers swung an inch or two above the canvas, unable to get purchase, tangled and held futile by his own weight. Trapped!

Stooping, Mien picked up the second net, folded it, stood immobile as a statue. Mr. Chambers was shouting frantically. At the bridge-rail, Crane stood looking down, and sight of him there was all the crew needed to hold them inactive. Theirs was not the loyalty of white men. They neither knew nor cared what was going on, so long as that calm, dominant figure stood there in control.

"Blast you, hurry up!" came the mate's voice suddenly. "Get me out o' this!"

There was a stir among the men. Morton, watching, saw the figure of Captain Bray cross the well-deck and come to a stop in the sunlight, staring dumbfounded at the queer apparition of Mr. Chambers hanging in a fish-net. Crane spoke for the first time, and his voice drove across and through the curses of the mate.

"Cap'n! Look up here!"

Bray swung around. A startled cry came from him. He shoved back his cap and stood staring open-mouthed at Morton's seated figure.

SWIFTER than eye could follow, the bronze Mien unleashed his net; it was quick as the strike of a coiled snake. Mr. Chambers roared warning, all too late. The net fell, and after it dropped Mien. By design or accident, he struck the skipper in falling, and both went rolling across the deck together.

Mr. Chambers went into frantic convulsions of effort, endeavoring to tear the net apart, flinging out his strength against the yielding meshes, accomplishing nothing except his own utter exhaustion. By the time he quieted, still gasping hoarse oaths, Captain Bray was neatly enmeshed and Mien was leaping back to the boom. The skipper was presently swung into place—the two of them dangling there above the hatch, side by side. Mien leaped down and waved his hand to Crane.

"All right!" he called in French. "All right, M'soo Delattre!"

Crane made his way down to the well-deck.

At this name of Delattre, the two men writhing in their nets gave over struggling, and their voices died away, and over the deck fell a queer deadly silence. Mr. Chambers was nearly upright, and through the net-meshes his face stared out, purpled, eyes distended, mouth gasping. Captain Bray was lying on his side, one hand caught up and held over his head, and he was quite helpless to move. A sharp breath came from him.

"Delattre!"

"Yes, Delattre," said Crane, for a moment invisible to Morton, above. "You gentlemen never knew I was using the name of Delattre, eh? Or that it was my wife who came aboard here in Pak-hoi, eh? You never looked at Delattre—afraid of the fever, eh? Well, you might better have risked the fever, gentlemen. This brown man is the brother of the one you knocked on the head. The native woman was a princess, his mistress. So we're very pleased to check over our accounts with you—after two years."

There was no response from the two netted figures. They stared and stared, wordless, swinging a little to the roll of the ship, twisting very slowly around and around, so that one moment Morton saw

their faces, the next their backs. Mien went up and squatted on the hatch, and was holding a knife in his hand.

Crane came out into the blaze of sunlight and laid the skipper's log book on the hatch, and lighted a cheroot carefully.

"No excuses, gentlemen?" he asked. "No, it's not much use now—we know the whole story, even a good many of the details. Captain Bray, you honored my wife with your intentions, so I intend to return the compliment. With Mr. Chambers I have no concern—I think Mien will take care of him very handily. Mien knows how the princess disappeared and how his brother was attended to——"

"Blast your dirty heart!" roared out Mr. Chambers violently, "You let me out o' this and I'll show the two of you what's what!"

"You're very well as you are, Mr. Chambers," said Crane, smiling as he spoke. "You don't know that you're already logged by the skipper as having killed Mr. Smithers? Well, you are——"

"Blast the lot of you!" thundered the mate. "What you goin' to do? Leave us here?"

"Why not?" asked Crane.

"For heaven's sake let us out of this!" cried the skipper, his voice stifled. "If you're Crane—Delattre—no matter who you are! Kill us quickly, if you like——"

"Why should I kill you?" asked Crane quietly. "I'd like to, yes; but I don't intend to be so merciful. That is, cap'n, where you're concerned. As to Mr. Chambers, Mien can suit himself, without interference from me."

MIENT guessed what was being said, and threw up his knife and caught it, grinning.

"What's that about me being logged?" demanded Mr. Chambers suddenly.

Crane took up the log book and ruffled the pages.

"Oh, you're down in black and white, but let it pass. Cap'n. I presume you've already noticed that Mr. Morton is very much alive? Yes? You needn't bother wasting any oaths on the inquiry. I'm going to take this ship into Manila for you, then we'll see what the court of inquiry

and the Board of Trade and so forth have to decide as regards our good Cap'n Bray."

Crane paused, shifted his cheroot, and smiled over the book at the agonized skipper.

"You see, cap'n, I was a witness to your assault on Morton. I saved him. The word of a jailbird may not be of much account, but your own testimony is right here, written down in your own hand—understand? You tell about his disappearance and so forth—a beautiful story! Then, we have Morton's testimony. You perceive what the upshot will be?"

A strangled groan burst from Captain Bray.

"You—you devil!" he cried. "You've tricked me——"

"No, fate has tricked you, cap'n," said Crane. "You'll lose your ticket and become a human derelict, a pariah. And you really believe I'd kill you? Not a bit of it. You can go kill yourself if you like, and welcome. I prefer to let you live on, a long while."

Morton, listening to all this, watching from the bridge-rail above, comprehended for the first time how deftly Crane's net had been spun about the wretched man who hung there slowly spinning and swaying. The tough, fine fish-net compressing the body of Captain Bray was as nothing to the invisible, deadly net in which was irremediably tangled all his present and future, his position, his very soul.

Realizing the depth of Crane's bitter vengeance, Morton drew a deep breath and sat back in his chair. It was just. He had no argument against it. He had no share, except to give his plain testimony.

The net which held Mr. Chambers shifted a little, hitched downward—the rope about the boom slipped slightly. Small as was the slip, it was enough to let Mr. Chambers stand on the ball of one foot; the mate straightened himself out, the yielding meshes giving to the thrust of his body. Get free he could not, though he could move somewhat.

"Blast you!" he cried. "What about me, huh?"

Mien rose lithely and came close to the net, grinning, his knife held out as though

to thrust. The mate drew away, as far as might be.



"You belong to him," said Crane casually. "Since you killed the native woman——"
 "It's a lie!" roared the mate. She hung herself!"

"The final mesh in the net," said Crane, and smiled.

MORTON heard these words and relaxed. They brought him a sense of finality, as though the drama which he had witnessed was now come to its ending. The final mesh, indeed—confession! He saw Crane turn and look up at him,

Then, like a flesh, the unexpected happened.

Mr. Chambers, one foot on the deck given balance and purchase, gaining some small freedom of action, thrust his arms forward. Undoubtedly, the slipping of the net had aided his efforts. The grinning face and knife of Mien were almost touching him. Unheeding the knife, Mr. Chambers got the bronze throat in his grip—net and all. The knife thrust in; Mr. Chambers clutched the bronze wrist.

"Now, you damned nigger—knife a white man, will you?" growled the mate, and his growl rose to a wild exultant snarl.

Crane whirled about, saw what had happened, and leaped to the hatch-cover. He hurled himself bodily on the two struggling, swaying figures, endeavoring to pull them apart. The net would hold one man, might hold two, but could not hold three. The fiber draw-rope parted. Crane was hurled headlong to the deck; a shudder passed through his body and he lay quiet.

The other two, interlocked, rolled to the deck and across half-way to the port scuppers—a wild scramble of arms and legs, flashing knife, sinuous net. The knife rose, no longer flashing, but dull red, and fell again. The thrashing figures, still fast-gripped, fell quiet, entangled, knotted. The knife was buried, and a red stream twined

across the deck toward the scuppers. The bronze head of Mien was all askew, grinning horribly.

Morton found himself at the rail, staring down.

Then a stir of men in the sunlight, and abruptly the voice of Captain Bray lifted, rang out shrilly.

"Chief! Maquorrie! Lend a hand here——"

Old Maquorrie appeared on the well-deck, a pistol in his hand. Morton saw him peering and blinking, staring at the netted skipper in astonishment.

"How the de'il did ye get there?" he demanded.

"Mutiny! Give me that pistol—cut me loose!" Captain Bray writhed, and swore as his movement made the net swing and slowly spin. "Move—hurry!"

Maquorrie took a step forward. Crane rolled over, put a hand to his head, sat up. The chief lifted his pistol.

"Mr. Maquorrie!"

Morton heard his own voice, vibrant and powerful, fill the well-deck. He saw Maquorrie turn and stare up at him. He saw the glint of yellow faces as the scattered men stared up, saw Crane rise, stagger, stand looking up also.

"Captain Bray nearly murdered me last night, chief," went on Morton. "We've taken the ship away from his control—he's not responsible. Mr. Crane will take her into Manila."

Captain Bray, twisting in the net, screamed hot curses. Mr. Maquorrie stood peering up, jaw fallen.

"Eh, man!" he exclaimed. "Is it a fact?"

Morton saw the sardonic grin on Crane's face, and answered it with a laugh. He himself was full in the net now—drawn into responsibility, acting with Crane, no longer a detached bystander——

"It's a fact, chief," he returned. "The skipper goes to trial."

Mr. Maquorrie shoved the pistol into his pocket.

"I'm damn' glad of it," he said. "I'll go look to them engines——"

The big net holding the doubled, helpless, whimpering skipper slowly spun and swayed in the hot white sunlight, and Crane, looking up, smiled.



BOSS OF THE CIRCLE BAR

By ALBERT WILLIAM STONE

Author of "Via Nefarious Jones," "Greater Than the Code," etc.

FOR A TIME IT LOOKED AS IF THE CIRCLE BAR BOSS WAS GOING TO BE BOSS NO LONGER, BUT SEVERAL FACTORS APPEARED IN THE GAME AND THINGS GOT OFF ON A DIFFERENT FOOT AFTER ALL

THE stranger said his name was Calkins and his business cattle buying. He claimed to hail from New Mexico and Arizona, and to have bought stuff over a territory as wide flung as Colorado, Wyoming and Montana put together. He claimed to know cattle, too, from horns to hoofs, and to pay good prices, cash on the nail, for whatever he took a fancy to.

He was an angular gentleman, was Calkins, with sloping shoulders and a scraggly mustache that looked as if it had been dipped in stale honey. He had a deceptively retreating face and forehead, and a nasal voice as high pitched as a Mexican peon's, especially when he was in good humor. He wore a narrow-brimmed felt hat, the brim full of holes, patched overalls indifferently tucked into short leather boots, a heavy flannel shirt that had once been brown, but had now faded out to a greenish yellow. If he ever wore a coat, nobody in Dobe City ever saw it.

THAT he was of an inquiring turn of mind was evidenced almost as soon as he landed in town. He was accompanied by three men as nondescript in appearance as himself, and a small herd of horses.

Calkins explained that he always carried a few horses, for trading purposes.

"What I'm looking for is blooded stock," he announced in the barroom of the Hair and Hide Hotel, 'Dobe City's only hostelry. "No range scrubs for me. I want good stuff, and I've got the money to pay for it. Anything like that around here?"

He had paid for the first round of drinks with a bill he peeled from a staggering roll of greenbacks. The bill was a good-sized one. The roll made his trousers' pocket bulge like a tobacco chewer's cheek. The bartender, Johnny Wade, noticed that the stranger's fingers were singularly long and bony; but then, Calkins was a bony man. Clearly he was a man of means, despite his apparent carelessness in matters of dress.

"Why, there's Cal Wortham," Johnny responded, eyeing the roll respectfully. "He's sort o' going in for blooded stuff. Got a herd of a couple o' hundred, they say."

Being a mere bartender, Johnny Wade's excursions into the surrounding cattle country were of necessity few and far between. As regards his customers' private business affair, he spoke hear-say largely. Mr. Calkins looked like a man quite well

acquainted with bartenders as a type, and with their limitations. Nevertheless there was a gleam in his queerly bulging blue eyes as he listened.

"What kind of stuff?"

"Herefords, I hear."

MR. CALKINS asked other questions during the next half hour. The bar-room was far from full, this being the slack season of the day, and his money was welcome to the till. He bought drinks for the house repeatedly, airing the plethoric roll of bills each time without making any noticeable diminution in the size of it. And he learned things that were matters of common knowledge to the residents of Adobe City.

He ascertained, for instance, that Cal Wortham was a rancher who enjoyed a wide popularity, but who occasionally abandoned the strict sobriety that characterized his behavior most of the time, and went on violent sprees. They called him a "periodical." Furthermore, when on such a spree he usually indulged a passion for playing draw poker, emerging at the end of four or five days with a totally depleted purse and a remorseful determination never to take another drink.

"How long since he was on the last one?" the cattle buyer queried with elaborate casualness, producing a silver flask with a curving neck and setting it carefully on the bar.

"Quite a spell," the bartender informed him, eyeing the flask with almost as much respect as he had the roll. "Yuh see, Mister, Cal's been gittin' chummy with a sky pilot lately. Gent named Goodspeed. He sort o' keeps Cal from fallin' off the water wagon, I reckon. Anyhow, Cal ain't been on a tear for 'most a year."

"All of that," asserted a cowboy at the other end of the bar. "Been a year and a half."

"Mebbe it has," acknowledged Johnny Wade. "Want I should fill that flask, Mister?"

"That's what I set it up there for. Fill 'er to the brim—best whisky yuh got in the house."

The bartender obediently produced a bottle marked "private stock" and emptied

part of the contents into the silver receptacle, driving the cork home with a practiced thump of his palm. Mr. Calkins paid his shot with a flourish.

"So he's been gittin' thick with a sky pilot," he remarked. There was vast disdain upon Mr. Calkins' retreating features and in his bulging eyes. "That's too plumb bad, ain't it?"

MR. CALKINS evidently believed in action. Presumably he slept at the camp his men had established at the edge of Adobe City, that night; but the next morning he was up with the sun, eating breakfast in the dining room of the Hair and Hide, where he voiced sundry nasal pleasantries for the benefit of Miss Elsie Rollins, the waitress, and left her a tip that caused her eyes to protrude in amazement. He bought a drink all around, announced his intention of riding out to the Circle Bar ranch, and looking over the blooded herd of Herefords owned by Mr. Wortham. From what Johnny Wade had told him, he said, the stuff must be about what he wanted.

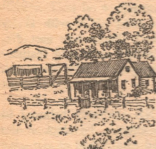
"He'll want a good stiff price for 'em," Johnny warned. "He thinks more of them Herefords than he does of his right eye, they say."

"I've got the money," retorted Mr. Calkins grandly. "When I see what I want I'm willing to pay for it."

It was eight miles out to the ranch-house of the Circle Bar, up the winding Huerfano Valley and over a reasonably good road. The cattle buyer rode a superb Oregon horse, long of leg and slim of barrel, with an arched neck graced with a brilliant black mane of long, thick hair. The beast stepped along as daintily as a race horse on its way to the barrier, dancing occasionally on its mincing hoofs and snorting with the sheer joy of living.

Huerfano was a valley worth looking at a second time. It stretched away to the northwest, winding around the foothills of the encroaching Rockies and rising in an almost imperceptible grade toward Ponchas Pass. Ranches were strung along it like a chain, each one with its group of pole corrals, barns, sheds and ranch-house, the latter usually of adobe. Off to

the right grazing land reached to the foot of the hills, miles distant; to the left the river flashed in the morning sun as it



dotted the landscape in all directions.

THE cattle buyer made a singular figure in the saddle of his magnificent horse. He slouched with the studied appearance of indolence. His long arms hung loosely, his sharp elbows rising and falling in synchronism with the movements of the animal. His battered hat seemed constantly on the verge of falling off. As he rode along his protruding eyes ranged lazily over the scene spread before and on both sides of him, and his loose lips were puckered in a soundless whistle. His feet toed outward like an awkward farm hand's.

"Yuh come to a bend in the road, an' then to a gate," the bartender had directed him. "Turn through the gate; see? Then foller the side road along the fence until yuh come to another gate. Be sure an' shut 'em both; Cal's mighty pertic'lar about that. Yuh'll find the ranch-house half a mile farther on."

He came to the bend presently, and just around it encountered a gate in the road fence, with a stretch of wagon tracks leading away from it in the direction of a depression he could see a mile and a half to the south. The depression was filled with buildings, he noted. One side of the side road was skirted by a barbed wire fence, but the other side was open. And a herd of extraordinarily fine looking cattle was grazing in the open field.

The buyer rode through the gate, fastened it carefully behind him and paused to let his eyes range over the herd. A low whistle came from his puckered lips this time.

"Worth every cent of two hundred apiece," he muttered aloud. His eyes

gleamed. "Forty thousand dollars! I can get it, too, right on the market."

HE STUDIED the animals as he rode, noting their heavy hair and well-filled-out flanks. That they were of the pure grass fed variety was obvious. Not a horn was visible in the lot. The more he looked at them, the greater became his enthusiasm.

"Bet I can get two-fifty!" he exclaimed as he rode closer for a more minute examination. "That steer would start a riot in the bidding ring at Denver, right now." The animal he referred to raised its big head and surveyed him out of wide-set eyes, switching its tail against its shining sides. "Danged if the hull herd don't look like they're curried off every mornin'."

He came to the last gate, pulled back the bar without dismounting, passed through and closed it in the same way. He covered the remaining distance to the group of ranch buildings in a few minutes, coming to a halt in the ranch-house yard. A cowboy with five days' growth of brown beard on his bronzed face came toward him, swinging a hackamore by one strap.

"Howdy!" greeted the cattle buyer. "Nice little place you got here."

His tone was full of nasal cordiality, and the cowboy's white teeth gleamed through the coverage of beard.

"'Tain't so bad," he admitted.

"I'm lookin' for Mr. Wortham. He around anywhere?"

"Yuh must o' passed him, down there by the river." The cowboy pointed. "See that clump o' trees? He's got a dog with him. They're roundin' up some scrubs along the river."

"I seen the dog," said the cattle buyer. "Is he alone?" The gleam in his protruding eyes was more pronounced than ever.

"Yep," answered the cowboy.

"Reckon I'll just ride down there an' say howdy, then."

HE TURNED his horse and rode toward the clump of cottonwoods designated. The river was glittering brilliantly through the trees, giving back the flash of the sun. A dog trotted to the edge of the

timber, paused with upraised foot and gazed at him inquiringly. A man emerged from behind the dog, and the buyer grinned.

"Howdy! I reckon I'm talkin' to Mr. Cal Wortham?"

"That's my name." The man behind the dog was about fifty years of age, apparently, with a gleam of gray in his brown hair, the latter made visible when he shoved his Stetson to the back of his head and passed a hand across his perspiring forehead. He was broad of shoulder and of obviously muscular development with leather cuffs encasing his thick wrists and a forty-five at his right hip. He wore a blue flannel shirt and corduroys stuffed into short boots with high heels. "What can I do for you?"

Mr. Calkins slid out of the saddle and produced the silver flask. He was grining widely, his reddish gums making a crimson streak across the tops of his short teeth. Mr. Calkins was meticulously smooth-shaven, save for the honey-colored mustache. His hair, however, hung to his shoulders.

"You can take a drink of the best whisky my money's been able to buy," he said, removing the cork with a flourish and holding forth the flask. It scintillated in the sun. The odor of the contents rose almost instantly. "After that I'd admire to talk some business with you."

The movement had been so sudden as to take the rancher completely by surprise. The cattle buyer could see his nostrils twitch under the assault of the alluring aroma.

"I—don't drink the stuff," the rancher said slowly, his voice suddenly husky. "Much obliged, though."

But Mr. Calkins was not to be put off so easily. He shook the flask, and the fragrance of the liquor became doubly pronounced. Then, after

seemed to be a long drink—he again held out the flask.

"I can't talk business worth a doggone until after I've had a drink," he urged. "You look like you'd feel the same about it, Mr. Wortham. Try a snifter, anyhow."

The other man's nostrils twitched more pronouncedly than before, and he took a step forward. His gray eyes became eager.

"Well," he said, "I guess maybe I will." His fingers closed around the flask with an almost spasmodic movement, and he threw back his head preparatory to placing the thing to his lips. With the movement the sun shone in his eyes, and he half turned to avoid the blinding rays. Then, as if in response to a warning, he lowered it again.

MR. CALKINS turned with surprising speed for so awkward looking a man. Directly behind him stood a third individual—a medium-sized man clad in cowboy habiliments, from sombrero to high-heeled boots, and with a saturnine countenance that might have made his fortune as Mephistopheles. A man with a heavy growth of black beard struggling to pierce its way through his swarthy skin, and deep-set eyes of crow black under brows incredibly thick and shaggy. A man with an extraordinarily slight body, he spoke in a heavy bass voice.

"Give it back, Cal," he said.

Mr. Wortham immediately handed the flask back to its owner, who accepted it absently. Mr. Calkins was staring hard at the saturnine interloper.

"Seems to me I've seen you before," he said in his nasal whine. The whine was even more highly pitched than usual. "Ain't your name——?"

"Goodspeed, Mr. Calkins," the third man said composedly. "Samuel Goodspeed, sir. You and I met in Bisbee, Arizona, two years ago, where I was holding revival meetings."

A new gleam came into the cattle buyer's eyes. It had a distinctly sinister tinge this time, and the pupils of his blue eyes took an aspect like those of a Chinaman who has taken too big a shot of hop. The grin faded from his retreating face. His bony right hand began to fumble



taking a long drink himself—or what

vaguely in the direction of his right hip, where he carried a filled holster.

"I remember," he said. "You—we——"

HE PAUSED, while the dark-visaged man eyed him steadily. His fingers ceased their vague groping. He thrust the silver flask back into his hip pocket with his left hand. Then he essayed an awkward bow.

"I never offer a man a drink after I find out he don't care for it," he said. "I'm apologizin' to Mr. Wortham."

"That's all right." Wortham was licking his lips. "You mentioned something about business."

"Yes. I understand you've got some thoroughbred Herefords for sale. I'm in the market for some prime stuff." Calkins had straightened up, and the nasal quality in his voice was so noticeable as almost to constitute an impediment. "I pay cash," he added, producing the roll of bills.

The rancher looked at it, and slowly shook his head.

"I've got a prime herd," he acknowledged, "but I don't think I care to sell—just now, anyhow. I aim to ship my stuff myself, you see, and take my chances on the market."

The cattle buyer nodded and walked over to his magnificent horse. He climbed awkwardly into the saddle and picked up the reins.

"I'm stoppin' in town a few days," he stated, with a quick side glance at the man who had interrupted the rancher in the act of drinking from the silver flask. "Maybe we can get together yet. If you happen to feel like trading, come in an' we'll talk things over. Good-by."

"Good-by," said the rancher.

"Good-by, Mr.—er—Goodspeed."

But Mr. Goodspeed did not deign to answer. His deepset eyes did not move as the cattle buyer rode away, his bony elbows rising and falling in synchronism to the horse's undulations. Fifty yards distant he turned in the saddle, grinning so widely as to stretch the honey-colored mustache almost from ear to ear.

"Look me up!" he called. "I'll stick around a week or so, anyhow."

They watched him as he rode through

the first gate, closed it without dismounting and headed for the main road. They might have noted that, for all his looseness of physique, he made surprisingly few waste motions. Wortham turned to his friend. His eyes held a furtive quality.

"He had that thing under my nose before I knew it," he said. "When I got a whiff of the stuff—well, you know how it is."

"I ought to." Mr. Goodspeed's grim countenance did not relax. "You'd better keep away from him, Cal. You know what whisky does to a man."

The rancher did not answer. He was staring after the departing cattle buyer, now a mere speck in the distance.

THREE days of the "week or so" had gone by when Cal Wortham saddled up and rode to 'Dobe City one morning. He did it casually, as though bent on some errand of ordinary importance; but when he arrived in town he rode straight through it to the other end, where Calkins had established his camp.

That the cattle buyer had deliberately tempted him with the silver flask there could be little question. That he had an ulterior motive in so doing was equally plain. Wortham's reputation as a "periodical" had spread over a wide area of cattle country.

Yet he went. He found Calkins lolling on a blanket that had been spread on the ground. There was a small cook wagon with the customary grub box on the end of it, and a fire was smouldering under a partly buried Dutch oven. Calkins' nondescript looking assistants were also lolling about. They all came to their feet as he sprang to an upright position.

"Howdy!" he shrilled in his nasal voice. The red streak across the roots of his upper teeth gleamed through the honey-colored mustache. "Glad to see yuh, Mr. Wortham. I—have a drink——"

He paused and shoved the half-drawn



bottle back into his hip pocket. "I forgot," he said with a chuckle. "Me, I've got the habit of offerin' this here flask to everybody. Most everybody in this country takes a drink, yuh see."

"I don't," said Wortham hesitatingly. "It—gets the best of me. You said the other day you were interested in prime Herefords."

CALKINS made no mention of the fact that the rancher had apparently changed his mind, right about face. Upon the occasion of his visit to the Circle Bar Wortham had stated with positiveness that he was not interested in talking sale. Now he had changed.

"I am," the cattle buyer said promptly. The gleam had come into his eyes, and his tongue passed swiftly over his lips. "Got the cash money, Mr. Wortham. How much do yuh want?"

"I've got a little better'n two hundred head," the rancher said slowly. "They're worth two hundred on the Denver market. Less freight, I oughta get one hundred and sixty, anyhow."

The buyer made no protest. He jerked out a pad and made some figures on it with a yellow lead pencil.

"That don't sound so bad," he agreed. "Take a lot o' money, but I reckon I can take the risk. Those Herefords'll make fine steaks on some big hotel table, Mr. Wortham."

"If you'd like to ride out an' look 'em over——"

"Not necessary," the buyer said promptly. "I saw 'em the other day. They're all right, or I'm no judge." He produced the big roll of bills and flipped a thumb over the raffled edges of it. Then, as on second thought, he restored it to his pocket.

"Let's you an' me go on into the hotel," he suggested. "We can sign the papers all right an' proper there. I like to do business in decent surroundin's, when the thing's possible."

THEY went to the hotel, where Calkins conducted the rancher into a room at the rear of the barroom for the transaction of the business in hand. He called for paper, pen and ink, and scratched off a

rough bill of sale. The rancher signed it, and received a goodly proportion of the bills from the buyer. He stuffed them into his pocket and rose.

"Guess I'd better get this over to the bank before they close," he said hesitatingly.

"Fine! I'll have my boys drive the critters away first thing tomorrow morning," Calkins' voice was very hearty. He chuckled. "Don't reckon yuh'll charge me much for lettin' 'em eat grass on yore range until then, will yuh?"

He produced the silver flask, pulled out the cork and shook the contents with a rotary motion. He passed the mouth deliberately under the rancher's nose.

"Better have a snifter," he advised. "It's good stuff, Mr. Wortham. You don't have——"

That was as far as he got. With the curiously spasmodic movement Wortham grasped the flask, upended it eagerly and let fully a quarter of the contents bubble down his throat. He drew a choking breath as he handed back the flask.

"I had to have it," he explained huskily. "Put it back in your pocket, Calkins, and forget I took that drink. Damn it—it's the first I've had in a year and a half."

"Sho, now!" sympathized the buyer, his bulging eyes glittering in the half light of the room. "A year and a half, yuh say? Hell, if I'd go that long, I'd go plumb loco."

"I've been pretty near loco since I got that whiff you gave me the other day, curse the luck!" said Cal Wortham. He turned toward the door, hesitated, and turned back again. "Let's have another taste," he begged.

"The 'taste' emptied the flask this time. The cattle buyer pressed the rancher down into a chair.

"You sit right here," he commanded. "Two drinks ain't gonna be enough, not by a long shot. I'll get this filled again—yuh don't have to belly up to the bar out there an' advertise yoreself to the world; sabe?"

WHEN he returned, five minutes later, Cal Wortham's inflamed eyes were telling the old, old story. There were

red rims to them, and his lips were set in a straight, stubborn line. He sat forward in his chair and held out his hand.

"Give me that flask!"

The cattle buyer gave it to him, watching him as he gulped the contents. They were alone in the room. One small window, high up in the wall, let in the daylight. The only exit was through the door that led to the barroom. Calkins sat down; and his elongated length was between the rancher and the door.

"How'd yuh like to try a hand o' draw?" he suggested nasally. "Help pass the time—till you're ready to go home, Mr. Wortham."

The rancher brought his fist down on the table with a crash. That the two long drinks had completely transformed him was painfully evident.

"Poker?" he grunted. "What do you



know about poker?" He sneered. "We'll have another drink, Calkins, and then I'll show you more about poker than you ever heard

of before."

The flask was tipped up and the liquor was gurgling as the cattle buyer, watching the other carefully, produced a pack of cards from the breast pocket of his shirt. Things were coming his way, his bulging eyes declared exultantly. When a "periodical" has gone eighteen months without a drink, he is apt to go all the way when he makes the plunge. And all the way, with Mr. Calkins, would be a very long way indeed, traversed in the shortest possible time.

Mr. Calkins had not learned how to acquire plethoric rolls in any Sunday School!

SAMUEL GOODSPEED heard about it two hours later. The messenger came straight from the Hair and Hide barroom, and the message was from Johnny Wade. Johnny's conscience was not easy over what was going on in the little back room. It looked bad; and Cal Wortham was everybody's friend when he wasn't trans-

formed into something resembling a locoed bull by redeye. This long-legged individual with the scraggly mustache and the disarming grin didn't look right.

Mr. Goodspeed listened to the message, and then made hasty preparations for departure to town. He was as good a cowman as he was a parson, and correspondingly popular. For a year and a half, ever since he came to the valley, he had been Cal Wortham's closest friend. He had never seen the rancher under the influence, but he had heard about it.

Now, upon receipt of the alarming news that Wortham had tumbled from the water wagon with a loud splash, he immediately saddled his only horse—the parson lived on the Circle Bar ranch in a little shack set apart some distance from the ranch and bunkhouses—and started for 'Dobe City on the dead run.

He was an excellent rider. In all respects he looked the part of the genus cowpuncher, in fact, save that he wore no six-gun. As his horse galloped swiftly along the main road to the town its rider's sombrero was jammed tightly down over his head, and his expression was grim. Mr. Goodspeed looked like anything but a preacher, to tell the truth. His jaw was hard and his chin was protruding pugnaciously as he reached the outskirts of the little cow town and galloped down the one and only street in a cloud of dust.

Most of the inhabitants knew why he was in such a hurry, and why he looked so grim. There was a general shaking of heads.

"He won't be able to do anything with Cal," old Jimmy Rawlins, cowman emeritus and loafer par excellence, remarked as the parson brought his horse to a stop before the hitching bar of the Hair and Hide and dropped the rein over the cocked ears. Jimmy had known Cal Wortham a very long time, being upward of seventy himself. "That gent is plain sizzlin' hell when he's drinkin'. Parson's got his hands full this time."

JOHNNY WADE witnessed the parson's entrance through the swing doors and motioned the newcomer to come closer.

They conferred in low tones over the upper end of the bar.

"They're back there," the bartender said, jerking his bullet head in the direction of the door that entered the rear room. It was closed. "Been in there two hours or more."

"Who is with him?" The parson doubtless felt that he knew the identity of the man with his friend, but wanted to make sure. Johnny confirmed his suspicions.

"What are they doing—besides drinking?"

"I dunno," said Johnny, wiping the bar with a soiled towel. "Nobody gits to go in, except this here Calkins gent. He comes out every so often an' gits that silver flask o' his'n filled up. He shuts the door when he comes out, and he shuts it again when he goes in. Ain't nobody got in to see anything."

"It seems to me," Mr. Goodspeed said witheringly, "that some of you folks who call yourselves Cal's friends would have put a stop to it before now." He was hitching up his chaps, cowboy fashion, and staring at the bartender accusingly. "You know his failing——"

"Yeah—an' I know Cal Wortham when he's hittin' 'er up, too," Johnny informed the other grimly. "Anybody that tries to stop him now has shore got his work cut out for him. You ain't never seen him when he's drunk, Sam."

"I'll see him now."

Johnny leaned closer.

"Listen, Parson," he said, "I don't like the looks of that Calkins gent. He does a lot o' grinnin' an' passin' that flask around, but he don't look good to me. Got too much on him, for one thing. Strictly honest gents don't need to carry no such rolls. You better keep out o' there."

THE door of the rear room opened suddenly, and the cattle buyer issued forth, the flask in his hand. To the naked eye he was cold sober, as he doubtless was in reality. He strode to the end of the bar and set the flask down upon it. Johnny Wade hastened to fill his order. Calkins caught sight of the parson and scowled. Then he grinned and nodded.

"Howdy!" he called genially.

The cowboy-preacher suddenly left his

end of the bar and approached the other. His brows were drawn low. He looked more Mephistophelean than ever.

"Is Wortham in there with you?"

There was that in his tone that brooked no temporizing, and the cattle buyer's grin faded.

"What if he is?" he retorted. "That's my business—an' his, I reckon."

"Tell him I want to see him."

For an instant Calkins' bulging eyes flashed dangerously. Stripped of its pseudo-

geniality, his countenance became fleetingly sinister. But he summoned the grin again and spread his hands wide.

"Sure," he acquiesced. "Why not? Come on



in, Mr. Parson."

He turned and strode through the door, with the other close at his heels. The door closed behind him. Half a dozen customers in the barroom broke into a chatter of conversation. What would happen in the little room between the three?

INSIDE the parson was standing with his back to the door and surveying the man slouched in the chair before the single table. That a poker game was in progress was evident from the cards and chips on the surface. The rancher's expression as he turned his uncertain gaze upon the intruder was at first vacuous; but as the other's identity permeated the haze that enshrouded his brain he straightened up in the chair, then rose to his feet. He grasped the edge of the table for support.

The cattle buyer was watching them both like a cat. Cal Wortham, who when sober was so tender hearted he even hated to brand a calf, stared at the parson with eyes that glittered menacingly.

The cowboy-preacher understood the situation perfectly. That he was in a dangerous position was obvious to his sensitive mind. He could feel the cattle buyer's sinister gaze upon him, and the hostility in the air. Nevertheless he stood his ground.

"I want you, Cal," he said quietly. "Come with me."

The rancher laughed and staggered slightly. That he was very drunk was patent. He faced his friend insolently.

"Go on back to your preaching," he exclaimed. "I'm 'tending to my own business, an' I'd thank everybody else to do the same, Savvy?"

"I am attending to my business," said the parson. "You are in danger here. I want you to come with me."

The cattle buyer interceded. The nasal quality was gone entirely from his voice; the tone was now merely venomous.

"You heard what my friend said," he said, his stringy form crouched slightly forward, his hand hovering near the gun he carried on his right hip. "I'm feelin' the same way about it. You better *vamose*, Mr. Sky Pilot, 'fore somethin' happens to yuh."

THE parson was the only man in the room totally unarmed. He was likewise the smallest in weight and stature. The cattle buyer had dropped his mask of geniality entirely; his loose lips were drawn back against his short teeth, and his retreating features were strongly reminiscent of a wolf's as his bulging eyes stared straight at the man who had dared to invade the sanctum. It was palpable that he could move with the deadly swiftness of a striking snake should occasion arise.

As the parson made no move to obey he continued sneeringly, "Don't think because yuh got the best o' matters down in Bisbee that you can run things here, too. Yuh had a bunch of interferin' psalm-singers behind yuh that time. This time I've got the drop; see? An' if yuh think I won't shoot, jest rile me; that's all I'm askin'. I owe yuh somethin', anyhow."

The parson returned the other's stare without wavering.

"I haven't any desire to 'rile' you, Calkins," he said composedly. His face was pale, but his eyes steady. The rancher was looking from one to the other, his expression dogged. "But I must take my friend home."

"Yeah?" snarled Calkins. He moved his right hand ostentatiously closer to the butt of his gun. "So he's in danger here, is he? Maybe yuh don't mind tellin' us what kind o' danger?"

"You know that as well as I do." The parson's tone was still quiet, but positive. "It was you who got him to take his first drink, Calkins. And I have no doubt but that you are planning to rob him, if you haven't done so already."

It was fighting talk with a vengeance, and the cattle buyer's weapon leaped into sight like the darting tongue of a snake. The gun roared deafeningly in the confined space. He had fired from the hip, it appearing impossible that he could miss the target at so short a distance.

NEVERTHELESS, the bullet merely splintered the edge of the table and ricocheted upward, burying itself in the wall near the ceiling. The cowboy-preacher had dodged downward simultaneously with the other's threatening movement. He remained in a crouching position, protected by the table, his bent back fully visible to his antagonist. He looked like a foot racer poised for the initial dash.

The next instant he had plunged forward under the table. Before the man with the gun could fathom his intentions, he felt his legs seized around the ankles.

The hold was a singularly powerful one, considering the parson's slight physique. With a startled oath Calkins jerked savagely with his right foot, almost upsetting himself in the effort but failing to win free. Quick as a flash he turned the muzzle of the gun downward and shot through the table top, but the bullet was deflected and missed the man on the floor cleanly. The table went over with a crash as Goodspeed brought his shoulders up with a determined thrust; before Calkins could press the trigger a third time the smoking weapon had been sent spinning to the other side of the room.

Mouthing thick profanity, the cattle buyer tried to draw an ugly looking knife from its sheath under his shirt. He succeeded in getting it free enough to make one slashing cut on his antagonist's fore-

arm, laying the flesh open to the bone. But the parson, doubling his left fist, hooked it expertly into the tall man's chin with all the weight of his one hundred and thirty-five pounds behind it. Calkins staggered backward and brought up against the wall, where he slid to the floor in a semi-conscious condition.

THE parson's hat had been knocked off, and his black hair, streaked with gray, was tousled. He was breathing hard as he gained his feet and drew back. The rancher had likewise stepped back as the table went over and was now standing with his back to the opposite wall. Goodspeed surveyed him.

"Get out of here," he ordered. "Quick!"

But he failed to reckon upon the extent of the insane inflammation the repeated

draughts upon the silver flask had wrought upon the rancher's brain. Instead of complying Wortham jerked out his own revolver and leveled it at his friend.



"I'm givin' you five seconds to *vamose* out o' here yoreself!" he growled. "Can't nobody butt into my business like you're doin', an' get away with it. I know enough to take care of myself, without havin' no snivelin', psalm-singin' sky pilot try to do it for me." He brought the gun to a focus, his eye ugly and red-rimmed behind it. "One—two——"

No one in the barroom outside had had the temerity to open the door, since such a move would doubtless have meant instantaneous injury or death for the one who essayed it. The high window, likewise, had remained clear of spectators. The parson now stood with his back to the door, his breast rising and falling from the effort he had just been through. The fallen cattle buyer was at his right, the knife still grasped in his hand.

"Three——"

The parson smiled bravely, and spread his arms wide.

"Go ahead, Cal," he said gently. "Shoot if you want to."

"Four——"

The crazed rancher's voice did not sound quite so harsh now, and the red-rimmed eye was wavering slightly.

"Why don't you get out!" he shouted angrily. "When I count five, so help me——"

THE parson did not hear the movement at his side, nor see the dazed Calkins as he crawled slowly toward him, knife still grasped in his hand. His entire attention was riveted upon the man who had threatened to kill him at the count of five. It would be an execution pure and simple, since the threatened man was standing with his arms outspread, making no move either to comply with the drunken man's demand nor to defend himself.

"Shoot if you feel that way, Cal," Goodspeed repeated in the same gentle tone. "I——"

The gun roared and spouted yellow flame. But the muzzle had suddenly swung to the left a split instant before Wortham pressed the trigger! Goodspeed remained standing, his slight form vague through the smoke of the three discharges, staring at the man who had just shot. He had been untouched by the bullet.

The rancher was staring downward, and Goodspeed turned to follow his gaze. Calkins lay huddled against the baseboard, grinning in ghastly fashion. White foam flecked the edges of his loose lips. The red at the roots of his upper teeth made a crimson line through his honey-colored mustache. A red stain was beginning to spread across the flannel shirt where it covered his left breast. He still held the knife.

THE parson opened the door and motioned for those outside to enter. Several crowded in. The parson was stooping at the side of the fallen cattle buyer, who was gasping out something.

"He got me!" He tried to point at Wortham. "You—I mean——"

The rancher, fully sobered, nodded. He was still holding the smoking gun.

"He was going to knife you," he ex-

plained to Goodspeed. "I had to shoot him."

"Yes—and I'd 'a'—done it—too—in another second——"

"But why?" The parson was plainly puzzled. "He was going to shoot me, you remember?"

The ghastly grin was frozen on the retreating countenance of the wounded man. He spoke with a tremendous effort.

"I knew—damn well—he couldn't 'a' done it," he gurgled. "So—I——"

His head fell back, his mouth hanging open. The knife clattered faintly as it fell from his sagging fingers. The bulging eyes had become queerly glassy. Johnny Wade, who had entered in the forefront of the auditors, pointed.

"He's cashed in," he breathed.

It was true. Mr. Calkins, who a moment before had been wholly and dangerously alive, was dead. There was a sudden rush of comment; but it was stilled as Goodspeed, raising his hand for silence, dropped to his knees.

"Kin yuh beat that?" ejaculated Johnny under his breath. "That maverick jest tried to kill him, an' he's *pravin'* for him!"

The cowboy addressed whispered back.

"The sky pilot's a real man," he said.

THEY carried the dead gambler out through the barroom and over to the undertaker's office for the necessary formalities. Cal Wortham, shaken visibly, passed through a moment later, accompanied by the parson. Johnny Wade touched him on the arm.

"If yuh want a drink, Cal," he said huskily, "say the word. You look like yuh need one.

The parson watched his friend. The rancher raised his hand and shook his head.

"Not a drop," he said simply.

That was all. But Johnny Wade was grinning broadly as the swing doors closed behind the two friends.

"He's *through!*" he declared with conviction. "I know the signs."

In the next issue

PART I

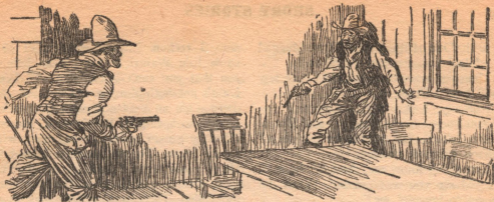
Clarence E. Mulford's

*greatest serial—of a cowpoke's
southward jaunt in search of
adventure*



MESQUITE JENKINS





MYSTERY RANGE

A Cowhand Plays a Lone Hand in Battle's Basin

By CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER

Author of "West!" etc.

CONCLUSION

THIS IS THE FINAL INSTALLMENT OF THIS GREAT SERIAL. THE FINAL FIGHT IN BATTLE'S BASIN IS ON. BRAZO, WHOSE FLIGHT AFTER A CRIME HE DID NOT COMMIT HAS MADE HIM A FUGITIVE FOR SO LONG HAS RESUMED HIS OWN IDENTITY. BRINN, THE MAN WHO RECOGNIZED HIM, HAS TAKEN SIDES WITH BRAZO AND ELLA AGAINST THE WILSON GANG WHO ARE DETERMINED TO LEARN OF THE SECRET OF JIM HENLEY'S GOLD. THAT SECRET THE HOLDERS OF MYSTERY RANGE ARE DETERMINED TO GUARD, AND THE FIGHTING INSTINCT IS RULING BRAZO'S THREE GREAT PATHS—TO ADVENTURE, LOVE, AND WEALTH

CHAPTER XXVIII

A NIGHT ATTACK

KING and Bill rode through the timber in zig-zag fashion, apparently anticipating that Brinn or Brazo would resort to shooting at them with their six-shooters. But as they drew away they grew less concerned for their safety and at last halted their horses and waved their hands derisively at their enemies.

Brazo was calm but Brinn raged.

"You're a soft headed sucker!" he charged Brazo. "If you was too chicken hearted to shoot why did you take the gun away from me? We had them! Now we've got to do it all over again! Don't you know that Wilson's determined to find out where Jim Henley's gold came from? There's a dozen men in that gang he's got with him, an' they mean business!"

Brazo gave Brinn the shotgun.

The short man amused him. He had an explosive temper, and the primitive lusts were boiling in him. Yet there was something likable in him. His black eyes were bright and they perpetually held an inquiring gleam. He smiled easily, with a certain secrecy which gave the lie to his questioning eyes. Brazo had disliked him because he had seemed to be too friendly with Ella, but now Brinn had served him well and he was revising his judgment.

"Soft, eh?" said Brazo. "Well, who was soft when King and Bill were about to make things interesting for me?"

BRINN grimaced.
"H'm," he said.

"Why didn't you do your shooting then?" asked Brazo.

"H'm." Brinn flashed a look at Brazo.
"Them jaspers is too dangerous to mon-

key with. One of them would have plugged me while I was shootin' the other."

"Then you wasn't expecting to have any help," jeered Brazo.

"Not any. I play my own game."

"You knew me right away," said Brazo. "When I came out of the barber shop."

Brinn grinned, nodded.

"You didn't know me, though," he said. "I could see you was puzzled. When did you get to knowin' me?"

"When I looked at you just before I took the shotgun away I saw you sitting on the ground at Bain's Camp accusing me of killing the paymaster."

Brinn chuckled. "That was quick thinkin'!" he said. "You was flabbergasted. For a minute you didn't know what to do. I was hit hard, but I enjoyed you. But you got away slick. When I saw you comin' out of the barber shop I knowed you wouldn't recognize me. I had a narrow squeak. I pulled out, but I lost a lot of beef, an' I've never been right well since. In the hospital over at Deming six months.

"Your friend died, eh?"

Brinn nodded.

"You got him plumb center," he said.

"What are you hanging around here for, Brinn?" asked Brazo.

Brinn's eyes grew truculent.

"This is a free country, ain't it?" he said. "I ain't botherin' about your personal affairs. It's none of your business what I'm here for. An' I reckon if the sheriff knowed what I know you wouldn't be hangin' around here either!"

Brazo moved and his heavy Colt was lying in his hand, its muzzle against the short man's stomach. Brinn had saved his life but he had also jeopardized it when he had accused him at Bain's Camp, and Brinn's manner had enraged him.

"You're doing the talking, Brinn!" he said. "You've followed me here. What have you been waiting for? Why don't you tell the sheriff instead of hanging around here?"

Brinn's eyes were alight with mockery. He laughed.

"Sho! So you want a show-down, eh? Well, use your brain. If I was intendin' to peach on you I'd have done it before

now, I reckon. I'm off clean, ain't I? I know Ella Wainright has got a hitch on you that you can't break, don't I? Well, I ain't got nothin' ag'in you nor her. An' there ain't no evidence ag'in you unless I want to spring it. Bain's dead. He was killed by a man he had an argument with. In his store. The stableman's cashed in. He run into a rovin' band of Apaches not more than a month after the paymaster was killed. There was another man there, too, but he was killed with the stableman. There ain't no more evidence ag'in you but me, an' I ain't goin' back there an' run chances of them takin' your word over mine. It don't look reasonable, does it? If I ain't got nothin' ag'in you, you hadn't ought to have nothin' ag'in me. But if you want to let yur gun off an' destroy the evidence you can let her go an' be damned to you!"

BRINN'S eyes were blazing with earnestness, but there was still a glint of secrecy in them.

"Why did you keep King and Bill from shooting me?" asked Brazo. "I never did anything to you except to kill your partner."

"Shucks," said Brinn, smiling faintly. "I'm Ella Wainright's friend, ain't I? Don't I know she wouldn't like to have you killed?"

Brazo felt it was useless to press his inquiries. Once previously, he had spoken to Brinn about his friendship with Ella, and when he had returned from the trip to Deming he had mentioned Brinn to Ella, only to have her make what to him had seemed an evasive reply. Her friendship with Brinn was not his affair. And today Brinn had saved his life.

He holstered his gun.

Brinn was paying no attention to him but was gazing toward the butte where he had seen the riders he had mentioned. He was squinting against the growing darkness and his body was rigid.

"We've got to sneak out of sight," he said. "Them devils are up to some mischief! They's spreadin' scatterin'! We'd better pull our freight!"

Although the darkness was settling heavily Brazo could see several horsemen

darting here and there in the timber. That meant they were moving to surround



Brinn and himself, and so he and Brinn began to run toward the buildings of the camp. They kept in the timber as long as possible and then ran crouching along the base of a ridge near the river until they were able to dodge behind a group of tents and shanties. Once among the tents they ceased running.

They stopped in front of one of the shacks, which was Brinn's, and Brinn entered, to emerge with a rifle, a saddle, bridle and some clothing.

"I'm movin'," he said. "I've got an idea that livin' in this shack is unhealthy."

BRAZO could not see his face but he caught the grimness in Brinn's laugh. They went to Brazo's cabin and Brinn entered, threw his belongings in a corner and retained only the rifle. He stood for an instant in the doorway beside Brazo.

There were no signs of the riders they had seen and no sound came from the timber.

"Any of the boys around?" asked Brinn.

"They rode east this morning to throw the stock onto a new range. I reckon they won't be back for a few days."

"Hell!" disgustedly exclaimed Brinn. "She nurses them cattle too much! She's got some fool idea that because they're Herefords she's got to pamper them! Mebbe before mornin' she'll wish she'd kept some of the boys here!"

Brazo stared into the darkness without replying. Meanwhile Brinn continued to talk. He smelled trouble. Wilson's men were wolves, just like Wilson. They'd find out where Jim Henley got that gold if they had to stake Ella Wainright out somewhere and torture her. Hadn't they got Kuneen to impersonate the deputy commissioner? And wasn't the real Kuneen in Washington, with his chief? The fellow who had impersonated Kuneen was Wilson's friend, a gambler from Tucson.

Peaceable methods had failed and now they would try something else.

"That somethin' will be to get hold of Ella Wainright!" declared Brinn. "They'll work like Indians!"

Brazo stepped outside the cabin. The darkness was now impenetrable and no sound disturbed the solemn stillness of the basin. There was even a lull in the night song of the forest denizens. The silence meant of course that Wilson's men were hovering about.

There was a light in one of the rooms of the ranch-house. Ella was alone there and unaware of the danger that menaced her. Brazo moved back to the cabin, entered, filled his pockets with cartridges, took his rifle from its pegs and joined Brinn at the door.

"They'll need some surprising," he said. "They'll not expect to find us at the house."

"That's right," said Brinn. "But you go first. I'll hang around outside. Mebbe some of them will come nosin' around here. There'll be a moon after a while, an' if I see any of them sneakin' around the house I'll hoot once, like an owl. If I can't get a bead on them, that is. I ain't throwin' no chances away!"

Brazo vanished into the darkness toward the house, and Brinn moved away from the cabin and was swallowed by the dense blackness.

Brazo approached the ranch-house by making a wide half circle to avoid the light that shone out of the windows. He had never been inside the house, but he had made a mental note of the location of the rooms, and he decided that the light was in the kitchen. The front of the house was dark, so he stepped softly upon the veranda, crossed it, found the door and tried the latch.

THE door was not barred. He opened it, entered cautiously and closed it behind him, barred it. He was in a big front room, but the darkness was as deep in here as it was outside except for a weak beam that came through a doorway quite a distance from where he stood. He decided that there was another room between the front room and the door

through which the light came. That room would be the dining-room, if the interior of the house had been planned as he had anticipated from his outside observations.

He was aware that any accidental noise he might make would frighten the girl, and if he tried to walk through the rooms in the darkness he was certain to stumble against something. The door leading into the kitchen was open, but the light was evidently in one of the corners of the room, near the stove probably, and only a faint streak entered the dining-room, to dimly illuminate a section of the western wall and to make a small yellow patch on the floor.

He did not move from the front door, but called softly.

He heard her walking across the floor of the kitchen. Her steps must have

drowned his voice for she continued to walk. He called her name again, and this time she stopped. Again he called. He heard her walk



across the floor, and then she was standing in the doorway with the light at her back, peering into the darkness toward him.

"Is somebody there?" she asked.

"It's Brazo," he answered.

He heard her gasp. She appeared to grow suddenly taller.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "So it's you!"

In her hands was something. A cooking utensil, he supposed. She dropped it. It clattered metallically upon the floor and rolled into a patch of light and Brazo observed that it was a large spoon.

"Oh!" she exclaimed again. "How awkward!" She stooped and picked up the spoon. "I'm getting supper," she added. "If you will excuse me for a moment I'll get a match and light a lamp in there."

Brazo could tell she was excited. But he had to go on.

"No," he said quietly, "don't light any more lamps. Go back into the kitchen and

put that one out. Take your stuff off the stove. Then come in here and I'll tell you what's happened."

SHE stiffened, tried to pierce the darkness between them in an effort to see him. He heard her catch her breath. But she was courageous, as he expected she would be, and instantly obeyed him. He heard something being moved back on the stove; heard her close a window as if with a divination that danger lurked outside. Yes, she had courage, and keen intelligence.

Then the lamp went out and he heard her moving toward him.

She was familiar with the rooms and with the location of the furniture, for he heard the rustle of her dress as she came swiftly forward. Then the thought came to him that she must trust him greatly to obey him so unhesitatingly.

She was standing close to him when she spoke. There was curiosity in her voice and a queer tenseness, but no unsteadiness.

"What is it, Brazo?"

"Nothing, maybe," he answered. "But we are not taking any chances." He told her what had happened in the deserted saloon building and how Wilson's men had scattered and advanced as though meditating an attack. He told her gently, for he didn't want to unnecessarily frighten her, though he wanted her to know exactly what the situation was.

"Brinn thinks they have an idea you know where Jim got the gold and they mean to get hold of you and make you tell them," he added. "But we'll stop that. I mean to stay here with you. We'll try to surprise them and maybe we'll get two or three of them that way before they know they've got started. Brinn is staying outside."

"So Brinn saved your life," said Ella.

In the dense blackness of the room he could not see her face, but her voice had a strange tremor in it, a leap. There was a little silence and then she said in a low voice, as though speaking to herself, "That was worth it."

"Worth what?" asked Brazo.

"Oh," she said, "nothing. I must have

been thinking aloud! Have you known Brinn long?" she went on.

"I've seen him around here. He puzzled me. I was sure I'd seen him somewhere, before. But tonight I recognized him. He's the short man I shot at Bain's Camp. I thought I had killed him. He's the only one left, besides myself, that was there when the paymaster was killed. He accused me of doing the killing."

"But he's with you—with us now?" she asked.

"Looks like he is. He's a bloodthirsty devil."

He wanted to ask her a few questions about Brinn, about her apparent friendship with the man, about his visits. But he forebore.

NO SOUND had as yet broke the outside stillness. There was activity out there, and by this time, if Wilson meditated seizing Ella, his men must be slowly closing upon the ranch-house. They would move carefully, anticipating resistance from himself and Brinn, but they would not expose themselves until a reconnaissance disclosed the whereabouts of the defenders. They must know, of course, that Brazo and Brinn were the only two men in camp, for they had probably been in the vicinity all day, watching and planning a time to strike.

Brazo moved to the doorway leading from the front room to the dining-room. His rifle was lying on the crook of his left elbow, his right hand was caressing the stock. The windows were black, but he knew that any one attempting to enter the house would have to enter through one of the windows, for the doors were locked and the front one heavily barred. He had forgotten to ask about the back door and he did so now.

"It is locked," answered Ella.

He had almost started at the sound of her voice. It was close—at his shoulder.

"It seems so quiet and peaceful," she said, "just as if nothing like this could possibly happen. Oh, I hope you and Brinn are wrong!"

"I hope so, too," he said. He shook his head, knowing that in the darkness she could not see the movement or the grim

doubt in his eyes. He didn't expect to survive the night, though he would do his best. When Wilson and his men discovered that there was only one man in the house they would probably rush it concertedly. They would do nothing while the darkness held, but when the moon rose so that they could distinguish objects clearly they would station themselves at the windows and get him under a cross fire.

HE BLAMED himself. If he had devoted less of his time to jealousy and more of it to the possibility of doing something for the protection of the woman he loved she would not now be facing the dire prospect of falling into Wilson's hands. For months he had stayed away from her, nursing his selfish thoughts, skulking about in sullen anger, letting her bear the entire burden of planning and building and scheming to make the place habitable.

He felt her hand on his arm. Her voice was close; he felt her breath on his cheek.

"Brazo," she said.

"Yes."

"I—I don't hate you."

"That's all right," he answered. "I don't blame you for hating me."

He didn't blame her. His actions must have made him hateful in her eyes. He had conducted himself badly; he had been a fool.



But I don't!" she insisted
"And I'm sorry."

"Sorry you don't hate me?"

he said.

"Sorry I said that," she answered. There was regret in her voice, a plea.

A grim humor had taken possession of him. He didn't believe her. And besides, even if she didn't hate him she couldn't love him. How could she love him?

He wasn't the type of man women loved. He was too selfish; he demanded too much. He couldn't express his love for her, he couldn't make her understand by his actions. His jealousy would never

permit him to be himself. He had gone around with a long face and a dour expression, and naturally he had failed to attract her. For many months he had lived in the cabin with her and in all that time he had made no progress.

"Shucks," he said, "it don't make any difference."

"It does make a difference!" she said with a vigor that astonished him. "I don't hate you, and I want you to know it! I—I've wanted to tell you, but you wouldn't come near me. Brazo, I wanted you to come!"

Her intense earnestness amazed him. Wonderingly, he turned his head and looked down at her, vainly trying to see her face. She had pressed closer to him; her soft, yielding body was against his, and one of her arms was stealing up over his shoulder and curving around his neck. He was trembling with a great eagerness.

He turned, set the rifle against the wall and put his arms around her, holding her tightly and pressing her cheek against his so that the hair over her temples was in his eyes and the delicate fragrance of it intoxicated him.

"I never thought this would happen," he whispered. "I had given you up."

"I meant it should be this way," she said, her voice muffled against his shoulder. "From the beginning," she added. "Oh, Brazo, I didn't want you to think—to believe you could have me just because you wanted me."

"You knew I wanted you?" he asked.

"Yes. You made it so plain, Brazo. I knew, too, that I wanted you. But you assumed so much. You went right ahead with everything, just as though—just as though you would take me whether I wanted you to or not. And I had to teach you that you couldn't."

A RISING moon was tingeing the window panes with a yellow light, and a flood of pale gold stole in upon them, revealing their faces to each other. Then to their ears came the faint hoot of an owl and Brazo reached for his rifle.

She was in his arms again before he could grasp the weapon, and for a moment he held her, kissing her with a pas-

sion he had never felt until now. He finally pushed her gently from him and held her, his hands on her cheeks. He could now dimly see her eyes smiling into his.

"I didn't know I loved you so much," he said.

But now he stiffened, reached for the rifle and drew it to him. For the hooting of the owl had come again and Brazo knew that Brinn was telling him that two of Wilson's men were near.

"They've come," he told Ella. "You go upstairs and lie on the floor until it's over."

She obeyed him without making a protest of any kind. He could hear her step on the floor as she moved in the semi-darkness toward the stairway in the big front room.

CHAPTER XXIX

A BELEAGUERED RANCH-HOUSE

B RINN had told Brazo that he would not signal unless he was unable to get a bead upon the prowlers, and as Brinn would be near the cabin which was west of the ranch-house, Brazo decided that the hooting indicated that Wilson's men were approaching from the east, and that there were two of them. Therefore Brazo watched the east windows.

The moonlight was growing brighter. Standing in the doorway between the front room and the dining-room, Brazo had command of the east windows of those two rooms and of one rear window in the kitchen. There was only one window in the western wall of the front room and only one in the west wall of the dining-room. These Brinn would cover, since as his hooting indicated, he was watching



that side of the house. The moonlight had entered the east windows only for a short time, for the moon was high in the sky before its rays clear the high wall of the butte beside the river. It was now near-

ing the zenith of its arch and was shining almost straight down.

The light outside was clear and Brazo could distinguish the trees and brush at the edge of the clearing that stretched eastward from the house. The rear of the house was close to a clump of brush which grew at the edge of the timber in that direction, and as the timber offered better cover than could be found eastward, Brazo was confident that one of the rear windows would be the first point of attack, unless some of the men had stolen across the east clearing in the darkness and were crouching close to the wall, awaiting an opportune moment.

Brazo knew that his position was not good. If the outlaws made a concerted attack he would have to move fast from one room to another to escape their fire and to return it. The walls and the doorways constituted his only barricade. There were too many windows in the house to make his position advantageous, and he would not have entered the house at all had he not feared that in the period of blackness preceding the illumination from the moon after it topped the butte the outlaws would have been able to steal upon the house without his knowing of it.

He stood in the doorway, listening. No sound reached him. Then he heard a sound at the rear door. The latch clicked upward, the door creaked as if a heavy body were pressing against it. The bar rattled slightly in its slots. Brazo heard the latch click down again. They had discovered that the door was barred and could not be opened from the outside.

ALMOST simultaneously there was a creak at the front door. The sound indicated that there were at least two men attempting to gain entrance and that they had a hope that one of the two doors might have been left unbarred. They would not attempt to batter the doors down, for fear of the resulting noise bringing Brazo and Brinn upon them. And Brazo was convinced that they would not have approached the house at all had they known he was inside. They would do what they had come to do without a fight, if possible, and their stealthy actions seemed to

indicate that they thought Ella would be alone in the house.

They would now try the windows.

Brazo stepped back into a corner of the dining-room where he could keep most of the windows in view without moving. He heard a light footfall on the veranda and suspected that the man who had tried the front door would now seek one of the windows. If he went to the west side of the house Brinn would see him and that would mean the end of him, but if he went around to the east side he would probably stop at the window nearest the veranda, which was the farthest toward the front of the living-room.

Brazo watched that window. Nothing happened. But a sound from the rear of the house reached him and he shifted his gaze quickly, to see the head and shoulders of a man clearly outlined against the glass of the kitchen window.

He raised his rifle and sighted along the barrel. But he waited, to make certain of the man's intentions. He did not mean to kill until he had to, but he would kill rather than permit any of the men to enter the house.

When the sound continued, and he observed that the man was working with an implement that resembled an iron bar and that the fastenings of the sash were cracking with the strain and would presently give way, he sighted along the rifle barrel again and pulled the trigger.

The vicious crash of the rifle was accompanied by the man's sharp cry and the tinkling of glass. Brazo did not wait to observe the result of the shot, but leaped out of the corner in which he had been standing and flattened himself against the wall of the front room. He heard the tinkle of glass again, and the thudding of a bullet against the wall near where he had been standing.

WHILE he stood with his back against the wall he heard the sharp, dry crack of a rifle outside, following the report of the one which had sped the bullet into the wall near the spot from which he had fired. A high, shrill shriek came from a point near one of the west windows. Brazo's grin was grimly humor-

ous. The man who had tried the front door had chosen a window in the west wall and Brinn had got him.

Brinn was alert. He could envisage Brinn's face as he had sped the bullet. Brinn liked to fight, liked to kill. The passion was visible in him, as certain other passions were visible in the eyes of other men. Brinn was primitive, his impulses were atavistic; fighting was an expression of his nature. Unless Brinn exposed himself Brazo need have no fear that he would be shot at from any of the west windows.

And now, following the shooting, there came sounds from outside as of men running through tall, dry grass. Then silence. A dead, foreboding silence.

The stillness was broken presently by a rustle and a step, and Brazo saw Ella moving down the open stairway. She had both hands pressed against her breast. Her face was startlingly white in the semi-gloom.

"Don't come down!" Brazo called softly. "There'll be more of it. They're not through yet!"

She stood on the bottom step peering toward him.

"You're not hurt, Brazo?" she asked, a quaver of apprehension in her voice.

"I'm all right. Please don't go near the windows."

"I saw a man shoot through one of the windows, Brazo. Are you sure he didn't hit you?"

"Pretty sure," he laughed. "But look here! How did you see that man?"

"I was looking down on him from one of the windows," she said defiantly. "I saw him level his rifle. I was going to shoot him, but he wouldn't stand still long enough. Then he ran into the timber with several other men. I think they are there now, watching."

Brazo observed that she had a huge Colt in her right hand. The weapon loomed gigantic in contrast to her slender arm.

"Shucks," he exclaimed impatiently, "you go right upstairs and stay there!"

"I won't!" she defied.

"Then I'll carry you up!" he threatened. "Do you think I want you killed, now—now?"

"Oh, Brazo, I want to stay with you!"

"Go back upstairs!" he commanded.

"Please, Brazo! I will worry about you."

"And when you go up there I want you to stay away from those windows!" he went on, ignoring her plea.

"Brazo," she said coldly. "I won't have you speaking to me like that. And if you are going to be so bossy after we are married, I won't marry you!"

BRAZO had no answer. He was silent. He did not want to argue with her, and he thought that if he did not answer she would obey him. Yet he was rather surprised when she did obey. But it seemed she only went to the landing, at the turn, for almost instantly her head appeared again.

"You'll be careful, Brazo?" she said. "If you should be killed now, after what has happened, I should want to die too!"

"I'll be careful," he answered, "for I want to be with you for a good many years."

Yet after she vanished he stood gazing grimly out of one of the windows. He wasn't very optimistic about his future, or about Ella's. Wilson's men were numerous; he did not know how numerous. They had the advantage of being able to concentrate their attention upon the house and the cabin which Brinn had chosen, while Brinn and Ella and himself would not know from which direction an attack would come. Around the house was the timber, in which Wilson's men could move with little fear of being seen from the cabin; there were hills and gullies and natural coverts of rock in and behind which they might lie concealed, to shoot when opportunity came. They had a wide range for their activities; they were near water; they could bring their food in.

And there was little chance of outside interference. The camp was deserted. The marshal had gone with the others, and it was unlikely that any stranger's would come in. Brazo had lived in the cabin many months and in that time he had had



no visitors. No one in the section had paid any attention to the cabin or the basin; he had been as completely isolated as if he had been in the middle of a desert.

Anderson and the other men would return, of course. But they would have set no definite time and if they were not warned they would very likely be ambushed by Wilson's men.

Wilson need not take any unnecessary chances. He had been surprised once and from now on he would be wary. He would have his men surround the house and the cabin. During the day his men would retreat to the concealment of the timber, while at night they would come closer.

HOWEVER, Brazo was certain they would not attack again that night. They knew, now, that Ella was not alone in the house, and no matter how many men Wilson had had in the beginning the number had been reduced by two. Probably the two dead men had been carried away, to be buried, but their deaths would inevitably affect the morale of the remainder.

Yet Brazo did not relax his vigilance. He went back to the doorway between the front room and the dining-room and watched the windows. The moon was bright and by its light he could see the clearing and the edge of the timber. There was no movement out there. The tall grass, the tree stumps, the scattered clumps of brush, were clearly defined.

Brazo did not hear Brinn again, but knowing something of the man's nature he was convinced that he was concealed somewhere in the vicinity, watching. Grinning, too, probably. Thinking of the man he had killed; enjoying a mental picture of the discomfiture of the other outlaws.

Brinn himself was an outlaw and yet he seemed to take pleasure in killing men of his type. There in the timber he had actually danced in his eagerness to kill King and Bill. A strange man. Yet he liked Ella; he had saved Brazo's life. It was impossible for Brazo to supply a motive for Brinn's friendship. He had shown Brinn that he disliked him; he had de-

liberately taunted the man, hoping to arouse him to the point of drawing his gun. At Bain's Camp he had shot Brinn, and Brinn, had by his own admission spent several months in a hospital as a result of that shooting. And yet Brinn had stepped in to save him from being shot down by King and Bill. Brazo was puzzled.

The night was long to Brazo. He grew tired from his vigil and walked slowly back and forth through the house. No sounds reached him. Toward three o'clock in the morning the moonlight gradually faded, vanished. Darkness, deeper than that of the evening, obscured the clearing and the timber edge. Now, if Wilson meditated another attack, it would come.

But no attack came. About four o'clock the blackness outside began to fade to a dull gray. The gray lightened, became silvery. The clearing again became visible, and presently it was aglow with the brilliance of day.

Then Brazo heard Ella descending the stairs. He moved toward her, for the front room windows were curtained with a light, filmy muslin that dropped straight down concealing objects from outside when no artificial light was used.

Ella's face was pale. There were faint dark circles under her eyes, showing that she had not slept and that tragedy and the imminence of more tragedy, had shaken her. But her eyes glowed at sight of Brazo, and in an instant she was in his arms.

"You didn't sleep a wink," he charged, after a time.

"How could I? I kept thinking of you, down here alone."

"And you watched from the windows up there," he said.

"Yes," she admitted.

Brazo no longer felt any embarrassment when meeting her eyes. Strangely, it was she who now dropped her gaze, and she blushed rosily in his embrace.

This was a different Ella. There was a gentleness in her manner he had not been aware of; a mystic atmosphere surrounded her; a wondrous graciousness, that seemed to have developed since her surrender to him, was in her.

THEY went together to the kitchen door and stood there for some time looking into the room. The kitchen table had a cloth over its top and the dishes that Ella had placed in preparation the night before were still there. Upon the stove was a small kettle partly filled with potatoes which she had cooked; there was a pan with a small portion of meat in it,



another kettle containing a vegetable, and a coffee pot which had been left on the fire in the girl's haste to answer

Brazo's summons. The fire was out.

They were hungry despite the tragedy of the night before, and as they stood there looking into the room they smiled at each other. But they could not enter the kitchen without being seen by Wilson's men. There were no curtains on the windows and they would be visible from the timber.

"I can slide along the wall and get to the stove," suggested Brazo.

She held him.

"You shan't!" she declared. "I have got you now, and I am not going to let them shoot you!"

She left him abruptly and strode boldly across the room to one of the windows before Brazo could move to prevent her. With Brazo standing rigid in the doorway she opened the top sash and stood for an instant while a slight breeze stirred her hair. Brazo was convinced that she smiled in the direction of the concealed outlaws. Anyway, she was smiling, though perhaps a little stiffly, when she turned, looked at Brazo and began to work with the cooking utensils on the stove.

Brazo was wiping cold perspiration from his forehead.

"Lord!" he exclaimed. His face had paled.

She continued unconcernedly with the kettles and pans, giving him a cool, bright smile.

"It isn't me they want to kill, you know," she said.

"But you dared them! You smiled at

them!" he said weakly.

"Of course, I had to show them that I am not afraid." She removed the lids from the stove and built a fire with some wood which was piled in a corner. Then she emptied the coffee pot, filled it with water from a pail and placed it over the fire. She got bread from a cupboard, sugar, bacon, canned milk. While working she talked to Brazo, though she did not look toward him when she might be seen from one of the windows, for fear the outlaws might discover he was near her and chance a shot at him. So she talked to the stove and the table.

"You are not to come out into my kitchen," she said. "Remember that. They would be sure to shoot if they suspected you were here. They don't know, now; they can only guess. It is quite likely they are puzzled. Perhaps they even think I did the shooting last night. But no matter what they think they will not shoot unless they feel you are here."

They ate in the dining-room, where the curtains were close enough together to form a screen. Ella pulled down the shades of the east windows so that no light might shine through. She spoke of Brinn, and Brazo told her there was plenty of food in the cabin, so that Brinn could eat if he was there.

And he's there, all right," concluded Brazo. "He's too smart to stay in the open during the day. And they'll not try any foolishness with him!"

THE day passed slowly and they saw no one, not even Brinn.

They occasionally heard voices in the timber, but not once did any of the outlaws appear. As Ella had divined, Wilson was puzzled. His visit to the ranch-house had been disastrous, and he would wait until he devised a plan to approach it with a minimum of danger to himself and his men.

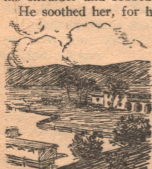
In spite of the menace which hovered near, Ella was in good spirits during the day. It was when twilight came that she grew serious and gazed soberly out of one of the east windows at the deserted town. There was something in the appearance of the place that terrified her. She had a

feeling that some of the tents and buildings were occupied by the outlaws; that they had withdrawn to them to wait until she or Brazo or Brinn relaxed their vigilance.

Greed had founded the town, and she had always feared it. There was something repellant in its appearance. The dust of months had settled over it. The frame buildings were warped, unpainted. Most of them had sagged out of their original perpendicular positions and were leaning maudlinly. Their doors were open, their black interiors yawned horribly with their emptiness. The tents that still remained were grimy and shabby. Some of the stake ropes were gone, others were slack. Canvas roofs and side walls had caved in. Some kerosene torches had been left and the elements had rusted them. Some of their lashings had given way and the torches were dangling drunkenly.

Here and there were piles of lumber which had been abandoned by the enthusiasts who had rushed headlong in their search for the yellow metal. Boxes, crates, barrels, kegs, bottles, cans, were strewn about. Desolation had set a heavy hand over it all. A brooding silence was in the atmosphere of the place. There was mockery in the whispering of the slight breeze that swept over it.

Standing near Brazo she shuddered. And Brazo, quick to catch her moods, put an arm about her and drew her close. To his amazement she hid her face on his shoulder and sobbed.



He soothed her, for he knew what was happening to her. But she still clung to him, shivering.

"Oh, Brazo, I wish the other men were here!" she cried. "Wilson is planning to attack us again tonight. I know it! I feel that something terrible is going to happen!"

It had grown dark while they were standing there. The shadows stole into the timber, over the clearing and into the house. A monstrous hush had come.

And then the sound of a shot outside the house broke the silence, followed by a screech of agony.

Ella pulled away from Brazo and stared at the blackness of the window pane.

"My God!" she whispered. "That's Brinn's voice!"

CHAPTER XXX

ELLA STANDS GUARD ALONE

THE voice was Brinn's, for Brazo had also recognized it. And now, as Brazo stood rigid, fighting an impulse to go to Brinn, yet knowing that to do so would be to expose Ella to further danger, Ella's hands were upon his shoulders and her voice, her trembling muscles were urging him.

"Go and help him, Brazo!"

He shook his head, telling her that he could not leave her, even to help Brinn, even though he owed Brinn his help.

"They'd rush you here," he said. "The chances are they are watching the house, waiting for me to do just what you want me to do. They'd be in here the minute I went out. Brinn wouldn't want that; he wouldn't expect it."

"But he's hurt, Brazo!" She was silent for an instant. Then she said, "He did as much for you! He saved your life, Brazo! Won't you do as much for him? If he's hurt and can't defend himself they'll kill him! Please! I'll stand right in the dining-room doorway with my gun and the first man that tries to get in I will kill! Brazo, I can't stay in here and think of Brinn out there, alone! If you don't go, I shall!"

She was pushing Brazo toward the front door. He gripped her arms and held her tight.

"You'll sure shoot if they come in?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered firmly.

He turned from her, unbarred the door, opened it and stepped out upon the veranda into darkness so dense that he could not even distinguish the huge bulk of the house. He crossed the veranda cautiously, felt the edge of it with his feet and stepped stealthily down to the ground. He stood for an instant listening, trying to penetrate the darkness in an effort to locate

the cabin. He now wished that he had visited the house in the daylight, for then he would have had a clear idea regarding its location. Not half a dozen times since they had begun to erect the ranch-house had he looked toward it, for it had represented defeat and had symbolized the growing ascendancy of his rival.

Suddenly he had blinded himself to it, obstinately he had refused to become interested in it. As a consequence, although he knew it was several hundred yards east of the cabin and that there was a clearing around it which was featured by various small gullies and hills, he had no intimate knowledge of the character of the ground he had to cross to get to the cabin.

That there were coverts in which Wilson's men might at this minute be hiding was certain; and that at any minute he might stumble into one of those coverts was possible, even probable. In that case his end would be sudden and unexpected. And Ella would be alone.

Therefore he moved slowly and carefully. He tried to follow the edge of the timber over the route he had traveled in order to reach the house the night before. But tonight he was without the light in the kitchen window to guide him, and there was no light in the cabin.

HE MADE some noise. He crashed into unseen brush and against low-hanging branches of trees, and occasionally he stepped upon dead twigs that snapped with alarming distinctness. Frequently he stopped to listen for sounds that would tell him the outlaws were trying to gain entrance to the house. But there were no sounds except those made by himself.

He went on. When he felt that he had followed the edge of the timber far enough he left it and started through the clearing, which was upon his right, northward. After a while he reached a section which was level and smooth under his feet and he knew he had struck an area of sand which surrounded the cabin.

He was now on familiar ground and he moved forward swiftly until his groping hands came into contact with the walls he knew well. There he stopped again and

listened. No sounds came out of the heavy surrounding silence.

He went on again, reached a corner, turned it and approached the cabin door. Again he stopped and listened, and still no sound reached him.

He entered the cabin and felt his way carefully through it. He searched the addition, ran his hands over the bunk which had been his for several months. He had decided that Brinn was not in the cabin, and was moving toward the door when his booted feet came sharply against a yielding object on the floor near the table and a low groan reached his ears.

Brinn? A wounded man, anyway.

He went to his knees, ran his left hand over the body, felt of the face.

"Brinn?" he whispered.

"It's you, eh?" came Brinn's voice. He sighed, apparently with relief. "Hell!" he said. "I heard you sneakin' in, but I thought it was one of them hyenas comin' in here to finish me! I'd holed up in the cabin all day. Soon as it got dark I went out an' got in some heavy brush back of a big boulder. I heard the scum movin' around me but I couldn't see none of them. One of them must have seen me, though, for pretty soon I got nailed in the side. Some way I got away from there and got in here, crawlin'. I've lost my gun an' rifle." He paused; then went on:

"Where's Ella?"

"In the house."

"You damned fool!" exclaimed Brinn hoarsely. "You don't mean to tell me you left her there alone!" He squirmed, tried to rise and fell back again, groaning.

"You get out of here, damn you!" he

raged, choking.

"They'll get her

sure! Get back

there an' take

care of her!

Chances are

they're there

right now! I

heard them all

around me,

goin' that way!



Why damn your hide! you ain't got the sense of a blind dogie! Get, or I'll choke hell out of you!"

As if in verification of Brinn's presentment there came to the ears of both men at that instant the distant roar of a heavy revolver. Then three more reports.

Brinn threshed on the floor, vainly trying to rise. He cursed, screamed maledictions.

BRAZO could hear the curses as he raced recklessly through the clearing toward the ranch-house. Twice he plunged headlong into clumps of brush and through them, falling heavily into the grass beyond them and losing his sense of direction upon regaining his feet. Each time he grew confused he was set straight by a heavy thumping as of some one banging against a door with a heavy battering ram, or by the crashing tinkle of breaking glass.

They had not got into the house it seemed, but they were attacking it upon all sides. The shots fired must have been from Ella's revolver, but there was no way of his knowing what damage she had done with them; and as no further reports came he was fearful that some of the men had already got into the house.

He was running with his head down with every muscle of his body straining to add more speed to his pace, when a foot caught in some obstruction and sent him hurtling headforemost into the black void. His head struck a rigid object, his spine seemed to crack; the surrounding blackness was illumined by flashing comets and pin-wheels of glowing fire through which he fell into oblivion.

CHAPTER XXXI

WHAT THE RAIDERS FOUND

ONE instinct dominated Brazo. Every sense seemed to have died, for he had no conscious emotion when at last he got to his feet and stood swaying back and forth in the blackness. He had no idea where he was or why he was trying to stand. He got up because he had been going somewhere when he fell and because the habit of man to stand upright had urged him. He had forgotten where he had intended to go, but he had got up facing the ranch-house and he began to stagger toward it. He did not know the

ranch-house was there, but the obscure instinct which had brought him to his feet still gripped him, still drove him to expend his remaining vitality in an effort to accomplish the object that the brain had evolved. It was the fighting instinct.

Not until he had staggered onward several hundred feet did consciousness return to him. And with consciousness came slowly back the strength that had flown from him, the terrible apprehension, the sullen rage, the deadly hatred for the men who had struck at Ella in his absence.

He did not know how long he had been unconscious, but as he ran he observed that there was now a light in the ranch-house, so he felt that he had come too late.

When he reached the veranda he observed that the front door was wide open and battered to splinters. He drew his gun as he leaped into the doorway, but a glance told him there would be no one here to shoot.

Wilson's men had come and gone. The furniture was overturned, the carpets torn up, the front room was wrecked. He ran to the door that led into the dining-room and saw in the light from a bracket lamp the same chaotic disorder. He glanced around the kitchen and in the dim light reflected from the dining-room observed that it, too, was wrecked. They had even torn the cupboards from the wall. Brazo knew why. They had been searching for Jim Henley's papers, which they hoped would reveal the spot where Henley had made his strike.

But Brazo was out of the kitchen with a rush. He leaped through the dining-room, into the big room, up the stairs. He groped through the upper rooms, calling, hoping Ella had hidden herself there. She was not upstairs.

When he reached the bottom of the stairs he stood for an instant, reeling, blinded by the accession of a new rage. Then he ran out on the veranda, leaped down and raced back toward the cabin.

The moon had come, now, and was shining calmly down, flooding the world with a silvery radiance.

Shortly Brazo was bending over Brinn, telling him what had happened.

"Sure!" raved the short man. "That's what you get for leavin' her! Now they've got her, an' she'll have hell! They've gone! I heard them not more than half an hour ago. They went clatterin' by here like the devil was after them. They've got her, an' they're takin' her to their cache. You know where that is. Oh, damn them, I wish I could get up! It's your fault, Brazo!" he added, his voice now almost a whine. "What are you standin' there for? Go get her!"

He withed and again tried to rise as Brazo leaped out of the doorway. But somewhere his body seemed paralyzed and he could only lift himself to his right elbow, and that merely for an instant. He sank to the floor again and lay there muttering and screaming futile curses.

BRAZO was in the stable throwing saddle and bridle on Blinky. He swung up just outside the stable door and leaped Blinky across the level that led westward into the timber. However, he did not go into the timber but skirted its edge and rode along the bank of the river to a crossing. He was drenched by the spume that Blinky's forelegs swished over him.

Blinky's leaps over the floor of the basin were prodigious. In that first terrific rush he seemed to realize what was wanted of him. He did not slacken his pace when he struck the upland, and he went over the crest of the ridge above the basin in half a dozen tremendous bounds. He fled over the higher level without urging,



dipped into a gully with sickening velocity, and straightened out on a level beyond, running with long, smooth undulations.

The moonlight was brilliant and the trail ahead visible. Blinky had been in the section before and he needed little guiding. He ran on over the face of the land, like some winged beast that merely touched the higher points here and there, puffs of dust occasionally erupting to mark his progress. He vanished behind a long line of timber, and reappeared farther on against a back-

ground of blue sky, star-dotted. For a time he was lost in a gorge, but presently he went out of it to another plain, where a long line of dust puffs revealed his passing.

He vanished again at the bottom of a long slope. A little later the moonlight disclosed him deep in the saccatone grass of a lowland, a bobbing, rushing dark projectile tearing through an emerald sea.

He went more slowly up a far slope, and for a time he halted on its crest. Then suddenly he was gone again and silence closed behind him and engulfed him.

Half a dozen coyotes slunk out of some timber and stared after him, their nostrils twitching. For a time they followed the hoof prints in the sand. Other denizens of the land scurried here and there, frightened by the plunging monster that had ricocheted through their domain.

Blinky ran on and on, doing his best. His rider seemed to know that more could not be asked, for the spurs did not touch Blinky, and there came no sound, no word of praise or blame.

On another high plain, far to the west, Blinky slowed. It was here that he had come in another time that he remembered, and his wisdom took him to a certain spot where he had once been tied. And when he divined that his run was over he halted, spread his legs apart and heaved air into his exhausted lungs.

Brazo slid off.

AT THE edge of the declivity that he had descended in his quest of Ella's suitcase, he paused and stared downward at Wilson's cabin, at the corral, at the surrounding country. The fact that the cabin had no light in it, and that there were no horses in the corral, cause him to catch his breath in amazement. He had thought he would find them here; that they would have brought Ella here.

Brinn had told him he had heard Wilson and his men riding away about half an hour before Brazo had appeared to the short man, following Brazo's recovery from his period of unconsciousness. Yet they were not here, nor had he seen any sign of them on the trail. Had they any other rendezvous?

He knew of only this one.

He slid down the slope and ran to the shack. He paused at the door, to listen, for this silence might mean that they had expected pursuit and had prepared for it by hiding their horses and waiting for him in the darkness of the shack. But though he stood beside the door for several minutes he heard no sound from inside. Then, bracing himself, he stepped through the doorway.

Still no sound. There was no one inside the shack. He searched, but made no light.

He emerged in the grip of a cold and futile rage.

They had expected pursuit and had tricked him. He was certain they had no other cache. He was convinced that they had seen him riding the trail and had ridden deep into some timber to permit him to pass. They would remain in the timber until some of them, sneaking after him, could kill him.

He climbed the slope and stood beside Blinky. The horse was still breathing fast but was apparently in good condition. But he did not mount until he had carefully scanned the surrounding timber and brush, and had gazed for a time over the back trail.

A FEELING of impotence which had been born in him within the past few minutes had grown. He was afflicted with a terrible yearning to strike, to come into violent physical contact with the men who had taken Ella. But his opposition was as evanescent as the moonbeams that filtered down upon him through the trees, so reason still ruled him his brain though it was whirling in a chaos of conflicting passions as he threw himself upon



his horse and started over the back trail. His hatred of Wilson, never more than merely a contemptuous dislike, had become malignant and deadly. He knew now that he had made

a mistake in not killing the man in their fight at the camp months before. He had made the same mistake in Tombstone. It would not be made the third time.

He rode back toward the ranch-house slowly. There was nothing to be gained by haste. Before he could punish Wilson he must find him. So as he rode he searched the timber clumps on both sides of the trail, the various gorges, the gulches, the small basins, the stretches of brush that grew here and there.

THE moon sank behind the mountains as he continued his search, and darkness came again to blot the country out of his vision. While the darkness lasted he sat motionless on Blinky in the middle of a level stretch of sand waiting for the blackness to lift. He did not move until dawn broke in the eastern sky. Then, instead of searching for possible coverts he began to look for hoof tracks.

This was faster work than searching blindly in the timber, and yet in two hours he could find no place where he could see signs that any riders had passed. It was not until he had traveled more than half the distance back toward the ranch-house that he became convinced that Wilson's men had not ridden the trail at all. They had gone in another direction!

Grimly he again gave Blinky the rein. As before, Blinky flashed across the country like a meteor. At a distance of perhaps two miles from the basin, Brazo heard the faint report of an exploding firearm. It was heavy, crashing, and it seemed to come from the direction of the ranch-house. He spoke to Blinky and the animal increased his speed. He went bounding over the crest of the southern ridge of the basin like a huge cat, and at the bottom he straightened out in the widest run of his life.

Twice while crossing the basin Brazo again heard shots and as Blinky drew nearer to the ranch-house there came others. Brazo could see little puffs of white smoke in the vicinity of the house; he presently drew so near that he could hear yells of pain and shouts of rage. Then, crossing the river and sweeping down along the edge of the timber, Brazo was

close enough to see several horsemen breaking out of the timber near the ranch-house. They were shooting as they rode.

PASSING the cabin he saw Anderson kneeling behind a stump in the clearing aiming a rifle. The rifle was resting on the stop of the stump and its muzzle was moving slowly, following the movements of one of the riders. The weapon belched a lance of smoke and one of the riders threw up both arms and tumbled out of the saddle. While Brazo was covering the few hundred yards to where Anderson knelt behind the stump three other riders went down. Two of the riders seemed destined to get away, but finally there remained only one. The other was hit by a bullet from Hardin's rifle. He toppled forward, slipped sideways, and his horse carried him out of sight in the timber. Hardin was standing at one of the rear corners of the ranch-house when he fired the final shot. He now looked at Brazo, grinned grimly and walked toward Anderson.

Brazo slipped from the saddle at Anderson's side. Anderson had got up. He looked at Brazo and spoke quickly.

"Seems like Wilson's men have got Ella Wainright. We got in about half an hour ago and found Brinn nearly dead. He told us what had been happenin'. We went to the ranch-house an' found it wrecked, an' Ella gone. We came out again an' went back to Brinn. Then we saw Wilson an' his gang in the timber an' we cut loose without askin' any questions. We got seven or eight of them, mebber more. Wilson went into the ranch-house when things got too hot out here. I reckon he's still there. He dropped his rifle while he was runnin', so he's only got his Colt. We figured on gettin' him after we got the rest of the scum. But Ella ain't with him an' I thought mebber we'd ketch him an' hang him! She's gone, Brazo!"

ANDERSON'S eyes were flaming with passion, but he appeared awed when he glanced at Brazo.

Brazo's face was dead white. With Anderson's word about Ella not being with Wilson his passions had burned out and

there was only one purpose left—to kill Wilson. They had tricked him. They had not taken Ella far. While he had been hunting them they had worked their will upon the girl. In the timber near the house. Somewhere along the river. In their determination to force her to tell where her brother had found the gold they had tortured her, perhaps killed her. Then they had returned to the ranch-house to continue their search. For Brazo knew Ella had not told them and they would finish the destruction of the ranch buildings in an attempt to find what they sought.

Whatever they had done to Ella was enough. They had touched her, degraded her by depriving her of her liberty. They must have threatened her, treated her brutally. They had probably concealed her somewhere, while they returned and finished their search. That meant of course that they had tied her. They had also probably gagged her.

So his thoughts ran.

If there was passion in his heart there was no fire in the passion. He was cold, calm. Only one purpose was in him, the determination to kill Wilson. He had no hatred for the man now, only a determination to kill him. But before he killed Wilson he would force him to tell where he had left Ella.

He left Anderson and Hardin and strode toward the ranch-house. They followed at a little distance, awed by his mood.

WILSON could not leave the house. Two of the Wainright men were on the east side, where they could watch the side and the front and rear. Anderson and Hardin were on the west side.

When Brazo entered the front door he drew his gun, for he was convinced that Wilson would fire upon him at sight.

Wilson was not in the front room and so Brazo went to the door leading into the dining-room. There, in a corner, gun in hand, facing the door, stood Wilson.

Wilson's gun was level. Brazo's gun was rigid in his right hand, the forearm tight against his waist, the elbow crooked. Wilson's hand was shaking, his eyes were glaring with the fear of death; the muzzle

of his weapon was moving in jerky circles. It was evident that he had heard Brazo coming, had decided to kill him the instant he stepped into the room, and that at sight of Brazo his courage had failed.

Brazo stepped away from the doorway and stood at the end of the room facing his enemy. He spoke, and his voice seemed to fill the room with its grim resonance.

"Wilson, where is Ella Wainright?" he said.

Wilson stared. His lips twitched, drew away from his teeth in a snarl.

"I ain't seen her, damn you!" he answered, his voice hoarse and quivering.

"Wilson," said Brazo, "Anderson

told me you were in here. Most of your men are dead. I came in here to kill you. But I'm giving you another chance. Where is Ella Wainright?"



AS IF the fear of death had paralyzed his fingers, Wilson's gun dropped from his hand and clattered heavily upon the floor. He crouched farther into his corner. For an instant his lips worked soundlessly, and then words shrieked out of them.

"Don't shoot, Brazo! For God's sake, don't shoot! I'll tell all I know!"

He wet his lips and stared wildly at Brazo and at Anderson and Hardin and some of the other men that had come into the house and were watching from the doorways.

"We came in here to get her," said Wilson. "We was goin' to make her talk about her brother's gold. We was goin' to make her tell. That's right. I don't deny that. But we wasn't goin' to hurt her, Brazo. I swear we wasn't!"

"But when we broke in the front door she shot three or four times. When we finally got in the back door was open an' she was gone. We heard her runnin'. Her dress was ketchin' on the brush she ran through. Me an' some more of the boys went after her. We couldn't see her on account of the darkness, but we could

hear her just ahead of us. Then, down near the river, we lost her. That's the truth, Brazo. I ain't seen her!"

BRAZO'S eyes had held a derisive gleam until now. As Wilson finished Brazo's muscles tightened. All that had been sinister in his manner quickly vanished. He laughed aloud, holstered his gun and looked at Anderson.

"Hold this man until I come back!" he said, his voice leaping. "I reckon I'm a box-head!"

He leaped out of one of the open windows and ran out into the clearing where he had left Blinky. They saw him leap into the saddle and race across the clearing, past the cabin, through the tents and shacks of the deserted town, to vanish at last in the timber beyond.

"Hell!" ejaculated Hardin.

A light seemed to flicker in Anderson's eyes.

"I reckon it'll be Heaven for Brazo," said Anderson smiling. He added, "If she's there."

CHAPTER XXXII

THE HIDDEN VALLEY

SHE was sitting on a grassy knoll behind a huge rock when Brazo emerged from the cavern into the hidden valley, and all that he saw of her at first was the top of her head and her disordered hair shining in the sunlight. She was facing the entrance to the cavern, and it was evident that she had been waiting and watching for some one to come. That she had expected the outlaws to find her he did not doubt, for when he saw her hair he also observed that he was gazing into the muzzle of her Colt .45.

The gun clattered down as she rose and held out her arms to him. She shivered as an instant later she snuggled close to him.

"I thought they had killed you!" she murmured, holding him tightly. "Oh, Brazo, don't ever leave me again!"

He laughed, telling her that the only danger he had encountered was when Wilson had told him that she had eluded him somewhere near the river.

"Then my brain began to work again,"

he added, "and I knew you had come here. But my heart was sure sunfishing for a while."

She drew away from him a little and caught his face in her hands, holding it and smiling into his eyes.

"I had this place in mind all the time," she said. "Twice I intended to mention it to you, but I was afraid you would try to bring me here while Wilson's men were watching. Then they would have killed us. I shot four times when they were breaking down the front door," she added, "but I do not think I hit any of them. I hope I didn't. Then I ran to the back door, opened it and ran through the timber toward the river. I heard them running after me, but it was too dark for them to see me. So I got here safely. A little while ago I went through the cavern and peeked out. I saw men running around and heard shooting. I knew Anderson and the others had come. I looked, but I didn't see you, Brazo; and I thought they had killed you!"

They went back to the knoll and sat there for a long time. Then he told her about Wilson.

"I reckon we'd better get back there,"

he said. "The boys don't know that you are safe, and they don't like Wilson any too well. Something may happen to him."

He led her through the cavern and across the river to the timber in

front of the cabin. They saw Anderson and Hardin standing in front of the doorway. Several horses were tethered in the clearing. The Wainright men had gone into the timber, eastward, with the riders of the horses. As Brazo and Ella approached the cabin they heard groans, and Anderson answered Ella's look of inquiry with a grin.

"There's three of Wilson's men in there," he said. "They're hurt, but not bad."

"And Brinn?" said Ella, quickly, anxiously.

"He's up in the house. I reckon he's

going to be a cripple. An ankle bone smashed an' one of his ribs busted by a glancin' shot. I've sent Ed to Cooney for the doctor."

"Where's Wilson?" asked Brazo.

ELLA was running toward the ranch-house. Brazo smiled, for he had grown to like Brinn.

"Wilson ain't here any more," answered Anderson, his face grave. "I don't know what you wanted us to hold Wilson for, but I followed orders an' brought him down here so's we could watch him while we was doin' somethin' for Brinn.

"Well, we brought Wilson in here an' set him on a bench opposite the bunk where we'd put Brinn.

"Brinn was layin' there, pretty helpless, an' groanin'. Wilson set there, watchin' him.

"As soon as Brinn seen Wilson his eyes began to glitter in a sort of wild way. He was ravin' mad an' he asked us if we'd found Ella. We told him we hadn't but that you'd gone to look for her.

"Brazo's a damned fool!" Brinn said.

"I was standin' close to Brinn, an' the first thing I knowed he'll pulled my gun out of the holster. Before I could twist around an' grab him he'd let it off twice into Wilson. After Wilson fell he set lookin' at Wilson for a minute. Then he grinned an' said, 'I reckon that'll teach you to keep your dirty hands off that girl!'

"Then he grinned that wild grin of his an' handed me my gun. So Wilson's not here any more."

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE END OF THREE TRAILS

B RINN likes you, Brazo," said Ella. She was stealing surreptitious glances at him as, two weeks later they were sitting on the log at the edge of the timber where Brazo had sat alone many times in the days when he had been waiting for Ella to come.

"That's odd," gravely replied Brazo. "I've showed him pretty well that I didn't think much of him."

"I know there was a time when you disliked him," she said. "But you like him now, Brazo?"



"There's something odd about the cuss," said Brazo. "He's a wild man. I've done nothing to make him like me. First, at Bain's, I shot him. Then when he came here I showed him that I didn't like him, and tried to goad him into drawing his gun on me. Well, yes, I reckon I like him more than I did."

"That's something," she smiled wisely. "Brinn is the most primitive man I ever met. He's like a child that has not been trained, Brazo. He's wild, and his impulses are violent. But if he likes you, he likes you. Moreover, when he likes a person

he wants that person to like him. He'll do anything for any one he likes."

She was silent for a moment. Then she said, gently, "Brazo, I must tell you



something. I should have told you long ago, perhaps. It is this: Ever since Brinn appeared here I have been giving him money to keep quiet about what happened at Bain's Camp. When he came here and discovered that I loved you he threatened to go to the sheriff unless I gave him money."

"Yes?" Brazo's eyes had grown grim and cold.

"The storekeeper, Bain himself, and the stableman, are dead," she went on. "Brinn is the only evidence they have against you. Perhaps they would not believe his word against yours. But you ran away from Bain's, Brazo, and that would be held against you. And I didn't want them to take you away."

"How much did you give Brinn?" he asked.

"Nearly three hundred thousand dollars, Brazo," she answered.

Brazo's eyes widened.

"You wanted me to stay that bad?" he said, his voice suddenly gone hoarse.

"I wanted you," she answered. "So I gave him the money. And he has given it all back, Brazo. He likes us. And he wants

to stay with us after—after—always."

Brazo smiled and drew her to him. He was thrilling with the knowledge that she had loved him well enough to sacrifice everything she owned for him. His voice was gentle, reverent.

"I'll try to be worth it," he said. "And Brinn can stay as long as he wants to stay after—after we are married."

THAT night they sat again on the log. Behind them were the ragged tents and the crude shacks of the deserted city engulfed by the mocking silence of the ages. Farther down were the dark windows of the cliff dwellings looking out, even as they were looking, upon the silent valley.

"Isn't it beautiful!" murmured Ella. "I love it! I loved it even while Wolf Wilson was chasing me down toward the river. I love it more and more. It is off the main trails, Brazo, and there will never be any crowding here."

Brazo meditated long, so long that she thought he had not been listening to her. So she turned to him inquiringly.

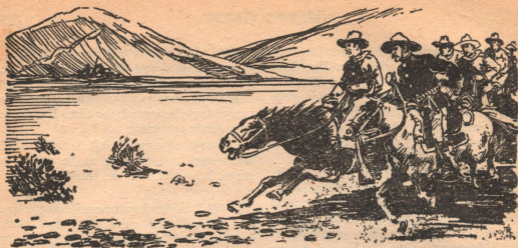
"You weren't listening, Brazo!" she charged.

"I was thinking," he said; "thinking about trails. How did I know I was coming here? Down there in Tombstone I got disturbed. Something seemed to be calling to me, beckoning. I got so I couldn't stay there any longer. So one day I asked for my time. Now, when I left there I had no trail in mind. I just drifted. And pretty soon I got onto the main trails you just mentioned."

"But I said we were off the main trails, Brazo!" she declared.

"So you said." He smiled at her. "But we are on the main trails after all. People who live their lives right can never get off of them." Gently, gravely, he went on.

"As far as I can figure it out there are three main trails that amount to something," he said. "They lead to love, adventure and wealth. They are the only ones worth while, and we have ridden them all."



OLD-TIMERS PLAYED STRAIGHT

By HARWOOD STEELE

Author of "Dancing Partners," "An Affair of Courage," etc.

A FEUD THAT HAD LASTED FOR YEARS BETWEEN A MEMBER OF THE OLD R.N.W.M.P. AND AN ENEMY OF THE PLAINS COULDN'T STAND UP WHEN IT WAS SHOWN UP AGAINST THE TRICKS OF MODERN CROOKS. AFTER ALL IT WAS A MAN'S GAME IN THE OLD DAYS; OLD-TIMERS PLAYED STRAIGHT

MANY dramatic and thrilling events marked the programme of the recent Jubilee celebrations at Fort French, Alberta.

But by far the most thrilling and dramatic event was not on the programme at all. This was the climax of the fifty-year-old feud between ex-Sergeant Cantyre, late of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police, and Ghost-that-Walks, Blood Indian chief.

Till the celebration brought it back, the feud had almost been forgotten by Fort French. Though each was represented in the district by a worthy son—Cantyre by Corporal Jim and Ghost-that-Walks by John Three Wolves, war veteran, champion bronco-buster and graduate of Carlisle—the men themselves had not been prominent there for three decades. Fort French had had time to forget that Ghost-that-Walks had once been the worst of all bad Indians, a famous horse-thief and cattle-rustler; and that Cantyre, a great horseman and an expert in handling both cattle-rustlers and

horse-thieves, with a full knowledge of every trick they used, had been, in consequence, the old chief's bitter enemy.

Conditions had changed. The fort had become a city, in name at least, the large garrison of policemen to which it owed its origin had been reduced to a mere detachment, the whisky-runner had been superseded by the land shark, the cow pony by the motor car. Yet had it not been for these changes, Cantyre's struggle with Ghost-that-Walks would never have ended.

IN JUBILEE week Fort French, doing honor to itself and to the Police, went back to the days of its glory, when it was a frontier post. Ex-Sergeant Cantyre and Ghost-that-Walks returned and there were such doings as the little town had not seen for a generation—such doings as it will never see again.

Cantyre returned because his son persuaded him. The boy—having fallen heir to the rough-rider's worsted spur once worn by his illustrious sire—had entered the

rodeo, and several of the Originals of the dear old Outfit, '74, chaps like Cantyre himself, were to be there. Nothing else would ever have induced the old man to leave his fragile wife and little fruit-farm on Vancouver Island.

For the actual celebrations he pretended to have little use. Fort French had always been a hole and nothing about it would be worth celebrating except its demise. The bygone days could never be revived no matter how the Jubilee Committee tried; they were gone, that was all. As for wearing his old uniform, per request of the said committee; why, the moths had eaten the seat out of the skin-tight breeches, and he wasn't going to make an exhibition of himself for a lot of Eastern tourists!

So Cantyre had said. If he had anticipated meeting Ghost-that-Walks, not even his son could have moved him.

But as it was, he came—straight as the flag-staff in the old barrack-square and broad as the carriage of its ancient cannon, though past the age of seventy. He came; and he had the time of his life. With his brethren of the Originals, a mere half-dozen all told, he was the hero of the week. The Lieutenant-Governor and all the mobs made much of him. Reporters tried to interview him, movie people to shoot him, the boys of the special guard of honor—fifty of them, picked from the nearest depot of the present-day Royal Canadian Mounted Police—to make him drunk, "Slick" Sorbie, promoter of the Jubilee—a crooked Easterner, the veteran thought—to sign him up for a year in vaudeville.

THERE were many reunions with old-timers, white and red. His advice was asked. He was made an official here and an exalted brother there. The days were filled with speeches, campfires, parades. And when he marched at the head of the '74 and later vintages, escorted by the modern troop in the beloved scarlet, through rapturous thousands, drawn to Fort French from every part of the continent by the magic of the Outfit's name, the cup of his youth was filled again, his pride and joy supreme.

Upon this ecstasy Ghost-that-Walks burst like one of the Egyptian plagues. Two

thousand Indians in the barbaric magnificence of paint and feather-bonnet assembled outside the old fort on the outskirts of the town to stage a war-dance and pow-wow. Slick Sorbie, with a keen eye for the picturesque and for movie profits, induced the Originals to smoke the Pipe of Peace with some of the oldest chiefs, under the eyes of the vast crowd and a whole arsenal of cameras.

Hence it was that ex-Sergeant Cantyre, passing slowly among the chiefs, shaking hands and delighting in old memories came suddenly face to face with his sworn foe of thirty years before; with Ghost-that-Walks, wrinkled, gray-headed and in every respect changed—but Ghost-that-Walks undoubtedly. Over the face of ex-Sergeant Cantyre crept just the faintest expression of surprise, then a look that made the rugged features harden into granite; and, under the eyes of that vast crowd, that arsenal of cameras, while the minds of the two and of Fort French leaped back those thirty years, he put his right hand in his pocket, made a sign with his left and said in a loud voice:

"This man has the Forked Tongue (is a liar) and I will not shake hands with him!"

II

ONLY the fiercest of antagonisms could have given birth to so deadly an insult. Only a long series of causes could have produced such an effect.

Leaping back those thirty years, the recollections of Fort French, of Ghost-that-Walks, of ex-Sergeant Cantyre, went to the first cause, then through a long series of causes and lastly to the most important cause of all.

For the first cause, they returned to the very beginning, to the time when the fledgling Mounted Police entered their natural habitat, when Cantyre rode with them as a constable in his early twenties and when Ghost-that-Walks was the mightiest warrior in all the wide Northwest. They went to the first meeting ever held between the Indians of the district and the Force, within the walls of that very fort; and they recalled that, of all the chiefs who habitually pitched their teepees within a week's ride

of Fort French, Ghost-that-Walks alone had not been there.

Ghost-that-Walks, even at that early date, had been following the war-trail as a full grown man for a decade and had won such renown that the mere rumor of his coming was enough to cause a panic in the lodges of the Crees, the Crows, the Peigans, the Stonies, and at least a small commotion



in the camps of the Sioux. During that decade, he had come to love the savage thrill of dancing to the throbbing war-drum, of terrorizing the darkness with his war-whoop, of pouncing upon unsuspecting victims, of carrying off women, cattle, horses, of lifting scalps and wallowing in fire-water. Yet he was asked by those impudent redcoat newcomers, to relinquish all this and become a beggarly tiller of the soil, living upon their sufferance!

In answering the summons of Inspector Gale—Kitcheokimow, the big chief—Ghost-that-Walks had sent the haughty and impertinent message:

"Your Great White Mother (Queen Victoria) is a low-born drab to me. The plains and all they bear are mine through my fathers and I will never surrender them."

This message was delivered in full council, to Gale and all his officers, while the other chiefs and young Cantyre listened. It was a declaration of war and a challenge. Gale accepted it on behalf of the Force in general and Cantyre upon his own account.

AS FAR as the Force in general came into the picture, the resultant feud had finished twenty years later, when Ghost-that-Walks settled down. But for Cantyre it had never come to a conclusion. Not even Ghost-that-Walks's ultimate submission could settle it, for him.

Nor was this to be wondered at, in view of what occurred, when first they clashed—and afterward. One day, while the peal of

his calling trumpets was still a new sound in the land, Gale told the unblooded Cantyre, "This Ghost-that-Walks is helping the whisky-traders. Go out and bring him in!"

Whereupon war to the knife began.

Cantyre walked alone into the chief's tepee, catching him in the act of ladling out the forbidden poison, and attempted single-handed to drag him from his lair. The deed was graced by the magnificent foolhardiness which was later to make the Force immortal and invincible, but this time it did not work. Before the clattering cup, kicked from the hand of Ghost-that-Walks, had reached the ground, a watching warrior shot the Policeman down.

The doctor's cart brought Cantyre in. He was sick with mortification. He could never forgive Ghost-that-Walks. Another Policeman was sent, also single-handed to gather up the chief—these Indians must be taught the lesson that one redcoat was as good as one hundred red men and that the law and its guardians could not be defied with impunity!

The second constable succeeded—and how he succeeded is a matter worthy to rank with the exploits of the old Celtic heroes, though it has no place here.

Ghost-that-Walks was given a heavy term of imprisonment. He was held at Fort French and once, of necessity, Cantyre put irons upon him. Red-hot irons went into the Indian then—straight into his very soul. To hobble the wild horse, clip the eagle's wings, fetter the winds is a frightful thing, but to shackle Ghost-that-Walks, in his own estimation, was worse. If Cantyre could never forgive him, he could never forgive Cantyre. War to the knife indeed, thenceforward! War to the death!

And war it was, a war of giants; Cantyre and Ghost-that-Walks matched well.

TWENTY years of battle and fifty of bitter enmity—it seems incredible; but long after Ghost-that-Walks had grown inwardly reconciled to white dominion, he continued outwardly to stand as the Champion of a Lost Cause, only because to stand in this way was to stand against Cantyre. When Sitting Bull went roaring through western Canada, Ghost-that-

Walks helped him—because he was against Cantyre. When the Canadian Pacific Railway with its thin sword of steel thrust through the heart of the old West, gave that land its death blow and the new West its accolade, Ghost-that-Walks camped on the right-of-way—to spite Cantyre.

And meanwhile he whirled through a riot of lawbreaking, sandwiched between long periods in jail, while Cantyre, rising by stages from greenhorn constable to senior sergeant at Fort French, spent a vast part of his time upon his track. The feud gradually resolved itself into a determination, on the part of Ghost-that-Walks to defy the white man's law as long as Cantyre was there to enforce it; and on the part of Cantyre, to trap and re-trap the Indian till even his proud, defiant spirit broke and he cried "Enough!" It was like a gladiatorial combat in which one of the combatants, temporarily worsted, is dragged from the arena by force, only to rush in again as soon as set free.

At last Ghost-that-Walks delivered the supreme coup of his career and laid himself open, to Cantyre's accusation—that he had the Forked Tongue.

HE HAD been very active, especially in horse-stealing during the year preceding, and Cantyre, in that year, had prowled along his trail like a starving wolf. But always the honors had lain with Ghost-that-Walks—so much so that the whole country was fretful and Cantyre upon his mettle as never before.

Up to the gate of Fort French, one



night in spring, a stockman rode at speed, demanding instant action and calling male dictions down upon the head of "that low-lived Indian skunk!" From the shower of

words, the Police caught a cupful sufficient for their purpose. Ghost-that-Walks was out again. Ghost-that-Walks and his young men had run away with two hundred head of horses from Broken W—

the biggest haul he had ever made—carrying them off under the very nose of Fort French, for the barracks and the ranch were not fifteen miles apart. He was making for his customary hiding-place in the nearby Rockies.

Fort French, day and night, had always a patrol in readiness to deal with just such emergencies. They slept with their bandoliers and saddle-bags filled. Cantyre was in charge of the party on duty that night. He said little when the order came: "Turn out!" Still, there was a certain gleam of triumph in his eye. Ghost-that-Walks, that gleam declared, would not walk much longer. He was about to be laid—and laid for good and all!

Within ten minutes of the alarm, the patrol was in the saddle. Within a quarter of an hour, it was hot on the Indian's trail.

TO FOLLOW that trail was child's play. The racing hoofs of the purloined horses had beaten a path as wide as Broadway across the otherwise untrodden snows and a full moon, brighter than arc lights, threw its gleam along that chill white street. All night the patrol rode. At dawn they were well into the lower fringes of the Rockies.

The stern chase is ever the long chase, on land as well as at sea. Deeper and deeper into the gloomy valleys it led Cantyre and his men, now west, now east, now south, twisting and turning through the shaggy gulfs with an intricacy to be equalled only by that of the red man's mind. The day passed, another day, a third day, yet Ghost-that-Walks remained a phantom whose passage left no trace other than the broad road trampled by the stolen herd. Cantyre held on grimly. Sooner or later the fast-moving patrol must catch up to their unwieldy quarry, unless the chinook should come—suddenly.

It never occurred to Cantyre that he might be being hoodwinked. He was full of that confidence which is born of an oft-proved knowledge of one's own ability.

The trail, during the fourth day of the pursuit, remained in the mountains, taking the patrol through heart-breaking, waist-deep drifts. Towards noon it turned east, for the seventh time. Only another double,

thought Cantyre; he's sure to swing back again. But Ghost-that-Walks did not swing back. In the late afternoon the hunters knew why. The chinook they dreaded, the warm swift wind of southern Alberta, had come, licking up every scrap of snow on the foothills as a blow-torch licks up paint. The frozen ground the wind laid bare was as hard as chilled steel. When the next cold wave came, on the heels of the chinook, not a hoof-mark would show on it. Cantyre cursed, grimly and fluently, for he was aware that, taking advantage of this development, Ghost-that-Walks could flee across the plains as he willed and to track him would be impossible.

YET he still held on, despite the frost that followed. He felt certain that the Indians could not be far ahead and that he was bound to sight them next morning. When the sun rose, his hopes were justified. From the top of a hill he spotted the marauders, a long way off, with their great herd of horses. Urging on his weary patrol to a last supreme effort, he pressed exultantly forward.

A few hours more and he came up with Ghost-that-Walks and his men, peacefully camping as though there were no such thing as the white man's justice. Cantyre spurred boldly over to the chief and told him that he was wanted for stealing the horses of Broken W, at Fort French.

Joy was in the sergeant's heart. He felt that the struggle of years was over, that he had given his enemy the deathblow.

Ghost-that-Walks looked at him with a disdainful, triumphant smile. "Stolen horses?" he said innocently. "Where are the stolen horses?"

"There!" replied Cantyre, waving his arm towards the grazing herd.

"Those horses are my own—bought fairly and openly and paid for with honest money," the chief declared! "I have had them all a year! Go and look at them!"

Cantyre inspected the stock. Amazement slowly took possession of him. Every one of the animals was branded with Ghost-that-Walks's own brand—a Lazy G. Many of them bore other brands, belonging to the outfits whence the chief had secured them. Not one, however, was

marked with even the suspicion of a Broken W.

HE LOOKED for signs of trickery—for brands altered by burning or cutting. A horse may be dyed so that only the delicate hairs in its ears and possibly on its muzzle or in its nostrils remain the original color; and even these may be touched up by a skilled man, unless he be in a tearing hurry. This is a trick as old as the trade itself in North America. But Cantyre found nothing.

He was furious. He felt certain that he was being fooled, yet how he could not fathom.

"Broken W saw you run their horses off," he told the Indian. "What have you done with them?"

"Broken W have eyes that look cross-ways," Ghost-that-Walks replied. "Someone else has stolen their horses. Whenever any one breaks the law, I always get the blame!"

Cantyre wondered. Could the rancher possibly have been mistaken? "What have you been doing, then, riding so crooked a trail—and for so long, if you are innocent?" he demanded.

"Surely, if I wish, I can take my own horses for a little exercise?" said Ghost-that-Walks sweetly.

"Get back to your reserve!" Cantyre ordered.

It was all he could say. The chief had beaten him.

FOR months thereafter, he worked upon that case, with no result. Broken W was positive that Ghost-that-Walks was guilty. So was Cantyre. There was, however, no evidence against the chief and the stolen horses had utterly vanished.

Then Cantyre was suddenly transferred to the Klondyke, for duty during the Great Gold Rush. When he came out, he went immediately to the South African War with Strathcona's Horse and on his return took his discharge. A year afterward, he learnt the truth from a sergeant who carried on the case and brought it to a triumphant conclusion—in the Mounted Police way, which is sometimes slow but always sure.

Learning the truth, Cantyre resolved never to forgive Ghost-that-Walks, though the stealing of Broken W's stock had been his last breach of the law and, though on Cantyre's departure, he had made his peace with the Force.

For Ghost-that-Walks had deceived him. Accompanying Broken W's horses with his



own, which he brought along as a blind, he had led Cantyre into the mountains and kept him busy there till the expected Chinook and the subsequent

cold wave made trailing of the stolen animals impossible. Then he had returned to the plains and, camping to await the sergeant and put him off the scent, had detached a portion of his party to run Broken W's stock over the bare and frozen ground—the ground no hoofs could mark—to his confederates in Montana.

III

ON THE night following his Jubilee meeting with Ghost-that-Walks, ex-Sergeant Cantyre had three unwelcome visitors.

They were unwelcome for several reasons. For one thing, the old man was tired. He had gone through an exceedingly exciting day. His behavior toward Ghost-that-Walks had created a terrific sensation and, while he felt not one whit sorry for it, he was afraid that it would get into the newspapers. The bronco-busting contest had been thrilling almost beyond endurance, since twenty competitors, every one a famous Canadian rider, had fought all afternoon to reach the finals. One man had been killed, one seriously injured; and—for Cantyre, the most exciting of all possible situations—the result of the thing had been that Corporal Jim, his boy, and John Three Wolves, son of Ghost-that-Walks, his lifelong enemy, were to ride in the finals next day on the two worst horses in North America.

True, the rangy chestnut Jim broke had not put up a very hard fight; but it had

been hard enough to take the pep out of his father. So the veteran was tired, for one thing. For another, he did not care to see any of this particular trio—Ghost-that-Walks and John Three Wolves, who came together, or Slick Sorbie, who came alone.

EX-SERGEANT CANTYRE was sitting on the bed in his hotel, while Jim pulled off his long boots, when a soft knock at the door announced the arrival of the two Indians. Their appearance was apropos, as it happened, for Jim had just been gently lecturing his father, telling him not only that his conduct that afternoon had been disgraceful but that to carry on this feud so long and at his time of life was perfectly crazy. He had even gone so far as to assert that ex-Sergeant Cantyre, having publicly insulted Ghost-that-Walks, should publicly apologize for the slight.

"Open the door, Jim," said Cantyre; and, when he saw who was there, "My God!"

Old Ghost-that-Walks looked definitely broken down and distinctly pathetic as he stood in the portal, half supported by his strong young son. The panoply he had worn that afternoon was gone—laid away in moth-balls, like the war-whoop and the war-party and all the wild, glamorous things of an age that could never come again. In their place he wore, as he might wear those Irons Cantyre had clapped on him nearly half a century before, an ordinary white man's suit.

The whole of the red man's complete subjection to the white was symbolized by Ghost-that-Walks and his inappropriate clothes. But the sign of hope was to be read in the appearance of John Three Wolves, upright, self-assured and up-to-date, a symbol of the triumph of new generation over the difficulties which had all but crushed their fathers.

Corporal Jim greeted John warmly, for, though rivals in the bronco-busting, they were good friends. Ex-Sergeant Cantyre was not so pliable. His face again became like granite, as it had done that afternoon, when he met the chief. He waited.

"How Pesu!" Ghost-that-Walks said humbly, hat in one hand, the other raised in salutation.

Pesu The Lynx was Cantyre's old

tribal name. It touched him in a tender spot, like the touch of a dearly loved though long-lost hand. He stirred restlessly, then asked gruffly; "What do you want?"

CORPORAL JIM and John Three Wolves glanced at each other but the two gray heads had forgotten their presence.

"I want to talk to you." Ghost-that-Walks stated.

"I am listening," replied Cantyre. They were speaking Blackfoot—in the old familiar way.

"Long ago, Pesu," began the chief, "we were enemies, you and I. We made fierce war on each other. All that is past and done with. You put me in irons once but I have forgiven you. Yet today you met me and before all those people you said I have the Forked Tongue; and you refused to shake hands."

"Well?" growled old Cantyre.

Ghost-that-Walks heaved a sigh.

"You did me an injustice, Pesu. After



all, in those days, that was the game—to beat each other. When you could set me off on a false trail, you did it. When I could scatter a false scent, I did it. Yet neither of us was a liar, in the way that you meant today. And why? Because it was all part of the game.

"I never tried to hide that from you nor you from me. Each of us knew that the other would hoodwink him if it were possible. So each of us was on his guard. There was no treachery, no taking of unfair advantages, as for instance there is in what the people of today, who boast of their superiority, call Business. It was a splendid game, Pesu, fought, not in a stuffy office or with two-edged words, but out in the open, man to man, wit against wit, strength against strength."

Old Cantyre's eyes had a faraway look in them, for all the stubborn persistence of hostility to be read in that stern set of his mouth.

"Under the sky, Pesu!" went on Ghost-that-Walks. "Yes, and fought out by men. Do you remember that time when you rode one hundred miles without stopping to cut me off at The-Place-Where-the-River-Ran Red and I put a bullet through your horse's head at a thousand yards? A man's game, Pesu, played by men in the open—and played straight!"

"Well?" growled old Cantyre again. Said Ghost-that-Walks, "We are both old now, soon to be riding the Ghost Trail. What is the use of going on with this feud? Won't you shake hands?"

It was a noble gesture and should have been taken as such. But the old demon, Pride, came back to roost in Cantyre's soul as soon as the magic spell of the chief's word-pictures faded away.

"No, I will not!" said Cantyre.

GHOST-THAT-WALKS and John Three Wolves went away; and a little later Corporal Jim, after telling his father that his name should be, not Pesu, but Sehawk (the skunk), also departed, fuming.

Old Cantyre got out his pipe for a last smoke—and to think things over. Just then his second visitor came around—Slick Sorbie.

He did not like Slick Sorbie, though the promoter had done his best to cultivate him. Sorbie had had the darned impudence to offer him that vaudeville contract—as if a veteran Mounted Policeman were a performing seal! Likewise, he was so confounded slick, so oily and prosperous. Puffing away, while the fellow held forth, ex-Sergeant Cantyre found himself repeating the words of Ghost-that-Walks, about the men of the old days who fought in the open, not in stuffy offices, with two-edged words, which today were called business. Here was the embodiment of everything rottenly modern that Cantyre despised.

Sorbie did not stay long. Nor did anything carried into Cantyre's brain by the river of his words find a reservoir there except a few remarks about tomorrow's finals:

"That boy of yours is a wonder, Cantyre. I'd like to do you a good turn, because I like you, even though you won't sign my contract. So take my advice and bet everything you've got on him. It's a certainty!"

Cantyre said drily, "Thanks."

Later, he went to bed uneasy. He had no relish for Sorbie's statement, especially the assertion, "It's a certainty." Also, as regards Ghost-that-Walks, he felt uncomfortable.

Lying awake, he turned matters over in his mind. Tomorrow John Three Wolves, as had been decided by the flip of a coin, was to ride that hideous piebald known as Treachery, and Jim the night-black Erebus. Carefully the old man considered all the facts, what he knew of the horses, what he knew of John, what he knew of Jim and Sorbie and everything he knew about the ways of crooked men. And suddenly he saw—or thought he saw—the truth; with an opportunity of squaring his account with Ghost-that-Walks in a way which would give Fort French the biggest thrill in its history.

IV

PACKED stands and bleachers tense with breathless excitement; a little knot of cowboys putting the finishing touches, in a hush that clutched the heart, to the saddling of Treachery, the outlaw which John Three Wolves was about to mount; the evening sun, from the old familiar Rockies, throwing its dying rays on this, the closing scene of what the papers had called "the grand finale of the Last Great West." In his seat in the front row of the arena, ex-Sergeant Cantyre watched and waited for what he felt was to be not merely the grand finale of the Last Great West but the grand finale of a tremendous day and of his own tremendous life.

John Three Wolves entered the arena, in chaps, silk shirt and wide sombrero, scarlet neckerchief dangling on his deep, broad chest. He came out easily and confidently and the crowd blew the lid off. The Indians let loose their wild weird shrieks, the white friends of John Three Wolves, who were backing him heavily, roared their acclaim and all the visiting Easterners who were stirred only by the man's grand physique and by the picturesque fact that he was an Indian screamed till their throats cracked. John flashed a smile at them and waved his hand. They roared again. To a far corner flashed another smile, a private smile this

time, for Ghost-that-Walks who sat among his warriors. Came complete stillness.

Then, with one swift movement, the buster swung himself lightly into the saddle.

Ex-Sergeant Cantyre leaned forward, his big fists clenched. A voice, across the silence, yelled "Ride 'im, cowboy!" The silence crashed into ruin under an oceanic tumult. John Three Wolves and Treachery became a twirling blur swamped by tidal waves of sound.

TAKE the hellish fury of hand-to-hand conflict, the uncontrollable violence and dazzling speed of forked lightning, the frenzy of the trapped wildcat, the desperation of the lunatic in the padded cell and you have the piebald Treachery as he was that day. He surpassed all previous efforts, all bygone displays of passion, power and wickedness. For ten whole minutes he went around that arena like a cat in fits, trying every piece of devilment known to the equine world. He spread-eagled, sun-fished, swapped ends, reared, savaged, kicked and rolled. He banged his head against the sinking sun, he lashed his heels against the rising moon. To the spectators he was a multi-colored spinning top, with the red streak of John Three Wolves's scarf aflame above him like the red badge of courage.

Often he had John straddling the whirling scythe of death. Twice he tried to scrape him off against the fence. Twice he tried to smash him flat by falling back on top of him. Three times he rolled, trying to make a pancake out of his rider. He hit the ground, all four feet bunched, with a jolt that was enough to slam John's heart through the top of his head. Sweat, blood and foam poured from his heaving flanks and blood came out of John's mouth and out of his ears.

At the end of the ten minutes, Treachery had had enough. He stood with his head



ling scythe of death. Twice he tried to scrape him off against the fence. Twice he tried to smash him flat by falling back on top of him. Three times he rolled, trying to make

between his legs; and John was still in the saddle. The crowd howled its acclamations. The Indian had the contest in his pocket but for this—though he had not been thrown, he had twice pulled leather. If Corporal Jim not only stayed on board, but also refrained from laying a clutching hand on the saddle he could rob John Three Wolves of victory; but not otherwise.

THE excitement was now white-hot.

Every one present sensed the terrific drama of the impending situation, wherein the age-old feud between the fine old fathers, so recently revived, was to be ended, one way or another, by their fine young sons. The sympathies of the spectators were cut clean in half. Aside from financial considerations—in other words, the betting—they did not know whom they wished would win—the stern ex-Sergeant and his cheery heir, typifying the magnificent Mounted Police, or the ancient Blood warrior and his handsome offspring, typifying the romantic Indian race. Of the actual outcome, they as yet suspected nothing.

Corporal Jim now appeared, in chaps, silk shirt and sombrero like John, but wearing with them a neckerchief of royal blue—the colour of the Mounted Police. Again the onlookers burst into cheers, their clamor redoubled when Jim went straight to John, as he dismounted, and offered his congratulations. The crowd's interest increased even more as the stalwart figure of old Cantyre was seen advancing into the ring. What was going to happen now?

But old Cantyre had no intention, then, of doing anything out of the ordinary. He intended merely to look things over and wish Jim luck. Erebus was driven out of the corral and the delicate process of saddling the wild black thing went forward.

The saddling was done by a party of Port French punchers, under the general supervision of the umpires. As it progressed, Cantyre strolled over and made another survey of the horse. Then, after a word of good wishes to Jim, he returned to his place.

Over the arena that loud shout rang again "Ride 'im, cowboy!" and the sky cracked a second time. Corporal Jim and Erebus were at it. The horse went round and round the ring like a scrap of paper in a whirlwind. Crash! Crash! Crash! He leaped again and again into the air. He imitated a ballet dancer pirouetting through impossible poses, a porpoise skipping through a seaway, a stray cat with a pack of schoolboys at its heels. All Treachery's devices he tried in turn.

BUT when he stopped bucking, as he did suddenly, no spark of fight left in him, Jim was still firmly seated and had not once pulled leather. The chief umpire moved toward Jim, while the stands and bleachers blew up in a frenzy.

At this stage, the people who had come to the Jubilee in search of red-blood drama had their wildest hopes fulfilled.

Though the chief umpire held up Jim's hand, in token of his victory, the horse he rode had not bucked half so long nor nearly so fiercely as Treachery. Jim's was a technical, rather than an actual triumph. The first murmur of dissension had just begun to make itself heard through the subsiding cheers when every soul on the grounds, not excluding the astonished umpires, became aware that ex-Sergeant Cantyre had taken a share in the business.

From his seat in the stand the old man was making a speech—a speech which embodied in itself the finest gesture and most generous art of renunciation he had ever made in his life, a speech which knocked the audience absolutely edgewise but, later on, inspired them to chair him shoulder-high.

"Friends," said old Cantyre, "the umpire's wrong! If anyone's won this contest, it's John Three Wolves, whose horse makes this thing my boy's on look like the old gray mare we used to sing about. If I wanted to keep quiet, my Jim could walk off with the



trophy under his hat. But Jim and I don't want a victory that's not won straight. I sort of think that when you've heard my say, you'll agree there's something wrong here and that all bets are off. Years ago I was quite good at catching crooks, especially crooks who played around with horses. So I know a little about the game.

"My friends, I've caught such a crook right now!"

THE audience, the umpires, the contestants stared with their mouths wide open. Slick Sorbie, white as a buffalo skull, rose stealthily from his seat and began to creep towards the nearest exit. Old Cantyre made a restraining sign.

"Better stop and hear about this, Mr. Sorbie!" he called. "It's interesting. Any one handy, please keep Mr. Sorbie just where he is! That's fine.

"During my time as a crook-catcher, I had one bitter enemy—Ghost-that-Walks. Yesterday I insulted him badly. I apologize, here where I stand and if he'll still shake hands, I'll be proud to oblige. Why? Because what's happened here this afternoon has made me realize that he's a man, who played a man's game against me, in the open and played it straight!

"In the old days, the rottenness I'm going to tell you about couldn't have happened. Old-timers, white and red, played straight."

Some one shouted, "Well, what is it?"

"I'm getting there, don't worry!" old Cantyre replied smoothly. "You know that rangy chestnut, the no-account brute my son licked yesterday, and Erebus, are strangers here. Sorbie brought 'em in from Arizona. They've been handled by his own dirty crowd and none of us have had a chance to get to know them really well. Last night Sorbie came to me and told me to bet on my boy, because his win was a certainty. Why a certainty? Sounds fishy, eh? Any one here made any bets with Sorbie—betting against Jim?"

"Here!" "Here!"—"I've five hundred bucks against him!"—"I've a thousand!" Different members of the audience took up the challenge.

"Thought so!" said ex-Sergeant Cantyre. "Looks to me as if this thing was

planned from the start. Guess Sorbie stood to clean up a little fortune from the lot of you, if Jim won. That's why it was to be a certainty. He couldn't pay John to lose—he's too straight a man—so——"

"It's a lie!" yelled Sorbie,

"Now, reminding you that I know a little about horses," old Cantyre continued, disregarding the promoter, "that none of you Fort Frenchies know Erebus or that chestnut as you ought to and that this slick Eastern gentleman and his bums have pretty well been able to do what he liked in the horse-corral, I'll ask you, Mr. Chief Umpire, what horse that is my boy's just ridden?"

"Why, Erebus! At least, from the little I've seen of the horse——" said he.

"Second," old Cantyre continued, hugely enjoying himself, "where's the chestnut?"

"In—in the corral, I guess!"

"Go and look in that horse's ears—and look right in—look well!"

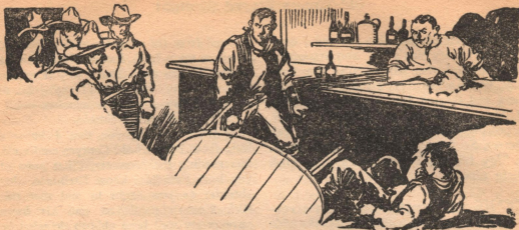
The umpire obeyed, then fell back as if slapped in the face.

"What's the color of hair in there?" asked Cantyre.

"Chestnut!"

"Look at the brands and see how they've been changed! Look at everything you didn't look at in the excitement of this contest. My friends, an Indian like Ghost-that-Walks may have got the better of me once, but a modern crook—never! When a horse-thief dyes a horse—a darned old trick—he often forgets the inside of the nostrils, the muzzle and the ears—where the predominating natural color always shows! That's the missing chestnut—almost the dead spit of Erebus—only needed a new coat to get by! He was dyed black last night, I'll bet my shirt, and put in place of Erebus because he couldn't buck! And Erebus, I'll bet they've run him into the Rockies by now! Come here, Ghost-that-Walks."

As the boys of the present-day Police rushed to save Slick Sorbie from the infuriated crowd, Corporal Jim and John Three Wolves, smiling, saw ex-Sergeant Cantyre and Ghost-that-Walks, proud players of a straight game, a man's game, wind up their feud at last with the hand-clasp of friendship.



PHIL COMES TO STAY

By H. A. WOODBURY

Author of "Proof," etc.

THE HILLS DO NOT BRING THEIR GIFTS ON ANY SILVER PLATTER; WHATEVER MAN WINS, HE FIGHTS FOR. SO THAT WHEN PHIL CAME TO STAY IN THE HEART OF THE BIG RANGES, HE KNEW THERE WOULD BE FOR HIM NO EASY SETTLING ON HIS OWN LAND

JED THOMAS swung out of the saddle with a little show of portliness. For an active life had not altogether defeated nature's predisposition to give him a stomach somewhat senatorial. But the blue eyes which gleamed from under the brim of his light sombrero shone with a fire which neither the years nor the good food of the Bar Cross had been able to dim. Hawk-like eyes they were—and cold. Yet they somehow achieved their coldness without being exactly unkind.

Leaving the reins of his pony dragging, he walked briskly toward the very tiny, tar-papared shack whose black and yellow newness struck an almost garish note in an otherwise very rustic spot of nature. Here, Sycamore Canyon widened out into a broad amphitheater of proportions sufficient for a tiny plot of alfalfa which was irrigated by the generous flow from Cold Spring. Overhead, scrub oak and red-branched manzanita crowded to the very rim of the canyon's bright walls. It was one of those spots which nature created for a home ranch—arable land enough for raising fresh vegetables and a little

hay, shelter from winter's drifts, and good water in abundance.

The door of the tiny shack swung open before Jed Thomas reached it, and a very lithely erect young man in blue denims and jumper came out to inspect his visitor.

Jed spoke first. "Your name Phil Riordan?"

The younger man nodded. Like his visitor, there was something rather coldly polished in his manner. The lines of his bronzed face were sharp. And, without wavering, his black eyes penetrated everything within range of their vision. There was, however, something else about him—a suggestion of youth's clean freshness, as if he had somehow caught the spirit of the mountain's wind blown fragrance.

"Well," went on Jed, "they tell me you bought out old man Greer's homestead rights to the springs, here."

Phil Riordan nodded once more. "It's evident, ain't it?" He pointed to the shack.

Jed drew in a deep breath. Long speeches were painful to him, and he was about to make one.

"Jed Thomas is my name," he began, "I'm owner o' the Bar Cross an' the Box

J. An' I'm here to tell you this here range ain't big enough for two outfits. I've run the whole she-bang for fifteen years, now, an' I don't aim to have no neighbors."

AS JED paused for breath, a slow mantle of crimson crept over Phil's cheeks.

"I've got deed to this here homestead," he said quietly, "an' permission from the government to run three thousand head in the forest reserve. Now what you goin' to do 'bout it?" He made no hostile move. He simply waited, his body tense in vibrant challenge.

Jed scowled.

"Well," he said after a moment, "I ain't goin' to run you off at the point of a six-gun if that's what you're invitin' me to do. I had my share o' scrappin' some twenty years ago. An' while I reckon I ain't an awful lot slower on the trigger'n I used to be, they's easier ways." He cleared his throat. "You paid old man Greer three thousand dollars for this place. Well—I'll give you four thousand. That's a thousand dollars profit for a week's work. Ain't bad now, is it?"

Phil's face did not light up.

"I'm a rancher," he said, "not a speculator. This place ain't for sale. Sycamore Canyon suits me top notch, an' I'm figgerin' to stay."

"Listen, you young fool," roared Jed, his voice mounting in spite of his efforts to keep cool, "this place should o' been mine by rights, anyways. I been leasin' it from Greer ever since he pulled out."

"Well," grinned Phil, "if you're accusin' me o' snatchin' it out from under your nose, you better change your tune. 'Cause I know danged well Greer offered to sell to you 'fore he offered it to me. If you didn't buy then, it's jest too bad, an' you got nobody to blame but yourself."

"I ain't cryin' over spilt milk," snapped Jed. "I lost out with Greer 'cause I was stubborn, I admit." Phil almost smiled. "Greer offered it to me for jest what you paid, an' I thought he was tryin' to hold me up. Told him I'd go to hell 'fore I'd give him a cent over twenty-five hundred. An' 'course after that, I wouldn't o' backed down an' come crawlin' to him for a mil-

lion. But I can offer you four thousand without hurtin' my pride." Jed spat viciously. "It's too danged much, but if they ain't any other way out, I'll pay it."

ONCE more Phil shook his head.

"Reckon I'm sorta stubborn myself," he drawled. "Anyways, now I'm here, I'm here to stay." He watched Jed coolly. "They tell me you're sort of a tough hombre, but I'm advisin' you not to git ornery. I ain't so malted-milk fed, myself." He turned half away, then came back, his voice suddenly friendly. "I'm goin' to fence off the springs themselves, but your cows can come an' drink with mine—on down the canyon any time they got a notion to. I'm peaceful if you are."

Jed did not answer. He saw that further argument was futile. And it was not in his nature to waste words. He returned to where he had left his pony. But just before he rode away, he once more delivered his succinct appraisal of the situation.

"This range ain't big enough for two outfits. An' you'll find it out danged soon."

PHIL turned back to his tiny cabin with an undaunted smile. His quarters were, just now, modest to say the least—one unfinished room, a cot in one corner, a tiny kitchen range in the other. It was



enough, he told himself, until he got things started. Of course, later, when he married Sally Gardner, he'd want a little

more luxury. But he wasn't going to marry Sally until he found himself squarely on his feet. And his present move was just the start toward getting on his feet.

Rather faintly, he continued to smile as the hoof beats died in the distance. So Jed Thomas promised trouble, did he? Well, old man Greer had warned him about Thomas.

"He's a hellion for fair," Greer had told him, "but underneath—well, danged if I know what they is underneath. Anyways, he give his men turkey one Christmas when he had to ride thirty miles through

a blizzard to git it for 'em. He'd promised it to 'em, you see, an' he wouldn't back down on his word. Stubborn as all hell, he is, an' a fighter that is a fighter when you git him riled. I'm wishin' you luck."

Phil stared at the wide chinks in the number four grade flooring. Ridiculous, Jed saying that the range wasn't big enough for two outfits. If it really wasn't, the forest department wouldn't have given him permission to graze three thousand head. Not that he had that many ready to graze, incidentally. As a matter of fact, he didn't have one. But he did have money enough left in his stake to buy about two hundred head—with the aid of a live stock mortgage. Like his ranch-house, his herd was to be modest. But Phil's life stretched ahead of him. The ensuing years would be kind, he knew. With a goal like Sally to work for, he'd make them kind.

No—what Jed had meant was simply that he wanted the range all to himself, that he resented any attempt to dispute his hard-won kingship. For Jed *was* something of a king in the local countryside. His interests extended even to ownership of most of the enterprises in the little hamlet of Menlo.

"Well," thought Phil, rising, "if he wants trouble, I'm ready for my share of it—words, orniness, or six-guns."

AND, still smiling, he made his way out-side again into the gaudy mid-day sunshine which flooded down into the canyon.

"Lost Eden ranch, Greer called this place," he remarked a few moments later to the soft-eyed bay which turned round to nuzzle him as he threw on the saddle. "Lost Eden ranch. Well, danged if it ain't sort of Eden, here. Reckon that's one o' the reasons I wouldn't take Jed's money an' go look somewheres else. I knowed this spot was home the minute I saw it."

A moment later he vaulted lightly astride the rangey bay, and some few hours afterward, tied the horse at the hitching rail in front of the Pleasure Pool Parlors—Menlo's club and recreational center and gossip-exchange.

Appraising eyes glanced up from the

various tables as he came into the smoke-choked room. Being a stranger from another part of the state, he was on parade.

One voice mounted a little above the droning buzz.

"That's the pretty boy that's gonna buck Jed Thomas. Rest your eyes on them nice shiny new boots. I'd think he'd be 'fraid o' gittin' 'em dirty."

There was general laughter at this.

PHIL hesitated in his tracks, his face warmly bathed in crimson. Then, abruptly, he took a step forward.

"Blamed if I like the way you said that, partner," he drawled. His voice quivered with metallic challenge.

The room at once became hushed.

"Well, what you goin' to do 'bout it?" A stockily built young man of about his own age sauntered forward.

And Phil was surprised to see that the man didn't look particularly mean or full of the devil, but seemed rather just about like any other normal cowpuncher. But Phil did not let the man's clean-cut demeanor dissuade him.

"This is what I'm gonna do," he snapped. And, darting his hand out quickly, he knocked the other man's sombrero to the saw-dust floor.

The other man took one step backward—bracing himself. And the next was volcanic. The two men charged at once. And the blue air swirled as waving arms cut jagged swaths through it. The hangers-on crowded in close, their cheers of encouragement mounting above the resounding thuds and the labored breathing of the two men.

Phil went down twice before he finally landed his lullaby.

Then, his man stretched out, he stepped casually away, still puffing very hard. He had in a way welcomed this fight. It gave him a chance to prove at once to whatever gossip mongers were present that he had come to stay.

The pool room was again very, very quiet. Nor did the silence break until after the beaten man had picked himself up and had walked outside. Then Phil turned to a bright-eyed youth near him.

"Who was that?" he demanded.

"Jed Thomas's foreman," said the boy.

The youth smiled swiftly. "Gee, mister, you sure pack a mean wallop." And other vociferous comments suddenly echoed the boy's sentiments.

But Phil did not pause to listen to compliments. He came to the point of his mission briskly.

"I'm lookin' for somebody to help me



git started at Lost Eden. Somebody handy with a hammer, jest now, but they'll be cows enough for him to punch later on."

There was again a silence. No one made the slightest move.

"Sixty a month," said Phil, "an' that's damned good wages."

The hangers-on eyed one another. They eyed the floor.

A LITTLE exasperated at this silence, Phil turned to the boy. "What about you, kid? You ain't makin' sixty a month, I'll bet dollars to doughnuts."

The boy flushed.

"I—I couldn't work for you," he faltered. "You see Jed wouldn't like it. He was in here this mornin'. Told us all to give you the raspberry, if you came tryin' to hire anybody. That's why—" His blush deepened in the suddenness of his confidence. "That's why Jed's foreman jest picked that fight."

Phil took in a deep breath. Just as he might have expected!

He turned back to the boy with a little heat. "But, Kid," he protested, "what the devil do you care what Jed likes or don't like, long's you got a good steady job with me?"

The boy smiled. "Well," he said, "don't you see? After Jed breaks you, he'd blacklist me for tryin' to help you."

The calm, matter-of-fact way in which the boy stated it gave Phil a little shiver. But he turned away in disgust.

"Reckon I got good buddies where I come from," he said, and pushed his way through the crowd to the swinging doors.

Then, as he stepped outside, another man shambled up to him, a rather hulking man whose clothes were sloppy. Phil stood his ground, expecting more of Jed's subtle work. He was surprised then when he heard what the man had to say.

"I'll work for you," the man said, "I been listenin' to what you had to say. Sixty a month sounds hunky-dory to me."

PHIL eyed his man speculatively. He lacked the clean-cut features of the now battered foreman and of the youth in the other room. And his green eyes showed a disposition to wander slightly. But his body was well built and muscular.

"How come," demanded Phil curiously, "that you ain't sold your soul to Thomas like the rest of 'em?"

The man's thick lips drooped. He scuffed the ground a moment with the worn-over heel of his cow boot.

"I—er— quit Jed," he said. "Used to work for him, but I don't like him."

"Well," said Phil, grinning a little, "shake on that, buddy. We got that much in common, anyways. You're startin' your job today. Now what's your name?"

"Ike Clark," said the man. And once again his eyes faltered under Phil's direct gaze.

As they jogged back toward Lost Eden, Phil continued to regard his new hand. Not the type he wanted, exactly. There was something rather cat-like, something a little untrustworthy in the man's manner. But in a pinch, he guessed he'd have to do. A man couldn't expect to come into Jed's territory and have everything his own way.

Phil would have preferred some one more on the order of the rather ingenuous boy—some one with youth's fresh enthusiasms. As for this Ike—Phil compressed his lips. Ike would, perhaps, bear watching. And he wondered again just why Ike wasn't one of Jed's men, when everybody else apparently was. Could it be that—? A suspicion occurred to him, and he dismissed it.

NOW you see," said Phil, after the two men had finished their breakfast next morning, "there's more carpentry than cow punchin' to this job, jest now while

we're gittin' started. I want you to go out an' dig post holes for a corral, this mornin'. I'll be back this afternoon to help you."

Ike scowled sullenly. "Hell, what a racket. Me, diggin' post holes!"

But Phil did not linger to hear his foreman's woes. He was astride his bay in a moment and was riding toward Jed Thomas's.

Jed ushered him into his huge beamed living-room with something of a grin.

"Well," he laughed, "have my boys made it so hot for you that you're ready to sell? I'm still offerin' you four thousand, but startin' tomorrow, it goes down a hundred dollars a day. Pretty soon you'll be payin' me for the privilege o' gittin' out with your hide."

Phil held his temper.

"Listen, Jed," he commanded, "any dirty move outa you, an' you'll find it's a game two can play. Remember that! But I ain't come to make no threats. I've come to talk business. Want to sell me some cows?"

Jed all but exploded. His florid face deepened to purple.

"Well, of all the goldurned, tin-plated nerve," he ejaculated.

Phil smiled. "I got to buy, somewheres," he went on, "an' I thought I'd save time an' trouble by buyin' from you. Suit yourself though."

Jed rose, quivering in his wrath.

"Phil Riordan," he snorted, "git the hell outa here, an' don't come back. This is war, now, git me? War!"

Still sputtering, Jed followed Phil out to his pony.

Phil rode off very thoughtfully.

He had gone only a little way, however, when he heard the hoof beats of a loping horse behind him. He reined his own beast immediately, to meet the newcomer, head on.

And, thus waiting, he saw in a moment the very man he had knocked down the day before in the Pleasure Pool Parlors. He set his lips. More trouble evidently. His hand wandered down to his holster, then wandered back. No, dang it—he'd fight his way through this mess without reaching for his irons unless the other side reached first.

Jed's foreman set up his pony in a cloud of reddish dust.

"Howdy," he remarked.

Phil returned his laconic "howdy," and



stared coolly through the man.

"Jest wanted to say," the foreman began, "that Jed's up to some mean tricks, maybe, but that me an' the boys ain't in on any more of 'em."

That is, you sorta got the boys' respect the other mornin', an' we're gonna see you git an even break. 'Course—" The man eyed the ground a moment. "'Course some of 'em lit out to pull this afternoon's stunt 'fore we could talk it over with 'em. But we'll see 'em when they git back, an' it'll be the last thing we do."

"What stunt?" inquired Phil.

"If you don't know, you'll find out soon enough."

Phil's glance became puzzled. What on earth was the man driving at?

"You see," the foreman blurted out, "if you don't do nothin' 'bout what we done this afternoon, we'll see to it, it's the last thing Jed pulls. 'Cause he cain't do much alone. All of us boys'd rather have peace." He smiled. "If you jest leave Jed alone, mister—give him time to cool down, why, maybe you two could be friends. He's up on his ole ear now, 'cause you talked sassy to him, but if you give him time to blow off steam, you'll find he ain't so bad. Leastwise they's a lot worse. Keep away from him, an' me an' the boys'll work things out." He smiled reassuringly.

"Thanks," said Phil dryly.

And, even more puzzled, he rode on. His forehead puckered. What on earth was the man driving at?

IT WAS a question the answer to which Phil discovered soon enough. He returned to Lost Eden to find his fence down in two places, and his alfalfa field trampled and torn. No serious damage of course, for you can't kill alfalfa by running stock over it. But one crop out of the

precious mountain three was lost.

Ike came up, sauntering aimlessly

"Jed's outfit came galivantin' down Sycamore Creek with a thousand head o' white faces," he said.

Phil's anger blazed up at the man's coolness.

"An' you didn't do nothin' to try an' stop 'em?"

"Hell," murmured Ike, "what could I of done?" He went on dragging at his cigarette, exhaling the blue smoke without removing the brown butt from the corner of his mouth.

Phil's black eyes raked the nonchalant Ike.

Any man with a little gumption could have prevented this charge. Or had the drive assumed stampede proportions, he could at least have taken some of the value of the alfalfa out of the hides of the men riding with the cattle.

Phil's forehead puckered. Could it be possible that Ike hadn't quit Jed Thomas at all—that perhaps he was still in Jed's pay? Jed apparently owned the rest of the men in Menlo. It wasn't exactly reasonable that a man of Ike's stamp should be the only one not under his banner. He recalled Ike's shifty gaze and his general untrustworthy manner. His fists clenched. It was all obvious enough. Jed had planted Ike there on the ranch to tip his boys off to when Phil was to be away! And possibly to raise any other hell he got a chance at! Phil's eyes narrowed.

"Ike Clark you git the hell outa here 'fore I put a bullet through you," he roared. "This is a job for one man, I reckon. Drift! Pronto!"

And he punctuated this last by kicking up the dust back of Ike's pony with a hail of lead just as his erstwhile helper leaped aboard.

AS THE man disappeared up the trail, Phil ceased to watch him. His eyes wandered back to the trampled alfalfa field. So this was what Jed's foreman had referred to!

Phil sat down to light a cigarette. He had the idea that it was a move which helped him to think.

And Jed's foreman had likewise urged

him not to retaliate! Why? Was there something craven in the man? Hardly. He had fought hard enough in the pool room. Or was it to give Jed's outfit a bigger laugh—to make it possible for them to boast that they'd not only ruined his alfalfa crop but had got away with it? Or, was it, possibly, as the man had said, simply because they desired peace—because they thought that as time mulled over difficulties, old troubles could be forgotten?

It was all rather puzzling. Yet something in the foreman's manner had almost invited confidence. Just as something in the boy's attitude had shown that all Jed's men were not of Ike's disagreeable stamp. His lips contracted into a thin, bloodless line.

Phil continued for some fifteen minutes to blow smoke rings, his eyes gradually wandering on down the pink canyon where he watched the lavender shadows turn purple. Up above Lost Eden—beyond one manzanita covered slope, the sun seemed to cool from bright flame to the dullness of dying mesquite coals. The golden borders of the clouds faded through shimmering iris to deadened gray. And as sunset became twilight, something of a chill drifted down into the canyon, rattling the leaves of the tall sycamores which clustered round the tar-paper shack.

WITH a slight shiver, Phil rose to go inside to light his fire. Whatever must be done, must wait until tomorrow, anyway, he decided. But he felt at present no particular disposition to let Jed get away with it. He was making his stand—battling for his place in the order of the universe so that in a little while he and Sally could stand together on their own feet and look out over a world which was theirs.

And in the dulling grays and lavenders of twilight, he had the premonition, somehow, that that battle must take place here and now. If he were defeated here, he had no reason to believe that trying again in some other locality might make any appreciable difference. There might be no Jed on another range. But there would be something else—poor water holes, little grass, mountain lions—anything. For Phil

realized that the hills do not bring their gifts on any silver platter. Whatever man wins, he fights for.



Still thinking it all over, Phil retired very shortly after his supper. For he felt little like sitting up to read accounts of other men's ad-

ventures when he found himself at present so engrossed in a very real one of his own. And furthermore, he desired plenty of sleep to prepare for the coming day.

BUT strenuous day ahead or not, Phil had very little sleep.

He awoke in an hour or so, coughing and choking, his lungs filled with the biting acrid taste of burning pine. And as he sat bolt upright, he beheld a rose flare through his open window. The huge old barn which Greer had built was going up in flames!

In a second he had slipped on blue jeans, boots and shirt and was running toward the blazing structure. It was a futile gesture. By the time he came within range of the blistering heat, the barn was doomed.

He watched for only a few moments—long enough to make sure that no sparks were drifting toward his cabin. Then he walked slowly and with very even tread back to his shack. He crossed at once to the table at the head of his bed, and girded himself about with his cartridge belt. He pulled his forty-four out of its ponderous holster to make sure that it contained a full load. Then, lifting his saddle from the floor, he went out again.

On the threshold, he paused to whistle three soft, singing notes. In a second there was a not-far-off whinny and a clank of hobbie chains.

The bay slithered through the shadows, skittish as a young girl.

"Big boy," he whispered, as he fed the beast his bit, "we got action ahead of to-night, and plenty of it."

In a moment, he was off—covering the trail at the easy and tireless loping rack of a good cow pony.

ALL was dark as he neared the huddled, squat outbuildings of the Bar Cross. But as he neared the gate, the sickish light of a crescent moon cast enough glow for him to realize suddenly that he had unwittingly all but overtaken another rider.

He set up his pony as the gate creaked to admit the man ahead. And in that moment, Phil's heart stood still. His hand tightened round the butt of his gun. There was no mistaking it—the man in the shadows was Ike. Returning now to tell Jed of his success!

But Phil restrained his first impulse to deal quick justice to Ike. Ike was, after all, only the tool. Were he to shoot now, it would mean sending the ranch into pandemonium. And he dared not risk arousing every one until he had seen Jed Thomas.

So he waited until the horse's hoofs were silent. And then leaving his own mount as further precaution, he crept ahead on foot. He waited again in the shadows of the saddle shed. Then, at last, sure that all was quiet, he made his way to Jed's own bungalow.

Yet once on the porch, he hesitated for a long moment. It seemed, somehow, so damned cold-blooded— After a time, he drew himself up to his full height. None of this sneakiness for him—even if that was the way Jed worked. He strode forward and pounded heavily on the door.

No answer.

He pounded again. And finally, Jed appeared in nightshirt and slippers, looking sleepy and just a trifle ridiculous. He came out of his doze swiftly enough.

"Why damn your young soul," Jed exploded, "wakin' me outa——"

But Phil gave him no chance to go on.

"Shut up," he commanded. And he emphasized his orders by sticking the cold blue nose of his revolver into the folds of Jed's stomach.

BLINKING at the swiftness of the gesture, Jed reached for the stars.

"You'll hang for this," he sputtered. For Jed read Phil's purpose in the depths of his black eyes. Jed's own eyes did not waver.

"I'm not gonna shoot you down in the dark," snapped Phil, "but I've decided

after today that you was danged right when you said this range warn't big enough for two outfits." He hesitated a second. "I'm gonna give you an even break, though—which is more'n you've given me. Go back in there an' git your own gat. I'll trust you. Then you an' me'll take a walk up the crick a ways. We'll face each other at twenty paces, an' when I yell, 'Draw,' we'll each go for our irons. Is that fair?"

Jed faced the younger man without flinching.

"It's a sportin' proposition," he remarked dryly. And he turned to re-enter the bungalow.

Curiously enough, Phil had no fear in that moment of the man's double-crossing him—of Jed's sneaking out to warn the others, or of his taking a shot from the shelter of the inside. For in the transient exchange of glances of a moment ago, there had been something proud and brave in the other man's eyes.

Nor was Phil's confidence misplaced. Jed joined him in a moment, closing the door noiselessly behind him. He was dressed now in blue jeans and cow boots as was Phil. And at his side dangled the heavy holster of his huge revolver.

THE men strolled off silently under the soft milkiness of the low heavens. The mountain night fell over them in a cool mantle, moist with dew and fragrant with columbine.

Phil called a halt presently as the manzanita brush at length thinned out sufficiently to afford a natural ring.

"This suit you?" he asked.

Jed nodded.

"One more thing," cautioned Phil, "I'm shootin' to kill. Remember that!"

"You an' me, both, brother." Jed's lips were twisted—ironic. He was no quitter.

"All right"; said Phil, "which corner do you want?"

Jed stroked his chin for a thoughtful moment, and silence enveloped them again, silence as thick and as cold as the night.

And then, abruptly, Phil broke it. "Look," he exclaimed, giving way, suddenly to involuntary surprise.

He pointed back in the direction of the slumbering ranch. And Jed, reacting to the very patent surprise in Phil's voice, turned also.

The heavens behind them were pink—and were becoming pinker!

Phil felt a sudden emptiness at the pit of his stomach. And his brain whirled. This was funny—Jed having a fire, too.

"Listen, Jed," his voice suddenly faltered, "hadn't we better go back an' see about that fire? I've got an idea that maybe—"

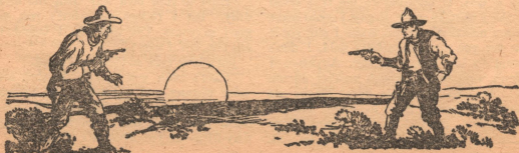
"Want to quit do you?" taunted Jed. "Well jest remember, youngster, that you started this. An' I don't want to quit—fire or no fire. Reckon the boys can take care of it."

Phil groped helplessly for words.

"Jed," he began again, "I've—I've got a notion Ike set that fire!"

"I don't give a damn about Ike," snapped Jed, "I'll finish him when I've finished you." The man's words came like pistol shots. And Phil had no chance to ponder them before Jed went on, "Draw, damn you, draw——"

COLD perspiration bathed Phil's forehead. But his hand moved quickly. There was no time for words, now. Phil fired——



Jed spun round once to topple over. But he did not remain on the ground. He rose in a second, clutching his wounded gun hand.

Phil was upon him in an instant.

"You balmy idiot," he exclaimed in his anger, "I had to take the chance o' killin' you."

Jed's eyes were cold. "Why in hell didn't you?"

"I may yet," snapped Phil, "but first I want to ask you a question. Jed, tell me the truth. Is Ike workin' for you, or ain't he?"

"You oughta know," barked Jed, "I thought he was your foreman. I fired him two weeks ago for bein' shiftless an' lazy, an' dishonest, an' good for nothin'."

Phil stepped back, a little dizzy now, in his present let-down feeling.

"Jest like I thought," he said, "the minute I saw the sky go pink. Ike set fire to my barn tonight, an' I thought it was you puttin' him up to it. So I come over here to have it out, an' I was even surer I was right when I seen him sneakin' in here ahead o' me. But when your barn went up, too, it—it didn't seem quite like jest a coincidence. All of a sudden it occurred to me that maybe Ike was out revengin' himself on two employers that both thought he was good for nothin'."

"An' you shot me in the hand instead o' the heart jest on the mere suspicion you was wrong about Ike?" queried Jed. "It'd of been a lot easier to miss my hand than my body, you know. An' if you had of, I wouldn't of missed you."

Phil nodded.

"Damn, Jed," he said suddenly, "it's funny, but—well, the minute I saw maybe I was wrong about Ike the whole thing, somehow didn't seem quite as important as it was. It occurred to me if I could make a mistake there, maybe I could make other mistakes, too. So, while I still got it in for you for that alfalfa field, I don't want to kill you, I reckon. Anyways, I don't want to go through another minute or two like them last ones. Maybe we could find easier ways to—to—" He felt his voice inanely falter. Funny, how churned up and helpless inside, he felt.

Jed relieved him of the necessity of going on.

"Well," he said, "damned if I *could* kill you after what you jest done. Come on."

They found their way back to the bungalow, where one of the excited members of the bucket brigade came dashing up to them.

"It was Phil Riordan's foreman done it," he exclaimed, "we tracked him into the canyon, an' put a couple o' loads o' buckshot into him when he tried to git on his horse." The man broke off suddenly to gasp, as he found himself addressing Phil as well as his employer. He faced Phil deliberately, "An' as for you——"



The man's fist drew back.

But Jed spoke up in time. "Me an' Phil's made up," he said, "tell you 'bout it, later."

AS THEY bandaged Jed's hand inside the kitchen, Phil suddenly smiled.

"Now, Jed," he began, "about them cows. I ain't bought 'em yet. So, maybe, if we are friends——"

Jed cut him off.

"Ain't I told you," he snapped, suddenly mustering some of his old fire, "that this here range ain't big enough for two outfits? An' don't you know Jed Thomas don't never go back on what he says?"

Phil all but gasped. This—after all that the night had held in store!

"Why," he faltered, "I—I sort of thought—" In a jiffy, he steadied his wavering voice. If Thomas expected him to be unnerved and to weaken, he'd show him he was still ready to fight it out to a finish.

"Have it your own way, Jed," he said drily, "but I reckon my word's jest as good as yours. I've told you I wouldn't sell out. An' I won't."

Jed's blue eyes suddenly softened.

"I ain't askin' you to, kid," he said, his voice warmer and richer and surcharged with an ingratiating mildness, "I'm wonderin' how you'd like to work this range fifty-fifty—as Jed Thomas's partner?"



THE FIRST KILL

By CHARLES TENNEY JACKSON

Author of "The Puddle Jumper," "Slave Trail Ranch," etc.

YOUNG TANG TANNER, RIDER FOR THE KEEN-ALDERS RANCH, HAD THE MISFORTUNE TO FALL IN WITH A BAD OUTFIT WHO WERE JUST MAKING THEIR GETAWAY AFTER A BANK HOLD-UP. NOT ONLY HAD HE TO MAKE A DESPERATE PLAY FOR HIS OWN SAFETY, BUT SEVERAL OTHER SIGNIFICANT STAKES GOT MIXED UP IN IT BEFORE THE GAME WAS ENDED

THE nervous hurry with which young Tang Tanner, rider for the Keen-Alders outfit, rattled the hook and bawled into the telephone surprised the girl operator at the irrigation station branch exchange. Della Malonee was more than surprised, for she knew that Tang was coming to town today. She even knew what for; that was first, to buy the pongee silk shirt with the purple monogrammed initials on the left pocket which he'd seen last week in a store window, and second to ask her how about coming out to the barn dance at the ranch Saturday night.

What Della didn't know was that Tang Tanner wasn't phoning from the Sandigger Creek Ranch nor anywhere in town. At this precise moment Tang was leaning over a bare pine table in the tiny shack down in a dry gully just off the Sandigger road nine miles from Lagunita, and with each of his vain yells into the telephone transmitter he felt the warm muzzle of a .45 bore harder and deeper into the back of his sweating neck. He couldn't see either of the two buys who were giving him his orders, but he felt that gun.

So Tang yearned and panted for that

connection. "Hello! Hello—hello! Operator! Hell—"

Then Della's voice floated over the wire sweetly, "Why, Tang! You know it's me. Operator? Why the formality?"

"Operator!" yelled Tang, then a hard hand twisted his neck.

"Do yore stuff, understand. Jest what I told yuh—"

"Operator—quick, listen—important!"

Operator's voice came again. When the bird who's on the line has been her steady date for six months any girl would be puzzled at this heat and hurry. Della Malonee started to get sore.

"Say, what's the matter with you? It's me—Dell—"

"Operator!" whooped Tang again. "Give me—no, get this through yourself—to the sheriff's office."

The gun jammed harder into his neck. A calloused hand closed in Tang's curly hair and jerked his head back. He heard the shift of shooting irons and the clank of spurs. His captors were weaving behind him with fresh menace.

"Give her what I told yuh! Go straight on this or they'll find yuh with this telephone inside yore brain box, understand?"

Tang humped to the phone. "Listen, operator! The fellers that stuck up the Colville State Bank was seen not an hour ago passin' west above Orchin's place. Yeh! The hunch is wrong about 'em head-in' down this way on the Sanddigger. Yeh! There was just two of 'em. If the deputies strike up west of Orchin's they can cut off these two hombres. Easy—yeh! They were all fagged out. Say, Dell——"

A GUN butt clouted his other ear. Tang saw sparks but he hung to the phone. A voice snarled close to him.

"Yuh saw 'em yoreself up west o' Orchin's——"

"I saw 'em myself!" repeated Tang to the phone. "All wrong about them bandits headin' this way. Get the posses started up past Orchin's——yeh, it's me, Tanner, talkin'."

"Gee!" he heard the operator whisper excitedly. Then Della's voice crackled on more excitedly. "Say, Tang, all right about those holdup folks, but I was told to get a warning to you people up the Sanddigger. There's a big oil tanker went ashore way up in Laguna Deloro on the hurricane tide last week and——"

The unseen gunman jerked him back off the table. At the end of the cord the earpiece flew from his hand but Tang thought he got Miss Malonee's last words.

"——oil went all through the sloughs and the engineers said to warn people——"

That's all Tang got. He was standing faced to the door looking straight into two guns and the men behind him. The taller of them rasped at him in a voice that was like the cold killing eyes above his gray dusty cheeks.

"What was that the girl handed yuh?" "I dunno. Didn't get it. Something about oil——"

The tall man snarled. "To hell about oil! I knowed that. I mean about this Colville Bank job?"

"The operator never mentioned it. Just took the message as yuh told me to send it—that the stickup men was seen west o'——"

"Stick yore hands up! Walk out that door? Granger!" He yelled out the shack

to the blackbearded youth who held the three animals in the dry sand of the grassless gully. "Cover this guy while I give doc a leg up. We'll take Tanner on a piece. Move, yuh!"

TANG moved right along. But he saw the tall man help the third one onto a fagged-out horse. This third one didn't belong to the country as the others did. A stout, perspiring man whose close-clipped gray hair showed above his black handkerchief mask, he slumped in the saddle with weary dejection.

No doubt was in young Tang Tanner's alert mind about the tall man and the unshaven youth he had called "Granger." They were the bandits who had ridden into Colville twelve miles beyond Lagunita, the county seat, yesterday and held up the little state bank for sixty thousand dollars in currency.

These two harariding quick shooting hombres didn't even take the trouble to conceal their job from Tanner. The leader's gray eyes narrowed on the prisoner after he had mounted.

"Git an eyeful, Tanner. Yuh don't know me, but I know yuh. Now yuh leg on ahead o' me till we git ready to git shut o' yuh. It don't take no time to put yuh away if yuh act funny."

"You call the cards and I'll say that's what yore hands reads," retorted Tang. "I ain't nobody's plum' fool."

Tang got several more eyesfull before the leader motioned with his gun for him to hit the dusty trail that led off south from the Sanddigger Creek road toward the great saltgrass swamps that hemmed in this branch of the tidewater laguna of the Texas coast. In the first place the three horses were blown and ragged. But the Colville Bank robbers were not more than thirty miles from the scene of their job. And Tang remembered what brief news had been phoned to the Keen-Alders ranch the previous evening. Just two men apparently had pulled the trick—but it was a mighty easy one. They had come in the side door of the brick bank just after closing hours, herded the cashier and bookkeeper into a back room, cleaned out the

counters and open safe and departed as they came.

IT HAD taken the imprisoned employees half an hour to raise an alarm. The sleepy little town had roused itself and called the sheriff at Lagunita. Then the posses had started to scour the rough country west on the few clues they had.

"But this here mystery man?" reflected Tang as he swung along with the slobber of the leader's horse flecking his shoulder. "I don't figger him. Mebbe they picked him up like they did me. Why in hell wasn't my mind on them birds when I rode into 'em just now? I never give 'em a thought till they had me covered."

Well, Tang knew where his mind had been. Busy about Della Malonee, the telephone operator, and his monogramed shirt that he had intended to wear when he took Della out to the dance at the Keen-Alders

plate. Yep, that was it. The three strangers met him just half a mile back from the deserted telephone shack which had been put up two years ago



for the use of the rangers, coast guard patrols or anybody else who had need for it. Its dusty hook was not jiggled three times a month ordinarily.

Tang had greeted the three riders with a cheery "Howdy." Then he had had the surprise of his young life when two guns shot up from holsters, held on him and the tall man barked for him to get off his paint pony. Tang got off and sighed as they took his own gun away and ran his horse off in the sagebrush gully. His mind ought to have hopped to the Colville job right then but not till the three herded him along to the telephone shack and told him to send in this false message to the county seat did Tang really tumble to the game.

Tang was one of those guys that everybody believes. His false clue would send the deputies on a useless ride while the bandits turned south to the coast swamps. They took Tang along because they couldn't leave him loose to give them away later.

Tang strode ahead chewing on a gumweed stick. He wasn't much worried. He just had the bad luck to happen along. Between his own skin and that Colville bank there was no choice. When the trail led down into the marshy flats out of the sandy gullies he began to grumble about this footwork. No waddy likes to hike, and Tang had on a pair of tight shoes that said quit every yard he went.

THE three riders behind him hardly spoke to each other. But more and more Tang got the idea that there was just one bad mean killer among them and that was the tall leader. Something about this hombre meant move and quick. Tang thought of him a lot the next hour even if he didn't turn his head to see him. Then he thought of Della Malonee and his silk shirt. Then of this Colville business. The only unusual thing he could remember about it that he knew of was that a state bank examiner had alighted from the 5:15 train just about two hours after the robbery. Somebody beat him to it. Anyhow, folks out in the sticks where the warning of the stickup spread forgot all about this examiner in the general hooraw of getting posses out on the trail.

"Damn it all," grumbled Tang. "They used me to throw that sheriff forty miles off the scent. Yeh, and I got a hundred and forty dollars in that bank. Dell said she had two hundred—well, I'll be kidded so strong about this yere trick that askin' her to marry me now is just lowdown gall and poison. Anyway, what'd she mean about warnin' me about oil? And that hurricane last week?"

He couldn't figure that at all. Nor about this masked man who brought up the rear of the procession. If he was another picked-up prisoner the two outlaws didn't have enough respect for him to keep him in sight. On a bend of the trail around the sand dunes Tang got a glimpse of that sagged figure jogging on as if beaten out by sun and exhaustion.

WHEN he looked back the leader had yelled at him. A business guy, this one. Tang kept his eyes front on the trail which now led along the tidal sloughs

and ponds of the great laguna which reached in from the Gulf passes. Cowmen didn't pass this way. No fit feed or water. Tang's feet began to slip in slimy mud. The September hurricane, which struck the coast last week, had beaten the grass into flat swathes and left a dry scum on every shrub and tangle.

That hurricane up from Cuba had done considerable damage up the coast, but down here along where Sandigger Creek emptied into the marshy lagunas there wasn't much to damage. The Keen-Alders ranch had a windmill down and a roof off the bunkhouse. Apart from this a guy who was dead stuck on a telephone girl in town hadn't any more time to think about hurricanes than he had bank stickups, so, till Tang noticed how high and far the tides had smashed in across this swamp trail he was hoofing, his mind wasn't on it at all.

When he crossed a mud slough he slipped and scrambled in oily slime and he cussed freely. Tang always liked good footgear, for if he had any personal conceit it was about his small feet built just right for shaking a leg at a waddies' ball. That was how he got his name, Tango, a few years back. Quick on his feet and with small hard hands on his lean loose arms. That was young Tang Tanner, and with an alert brain that had brought him right along to be a top rider with his outfit.

WHEN he waded into a shallow slough he heard the unshaven youth behind him swear. The water gleamed like a million rainbows in the flat beaten grass. The horses slipped and snorted and Granger grumbled on.

"They won't drink it, Ace," he called out. "That stuff lathers 'em to the bellies, too. Where we head out o' this?"

"Shut yore trap," rasped the tall man. Then he yelled at Tang, "Right across to the grass. Yuh'll find a trail—and find it quick, brother, get me?"

"I get yuh." The prisoner legged up behind the brown billows of saltgrass. "Looks like an old trail, Mister."

Pausing a minute on the low bank he got his first good look at the three riders as they scrambled out of the mud slough.

That hard egg Granger had called "Ace"

carried a small leather sack under his arm, and a rifle stuck down beside his left leg. He had a good animal but Granger and the fat man who wore the black mask and had been addressed as "Doc," rode poor fagged out mounts which had trouble in getting out of the slough.

Tang wondered casually why they hadn't taken his smart cow horse when they held him up. But he was glad they hadn't. That animal was the pet and pride of his string and he always rode it to town when he went to see Miss Maloney. She had a little black mare and Tang thought the animals showed up like a circus team when he and Della loped out the creek road or tied up in front of the picture house in Lagunita. Teamed up right, they sure did for looks.

Ace yelled at him again, "Right across that next slough, yuh! Keep yore eyes ahead, too. This outfit needn't worry yuh none."

Tang hit the mud flat. A hot dry noon, and the acrid smell of drying oil wherever



the hurricane tide had rushed last week. What was it Dell had said? A Gulf tanker had been blown ashore up the laguna and broken in two? The oil sure had been spread by the tide and it was worse the farther they traveled into the marsh. He sloshed into pools where he came out leg-lathered. Once he heard the masked man complain that the stuff made him sick. Ace snarled back to him.

"Well, hit back fur town if yuh don't like it, Doc. But long's yuh trail with me yuh stand fur what I tell yuh, see?"

Tang listened. Then this town man wasn't exactly a prisoner. But he was scared of Ace. Ace was a mean one but he knew his stuff.

"Well," grumbled Tang to himself. "I'd rather deal with a hard nut than these two squawkers. They might get panicky and

hand me a bullet for nothin'. Wonder what Ace figgers on about me?"

ANOTHER hour slogging on deeper into this silent sun-blasted wilderness, last ridges of stunted mangrove, storm-twisted little oaks with a jungle of cactus and thickets on the sand ridges, Tang began to get uneasy. This big fellow, Ace, had the killer look. He had a sure grim purpose on this getaway too.

"We're leavin' a trail big as a house," Tang reflected. "But Ace ain't worried none. By the time Sheriff Budd gets through his hunt above Orchin's these guys'll be faded. Now about me? They don't want me found soon. Tie me up and leave me—or maybe——"

He shot a glance over his shoulder. Ace's cold eyes had been fixed steadily on his back. The kind of a look a killer might have when he had concluded to get rid of a burden shortly. Tang hit on quicker. No use of wasting breath arguing with a man like Ace.

Another long point of scrubby oaks and jungle showed up ahead. When Tang started along the mudcovered sandy shore between the brush and swampgrass Ace yelled at him again.

"Turn up there where there's a kind o' thinnin' in the stuff. Break a way into the clearin'."

Tang swung sideways into the thorns. Ace forced his nervous animal after him. There was a dry sandy clearing with a few gaunt oaks making patches of shade. Ace watched the other two riders struggle through the barrier. But his eyes shot acutely to the prisoner. Then he swung off.

"Unsaddle my animal. Put him on the lariat by that grass——"

"Mighty poor feed. You need water for 'em, Mister."

Ace eyed him closely. Granger aided the stout man to get off. Doc was complaining loudly. He was saddle sore and beaten out. Ace handed him the waterbottle with an undisguised sneer.

Then the black mask fell from the other's face as he drank.

Doc yelped in a sort of terror. The blackbearded youth laughed and Ace cut in with another jeer.

"Easy on that water, Doc. Nothin' to drink this side that fur point yander, and mebbe not then. This ranny ain't goin' to worry yuh none with yore mug out."

GRANGER was busy with the feed bags. Ace stood two yards from Tang as he put the leader's horse on the picket. Then he motioned Tang back to the oak shade.

"Sit down. Back to that stump. Stay put, too, cowboy—hear?"

"My ears is good."

Tang spoke lightly but his eyes had traveled swiftly over the unmasked man. A townner, with store clothes and a prosperous if now bedraggled look about him. He tucked a white handkerchief about his red sweaty neck and laid himself out on the dry grass. Tang searched his memory in vain, wondering if he'd ever seen Doc.

Granger started a fire and got out a coffeepot. His thin, unshaven face grinned evilly at Tanner. Then he spoke to Ace.

"Be a doggone good place fur a rabbit hunt, wouldn't it? But I reckon nobody'd find a carcass in this bresh no time."

"Close yore trap, Granger," grunted Ace dryly. "Tanner, husk off yore shoes and toss 'em over."

"Dang glad. My feet is wore clean out."

Tang pulled his shoes off. Ace figured he'd make no break in this storm-strewn ridge sockfooted. But nothing like that was on Tang's mind now. Ace sat cross-legged with his gun loose a yard away. Doc moaned and twitched in a sweaty, feverish try at sleep.

Granger dug some bread and canned hash from a sack. "Doc'll be clean beat out to keep on goin'. Then this guy here—you figger we'll tie him up before we cross the big slough?"

Ace watched the prisoner sprawled on his back, elbow up to keep the sun from his eyes. "When we're ready. One way or other—we'll be shut o' him. Sling over the bag."

The third man moaned, too beat out to take interest in the other two now busily pawing over the leather pouch. A wisp of dry grass hung over Tang's nose and through this his half-closed eyes could glimpse their count of the money. Ace

laid packages of currency in small heaps on the sand. Yellowbacks with the bands still on them. Gold and silver clinked under his hands. Granger watched greedily but touched nothing. Ace had him under iron control.

Now and then the leader's gray eye sought the two apparent sleepers. Tang breathed regularly like a tired, indifferent prisoner.

Then the stout man they called Doc sat up lamely. "You're damn careless doing that with this fellow here listening," he complained. "And I got something to say, haven't I, seeing that——"

ACE cut him off. "Yeh. Crawl over. Count if you want. This guy here don't figure in. He knows this is the bank job so what else he hears won't worry us none. He won't get the chance."

Tang snored gently. "Won't get a chance?" That must mean he'd be put where he couldn't tell later of this get-away through the unmarked reaches of Laguna Deloro! Coming from Ace it must mean that. Ace didn't fear him at all. If



he moved now, showed he was awake, he might be split with lead from hip to armpit as he lay, not ten feet distant from the gunman's knees.

The three argued in low tones. The count seemed to satisfy Doc. He grumbled more about his stiff bones and feverish thirst. In vain Tanner tried to figure where he came in. A hardriding pair the others, but this bird was crippled by one day in the saddle.

"Just two pulled that holdup, I heard?" thought Tang. "Now, who——?"

But he cut Doc, the mystery man, out of his mind. Ace and Granger were going to put Tang himself away, without any doubt. Tied up or shot down he'd be buzzard meat in a few days. Tang snored and fidgeted like a worn-out man but his brain was seething. He had no chance in a dash for the brush. Nothing got past Ace's shifting suspicious eyes. Even the flit of

a redwinged blackbird in the oaks drew his quick scrutiny.

Tang heard rather than saw Granger coming back from the opposite side of this clearing. He was not breaking brush so there must be some sort of trail beyond. Tang heard his low mutter to Ace.

"I went clean to the slough. Some o' them oaks is downed by the storm but the old skiff ain't damaged. Just slewed in mud. Yuh figger to swim them animals?"

"Mebbe not. We won't need hawses once we get to Braler's. And what they find of 'em afterwards won't worry them deputies none. Sidewindin' in and out them gullies threw the sheriff wide off us. They won't figger we never aimed to get thirty miles from Colville on this run-out. I got it all figgered. Tanner's the only man ever laid eyes on us."

"He ain't goin' to cross the flat either," muttered Granger.

Doc rolled up from his sweaty doze. Tang felt the man's terror ooze into the air. "You mean——?" gasped Doc. "You goin' to——?"

ACE snarled at him. After a silence Tang twisted slowly and yawned as if he'd just come from dogtired slumber. Then he sat up blinking vacantly as if wondering where he was.

"Mister, how about a pull at yore water?"

"Water's pretty short. Chew on a piece o' brush."

"Man, I'm dang dry," retorted Tanner and got heavily to his feet. Granger began his sardonic kidding.

"Plenty o' water, Tanner, but it's salt. But that don't hurt yuh."

Ace cut in again. "Close yore trap, Granger! Ranny, yuh go untangle that animal o' mine off the bresh. The line's under his foot. Move, now!"

Tang got to his feet lazily. It was thirty feet to the oak where the starface was yawning around his pin. He even grumbled at the discourtesy of his hosts.

"Hell of an outfit——won't give a man a drink——hold up, you frawg-bellied rambler!"

He loosed the rope from the horse's heel carelessly. But it had been drawn up taut

over the leaning oak stump and down again. The animal kept weaving it tighter. Tang reached for the line and, leaning against the stump, he got a quick look back at the three.

They were all watching him, Doc red-faced and gaping in fear for what was to come, Granger with his blackchinned grin. And Ace stood with his hand to his belt. That grim stillness struck to Tang's soul.

"Going to give it to me when I turn back, sure as hell— Hold up, you brute!" He sprawled for the rope on the stump, but his left hand had gone to the pocket of his wet pants. Perhaps that starface loosened, and a quick swing to its bareback—if he threw himself low he might dodge Ace's bullet and kick the animal off in the thickets. Even if wounded he might get into thick cover and have a chance before they hunted him out.

A chance, a mighty slim chance,

With a foot on the oak bole he could see above the brush back toward the grassy sloughs. The sun was low and the distant sand dunes dim. But something on the lonely trail caught his eyes. Then he stiffened as if Ace's bullet had crashed his side.

SOMETHING moved out on that slough trail.

A flash of color, then black, moving. Tang almost gasped. He glimpsed the brown riding shirt that Della Malonee wore on her rides with him out of Lagunita when he came to town. Della on her nervous little black mare and leading his own mottled cow pony, crossed the slough at a quick trot. Then the brush hid them.

The knife tightened in Tang's hand. If the girl followed the only trail she would ride right into the outlaws' camp. A moment more and they would hear her breaking the brush. Tang shot another covert look at Ace. The killer stood hands to his hips watching.

"Won't do—" gasped Tang. "But I got to now. They can get me but she'll hear 'em shoot. She can turn and pull out—only, will she? She sure found my horse on the Sanddigger road after she rode out to meet me, puzzled by that phone business. Then she saw the trail and hit into

the marsh—doggone her spunky hide! Bad—sure bad. Ace'll have to get rid of her, too."

Another glance back. Ace seemed suspicious of the prisoner's idle fooling with this lariat tangle. Suddenly he yelled sharply. "Bring that animal in, Tanner! Yuh'll hoof on a piece farther."

The Keen-Alders rider had softly cut the rope on the far side the tree. He backed the starface gently a yard and then sprang for its bare back. His socked heels dug its ribs as he swung over along its neck with a hoarse yell. Della would get that warning.

Then he heard the crack of guns and with it a howl of fear. Doc's voice in a scream, as if his nerves had collapsed at gunplay.

Then Granger's shout. "Back out o' this, Berryman! Git down——"

Berryman! Even as Tang flogged the startled horse on his wild break through the brush, that name stuck to his mind.

Berryman—vice-president of the Colville State Bank! Tang had never seen this official. But Della knew him. She had spoken of Berryman as being ill recently at his Colville home!

BUT Tang couldn't give Berryman another thought. The starface had come around in a crazy circle, headrope dragging, despite Tang's efforts to beat it out



of the thickets. And suddenly, in the fringe of a serried growth of cactus up rose Ace's white hat, his gun arm following.

Tang whirled his legs over the animal's rump. His socked feet struck the gun even as it cracked and he felt the burn of powder up his leg. But he had knocked Ace staggering. Then the horse swerved and Tang swung his right arm to clutch the killer's neck. On the horse bucked with the rider dragging the other man along, working his left fist like a piston to his face.

Ace fought to get the pistol up but when Tang gave him a last shove he went over in a nest of spines howling. But even then he had the gun working. The next bullet clipped hair from the back of the rider's neck. Tang sprawled low and kicked the plunging animal. Granger's lead was cutting the brush all about him as he tore for the edge of the brush beyond the camp.

In the dusk he saw another flash from Ace's gun. Berryman was yelling like a demented man up by the oaks. Tang made some words of it.

"It's a damn lie! I never considered killin' that boy! You did, Granger! I never planned no such——"

The starface lunged unguided out to the mangrove fringe near the salt mud. There was quiet for a moment and then Ace began cursing. A bad shaking up didn't take the fight out of this guy. Tang heard him slashing and kicking the brush and yelling at his lieutenant.

"Get that bird when he's clear o' the brush. Bring that Winchester. He can't cross the grass ridin'!"

But Tang had other things now on his mind. The starface squealed and staggered as the lead cut the thickets. Tang beat its flank with a tangle of rope. The guns were flashing fast behind his flight. Ten yards on, where the brush gave way to the grass Tang got a glimpse of Della Maloney's startled face. She had halted the led horse, pulled up her own and was staring hard.

"Back out o' here!" yelled Tang. "Drop that leadrope, Dell——"

"Tang!" she cried excitedly.

"Over—low—they'll get you!" he shouted.

Suddenly the starface squatted again, went up and struck stiff-legged in the grass. Tang felt a hot pain sear his forearm. Then he shot off, struck on his feet and raced to his paint pony.

DELLA had turned on the trail. Tang swung to his saddle.

"Not that way! Along under this shore. Ace'll have his rifle workin' out in the open!"

Della's white face was alongside. "Tang,

where to? We'll be trapped on this ridge!"

"Yeh, but the jungle's as bad for 'em as for us. And they can't linger. They'll thing it a posse surroundin' 'em!"

"Who is it?"

"Killin' outfit—the Colville bank robbers. And Berryman's with 'em. How you figure that?"

They were loping side by side on the narrow streak of muddy sand between swampgrass and overhanging thickets toward the far point of the ridge.

"Berryman?" the girl gasped. "I did hear something. That the gang came to his house, made him get up and come along at the point of a gun—in his own car—all kinds of stories out!"

"Berryman was in on it. That bank examiner comin' to look over the books. Berryman framed this—I see it all now!"

"Sure as shooting—if what you say is true!" Then she looked troubledly at him.

"Tang, you got a gun?"

"Granger's got my gun. Two bad hombres to hunt us down. Berryman's a wreck——"

"Here's the end of the ridge! It's an island!"

"Hop off. We got to hide out. It's almost dusk. We can't cross off in them sloughs here."

She was by his side. They tied the animals to the thickets and stared off across the marsh where the last sunlight had fled. The narrow sand beach was streaked with that same scum that had been on the slough trail. Tang turned to her suddenly.

"What was you aimin' to tell me when I handed you the fake message about this crowd goin' up by Orchin's? Oil?"

"The shipping folks asked me to warn you people up about Sanddigger Creek. The hurricane tide spread the crude oil from that tanker all up the sloughs. If any of you boys had started a fire, even slung a match somewhere down in the flat it might start a fire that'd go over half the county westward."

"Holy Smoke! Now, I remember that Ace took my makin' away from me. He wouldn't let Granger smoke in the slough grass!"

"The stuff's all around this island, isn't it? Listen, Tang!"

HE WARNED her to silence. They could hear sounds in the brush on the low ridge. On their knees under the brush edge the two bent ears to that sound. Tang whispered that he thought the outlaws were following along the opposite side of the island. And shortly he touched her arm and nodded. The noise was closer behind the dense cover in the shadowy dusk.

"They're busy lookin' for a getaway, Dell. Not huntin' us now. They got a boat hid somewhere to cross the big slough with."

A voice spoke sharply not ten yards away in the black mangrove. Ace was cursing his followers when he reached the grass flat where the ridge ended.

"Drag that skiff off that mud, Granger. Lay hold, Doc. You ain't no pen-pusher now. If them deputies is spreadin' around the upper end o' this island we got to be off down that slough. It don't need Tanner to warn 'em. I heard riders in the grass."

Tang heard the floundering of feet in sucking mud, but the twilight and the jungle above him hid every sight. Then Berryman's scared complaints arose closer than the rest.

"I can't shove on that skiff. I'm done in, Ace. Can't lift an arm——"

The leader broke into abuse again. Berryman was the dog of the outfit! he didn't dare resent any insult. But the quarrel died to cautious mutters. Tang guessed



that Granger was shoving the boat from some grassy screen to a shallow slough. When he heard the thud of a pole on wood he crept on around the point. It was safe to gamble that

they were off the ridge.

He tried to keep Della back but when he came in sight of the skiff he felt the touch of her hand. Then Berryman's weary voice broke out.

"They'll find the horses, Ace——"

"Dry up! Across this slough once they won't find nothin'."

"What you mean?"

"This flat is slathered with crude oil. Ain't you noticed it? A match to it now and there'll be a smoke screen behind us that won't leave nothin' to show. Livin' or dead. Them trailers won't get back alive——"

THE banker gasped. He was coming on slowly. Tang saw Ace and Granger now in the skiff. Granger was poling in the mud slough.

Berryman stood on the shore apparently uncertain whether he was to go or stay, too cowed by Ace to voice protest. Even in the crisis of flight from the supposed deputies Granger rasped a jeer at him.

"About Doc, now? This skiff ain't made for three—and a sack o' good money."

Ace snarled a whisper. "Hop in here, Doc! Yuh keep that stuff quiet, Granger afore he blubbers."

"Well," grunted Granger, "if yore plans pans out as you figgered, once across the big slough and yuh fire the grass in this southeast wind, there won't be nothin' livin' back here to worry over. Nothin'—Tanner or them trailers. Doc, nor nobody——"

Doc was splashing through mud to the boat. Tanner saw them all now in the dusk swinging clumsily about on the pole. The muck was too deep to find bottom easily.

Tang drew back to the girl's side. He understood Ace's calculated plan now. The bandit had reached the ridge on a bold push regardless of the trail his party left. He had waited there for the usual sea breeze coming after sundown, and the flood tide.

Then they would cross to the sand dunes toward the coast south of the lagoon and fire the reeking sloughs and grass behind them. In six or eight miles westerly there would be nothing to mark the flight. Even Tanner would be supposed to have vanished in the holocaust and never found again very likely.

TANG fumbled impotently at his empty holster. He'd have given a year's pay for his .38 to crack down on those three dim figures not thirty feet away. Della touched his arm again.

"You heard? They'll do it, too! Catch us

helpless on this brushy ridge, nothing but an island with the oil-covered sloughs all around it!"

What Tang was thinking of now was that he was aching for the smoke Ace had forbidden him all day. He didn't have the makin's but he had the matches. Matches? — He began to mutter grimly as an idea bored into his brain.

Then he crawled past the girl. "Look here, Dell, there's deep clean sand back a piece on this shore. In them bare spots above where this oil drifted. Yuh could dig in like a badger—mebbe it would help!"

"What you mean?" The girl gasped, staring close to him.

"Goin' to burn us out are they? The guy that started that quickest'd have the best chance. The outfit caught off in the grass would have the worst of all. Damn if I don't—"

She got on her knees and hugged his arm. "Do it, Tang! Only how? This wind is blowin' toward us here."

"But they ain't made any time yet across the slough. They ain't off the mud. I don't know how fast crude oil'll spread. It ain't gas by a dang sight. We might flicker to a cinder, Dell—"

"Take the chance! We're on high land, and no oil here!"

He stared at her in the first faint starlight. The subdued voices of the three battling the mud with the poles, came on the breeze. Tang clutched her arm and whispered.

"Get back up to that sand bank. Ready to woodchuck in. I'll join yuh—or mebbe not. Depends—"

"You work fast. I can't figure it, but try something, Tang!"

HE STARED at her silently. This was great, to find she was a girl like that. Ready for the breaks of the game. She didn't even pull any soft stuff about the danger to him. Just turned back to obey orders. Tang crept to the grass at the high tide line. In either case the two would have to face fire here on the ridge, for Ace would start it once he had crossed to safety.

A yard out on the slough Tang wal-

lowed down flat on the hurricane-smashed salt grass. The stuff was all about the root hummocks, and when he wormed over mud the smell of it choked his nostrils. Something else to think about.

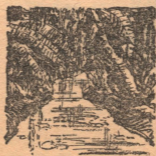
"I'll be lathered with it from ears to socks. Now, if I get trapped anyways, it won't be so pleasant."

No, it wouldn't be. When he had crawled twenty yards off behind a billow of sodden grass that curved to the right bringing him along the narrow slough up which the outlaws were working the flat-bottomed skiff, Tang hunched to his knees in the hummocks.

He had to get to windward of this boat if his plan was to work. Not much wind yet, but he didn't know how fast the fire would run.

Then another thought hit him. This scheme might drive Ace, fully armed, back on the island where he and Dell would be helpless in a fight. But still he couldn't see any fight left in anybody after this business. This was just another chance he took.

TEN more yards, knees and hands sinking in the muck between the grass roots, and he came on water that reflected the stars. Then the shadowy blur down this pond toward the island moved, and he knew Ace's crew was making the bend. Once in this water they would make better going. But Ace would not start his fire screen till he was across to the opposite dunes up the wind. Tang didn't plan he



should get this far. If he did Tang would be discovered and filled with lead where he lay. So he pulled the matchbox from inside his shirt, the only dry spot on him. He

could bend down the sere broken tops of grass plumes right by the water's edge. They crumpled into the unstirred mud by his head. Then he crawled back to where he could just reach the stuff. Ace would find him a fair mark if he got up to dash

into the wind and circle back to the ridge by a glare of flame.

"But Ace'll have his mind on something else," he muttered. "I reckon we'll all be some busy. Wonder how a fried rabbit feels?"

He cupped the lighted match under the dried blades. Watched it catch and flicker, then began to back. A yard away he turned in the crushed trail he had made and went on, hands and knees five yards more, and then got up to a crouch behind the grass billows.

He saw a faint glare. This wavered in the wind and Tang dodged on a turn toward the black shadow which was the end of the ridge.

Then he heard a shout. That beacon, forty feet ahead of the skiff, had drawn attention. Another yell and excited voices.

But Tang floundered on around the island point. He figured this fire would race with the wind, but instead it began to send up a dense black smoke under which a glare spread slowly. When he reached the sand, kicking the swamp mud from his feet he got a glimpse down the slough. The skiff was silhouetted against the spread of flame. In the grass it was crackling faster in wind puffs, but over the water it ate steadily across and down toward the boat.

"Thought she'd jump faster'n that!" Tang gasped. "Dell, where yuh hid up!" He dashed along the narrow beach and came on the girl turning out of the brush. The glare beyond the point showed her excited eyes.

"You got ahead of them!"

"Yeh. But this stuff don't act like I figured——"

"Come on! Back to the horses! We can beat it out!"

"Six miles across that oil-soaked slough? I don't aim to get caught half way. No, up the ridge into the sand, Dell. Listen now!"

"They're trying to get back to land!"

TANG ran to the highest sand point and stared through the thickets. That line of fire was spreading faster now. The glare illuminated grass and brush, and over it the dense smoke flowed.

But the skiff came about in a slow circle

ridging up the thick mud. Tang had wondered why they did not put back to the shore but he saw now. That slough mud, with an inch or so of tide water over it, was bottomless to Ace and his pushpole helper.

Doc was half over when the leader pulled him back. Granger was shoving on the pole yelling with fright. And a long angle of fire was eating steadily on, faster than it appeared. Already Tang lost sight of their heads in a sudden billow of the choking black smoke. Along the grassy margins on both sides of the flame was beginning to roar with showers of sparks vomiting into the gloom. A spurt of wind sucked along over the reflecting water.

Della Malonee jerked at Tang's shoulder. "It's racing now—it'll spread both sides of the ridge, maybe clear over it!"

"It shore will. But those birds; if Ace gets ashore with a gun——" he suddenly dashed around the point to the spot where the outlaws had shoved the boat from the streaked sand. Della saw him stretch flat out staring at the three.

Granger dropped his pole when it stirred oil blazing over the water. He went overboard with a yell, sank in mud to his neck and fought for the land. Doc Berryman climbed over clumsily. Ace stood up yelling at them. Then he lifted the leather sack which held the loot of the Colville State Bank. The leader was watching the fire angles. Then he turned to see how the two floundering for shore were making it. Berryman gave up in six feet and began choking with fear or smoke or mud in his mouth.

BUT the wiry Granger was coming, pawing the top of the mire putting every breath into the struggle. Ace was cursing. Once he picked up the pole and tried to shove the lightened boat back. Then he slipped the clumsy sack over his neck and slid overboard.

The fire was closing on the skiff's bow when he left the stern. Tang saw their heads against the glare, then the suffocating smoke swept low. He could make nothing of it for a moment, and got to his knees to run back to the girl. This was

starting something that had to be finished. But even as he turned he saw a movement in the shoal mud near the sandy shore.

Granger's streaked muddy head shoved out. His shoulders dripped with heavy gobs but he crawled now when his knees found firm bottom. Slowly, head down, blinded by smothering fumes, he crossed the beach under the thickets.

That was when Tang struck him. Tang came down with both knees on Granger's kidneys, his hand reaching around his belt. He sank fingers through gobs of mud to close on the gun holster. The next second it was out and he brought the barrel down on Granger's skull.

Tang was up knocking the mud from his hands as he turned. No need to bother with this guy. He was out cold. Tang raced to Della, coughing in the smoke, and showed her the gun.

"Get low behind that brush. Ace'll crawl out, and he's got a .45. That fire'll get Doc—he's all in!"

THEY heard shouts and curses under the smoke pall. The fire was a dull glare coming behind this. But the grass was blazing high. Tang hesitated again. Then he saw a figure stir at the edge of the mud. The leader was getting to his knees burdened with the plunder bag, and trying to wipe muck from his cheeks. If he saw a dark figure shift to him in the

smoke he must have supposed it was Granger. So when Tang grabbed his hair with one hand and jammed the muzzle of a gun into his ear, Ace just squat-

ted dumbly trying to make this out. Then Tarter's yell came to him.

"Hands out straight forward! I'm Tanner and my gun's on you, Ace!"

Tang felt a tremor run through the muscles of the bandit's neck. Then the crouched body moved quicker than Tang thought was possible. His left hand shot up, knocking the gun aside, and he lunged

into his captor till Tang went reeling back on the slippery sand.

They came up together, guns working. The quick crack of them barked above the crackle of burning grass. The swift heat of lead seemed to sear Tang's face as he pulled trigger on his obscure target in the weaving smoke. Then the Keen-Alders rider centered on the other man while his eyes were closing against the smart of the acrid smoke. The next pull brought nothing but a click. He stumbled away in the fumes, blinded.

Then Tang heard a cry. Della was clutching his sleeve.

"He's down! Tang, get back from here!"

But Tang Tanner stood choking. "Got to get him out, Granger, too. Can't leave a man burn——"

"Here's Granger. Give a hand, Tang!"

He knew he was dragging at a limp human form. Back from the leap of grass fire to the clean sand. Then Tang ran to the point of the ridge. Dimly he saw Ace face down to the store.

"Berryman!" he yelled. "Stand by, Dell! I can't hardly see!"

BERRYMAN had fainted apparently out in the slough mud. Tang was in up to his waist when he seized the embezzler's collar. The cowboy went fighting back dragging the unconscious man. Out of the clinging slough mud up to the trampled sand. Tang couldn't see a thing until Dell guided him to where he stumbled over Granger's body and dropped Berryman there. Then he sat down abruptly.

"Well, if we get out o' this mess—the bunch of us——"

"The fire's racing past in the big grass, Tang. Not on the ridge—yet. Be still—you're blind as a bat the way you act!"

"I'm a son-of-a-gun," grumbled Tang—"me pullin' them birds out after all they framed for me. Well, Ace, now. I dropped him—where is he?"

He went stumbling back till he almost fell over a limp form.

"Oh, Dell!" he shouted. "Give a hand! This guy's out!"

She was at his side. He felt her rather



than saw her in the smoke and flame. Then he heard her voice.

"Out? He's dead—you got him, Tang!"

"Aw right," choked Tang. "First man I ever got. But drag him." They hauled at the bandit's body with the fierce heat searing their faces. Back on the sandy clearing they dropped him with the other two. Tang sat down heavily. Then cleared his vision.

What he saw was Granger sitting up staring into the nose of his own gun with Della Malonee's eyes behind it.

"That's the ticket," coughed Tang. "But there ain't a shell in it. I pulled 'em all on Ace." Then he leaned closer to the girl. "We got 'em faded. Ace is gone. Them two is four-flushers. Hold the gun on 'em.'!"

Granger stared dizzily at the gun a moment, then stretched out beside Berryman's unconscious body. Tang got up. The worst of the leaping grass fire had gone past the narrow sand beach and was lighting up the swamp beyond. The Keen-Alders rider limped after it painfully, to where the two horses were snorting and plunging in the brush. Della Malonee's little black mare and his loved paint pony. Tang wasn't even civil to them.

"Hold up, yuh two jugheaded cowbusturs! What the hell's a little ol' bresh fire? I killed my man, didn't I?"

Tang wasn't really in his right mind till he reeled back to where Della sat cross-legged, watching the two prisoners.

"I ain't shot up much, Dell. Just raked up the arm. Don't you worry, honey——"

"Who said honey?" she retorted. "You're watching two bad men aren't you?"

"Aw right—if that's the way you feel. But these guys won't stir till we tell 'em.

We can tie 'em up here and leave 'em till we ride back after that fire's burned over the trail, and tell the sheriff where we left 'em, or we can make 'em hoof in ahead of us while we ride easy. But Doc Berryman can't make the grade. I get that feller now. He framed this so's it looks as if Ace and Granger made him go to the bank that day, from his home and let 'em in the bank



by the side door. They left him in his car till they got to their horses up by Orchin's and then cut back to the Laguna where they run into me. Well, at that Berryman didn't aim to have me shot down in the back like Ace figgered. So, I——"

"Never mind!" laughed Della excitedly. "We got them under the gun, haven't we? Oh, gosh——"

"No cussin'," said Tang. "I got several things to tell you. First, is, we're going to that dance Saturday night spite hell'n fire. An arm in a sling don't stop me hoofin' it. Next is that savin' account I got in the Colville bank, it's going to be made a joint account with yours—get me, Dell?"

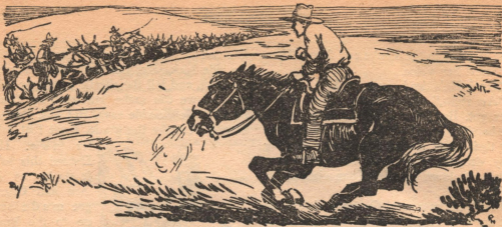
Miss Malonee wobbled her gun around till even Berryman sat up and moaned while Granger stared at his two captors.

"All right," she retorted finally. "If you say so, Tang! I just been waiting for you to tell me what to do!"

"Meanin', I guess," grumbled Tang, "you aim to marry me. Aw right! I ain't kickin'! Now just keep yore gun kinda aimed on them two guys while I—Oh, hell! kiss you, Dell! How about it?"

BUCK FEVER

CONSIDERED as an interesting trick of the human mind, the phenomenon of buck fever is probably similar to stage fright. A person unaccustomed to addressing vast audiences will sometimes glare at the sea of faces before him and repeat the same sentence over and over. Perhaps for the same reason, a hunter will tramp all day hoping to get a shot, and when his chance comes, forget to shoot. This is strange enough in itself. But what is still stranger is that some wild animals seem to understand it, and walk leisurely away to the nearest cover, disdaining to hurry. It certainly cannot be claimed that the hunter "gets rattled," for he usually lies or stands perfectly still, merely watching.



DEAD MAN'S POCKET

By STEPHEN PAYNE

Author of "Help and Hay," "The Fake Cattle Buyer," etc.

"I SEEM TO HAVE BECOME SOMETHING OF A SCRAPPER" MUTTERED YOUNG MITCH TO HIMSELF AT THE CONCLUSION OF A SHORT TIME HE SPENT ONE NIGHT IN DEAD MAN'S POCKET. AND NONE OF THE THREE RUSTLERS WOULD HAVE CARED TO BE THE ONE TO DENY THAT SIMPLE STATEMENT; NOR THE SHERIFF WHO WAS LATER TO DESCRIBE THE KID AS A "WAMPUS-CAT OF A FIGHTER"

IT TOOK "Dad" Holman's cow-punchers half a day to round up his foothills pasture wherein a thousand three- and four-year-old beef steers grazed by day and bedded by night. This pasture, which was a series of high-timbered ridges, rolling hills and level mesas, all cut by valleys having in their depths silver-threads that were streams of crystal water tumbling joyfully downward from the hoary peaks of the Never Bare Range, lay west of the ranch proper and above the spot where the many streams converged to form the Holman River. In its wide valley, where the foothills practically ended and where the level reaches which stretched endlessly away to meet the eastern horizon began, lay the Quarter Circle H ranch.

The aloof, majestic mountains, the friendly, alluring hills, the peaceful, grassy valley, and the rivers with its countless tributaries, had all been there long before Dad Holman came and settled.

But Dad had been there thirty years before he even met young Mitchell Clark, a willowy, freckled kid with uncombed

mousey hair and gray eyes that were wide, friendly and inquiring. Mitchell's overalls were too short in the legs, and his cotton socks hung down over his shoe-tops. The shoes themselves were scuffed and worn, and the kid's once-brown shirt was faded and bleached from weather and from washings. But the brim of his wide, flat-crowned hat had been doctored with a mixture of sugar and water so that it was truly a "Never-Flop."

DAD HOLMAN, a genial widower with three grown sons of his own, observed, at first critically and then commiseratingly, this gangling youth on the evening when, on foot, Mitch reached the Quarter Circle H. The rancher knew Mitch was as green to the cow world as is the grass which grows on the hills in the month of June.

"How do, sir? I want to be a cow-puncher," began the kid in a friendly tone.

Dad murmured, "Um?" thoughtfully, and smoothed his trim brown beard between stubby thumb and equally stubby forefingers. He thought of the thousand

steers in his foothill pasture, which had been gathered on the fall roundup, with one-half of which he was going on the morrow to start to the railroad. He'd take this half of his beef to market now, the other half later. This to guard against dumping all of his beef on a market which might later on be higher than it was now. Dad was a little bit short-handed to handle that trail-herd, and some one must stay at the ranch to attend to the chores. The coming of this freckled bean-pole in the scarecrow clothes was at least opportune.

"Can you milk and do chores?" asked the rancher.

"Uh?" said Mitch Clark, and something seemed to swell in his Adam's apple, but he didn't know how to lie. And his "Yes, sir; I was raised on a farm," gave him a job on the Quarter Circle H ranch at the princely salary of fifteen dollars a month and board.

The board he would have to cook for himself. Also, he was to milk four head of cows, do sundry other chores such as cutting up a large pile of wood in odd moments, see to it that the stock cattle in Dad's spacious meadow didn't break into haystacks, and in general look after things until Holman and his waddies returned from the twenty-day trip to the railroad.

Then, because the kid so evidently and so earnestly wished to accompany the punchers when they rounded up the foothills pasture on the following day, Dad suffered him to tag along.

FROM the back of Grampus, a waterfounded bay horse with long teeth and great holes above its eyes, Mitch helped the hardriding, reckless Quarter Circle H waddies whoop the rollicky cattle in Dad's great pasture into a bunch, and then he watched Dad and his oldest boy, Hank, count five hundred head of those cattle through a gate at the south side of the pasture and finally cut off the flow of cattle through that gate, leaving the remaining five hundred once more to scatter at will.

Mitch watched the herd file down out of the foothills like a stream of water, a rider ahead of the moving, living col-

umn of sleek, wide-horned bodies; riders along its edges; other riders behind it. Mitch was one of these. His blood was wine in his veins. His eyes danced. For a few brief hours he was a cowboy.

The herd skirted the southern edge of the valley, following along Holman's outside fence, and from there Mitch saw the chuckwagon leave the buildings. High on his seat, manipulating the lines over four mettlesome horses that seemed desirous of nothing so much as to run away, sat the cook. Behind him bedrolls, tied to prevent their falling overboard, were piled high in the wagon's box, and back of them jauntily rode the chuck-box, its wooden leg dangling from its hinge and rattling to the wagon's lurches.

Out from the corrals swept the colorful and magnificent Quarter Circle H's horse cavvy; trim ponies, fat and full of pride, trotting to an accompaniment of tuneful, jingling bells. Like trained soldiers they fell into line behind the chuckwagon, and none bolted ahead of it. After them, curbing his cavorting horse which he sat with the grace of a centaur, rode the wrangler, a jaunty figure with snow-white muffer and wide, white hat shining through the dust cloud in the wake of the cavvy's heels.

EASTWARD across the level, sage-covered land went the wagon and cavvy, rapidly leaving the more slowly moving beef herd, which by comparison merely crawled snakelike, following the same direction.

"All right, kid." Dad Holman's voice brought Mitch back to the unpleasant realization of his own lowly position in the scheme of things. "Better shack along back to the ranch now and get a bite to eat. Us punchers won't get nothin' till we make camp this evenin'. Ain't scared to stay alone, are you?"

"Nope," returned the kid steadily but none too confidently. Then wistfully, "Maybe next time you take out a trail-herd I can go 'long?"

"Not a chance, son," answered Holman, not unkindly.

"Uh?" muttered Mitch unhappily and gazed appealingly at young Amos Holman,

who, accompanied by a lean, hatchet-faced individual with three days' growth of brindled whiskers, a sharp-pointed nose and squinty little eyes, had ridden back alongside the herd to join his father when he saw that the latter had stopped.

Amos was a husky, dark-eyed, swarthy-faced fellow with a deep, rumbling voice. He'd scowled yesterday when he'd heard that old Dad had hired the green kid as chore boy, and he was scowling now.

Corn-fed rubes, even if they was built like a razorback hawg, thus failin' to show



the effects of havin' been raised on corn, didn't have no business on no cow ranch, Amos had said. And he had added as well that Dad was an easy mark. Did he expect that splinter to take

care of things proper? Humph!

AND now as Mitch looked at him Amos growled, "Aw, come on, Dad. Don't waste time tellin' that poor misfit what to do. You'd jus' as well hang a scarecrow on the gate as to leave him on the ranch. Ain't that right, Cal?" He turned to the squinty-eyed rider beside him.

"Oh, Slats is all jake," said Cal, inhaling on his ever-present cigarette and surveying Mitch in a manner which belied his words. Mitch had not liked Cal Jackman at first sight and now, as he glanced sharply at the fellow to determine whether he was sincere in his statement or not, he thought he detected a secret exultation in the rider's shifty eyes.

Mitch had heard from some of the other punchers that Cal had asked Dad Holman to be the one left on the ranch, before any one had come along to take that despised job, and that Dad had agreed. Fritz Condit had told this to Mitch, and Fritz had seemed to find something amusing in the circumstance.

"That 'ere pointed snout of Cal's was sure put outa j'int," Fritz had said, "when he larnt the old man had done hired a chore boy for to hold down the diggings while we was gone. He were agoin' to crawl the old man's frame 'bout it, he

lowed, 'cause, by grab, it were all cut and dried he were to have that job. But say, when he seen you, Slats, he crawled right down offen his high hoss and got over his prod, pronto.

"He says to me, 'Fritz,' says he, 'I never did want to chore nohow, and was I to 'sist on it, why, like as not, the old man'd up an let that galoot amble 'long with you pore cowboys to the railroad. I'll save you from any such terrible calamity as that'd be. Yep, even though this yere bum foot I got—' Slats, I didn't know Cal had no bum hoof till he squawks about it kinder outa-the-blue-sky-like. He says, 'Even though this yere bum foot what I got may make me quit afore we trails far. It's tough to ride with a hurtin' foot,' he says.

"Slats, I doan believe Cal has got no hurt hoof. You see, he's the dangedest liar what we ever did have on this Quarter Circle H spread, an' he's so crooked Slats, that o' Haversack, what runs the Tippy Tincup Saloon down to Juniper, he asks Cal one time if he wouldn't hire out to him. And Cal says, 'What for?' Haversack he grins and says, 'I figgered if I could p'int up your head a mite I probably could use you fer a corkscrew.'"

HOWEVER, Mitch wasn't thinking of what garrulous young Fritz Condit had told him. He thought he'd like to make that self-satisfied young Amos Holman eat his words. H'm, what if Mitch hadn't been raised in a cow country? A kid had to learn, didn't he? And if he wasn't much to look at, he couldn't help that either, could he?

Dad Holman said, half angrily, half banteringly, "Aw, dry up, Amos. I know this kid'll look after things. Let's ride."

The three followed the rollicky cattle, and Mitch sat on his water-foundered old plug, watching the herd slowly drift out of sight in the haze of its own dust. He sighed and turned old Grampus to ride back to the ranch buildings when Cal Jackman came galloping towards him from the direction in which the beef herd had vanished.

"Slats," said Jackman, stopping his pony, flipping a new cigarette together, lighting it and inhaling even as he spoke,

"the old man sent me back to tell you somethin' he forgot all about till jus' now. Them steers up yonder in the foothill pasture Holman has sold 'em to a buyer, and that buyer an' his men'll be along to get 'em. Old Dad told me to tell you so you'd know it'd be all jake, savvy?"

"Uh-huh, a buyer and his men are comin' to get the rest of the steers what's in the pasture we rounded up this mornin'," repeated the kid.

"Say, you're plum' intelligent," snickered Cal. "You got that dope all straight right off the bat. Waal, treat that buyer an' his men like they was princes. Cook 'em some darned good sinkers an' everything. Give 'em the best beds and anything they want. Boss's orders. S'long."

"When they comin'?" Mitch called, for Cal was riding back the way he had come. "Shall I count the cattle to 'em?"

"Sure thing." Mitch wondered why Cal Jackman chuckled. "Help 'em in every way you can, but I dunno just when they'll drift in on you."

IT DID not occur to Mitch Clark to doubt the authenticity of Jackman's words. Curiously enough, neither Holman nor any of his punchers had mentioned in



the kid's presence the trailing out and shipping of the other half of the beef steers. The new chore boy would have been greatly astonished had he heard

Cal Jackman's glib-tongue excuse to Dad Holman for his riding back to speak to the kid. Cal said simply that he'd forgotten a letter in the bunkhouse and he wanted to lope back to ask Slats to mail it.

That very evening, however, when the Quarter Circle H waddies were eating their supper at the chuckwagon, ten miles distant from the ranch, Cal Jackman limped so badly that he could hardly hobble around and wait on himself. His foot, he said, pained him somethin' terrible and he thought he'd better go to Juniper and have a doc look at it. In fact, he might

not be able to join the boys with this trail-herd again. So Holman made out Cal's check and the rannies offered condolences. A horse fallin' on a rider over a week ago and that rider's foot just beginning to hurt now, sure showed that a bone was busted or somethin'.

"Or *somethin'*," muttered Fritz Condit aside, enigmatically. "That Jasper wants to get on a hell of a drunk in Juniper. That's all as ails him."

But the other waddies thought Cal sincere, and Cal, riding his own horse, headed toward Juniper, fifteen miles to the southwest.

II

YOUNG MITCH CLARK, holding down the Quarter Circle H ranch with a sense of great responsibility and also of tremendous loneliness, was rejoiced indeed when, on the evening of the day following Dad's departure, three men rode to the ranch buildings. Two of them were black-bearded, unkempt, Roman-nosed fellows who wore two guns apiece and had carbines scabbarded under their saddle fenders. The third man, a slim lantern-jawed individual, toted only one gun and carried no carbine.

"Lo, kid. Boozeman's my handle. I'm a cattle dealer," he announced to Mitch. "Reckon Holman told you I'd bought a string of beef steers from him?"

"Uh-huh," cried the kid joyously, and extended his freckled hand. "Mitch Clark's my name. Sure glad to see you."

"Old Dad Holman ain't t'home, eh?" said Boozeman. "Mighty sorry to miss him, but the five hundred steers is all paid for and I got the bill of sale, and you're here; so I guess we don't need him, hey, Mitch?" with a friendly wink at the flattered kid.

"Meet my punchers," he went on. "Biggest hombre is Swart Regan, t'other one is Ben Regan, but some folks call him Whiskery Ben. We'll stable our brons. Can you cook us up a feed?"

"Uh-huh, I'll do my darnedest. Don't you have no chuckwagon, Mr. Boozeman, nor no horse cavvy?"

"Not this trip," returned Boozeman. "We kinda aim to put up at ranches, you

see, and pasture our herd at nights under fences. The three of us can drive 'em daytimes all jake."

"I see, and where is your ranch, sir?" said the kid.

Boozeman waved his hand toward the south. "Right down along that there range eighty miles. If you got any more questions, I'd sure be glad to accommodate with answers." He winked broadly at Swart Regan, and Mitch felt himself coloring.

"You're sure one jimdandy kid," vociferated Swart Regan and slapped his leg. "Holman done noble to pick you up."

Boozeman spoke again. "Well, Mitch, s'pose you take care of our ponies and we make ourselves t'home?"

"Yes, sir," said Mitch. "I'll be awful glad if you'll let me do that, but hadn't I better start a fire in the fireplace for you gentlemen?"

"It'd be right agreeable, right agreeable," replied Boozeman, and seemed to have difficulty in keeping his face straight.

MITCH stabled the horses of the three men, then hurriedly cut some wood and built a fire in the fireplace, while Boozeman, Regan and Regan reclined in Dad Holman's comfortable chairs and smoked. Would the kid have supper ready pretty quick?

Mitch would. What did they particularly like? Well, fried chicken, and apple-pie and ice-cream, for a few items. Mitch went out and killed four young roosters. It took lots of time to pick them and get them ready for cooking, but Boozeman said he and his men were in no hurry. How about the ice-cream? Mitch was stumped about that because there was no ice. Whiskery Ben suggested that the kid ride up to the top of the Never Bare Range and bring back a sackful of snow.

"But it's gettin' dark now, and I wouldn't get back much before morning," said Mitch. "I'd sure like to do it for you, but I gotta milk yet after supper. I tell you, if you'll stay over tomorrow—" He broke off as Whiskery Ben broke into a bellow of laughter.

"Gawd, Boozeman," guffawed that individual, "I didn't think anything as green as this thing ever was growed."

"Never mind old Whiskery, kid," chuckled Boozeman. "He kinder gets took explosive that way sometimes. Jus' forget the ice-cream an' fry up the chicken and a lot of 'taters and open a lot of cans. Don't forget the pie, though. Boys," to his men, "to pass the time we'll jus' start a little stud game, hey?"

And a stud game was started in Dad Holman's neat living room. Mitch, entering it some two hours later to announce supper, was rather flabbergasted to observe tobacco juice squirted about with a total disregard for the furniture or the walls. He'd have a nice job cleaning up that mess, but these men were to be treated the very best he knew how.

The kid's apple-pie was hopeless, even though he'd followed a cook-book recipe faithfully, but his fried chicken was all right, so his chuckling guests seemed not to mind the rest.



Mitch finished his own meal in a hurry and left the guests still eating when he went out to milk. This running a ranch all alone wasn't such a snap, he reflected as he found that he'd forgotten to drive in the milk cows from the meadow. Finding them in the darkness took an hour, milking them and feeding the pigs another hour. When he walked to the house with his milk, the stud game had been resumed, and as he paused outside the door he heard Swart say:

"Ain't this the plum' softest set-up what we ever had, boys? I sure wish old Cal could 'a' been with us tonight. Won't he haw-haw when we tell him how the tenderfoot tumbled all over hisself waitin' on us, though?"

"'Tenderfoot tumbled all over hisself?'" iterated Mitch. "I ain't done no tumblin'."

Cal? Who's Cal? Course they can't mean Cal Jackman."

LATER, while the unassisted kid was washing the dishes, the two Regans took Dad Holman's bed, and Boozeman, telling Mitch to have breakfast ready by five o'clock, appropriated the guestroom for himself. Mitch took the alarm-clock with him and went to the bunkhouse.

In the morning he had to cut more wood before he could get breakfast, but he had the meal ready on time and then, leaving the dirty dishes, he fairly broke his neck getting the milking and other chores done so that he could ride with Boozeman and the Regans.

So for the second time Mitch gloried in being a cowboy as he helped round up the other five hundred steers in the foothills pasture. Then, with a deep sense of responsibility, Mitch counted the fat, rollicky steers out through the same gate where Holman and his oldest boy had counted the first half of them. This gate was a full two miles above the ranch buildings and opened to the vast foothill rangeland at the south of the pasture.

AS THE last steer passed through the gate, Mitch looked at Boozeman, who had brought up the drags while Swart and Ben had gone ahead.

"We're short a hundred head," said the kid with grave concern.

"You just lost track of an even hundred," replied Boozeman with equal gravity.

"Huh? I didn't think you was countin' 'em."

"Well, I was, and I got an even five hundred."

"But you was 'way back behind the cattle," incredulously.

"When you l'arn the business like I know it, you can count 'em from half a mile off, kid. Goin' back to the ranch?"

"What? You can count cattle 'way off from 'em? Golly, I got a lot to learn."

"Ain't it the truth!" cryptically. "Goin' back to the house now, ain't you? What you goin' to do when you get there?"

"Oh, I was figgerin' to ride 'long with you for a few miles. You're headin' south

'long these foothills and I can circle back and come up 'crost the meadows to look at the cows in the meadow, and the haystacks."

"Uh?" ejaculated Boozeman and scowled at the kid. Then, suavely, "We're sure terrible obliged to you for all the help you've been and everything, Mitch, and when I see Holman I'll tell him how fine you treated us. But now, just as a suggestion—I don't want to butt into your business, course—you've done all you can to help us and I think you really ought to go back to the ranch proper and get right on the job. We can handle this herd all hunky-dory and I can give your boss a lot better account of his new hired man if I can tell him you helped us roundup, counted the cattle for him, and then flagged your kite right back to your job. That'd please old Dad best, Mitch."

"By George, I guess you're right. I'm my own boss, kind of, and I hadn't thought of it quite that way. I hope you'll tell Holman that I did pretty good at punchin', too, won't you?"

"You bet I will, Mitch. I can't tell you how much we've enjoyed meetin' you and enjoyed your hospitality and all."

Boozeman extended his hand. Mitch shook it, kicked old Grampus, who grunted and wheezingly trotted, east down the ridge. The five hundred steers, headed



south through rough hills, had passed from Mitch's sight. And he himself was soon in the lower valley beneath the foothills, where nestled the ranch buildings, and was thus out of sight of them. Nor could he from the buildings see any part of the pasture except the great, blue-green, white-tipped mountains rising back of it.

IT WAS lonely at the ranch now that his guests were gone, and oh, what a horrid mess there was in the house to clear up. Mitch would have to wash dishes

and scrub floors and furniture, perhaps even wash the bedding. Of a certainty Regan Brothers were the dirtiest humans he'd ever seen. Mitch looked at the mess in the house, turned up his snubby nose with distaste and did not enter. He wanted none of that job. He wanted to be punching cows; he wanted to be trailing along with those steers. How he wanted to be with the herd!

"I'm my own boss. I got heaps of time to get everything fixed up 'round here afore Dad comes home," the kid argued with himself. "Uh-huh, and I won't have another chance to help drive cattle after today. I'm agoin' back up there to that gate and foller up them steers and help drive 'em for five miles or more."

He mounted Grampus and went jogging up the valley out onto the ridge that led to the pasture gate. But when he gained the crest of the ridge, he stopped as though petrified for across the pasture wherein they had so lately grazed, being rapidly driven along by Mitch's three visitors, were the steers headed due north. Dust rose from their hoofs. Sunlight played on their shiny horns and glossy coats.

MITCH couldn't understand it, but some sixth sense whispered to him that all was not as it should be, and instinctively he moved his horse into a small quaking-aspen grove. It was, Mitch judged, about two o'clock in the afternoon, and he had a notion to spur to Juniper and tell the sheriff that he didn't think everything was quite right at the Quarter Circle H ranch. But what if he was all wrong in his surmise? The sheriff and everybody else would laugh at him.

Yet of a certainty the cattle were being driven up along the range towards Never Bare Pass, the only pass over the range anywhere in the vicinity. Well, perhaps that was all right, too. Perhaps Boozeman's ranch was on the western side of those mountains and he had decided to take the steers over the pass and thus to his ranch on the further side of the range.

However, the kid couldn't quite make up his mind to ride openly to the herd and ask Boozeman exactly what he intended

doing; and knowing not what to think or do, he kept out of sight of the riders driving the beef herd, paralleled their route and kept pace with them. Eventually Mitch, now a little in advance of the steers, which were a quarter mile at his left, reached the great wide draw leading to the Never Bare Pass.

A CLEAR stream of water ran down that draw coming from the canyon up which led the trail over the range. And near the bank of the stream lay two bed-rolls and set of panniers, while over a small fire a man was cooking. Two hobbled ponies and a picketed pony were grazing near by. Mitch thought he'd lope to the camp and ask the advice of this lone cowboy or prospector or whatever he was, and sped forward for that purpose.

When the kid was three hundred yards from the fire, the man who was cooking straightened up, and Mitch was astounded at recognizing Cal Jackman. What on earth could one of Dad Holman's punchers be doing at this place at this time? However, the kid was also relieved. Jackman would know what was what, would know what to do.

Jackman had seen Mitch and, to the kid's further amazement, acted for a moment very much as if he intended drawing his gun, but possibly that was only a natural reaction to a range-raised cowboy when approached at a lope in a wild and lonely spot. At least, Jackman instantly seemed to forget his hostility, for he sang out, "Why, hello thar, kid! What you doin' so far from the ranch?"

Mitch spurred to the fire and blurted, "Cal, Cal, that cattle buyer, he's bringin' them steers right this way!"

"And why not?" questioned Jackman practically, while the leaders of the beef herd came down the slope into the wide draw with Boozeman riding point.

"Why not?" cried Mitch. "'Cause Boozeman said he was goin' south with 'em. What you doin' here, Cal?"

"South after he crosses the range, yeh," returned Jackman glibly, and deftly rolled a fresh cigarette. "What am I doin' here? Why, Holman sent me back with a pack outfit for to help Boozeman move his

cattle. Hope you treated the boys well there at the ranch, did you?"

"Uh-huh. But if Dad sent you back, why didn't you come to the ranch?"

"What's goin' on here?" boomed Boozeman, who'd left the leading cattle drinking out of the stream and had loped to the fire.

"Ol' Dad's li'l pet chore boy has come to have supper with us," replied Jackman and winked at Boozeman.

MITCH had noticed that Boozeman seemed uneasy and apprehensive, and now he noticed Jackman's wink. He couldn't fathom these fellows. Were they poking fun at him, or what?

"Why didn't I come to the ranch?" Cal was continuing. "Kid, I jus' had time to make it to this point here. Knowned these boys'd be along here this evenin'."



Mitch glanced at the two hobbled horses and the one picketed horse. Not one of them was branded with Holman's Quarter Circle H. The kid looked at Boozeman and at Jackman, and drew a deep breath.

"Boozeman, did you know Cal'd be here?" he blurted out.

That individual nodded vigorously. "Reckon I'd better eat so I can watch the herd while the other boys chew," he vouchsafed and swung off his horse.

"Why'd you start south, then come this way?" Mitch demanded.

"Sonny," said Boozeman, "curiosity is what got the bear in a trap. We wanted to count them steers through a gate, that's why we let 'em out on the south side of the pasture. Hadn't you better be gettin' along home to do your milkin'?"

"Er, I guess so." Mitch turned Grampus and started to ride away, but Jackman called to him and came to his side.

"Mitch," he said, "you seemed to be a mite suspicious or somethin', but everything is perfectly all right. Just thought I'd tell you."

"You're sure of that, Cal? That Booze-

man has told me lots of lies. I've caught him at 'em. Why, I know darned well he never counted them steers a-tall. I don't like him and I hate them two whiskery wallopers what's punchin' for him."

"Can't help that, kid. Cowmen like to load a tenderfoot. Boozeman was probably just stringin' you for fun."

"Jackman," returned Mitch with sudden candor. "How's it come that not one of the three ponies you've got here is a Quarter Circle H pony?"

JACKMAN started violently while his eyes flickered strangely. But he gained complete control of himself in a second.

"For a greenhorn you're getting powerful observin'," he remarked. "Howsoever, answerin' your question, one of them ponies is my own private hoss. The other two was bought along the trail by the old man, jus' because he couldn't spare no ponies from the remuda for me to bring on this trip. Anything else botherin' you?"

"Nothin'," said Mitch in a voice which he tried hard to make sound casual. "Nothin' a-tall." He was anxious to get away from there. The violent start which Jackman had given and the apprehensive flicker of the fellow's eyes, had not been lost to the kid. Besides, Whiskery Ben had joined Boozeman at the fire, and Mitch didn't like the way both the whiskery fellow and Boozeman were looking at him.

Whiskery Ben had unscaubarded his carbine as he dismounted, and Mitch saw no need of his doing that. There was something rotten here under the surface, and the kid sensed it in every fiber of his being without being able to put his finger upon it in a tangible form. Once he was out of Boozeman, Jackman and Company's sight he was going to burn up the earth on the trail taken by Dad Holman and find out the truth from the old rancher's lips.

MITCH said, "So-long," and loped south across the hills in the direction from which he'd come. The sun, he absently noticed, had sunk behind the white tips of the Never Bare Range. Darkness would fall in a very few minutes. What ought he to do, anyhow? Had he any grounds for his suspicions except a hunch and the fact

that Boozeman had lied? H'm, Whiskery Ben had been fondling his carbine as though he'd have liked nothing better than to put a bullet through Mitch. The kid wished he had a gun. He ought to be armed when there were such tough looking jaspers around as the Regan Brothers.

He was now loping along down a draw as something sang past his ear with a spiteful zinging sound. "Ping-zing!" sang another something, and the kid's left shoulder felt seared as by a red-hot iron, while to his ears came twice the staccato bark of a rifle.

III

OLD GRAMPUS snorted and leaped ahead. "Zing!" wailed another leaden messenger, which tore the overalls on Mitch's left thigh. "Boom!" sounded a rifle, and yet another bullet whistled as it sped above the kid's head, even as his horse sped into a quaking-aspen grove.

"No doubt now of what that layout's up to!" gasped Mitch. "Tryin' to plug me from behind. That shooter was tolerable close, too. But they let me get far enough from the cattle so as not to stampede 'em by shooting."

He popped out of the sheltering grove, and there on the skyline of the hill at his south was a rider sitting his horse motionless, his carbine at the ready while his eyes searched the draw. Mitch turned Grampus east, then halted him with one yank. Another rider was on the crest of the hill at that side of the small valley. Behind the kid a horse was thundering forward down the draw.

The man at Mitch's south caught sight of him, raised his rifle and fired. Again Mitch heard the angry whine of a bullet, and he turned Grampus due west, lashing him with his rope. Up the slope fled the old horse.

Out of the grove which had a moment before screened Mitch, leaped Whiskery Ben's horse. Ben swore and sent a bullet after the kid, even as he turned his mount to follow. From the hilltop on the east Cal Jackman, armed only with a six-shooter, swept down and across the little valley after Mitch, while Boozeman from the south came thundering forward.

Old Grampus, with hot lead kicking up

the dust all about him, wheezed as he breasted the hill and sped up a long ridge westward toward the mountains. Mitch looked back and saw in the fast fading light his pursuers pop up over the hill some three hundred yards behind him.

"Go your darn'dest, horse!" the kid whispered. "Your speed and darkness is our only hope. Them hombres want me."

Old Grampus struck out nobly. His pursuers could not gain and they were too far away for their infrequent shots to be effective. Boozeman, Jackman and Whiskery



Ben seemed to realize that, for they gave all of their attention to overtaking their quarry and up the long ridge flashed the chase; while far above the un-

concerned stars came out and winked gravely over the vast mountain-land.

"They can hear us! We can't shake 'em!" gasped the kid minutes later. "Horse, we gotta get away from these mountains. Can't gallop up one of them. Gotta——" He turned Grampus south and the old horse practically slid down a steep slope into what Mitch knew must be a canyon. He should turn east down this, but sounds from that direction told him that at least one of his pursuers was already down in the canyon behind him.

SO WESTWARD up the dark canyon raced Grampus, and Mitch saw that the walls on either side of it became higher and more perpendicular with each leap of his horse. The first thing he knew, he'd run up against a windfall or rock slide and be cornered, but what help was there for it? He was a jimdandy of a hand to try and match skill and wits with four rustlers, he was! He'd be killed and those slick scoundrels would get away with Holman's steers.

Yes, and Dad had trusted Mitch, had told him to look after things at the ranch. A fine man to look after anything, he was. Hadn't realized for hours and hours that a steal was being pulled off under his very nose. And he didn't even have a gun!

What a bonehead! And what a fool he'd been to ride to Cal Jackman's camp and let that double-crossing scoundrel know by his very actions that he suspected something.

Grampus popped through a narrow opening into a small cliff-surrounded basin which was carpeted with a heavy growth of dried grass, with down timber and boulders scattered all about. Mitch didn't realize that he had landed in a pocket or blind canyon until he found no exit from the basin on its opposite side, and by that time Boozeman, Jackman and Whiskery Ben had reached the bottle-neck opening to the blind pocket.

IN THE INKY darkness they could not see Mitch, but he knew they'd all halted, for he heard not their horses' hoofs, but did hear Jackman's voice:

"Steady, boys!" Cal yelled. "This here is a pocket. Jus' as I told you a while back, I knowed we had the danged greenhorn when he headed up the canyon. Can't get outa here. I'll watch this openin' and do you two sneak 'round, one one way and one t'other, and get 'im."

Immediately after Jackman spoke, Mitch heard horses moving, and he instantly took his rope from his saddle and, abandoning Grampus, stole straight across the pocket toward the bottle-neck opening and Jackman. So dark it was that Mitch almost collided with Cal's horse before he became aware of Jackman's position. A moment later the kid could see Jackman's body rising above his horse; but as Mitch was close to the ground, Cal could not see him.

Mitch made a loop in his rope, thinking he'd rope Jackman and drag him from his horse, but then he wasn't at all sure he could rope the rustler. That was the disadvantage of not being an expert cowboy. The next time he got into a scrape like this, he'd know how to use a rope, you bet you! He heard Boozeman and Whiskery swearing as they moved their horses around the little basin.

"Blacker'n my black cat's hide," complained Boozeman. "I can't see three feet; can you, Ben?"

"Naw. Tell you what let's do. Let's get back to the neck of this yere trap and fire

the darned thing. Smoke the whelp out, huh?"

"I believe I could sneak past Cal," muttered Mitch. "Fact, I'm sure of it! But I gotta get these pups somehow. Won't do to run, though I ought to."

HA! CAL was dismounting. Mitch dropped his rope and struck the man



head-on just as he swung to the ground. Jackman's horse shied away and Jackman went down all asprawl before the kid's rush. Mitch recovered his bal-

ance and jumped for Jackman's stomach, revealed in the darkness only by the whiteness of his shirt. The kid's feet drove into the man's middle; and a second later, as Jackman doubled up, writhing with pain, Mitch snatched his six-shooter from his hand. So sudden had been Mitch's attack that Jackman had had no chance to defend himself, and now with one lightning move Mitch smashed the revolver down on Cal's head.

Then the kid yanked Jackman back into the bottle-like neck of the canyon. Boozeman and Whiskery were coming. Mitch could hear their horses as he ran back, seeking Cal's horse. He found it and mounted. Boozeman drew near on his right and Whiskery Ben on his left.

"We're agoin' to fire this here trap, Cal," Boozeman announced. "Didn't see nothin' of him, did yuh?"

"Naw."

"Sounded like your hoss was cuttin' up or somethin'," Boozeman continued. "Was he?"

"Kind o'. Want some matches?"

"Yeh." Boozeman dismounted and approached Mitch, more by feel than by sight. "Better lead all our hosses out, and you hold 'em, Cal," he said, reaching up to get some matches from Mitch.

WITH the butt of Jackman's .45, Mitch drove at the fellow's skull with all the power of his right arm. Boozeman

fell with a dull thud, and the horse Mitch was riding, emitting a terrific snort, leaped away from the body, and in so doing collided with the animal ridden by Whiskery Ben.

Whiskery yelled, "What the blazes?" And then, "Well, I'm teetotally damned!"

Ben's eyes must have been far better in the dark than those of any of the others in the Pocket, for as Mitch bumped into him he recognized the kid, and even as he ripped out his last word he acted.

Whiskery Ben's right arm shot around Mitch's body and at the same instant he spurred his horse, fearfully. The animal lunged ahead and Mitch, unhorsed, was dangling from the arm of a man who was a giant as compared with Mitch. Yet the kid had retained his hold on Jackman's revolver, and now, as he swung in mid-air, he brought his left hand into play and shifted the grip of his right from the weapon's barrel to its handle. The .45 came up across Mitch's body, pointed almost pointblank at Whiskery Ben's body, and a second later the surrounding cliffs sent back hollow echoes of the Colt's roar.

All this in the space of two seconds. And Whiskery Ben, releasing Mitch and reeling from his saddle, never knew what had hit him. Jackman and Boozeman were both unconscious.

"I seem to have become something of a scrapper," muttered Mitch as he tied those two securely. "Yeh, I've killed me one rustler, but there's still one more to get."

THERE was no hesitation or indecision about the kid's movements now. He didn't realize it, but in his fight with the three toughs he had changed from a kid to a man, had become a full fledged Westerner. Armed with two revolvers and a carbine, Mitch selected what he considered the best horse of the four, mounted, loped down the canyon, climbed out of it and cut across the hills to the wide valley wherein Swart Regan was holding the five hundred Quarter Circle H steers.

Boldly the kid loped straight to that swarthy cattle thief, who naturally thought it was one of his companions thus approaching him and consequently was tre-

mendously astonished to have a six-shooter thrust almost into his face.

"You?" he gasped, raising his hands and recognizing Mitch in the dim starlight. "You, a sissified greenhorn, a-stickin' me up!"

"Get funny if you want to, but I'd advise you not to!" snapped Mitch. "Start somethin' if you feel lucky."

But Swart Regan didn't feel lucky.

DAD HOLMAN, returning from shipping his first five hundred steers, rode homeward by way of Juniper with his son Amos, and the first man he met in the town was the sheriff.

"I've been hopin' you'd come along, Holman," said that individual. "You see, I've got three tough rustlers jugged and awaitin' for you to prosecute 'em."

"Three rustlers?" exclaimed Holman. "Who brought 'em in?"

"Kid name of Mitch Clark, who said he was handlin' your ranch," returned the sheriff and grinned. "Yeh, he sure did. Said he was a little slow gettin' here with 'em, 'cause he had to drive your beef steers back to the pasture before he did it, and also had to bury the fourth bad man."

"Our steers?" gasped Holman and his son Amos as one.

"Uh-huh. Cal Jackman is one of these thieves. Seems he had the whole deal planned out with the other birds, but the kid threw a monkey wrench in their machinery and done it proper. Oh, I tell you, Holman, he's some wampus-cat, that kid! He must 'a' had a heck of a fight."

"What?" cried Amos. "Why, I thought Mitch was nothin' but a cottontail. I'll sure ask his pardon."

"Yeh, Amos," said Dad Holman drily. "You'd better try to get along with Mitch, for he'll be helpin' trail out that herd he saved. But, Sheriff, come through with a lot more details. Where'd this scrap take place?"

"Why," drawled the sheriff, "that humdinger of a freckled kid was so plum' modest about it all that I didn't get many details. Reckon, though, he'll show you the place where he tangled with three of them birds t'oncet. He said he named it Dead Man's Pocket."



The STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

THE REAL WEST

FOGGING along with a bellow like a steer when the branding iron hits him, about every so often, you hear some "critic" telling the world—whether it wants to listen or not—about how stories of the Old West, with the hard riding, the singing lead, the cool-eyed men that are an integral part of many such yarns, aren't true pictures of Western life. Well, you can't go on the prod about that kind of criticism—it's too much like a tenderfoot telling Will James how to go about busting a wicked bronc. For the critics are almost invariably tenderfeet, and the writers such old-timers as Tuttle, Raine, Mulford, Frank C. Robertson, Ernest Haycox, Clem Yore, George C. Henderson and dozens of others.

What Haycox has to say on the subject, for example, makes mighty good reading. He gives a tabloid picture of the grim days of six-shooters and wide-flung ranges, and his letter is an interesting background for his entertaining yarn, "A Municipal Feud," in this issue:

"One thing I want to put up. There is a great deal of spurious criticism directed against the story of the West—chiefly on the ground that it contains too much action and does not reflect the West as it really was. In short, according to these critics, it ain't Art. Yet a man may write a tale around the fantastic embroglios of some twentieth century flapper in an Italian summer resort, conduct a Romeo and Juliet affair across a tea table, fill it full of those remote emotions which are so spiritual as almost to elude the poor gink's pen—he may do this and infallibly it's Art. Seems there is a geographical line drawn across the critics' mental map of America. East-

ward is Art; westward it's only another one of those things. This is hard; it is very hard. In fact there is a movement on foot out here among us to import a miscellaneous collection of foreign noblemen, some sword canes, five or six tins of foie gras and see can't we write some Art. In furtherance of this move, if you know where we can get a real good sample of tremulous and illusive emotion—about a yard of it—we would thank you kindly. All our collection consists of at present is a pair of English whipcord riding breeches, a recipe for spumoni, and several good arguments why America should cancel its war debts. This last item we got free—it cost us nothing.

"But the fact is—the West of the old days, and even of today, lived and lives in the major scale. Weird harmonies wanted. In God We Trust—All Others Pay Cash. In answer to the statement that all the gunplay and all the dirty work back in the canyon is distorting the picture of the West as it really was, I do not think the wildest pen among us would deny that Coyote City had as many humdrum hours as it had hours of excitement. Life moves slowly and it moves to its climaxes—here and everywhere. But the reader isn't interested in the humdrum hours; he wants to know what happened when Indigo Jones and Joe Breedlove get in trouble with the posse. Therefore we tell that story instead of how many critters went through the branding chute and what the current quotation is in Omaha on 'Steers, Good (1100-1300).' If the critic in reading all these stories of action happens to conclude that the West is one grand uproarious patch of trouble, that's his own fault. We put up our signposts for him to go by.

YET, no matter how wild a piece of country any of us may draw or how tough a fight we may happen to tell about, there is warrant in actual history for it. There is warrant for more than we could expect the reader to believe. Let anybody read the chronicles of Dodge City, of Lincoln County, of Abilene, Deadwood, Tombstone, Ellsworth—and so on. And there are hundreds of little towns now nothing but skeleton structures on the plains and in the hills from which the echo of their booming days still rings. Likewise, for every Billy the Kid, there were a dozen other men just as bad who never got into print. And so it goes. I know of actual occurrences out here I can't put into type. The reader

would accuse me of transgressing probabilities. You can put it down as gospel truth that there is no single patch of ground out here (and for that matter anywhere in America) that hasn't got its history of feud, sudden death and all the brew coming from the clash of conflicting races and conflicting purposes. That's one way the United States grew."

And a thrilling, blood-stirring way it was. It formed the basis for more stories than will ever be written—and it supplied more action than all the pages of **SHORT STORIES** could ever describe.

HE LIVED WITH THE MOUNTED

WHEN Harwood Steele spins a yarn about the old-time Canadian Mounted, he's writing about men he's ridden trail and eaten grub with. Born in Fort MacLeod, a little Canadian town founded more than fifty years ago by the Mounties, and himself the son of a general, Mr. Steele spent boyhood years learning the tricks of the Canadian West from men who, in such things, had no peers. He tells, in a letter that came to us along with "Old-Timers Played Straight," his Mountie tale in this issue, where he found his two main characters:

"The ex-sergeant in this yarn is a sort of composite of several veterans of the Mounted Police I have known, all picturesque, forceful, entertaining old ducks," he writes. "One of them, at present a Colonel in the Canadian Militia and boss of a big job in a large city, is well over seventy and was one of the first batch to ride into the West in 1874; but he is as straight as a die, as solid as a rock and as active as a man of fifty. He walks around with a kind of grim determination and expresses his views on matters of which he disapproves with a vigor glorious to behold.

"Associated with my friend the Colonel in this composite picture is another ancient scalp-hunter, now dead, who was more like something out of the pages of a dime novel than any other person I have met. When I first encountered him, he was well on in years and had adventured all over the cattle country of North America, had served in several small wars and had apparently ridden the plains in the days before the railroad. He wore a large sombrero in lieu of a Stetson and a pair of those lovely,

long moustaches once so popular with real two-gun he-men. These things I found fascinating—I was on the sunny side of the teen-age at the time. Here today and gone tomorrow, chockful of thrilling stories and Western lore, this relic of the romantic past used to drift into my father's house and initiate me into such delightful matters as the throwing of a lariat and the tying of a diamond hitch. There are not many like him now.

"Nor do I suppose that it is often possible to see such riding as is described in my story, though the setting is really a description of the recent reunion of old-timers held at Fort MacLeod. As an old roughneck frontiersman used to say to me with relish, 'There was *riding*!' I don't think, though, that it can possibly have come up to the standard of long ago, when the busters stayed on board till the blood ran out of their nose and ears and the bronc had jolted them insensible. Them were the days!"

MESQUITE READS SIGN

COWBOY, plan on action! There's a riding, shooting hombre just a-coming over the ridge, and when he finds that old Tobe Ricketts has been murdered—and the bullet hole's in his back at that—there's going to be some salty doings.

Mesquite Jenkins—that's the name of this unsmiling, thin-lipped stranger who rides across the desert with a pair of guns strapped handy. And that's the name of the ripping Clarence E. Mulford action serial, "Mesquite Jenkins," opening in the next issue. Mesquite knows a thing or two about reading sign on men for as everyone knows Mesquite is old Happy's protegee—the only youngster Hopalong ever cared to train in his own marvelous skill at gunplay and other frontier actions. He finds out some things about buckaroos who have been wide-looping over on the Ace of Clubs range, too—and the way he mixes plumb into the midst of a mystery that the sheriff himself can't solve is surely salivating. There's just about everything in this Mulford yarn from the bawling of a brand blotted steer to the crackling rattle of guns

that sputter six shots in an instant; there's trailing and treachery, and there's trouble in every paragraph.

L. Patrick Greene and the Major haze along trouble, too, in a long novel called "The Devil's Kloof." The Major stumbles into mystery in a legendary treasure cache where he and Jim are bound. But they aren't alone—others are on the trail of the treasure, too. There's Richards the crooked promoter, and there's a girl who is the rightful owner. Besides all these, there are natives—hordes of blacks who resent the white invasion of sacred territory and go on the trail to write revenge in blood. What the Major does when the natives attack makes a thrilling, action-jammed story—one that you won't lay down till you've finished it.

"The Sheriff of Crooked Rib," by Ernest Haycox, is a grim tale of a man hunt—a tale in which wild young Bill Patent shows the critical citizens of Crooked Rib that something more than good will and honest intent are needed to handle a gang of stage robbers. What's more, Bill puts the ancient sport of peppering the town pump with lead back on an honorable basis.

Charles Wesley Sanders is the author of "Toll of the Forest," a gripping novelette of adventure when men try blackmail and start forest fires to gain their ends. And in "The Demands of Strawfoot Bill" Barry Scobee tells a screamingly funny story of the old prospector who gets his neck out of a noose by dangling golden bait before his captors—and then gets himself into something worse by dangling it too long.

There'll be other fighting, fast-moving stories of the West, the North and sport. The May 25th *SHORT STORIES* is the kind that fills a jasper clear full of excitement and adventure—and then makes him hone for more.

BEAR AND BULL FIGHTS

AWADDIE might fork his cayuse from Oklahoma all the way to San Diego without meeting up with an old-timer old enough to have sat in on the American version of the Spanish bull fight. And yet, in California and other portions of the West

where Spanish influence was potent, they used to derive a lot of enjoyment from bear and bull fights. The cowboy-writer George C. Henderson, in his speedy yarn "The Gun Fighters" in this issue, shows his knowledge of this salty form of amusement when he brings into his story a contest between a steer and a brown bear.

Harold J. Ashe, a Californian versed in the lore of his state, writes as follows about the sport:

"During that period when California was experiencing its first years of Statehood, one of the most popular amusements among the hardy inhabitants, was a fight between grizzly bears and bulls.

"Jaded by the picturesque yet common spectacle of man and bull circling the arena, the spectators often demanded that the dressy Spanish bull fighter retire and a grizzly bear be brought out and chained in the center of the circle. With but fifteen feet of chain, it was intended to give the animals about equal chance in the fight.

"The bull was the aggressor, but the grizzly was able to put up a bloody, slashing fight whenever the bull got within range of his long-reaching, ripping paws and claws. Generally the bear would fasten his claws into the tongue of the bull, and if he succeeded in this there was no doubt as to the outcome of the battle."

A BEDFORD-JONES FILE

JUST as we were going to press with the H. Bedford-Jones tale, "The Net," of intrigue and flashing knives in the China Sea, along came this plea from a Missouri Bedford-Jones fan whose file of stories by this writer is incomplete. Our own extra copies of the magazines he wants were exhausted long ago—as are most of the back numbers of *SHORT STORIES*, so great is the demand for them. But we're passing Mr. Ingles' request on to you folks, in the hope that some of you can help him:

"Would like to obtain the four issues of *SHORT STORIES* containing these stories by H. Bedford-Jones:

"The Place of Dead Gods"—a complete novel.

"Arizona Argonauts"—a complete novel.

"Men Die for Honor"—a novelette.

"The Debt"—a short story.

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**HERE'S YORE \$25; SIT IN AGAIN,
HOMBRE!**

MAYBE the Panhandle hasn't changed as much as some folks think since the days when the XIT—the old "Ten Counties in Texas" outfit—ranged its herds of black Aberdeen-Angus and Gallo-way cattle over its wide dominion. Bank robbers at \$5,000 a head—delivery on the hoof refused—sounds like action such as the old-timers yarn about. And speaking of old-timers, Mr. Robertson—why not sit in again and pass on to us a few tales that the salty old grizzlies spell in your ear? Meantime, if you'll look behind the General Delivery window in your mail office, you'll find a check for \$25.00—for this most interesting letter to the present issue of **SHORT STORIES**:

Editor, **SHORT STORIES**,
Dear Sir:

Although I can't qualify as one of your oldest readers, I believe I can qualify as one of the most enthusiastic of the younger crop. I've been reading **SHORT STORIES** about two years and it gets better and better. Your authors brigade ranks with the best. Tuttle's letters from Gus Potts are a riot. I can't read them in a hotel lobby any more

because if I start everyone wants to know who that damn fool is and what is he sitting over there howling about. I choked on the last one and had to go up to my room to finish it. I am impatiently awaiting your next issue containing the Seltzer, Newsom and Robertson stories. Newsom especially always hits the spot with me.

I notice Mr. Mills, one of your correspondents, speaks of San Angelo, Ozona and the Panhandle. Wonder if he has seen that country lately? thousands of oil derricks; roads, good, bad and indifferent; towns from hell-roaring oil field camps to up-to-date cities with fine hotels, paved streets and all the comforts of Chicago including bank robberies. The Texas Bankers' Association offers \$5,000 a head for dead bank robbers, not a cent for live ones. Other states and cities might profit by this example.

I meet some of the old-timers and their tales of the old days on the Spur, SMS, Four Six, Three D, Spade, Pitchfork, XIT, and many others always keep me listening until the last word. Not so long ago I sat up nearly all night in a New Mexico hotel listening to old yarns of the building of the Santa Fe. A small quantity of a forbidden beverage is a wonderful tongue loosener when properly applied.

I've read with interest the controversy over Billy the Kid. I've been in Fort Sumner and visited the grave or alleged grave—take your pick—and from all I've heard and read I'm inclined to string along with Burns and his "Saga of Billy the Kid." However, let the argument roll on—it's interesting, and arguments sometimes bring out hitherto unknown or unrecognized truths.

Don't blame anyone but yourself for this long-winded outbreak of words. You invited it, now take the consequences.

Best of luck to you and to **SHORT STORIES**. May you live long and prosper.

Sincerely,

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