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THE TORNADO FROM EAGLETAIL

by H. Bedford-Jones

Neither ever saw a human being before

Copyright Action Stories

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Vol. X
No. 56

JANUARY
1929

W. H. Fawcett, Publisher *Roscoe Fawcett, Managing Editor* *Jack Smalley, Ass't Man'g Editor*

A Sweeping Air Story

RIVALS OF THE CLOUDS . . . . . RAOUL WHITFIELD . . . 53
Lieutenant Adams fought clinging fog as well as enemy aircraft.

Two Smashing War Stories

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PRICE OF A DRINK . . . . . HAROLD CRUICKSHANK . . 129
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Thrilling Stories of West and Adventure

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Southwest—He rode out to "get" a man and when he got him he got a big surprise.

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Illustrations by Tom Foley and H. I. Shope

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1. Twenty-four cash prizes will be paid by Screen Secrets Magazine for the nearest correct identification list of players pictured and the most interesting letter (not more than 100 words) telling which one of these players is your favorite star and why.

2. It is not necessary to buy any magazine or article to compete in this contest, but as reference, past issues of Screen Secrets Magazine may be consulted. Copies may be inspected at Libraries.

3. Contest open to everyone except members of the staff of Screen Secrets Magazine and their families.

4. Contest closes January 10, 1929, at midnight. You may send as many sets as you wish, but no contestants will be entitled to more than one prize.

5. In case of ties, tying contributors will be awarded duplicate prizes.

6. Send your lists and letters to Screen Secrets Magazine,

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any time before closing date. The editorial staff of Screen Secrets will be sole and final judges.

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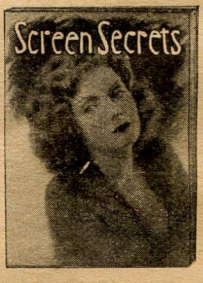

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A Chat with the Editor

By Capt. W. H. Fawcett

Member of the American Shooting team that won the world's championship at Olympic games in Paris in 1924

YELLS of "Ride 'em Cowboy!" and "Let 'er Buck," and other cries of denizens of western ranches were transferred to the western front during the World war and those same yells which are so closely identified with the American west inspired terror in the hearts of enemy soldiers.

These punchers, accustomed as they were to lives of danger were among the first of the Yanks to go over the top into No-man's land. Entire divisions of the American army, such as the Ninetieth and Ninety-first and others were made up of westerners—men who fought valiently and won renoun for their bravery.

Today there are cow punchers on western ranges who modestly treasure among their few possessions some of the highest decorations for valor it is in the power of nations to award.

COWBOYS IN KHAKI

STORIES picturing three phases of warfare which American cowboys experienced with the A. E. F. are published in this issue of TRIPLE-X. The tales are "Rivals of the Clouds," by Raoul Whitfield, a war-time aviator; "Tex in the Trenches," by Jay J. Kalez, a westerner who served overseas; and "Price of a Drink," by Harold F. Cruickshank who fought with the Canadian forces in which there were many American cowboys who enlisted for battle action prior to America's entry into the war. As a class cowboys are men of valor whether on the range or in the trenches.

SHADES OF THE PAST

SHADES of the Old West marched recently by the side of old timers at the Cotton Carnival and Rodeo at Roswell, New Mexico. Supporters of Billy the Kid rode side by side with those who had thrown their fortune in with John Chisum and Billy's enemies in the stirring days of the Lincoln County war, that most famous of all range wars in the history of the turbulent west

There was Frank Coe, a friend of The Kid and there, too, rode George Coe, the young gun-slinger who lost a finger in a shooting affray with The Kid's enemies at Dowling's Mill. Young men then, they are now old, gray haired. Beside them in the parade was Aunt Sallie Robert, niece of John Chisum of Jingle-bob fame, one of the most prominent figures in the Lincoln County war.

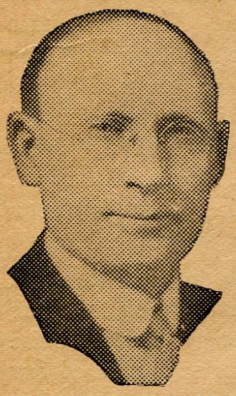
Perhaps the shades of Billy The Kid, Chisum, Pat Garrett, Murphy and others of those who fought and died in the southwest rode with the others in this historic parade.

BUCKING AIRPLANES

C. B. McMAHAN is called the "Powder River Pilot," and although he has given up ranch life entirely he insists that a bucking horse offers more thrills than a bucking plane. There is about the same fascination in flying as riding the plane, however, he says and so as long

(Continued on Page 10)

I'll Pay Your Bills



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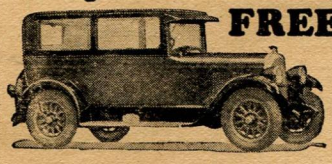

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A Chat with the Editor.

(Continued from page 8)

as fate has decreed that he must leave his ranch home in Montana to make his living in a city he is going to stick with flying.

The sky puncher now resides in Minneapolis although he was born and brought up in the Powder River country of Montana. He broke wild horses, toured the nation as a Wild West star in rodeos and then evolved a new stunt with an airplane. He would descend into the arena aboard an airplane, climb down a rope ladder, dive from the ship, bulldog a steer and then catch the ropedangling beneath the plane and climb aboard. This proved to be a mighty popular stunt with Wild West shows and it led to his becoming a fulfledged pilot.

AIR CONSCIOUS

AIRPLANES are becoming more and more popular. The nation is air conscious at last. Nearly everyone is either talking or thinking about aviation as never before or else actually flying. Thousands of young men and women are learning how to fly today.

Planes are being used to transport mail over western plains where once pony express relays of hard riding cowboys provided the only rapid means of transport; planes are transporting passengers and freight; they are used for business and pleasure—but particularly for business. Today airplanes are being used in the west to guard against forest fires and are in some instances being utilized by ranchers for the patrol of their vast estates. On some of these ranches airplanes may be seen flying over the range on which the cowboy with equipment as of old is plying his hazardous and thrilling trade!

WATCH TRIPLE-X

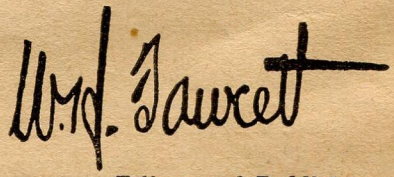
LAST month—in the final issue of 1928, the Editor made a firm resolution to make TRIPLE-X an even better book than it has been. Now, with this first issue of 1929, he has endeavored to do just that. This January issue brings the first installment of a two-part novel by H. Bedford-Jones, one of the deans of western and action stories of the age! Don't fail to read it. There is also a notable array of other writers.

Next month another forward step will be taken in the development of your favorite magazine—a step that we promise will be a pleasant surprise for all of our readers. There will be—among other things—the start of a new novel by Murray Leinster, author of that great novel "Kid Deputy," and other notable works. We won't tell you much more about that next issue—just watch for it and notice the stories, the writers and the illustrations!

GREETINGS

THE winter season is with us again. Most of the nation is feeling the nip of cold. Easterners are blanketed with snow. Westerners are snuggling deeper within their bed rolls or in their bunks. Cowboys are braving blizzards to guard their herds.

At this season of holidays the editor of TRIPLE-X and his staff and the authors desire to extend to the readers every good wish for a Merry Christmas and an all fired happy New Year.



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Mayfield's Escape

A True Story of the West

By George Arnold

WHEN Bill Mayfield, the Comstock gambler, killed a crooked sheriff he became the storm center of Nevada and his escape threatened to throw the territory into civil war. The author lived for many years in the Comstock.

FOR thrilling interest and romance the story of the crime, conviction and escape of Bill Mayfield is without parallel in the annals of the Sagebrush State. His crime is considered the most exciting murder case in the history of Nevada—one that divided the community into factions and came near precipitating a general conflict in the first year after the organization of the Territory.

It was this way: In 1859-'60, John L. Blackburn was Deputy United States Marshal for that portion of Utah known as Carson County; and when it was organized into Nevada Territory in 1861 he was elected sheriff of Ormsby County. He was a tall, full-bearded, handsome man, with the air of a Southerner, though a native of Illinois.

His popularity at the start is to be inferred from his success as an office-seeker, but to accept his official station as a true indication of his character would lead one widely astray. Whatever may have been his qualifications for office at the beginning, by the summer of 1861 he had entirely impaired them by dissipation and the unbridled license given to his temper, so that instead of being regarded as a bulwark of the law, he was looked upon as about the most dangerous man in the Territory, and without exception the most reckless law-breaker.

A single example will depict his nature. He arrested a man for some minor offense out at one of the stations on the old emigrant road and brought him to Carson City. Instead of going directly to the jail he entered Bill Rice's saloon to refresh himself after the dusty ride. The prisoner was very drunk and insisted on singing in a boisterous manner. Blackburn cautioned him to be silent. The fellow kept up the noise until Blackburn, in an access of fury, pulled his pistol and shot him dead, remarking that the fool would be quiet now. To show his indifference, Blackburn asked the bystanders up to drink, and clinked glasses with them over the corpse of his victim.

WITH the inevitable tendency of all desperate men, Blackburn had grown to thirst for blood when in liquor. He didn't confine his attacks to dangerous or disreputable characters. He assaulted some of the most prominent and esteemed citizens. A feeling of insecurity and terror pervaded the community. No one was assured that his own life would not be sought next. In short, matters came to a pitch where most of the leading citizens felt that the man who could kill Blackburn would be doing a public service.

At this stage of affairs, sometime in November, 1861, Henry Plummer—the arch fiend in the hideous demonarchy of

(Continued on Page 14)

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One Full Ampoule of my amazing hair fluid which I discovered myself and which grew hair on my head.

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Here is How I Used to Look

I was just as bald as this picture. It is a true photograph without any tampering or retouching. It is exactly like I used to look. Then look at the full head of hair I have in the picture on the left!

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Mayfield's Escape

(Continued from Page 12)

those days, who afterward organized and, while sheriff, directed the operations of the most notorious band of road-agents and murderers that ever terrorized the mining regions, and who was hanged by the vigilance committee at Bannock, Montana, in 1864—came to Carson City. He was already a murderer and fugitive from justice in California. A requisition had preceded him, and the Nevada authorities were on the alert.

Plummer found an old acquaintance and friend in William H. Mayfield, a professional gambler, who hid him in his cabin until preparations were made for more safely secreting him in the loft of Jack Harris' house by cutting through the lining of the ceiling and placing a bed, provisions and other necessaries, together with the fugitive himself, upon the girders and then closing and concealing the opening.

Sheriff Blackburn had a warrant for Plummer's arrest. Suspecting Mayfield of harboring the fugitive, he searched his cabin, but too late; the culprit had been transferred to the loft. Mayfield frankly told the sheriff, however, that Plumber had been there but had gone away. The thought of having been foiled rankled in Blackburn's breast; and when, as was customary with him now, he proceeded to get drunk, it was the uppermost thing in his mind. Meeting Mayfield, he accused him of still concealing Plummer. Mayfield succeeded in avoiding him at the time, but later in the evening they met at the St. Nicholas saloon, when Blackburn renewed his charges more aggressively.

"I will arrest Plummer," said he, "and no one can prevent it. I can arrest anybody. I can arrest you, Bill Mayfield, if I want!"

"You can if you have a warrant," replied Mayfield, "but you can't without."

"I tell you I can arrest you or anyone else," rejoined Blackburn, "and damn you, I'll arrest you anyhow."

BLACKBURN made a movement as if to draw a weapon, but some friends caught hold of him and tried to force him from the room. He broke away from them, however, and made for Mayfield again. Like a flash the latter plunged a bowie-knife into his assailant's breast, repeating the thrust half a dozen times as the wounded man tried to close with him. Blackburn fell to the floor and died within ten minutes.

In the confusion Mayfield escaped from the saloon. He lay hidden all that night in a hogpen. The next day friends provided for his concealment in more savory quarters, but a large reward being offered for his arrest a few days afterward, some one revealed his hiding-place and he was taken into custody.

Political feeling ran high at that time. Blackburn was a Unionist, Mayfield a Secessionist. It looked for a while as if the case was going to resolve itself into a purely partisan question, and a conflict appeared imminent. In expectation of an attempt at rescue, Governor Nye made a requisition on the commandant at Fort Churchill for a military force, and fifty soldiers were sent to guard the prisoner.

The trial was brought on without delay. It was claimed by Mayfield's friends that he was not given a fair trial, inasmuch as there was not a single Democrat on the jury. Fairly or not, he was convicted and sentenced to be hanged February 28, 1862.

There were men of both parties, however, who felt no political interest in the case, but only thankfulness for Blackburn's death and a grateful desire to save his slayer, whom they regarded as a benefactor. They immediately set about devising ways to effect Mayfield's release. A pardon was out of the question, and in the existing state of public feeling there was scarcely more hope in a motion for a new trial, or in an appeal to the Supreme Court.

But an effort was made, and by means notoriously effective in influencing some

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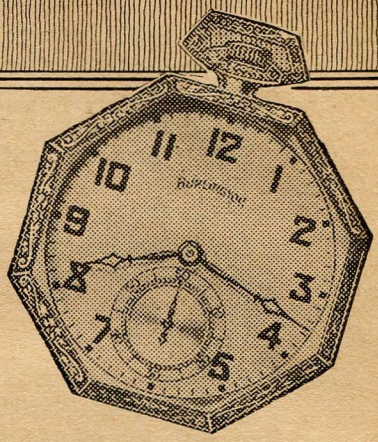

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Mayfield's Escape

(Continued from Page 14)

of the Supreme Judges in those days, two of them were induced to order a stay of proceedings in Mayfield's sentence until his case could be brought before the court *en banc*. This order rendered the time of execution a matter of supreme uncertainty, and the authorities were easily persuaded under the circumstances to dispense with the military guard and transfer the condemned man to the Territorial prison for safe-keeping.

Uncle Abe Curry was warden of the prison, as good and kind-hearted a man as ever lived, and a prominent and public-spirited citizen. What wonder, then, if he shared the feeling of other good citizens to an extent that rendered him careless about keeping strict watch over one they believed to have done a public service, and who was not one of his prisoners anyhow? Mayfield was furnished with tools for cutting off his irons, which he proceeded to do just cautiously enough not to attract the attention of some new guards.

ABOUT 9 o'clock on the night of March 15, 1862, he crept out of the prison and by pre-arrangement met a friend who delivered to him $1,000 in money and the fleetest horse in the Territory, and who told the fugitive at the same time to strike for the wilds of Idaho, as nothing could save him if he fell into the clutches of the authorities again.

Mayfield subsequently sent back an account of his escape to The Enterprise. He took to himself all the credit for it, and pictured himself as a Jack Sheppard at prison-breaking. One passage, however, had a touch of vivid description and humor in it that indicated the Sagebrush State might have developed another Mark Twain had the aspirant not gone wrong.

"The guard," wrote Mayfield, "was walking back and forth in the ward room, while old man Curry was sitting playing poker with some of the work hands about ten feet from my cell. I got down on my knees, and, watching the old man's eyes, started for the door. As I got to it I saw the old man raising the hand that had just been dealt to him, and, as his eyes were directed toward me, I thought I would wait until he got a big hand, for, being an old gambler myself I knew it would always excite an unsophisticated gambler to have a high hand dealt to him. A few minutes afterward a big Irishman who was playing in the game got a big hand, queens and sevens, before the draw. He bet 'twenty beans.' The old man saw it, and they took one card each. The old man drew a king, making him a king full. The Irishman drew a queen, making him a queen full. They bet and bet until they had about 200 beans in the pot. All this time I was fixing to go, and I came to the conclusion that if I couldn't go out on that hand I never could; and so I went."

Mayfield made good use of his first hour of liberty, getting as far as Peavine Valley and well within the boundaries of California. But there he hesitated and finally discontinued his flight. Every mile was separating him further from a Carson City girl with whom he was madly infatuated. A fierce conflict was raging within him. But his love for the girl proved stronger than his love for life and liberty. He turned and rode back to Huffaker's, in the Truckee Meadows, so he could communicate with his sweetheart. He remained there several weeks, and his whereabouts became a matter of common knowledge. Friends urged him to renew his flight, but in vain.

SHERIFF GASHERIE of Ormsby County, who had been elected soon after Blackburn's death and who naturally disliked to show ingratitute to the man who had made a vacancy for him, at length notified Mayfield's friends that popular clamor compelled him to take cognizance of the escaped man's presence at Huffaker's. He informed them of the time of his intended visit, and word was sent to the fugitive to make himself scarce

(Continued on Page 194)

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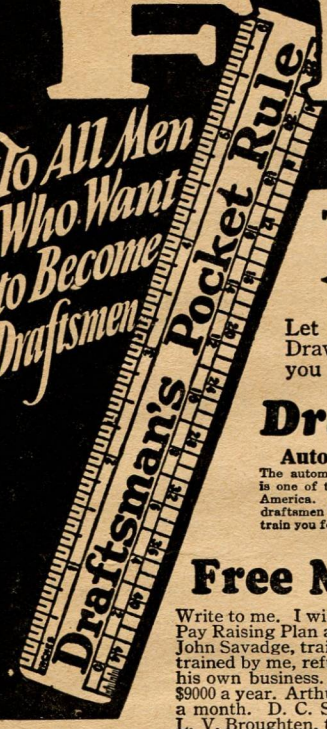

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Roping the Facts

Dick Halliday

WHAT would you like to know about the West? Just write to Triple-X Magazine and Dick Halliday, cowboy, deputy sheriff, deputy game warden and gun toter will answer your queries. Mr. Halliday, whose home is in New Mexico, is one of the greatest authorities on the West.

By DICK HALLIDAY

Author of "The Last Cavalier," "The Evolution of the Cowboy," etc.

WHY do cowboys, in some sections of the West, wear silk handkerchiefs round their necks? Last year I saw Charley Siringo, the old time Westerner, in Hollywood and although he was dressed in an ordinary business suit he had a red silk handkerchief round his neck. I noticed that few cowboys in the North West wear these handkerchiefs and I have seen very few worn at the rodeos, so what is the reason for the custom?

A. B., Los Angeles.

A handkerchief worn round the neck, is a common article of attire amongst frontiersmen and its use is not confined to the Western cowboys. I have seen it worn in Australia and Africa, in South America and in Mexico. The cowboys of the trail driving days used it to cover their faces when riding in alkali dust; also to protect their necks and the top of the spine from the sun and as a muffler in cold weather. Rodeo cowboys don't need it in the arena so they don't wear it but you will notice most of them wear their handkerchiefs when riding in the opening parade of the rodeo. Charley Siringo, like many another old timer, is so used to wearing his handkerchief that he wears it all the time. The range cowboy is liable to need that handkerchief any time so he keeps it hanging on the safest and handiest peg that he knows of—his neck.

* * *

LOCKED SPURS

What is the meaning of "locked spurs?" I saw the expression used in a Western story and wondered what it meant?

John W., Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

There are plenty of riders who use their big, blunt rowelled spurs to hang on with when they are riding a pitching horse. They lock or thrust these spurs in the saddle cinch, and as long as they can keep their hold they cannot be thrown. A rider who uses his spurs for this purpose will wire or "lock" the rowels to the shank so the wheels won't turn. Hence the phrase "locked spurs." To use spurs wired this way is against rodeo contest rules. Mostly, today, locked rowels are only used in ranch horse breaking. When a cowboy is working he doesn't want to get bucked off and he will use any means to keep contact with his saddle. He'll even hold on to the horn—even if it is supposed to be eternal disgrace for a waddy to descend so low.

* * *

JERK LINE TEAMS

What is a jerk line team and are there any of them left in the West today?

Alex K., Glasgow, Scotland.

A jerk line team is the name applied to a freighting team of horses or mules driven with a single jerk line—hence the name. Such a team usually consists of four up to ten span of mules. The lead pair are mostly horses and are trained to act as leaders to the team. The bits of these two animals are fastened together by a light iron bar, and from the bit in the near leader's mouth, a single jerk rein, made from braided cotton rope, runs through rings in the hames of each team, back to the driver's hand. The driver rides on the near front wheeler and handles the team from the saddle.

A big jerk line team of twenty horses or

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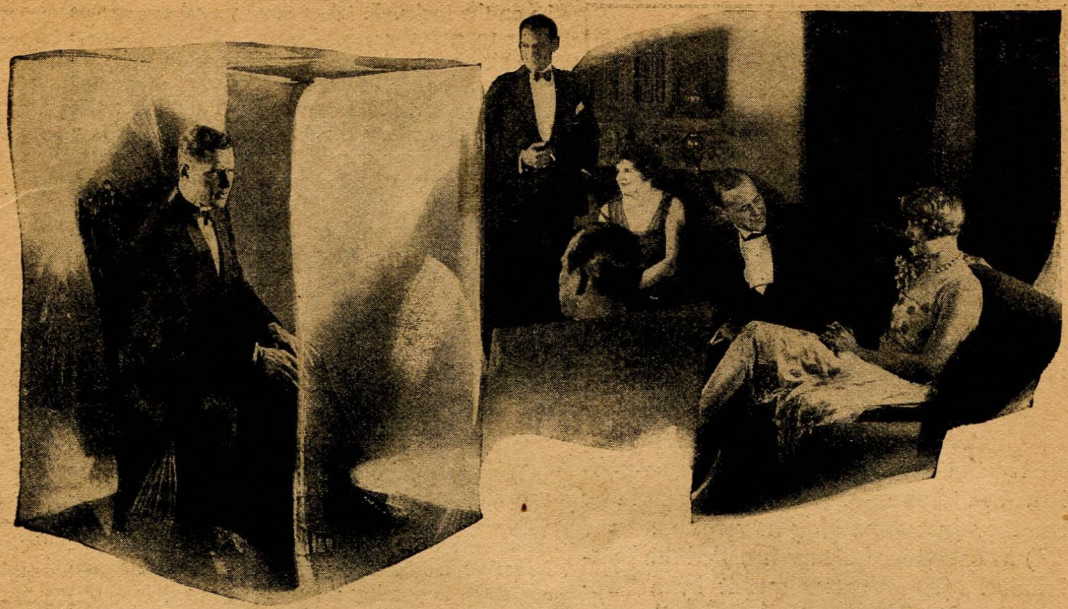

I Turned To Ice When I Tried To Talk

—But Now I Can Sway An Audience of Thousands!

I HAD always been painfully bashful. When trying to carry on even the most commonplace conversation my voice would sound unnatural and my hands and knees would tremble. Often I would listen to an argument among a group and become so keenly interested that I would want to voice my own opinion—yet timidity would keep me silent. I never had the courage to stand up for what I knew to be my rights—I was always afraid of "what people would say," of ridicule. Since my childhood I had had a secret desire to appear in public—to be active in politics—but my shyness was so great that I turned to ice when I tried to talk—in even the smallest gathering!

My inability to talk was also affecting my business success. I dreaded going in and asking for a raise—I was afraid of any situation that meant using my voice—having to express myself. I didn't know how to present the ideas which I was sure the firm could use. I was just a plodder—a truck horse, capable of doing a lot of heavy work but of no use where brilliant performance was required. Often I would see men who were not half so thorough nor so hard working as I, promoted to positions where they made a brilliant showing—not through hard work, but through their ability to talk cleverly and convincingly—to give the appearance of being efficient and skillful.

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Soon I had won salary increases, promotion, popularity, power. Today I always have a ready flow of speech at my command. I am able to rise to any occasion, to meet any emergency with just the right words, to approach all types of people with ease and fearlessness. And I accomplished all this by developing the natural power of speech possessed by everyone, but cultivated by so few—by simply spending 20 minutes a day in my own home on this most fascinating subject.

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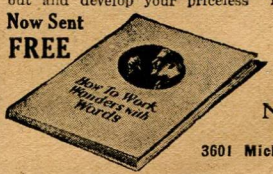

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ROPING THE FACTS

Roping the Facts

(Continued from Page 18)

mules would be hooked up to one large wagon and two or three trailers. In this case the freighter is accompanied by a "swamper" who sets the brakes on the trail wagons and gives a hand in getting through rough country. Jerk line teams are still in use in Northern California and in other remote mountain districts. And incidentally, four horse stage coaches are still running where the roads are too rough for motors and trucks.

* * *

GENUINE STUFF

Are the cowboy songs and poems published in TRIPLE-X the genuine article or are they just something new for readers? (2) What part of Texas is called the Panhandle? (3) What is meant by a "Tejano"? (4) Will you give me the addresses of some ranches in New Mexico and Arizona?

Miss M. L., Wooster, Ohio.

Yes, the cowboy songs published in TRIPLE-X are genuine range songs brought West in the early days.

(2) At the top of Texas is a narrow strip of land just like the handle of a pan. This is known as the Panhandle. Take a look at a map and you will at once see why.

(3) "Tejas" is the Spanish spelling of Texas, so a "Tejano" would naturally be a Texan. Savvy?

(4) Sorry, but ranchmen have, except under exceptional circumstances, asked me not to give their addresses to any Eastern enquirers. Ranch owners and their hands have to work long hours and they have no time for correspondence.

* * *

LOOK BEFORE YOU LEAP

Where can I get a Colt Frontier Six-shooter and how much will it cost? (2) How much capital is needed to buy a small ranch and what would be a good section of the country to buy it in? I have $40,000, is that enough?

J. M., Philadelphia, Pa.

You can buy a Colt of any model from the Colt Patent Firearms Company, at Hartford, Connecticut. The Frontier model costs $34.50. (2) You could buy a small ranch for $40,000 but it would be advisable for you to learn the ranching business before buying or you'll soon be on the rocks. It takes three years' experience even to get a partial idea of all round range handling of stock in dry seasons and in bad winters, and plenty of business "savvy" is wanted by the owner. If I were you, I'd think twice before buying any ranch. Cattle ranching is a business and not a sporting proposition. As to locations to buy in, I'd prefer Nevada or Eastern Oregon. Elko, Nevada and Vale or Ontario, Oregon would be good points to start a "look-see" from. But don't take your money with you.

* * *

NEW STYLES

Why do cowboys use such big, swelled fronts on their saddles?

T. C., Brooklyn, New York.

The swelled front came in about twenty years ago and it is supposed to give the rider a secure seat. But outside of riding broncs—for which the swell is pretty good—the swell fork is rather a hindrance than an aid. The vogue for them is passing now, and up to date riders are getting saddles made smaller in front and with low, sloping cantles, more after the order of the saddles used in the early days. Still, the swelled front will probably always be in use, as it makes a timid rider feel at home in the saddle.

* * *

STILL IN USE

Is the Colt single action revolver still in use in the West and if so, why has this old model stayed in favor so long?

J. C. M., Springfield, Miss.

The single action frontier revolver is still made and is frequently seen in the West today. The demand for it was brisk up to a year or so ago but at the present time the vogue for it seems to be passing. It is a reliable, simple, and strong gun, very suitable for rough use, and that is one reason why the men of the early West liked it. In the West folks are conservative and the reputation of Old Reliable was passed down from father to son and the fame of the old style gun grew amongst the modern generation. Hence the demand for it.

But nowadays most men, when they buy a revolver prefer one of the later models and so I suppose the old single action will gradually go into the discard. But it hasn't got there yet. Hundreds of Border officers carry them yet and won't have anything else. As it is made at present, the gun isn't suitable for target shooting and is a bit too heavy for most men to care about lugging around with them. The modern patterns are lighter to carry and a good bit more accurate to shoot with, so the gun-toting part of the West is now getting modernized and up to date.

(Continued on Page 22)

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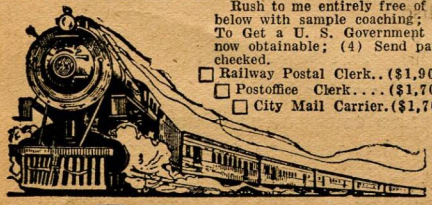

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ROPING THE FACTS

Roping the Facts

(Continued from Page 20)

GUN TOTING

How many different ways are used today in the West to carry a gun? (2) Are guns allowed to be carried at all? (3) How do Texas officers carry them?

J. L., New York City.

Several ways are still in use. On a cartridge belt or sometimes on the waist belt, in shoulder holsters, hip pocket holsters, or waist band holsters. Derringers and Colt .25 automatics are frequently carried in the watch pocket. (2) I'm only acquainted with the officers in one town —El Paso—and the border officers from there to California. The El Paso men carry their guns in a quick draw holster which is slung on a black Sam Browne belt. Officers frequently carry a "Sunday" gun in some position to suit themselves. I know one who packs a small gun in each boot leg. (3) As to carrying guns, most states have restrictive laws but speaking generally, you can carry a gun openly but not concealed. They do not allow you to carry guns inside town limits either.

* * *

HARD TO DO

Who are the Texas Rangers hired by? (2) Could I join them? (3) I am going West next summer for the fun of a trip; could I get any ranch work?

R. K. M., Danesville, Ohio.

The Texas Rangers are in the pay of the State of Texas. (2) You could not join them for special qualifications are required. (3) As to getting work in the West, that depends on you and where you are. Keep out of the South West anyhow as work is scarce and hard to get. You will not get a cowboy's job wherever you go. You could get work in the haying season in Oregon and Nevada and then go fruit picking in Idaho and Washington in the fall.

* * *

What does the expression "plumb a-foot" mean? (2) Is the Niobrara Range in Nevada or Nebraska? (3) Is there a cowboy song called "Chopo"?

Miss J. M., Wooster, Ohio.

To be set plumb a-foot is one of the greatest misfortunes that can happen to a cow-puncher, since it means loss of horse. So, in the range country, it is an expression that is used to denote the very extreme of bad luck or hardship. (2) The Niobrara is in Nebraska, probably some magazine proof reader made a mistake when he located it in Nevada. (3) The cowboy song "Chopo" was published in a recent number of TRIPLE-X. It is an old range ballad.

* * *

REAL SOURDOUGH

CAN you tell me how to make sourdough that I can use on camping trips and while in the woods?

J. C. Minneapolis.

Make a creamy, well-beaten batter by adding water to one cup of flour, a tablespoonful of sugar and half a teaspoonful of salt. Stir in a teaspoonful of vinegar and allow the dough to sour. It may take from 24 to 48 hours to sour.

To make hot cakes, make a smooth, rather thick batter of flour and water, then add the "sourings" and let the batter rise overnight. Use up as much batter as you need, and then keep the remainder for leaven for your next batch. Before cooking, add two or three tablespoons of sugar, a half teaspoonful of salt and a small half teaspoonful of soda. The soda and salt should be dissolved in a few drops of warm water. Then beat well and bake in hot, greased frying pan.

For bread, take a cup of "sourings," a teaspoonful of sugar, teaspoonful of lard, teaspoonful of salt, quarter to half teaspoonful of soda, add enough flour and water to make a small loaf. Mix into dough and allow to rise overnight. Bake in reflector or dutch oven.

Bannocks are a rich biscuit dough, the best frying pan bread, since it is easy on the digestion. Take a pint of flour, two tablespoons of sugar, a large teaspoonful of baking powder, a teaspoonful of salt. Into this, mix two teaspoonfuls of cold fat, lard or bacon grease. Then add enough water to make a smooth, thick dough. Put the dough in a hot, greased frying pan and hold over a bed of coals long enough to make a bottom crust. Then raise a little above fire and the dough will rise rapidly. Then lower pan to brown the bottom. Now, with help of a plate, turn it over gently and brown the other side.

The beauty of using sourdough is that a bit of the dough can be packed along for leaven, and a bit of the next meal's dough then can be used for the next meal and so on.

* * *

A REAL GUN

I WANT your advice on buying a revolver to carry on mountain camping trips and also want to use it for target shooting. What model and caliber would you recommend? I do not care for the

(Continued on Page 194)

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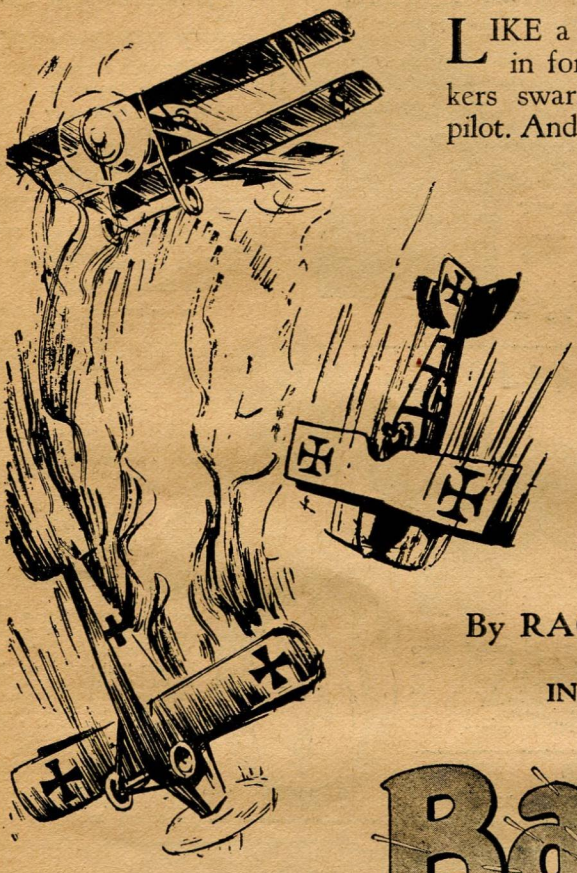

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Lyons of the Cloud Patrol

By RAOUL WHITFIELD

IN THE JANUARY

Battle Stories

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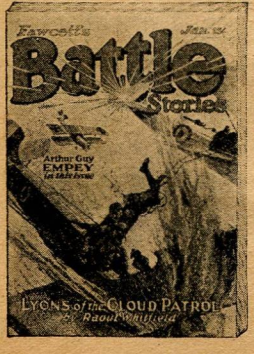

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Name.....

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They gave me the "ha-ha" when I offered to play

... but I was the life of the party after that

THE first day of Dorothy's house party at the shore had been a huge success. After swimming, boating and golfing all were ready for the wonderful dinner that followed.

"Well, folks," said Bill, as we left the table, "I'm all set for a good dance."

"Fine," cried Dorothy, "Dick can make the banjo hum. Who'll play the piano?"

All looked at one another foolishly.

"Jim, you play, don't you?" asked Dot.

"Yes, I'll play 'Far, Far Away,'" laughed Jim.

"Well, then, Mabel, will you help us out?"

"Honestly, Dot, I hate to admit it, but I can't play a note," she answered.

It certainly looked as if the party were going flat.

Then I Offered to Play

"If you folks can stand it," I offered shyly, "I'll play for you."

The crowd instantly burst into laughter.

"You may be able to play football, Jack, but you can't tackle a piano."

"I've never heard you play a note and I've known you all your life," cut in another.

As I strode to the piano I chuckled to myself: I had a surprise in store for them.

No one knew what to expect. They thought I was about to make a fool of myself.

Then—I struck the first snappy chords of that foot-loosing foxtrot, "St. Louis Blues." Dick, dumbfounded, almost dropped his banjo. But in a flash he had picked up the rhythm and was strumming away like mad.

The crowd were all dancing in a jiffy. Foxtrots and waltzes—with rests few and far between.

After a good round of dancing I decided to give them some real music and began a beautiful Indian love lyric.

The couples were now seated quietly about the room, entranced by that plaintive melody.

No sooner had the last soft notes died away that I was surrounded by my astonished friends.

"How wonderful, Jack! Why haven't you played for us before?"

"How long have you been studying?"

"Why have you kept it a secret all these years when you might have beeen playing for us?"

"Who gave you lessons? He must be wonderful!"

I Reveal My Secret

Then I explained how I had made up my mind to go in for something besides sports. I wanted to play—to entertain others—to be popular. But when I thought of the great expense and long study and practice required, I hesitated.

Then one day I ran across an announcement in a magazine telling of a new, quick and simple way to learn music at home, without a teacher.

I was a little skeptical at first, but I sent for the free booklet and free demonstration lesson. The moment I saw it I was convinced and sent for the complete course.

When the lessons arrived I started right in giving a few minutes of my spare time each day. And what fun it was. No monotonous scales—no tedious exercises—no tricky methods—just a simple, common-sense system that even a child could understand. And I was playing my favorite numbers almost from the start.

* * * * * *

Anyone can learn to play this easy, no-teacher way—right at home. The piano, if desired, or any other instrument that you may choose. Almost half a million people have learned to play by this simple system in less than half the time it takes by the old-fashioned methods. And the cost averages only a few cents a day.

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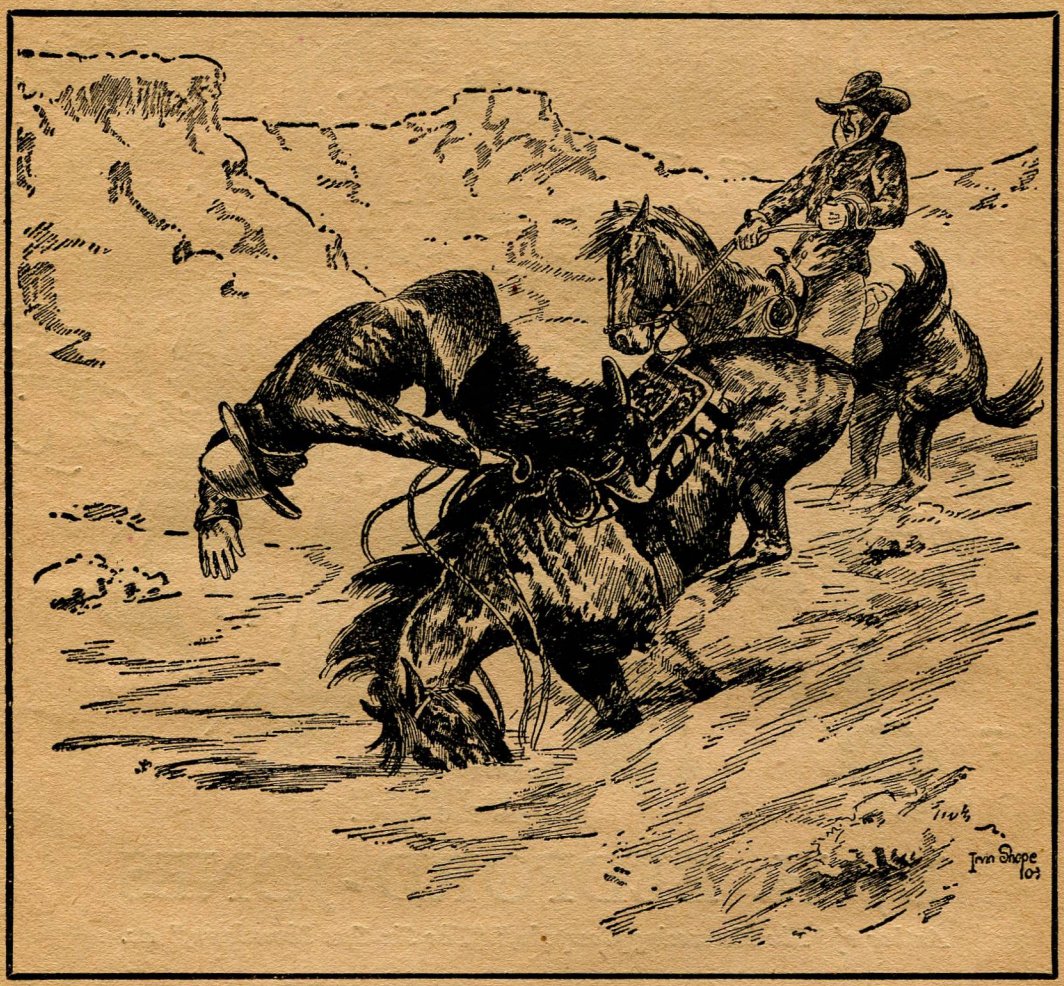


TWO PAIR BREAKS A RECORD

ONE New Year's day after bringing in a weak little calf and its mammy to the feed lot, me and Two Pair Jenks starts in the early afternoon for a dance which is staged at a school house just fifteen miles away. It's been a nice winter, just cold enough to keep the snow dry, and the winds have kept a lot of the grassed ridges bare for the cows to graze on. But when the wind blows the snow off the ridges it fills the coulees and washouts level full at times, and as Two Pair and I lope down a slope hittin' for another ridge where the travelin's better, suddenly the front end of Two Pair's horse sinks out of sight, and Two Pair sails over its head and dives into the snow so far that only his legs stick out.

The horse scrambles out and breaks for home, but I catch him before he has gone far. When I lead him back, Two Pair has reversed ends and is floundering through the powdered snow, only his hat and hands showing. I throw him the end of my rope and he soon climbs out.

"Well," he says, "that ain't no way to start the New Year is it?"

"That's a grand dive you made, perfect form," I answers.

"Not countin' the record-breakin' time I stayed under rescuin' my hat," he chuckles as he mounts and we ride off a bit more cautiously than before.

The Tornado From

The gang was thrown into an uproar as Frisco Red fought.

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

Author of "The Hossracing Cowpoke," "The Six-Gun Showdown," etc.

JUST outside Morgan City, beyond the loading pens and the water-tank, the railroad was bordered by dense brush. The Eagletail country was in constant dread of brush fires, for the spring and summer had been dry. Thus, when Steve Hewson, on his way into Morgan City, discerned a thin thread of smoke winding up from an arroyo between the road and the railroad, he drew rein and scanned the gray wisp with thoughtful eyes.

"Hm! Maybe a train spark has started something," he reflected, "but more likely there's a hobo camp. And they'd better be warned, or the durned fools will set the hull country afire."

Since his horse could not make headway through the brush, Hewson dismounted and started afoot for the arroyo.

Knowing that any interference with the gentry of the road was apt to be resented, Hewson did not advertise his approach. He meant to catch the firebugs unaware, and therefore made fairly silent progress. He was bound on a long ride and did not want to be delayed any longer than was necessary, either.

Eagletail

A New Novel by the Author of "Ghost-Gold Plunder"

HERE begins a stirring serial of the old west wherein a human tornado from the wild Eagletail country sweeps down on a range feud with startling results. Start here one of the best novels H. Bedford-Jones has ever written for Triple-X Magazine.

Steve's gun spoke as he spurred furiously to Red's rescue.

When he parted the brush that opened upon the arroyo, a curious scene met his gaze.

Four men squatted in the sand about a small fire on which a coffee-pot was set. They were entirely too much absorbed in their own affairs to suspect any eavesdropper, and were quite unaware of the grimly searching eyes looking down at them. All four, as Hewson could see at a glance, were hoboes.

Then he observed something else that caught his interest. One of these knights of the road was much younger than the others, had a peculiar pallor, and his head was newly cropped. Also he seemed on most unfriendly terms with his three companions. He was, indeed, snarling at them as Hewson took in the scene.

"Forget it!" he was saying. His words were not hobo speech, and seemed more attuned to the range country. "You jiggers can do what you like, but I ain't in on it, savvy?"

"Listen to the Sacramento Kid!" sneered one of the others, a bloated gentleman with a bulbous red nose. "Got converted in stir, huh? Done your danged little dirty soul good, huh? You ain't associating with no stiffs and road workers, huh?"

"I ain't going in on no job, that's certain," rejoined the Kid, with a flash of temper. He was red-headed, as Hewson could see from his cropped thatch. "I'm out o' stir and I'm staying out, savvy."

"Yeah, you're out—and how'd you get out?" returned the other mockingly. "Made a break, that's what. Listen, Kid! We need you on this job, see? And you go in on it with us, or by gosh we'll turn you in."

The blue eyes of the Kid flashed. For all its youth, his face was bitter, desperate, hard as cold stone.

"You try that and I'll drill you, you low-down mangy coyote!" he snapped. "That's enough. You gents and me part here and now." He rose to his feet. "And what's more, you-all can drift right out o' this country. I'm goin' into that town and—"

"Snitch on us, will yer?" cried out another of the four, with a shrill curse. "Blast yer dirty little hide—"

The Sacramento Kid hit him between the eyes and he fell backward. Instantly, the other two were on the escaped convict. He met them with smashing blows. All three of them piled on him for an instant, then the red-nosed man jerked out a gun. There was a report and a spat of flame. The Kid staggered and fell heavily.

THEN came a louder report. The gun in Hewson's hand smashed out its message as Hewson spurred forward to aid Red. The killer whirled about and fell in death. The other two stared up at the disclosed figure of Hewson, and a yell of fright burst from them.

"Get!" he ordered. "You low-down, murdering dogs—get!"

They scurried away.

Heswon put up his gun. He wasted no time on the red nosed hobo, but went to the Sacramento Kid. The latter was shot through the body, but not mortally hurt. Hewson bandaged him, and he opened his eyes to stare at his rescuer.

"Feelin' better?" said Hewson. "I happened along just right huh? Reckon I can pack you into town—you ain't much weight, kid. I got a hoss close by."

"My gosh!" gasped the Kid. "Listen, feller—leave me be."

Hewson grinned and rolled a smoke.

"You listen to me, Kid," he said. "I heard the hull thing, sabe? Now, let me orate. My name's Hewson. I own the Double H, south o' town. I'm goin' to be away for a spell, but when I come back I'll look you up. Meantime, I'll leave you with a friend o' mine in town. Your name's Joe Toole, sabe that? All right, Joe. Know anything about cows?"

"Cows? I was raised with 'em," said the staring Kid.

"I figured you was." Hewson lighted his cigaret. "Now, Joe, I ain't asking no questions. I ain't a mite interested in what lays behind, not a mite! Here you are, and here I am, and that's enough. You look to me like you might be a top hand, and I can use one or two riders on the Double H this summer, so you're engaged on the spot. Sabe?"

The Kid looked up at the brown face with the piercing, whimsical, kindly eyes, and a sob came into his throat.

"My gosh, feller—you're a white man!" he said faintly. "But it ain't right for me—I done broke jail—I can't get you into trouble."

Hewson grinned. "Me and trouble get along fine, Joe," he broke in. "Fact is, I'm off lookin' for trouble this trip. Now, you forget all them sentiments. I'll tote you into town and leave you safe, and when I get back you'll be toddlin' around with your hair grown out and a scar on your ribs. Is it a bargain?"

"It sure is, feller," said the Kid, with a gulp. "And by gosh, you won't regret it if I can help it!"

"I ain't aiming to," said Hewson blithely. "Regrets is bad medicine, for a fact—don't hardly ever pay. Now, let's see—looks like you might walk a ways if I help. Try it."

He aided the young hobo to his feet.

Leaning on Hewson's arm, the Sacramento Kid—or Joe Toole, as he had now become—managed to take a few steps. Little by little, with pauses for rest and recuperation, with the blood breaking through his hasty bandage and running down his side, Toole managed to make it as far as the waiting horse. Then he collapsed.

With a grunt, Hewson lifted him, and presently was settled in the saddle with the limp body over the pommel and the protesting cayuse headed for town.

"Get on, you fool!" Hewson addressed his horse. "Let's leave this jigger and be on our way to find Tom Bowles!"

CHAPTER II

THE TORNADO STRIKES

SEVERAL days after the above events, Steve Hewson negligently spat into the dusty road and surveyed Las Palomas with a critical and most unfavoring eye.

"This here town," he observed to his horse, "is about as near the latter end of creation as they make 'em! I reckon we'd better take us one drink apiece and head back to Morgan City, li'l hoss! Tom Bowles sure lied when he called this here a cow town!"

Mr. Hewson's pessimism was justified, at least by appearance; still, towns never grow up without a reason, and as he jogged onward he knew there must be some reason for Las Palomas, unlikely as it seemed. Beyond a doubt the reason was water.

The town lay three miles off the railroad and had sprung up in the center of a wide alkali flat. From a little distance, Las Palomas looked like a straggling lot of dust-white cabins; on closer view, these took shape and size and developed into a respectable town, fed by artesian wells.

Las Palomas, as a matter of fact, had all the adjuncts of civilization. There was a stage line, a bank, a hotel, general store and post-office; there were three saloons, and an even dozen private houses. Unlikely as the town looked, it was a fair business center, for ranches lay among the hills roundabout and all the southern end of Sundown County did its trading here.

Ambling along up the street, Steve Hewson saw not a single living creature; Las Palomas might have been a deserted town to all appearance. Nobody was sufficiently interested in him to step out in the hot afternoon sun and look him over—this was the real reason. Three horses were at the hitch-rail before the first saloon he came to, and he eyed them critically.

"Ain't so bad. Look like top cow-ponies, for a fact!" he observed. "Now, if I can find Tom Bowles without stayin' too long in this district, I'll be plumb satisfied."

He dismounted, threw the reins over the head of his weary horse, and mopping the sweat from his face, strode into the saloon.

There was nothing to warn Las Palomas of the calamity that had befallen it. Steve Hewson was large in build, wide in the shoulder, with steady gray eyes and a rugged face; his whimsical smile, his air of lazy amiability, carried little to warn strangers. True, nobody monkeyed with Steve Hewson of the Double H down in the Eagletail country, but that was far away from Las Palomas.

Once through the swinging screen doors, he entered upon comparative coolness and obscurity, for light came only through the doors. Besides the bartender, who wore a heavily curled black mustache and a bad eye, two men were at the bar. One, in his shirt-sleeves, was portly and had taken a drop too much. The other, in overalls and boots, chaps and a gay scarlet handkerchief, was a small man who seemed overbalanced by his big white stetson. Under the upcurved brim his red-rimmed eyes peered forth like those of a reptile.

"Howdy, gents." Steve Hewson stepped up to the bar and laid down a coin. "Drink all around on me—but gimme beer if you got any. Too hot for liquor."

"Shucks, pilgrim!" exclaimed the portly drinker. "This ain't hot for Las Palomas! Why, Dug Perkins here was just sayin' his outfit was hollerin' their—hic—heads off 'cause we ain't had no real summer weather yet! You must be from cold climates, huh?"

"Sort o' like that, I reckon," and Mr. Hewson grinned. "Down in the Eagletails, where I come from, we don't rightly figger it's hot unless the stock starts dyin' off. When their hides shrink up on 'em so's they can't move, then they die, savvy? That's what we call hot."

The portly gentleman burst into laughter, in which the barkeep joined. Mr. Dug Perkins, as the smaller man at the

bar was evidently named, came closer and peered at Hewson with his red-rimmed eyes.

"EAGLETAIL, huh?" he demanded. "Know a feller down there name o' Steve Hewson?"

"Know him to my sorrow," said Mr. Hewson promptly. "Dog-gone him, that there feller is the lowestdown reptile I ever met up against! Why, you know him?"

"Heard of him some," admitted Dug Perkins. "Tom Bowles is down from that-a-way. Tom talks about him in his liquor."

"Now," interposed the portly one, "don't you go to talkin' against Tom Bowles. He ain't a bad feller a-tall, he ain't—"

"He ain't? He'd pizen a skunk, he's that mean!" said Perkins viciously. Steve Hewson turned and considered the gentleman reflectively, but Dug Perkins failed to observe his eye. "Why, Tom would shoot anybody in the back and be glad of it!"

With drunken amiability, the portly man veered about.

"Well, I reckon he would, come to think of it," he said. "Yep—hic—reckon he would—"

"He sure would," added the bartender, with a sneer. "I seen him t'other day when that killing come off. He was cool as could be, like he enjoyed it. Gents, lemme tell you Bowles is sure one bad hombre!"

"I reckon," drawled Steve Hewson, "that all you gents agree on that there fact?"

"You bet!" said Perkins.

"Yep, we—hic—we sure do," said the portly one.

"I don't," said Mr. Hewson.

With the word, his gun leaped into sight and the business end of it caught Perkins over the ear and sent him reeling, to fall in a heap. Swinging, Hewson plunged his left fist into the portly stomach at his side, and the drinker collapsed with a loud "woof!" Just in time, Hewson dropped—the bartender had let fly with a bottle. It missed, and spattered on the opposite wall.

Hewson put one hand on the bar and vaulted over.

It was hard to determine just what happened next; the barkeeper was a fighter, and for a moment the air was full of bottles, bung-starters, fists and boots. A bottle hit the big mirror plumb center and smashed it full of radiating cracks; the cigar-case at one end of the bar was knocked down and smashed, sprinkling the floor with cigars; the bar itself rocked on its base but settled back again; the bottles behind it were swept from their shelves. At length Steve Hewson rose up, caressed a bruise on his cheek, and surveyed the scene of wreckage with some satisfaction.

"Well, sir," observed a calm voice from the doorway, "it sure looks to me like the good old Eagletail Tornado had hit town! It sure does!"

Hewson swung around. In the doorway stood a dusty figure—a large man with a stogy gripped in his wide mouth, and twinkling eyes fastened upon Hewson.

"My gosh! It's you!"

"Yep," said Mr. Hewson reflectively, "everybody but me seemed to think that a feller named Tom Bowles was a sort o' pizen varmint, so I learned 'em. Howdy, Tom!"

"Howdy," said Mr. Bowles, and gravely shook hands. "If you're all done, let's go."

BOWLES was girded with two guns, as Hewson observed, and for all his calm demeanor, was alert and scrutinized the street before issuing forth. The two men left the wrecked saloon and went to their horses.

"You ain't leaving town right after gettin' here to meet me?" said Hewson.

"Sure am," said Bowles, and swung into the saddle. "Sudden come, sudden go is my motter for this here trip. Only that it's the heat o' the day, I'd prob'ly

stop lead 'fore we left town, so let's get movin' before folks wake up."

Steve Hewson asked no questions, but mounted and set forth beside Bowles, who was scanning the shop-fronts and houses narrowly. He had questions enough to ask, so far as that went, but realized that this was no time to ask them. Besides, he had skinned his knuckles and had a badly bruised face, and was occupied in cursing a piece of flying glass that had cut his arm.

Zin-n-ng-g-g! A bullet whistled between the two men, and the crack of a rifle lifted in their rear. The startled horses plunged forward. They were at the edge of town now, and looking back, Hewson saw a figure standing in the street. No further shot came, however.

"Who's your friend, Tom?" he inquired, when they had the horses calmed down.

"Sheriff, prob'ly," said Bowles, who had not glanced around. "Him and Dug Perkins are cousins. Looks like I'll have to plug him yet."

"You plugged somebody t'other day, didn't you?"

"Yep," said Bowles.

They rode on in silence, and the town fell from sight in the gray level of the alkali flat, and presently the road was winding among rolling foothills. Then Steve Hewson paused to roll a cigaret and unload his waiting queries.

"Howcome, Tom?" he demanded. "Down in the Eagletail country you used to be a respected member o' sassiety. Looks like your morals have got plumb unsettled since you come up into this here region."

"Yeah," said Bowles. "That's why I wrote you to come on up if you was free. How's things down at the Double H?"

"Middlin' fair as usual," said Hewson. "We ain't had a killin' in the county for goin' on three months now, excepting for greasers. That there ranch you bought—ain't she no good?"

"Yeah, she's good," said Bowles, and grinned. "Trouble is, she's so danged good that two-three other fellers want her."

"Shucks!" complained Steve Hewson. "You mean to say you had the nerve to get me up here just to help you out in an ordinary range war?"

"Ain't no ordinary war," said Bowles.

Hewson had known Tom Bowles the whole twenty-five years of his earthly existence, and held the lethargic, easy-going big fellow in affectionate respect; he knew of what Bowles was capable if once really roused. And Bowles, on the other hand, knew that in time of need the "Eagletail Tornado", as Steve Hewson was termed down south, would be better than a dozen men behind him.

Bowles produced a packet of stogies, selected a fresh one, and lighted it.

"You said to come alone, so I done it," said Hewson. "I might have brought three-four of the outfit to sort of lend us moral support, Tom."

"Nope," said Bowles, as the horses jogged on side by side along the deserted road. "Your danged hell-raisin' outfit would sure gimme a bad reputation up here. And as I say, this ain't no ordinary war. When it comes to guns, I can use 'em. T'other day two jiggers laid out to get me as I rode to town, but I got one and the other skipped. But this here business needs brains, and that's what I ain't got. You have, up to a certain extent."

"Thanks," and Hewson chuckled. "How many killin's so far?"

"Only the one. We ain't got right started yet."

"Well, I'll let you orate, so go ahead."

"I RAN into a mess up here," said Tom Bowles. "After I had bought this here Triangle P outfit, I found these here jaspers had rigged me. It's the likeliest range you ever seen, Steve; elegant buildings and so forth, fine water, and about five hundred head, all whiteface stock and in good shape. Title's clear as a bell and runs back to a Spanish grant."

"Yeah?" said Hewson. "'Cording to the Bible, the Garden of Eden was a right smart place too, only it had a snake in it. Where's the joker?"

Tom Bowles looked at him, half frowningly.

"Well, Steve, it sounds right silly to tell about, it sure does! You see, this here is an out of the way place. It was settled back in the early days by a wagon-train of folks from Missouri. They took up all the good land, drove out the greasers, and laid out to keep everybody else from comin' in—and they done it. They married amongst themselves, so that everyone around here is related to everyone else."

"I've heard of spots like that," assented Hewson. "You got to bust the gang or they'll bust you and freeze you out, huh?"

"Keno!" said Bowles. "Well, it turns out that this here Triangle P has been used for sucker bait for quite a spell before I got hooked. One feller after another has bought it on sight, settled down, and had to quit and sell out at a right smart loss. There's three-four main families who run the whole danged place—the other ranches, the bank, the store, and the saloons and so forth. Once in a while a feller from outside has married into the ring, and them kind are worse than the others."

"Huh!" Hewson grunted. "I don't see howcome you're so down in the mouth. You ain't busted. You brought five-six fellers up here with you, the best danged outfit I ever seen. They sure can't force you out. Not while you got your outfit, anyhow."

"I ain't got it," admitted Bowles gloomily. "Jake Hart broke his neck—got throwed by a hoss. Accident, seemed like. Slim Foster got drunk and tried to bust in the bank, and went to jail for it; they swore it on him. Gus Hansen quit after spring roundup, to go as foreman on a ranch up north. Hoppy Lang, he went to a dance and got into a ruckus, and when the smoke cleared off Hoppy was dead and nobody knowed who done it. The only one left is ol' man Bills, the cook. He's on the job."

"Too bad they didn't know your failin's better," commented Hewson. "If they knew how close you set to the table, they'd attended to Bills first of all. Well, who's riding for you now?"

"Nobody," said Bowles. "Don't need no riders for a month or two, real bad. Can't hire me a one around here, and if I bring in any, they'll only get run off. This here gang gets after me in all sorts of dirty ways, and it's danged hard to put a finger on 'em. They done tried to lick me, and after I wiped a few in the street-dust, they quit that. Now the sheriff's done give orders that I ain't to tote no guns in town. They got half a dozen court charges swore out against me, mostly for assault. Then they claim my fences ain't been kept up and my stock is doing damage—when the danged jiggers cut the fences their own selves!"

"And it's sort of gettin' you down, is it?" queried Hewson.

"Well," returned Bowles seriously, "I tell you it gets 'under any man's hide, Steve. If I lose my temper and cut loose, then they got me sure—they'll jail me. One gent can't fight a whole country, and that's a fact. And they know it. I got to a place now where I had to holler for help, and Bills, he says your brains could beat mine any day and to send for you. So I done it."

Mr. Hewson ruminated over this for a little, then had a bright idea.

"I got it, Tom!" he exclaimed. "We can fix it, just like you said yourself."

"Huh?" Bowles turned to him. "How?"

"Why, you marry into the outfit, that's all! Pick you some female that's connected with all the folks—"

Mr. Bowles made sundry remarks not fit for print.

"Anyhow, I'm too old," he said. "Now, it might do for you, Steve. You're younger'n me and might maybe manage it. There's two-three right smart lookers up here—"

"Let's talk about something else," said Hewson, and grinned. "When do we eat? I ain't had a bite since daybreak and it's past noon now."

"Got to wait till we get home, I reckon," said Bowles. "I ain't welcome at no ranch around here. This here road," and he pointed to a side fork, "goes up to Fletcher's place, a couple miles from here. All the folks around here are either Fletchers or Dibbles or McHorns—"

Hewson drew rein and waved his hand cheerfully.

"All right, Tom, you ride on home," he said. "Me, I'm goin' to Fletcher's and get me a bite to eat and maybe use my brains. Yeah, I mean it! I'll mosey along in time for supper, and maybe have some information. So long.

And, leaving the astounded Bowles staring open-mouthed at him, he turned into the side trail.

CHAPTER III

BRAIN WORK

STEVE HEWSON was not long in covering the two miles to the Circle F, as the Fletcher brand ran. He was curious to hear the other side of the story, to see what he could see, and he also wanted some dinner.

"Besides which," he cogitated cheerfully, "I'm a right good liar, and I'd better get in a few licks before word of what happened in town gets flying around. The one who gets in the first blow gets in a whole lot."

He found himself in an unexpectedly green valley where stock grazed thickly, and a clump of buildings nestled under wide-flaring live oaks ahead. Nobody was in sight, and the reason was evident as he came up to the house—the clatter of dishes and sound of voices came from the dining room, showing that he had just arrived at the right moment.

Turning his horse loose without ceremony, Hewson went around to a side door which opened directly upon the dining-room. The door was ajar, and as he stepped into the opening and was confronted by astonished faces, he removed his hat and smiled.

"Howdy, folks!" he exclaimed genially. "Ain't met a soul on the way—maybe you can tell me if this is the Triangle P, where a gent named Bowles lives?"

"No, it ain't," said a grim-faced man with a hard eye and grayish galleghers, who sat at the head of the table. Two others of those present, Hewson took to be his sons; two more, riders of the outfit. The comfortable-looking woman at the end of the table was probably his wife and—and—but no! That girl could never be the daughter of Old Hardface!

"This here is the Circle F, and I'm Cant Fletcher," said the owner curtly. "Who are you?"

"Steve Hewson by name, and amiable by nature," said Mr. Hewson, and was glad to perceive that here, at least, his name was evidently unknown. "I'm tryin' to find the Triangle P, but must have got off the road."

"Well, you come right in and set and eat," said Mrs. Fletcher, since her husband seemed indisposed to be even half-way hospitable. "Jenny, I reckon we can crowd a place over here. You fetch a plate."

"Thanks, ma'am," said Hewson. "If you-all will give me just a minute, I'll wash up."

Windmill, pump and trough were close at hand, and two minutes later he was back in the dining-room. A place had been made for him opposite Jenny—a clear-eyed young woman whose general looks were extremely easy on the sight, and whose smile left positively nothing to be desired.

As it happened, Steve Hewson had a real and abiding dislike for only one thing in the world—sham. He detested a bluffer or a hypocrite, in whatever form or shape presented to his attention. And something in the looks of the girl opposite him whispered that she cherished the same feelings, whereat Mr. Hewson was right happy.

He found himself eyed by everyone, helped abundantly to everything in sight, and not questioned openly. Since he wanted nothing better than to be questioned, he restrained his appetite and proceeded to talk as he ate.

"I dunno but what it's right lucky I happened in on you folks like this," he stated, beaming upon the grim Fletcher and the unsmiling sons and riders. "It's lucky for me, sure enough, so far as hunger goes, but I was thinking of information. I sure need it."

This guileless statement drew a grin

from one or two, but Fletcher's eyes narrowed.

"You a friend of Bowles?" he demanded flatly.

"Well, that remains to be seen," and Hewson chuckled, "after I buy his ranch —if I do."

"After—what?" gasped Fletcher. "You mean to say you aim to buy—his ranch?"

"Stranger things have happened," returned Hewson easily, and smiled cheerfully at Jenny. "I wouldn't say that I'd buy anything until I see it, and I haven't seen the Triangle P so far. Maybe it ain't even true that Bowles is wanting to sell out. However, judging by what them jiggers in town done to me this morning when his name come up, he ain't popular."

"No, he ain't popular," said Fletcher. "Something happened in town, huh? What was it?"

"Well, it come mighty near being a gunplay," confessed Hewson, "but we turned it into a scrap and let her go as she lay. I still got a skinned knuckle to show for it. What's this Triangle P like, anyhow? Is she worth five thousand in cash?"

Fletcher blinked hard at this.

"Huh? Five thousand? Pilgrim, ye don't mean to say Bowles is aiming to sell at that figger?"

Hewson shook his head. "Can't say for sure till I see him and verify it," he stated. "I been aiming to invest a little money, and from all I hear this is a right good country to settle in for a spell. You think his ranch is worth more'n that, huh?"

"Hard to say," evaded Fletcher. "If it ain't too direct, where you from?"

"From down below," said Hewson carelessly. "Say, ma'am, these biscuits sure are fine!" He addressed himself brazenly to Mrs. Fletcher. "You know, ma'am, this is always my luck—it is, for a fact! I always said that if ever I come acrost a woman who could make biscuits that were plump perfect, I'd marry her then and there. And every danged time I do, she's already took over by somebody else!"

Mrs. Fletcher laughed at this. "Well, Mr. Hewson," she returned, "you missed your bullseye this time, because I didn't make them. Jenny did."

"Oh!" Hewson looked at Jenny, wide-eyed. "Oh! Miss Jenny, are you married?"

"I hope not," began Jenny, when her father interfered.

"That's enough o' this fooling, Hewson. S'pose you tell me something, since you're so willing to talk! Are you right pressed to get to the Triangle P?"

"Oh, I ain't in any particular hurry," rejoined Hewson. "So long's I get out there sometime tonight, I s'pose it's all right. Place won't fly away. Why?"

Fletcher was frowning. "I'd like you to stay here an hour or two—gimme a chance to see a man in town. I might have some interesting information to give you about Bowles. I ain't afraid o' doing a stranger a good turn if it's possible. What say?"

"Sure, sure," assented Hewson. "I'll be real glad, Fletcher, and it's right neighborly of you, for a fact. My hoss needs a rest, anyhow."

"We'll take care of your hoss," said Fletcher, and shoved back his chair. "I'll go in right away—likely find some mail, anyhow. Ross, you and Jim get in them posts in the upper flat and have the job done 'fore sundown," he said to his two sons, then turned to the riders. "I want you should finish clearin' the loco-weed out o' High Valley, boys. We got to turn the stock in there Monday mornin', and that job's got to be done first. Got to catch the weed now, too, 'fore it goes to seed. Get it cleaned up and burned, and look to the pipes that bring water down from the spring."

He stamped out—a grim man, bitter hard, uncompromising with anyone or anything. Thought Hewson to himself, that if they were all like him, there would be some hard nut-cracking before this game was won for Tom Bowles!

HEWSON had not yet finished his meal when the others departed—all save Jenny and her mother. It was most delightful as a dinner, to a travel-worn pilgrim, and Hewson said so; he insisted

on giving them a hand with clearing up, despite protests, and in no long time was thoroughly at home with all concerned.

When the work was finished, Jenny adjourned with the visitor to the front porch, made herself comfortable in the hammock, and fastened a steady regard on Mr. Hewson.

"Well?" said the latter, as he rolled a smoke. "Your interest is right flattering, ma'am, for a fact, but—just what are you thinking about?"

"Something important," she returned.

"Good!" said Hewson, licked the cigaret, and fumbled for a match. "You and me are alike on that point. So'm I. And I'm right glad you consider it as important, because I sure do."

"What?" demanded Jenny.

"What you're thinking about," and Hewson grinned. "I expect about my remarks on biscuit making—"

"Don't be silly," she cut in severely.

"I ain't," spoke up Hewson, before she could continue. "I don't think it's a bit silly. I think it's good judgment—"

"Will you listen to me?" she demanded.

"Yes'm," he said meekly, though his eyes were twinkling.

"I want to know what you mean by telling the story you told at dinner!" she said. "You know perfectly well that you're Tom Bowles' old friend."

"Good gosh!" exclaimed Hewson, genuinely astonished. "How'd you know?"

"He told me so himself—told me a lot about you," she returned. "He and I are pretty good friends; I like him, even if nobody else does."

"I do," said Hewson, "and now that you do, that settles it."

"Settles what?"

"What I said about biscuits and marrying you—"

There was a sharp sound. Mrs. Fletcher came into the doorway to see Mr. Hewson picking himself up, with a very red face, and Jenny with an even redder face.

"Now what?" said Mrs. Fletcher, smiling.

"A slap, ma'am," said Hewson, unabashed. "I says to Jenny that I was perfectly serious about marrying anyone who could make biscuits like she does. And I ain't ashamed of it. I am. I mean it. And you can't blame me, ma'am!"

Mrs. Fletcher looked at him for a moment, then broke into a peal of laughter. Jenny, angry as she was, felt her lips twitching.

"No, I reckon I can't blame you," she responded. "And I can't blame Jenny either—"

"Thank you, ma'am, thank you!" exclaimed Hewson gravely. "It's mighty good of you to take it this way, and I'm mighty glad it's all settled. I expect Mr. Fletcher will blame Jenny some, me being something of a stranger, but I reckon I can give him proofs that I'm right solid."

"You are," broke in Jenny. "Solid bone. Are you actually in earnest, or is this some more of your joking?"

Steve Hewson winked at Mrs. Fletcher, then turned solemnly to the girl.

"Miss Jenny, I admit I done started out by joking, but since you're takin' it in earnest, why, so am I! Now, if you and me could take a little stroll out under them there trees and sort of talk over our future plans, your ma can enjoy this here hammock and the breeze. And you and me can get things all fixed up in proper fashion. Will you come along?"

Jenny regarded him with angry eyes for a moment, then caught the hint of laughter he could not quite repress.

"Certainly," she returned sweetly. "And you can talk to dad when he comes back."

Mrs. Fletcher sank into the hammock, laughing heartily, as they walked away among the trees surroundings the house.

SOMETHING to the surprise of Jenny, she found Mr. Hewson abruptly serious, as they got out of earshot.

"I'll trade you, Jenny—swap for swap," he said. "I didn't know you and Tom were friends. I only rode out part way from town with him, and then he went on home. I'm going on there from here, like I said. Howcome you're friends with

him? I thought he was being frozen out here?"

"I'm not taking orders about my friends," she returned quietly. "I like Bowles, and I think he's a fine man."

"None better made," agreed Hewson.

"And it's a shame the way they're picking on him," she continued. "I know the whole story, and how the place has been sold over and over, and so forth. Casper Dibble, the banker, and Joe McHorn, are behind the deal. Not openly, of course—then Wat Dibble has one of the biggest ranches in the county, and he's in on it, probably. And everybody else backs them up."

"What relation is Wat to Caspar?" queried Hewson.

"Nephew," she returned. "Just to set your mind at rest, I might say that I'm to marry Wat."

"Oh!" said Hewson, and looked curiously at her. "You in love with him?"

"That has nothing to do with it," said Jenny, but she reddened slightly as she spoke. "I said I'm to marry him—that's the custom around here, to do as you're supposed to do. I didn't say I meant to do it."

"Oh!" said Hewson in a different tone. "Anybody you are in love with, if I may ask?"

"No," she said, looking him in the eye. He grinned.

"All right, then there's a chance for me. Now, Jenny, listen here. You can find out from Tom Bowles that I'm no ladies' man. Also, I ain't aiming to insult you or anything of that kind. But facts are facts, ain't they! Yep, you can't get away from facts."

"Just what fact are you referring to?" she demanded.

"Me making up my mind to marry you if you'll have me—just like that." Hewson met her gaze with level, unafraid eyes. "Now, I ain't going to mention it again, Jenny—not until the right time comes. I ain't ever asked any other girl to marry me, and I never expected to—but facts are facts. You can think it over. Now, let's forget about me, and pass on to you. Do you aim to marry Wat Dibble?"

Jenny, obviously, could not make up her mind whether to be furious or accept Steve Hewson at face value and let things ride. Apparently she decided on the latter course.

"No, I certainly don't intend to do anything like that," she returned.

"All right—it's none o' my business, as you were about to add," and Hewson chuckled, "only I might make it my business. Now, about Tom Bowles. You've done told me who's back of the deal; your dad ain't against Tom?"

"Everybody's against him," she returned, frowning. "Folks here all hang together, Mr.—"

"Steve, plain Steve," said Hewson. "Might's well get used to it. Well, everybody hanging together makes it bad—for them that hang. Who's Dug Perkins? I met him in town this morning."

"He has a ranch over beyond the Triangle P. He and Wat go together a lot."

"I see. Now, have you got any suggestions to offer as to how this here affair might be solved without plugging a few gents? I hate to start any gunplay, because then I might have to dodge a few bullets myself, and it ain't healthy exercise. How can we sort of appease the lions?"

"You can't," she said flatly. "If any one old-timer here, somebody that's got position and is respected, would come out and stand up for Tom Bowles, then of course things would be a lot different. You haven't really any idea of buying the Triangle P?"

"I might have," said Hewson. "Or at least part of it. I didn't say I'd buy the whole works. I've got a notion working in my head, thanks to you, that may get somewhere. We'll see about it later. Is that your dad coming?"

Jenny turned, glanced at the spurt of dust on the road, and nodded.

"Yes, and he's alone."

"I expect he's seen Caspar Dibble, then," said Hewson, "and got primed up on how to handle this new sucker. Or is that talking too strong about your dad?"

"Huh!" said Jenny. "He's no dad of mine. He's my adopted father or stepfather or whatever you call it, also my uncle. So I'm not wasting any worries over how strong you talk."

"Oh!" exclaimed Hewson. "You didn't tell me that before, young lady. Now, s'pose you be a good little girl and run along home and let me have a private talk with your worthy uncle."

"What for?" she demanded.

"So's you won't be disappointed in me by hearing what a good liar I am, maybe. And then, I'd hate to put a bullet through him while you were right here."

Jenny studied the lean and earnest features of Mr. Hewson for a moment, met his twinkling eyes, then, with a curt nod, turned and was gone toward the house.

"I'll see you later," she flung over her shoulder.

STEVE HEWSON looked after her with a vivid appreciation of her quick, lithe step and her striking personality. The sun, striking down among the trees, touched her brown hair to a mass of flowing gold, and revealed the outlines of her slender, graceful shape. Mr. Hewson sighed as he turned to meet the approaching rider.

"My gosh, what a difference a hundred yards makes!" he muttered, looking at the grim-faced Cant Fletcher. Then he raised his voice. "Howdy! Find anybody dead in town?"

Fletcher dismounted, dismissed his horse with a slap, and turned a cold gaze on Hewson.

"I hear Bowles come into town and met you, and you rode out together. That true?"

"Sure," said Hewson easily. "Him and me disagreed on the way."

"Huh!" said Fletcher, skeptically. "And you sure raised hell in town. And you sure run a blazer on me, young feller. Now, you know what I'm goin' to tell you?"

"You'll change your mind about it," said Hewson, "if you lemme tell you something first."

Fletcher met his eyes for a moment, squarely, searchingly. Abruptly, his cold anger died under the gaze of Hewson; between the two men arose a quick comprehension, a realization—not a liking, but a certain respect.

In this moment, Steve Hewson saw something that probably no one else had ever realized. Cant Fletcher was a man of forbidding exterior, of hard and bitter aspect, yet there was something about him of the old stern Puritan—perhaps a rigid and uncompromising sense of justice, perhaps something deeper. And he was not a man to make friends. Beyond a doubt, other men feared him, had always feared him.

"I'm tellin' you this, Fletcher," said Hewson, with all gay lightness of manner quite gone from him. "You're a man that ain't appreciated."

"Yeah?" said Fletcher suspiciously. "I get on all right."

"Sure. But me bein' a stranger, I can say what I think, and if it makes you mad, all right. Now, if I buy out Bowles and take over his outfit—"

"You got no such idee," said Fletcher. "You and him are friendly."

"Well, good gosh! D'you reckon I'm goin' to be anything else but friendly with a feller I aim on doin' business with? Not much. Stands to reason! And as for buyin' him out, if we agree on a figger I bet you that this time tomorrow night will see Tom Bowles gone and me running the Triangle P. And that's what I want to tell you something about."

"Yeah? And what you aim to tell me?"

"That I figger you out to be a square jigger—just that. Square clean down to the ground. I expect you're a tough jasper in a swap, and you hold up your own end all along the line; but the one thing about you hits me between the eyes, is that you're plumb square."

Fletcher was too astonished, for a moment, to find words.

"Shucks!" he said gruffly. "Most everybody's square, I guess."

"Not by a durned sight," said Hewson emphatically. "And a lot o' folks up here around Las Palomas have got a different reputation. If I settle down in these here parts, I can handle the other sort o' gents, but I hate to have a neighbor like you, a feller who's real square in all he does, set out to be hostile just because I'm a stranger."

"Huh!" said Fletcher, surprised again. "Bowles been talkin' about me?"

"Nary a word—never mentioned you. I'm playin' my own hand as I see the cards. Why?"

"Huh! Me and Bowles had a couple o' run-ins," said Fletcher reflectively. "I reckon I was set ag'in him, for a fact, and he didn't take to me none. I thought mebbe he'd set you up to something."

"He ain't setting me up to a thing," and Hewson laughed. He had a ringing, friendly laugh that usually drew a response from others, and the grim features of Cant Fletcher relaxed a trifle. "Well, that's all I got to say," he went on, careful not to overplay his hand. "When a feller settles in a strange country, he'd most always do a sight better if he'd take advice from somebody there; and if you'd let me come to you when I need tellin', I'd appreciate it a lot."

"Why, sure, sure," said Fletcher, embarrassed. "I reckon I'll be glad to keep you posted, Hewson, though you look to me like you weren't no tenderfoot. About this here outfit, now—I asked some questions. Looks to me like you'd have a bargain at any price under ten thousand I hadn't no idee that Bowles wanted to sell out, especially so cheap. There ain't any mortgage on the outfit, neither."

"S'pose I could get one plastered on?" said Hewson, as they walked toward the house. "I dunno who to go to here, but it might help a lot towards buyin' the property."

"Well, s'pose you see ol' man Dibble, at the bank," suggested Fletcher. "It was him I was talkin' to about the mortgage. To tell the truth, I did think at first there might be some other likely outfit might suit you better, but there ain't hardly a thing for sale around here."

Hewson knew perfectly well that Fletcher had taken the surprising news to town, and that everyone must have been flustered to find that Bowles was thinking of selling out to a stranger from the outside. However, he figured that he had got in a strong day's work right here, and as they came to the porch, where Mrs. Fletcher sat alone, he set in to make it stronger.

"Well, ma'am," he said genially, "Your husband has done me a right good turn, riding to town and back this way. What's more, he's promised to help me out with his advice in case I take over the Triangle P—and lemme tell you, ma'am, that's something I appreciate! It ain't every man would take hold of a stranger like this and give him a lift, and I'm particular glad to have a square feller like your husband standing back of me."

Mrs. Fletcher looked astonished at this, as well she might, and Fletcher himself was too surprised to utter any denials; nor, perhaps, was he quite certain as to how far he had promised to stand back of Mr. Hewson.

Upon this, Hewson went to saddle his horse, and made his farwells. Jenny, he learned, had ridden off to visit a neighbor; he was somewhat taken aback at learning this, but shook hands heartily and rode off on his way—and Fletcher gave him a firm handgrip at parting.

At which, Steve Hewson chuckled to himself.

CHAPTER IV

RANGE INTRIGUE

THE afternoon was waning when Steve Hewson rode up to the Triangle P outfit. The range fully justified all that Bowles had said of it. It comprised chiefly three cañons shaped much like a Y, the approach being from the lower end. The outfit itself was located at the fork of the Y, and that entire lower cañon, a good half-mile in length, was a green Paradise such as Hewson had never thought to find in this country. The

two diverging upper cañons, which brought down the water from the foothills, widened out amazingly, and while nothing like so fertile as the lower flat, afforded ample evidence of their goodness as range land.

"With such an ace in the hole, this here outfit can't lose!" thought Hewson. "And enough of it to take care of a big herd, too."

The buildings before him at the fork of the Y, where two creeks meandered down and joined forces, commanded his amazed and appreciative regard as he drew closer. The house stood just above the junction; it was a one-storied but widely spread structure of adobe, with long projecting beams and a wide verandah all around, a patio lying behind. The other buildings were all out of sight up the left-hand cañon, cloaked by trees —for trees were everywhere about this fork. Pepper trees, their great feathery branches sweeping the ground, and poplars and cottonwood.

Fencing surrounded the buildings, and at the gate Hewson dismounted.

"Swing her open and come on up—leave her open," sang out a voice, and he saw Bowles seated on the wide verandah near the entrance. Chairs and a hammock, a table littered with newspapers, and faded cushions made the place seem like home.

"Howdy, Steve! Glad to see you," sang out Bills, usually called "ol' man Bill", the cook. He came limping out and took the reins as Hewson dismounted and shook hands. "G'wan up and set down," he said. "I'll put up the hoss—gosh, it's like old times to see your mug, Steve! Pitcher o' lemonade up there. Go set with our bloated plotocrat and swap talk. This here is a real ranch, this is—nothin' to do but set around and watch the cook work."

Hewson laughed and went up to the verandah, and settled comfortably in a chair.

"Well, get any dinner?" inquired Bowles.

"Best dinner you ever seen," said Hewson. "And found the girl I'm going to marry, Tom. Good day's work all around."

Bowles broke into a roar of laughter, for which Hewson could see no visible cause.

"Jenny Fletcher, huh?" Bowles shoved a box of cigars across the table. "Shucks, Steve! Do you reckon she's much for looks?"

"Looks don't count," said Hewson, biting at a cigar. "Anyhow, she's got 'em. And she's got more, Tom—the minute I looked into that girl's eyes, I knew she was the one I'd been waiting for and never hoped to find! Yes, sir. And what in dingnation are you knocking her for, huh? She tells me you and her are friends. It ain't like you to knock—"

"Aw, dry up, your danged tongue is hangin' at both ends," said Bowles. "Jenny's all right, and I'd go to the mat for her any day—but Cant Fletcher! My gosh, feller—"

"Fletcher, he's not so bad," said Hewson, and Bowles stared at him agape. "Listen here, Tom! You and me can do two things in this here deal. Either we can oil up our guns and start in to fighting, or we can use diplomacy. And it looks to me like fighting won't get us nowhere."

"That's why I called you in for help," said Bowles, eyeing him. "Got any idees?"

"Yeah, I got a good one," said Hewson earnestly. "First, I'm goin' to buy you out."

"Huh? You—you're what?"

"Yeah. Buy you out. And you're goin' away."

"Like hell I am!" said Bowles, and turned red. "Back down and crawl out? Not me!"

"Ain't a question o' crawling," said Hewson. "Listen, now! You've got your back up at everybody around here, and they at you. Pretty quick, somebody will land a bullet in you. So the best thing all around is for you to sell out to me—sell out complete, so far's everybody here knows.

"In reality," he went on earnestly, "you sell me a half interest, then you go down

to Morgan City and run my outfit in the Eagletails. You settle down there, I'll settle down here, and we'll make it a fifty-fifty deal. Of course, I may lose out here—but take it from me, I'll make a fight! And I got things started right now. Cant Fletcher is playin' the game fine—he'll stand back o' me if I buy you out. He don't know it yet, but he will. I've got things started with him."

"And what about Jenny?" said Bowles. "Steve, I'm right s'prised at you. It ain't like you to indulge no loose talk about a girl—"

"Cut it out!" snapped Hewson. "Loose talk my eye! Tom, I'm dead in earnest. If there's any way on earth I can—"

He caught a scowling look from Bowles—a look of almost savage warning.

"Aw, shucks!" said the older man hastily. "Can't blame anybody for fallin' in love with Jenny at sight, but you'll get over it. Won't he, Jenny?"

"He sure will," said the girl's voice.

STEVE HEWSON came out of his chair as though on springs, and turned to look at the girl framed in the doorway. He was thunderstruck by her appearance here, and for an instant his face was red as a beet under her amused look. Then he rallied.

"All right, all right—it ain't any secret," he said stubbornly. "Now that we got the agony over, you understand things anyhow. Come on out and set down. Jenny, and talk about the weather and so forth. Howcome you here?"

"I rode, of course," she retorted, and coming to the table, poured lemonade into the waiting cups. "Tom Bowles haven't you any glasses? Well, I expect you haven't." Her eyes lifted to the intent stare of Hewson, and she laughed. "I told you I'd see you later, didn't I?"

"Yep, and I was right disappointed to find you gone," said Mr. Hewson. He took the cup offered him, and lifted it. "Well, here's luck all around!"

"Luck all around," repeated Bowles, with a grin.

"Luck all around," said Jeny, and at that, Hewson chuckled.

"Thanks, young lady! Glad to know how you feel about it, anyhow," he observed, and then she caught his meaning, she was about to flash out angrily when Bowles intervened.

"You folks set down and stop this here squabbling about love and suchlike. You don't know a durned thing about it. Jenny, I got a heap o' respect for your judgment. You done heard what Steve allowed to do. What d'you think about it, huh?"

Jenny reflected briefly. "Well, I think it's a pretty good scheme," she said. "Steve, here, takes things for granted and is going to get into a lot of trouble with his smart ways, but he might make the grade if he was running the ranch, Especially if he could get dad behind him. I don't expect he could, because dad hates a liar and so do I, but—"

"Haw, haw!" Mr. Bowles slapped his thigh and exploded in laughter. "That's a hot one, that is!"

"Fletcher will back me," said Hewson curtly.

"I know him better than you do, perhaps," intervened Jenny. "He won't back you openly, at all events; and it's open backing you'd need here."

"I'll get it, and from him."

"How?" she demanded, skeptical. Hewson shrugged.

"I ain't figured that out yet, Jenny. But I'll do it. That is, if Tom says the word. This is his ranch."

"Well," rumbled Tom Bowles, "I sure hate to back down!"

"You did that when you sent for Steve Hewson," pointed out Jenny. Bowles grunted.

"Huh! Well, I reckon that's true. Lot o' difference between hollering for help and backing down, though," he returned. "Ain't like it was a bony fidy offer—"

"Well, it is!" said Steve Hewson. "Listen here, Tom—I'm making you a straight business proposition! You know good and well I can't stick around up here all summer and let my own Double H outfit go to halifax. I'll deed you a half interest in it on condition that you go down and run the outfit. You deed me a half interest in this range of yours, with

power to run it. Then we'll go into town tomorrow and do some talking, and you'll keep on a-going until you get to the Double H, and I'll come back here—and we'll see what we'll see. How's that strike you?"

"Fair enough," said Tom Bowles promptly, "only I reckon your range is worth a mite more'n this one, account the stock you got."

"Let that pass—Jenny Fletcher is setting on the porch here, ain't she? That makes this here porch worth my whole danged range!" said Steve Hewson. "But you can always ship me up some stock to even it up, if you like."

Bowles cocked an eye at the girl.

"How about it, Jenny? Do you want this hell-raisin' jigger around here?"

"Of course not," she returned promptly. "But it looks like a good proposition."

"Then it's a bargain!" said Bowles. "So that's ended. Jenny, you stick around for dinner—"

"Can't be done," said Jenny, rising. "I'll have to get home. I'm mighty sorry to be saying goodby to you, Tom—and I sure will be sorry I can't ride over here and see you—"

"Shucks, me and Steve are ridin' along back with you, anyhow," said Tom Bowles, and heaved up out of his chair.

So they saddled up and rode home, or nearly home, with Jenny Fletcher; and after parting from her, rode back to the Triangle P again, mostly in silence.

IT WAS dark when they reached home, and at the supper table, Bowles promptly called the old cook, who had been with him for years, into consultation. He laid the proposal of Steve Hewson before Bills and asked his advice.

"Well," and the old rider grinned at Hewson, "I've knowed Steve goin' on ten year, and next to you I'd just as lief work for him."

"Huh? What in time d'you mean by that, you mangy-hided coyote?" demanded Bowles.

"I'm gettin' sort o' tired of setting around where there ain't no excitement," said Bills, giving his belt a hitch. "Long's you're setting here drinking lemonade, there ain't nothing going to happen. If this here crazy half-wit takes on the outfit, then anything's liable to bust loose; and if it don't, this here galoot will turn it loose. So I say to take him up, and go on back to the country where you was raised. Me, I'll stick around and cook for Steve until they bury him, and then I'll come along and join you."

Hewson chuckled over this left-handed form of advice. Bowles pretended to be highly angry, and smashed a coffee-cup trying to hit the cook; and everybody understood each other. Bills, as a matter of fact, was an old rascal who loved nothing better than a fight, although he usually came out second-best.

With sunup, Bowles and Hewson were riding for town, while Bills hitched up the team to follow with the buckboard, since the ranch was about out of supplies. Much against his will, Bowles was persuaded to leave his rifle as a legacy to Hewson, and to pack up his things and be ready to get the noon stage out of Las Palomas.

"No sense you getting into ructions now," said Hewson, as they rode. "I got a sneaking idea how to handle this here matter, but between you and me it's got to be handled mighty fine. And I aim to do the killing my own self."

"I knowed it, dog-gone your dirty hide!" said Tom Bowles. "Soon's I get gone, you'll start to shooting and raising hell and leaving me out of the fun!"

"I won't," said Hewson. "I got no such notion, Tom. But soon's that feller Wat Dibble finds out about my ambitions, he's goin' to climb my frame."

"He sure as hell is," agreed Bowles. "Who told you about him?"

"Jenny did."

"Huh! Looks to me like you're liable to be married next week, the rate you're going, if you ain't dead!"

"Nothing could suit me better," said Hewson, whereat the other sniffed.

"Listen, now; I'll bequeath you all I

know, which ain't much, about the gents who rigged me. Caspar Dibble, the banker, would chew his own ear off for a plugged dollar, and he'd betray his best friend for a nickle. Wat, who's a sort of nephew to him, is different. He's young and bad when he's drunk and worse when he's sober. Him and Dug Perkins run together. Dug is the feller you seen in town. He's got a hellcat of a wife who runs him out once in a while. Joe McHorn is the only lawyer in Las Palomas. He's a bank director, too."

"Him and Dibble senior are back of the Triangle P game, huh?" said Hewson.

"Yeah. Mostly McHorn. Wat Dibble is the one who sold to me. They're all in on it, of course, but I reckon Wat and McHorn run it together, and Caspar, he sets back and makes side money off the deal—like on a mortgage and so forth."

"Well, maybe we'll let him sniff a little on this deal," returned Hewson blithely.

A mile farther on, a side road came into the highway, and a single rider was jogging along on his way to town. Recognizing him Bowles uttered a curt oath.

"There's that danged Dibble now—Wat."

"Well, keep your shirt on and act friendly," advised Hewson, seeing that the other was drawing rein and awaiting them. "Prob'ly he ain't heard of my ambitions yet."

This was apparently true, for Wat Dibble greeted them in a friendly if not cordial manner. He was a square-built man of a trifle over twenty years in age, but his air of bulldog obstinacy and his bushy black brows gave him an older look.

"Glad to meet you," he said, as Bowles introduced Hewson. "Stranger in these parts?"

"Not exactly," said Hewson lightly. "Come up to see an old friend o' mine lives around here—Cant Fletcher. Run into Bowles here, and I reckon I'll buy out his ranch and stick around a while."

Mr. Dibble blinked hard. He was staggered—badly staggered, by this casual information.

"You—you the feller had a run-in with Dug Perkins yesterday?" he queried.

"Me?" Hewson looked surprised. "Nope. First I'd heard of it. I had a drop too much and maybe acted up a little rough—wouldn't hardly call it a run-in, though. Fine-looking country you got up here! Sure is all Cant Fletcher said of it, for a fact!"

Dibble looked as though he were trying to think—hard. The three rode on to town, Steve Hewson doing most of the talking in his usual carefree and casual manner.

CHAPTER V

GATHERING CLOUDS

INFORMATION conveyed indirectly may be valuable. Steve Hewson was asking Dibble, as they came into town, guileless questions about where he could pick up a little more stock for the Triangle P. Dibble shoved up his Stetson and scratched his head.

"Huh! Might arrange for that, maybe—all depends. I been talking some about takin' over some Circle F stock, maybe five hundred head, for cash; might be we could arrange it."

They parted cordially. Wat Dibble was making an effort to be agreable to the newcomer. He had recovered from the shock of finding the Triangle P sold to an outsider, and was figuring on where he could get in.

"Cant Fletcher needs cash, does he?" said Hewson thoughtfully.

"I reckon," said Bowles. "I hear tell he's been sort of in the hole. He had a son who run off three-four years ago, got into trouble in 'Fricsco, and has cost the old man a pile o' money. I dunno the rights of it. Pretty near killed old Fletcher, I hear—too bad it didn't finish the job! I sure wouldn't do no mourning. What's on your mind, anyhow? You ain't thinking of supplyin' that old galoot with cash, are ye?"

"I dunno, Tom," admitted Steve. "I'm right anxious to do him a favor or two,

for a fact. Far's I can see, that jigger is an ace in the hole if I can play him right."

"Well," warned Bowles, "you do much more talkin' behind his back about what good friends you and him are, like you done to Wat Dibble, and Fletcher will sure come a-smoking! I'm telling you. What's the program now?"

Hewson drew rein. "Bank's just about opening up. Hm! Let's leave the recording office out o' this—we don't want anybody here to know too much about our business. You come along and introduce me at the bank, and back up my play."

"Sure."

They dismounted before the bank, a dusty building of brick, and found the doors just opened up for business. Caspar Dibble, who acted as his own cashier, turned over his window to a teller and joined them in the frugally furnished private office at one side, and Steve Hewson was introduced. The banker was a leathery man of sixty with fishy, droop-lidded eyes and a mouth like a steel trap.

"Mr. Hewson's buyin' me out, Dibble," said Tom Bowles bluntly. "We've done arranged a price for the outfit and so forth, and Hewson wants to talk with you."

Having already been apprised of the staggering news by Wat, Mr. Dibble betrayed no emotion on learning that the Triangle P had passed into outside hands without profit to the Las Palomas ring. He beamed on Hewson and hoped he would like the country up here and so forth.

"Reckon I will," said Hewson genially. "Cant Fletcher allows he'll give me a boost if I need it—but I ain't going to anybody but a bank to borrow money. I believe in lettin' the bank know all my business, cards down. Ain't that right?"

"Excellent, Mr. Hewson, excellent!" approved Caspar Dibble. "You know Cant pretty well?"

"Oh, more or less," said Hewson. "Him and me are pretty good friends. Sort of related distantly. I don't reckon he could lend me any cash right now if I wanted him to, huh?"

"Not cash—not hardly," returned Dibble. Tom Bowles tried to choke off Hewson's talk of relationship with Fletcher, but his looks passed unheeded. "Cant is sort of pressed for ready cash right now—got a fine ranch, though. Figure you'll need some cash?"

"Well, I'm makin' a cash deal for the outfit," said Hewson, "and I aim to throw in a bit more stock—the range could stand it fine. Don't guess I'll need more'n a couple of thousand at the outside. What kind of security would you want?"

"Our rules are pretty strict," said Dibble, stroking his chin. "We got to have plenty for a loan of that size, Hewson. What was you aiming to put up? The outfit?"

Hewson laughed. "On a loan of that size! Not hardly. Tell you what I'll do; Bowles, you deed me the ranch by halves, see? Gimme a deed for half the outfit, stock and all; I'll put up a mortgage on that half. How's that, Dibble? I reckon that's more'n enough, huh?"

Dibble demurred, for demurring was the best thing he did. However, the bargain was beyond doubt attractive. Hewson refused flatly to give him any time to think it over.

"Nix on that! I got to finish business here and now so's Bowles can take the noon stage out. Either I bororw the money, or I let it go altogether, so speak your mind, feller!"

Mr. Dibble wanted his fat interest rate and wanted to have at least half the Triangle P sewed up for a fraction of its value, so he proposed that they adjourn to the recorder's office. Here a rough guess was made as to the best half of the Triangle P, and after some time the papers were made out to the banker's satisfaction. Tom Bowles made out the deed, it was duly recorded, and the three then returned to the bank and Joe McHorn was called in to make out the mortgage papers.

McHorn was a stoop-shouldered man of forty, with a face like a sour persimmon. He did not know what to think of the matter, but Dibble persuaded him to act first and talk afterward, and the

papers were duly drawn up and signed.

"Now," said Dibble, "how you want the two thousand deposited? In a checking account?"

"Don't want it deposited," said Hewson promptly. "I'll keep it in my pants, thanks. May need to buy a drink or something. Gents, will you step across the street and liquor up?"

"Not me," said Bowles. "I ain't drinking. Besides, I got to get my stage ticket. See you later, Steve."

THESE activities had taken time, and the morning was fast disappearing as the three walked across the street to the nearest saloon. Hewson was genial and extremely cheerful, and after one round excused himself, leaving Dibble to tell McHorn all about the deal.

He started out to find Tom Bowles, but he stopped short at sight of Cant Fletcher just coming out of the postoffice. The man had an open letter in his hand, and in his grim-lined face was a look of stricken horror.

"Morning," said Hewson, wondering what was up. "Why, Fletcher, what's the trouble? You look like you'd been hit below the belt."

"My gosh, I have!" said the rancher, with a hollow groan. "It's—it's—well, can't talk about it, that's all—"

Hewson took his arm and drew him to one side.

"Here, Fletcher. I rode into town with Wat Dibble, and he told me something of your troubles. Now, I don't want to butt in, but—"

Fletcher's face took on a savage expression.

"He what? He told you—"

"Yeah," said Hewson, "told me all about it, and him takin' over your stock and so forth. Now, listen here. I ain't forgot what you said yesterday about backin' me up, sabe? Well, it's a poor game that don't work two ways. What's hit you? Can I help you out any?"

"I—no, I reckon you can't, Hewson," said the rancher brokenly. "Did—did Wat tell you about—"

"About your boy, you mean?"

Fletcher nodded, his grim face reflecting inner misery.

"No secret, I reckon," he said, bitterly. "I got to raise some money, catch the stage out o' town right off, and—and go give the boy a lift. He's dyin', according to this here letter. Good gosh! I come into town all alone, and—"

Steve Hewson acted promptly and with decision. This looked providential—he had wanted nothing better than to place Cant Fletcher under an obligation to him, and here was the chance ready made.

"Well, you forget about them robbers over to the bank," he said, hauling out his roll of large bills. "Here's a thousand—twelve hundred—fifteen hundred in cash. You go along and tend to your boy, pardner. When you come back, turn over some stock to me instead of to Wat Dibble, sabe? We don't fight about the price—you're square, and I ain't out to cheat you. I'll tell Mrs. Fletcher where you've gone—"

It was probably the first time in years that Cant Fletcher had been offered something for nothing. He was dazed. He looked from the money to the face of Hewson, in bewilderment.

"Huh?" he gasped. "You—what about interest—or security?"

"Security, hell!" said Hewson. "I ain't no money-lender. This is between friends. I'm buyin' some stock on the hoof, and advancing the price, that's all. Forget it! You run along on your errand, and we'll settle up when you get back. I've took over the Triangle P, and I'll be setting right here. And I hope you find the boy ain't dyin' like you say."

"He writes he's bad hurt and may die," said Fletcher. "He ain't up to much, but I can't go back on him. Hewson, by gosh, I won't forget this here business! If there's anything I can do for you—well, it's something money don't repay, that's all. I'll take the money, and we'll square up when I get back—won't be more'n two-three days, I reckon. Will you stop in and tell the folks? Break it easy-like to ma, will you—"

"Leave it to me," said Hewson. "Where's your hoss?"

In five minutes he had collected Fletcher's horse, put it with his own and that of Bowles, and shook hands with the gaunt rancher. In a way, Hewson felt somewhat ashamed of his action; it had been calculated, deliberately done for the sake of its effect, and Steve Hewson was not proud of himself as he sought Tom Bowles and found that gentleman conferring with Bills, who had arrived with the team.

"Give us some money, Steve," said Tom. "We got a bill to pay at the store, and I ain't got a cent to go south with—"

"Help yourself," said Mr. Hewson. "I got five hundred left."

"Huh?" Bowles stared at him, aghast. "Good gosh, feller! You had two thousand in cash less'n half an hour ago—"

"Shucks, I can spend more'n that in half an hour!" and Hewson chuckled. "I been sowing some seed. Here, take what you need. Bills, you load up and go on back to the ranch after dinner, and don't start in drinkin' the town dry neither. I'll be along after I do an errand or two on the way."

As the stage was already loading up, Hewson accompanied Tom Bowles into the hotel, where they caught a hurried dinner. Over the meal, Hewson explained where his money had gone, and Bowles grunted.

"Well, I reckon Fletcher won't cheat you—but he's sure as hell one hard feller in a swap! So his boy's cashing in, huh? No loss, from all I hear. All the good in that family run to Jenny. So he'll be aboard the stage, huh? Well, him and me won't make no talk. Got to rush, feller. I'll write you back from Morgan City and we'll straighten out our deal."

Hewson nodded.

TEN minutes later, the stage drew out for Zion Junction and the railroad. There was, as usual, a crowd on hand to witness its departure. And this crowd, who had heard about Steve Hewson and the saloon fracas of the preceding day, was now petrified to see the warmth with which Cant Fletcher wrung the stranger's hand and took his departure.

It was also petrified to see Tom Bowles, and to hear the gossip that this stranger had bought out the Triangle P.

"All the same," thought Hewson to himself, as the stage drew out in a whirl of dust, "I feel like a mangy coyote, takin' advantage o' Fletcher for my own ends! Personal, I know durned good and well I wouldn't hand him fifteen hundred dollars—it's all bluff on my part. Steve Hewson, you'd ought to be kicked!"

He went into the Blue Front, found Mr. Bills standing at the bar, and joined him gloomily.

"My gosh, what's hit you?" demanded the cook. "You look down in the mouth."

"He'll look downer in a minute," said a voice behind them. "Put up them hands Hewson!"

Both turned. Gun ready, Dug Perkins stood just behind Hewson, his red-rimmed eyes venomous with hatred. And at his elbow was a scrawny gentleman wearing a sheriff's star.

"Welcome to our party, gents!" said Hewson, brightening at this hint of trouble. "You want me to look over your gun and see if she's working, Dug?"

"No, I don't," snapped Perkins. "I'm servin' notice that you're goin' to be arrested for assaulting me yesterday—get that?"

"Yeah," drawled Hewson. "And them words being so, I serve notice here and now that you stop lead when we meet again. Get that? I mean it, too. Sheriff, you backin' this gent's gun-play?"

"Put up that there gun, Dug," said the sheriff. "Hewson, you got to hand over your gun when you come into town, sabe? We don't want no more ruckuses startin' around here."

"Sure, sure, glad to oblige!" said Hewson cordially. "Start right in by taking Mr. Perkins' gun, sheriff. I'm next."

"Huh?" the sheriff dropped hand to his weapon as he eyed Hewson. "We know Dug, and we don't know you."

"And I know you, you dirty-shirt wash-out!" said Hewson calmly. "You

and your gang don't ride me for a minute, sabe? If you want to know me, go ask Cant Fletcher. And now, get to hell out of here before I kick you out. Move! There's my gun on the bar, you reach for your gun and it's murder, sabe? Move, you coyotes!"

As though by magic, Hewson's gun appeared lying on the bar. Those within hearing, who had taken to shelter, craned forth to see. Mr. Bills uttered a loud guffaw, for the sheriff was hesitant. To use weapon on an unarmed man was a bit too strong.

And then, abruptly, Hewson launched himself and kicked Dug Perkins, hard. Caught by surprise, Perkins was sent through the doorway, to fly across the sidewalk and roll headlong in the dust. The sheriff reached for his weapon, but found the gun of Bills boring into his side.

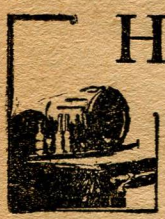
"Try it," said Bills.

"Not me," returned the sheriff. "But I ain't through with you gents, lemme tell you—"

"Well, get through!" Hewson looked at him. "Put up your gun, Bills. All right, sheriff—go right ahead and draw, and we'll have a new sheriff tomorrow. Draw, you polecat!"

The sheriff turned and walked out, preserving his dignity as much as possible.

"Which," said Bills to the bartender, "shows that the Eagletail Tornado has sure hit this man's town! Here's how."



HEWSON had seen nothing more of Wat Dibble, since reaching town. He now gave his attention to getting Mr. Bills safely off for home, and presently watched the team head down the street, with Bills shouting insults at several riders whom he recognized. Mr. Bills had taken a drink too many.

This task accomplished, Steve Hewson had nothing more to do than get a farewell drink and be on his way. He considered. There was the Blue Front, where he had just encountered Dug Perkins; the Last Chance, which he had more or less wrecked on the previous encounter; and third was the Silver Dollar, which he had not yet seen.

"Curiosity killed a cat," he thought cheerfully. "Let's go see."

The Silver Dollar was operated by one Mike Dibble, an offshoot of the family and related to all the rest of the county in varying degrees. He was a large red-faced gentleman with a heavily curled black mustache, and he had been hearing all sorts of stories about the wide-shouldered stranger who had just bought out the Triangle P.

"Huh!" observed Mr. Dibble. "These here bad men ain't no novelty. Hit 'em once under the jaw and they change their minds in a hurry about bein' bad. I know 'em."

"Well, you got a chance to get acquainted with this one," said someone at the bar. "He's headin' in this way right now."

The sheriff, as it chanced, was standing at the end of the bar enjoying a drink. He looked around, startled, as Steve Hewson grinned and joined him.

"Howdy, sheriff! Just the feller I was lookin' for. Give us a drink, barkeep—me and the sheriff want to talk over a matter."

When the bottle was slid along, Hewson refilled the sheriff's glass and spoke softly. He paid no attention to Mike Dibble or the others, who were eyeing him curiously.

"Now, sheriff, you pin back your ears and listen close. You and me had ought to be friends. If you want it the other way, then take your pick. You know Cant Fletcher—him and me are pretty thick, so use your head."

The sheriff, who was none too bright and had been unable to provide for his family until the last election put him in office, was not at all sure what to answer. He had seen the stage leave, and had witnessed the warmth between Hewson and Cant Fletcher. At this instant, Mike Dibble, who had put off his apron and had come around the bar, stepped up to the two.

"So you're the bad man from down be-

low, are you?" he demanded truculently. "Turn around and let's have a look at you, pilgrim."

Hewson turned and surveyed Mr. Dibble.

"My gosh, feller!" he exclaimed with an air of intense surprise and even horror. "Where'd you get it? What made it that-a-way?"

"Huh?" Dibble scowled. "What you talkin' about?"

"The curl in that there mustache of yours. Is it natural?"

The sheriff intervened.

"Listen, gents, cut out this funny business," he said. "Mike, don't start in to ride this here gent—"

Dibble put out one hand and shoved him. The sheriff staggered halfway across the room.

"So you're gettin' gay with me, huh?" Dibble glared into the amused eyes of Steve Hewson. "You're the feller I've heard Bowles talk about, huh—the Eagle-tail Tornado, that right? Well, this here country is where tornadoes goes to sleep, sabe?"

"Yeah, I get you," said Hewson, smiling a little. "You don't like bad men around here, huh? You and Dug Perkins must be bosom friends, feller."

The red face of Mike Dibble grew redder than ever, as he whipped himself into a fury. Steve Hewson took up the bottle and began to pour another drink. His apparent unconcern maddened the hot-tempered barkeep.

"Go for your gun, you—"

Dibble loosed a string of vile epithets, his hand hovering above his belt. Hewson gave him one sidelong glance, then—

Just how it happened, no one could see, for everyone within range was scattering for cover. The bottle seemed to fly from Hewson's hand, and the butt end struck Mike Dibble squarely between the eyes. The man flung out both hands and dropped; his face was covered with blood, for the bottle had smashed and cut him badly.

"Which same," observed Hewson drawlingly, in the silence, "shows how easy it is to keep out of a gunfight. Ain't that so, Sheriff? If I was you, I'd advise these gents to leave tornadoes and such things alone. They sure are bad medicine. Have a drink?"

The dazed sheriff shook his head. Mr. Hewson finished his drink, stepped over the prostrate bartender, and departed beamingly.

A MOMENT later he was swinging into the saddle, taking the horses of Cant Fletcher and Tom Bowles in tow. There were plenty to watch, but none to hinder, as he left town.

"Well, my curiosity was sure satisfied," he ruminated, with a chuckle. "So far, I ain't pulled a gun, but it looks like somebody was goin' to stop lead before things go much farther. That there sheriff is straddlin' the fence. Dug Perkins and his friends are out for my hide. Soon's Wat Dibble shows his hand, we're all set to go. Looks to me like I'd better go home and lay quiet and sort of oversee my property for a spell. Dog-gone, I feel mean about working Cant Fletcher like I done! I feel mean as hell, to put it blunt."

As he rode from town, heading for the Circle F, Steve Hewson's face grew darker. He was too frank and straight-acting to approve of his own doing this day. True, all is fair in war, and this certainly was war; yet there was something about his action which struck him as sneaking and underhand. Perhaps it was the fact that Cant Fletcher had gone to find his dying son. This possibly reacted on Hewson's attitude, even to making him regret what he had done, or rather the hypocrisy in its doing.

It was in this mood that he rode out to the Circle F. As he drew near the house, he saw two riders on the front gallery, talking with Mrs. Fletcher, but no one else was in evidence. He was the center of attraction as he rode up, and one of the riders came out to meet him.

"Anything wrong with Fletcher?" inquired the rider, low-voiced, jerking a thumb toward the Circle F horse.

"Nope." Hewson dismounted and turned over the horse. "He ain't comin'

back for two-three days, that's all. Gone to see about his boy."

Mrs. Fletcher introduced him to the two men, who speedily took their departure.

"Well?" inquired the lady. "I see you got Cant's hoss there. What's it mean?"

"I got to tell you, Mrs. Fletcher," said Hewson. "He got a letter in town that—that your boy was sick somewheres. He hopped the stage and says for me to tell you about it."

Mrs. Fletcher turned white.

"Is—is that all of it?" she asked in a low voice.

"Yes'm," said Hewson. He did not intend to say that the boy was dying.

"Where did he go?"

"By gosh, ma'am, I never thought to ask!" Hewson laughed. "For a fact, I didn't—"

He broke off, glancing around. In the doorway stood two people—Jenny and Wat Dibble.

"We heard what you said," spoke up Dibble. "This is the first I heard about Cant going away—howcome he didn't say anything to me about it this morning?"

There was distinct hostility in the man's eyes and voice. Hewson was astonished until he looked at Jenny and saw signs of agitation in her face—certainly not due to the plight of her cousin. Hewson decided instantly on his course.

"Oh!" He looked at Wat Dibble, and under his whimsical laugh the young rancher flushed. "You seem to think Cant had ought to consult you when he turns around, feller!"

Wat Dibble took a step forward. His private talk with Jenny had obviously been anything but pleasant; sight of Steve Hewson sitting here on a footing of apparent intimacy with the family, doubtless inflamed him like a spark of powder.

Before he could speak, however, Mrs. Fletcher intervened.

"Now, boys, will you both kindly shut up? You don't need to glare at each other like two dogs itchin' to fight—there ain't going to be no fight around here, Jenny, you go get some cold water or lemonade or something; I'm dry, and I reckon all hands would like a drink."

The girl disappeared.

"Not me, thanks." Wat Dibble gave Hewson one look, then came and shook Mrs. Fletcher's hand and descended the steps. "I got to be off," he said, a trifle sulkily. "I'll run over tomorrow and see if there's anything I can do. I'll probably be goin' to town anyhow."

He departed toward the corral for his horse.

"Our young friend," observed Steve Hewson, fabricating a smoke, "seems right peeved with me, somehow. He's a nice feller so long as he ain't crossed, huh?"

Mrs. Fletcher sniffed. "I expect he is. Oh, there's Jenny now!"

"Where's Wat?" inquired the girl, appearing with a tray and pitcher and glasses.

"Done gone home with his rope dragging," said Hewson. "What'd you do to him, huh?"

Jenny eyed him, as though to say she would pay him back for this thrust.

"What I don't understand," exclaimed Mrs. Fletcher, sipping her water, "is howcome dad went off like that! I know good and well he didn't have any money to speak of. I s'pose he went and borrowed at the bank—"

"No'm," said Hewson. "He arranged to sell some stock. I'd just got some money, and I come on to him when he was reading that letter, and I says for him to take the money and we'd settle up when he got home, him selling me stock. I need some more for the Triangle P, and I knew that Wat Dibble had figured on buying some—"

"And you gave him the money?" demanded Mrs. Fletcher, staring at him. "How much?"

"Fifteen hundred. Wasn't much time to talk—he had to make the stage."

"Well, for the land's sake! To think of you helpin' him out—"

"Oh, hell! Beg your pardon, but it's so," said Hewson, savagely. "I don't aim to play that sort of game anyhow, and I'm an ornery lowdown skunk—that's a fact. You may's well hear it all. I figured that

if Cant Fletcher backed me up I could make the grade among the folks here. I figured if I could obligate him to me, it'd be fine. And I done took the chance. It wasn't generous and it wasn't helping him neither—it wasn't nothing but ornery cold-bloodedness, and I'm durned ashamed of it, and so I'm telling you. It's been stickin' in my craw ever since."

He lighted his smoke and met the astonished gaze of Mrs. Fletcher without flinching.

"Huh!" she said. "So that's it, is it?"

"Yes, that's it," said Hewson. "And you needn't tell me how lowdown I am—I know it."

"You poor innercent young fool!" said the good lady. "For two cents I'd kiss you—just like that! Why Steve Hewson, I'm right proud of you! Yes, sir. So far as I'm concerned, you'll get backed up good and plenty. I'm glad you done it, and I'm glad you're setting there telling us about it—"

Wat Dibble passed the end of the porch, waved his hand, and rode on without halting for the road. Hewson shrugged and looked at Jenny.

"Well, I reckon we're all liable to lowdown, ornery impulses, huh?" he said. "Anyhow, I'm playin' straight with you folks from now on—"

"Don't be silly," exclaimed the girl, her eyes shining. "Steve Hewson, I think you're fine! I knew all the time—I guessed, rather—that you were up to some sort of a game, and now that you've chucked it, you suit me fine."

"That's good," and Steve chuckled. "Then, about the marrying part—that ain't chucked with the rest, you know—I reckon that'll suit you fine too?"

"You talk to dad about that when he gets home," said the girl, smiling.

"I will," said Hewson, gravely. "Well, folks, I feel better—and I'll be on my way. Them hosses look anxious about home, and I want to look over my new place."

"You've bought the outfit, then?" inquired Jenny.

"Yeah—half of it, anyhow. I can always buy the other half off Tom, whenever I'm ready to marry and settle down. Well, ma'am, I hope you won't have any bad news from your husband, and that everything will come out well—"

Mrs. Fletcher rose, and smiled as she gripped his hand in both of her own.

"Steve," she said, "you're all right! And remember what I'm tellin' you—when you need any backing up, you just refer folks to me. Understand?"

"Thanks, ma'am, thanks," said Mr. Hewson, confusedly. "I expect we'll come out all right. Jenny, so long until tomorrow! Between me and Wat, I guess we can do all the errands you folks need done."

He went out to the waiting horses, swung into his own saddle, took the reins of Tom Bowles' horse, and headed away.

AN INEXPRESSIBLE relief surged through him as he rode; he had cast off a shadow, with that confession—had freed himself of a dark incubus that had ridden him ever since noon. As a man will, he had deliberately acted against the promptings of instinct, obeying the dictates of reason and cold calculation; but in the end, instinct and conscience had triumphed. His action was in no sense an out of the way one—it was the feeling of hypocrisy that rode Steve Hewson so hard.

"Now, by gosh, I'm myself again!" he reflected happily. "I can lie like hell when it has to be done—to an enemy. But a feller that will lie to a friend ain't good enough for decent hanging. There's lies and lies, all kinds of 'em—"

He was whistling cheerily when he turned a bend and came to the junction with the highway.

The sun was well in the west. On the other side of the highway was a low, rocky hill bare of brush. Hewson came to the highway from the west, with the sun behind him. His eye caught a glitter on the hillside, but at the same instant he perceived Wat Dibble sitting his horse where the farm road came into the highway, evidently waiting for him. Everything else was at once swept from his mind.

"Howdy, pilgrim, howdy!" called Hewson jauntily, as he came within hail. "Lookin' for me to come, huh? Well, sir, I figured you might be sort of hanging around waiting for me, so I done hurried up all I could—"

"Kind o' make yourself to home there, don't you?" said Wat Dibble. He swung his horse around, bending a dark scowl on Hewson. "I guess you and me will have a word or two, feller."

"That's real kind of you, for a fact," said Hewson cheerfully. He drew rein and began to roll a smoke. "I sort of thought you had something on your mind back there. What is it?"

"Two or three things," said Dibble. "You been tryin' to shine up to Jennie, huh?"

"Shucks! I wish I could," returned Hewson. "Yes, sir, I'd sure like to. If—"

Once again his eye caught a glitter on the hillside. He let go the reins of Bowles' horse, touched his own animal with his heels; the horse moved slightly, and Wat Dibble was between Mr. Hewson and the hillside opposite.

"Well," said Dibble, dangerously quiet, "We'll settle this business here and now. I don't swallow your big talk about bein' friends with Cant Fletcher, and I don't give a durn if you are. You're keepin' away from there—from right now, on! Sabe that?"

"Well, I sabe what you say, but that don't make it so," and Hewson laughed a little. "What you aim to do if I don't? Put a bullet in me?"

"The quicker you're plumb removed from here, the better suited I'll be," said Wat Dibble, "And I'll sure as hell remove you if you get in my way. That's all."

He turned his horse swiftly and drove in the spurs.

Hewson looked after him for an instant —then flicked a glance at the hillside. He caught a slight movement. With a lurch, Hewson flung himself far over in the saddle; something burned his thigh, and from the rocks above came the lifting report of a rifle.

The first bullet had barely drawn blood —but here in the open, shelterless, Hewson had not a chance in the world.

(Hewson is trapped by his enemies but he is no fool with a six-gun. The Eagletail Tornado will be found storming along through furious action and into new dangers in the conclusion of this most gripping story by one of the greatest authors the west has ever produced, in the February Triple-X, on sale January 10th. Follow the Tornado to a crashing conclusion.—Editor.)

A QUEER WAGER

THE amazement of the Indians upon first beholding a white man had little on the astonishment of at least one band of Indians when they first saw a Chinese.

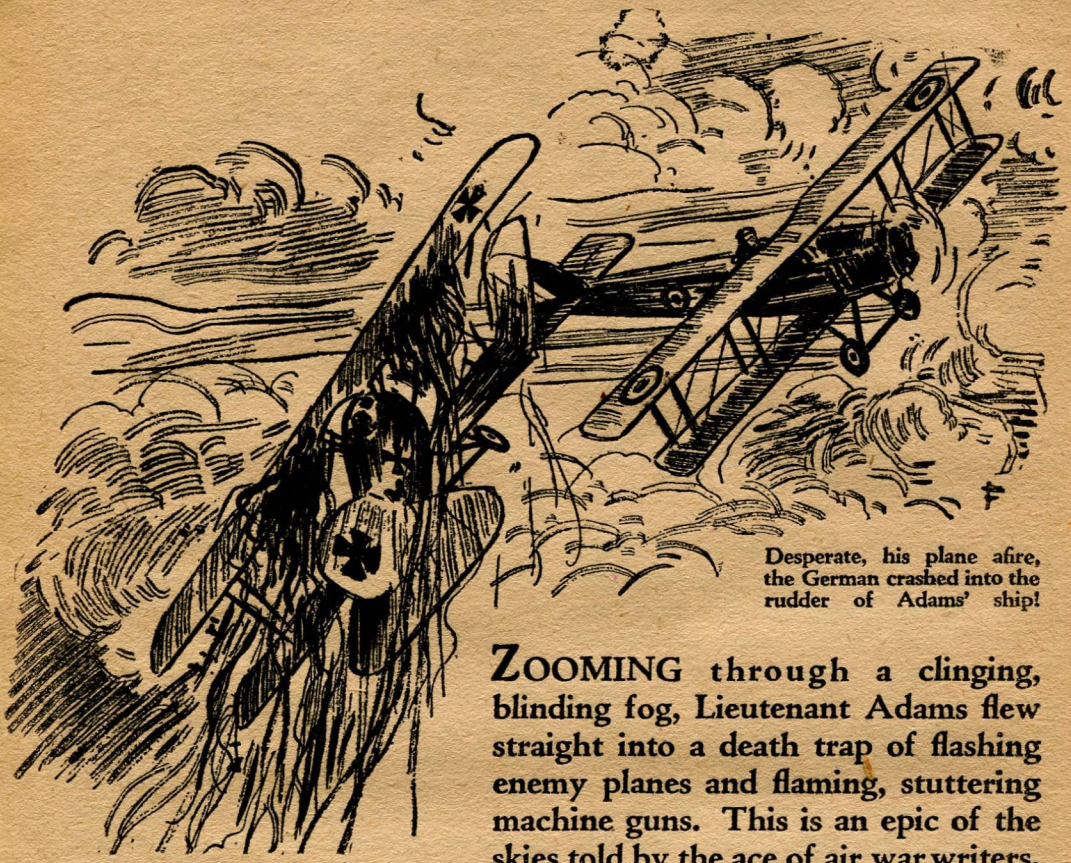
The incident is graphically recounted by Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance in a recently published book. The Chief was a youth at the time and his band of Blackfeet had journeyed to a trading post in the Northwest to secure blankets and other materials. The Indians had never seen many whites, and none of the tribe had seen a white woman, and naturally all were curious to see the trading post and to view the Whites.

As the tribe pitched camp, some of the young braves wandered off to try to find some otter, which were plentiful. While out they saw five or six persons described as "long-haired people with light skin," in a cabin.

Astonished, they returned to the camp with their information. Nobody knew who or what these persons could be, so it was decided they must be white women. One brave, however, maintained that they were "some other kind of pople" and the argument grew bitter. Finally this brave, Sun Calf, and another laid a bet of five horses concerning the people, and then they went out and actually captured one of these unknowns. Even after they had led the frightened creature back to camp, the Indians were divided about the matter, some of them maintaining it was a white woman, others just as stoutly claiming it was "some other kind of man."

Finally some Indians living near the post were attracted by the bickering and when they heard the cause they laughed and finally told the Blackfeet that the strange creatures were Chinese "from across the Minne-Tonka," or Pacific. Sun Calf won his bet.

Rivals of the Clouds



Desperate, his plane afire, the German crashed into the rudder of Adams' ship!

ZOOMING through a clinging, blinding fog, Lieutenant Adams flew straight into a death trap of flashing enemy planes and flaming, stuttering machine guns. This is an epic of the skies told by the ace of air war writers.

By RAOUL WHITFIELD

Author of "Cloud Raiders," "Clipped Wings," etc.

THERE was plenty of it, this gray, clinging fog. Drifting slowly down the slope just west of the tiny pursuit squadron field, clinging to the branches of the gaunt trees, then sweeping out over the field itself, the fog moved. It hung within ten or fifteen feet of the soft earth, and it was thick. Thick and cold. Twenty minutes ago there hadn't been any sign of it; now the barracks could not be seen from the nearest camouflaged hangar.

Lieutenant Ben Chapin came out of one end of the barracks and swore beneath his breath. It was almost eight o'clock and two ships were out on the dawn patrol. They had been out since a few minutes after six, and were due back any minute now.

A figure, short and chunky, emerged from the white screen of the fog, moving toward the barracks, a clap-board building considerably the worse for wear. Ben Chapin hailed the figure.

"Who's flying the dawn patrol, Adjutant? Adams and Cole?"

The short officer shook his head, pausing beyond the reaching wisps of white stuff. He spoke in a grim voice.

"Adams and that new officer—Lang-

don," he stated. "Looks tough, eh?"

Ben Chapin nodded. "Not so bad for Adams," he said slowly. "He'll have brains enough to fly back out of it, and land somewhere. But this Tex Langdon—the Lord knows what he'll do!"

The adjutant swore. "Wild riding birdman!" he muttered. "But if he tries to come down in this stuff, he may finish up his career in a hurry."

The adjutant vanished from sight into the narrow corridor of the barracks. He was hungry and cold, and not particularly concerned about Tex Langdon. Lieutenant Chapin stood out in the fog, and shook his head slowly.

"Hope Tex does use his bean!" he muttered. "Sort of like that officer. Acts like he's *trying* hard enough. But this'll be his first dose of—"

HE CHECKED himself. He was thinking of the clash after mess, last night, between Adams and Tex Langdon. It had been a sharp one. Lieutenant Adams was an old-timer—three weeks on the front. Tex had been up three days. In that time he had nosed over one ship, cracked another up two miles from the Squadron, in a forced landing, and then he had taxied into a wing-tip of Adam's pet Nieuport, just before mess. The old-timer had told him just about what he had thought. Tex had listened with a grin on his face, and the grin had enraged Lieutenant Adams.

"You'll get yours in about three more days, Langdon!" he had shot at him, and then, as Tex had kept right on smiling, Adams had gone the limit. "And the sooner the better—for this outfit!"

Ben Chapin, standing out in the fog with his face tilted upward, swore grimly. Adams hadn't meant that. He'd been sore; the nervous strain was telling on him. And Tex had smiled that provocative smile of his. The big fellow was calm, or had been until that second. Then his eyes had narrowed to little slits.

"Easy, Lieutenant!" he had shot back coldly. "Where I come from that's right bad talk!"

And then Adams had laughed. It had been a nasty laugh. And when he had finished laughing he had shot more words at the big Texan.

"You're not where you came from, unfortunately! But you'll get there, Lieutenant. The first Boche that gets on your tail will send you back to where you came from!"

Tex had got to his feet, after that. There had been no color in his face; Lieutenant Adam's meaning had been unmistakable. Ben Chapin had grabbed him, and the old-timer had turned his back and moved from the mess-room.

Lieutenant Chapin listened for the roar of a ship's engine, heard nothing but the distant rumble of guns, muffled by the fog. Staff had pulled a boner, in picking the locality of the Sixteenth Pursuit's field. Every five or six days the ground fog was so bad that ships didn't get in. Once or twice they hadn't been able to get off.

The pilot turned back toward the barracks. He shook his head slowly. Somewhere in the sky, winging back toward the squadron, most probably, were Lieutenants Adams and Tex Langdon. Quite often two pilots, one winging in from the north and the other from the south patrol of the front, would meet over Chalbrouck, fly back to the Squadron together. Perfectly synchronized wrist watches helped such a meet in the air. Lieutenant Adams was an old-timer. He knew about fog; knew where it was likely to hang and where the ground might be clear. If the two ships met, he could guide Tex Langdon in. He could; but would he?

Ben Chapin swore again. He shook his head. It looked like a tough break for Tex. One more smash and he'd go back toward Blois. The Squadron needed ships too badly. And now there was fog, heavy fog. And the only pilot who could help Tex was Lieutenant Adams. Ben Chapin's lips moved slowly as he moved along the corridor toward his tiny coop.

"If Tex rides this one into the corral," he muttered grimly, "he's good! More than good, I'll say—he's *perfect!*"

NINE miles east of the Sixteenth Pursuit Squadron's fog-shrouded field, ten thousand feet above the front lines, two ships zoomed and dove, twisted and spun in the sky. The two ships had been engaged in combat for more than three minutes, and the battle was a tough one. One plane was a baby Albatross, very well camouflaged. The other was a fifteen-meter Nieuport, not so well camouflaged. In the narrow cockpit of the Nieuport was Lieutenant Tex Langdon. His blue eyes were rimmed with red, his lips were pressed tightly together as he handled the American ship, trying to get in position for a machine-gun burst at the enemy plane.

The German pilot was a fine flyer. Twice he had almost sent streams of tracer-marked lead into the fuselage of the American ship. The left wing surfaces showed the bullet holes of his last hit—and it was much too close for comfort. But Tex Langdon was fighting on and fighting desperately.

Two things worried him. He was running low in gas—and the damaged wing surfaces might be badly weakened. The Boche pilot had come down out of the clouds, almost taking him by surprise, as he was winging back toward the Sixteenth. Tex had kicked the Nieuport into a tail-spin, and on coming out of it the German lead had punctured his wing fabric. Since then the fight had been sharp.

The air was bad; the earth below was obscured by drifting fog. The patrol had not been a particularly successful one and now the attack of the German pilot threatened to make it disastrous. Tex had the feeling that he was too green for the enemy pilot.

The Nieuport came up in a zoom; for a flashing second he had the Albatross in the ringsight of the Browning. He squeezed the stick-trigger of the propellor-synchronized weapon, then released pressure after a short burst. He saw that his stream was behind the slanting enemy ship, then he lost the plane in a blind spot of his own ship.

He nosed downward and caught the flash of a shape coming up at the Nieuport then went over in a vertical bank. Green-yellow tracer-bullet fire streaked through the sky close to the plane. Once again the German pilot had come very close to scoring a hit!

Tex Langdon's lean face twisted. The patrol had been a long one, a difficult one. He was new to such flying. The German pilot was more experienced. The Nieuport's gun was getting low. There was the fog hanging close to the earth; it might mean that he would have to search for the Squadron field.

The Albatross was a quarter mile away, between the Nieuport and the Allied rear lines, and banking. Her pilot banked, came out of it, zoomed for altitude. Tex Langdon wiped his goggle-glass clear of a splatter of oil, nosed down to gain speed, and banked his own ship. He could not afford to let the other pilot get altitude.

His lips moved as he squinted blue eyes on the enemy ship.

"Get sense—show tail and fly out of it! If I don't—he'll get me!"

It was the way he felt. He was fighting a losing combat. He was new at the front. There was justification for a sky retreat. Just one thing stopped him from winging out. One human—Lieutenant Adams. He would make his report and Adams would learn about it. There were few secrets in the outfit; he had learned that already. Adams would know that he had run away from an enemy pilot.

HE SHOOK his head. The Albatross was streaking in at the Nieuport now. Their altitudes were about the same; both had leveled off from zooms. But now the German pilot zoomed again. And then, as Tex pulled back on the stick of the Nieuport, he came out of the zoom and dove.

The American pilot shoved his stick forward, to dive the Nieuport. He saw the nose of the tiny Albatross come up, knew that the enemy pilot had tried again to get beneath his plane for a shot upward. Both planes were streaking at each other now. Tex squeezed the stick-trigger. The

crackle of machine-gun fire sounded, then died abruptly. But his fingers were still squeezing the trigger. The gun had jammed!

Tex Langdon groaned, banked to the right. A strut leaped, out on the left wing. Fabric ripped; the tracer stream of the other ship was tearing through wing and wood. A shape flashed up past the vertical-banked Nieuport. Tex Langdon twisted his neck, got a glimpse of the German pilot's head. The two ships rushed past each other.

Once again Tex felt the desire to wing for it. He had plenty of reason now. His wing fabric was badly damaged—a strut had been splintered. And yet, something within him refused the chance. He swore hoarsely, banked around, leveled off.

His eyes widened. Slanting down toward earth, flames streaking up from her, was the Albatross! She was an eighth of a mile distant, and for a second he thought that his short burst, before the gun had jammed, had done the trick. And then he saw the other plane.

She was banking around, and evidently had just come out of a dive. She was a Nieuport—and bore the markings of the Sixteenth Squadron on her camouflaged fuselage. Tex stiffened in the cockpit. He forgot about the damaged wing fabric, the splintered strut. Lieutenant Adams—flying the dawn patrol! Adams had shot down the enemy with whom he had been combating!

His Nieuport was roaring toward the other ship. He cut down the throttle speed. Lieutenant Adams was dropping down toward earth, toward the ground fog. At intervals, as Tex followed him down in a mild glide, he could see the other lieutenant's ship spurt a trail of smoke from her exhaust. The ship was all right; Adams was keeping the gas feed steady.

The German plane crashed between the lines, in a great burst of flame. Black smoke rolled up from her. And Lieutenant Adams was leveling off now; he was heading back toward the Squadron. He was ignoring Tex, just as though he had never been in the air. Even as the pilot of the damaged ship tried to level off and wing after the other Nieuport, fog swept over Lieutenant Adams' plane. She was lost from sight.

RAGE struck at Tex Langdon. His Nieuport was heading back toward the Sixteenth, but the whole sector was covered with fog. Lieutenant Adams knew that. The veteran pilot knew that Tex would have trouble finding the Squadron. He must have guessed that gas was running low. And yet he winged away from the other Nieuport; roared his ship into the ground fog.

Tex Langdon swore grimly. He roared the engine into full voice and the Nieuport rushed into the white blanket of fog. The beat of the engine increased in tone, magnified by the density of the atmosphere. Tex could barely see the wing-tips of his ship; his goggle-glass clouded instantly. He felt that he was flying with a wing droop, and there was no level guage in his baby plane.

He pulled back on the stick. It was either that or risk going into a spin. He couldn't drop down very low to the earth, as perhaps Lieutenant Adams was doing. He didn't know the country well enough. There were hills about the sector; he might pile into one. Adams could fly by time and his sense of direction.

"He knew I couldn't make it!" he muttered. "Not without—his help. And he pulled out on me!"

The engine spluttered, picked up again, spluttered once more. Tex Langdon worked over the air and gas adjustment, his heart pounding. Then, abruptly, as he nosed the ship forward, the engine died.

Tex Langdon was suddenly very cool. He banked the ship to the westward, got her into a gentle glide, stretching it as much as he could. He cut the ignition switch. The Nieuport glided downward, her wires shrilling softly, the fabric of the left wing surfaces crackling in the glide-wind. The fog enveloped her.

The altimeter was not registering at the low altitude. He guessed that the sh

was within fifty or seventy-five feet of the earth. He pulled back slightly on the stick; the nose of the Nieuport came up. There was a blur of dark color stabbing up through the gray stuff. Savagely he wiped the glass of his goggles for the last time and stared ahead, downward.

Something long and curved stabbed at the right wing. He saw other blurs of color, fog clinging to them, rise up before him. He jerked the stick back against his flying overalls; the nose came up. And then the ship twisted violently to one side! Fabric ripped! He threw both arms before his face, releasing his grip on the stick!

The weight of the Hispano-Suiza engine carried the Nieuport down through the upper branches of the trees. And only the fact that Tex Langdon had stalled, just before the plane struck into them, saved him. As it was, a twisting, battering branch shot through the fuselage fabric, ripping the overall material and sending a stabbing pain up his right leg.

THEN the plane was motionless, and Tex Langdon snapped the safety-belt buckle loose, slid carefully out of the cockpit. The splintered prop was in the soggy earth beneath the trees through which the ship had plunged, but it had not battered in deeply. Off to the right, as Tex dropped to earth and limped about, sounded the steady firing of a battery.

Tex Langdon smiled grimly. The ship was a wreck. Lieutenant Adams had dropped down from the skies and had got himself, The Boche with whom Tex had been battling so desperately. Then he had winged on back, through the fog. It had been as though Tex and his plane had not existed.

The tall westerner shook his head slowly. It would probably mean Blois for him, though the bullet holes in the wing surfaces might help his case. He'd get over to the battery, get directions back to his Squadron. And there was one officer with whom he wished to talk, back at the Sixteenth. He wouldn't have much to say—but he'd *say* it in his own, particular way.

He took a last look at the Nieuport, limped toward the sound of the firing. The battery would be fairly close to the front—and that meant a long trip back to the outfit. He had been lucky, perhaps, to escape as he had, in the landing. But there was no thanks to Lieutenant Adams; not for that.

Tex Langdon limped slowly onward. The woods ended abruptly, he was on soggy ground. In the distance there was the flash of red, spreading strangely through the white-grey fog. It was cold. All about him guns rumbled. But he didn't feel the cold, and scarcely noticed the rumble of the guns. He was thinking about Lieutenant Adams, and getting back to the Squadron.

CAPTAIN LOUIS JONES spoke across the crude desk between his short form and the tall one of Lieutenant Langdon.

"You haven't had the experience of Lieutenant Adams; and it was your first combat. You should have flown out before your gas got so low. Lieutenant Adams tells me that it looked as though you were in trouble. He says he dropped on your Boche and got him. He hasn't any verification because the ship fell between the lines, and there was a lot of fog, though not where the Albatross fell. Perhaps you will verify his shoot-down."

Tex Langdon nodded. There was a grim smile on his face.

"I will, Captain," he stated. "He got the Albatross, all right. Got back here without any trouble, they tell me."

The Squadron C. O. nodded. "Went around to the west, slipped under the fog and came in just off the earth. Of course, he knew—"

The captain frowned and changed the subject.

"We expect two new ships down from Colombey before dusk, if the fog lifts. You'll draw one of them. We'll try to salvage your old ship. Tomorrow morning you can stay back of the lines, working on your new gun and feeling out the ship. I'm not exactly praising your work,

Lieutenant. Get *that* straight. But you had a bad ground fog. Bad enough to give you another crack at the front. *This* time—"

He shrugged his shoulders, smiling at Tex Langdon. The lieutenant nodded.

"I understand, Captain," he stated. "I've cracked up a lot of ships in a short time. But I've been trying—"

The C. O. smiled slightly. "That helps but it isn't the whole thing, Lieutenant," he stated. "I know you're trying. It isn't enough. You've got to succeed. Won't always have Lieutenant Adams around to pull you out of scrapes, you know."

Tex felt rage strike at him. But he controlled his feelings with an effort. Adams, getting him out of a scrape!

The C. O. nodded dismissal. Tex Langdon went from the captain's office toward his own coop. It was almost four o'clock; it had taken him five hours to reach the Squadron from Battery H4. He was about to turn into the barracks when he almost collided with Lieutenant Adams. That officer muttered something, turned to one side. Tex caught him by the arm.

"JUST a second, please, Lieutenant! C. O. tells me you got me out of a jam, this morning."

Adams narrowed dark eyes on the blue ones of the Texan. He nodded, standing fully a head shorter than Tex.

"Well, didn't I, Lieutenant?" he snapped. "Sorry I couldn't fly both ships —might have kept you out of another!"

"I'm not saying you *didn't* get me out of a sky jam, Adams," Tex replied in a quiet tone. "But I am saying this—you didn't know you were getting me out of one!"

The other pilot stiffened. His eyes narrowed on Tex Langdon's blue ones.

"Come again!" he snapped. "Make that more clear!"

Tex nodded. "The C. O. asked me to verify your shoot-down, Adams. I did. But get this straight. You saw me sky-scrapping with a Boche. You had ceiling, and a chance to drop in. You did and you got my Boche! You didn't know I was running low in gas, or that I'd been hit twice by the enemy's lead. And if you *had* known it wouldn't have made any difference. You got the German ship for your record! And you winged straight for the Squadron, not giving a damn about me!"

Lieutenant Adams smiled grimly. "Think so, Langdon?" he asked quietly.

"I know so!" Tex snapped back. "I mussed up your pet ship in a take-off, and I didn't get on my knees when you howled about it. You're sore. You knew I couldn't find the Squadron in the fog and you left me to go where you've said I came from!"

There was a little silence. Then Lieutenant Adams spoke. His voice was like ice.

"You couldn't have followed me through that fog, Langdon," he stated. "Because you can't handle a ship in the sky. Is that any reason that I should mess my chance up? My Nieuport was running low in gas, too. I wasn't sure of finding the outfit. And I dropped on that Boche because he was out-maneuvering you. I sat up in the sky and watched you. You never even saw me there!"

Tex stared at the other lieutenant. Then he laughed nastily.

"*You* may get in a sky jam some time," he said slowly. "You might even crack up a ship one of these days. And if I'm around—"

Lieutenant Adams swore sharply. His face twisted.

"You won't be!" he snapped. "I'll be shooting lead around the front when you're—"

He broke off, controlling himself. Tex Langdon smiled at him, his eyes narrowed. When he spoke his voice was very low and steady.

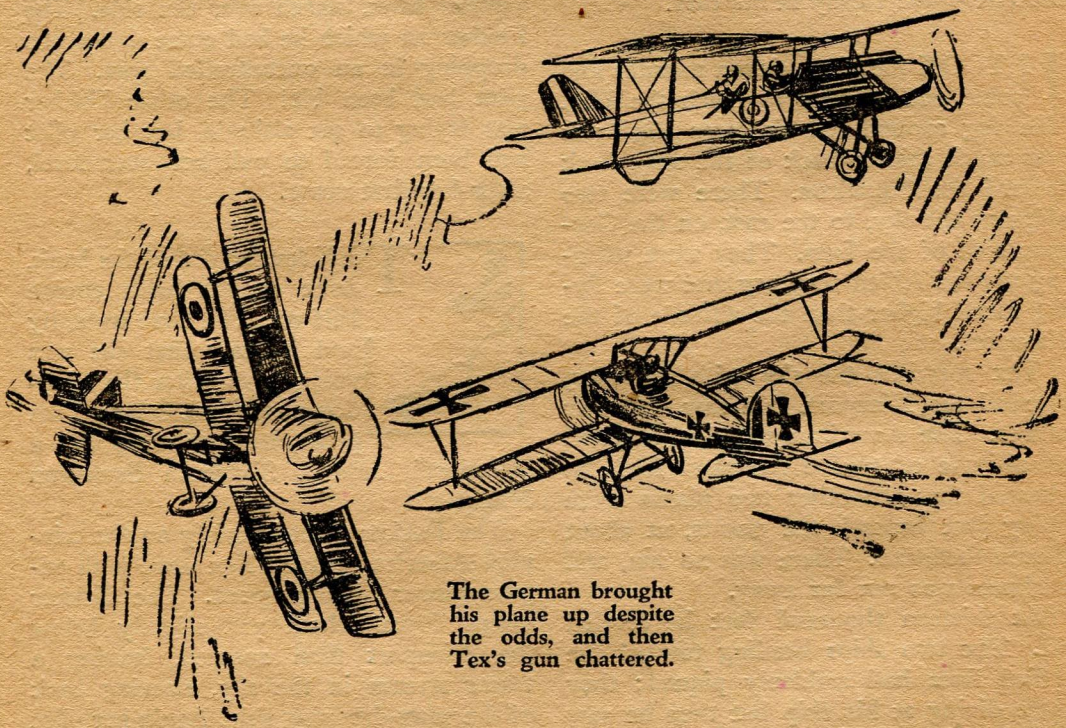
"When I'm back where I came from, eh, Lieutenant? Maybe you're right, Adams. But I'm not forgetting that you winged out on me, into the grey stuff. The captain didn't ask me to verify that fact."

The veteran smiled grimly. "If I ever get in a sky jam, Langdon," he said slowly, "I won't expect any help from you. If you did try to help you'd probably crash me in the air. It's about the

only thing you haven't done since you've been up."

Lieutenant Tex Langdon nodded. "Just about," he agreed in a peculiar tone. "Except—I haven't quit a man in ground fog!"

The two replacement ships didn't come in that afternoon. Nor the next afternoon. The fog continued to hang low and thick. Most of the pilots sat on the ground, worked on their ships, lined up guns. One morning of the third day the fog lifted a bit and the two replacement Nieuports were ferried in from Colombey. Lieutenant Schafer drew one and Tex Langdon drew the other.



The German brought his plane up despite the odds, and then Tex's gun chattered.

Tex worked over his Browning, got the ship off for an hour's hop back of the lines before dark. She handled well, and in a couple of bursts at the ground target south of the Sixteenth's field he didn't do so bad. But he almost cracked up setting her down, making a fast landing. He taxied her into one of the camouflaged hangars, gave the ground-crew sergeant his o. k., and moved toward his coop in the barracks.

An orderly was waiting for him; he was wanted at the C. O.'s office. He washed up, hurried over. Captain Jones frowned up at him.

"Lieutenant Connors reports sick. Looks like a touch of flu. We're short pilots, and Brigade is howling for defense planes. Enemy ships are flooding the Sector air. Is your new ship all right?"

"Yes, sir," Tex replied quietly.

"Take her over until dark," the C. O. ordered. "Lieutenants Harrington and Adams are out. Head for Hill G.8. Some Fokkers are raising the devil up that way. The French may get some ships across, and you might help some in a dog fight. Pull back here before dark. That's all. Get me a report as soon as you get in."

Tex nodded, saluted. He went to his barracks, got his helmet and goggles, headed for the Nieuport again. The ground crew pulled her out. Adams across the line! Tex smiled grimly. That lieutenant was getting plenty of work. So were they all, for that matter.

He climbed into the cockpit, revved up the little ship's engine for a few minutes, nodded his head for the blocks to be pulled away. The pursuit plane rolled out across the soggy field, climbed into the sky. Tex headed straight for the

front. As the Nieuport gained altitude, he stared over the side. From the northeast, clinging low to the ground, white fog was drifting.

Tex Langdon groaned. For a brief second he thought of banking around, turning back. The C. O. was not pleased with his work. And he was winging toward the front with darkness and fog coming to obscure the Squadron field. If he cracked up again—

Well orders were orders. The Nieuport climbed steadily; he banked slightly toward the north, toward Hill G.8. The fog was not yet thick, but it would grow thick. There was little wind. The beat of the Hisso was steady in his ears.

IT TOOK the plane eleven minutes and some odd seconds to reach the Hill. The fog around the rise was slight; it was much thicker back of the ship, back toward the Squadron. There were two ships in the sky, to the east, on the German side of the lines. They were winging toward Allied territory and were flying much higher than the altitude of the Nieuport.

Tex searched the sky with his eyes, climbed the Nieuport. He saw no other planes. The American ship had reached an altitude of twelve thousand feet; he guessed that the other two planes were flying just beneath the clouds, at about fifteen thousand. There was no sun, and darkness was not far away.

At thirteen thousand feet he leveled off. The two ships heading toward the Allied lines had suddenly piqued; they were diving at his ship but then he saw that he was mistaken. Across the lines, winging back toward the Allied side, was a tiny plane. She was flying with a wing droop and it was upon her that the two other planes were dropping!

Tex dove the Nieuport. She slanted down across the lines, her nose pointed toward German territory. He could distinguish the other two diving ships now. They were both Fokkers of the fighting type. The plane below, he guessed, was an Allied ship—trying to get back across the lines.

That ship was almost over the lines, and the German pilots had stretched their drive, thus allowing Tex to gain on them. He was within a hundred yards of the nearest enemy ship before the pilot saw him. Instantly the enemy zoomed.

Tex, lips pressed tightly together, pulled back slightly on the stick. The Fokker's zoom failed. A long burst of lead from Tex's Browning streamed down into the cockpit of the enemy plane. As Tex pulled all the way back on the stick, zooming and then going over on a wing, he saw the second Fokker cease to dive on the ship below.

He pulled the Nieuport around in a vertical bank, stared over the side. The Fokker on which he had come down was dropping in an uncontrolled spin. The pilot had been hit! The other Fokker was trying to get altitude, but her pilot had been forced to pull her over level, after her first zoom.

TEX leveled out of the bank, dove on her with engine half on. She dove instantly and he saw that she was going down after the wing-drooping plane below. That plane, he saw now, was a Nieuport! And a Sixteenth Squadron Nieuport!

The Fokker gained rapidly on the crippled American plane. Tex dove with engine power adding speed. The Fokker swept down behind and slightly below the Nieuport then zoomed, leaving a tracer stream in the sky, slanting back of the wing-drooping ship. Again her pilot had missed by a narrow margin.

But this time the German pilot pulled his ship up and over, and at the peak of the zoom, as she was on her back, he did a nice Immelman. In a flash the Fokker had righted herself. Less than fifty yards of air separated her from Tex's Nieuport now, Both guns spat streams of lead at the same second.

The German pilot's lead was low. It passed beneath the under-gear of the Nieuport. Tex zoomed as the enemy shape flashed close. Flames were shoot-

ing up from the engine of the German ship. But she zoomed, too. The Nieuport jerked sickeningly. The controls were loose in Tex's grip! The Fokker pilot, knowing he was finished, had rammed the Nieuport from below, striking the tail assembly with a wing-tip!

Tex Langdon felt the Nieuport go into a side slip. He tried to get her out of it, failed. She was slipping off on her right wing, toward the brown-grey line of the earth, almost a thousand feet below!

He jerked his head. The second Fokker was going down in a straight nose dive, flames shooting back from her. And toward the ground fog to the westward winged the crippled Nieuport that he had saved from the two enemy planes.

WIND tore at Tex Langdon's helmet. He moved the stick to the right, expecting to feel no pressure, believing that the tail assembly had been carried away in the crash. But there *was* pressure. He kicked right rudder. The slip ceased but the Nieuport was now diving at terrific speed, less than five hundred feet from the earth!

Slowly he pulled back on the stick. He cut the throttle speed down, held his breath. And slowly the nose of the Nieuport came up. The tail assembly was still sticking in place, although the ship answered sluggishly.

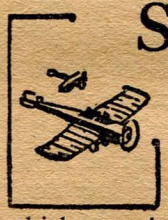
He advanced the throttle to three-quarter speed. The plane was headed toward the Squadron. She was flying less than three hundred feet above the earth, and there could be no maneuvering now. The Nieuport would have to be flown level, carefully. The slightest piece of overcontrolling might rip the damaged tail-assembly from the fuselage.

Tex Langdon stared ahead, down. He groaned. He had forgotten the ground fog. It was spread over the earth, in the direction of the Squadron, like a grey-white blanket. Even below the ship now, the first wisps of it were drifting. And far ahead was the wing-drooping Nieuport, vanishing from sight into the grey stuff.

Tex stiffened in the cockpit. Lieutenant Adams, once more winging away from his plane in the fog! He couldn't be sure of it but he could guess. He had saved Adams from going down with Boche lead in his plane and body and the lieutenant again was winging in to leave him alone. Even with a drooping wing, he might have waited. Lieutenant Harrington *would* have waited. It was Adams, all right.

He reached for the throttle, but then he muttered to himself suddenly. The Nieuport that had vanished into the fog was in sight again! She was banking around, coming back!

Tex held the little combat ship in level flight. He watched the other plane come on, his eyes wide. Her left wing drooped badly; she had banked around to the right. He caught sight of a helmeted head, an arm held out in the prop wash. The two ships rushed past each other. Tex stared back. Once again the Nieuport was banking to the right. She came around sluggishly, gained slowly on the throttled down sister plane.



SIDE by side, with less than twenty feet of grey air between the wing-tips, they flew now. And Tex recognized Lieutenant Adams. That officer was pointing toward his left wing-tip, which was in tatters toward the trailing edge, with one strut twisting back in the wind. The officer got a hand out in the prop wash, tilted it downward in a mild degree. Tex nodded. He pointed back toward his ship's tail assembly, saw Lieutenant Adams twist his head, stare back.

And then the veteran lieutenant nodded his head and banked slightly to the southward. Tex banked, too, very gently. The other Nieuport was nosing downward now and Tex moved the stick forward a bit. The movements of his plane were very sluggish, uncertain.

Fog swept over both planes. Tex flew with his head half turned, watching the wing-tips of the other ship. Several times they were lost from sight, but each time he picked them up again. Both ships were

flying throttled down. Seconds passed and they seemed hours. The fog was growing thicker.

And then, very suddenly, the fog cleared. A slope seemed to rise out of it. Lieutenant Adams banked sharply away from Tex's Nieuport. His plane's nose came down. Tex banked his plane, cut the throttle. Below was a fairly level field with very little fog on it. Even as the Nieuport glided downward, he saw the wheels and tail-skid of the other officer's ship strike.

And then he was stalling the tail-damaged ship. He was within ten feet of the earth when something snapped under the strain. The nose whipped downward. There was a grinding crash as the prop splintered into the earth. Tex tried to protect his head but failed. Something battered him backward. There was a flash of yellow light and then everything went black.

TEX LANGDON recovered consciousness slowly. His head ached; he raised a hand to bandages wound about it. Slowly he blinked the dizziness away from his eyes, wet his oil-stained lips with the tip of his tongue. He looked around.

He was propped up against the wreckage of a plane. There were khaki-clad figures moving in the mud of a field, against a back-ground of drifting fog. He turned his head slightly. The eyes of Lieutenant Adames smiled at him.

"Feel rotten, eh? But you *do* feel! That's something."

Lieutenant Tex Langdon managed a painful grin. It was *more than* something, he thought. It was everything. His blue eyes narrowed on Lieutenant Adams' dark ones.

"You—came back—" he muttered thickly. "You got—me—down here—"

Adams grunted. "Didn't quite do that Tex," he stated grimly. "That tail-assembly of yours collapsed before you set her down. Figured this lope would have less fog and headed for it."

"You came back—" Tex persisted. "After you winged into the white stuff."

Lieutenant Adams swore softly. "You and I, Lieutenant—we've been acting up," he said slowly. "You may crack up your own ships, but you cracked up two other ships, today! And you saved my neck. I couldn't wing out on you, Tex. Figured I might be able to bank around, without the droop getting me into a slip. It was pretty rotten—winging out on you. Didn't know, though, that you had a crippled chip."

Tex grinned feebly. "It was damn white—after what I've said to you, Adams—" he said slowly. "We've both been—pretty thick."

He fumbled for a cigaret, found two. Adams lighted them up. They inhaled appreciatively.

"Pretty thick—" Lieutenant Adams was agreeing. "Sort of like—"

He stopped, grinned broadly. Tex nodded. He raised his eyes slightly.

"Like the ground fog, Adams," he muttered. He closed his eyes. "But we—got out of it."

And Lieutenant Adams, smiling grimly, nodded his head.

"We cleared up, Tex," he muttered, "just about in time!"

Luke Forks Trouble

At the crack of the rifle Luke's horse pitched forward.

WHEN Luke Gilberts rode to seek vengeance he found that he had forked a large load of trouble, but he rode it out to the bitter end. Mr. Barker has written many fine stories for Triple-X but this is by far his best.

By S. OMAR BARKER

Author of "Ride 'Em Cowboy," "Fishin' and Wishin'," etc.

LUKE GILBERT rode into the Sabinoso country to kill a man he had never seen. He kept off the trails and avoided all possible meetings because he had no way of knowing who would be his friend and who his foe. Somewhere in this lawless Borderland of cedar clumped hills he expected to find the man who had killed his brother. He did not go to the sheriff at Los Huecos about it because he guessed from the sort of letter he had received from that official, that Sheriff Hickens looked upon a killing in his county as a mere casual incident. Too bad, but nothing to get unduly excited about.

The sheriff's letter had been brief:

"We found your bro. Hank Gilbert dead in the cabin where him and another feller named Dan Broussard was livin', prospectin', I reckon. We buried him an' sending you hearwith his effecks. He was shot in the back. Found this here Broussard's gun outside the window with one empty cattridge in it an as he ain't showed up no place looks like he done it. Probly hid out awhile over the Border. Yores, Sheriff Hickens."

Among Hank Gilbert's things sent on by the sheriff was a letter he had started

to his brother. Something had kept him from finishing it. Its last line was: "Have stumbled into some dirty work hereabouts and have been warned to clear out if I don't want a bullet through my neck. Dan Broussard is—" There it had broken off in a long scrawling scratch.

The sad news had bred sudden and bitter resolve in Luke Gilbert's heart. Hank had been his "little brother," and the bond of affection between them had been tender, yet strong as chains. Now one single, unalterable purpose took possession of him. He quit his job cowpunching and rode southward to accomplish it. He would not rest until he had avenged the murder of Hank Gilbert.

He made his camp in a cove hidden by curving ridges which were themselves fringed into isolation by miles of foothill sabina and piñon. He was a lank legged, hawk-eyed hill billy cowboy and though he knew this Sabinoso country only slightly he preferred to make his first investigations without help. He did not believe Dan Broussard would hide out long across the border with no greater threat than Sheriff Hickens to keep him there.

It was two days after his arrival in the Sabinoso country that he found his brother's cabin, and near by it, his grave. The cabin was unoccupied and had evidently been left in somewhat of a hurry. He rummaged carefully through what things there were in it, but found no clue to aid him in his search.

The next day he ventured farther south and crossed the border. He spent most of the day hidden in a juniper clump on a high hill, watching the country roundabout. Toward evening he saw smoke, as if from a campfire, rising from some hidden hollow. But it was too late to reconnoitre further today. He headed northward once more toward his own camp, the late afternoon sun making long shadows of him and his horse as he rode.

The sudden sound of a human voice some distance down the hill to his left brought him to a quick stop, his hand on his gun. He listened. The sound had been a peculiar one, half a curse, half a cry of fear. Now there was silence for a second and then two quick shots. Silence again. Luke slid from the saddle and tiptoed down toward the ledge below him. As he came closer he heard a half subdued "Oh, my God!" followed by a sort of grunting groan.

The sounds were puzzling, yet it was more than mere curiosity that made Luke Gilbert creep closer. He came to the edge of the junipers above a little series of ledges ending in a bench wide enough for a trail. His eye first caught the sight of an empty-saddled horse. The animal's ears were cocked forward nervously. Then he saw in a flash what was wrong.

A HATLESS man, fair haired, his moonwhite face as smooth as a boy's sat in cramped agony on the ground. His left boot was off, his trousers pulled above his knee. A silk kerchief was tight about the knee joint. The man seemed to be trying desperately to get his mouth down to the calf of his bare leg.

Outstretched on the flatness of a little rock ledge some three or four feet above the man, between him and Gilbert, lay a huge glitter-skinned rattlesnake. The reptile's head was blown to bits but his tail still writhed slowly. Plainly the man had been bitten, probably as he rode along below the ledge. Luke whistled. The young fellow looked up.

"Tighten it good at the knee!" called Luke. "I'll be there in a minute!"

He looked around swiftly for a way down over the ledges, and seeing no breaks clambered down, tooth and toenail, directly in front of him.

He reached the snake bitten man just in time to see him go limp in a dead faint. Luke went swiftly to work. First he gave the knee tourniquet a tightening twist, then he cut swift criss-cross slashes at the little red fang marks on the calf of the young man's leg. As the blood began to ooze out he put his mouth to the wound and sucked as hard as he could. Swiftly he spat out the bloody mess and sucked again and again. From his jacket pocket he brought out a small silver whiskey flask and poured part of its contents down the boy's throat. He lit a piece of wood

and held the heat close enough to the fang wound almost to burn it.

When he had done everything he could Luke went back for his horse and brought him by a detour down around the ledges. The boy had come out of his faint, but still seemed dazed and feverish. Luke poured more whiskey down his throat, somehow got him on his horse and took him in to his camp as darkness claimed the hills. He put him to bed inside the tent, then built a fire outside, filled his Dutch oven with coals and brought it inside for heat. When he had eaten a bite he sat down on the edge of the spruce bough bed, his eyes fixed in intent watchfulness on the young man's face showing flushed and feverish even in the yellow candle light.

Something about the clear-skinned youth of this fair haired, blue-eyed cowboy reminded Luke poignantly of his own dead "kid brother". It gave him a pang of anxiety for the boy that he perhaps would not have felt for a stranger in his plight.

For three days Luke Gilbert forgot the grim business that had brought him to the Sabinoso country and gave both his time and his attention to the "Kid," as he had already begun to call him. It was a doubtful battle, with death for a determined, ever present foe, but Luke and his patient won it at last. On the morning of the fourth day the boy's eyes were clear again and his heart-beat weak but regular.

With the boy's recovery Luke's mind came back heavily to his original purpose. Now with this delay his camp supplies would need replenishing soon. He got his saddle horse from where he had him staked to spring meadow grass and saddled him.

"Now you just make yourself at home, today, Kid," he said. "I've got to ride in after some grub. You're outa danger now and can just rest easy and comfortable here till I get back, savvy!"

The Kid nodded.

"Say," he broke out hesitantly, "I ain't wanting to butt into your business. I ain't asked who you are nor I don't aim to. We've both took strangers' privilege about mentionin' names, but—but you've saved my life, *amigo,* and what ever it is worryin' you so, I'd be mighty proud to help you!"

Gilbert paused. Caution warned him to keep silence, yet instinctively he felt he could safely confide in the youngster.

"Thanks, Kid," he said finally. "I'll remember that! As for names—I reckon mine don't matter none to you right now, nor yours to me, but just in case you'd rather not take no chance of getting mixed up in it, I'm going to tell you, confidential, that my business ain't very purty to talk about. I'm gunnin' for a man—a damn cowardly killer—that I am to shoot on sight. He—his name's Dan Brouss—"

He broke off suddenly, his voice hard and grim with the last words. He saw startled surprise come over the Kid's face. He stepped forward suddenly and seized him by the wrist.

"Listen here, Kid," he said tensely. "I'm a fool for not keepin' my mouth shut. You just forget what I said, savvy? As far as you know from now on I'm just one more wanderin' cowboy, understand?"

The younger man, lying back on his pillow now, nodded puzzled agreement.

"I knowed I could trust you, Kid!" grinned Gilbert, patting his pale hand. "Well, adios till this evenin'!"

Before the Kid could shape words to speak, the older man turned and left the tent. The kid could see his shadow as he swung up to the saddle and rode away.

IT WAS already dark when Luke Gilbert rode back to his camp that evening, his saddle heavy with food supplies, his heart heavy with grim but rebellious resolve. He had seen Sheriff Hickens in Los Huecos and the sheriff had described Dan Broussard to him. Now he knew that the man he had sworn to kill was the man whose life he had saved, the clear-faced youngster who had already begun to take a brother's place in his heart.

Luke cursed himself for a soft hearted,

mush-headed fool. Why had he trusted the Kid's seeming innocence so readily. He should have learned who he was and left him to die. Yet even now he shrank with dread from the task he had set himself to do. Only the remembrance of his brother, shot in the back, steeled him to it.

The camp was dark. Luke dismounted and stepped into the tent, gun in hand. He struck a match and held it high. The tent was empty. Pinned to the bedding he found a note:

> "Dear Amigo: It ain't that I'm scared out—though I can't figure why you want to kill me—it's because of a duty like that I've swore to do myself, that I'm runnin' off. I am Dan Broussard—but I won't never forget what you done for me and I am your friend always—the Kid."

Luke Gilbert had ridden into the Sabinoso country to kill a man. Instead he had saved his life. He sat for long hours trying to clear up the turmoil in his heart. It seemed impossible that this frank faced Kid could have been the murderer of John Gilbert, but as the loneliness of midnight came and found Luke still wrestling with the whirlpool of his feelings, somehow the remembrance of his brother and of the lone grave by the cabin, crowded out everything else. Grim resolution again took possession of him as he threw himself upon his camp bed for a few hours rest before dawn.

At dawn he set out again, following with keen eyes the tracks and scuffed rocks that marked the trail of Dan Broussard back southward across the border. He passed the ledges where he had first found the Kid and headed down a sharp gorge toward the spot whence he had seen campfire smoke arising. At the canyon's bottom the faint trail was suddenly lost in a maze of dusty tracks that he saw to be hoof marks of burros, mules and horses, headed southward.

Smugglers, nobody else would be packing anything up here! And Broussard's trail had merged with theirs. Grimly Luke followed, on, rounding the narrow curves of the canyon cautiously.

Suddenly, without warning, a shot cracked out from somewhere in the junipers up the ridge to his left and a bullet spanked a ledge rim high above his head and glanced off whining. Luke sensed the direction. He spurred forward and swung down swiftly behind his horse, his eyes straining for sight of movement up the ridge. He saw none, but his horse suddenly threw up his head, ears pointing toward the curve of the canyon a few yards ahead. When Luke looked he saw the outlines of two tall hats showing above the fringe of scrub juniper at the canyon's curve. In the same instant gunfire spurted from the junipers, and Luke's horse dropped quivering like a butchered beef in his tracks.

Firing into the junipers as he fell, Luke dropped flat behind the quivering body of his mount. The horse had crumpled to his knee and then kicked over on the left side, cramping Luke's rifle in its scabbard under him. The cowboy eased his six-gun over the horse's body and fired again into the junipers whence the shots had come. He could see no movement there now. Keeping one hand on his six-gun at ready, he began scratching under the horse with the other. If he could get at his rifle he might hope to shoot effectively at his assailants. The distance was too great for good six-gun shooting. He turned a swift glance to the ridge whence the first shot had come. However close to the ground he might lie he would still be exposed from that angle. Probably that first shot had been the signal of his approach.

ALL AT once a whole volley of shots sounded from down the canyon and bullets thumped into the horse's body like hailstones. Others sang high against the rocks. Luke figured from the sound that the shooting would be two or three men with rifles. He stayed low behind the horse working his own rifle out of the scabbard. The dead horse was proving a good shield, for not a bullet touched him. With a last desperate twist he freed his rifle.

Then, as the shooting stopped for a second, he eased a cartridge into the chamber and shoved the barrel gently up over the pony's body in the hollow just back of his shoulders. It had been minutes since he showed any sign of life, so that now, as his eye came up over the rifle sights he saw that one of the men in the junipers was slowly coming to his feet, looking. Luke took his time. He had learned as a boy, hunting deer, that one shot accurately aimed is worth a dozen hit or miss. He found the man squarely in his sights and pulled the trigger. The tall-hatted hombre dropped like a chopped down tree.

Luke flattened again out of sight as Tall hat's companion fired from a nearer juniper. Then, in answer, he got his rifle trained on the man's hiding place and raked it crosswise and up and down with five swift shots. When he flattened again into hiding there was silence down the canyon, presently a groan and then silence again.

Swiftly Luke reloaded both six-gun and rifle. He was sweating but grimly calm. Somehow the zest of battle had cleared his head and eased the uncertain ache at his heart.

As he reloaded he heard the clamor of boot scuffling, shouts and running hoof sounds from farther down the canyon around the next curve. Evidently reinforcements were coming in numbers.

"It's bye-bye for me!" he told himself. There would be no time for flight to a better stronghold. Besides, somewhere up on the scrubby timbered ridge across the canyon there must be the hidden gunman who had fired the first warning shot, waiting, no doubt, for him to show himself. Luke readied both his guns across the horse's body and waited.

THERE was one grim satisfaction in the situation, at least. Evidently this was the smuggler gang who, with Dan Broussard, had been responsible for Hank Gilbert's shot in the back. Luke's trigger finger was at ready, but he did not fire at the first figure to appear cautiously around the turn in the canyon. He was waiting to see if the slim, boyish figure of Dan Broussard—"the Kid"—would come. He steeled himself to make his shot deadly if it should, yet with an aching dread in his resolve.

The first man ran crouching forward to the shelter of a juniper. The second followed. Another. One was a Mexican. Luke's glimpse told him the others were of that renegade, whisker-faced type so common in border deviltry. But not one was "the Kid." Still another appeared. Luke could see that the first three were working forward toward him under cover of the juniper trees. Evidently they expected to creep in close and charge him. Luke cursed himself for waiting so long to shoot, then found the last figure in his rifle sights and fired. The man started to run, screamed and dropped, writhing.

A volley answered Luke's shot, most of the bullets either thudding into the horse's body or else spanging against the rocks behind him. But one, striking lightly through the horse's ribs, glanced and ripped through the muscles of his forearm.

Luke shifted his left hand to the rifle trigger. The remaining men were coming on swiftly, dodging from one clump to another, spreading out as they came. The cowboy crouched lower, uncertain whether to get up and charge to certain death, getting as many of them as he could, or stay hidden and shoot as they came.

All at once he heard the scuff of boots on the rocks up over the ledge thirty steps back of him. He turned to see another man, tall and black-moustached, raise a rifle to his shoulder and take deliberate aim at him. There was not the slightest chance of his missing. Luke fumbled his rifle around, but he knew he could not be quick enough.

Then, instead of the crack of a rifle, a heavier shot boomed and echoed from up on the ledge. The man with the rifle tottered, his gun wavered, then fired, wildly. Before Luke could make another move to act, a slim body leaped out of

the juniper on a ridge across from the falling man, then came in long deer-like leaps down the hill toward Luke Gilbert.

"Quick, *amigo!*" He shouted. "I've got this 'un! Keep shootin' into 'em in front! I'm comin'!"

Strong emotion gripped at Luke's "innards" as he saw that the newcomer was pink-faced Dan Broussard, rushing madly, coming to his aid.

Luke yanked his six-gun up over the horse's body, turned his back on Dan Broussard and began firing swiftly and with some effect into the four or five men now charging upon him from the front.

As Luke Gilbert stopped to reload he felt a streak of burning fire on his head and the day went dizzily black before his eyes. For a dozen seconds he struggled to see, to move, even to feel that he still lived, but he could not. Then whirling blackness overcame him.

Yet even then he somehow forced a ray of consciousness to stay with him, and in another two minutes he opened his eyes to see three or four men scurrying like rabbits down the canyon, with a slim hatless boy, his tousled hair glinting goldenly in the sunshine, running crouching from juniper to juniper after them, shooting as he went.

WHEN the fleeting men were out of sight around the canyon crook, Dan Broussard came swiftly back to Luke and knelt beside him. He raised the cowboy's head carefully, anxiety standing out like ridges on his smooth face.

"Did they get you, *amigo?*" he questioned in husky earnestness. "Are you hit bad?"

"I—I'm all right, kid," said Luke weakly. "You came jest in time. Another second and they would have had me!"

"Don't I know it!" exclaimed the boy, wiping sweat from his eyes. "I was way back up on the ridge top yonder spyin' on their camp when they tackled you and I like to never of made it down to within shootin' range in time! But anyway—*amigo*—" he smiled and nodded toward the body of the big man up on the ledge. "Anyway I got *him*—the one I come after! Old Minovas! It was him that shot my buddy in the back!"

"Which reminds me, *amigo,*" he went on with whimsical seriousness as he bound up Luke's head wound. "I reckon you got my note—I'm Dan Broussard—you said you came here gunnin' for me—well, you saved my life once, so if you still feel that way about it, I reckon you got a right to plug me all you please."

Luke Gilbert tried to speak but something seemed to well up from his heart to his throat and choke him to silence. He did manage to smile and shake his head.

"Anyways," went on the Kid, as he tore strips from his shirt to bandage the cowboy's arm, "even if you did still want to plug me, I wouldn't kick now—now that I've got the murderer of poor ol' Hank Gilbert! Livin's somehow kind of empty for a fellow that's lost a pal like Hank. Well—there! You're all bandaged up. Let's see if we can get goin' out of here. I got my horse back over the ridge. Reckon you can walk a-tall?"

"Just a minute," said Luke Gilbert huskily, "'fore I get up and maybe faint on you so I can't say it: It *wasn't you* I was gunnin' for, after all, kid. I just thought it was from what they told me. The job I come to do, you've done fer me—just a few minutes ago—besides saving my life. And if you'll shake hands with me now, Kid, I reckon I'll be pleased and proud enough to walk most anywheres. You see, Kid, I'm — I'm Luke Gilbert, Hank's brother!"

For a second surprise stood blankly in the boy's face. Then in understanding silence Dan Broussard took the cowboy's extended left hand and gripped it tightly in his two slim ones.

Two days later Luke Gilbert, who had ridden into the Sabinoso country to kill a man he had never seen, rode northward out of it with wounds on head and arm but none in his heart. And with him, himself already as beloved as a brother, rode "The Kid"—the man he had come to kill.

Shorty Traps a Rustler

One of the charging men fell as Shorty fired.

TREACHERY and rustling repaid the lonely Shorty for extending rangeland hospitality to a band of strangers. His reprisal makes a stirring story of the west, written by a man who knows the aching loneliness of long nights in a far-off cow camp.

By GUY L. MAYNARD

Author of "Riding Death Trail," etc.

SHORTY DONOVAN rode up to a willow-fringed water hole and gazed peevishly around.

"Cows!" he grumbled, glancing from one group to another of sleek, well-fed four-year-old steers grazing on the lush bunch grass of Gooseneck canyon. "Nothin' but cows! I been associatin' solely and exclusively with old Matt Leasenby's cows so long I'm gettin' as locoed as a Bosky sheepherder. Talkin' to myself. Been here mighty nigh all summer alone and got another month yet to serve before it's time to ship these here over-stuffed critters. Danged if I wouldn't give a month's wages just to talk for an hour to any kind of a human bein'."

Shorty discontinued his querulous monologue to roll and light a brown paper cigarette.

"Get along, Pinky!" He wheeled his sorrel cowpony toward a point where the sheer rock walls of the box canyon converged into a narrow exit. "Time we was

headin' back to the shack fer grub."

Riding through the selected lot of fat white-faced cattle which the owner of the Lazy L was running on the rich feed of this rock-rimmed mountain pasture to fit them for his annual market-topping shipment, Shorty soon reached the mouth of the canyon.

"This here hole in the hills was sure well named," he mused, giving the sorrel his head to follow the narrow curving neck of rocky gorge which formed the only passageway through which anything except a mountain goat could enter or leave Gooseneck canyon.

As he emerged from this tunnel-like entrance to the canyon, Shorty reined up at a gate of heavy poles set in a solid wall of stone built across the mounth of the passageway. Dismounting, the little puncher pulled down several of the bars and led his mount through the gate. Replacing the barrier he swung back into the saddle and rode round a clump of spruce which concealed a log cabin and tiny corral nearby.

After putting the sorrel in the corral Shorty entered the cabin, hung his cartridge belt and holstered .45 on a peg beside the door and set about preparing his mid-day meal. The savory odors of sizzling bacon and boiling coffee had whetted the hungry puncher's appetite to such a degree that he was almost oblivious to anything but his forthcoming meal, so that he did not hear the *clop clop* of horses' hoofs until they were almost to the door of the little range camp.

"Hooray!" yelped Shorty gleefully, looking up with a sudden start and glimpsing the approaching riders. "Company for dinner!" He hurried to the door to welcome his unexpected guests.

FIVE tougher looking cutthroats never rode a trail than the dusty, sweat-stained crew that reined their tired mounts up to the cabin and swung sullenly out of their saddles without waiting for the customary invitation to alight.

"Howdy, gents!" beamed Shorty, to whom a Mexican sheepherder would have been a welcome guest. "You're just in time for grub pile."

"You said a mouthful, hombre," growled a tall, loose-framed man with long gorilla-like arms and a decided limp in his left leg. As he spoke, the surly rider, who was apparently leader of the gang, pulled a carbine from the scabbard on his saddle and turned toward the cabin. The other riders followed, except a squat, swarthy man who looked like a half-breed. At a word from the leader this fellow led the five horses around to the rear of the shack and tied them securely in the shade of a big spruce, remaining outside as a guard while his companions entered the cabin.

One look at the black stubbled pock-marked face of the tall man convinced Shorty, who had returned to his post by the cook stove, that this was no chance passing of a bunch of law-abiding cowpunchers. Vicious brutality was written large on the countenances of nearly every member of the band. The heavy-lidded, slitted eyes of the leader marked him as a killer, one whom it would be dangerous to cross in anything. The pair of Colt .45's, in their tied down holsters low on his thighs, were further evidence of the man's menaceful character.

"Help yourselves, gents," cordially invited Shorty, eager to placate his truculent visitors. He dished up the smoking bacon as he spoke and reached for a pan half full of cold soda biscuits.

"Hell!" sneered the pock-marked leader, "That ain't a starter for this bunch. Get busy an' cook up a reg'lar meal! Set out all the fancy trimmin's you got, too! Sugar, molasses, sardines—all your Sunday knick-knacks. An' make up another pot o' java."

"You aimin' to clean me out?" bristled Shorty.

"Close your trap an' get busy!"

The little puncher's blue eyes snapped at this indignity; but realizing that he was helpless to enforce any further protest he started setting out his small store of treasured provisions. As fast as he opened tins

and packages the contents were wolfed down by his ill-favored callers.

After the four ruffians had gorged themselves to repletion, one of their number, a thickset man with a sprinkling of gray in his shock of copper-red hair, went outside. A moment later the half-breed who had been left as guard came in and proceeded to devour what was left on the rough pine board table.

Shorty, mad as a hornet, began throwing the ingredients together for another batch of biscuits in order to satisfy his own gnawing hunger.

"A bunch of Apaches on the warpath would be gentlemen compared to this gang of camp robbers," he reflected bitterly.

THE gaunt leader rolled up the left leg of his overalls and removed a bloody neckerchief from around his calf, exposing a flesh wound.

"Bring me some water an' whatever you got on hand to fiix up a bullet hole with, fella," he ordered Shorty.

The little puncher got out the few simple things which he kept for first aid. After dressing the wound, which Shorty noticed was probably less than twenty-four hours old, the injured man rolled a cigarette and leaned back against the wall. For several minutes he puffed silently, watching his unwilling host through narrowed eyes. His companions had already started a game of poker.

"What you doin' up here, cowboy?" finally inquired the wolfish two-gun man.

"Ridin' line," promptly lied Shorty.

The little puncher sensed that this sinister leader of a gang which he had already sized up as bandits was not seeking information out of idle curiosity. An hour ago he wanted to see a human face but already he was beginning to regret his wish.

"Uh-huh!" nodded the pock-marked man, his unwavering gaze on Shorty's guileless face. "Who for?"

"The Lazy L!"

"Come clean, hombre! You ain't talkin' to no bonehead. You're tryin' to hide somethin'!"

The surprised Shorty blinked at the suddenly snarled demand of his inquisitor.

"Whatcha mean?" he asked.

"Meanin' I took notice of that trail you got wore between this shack an' the mouth of that canyon the other side of the spruce thicket. What's in the canyon?"

"A few cows!" mumbled Shorty.

"How many an' what kind?" persisted the now thoroughly aroused leader. "An' don't fergit I'm sendin' a rider to check up on you."

"A hundred head of steers."

"That's the stuff," grinned the other. "You hear that, Baldy?" he turned to the nearest of the three cutthroats who now were playing poker.

"Sounds good to me," replied a lean, hatchet-faced man with a bald head.

"What you an' Chico say, Bowen?"

The sullen, taciturn ruffian addressed nodded across the table.

"Bueno!" grunted the squat breed, discarding from his hand and holding up three fingers to indicate his draw to the dealer.

"Startin' about sundown so's not to run into any range rider," went on the leader, "We can haze that bunch clean down to—" he paused and glanced meaningly at the players, who quickly looked up and nodded their comprehension of the unspoken words, "—before sun-up tomorrow. We'd oughta clean up purty on 'em and it'd sorta even us up on that—"

"You fellers is fixin' up for a first class neck-tie party," cut in Shorty, enraged beyong the bounds of caution by the bold proposal to rustle the herd.

"That'll be enough outa you," rasped the gaunt rustler chief. "Next time you butt in I'll see can a .45 slug quiet you."

"You reckon it's safe to lay up here till evenin', Ranse?" asked the man called Baldy.

"Sure it is. Them jaspers lost our trail an' quit before we hit the pass," the leader reassured him.

"Might as well get some sleep then. Ain't had a wink since night afore last an' now we got another night in the saddle ahead of us."

"That's what I'm figgerin' to do," agreed Ranse. "Meanwhile we gotta take care of this here bowlegged runt that's got such a likin' fer gab."

"Hombre," he snapped, rising from his seat on a low bench against the cabin wall and advancing on Shorty with a menacing hand near a six-gun, "flop down flat on your belly on the floor!"

For a moment the harassed little puncher stood balanced on the balls of his feet, tempted to spring at his captor. But the heavy Colt tied down on the pock-marked man's right thigh had miraculously appeared in his hand, its black muzzle pointing full at Shorty's best buckle. Cursing to himself, the puncher dropped to the floor.

Ranse took the rope from Shorty's saddle in a corner of the room and quickly bound him hand and foot. Then he dragged the little range guard over to one corner and left him with his head resting on the saddle.

After a brief whispered conversation with the three poker players, which Shorty was unable to hear, Ranse limped out to the rear of the cabin. The sound of his harsh voice drifted in through the open window, informing the gray haired man with the horses of the new plan for rustling the Lazy L beef herd. This apparently met with approval, for a few minutes later Shorty heard the sound of a single horse pounding away toward the canyon.

IT WAS probably a half hour later that the Lazy L puncher again heard the drumming of hoofs, coming to a halt in front of the cabin.

"This here ranny shore told the truth, boys," Ranse informed the poker players as he strode through the door. There was an evil grin on the rustler chief's pock-marked face. "Purtiest bunch o' cow critters I ever laid eyes on. Penned up in a little pocket canyon all ready for us to start drivin' to market.

"Put up them cards an' let's all grab some sleep. Baldy, you relieve Jackson on guard when he calls you in about an hour. Then Chico takes a turn after your hour's up. Bowen, you stand the fourth watch an' then call all hands. By that time it'll be long towards sun-down an' we'll hit the trail with them cows."

As he finished speaking, Ranse strode across the little room and sat down on the edge of Shorty's bunk. Unbuckling his two heavy cartridge belts with their holstered .45's, the hard-bitten leader placed them in the bunk, pulled off his boots, dropped his dusty gray Stetson beside them on the floor and turned in for some much-needed sleep. Three card players, having finished playing dropped down on the bare floor and were almost instantly asleep.

Shorty listened to the heavy breathing of his unwelcome guests for what seemed to him an interminable period before the gray haired man called Jackson entered the cabin and awakened Baldy.

Trussed up as he was, the little puncher's muscles became painfully cramped in that first hour. As the second watch wore on, the strain was almost unbearable. By the time the fourth hour of waiting for his captors to finish their rest had ended Shorty was in a deplorable condition.

"Dog-gone!" he groaned to himself. "I wish these devils would git goin'. I'm most cut to pieces by this tight rope. If they don't search my saddle pockets afore they leave I got a knife in one of 'em that I might make out to open an' cut with it. I sure gotta save that herd. The old man said he picked me to guard them prize cows 'cause he figgered I was the most reliable waddy in the whole Lazy L spread. An' he's been throwin' out hints fer the last year that I'm in line to be range boss when Bill Stevens cuts loose an' starts his own herd. Dad bust it, I *gotta* stop these hellions somehow!"

Shorty finished by rolling from the side he had been lying on to the other, in an effort to ease somewhat the terrible ache of his tightly bound body. This change of position brought him facing the open door. Almost immediately the surly Bowen entered the cabin and proceeded to

arouse the sleeping rustlers. Jackson was the first to arise. As he stood by the door adjusting his gun belt and holster, Shorty got his first good look at the man with the grayish-red hair.

"Only half-way decent lookin' jasper in the bunch," thought the little puncher. "Looks like he mighta seen better days."

A moment later Shorty gave a half audible grunt of surprise. For the rustler, feeling the cowboy's eyes upon him, had glanced up and with a sudden change of expression had given the bound man a mysterious hand singnal which Shorty recognized as the secret sign of a certain fraternal organization which his employer had induced him to join the previous year. The puncher remembered now that he was wearing the emblem of the order on his vest. Before he had time to reflect further on this astonishing incident, the rustler chief rolled out of his bunk and came towards him.

"This ranny knows too much for us to leave him here thisaway," Ranse said, looking down at the helpless Shorty.

Out of the corner of his eye, Shorty could see the long sinewey fingers of the man curling around the butt of a six-gun. There was murder in the glitter of his snake-like eyes.

"What you aimin' to do with him, Ranse?" asked Baldy.

"Put him outa his misery," growled the leader, deliberately drawing his heavy Colt. "Some range rider is liable to drift along this way an' find him afore we git a good start."

"Hold on, Ranse!"

Jackson had stepped over between the rustler chief and his intended victim.

"What you buttin' in fer?" growled Ranse.

"I'm against any unnecessary killings," said the gray-haired man quietly. "Been too much of that. First thing we know this whole country will be full of posses looking for us. Let's leave this waddy tied up here. Not likely there'll be anybody riding this way for two or three days."

"Gittin' soft, huh!" sneered Ranse.

"Maybe so. But that idea you got of killing everybody that happens to get in our way hasn't brought us much luck."

"I ain't takin' chances on this guy puttin' a bunch of cow nurses on our trail just to spare your tender feelin's," Ranse snapped.

"Let's put it on a business basis then," suggested Jackson, noticing the deck of cards. "I'll play you a hand of poker. If you win, I've got nothing more to say and you take my share of the money from the herd. If I win, this waddy stays tied up. You game?"

A covetous gleam lighted the killer's greenish eyes as he pondered this extraordinary proposition. Shorty felt, rather than saw, the rustler chief wavering. The man who was risking his share of the expected loot to save the life of an unknown cowpuncher never shifted his steady gaze from the undecided Ranse for an instant.

"I take you, Jackson!" suddenly declared the leader.

Shorty, watching the two rustlers out of the corner of his left eye, caught the crafty expression which flitted across Ranse's pock-marked face.

"That low-life figgers to cheat," thought Shorty.

RANSE sat down at the table and began shuffling the cards. Jackson dropped onto a bench across the table from his opponent. The other three members of the rustler band crowded up to the table on the opposite side from the hog-tied little puncher on the floor, so that he still had a fairly good view of the players. As the cards whirred together again and again with the shuffling by Ranse's long sinewy fingers, Shorty felt himself go cold. This merciless Ranse was a master manipulator of the pasteboards. Undoubtedly he was shifting the cards for a "set-up" that would cost the watching puncher his life. Jackson, however, seemed to suspect no trickery.

With a final shuffle of the cards, Ranse slapped the deck down on the pine table.

"Cut!" he offered, his cruel face now cold and mask-like.

"Deal!" said Jackson, starting to roll a brown paper cigarette.

The intently watching Shorty saw a sudden snarling twitch of Ranse's thin lips expose his yellowed teeth in a split second flash of rage. If the killer had prepared a "set-up" as Shorty now felt sure he had, it was spoiled by this unexpected maneuver of Jackson's. Yet the gray-haired man could rightfully claim the privilege of passing the deck uncut. It was up to the baffled Ranse to deal. There was grim satisfaction to Shorty in the fact that now, at least, the game would be played honestly.

Ranse dealt.

Shorty turned his head till his neck ached, anxious eyes searching the immobile features of the players. Into the killer's slitted green orbs came a momentary flicker of triumph as he read his hand. Shorty's heart sank, he felt the blood draining from his strained face, as Ranse discarded two and Jackson three cards.

Again the rustler chief dealt. And again the tense little puncher on the floor saw the tell-tale flicker in those evil eyes. Jackson's poker face told nothing. The gray-haired man, after one swift glance at his cards, had glued his eyes to his opponent's hand. The killer looked up, thin lips parting in a crooked grin. Instead of throwing his cards face up on the table he spread them fan-wise with a twist of thumb and fore-finger and held them up for the helpless pawn in the game to read.

"My God!" groaned Shorty under his breath. "Three aces and a pair of jacks!"

And then suddenly he saw something which sent the blood pounding through his veins.

Jackson had thrust his his own cards, spread wide, in front of Rance's hand.

"Four treys!" yelped Shorty joyfully.

Ranse leaped to his feet, kicking over the bench and glared at Jackson. For a moment Shorty feared that his reprieve from death might be short-lived. But the killer mastered his rage as quickly as it had come over him.

"You win!" he snapped savagely. "Let's get goin'!"

SHORTY watched the rustlers file out the door. Ranse, in the lead took the puncher's cartridge belt and six-gun off its peg as he passed. But Jackson made a pretense of having to step back for something he had forgotten. Moving quickly, he grabbed the pan of biscuits Shorty had made for himself, and a bucket of water.

"Best I can do for you," Jackson muttered as he placed the food and drink beside the prostrate puncher. "Reckon you can make out till some rider drifts along this way. I'll try to get word to the Lazy L about you."

"I ain't forgettin' right soon what you've done for me," said Shorty. "An' I'm thankin' you hearty till you're better paid."

Jackson was out of the door before the Lazy L puncher finished speaking. A minute later the drumming of hoofs told Shorty that the rustlers had departed. Realizing that whatever he was going to do to save the herd must be done quickly, the little puncher set to work with desperate haste to free himself.

By wriggling his body until the saddle pocket was within reach of his hand, Shorty tilted the pocket and allowed a heavy bladed clasp knife to drop out. Precious time was lost in opening and maneuvering the knife into position where he could saw the rope which bound his wrists across the sharp blade. But this difficult feat was finally accomplished. It was but the work of a moment then to free himself entirely. Sitting up and rubbing his numbed limbs till circulation was restored, Shorty's nimble wits raced ahead in an effort to scheme success out of what appeared to be a total loss.

"I gotta move sudden an' violent against that bunch," he thought. "But five gun slingers like them ain't gonta be easy to stop. If I could reach that ledge above the gooseneck 'fore they get clear of the canyon I'd have a chance to work on 'em without showin' myself."

Rising to his feet with a groan as his cramped legs straightened under him,

Shorty moved a small box back against the wall of the cabin and mounted it. Above his hand on the rough hewn upper surface of the log, the puncher grasped the barrel of a .30-.30 rifle and a six-gun and drew them from their hiding place.

"Lucky I keep this arensal hid out when I ain't usin' it. Them jaspers never thought of lookin' up here!"

After filling his pockets with cartridges from boxes concealed on the top of the log, Shorty headed for the little corral. The sorrel cowpony came trotting up to the bars at his whistle. Shorty made quick work of saddling his mount. Leaping into the saddle he dashed toward the mouth of the canyon.

As he drew near the narrow cleft in the sandstone walls of the canyon, he noted the open gate. He reined up before it and sat his horse a moment, listening. Owing to the gooseneck curve of the entrance, he could see nothing of what was going on in the small enclosed valley where the herd grazed. Distant shouts informed him, however, that the rustlers were busily rounding up the cattle preparatory to driving them out.

"I got a idee!" Shorty suddenly cried out.

He slid from the saddle. Jerking the heavy bars one after the other into place, he quickly closed the gap in the stone barrier wall. With a bound he was back in the saddle and spurred the sorrel into the cover of a nearby clump of spruce. Here he dismounted and tied his horse.

"Them rustlers is shore caught like rats in a trap," grinned the little puncher as he gripped his rifle and started back to the canyon on a run.

A narrow ledge which jutted from the face of one of the canyon walls sloped downward near the entrance to the gooseneck gorge until it was only a few feet above the level. At this point Shorty climbed to the ledge. Crouching low and taking advantage of the cover afforded by an occasional scrubby bush, he worked along to where the sandstone ledge widened inward, becoming a shallow cavern roofed by the over-hanging top wall. There was a tilt to the floor of the ledge, its outer rim being a couple of feet higher than its point of contact with the main wall. This made a rampart behind which a fighter could lie in comparative safety. Formed as it was, one well-armed man could have defended the tiny stronghold against a regiment. What was still more to Shorty's advantage in what he proposed to do, was the fact that it commanded the only gateway through which man or beast could get out of Gooseneck canyon.

From his vantage point on the ledge Shorty could see practically every foot of the tiny, cup-shaped valley, enclosed by sheer walls of red sandstone. Its level floor was carpeted with waving bunch grass, like a field of ripening wheat. A willow-bordered stream trickled down from its spring-fed source at the base of the north canyon wall and ended in a reedy water hole near the center of the valley.

On this rich range the small herd of high-grade steers in Shorty's charge had fattened during the summer.

"Now I got to fight for 'em," he gritted, peeping cautiously over the rim of the ledge at the yelling rustlers on the far side of the valley. Expert cowpunchers, they were rapidly hazing the cattle into a compact herd.

SHORTY rested his rifle in a tiny crevice of the ledge rim. His eyes eagerly sought the lanky form of the rustler leader. "Here's where I open the ball," he muttered grimly, as Ranse rode clear of the willows and shouted an order to his men.

The muzzle of the little puncher's .30-.30 followed the moving target until Ranse drew rein. Then his trigger finger twitched. The rustler yelled and grabbed his left arm.

"Only winged him," Shorty grumbled, ejecting the empty shell and sliding another cartridge in place.

A wild commotion followed the shot. The startled riders turned from their work and dashed for the shelter of the willow thickets along the stream.

Shorty half rose from his crouching

position behind the uptilted rim of the ledge in his eagerness to get in another shot before the last of the rustlers could reach cover.

Zing-g! A bullet whined past the puncher's head and thudded into the canyon wall at his back. He ducked to safety behind the stone rampart. A drifting wisp of gray powder smoke had betrayed his position to the hiding cattle thieves.

Rifles began cracking from different points in the willow thickets. Rock dust and splinters sprayed over the crouching cowboy.

Shorty glanced at the setting sun. "Them hombres kin shore throw lead," he conceded. "I'll see if I can work an old trick on 'em. Got to finish this scrap before the sun drops behind that ridge or it'll be too dark to pick 'em off when they try to stampede the heard out of the canyon."

Hanging his big gray Stetson on the muzzle of his rifle, Shorty shoved it slowly above the ledge rim.

Zing! Zing Zup! A stream of angry lead whizzed and thudded round him. Frightened cattle scattered with the crackling gunfire of the concealed rustlers.

A well-aimed bullet tore the hat from the rifle muzzle, and the .30-.30 dropped from Shorty's nerveless hands. The shock of the bullet striking the gun barrel had temporarily paralyzed his whole right side. For a moment he lay gazing vacantly at the fast fading gleam of sunlight on the fallen weapon; then gradually his shocked nerves became normal and his muscles responded.

"Woof! Nearly knocked me all the way out!" grunted Shorty to himself. Even in the heat of battle his habit of talking to himself persisted. "If that thing had hit me I reckon I'd have knowed it, all right—or mebbe I never would have knowed anything else."

Savage yells and curses suddenly mingled with the crash of gunshots across the little valley.

Shorty picked up his rifle and edged cautiously back to the rim of the ledge.

"They're breakin' cover!" he exulted, catching sight of several horsemen racing toward the milling cattle. "Just like I figgered, they think they got me. Looks like they're aimin' to make a rush for it."

THE cattle were straightening out and heading toward the mouth of the canyon.

"Here's where that gang gits what's comin' to 'em," grinned Shorty, shoving the barrel of the .30-.30 across the ledge rim. "They ain't gonta git outa here so easy as they think."

Heads and tails high and bawling with fear, the stampeding herd dashed down the canyon ahead of the yelling rustlers that crowded upon their heels.

Shorty drew a bead on the burly Bowen, whose racing buckskin bronco had forged slightly ahead of the others. The .30-.30 cracked viciously.

The rustler suddenly threw up both hands. He dropped his rifle and sagged backward in the saddle, then slumped to the ground while his horse reared up and snorted in fear.

Immediately the onrushing rustlers opened a terrific fire. The little valley seemed to rock with the thundering blasts.

A hail of lead spattered round the barricaded cowpuncher. A chip of rock cut his cheek. His rifle barrel grew hot from the jets of flame which burst from its muzzle.

On came the yelling gang. Quirts lashing, spurs raking, they forced their frenzied mounts at top speed. The half-breed, Chico, was in the lead now. Baldy and Bowen rode side by side close behind him. Jackson brought up the rear.

"Where's Ranse?" Hardly had the query formed in Shorty's mind when the branches of the willows near the water hole swished apart and out shot a rangy bay horse. On his powerful back sat the rustler chief. One bandaged hand hung useless at his side. The other held a six-gun. With the bridle reins in his teeth, Ranse spurred the big bay to a furious gallop.

Quickly reloading his rifle, Shorty pumped lead at the three remaining riders

who frantically were urging their plunging mounts against the cattle.

"He's closed the gate," yelled Ranse, the rustler leader, to his two remaining men. "By God, we're trapped. We've got to rush him now."

HE WHEELED his horse and the four bad men spurred frantically back up the trail, in an attempt to shoot their way past Shorty. Shorty shouted with a fierce joy as a shot from his gun sent Bowen toppling from the saddle. Only three against one now. He might get them all yet. But the light was fast fading now, and in the little valley the shadows were lengthening, making good shooting difficult. It worked just as well for him, though, Shorty reflected—they couldn't shoot so well either; but he did want to get that damned Ranse.

Yes, he wanted to get that man. Ranse would have shot him down like a rat if Jackson's clever play hadn't foiled him. Why had Jackson done that? Shorty didn't have time to figure it out just then. A shot sent Chico crashing down.

Swiftly he pumped shots at the two charging rustlers. Then his gun chamber was empty. In a frenzy he attempted to reload. He got two shells into the breech. The two horsemen were nearly abreast of him on the trail below. In another minute they would be around a bend; perhaps they could circle him and get him from behind. No time to reload further now so he drew the six-gun.

He aimed hastily, squeezed the trigger. The shot missed Ranse but sent Jackson's horse crashing down. The rider rolled clear, but lay half stunned. Desperate, Ranse charged ahead, his one six-gun blazing. He emptied the cylinder at Shorty, then hurled the gun away and reached across his body to get his left hand gun. His left arm dangled grotesquely, Shorty noticed. Funny how a man's mind worked at a time like that.

Then Shorty fired again—and it went home. Even in the growing darkness Shorty could see the surprised look that spread over the bandit leader's face, so close was he. Then he slowly slid from the saddle.

Shorty lay for a moment staring at the scene of battle. Four men he had shot down from his vantage point. He had won, through his quick thinking and his quick acting. Then the reaction set in and he laughed hysterically. He controlled himself with an effort, however, and reloaded his empty rifle; then he poked his head cautiously out. Jackson was still alive, and despite his act in saving Shorty's life, he might still be dangerous. He was an outlaw and to Shorty's range bred mind there was no sense in taking unnecessary chances with such gentry.

But Jackson was sitting up and slowly his hands raised above his head.

"You win, fella," he announced. "But I suppose it means behind the bars for me."

Shorty's reply was terse and very much to the point:

"Get over to one side and let them cows drift back out of the gorge."

Jackson caught up one of the riderless horses and led it over to the side wall of the canyon. Without waiting for the cattle to get out of the narrow inlet, Shorty ran back along the ledge and dropped to the ground. In a few minutes he had secured his horse from the clump of spruce and then he rode back to the gate in the stone wall. Already the cattle were moving back from the gorge and Shorty managed to get the bars down. Then, still keeping a wary eye on Jackson, he hazed them through.

SHORTY could see now that Jackson's nerves were unstrung by the experience he had just been through. "Put down your hands, fella," he ordered, not unkindly. "I reckon you an' me ain't got no more reason fer lead slingin'.

"I wish you'd tell me what the dickens you was doin' hightailin' it through here in the first place for, anyhow. I was just wishin' some human company would come

along but I sure wish now that you fellows hadn't of come."

"We been over to Pajaro Basin," Jackson answered quietly. "Was gonna rob the bank at Vacaville but the sheriff come on us before we could pull it and Ranse plugged him. That's why I told him his habits of killing everybody wasn't getting us nowheres. Well, the whole town came a-shootin' and we had to run for it.

"Then you trapped us here with that rifle of yours—I suppose you had it in the camp all the time but we never saw it—and we were so surprised we didn't act until you had the jump on us. I sure was lucky that shot hit my horse instead of me."

"YOU ain't had all the luck today at that, fella," rejoined Shorty. "What about them two treys you caught in the draw? That pair of little three spots shore saved my life."

The flicker of a smile lighted Jackson's pale face for an instant as he turned to the Lazy L puncher. "I didn't catch 'em both in the draw," he said.

"How come?" Shorty demanded. "You only held up two cards."

"I slipped one of 'em out of the deck when Ranse and the rest of the boys were looking to see how you'd take that full house he showed you."

"An' took a chance of gettin' shot when you did it," warmly declared Shorty. "Fella, you ain't no regular bandit. How did you happen to get mixed up with that gang?"

"Booze an' cards," Jackson answered simply. "I went broke and fell for Ranse's scheme to grab off some easy money. Now I got to pay for it."

"Far as I'm concerned you done paid in full," said Shorty, holding out his hand. "Hightail it fer a new stampin' ground. An' luck to you!"

The gray-haired man took the outstretched hand in a fraternal clasp, then wheeled his mount and was gone.

"Reckon they's bound to be a big reward offered fer this bunch dead or alive, 'count of killin' a sheriff while they was robbin' a bank," mused the thrifty Shorty. "I'll pack these here defunct corpses on a coupla horses in the mornin' an' deliver 'em to the proper authorities in Vacaville."

As he reined his horse toward the mouth of the canyon, the little puncher of the Lazy L glimpsed a bunch of white-faced cattle drifting wraith-like through the star-lit dusk of early evening.

"The more I see of some folks," he muttered significantly, "the better I like cows."

You'll Enjoy Reading

Fangs of the Air Wolf

By RAOUL WHITFIELD

A Stirring Tale of a Renegade Airman Who Scourged the Border

In the February Triple-X—On Sale January 10th

The Bed Roll

RAIN or starlight, the cowboy frequently must sleep under open skies. And of course he must have a bed to meet any conditions. This article tells how the cowpuncher makes up his bed.

LIKE everything else that the cowboy uses or owns, his bed must be built to stand hard usage, rough weather and all sorts of climate.

In summer and in winter, from Montana to Texas, the cowboy's bed is his home. With a good bedroll, a cowboy is at home wherever night overtakes him.

It is made of a tarpaulin about sixteen feet long and perhaps seven or eight feet wide. This is spread out and three or four "soogans" or quilts are laid on it, then a double cotton blanket instead of a sheet and then more wool blankets and perhaps more quilts or soogans, depending on the weather.

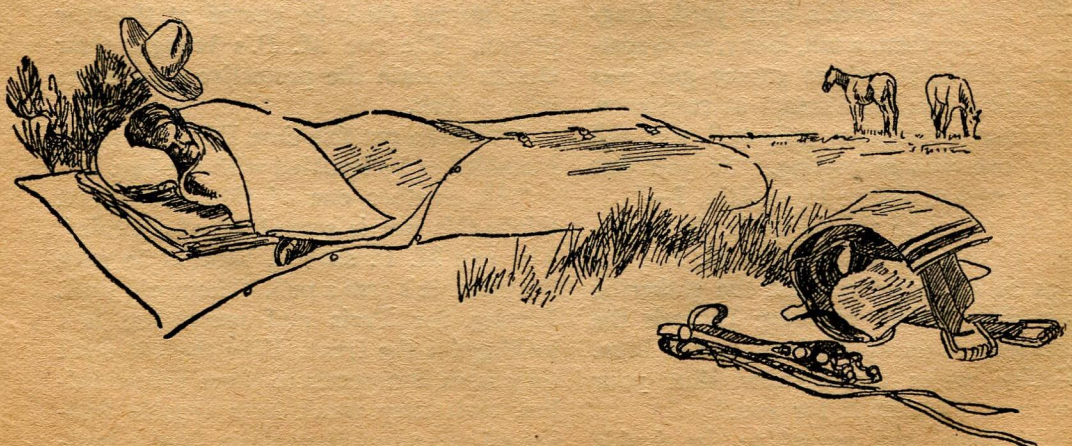
Then the long end of the tarp is drawn back over the bed proper to keep out dirt. The tarp itself is heavy enough to withstand heavy rain or snow without leaking.

Rings and snaps are attached to the sides, so that the edges of the tarp may be fastened. When the puncher wakes up after a night's sleep he folds the edges over to the middle of the bed and snaps them. To carry on a horse he folds it once more and lays it over the horse's back like a blanket, tying it down with rope or straps. During roundup times the bed rolls are rolled up and put in the bed wagon, which follows the chuck wagon.

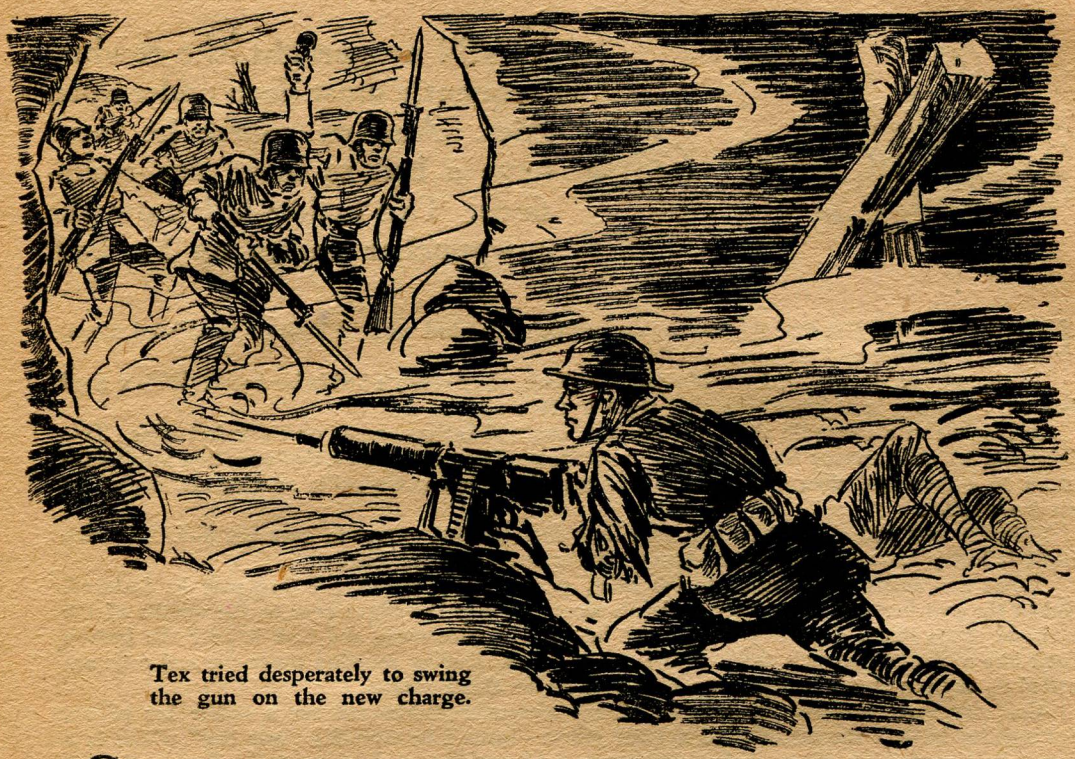
Contrary to a somewhat popular belief, the cowpuncher does not use a saddle for pillow, for saddles haven't the qualities of a good pillow—instead he uses his "war bag" which is a flour sack containing extra socks, underwear and perhaps a shirt or two. Frequently the wandering cowpoke uses the bed roll as a handy place in which to carry things that are not otherwise easily packed, as magazines, mouthorgans, perhaps his other pair of boots—if he has another pair—or other similar things.

When the puncher spreads his tarp for the night he can pull the outside flap over his head if it looks like rain. He also stores his boots under the flap to keep them from becoming wet.

The work of the cowboy is strenuous and he has but little time for relaxation. At the end of a hard day's riding, it is luxurious to unroll the bedroll, and sprawl out with the back against the unrolled half, puffing at a last cigarette while the sun is going down in a blaze of glory or the campfire flickers in the early darkness. Then the weary puncher creeps between the cotton blanket and soon is asleep.



Tex in the Trenches



Tex tried desperately to swing the gun on the new charge.

GERMANS charged from all sides against a cowboy soldier and his two comrades who stood alone between the Yanks and a terrible trap. This is an enthralling story of front line action by a cowboy author who served in France.

TWO rain soaked M. P.'s struggled through the ankle deep mud of Madame Lavez's barn yard, dragging between them a tall, lanky, mud-spattered individual, whose gawky gait was as awkward as his attempt at resistence.

"Listen, yuh two galoots," the tall lanky one was protesting. "If you just give a man a chance to explain, I—"

"Ah, tell it to the C. O. in the morning," the shorter of the two M. P.'s cut in as he motioned through the gathering dusk at a guard, standing beneath the protective eaves of Madam Laves's barn. "You're under arrest, now shut your mouth or I'll shut it for you."

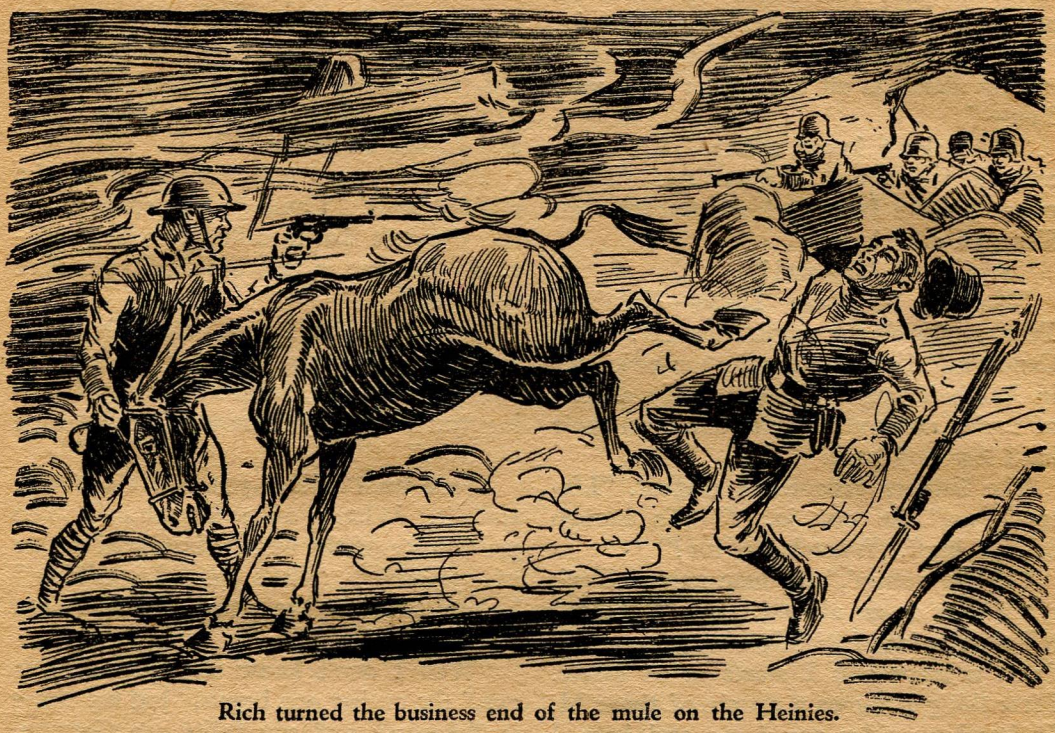
The guard had moved to the double halved barn door and now fumbled at his belt for a key to the mammoth lock that dangled from the door bar. Through the rain-hurried dusk he peered at the new arrival. The two M. P.'s brought their charge beneath the protective barn eaves with a jerk.

"Whatcha got this time, Ed?" the guard mumbled as he fumbled with the key.

"Ah, another one of these birds that thinks this war is some kind of a picnic." The one M. P. sneered back as he gave the prisoner's arm a pull. "Same old stuff. Hitting for Paris and pretending he's looking for the front. Why the hell don't they issue compasses to these yellow bellies, then they won't have trouble finding all the action they claim they're looking for."

By Jay J. Kalez

Author of "Tex Cleans Up Chicago," "Two-Gun Shoots First," etc.



Rich turned the business end of the mule on the Heinies.

The guard grunted his agreement as the barn door swung open. "This makes three." he spoke as he reached out and grasped the prisoner by the arm. "Hold him for the morning courtmartial same as the rest?"

"Yes, skipper'll pass on them in the morning." The speaking M. P. pushed the prisoner forward. "Guess all three go to Is-sur-Tille for a general." Then to the prisoner. "Com'on, 'Boot.' Move."

"Now listen, fellahs," the prisoner started to speak as he faced the blackness of the open doorway, "you boys are all wrong. I—"

"Ah, tell it to the Marines." A heavy boot planted amidship and the protesting one sailed forward into the blackness. A half dozen stumbling steps and he tripped flat over a prone body upon the barn floor. A barrage of courses echoed with the slam of the barn door. Inside, it was so dark that the luckless one could see nothing.

"Hey, why don'tcha watch where you're goin'?" a voice demanded out of the darkness. "You think my face is a welcome mat?"

The newcomer did not answer.

"Where ya at?" The voice in the darkness sounded anxious.

"I don't know where I'm at but I'd just as soon be someplace else." The new addition to the improvised jail spoke up.

"Well you'll be there quick enough," the cussing speaker cut in. "Shut up and roll over this way—toward my voice."

"What's the matter?"

"Keep shootin' off your mouth and you'll know what's the matter. Roll this way before that damn mule wakes up and plants his feet in your face.

A SOUND of crushed straw and suddenly the bodies of the two speakers touched.

"I's been in a lot of jails but I's never

been in a jail where they lock up mules before." The newcomer voiced his disgust with an appropriate oath.

"Well don't feel stuck up about it, neither have I," the distrubed one cut in. "You don't know the kind of mule you're talking about, is all the matter with you. You—"

"Who don't know mules?" the newcomer's voice was threatening. "Man, where I come from mules is thicker than flies on a dead horse."

"You from Missouri?"

"No sir, I's from Texas—Humbolt, Texas. Hank's my name, stranger. Hank Canutt and I's the champion mule-skinner in Rawhide county. I can make a span of mules do anything but stand on their hind legs and bark."

The listener groaned in disgust. "Listen, Tex," he cut in. "That's enough of that bluff. Whatcha in for?"

"In for nothin'," the man named Hank came back in an abused tone. "I heared tell about a lot of stiff fightin' going on up front a piece and I starts in to locate. First thing I knows a couple of these M. P. hombres rides me down and here I be. Say, you under arrest to?"

"Well I be damned," the questioned one exploded. "You think I'm sleepin' in this lousy barn for my health?"

"I don't know," Hank mumbled back. "Barns is the only place I's slept in since I's been in this here France. What all you in for?"

"I'm in for forgetting how to say 'halt' in mule language. Course there's a few incidentals besides that, but that's what started it anyway. Hilda tried to outrun a couple of horseflies and some brass-hat's limousine got in the way. The M. P.'s picked up Hilda and me and I guess the water cart is still down the road."

THE water-cart driver suddenly cut his explanation short. From the darkness beyond came a sniffling sob as of someone trying to cover the sound of his weeping.

"Who's that?" Hank whispered.

"Sh, not so loud." The water-cart driver brought his mouth close to Hank's ear. "That's the young kid that gets the works. Went over the hill under fire or something like that. He's been bawlin' ever since I landed. "He's just a punk kid. Still scared stiff. He stands a chance of saying good morning to a firing squad and I guess he knows it."

The darkness still echoed with the choking sobs. "Come on kid, snap out of it," the cart driver called into the darkness. "No use in bawlin'. Hell, you ain't dead yet."

"I wish to God I was," came the moan from the blackness. "I'm not afraid to die but—but—oh, what's the use of telling you fellows, you wouldn't believe me anyway."

"Sure we'd believe you kid. Go ahead, spill it. What's on your mind?" The gruff voice of the mule driver held a note of sympathy. "Let's get him talking," he whispered at the same time to Hank. "Go ahead, kid."

"Well I don't know who you fellows are," the crying one began, "but my name is Schwartz and my folks are German. I—"

"That's all right, kid," the sympathizing one cut in. "Names don't mean anything in this man's army. My name's Rich but the best job I ever had was hashin' in a beer garden. Names don't mean a thing, do they partner?" The mule driver nudged Hank.

"Reckon they don't," the Texan spoke up, "I knew a nigger named White and he was blacker than a spade flush."

THE sobbing one was silent for a second. "Well," he began again, "when I enlisted I was afraid they might not take me if they knew my folks were German so when they asked me I didn't tell them anything about being able to talk the language.

"I kept quiet about it all along and yesterday up in the front some of the fellows went over on a raid and brought back a couple of German prisoners. I was on C. O. guard and when they brought in a Frenchman to act as inter-

preter I got a chance to listen in while our captain questioned them.

"Well, it wasn't a minute until I found out the Frenchman wasn't asking the Germans a thing the captain was demanding. He was talking to them in German and telling them how many men we had up in the line and all the time making up fake answers to the captain's questions.

"One of the Germans told the Frenchman they were planting a big mine just about under our position and if he was what he pretended to be he had better get out of there and get out quick.

"The Frenchman turned right around and told the captain that the two Germans had a lot of information to give and suggested he be sent back with them to the staff headquarters for questioning before the general.

"The captain agreed and before I had a chance to say anything, he ordered me to take the two Germans and Frenchman back to the division commander's office.

"I was afraid to blurt right out with what I knew because the captain might suspect me on account of lying about talking the language, but I figured as soon as I got to the D. C. O. I would tell everything and let them go after the Frenchman.

"I just started back with the three men when the Germans open up the shelling they give us every morning. All of a sudden, when we were about a kilometer back, a big one came a whistling and lit right ahead of us.

"The concussion knocked me unconscious or something hit me and knocked me out, and when I came to the two Germans and the Frenchman had disappeared.

"I was afraid to go back to the captain without my prisoners and I thought that maybe the Frenchman had taken the Germans on and was going to drum up a big story when he got to the D. C. O.

"The firing was still pretty heavy and I started back for the rear on the run. Just as I came over a little hill, two M. P.'s arrested me. I tried to tell them what I was doing but they said they had watched me running away from the front.

"I tried to explain to the M. P. sergeant they brought me to, but he simply ordered them to charge me with deserting under fire. I haven't got a chance because no one will believe me. I don't care about myself. That's not bothering me. It's the disgrace and—and that mine. If they blow it up and kill a lot of our boys it will be all my fault for being afraid to tell the captain."

THE darkness went suddenly quiet as the young soldier Schwartz once more began his muffled sniffling. Hank and the cart driver Rich sat in silence as the meaning of Schwartz's story filtered in.

Suddenly, Rich leaped to his feet. "Hell, it ain't too late yet, if we could only get out of here," he shouted. "Where was your outfit at buddy?"

"I don't know exactly," the boy answered. "Hill 360 is all I know about it. The D. C. O. was at a place called Moffet farm. That's where I was making for when they grabbed me."

"It wouldn't be hard to find if we could get out," Rich shot back. "I've been making every road in the sector with that water cart of mine. If—Say Tex, you talk about bein' in so many jails, did you ever bust out of one?"

"Reckon bustin' out wouldn't be no trick," the Texan drawled. "How you goin' to stay out when you do get out?"

"Just get me by that guard outside and I'll do that," Rich came back. "In this darkness they couldn't catch anybody, and by daylight we'd be where it ain't healthy for M. P.'s."

For a moment the darkness was silent save for crunching of straw beneath the Texan's feet. A scratched match and the dim yellow flame disclosed the tall, lanky one carefully inspecting the barn's double door. Slowly his eyes ran up and down the door's fastening.

"You sure that mule of your's is from Missouri?" the inspecting one called.

"Who, Hilda?" came the mule driver's voice. "Listen Tex, take one look at that animal. If Hilda ain't from Missouri I'm her uncle. Whatcha figurin' on?"

Between chuckles, Hank unfolded his

plan. Rich and the boy listened in silence. Carefully Hank went into detail.

"Are you sure it will work?" Rich finally shot at him.

"Now you all's goin' to ask me again if I knows mules. You and the young fellah here jest hang on to the rope I fasten around that animal's neck and stay clear that mule's rear end. I'll do the rest. Then, when we gets down the road a piece, you takes command."

FOR a few minutes the floor bedded straw stirred noisily as the three men busied themselves about the nervously stamping mule. With the animal harnessed, Hank took the long stake rope and wound it double into the harness tug's eyes. Then placing himself at the animal's head he groped his way through the darkness until he had backed the mule against the barn's double door. Stationing Rich and the boy well to either side of the door he gave them their instructions.

"Remember you fellahs," he began, "when I hollers 'go', hang on, cause we're goin' to start movin' right sudden. Holler loud as you can and stay clear of that animal's heels or this party is goin' to be total casuals. You ready?"

"Anytime," came the answer.

"Then whoop'er up. Let 'er buck."

"Whoa mule," came the drawn out cry from the darkness and as if a battery of 75's had turned loose, the barn door echoed with the crash of the screaming jack's flying heels.

Three mighty lifts of the animal's heels and the barn door flew clear of its hinges.

"What in hell's the matter in there?" came the shout of the guard at the barn door.

"Help! This mules gone loco," came Hank's scream above the tumult of "whoa mule" cries of Rich and the boy as Hank pulled the mule's head about and faced the animal through the open door.

"C. O. the guard, Post number three," came the wailing shout of the guard outside as the noise within the barn took on a death warning shriek.

"Go," screamed Hank's voice above the chaos and like a bat out of the devil's headquarters Hilda bolted through the barn doorway, Hank clinging to her neck with one hand clutching a long twisted ear. Rich and the boy hung to the harness tug ropes and flew through the air.

If the corporal of the guard, turning out a hundred yards away, had any idea a jail break was in process, he lost the idea in the vision of squealing terror that charged past him and went tearing down the road dragging three men. Also, if the jail guard had any idea he was about to loose his charges, he forgot it in his haste to gain the safety of the manure pile that banked the jail door. Little Hilda did more squealing and threw more hoofs per minute than any combination of hide and hair ever concocted.

Down the inky black road way they went, Hank half astraddle Hilda's neck, shouting a cry of battle into her ear. A queer cry, more like the hissing buzz of a bee but a cry for Hilda's ear alone. Behind, dragged Rich and the boy.

TWO minutes and the aroma of Madame Lavez's barn yard had given way to the cool dampness of wet foliage. They were plunging down the road as it lead into the heavily treed woods. Far behind, the dim hoarse shouts of the officer of the guard told them pursuit was as yet not organized.

The night air sizzled with a litany of blazing oaths as Hank bore his weight down on Hilda's head. Gradually the mule drew to a peaceful halt, as if the action of the past few minutes had been a well rehearsed play.

"All right, soldier, you're the boss from here on. Where to now?" Hank stood stroking the mule's neck waiting for the two trailing doughboys to grope their way forward.

A minute later two panting forms loomed alongside.

"Say partner,'" Rich began as he drew near. "Just tell me two things and I'll be obligated to you for life. Tell me what

you whispered in Hilda's ear to start her and repeat that string of cussin' you used to stop her. Do that for me and I got the grandest idea of how to win this war, that was ever put out."

Hank's low chuckle was cut short by a startled exclamation from the boy Schwartz. "Listen," he cut in. "They're turning out the whole guard."

"Let 'em turn out," Rich sneered. "Them M. P.'s won't go out of the yard in this dark. They don't know which way we went anyway. Let's move down the road a piece and see if that water-cart of mine is still parked. If we find that we're O. K."

Down the blackened lane they moved the mule following peacefully to Hank's guiding hand. A half hour of groping through the blackness and suddenly Rich called a halt.

"She's right along here someplace," he called from the roadside. "I remember this stone wall running along. There's a little bridge ahead and there she should be. You fellows stay here while I look around."

A few minutes, and at a welcomed shout from Rich, Hank and the boy moved ahead. Hilda followed as willingly as a petted pup.

"Here she is," Rich called. "Put that mule between the shafts and let's get going. And remember this, you two, if anybody stops us from now on, we're taking a cart of water up front to the 26th. You two guys are my helpers and all you have to do is keep shut. From here on I'm wise to every turn in the road."

QUICKLY they hitched the mule to the clumsy water cart. In a few minutes they were moving, Rich now at the mule's head, Hank and the boy following behind.

For an hour they traveled. Only once were they stopped. An M. P. at a cross road halted them but at a word from Rich and an invitation to inspect their cargo, he passed them on. No sign of the pursuing officer of the guard—if he were pursuing—presented itself.

Ahead, the ground gradually grew more open. Open and broken. Rich began to lead a zigzagging course in and out of the shell holes that cut the road. Now and then the black sky above streaked red and slowly their ears begun to catch the staccato chatter of machine guns.

Suddenly they came upon a group of trucks discharging their loads at a supply dump. "Where's Moffet farm?" Rich inquired of a truck driver.

"Where is it?" the truck driver repeated. "You mean where was it. Fritz turned loose with all the artillery this side of Berlin, this afternoon and what his shells didn't get a bunch of Fritz planes did. Whatcha lookin' for, D. C. O.?"

"Yeah," Rich answered.

"Moved up," the truck driver went on. "Somethin' big coming off in the morning and they played in luck. Moved out just before Fritz turned loose."

Into the mind of all three men flashed the meaning of the heavy afternoon shelling. To Rich and Hank it told the truth of Schwartz's story. The Frenchman or his German aids had in some way gotten the information across the line. Information and location.

SILENTLY digesting the meaning of the gathered information, the trio once more moved up the road. A few hundred yards, and with a sudden crash the trailing water cart rolled sideways into a shell hole, downing the struggling mule with it.

It took but little inspection to show that piece of equipment was out of commission. One wheel and the shafts were broken. Rich began unhitching Hilda at once.

"Shall we leave the mule here?" Hank inquired as he helped Rich cut the animal loose.

"Leave Hilda?" Rich shot back. "I should say not, brother. This mule is going to be the only proof I got to bank against an A. W. O. L. citation. Hilda sticks with the party as long as I do. When we locate that Hill 360 or the D. C. O. I'm hitting back for the S. O. S.

and Hilda is goin' to be my alibi."

By now, all signs of a road had disappeared. The slow drizzling rain had let up entirely and the men were able to get a dim outline of the land ahead.

"Wait a minute," Schwartz called suddenly as he pointed ahead. "That looks like it might be the place over there. The hill was barren on the side and topped with woods. We were dug in on the far side."

"Any port in a storm," Rich commented and once more they moved on. Twisting their way to the slope they worked up its side and plunged into the woods. There was little sound of firing and only occasional machine gun fire gave them any inkling as to direction.

Perhaps a half hour had passed when suddenly the night burst into a flame-belching roar. Shells began to burst about them and the blackness lit red with their explosion. A few minutes and from behind them an answering roar seemed to raise in reply. They were in the midst of an artillery duel.

IN THE blinding flashes Hank sighted a black shadowed square cutting into the hillside a short distance ahead. Quickly moving forward, he called to his two companions to follow.

His find proved to be the entrance of what seemed to be a deep dugout. High and well timbered, the dugout mouth was banked with sandbags and then camouflaged over with brush. Guided by shell flashes, the trio plunged within the protective walls, the flat eared Hilda following willingly.

Inside, the three men listened to the bombardment without.

"Say Tex," Rich suddenly spoke up. "I don't like the looks of this layout. How come a swell dugout like this and nobody in it?"

"Been thinking of that myself," Hank answered. "Reckon our boys must have moved on up a ways and left the place but—"

At a sudden low cry from Schwartz, Hank went silent. Far down the tunnel's blackness appeared a tiny pin point of light. Almost at the same instant Rich began banging his hob nailed shoes against metal.

"This ain't a dugout, it's a tunnel," Rich whispered as he continued banging his heel. "Listen, there's some kind of a track laid along it." The ring of his hob nails above the shell roar without, proved him right.

Far down the blackness, the pin point of light grew larger. Within sounded the dull clank of steel wheels upon uneven rails. Rich moved close to Hank.

"Listen Tex," he confided in a whisper, "I ain't making any longshot bets, but something tells me we've ran into a Fritz nest. Hell, our fellows haven't enough to eat up here much less steel rails and tunnel equipment like this layout. Don't suppose—"

Rich cut his words short. Dim in the tunnel's hollowness, echoed a cry. Faintly the words carried forward. Indistinguishable words, but plainly audible as to accent. Somebody far down the tunnel was shouting orders in German.

Rich grabbed Hank's arm. "It's a Fritz layout for sure," he whispered. "What'll we do?"

Unconsciously each man felt in his belt for a weapon. They were unarmed, helpless, without even as much as a grenade for defense. The voices down the tunnel grew louder.

Outside, the thundering roar of the artillery bombardment still sounded. Back some fifty feet within the tunnel entrance the three Americans caught the flashing red of the exploding shells. It was as good as death to venture out. The fire now seemed concentrated upon the hillside.

"Listen fellahs," Hank suddenly spoke. "If them is Germans acoming and they're pushing some kind of a cart in front of them, they're a working party and reckon ain't no more armed than we are. What say we try a little downright bluffin' on them?"

"How?" Rich demanded in the same breath.

"Make 'em think we're armed. Here, drag the harness of that mule. Uncouple

the hames of the collar and hold them out like they was a rifle. In this kinda light they can't tell the difference. You Schwartz, hold your arm back all the time like you had a grenade in it. If the bluff don't work we can always run for it."

RICH answered with a grab for the mule's collar. In a minute the harness was on the tunnel floor and the hames buckled free. Then, leaving the mule, they moved cautiously forward and prepared for their attack. Crouching against the tunnel wall they waited.

Slowly the light grew closer. By now they could make out plainly the bulky, black shadow of a low tunnel car piled high with filled sacks. From behind it came the sound of the trailing voices. A minute and the car was upon them.

Flattening their bodies against the tunnel wall the three men held their breaths as the loaded car scraped by. The flickering lights of three miner's lanterns leaped into view. Behind them followed a fourth.

With a wild yell, Hank leaped at the trailing lantern. A bulky German stumbled over backward as the rushing Texan swung back the harness hames in tomahawk fashion. The piece of iron bound hickory landed with a killing blow. The hames were buried in the German's neck. The German completed his stumble with a groan.

Whirling about, Hank faced the car. Flat against the high pile of sacks stood the three remaining Germans, their hands in the air. To either side of the tunnel stood Rich and the boy, one with the hames held rifle fashion the other with drawn back hand.

"Kamerad." came the babbling cry from the three white-faced forms, their up-stretched arms framing the miner's lamp in each cap. "Kamerad."

Hank swung the bowed hames beneath his arm pit in rifle style and rushed forward.

"I got the boss of the layout," he shouted as he breasted Rich. "Search them quick before they all change their minds about this 'Kamerad' business."

Rich moved forward and made a quick search of their captive's bodies.

"Not even a pocket knife," he called back as he passed his hands over the last man.

"What's on the car?" Hank demanded.

Rich felt of one filled sack. "Dirt," he called back. "Plain dirt."

Hank drew up his dummy weapon threateningly. "How many more of you back there?" he snarled at the captives.

The three Germans looked helplessly from one to the other. The blankness of their expression showed they did not understand.

"Let me talk to them," said Schwartz. "They don't understand you."

Without waiting for Hank's permission, Schwartz hurled the question at the three men in German. An excited babble and waving of arms was his reply. In a minute he whirled to Hank. His face shown white in the yellow light of the miner's lamps.

"We're in some kind of mine tunnel," he said excitedly. "These men say there's about twenty men working at the far end."

Hank's jaws set. A mine sap. The very thing they had set out to warn the division commander against. Could this be the very one Schwartz had overheard the Frenchman speak of?

"Ask them how far it is to where the men are working," he commanded of Schwartz. The boy hurriedly translated the question to the Germans.

"Rich," Hank called as he waited. "Search that Fritz I laid away back there and see if he's got side arms."

"It's a thousand yards to where they're working," Schwartz cut in. "This is the main tunnel. There's a half-dozen mines laid to either side of it."

HANK did not reply. Rather he stood gazing past the loaded car toward the tunnel entrance. Something in the frame of blackness beyond held him.

"I got a Luger off the bird you cold-cocked," Rich shouted from behind him.

"Sh-h," Hank hissed, as he still stared past the loaded tunnel car. "Quick, put out those lights. Schwartz, tell these men if they let a whisper out of them we'll kill them. Be quiet."

A sudden silence filled the tunnel. Something in the hollow quiet seemed to shriek a warning. The rumble of the heavy firing in the night without had grown strangely quiet. Inside the tunnel plunged black as the miner's lamps went dark. Rich, the newly discovered Luger tight in the pit of one German's stomach, faced the three captives about. Silently the men waited as Hank peered through the darkness ahead.

The click of metal against metal suddenly echoed down the tunnel. With it came a low whisper in German. A minute and a flashlight beam loomed up on the tunnel's black walls ahead. Hank's eyes searched the path of light from its dim reflected rays.

Ten yards ahead, Hilda's grotesque shadow half filled the tunnel passageway. Beyond her, barely within the tunnel's mouth, a half dozen scuttle shaped helmets bobbed about in the dimness. Noisily they struggled with some clumsy object that lay a shapeless heap on the tunnel floor.

"What they saying?" whispered Hank to Schwartz as the jabbering voices grew plain.

Schwartz did not answer. His ears were strained ahead.

"How many are there?" came Rich's voice from the darkness.

"Six I reckon," Hank whispered back. "They're—" The touch of a hand in the darkness silenced him.

"It's a machine gun crew," Schwartz was whispering. "They're trying to fix a place to set up in the tunnel mouth."

A low mumbled curse escaped Hank's lips. They were trapped. The tunnel mouth was now barred to escape and far behind at the tunnel end were three times as many of the enemy.

QUICKLY the cause of their entire predicament flashed through Hank's brain. The truck-driver back at the Moffet farm had spoken of something big coming off. Evidently the Germans had some inkling of the move. In the darkness the three men had wandered through the broken lines and happened upon the outlet to the mine laying operations. The tunnel itself had perhaps been well guarded but in the barrage of artillery fire the Germans had taken to their dugouts. Now, with the shelling over, they were perhaps seeking a more advantageous point to set up their gun. The tunnel mouth had been chosen.

Instantly the double danger of their position became apparent. To remain silent meant certain capture by the sapping crew coming up from the tunnel end. They must fight it out.

Groping in the darkness for Rich, Hank whispered his desperate plan of immediate attack. It was fast nearing the hour of daybreak. In their position, the darkness was their only ally. If they attacked they must do so at once.

The problem of the three German prisoners was simple. They believed the three soldiers armed. One man could easily take care of the captives in the darkness. Of the more ignorant, laboring type of soldiers, the prisoners seemed well satisfied with their lot. There was little to fear from them. Of the machine gun crew at the tunnel mouth though—. With the thought Hank moved into action.

Leaving the boy Schwartz to guard the prisoners, Hank and Rich crawled around the tunnel car. Rich still carried the captured Luger but Hank's only weapon was the bowed, hardwood hames. Silently they groped their way toward the swinging flashlight beam ahead.

A minute and they had passed the peacefully sleeping Hilda, who though half blocking the tunnel pasageway, seemed to little mind their passing. Now, flat on the tunnel floor, they squirmed their way on.

Ahead, they could make out the laboring gun crew. Already their machine-gun was set up in the tunnel center. Piles of ammunition boxes lay grouped about it. Three of the crew were making them-

selves comfortable among these while the German with the flashlight, evidently the crew commander, was inspecting the set of his gun.

Barely breathing, Hank and Rich crawled along the tunnel floor to within a dozen feet of the unsuspecting crew. The dull gray haze that mingled with the flashlight's beam warned them of an added urge to haste. Already day was breaking outside. The smell of a damp fog drifting in past the tunnel mouth gave the reason for the light's dullness.

THE gun commander had suddenly crouched over his gun. In a minute the tunnel mouth echoed with the chatter of the gun. The time was opportune.

"Now, Hank whispered as his groping hand touched Rich's arm. "Rush 'em."

Like silent leaping panthers the two men swept forward. The dull thud of the heavy harness hames upon the neck of an unsuspecting foe was the first warning of attack. Then the Luger roared its report.

Down went the nearest standing German, his neck bowed in an awkward twist. A flash of flame from the Luger and a second German pitched forward in a heap. The man crouched over the machine gun whirled as he leaped to his feet. Hank felled him with a wild swing of the hames into his face.

The three Germans seated amongst the black ammunition boxes now charged forward as one. A flash of flame leaped from the hip of the nearest. Hank felt the sing of lead as an answering roar echoed from almost at his elbow. He brought the hames down with a mighty swing at the same moment kicking forward at a second charging figure.

The Luger at his back spoke twice, then went silent. Hank caught a vision of Rich hurling his body forward, head down like a charging bull. Barely checking the swing of his weapon, Hank whirled just in time to catch the weight of an unseen enemey in a crouch. The sixth man of the crew had leaped at him from the side. Down they went in a struggling heap.

A great hand clutched at his throat. Hank twisted and swung blindly upward with his club. In the dim gray light that filtered past the tunnel entrance he caught a glimpse of Rich mingled in a squirming heap, with two of the enemy at his side.

The hand at his throat suddenly found a hold. A smashing fist crashed down upon him. Hank squirmed and barely caught the blow on the rim of his helmet. In the same instant he swung upward with his one free hand. The blow landed clean. With a groan the German released his grip. A mighty swish of the hickory hames and the enemy rolled clear.

Struggling to his feet, Hank searched the dimness for Rich. A swaying form against the tunnel wall loomed through the grayness. Hank hunched his shoulders for a rush.

"Hold her, Tex," came a faltering voice from the dimness. "This is little Willie."

"Yuh hurt?" Hank demanded, his eyes sweeping the array of sprawled bodies about.

"Give me time to find out," Rich shot back, "Did we get them all?"

"Reckon so," Hank mumbled, his eyes still sweeping the bodies. "Better search them before they start getting their second wind."

QUICKLY the two men began disarming their victims. Already two of the men were beginning to recover from the effects of the attack. The remaining four lay motionless. A quick inspection accounted for them. Rich and his aim had been deadly for three. The fourth lay with his head bent beneath his chest, the mark of Hank's weapon plainly printed upon his neck.

Arming themselves with the captured weapons from the machine gun crew, Hank and Rich sought to jerk the two recovering Germans to their feet. A sudden cry from down the tunnel and they both whirled about. From the blackness beyond came the wail of Schwartz's voice.

Leaving Rich to guard the two new

prisoners Hank rushed back into the darkness. "What is it?" he called as he eased himself past the still peacefully sleeping Hilda.

"Somebody running down the tunnel," answered Schwartz, his voice a tremble.

"You still got your three men?" Hank demanded as he squeezed passed the tunnel car.

"Sure. I got 'em laying down and I'm sitting on them." The boy's voice sounded with a bit of pride at his method of accounting for his captives.

Hank fumbled in his pocket for a match and struck it upon the handle of the captured Luger he held in his hand. A yellow glow lit the blackness. A dozen steps further down the tunnel and he began a mumbling chant of curses.

"What is it?" called Rich, who by this time was rounding the car with his captives, the rescued flashlight guiding his path.

"Reckon that Fritz I put away at the start of this thing, came to and made a run for it. He's gone."

Still searching the blackness beyond Hank took Rich's reprimand for carelessness without a word. Far down the tunnel he could hear the pounding footsteps of the escaped German. Evidently he had not hit the first German as hard as he had intended.

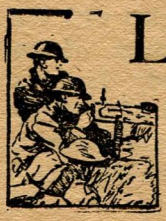
"What'll we do now?" came Rich's voice.

"Reckon we better run for it while we can," Hank shot back. "Line those prisoners up. We'll take 'em with us. This tunnel is going to be damn unhealthy as soon as that German warns the men at the end."

Quickly they pushed their prisoners past the tunnel car. Hank lead the way. Approaching the still sleeping mule, he stroked her hips gently as Rich worked the Germans by. Then grabbing up Hilda's halter rope, he turned her around and prepared to follow. A sudden shout from Rich and he halted.

"Listen," Rich called back from ahead. "What does that sound like?"

Hank strained his ears forward. From outside the tunnel came a wild chatter of machine-gun fire mixed with the crack of firing rifles. He dropped the halter rope and rushed forward. Sneaking cautiously to the tunnel mouth he peered about. The sight that met his eyes caused him to drop flat.



LIKE a waddling bear he scrambled across the few feet to the mounted machine-gun in the tunnel mouth. A second later he dropped behind its breech, and not a second too soon. Even as the gun's muzzle lashed out with its spitting flame the helmets of a wave of Germans appeared above the sloping crest of the tunnel's mouth.

"They're coming," Hank shrieked over his shoulder as he sprayed the jerking gun across the open arc past the tunnel mouth.

"Hell, this is curtains," came Rich's voice. "Look, the whole German army is rushing us."

"Us hell," Hank shot back. "It's an attack. Look down the hill there. Them's our boys coming this way."

Here and there, barely visible in the veil of fog-like mist far down the slope, single khaki clad figures now and then loomed up. However, their number seemed as naught compared with the scatter of scrambling gray figures rushing about the slope in the wide open area before the tunnel mouth.

Evidently the Germans were retreating to their second defense line and now in a dozen spots on the hillside below, machine-guns took up their noisy chatter as the retreating line filtered past their spitting muzzles.

It was such a group of retreating infantrymen upon whom Hank had turned loose his machine gun's spray. His aim had been good but a dozen forms were diving into the bordering woods beyond and already the camouflaged tunnel-mouth's walls began to sing with flying lead as a machine-gun in the clearing below identified the tunnel's defenders.

"Hell, we haven't got a chance," Rich screamed as he tore loose the strap on a

second ammunition box. "They'll set off the mines in this tunnel and blow us to hell."

"Reckon you're shell shocked or something mister," Hank sneered, his voice cool and slow as he trained the gun on a suspicious wood spot below. "They'll never set off the mines with a crew still back there."

"Yes, but that tunnel gang will be on our tail in a minute," Rich shot back.

"Get busy," Hank snapped. "Blockade that tunnel back there. Turn that tunnel car on end and bank it with dirt sacks. If we can hold out a while our fellahs will be up here. You put the three Fritzes to work and send the kid to help feed this gun."

Rich leaped to his feet as the possibility of Hank's words flashed upon him. If they could plug the tunnel with the car and its load of sacked dirt, there was still a chance. More important, the Germans never would fire the mines beyond as long as the tunnel crew was held within. The crew itself would attend to that. Even if the mines were wired to some central station, the sappers, if held below, could cut the wires.

Ordering the boy Schwartz to aid Hank with the machine gun, Rich rushed the three prisoners back to the tunnel car. A few threatening orders, a wave of the Luger in the flashlight's beam and the prisoners tore at the task. Quickly a plug of dirt bags was being formed about the upturned tunnel car.

Back at the tunnel mouth Hank was spraying his fire. The open space before the tunnel mouth was now clear of all moving objects but from the woods beyond the echo of machine gun and rifle fire raised to a deafening dim. Only the one unseen gun, however, directed its fire at the tunnel mouth. The bottom of the hill, with its wall of thin mist, was the target of the wooded screen beyond. Out of the fog came the answer to the defending chatter. The Americans in full swing were attacking the hill from flank and center. Hank aided with his captured weapon.

A SUDDEN cry from his side and he let up on the machine gun trigger. The boy Schwartz had dropped forward in a heap across the ammunition boxes. Hank grabbed him by the shoulders and rolled him over. Schwartz attempted a contorted grin as his hand pressed against his chest.

"They—they—got me," he mumbled. "But—but—if you ever get a chance—tell them I was no coward."

The boy's head sank. Hank gulped hard as he swung back to the gun. The boy had gone out game. He squirmed lower behind his gun. Somewhere in the woods sharpshooters had taken over the task of ridding the tunnel menace.

A sudden rush of footsteps from behind and Rich threw himself flat at Hank's side.

"It's fixed," he shouted as he tore at a fresh ammunition belt. "Plugged tight with dirt sacks and the car."

"Where's the prisoners?" Hank snapped back over his gun's sights.

"I strapped them all up together with Hilda's harness. They're at the plug. What's the matter with the kid?" Rich reached out toward the still Schwartz.

"They got him," Hank shouted back. "Stay low, there's a bunch of snipers working on us. If—My God, look! Give 'em hell!"

Hanks words were in tempo to the sudden action below. The fog had slowly rolled on down the hill. The shell torn earth at the foot now showed plainly. From every shadowed mark belched stabs of flame. The Americans had seemingly gained a firm footing below. Now they must defend it. The Germans had launched a counter-attack.

From out the woods poured an ever growing column of field gray figures. Down the hill they charged, bayonets low, steps firm. From their flanks rattled the leaden death of their machine-gun barrage. The morning echoed with their hoarse shout of battle.

Nor was the menacing tunnel mouth to be overlooked in the attack. A rain of machine-gun bullets sprayed dirt from the

tunnel mouth. Then, like a caving ditch wall, down rolled a wave of gray from either side of the tunnel mouth's banked sides.

Blindly they fired into the dimness beyond the mouth as within the tunnel's narrow space, shots went spattering from wall to wall. They were attacking in the most effective fashion. Scattered out and from all sides. It was two against fifty.

Hank's jaw set and his eyes grew narrow as he sprayed his lead about the spitting stabs of flame from the tunnel mouth rim. At his side Rich, a Luger in each hand added to the dim. The tunnel roared with their fire.

"Damn! Damn! Damn!" came a roar in Hank's ears as out of the corner of his eye he saw Rich hurl a Luger toward the tunnel mouth. The mule driver was out of ammunition for one gun. Hank knew too well the soldier's rage, in the heat of attack yet unable to fight back.

THEN like a wail of death sounded Rich's scream above the dim of fire. "My God Tex," came the mule driver's scream. "They're through! They're through!" Hank's mind flamed in a blaze of indecision. The sappers at the tunnel end had broken through the tunnel's plug. They were being rushed from the rear. To whirl the machine gun about for one instant meant certain death from the determined attackers at the tunnel mouth. They were done for. Done for with victory in sight, for even as Hank grasped tighter at the firing grip a hoarse battle shout rolled up from the hill foot below. The Americans had met the counter attack and turned its tide.

Then into his ears came the maniacal words of the screaming Rich. "Tex, Tex!" the mule driver was screeching, "Tell me quick. What do you whisper in that mule's ears to make her throw up a heel barrage?"

Hank, grim in his determination to stick to his gun, gulped wildly as he fought to fathom the meaning of Rich's words. Then the mule driver's plan of defense flashed clear. The sappers were without firearms, being merely a work party—they would be helpless against a mule's flying hoofs.

"Whistle in her ear! Whistle in her ear!" he screamed back at the bending Rich. "Cover her eyes so she can't bolt and whistle in her ear."

Like a flash Rich was away. Once more the machine-gun set up its deathly chatter. Slowly the face of it's gunner worked into a wide grin as from the tunnel blackness beyond came a wierd, squealing screech, coupled with the thud of stamping hoofs.

Terror-stricken screams seemed to add to the tumult. Over it all, the chatter of Hank's gun rattled on; and as slowly the far-off cry of battle from the hillside below grew louder, the firing at the tunnel mouth grew more broken.

Into the now retreating waves of scattered gray Hank poured his fire, raking the woods into which they disappeared, until with a sudden shout he leaped to his his feet. "Hey buddy! Hey buddy!" he shouted as he ran beyond the tunnel mouth. "In here! In here!"

A dozen khaki figures answered his call, but at the tunnel mouth they paused.

"What the hell's going on back there?" demanded a sergeant as he stared wide-eyed into the blackness listening to the screeching squeal mingled with the pleading screams of "Kamerad!"

"We got a gang of prisoners back there," Hank shot back. "It's a mine layout and we got the gang of sappers penned in."

Then, as the sergeant glanced suspiciously from side to side, the sound of Rich's voice sounded above the tumult.

"Tex! Tex!" the mule driver was screaming." What do you yell at this mule for 'as you were?' " Tex started forward on the double.

A MUD-SMEARED major stood at the tunnel entrance gazing at the array of battle. Before him stood Hank and Rich, the now peacefully blinking Hilda

between them. Down the hillside tramped a double column of gray. At the tunnel mouth rested a still form covered with a single spread blanket.

"Good work, men. Wonderful work," the major was saying. "I don't understand how you men could have got in the position you were but your steady machine-gun work did the job.

"I'll have your names, men. G. H. Q. will hear of this."

Hank and Rich called off their names and the Major scribbled them in a notebook.

"Both privates, eh?" he muttered. "Who was in command?"

For a moment both men stood still. Then as one two heads nodded silently toward the still, blanketed figure of young Schwartz.

"Oh, I understand," the major spoke as he scribbled on a pad. "The casual. Too bad he could not have lived to receive the honors he has earned. Is he entirely responsible for you men doing your wonder work?"

"Reckon so," the tall, lanky Texan drawled. "You see, we's all prisoners back there somewheres but—well—you see—."

And then, Hank told of his own arrest, of his meeting with Rich and the dead youth, Schwartz.

He spoke haltingly at first, being unaccustomed to talking to Majors. But as he warmed up the words flowed more smoothly. He told of young Schwartz' discovery of treachery, of their escape and subsequent finding of the mine mouth. Then he told of the battle that followed and of how Schwartz had met his death.

The major listened silently, then whistled.

"So, that was why the lad never reported with his prisoners and the Frenchman!" he grunted. "I was apprised of that detail being missing and we thought perhaps they were all killed by a shell. But nobody knew how the Germans got wind of our advance. The Frenchman doubtless was a spy and he gave the enemy their information."

"Yes, sir," returned Hank. "That's what the boy figured, sir. He wanted us to tell his officers he wasn't no coward and I'm here to say he sure wasn't, neither."

"No," and the Major's voice softened, "he wasn't."

Then for a minute he stood at salute while two men picked up the blanketed figure and carried it outside.

"He was a brave man," the major said simply. Then he turned to Hank and Rich. "And doubtless he saved our advance from running into a terrible trap.

"As for you two men, that was a grave offense to break jail. However, in view of your subsequent actions, I shall see that charges against you are dropped. And what's more, G. H. Q. will hear of your actions."

"And if there's anything that can be done for the mule," and he laughed—"I'll see about that, too. For the present, I think you had better take her back to the officer of the guard from whom you escaped. I'll write a note which will clear you and he'll see that you rejoin your respective commands. Dismissed!"

The Major answered their salutes, then strode off down the hill. As he went he heard behind him the disgusted exclamation of Private Rich:—

"How the hell do you start this mule, anyway, Tex?"

Tel Brown Cleans

In a second the room was in a shambles and six-guns answered the whir of automatics.

WHEN Tel Brown found an eastern gang blackmailing one of his old range friends he forgot all about loafing and exploded into swift action. The story of that explosion makes one of the most entrancing novelettes ever written by Mr. Webb for Triple-X Magazine.

By JOHN WEBB

Author of "Tel Brown Burns Powder," "Panhandle Fights Back," etc.

IT WAS night. Tel Brown and young Bucky Keys rode along through the darkness, bound for the Bar-O, old Jim Tolland's ranch. The purpose of the visit was mainly social, but not entirely so. Back in the day when Tel Brown had been addicted to work, he and Jim Tolland had been close friends.

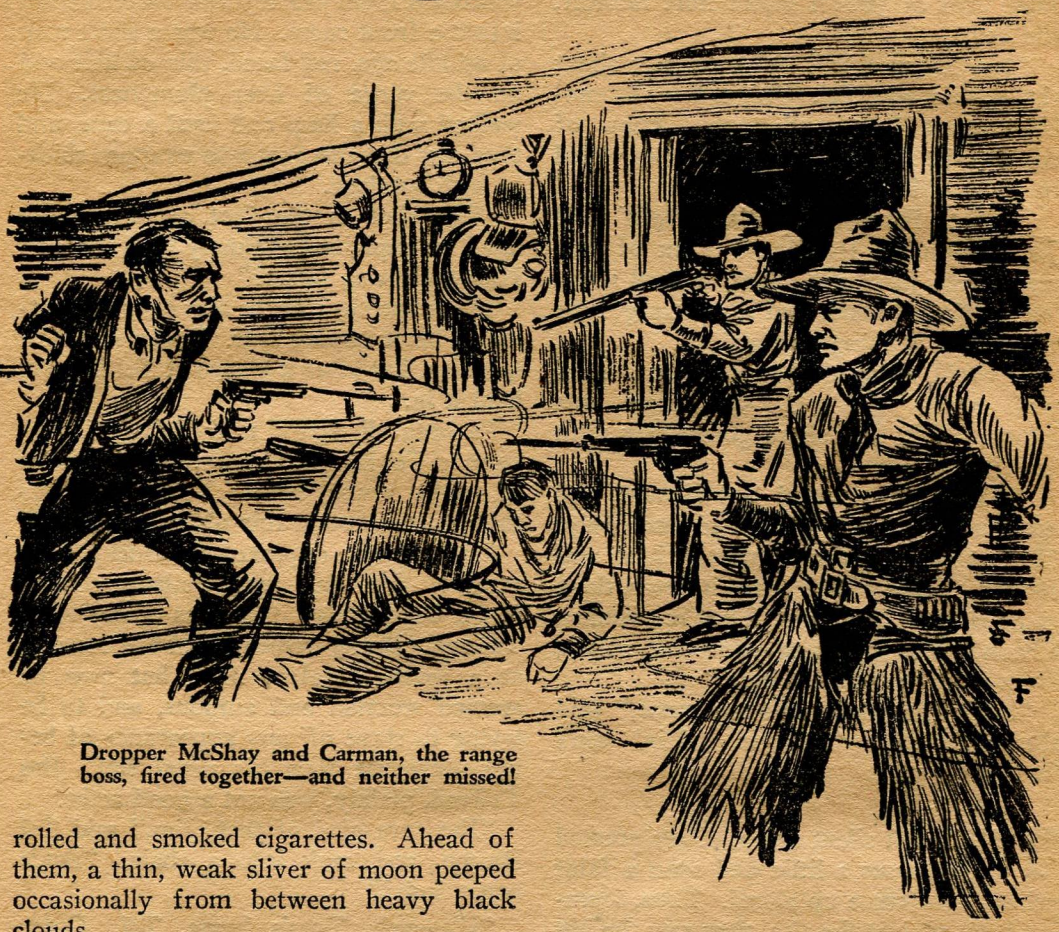
"I ain't seen Jim fer a right long time," the militant loafer had remarked that morning, back in Cottonwood. "I'd sure like to see him. 'Sides, I'm kinda wondering about them things they're saying about him. If it's true—but shocks, I just don't believe it. He ain't that kind o' jigger. I know Jim."

So Tel Brown, worried and puzzled, had saddled his big gray and started for the Bar-O, and Bucky, the bony idler's admirer and staunchest friend, had come along.

They rode silently. Tel Brown chewed steadily on twigs that he broke from limbs that reached out over the road. Bucky,

A Gang

Another stirring tale of the militant loafer's adventures, wherein he shoots it out with gangsters.



Dropper McShay and Carman, the range boss, fired together—and neither missed!

rolled and smoked cigarettes. Ahead of them, a thin, weak sliver of moon peeped occasionally from between heavy black clouds.

"A man like me," drawled Tel Brown, oughta be getting his rest, instead of forking a hoss this time of night. Big fella like me needs a lot of rest—"

He broke off. He stopped his chewing and listened with his head on one side. Through the drowsy night came a gentle murmur. The murmur grew in volume, became a low deep roar. It was coming from the road behind them.

They turned in their saddles. Behind them in the darkness stood out two white lights that rose and fell and jerked from side to side of the rutty road. Swiftly the lights approached, accompanied by the growing roar.

The two pulled their horses to one side of the road, almost in the thick, black trees. Tel Brown struck a match and held it above his head. He struck another, and Bucky too struck one.

The automobile was coming fast. It came abreast, skidded, then straightened out and roared past. Trigger, Bucky's little sorrel, reared, pawed the air and would have come down with both fore legs across Tel Brown's mount had not Bucky swung it aside. The little horse landed in the road, started to bolt, but stopped and stood quivering when Bucky jerked it back and spoke sharply. A cry floated back to him from the vanishing car—

"—out o' the way, hicks!"

"Means you," came Tel Brown's gentle drawl from the side of the road. The loafer spoke lightly, but Bucky got a glimpse of him as he came out of the

blackness of the trees, and his jaw was like rock.

"Wouldn't call 'em careful. Sonny, that little hoss of your'n didn't hurt himself, did he?"

"No, Trigger's all right. Funny about that automobile, Tel. Only a few automobiles round here, and none I know of could make time like that. And they called us hicks. Must be city gents."

"Right. From St. Louis. Stayin' with Jim Tolland at the Bar-O. Six of 'em, come with Jim's son, Tom. Heard about 'em in Cottonwood, and it's them got me wondering at things I heard."

"They'll be at the Bar-O, then. And we'll meet 'em!" Bucky's voice was happy. "Tel, I'm shore gonna talk with 'em!"

"M'mm," murmured Tel Brown, and spat out a wad of well-chewed wood pulp. "If you do, boy, you wanta talk hard and sudden. From what I heard in town, them gents is bad! Real bad! They're gunmen, I hear, and city gunmen—different, sonny, from what we got out here."

"I'm gonna talk, just the same," said Bucky grimly, "and if talkin' ain't 'nough—"

THEY fell silent again. They pressed their horses a little and soon a faint yellow light came up ahead. Then, looming back against the sky, they saw the big Bar-O ranch house, and a little later, the scattered outbuildings.

They reached a corral and slipped from their mounts.

"Hy!" yelled Tel Brown. "Hy, Jim Tolland!"

There came no answer immediately, but in a little while there came a voice from the house; a voice with a trace of anxiety in it—

"H'lo! Who's there?"

"Bucky Keys and Tel Brown," answered the latter. "That you, Jim?"

"Yeah! Turn yore hosses into the corral and come on in." There was unmistakable relief in the voice; a peculiar shrillness was gone. "I'd come out to yuh, Tel, but I got a bum foot. Come on in, Tel!"

In a minute or so Tel Brown and Bucky mounted to the porch of the big house Jim Tolland had built some years ago. Jim welcomed them heartily and ushered them into the front room. He was a short man of middle age, red faced, thin of hair and on the verge of over plumpness. He walked with a limp and used a cane, and they saw that one foot was wrapped thickly with bandage.

"Got shot in the foot about a week ago," he explained. "Funny kind o' thing. How yuh been, fellas?"

He seemed to want to slur over the matter of his wounded foot. Bucky started a question, but after a glance at Tel Brown, held it in.

"I been all right," said Tolland in answer to Tel Brown's query. "Everything's all right round here! Yessir! Everything's fine around this old ranch, boys!"

His manner appeared to Bucky over earnest. He had met Tolland several times before, but this was a different Tolland. Bucky remembered the rancher as a jovial, carefree man, but now he seemed worried and anxious, and to be trying to stave off any appearance of being otherwise than his usual self. Jim Tolland, plainly, was not a good actor.

"I'm sure glad of that, Jim," said Tel Brown, and sank into a chair. "Son's home, huh?"

"Uh—yeh, Tom's home, Tel. Come home 'bout a month or five weeks ago. Yeh."

"Been away for 'bout six year, ain't he, Jim? Where's he been?"

"Uh—oh, travelin' round mostly. St. Louis last."

"Great town, S. Louis. Tom was there quite a while, I hear."

"Three-four years, Tel. How's everything over Sandhill way? Working hard as usual, yuh son-of-a-gun?"

"Hard as usual, Jim," drawled the loafer. "Doing plain nothing, Jim, that's me. And you can't do nothing in a minute; you gotta have plenty of time. I got it too; never run out of time."

Tel Brown was off on his favorite theme, the art of plain and fancy loafing,

and the benefits to be acquired therefrom. He talked on and on, pausing only to find another matchstick for his tireless jaws.

"Work is a blight on the human race. It's a bad habit and does things to you. Knowed a fella once— Tom brought some friends with him from St. Louis, didn't he, Jim?"

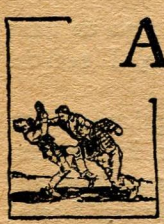
"Uh—yeh, Tel. Some friends from St. Louis."

"Six of 'em, eh? Reckon you're glad to meet friends of Tom's, hey, Jim?"

"Yuh betchuh, Tel! Yessir! What was yuh sayin' 'bout that fella yuh knowed?"

Tel Brown, in his drawling way, told a long, meaningless yarn about that fellow. "And that's what work done to him," he finished. "All he knowed was work, work, work, and when a man gets that way— Where them six fellas bunkin' Jim?"

"Huh? Oh, them!" Again that shadow flitted across Jim Tolland's red face. He wanted to avoid the subject of his son and his friends from St. Louis. "Why, in that old bunkhouse I ain't had no use for, for a year or so. Wanted 'em to sleep in the house here, but they said no, they'd ruther sleep in that old bunkhouse, where they could get out and in without disturbin' nobody. Jest come in a while ago; I heard their automobile. Well, Tel, maybe you're right 'bout work, but me, I been workin' all my life, and dog-gone, I kinda like it—"



AN HOUR or so of talk on the subject of work versus loafing and Tel Brown arose and yawned. He needed his rest, he said. He and Bucky would bunk in with the Bar-O hands, in the new bunkhouse. He said good-night and with Bucky went out into the cool, dark night. He reckoned he knew his way about and could find the bunkhouse and an empty bunk, and insisted that Jim Tolland not bother himself about them.

"Bucky," said the gangling loafer as they walked slowly from the house, "something here is wrong. Can't you just feel it in the air? Jim Tolland shore ain't himself. But dog-gone it, I jest can't believe them things they said about him in town—"

He broke off and peered through the darkness. In the door of the old bunkhouse lounged a slim figure smoking a cigarette.

The man ground his cigarette beneath his heel, then took a lighted lantern from the door and came toward them.

"Hello— Oh, I thought you guys were somebody else."

"Tel Brown and Bucky Keys, from Sandhill," said the loafer, "just now from Cottonwood. You're a friend of young Tom Tolland's, I reckon."

The stranger nodded. He seemed disappointed. He was a slender, slouching man in city clothes. His face was sharp, hawklike, and his eyes were set deep beneath thick, black brows.

"McShay is the name," he said. "Youse are the two birds that almost got yourself run over in the road a while ago, I guess."

"Yeh!" burst out Bucky hotly. "What the hell's the matter with you fellas—"

"Shush-shush!" said Tel Brown quickly. "No use getting all het up, sonny. Yes, McShay, we're the gents. Don't you think you was kinda careless?"

"Careless?" The slim man laughed nastily. "You damn fools, don't you know enough to keep your nags out of the road when you hear a car comin'?"

"Nags?" Tel Brown shook his head slowly. "Them is good hosses, McShay. My Hatrack hoss looks like his name, but you can't always jedge hoss flesh by looks, and Bucky's Trigger hoss—"

"Guy, I don't care anything about your horse— Keep 'em out o' the road! You were holdin' up traffic."

Bucky started to say that these were range country roads, built by cowmen for cowmen, but Tel Brown stopped him with a gesture.

"We pulled over to one side and lit matches so's you'd see us," the loafer said, "but dog-gone it, seemed like—"

"I saw you, and I was driving! But I was in a hurry and when I'm in a hurry I don't put on brakes for anybody! Es-

pecially not for a couple o' country hicks ridin' broken-down nags—"

"Fella," said Tel Brown slowly, and fumbled for a matchstick. "you're shore talkin' rough. We're tryin' to be nice, but you won't let us."

Bucky's knuckles itched. He wanted to plant a fist against that lean jaw. He wanted to stop that nasty mouth.

This man McShay, Bucky told himself, was bad. It stood out of the vicious face and the little deep-set eyes. He carried no visible weapon, but just the same, he was a dangerous man; a man to take no chances with. That much was plain.

And at this moment McShay was in an evil humor. He was savage. He was an angry rattler coiled to strike at anything that came near.

Bucky had never seen such boiling savagery in a human face, nor such black evil. McShay, to Bucky, was the sort of man to be condemned without a hearing.

The man spat from between his teeth. He snorted contemptuously.

"Listen, hick," he said to Tel Brown, "I'm not asking you to be nice. I don't give a damn how you are! The best thing you can do, the humor I'm in, is to get to hell away from me, before you get a sock in the jaw! G'wan—beat it!"

Tel Brown sighed resignedly.

"I done my best," he said. "Fella, if you try to sock me in the jaw or any place else, I'll shove your teeth right down your throat—"

McShay moved quickly. His right fist shot up in a short swift arc. He was quick, but not quick enough, for Tel Brown's bony fist slipped inside of his swing and clupped against his chin.

McShay wavered, then his knees buckled and he crumpled into a huddled heap.

"Before he comes to," drawled Tel Brown, "let's you and me nosy away from here. I'm afraid o' that jigger. I sure am!"

That, Bucky knew, was a downright lie, for if there was anything in the world Tel Brown was afraid of it had not yet come to light. Nevertheless he followed the big loafer to the regular bunkhouse and entered at his heels. They found empty bunks and without arousing any of the Bar-O hands, turned in.

THEY roused out with the Bar-O cowboys in the morning. There were greetings all around. There were only two that they did not know, and one of these was the foreman, Pete Carman, a stocky, powerfully built man who showed signs of a hot, quick temper.

"Howdy," he said. "Heerd of you, Tel Brown. Kind of a detective, ain't you."

"Got mixed up in a couple little things, Carman, and had good luck. Ain't what you'd call a real detective; jest a plugger and purty lucky, that's all."

"Well, mebbe that's nine-tenths of good detectin'—pluggin' away till something turns up. Gonna stay with us long?"

"Dunno," answered Tel Brown. "Just happened along."

Carman finished buckling his gun belt, from which hung a heavy .45. He tied the holster down, being strangely careful to set the gun at the proper angle. He straightened slowly and looked at Tel Brown narrowly, and seemed to be thinking.

"Good place for detectin', here," he said. "Mebbe—well, I'll see you later, you two. Hear cookie rattlin' pots and pans, and that makes me hungry."

He went off, walking with a rolling stride, his aim the cook shack.

"Tough hombre, seems like," commented Bucky.

"I betchuh, boy. Useful man to have around in gun slingin' time, I reckon. Well, let's chow."

All hands, with the exception of Jim Tolland himself, ate together, in the mess room. Young Tom Tolland was there and so were his six friends from St. Louis; and the six were a hard looking lot.

Bucky puzzled over it, but could come to no solution. These six men were strange friends for Tom to have, and it was stranger still that his father received them as guests and allowed them to stay. Plainly, they were city gangsters. They were tough and cruel and vicious, with McShay a bit the worst and most danger-

ous of them and apparently the guiding spirit.

He watched Tom Tolland and listened to his talk. Tom, tall and athletic but with a loose, weak mouth, seemed oddly changeable. One moment he seemed to feel friendly toward the six gunmen, then he would draw into himself and become morose and uncertain. Bucky struggled with the problem all through the meal, but wound up at the same point of utter bafflement.

"I can't figger it out," he said to Tel Brown after breakfast. "How does Tom Tolland come to have friends like that, and bring 'em home with him? And why in heck is old Jim letting 'em stay here for over a month? He ain't running a hotel for plug-uglies."

"It is funny, Bucky. No gettin' away from that. Somethin's wrong. I dunno. Ought we to stay here and see what we can do for Jim, or ought we to fork our broncs and mind our own business? Seems like, though, a man oughta do what he can to help an ole range friend. Jim's in trouble; I can see that. Reckon we'll stay a while, huh?"

"Sure, Tel. Can't leave Jim. He's scared, Jim is, and he ain't the kind to scare easy. He's leery about somethin'—"

HE BROKE off abruptly. McShay, the slim, savage faced gangster, was coming toward them. The city gunman strode up to Tel Brown and looked him in the face, his little eyes abrim with surging poison.

"Hick," he snarled, "you slugged me last night and put me out. You got a wallop. I'm doin' nothin'—now! But later on— I won't forget you, hick!"

He screwed about and strode away.

"He won't either," said Tel Brown. "He ain't the forgettin' kind. Looks like turbulent times coming, sonny, and little rest for me. Gosh, and I've been so dog-gone tired of late—Let's go see what Carman's got on his mind."

The stocky range boss had been looking on from a little distance. He turned to Tel Brown and Bucky as they approached, but his eyes followed the retreating McShay.

"What's that weazel growlin' to you about?" he asked.

Tel Brown told of McShay's threat, and of the occurance of the night before.

"Come near runnin' you down, huh?" growled Carman. "Just like 'em. Rats, all six of 'em. You oughta broke his neck. They're killers, and sneakin' killers that would jest as soon plug you in the back as any other way. And besides—"

His voice trailed off and he hesitated, seemed to be considering something.

"Besides what?" urged Tel Brown.

Carman grunted as if arriving at a decision.

"They're a stick-up gang. Yeh! I know what I'm talkin' 'bout. Yesterday Sam Wyman, owner of the Double A, sold nine hundred dollars' worth of stock and last night he was comin' home with the money in his pocket, and just before he got to the ranch he was held up, robbed and shot dead!"

"Sam Wyman! Shot dead!" Tel Brown stared. "How'd you hear that, Carman?"

"The news was all over town when I left. Yessir, Sam was killed. He seen who it was, I reckon, so they killed him so he couldn't have 'em rounded up."

"Huh? You mean them fellas done it—them six?"

"I mean just that! They was out in that automobile of McShay's. They held up that paymaster last week over near Juanita, too. They leave the automobile off a little way and do the job, then get back to the automobile and get away. I know, and sooner or later I'll get 'em. I hate them damn polecats and I'm gonna get 'em! Just wait!"

"But gosh, don't Jim Tolland know what's goin' on?"

Carman frowned.

"I dunno—can't figger it, Brown. They got Jim tied up somehow. That's somethin' I can't figger out. But I'm workin' on it. Thought I had 'em last night—I got back a little while after you fellas turned in—but somehow they give me the slip.

"Listen!" He tapped Tell Brown on the

chest with a stubby forefinger. "If you have a run-in with them gents, sling lead first and talk afterwards! Don't take a chance! Let 'em have it! Every one of 'ems got an automatic under his arm, and everyone of em's poison! They're bad and the only thing'll cure 'em is hot lead! Kill 'em like you would a snake, and you'll do the world a durn good turn! My gun hand gets itchy every time a look at 'em!"

He turned wrathfully away, then swung back.

"This ain't pers'nal, you understand; it ain't only 'cause I don't like them jiggers. It's cause o' Jim Tolland. He's worried 'bout somethin', Jim is, and when he's expectin' trouble he can count on me! He's a white man, Jim Tolland is."

"You betchuh," agreed Tel Brown.

"And you fellas can count on me too. Lemme know what you find out, and when you need me, shout! See you again."

THAT afternoon, Tel Brown and Bucky rode over to the Double A. It was as Pete Carman had said—Sam Wyman, as fair and square a man as ever forked a bronc, had been held up, robbed and then shot down in cold blood. He had been alone. One of the Double A men, returning from town only a few minutes behind Sam Wyman, had heard the shots and had found the old rancher just as he was breathing his last. The cowboy, Gus Edwards, had taken the body to the ranch and then high-tailed it back to Cottonwood to notify the sheriff.

Things in this section, said the Double A boys, were getting bad of late. In a little over a month there had been four killings and five hold-ups, and no one had been apprehended.

"Where's Gus Edwards?" asked Tel Brown.

"In town yet. He sent the sheriff and coroner out and then stayed to look after a freight shipment that was comin'. But if you wanta look at the place where Sam was bushwhacked, I can tell you where it is."

He described the spot and Tel Brown said he would take a look at it on the way back to the Bar-O.

"Got any idee who done it?"

The Double A range boss growled deep in his throat.

"Wish we had! If you find out anything, let us in on it. This range needs a good cleanin' and we're honin' to do the job!"

Tel Brown fumbled for a matchstick and judged the time by the sun.

"Sam was shot in the back, I hear," he said.

"Yeh!" Again the range boss growled in his throat. "In the back! Reckon after they took his money they told him to get along and not look back and then plugged him. A forty-five slug in his head and another between his shoulder blades. The dirty polecats!"

Thoughtfully, Bucky and Tel rode off.

They found the spot. It was a bare half mile from the Double A, at an intersection of two roads, both lined with mesquite growth and an occasional cottonwood. On the hard-packed sand of the road was a dark brown blot—caked blood.

Tel Brown slid from his saddle. For a long time he stood silent, studying the ground in the vicinity of the blood.

"Can't tell much now," he muttered. "Gus Edwards was here and a lot of the Double A boys and the sheriff and gosh knows who else. They trampled things up. No footprints—and what can a detective do without footprints? No automobile tracks, either, far as I can see. Let me meditate."

He meditated, leaning against his horse and his big jaws champing tirelessly.

"What they would do, seems like," said Bucky, "is drive near in their automobile and pull over out of the road, then come the rest of the way on foot and wait for Sam. One of these roads comes from the Bar-O, and if they come that way—"

"Dog-gone, boy, you're gettin' to be smart! Almost as smart as me! I was thinking same as you. Let's take a look along that road."

Afoot, they went along the road that ran to the Bar-O, their eyes searching the mesquite on both sides. When they had

gone about a hundred yards, Tel Brown stopped suddenly and pointed.

"See here? Something went through there, and not long ago, 'cause the brush ain't straightened up yet. Let's look."

They worked through the tangled growth. A little beyond, they came to a spot that was almost bare, and here Tel Brown put out an arm and brought Bucky to a halt.

"See 'em, sonny?"

THE tracks were plain. A car had left the road, pushed through the mesquite, stopped and then backed into the road again, making a sort of V in the sandy soil.

Tel Brown bent low over the tire tracks and studied them.

"Don't know much about automobile tires," he said, "but them's too big for a flivver. Big tires with little circles on 'em. Have to remember that."

"Looks like footprints here, where a man got out of the automobile and walked toward the crossroads," said Bucky, "But you can't be sure, ground's so hard."

Tel Brown too had seen the footprints —if they were footprints—and was on his knees studying them. He shook his head and arose to his feet.

"No, can't tell, Bucky. Might be anything. I'd like to know how long that automobile was standin' here, and when. Don't know whether we're makin' progress with our detectin' or not. Trouble is I'm tired. This ain't no way for a village loafer to act, expendin' energy jest to look for footprints. Le's get back to them hosses."

When they reached the horses, however, Tel Brown did not mount immediately. One arm over the saddle, he stood scratching his knobby head and scowling thoughtfully.

"Bucky, we gotta get clever. We got a reputation to uphold. There's a lotta questions and we gotta find the answers. Things is hooked up together, somehow, but durn if I can figger it out.

"One thing, how come young Tom Tolland to bring them city tough-nuts home with him? And why is Jim Tolland lettin' 'em stay? And what's Jim worried 'bout? What's he hidin'? How'd he get shot in the foot, and why didn't he tell us 'bout it last night? And who shot Sam Wyman—"

"Gosh, that's easy. Them city jiggers done it, o' course; we know that."

"Knowin' it and provin' it, sonny, is different things. We gotta prove how and when and why, to be of any use. Tell you what—you go to Cottonwood, get hold of Gus Edwards and ask him did he hear a automobile last night, after Sam was shot. He was close enough to hear the shots and mebbe he heerd a automobile leavin'—or mebbe not. You go ask him. Me, I'm goin' back to the Bar-O and rest, dog-gone it. Get along, boy!"

He turned Hatrack toward the Bar-O and the big, ungainly looking gray went off at a lazy but ground covering lope. Bucky took the road to the left, toward Cottonwood.

WHEN Bucky left Cottonwood, his errand accomplished, and headed for the Bar-O, it was dusk, and long before he reached the ranch it was pitch dark. He urged Trigger as he seldom did, for he was eager to reach Tel Brown and impart to him what he had learned from Gus Edwards—news that seemed to Bucky to be of vital importance. It pretty nearly clinched matters, to Bucky's way of thinking, and made the end nearer and more certain.

About a mile from the ranch, he suddenly pulled Trigger to a halt and sat peering ahead. There was a light ahead—no, two of them, close together. An automobile, stopped, probably because of engine trouble or to change a tire. Bucky slipped from Trigger led the horse off the road and tethered him to a tree. Then he went ahead on foot, walking cautiously and keeping close to the brush along the side of the road.

It was McShay's car, of course, he reasoned. That was the only car at the Bar-O and this road went nowhere else. Bucky

slowed as he neared the car, and walked more cautiously.

McShay's car it was, and McShay himself was peering beneath the hood, a trouble light fastened to the windshield. Beside him stood a gangster Bucky had heard called "Kid" Shine. In the body of the car he discerned four shadowy figures that he knew must be the others of the gang. Soon he was near enough to hear their talk, and crouched in the brush.

"She's a good boiler," McShay was saying, "but they ain't none of 'em perfect. They sure get a guy's goat sometimes."

"We better get away from here," said a voice from the rear. "You sure Carman went out ahead of us, Dropper, or can he be follerin' us?"

"Dropper" was McShay's nickname. He snarled curses as he worked upon the motor with a wrench.

"He's gone, I told you! I seen him leave. This feed line's full o' dirt! What're you worryin' about Carman for?"

"I ain't worryin', Dropper, but we got to keep a line on him. He's been layin' for us right along, the lousy snipe, and if he gets a chance—"

"To hell with Carman!" put in another voice. "I'd bump him off in a minute if Dropper'd say the word."

"Not yet, Toney," said Dropper snappily. "Keep yer shirt on a while. We'll take care of Carman before we leave, but we're not leavin' yet. There's more easy dough to be had round here, and we ain't leavin' till we get it. Then you can finish Carman and we'll lam. There— the damn thing's clear! Close the hood, Mike, and let's make speed."

The engine roared into life. The car leaped ahead, tore past Bucky and hurtled down the road toward Cottonwood.

Bucky leaped to his feet. He was more eager now than ever to reach Tel Brown. What he had just heard, coupled with what Gus Edwards had told him, made things as plain as day—well, almost that plain. There were a few other things to be ironed out, but they, he told himself, were merely minor details. Tel Brown would clear the entire thing up in double quick time.

HE FOUND Tel Brown waiting at the corral, and the big loafer helped him unrig his bronc and turn it loose.

"I been talkin' to Jim Tolland," the idler said, and though I didn't tell him what we were trying to do, durn if he ain't on to us. And you know what, Bucky? He wants us to clear out and let things alone! Yeh! He didn't say that, but I could tell by his manner and the way he took it when I told him we were going to stay round a while. He's afraid, dog-gone it, that we will clean things up!

"Gosh, I hardly know what to do. Jim's a friend o' mine and I'd like to help him even if he don't want me to. Sam Wyman was a friend of mine too, and a darn fine man, and he was shot in the back. Dog-gone it, if a man's a decent human he's gotta do what he can for his friends. Find out anything, sonny?"

"Did I! Listen, Tel!"

He told first of what he had heard in the road near McShay's car, then went on:

"And that's right in line with what Gus Edwards told me. When I asked him first did he hear anything beside the two shots, he say 'No.' Then he got to thinkin' and he remembered he did hear somethin' that he couldn't make out, then forgot about it. It was a sort of low roar, Tel, like a—a automobile! When I mentioned automobile to him he sat up and said sure, that's just what it was, and why didn't he think of it before. He promised he wouldn't say nothing to nobody else till we told him it was all right.

"See, Tel, it makes everything clear! All we gotta do now is—"

"Prove it! Yeh! Bucky, I dunno whether we're goin' backwards or forwards. This is too durn easy. There's a twist somewheres."

"Well, yeh, a couple of twists; but they're side issues, Tel. Did you get a look at the tires on McShay's automobile before he left?"

"Yeh. Same as them tracks we seen out near where Sam Wyman was killed

last night. It was McShay's automobile, all right."

Bucky nodded. Just as he had thought. To him, the guilt was fixed; all that was needed was proof.

"All we need now is plenty of evidence, so when we turn them jiggers over to Sheriff Hardy and bring 'em to trial we can put 'em where they belong. What do we do next, Tell?"

"Me, I'm gonna put the body to bed. I need rest. Come on, boy."

THEY entered the bunkhouse, found their bunks and turned in, and in no time at all were asleep.

It seemed only seconds later that Bucky jerked to a sitting position and gripped the wrist of a hand that clutched his shoulder.

"S-sssh! Get your pants on, sonny."

Bucky, wide awake now, silently lowered his legs over the side of the bunk and pulled on his pants and then his shoes. From around him in the darkness came the sound of sleeping men—restless stirrings, from here and there a snore, and from one bunk the muttering of a cowboy breaking over again an outlaw horse.

"Grab a gun," came Tel Brown's whisper, and Bucky thrust a gun inside his waistband. Then, walking on his toes, he followed the militant loafer to the door.

They stepped out into the quiet night. They paused for a moment to get their bearings, and by Tel Brown's manner, Bucky sensed that he was alert and tense. Also, he had stopped chewing, and that was a sign that never failed.

One dim light still burned in the house, in the small room used by Jim Tolland as an office. The St. Louis gunmen had returned; their car stood under a shed beyond the cook house. All was quiet and peaceful as it should be, and Bucky wondered at Tel Brown's manner.

"Times like this," murmured Tel Brown, "I don't sleep so well. I keep waking up and listening in my sleep, seems like. When you hear a man stompin' along kicking dirt and mebbe whistling or humming, you don't pay no attention to him, because he don't care who hears him and ain't got nothin' to hide, but when you hear a man cat-footin' 'long— See anything?"

"Not a thing, Tell."

Neither did Tel Brown, but his manner still said he felt something was wrong and was going to find it. He was alert and ready, and as big as he was, and as ungainly in appearance, he made no more noise than a cat as he stepped away from the bunkhouse door and led the way across the shadowy yard.

He was making for the old bunkhouse, the one now used by Dropper McShay and his gang of gunmen. Bucky, walking as silently as he could, kept close at the loafer's heels. Both had their guns out and kept low as they moved along.

STRANGE, thought Bucky, how quiet it was. Too quiet; too peaceful. Not that things should be otherwise at this time of night, but—well, there was something in the air. Something was wrong; he could feel it.

He wished something would happen; something loud and in the open. He was a fighting man; he liked to bang away with no secrecy, or leap into a rough-and-tumble and swing left and right. This snooping in the darkness and hardly daring to breath was not to his liking; his nerves were taut as violin strings.

"Tel—" he started to whisper, but broke off, for Tel Brown had put out a hand and was pressing him down. Then, straining his eyes, he made out a figure crouching by a window of the old bunkhouse.

Just a vague dark figure that he could not identify, but it was a man, he knew that; a man that bulked broad against the whitewashed boards.

The window was open, a black rectangle in the side of the house. Very, very slowly the man arose, and slowly his figure merged with the dark embrasure. Then the man disappeared; he had crawled within.

For a moment Tel Brown seemed un-

certain. The man might be watching from within the house and would spot them if they moved closer. Or he might be too intent on his own doings to think to look back through the window. So Tel Brown wavered in indecision.

Then, suddenly, he decided upon a course and went off at an angle, going with that long, sliding stride that made not a sound. Bucky followed as best he could, doing his best to make no more sound than the big loafer did.

Tel Brown was heading for the doorway now. The door was on the end of the house to the left of the open window, facing the ranchhouse itself. The door might be closed but hardly locked, for the gangsters would not likely lock a door and leave a window open. And what reason had they to lock the house at all?

They reached the corner of the house and softly rounded it. Bucky was doing his best to be noiseless and doing a mighty good best, but he trembled lest at any moment he blunder and make a noise. This silent spying wasn't his game; he was clumsy and he knew it, and he told himself it would be just like him to stub a toe and fall on his face.

Beside the door they stood motionless for a few seconds. The door was closed. Tel Brown put out a hand and gently raised the latch. He opened the door a tiny crack, to make sure there was nothing holding it.

He put a hand on Bucky's arm. He squeezed with his fingers and gestured with his head, and to Bucky the message was as plain as if it had been spoken openly.

Tel Brown was going boldly in. What happened then would depend upon the presumably sleeping occupants of the house and upon the man who had entered through the window. No matter what happened Tel Brown would learn the identity of the man, and perhaps the reason for his surreptitious entrance. He would turn up something that would likely prove a signpost to further discovery. That was Tel Brown's way——to push on and on till he reached his goal.

The loafer put the flat of his hand against the door, ready to thrust it open. He raised a foot to step in over the sill. His big body was in motion when—

Wham!

Then, after a tight-drawn second—

Wham—wham!

TEL BROWN plunged forward, with Bucky at his side. The door crashed open. They hurtled into the dark bunkhouse.

There was the sound of men springing from bunks, of scuffling feet, the clatter of an overturned bench.

A chair came swishing through the air. Tel Brown half warded it off, but it fell to the floor and twisted between his feet. He fell headlong.

Bucky leaped over him, seeking for something to attack. Then a heavy, hard object smashed down upon his head and he went down, down into heavy blackness.

When he came to, the bunkhouse was filled with light. He lay on the floor, a folded warbag beneath his head. Tel Brown stood at one end of the room, back against the wall, in his hand one of his big old Colts. At the other end of the room were five men—Dropper McShay and four other gangsters. On the floor, in blue pants and dark sweater, lay the gangster Tony. Blood was welling from a hole in his chest and from another in his throat. Tony, at a glance, was dead.

A man burst through the doorway. It was young Tom Tolland, in undershirt and pants, and with his shoes half laced. Then came two cowboys, guns in their hands. Then came Jim Tolland, his face twisted with terrible anxiety. Then came Pete Carman, lantern in one hand and gun in the other.

Tel Brown thrust out a hand, gripped Carman's gun and pushed it down. He grinned and put away his own.

"Shootin's over, gents," he drawled. "One dead—and he's dead as hell. How's yore machinery Bucky? Knowed you weren't hurt bad. Dropper McShay smacked you with a table leg." He swung to old Jim Tolland. "Tony got himself killed, climbin' in a winder—"

"You," cut in Dropper McShay, "are

crazy as hell! Tony didn't climb in no window. He was in his bunk asleep."

Tel Brown fumbled aimlessly for something for his teeth to clamp upon. He seemed puzzled but not greatly surprised; it was as if he had half expected the information that Dropper gave.

"How come, then," he said, "that Tony's dressed. He's got a sweater on, and pants."

Dropper loosed a short, quick laugh.

"Hick, Tony's had them pants and sweater on ever since he bought 'em. He never undressed when he went to bed. And he never slept, either."

"That's a fact," put in another gangster, a big flat-nosed man. "When ever you got up for a drink or to smoke a butt, you knew Tony was watchin' you. He slept with one eye open—when he slept at all."

"He'll sleep now," growled Carman.

Tel Brown withdrew into the background, and Jim Tolland began to ask questions, and as he asked them, his manner vaguely gave the impression that he feared full and truthful answers. He wasn't looking for the truth; he was making a sort of investigation merely because he knew it was expected of him as owner of the ranch.

THE five gangsters knew nothing—not a thing. They had been soundly sleeping, Dropper said, when gun fire awoke them. They had then sprung from their bunks. The crooked-nosed man, Kid Shine, thinking that they had been attacked for some reason that he could not—or would not—explain, had thrown a chair, and Dropper McShay for the same reason had swung a table leg. Then the lights, and Tony lying dead upon the floor.

If Tel Brown paid any attention to the questioning he gave no sign of it. He stood over Tony, and suddenly reached down and drew from where it lay half hidden beneath the body a flat, black automatic. He smelled the muzzle, looked in the chamber, inspected the cartridge clip, then handed the weapon to Jim Tolland.

The ranch owner looked around as if he had done all the investigating that could be expected of him and was glad.

"Tel and Bucky, you two—uh—in the morning,' eh? We'll see 'bout this. Pete, send a man to town to notify the sheriff and the coroner. Leave the body where it is. Let Sheriff Hardy earn his pay; solving murder mysteries ain't my strong point."

Bucky, to himself, said that it was not Sheriff Hardy's either. Hardy was a fine square man and a gallant fighter, but not the quickest and surest detective in the world. But he knew his limitations and made the most of what he had.

Tel Brown gestured and went out, and Bucky followed him. The big loafer pressed straight through the curious punchers outside the door and headed for their bunkhouse.

"Well," said Bucky, "what now?"

"Rest! Rest, sonny, is as important as food. I gotta get my rest. I gotta get it! I'm shore keepin' hours! Two o'clock, I betchuh! And me trompin' around. Into the hay, boy—into the hay!"

And into the hay they went.

IN THE morning after breakfast, Tel Brown ambled toward the ranch house with Bucky at his side. Jim Tolland, looking more worried than ever, met them on the porch. Sheriff Hardy, standing with Tolland, grinned a greeting and licked at the wrapper of a big black cigar. The sheriff was a giant of a man with a bulldog jaw and kind eyes.

"Tel," said Tolland, "tell me and the sheriff what happened last night, from your angle."

Tel Brown looked at Tolland, at the sheriff, at the sky, then talked; slowly, unhurriedly he told the story exactly as it had happened. Lying in his bunk, he had heard suspicious sounding feet; had followed to investigate, had seen the man enter through the window, and then had come the shooting. He knew no more than that, and Bucky's story was the same.

"But that fella sneakin' in the winder," said the puzzled sheriff—"who was that?"

"Sheriff, I dunno."

"Who killed this fella Tony?"

"I dunno."

"Do you think that man did it, or was the man Tony himself?"

"Gosh, Sheriff, I dunno."

Sheriff Hardy released a grunt that was almost a groan.

"If the man that come in the winder wasn't Tony, could he 'a' got out again without you seein' him?"

"Yeh, he could. It was real dark in there. I got tangled up with a chair and Bucky got smocked on the skull, and before we got straightened out a dozen men could have got out the winder."

Jim Tolland registered an expression that might have been relief, and the regret with which he spoke seemed somehow forced and not sincere.

"What it boils down to, then, is that Tony was shot by some one but we don't know who. Do what you can to get him, Sheriff, but she shore looks hopeless."

"She does that," agreed Sheriff Hardy, and pawed at his head. "But we got to do somethin'. Who would wanta kill Tony; anybody have it in fer him?"

"Well, no," answered Tolland. "Tony wasn't what you would call liked, but I don't know that anybody disliked him enough to kill him."

"But he was killed; we know that," grumbled the sheriff. "And somebody done it; we kinda presume that. So far so good—but that's all we got. I'm a better cow nurse than I am a sheriff, and nobody knows it better'n me. All I know for shore is that this fella Tony What's-his-name was found dead with two forty-five slugs in him, and—"

"Forty-five slugs?" put in Tel Brown pausing for a moment in his wood-pulp making. "Was he shot with a forty-five?"

"Huh? Shore—coroner picked 'em out and give 'em to me. What of it? Forty-fives in this section are thick as fleas on a dawg. Everybody carries a forty-five. Right here in this room for instance—three of us are carryin' six of 'em, and I reckon Jim's got two-three around."

"A half-dozen," said Tolland. "Two right in that desk. Plenty of forty-fives."

"That's right," admitted Tel Brown, and resumed his chewing. "If you tried to follow up every gent what's got a forty-five— Reckon what I need, way my brain's workin', is rest."

"This is sure got me guessin'," said Bucky when they got outside. "Mebbe, Tel, Tony sneaked outside for some reason of his own and when he come back somebody in the gang thought he was somebody else and plugged him, huh?"

"I thought of that, and mebbe that's the way it was, but I don't think so."

"O mebbe some of 'em had it in for him?"

"Mebbe. But accordin' to Tony's gun, he only fired one shot, and the way it sounded, he fired first, then the other fella fired twice and got Tony both times."

"That's right. Then if Tony crawled in the winder and fired at somebody—naw, that sounds crazy." Bucky gnawed at his lip. He had something on his mind but wasn't sure that he should say it. "Tel, ain't it funny how ole Jim's actin' ? Like he hopes we don't find out too much. Tel, you don't s'pose Jim can be—can be kinda mixed up in this somehow? Mebbe he got tangled and they pulled him in deeper and deeper without him realizin' it, and now he's in so deep— You know how a man will get mixed up in things sometimes."

"I dunno, and that's the truth. But Jim's one of them fellows that would do most anything to help a friend but wouldn't lie or hide a thing to save himself, and I betchuh if he knowed who shot Sam Wyman in the back he'd come out with it mighty quick. He's puzzled and scared and wondering; that's the way I figger Jim."

BUCKY was glad and satisfied. He had not wanted to believe Jim Tolland on the wrong side of this affair. Tolland was of the old West and there weren't many like him left. Tel Brown had faith in him, and when the apostle of laziness had faith in a man, that man was one to bank on. Tel Brown was a mighty good judge.

Pete Carman had slid from a corral rail and was coming toward them. The stocky range boss wore a half-grin, but in his eyes was a trace of worriment.

"Well, one gone," he said. "Tony, I mean. Can't say I'm sorry. He was a—well, he's dead now, no matter what he was. Speakin' like a honest man, I'll tell you I wouldn't drown myself in tears if he'd taken the other five along with him."

"I reckon you got an opinion," said Tel Brown, fumbling for another matchstick. "Who do you think done the job?"

Carman spat.

"One o' the others, o' course. There ain't one of 'em that wouldn't double-cross the rest and there ain't one of 'em don't know it. Tony tried something and got found out, and one of 'em gave him a ride on the hot end of a bullet. Dropper McShay, most like; he's the watchfullest of the bunch and the quickest with his gun. A born killer, that gent. Learnt anything?"

"Not a thing. Just stumblin' along in the dark, we are."

"Well, if you get one of them things they call clues, lemme know and mebbe I can help you follow it up."

Tel Brown broke a splinter from a corral post and looked at it intently.

"Carman," he drawled, "you look worried."

"Huh? Me?" The range boss glanced toward the ranch house and hesitated. "Well, reckon I am, Brown. About Jim. Way things are pointing— I been hoping Jim ain't mixed up in anything, but now—well, I dunno. I'm still hoping anyhow. Reckon there's a lot about this I don't savvy. Seen young Tom Tolland?"

"Went to town early. Be back tonight, his pop says. Tom's got something on his mind, too, way he acts."

"Yeh, I been noticing it. You don't think—aw, I'm doing too much guessing. Don't forget, you fellas, if you learn anything lemme know first afore yuh talk to anybody else."

Bucky looked after him and shook his head.

"Carman knows more than he lets on, seems to me."

"I betchuh."

"Reckon he won't say all he knows 'count o' bein' afeerd o' gettin' Jim in trouble. Carman ain't shore of us, seems like—"

He broke off, for Sheriff Hardy, his big face dark with angry bafflement, was almost upon them.

"Tel," said the sheriff abruptly, "you ain't what I'd call a fool. You know things, and never tell half what you know. Listen—election time is rollin' round and I'm running again. I want another term bad, and getting the man who killed Sam Wyman would help a lot. I'm a good sheriff, even if I ain't so bright, and I'd appreciate a little help. I got a idea you know who shot Tony last night—ain't I right?"

Bucky was getting to think he knew Tel Brown, but every now and then something came along to show him that he didn't. The big loafer was an odd character and seldom gave word to half of what was in his mind, and his answer to the sheriff's outright question almost knocked Bucky over.

"Yeh, Sheriff," drawled the loafer, "I know the man what shot Tony last night."

The sheriff drew in his breath. His random shot had struck a bullseye. Bucky, open mouthed, stood staring.

"It's clear as print," said Tel Brown, "and I'm sure surprised you don't see it yourself. But there's other things—lemme alone, Sheriff, and when the time comes I promise you I'll see you get the credit. All I wanta do is help Jim Tolland."

Sheriff Hardy nodded, satisfied. Tel Brown, he knew, was as good as his word, always.

"All right, Tel. Jest lemme in on it, that's all I ask, and I'll appreciate it. What 'bout Sam—know who killed him?"

"Well, I kinda got a idee. Mebbe I'm right and mebbe I'm wrong. Seems clear—but so does arsenic water. I gotta think about it, Sher'ff."

"Good luck, fella. Only don't forget me. I'm hangin' round a while, and if you want me—"

He went away, his body erect, his downcast expression gone, as if a load had been lifted from his mind.

"Gosh, Tel," gasped Bucky, "why didn't you tell me?"

"Man can't think and talk at the same time," said Tel Brown. "Dog-gone it, let's rest. Come on, sonny."

TEL BROWN brought a chair from the ranch porch and placed it in the shade of the new bunk house. All day he sat there, leaning back against the house and splinter by splinter making pulp of a stick of clean new pine. Bucky, wandering here and there, talking with the Bar-O punchers, inspecting the young stock in the corral, arguing the merits of various guns and horses and watering holes, observed to himself that mighty little went on that Tel Brown did not see, and doubtless file away in that knobby head.

After supper Tel Brown resumed his chair by the new bunk house, and Bucky joined him. Tel Brown spoke of the Bar-O grub—durn good, he classed it. He spoke of everything but the thing Bucky wanted most to hear. He wanted to hear the name of the man who killed Tony, but that he did not hear. The big loafer, like an eel, squirmed away from the subject each time Bucky brought it up.

It grew dark. The men of the ranch turned in to be ready for another day's work. The lights in the main dwelling went out one by one—all but the light in Jim Tolland's office. Jim was waiting, and Tel Brown, sitting there in the darkness outside, was waiting too.

"How," he wanted to know, "can a loafer loaf without loafing? I got a reputation to uphold, and today, dog-gone it, I done my best. Reckon you ain't never heard of a better loafer than what I am—"

He broke off, for from the road came the sound of a loping horse. Tel Brown left his chair, gripped Bucky by the arm and drew him into the shadow of the house.

Tom Tolland slid from his horse at the corral gate. He unrigged his bronc, turned it into the corral and walked briskly to the house. He mounted the steps and the two watchers saw the door open and close behind him.

"I don't like snooping or listening as a rule," said Tel Brown, "but sometimes things demand it. And fellas'll talk freest about what's first on their minds when they meet after being apart a little while. Come on, sonny."

WALKING with his noiseless stride, he rounded the porch and a corner of the ranch house and halted beneath the window of Jim Tolland's office, and with one hand signaled Bucky to be quiet and listen.

"—don't nobody know where they was when Sam Wyman was killed," came young Jim's voice, "but far as I can find out they was in town when the Gold Dollar mine paymaster was robbed and shot. Without letting on I was trying to find out anything, I done a lot of talking and listening, but I know less now than I did before I started. Trying to find out where Dropper McShay is, and was, is like tryin' to put your finger on a flea on a pitch-black night."

From his father came a disappointed grunt.

"It's got me worried, Jim. I wish I could get rid of them. If I thought I was shelterin' a gang of robbers and murderers—"

"Get rid of 'em, then! Say the word, Pop, and I'll chase 'em myself!"

"No, no! And let them squeal on you and send you to jail? If I thought they was doing this killing and robbing I'd round 'em up, no matter what they told about you, but mebbe they're not doing it. You're all I got, Jim, and I gotta be shore."

"And me innocent, too," groaned Jim. "I didn't have any more to do with that robbery in St. Louis, Pop, than you had. But Dropper and Kid Shine have got me framed, and they can send me to the pen any time they want. When things got too hot for 'em in St. Louis they made

me bring 'em along with me out here, to hide out for a while, and they're still here, and I don't know what we can do about it unless you let me—"

"No, I said! McShay and Shine, eh—only them two?"

"That's all. The others ain't in on it. If only— Listen now, Pop—none of that! I know what you're thinking. You're not as young and quick with your gun as you used to be—aw, I ain't saying you're a shaky old wreck or anything like that! But you've shore earned a little peace and I don't want you to start anything on my account. And if you did kill them two, what would you say to the sheriff and all? You gotta have a reason you can spit right out, and you ain't got one. I feel like doing some gun slingin' myself, but I want to do what's best for both of us, and according to my way of thinking the best thing to do is wait till we're sure how things lay and what's the right thing to do—then do it!"

"It's a mess," growled Jim Tolland. "It's got me sick, way I been tryin' to figger it out. Mebbe I'd have learned something the other night if I'd have had sense enough to make sure they was all in 'fore I tried listening at their window. There I was, all ears for what they was saying and paying attention to nothing else, when bang! and I got a forty-five slug in my foot fer Doc Stevens to pick out. Reckon he'd have got me right if it hadn't been so dark."

"One of 'em was outside, I reckon, and seen you listening at the winder, and you couldn't tell who it was when they all come crowding out and mixing with our boys."

"Sure, that's how it was. Mebbe Pete Carman wasn't mad! He wanted me to let him turn the boys loose and let 'em wipe the whole gang out. He'd have done it anyhow if I hadn't stopped 'em quick. Well, Jim, seems like the only thing we can do is sit tight and wait—"

Wham!

Bucky ducked instinctively, though already there had come to his ears the hum of the bullet above his head. Then he leaped to his feet and glanced swiftly into the lighted room.

He saw young Tom Tolland standing by his father's desk with one hand outstretched as if reaching for something with which to steady himself. Then he saw Tom pitch face down across the desk.

Tel Brown, instead of getting to his feet, had crouched even lower and his eyes were seeking the direction from which the shot had come. Perhaps from the old bunk house, or the new one, or perhaps from near the corral—it was hard to tell. Nothing moved, there came no sound; a flat, dead stillness had fallen upon the ranch house grounds.

THEN came questioning voices. A door banged, and from both bunk houses came running men.

A half-dozen arrived at the ranch house porch together. Among them was Dropper McShay and the big, flat-nosed ex-pug, Kid Shine. Only a jump behind them came Pete Carman, gun in hand and black fury mirrored upon his broad, square face.

Tel Brown met them at the porch steps, and once again gripped Carman's gun and thrust it down.

"No lead slingin', Carman. We got to think—"

"Think hell! We gotta clean that damn gang out! I'll take it on my own shoulders, by God! Come on, boys! Unlimber and let's wipe 'em out—"

"Wait a minute!" came Tel Brown's voice, no drawl in it now. "You'll do nothin' till you know what you're doin' !"

"Know what we're doin' ?" raged Carman. "Don't you think I know? That gang o' gutter snipes ought to be wiped out—every one of 'em! If Jim would only give the word—"

Jim Tolland appeared suddenly in the doorway.

"Pete!" he called. "Tom's hurt bad! Send a man—"

"Right!" cried Carman. "Toby! Get your bronc and high-tail it to town fer the doc! Get going, Toby!"

His quick anger had subsided somewhat when he turned again to Tel Brown.

"Reckon you're right, Brown—'bout waitin', I mean, 'till we're sure. Not that I ain't sure and more than eager to ride that gang—but let it go for now; I spoke quick. It's up to Jim."

He swung upon Dropper McShay, who stood watching with one hand in his coat pocket and a twisted leer upon his slum rat's face. Dropper was alert and ready, no doubt of that; nor was there any doubt that the hand in the pocket gripped tightly the butt of an automatic.

"You, fella!" snarled Carman. "You're the cause of this—you and them polecats with you! If Jim would say the word!"

Dropper loosed a laugh that was thin and cold.

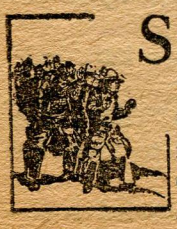
"He won't, Carman," he said softly. "Not that I give a damn—but he won't."

Jim Tolland stood motionless on the porch, looking down at them. He was a different man now; he was hard, grim and determined, and the worried, uncertain look was gone. The shot that had downed his son had brought back Jim Tolland, the fighting pioneer.

"Who fired that shot?" he demanded. "Anybody know?"

Nobody knew; or at least nobody answered. There came only two sounds from the little crowd—a low growl from Pete Carman and a short, grating laugh from Dropper McShay.

"All right!" snapped old Jim. "But the coyote's within reach of my voice, and I tell him this—I'm gonna get him! No matter what happens or what it costs, I'm gonna get the dirty, sneakin' bushwacker that fired that shot! I been waitin', lettin' myself be bluffed into saying nothing about what I been purty sure of, but that's done! Done! Now I'm after the man what shot my son, and I'll get him if I have to turn things upside down!"



SHERIFF HARDY, half-dressed, and struggling with buttons, and growling curses at his own lack of mental brilliancy, was firing questions left and right. And bringing to light—nothing.

Most of the men, however, agreed on one thing—the shot had sounded as if it came, not from one of the bunk houses, but from near the corral. That was pretty well substantiated as a fact, but the rest was merely guesswork and opinion. The punchers were of one mind—one of McShay's gang had fired the shot. Why, none could even guess. The gang kept silent save when questioned, but in their very silence, and the looks that passed between them, there was something knowing, as if they could have told a lot had they wanted to.

At this thought Bucky snorted. Told a lot? Of course they could! Hot anger surged through him as he watched the sneering McShay.

Pete Carman came to where Tel Brown sat with Bucky on the ranch house steps.

"That," said Carman, "was a close shave. For me, I mean. Anyway, that's what I think."

"For you?" exclaimed Bucky, and Tel Brown paused in his tireless chewing.

"Yeh. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if that bullet was meant for me, and went in the winder and hit Tom only by accident. I was half-way between the corral and our bunk house and it went right over my shoulder."

"It did!" gasped Bucky. "Gosh, Pete! How come you—"

"I just got back from town. I met Tom in town, in the Keno, and told him I'd ride out with him, but we missed each other somehow and first thing I knowed he was gone, and I come out alone. Way I figure, that jigger was there by the corral, waiting for me, and soon's I got in line with the light from Jim Tolland's office he let fly."

"But, gosh—who—why—"

"That gang from St. Louis. Don't you see? They know I'm onto 'em and that I'll fill 'em with lead first chance I get, and they're afeerd I'll get Jim to run 'em off or set the sheriff on 'em. They decided I was liable to turn into a stumblin' block for 'em and so one of 'em waited for me there by the corral. But missed me and hit poor Tom."

"Well, I'll be durned!" said Bucky.

"Mebbe you're right, Carman," said Tel Brown, "and mebbe you're wrong. Mebbe that bullet was meant to land just where it did. Supposing, now, somebody heard Tom in town talking and asking questions and got the idea he was getting suspicious and was mebbe on the trail of something—"

He left off to search for another sliver, and Bucky stared at him, his mind struggling with the new thought just presented.

"By golly, Tel. I bet you're right. But were they in town?"

"McShay was," said Carman quickly, his voice a little hoarse. "I seen his automobile when I come out of the Keno. Reckon he left town about the time Tom did, or a little before."

"I heard him come in," said Tel Brown, "but didn't know where he'd been."

"That might be it," said Carman thoughtfully. "Mebbe it wasn't me they tried to get after all. But from now I ain't takin' no chances anyhow. You fellas found out anything new?"

Tel Brown had at last discovered a sliver, and put it between his teeth.

"You know as much about it as we do, I reckon," he said.

Sheriff Hardy, sour with disappointment, went into the house. McShay and his gang had gone. The punchers had drifted to their bunk house and Carman followed them.

"He sure hates Dropper and his crowd," commented Bucky. "If he had his way he'd demolish 'em."

"He would, sonny. No doubt whatsoever of that."

"Tel, do you think whoever fired that shot seen us there beneath the winder?"

"I don't think so, boy. We was low and it was too durn dark."

"Well, we know one thing, Tel—why Jim Tolland let them St. Louis crooks hang round so long. They had Tom framed and could send him to jail any time they wanted, and old Jim was willin' to do most anything to hold 'em off. They're blackmailers, kinda."

Tel Brown paused in the act of putting a pine sliver in his mouth.

"Blackmailers, huh?" he muttered. "They're sneakin', spying, heartless skunks and born for a thing like that. Well, now!"

He yawned and stretched.

"Bucky, sweet rest is the reward of merit, and—"

"Yeh! Save that slop! A big fella like you needs a lotta rest. Rest, then, if you're so durn set on it."

THEY went to their bunks and rested till Sheriff Hardy roused them out at sunrise.

"Dog-gone it, Tel Brown, I need help. I ain't slept a wink all night, I been thinkin' so hard, and durn me, I ain't got nowhere. You come out of that bunk and give me a push in the right direction and mebbe I'll get that shootin' fella and chuck him in my jail."

Tel Brown sighed as he rolled from his bunk, but in a surprisingly short time he was outside with Bucky and the sheriff and ready for the day.

'I done pretty much like you, Sheriff," he drawled. "Layin' there in my bunk, I—"

"Snored like hell," put in Bucky.

"Huh? No, no! I done a lot of thinkin'. I done good, seems as though. This thing is like a picture puzzle, somewhat. I got most of the pieces and she makes a right good picture, but there's a couple or three pieces I just can't get hold of, or I got 'em and can't fit 'em in. Don't it seem to you, now, that that shootin' last night and the killin' o' Sam Wyman and them other robberies and murders is all hooked up together somehow?"

The sheriff considered, frowning heavily as he thought.

"Well, yes, kind of does seem like that. But the shooting last night, that seemed kind of different. That wasn't robbery or anything like that."

"Well, no, but I bet there's some connection. I wouldn't be surprised if that bullet come from the same place as the one killed Sam Wyman."

"I wish," said the sheriff, "I'd have known about Sam being shot right away. Might have done something if I could

have got on the job right away. But there I was asleep in town! Gus Edwards, that Double A boy, didn't get into town till next morning. Started right away, soon as he found Sam dead and toted him to the ranch, but his bronc stepped in a gopher hole and broke his leg, and Gus had to hike to the Box-M and get another hoss. So by the time I heard about it, and got out there, it was near about noon. Footprints and such? Humph! Looked like a herd o' cattle had been hazed back and forth a half-dozen times—"

"Sheriff," broke in Tel Brown, "has the doc got a look at Tom Tolland, and how is he?"

"Not dead. Close squeeze, though. Just missed a lung. The doc started in and got the bullet soon's he—"

"Sheriff, I bet it was a forty-five."

"You're a gambler," said the sheriff sarcastically. "I'd be durned s'prized if it was a twenty-two. Of course it was a forty-five."

Bucky, watching Tel Brown's jaws, blinked unbelievingly, for those jaws did not move for at least ten seconds. Then they resumed their wood-pulp making and their owner grinned at the clear blue sky.

"Sheriff," he said, "that picture is complete. And she sure is purty! The way them pieces fit!"

"Huh—what!" exclaimed the sheriff. "You mean you—you—?"

"Yep. All you gotta do now is get that old jail ready."

"Huh—why—what do we do, Tel—"

"First, Sheriff, we eat. Then we rest—no, I'm ahead of myself. Let's eat anyhow. A man's gotta do that, way's things is nowadays."

AFTER breakfast Jim Tolland came from the house and made straight for Tel Brown. The rancher, his manner of indecisive waiting completely gone, was wearing a gun and his face was grim and as hard as brown granite.

"I'm gonna get the man who fired that shot," he growled, "if it costs every penny I've got. I'll hire the best detectives in the world. But not unless I have to, Tel. I savvy you, oldtimer—you never did tell half of what you knowed. If you can find that man— I ain't sayin' anything 'bout paying you, because I know you'd get mad, but—"

"Shucks, Jim, ain't we rode range together and borrowed blankets and makin's and such? Shucks!"

"Find that man, then! Get him, Tel. What I mean, fella, is point him out to me!"

"Jim, I been waiting fer you to say something like that. I didn't like to go bustin' along, hornin' in on your business. I got the man spotted and by golly we'll haul him out."

He straightened his belt and made sure his two big guns were loose in their holsters, then looked at the men with him. His lips moved as he counted to himself.

"You and me and Jim and Sheriff Hardy," assisted Bucky. "Four of us. And Dropper and four others—five of 'em."

"Uh-huh." Tel Brown glanced aimlessly around. "Bucky, you go get Pete Carman—that'll make us five."

In a few minutes Bucky returned with the stock range boss. Carman throbbed with eagerness; so eager was he, in fact, that he had to be held in check.

"Wipe 'em out!" he snarled. "Just corral 'em and start slingin' lead!"

Tel Brown shook his head.

"That wouldn't be just right," he said. "We gotta act kind of according to law and give 'em a chance to surrender. Hey, Sheriff?"

Sheriff Hardy nodded quickly. He, too, was eager. For this haul, if it were sucessful, would certainly assure his winning the coming election.

"The shootin' last night," he said, "and the shootin' o' Sam Wyman and the Gold Dollar paymaster and all them other killin's and robberies—is they all connected? Same gang back of 'em all? Do you think this'll clear 'em all up?"

"Sheriff," answered Tel Brown, "I'm sure of it! You take the back door.

Bucky, you take a window, and Jim, you take a window on the other side. I'll take the front door. And, Carman, you—" he scratched his head— "you stay along with me. Yes—reckon that's best."

Carman grinned.

"You want to keep a close watch on me, huh?"

"Yeh."

"Well, my gun hand shore is itchy, but I reckon I can hold in till they start something or you give the word."

THEY stood there, the five men, peering furtively at the old bunk house, and each planning out the part he was to play, and Bucky turned the situation over in his head.

Five vicious, deadly, reckless men within that house, he mused, and five men to capture them. Very little margin there. Reluctantly he told himself that Tel Brown would do better to wait till the Bar-O men came in from the range and enlist their help; then they could surround the bunk house and demand a peaceable surrender. Not that Bucky himself was at all averse to conflict, but the other did seem the better plan.

The sheriff, who was to take the door on the opposite side of the little dwelling, started off, walking casually in case he should be spotted from a window. He paused by the bunk house, spoke to a hound dog and slapped it playfully, then rounded the house to the other side.

Bucky went next, rolling a cigarette as he strolled. He paused to strike a match, looked around, and then made for a log some ten feet from the window he was to take. From the log he could reach the window within a second of the time Tel Brown gave the signal that all was ready.

Tel Brown, Jim Tolland and Pete Carman moved forward together, walking slowly and talking, and looking not once toward the house which was their aim. Some ten feet from it, they paused, then Jim Tolland swung and went straight to the window that had been allotted him, and the two others strode swiftly to the door.

"Aces full!" sounded Dropper's voice. "Kid, you know what you can do with that Chinese flush—"

"Gents," came Tel Brown's drawl from the front doorway, "we got a little business to talk over with yuh. Keep your hands on the table and keep your seats!"

Dropper became suddenly a tense, coiled spring. He snapped stiff and straight, and sat there all knife edge, a deadly reptile with bared fangs.

"Just a little business," drawled Tel Brown. "The sheriff, over there, will tell you what it is."

DROPPER jerked half out of his chair, glanced swiftly around, then dropped back, for in every aperture was a steady gun backed by a hard, grim face. He made a little gesture and the four killers at the table with him remained motionless in their chairs.

"What's this?" demanded Dropper, his voice low and hoarse and his eyes like polished steel. "What's the trouble, hick?"

He squinted at Pete Carman, who had appeared beside Tel Brown in the front doorway, and his eyes narrowed in suspicious puzzlement.

"Tell him, Sheriff," said Tel Brown.

"You fellas," said the sheriff, "are under arrest—every one of you! The charge, gents, is robbery and murder, and attempt to murder. One of you fired that shot last night. You held up Sam Wyman and shot him in the back. You robbed and killed the Gold Dollar paymaster—"

"Back up!" snarled Dropper, springing to his feet, regardless of the steady guns. "Back up, hicks! A frameup, huh? You damn corn crackers, we didn't do them things!"

He stood leaning forward a little, his thin lips drawn back crookedly from his yellow teeth; a livid, murderous rat with murder in his heart and in his eyes. He glanced across the table at the brutal-faced Kid Shine, then quickly around at the three others. They were ready, watching him, looking for a cue from their accepted leader.

"Watch him!" hissed Carman in Tel Brown's ear. "Let him have it if he

moves! Dropper first, and then the rest! Wipe 'em out!"

The stocky range boss quivered like an overtaut wire.

Dropper's eyes blazed redly.

"I been framed before," rasped Dropper, "but by slick city dicks; not by a crowd of cow chasin' rubes! Hang it all on us, will you? You will not! We didn't do them things! You, Carman—you said you'd get us and you think you done it—but you ain't! Listen, Sheriff, you mush-headed flatfoot—I'm gonna talk! I'm gonna talk—get me? I'll tell you—"

Dropper stopped abruptly, warned by the sixth sense of his kind. He spun about, one hand streaking for the gun beneath his arm.

Tel Brown had been leaning forward, hanging on Dropper's every word, boring him with cold gray eyes, seemingly forcing words from the slim killer's lips by sheer will power.

But that was over. Talk was done. Swift action took its place.

Tel Brown moved quickly. His long gun barrel swung in a quick, short arc and landed with a sharp crack across the wrist of Pete Carman.

The gun sped from Carman's hand. The range boss dropped like a flash, dodged under Tel Brown's clutching hands, and on one knee went for his other gun.

Wham! Wham!

Dropper, then Carman, had fired a split second apart. And neither missed. Within the wink of an eye the two, Dropper McShay and Pete Carman, were plunging to the floor—two dead men.

"Durn!" cried Tel Brown. "Pete Carman—I wanted him!"

Bucky stared—then like a flash of light it leaped through his brain. Within one tiny instant the whole thing was clear.

The man who shot Tom Tolland, Sam Wyman, the Gold Dollar paymaster, was responsible for those other killings and robberies—that man had been Pete Carman! That had been the reason for his repeated questioning of Tel Brown as to the progress he was making. And Carman's talk, from first to last, had been to throw suspicion away from him.

"Steady!" Sheriff Hardy was roaring, but he might as well have saved his breath, for regardless of his order the gangsters were going for their guns.

A bullet burned Bucky's cheek. He fired, and a squint-eyed gangster went down with a slug in his hip. Kid Shine fired twice, then plunged headlong for the window guarded by Jim Tolland.

Tolland fired. Kid Shine's feet stopped their pounding on the floor. But his big body, of its own momentum, kept going forward. He dived head-on against the wall beneath the window and sank in a huddled heap. Tolland's bullet had struck him squarely between the eyes.

Another gangster fired wildly and leaped to the doorway, tried to squeeze past Tel Brown. But the big loafer's long gun rose and fell—*clup!*—and the man went to the floor as if hit with an ax.

The last gangster started forward, looked into Sheriff Hardy's gun, and threw up his hands. "Youse win!" he cried.

A QUEER silence succeeded the roaring of shots. It was broken when Sheriff Hardy drew a deep breath, then walked around to the door and entered, surveying the scene.

Four of the gangsters and Pete Carman were dead and the one that Tel Brown had struck was out cold. A bullet had grazed Jim Tolland's ear, but he paid no attention to the slight injury.

"Well, that was sure brief but all fired sharp," remarked Sheriff Hardy as he mopped his brow. "It ain't all quite clear to me yet, but looks as though Carman was the guy who killed Tony, at least."

"Yes, and Sam and the rest of 'em too," drawled Tel Brown. "And shot Tom, too. Howcome you to have hired him, Jim? He wasn't here last time I was up this way three or four years ago."

"He done me a good turn when I needed some cash, and he was a real top hand cowman," Jim answered. "I took him on two years ago when he was drift-in' through and I needed men. Later he loaned me some cash—he appeared to

have plenty dinero but I never thought much about a range hand having it—does seem kind o' queer now that I think of it, of course.

"I never inquired into his antecedents, if any, and he never talked much. Guess he drifted in from Montana."

Later Sheriff Hardy learned from Montana and Nebraska authorities that Carman was wanted in several places for holdup jobs. He had always appeared on some ranch, worked for a time as a respectable cowman, but always when he came trouble rode into the country with him. When suspicion began to point toward the cowboy he would drift on. Sometimes the drifting was in a hurry but more often he left quietly before things got too hot.

Jim Tolland ordered the bunkhouse cleaned out and the bodies removed. Then the sheriff and his one prisoner and Tel Brown, Bucky Keys and Jim Tolland went up to the big ranch house where Tel informed Jim that "he guessed he'd be on his way now." Jim nodded, realizing that the big loafer wanted no rewards for his work.

"Good bye, Tel, and don't work too hard," he grinned.

"Good bye, Jim," drawled Tel mournfully. "It'll be a long time before I get rested up from this."

A half hour later Tel Brown and Bucky Keys sprang to their saddles. Tel Brown headed Hatrack toward the road that led to town. The Bar-O fell behind them.

"What was the first thing made you suspect Carman?" asked Bucky hopefully.

"Well, he kept wantin' to know what we'd found out. You see, he wanted to know when to lay down a false trail or to high-tail it for parts unknown. I wondered about him at first, then suspected him, then felt downright sure he was the jigger we was looking for.

"You see, McShay and his gang had found out what Carman was doing, somehow, and was blackmailin' him for most of what he stole. That's why he wanted to kill 'em off sudden, so they wouldn't have a chance to talk. It was him we trailed into that winder that night. He wanted to kill 'em one by one in their bunks, but Tony seen him and got killed. It was Carman shot Tom Tolland last night. He had heard Tom asking questions around town and was afeerd he'd learned too much. He thought he'd ride out with Tom and finish him on the road, and when Tom left sudden like that, without Carman seeing him, Carman got scared and rode after him and fired through the window. He shot old Jim, too, before we come here, because Jim was listening at McShay's window and Carman was scared he'd hear 'em talking and get onto everything."

"But what made you sure it wasn't McShay doin' the robbin' and killin' ?"

"All them bullets was from a forty-five. There ain't many forty-five automatics out here, and even if there was, men wouldn't carry 'em under their coats. The forty-five is a heavy gun, a belt gun. And anyway, city gansters run to thirty-eights or even thirty-twos. Then when Carman springs that about news o' Sam Wyman's killin' bein' all over town—

"You see, he'd seen Gus Edwards ride for town and didn't know about his bronc steppin' in a gopher hole and Gus not getting there till next morning. He thought he was telling something that everybody knowed."

"Gosh, that's right! I never thought of that! Was that all, Tel?"

"Well, no. You see, just after Tony was killed and Carman come runnin' in, I reached out and felt his gun, and done the same after Tom was wounded, and both times his gun was warm. And a warm gun, sonny, is one what's been fired."

"Well, I'll be durned. You got brains, Tel. Dog-gone if you ain't. I remember you pushing Carman's gun down. Ain't I dumb!"

"Well, no, sonny, 'tain't excalty that. It's just that you're so full of energy you dash madly ahead and fall over things without seeing 'em."

"Reckon you're right," admitted Bucky gloomily. "What do we do now, Tel?"

"Soon's we reach town I'm going to find me a nice soft bed and rest."

And he did.

Haunted Rider

By Earl W. Scott

IN Lincoln Town the road runs brown,
And ribbons the valley up and down,
And children shout the hours away,
To gambol at life in their simple play.

When moonlight witches this ancient land,
With fairy touch of a silver hand,
A ghost band gallops the brown dust way,
From the mountain mists of another day.

Twenty-one men on haggard steeds,
Pale ghosts follow where pale ghost leads,
Haunting the soul on the lathered grey,
Out of the shades of yesterday.

Once he turns and his ageless face,
Drawn by death and the endless race,
Tortures the stars and then is hid,
As dawning banishes Billy the Kid.

The Jinx Punch

And then Bud's left came up against that brutal jaw—and the crowd went wild.

BATTLING GROGAN had been a jinx to Bud Terry ever since they fought youthful gang battles—and now they were meeting in the squared circle for big stakes! This is an exciting fight yarn by a young author who has donned the gloves with some of the best light-heavies.

By JOE BALL

Author of "Tom Guns the Gangsters"

A PROLONGED roar from overhead announced to the trio in the dressing room under the Garden that the last of the preliminaries was over.

"Nervous, Bud?" Sammy Taylor's scarred face was solicitous as he asked the question. The big handler hovered over his charge like an old hen guarding a lone chick.

"Nope," the slim figure in the faded red bathrobe made answer. "Never felt better. This Battling Grogan is in for a bad half hour—if it goes the full twelve frames."

And the tranquil gaze of Bud Terry's grey eyes backed his statement. Tall and slim, with his clipped black hair brushed back above acquiline features, Bud looked more like a welter or middle weight than a light heavy.

Jim Reed, his manager, a thin man with a slight limp carried back from France,

turned to Sammy. "All right, Sammy. Let's go.—And Bud, get this guy and get him quick. Then we knock over the Champ and we're in the big money—"

Reed's voice continued his admonitions as the three traversed a wide hall and climbed a flight of stairs into an aisle of the fight arena. It was the tenth of July and the acrid smell of smoke mingled with the odor of prespiring thousands, smote Bud's nostrils as they came into the aisle.

A hoarse cheer greeted their appearance. Tim O'Rourke, veteran fight promoter of Manhattan, was staging another of his elimination bouts at the Garden. The winner was to meet Billy Jackson, the light heavy champ, the following fall. Jackson had not fought for over a year, being too busy with movie and vaudeville contracts, and the fans were anxious to see him toppled.

Sport writers and fight followers were agreed the winner of this bout would take the Champ easily. Both had piled up formidable knockout records in the last year and both were good boxers. Grogan had a left that fairly smoked while Terry's right had dynamite in it, as any of the unfortunate ringsters he had met in the last year would testify. True, both were one-handed hitters, but how those hands could sock, enthusiastic fans ejaculated.

Bud was climbing through the ropes when another roar greeted his adversary's appearance. Bud watched with interest the progress of his opponent as he advanced down the aisle. He had heard that Battling Grogan hailed from his own home town, Ironton, Pennsylvania, but he could not remember ever having met or seen the man there. He had moved away from Ironton when still a boy—perhaps he just had never happened to meet Grogan. Now that he was a rising young fighter, he never had met the other, either. His pictures somehow looked vaguely familiar but Bud never had thought much about Grogan.

As the other man seated himself on his stool in the opposite corner, however, Bud started and nearly came to his feet.

"What's the matter, Bud?" queried his trainer.

"Nothing," returned Bud, getting control of himself.

But he had recognized that man across the aisle—he knew now where he had seen before that brutal face, with its thick lips, heavy undershot jaw and small eyes peering from under a jutting forehead.

SLOWLY a scene from his boyhood in Ironton re-enacted itself in a corner of his brain. He saw a slight lad of fourteen waylaid by a gang from over the tracks. The leader of the gang, a hulking lad two years Bud's elder, and heavily built for his age, had the same undershot jaw, small eyes and thick lips of Battling Grogan! But his name was Dargo. Some clever manager had changed it.

He saw again the gang standing in a circle while their captain pummeled the slight lad from the "highbrow" North side into insensibility. Long after the gang had left his still figure lying there, Bud had risen painfully and crawled howeward. Crawled home, to get the news his mother and father had been killed in a train wreck that morning. Bud felt a dull ache in his heart as he remembered that day.

Then he glared across the ring at Grogan. That beating had been only the last of a long series of encounters between Bud and the captain of the South side gang. And always the bigger boy had bested him. Refusing to be placed in an orphanage after his parents' death, Bud ran away. He made his living selling papers in Chicago. Always he hung around the gyms where boxers trained, seeking to learn the art of self defense. The memory of his many beatings at the hands of the youngster in Ironton burned in his heart. Then, from a hanger-on at the gyms, he finally became a fighter himself.

"Tony Dargo!" Bud ejaculated to himself. A shadow of the jinx that had ridden him in his numerous battles with the other boy passed over his face. He shook it off impatiently.

"Come on, Bud, my boy. Snap out of it! Where's your guts? Can't get the jimmies now." Bud had a habit of talking to himself, especially when he was in trouble.

"What's the matter? You *are* worried!" The question came from the faithful Sammy.

"Nothin'. Only I used to know that bozo in my home town. And his name aint Grogan at all. It's Tony Dargo. He and I have met before." A grim light crept into Bud's grey eyes as he uttered the last words.

The referee announcing the two fighters cut off any reply. Then they were called to the center of the ring for instructions.

"Well, Runt. Ready to get licked again?" Dargo snarled as the two came together. Bud knew he also remembered. The referee, Ed Gilbertson, mumbled the rules, Bud listening tight-lipped. Though Gilbertson was rated a top-notch referee and had been the third man in several title bouts, Bud did not like him. He was too fat, and his small eyes were too shifty.

The difference in build between the two men was strikingly apparent as they stripped off their bathrobes. Grogan's huge, bunchy shoulders and knotted muscles attested his bull-like strength while Bud, with his sloping hips and smooth rippling sinews looked a mere stripling.

But his appearance was decpetive. That lean waist was made of iron, and the hitting muscles under his arms and on his back coiled into huge swells as he swung his arms to loosen them up. And his barrel chest, almost as deep as it was wide, made his shoulders look much narrower than they were.

THE gong!

Both men came out cautiously, sparring at long range and seeking to feel each other out. Bud jabbed tentatively with his left, his weak hand. Grogan grinned in derision as the light blow glanced off his cheek, and he prepared to shoot his own mighty left.

Bud saw the grin. "Huh! You're another o' these guys that think it'll be a cinch to watch a one-handed hitter. Well, watch this one!" He was talking to himself again.

Crack! Bud's right connected.

The grin was wiped off Grogan's face. The blow was too high for a knockout, but it shook the other from head to heels. He back-pedaled vigorously while Bud bored in, swinging both hands and watching for another chance to shoot that deadly right. Jim had said to end it quickly. Well, he was going to do it; the quicker the better. And he had a few old scores to settle with Grogan, or Dago, on the side.

Time and again that sizzling right smoked into Grogan's ribs as Bud followed him around the ring. But the other had covered up and he could not reach his jaw. Grogan's head was clearing now, as the effects of Bud's first terrific wallop died out.

Suddenly Grogan stopped, his right foot slid forward and as Bud leaped in, the other met him with a vicious left hook. Flush on Bud's jaw it landed.

Grogan drove in as Bud swayed dizzily. His left swung in a mighty arc. Bud dived in and it passed harmlessly over his head. He hooked a counter with his own left, but it didn't phase Grogan.

Desperately he hung on to Grogan. Cries of "Knock him out!" "Kill him!" sounded in his ears. Bud continued to hang on grimly and when the referee pulled them apart, he covered up and danced out of range until his brain cleared. He grinned at Grogan. Bud's pluck forbade him showing he was hurt, besides, it was bad ring generalship.

As the gong sounded for the end of the round, the two were standing in the center of the ring slugging, with the shouts of the crowd rising to a roaring crescendo.

"For Gawd's sake, Bud, keep your head," Sammy admonished him in his corner. "Run into the left again and it's curtains for you."

"Don't worry, I won't. I sure wish I had a left to counter with, though. But he doesn't like 'em upstairs and he's going to get plenty of 'em there from now on. I'll get him in this frame."

He met Grogan in his corner with a tigerish rush as the bell sounded. Both arms working like pistons, he shot blow after blow into Grogan, not giving him a chance to set himself and shoot his left. Time and again he cocked his right for a knockout punch, but always Grogan grabbed it in time. He threw his left into Grogan's middle, but the punches lacked steam, and seemed to have no effect on the other.

Then Bud started talking to himself again. "What the hell, Terry! Use your bean! Remember the old count. One to the middle and one to the jaw."

Bud suddenly changed his tactics and twice in succession that right buried itself to the wrist in Grogan's stomach. The second time, Grogan doubled over with a groan and his hands dropped for an instant.

Thud!

It was a short right hook, that traveled about a foot, but it exploded against Grogan's chin like a charge of T. N. T. He went down like a poled ox.

BUD crouched over him as the referee took up the count. Gilbertson counted two and then stopped to wave Bud back to a neutral corner. Then he started in all over again. The crowd booed, but the fat official payed no attention. He continued his count, his arm rising and falling with maddening slowness.

At the count of five, Grogan moved slightly and the blank look passed from his face. At seven he pulled himself to one knee. Then he rose unsteadily on the count of nine.

Bud was on him like a flash, but was over-eager and allowed Grogan to get in close and tie up his right in a clinch before he got in a solid punch. Then again, after the referee had separated them, he chased Grogan around the ring.

Twice more he knocked the other down, but they were glancing blows which landed on Grogan as he was going backward and they carried no kayo. At the bell he had the other against the ropes, throwing punches into him with both hands. Disgustedly he turned his back and walked to his corner while Grogan's seconds helped him to his.

Bud cursed his impotent left. "All he has to do is grab my right and hang on and I can't do a thing," he complained.

The third round was a repetition of the second except that Bud could not land solidly. Toward the end of the round he got Grogan against the ropes again and his cocked right, starting at his hip, landed on Grogan's jaw with the force of a pile driver. Grogan was slipping off the ropes to the canvas when the bell rang. His seconds carried him to his corner.

"You'll get him in the next frame," Sammy consoled Bud as he kneaded his legs in the one-minute rest interval.

At the bell, Bud tore across the ring with only one thought in his mind—to end it quickly. A barrage of lefts and rights drove Grogan back into his corner. Grogan dove into a clinch. As the referee stepped in to separate them, Grogan swung Bud around so that his own back was toward the referee.

"Break clean!" At Gilbertson's command as he pulled them apart, Grogan's left swung low in a vicious arc. Unexpected, the blow landed with terrific force on Bud's groin. He doubled up and dropped to the canvas, groaning in agony. Grogan had pulled an old trick when Bud had least expected it.

"Foul! Foul!" Reed's shouts penetrated the fog of pain in Bud's head. But instead of hearing the referee tell Grogan he was disqualified, Bud heard him begin to count. Reed's shouts were redoubled, but Gilbertson's count continued inexorably.

Bud's dazed brain was functioning as he writhed on the canvas, his legs were powerless. "Come on, Buddy, get up! Gotta catch that city edition." He was muttering to himself, back in his newsboy days. "Roll out, Buddy boy." Then, "Get up, you yellow quitter! Goin' to let a

dirty ham like Grogan put you down with one punch?" At eight, gritting his teeth in the face of his pain, Bud dragged himself to one knee and at nine he rose unsteadily.

The crowd was roaring. Bud was barely on his feet when a terrific left hook caught him on the head and he went down again. Once more, he rose on the count of nine, but his reeling brain told him he was about through. Bent over by the pain in his groin, he stood crouching, waiting Grogan's rush. He couldn't move to avoid it. His legs were numb.

When it came, he tried clumsily to duck the other's left. It glanced off his head and he dove into a clinch, hanging on while the ring and audience went round in sickening circles.

"Musta eaten some green apples," he was muttering to himself again. "Sure got an awful tummy ache. Damn this guy!"

Then Grogan pushed him off again and was throwing punches into his unprotected face. That terrible left thudded against his jaw, just under his ear, and Bud felt the world going back.

"It's curtains, Buddy. The last punch is comin', the punch that means dreamland for us. Dream—land. . . ."

Grogan was only a blur in front of him now. Dimly, as from a great distance, he heard the words, "All right, boys. Watch this one. It finishes him." Grogan, talking to the ringside seats, telling them he was going to knock him out. He saw Grogan's right foot slide forward as he cocked that left. Then everything went black as the punch landed.

When Bud came to he was back in the dressing room, with Sammy's anxious face hanging over him. Jim, further down, touched his groin and a stabbing pain shot through his side. His head ached and his jaw was swollen so he could not close his teeth.

"That was a dirty deal, Bud," Jim said, seeing he had revived. "We squawked to Gilbertson for all we were worth and so did the newsboys. But he swore he saw the punch and it landed fair. Don't worry, though, boy. We'll get another crack at that lad and you'll knock him stiff."

Aching, weary, with his head throbbing, Bud got dressed and he and Jim went out to eat, then went to bed.

THEY were awakened next morning by an eager rapping on their hotel door. Bud groaned as his tortured body came up out of a deep sleep. Jim cursed as he crossed to the door.

"What the hell's the idea of waking us—" he began as he opened the door. Then he subsided as Sammy stalked into the room.

"Well, how's everybody gettin' on?" he queried cheerfully. Sam had been a cowboy before he became a boxer and then, having burned himself out through poor handling, he now was a good trainer himself. He had learned a good deal of what not to do to a prizefighter. When excited he frequently slipped into his old range land vocabulary.

"I suppose you've heard the rumors about Gilbertson gettin' a cut from Grogan?" he inquired.

"Just got up," growled Jim. "We hadn't heard but we sure suspected something of the sort."

"Waal," drawled Sam, "them's the rumors I done heard—but you just try to prove 'em. But a good friend of mine told me he saw Grogan meet Gilbertson at a certain speakeasy I knows of and I went down there already today. Another friend of mine—yeah, I got lots of 'em in this man's town—down there said he had seen them there together so I'm purty sure of it now."

Bud sputtered angrily.

"What are we gonna do about it?" he finally ground out.

"Try to do something," returned Jim moodily. "We got no proof and it's just about impossible to do anything at all.

"Here's the dope, as I see it now," Jim Reed continued. "Grogan fights the champ on Labor day. He'll probably take him.

But it's a cinch he won't be givin' you no chance to knock his title off until he has to. So I think the best plan for us is to rustle up as many fights as we can in the next year. We'll knock over all the promisin' light heavies in sight an' then he'll just have to take us on. What's your slant?"

Bud's face was still swollen from the pounding he had received and one eye was partially closed. But a bleak look in his gray eyes boded ill for someone.

"O. K. with me, Jim. All I want is another chance to get in the ring with that bozo."

The three fell silent for a while. Then Reed spoke again.

"Well, I guess there's no use crossin' that fence until we come to it. What we gotta do now is get out some fights." He pulled a yellow slip of paper from his pocket. "Got a wire from Ed Riley at Chicago this morning. He offers us a battle there with Knockout Ryan in a month. Shall we take it?"

"Sure, he's as good a one to start in on as any." Indifference was in Bud's voice. He was thinking of the shot at the champ that would have been his but for Grogan's foul the night before. Reed went out to despatch a telegram while Sammy and Bud brooded silently over the battle of the night before.

"SURE looks like that Dargo is a jinx for me," Bud muttered. "If I only had a left. A good left hook and I could knock Grogan cuckoo with my eyes closed. He's wide open for one when he swings that haymaker of his. A left—a left . . ." He looked disgustedly at the offending hand. Then he turned on his gloomy buddy.

"Sammy, how come I haven't got any wallop in my left? I was just thinkin' how handy it would be fightin' Grogan. A good handy left hook, packing a kayo, to counter with when he swings his, would knock him for a row of hearses."

"You got a left, Bud, only you ain't never learned to use it, and consequently you can't. You're like a range bronc that's never been rode. He can carry a man, but it's jest nachurly hell for the first few days. He has to learn. You got the arm an' muscles. All you need is to learn to use 'em.

"Your left packs plenty of wallop for most of your fights—that's why I never bothered you about developing it more. Besides, it would take a lot of work and time to do it."

"But, my Gosh, I'm gonna do just that," Bud's voice took on a new hope. "And I'm going to keep that as a jinx punch for Mr. Grogan, or Dargo, or whatever the heck his name really might be. Boy, how I'm gonna surprise that bozo next time we meet."

A week later Bud started training for his bout with Knockout Ryan. The usual gym crowds watched his workouts and most of them admired this twenty-year-old youngster who packed such a terrific wallop in his right hand. But they didn't see all of his workout.

Bud had rented a separate room at the gym, and every day after his regular workout he and Sammy would lock themselves in for long hours of secret sparring. After a week of it Bud began to wear a satisfied smile as he hopped under the shower after the daily grind.

A month after being knocked out by Grogan at the Garden, Bud Terry kayoed Knockout Ryan in the second round at Chicago.

On Labor day Bud, Sammy and Jim had ringside seats at the Polo grounds when Billy Jackson took his title bout out of cold storage and let the world take a look at it. Although it was rattled around a bit on his head, he was still wearing his crown at the end of twelve rounds of the worst stalling the New York fans had seen in years.

The champ was slow, flabby, and his punches lacked steam even in the first round. It was obvious to anyone with any knowledge of the game that Grogan carried him through the last six frames. But there were still enough writers to prate about ring generalship, to save the two from the commission's wrath.

"THAT means Grogan has fixed it for a return match with the champ in a year or so," Bud commented as they shouldered their way through the disgruntled crowd. "That is, he will if I don't beat him to it." Bud's jaw set.

He started out systematically to clean up everything in the light heavy ranks. He directed Jim Reed to get him as many matches with the top-notchers as possible. In October he traveled westward to San Francisco to take on the Frisco Kid, west coast champion, and heralded as the coming light heavy champ. He flattened the Kid and his championship hopes in the fourth round.

Then down to New Orleans, where, in November, Bud knocked Tommy Goldberg out in the first round. Thereafter he fought at two-week intervals, always keeping fit and piling up a formidable string of knockout victories. Three second-raters he put away in one round. He kayoed Sam Maloney in the sixth and put Joe Barton to sleep in the fourth.

And all the time he and Sammy continued their secret workouts, an hour every day.

On January twentieth he had ringside seats in Pike's arena at Pittsburgh when Battling Grogan won a hard-fought decision over Lefty Flynn, a home town boy, in twelve rounds.

Flynn was a southpaw, like Grogan, and twice, once in the second and again in the sixth, he rocked Grogan back on his heels with a short left hook, stepping inside the other's wider swing to land.

"See that, Sammy?" Bud nudged his handler. "I told you that boy was duck soup for a good left hook."

But Flynn's blows didn't carry enough steam and Grogan soon rallied, to have Flynn hanging on in the last four frames. In the eighth, after a flurry of hooks to the head, he had Lefty hanging onto the ropes, wide open. Grogan went in to finish him.

As he measured Flynn for the final punch, Bud, sitting at ringside, heard the words Grogan spat out of the side of his mouth.

"Watch this one now, boys. Here's where Mr. Flynn goes to dreamland." The big battler boasted to the fans. Then his right foot slid forward to give added weight to that left. There it swung! Up and out in a wide arc. Crack, and Flynn slumped down, cold. Only the bell saved him.

Somehow or other the Pittsburgh lad managed to weather the remaining four rounds by hanging on for dear life. But the decision was Grogan's by a wide margin.

A few weeks later Jim matched Bud with Jerry Dunne, a former light heavyweight who had graduated into heavyweight ranks and was going great. The fight was scheduled for March twenty-fifth at Philadelphia, and Bud did the most intensive training for it he had for any of his bouts since the one with Grogan.

"Beat this lad, Buddy," he told himself, "and the newspaper boys will give you a hand to get a return fight with your old friend, the Battling Grogan, who throws 'em where they land."

Dunne was a clever boy who packed a wicked punch in either hand. But Bud was tuned to the minute, when he climbed into the ring in Philadelphia the night of the twenty-fifth.

Dunne roughed him a bit in the first two rounds, and Bud took a couple of mean wallops in the sixth, but his speed finally overcame the advantage of the other's weight, and in the eighth a lightning feint with his left and that bone-crushing right across ended the battle.

The next day, looking over the morning papers, Bud found the sports writers had been looking up his record and had it plastered all over their pages. Alongside it were the records of Grogan and the champ.

"Those boys sure know how to make things plain without sayin' much," Bud murmured to himself as he scanned the pages.

TWO days after the fight with Dunne, Jim closed a match with Lefty Flynn by wire. The fight was to be in Pittsburgh, May tenth. A week after the match was made, Jim received a wire from Tim O'Rourke, promising Bud a return match with Battling Grogan at the Garden on July tenth, if he won the decision over Flynn. The winner would meet the champion the following fall.

The three were jubilant.

"Bud, old hoss, you're sure goin' to meet up with that wop with the Irish moniker again," Sammy crowed.

"All you have to do is get a decision over Flynn," Jim exulted. "That's all Grogan did. Guess Tim figures Lefty is too tough for you to kayo him. Old Bat Nolan was the only boy that ever put Lefty to sleep, and Bat was a great scrapper in them days."

Bud was muttering something under his breath. The others caught the words, "Never been kayoed, eh? Maybe . . . surprise. We'll do our stuff, eh, Buddy boy?"

Then Jim's voice cut in. "Grogan's been going great guns in New York the last few months, according to the papers. He knocked out Sailor Smith in the sixth last week, and the Sailor is one tough baby."

"That's all right. You wait until I get Grogan in the same ring with me again. He'll sure get one helluva surprise." Bud's voice was grim.

Training for his bout with Flynn was an easy task. Bud was already in perfect condition, due to his long string of fights, and needed only a few rounds of boxing daily and his roadwork to keep him there. Only he and Sammy still continued to spend an hour every day in their locked room.

On May tenth Bud climbed through the ropes in Pike's arena at Pittsburgh. There was a slight smile on his face. He grinned to himself as his eyes swept over the press row, where cool-eyed reporters lolled back from their telegraph and typewriter keys for smokes.

"Buddy, we gotta give the boys some real copy tonight. They been pretty good to us."

During the first round Bud found out that Flynn couldn't lay a glove on him. His speed and boxing had improved so tremendously in the last year he found it simple to keep away from the other, while he jabbed and hooked him at will.

But try as he would, Bud couldn't land his right. Every time he made the slightest motion with it, Flynn grabbed and hung on like a plaster.

"Huh, been told to watch Terry's right, have you? Well, Buddy, it's up to me an' you to outsmart this lad. Speed'll do it."

Bud landed only a couple of solid punches in the first two frames, and Flynn, a veteran at taking them, only laughed. Once, in the second, when he went wide with a right jab, Flynn swung a left hook to Bud's head. The blow only jarred Bud slightly, but he saw Lefty's right hand, guarding his chin, drop for an instant as the southpaw shot his left.

"Bud, you and me have an idea. Next time Mr. Flynn tries that left hook we'll hand him a little present, all done up in leather."

In the third round Bud rushed Flynn to the ropes, battering him with a flurry of lefts and rights. Then he stepped back and, feinting his left, started a straight right jab to Flynn's head. He shot the punch purposely slow.

Then, as Bud caught the other's left with his right, his own left, cocked at his hip, flashed up and out in a vicious short-arm hook. As it thudded home on Lefty's jaw, Bud shot a sizzling right across, the blow landing a split second after the left hook. Flynn swayed for an instant, then crashed to the floor, face down. When a boxer falls forward, it's a sure sign he's out. And Lefty didn't move a muscle at the count of ten.

There was a moment of petrified silence from the crowd as the referee finished counting. Lefty Flynn knocked out! They couldn't believe their eyes. Then bedlam broke loose.

"Boy, what a sweet socker that lad is!"

"Did you see that right? Talk about wallop . . ."

"Talk about your right-cross . . ."

The next morning the newspaper boys

had even more to say about it. With the exception of one or two of the old hands, all the sports writers credited the kayo to Bud's right. Some scoffed at the rumored story of a short left hook just before that last right doing the damage. "Terry always was and always will be a one-handed socker," they declared. "He doesn't need more than one hand. That right . . ."

"I sure hope they stick to that story," Bud said to Sammy the next day. "It's just the sort of line we need."

HE STARTED intensive training for his match with Grogan, two months off. Every morning he did six or seven miles on the road. Then in the afternoon he went three fast rounds each with four sparring partners, punched the bags and skipped rope.

The gym was crowded every day, now, with fans anxious for a look at the man who had knocked out Lefty Flynn. Some of them were watching for that rumored left hook that had stopped Lefty, but they didn't see anything of it. Bud lengthened his secret workouts with Sammy to an hour and a half.

Two days before the fight Bud laid aside his gloves until the night of the tenth. A light run in the morning and a long walk in the afternoon constituted his training from then on.

On the night of the ninth he ate his last heavy meal, steak, cooked rare, with dry toast and a little tea. Then he started drying out. He tipped the beam at exactly 174 when they weighed in the next afternoon. Grogan weighed 174½. Some dry toast with sugar sprinkled on it, and he turned in at the hotel and slept quietly until an hour before he was scheduled to appear in the ring.

The Garden was packed again, as on that eventful night a year ago. A howling burst of cheers greeted Bud as he made his way down the aisle to the ring, the same faded red bathrobe wrapped about him. Ahead of him, Sammy pushed a way through the crowd, carrying the bottles and towels, while Jim brought up the rear.

Then Battling Grogan made his appearance and pushed through a crowded aisle to the ring. His welcome was almost as prolonged as Bud's. He had won most of his fights in the last year by knockouts, and only the month before had put Jack Carpenter, a rugged heavyweight, to sleep in the second round.

The referee climbed into the ring. It was Ed Gilbertson again, insisted on by Grogan over protests by Jim and Bud. Grogan had said he would not fight unless Gilbertson was the third man in the ring. Bud and Jim finally had to give in.

They were in the center of the ring while Gilbertson mumbled the instructions.

"So you're back for more, eh?" Grogan sneered as they came together.

Bud only grinned sardonically at him and his lips set in a thin, determined line.

At the bell both men leaped from their corners and met in the center of the ring with a jarring impact of padded leather on flesh. The crowd cheered at this promising beginning.

Wham! Crack! Smack! Bud's gloves thudded home on Grogan's body. One of Grogan's huge fists countered to his jaw. Bud rushed him into a corner, was bounced back by a straight left jab that rolled his head back.

As Grogan started to follow up his punch, Bud's left lashed out in a stinging jab. He crossed his right in a lightning one-two. A solid thud told him the first real punch of the fight had been landed.

"Yip-Eeeee, Bud. Go get 'im!" Sammy's wild cowboy yell told him the big puncher had seen that right.

He tore after Grogan and chased him around the ring for the rest of the round, with both gloves pounding a vicious chorus on the other's head and ribs.

BACK in his corner Sammy whispered, "You got him goin', Bud. Keep after him with that right. No use usin' the other." Bud nodded.

He pounded Grogan all over the ring in that second frame, but Grogan had gone

into a shell, and all he hit was hands and elbows. Toward the end of the round his right flashed in and caught the other on the chin, the only solid punch in the round, but the bell stopped his follow-in.

"Watch out, Bud, or you'll wear yourself out hittin' elbows," Sammy cautioned at the rest interval. "That's what he's playin' for. He wants you to wear your arms out and then he'll go in and take you."

Again Bud nodded. His old grin replaced the worried look his face had worn during that ineffectual second. He came out slowly in the third, boxing cautiously and seeking a good opening before he shot a punch. He started to pound the other's ribs systematically. First he whipped a stinging left to Grogan's partially protected face. Then, as the other pulled his elbows in slightly, that lightning right would flash out and thud against his ribs with a jarring impact. Bud knew those blows were counting. A couple of rounds of that and the fight would be over.

Grogan evidently realized the same thing, for he suddenly straightened up and drove Bud across the ring in a bull-like rush. Head down, both arms flailing, the other bored in. Bud side-stepped to the left and his right swung up in a vicious uppercut.

The other's rush carried him to the canvas, face down. Few had seen that right, but Bud knew it had dazed Grogan. He took the full count before pulling himself to his feet. Once more he went into a shell; and again Bud started that unmerciful tatoo on his unprotected ribs. He saw Grogan wince and heard a sharp crack as his right buried itself in Grogan's side.

"Busted a rib that time, unless I miss my guess," Bud muttered to himself. "Now let's finish him off."

Grogan came up, his face desperate, and tried to dive into a clinch. A left jab straightened him up and Bud shot his right across. Flush on his jaw it landed, and Grogan was down again. Sammy's range yell came to Bud's ears as he stood in a neutral corner waiting for the count.

This time Grogan did not move until the count of eight. Then he dragged himself to one knee and at nine he staggered drunkenly upright. He stood groggily in the center of the ring, both hands at his sides.

As Bud leaped in to finish him, the bell sounded, ending the round.

"That's the ticket, Bud," Sammy cried back in his corner. "Easy does it. First the ribs and then that right cross. This frame'll end it sure."

The big handler glanced over to the opposite corner, but one of Grogan's handlers was holding a huge towel in front of him while Bill Edwards, Grogan's manager, was fumbling with his gloves. A fleeting suspicion crossed Sammy's mind, but was forgotten instantly as the bell sounded for the beginning of the fourth.

"THIS is the round he fouled you last time, Bud. Go get him!" he cried, and ducked out with the stool.

A momentary shadow darkened Bud's face as he thought of that fourth round a year ago and of his encounters with Tony Dargo back in Ironton. Surely Grogan was so far gone there was no possibility of his coming back. "Buddy, a jinx is only a jinx, and the sooner it's busted the better. Let's go." And Bud Terry came out grinning at the bell.

Grogan was covered again and Bud started his cautious pounding at the other's ribs. Wham! Sock! Thud! The blows pounded home with monotonous regularity.

Then they were in a clinch over in Grogan's corner and Bud felt the other draw back his left, just as he had done in that same round a year ago. Startled, fearing another foul blow, he dropped his guard to protect his groin, and then Grogan rubbed his glove across Bud's eyes!

A pungent odor assailed Bud Terry's nostrils, and he tried to think what it was —then he felt his eyes clouding. Desperately he broke from the clinch and rubbed

one glove across his now smarting eyes. They smarted all the worse.

His sight was fading—he was going blind!

Desperately he dove into a clinch, striving to wait out the round. But Grogan shook him off and started a flurry of gloves for his face. He tried to go into a shell but Grogan's smashing blows crashed into his face. A rain of blows battered him down just as the bell sounded.

Sam helped him to his corner and Jim crowded in too.

"What's the matter, Bud, lad?" he heard Jim's anxious voice pierce through the fog that clouded his brain.

"Somethin' went wrong after—first clinch," Bud muttered thickly. "Can't see."

Sam leaned over and sniffed at Bud's face, then let out a yell of rage.

"The skunk, to pull that old trick," he fumed. "He had a wad of benzine cloth in his glove and rubbed it in your eyes. Now he's probably got it out and we can't prove it. But we're going to squawk, anyway."

He strode over to where Gilbertson leaned against the ropes in a neutral corner. "Grogan had benzine on his glove and smeared it in Bud's eyes that last round," he said without preliminary. "You gotta disqualify him."

Reed followed with another protest. He, too, had smelled the blinding stuff. The crowd watched expectantly, then calls of "Write him a letter!" "What's the matter? What you crabbin' about!" "Quit the beefin'!" were heard.

"I've gotta do what?" Gilbertson demanded truculently, his voice shrill. But his small, piggy eyes watched the activity in Grogan's corner.

"You gotta disqualify that dirty bum!" Reed barked. "He had benzine on his glove, I tell you. If you don't believe it, go over and sniff his mitt."

RELUCTANTLY Gilbertson allowed himself to be led over to Grogan's corner. Edwards greeted Reed and Sammy with a snarling, "What the hell yuh tryin' tuh do? Claim a foul again?" He sneered.

"Let's see Grogan's glove," Gilbertson requested.

The referee sniffed at the leather, then Reed and Sammy put their noses close to the gloves. There was no odor.

"He washed it off, or something," Sammy averred. "I know damn well he had it on. You can come over n' smell it on Bud's eyes."

"That's enough squawkin' from you two," Gilbertson ordered, a triumphant light in his small eyes. "I'm through smellin'. Go on back to your corner or I'll disqualify your man."

Protests were of no avail. Reed and Sammy made their way back to where Bud was lying, exhausted, against the ropes in his corner. A cloudy mist still obscured everything for Bud, and his head was ringing from that last punch.

"Guess it's all up, Bud," Jim said. "We'll have to throw in the sponge. You can't go on fightin' while you're blind." He picked up a towel from the water bucket.

Bud groped out and caught his arm. "Nothing doing, Jim. Throw in that sponge an' I'll murder you. If that big ham thinks he can make me quit, he's got another think comin'. I'll stay in there till my eyes come back an' then knock him cold."

Arguments did no good. Bud was determined to stick it out. So they sponged his inflamed eyes with water and revived him with smelling salts as best they could.

At the bell, Bud went out cautiously with both arms wrapped tight against his body. He groped in the general direction from which he expected Grogan to come. A jarring left informed him Grogan was in front of him. He dove for a clinch but the other sidestepped and another haymaker caught him alongside the ear. He dropped.

At the count of eight he staggered upright, while the ring whirled in dizzy sweeps under his feet. Grogan was on top of him, but in some miraculous manner he managed to get into a clinch and

hung on like death until his head cleared.

Grogan was only a dark blur in the grey mist before his eyes. Still, muttering drunkenly to himself, Bud hunched his shoulders and grimly took it as Grogan threw punch after punch into his welted body and battered face.

The last half of that round was a nightmare to Bud. When Sammy helped him back to his corner after the bell, he was still muttering to himself. "Keep the old knees stiff, Bud.—It's the last punch does it—the last punch."

THEN, dimly, a familiar voice penetrated Bud's pain-fogged mind. Grogan was talking to the ringside seats again.

"I'll take him this frame, fans," he boasted. "A good left and it'll be curtains for Mr. Terry."

The speech struck a responsive chord in Bud's mind. He tried to pull his scattered faculties together and remember what it was. A thousand tin pans were banging in his head.

Then remembrance sifted through—remembrance of Grogan's words just before everything went black in that fourth round a year ago, and then that eighth round at Pittsburgh, Grogan's right foot had gone forward—yes, he remembered.

Then the bell sounded. Bud came out in a shell, his weary brain still struggling with a problem. There was something he should remember.

"Come on, Buddy boy, snap out of it. What's the answer?" Smack! He was down again. "Thank you, Mr. Grogan, I have it. The workouts with Sammy. Nearly forgot 'em!" A plan took form in Bud's mind. With the necessity for concentrated thought, his fogged brain cleared. He was coldly calculating under the barrage of punches shooting in. He could dimly make out the form of the other now, a few feet in front of him.

Over and over in his mind the words were spoken as his numb body absorbed the other's punches. *"When Grogan talks to the ringside seats. When Grogan talks to—"*

His brain, cold as ice in his deadened body, waited for that signal. His left fist cocked itself at his hip. "He'll never think of watchin' the left. Remember, Buddy, it's the last punch wins the fight—the last punch—a jinx for Grogan!"

There it came. Grogan was talking. Crouching groggily in the center of the ring, both hands swinging apparently helpless at his sides, Bud heard the words: "All right, Boys. Watch this one. This will send him to dreamland."

He saw the blurred outline of Grogan's right foot slide forward.

"Now! Buddy, boy, now! *The last punch!*" As he uttered the words Bud dropped into a crouch; his left shoulder dropped down and back as his own right foot slid forward. His left snapped up, elbow close in and forearm hard as iron. As the swish of Grogan's left swing passed over his head, he shot it.

Up and out that left leaped like a flash. An instant before it landed, Bud's bent knees straightened, his left shoulder snapped up and every muscle in his body tightened in that final, tremendous effort.

Crack!

The heavy body hung swaying for an instant, then crashed face down to the canvas. Frantic newspaper men pounded telegraph keys or spoke into telephone mouthpieces: "Flash—Terry, out on his feet, uncorks greatest left hook in ring to kayo Grogan in sixth!" They did not have to wait for the referee's count to know it was a knockout.

As Gilbertson finished the slow count and raised Bud's arm, Sammy and Jim caught him in their arms.

"It's the last punch wins—the last punch—" Bud was still muttering to himself as they half carried him down the stairs. In the dressing room they found Tim O'Rourke awaiting them, a grin on his broad, Irish face. And his words seemed to bring Bud to for the first time.

"Great work, Terry. You meet Jackson at the Polo grounds next fall. And unless I miss my guess, there'll be a new light heavy champ when the smoke of battle clears."

Price of a Drink

A Smashing Story of Front Line Battle!

Belter hurled another bomb at the advancing Germans.

TORTURING thirst drove Belter beyond the lines in a last desperate effort to get relief for his platoon—and then he found the German well was dry! An enthralling story of battle and heroic sacrifice in front lines by an author who served nearly three years in the Canadian army.

By H. F. CRUICKSHANK

Author of "Bomb 'Em Out," "Six-Guns and Sabres," etc.

"PLEASE pass over the consomme of willy. Thank you, garcon. Now a little of the—"

Crumph! O-o-o-o-o-.z-z-z-z-z, Cr-ash!

Sergeant Belter tossed a can of corned willy from him and ducked for the cover of some sheltering elephant iron. It was 5 A. M. and Belter was endeavoring to catch up on several lost meals. His buddy, First Class Private Cory Allard, grinned as he headed for cover at the sergeant's heels. Together they lay crouched, while overhead shrapnel thrashed wickedly.

The roar of two thousand guns reverberated hideously at Montfaucon Heights. But, the Yanks clung, grim-faced and determined, to their jumping off trenches. No barrage of Heinie's was going to turn them. But, Gawd! thought Belter. It'd sure be worth oodles of

francs if we could get to hell outa this and stop some place for breakfast.

"Y'ain't got such a thing as a roll of grilled beef-steer in your O. D.'s, Cory?" The query was put, while Belter sought to appease a gnawing appetite with slabs from a black plug of chewing. "No. No gravy, thanks. Just a little of the—thanks," as Cory handed over another meagre portion of willy. "And the merciful little bis-quee! Mon Dieu, garcon. But you are ze wizard, non?" chuckled the sergeant, as Allard tossed over a decrepit half of a questionable hardtack.

Such was the spirit of the West! A slice of greasy corned beef and a chip from a flinty hardtack was all the food Belter had tasted in thirty-six hours. Any person on a diet, who can loll in the luxury of a private library, may subsist for longer, on less. But Sergeant Belter knew no such privileges. His responsibilities were great. His platoon had come up through a veritable rain of flaming hell the night before and all through the grim shadowless dawn they had stood to while a frantic enemy had stormed them with every conceivable battle device. Men lay and choked lethal fumes of gas from wheezing lungs. With it came the foam which was the forerunner of death. These men had asked for water. Others had asked for food; and, like the mother whose situation borders on the hopeless, Sergeant Belter had soothed his men—his kids, as he often called them, with promises of food and water.

"Don't forget, you're men of the 79th," he encouraged. "Keep your spirits up, gang, your heads down, and hold both hands on your bellies. You an' us is gonna fork into them Heinies mighty pronto. Gonna breeze outa this little hell an' get us a breakfast."

THE men had grinned. They had placed their confidence in Belter as soon as he joined them, he having received his transfer from a hitch with the Canucks. Belter knew his No-man's land and he knew how to handle men. But, for all that, just now he was worried. The lack of rations didn't bother him nearly so much as the lack of water. The gang must have water! As his words framed that sentence he grinned and shrugged. *"Must have water!"* Might as well think of it in terms of champagne, he thought. Then Cory touched his arm. Allard was pointing to a fringe of the woods where, through the film of stagnant mist-wraiths a dull figure moved.

Belter's keen eyes seemed to pop forward. His lips seemed almost to vanish as they drew together in a thin line. Then they parted in a smile and he turned to Allard. His head nodded.

"That's us, Cory," he breathed. "That's a Heinie goin' to a well, for water. Over there is what's map location 33D—H9, an' it's the only well in the sector. Just watch us from now on, for here's where the gang gets its water supply."

Wars are built upon the foundation of conflict, that wretched element of the devil which sends two minds, two bodies to battle, one against the other. Without two opposing forces there is no element of conflict; and without conflict there is no war. Sergeant Belter turned this piece of philosophy over in his mind as he slipped a couple of Mills grenades in his blouse. Of course there was Heinie to be considered! He was in the war too! And, what was more, Heinie was guarding that one and only well as though it were more important than the portals of Berlin.

Two Maxim nests spewed an almost incessant stream of flaming lead across the path of that Argonne oasis. There was other water it is true; but water that floats the days old bloated shapes of mules and men is not to be considered.

Belter slipped over to his platoon officer who lay crouched in a hastily dug funk hole. Lieutenant House was about as good a head as the best of western officers.

"Thought we were due to go east, sir," jerked Belter as he wriggled up. "Wasn't there some talk of a general fracas at dawn?"

"That's just what there was, Belter," was the smiled reply. "But—" here the officer broke off as a hail of German gre-

nades smashed in close behind. "You know, Sergeant! Sometimes orders get all shot to hell. Latest thing in rules and orders is: 'Stand to, and wait for order by rocket.' A burst of green and gold means we go into 'em; and I hope to heaven it comes soon, for if I don't get a drink in the next few minutes I'm going to croak of—look out!" The lieutenants hands shot up to his ears as a fearful detonation smashed into the platoon area.

"FIRST AID! First aid!" Sergeant Belter picked himself up from the cover of a mound of stinking clay. Men were yelling for aid. God! But why did headquarters keep them dug in at this spot? Hours and hours of hellish waiting; standing to like a pack of jungle beasts; waiting with drying tongues for the taste of an enemy's blood. It was nauseating. The swift attack! The ring of cold steel against the cold naked steel of Heinie would have been welcome. The thrash of an Allied barrage and the scream of flying grenades. God! That was one of the spices, the only, few spices, in the life of the front line scrapper; but the weary, anxious wait, while frenzied demons wreaked a fearful thundering spite, was too damnable.

Belter rushed to the side of a man who had tottered and fallen. His hand reached up behind the other's neck and he raised the lolling head.

"Hold it calm, buddy," he urged, as he wiped a fleck of bloody froth from the private's drooling lips. "It won't seem so damn bad, ol' timer, if you can hang onto yourself for just a little while. Ease up now an' don't kick or squirm, for after the first little while things gets easier." Belter shuddered as he uttered those last few words. "Easier!" Great God, of course they got easier, when the cold clutching hand of death gripped at the heart of the sufferer, squeezing from it the last thick drops of blood.

"Water—jus'—one lil drink—Sarge!" A groan almost escaped Belter. He had hoped that the kid would pass out without a request for water. Hell! A cigarette, the loan of money, anything just then but a request for water.

The sergeant's hand slipped carefully to his canteen. He shook it. It responded with a feeble clucking, lapping sound. In the past ten hours Belter had scarcely wet his own lips, the water from his canteen going to the eager, burning throats of men whose last pitiful efforts had been requests for water. Belter had hoped to save that last flutter in the canteen against the time when he could no longer go without. He might be wounded! That drop of water might yet be the means of saving the platoon.

"Supposing the looey went under in attack. Supposing there was nobody left in command but me!" The thoughts forced themselves upon the sergeant as the trembling lips of his wounded buddy continued to blabber for a drink.

Then an oath slipped from the sergeant's tightly drawn lips. "Hell!" he jerked. "He's only a kid. He'll pass out a whole lot easier if I give it to him."

FLUTTERING fingers reached eagerly for the sides of the canteen as Belter raised it to the kid's lips. There was a gurgle, an ominous note of warning in the splutter which followed the draining of that water can. Belter tossed the thing aside. With both arms he raised the head up towards him and smiled down into those glassy eyes which did their utmost to smile the youngster's gratitude. In a flash Belter had whipped a pad of lint from a field dressing, allowing the boys neck to loll in the crook of one arm. He dabbed at the red-foamed lips, carefully lest he should give any pain to the figure which shuddered against his big frame. Then the boy quivered and his legs stiffened. For a second or so there was a faint fluttering of the eyelids and then Belter smiled and gently lowered the kid to the clay. With quick, careful movements he removed the boy's personal effects and identification. Belter knew the kid's people down on the Mississippi—Iowa farm

ers in pretty good circumstances. This was their only child and they'd miss him.

As a sizzling flight of whizbangs split out in front Belter got to his feet and turned. Nearby Allard was struggling with a big bayonetman who was raving for water. The man's shoulder was a ghastly sight and one arm hung limp, save for its thrashing in the blood which pumped out of a tortured body. This man was yelling for water and it was then that Belter clinched his fists. Up at Ypres in the early days of '15 he had helped stem the tide, together with a handful of never-die Canucks; the Yankee sergeant had stood and fought, even though gassed. There was no water then! Rations were out of the question and now after two years he was back in a like situation; only this was some different. Out ahead was water. Down in the hidden depths of Heinie's strong fortifications there was sure to be food. Belter picked up his empty canteen and chuckled. There was a determined light agleam in his blue-gray eyes. He turned and snatched off the canteens of a half-dozen forms and turned toward the officer's funk hole.

Out to the right flank a fearful hurricane of shells stormed at the Yankee lines. Belter's officer got to his feet as the sergeant drew near.

"That's one of the reasons we can't move, Sergeant," he murmured. "Until they cut through on the flanks its little use us worrying about a move. Our little column would last out as long as a June frost in— Why great Caesar! Why all that hardware on your belt?" The officer pointed to the half dozen canteens.

Belter grinned as his firm teeth bit deeply into the inevitable black plug.

"GONNA breeze over to Berlin an' get us some Eau-de-Cologne, lootenant," he jerked. "There's a well out in front, an' if these boys don't get a shot of water into them, you may as well just wave a white handkerchief an' flag a Heinie patrol to come over an' pick us up. These canteens is for water, sir. I'm goin' across to the fringe an' do my damnedest to—"

Karr-arrumph! Whoo-uff— Crash! Flying fragments whirred back from the smash of a couple of German 77's. Again a man yelled. Again came the cry for water. Belter looked down at his officer, from his position on a battered section of fire step. Their eyes exchanged meaning glances and a hand reached up to seize the big palm of Belter.

"Good idea," jerked the officer. "But, I can't allow it. Hell, man! You'd never make it. You're the most valuable non-com in the brigade, Belter."

There was a quick wrench as Belter tore his hand free. His toes dug into the clay wall and he eased his big frame up gently over the top.

"If I get hit, lootenant, you don't have to croak to brigade the how come of this trip. 'Killed in action' is plenty good enough for all general purposes. Au revoir, sir, an' put a little light in the window after you've locked up, so's daddy can find his way—" Gr-r-r. At-tat-tat-tat-tac-a-tac-a-tac-a-tac-a-tac! A vicious crackle from Maxims cut into Belter's remarks. His big frame flattened into the grassy clay and he snaked forward to the fold of a skeleton copse.

"Phew!" Belter hissed the exclamation as he replaced his steel hat which had been cut from his head by a Maxim bullet. "Now we're here, Belter, what the hell? Just tell us, what the hell?"

Fifty yards farther on! But such space! Two concrete emplacements flanked the precious water supply. To Belter, the only way out was to outflank the right gun nest with his Mills and come in with a flying rear action on the northern post. It sounded simple enough, too. But Belter chuckled at the irony of the thought suggestion. He heaved a sigh of relief that there was no immediate danger from contact with a German patrol of bayonetmen and bombers. Anticipating attack on a large scale Heinie's men were all drawn to the front line, or the safety of the deep shelters at supports. Save for the menacing gun nests and the persistent thrash of shell fire there was no other obstruction in that ghastly waste of No-man's land.

IT IS often not so bad when at a fellow's side is a buddy, some rip tearing, long headed doughboy whose company helps stem the tide of hideous thought matter which persists in storming the mind when one is alone—in such hopeless situation. Belter felt his frame shudder as the "whish, soo-whissh, wissh" of low splitting bullets cut the gray tops above his head.

His set lips emitted a few bars of inaudible song and he was tempted to chuckle as the whine of a long range "heavy" mocked his effort at cheerfulness. Then came the devilish crash of a salvo of 75's.

Karr-ack! Karr-ack! Crash! Crash—The smashing quick-fire bursts of those French guns was as a tonic to Belter. Some Yankee gunners, back a piece, were yanking lanyards with telling effect, for the whole of No-man's land seemed to awaken from a sluggish state of lethargy to a seething, swirling, erupting hell. A preliminary, registering barrage! Maybe, thought Belter, but mighty damned useful. He got to his knees, flattened, raised again, and flung himself forward. In his blouse there rubbed together the cold, hard shapes of two Mills bombs. In his right hand, held by determined grip, was a long-barreled Colt forty-five. In his heart was the flaming desire to cut a way through to that precious, alluring well, and . . . in the cover of that smoking, flaming strafe of the 75's he shot forward through a withering hail of searching Maxim lead.

A German gunner shifted his traverse as, through a rift in the coiling smoke, he caught a glimpse of the scurrying Yankee sergeant. Something plucked at Belter's equipment and he flopped at full length to a shell-hole of green-covered water.

Cursing the filthy ooze from his lips, he pulled himself out of the clinging trap. God! But that 75 strafe was getting worse and worse. As Belter ducked along he fairly tasted the hot breath of those flaming shells. Right in his path too! "Damned artillery," he hissed. "Cussed bunch of lousy doughheads! Want 'em bad, an' . . . cripes!" Then Belter gasped in further despair, for the gunfire was centered directly on the well area.

When the devil allies himself with fate, there is bound to arise the most damnable complications. Thus Sergeant Belter thought, as he lay hunched in the lee of a dripping sap, while overhead—barely clearing his retreat, screamed the flights of smashing H. E.; and shrapnel. Had it been Heinie's stuff, he could have stood the shock, but here was his own artillery robbing him of a chance to rustle some water for his isolated buddies.

"Ain't no breaks in this cock-eyed fracas," he muttered. "I might have made it if them lousy swozant-kanz hounds had only laid off for a while longer. Now it looks like the jig's up. I'm forty miles up a limburger tree, too, for never in God's world can I make the run back, not since I got Heinie stirred up." And . . . there seemed a great truth in Belter's statement. He had not known that at this hour each day the American command shelled the well area in an effort to cut off the German water supply, and also to inflict as many casualties as possible. Belter had heard of such games before. It was the old trick of war: "Catch 'em reg'lar, where it hurts 'em worst. Up at Armentieres, in the old days, Jerry had pulled the same streaks. Waiting till he knew some cook's helpers would be bound to draw water, an' then shell hell outa the well!"

THE sergeant's head ventured up over the top, and his eyes swept the well sector. Spouts of flame and sky-riding debris marked the exact location of bursts. But . . . Belter's breath commenced to come in quick gasps. The bulk of the shell-fire was falling a point to the north of the well. It might be that . . . but Hell! He thrust the thought from him. Of course the gunners would shift range. What was the use of palying out a supply of ammunition on any set area? This was a daily strafe! A map-location shoot, which meant that a few hundreds of

rounds must be expended in an effort to sooner or later cut Jerry from his water supply. Headquarters seemed not particular just when they attained the desired result. The French, whom they relieved, had been plastering the sector for months. A division of British had also spent a few thousand rounds here. Soon the infantry would go across—madly yelling doughboys, whose bayonets the Boche had already tasted, and then . . . well, wouldn't the well just naturally fall into Allied hands? Meanwhile, the practice was good for the Yankee gunners. They were comparatively new to the 75's. This would give them a lot of useful work in concentrated fire. Help bring 'em up to the finest pitch of good gunnery, which . . .

"Tcha!" Sergeant Belter spat contemptuously. His fists clenched as he shrugged—a gesture of resignation. He raised his head and once more glimpsed the thrash of the strafe. It was a devilish chance to take. But . . . by Cristopher; In the last twenty rounds a shell had not hit in any closer than forty feet of the well. The barrage was between the well and the German machine gunners, and . . .

Blood trickled from a cut in the sergeant's lower lip as his teeth sank in. He gave a hitch to his belt and thumbled, nervously, the hammer of his Colt. Should he go? It seemed a reckless, madbrained venture. It would take but one shell, the shifting of a point or two in direction, the falling short of but one 75, and his war days would be over. But . . . back at the Yankee lines . . . good God! Hadn't he heard them, those wounded buddies spluttering requests for water?

For a moment he paused, he swayed as though on the verge of attempting a great leap, his narrowed eyes focused directly on the splatter of shell-fragments. Undecided, he poised thus, seeming to count each salvo, each flaming, individual burst.

Then he started.

"Not a short in the bunch," he muttered. "Not a waver in about a hundred an' ten rounds. The odds are with me an' I'm gonna . . ." Just then there was a murderous close-in growl and Belter groaned as a couple of shells crashed in almost at the base of the well boxing.

"Damned rotten bunch of coo-cooed sidewinders," he snarled. "Right when I was all set to go across, the damn popgun bozos has started to short-fuse." He raised his big fists aloft and shook them, as his lips emitted a volley of almost sobbed imprecations.

ALL about him the quaking of earth became the more tremulous with the added smash of battle. Thousands of guns now rumbled in one long interrupted roll. Belter looked about him, and it seemed as though he'd fallen into a veritable maw of hell. Something tripped in his big virile mind, a delicate trip wire which called him to action. The spirit of glorious victory surged through his strong flowing blood now. No matter which way he turned, there faced him the mad snarl of a plundering war pack. He was enveloped in the smoke from a host of thundering guns which seemed determined to tear the Argonne sector from the central body of earth.

"One way's as good as another now," he told himself. "An', if I'm gonna pass out, I reckon I may as well fade tryin' to do somethin' else besides stick here shiverin' an' suckin' my thumbs."

With this thought framed into action, Belter leaped forward. Then, with head ducked low, canteens jangling empty at his thighs, he rushed in a mad, headlong effort for the well. With trembling fingers he slipped the canteens from his belt and darted for the windlass which hung above the mouth of the well. He seized the handle, and commenced to win, then . . . his lips parted and he gave vent to a groan of despair. There was no pail attached to the well rope! The German was thorough! He seemed to draw his war schemes with a pencil of the devil's designing.

Though Belter gave vent to his feelings with cursing, he was in no way a whiner. A gruntled chuckle escaped him as he

reflected on the strategy of the Boche. "Could just about have expected this," he mused. "He would have been a locoed dumb-bell to have left that pail behind. Strange, though, I never thought of that before I started out. Now, I gotta do some swift, tall thinking." But the vicious whine of a sniper's bullet made clear thinking impossible for the moment. In the fetid atmosphere, where at every second, on every foot of ground, stalked death, Sergeant Belter lay in cover waiting, watching through smarting eyelids for a movement of humanity to his left front.

Like a sluggish snake Belter slithered forward out of reach of the hailing shrapnel. Time and again he seemed to collapse utterly as the slash of Maxim bullets cut at his equipment. But always, his eyes searched the copses ahead.

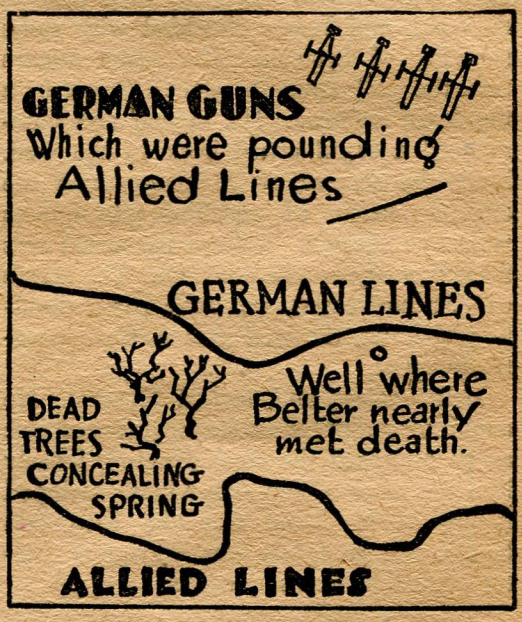
In the haven of a comparatively dry shell-hole he hunched back, removing the tell-tale shape of his helmet. With dried tongue he sought to ease the torture in his cracked lips and from time to time his hands fumbled with the neckband of his blouse. A strong morning sun had parted the stagnant mists and bore down on Belter with penetrating glare. He resorted to the black plug, but spat the chew from his mouth with a gasp that was dry and alien.

"Wish to Gawd somethin' would happen," he muttered. "Them Jerries can't go on forever without water. Soon one of them krauts is gonna breeze over with a pail, and then . . ."

There was a movement over to the left. The mere bobbing of a scuttle-shaped helmet. It was an effort which caused Belter to gag, but his exclamation jerked out into the now quieting morning. "Mebbe that bozo's the lad I'm expectin'. There's smoke over there; must be a cook kitchen."

A PAIR of broad shoulders raised above the trench, then Belter's eyes popped, for he looked down at the welcome shape of a bucket. His big frame stirred, and again he had commenced to snake along. This time he headed for a low fringe of willows through which, he figured, the German must crawl.

With breathless excitement he clung, a flat, immobile shape, in the meager cover, while towards him, in short, low rushes, sped the enemy water detail. A few yards now separated them and madly Belter struggled to force the dry choking sensation from his throat. He felt he could no longer hold against the strangling force which was the united power of thirst and tense excitement. His lungs were at burst point and the skin on his cheek bones seemed suddenly to shrivel



This map shows where Belter made his fight for water.

and crack. The snapping of a dry windfall ahead pulled him together and he wheezed a long, dry breath of fetid air through his tortured lungs. Not more than twenty feet away, now snaking along with great caution, was the menacing shape of the big Prussian.

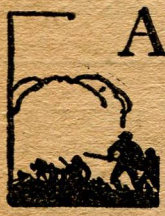
Yards contracted to feet. Ten feet! The German had turned and raised to his hands and knees. Belter watched him closely. Then the Prussian commenced to move to the south and Belter leaped.

A swift struggle ensued, grim, silent; for it was fatal to shoot. Out in the

heartless Argonne wastes, spent almost from lack of food and water, the Yankee pitted his might against a superior physical force. But the will of the Westerner, the call of his thirsting buddies, served Belter well. From an inner source came the response with a reserve that was crushing to the Prussian.

Belter jerked free from an arm lock, and struck upward, a savage left uppercut that rocked back the big, broad head of the other. The German lunged, but Belter struck again, this time it was the barrel of his Colt which cut upward and across the massive jaw. With a gurgling gasp the German slumped, then pitched forward, and Belter chuckled with some showing of hysteria. His eager fingers tore the pail from its place of rest in a tangle of willows. He turned and commenced a rapid crawl back to the well. Now the scream of whizbangs and the sinister swish of machine gun bullets went by unheeded. Belter's narrowed eyes ranged solely on the well box. The strafe of 75's had eased, and save for a desultory shelling, the well area was comparatively quiet.

Belter raised and ducked forward. He could not suppress an exclamation of glee as he glimpsed the rope dangling loosely into the maw of the water-hole. Gripped firmly in his hand was the hard pail handle and so tightly was it gripped, Belter's knuckles showed white.



A FEW quick turns and the dangling rope end came to the surface. Its frayed ends bobbing and swaying as is the custom of well ropes. For a second Belter's eyes stared widely at the dancing thing. Then he shrugged and made a hitch about the pail handle. A quick downward flip and the rope paid out. Belter's clouded face once more brightened. The windlass whirred, as the rope spun down! Ten, twenty, thirty . . . forty feet, and still the pail plummeted in its headlong plunge. Fifty . . . Belter's eyelids flickered and he hung poised above the gaping mouth of the hole. Sixty! There was an eerie hollow ring of striking metal. Belter gulped as he watched the rope jerk up.

"Great God!" was his parched exclamation. "Dry! My . . ." he broke off and slumped to the ground. Foiled! Again the enemy had won in the game of strategy. Belter flung an arm up over his eyes and groaned. The well, after all, was only a decoy, a clever ruse to draw the Allied fire, masking the true location of Heinie's coveted water supply.

The sergeant raised to a sitting posture and cast a weary glance about the hazy shell-wracked wastes. Not a breath of pure air, it seemed. Nothing save the interminable reek of stagnation and death and the incessant roll of drum fire on the flanks.

Water! His whole soul now craved water and he knew in his heart that somewhere in the vicinity was a closely guarded, or well concealed water supply. "Them Jerries don't just breeze around in the open, with water buckets, for effect. No, Belter, there's water somewheres, but . . . cripes!" And the big Yankee slapped the dried clay with the palm of a hand. So was there water in the Atlantic ocean! There seemed no way out! Belter set his mind to scheming a way back to his lines, and the thoughts of this stung him. Back to his buddies. Hell! Empty handed, the thought was repulsive and, as he stirred, the hollow, useless canteens at his belt jangled in mockery.

Then to an almost dormant mind, a mind from which the last grain of reason has been harvested by fate, there flashed a light. Belter jerked to his feet. His brows elevated and his clenched hands beat a tatoo against his thighs. The Prussian water man! God! That man might not be entirely out; it was a fair gamble that he had only taken a haymaker and would possibly return to consciousness. The sergeant dreaded to think too deeply on the subject. It held for him an ominous suggestion, worse than any gamble he had previously known. But again the keen spirit of the West; the never-die soul of the Yankee scrapper, leapt to the

surface and with heart plunging rebelliously Belter ducked along, back to where lay the fallen German.

THE noon sun beat down with greater force and burned into Belter's spine with devilish heat. But the big sergeant paid little heed to its spiteful glare, or, in fact to any extraneous matter. At his feet lay the groaning figure of the Prussian. The man was stirring and Belter, Colt at the ready, waited for the other's return to a state of consciousness. It came! A frightened stare, with shattered mouth agape. The Prussian sat up, and his great arms stole skywards.

From the man's belt the Yankee snatched a Luger which was flung aside. Then Belter spoke low, in English. There was no response save the negative shake of a huge head.

"Vasser." Belter's knowledge of German was limited, in fact he knew little more. But he pointed to the pail and again called *"vasser!"* It had the desired effect. The big man grinned horribly, and pointed to a long fringe of skeleton trees. Belter brightened, for he could see that the topography of the copse lent itself to the possibilities of a spring. But how to get there; how best to reach that oasis! It was the most baffling situation of the day.

"Peel off your coat, Jerry," he barked. "Hustle," he snapped, and made the necessary sign for the removal of the other's coat. He whipped a rifle cord from his pocket and bound the Prussian securely. There was a struggle, but Belter soon gained complete mastery and with a few deft hitches he tossed the trussed form from him.

There was no cutting of Maxim bullets as Belter sped along. But as he neared the fringe the long drawn wail of an American heavy sent him flat to the clay. The artillery had commenced to register, with shells that rocked the entire era, spouting tons of clay and rocks skywards from the very vitals of earth.

A Prussian at the spring waved, as Belter's head and shoulders raised once more. The Yank started back in alarm, then pulled himself together and waved back. He watched the other's movements closely. The Prussian seemed in no hurry and was seated.

Belter felt a shiver ripple through his frame and his hand closed over the grip of the Colt. That Jerry must be removed! At the next salvo of American shells he'd draw down, though he hated to snipe in cold blood.

It came, that fearful, monstrous roar, like the death howl of some prehistoric sky-beast. A deafening crash, screaming, flying fragments, then the deathly silence which follows.

Belter rushed forward, his teeth set against the sight which he knew would present itself at the water source. God! But the war was surely cut from a devil's pattern. A moment before the big Prussian had waved a friendly salutation as he sat back to enjoy a smoke. Now Belter's eyes traced some of the pieces which had previously made up the entire physique of a splendid specimen of manhood. Some of the pieces were missing, and Belter shuddered.

His trembling hands flung aside the pail, and he flattened at the cool water's edge. He drank, oblivious to the menacing crash of H. E. Water was all that mattered to him. It was cool and he longed to sink his blistered face beneath its soothing depths.

CANTEENS were filled, then Belter drank again. His cheek was stuffed with a welcomed wad of tobacco, then he turned his head for the Yankee lines. Following the cover of the skeleton forest, he moved with great caution, lest he fall foul of a trap. On . . . on . . . out of the copse, then . . . God! He stopped in his tracks, for coming towards him was a remnant of a Prussian machine gun crew. They were withdrawing. The American artillery had done for their guns and the balance of the crew. Quick as a flash Belter jerked out his Colt. There was no way out now but to fight. The odds were great in the enemy favor,

for each man gripped a wicked Luger. But Belter had his Colt; he had drank of the spring water. His canteens were filled and he *must* get through to his buddies. There was the greater urge! His pals, buddies, were suffering. They must be almost spent by this! With teeth set in grim determination, he twirled the cylinder of his gun and stood to.

Cr-ack! Cr-ack! Thupp! Th——upp! The 45 leaped in the sergeant's hand, and its muzzle spewed a streak of flame. A Prussian toppled, then pitched forward to his face. Came an answering volley from the Lugers, and Belter's left hand jumped and spouted blood. Too many of them for pistol shooting now—hastily he fumbled in the pocket of his own blouse, got out a bomb, pulled the pin with his teeth and hurled it at the approaching group of Germans. A shrill br-rr-ramp! Three of them toppled over. The others continued to charge!

WHOOSH! Thupp! God! Belter's left arm, the already wounded limb, splintered at the elbow, and the big Yankee tottered. Then he shook himself and yelled a curse. Defiantly it rang, and, mustering his last reserve of strength and will, he jerked up his Colt and fired. Two rounds! Then the hammer clicked feebly. There came a heavy thrashing in a small patch of undergrowth. Belter raised, and instinctively gripped hard the Colt. A figure lunged to view and the sergeant hurled himself to the attack. His knee struck upwards, there was a swift smashing blow from the barrel of a Luger, but Belter sidestepped enough to dodge its full force. The Luger crashed onto his left shoulder. With a howl of rage and pain, the sergeant swung up. The terrific impact shot him back. The Jerry tottered back. Belter recovered and rushed; flinging aside his gun. Then his fist crashed up a savage hook. There was a cracking of bone and Belter looked down on the limp form of his opponent and from the scarcely breathing shape to his bruised, bleeding knuckles; then to the terrible shape which was his left arm and hand.

He half emptied a canteen before he could muster strength enough to continue towards his lines; and continue he must! After what he had come through he must complete his mission.

It was Cory Allard, who, on sentry back at the American lines, first spotted the swinging canteens on the staggering form. It was Allard who placed a restraining hand on the arm of a Yankee sniper whose Springfield was lining on the approaching sergeant. Belter was still in the Prussian coat and it was a mercy that his buddy recognized him by the canteens.

Came a sinister whine. A crash! Allard saw his gallant buddy pitch forward to his face. But Belter struggled to his feet. Both arms now hung limp and he shuffled along, reeling from side to side. Maxims at his back now opened up with staccato rattle and thumped close in. Fifty feet more! Cory leapt, and caught the tottering form in his arms.

BELTER raised himself to look up into the face of his officer. He grinned and opened his lips to receive a cigarette. Both arms lay strapped up neatly in bandages, about him clustered a score of doughboys.

"So, you came back?" called the lieutenant. "Great Caesar, Belter, you must have gone through hell. You just got back in time last night. The gang here was—"

"Last night? Good Gawd, then this is tomorrow—the 26th?" The officer nodded and puffed a coil of smoke from his lips.

"Yes, sir, and its now about 5:10. At 5:30 you'll hear our guns blow the Argonne forests to hell and you'll see the 79th go forward to the capture of Montfaucon. Thanks to you, Sargeant, we'll be able to give 'em hell. Now here comes your transportation back to hospital."

The officer reached a hand to his pocket and drew out a roll of francs which he tucked into Belter's blouse.

"Take this roll and wet up the medal you'll get. Medals, I should say, for there's a French outfit back of us who know all about your gallant work. Go in and drink the health of the old gang."

The Running Iron

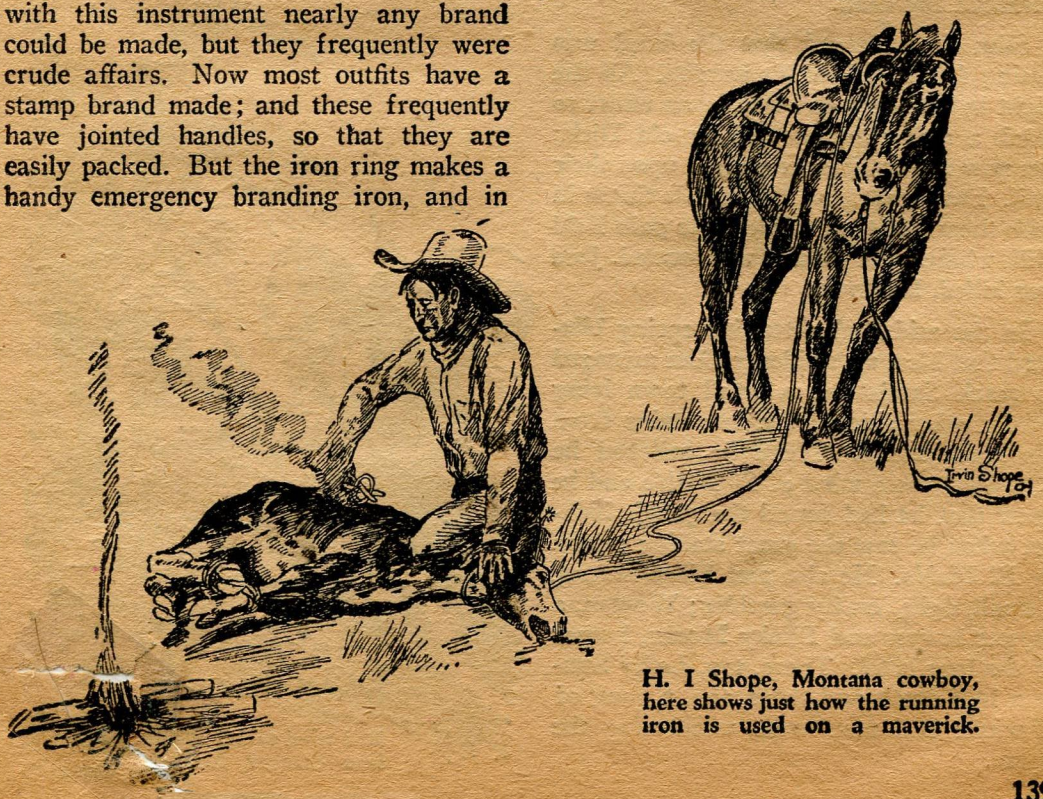
UNDER the fork of almost any saddle in the old days could be seen a heavy iron ring, tied by the saddle strings —and under the fork of many an old timer's saddle today it still may be seen.

It is the "running iron"—an emergency branding iron, in the form of a ring about four inches in diameter, hammered to a dull edge on the outer rim. In early days, when cattle ran over vast areas of land, the range riders needed such an emergency branding iron to brand calves that were frequently missed in the roundup. They used it to brand any wild cattle that might not have been rounded up.

In those days, most brands were applied with an iron rod with a hook on the end—with this instrument nearly any brand could be made, but they frequently were crude affairs. Now most outfits have a stamp brand made; and these frequently have jointed handles, so that they are easily packed. But the iron ring makes a handy emergency branding iron, and in fact, so handy is it that it was soon adopted by cattle rustlers who used it to "blot brands." Many old timers still use it for legitimate purposes since it is so easy to carry.

When used, it is gripped with two sticks, held pincer-wise, as in the illustration. It can be easily heated and then applied to the calf's flank, as in the large illustration.

Many states have passed laws against carrying such a "running iron" because they are recognized as the tool of the rustler. In other parts of the country, however, they may still be seen in use when necessity arises on the part of the puncher out on the range.



H. I Shope, Montana cowboy, here shows just how the running iron is used on a maverick.

Bandits of Bald

GLEAMING knives, barking guns, hard riding and thrilling surprises mark the last installment of this gripping serial of the wild Niobrara range. A synopsis enables the new reader to read completely this novel.

SLIM MARTINDALE halted his horse as he was riding into the foothills near the Double O ranch on the Niobrara range one bright April day. Coming up the trail ahead he saw a queer cavalcade, and when it approached he saw that it was composed of old Dick Marsden, his daughter Grace, Red Freeman, a mining engineer, and Jose, a Mex muleteer. The four showed evidences of battle and lack of sleep and even as Slim looked, big Red Freeman threw his rifle to his shoulder and fired at a lurking Mexican across a gorge. The Mexican fell dead.

Slim then learned that the band was fleeing from *El Diablo's* bandits. All the night before they had fled in an effort to reach a rich claim located by old Dick; but now the bandits were close upon their trail. Daredevil Slim Martindale threw in with them and they managed to gain Bald Hill, where Dick's claim was located. Jose was killed, however.

In the midst of a terrible spring blizzard that blew up suddenly Slim managed to reach Sandstone, a small town lying on the other side of the mountains from his home ranch. There he believed he would get some wind of *El Diablo* and he knew that he had found the gang's hideout when he saw the great stallion ridden by *El Diablo*. He also met Silky Barnes, a small, agile, crafty gambler; Wooten, a shyster lawyer and Blinky Moran, keeper of the lone hotel. There, too, Lefty Shuman held forth and there, too, a gang of Mexican bad men were weathering the storm.

Slim overheard the men plan to cut off a group of miners who were on their way to aid Dick Marsden. Before the gang set off he picked a quarrel with Lefty Shuman and killed him, then managed to make his escape before a crafty Indian scout could locate him. He followed the men, whom *El Diablo* now was leading. Slim couldn't figure where the bandit leader had come from but he was trying hard to figure out a way to reach the miners and help them pass the bandits. He effected this by killing the Indian scout and changing clothing with him, thus passing the bandits and joining up with Ute Charley Dole, an old scout, and the rest

Red tried to aid Slim but the Mexican charged, his knife gleaming.

Hill

By G. W. Barrington

Author of "Outlaw of Badger Hollow," "Trailin' Trouble," etc.

Slim eluded the Mexican and dashed toward the flaming tent.

of the men who were led by Tim Hennessey, a scrapping Irishman.

They staged a fierce fight and managed to drive *El Diablo* and his bandits back but the wily bandit leader, realizing the need for speed, cut back and managed to gain Dick Marsden's camp on Old Baldy. There, luring Red Marsden away, he walked into the old prospector's camp.

Grace Marsden, realizing that Red Freeman had doubtless been killed and that *El Diablo* now would force her father into giving up his claim, fainted.

Old Dick Marsden made a valiant dash for his rifle but *El Diablo's* Mexican cutthroat who accompanied him, caught the old man and dragged him away.

CONTEMPT and insolence in his every movement, the bandit chieftain crossed to the fire and sat down. Picking up the big-bellied coffeepot, he placed it on the flame, then crossed his trim legs and watched abstractedly as the fire leaped to a cheerful blaze. He turned his masked head casually as the tall Mexican wrenched away the rifle tottering old Dick Marsden had managed to reach. A blow from the bandit's fist sent the crippled old miner reeling back into the tent, where he fell helplessly, cursing his own weakness.

The Mexican lashed him to the tent pole with a rope cut from the tent. Then he picked up the bucket of water Cliff Freeman had set inside, and splashed it over the unconscious girl. He grinned crookedly as she revived under the chill splash, and struggled to a sitting posture, brushing drenched wisps of amber hair from her eyes, and gazing at her captors out of big, blue, bewildered eyes as her

semi-dormant faculties slowly began functioning.

"Cheer up, Hon." Old Dick managed to mumble, unconvincingly. "These here damn sneakin', unregenerate skunks, can't—"

The old miner's thin voice subsided, but his clear old steel-gray eyes glared in impotent rage when the Yaqui bent over and slapped him brutally.

"*El Diablo* is present, and when *El Diablo* is present, despised gringoes should keep a civil tongue," the Mexican grated, glowering menacingly down at the prisoner.

His tanned face showing an angry flush where the cruel blow had landed, and with a little trickle of blood dribbling from his lip, old Dick swallowed his rage and ignored his tormentor to address the masked outlaw by the fire. "Waal, say it, Greaser," he said, slowly. "If you want to murder me, go ahead and git it over with. Otherwise, I'm telling you now that when jedgment day comes for your damn outfit, I'm gonna be aroun' somewheres in the neighborhood and try to make it plumb discommoding for you!"

The Yaqui snarled and drew back his hand for another blow, but abstained when the chief interposed. "Never mind, Juan," he ordered, with a bored air, then added with a shrug of his slender shoulders. "What the Senor Marsden may say ees vera unimportant. What Senor may do, ees quite, the op-po-site. When the Senor ees tired of foolish cursing, and ees ready to talk sensibly, then we will talk. Look within, Juan, for the pro-vee-sion. I would eat while the Senor ees consider the seet-u-a-tion."

A flush of hot rage driving the pallor of fear from her horror-strained face, the girl had sprung up when she saw her father struck. As the burly peon passed inside the tent to forage for stores, she leaped for the rifle he had tossed aside, carelessly. Before her hands had more than touched the stock of the weapon, *El Diablo* had leaped like a catamount, to jerk the rifle away and pinion her arms behind her in a steel-like grip.

"My Juan has grown careless," the level, mocking voice sounded behind her as she felt herself being propelled toward a scrub cedar on the opposite side of the fire. Fairly trembling at the reproof, mild as it was, Juan slashed off another guy rope and bound her wrists behind her, then lashed her fast to the tree, drawing the bonds mercilessly tight.

"Ah, that ees better—much better," *El Diablo* commended, resuming his former relaxed posture by the fire. He accepted the victuals Juan brought, tossing his menial a few cold biscuits and a slab of pork as one would a dog. "Ah," he exulted, after tilting back the lid of the pot to examine its contents. "The good café was already make an' ees now warm.

"While I refresh, we will deescuss beezness."

He poured coffee for himself, then daintily accepted sugar and condensed milk brought by Juan. At a nod from his chief, the peon poured himself a cup of coffee, and retired a few paces to sit cross-legged and gorge noisily.

THE first shock of the bandit's unexpected appearance having passed, the girl steeled her nerves for the ordeal she sensed was coming. Sturdy old Dick grasped an opportunity to smile reassuringly—a wan, unconvincing effort—then clamped his lean jaws tightly as a signal for her not to talk.

El Diablo's gnomelike profile was presented to her, as he sipped coffee daintily through a slit in his mask, occasionally breaking off a morsel of bread and meat, passing it under the mask to his mouth. All eyes now, the girl took quick note when she glimpsed beneath the silken shield a long, slim, moustache-end which hung straight downward in a glossy, ebon line. Taking instant notice of her interest, he turned his back to rearrange the mask.

The bandit leader ate sparingly, and fashioned a cigaret to accompany his second cup of coffee.

Down in the gorge, the firing recommenced, then lulled, then broke out with

renewed intensity. Stopping his busy grinding, Juan rose and started to investigate, but reseated himself and commenced wolfing food again, when *El Diablo* said, indifferently: "Eet ees nothing, Juan. They come no nearer. They nevaire weel come nearer.

"And now to beez-ness."

He drew off a fur-lined guantlet, and reached beneath his coat, withdrawing a folded paper. Again he appeared to feel the girl's intensive gaze, and drew on the glove with some haste—but not before she had noticed the magnificent diamond that blazed on the first finger of his left hand. It was a beautiful, clear stone, set in a heavy, chased band — a bauble she knew she would be able to recognize instantly, anywhere.

El Diablo rose and extended the paper to Marsden, then produced a fountain pen and uncapped it. "The Senor will sign there," he purred, smoothly, indicating a dotted line at the foot of the page.

"Like Hell the Sey-nur will," Marsden declined defiantly, glowering at the offending document. "I ain't got my specs on, but I can ketch a word here and there. That there's a deed to this here claim.

"Huh! Awready got her acknowledged by a notary, eh? Feller name of Wooten! Witnessed too! Grantee's name to be filled in later, I reckon."

"Senor Marsden has good eyes for one of his years," the outlaw commented, suavely, "and now, the Senor will sign—here." There was a note of ominous finality in the cold, level voice, and the gesture with which he extended the pen again was a threat in itself.

"You can go straight to Hell," old Dick Marsden blazed, wrathfully. "You got me helpless, of course, but I ain't scared none! You're on top o' the world right now, Greaser; but you'll pay for this!"

"I have said we weel dees-cuss. So we weel—for a time. Eef the so good Senor weel pardon, I shall return shortly.

"Meanwhile—sign."

THE firing down the gorge had grown louder, more sustained. More idle curiosity than uneasiness in his air, the outlaw strode to the edge of the cliff and gazed downward for a time. He returned shortly with the leisurely air of one who has been out for a stroll.

"Go below, Juan," he ordered. "Tell my brave *caballeros* that I but wait a few leetle minutes until the Senor Marsden has signed. Then I come to them."

"Huh!" Marsden snorted. "If they wait until I put ink on that there stinkin' paper, they'll be down there after their lousy carcasses has rotted and their—"

"The Senor ees—what you call eet—irritable?" the outlaw interrupted. "Eet appears Juan was een-con-seed-erate. I fear that Senor Marsden has lost his temper because he ees much cold."

Taking a skillet from its nail on the tentpole, the outlaw filled it with glowing coals from the fire and set it between Marsden's feet. "When the Senor has grown warm and good-natured, perhaps he weel sign more weel-ingly." He returned to the fire and sat down, nursing one knee in his gloved hands and paying no attention to the girl's screamed protests.

While his daughter struggled in her bonds and shrilled out hysterical appeals, grim-faced Marsden withstood the ordeal for a time. With his back turned, the outlaw noted the pungent odor of scorched leather, caught the pent breathing, the tooth-grating, the convulsive twisting of the old miners lean body under torture.

"Listen, Greaser," Marsden grated, finally, moved by the girl's hysterical appeals. "If I was here alone, I'd see you in Hell, 'fore I'd sign!

"As things is though, I ain't got much choice, I reckon! I just nachully can't up an' die, leavin' my gal in your hands! Now here's my offer—the only one I'm gonna make! If you'll agree to leave Gracie go down the gorge to our friends, I'll sign!"

"But surely—and why not?" the outlaw agreed, readily, pulling the glowing coals back a little way and extending the pen again.

His bonds slackened sufficiently to allow him to use his hands, sweating old Dick scrawled his signature, then threw

down the pen. Still in awful torture from his scorched boots, sweat rivuleted down the old miner's rugged forehead, and he leaned back against the tentpole, breathing spasmodically. When the outlaw commenced retying him, the girl protested.

"Loosen him, please," she pleaded. "He has signed."

"He has sign—and for that he was a fool," *El Diablo* commented, cooly, as he drew the bonds tighter. "Now that thees document is execute, I have no further use for heem."

"You wouldn't kill him now that he has done what you wished," she faltered, sagging weakly in her bonds at the horrible thought.

"But the so beautiful Senorita does me the big een-justeece, to think that *El Diablo*, the so great bandit chieftain would be but a common butcher!" he protested, facing her and spreading his gloved hands wide. "No, Senorita, I give you my word that I shall not keel your father." As she commenced pouring out thanks, he added in his purring voice. "Me keel him? But, certainly not! My Juan will attend to that. I hear heem coming now.

"As for you? Be much compleemented. *El Diablo* ees not blind. You go from here weeth heem."

"You dirty brute! You cold-blooded, thieving, murdering beast!" she screamed in wild fury. "I'll go nowhere with you—and remain alive! I'll tear loose somehow, and leap off the cliff, taking you with me if I can! And, if you do make me live, somehow I'll manage to strike death into your black heart!"

HE HAD started toward the cliff to meet the peon, hearing the hob-nailed boots again grinding up the trail. He turned back. "In that case," he purred, "everytheeng ees deefferent. I shall now keel your father, after all."

He jerked a blazing brand from the fire and heaved it on a mattress inside the tent. As the bedding caught fire he turned his back on the crackling flames and strode toward the cliff.

"I shall have my good Juan come and fetch you, Senorita," he promised. "But first eet ees well that you console the Senor Marsden—who will be in need of consolation soon.

"Pardon, perhaps I make oversight. Perhaps I should explain that the big ox, Free-man blunder down there to attack us—and was keel, immediate.

"Perhaps, too, the Senorita weel be interest to know that the gringo *vacquero* who rides the so swift spotted *caballo* has join my band of noble adventurers, and ees guide us here.

"Eet ees ever so when men dispute the weel of *El Diablo*. Some blunder—and die. Some grow wise, and join us while there ees time. You have no freends down there, but a blundering Irishman and one or two remaining mole-eyed followers who sweat and worry on to their doom.

"But, perhaps, I bore the so pretty Senorita weeth too much conversation—for wheech, pardon."

He swept off his ornate sombrero and bowed to his boot-tops.

"Adios, Senorita—until Juan brings you to me," he mocked, then turned and strode out of sight among the alders.

"Shet your eyes, Daughter," Marsden's voice came gaspingly out of the smoke-swirl as the far end of the flimsy tent appeared to explode in a wall of fire, and red tongues of flame leaped along the roof and licked greedily down above him.

Incapable of speech or motion, the girl hung limp in her bonds in a semi coma. Still clicking and rasping on the cliffwall the hobbed boots attracted her straying faculties. As one floating in a mystic haze midway between heaven and earth she heard the calm, even voice again: "Goodbye, Gracie. Kill yourself, if you git the chance."

Driven to madness, the half-insane girl screamed shrilly—a throat-rending, eerie screech that rolled off the ledge, to be caught up and buffeted about by the stern bluff across the gorge, and tossed back, increased a hundred fold.

Back in the mists again, she heard those

clicking boot-heels rasp over the rim at the head of the trail, then pound toward her. Mingled with them was a bellowed call that appeared to lift her out of the gloom and toss her gently down to solid earth. Stiffening her trembling limbs by a mighty effort, she looked, then jerked up from her limp posture and looked again.

The hobbed boots—the boots that big, bluff Cliff Freeman had owned, and sinister Juan had appropriated were fairly striking fire from the rocks as the tall form above them raced for the burning tent.

There was a grunted expletive as he dove inside the rolling curtain of smoke, the flash of a knifeblade in the murk, and the stamp and scrape of the hobbed soles as their wearer groped and wrestled and heaved.

Then in the bright, warm sunshine suddenly appeared the slumped form of Old Dick Marsden—heaved out by a man who followed, seconds later, groping his way on his hands and knees with his head tucked close to the ground, and his strained lungs emitting great roaring gasps. As the begrimed figure rose slowly and commenced dragging Marsden's wilted form away from the blazing tent, he turned his smutty face toward her and grinned as he drawled, reassuringly: "Cheer up, Miss Grace! Your Dad was some warm, but he ain't toasted none."

The girl screamed again—deliriously, this time. It was Slim Martindale who stepped toward her and commenced untying her bonds with deft, sure fingers.

"AW-RIGHT, Fre-e-eman!" he bellowed toward the cliff trail, as voices were heard there.

"Freeman?" the girl gasped, leaning weakly against Slim, as he led her toward a flat rock and seated her. "Did you say Freeman?"

"Yes, Freeman!" a booming voice rolled back, and the giant appeared, shoving Juan ahead of him by the scruff of his neck as easily as a boy rolls a hoop.

"But I thought—that brute told us that Cliff was—"

"Don't think, right now," Slim advised, easing down beside her and holding her fully as tightly as was necessary under the circumstances. "Here, have a swig," he prescribed, drawing out a bottle with his free hand and pulling the cork with his teeth.

"Reckon I'm declarin' myself in on this round," Marsden interjected, avidly. "By golly, if ever a geezer needed a snort, I'm that there geezer!

"I been shot, and half-friz by the blizzard, and damn near toasted to death, besides enduring the ensoo-ing shock when two of my friends is ressurected plumb sudden and unexpected!

"After Gracie's had her'n, hand me over that there red-eye. I'm gonna ruin it."

"Take it to him, Big Boy," Slim grinned, after the girl had declined the proffered bottle. He reached the flask to Freeman, who had just seated himself on the other side of the girl.

"Take it to him yourself," the big, red man answered, circling the girl's trim waist with a massive arm, and brushing the puncher's arm away in the act.

"Ho-hum!" Slim lamented. "First time I ever got what I call plumb comfortable in all my busy life, and then a ranny has to go and ride me off."

His freckled, smoke-begrimed face wearing a doleful, abused expression, Slim dutifully gave the old miner his doctoring. Then he surveyed the wrecked camp, occasionally slanting a resentful eye at the big engineer—who brazenly continued to serve as a massive, muscular pillar against which the still trembling girl leaned.

"Ho-hum!" Slim wailed again, gazing wrathfully at the smoking remnant of tent and its smoldering contents; "all that good chuck plumb ruined, and dinner time past awready!" He grabbed up the half burned tentpole and commenced prodding at a mass of debris in one corner. "They's still a little hope that all ain't lost," he muttered. "Mebbeso I kin scratch out a few cans of beans that ain't blowed up, and manage to live through till Hennessey gits them creepin'

jacks up the cliff with fresh supplies.

"Better come and help a feller, Freeman."

"Ain't hungry right now," Freeman grinned, then looked doleful in turn when the girl gently disengaged herself from his clasp and rose to go to her father. Just then Ute Charley strode silently into their little circle, grunting short cuss-words in his beard and taking inventory of the damaged camp with a succession of darting glances from his shrewd eyes.

"WHAT the hell you call this here—a love serynade, or a tea party without no tea?" he demanded gruffly. "Here a damn greaser—beg parding, Miss—burns our camp on us, and one of you hunts beans whilst the other'n squats and looks goo-goo-ey!

"Now, what I wanta know is: Where'n hell did that there geezer go to?"

Freeman looked at Slim. Slim looked at Freeman. Then both of them grinned foolishly, and were starting to make some rather lame explanations, when Hennessey appeared, prodding patient old Blue ahead of him, and chattering volubly. "Wiggled through by a scratch, Dick, old-timer—and from the way things look we ought to have brought the fire department."

While neglected Blue backed under the shade of the scrub cedar, where he promptly fell into a deep slumber, Hennessey paid his respects to the lady: "Greetin's to you, Miss Grace, and it's medicine for sore eyes you are," he blarneyed, extending a moist palm. "It's been a hard, long trail from Dinver, what with blizzards and stingin' scorpions of humanity and sich-like torments. But it's worth that trip and a dozen more like it to git but a wee glimpse at the likes of you, and—"

"Aw hell, anothern, eh?" Ute Charley grunted disgustedly. "Awright," he added, resignedly, laying down his rifle and peeling off his coat. "If I got to make a new camp all alone whilst you three is trying to spark the same gal, reckon I better set about it.

"Meanwhilst, I'm remembering that there *Diabler* sandeater is runnin' loose somewheres around here. Mebbe after while you'll tell me what you might know about his whereabouts."

CHAPTER XIV

CHANGED TACTICS

"Waal, now that the gal's outa sight, mebbe so I kin git you geezers to pay a little 'tention whilst we kind of tell each other what we know," Ute Charley suggested. He, with Marsden Freeman, Slim and Hennessey sat by the dying fire after nightfall. Hennessey's men had erected their pup tents. Out of tarps and pack covers a larger tent had been constructed for the use of Marsden and his daughter.

Relieved of their packs, the jacks browsed contentedly about camp. Lashed to the scrub cedar a little way from the fire, somber-faced Juan gradually became an ebon splotch in the gloom as the night grew darker.

Towering in the background, stern old Baldy's snowy dome had changed from a white glitter to a misty gray, then had melted into the starless night sky and become as nothing.

"Easy to tell what I know," Hennessey answered, first. "I left Denver with a ticket for old Dick Marsden's camp—and here I am. How the devil I got here, I dunno whatever."

"That'll do for you, then," Ute Charley commented, dryly. "Here's my report. Kept on the ridge all the way triggering them greasers out of a couple ambushes 'fore they gived up and sashayed on ahead, some of 'em making a bluff now and then to slow us up—whilst *El Diabler* and that other blood-sucker rambled on up here to raise a little private hell.

"By the way, did you jaspers puncture any of 'em?"

"Couple, and we seed a couple more you crimped," Slim drawled. "Near as I can figure, that leaves four still on their feet—not counting this one we got hogtied.

"We pushed 'em on north past this place, and they was plenty willing to give us what room we wanted. That's all I know."

"An' *Diabler*?" Ute Charley persisted. "See anything of him arter you come up here?"

"Not me," Freeman spoke next, frowning into the fire, after Slim had shaken his curly head in negative. "He must have slipped past us and down the cliff while I had that big greaser on my hands and Slim was busy getting Marsden out of the fire."

"He did not," Hennessey declared, positively. "I started that trifling old Blue up that trail while you two still was in sight, and the other boys followed, all strung out. The devil himself couldn't have passed without being seen."

"By th' way, Freeman, how'd they get your boots? Steal 'em off you when you was looking the other way?" Irrepressible Tim's Irish-blue eyes twinkled as he asked the question.

"No, I'm hardly that easy," Freeman answered, smilingly. "I took 'em off to climb up an join Ute Charley—which I couldn't do. Those two picked 'em up as they slipped past, I suppose."

"Later on I ketched that long-geared hombre wearing Freeman's boots and thought I sabied the way of it," Slim explained. "Being a mite hungry, I was in a hurry, so I just yanked them boots off him, after giving him the butt back of his mangy ear, and left him fur Freeman to ride herd on, whilst I sashayed on up here."

"Yes, but you didn't hit him hard enough, Slim, and when I came up the trail he jumped me with his knife and it took me a couple of good raps with my fist to unloosen him from it. It it hadn't been for that I'd have been right there with Slim putting out the fire." Freeman grinned, displaying a set of bruised knuckles. Over by the trees the Mexican growled in his throat.

"BUT where did that damn rattlesnake go?" Ute Charley asked. He rose to stride uneasily about for a time, muttering into his matted beard, as the others sat, silent and depressed. Finally he paused by the fire to growl disgustedly. "He was here. You was here. Now where did he go?

"Shore enough, he was here, and he didn't go down! So he went up—up the trail to the peak of Old Baldy—!"

"But he couldn't get nothing to eat up there, and would starve plumb to death," Slim observed, when Ute Charley paused to allow his conclusion to sink in.

"He didn't intend to reside there permanent," Ute Charley answered, dryly. "We had 'im boxed up, and he took the only way out, but it ain't gonna help him none, in the long run.

"You know the lay here better'n anybody, Marsden. How many trails is they up to the peak?"

"One—and it ends on this ledge, right there by the pool."

"And how many down frum here?"

"One—the one you clumb up."

"We got him, fellers—got him corralled plumb tight if we ride fence on him prompt and vigorous!" Ute Charley declared. "Now, listen, everybody!

"Freeman, take your rifle and go watch that up trail! Shoot when you see anything wiggle, and keep shooting till it quits wiggling!"

As Freeman caught up his rifle and lumbered toward the pool, Ute Charley turned to Slim. "Go watch the down trail!" he ordered.

"Going," Slim answered, laconically, then disappeared in the alders. Ute Charley rubbed his horny palms together delightedly and turned to the two remaining by the fire. "Go to bed, Dick, and rest happy," he chuckled. "In the morning we'll go on up there and skin us a skunk, eh?

"You better turn in too, Hennessey, while I prowl around kind of keeping cases on things in general. Right now, I reckon I ought to go loosen that Juan feller's cinches and let him feed a little."

Cursing the pain in his heat-blistered feet, Marsden departed for the tent. Still

chuckling complacently, Ute Charley lighted a pineknot at the fire and went to inspect the prisoner.

Hennessey knocked the dottle from his pipe on the rock at his feet, stuck it in his shirt pocket and rose to stretch and yawn drowsily. As he bent to kick a few burning ends of branches into the dying fire, bedlam appeared to break loose on the ledge,

FIRST, from the foot of the trail by the pool, Freeman's full voice boomed in the darkness, as he ran heavily toward the fire. "Hey! I lit a match and examined the trail! He's been up there, all right—but he's come back down!"

The opposite wall of the inky gorge still was tossing the big engineer's voice about when Ute Charley's torch flared like a meteor as he raced back from the cedar, cursing cold-bloodedly and holding up for inspection loose strands of the rope which had held their prisoner.

"Cut clean where the knots was tied next to the crittur's spine!" he howled wrathfully. "That damn sneakin' cross twixt a lobo and a Gila monster snuck down here and cut his pal loose right under our noses, whilst we was—"

"Gracie! O-o-oh, Gracie! Where are you, Daughter?" Marsden's quavering tones rose inside the tent. Seconds later he weaved outside, shrilling out in anguished tones: "Gawd Awmighty, fellers! Gracie's *plumb gone!*"

"Sli-i-im! Are you there?" Ute Charley bawled, racing toward the alders, with Freeman and Hennessey pounding at his heels.

"Uh-huh," the puncher's drawling tones came back from the alder clump. "S-s-sh!" he cautioned, as they reached his location. As over by the cliffwall the men in the pup tents roused to shout drowsy inquiries, and poor battered old Marsden limped out of the gloom to join them, the puncher reached out a long arm to point into the inky gorge. "Hosses moving down there!" he declared.

As they listened in strained silence, broken only by Marsden's labored breathing, shod hoofs clicked on the hard rock below, and the creak of saddle gear came up, faintly. Then out of the pitch-black depths rose a thin, bugle-like voice that sneered and taunted and mocked: *"El Diablo* must leave the mole-blind, blundering gringoes for a time—leave them to converse weeth their poor, deesgusted burros, wheech are not allowed to seek better company!

"But, have no fear. *El Diablo* goes North but to cache the so fair senorita where he may return to her after he has keel the beeg, *Americano* toads!"

"Gra-a-a-cie!" Marsden's cracked voice shrilled despairingly. "Speak to your old dad, Daughter!"

Again came the click of shod hoofs in the ebon stillness of the gorge, the restrained murmur of voices receding up the inky slash. Peering suddenly over rugged Baldy, the thin advance segment of a full moon set the snowcap aglitter, and painted an ever-widening band of mother-of-pearl on the wall across the gorge.

Gnashing his stubby teeth in impotent rage, Ute Charley raised his long rifle, then shook his shaggy head and dropped its butt to the ground with a disgusted thud. "Too damn fur; might hit the gal," he muttered.

"Now lookee here!" he went on, "we got to crack down on that greaser, and do it right now, and do it plenty!

"Listen; he ain't got no monopoly on doing the unexpected. Right now he's riding off somewheres to reorganize. Then he'll ooze back here when we're least expectin' him and bushwhack hell out of us!

"That's his program, as per usual—but she don't go! Right now, we're gonna take in behind that bunch and stick on the trail till we fetch 'em to a complete showdown!"

"Looks good," Freeman agreed. "After all the trouble we've had getting located here, the last thing they'll expect is for us to climb down off Baldy and leave it unguarded."

"How about you, Marsden?" Ute

Charley inquired. "Willing fur us to abandon your claim and—"

"Claim hell!" Marsden answered, wearily. "If we only can get Gracie back—"

CRUSHED in body and spirit at last, the old prospector broke down, and stumbled glumly back toward the tent. Looking after him, Ute Charley arrived at a decision. "Got to send that poor old cuss off somewheres to get patched up and rested," he declared. "This here job we're tackling is gonna be work for he-men, and he never would live through it. It's a long ways to Denver, but—"

"Leave him to me," Slim volunteered. Freeman turned in surprise to face the puncher, and Ute Charley grunted disgustedly as Slim drawled on: "I'm kind of lazy myself, so I'll dodge this job and haze old Dick down to the Double-O, where *El Diablo* will never think of looking for him. I'm starting right now."

"Who will we leave in camp?" Freeman asked, a half hour later, after the men had been rallied and armed, and ammunition and rations distributed among them.

"Nobody," Ute Charley came back, grimly. "We're going after that *Diabler* geezer to git him. If they's a camp here when we come back, awright; if they ain't —waal, they just ain't. All we'll do right now is to haze them damn jacks down out of here and barricade the trail against 'em, so's they won't chaw up all our chuck and bedding.

"Shake your hoofs now, fellers! Watch the rear, Freeman! An' you Hennessey, try to get it into that damn hard Irish head of your'n that you won't go whangin' ahead on a trot, lickin' every human that gets in the way! Understand them rannies has got a holin'-up place somewheres up the gorge, and we're goin' up there to ketch 'em in it an' surround 'em an' massacre 'em. Keep in sight of me, but don't crowd me. When I stop, you stop, too. If you lose sight of me, wait till I come back after you. We're gonna do this here job by inches, an' do it plumb clean an' proper. Now hit the trail, bullies! Step careful! Talk low! No smoking on the trail!

"Don't worry none, Hennessey, if I git a long ways ahead. Just shag along till you get to where I'm at."

Swinging ahead with the noiseless, shuffling stride peculiar to him, Ute Charley soon was swallowed in the gloom. Behind him, Hennessey and his squad made the best time of which they were capable. Still back of them, outwardly composed, but raging inwardly, Cliff Freeman covered the rear. Keyed to grim, desperate resolve, Ute Charley's little force moved out into the darkness.

GOING in the opposite direction, Slim Martindale got little spotted Pete and the brown gelding from the blind canyon in which he had left them grazing.

"Grab leather an' hang tight, ol' timer. We're gonna hightail it some," he advised, after helping Marsden to mount.

"Wish I was going the other way," Marsden grunted, after the horses had settled into a steady, distance-eating gallop.

"For why?" Slim inquired, as one bent on whiling away the time with purposeless conversation.

"So's I'd stand a chance of lockin' horns with *Diablo*. He went north, didn't he?"

"You see him go north?" Slim countered, as Pete cuffed stirrups sociably with the gelding on a curve.

"Naw—but, he—"

"Uh-huh, he stood a little north of us and talked. Then we seen a bunch going that way."

"But he said—"

"Uh-huh. He said he was going north —which same statement about convinces me that he left the bunch to go that way, then slid back, tucked close to the bluff and went the other way!"

"What makes you think that?" Marsden inquired, interestedly.

"Waal, he went up Baldy when we

thought he'd gone down Baldy, didn't he?" the puncher countered, dryly.

"But he rid that sorrel stud—I seed it with my own eyes."

"Mebbe that ain't no one-man hawse, at that."

"But, he wored a mask!"

"Somebody did. That's *Diablo* every which way. Always doing what a feller thinks he ain't. Waal, he ain't got that kinda work patented. Shake that bronc, oldtimer! I want to git you tucked away in the good old Double-O before daylight. Then me and Pete's gonna go somewheres, and see what we can see!"

CHAPTER XV

INCH BY INCH

PLODDING silently around a turn of the cliffwall, Hennessey's little squad breasted a sharp incline where a low, massive overhang roofed the trail, almost with a tunnel-like effect. Now swung directly overhead, a brilliant moon flooded the gorge with light, bringing out in distinct relief every rugged landmark, every slash and boulder and brush-fringe.

Leg-weary from their unbroken tramp of nearly twenty miles, their shoulders strap-galled by the heavy pack that each carried, the trail-weary bullies obeyed with promptness when, walking in the lead, Hennessey held up a hand as a halting signal. Seated on a boulder beside the trail, his long rifle across his knees, Ute Charley grunted a greeting.

"Set and rest a spell," he suggested, speaking out of a corner of his bearded mouth, and continuing to eye the open trail ahead alertly.

"For once, we'll have no argument," Hennessey assured him, tossing his pack off over his shaggy head, and sitting down on it with a contented sigh. "It's once that I'm willing to give the soles of me feet a rest, while the seat of me pants takes the weight of me body. Suffering Saints, but I'd like to enjoy a whiff of me pipe!"

"Suck away and have a good time while you can," Ute Charley consented, unexpectedly. "Keep a little way back from the edge of the overhang, though, and cover your matches with your hats.

"Seen Freeman lately?"

"Devil a bit of it," Hennessey answered, already busily packing his pipe —an example the others were not slow in following. "He's back there somewheres. Reckon he'll be along presently."

"Waal, when he comes up, hold him here till you hear frum me," the old scout ordered, rising. "Up t' now we been plowing ahead plumb steady, because the trail was dark. But now, that old Moon's got her eye on us every darn step we take. From now on out, we got to do this job inch by inch."

"And why?" Hennessey inquired. "Everything seems quiet on ahead."

"Too damn quiet," Ute Charley grumbled, uneasily, then discarded his pack and rifle and swung noiselessly out on the trail.

"Would you look at that, now?" Hennessey grunted, rubbing his eyes and gazing at the spot where the old mountaineer had been. "It's a magician that old cuss is! Now you see him, and now you don't!"

"Where'd he go?" one of the huddled men asked in a husky whisper.

"Tell me, then I can tell you," Hennessey whispered back. "All I know is he was right over there, and now he ain't nowheres. More than that I can't say a-tall, a-tall!

"There comes Freeman! Hey, Goliath, stop and rest your hands and face! General Ute Charley has ordered this army to camp here for the summer."

"Trouble is right," Hennessey gabbed sitting down without removing his pack —which to him was no more than a feather.

"Trouble is right," Hennesey gabbled on. "I'm thinking a fee-rocious lizard crossed our trail—or mebbe it was a hungry magpie that was gitting ready to devour us completely. Anyway, that cat-eyed old cuss staked us out here. Then went prowling off to—"

"FREEMAN!" Ute Charley called guardedly, so near them that startled Hennessey twisted half around to grab up his rifle, then chuckled sheepishly: "I'm not denying that you made me jump that time, Charley! How the devil do you come and go like that, without being seen no more than a snake in tall grass?"

"My buckskin clothes is the same color as the rocks, and I don't wear no bright trappin's," Ute Charley explained. "But," he added, with a distinct trace of uneasiness in his level voice, "at that, it ain't no cinch bet that they didn't spot me when I crawled out there to get a squint at the creek bed.

"Fact is, Freeman, I'm plumb outside my jurisdiction, never having roamed this for up Clear Creek canyon. It's up to you to tell me a few things.

"First question is: Is they a ford anywheres hereabouts?"

"Yes—about a long quarter down stream from where we are."

"And a trail up the opposite bluff?"

"Not exactly that. You see you took a look at the creek. Notice a patch of white water, with a dent in the cliff right back of it?"

"Uh-huh. Reckoned it was a rapids."

"It's the mouth of Badger creek. She empties into this canyon there—and that's the only crossing within miles in either direction. You can't cross directly, though. You have to go back a little way from here and slant down to Clear Creek, go up to the ford and cross. Then you work along the other side till you come to Badger creek slash. You go in there, following the creekbed for a mile or so, then zig-zagging on another trail to the upper level."

"And what's over there—mine, or single-barrel ranch or anything?"

"Just hills and hollows—not a thing in the way of a human habitation. Why?"

"Mebbe nothing—mebbe a hull lot. Would it be possible for a bunch to git hawses across there from this side?"

"Ye-e-s—that is, I think so, though I never knew it to be done. Why?"

"And then hawses could follow Badger creek and go up that there trail you told me about?"

"It would be some scramble, but they might make it. Why?"

"This one was a big stud hawse, and he didn't get to finish his nickering," Ute Charley went on, "I'm thinking some human follering a still trail clapped his hand on that hawse's nose to stop his bellering.

El Diablo

"Now what say, Freeman? Do we cross?"

"We do," Freeman answered, with quick decision, whipping his rifle to his shoulder and turning back down the trail. "Come on. I'll show you the way."

"If you're dead sure it wasn't a rabid mosquito barking that you heard, me and me bullies 'll go along," Hennessey declared amiably, as he knocked the dottle out of his pipe regretfully and started to get stiffly to his feet.

"Shet up!" Ute Charley barked.

"Wait a second, Freeman! Now listen, everybody!

"Stuff all your extra shells into your pockets, but leave your grub here 'cept a few sandwiches. Cache the bedding, too!"

"What's the idea?" mystified Freeman inquired, as the other commenced digging cartridges out of their discarded packs.

"They ain't no doubt in my mind that we're 'bout to run into that *Diabler* greaser's hold-out," Ute Charley stated, with a firm conviction that bred respect. "I'm plumb certain that he'll have a big gang over thar—some of 'em Injuns, mebbe—and we're gonna flow right in and tangle hips with 'em *hard*.

"Waal," he summed up, eloquently, "When we git through making smoke, either we eat their grub, or we don't eat —an' we'll git plenty blankets from them —if we're ever gonna need any."

CHAPTER XVI

AT THE DOUBLE-O.

"NOW what, I wonder?" Crusty, sun-dried, saddle-bowed, roan-bearded, beady-eyed Tom Spencer, owner of the tight little six-puncher-and-the-boss, Double-O, cow resort had had a hard day in saddle and had curled up late in his attic bedroom to snore off his fatigue. Then, just as drowsiness was bathing certain aching joints like a soothing lotion, horses had jogged across the frosty hoof-packed ground over by the corrals. The bunkhouse door had screeched open, and a lusty voice had shouted a full-lunged inquiry. Then came more voices, and the stamp of feet in and about the bunkhouse in a manner that nearly approached a commotion.

"Some damn tanked-up ranny stoppin' by on his way from nowheres to anywheres," Spencer assayed the sounds, then turned his other sun-burned ear to the pillow and started to sink again—only to rouse and cuss with increased vigor when spurred heels clumped and jingled across the porch of the ranch-house.

In expectation of the customary hail at the door, Spencer raised to one elbow and ran up the time-cracked green shade. He started to heave up the sash, but desisted, with another muttered outburst of open-range invective when the late-comer opened the never-locked front door and chugged across the hall and took to the stairs with the sureness of one who knew the place.

Groping on the windowsill for a match, Spencer lighted the squat, smokey-globed lamp on a chair within reach, and turned to the door as it swung open to admit his unconventional visitor.

"Waal, what's up?" he inquired, sleepily. "Oh, it's you is it?" he added, disgustedly, as he adjusted the chimney and caught sight of his visitor's face. "Waal, what's the idee o' bullin' your way up here and spoilin' my beauty nap? They's cold beans in a pot in the oven and plenty cornbread and m'lk in the cupboard! Go pack your cussed in'ards, you durn toad-speckled human vacuum, and leave me get some sleep!"

"Ain't hungry," the other declared. "Fact is—"

"Ain't hungry? *Ain't hungry?* AIN'T HUNGRY?" Spencer popped upright to howl in astonishment. "Oh, 'scuse me, stranger, I reckon I've made a mistake. You shore do look like Slim Martindale, though!"

"I'm him," Slim admitted, grinning through his freckles as he impolitely seated himself on the chair which held Spencer's clothes. "But listen, I—"

"Awright, I'll give you your job back, if that's what's on your mind. Don't know just why I do, but I always do when you come back plumb broke after sashayin' around the country like a herd-breaker!

"Now go on away and leave me—"

"Look at that there, if you think I'm busted!" Slim dragged his roll out of his shirt and dropped it on the coverlet.

"Hum-m! Looks like you're fat, shore enough," Spencer admitted, eyeing the irrefutable evidence appraisingly. "Waal

then, if you've come home with money on you—fur once—and ain't hungry—for once—what the—"

"Needing a little help, so I—"

"Ain't interested a damn bit," Spencer declared, with great finality, sinking back and tucking the blanket about his bearded chin. "I know you, Cowboy, and I ain't gonna be drug outa here t' go make no killing in a poker game, nor help charivari no new-married couple, nor any other wild-eyed proposition you know how to make!

"Put the lamp out before you leave, will you?"

"Ain't gonna leave till you—"

"Give you one minute to say it in, then—and remember I got a gun under my pillow. Now shoot."

SLIM shot. A spouting geyser of steaming words, he told of the trouble on Baldy, of the gang at Sandstone, of battered old Marsden right then being bathed and patched and bandaged over in the bunkhouse.

Watching the boss' craggy profile, lamplit on the rumpled pillow, Slim almost lost heart. "But you ain't heard all, nor th' half o' it," he pleaded, staking all on his trump card, after Spencer had re-remarked pointedly that he mustn't forget to close the bedroom door when he went out. "They got Marsden's girl!"

"Wha-a-t?"

"They rustled Marsden's girl and eloped with her!"

"Who—git off them clothes—did?"

"*El Diablo,* an' he—"

"When? Where?" Spencer sputtered, throwing his feet to the floor and commencing to buck off his nightshirt. While he struggled into his red-flannel underwear, the puncher grinned joyously and chattered on: "But I don't want you tonight, Tom! Just come in to ask if I could borrow Dutch Steiger and Lefty Yocum for a day or two. You see I want to—"

"Said they'd roped a gal, didn't you?—Pitch me them britches!—Where you reckon they got her corralled at?—Git your big feet off of them socks!—Boys saddling, are they?—See my boots anywheres?—"

"Won't say another damn word till you set still and listen!" Slim declared, settling back comfortably and commencing his characteristic search for the makings.

At first grumblingly, later grinning and nodding applause, Spencer sat quietly on the edge of the bed and listened while Slim promised action—plenty of it.

"She's all settled then," the gratified puncher summed up, a few minutes later. "At exactly eleven-thiry tomorrow night you and Bob and Barney'll be playing pool in Blinky Moran's place at Sandstone? That right?"

"We'll be playing that game if we have to shoot a few dozen geezers away from the table to git to use it. Gone to stealin' gals around here, eh?"

"Awright. Me 'n' th' boys'll be ridin' now. Aw-ree-voy, till we see you at Sandstone!"

Twenty minutes later, Slim was munching cold victuals as tireless little Pete galloped on the starlit, windswept backtrail to Clear Creek canyon. With him rode phlegmatic, solid-bodied round-faced Dutch Steiger, and Lefty Yocum, reckless-minded and knotty-bodied.

Back in the sprawling dun Double-O ranch-house, fiery old Tom Spencer grunted a sleepy answer when the old clock down in the hall struck a single jangling note.

"'Leven-thutty, eh?" he muttered. "Gawd, but I wish this was tomorrow night!

"Gone t' stealin' gals, eh?"

CHAPTER XVII.

CLOSING IN.

ON THE backtrail Ute Charley proceeded without caution, confident that his enemies were across the gorge, and at a safe distance. When Freeman pointed out a winding scar that dipped sharply toward the level of Clear Creek, the two stood aside to allow Hennessey and his bullies to plod by.

As they disappeared from sight, sprayed by Hennessey's never-ending chaff, Ute Charley gathered a few small stones and erected a miniature cairn where the trails forked. Watching curiously, Freeman was puzzled when the old mountaineer broke a twig from an alder and laid it by the little heap of stones—and pointing to the new trail.

"Little arrangement 'twixt me and Martindale," Ute Charley explained, appearing to sense Freeman's puzzlement. "Just before he left out, he told me to mark our trail this a-way. I'm guessing mebbe he's gonna foller us—when he gets time."

"Perhaps so," Freeman agreed, a little dubiously. "Still, if he wanted to help, I can't see why he—" The big man paused, reluctant to bring a direct charge of cowardice or indifference against the easy-mannered puncher who had made their cause his own, at times.

"Sloped out an' left us in a tight, eh?" Ute Charley supplied, shrewdly guessing what was in the big engineers mind. "Waal, anyway, it didn't cost nothing to leave sign for him—so there she is."

Turning up stream, hidden by the sparse timber of the creek bottom, Ute Charley led the way across the ford—after leaving another marker. He left a third one before swinging northward along the west bank of the rushing stream to where the less impetuous Badger Creek flowed out of its dark, closewalled channel.

"Gravel, eh? Wait a minute, fellers!" Ute Charley grunted, feeling the bottom with his moccasined feet. While the little party stood shivering, chilled by the icy waters of the little mountain stream, he stepped ahead to where the moonlight glittered on a short shoal. Presently he waved them on, and he greeted them with a restrained chuckle when they plowed through the soft footing to where he had just finished an intensive inspection of the creekbed.

"On the right trail, an' she's plain as a public highway," he crowed. "Shod hawses passed through here not more than two—three hours ahead of us. The gravel ain't sifted into their tracks yet.

"From now on, it's step easy and no smoking. And you, Hennessey, try to keep your mouth shut and your eyes and ears open. Give me fifteen minutes start, then follow till you meet up with me. I'm thinkin' we ain't got a million miles to go till Hell's gonna break loose, if we don't step plumb careful."

Working up the stony creekbed with the least possible noise, they found the old mountaineer waiting where a broad trail showed that horses had scrambled out of the creekbed on the south side, taking to a narrow path that zig-zagged skyward. Here Ute Charley indulged in another restrained chuckle as he heaped an imposing cairn in the bed of the stream, and indicated the trail with a club-like dead cedar limb. That done, he again cautioned them. "Just keep me in sight, an' stop when I stop. If one of you wants to get us all massacred, all he's gotta do is to make a noise that a chipmunk kin hear."

SCALING the winding path with the sure-footedness of a mountain goat, Ute Charley made them labor to keep in sight. Often he paused to stop and listen. Led by burly Freeman, with Hennessey quiet and serious, probably for the first time in his happy-go-lucky life, the grim little squad crawled upward. Dawn was paling the east, when, after having reached the crest of the ravine, Ute Charley lay motionless on the trail for an unusually long period, then slid noiselessly down to their position, a hundred feet lower.

"Follow me, Freeman; the rest of you hide amongst them boulders," he ordered, laconically—then snailed up to his former location, with the less active Freeman keeping at his heels with some effort.

Reaching the crest again, Ute Charley grasped Freeman's sleeve, and pointed through the low fringe of bushes growing along the rim: "See that blasted pine leaning over that big rock?" he whispered.

Freeman nodded.

"Waal, they's a man settin' with his back agin' it," Ute Charley declared.

"He's guardin' this trail, of course, and we got to get him—an' get him good an' hard. He—"

Ute Charley's grip on Freeman's arm clamped down tighter, and both almost ceased to breathe when the shapeless form at the boll of the dead pine rose slowly, resolving itself into the form of a man. Outlined clearly in the pale morning light when he stepped warily away from the tree, he proved to be an Indian, past middle age, stern-faced and composed in the manner of his race. Warned by that subtle, intangible sixth sense which serves men of the wild, he took two catlike steps toward where the two watchers hugged the ground, then paused to look uneasily in all directions.

"Uh-huh! Renegade Sioux," Ute Charley grated, after a close inspection of the lone sentinal. The face, fully exposed in the strengthening light, was of the Aztec cast—roughly-lined, and carrying a certain majestic dignity found in no other race. Hatless, with manelike hair down in two long braids, a nondescript shirt and vest, and a pair of shapeless overalls bespoke white influence. The beaded moccasins that adorned his toed-in feet brought back the Indian effect strongly.

The picket took another step forward, bringing his rifle to a ready, and bending to peer suspiciously toward where his enemies lay. Screened by the low bushes, Freeman rolled his weight to one hip and slowly brought his heavy rifle to bear, but Ute Charley nudged him warningly and the big engineer desisted.

For a full minute the Sioux gazed intently in their direction. Then he backed toward the pine and sat down facing them, with his rifle across his knees. Close to Freeman's ear, Ute Charley's whisper was scarcely audible: "Stay put as you are, and count five hundred, slow! Then rake that rifle acrost a rock, quietlike, and watch my smoke!"

Before Freeman could do more than nod in agreement, Ute Charley snailed off at right angles to the trail, and appeared to melt into the rocky landscape.

"FOUR HUNDRED and eighty-eight, four hundred and eighty-nine, four hundred and—" He lost count momentarily when on beyond the pine he caught sight of an elusive shape that appeared to flow across the uneven ground from one bush to another. "Four ninety," he took it up again, counting on slowly, doggedly, as the picket rose again, turning slowly to look in the suspected direction.

"Four ninety-one—two—three," the count dragged on, with Ute Charley frozen to his bush, ten yards from his quarry.

"Four—five-six," he counted mechanically, as they held their respective positions. The sentinel's very nostrils appeared to dilate as he turned his head slowly in one direction, then another—searching for hostile sight or sound.

"Seven—eight—nine," religiously tolled off, though the engineer trembled the length of his big frame in an agony of impatient anxiety.

"Five hundred!"

With the rake of the gun-barrel on the rock, the Indian whirled toward the sound, then crouched low, and swung his rifle around. Beyond him, Ute Charley rose silently, catfooting forward, six gun grasped by its barrel. For a tense moment, during which the watching Freeman's breath seemed to leave his body, the old frontiersman stood erect behind his prey, timing his blow calculatingly. Then the gun butt descended in a sweeping arc, landing with a sickening thud that made hardy Freeman's flesh creep. Falling forward on his face like a stricken beef, the Indian lay without motion as Ute Charley knelt beside him, weapon upraised, ready to strike a second blow. After a little time he holstered his pistol, and motioned Freeman to come.

"It's all over with that one," he reported, succintly, "I ketched him on the temple and caved it plumb in, though I didn't mean to. Go bring the boys!"

When Freeman came up with the others Ute Charley still was inspecting the

sprawled body. The old scout growled out a command for silence, and ordered Hennessey and his boys to lie down among the rocks and bushes. Then, with Freeman's aid, he propped the dead sentinel against the blasted pine in a natural position, and placed his rifle across his lap. That grewsome task performed to his satisfaction, he drew Freeman out of sight among the boulders for a short consultation.

"Know this here neighborhood?" Ute Charley mumbled past the twist of natural leaf off which he was gnawing an enormous quid.

"In a general way. Why?" Freeman answered.

"General way won't fill the bill," Ute Charley declared. "We got to get the lay plumb definite before we stir a hoof. All we can do is to wait till the light gets a little better. It won't be long, at that."

"But I don't see any use in waiting, when—"

Ute Charley whistled cautiously. When Hennessey's tousled head popped above a bush, Ute Charley beckoned them to come.

"Squat and listen, fellers," he commanded, motioning them down beside him. "Let me do most o' the talking," he cautioned, after they had knotted about him. "We're getting right close onto 'em, and we gotta lay our plans plumb careful."

"But how do you know we're close?" Freeman inquired, squirming impatiently at what he considered an unnecessary delay.

"Shet your face, you big idjit!" Hennessey interjected. "'Tis a cautious-minded man is Ute Charley—an' watchful! How do you know that he didn't hear a ma cow moo somewheres hereabouts?"

IGNORING the Irishman's sally, and the chuckles it evoked among the grinning men, Ute Charley addressed Freeman, a little testily; "Seen that dead Injun same's I did, didn't you?"

"Yes, I saw him, of course. What of it?" Freeman was commencing to be nettled by the old mountaineer's "schoolteacherish" manner.

"Waal, where you reckon he come from?" Ute Charley persisted.

"Can't say that, of course. Probably was with their party, and they dropped him off here to watch the trail."

"Humph! Look at his feet an' laigs did you?"

"Not particularly, but—"

"Waal, I looked at 'em damn particular, and I seed that they wasn't wet none—which they would have been if he had been splashing a hawse across one crick, an a mile or so up another one."

"You win," Freeman admitted.

Making no further comment, Ute Charley chewed his tobacco complacently while the oncoming sun set the surrounding plateau a-steam with morning mists, then dissolved them and set the landscape aglow with gold and purple and shell-pink reflected from the snowy caps of the adjacent peaks.

First peering cautiously over the big rock by the pine to assure himself that no one was approaching, Ute Charley mounted it, turned slowly to inspect the terrain in all directions. Finally he nodded as though confirming some inward theory, and slid down among them.

"Waal, you can get your guns ready for the big smoke-up," Ute Charley announced. "We're gonna be tangled up in a big he-fight 'fore a lost calf kin find its ma.

"That Injun I kilt had cleaned an' dried his moccasins last night—they always do. Right now they's a little red clay on 'em, but not a hull lot—proving that he's come only a little ways, and in soft footing. Also, his clothes was only a little damp. How's yourn, Freeman?"

"Pretty dewy," Freeman answered, commencing to see light.

"Waal, you was out all night. That Sioux hadn't traveled a quarter after leavin' his blanket.

"Awright, then, that means that he was at the hold-out when they got there. An' *Diabler* sent him up here to play picket. Simple enough, ain't it?"

"Is when you've explained it to us numbskulls," Freeman admitted, a new respect in his voice. "But, even if their stronghold is close—and it undoubtedly is—how'll we locate it?"

"Said they was red clay on that Sioux's moccasins, didn't I?" Ute Charley countered, after indulging in one of his rare chuckles. "Now all you damn moles stand up an' look around." He waved one arm to almost complete a circle: "All hard land, with only a few sick lookin' bushes." He completed the circle, indicating a bowl-like depression a short distance to westward, from which towering treetops protruded—dark green and vigorous.

"Soil down there, eh?" Ute Charley chuckled again, then grew serious as he tightened his belt and inspected his prized rifle lovingly.

"Waal, the big war's about on, fellers," he promised them, "and we're gonna proceed on the same old plan—eyes and ears open, mouths shut, and step careful!

"Keep fifty feet back of me, Freeman! Don't take your eye off me under no circumstances! You other four bullies stay a hundred feet back of Freeman, and keep Hennessey quiet, if you can! If you can't, knock him in the head and leave him lay!

"Now gimme my start, then git down on your bellies and play snail! Don't start no fightin' till I do—but when you do start, start hard!

"Now wait a minute! I almost forgot!" Gathering loose stones, he erected another cairn, with its pointing twig. Then, from bush to rock, and from rock to bush, Ute Charley snaked toward the suspected hollow, raising his shaggy head occasionally to sweep the neighborhood with his piercing gray eyes, now and then lying motionless with his ear to the ground—making certain that the way ahead was clear.

Inch-by-inch, "eyes and ears open, mouth plumb shut," grim old Ute Charley Dole worked toward where his enemies lay—how many, or how well fortified, could only be conjectured.

CHAPTER XVIII

AT GRIPS

TIMBERED on the rim, and half way down its sides, a cuplike pocket, perhaps ten acres in area, lay before the wary men when Ute Charley motioned them up to inspect it. Finding the eastern wall of the hollow too precipitous, he had followed a defined trail that circled to the west side. From there a good view could be had—and it was not in the least inviting.

In contrast with the windswept terrain of the plateau, the hollow was sodden with melting snow. Tiny rivulets streaked the walls everywhere. Each tree and bush dripped its contribution. The entire floor of the hollow was saved from inundation by a still deeper depression a little east of its center—ordinarily dry, probably; but now a lake, almost blood red in color from the clay erosion it held in suspension.

On the western margin of this little pond stood a decrepit log cabin, stoutly built, but showing every mark of age. A mere wisp of smoke spiraling lazily from its stone chimney was the only visible indication of inhabitants.

"Got me beat," Ute Charley confessed, scratching his dun beard thoughtfully. "No corrals, and no woodpile. That ain't no permanent headquarters for a gang like *Diabler's.*"

"Must be it, though," Freeman argued. "All I can see for us to do is to rush this place and have it out!"

"Huh!" Ute Charley grunted, scornfully. "Look at that there trail down this side! At least a half dozen hawses slid down there durin' the night! Where are they?"

"Might be—" Freeman started to argue, a little uncertainly.

"Might be, eh?" Ute Charley cut in. "Waal, so long as I got anything to say, we don't ram ahead inta *Diabler's* camp on no damn 'might be's.' I'm gonna *know* where we're headed. Now you hardheads

stick tight here, till I ooze down there an' scout this here thing out!"

Laying aside his rifle, and relying upon the short guns he carried that morning—something he rarely did—the old mountaineer made his usual cautious advance. Leaving the trail at the foot of the sharp decline, he took to the north wall, circling it to eastward.

From their elevated position, his friends saw him for a time, then lost him as he crawled into a narrow belt of low bushes.

After a dragging half hour of inactivity, Hennessey nudged Freeman: "Be gorra, I do hope on me soul *Diablo* don't keep a cat! Ute Charley might hear it mew an' spend another half a day laying an' listenin' for more mews!"

"Is aggravating," Freeman agreed, changing from one hip to the other to ease his cramped limbs. "Can't be more than five or six left in *Diablo's* band. Looks to me if we had rushed the place a half hour ago, we'd be taking things easy right now."

"PROBABLY so," Ute Charley's dry voice sounded behind them. "As you say, you'd be takin' things easy—damn easy. You wouldn't even be troubled about thinkin' or breathin' right now, if you had your way.

"C'mon, and I'll show you something that mebbe will learn you trigger-brained rannies to look twice before you leap—an' not leap a-tall if the looks don't suit you!"

"I knowed it!" Hennessey declared, positively. "He's seen a man-eatin' magpie down there! We'll have to wait at least a week longer before we start our campaign!"

"May start sooner than you're ready for it, if you don't keep your big mouth shet," Ute Charley growled. He led them away from the hollow in a direct line for a little way, then circled to eastward for a few hundred yards. There he entered a low wash leading off the plateau, following it till it opened on the rim of the hollow, almost directly south of the cabin. Emerging from the wash, the guide crawled to the rim and looked down. As, one by one, they inched to his side and followed the direction of his pointing forefinger, each gave a start of surprise—several of them, in fact.

Hidden until now by an irregularity in the contour of the wall, a half dozen horses cropped scant grass, and browsed brush almost directly beneath the little party. One of them was *El Diablo's* big sorrel stallion.

"S-s-sh!" Ute Charley warned, as a low buzz of whispering ran along the line of men. He changed the direction of his pointing finger from the horses to the cabin. On the east side of the sloping roof an Indian lay—without doubt another sentinel. He was a mere stripling, with all the alertness and conscientious thoroughness of a youth resting under what may have been his first heavy responsibility.

At short intervals he peered over the coaming to view the trail down the west slope—the trail they would have followed, had Ute Charley not forbidden it. At other times he squirmed around to make an intensive survey of the entire rim. Not for one instant did he remain inactive, or careless. Watching him, Freeman fairly shuddered to think how easily they would have been disposed of had they rushed blindly down that trail and across the barren ground west of the cabin. At their first movement the picket would have warned those inside, and they would have been slaughtered like so many running hares.

Freeman caught Hennessey's glance and grinned sheepishly. The bluff Irishman grinned back as sheepishly, then shrugged and looked back at the old guide. Ute Charley cupped a hand to his bearded mouth and whispered: "It's a slippery job, but we got to slide down that there wash, one at a time, whilst that Injun is lookin' the other way!

"They's some bushes down there. When one of you lands, just lay down till all of us is down. I don't think he'll hear us, if we go plumb careful. If he does—waal, if he does, he just does.

"Come next after me, Freeman! Now watch how I do it! All of you remember

to take your time, and get down without being seen, if you kin. If anything breaks before we're ready, jump cover and scoot for that cabin anyway! Now here goes Ute Charley—playing beaver."

LYING on his back in the chutelike wash, Ute Charley eased over the edge, then slid through the oozy slush to the bottom with practically no noise.

Setting brakes with his riflestock, Freeman checked the descent of his big body sagaciously, earning a grunt of commendation from the guide as he squirmed to cover in the bushes beside him.

Hennessey's squat body adorned the slide next, making a headlong plunge of it, and landing in the ooze with a sucking sound that reached the ears of the vigilant youth on the roof.

Ute Charley's proteges, above and below, held their breaths when the Indian squirmed around to look. Hennessey still was in plain sight, scrambling awkwardly toward cover, on all fours.

Yet the luck was with them. Feeding a short distance off, the sorrel stallion had just started to cross a soft spot, and he proceeded to do so, with a succession of sounds somewhat like the one that Hennessey had made. His attention attracted first by the horse's movements, the guard looked in that direction for a few seconds before sweeping the bluff with his customary careful survey. During those precious seconds Hennessey found cover for his be-slimed body beside Freeman.

Their lesson of caution having been well learned, and with death as the almost certain price of failure, the other four made the slimy passage. It was a succession of breath-taking thrills which keyed the entire party to highest tension —which relaxed in no great degree when the last bedraggled man of them wormed into the bushes. Not one of them but knew that their success in approaching an alert Indian was little short of miraculous; not one but realized that the next job was even more ticklish. They now were in the hollow, with no hope of emerging from it until they had locked grips with the bandits known to be there. They simply *had* to take that cabin.

Big, dogged-natured Freeman looked grimly determined as he turned to their leader for instructions. Even reckless, on-rushing Hennessey grew serious, and a little nervous, when Ute Charley motioned them to stay as they were, and started on his next hazardous venture.

Always slow, maddening slow to those who knew the stakes for which he played, the old guide commenced working from bush to bush, silently and surely. Instead of going directly toward the cabin, as they had expected, he worked eastward along the bluff, then eased behind a line of dwarf willows that ran diagonally from near the bluff to within a few yards of the southeast corner of the cabin.

For what appeared to be an age to the waiting men Ute Charley remained hidden. Whether or not he had heard some suspicious sound, the guard on the roof stood up on the coaming to make an unusually long survey of the vicinity of the little pond. Scarcely had he reseated himself, with his back toward the willows, than Ute Charley stepped cautiously from them and cat-footed across the short space remaining. Once under the low, wide eave of the little structure, he stood erect and worked along the side of the building to where a narrow window showed beside the wide chimney. Flattening himself against the wall, he removed his flopped gray hat and gazed inside, then ducked below the sill and crossed to the other side to get a view from another angle.

WHEN the old guide replaced his hat and made his customary beckoning gesture, he followed it by holding up one finger. Reading the sign correctly, Freeman set out following the route Ute Charley had taken.

"Me next!" Hennessey whispered, as the big engineer crawled past on his way to the willows. Freeman nodded cheerfully, though inwardly fearful. Having gone but a few yards, he looked back, scowling when a light crackling of twigs

warned him that impatient Hennessey was close on his trail. Reaching the end of the willow screen after a time, he successfully passed the few yards of open going and joined Ute Charley, just as the latter had commenced his inspection of a door on the far side of the chimney. Lifting the latch with the utmost caution, the old mountaineer shoved lightly against the flimsy door, then a little harder. Then he stepped back with a frown of disappointment and clutched Freeman's arm, at the same time making the gesture of battering at the door with his shoulder.

The engineer nodded understandingly, and gathered his strength for the effort, but Ute Charley held up his hand warningly, and his lips soundlessly formed the word: "Wait!"

Keyed to the highest tension, every muscle and nerve in his massive, clean-blooded body braced for the big moment, the engineer nodded again, then spun around to look eastward, when he saw a startled look spread over the face of Ute Charley, who had backed against the wall and jerked his rifle to a ready.

Nestled in the timber, beyond the pond, stood an Indian teepee, visible only from their location. Just outside it, rifle in hand, stood the tall Mexican, Juan. Completely fagged from two sleepless nights, the Yaqui evidently was having difficulty in arousing his befuddled faculties. As he looked, then rubbed his eyes and looked again, Ute Charley's restless, roving eyes discovered a movement in the brush beside the teepee. Less quick of sight, Freeman had become but vaguely conscious that danger lay there when the muzzle of Ute Charley's rifle thrust forward like the strike of a serpent, spitting angry flame as the butt touched his shoulder.

The bellow of that ancient piece seemed to set the entire hollow in motion. Over by the teepee, a tall Indian leaped high, relaxing his hold on his rifle as he turned in air to a horizontal position and crashed down among the bushes without so much as a death groan. Bursting from the bushes beside him, a half dozen other Indians, who evidently had started stalking the intruders, let out wild yells in chorus, and charged.

With the acute senses of one whose every faculty and instinct leaps to his aid in time of stress, Freeman saw and heard a dozen things, simultaneously, as he turned toward the cabin.

Bursting from the willows at full charge, Hennessey had almost reached the little hut when the guard on the roof slid to the eave and leaped like a catamount, glittering knife flashing in full-arm sweep as he collided with the onrushing Irishman—his only visible enemy. As the two went to the ground, both nearly breathless from the shock, the other four broke from the willows, firing wildly through the south window of the cabin as they ran.

In those same seconds Ute Charley dropped to one knee and commenced pumping a steady stream of lead into the brush where the Indians had dropped.

And only seconds later Freeman rammed his muscular shoulder against the door, which yielded with a splintering crash, letting his big body through with such an unexpected lack of resistance that he fell full length on the rough planking of the floor.

"INSIDE, everybody!" Ute Charley roared, whirling with the crash of the door and leaping over the threshold. The sharp crack of a sixgun greeted his entry, and he spun half around with a bullet high in his shoulder. As he dropped his useless rifle and unholstered a heavy six with his left hand, a second bullet shocked him from crown to toe as it tore through the same shoulder. As he sagged weakly against the door-casing and sank slowly to the floor, he was bowled aside by the charging Hennessey, who had shaken off his agile, but slender adversary and rammed into it, bellowing like a bull.

Trying in vain to steady himself, Ute Charley dropped outside, where he propped himself against the cabin and

commenced firing his heavy six toward the teepee.

By that time the interior of the cabin had become an inferno of strife. Pistol smoke hung acrid in the close little room. Looking through it with pain-dulled eyes, Ute Charley struggled weakly to bring his wavering gun to bear inside when he saw Freeman struggle to his knees despite the buffeting of three fiercely-fighting adversaries, then go down, tripped as he had almost gotten his feet under him.

In Hennessey's face a knife licked out of the smoke, slashing a red streak just below his eye, down across his cheek to his collar-bone. Seemingly pricked into greater ferocity by the wound, the fighting son of Erin lashed out with a mighty fist, shouting joyously when it landed with a solid smack that was followed by the fall of the knife-wielder's body.

The next moment Hennessey felt his legs clasped tightly by the man he had knocked down, while another opponent was banging away at him fiercely with a pistol-butt.

"That's the stuff, oldtimer! Take the elvator! Goin' up-up-up!" Hennessey shouted encouragingly, as, out of the tail of his eye he saw Freeman's big body heave mightily, then work slowly toward the upright, fairly harnessed with clinging, flailing enemies.

Once on his fet, the giant planted his towerlike legs far apart and gave a mighty wrench which shook off one little Mexican as a boy heaves a potato from the end of a stick. With his freed arm Freeman caught a second foe by the nape of his neck and jerked his head backward until he loosened his hold, screaming in awful agony. A kick full in the stomach sent the howling sufferer careening into a corner, where he fell heavily on a decrepit cot, smashing it to the floor, where he lay writhing and swearing luridly in bad Spanish. His one remaining enemy Freeman disposed of by raising him off the floor and banging him against the log wall with such awful impact that the old structure shook from coam to underpinning. The next moment the Mexican lay senseless, his back broken.

"Lay off. This is Tim Hennessey's own private war!" the volatile Irishman shouted protestingly when Freeman turned to aid him. "I got two down, and only one to go, so stand back and—

"Ugh! Stay with 'em, Big Boy! Me light's—goin'—goin'—o-u-t!"

A bullet from the brush had hummed through the open doorway, catching the Irishman in the back.

Backing within sight through that same doorway, three of Hennessey's men appeared, firing steadily as they came. The fourth lay with a knife sunk to the haft in his breast, his hands gripped tightly about the throat of the Indian guard—whose brains were slowly oozing out where someone had beaten in his skull with a rifle butt.

As Freeman jumped to catch Hennessey's wilting body, the Mexican he had been fighting leaped for the south window, smashing sash and panes in his plunge. With gun-room won at last, Freeman drew and fired while the man still was in the air. Slumping over the windowsill, the Mexican lay draped there without motion, while the three survivors from outside tramped in. Two of them were steadying Ute Charley, who bore his pain stoically, and smiled grimly as he saw Freeman standing like an avenging Goliath over the living and dead. The third man weaved in with an effort, staggering toward a cot in a far corner, and collapsed just before reaching it. Picking the man up, Freeman laid him on the cot and bent to examine him, then covered his face with a blanket, and turned away.

CHAPTER XIX

TO A FINISH

THE firing from outside stilled for a time after Ute Charley's men entered the cabin. Taking advantage of the lull, Freeman bound his prisoners securely, then leaned the shattered door in its place —not as a barrier, but to screen his movements.

One of Hennessey's men, a pallid youth whose eyes were ghastly with terror, but whose face was a desperate fighting mask,

was stationed as an outlook man. Having reloaded all the guns in the cabin, Freeman turned to Ute Charley, who had just finished stuffing a handkerchief into the worst of the two gashes in his shoulder. "How you making it, Old Man?" the engineer inquired, anxiously.

"Oh, so-so like," the grim old warrior answered. "Got two slugs plumb through that shoulder, and I reckon one of 'em nicked the bone. I'm half a man yet, though," he added, cheerfully.

"You're a he-man at that!" Hennessey declared admiringly. He fumbled beneath the back of his shirt with an exploring forefinger and withdrew it, gory.

"Me, I dunno," he answered, meeting the engineer's anxious, inquiring look. "Near as I can make out, that bullet glanced off me ribs where they join me backbone. I don't think I'm kilt entirely; but it's paralyzed I am from the waist down, and from the same place half way up. Would you give me a shot of red eye and lay me on me stomach by that door? I'm thinking I'm still able to wiggle me trigger finger a few times!"

"Strikes me you're something resembling a he-man yourself," Freeman declared, as he held the willing Irishman's head and offered a flask he had taken from a shelf above the shattered cot.

"Aw, get away with your blarney!" Hennessey rebuked him.

"How about those rummies out there? Get any of 'em, you think?" Freeman inquired. He addressed the watcher by the door, but it was Ute Charley who answered: "Anyways half of 'em's off their feet."

"And that big Mexican?"

"Still goin' strong last I seen of him, damn his rotten hide!"

"That's bad. He's a vicious devil, and never will quit till we're all down—or they are. Wonder which one of these scowling devils is their leader?"

He indicated the prisoners, glowering in their bonds on the floor.

"Don't know right now," Ute Charley growled, menacingly, "but if I'm alive when this thing winds up I'm gonna tie 'em to bushes and heat my old gun-bar'l red-hot and find out!"

"Along that line I got a suggistion," Hennessey chimed in. "Ever hear how them heathen Chinese officials identifies their criminals?

"No? Why the ignorance of you! They cut them criminals' heads off—then they can tell 'em every time!"

"COME here, Freeman," Morton, the young fellow at the door called, guardedly. "Something going on up on that rock shelf beyond the teepee," he explained, pointing.

"They're building a barricade of small boulders up there!" Freeman declared, quickly. "Let's give it to 'em, boys! No use to allow them to take their time and make a regular fortress.

"No, wait a minute! Come and give me a lift with these crippled fellows! Speaking of fortifications, that fireplace looks good and solid! We won't be so bad off, ourselves."

Ute Charley managed to walk to the fireplace with some assistance, his sufferings indexed on his pain-distorted face, but with never a groan or whimper. Hennessey cursed them for a bunch of bumble-fingered fat-heads, when they jarred him a little in lifting him—then took the sting off by admitting that they worked pretty well for a bunch that never had learned to carry the hod.

Morton, the pallid-faced youth who was afraid not to fight, poked the barrel of his gun out through a knothole in the shattered door and commenced triggering busily. He stopped when Ute Charley called: "Wait a little while, son! What's the use o' shooting unless you're hitting somebody?"

The old guide had been peering through a gap between the chimney and the logs. "Everybody better git back here an' lay low and let 'em do their do for a spell," he raised his voice to advise, when the enemy started another brisk fusillade. The advice appeared sound, so they hov-

ered behind the fireplace while bullets spattered against the old structure—some of them bedding themselves harmlessly in the logs, others boring through rotten spots or singing through chinks to rake the room.

Exhibiting the humaneness latent in every really brave man, Freeman exposed himself freely to drag the prisoners to safety.

Alternately growing and lessening in intensity, the initial attack from the reorganized enemy wore itself down, without having inflicted any damage or drawn an answering bullet.

Always impatient during enforced inactivity, Freeman rose to pace about uneasily. When he chanced to show himself by the shattered south window a bullet zipped through it. From his position on the floor, Hennessey fired diagonally upward past Freeman's hip, then twice more in quick sucession. After the third shot he yelped joyously and broke his six to reload.

"Told you I was alive yet!" he exulted. "Me legs is numb, but I don't shoot with me legs! That heathen was up on the bluff by the otter slide we come down on—and I got him, eh, Big Boy?"

"Got him, and it's a good thing you did!" Freeman answered. "They may get us anyway, in the long run, but he had us flanked, and would have pickled us in short order if he hadn't got too enterprising!"

"Might as well look at things as they are, you fellers that's got whole hides," Ute Charley said evenly, twisting painfully around to lean against the fireplace and face them. "You ain't got a shot in the world to live through what they hand out if you stick here. Only thing for you to do is to bust out an' make a running fight of it."

"Know any more good jokes?" Freeman inquired, blandly. He took a quick side glance at young Morton's fear-constricted face, noted the hesitation there, and added: "I'm not leaving helpless friends—and I'll shoot daylight into and through any other able-bodied man here who even suggests such a thing!"

AS UTE CHARLEY started to grumble out some sort of a rejoinder, the firing from the ledge broke out with unprecedented vigor, bullets fairly hailing against the cabin. Uneasily Freeman noted that the firing now came from two angles, and that the staunch old fireplace no longer afforded complete protection. Within the first minute a searching bullet ripped a big splinter from the floor within inches of Morton's thigh. A little later poor, helpless Hennessey drew in his breath jerkily and expelled it with a sharp hiss as a slug tore through his biceps, then bored on to bring a sharp shriek from the Mexican prisoner lying beside him.

Suddenly overwhelmed by a fierce determination to go down fighting, Freeman got up and strode to the door, where he fired his rifle steadily at the thin wisps of smoke that betrayed the enemy's location. After a short hesitation, the other two joined him, the three soon filling the close little place with a cloud of smoke.

When Freeman paused to reload, Ute Charley caught his eye and beckoned. When the engineer reached his side, the old guide cupped his hand to his mouth and bawled above the crash of the rifles:

"Damn poor shootin' they're doin' over there! Burning more powder than they ever have before, but they ain't a bullet drilled in here in the last minute!"

Freeman lumbered back to the opening and spoke to the men there. They ceased firing and turned their sweaty faces to look at him curiously. With silence in the cabin, the din without at once took on the aspect of a storm that was fierce, but distant. Threading through it were voices—lusty, hearty voices, yammering out incoherent battlecries.

For a half minute Freeman stood listening. Then the puzzled expression on his ruddy face gave place to a look of astonished delight, and he jerked the door away from the opening, slamming it on the floor behind him as he leaped outside.

"That's Slim Martindale, fellows! I'd know that voice anywhere! He and somebody else are pouring hot lead down from

the bluff above, and he's got 'em where the hair's short!

"Whoop-e-e, Slim! Stay with 'em! Come on bullies! Here we go for the great big finish!"

"Your idee's a plumb good one, but you're a little late! The finish is finished awready!" Slim's voice rolled back, and he came scrambling down the precipitous slope, stopping on the ledge to make a wary inspection of the half-dozen forms sprawled there.

When Freeman and the others joined him, Slim grinned through his freckles and extended a hand, as he explained succintly: "Me and Dutch and Lefty got behind and above them snakes, and not a ranny of 'em was alive a minute after we got busy!

"Where's the rest o' the bunch?"

The puncher looked grave when informed of the casualties their party had suffered, but succeded in cheering up the sufferers, after all had gathered in the cabin, and he had inspected their wounds.

"Bone's nicked, sure enough, but you'll be awright in a few weeks," he assured Ute Charley. "I'm a kinda half-ways third-class hawse doctor myself, and you're a hawse, oldtimer, if I ever seed one!

"And you, Irish! You got banged in the back by flat lead that may a cracked a rib or two, and crossed your telegraph wires, temporarily! That's about all!

"Hightail it up there and git our hawses, will you, Lefty? I got a first-aid kit in my saddle pocket that's gonna come in some handy in this here emergency!"

AFTER Slim had sluiced their wounds with a fiery antiseptic that brought grimaces from Ute Charley and blood-curdling curses from Hennessey, he bandaged them clumsily, but effectively, then opened an after-the-battle council.

"Got to be leaving out of here pretty quick now," he announced. "Got a little trip to make that just naturally can't be postponed none. I'll leave Dutch here to help you fellers out.

"By the way, Lefty, Pete's been shagging continuous, and the poor little cuss is about wored out. I seed a big sorrel stud out there in the brush. Wish you'd go ketch him and saddle him for me. Get a fresh hawse for yourself, too, if you think you'll need him. You kin ride with me for a ways, then hightail it to the Double-O for help. These fellers need a doctor, and you better fetch the buckboard up this way as far as you can so's you can haul 'em in when it's safe to move 'em."

"You're a hell of a funny feller, if I do have to say it," Ute Charley remarked. "Here you come bustin' up here to help us hunt *Diabler* an' the gal—and, by heck, you ain't said a word about neither of 'em."

"Never done no sich," Slim drawled. "What I come up here for was to get a little help. The ways things turned out, I got rid of some, but I reckon I'll make out some way."

"Waal, where you goin' now? To take a nap? You sure look like you're needing one."

"Yeah? Waal, looks is deceivin' sometimes. Right now I got something real important on my mind. I been thinking that where Injuns is camped most usual they's jerked bear meat or venison somewhere around. Having a few minutes left before I leave out, I'm gonna ooze over there and search that wicky-up some assidious."

Spying a huge loaf of sour dough bread on a shelf above the cluttered table in one corner of the room, the puncher tucked it under his arm and strode out.

"Don't know where you're going, or what for—but I'm going along!" Freeman called after him.

CHAPTER XX

MAN TO MAN

"LOOKS like you're due to pick up a little easy money after that pool game had ended, eh, Silky?" Seated opposite the bar in Blinky Morgan's place,

with his chair tilted against the wall, P. T. Wooten spoke cautiously out of one corner of his flabby mouth. P. T. Wooten always spoke cautiously, secretively, as became one whose mental processes were dark and devious, and often sinister.

Seated next to the shyster, dapper little Silky Barnes ran a white hand through his blonde hair and kept his pale eyes fixed on the men at the pool table, as he answered with equal secretiveness: "Looks that way, but you never can tell. Sometimes these ranchers make a lot of noise about gambling, then want to spend a night finding out who loses a dollar or two. Handled right, though, I believe that these three will give down some real money before morning. They sure appear to be flush and reckless; that's why I'm staying out of bed when I really need some sleep."

"Better keep two or three of the boys here too," cautious Wooten advised. "That old cock with the beard looks to me like a rearing-to-go fighter; and those two punchers—"

Wooten stopped to turn his flabby, expressionless countenance toward the pool table, where Tom Spencer's voice rose raucously: "My shot, an' I got the world by the tail! I'm callin' a combination—fifteen ball for the corner pocket. Bet you ten bucks I make it!"

"I'm callin' that! Want to go half on it, Barney?" Bob Dorgan spoke up, promptly, digging into his greasy corduroys to fish out a wad of crumpled bills. More conservative by nature, Barney Hall, the other puncher, clumped around the table to sight at the combination over the top of Spencer's cue ball, then went to the designated corner pocket to get a backsight from that angle. After taking these observations, he tucked his half-finished bottle of beer against one corner of his mouth to drink gurglingly, at the same time shaking his head in negative.

Squinting across the table, Spencer cued his ball viciously—and missed. "Aw well, what's the difference?" he chuckled, as Bob gleefully raked in the winnings. "This is a piker game anyway. After a bit, when we git to playin' poker, we'll shuffle some real money, an' see what we see. Chances is I'll peel you rannies clean before morning, includin' your clothes and a first mortgage on your underwear."

Watching out of his one eye from back of the bar, Moran caught Barnes' suggestive nod and turned his scarred face toward the pool table.

"Hey, back there!" he called with as near an aproach of heartiness as his surly nature would admit. "I buy a drink for the house every Friday night at eleven o'clock! By a strange coincidence they's a Friday in this week, an' this is it. Also, eleven o'clock done slipped past before I noticed it—for which I beg parding.

"In other words, everybody tuck their bellies against the bar, an' say what!"

"Music to my ears," roan-bearded little Spencer declared, leaning his cue against the table and making for the bar with the short, jerky step peculiar to him. "C'mon, boys, dawg-gone your lazy hides! The sweetest drink that ever was drinkt is the one that's on the house!"

"Red-eye all around, I reckon," Moran said, suggestively.

"Sure thing!" Wooten and Barnes answered in unison.

The half-dozen frowsy-looking townsmen who had hastened to the fountainhead endorsed Barnes' taste avidly.

THE law of suggestion had been applied, and now it functioned. Spencer hesitated only momentarily, then picked up the bottle subtle-minded Moran shoved at him in a matter-of-fact way.

With a pattern set for them, the two punchers followed the boss's example. They had been drinking straight beer, and were a little dubious about mixing 'em. But—

"My turn!" Barnes declared. "This one's on me!" Wooten said, almost simultaneously, their idea being to start the spirit of whoop-it-up-till-morning, before the poker game opened. Steady-headed little Barnes had a mentality that appeared impervious to the assaults of liquor

fumes. So nothing pleased him more than to contest with a sucker, first at the bar, then at the greasy card table in the rear of the long, low-ceilinged, tobacco-fumed room.

Not caring who bought, so it was bought, the merry villagers strung along the bar unanimously endorsed the program by passing the bottle down the line of emptied glasses, while Moran hustled to refill the chasers.

When Barnes slid the bottle to Spencer, with a hospitable, "Fill up and drink hearty," the little rancher picked it up, then twisted his lean body to get a look at the grimy-faced clock above the dingy backbar.

"H-u-m-m! Eleven-five," he considered, then grinned through his bristling beard and set the bottle down again. "Just hapent to think we got an unfinished game back there," he announced, "and I don't want to git lit up none till I've showed these ham-fingered galoots what real poolplayin' is!"

"Aw, one more won't hurt you none," Moran stopped his vigorous polishing of the bar to volunteer.

"Won't hurt none, but it won't help none, and us expert pool artists has to be careful," Spencer declared. "C'mon, boys, an' take your licking! We'll quit after another game or two, and see what the little pasteboards does for us!"

"Anybody barred in that poker game?" Barnes went back to the table to inquire after Spencer had lighted a long black cheroot and picked up his cue.

"Not on your life!" the rancher answered, readily. "She's plumb open to the world, and the more that sets in the more dinero I'll have when Moran sweeps us out with the other trash in the morning!"

"Guess I'll stay around and set in with you for a while, then," Barnes said, casually—which was exactly what Spencer had been luring him to do.

Reseating themselves by the wall, Barnes and Wooten watched with concealed impatience as the pool balls resumed their merry clicking, Spencer and the punchers chaffing each other continually as they played.

AFTER a time Wooten shuffled his big, frayed person to the bar and engaged in a low-voiced conversation with Moran, who nodded understandingly and jerked his head for two of the loungers to come to the cigar case. He talked with them there, while Wooten returned to his chair, leaning over to whisper to Barnes: "Told Moran to have Ledbetter and Jenks stay to the finish. You might need them in case these suckers squawk."

Barnes shrugged his well-groomed shoulders and smiled scornfully. "Since when have I needed help in handling a few drunken punchers?" he asked, a little resentfully.

"Oh, I know you're lightning with that gun of yours," Wooten soothed him, suavely. "And, of course, Moran will be back of 'em with his gun, and all that. Still—"

"Still what?" Barnes asked, when the other hesitated.

"We-e-ll, I don't know exactly. All I can say is, that old rancher strikes me as knowing what he's about," Wooten declared, eyeing Spencer uneasily. "For instance, you'll notice that when we tried to tank him up, we got two whiskies in us to his one."

The two fell silent for a time. Back at the pool table, high heels clumped and spurs jingled, and burly Barney bawled out a snatch of trail song between shots.

When four of the townsmen trooped out, seeing no immediate prospect of mooching another drink, Ledbetter and Jenks stationed themselves at the front of the bar and commenced throwing poker dice for the cigars, half-heartedly. Noticing that those two worthies appeared bored with the situation, Barnes spoke to Wooten, a little impatiently: "Tell 'em to go on home. You ought to know that I can take care of this thing."

"Tell 'em yourself—then the responsibility will be on you," Wooten came back, with unwonted heat. "I tell you, Silky,

there's something going on here that I can't quite understand, and—Ahem!"

The clock above the backbar had tolled a single jangling note.

The shyster's flat voice trailed off to nothingness, and his flabby jaw sagged as he gazed, open-mouthed past the cigar case to where the door had swung inward to admit Slim Martindale.

YES, Slim Martindale, saddle-weary, and haggard from loss of sleep, but alert in bearing and movement as he stepped aside to make room for the massive form of Freeman, who loomed in the doorway for a moment, then crowded up close to the two at the cigar case.

Barnes' pale eyes flamed balefully, then contracted to twin points of green fire as he looked through the open doorway, and on across the narrow, sagging board walk. Standing there was a big golden-sorrel stallion which tossed his blazed muzzle impatiently, and pawed fretfully at the edge of the walk with a white-fetlocked foot.

A tense silence clamped down on the sordid little liquor-fumed room as the puncher stood with goat-chapped legs spread wide, his clear brown eyes sweeping the room as though noting the position of its every occupant. As he stood thus, there was a general shifting of position all about the place.

After one glance, Moran moved to a position handy to the shelf below the battered brass cash register, where his heavy six-gun lay. Backing to the rear wall, Spencer leaned his cue against it. "Your shot, Bob," he prompted in a thin voice that trembled with excitement.

Wooten inched his chair away from Barnes, as the little gambler left his seat and stood facing the immobile figure that had stepped out of the night.

The mere presence of the puncher in Sandstone, after what had transpired there during his previous visit, was a declaration of war. His assurance in bringing the sinister sorrel stallion was even more ominous.

As he started deliberately down the room, Slim hitched his slush-bespattered trousers with a characteristic gesture, leaving his thumbs hooked carelessly in his belt. Walking straight up to the little gambler, he drawled in greeting: "Lo, Barnes! What'll you give me for that hawse I been forkin'?"

The gambler's little green eyes fixed on the punchers hands, but his voice came cool and level: "Won't buy that horse from you, because he isn't yours."

"That so?" Slims eyebrows arched in surprise. "Whose hawse is he then? Ain't your'n is he?"

Before Barnes could answer, Slim's smooth drawl went on: "Tell you what I'll do. I'll cut you the cards just once, for a hundred bucks, high card wins. What say?"

As Barnes looked his surprise at the puncher's sudden changing of the subject, Wooten shifted the location of his chair again, and parted the flowing tails of his frayed Prince Albert to seat himself heavily as he said, suavely "That's better—much better. For a time I was afraid you two good sports were about to —er—fall out, over the ownership of a horse, which doesn't appear to belong to either of you."

"Don't belong to me," Slim admitted, "and any geezer that claims him sure can have him. Meanwhilst, though, I'm gonna keep him.

"Do I hear any objections anywheres?"

"Not the least bit in the world," Wooten prompted, tapping Barnes' ankle warningly with his big flat foot.

"Awright, then, how about cutting them cards?" Slim inquired, with another surprising divergence of thought.

"It's a bet," Barnes agreed. "Bring us a deck, Moran."

"Shuffle 'em," Slim suggested, after Moran had trotted with the deck, then trotted back more swiftly to be near his arsenal.

Using the vacant chair as a table, Barnes riffled the pack with nimbled, trained fingers, then extended them to the puncher who had bent over to watch closely. "Cut!" he invited.

"AIN'T necessary," the puncher declared, looking straight into the little gambler's eyes. "All I wanted was one good look at the first finger of your left hand where you wear that big diamond ring when you're out in the hills with your damn gang committin' murder! You ain't got it on, but the place where you wear it shows, Mister Silky Barnes, *otherwise knowed hereabouts as EL DIABLO!*"

Not so much as by the twitch of a facial muscle did Barnes betray the rage and hate raging within him, as Slim drawled on:

"Some fellers is *too* slick! Grace Marsden seen your moustache and that ring! You wanted her to see 'em because the moustache was false, and you don't wear no ring ordinary times!"

Not a man in the room but whose heart beat faster, who breathed more heavily, tingled with the certain knowledge that one man of the two must die.

Of them all, the principal actors appeared the least concerned. Standing in an indolent attitude, a slight smile crinkling the corners of his firm mouth, the tall, curly-headed puncher watched unconcernedly when Barnes dropped the deck on the chair and coolly withdrew the long amber cigaret holder from his sensitive mouth. With calm deliberation he twisted a burnt-out stub of a cigaret from the holder and dropped it into a corroded brass cuspidor by the stained wall. As he turned back to face the puncher, he started to put the empty holder into the outside breast pocket of his coat.

"Needn't go to all that trouble to git your coat lapel outa the way so's you can get at that gun you got cached in your shoulder holster," Slim observed in a detached way. "I'm gonna spot you a good grip on that coat lapel, *Diablo!* Then I'm gonna—"

With a lightninglike motion Barnes jerked his coat back with his left hand, as his right flashed across his vest and drew.

The puncher's thumb unhooked from his broad leather belt, and the hand whipped down, then back, then up like the popped end of a whiplash.

Three times, steel-framed little Barnes sought to bring his wavering gun to bear. Each time he was shocked off balance by a slug that tore into his body. After the third shot, the tall puncher stood, smoking gun in hand, watching the slender form of Barnes slump sidewise against the wall, then crumple in the sawdust by Wooten's feet.

Slim snapped around in his tracks. Back at the pooltable two cues had struck the floor, and Spencer's gun had bellowed stridently against the soundboard of the rear wall. Moran's hands slapped the bar as he fell face downward on it, his six sliding from his nerveless hand splashed by the blood dripping from a hole in his temple.

By the cigar case there was a scuffle of feet and then the loud smack of a fist pistoned against solid flesh. Ledbetter crashed to the floor, battered a moment later by the wilted form of Jenks, who had been picked up bodily by Freeman and slammed down on Ledbetter with a force that knocked the breath from both their bodies.

"Gone to stealin' gals around here, eh?" Spencer's voice rang out, as he trotted to the front. "Gone to stealin' gals, right in Gawd's country where men is men, an' skunks is skunks, an—"

"Hush!" Slim warned, then trotted to the stairway, on which he had heard the patter of bare feet. Jerking the door open, he discovered two Mexicans who had been sleeping upstairs. Lined by his gun, they marched to the bar, where Freeman disarmed them, after peeling the belts off Ledbetter and Jenks.

WHILE the others chattered volubly, exulted by their complete and speedy victory, Slim faced the cardtable around

and sat down behind it. Taking off his hat, he rapped on the table for order. "Court's done opened!" he announced. "Freeman, you're sheriff! Fetch me that dog-faced son-of-a-gun in the red shirt!"

Collared and shoved forward by Freeman, Spencer shuffled and chewed his lip, but stood silent when Slim eyed him sternly and asked: "Where's Grace Marsden hid?"

"Take him out and shoot him, boys," Slim said to Bob and Barney, after a repetition of his question had brought no answer.

They led him out through the alley door, and a shot sounded outside.

"Now fetch me that lantern-jawed geezer with the purple nose!" Slim ordered.

There was another shot outside after Ledbetter had been led out, leaden-faced, but silent.

"Mexico's turn," Slim announced, briskly. "Shoot 'em past and let's get it over with!"

The Mexicans having been paraded and questioned and led away, with a pistolshot in the alley following the disappearance of each, Slim shook his curly head dejectedly, and rose: "Reckon we're stumped, fellers. We give all of 'em a fair chance, and—"

"Not quite all—there's one left," Freeman interrupted, indicating Wooten, who still sat by the wall, his flabby face heavy with abject terror.

"Tha's right," Slim agreed reseating himself, and resuming his grave judicial air. "Don't reckon he knows much, or would tell it if he did. Still, we don't want to show no partiality, so run him through the chute."

Propelled to the table by the big engineer, who handled him none too gently, Wooten stood silent, ghastly faced, when Slim drawled the inquiry: "Where's Grace Marsden?"

Slim rose and sighed heavily. "Guess we got to hunt all over this town for her," he lamented! "Well, take him out, an' get it over with! Then we can—"

"Let go me! Let go me! I'll talk! Honest to God, I'll tell the truth!" the big man screamed in a hoarse, strained voice.

"The girl's in the basement under Barnes' barn! Trap door in the front of the oats bin! Barnes took her there! Let go, I tell you! Give me a chance and I'll—"

"Enough said," Slim interrupted, grinning. He raised his voice to call toward the alley: "Awright, fellers! Fetch 'em back in!"

Herded by Spencer and the punchers, the presumably dead prisoners filed in glumly and were ranged along the wall. "Git in line with 'em!" Slim grinned at the livid-faced shyster. "Hold 'em there, fellers, till we get back! If that girl's all right, they'll live a while. If she ain't all right—

"C'mon, Freeman. We'll go see!"

CHAPTER XXI

SLIM,S PROPOSAL

GRAY dawn found a happy party gathered in the cozy "big" room of the Double-O ranch-house.

Having feasted his eyes on his rescued daughter, and cuddled and petted her with his gnarled hands as though to be certain that his eyes had not deceived him, Dick Marsden joined Spencer by the fireplace, and the two patched together the loose ends of the history of the campaign for possession of the mine on Bald Hill. Called on to fill in certain gaps, Freeman told of the happenings at the outlaw's camp up by Badger creek. Having related his tale, the engineer managed to wedge his big body in beside the girl, who was seated on a settee in an alcove where the firelight didn't shine *too* strongly.

For some minutes they spoke never a word that the two gray-heads by the fire could hear.

Slim found them there when he came in later than the others, having taken time to rub the prized stallion down carefully, despite his sleepiness and fatigue.

"Trailed you down, eh?" Slim remarked, cheerfully, drawing up a chair

and seating himself on the other side of the girl.

"It appears you did," Freeman answered, none too delightedly.

"Kind of sleepy, myself, not having slumbered none for three nights, 'cept what napping I done in saddle," Slim prattled on. "Still I was bound to have a talk with you, Grace, and it couldn't wait."

"Oh, in that case—" Freeman heaved his big frame upright and lumbered to the fireplace to gaze sombrely into it.

Slim dropped his voice to a confidential tone and drawled to the girl, who had commenced to fidget on the settee, and eye Freeman's dour countenance uneasily: "Had something to say to you that just nach'ly couldn't wait. Reckon me and you knows each other pretty well by now, so—"

"Oh! I'm so sorry," she interrupted, impulsively patting the back of one of his hands with her smooth palm. "You've been so kind, and so brave, and so self-sacrificing that—"

"Keep the change," the puncher interrupted, impolitely. "What I want to ask —what I got to ask, is—"

"Please, *please* stop," she cut him off, turning her lustrous blue eyes on him pleadingly. "You see, it's this way. I—that is, Cliff and I—we—"

"Damn Cliff! That big galoot ain't in on this play none! He's a good enough jasper in his way, but they comes times when a feller has to be kind of selfish-like!"

As Freeman turned his red-thatched head to frown protentiously in their direction, the girl drew her hand away and shrank toward the other end of the settee, pouting. Unperturbed, the puncher leaned over toward her. She was surprised to note a mischievous glint in his brown eyes as he dropped his voice to a still-lower tone and drawled on: "I been rustlin' around, and I found a mag-nify-cent two-pound steak out there in the kitchen. If it ain't askin' too cuss-fired much, couldn't you sneak out there an' fry it for me on th' Q. T., with mebbe a few potatoes an' three-four eggs, to kinda patch out a meal?"

As she rose smiling, and departed for the kitchen, Slim caught Freeman's glance and called: "She said 'yes', Big Boy! Fact is, that's one fine girl that distributes her favors plumb impartial! Leastwise, I'm betting that big sorrel stud that she's said 'yes' to both of us this morning—and each of us has got his heart's desire!"

DON'T FAIL TO READ

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A Smashing Story of a Sixgunning Cowpoke
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Mystery of the Lost Tribe

Dick and the trapper locked in furious battle, while the Eskimos watched, fascinated.

WHEN the Mounties came to take the Eskimo census they found one tribe missing. Where was it? The answer to that question forms an enthralling story of the frozen north, told by a man who year after year deserts civilization to roam the Barren Lands.

By A. de Harries Smith

Author of "Siccani Medicine," "Arctic Rustlers," etc.

OUTSIDE the thick snow walls of Iktik's dancing house the Arctic winds roared and boomed; accompanied now and then by a thin howl of distress from one of the huskies cowering down in the white drifts.

Inside the igloo there was both warmth and light of a kind. The air reeked with the raw tang of furs, greasy bodies, and wet deerskins. Stone lamps, filled with blubber oil and fed by moss wicks, glinted on the Eskimos' half naked bodies and on the khaki tunics of two Mounted Police.

"Umilak! Hey, you Umilak, *aqciluqotuyaqtayin!* Move along there!"

Sergeant Dick Cleaver shouted the order in an irritated voice that cut through the natives' clucking gabble. There was a moment's silence and then a concerted howl of laughter filled the igloo.

Two bearded Eskimos, stripped to the waist, suddenly rushed across the hard packed floor, and arriving at arm's length commenced to slam each other on their chests with alternate, rocking blows. The men laughed childishly, glancing over heaving shoulders at the delighted audience of women.

"Some circus!" Constable Tim Noonan grunted wearily, throwing down the record book he was holding. He stared over at the two Eskimos still buffeting each other and all at once a smile stole over his round, freckled face.

"Lemonade! Popcorn! Peanuts! Who says peanuts; freshly salted—" Tim commenced droning.

"Shut up!" Cleaver's curt tones broke in on him. "We've got to finish this Eskimo census and have it ready to mail out on the first boat or there'll be hell popping. Fed up with these antics. I'm going to knock a hole in this funny business."

The sergeant's gray eyes were flaming as he jerked upright from the pile of skins on which he had been sitting. He shrugged wide shoulders, shaking himself free of the snow water dripping from the roof, and stepping over the half circle of bent backs before him, strode across the hut.

A quick walk carried the youngster to where the two panting Eskimos still belabored each other good naturedly. Cleaver's sun browned hands darted out fastening on one native's ears. He whirled the man about, and with a hard knee driving behind, forced the performer through the squatted natives and over to where Noonan sat.

"Now!" Cleaver threw out. "Make another start, Tim. Put down Umilak, married, hunter, and leave the rest of the damn thing blank. I wish to thunder that some of those arm-chair guys in Ottawa that wished this head counting job on us were here. I'd make them sweat. Got it. Right."

Wham! The Sergeant sent an uppercut into Umilak's moon face that rocked the Eskimo's head and sent him crashing against the snow wall. The native reached the ground in a clatter of pots and a wild chorus of delighted hoots.

"Don't let him out of that corner," Cleaver warned his comrade. "I'll drag them in one by one and we'll get the thing done that way. Got to be out of here today if we're ever going to get the census completed in time. Hey, you Tutanok; come—"

A wild chorus of yowling from the huskies outside halted the words. Instantly the dance house became a riot of sounds. The Eskimos crowded into their parkas, jostled one another at the low entrance, and scrambled out into the bitter outside air. The clamor of fighting dogs drifted in above the natives' calls of greeting.

"Visitors," Noonan suggested, feeling in one pocket for his pipe. "Jake with me. We'll count these birds in with the rest of the gang. May save us a trip. Hope it's a whole dang tribe. Say! Well, I'll be eternally hogtied! Ain't no blubber chewers a-tall. No less a person than our old tillicum Mister "China Coast" Wulraven. Howdy, Chink."

"Hello! Hello! Hello!"

CHEERY salutations flowed from Wulraven's frosted parka as the trader's thick-set frame squeezed in through the entrance and came erect in the flickering light. He grinned over at the two Mounties. Noonan grinned back. Cleaver spat disgustedly.

Eager, laughing Eskimos divested the newcomer of his outer garments, and in a moment he was stripped to mackinaw shirt, seal-skin breeches, and long mukluks. Amiability was written on his broad face, spotted with little tufts of hair that waggled as he rubbed the circulation back into chilled features. The trader took no notice of the natives crowding about him; both cunning little eyes were peering across at Cleaver while pudgy hands ran back and forth across his face.

"Lucky you came, Chink," the sergeant rumbled at length, when the other man signified by the production of his pipe that he was at home. "Having the deuce of a time numbering off these Esks. Say, you've been around the Puvalik country

lately. Seen anything of that one tribe over there? About a hundred hunters, I guess. Been looking for them for the last three weeks."

"Nope," Wulraven's beaming face became a mask at the question. He stared steadily at Cleaver, shaking a tousled head. "Never seen or heard tell of 'em," he went on after a pause. "Why all the excitement though? They're all alike, ain't they? Stick down a bunch of names on your paper an' let it go at that. Who's goin' to know?"

Cleaver ignored the suggestion. He looked down at the trader for a long moment, then again strode across the dance house, hauled another Eskimo over to Noonan's seat and ordered the constable to enter the particulars. The work went on steadily while the heat and stenches grew in volume. Finally the census of Okamok's tribe was completed.

"You didn't see anything of them, eh?" the Sergeant went back to the previous question with his usual tenacity. "Sure you didn't get any word, Chink? You have runners out after fur all the time and you generally know what's going on.

"Nope," Wulraven grunted again, voice suddenly harsh. He gazed fixedly at his pipe stem ignoring Cleaver's eyes. "What the hell's it got to do with me anyhow? You guys is just chasin' around keepin' the Esks from trappin'; that's all the good you's doin'. Mark it down like I told you —Here, what's comin' off? Look where you plants your great feet, will you?"

Noonan had risen and carefully walked across the trader's outstretched legs. The constable stopped at the words, wheeled about and drew back one arm. Cleaver halted the gesture, spinning him around again. No words passed. The two Mounties packed the census records away in a waterproof case, threw on their parkas, and getting down on hands and knees, crawled through the entry tunnel into the bitter outside air.

"Doesn't know nothing, does he?" Noonan queried, turning his back to the stabbing wind. "That walrus faced object is back of this lost tribe racket somehow. Why would the Eskimos keep clearing out of our way, eh?"

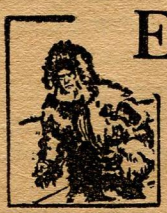
Cleaver filled his lungs with the clean, cold air, and shrugged his shoulders. "You're on the wrong trail, Timsy," the big man's voice came from the depths of his hood. "No reason in the world why Chink should want to keep us away from the natives. It does not hurt his trading to have us count the Esks. No, they're being fooled by some medicine man's tricks or something of the kind. Well, we'd better show some speed or our name will be mud on the police records."

The sergeant beckoned to the native holding the police dogs. Payment for services rendered was made in the shape of a broken fountain pen. A moment later Noonan was running in front of the team, head down and breaking trail. Cleaver swung the whip, there came the jangle of bells, excited yelps from the huskies, and the police sled swung toward the north.

A chorus of laughs from the snow houses brought the sergeant's head about, when the team had run about a hundred yards. Clinging to the steering handles Cleaver glanced back, and with it a frown settled down on his wind tanned face.

A huddle of fur clad figures stood before the dance house. "China Coast" Wulraven's red and black mackinaw shirt was distinct against a background of smoky parkas. The little man was bent double, both hands thudding his sides in high amusement.

The sergeant's lips were framed to utter a long "O—aah!" All at once he thought better of it, and swinging the long black lash again, wheeled away, a hot oath on his tongue.



EIGHT days later the two Mounties stood on an icy ridge gazing down into a snow-choked valley at their feet. The baffling wind had subsided to be replaced by a temperature they knew must be in the region of fifty below zero.

But with the wind gone, the trail they had been following and losing with unfailing regularity, was once more revealed.

It was deeply indented by the passage of many sleds and led directly to some snow huts, faintly visible against the rock walls below.

The men's breath came in little puffs of frosted fog, the dogs were white with it. It was too cold to talk. Cleaver nodded toward the igloos, and with the mute order the constable once more paddled forward before the team. They drove down through the aching whiteness and halted before the largest igloo.

With Noonan standing guard over the huskies, Cleaver ducked out of sight. In a minute he was back again, perplexity written on his face.

"Gone, Tim," the sergeant said curtly. "The igloo is warm yet. They've just lit out. Damn the crazy fools anyhow. Unhitch. We'll camp here. Too late to go on tonight."

The dogs were freed of the harness, and sensing a welcome, crowded into the low entry on the men's heels. Well accustomed to igloo etiquette the five shaggy brutes squatted in the farthest corner, sitting with cocked ears and wrinkling snouts while the men thawed out the huskies' rations of tallow and pounded meat over the blue flame of the canned heat cooker.

"Beats all," Cleaver growled when their own simple meal was over and the pipes were shutting out the odors left by the igloo's late occupants. "You know what it'll be, Timsy? If we don't get this cursed census completed in time to go out on the boat they'll have it at headquarters that—Hey, what's wrong with Alook?"

The team leader had risen to all four feet, wolf hair along his spine erect. His actions were immediately followed by the other four. Low growls of distrust came from deep down in the five throats.

"Wolves, I guess," Noonan hazarded, rolling over lazily on his sleeping bag. "You quit that monkey business, Alook, or I'll—"

A concerted chorus of yowls burst from the five dogs. Cleaver flung himself across the igloo blocking the entrance, but just a moment too late to prevent the team leader's charge.

Pung! Pung!

The sound of two rifle shots came dully through the thick snow walls, followed immediately by a shrill yelp. One of the dogs was crippled.

"Parka! Gun!" Cleaver called across to the other man, kicking the raging dogs back from the tunnel. "Hold them," he added, slipping into the parka, and disappearing, gun in hand.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

Three times the sergeant's revolver barked, as he came upright and momentarily glimpsed one shadow, darker than the others, slipping along the rock walls.

Crack! A low laugh answered the fourth shot. The prowler disappeared into the night.

Cleaver's eyes were glinting dangerously when he rammed freezing hands under the parka's skirt and padded over to gaze down on the team leader. Alook was biting wolf fashion at a red spot on his side. Another report stabbed the night's silence. Then with lips wrinkling in disgust at what he had been forced to do, Cleaver once more ducked into the igloo.

"White man?" Noonan asked, ignoring the dog's death. He well knew what that last shot heralded.

"Grrr," Cleaver growled, jerking the parka over his head. "White men? Sure. Never had any trouble with the Eskimos here; just like a lot of kids. But why in the name of hell's bells should any of the traders want to kill our dogs and try to stop us taking the census? Doesn't interfere with anyone so far as I can make out. But this guy means business. We'll get him. I'm going to sit up and watch the dogs. You roll in."

SQUATTING above the little blue flame, Cleaver sat the night out, puzzling over the problem that confronted him. But with the graying sky he was no nearer a solution. Breakfast over, the dogs were again hitched and started out across the rolling rock rises.

One valley succeeded another. The Mounties jogged steadily along bare ridges, helped the laboring dogs through the drifted gullies and again gained an-

other crest to find themselves looking out over the desolate panorama of the Arctic coast line. League after league the snow covered beach stretched on into cold-hazed horizons, with to the north the serrated shapes of the sea-ice pressure ridges towering against the sky line.

"Blazes!" The sergeant stumbled against the sled, bumping his thigh on the steering handles. The dogs had come to a sudden halt and were squatting in the snow. Ahead of the team Noonan's bear-skin gauntlet was pointing to a distant black dot creeping along the shore line.

"Coming this way," Cleaver called, one hand over his mouth to shut out the icy air. "Head down to the sea ice and stop them."

Noonan nodded, flinging himself down the slope, the now eager dogs hard on his heels. With the sergeant hanging onto the handles to keep the sled upright, they finally catapulted out onto the ice.

"A team!" the constable yelled back, boyishly excited. "White men!" He patted the lump on one hip that denoted the service Webly and shuffled off to meet the approaching dogs.

"Jee-rusalem! It's 'Daddy' Stone, the mail carrier," Cleaver grunted to himself in relief. "Good enough. Now we'll get all the news of the coast. Mush there, you huskies; mush!"

The sled animals bayed savagely at one another when the teams drew abreast, only held back from an immediate butchery by the crackling whips. Cleaver left Noonan at the police team and strode across to Stone's bent figure.

"Hello, Dad, how's she coming?" the big man boomed, thrusting out a muffled hand.

Stone ignored the gesture, bursting into voluble and acid speech.

"What kind of bozos are you, anyhow?" the mail carrier yelped, waving thin arms. "Mounted Police; yah! Drivin' mail along this coast for nigh on ten years with never a thing to harm me. An' now here comes a bunch of Esks. Holds me up. Yessir. Holds me up an' robs the mail."

"Eh?" The sergeant's grunt was incredulous. "What the deuce do you mean? Rob the mail? Nonsense."

"Nonsense you says! Suffering Moses! You wouldn't think it nonsense if a dozen Eskimos jumped out on you with guns in their great mitts. Nonsense, the boy says! Ain't no nonsense to get a 30.30 poked in your slats. Three packets of mail belonging to Chink Wuraven tooked outa the sacks an'—"

"Who?" Cleaver reached over and gripped the little man's shoulder. Dad shook the hand off, adding his ravings to the dogs.

"Good Lord, Timsy," the sergeant shouted across. "Dad's been robbed of mail belonging to Wulraven. Wulraven, get that?"

Noonan nodded. That let "China Coast" out of the scheme of things. Must be another white man behind the Eskimos' mysterious disappearance after all; somebody who had it in for the trader.

"Sure they were Eskimos?" Cleaver asked the mail carrier. "No white man dressed up like a native?"

Stone motioned as though to spit derisively, then said, voice loaded with scorn, "Think I don't know the Eskimos' flat, yaller mugs by this time? No white man in that gang I tell ye. Three parcels of mail; registered too. There's your job now; go get 'em." He lifted the whip preparatory to starting.

"How far back?" Cleaver yelled when the dogs got into motion.

"Ten, twenty miles mebbe," Dad responded, tones still acid. "Down by the Inlet. You'll see their tracks if you ain't blind as well as durned ignorant. Get up outa that! Sikki, Naruk; I'll tan ye!"

CLEAVER walked across heavily to his sled and picked up the whip. "Somebody stole Wulraven's mail — Wulraven's — Wulraven's." The thought echoed and re-echoed across his brain in time to the back-bells' tinkling as the team careered along the smooth ice fringing the shore.

The sergeant refused Noonan's gesture

to stop for the usual tea making, mushing steadily until they reached the mouth of the frozen Inlet and a jumble of footmarks where the mail runner's sled had been held up.

With a curt "Go ahead, Tim!" Cleaver waved to where the footmarks led down from the rocks above. Noonan grunted disgustedly at his superior's persistency, but, knowing the man, at once took his position before the team and resumed a tireless jogging.

So the Mounties came to another ridge crest, after much cursing and tugging at the sled. There they found that the Eskimos, instead of going in one party, had split up; trails wandering off to all points of the compass. The team stopped of its own accord as the constable walked back to the other man, spreading his hands with a hopeless gesture.

"Drive over to that pile of rocks there to the east," the sergeant ordered before Tim had time to voice his query regarding supper. "Looks like a cache."

Without waiting for the dogs Cleaver strode to where the pile of stones reared up against the skyline. A low whistle came to his lips.

The rock pile was carefully built; one of the usual Eskimo caches to protect valuables from wolves or stray team dogs. On top of the pile was a sizeable parcel tied up in a caribou hide. Cleaver could see bushy tails protruding from it and knew the package contained white fox skins. Nothing new or strange in that.

But what caught his eye and caused the sergeant to leap forward eagerly was a piece of brown paper fluttering on the snow. It was apparently the wrapping off some small parcel, bore the postmark of Vancouver, British Columbia, and was addressed in typewriting to:

Amos Wulraven, Esq.,
Nanchuk Bay,
Coronation Gulf, Arctic Coast.
By H. B. C. steamer.

"Is this a readin' room, or do we eat?" Noonan's voice sounded when the dogs' bells ceased jangling.

"No, it isn't; and we don't," his comrade responded, voice lighter. "Beginning to see through this affair, Timsy. We'll poke along right away, grab this gang, and finish the census. That's the main thing."

"Easy as kiss your hand, ain't it?" the constable grunted. "Mebbe. I want to finish the numberin' an' likewise I want to go home to my mama. Holy mackerel! We got a picture gallery as well as a readin' room."

Cleaver was just in time to prevent one of the dogs curling up on the spot toward which Noonan's mukluk pointed. The sergeant shoved the huskie aside, getting down on his hands and knees, and staring intently.

A sign had been made in the snow. It was crude and sprawling, but in general represented a "Y" with a long stroke drawn through the "V" shaped top. Cleaver's eyes followed the direction of the stroke. Then he got to his feet and laughed.

"Yes, we've got no bananas, but we've got Boy Scouts," he said to the amazed Noonan. "Cock your eagle eye on that. Remember those Indian trail signs away down south, eh? Scouts copied them, I suppose. Well, that sign reads, 'A short distance west to the camp.' I'm playing a hunch; going due east. We're off!"

"We have Boy Scouts, an' likewise we have looneys, an' no bug house nearer than Alaska," Noonan growled in heavy scorn. "I'll play Boy Scouts if you're dead set on it, but what I want to know is when do we eat and when do we finish this blasted census?"

"Take the bells off the dogs," the sergeant ordered, instead of replying. "See that your gat is all okey and then beat it straight east, down that valley."

After another frosty glare from the hungry constable, the bells were removed and presently the police team was again in motion; silent but for the sled's creaking and the dogs' labored breaths.

AS THE team trotted on the sergeant noticed that various single tracks led in from the surrounding ridges;

merging into one broad trail leading straight forward. He nodded to himself. The Eskimos had been well trained. No doubt about it now; there certainly was a white man mixed up in the business somewhere.

A sudden stoppage of the sled's progress fractured Cleaver's train of thought, and sent him hurrying ahead to where Noonan was pointing down to the valley below.

They were looking at the freshly laid walls of a large snow-house, surrounded by a number of smaller igloos. As yet the spaces from which the snow blocks had been cut had not drifted level again, while a veritable forest of sealing spears, ice scoops and long hunting bows was stuck upright in the snowdrifts. Even the sleds had not been elevated on poles beyond the dogs' reach after the usual custom. Everything pointed to a hasty camp.

"Those birds must be real jazz hounds," Tim growled. "Sure throwin' themselves into it in a hurry."

"Huh, huh," the sergeant grunted, eyes narrow. "Guess they must have the huskies tied up in those smaller igloos. The Esks are too wise to let them run loose, chewing the lashings off the sleds and raising cain generally. Lucky for us, too. Looks like a cave over there under that rock wall. We'll park the dogs there out of sight and then see what's what. Easy, Tim, and circle wide."

Ten minutes later the police team was tied to the overturned sleigh and given a ration of half-thawed pemmican. Then the two Mounties soft-stepped across to the dance house.

Cleaver stopped at the tunnel entrance, listening to the drone of voices bubbling out. The gabble stopped suddenly; there came the low thudding of a dancing drum and then a nasal voice rising and falling in sing-song cadences.

"Polar Bear night club in full swing," Tim laughed. "What a life!"

Cleaver's impatient hand wave cut off the words. He motioned Noonan to advance, jerked out his own revolver, and with the weapon in his teeth got down on hands and knees and commenced crawling into the tunnel entrance.

The sergeant waited for a moment to accustom his eyes to the blubber lamps' flickering lights; came upright with a jerk, holding up his left hand in a demand for silence.

"Cunik qaqlaq, Cunik,
taniaqun—.————"

A young girl occupied the center of the dance house floor. Her glistening arms waved in the hazy lamplight, but stopped as suddenly as did the song when her oblique eyes flashed to the sergeant's long frame.

There came a chorus of yelping exclamations from the Eskimos. Three or four of the men jumped to their feet, only to subside again when Cleaver's revolver swung over to them. The girl laughed harshly, leaped aside, and huddled down amongst the old women who sat with their backs to the snow walls.

"There's a white man here, and he'd better step out, and make it lively," the sergeant ordered. No reply came but the whites of eyes rolling in the half light. Cleaver repeated the command without avail.

"All right," he growled to Noonan over one shoulder. "I'm going through this mob. Keep them covered, and if anyone raises a hand, let drive."

One by one, the sergeant made each man and woman stand and walk out into the center of the igloo, staring intently at the flat faces.

A puzzled expression commenced to wreath his own features as the examination went on. Every face was alike; broad, yellow, grinning amiably, and lit by slanting Mongolian eyes.

The last man shuffled back to his place, shepherded by the revolver, when Cleaver turned to Noonan and grunted disgustedly, "Hunch didn't work. What do you make of this, Tim? It's got me going! They're all Eskimos!"

THE sergeant swung back to the staring natives again, speaking in clucking Puvalik: "Behold, you are all known to the Very Strong Men. We come seeking a good talk, but the hunters flee before us like the caribou before the wolves. We are the friends of the People of the Ice. Therefore, why do you run away? You are not afraid of the Red Coats. Why is this thing?"

One of the Eskimos motioned as though to get to his feet, only to be pulled back immediately by a wizened little man sitting alongside him. Another silence descended upon the igloo; broken only by heavy breathing and the rustling of deerskins.

With an oath on his lips, Cleaver threw the revolver up, glaring at the staring semi-circle. The gesture was halted by a hard kick from Noonan's mukluk.

"Dogs!" the constable whispered. "Someone coming!"

Cleaver listened for a moment, eyes narrowed, then called to the Eskimos in Puvalik. "One comes. We hide. He who speaks or makes any sign dies by the shooting stick! Let there be a great silence."

With the words he thrust a passage through the natives and squatted down beside the old women in the shadows cast by the wall. Noonan laughed softly and followed his chief's example.

The noise of the creaking sled outside stopped. Then there came the rustling sounds of someone scrambling in through the tunnel.

"Chink" Wulraven came upright in the half-light, staring about him out of hard eyes!

"So!" the trader's voice sounded at length. His tones had lost their usual easy good-fellowship; they were icy, venemous.

"So!" Wulraven repeated the single word. "I'll cut the heart out of youse; you dirty, crawlin' Chow rat!

He slid forward, bent down, and jerked the little wizened man to his feet; the man who had halted the Eskimo who had apparently intended to speak to Cleaver.

"Holy Hannah!" Noonan breathed. "What's this stuff of Chow an' Chink?"

Cleaver silenced the whisper with gripping fingers. The sergeant's face was changing from tensed gloom to amazement.

"Double crossin' me, eh?" Wulraven went on, as his fingers gripped the little man's scrawny throat, shaking him back and forth. "You holds up the mail an' lifts the dope I'm peddlin' to the Esks, does you? Teaches you snow signs an' you tries to gimme a bum steer. I'll larn you somethin', you slimy Chinaman. Knew your breed in Shanghai and Tientsin, but I thought you was straight. This is where you goes topside; an' topside one time, Wung Gee! Get that?"

Wung Gee! Blazing illumination stabbed Cleaver's brain. Wung Gee! Why, that was the Chink cook who came up on the "Snow Queen" from Seattle and disappeared when she was unloading at Coronation Gulf! And Wulraven had picked him for a partner! Why, you couldn't tell a Jap or a Chinese from an Eskimo when they were dressed alike. All Asiatics, when it came to that. The lone Chinese was masquerading as an Eskimo! Holy Jerusalem!

Noonan's elbow nudged the sergeant. He took no notice of it, eyes still on Wulraven, who was swaying the terrified Celestial back and forth. So that was why "Chink" was so anxious to keep the Eskimos away from the police. He was trading them some rotten China coast drugs for their furs!

Cleaver's brain picked up and pieced together various small incidents connecting the two drug peddlers. He remembered the number of visits Wulraven had paid to the "Snow Queen," the white fox skins and curios the trader had bestowed on the ship's cook for no apparent reason. Wung Gee had been smuggling in the drugs. Yes, that was it. And then Wulraven saw the remarkable facial resemblance between the Chinese and the Eskimos and resolved to use it to fool the police. Slick! Slick!

So that was why Wulraven didn't want them to trace up the lost tribe! He was afraid that the two Mounties might discover his scheme, clever as it was. And it must have been Wulraven who shot the dog, too. He doubtless had intended to pick off the rest of the animals but Cleaver had been too swift for him.

But what about the stealing of the mail? Ah, Cleaver had it now—the Chinese had persuaded the Eskimos to steal the dope which was being sent to Wulraven under guise of merchandise or letters! Then he had drawn the wrong snow sign in an effort to throw Wulraven off his track—it was an Oriental double cross that didn't work, for Wulraven had discovered the scheme!

"No can do! No can do!" Wung Gee's gasping voice sounded dimly as Wulraven's fingers tightened. "P'leeceman come one time—" He waved a despairing arm behind him.

Policeman! Wulraven's quick eyes caught the motion. The trader's hand dropped from the man's neck and darted to his hip.

ALL at once the silent igloo rang to a babble of sounds. Wild screams from the women and children, and hoarse grunts from the men, when Cleaver's long frame catapulted across the squatting natives and he and Wulraven went down in a whirlwind of flailing fists.

The trader was no weakling, despite his rotund body. He had been accustomed to the merciless dockside scrapping of fifty Pacific coast ports. Now, though surprised, his brain was seared with the knowledge that defeat meant a long term of imprisonment. He fought as his kind do; with teeth, nails and butting head.

"You dirty dog killer!" Cleaver panted. "There's one for Alook!" Whung! Whug! Whug!

Back and forth the two men rolled across the wet floor. Now Cleaver was atop the other man; now Wulraven had the advantage. The sergeant was vaguely aware of shrill yelling, of furred bodies and sealskin boots darting aside as the fighters caromed off one snow wall and then another. Time and again his fist smashed into the trader's face, but always that evil mask returned, yellow teeth bared, and groping.

Then, surprisingly, Wulraven's head snapped back. Cleaver felt a numbness stealing up along his wrist and arm. With sweat trickling down into his eyes and with roaring lungs he came half upright to see the trader lying flat on the trampled floor, arms and legs spread.

"No payee, no washee; you come Fliday," Noonan's voice finally pierced the sergeant's clearing mind. "That's the last time you're goin' to bleat that tune at any white man. The supremacy of the Nordic race. Get that Wung Gee? Back at the detachment I got a pile of socks an' such like. You'll be busy, old timer."

Cleaver slowly got to his feet, tugging down the dirty, rumpled tunic. He stared about him to see that Tim had one arm placed affectionately about the Chinese' shoulders. The Eskimos too were apparently enjoying the episode; two of the men were shoving the girl forward with the intention of having her resume her chant.

The sergeant quelled the singer with an emphatic gesture, panting at Noonan "Never mind . . . the Chinese. Get the record book from the sled. We'll complete the census and get these two back to the detachment. I'll make him hand over the drugs; opium, I guess. Give me a drink of snow water out of that stone pot over there, Tim."

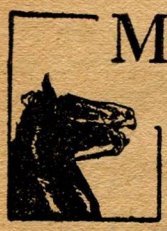
"Sure hot on the detective act, ain't we?" Noonan queried as he reached for the water. "Had a hunch all the time that it was something like this."

"You're one hell of a liar," Cleaver replied between gulps. "It had us both buffaloed, and you know it. Get that book, Timsy; I'm fed up with census taking."

As he turned to leave the igloo the constable offered a mute demonstration of one who toils at a wash board. Wung Gee smiled wanly.

READERS' RODEO

WHAT have you got to say, Readers? This round-up is staged every month, for you to hold a get-together, discuss your ideas and meet up with your favorite authors. You are all invited to attend.



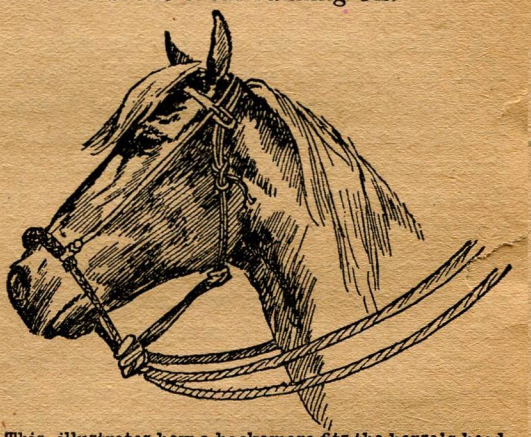
MANY TRIPLE-X readers are puzzled over the use of a hackamore. They read about it in stories but they are rather hazy as to exactly what a hackamore is, and how it is used. Consequently the Top Hand has taken it upon himself to make an explanation. H. I. Shope, Montana cowboy, artist and writer, has drawn a picture of just how a hackamore looks, and here are some interesting facts concerning that bit of horse equipment.

The origin of the word hackamore comes from the Spanish term for halter—"jacamo." It was picked up by American cowboys who in pronouncing the word something like the Spanish—hackamo—soon had Anglicized the word to "hackamore," as it now is spelled.

Naturally, since the name came from the Spanish, it may be assumed that the object itself was taken over from the Mexicans. The American cowboys found the hackamore in general use among Mexican vacqueros and it is such a handy affair that it was adopted as they had developed it. It really is a sort of modified and developed halter, of special design.

It is made of a heavy braided rawhide nose band which is hung low enough on the horse's nose by light cheek pieces of latigo leather, to enable the rider, when using the hackamore as a bridle, to pull in the horse's head and even shut off his wind to some extent. When used as a halter to lead or to tie, the weight of the pull comes on two small ropes which run from the bottom of the nose band up around the horse's neck to form a throat latch. Two very intricate knots are tied in this rope, one just under the jaw and the other where the ropes join the nose band.

A rope about 20 feet long is fastened to the nose band, looped around the horse's neck and tied again to form reins. The end of this rope is used to tie or lead the horse. When riding a bronc, the rider often sticks the loose end under his belt; instead of tying it. Then if he is thrown he often is able to grab the rope and prevent his bronc from running off.



This illustrates how a hackamore fits the horse's head.

The hackamore is used to teach colts to rein before they are taught to take a bridle. This is done because it is easy to ruin a colt's mouth by using a bit before he is taught the use of a bit. On the northern ranges, many riders use a hackamore as a bridle in winter, because the use of a regular bridle frequently frosts a horse's mouth in winter.

DO COUGARS SCREAM?

THIS question is agitating the boys around the home ranch these days, and so hot has become the debate that there now are two camps, the "Screamers" and the "Silents." Not, however, that but both sides do enough loud talking, with the "Silents" just as vociferous as the "Screamers."

It all started when Dick Halliday, well known to TRIPLE-X readers, and S. Omar Barker, also well known and who wrote the fascinating *Luke Forks Trouble* for this issue, started a little debate as to whether a cougar or mountain lion actually screams.

Mr. Halliday maintains with great firmness that they do, and he has marshalled a host of other cowboys and westerners who claim they have heard them scream.

On the other hand, Mr. Barker, who spends most of his time in the Sangre de Cristos region, where he hunts, fishes, rides the range and does his writing, maintains that in all his existence there he never has heard a cougar scream—and they are plentiful thereabouts, too.

Well, when those two authorities began giving differing "expert testimony" there was more fur flying than a court scene with two eminent psychologists politely remarking that the man on the other side of the case was all wet.

So much excitement was stirred up by the argument, indeed, that the New Mexico Game and Fish department has taken a hand and now is gathering more expert testimony, which the department intends to make public soon.

* * *

WELL, DO THEY?

SO FAR as the Top Hand is concerned, cougars do scream. We have heard them emit a wild screaming cry which sounds like a woman shrieking. At least, we always understood that it was a cougar making that noise which is enough to cause the hair of any man to begin creeping. But we've seldom seen a mountain lion that the dogs haven't stirred up. And Jay Lucas, who used to hunt them for a living, says that in all his experience, he seldom has seen a cougar unless it first was chased by the dogs. They have extremely sharp eyes and will slink off before a man can detect their presence. Mr. Lucas claims to have seen only three or four before they saw him and were off.

That just goes to show how difficult it is to prove actually that it is the mountain lion that is doing the screaming. We're open to persuasion. It might be the wail of a banshee. Or perhaps the lions in the Sangre de Cristos region have been so frightened at the hunting prowess of Mr. Barker that they just naturally don't yowl any more.

Anyway, the argument promises to be right interesting, and we're expecting lots of letters from readers on the subject. Maybe some of them will tell us whether a mule brays, too, while they're at it. We've heard plenty of them but we might have been mistaken, after all.

* * *

LIKES WAR STORIES

SIX months ago TRIPLE-X began a new policy of serving Air, Western and War stories to the public. Immediately the policy proved popular, as was proved by the number of letters from readers all over the country.

William Kranzler, Lehr, North Dakota, is one who is enthusiastic over TRIPLE-X MAGAZINE!

> **May I have a little space in Reader's Rodeo to express my appreciation of Triple-X? I have always longed for a magazine full of western and war stories. When I ordered Triple-X I found that magazine. Gee! I sure like your western stories and still better your war stories. Yes, Triple-X has the "real stuff" and I like every word of it.**
>
> **Much success to Triple-X and its writers.**
>
> **William Kranzler.**

Doubtless Mr. Kranzler and the others who enjoy reading the war stories will be happy to know that some of the best war story writers now are at work on stories for 1929. H. F. Cruickshank, Arthur Guy Empey, Frederick C. Painton, Jay J. Kalez and others have written stories that will appear in early issues. Raoul Whitfield will have more of his air war stories also and the usual good western stories will be forthcoming.

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30x3½	2.45	1.35	30x5	4.25	2.45
32x3½	2.70	1.45	33x5	4.35	2.60
31x4	2.95	1.75	35x5	4.45	2.75
32x4	3.00	1.80	29x4.40	2.70	1.50
33x4	3.45	1.85	30x5.25	4.00	2.50
34x4	3.50	1.90	31x5.25	4.25	2.60
32x4½	3.75	2.25	30x5.77	4.35	2.75
33x4½	3.85	2.30	32x6.20	4.75	2.75
			33x6.00	4.95	2.75

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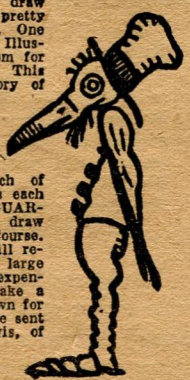

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HERE'S ANOTHER!

YES, here's another man who is glad to see better covers and better stories on the inside of TRIPLE-X MAGAZINE. We go to a great deal of trouble to get good artists to do good pictures for TRIPLE-X covers and we go to even more trouble and expense getting good authors and good stories for the inside—consequently we're glad when readers take note of such details.

This is the first time I have written to express approval of Triple-X. Heretofore I have done that little thing by silence. However, the vitalizing of the cover from the stereotyped style used previously calls for appreciative comment.

But it's the change on the inside—that is the one I'm heaving bouquets about. The all-western idea may be all right for some but not your reasonably humble servant. Injecting war stories is a great idea; now all you have to do is increase the number of sport stories to get my note every month.

Personally I have no use for a magazine devoted to one specialty; as sport, war, aviation, west or detective. The stories seem to run better when they're mixed up.

Well, that's enough of a hod-full for the one time I've bothered you with my ideas on any subject. Lyle Lewis. Chicago.

P. S.—Not through yet! That idea of one of your readers about more outdoor stories (like L. Paul's) is O. K. With or without six-gun accompaniment.

We'll bet a nice, brand new Stetson that Mr. Lewis will like the fight yarn by Joe Ball in this issue—and there will be more from this author, too. Mr. Ball has had on the gloves with some of the leading light heavies in America—and he knows more about the fight game than most of the professionals, too. He deliberately gave up a promising ring career to go in for literature, however, and now he is making use of his ring knowledge. At present he is living in Washington.

And speaking of L. Paul—wow! what a treat is in store for TRIPLE-X readers! For Mr. Paul has written one of his excellent stories and it will appear in an early issue. And then he writes in to say that he is at work on another Whitey and Bateese yarn. It's going to be a corker, and we don't want any of the TRIPLE-X readers to miss either of these stories. Next month James B. Hendryx has contributed a gripping story of a gambler in the northland—it's a story

that will keep you on the edge of your chair from first word to last. We know you'll like it.

* * *

GROWING, GROWING——

THAT'S the story of MODERN MECHANICS, the latest magazine to be added to the Fawcett string of publications.

Started but a brief two months ago, already the magazine has proved its popularity and the demands for it exceed the press runs. Seldom indeed has a new magazine enjoyed such an immediate and tremendous favor with the American public.

Scarcely was the first issue on the stands than it was snapped up; and the second issue sold just as quickly.

The third issue now is on the stands with some of the most interesting articles ever published in a magazine devoted to science, mechanics and invention. There is, for one thing, a continuation of lessons on how to fly, by Gene Shank, one time holder of the world's loop-the-loop record. Then there is an article on how to build the Heath Parasol, a light airplane of excellent design. Other articles follow Byrd and Shackleton to the South Pole on their two dashes for science.

And if you have an old Ford automobile there are some mighty useful articles on uses to which they may be put, such as stump pulling, powering a boat, pumping water on the old ranch, and other things.

An article that is creating a great deal of comment already, is one covering a day with the new mechanical man invented recently. The man is followed all through a "working day" and it is shown clearly just what "he" can do.

The magazine is edited by experts in their fields and is published by Captain W. H. Fawcett, well known publisher and editor of TRIPLE-X, Whiz Bang, Smokehouse Monthly and all the other popular group of Fawcett publications. You can't go wrong by buying any of these magazines—and especially is MODERN MECHANICS a book that will prove popular with all members of the family.

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SEND NO MONEY

To secure 10 days' free inspection of policy send no money. Mail to the National Protective Insurance Association, 1265 Scarritt Bldg., Kansas City, Mo., the following information. Name, age, address, beneficiary's name and relationship. After reading the policy you may either return it without obligation or send $3.65 to put policy in force.

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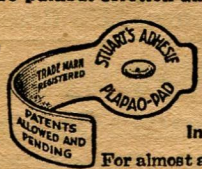

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DANGEROUS WORK

AND speaking of hard work, Raoul Whitfield risked his neck when he got the inspiration for *Rivals of the Clouds*, the gripping air-war story that appears in this issue of TRIPLE-X. Mr. Whitfield was an aviator during the world war, but after the Armistice his wife made him promise not to fly any more. The lure of the air was too strong, however, and finally Mr. Whitfield could stand it no longer. So he convinced his wife that flying wasn't half so dangerous as she thought—and went up again.

The very first time up he became partially lost in a heavy fog over the Pacific ocean, and when he got down he had the germ of the idea for this story. He remembered the tale of one of his comrades who nearly shot down a buddy in the war and then he combined the two ideas and wrote *Rivals of the Clouds*.

Mr. Whitfield now is at work on several more of his corking air stories which soon will appear in TRIPLE-X Magazine. His stories appear also in BATTLE STORIES, the battling brother of TRIPLE-X. You'll enjoy reading *Lyons of the Cloud Patrol*, a serial beginning in the January issue of Battle Stories. And don't forget, readers, that this ace of air writers will have more stories in TRIPLE-X—they're going to be real hum dingers.

* * *

THE PRICE OF A DRINK

IF YOU have ever known what it was to be really thirsty, you can sympathize with the situation in which Belter found himself in H. F. Cruickshank's story "Bombs for the Boche" in this issue.

Mr. Cruickshank says that such torturing thirst was common in the trenches and that he got the idea for his story when he himself was out of water in the front lines for nearly 36 hours. That was 10 years ago and Mr. Cruickshank stored that terrible memory in his mind—and now he has written this smashing story about it. There will be more from Mr. Cruickshank in forthcoming issues of TRIPLE-X.

CONCERNING MR. BARKER

MR. BARKER himself is an interesting character, who was born at Beulah, New Mexico, in 1894. He says that when a youth he chased squirrels on the hills so much that one leg grew shorter than the other from rampaging around and around the hill—but he doesn't say which leg.

"I am a westerner by birth, bringin' up, habit and future intention," Mr. Barker says of himself. "I was born and raised on a small mountain ranch. I've never worked for the big outfits, but I know mountain cowpunching *poco bien*, and the rest of it from residence and association. I've trapped, hunted, fished, ridden, driven, hiked and camped pretty near all over New Mexico, besides taking time off to be a Forest Ranger, a soldier overseas, a college professor, a legislator, a slide trombonist, newspaper reporter, publicity director of the Las Vegas Cowboy's Reunion, a Spanish interpreter and other things too humorous to mention.

"The idea of *Luke Forks Trouble* just sort of grew on me from the idea that the very fellows we often suspect as enemies turn out to be good guys well worthy of our friendship. It isn't a new theme but it is true to life all right.

"I like to get action in my yarns but I wouldn't give two cents for action without the atmosphere of the country in which it takes place."

That is one of the things that makes Mr. Barker a good writer. He not only is anxious to tell a fine story, but he wants his details correct. And it is our idea that it is the same quality that is making TRIPLE-X MAGAZINE such a success with its thousands upon thousands of enthusiastic readers. We strive to get the best writers, and writers who "know their goods," too.

We will continue to publish more stories by Mr. Barker, his followers may be certain. And they'll be good ones, too.

Next Month

Here's an advance billboard of the headliners in the February Triple-X—Out January 10th.

Wanted — Dead or Alive

Beginning A Smashing New Serial of the West

by

Murray Leinster

DEEP in the inaccessible fastnesses of the rocky hills a gang of eastern gunmen had a mysterious rendezvous about which strange tales were told but about which the ranchers knew nothing definite. The gangsters ruled the county by a reign of machine gun terror and nobody knew their true power. Then Slim Galway came to investigate the reported death of his brother—and his ensuing adventures make one of the best novels ever published in Triple-X Magazine. Mr. Leinster is the famous author of "Kid Deputy."

The Tornado from Eagletail, Part II, by H. Bedford-Jones

Fangs of a Sky Wolf

By RAOUL WHITFIELD

Poke Kennedy thought he was so "air-wise" that what he didn't know about flying just wasn't known by anybody, any place. Then he crossed machine gun fire with an air wolf who taught him that nobody knows it all about anything. This is another typical exciting air yarn by the ace of air-war writers.

Rimrock Ropes a Rustler

By JAY LUCAS

Here's another thrilling novelette of the old West by a man who rode the range for many years and who knows how to write of cowboys and their exciting adventures.

Gambler of God's Country

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

An enthralling story of a north country gambler who played square alike with friends and enemies of the gaming tables, told by a famous writer of adventure fiction.

Other stories of West, War and Air by Harold F. Cruickshank, Allan Bosworth, Sewell Peaslee Wright, Dick Halliday and others.

The February Triple-X will be On Sale January 10th.

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Saxophone gives you these extra features—Snap-on Pads, greatest improvement, easy to replace, no cementing — Patented Automatic Octave Key, perfect Scale Accuracy, convenient key arrangement.

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playing a sweet-toned Buescher. 10 evenings, one hour each—will astonish and please you. It's easy with a Buescher. Tell us what instrument you are interested in. We'll do the rest.

Buescher Band Instrument Co.
2593 Buescher Block Elkhart, Indiana

GET RID OF YOUR FAT
Free Trial Treatment

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

Let me send you proof at my expense.

DR. R. NEWMAN, Licensed Physician
State of New York 286 Fifth Ave., New York Desk M

WHISKEY or DRUG HABIT CURED FOREVER or NO PAY

Full treatment sent on trial. Can be given secretly in privacy of home. Guaranteed to banish forever all desire for whiskey, gin, wine, home brew, moonshine, opium, morphine, heroin, paregoric and laudnum. Costs $2.00 if cures, nothing if fails. Save him from Poison.
STANDARD LABORATORIES Sta. 44-13 BALTIMORE, MD.

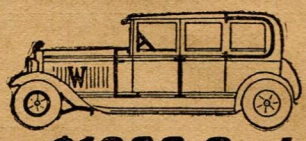
HYPNOTISM

Would you possess that strange mysterious power which charms and fascinates men and women, influences their thoughts, controls their desires and makes you supreme master of every situation? Life is full of alluring possibilities for those who master the secrets of hypnotic influence; for those who develop their magnetic powers. You can learn at home, cure diseases and bad habits without drugs, win the friendship and love of others, **increase your income,** gratify your ambitions, drive worry and trouble from your mind, improve your memory, overcome domestic difficulties, give the most thrilling entertainment ever witnessed and develop a wonderfully magnetic will power that will enable you to overcome all obstacles to your success.

You can hypnotize people instantaneously—quick as a flash—put yourself or anyone else to sleep at any hour of the day or night or banish pain and suffering. **Our free book tells you the secrets of this wonderful science.** It explains exactly how you can use this power to better your condition in life. It is enthusiastically endorsed by ministers of the gospel, lawyers, doctors, business men and society women. It benefits everybody. It costs nothing. We give it away to advertise our institution. Write for it today. (Use a letter with a 5-cent stamp.) **Sage Institute, Dept. 611-M, Rue de l'Isly, 9, Paris VIII, France.**

How do you SPELL YOUR NAME?

In the window, top, body, wheel, or under the fender of the Buick Sedan pictured here are certain lucky letters cleverly worked into the picture by the artist. Can you find even one of these letters which appears in your last name? If so



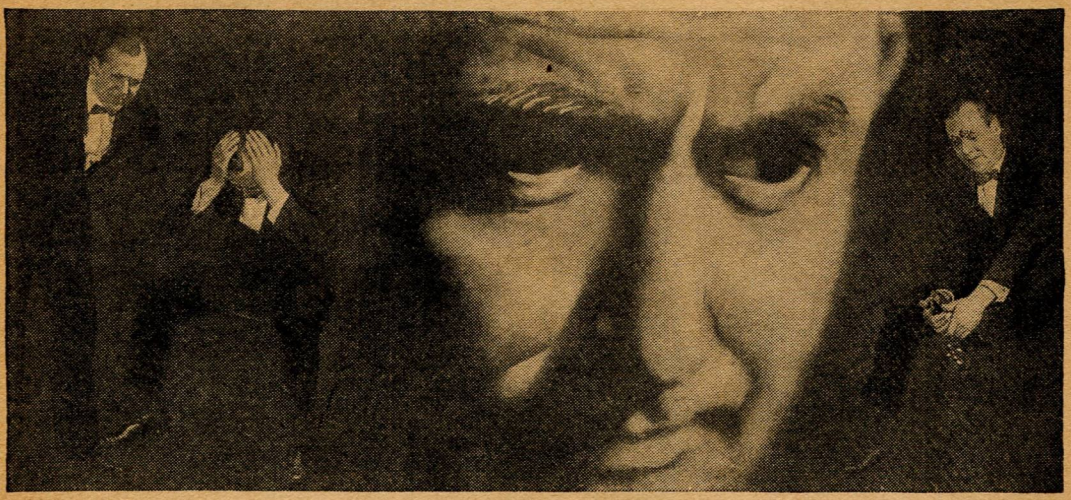
TELL ME the letter you have found in the car. Remember, this letter must appear somewhere in your last name. Send it to me with your name and address. I am giving away four autos and many other prizes. You may be the one who will write me

AND WIN BUICK SEDAN or $1800 Cash

CERTIFICATE FOR $480.00 TO APPLY ON GRAND PRIZE SENT IMMEDIATELY AS BELOW IF YOU FIND A LETTER

Immediate quick action--no delay--we send Certificate for $480.00 to add to the first prize, if you win, and directions for getting Buick Sedan. Prizes given to advertise our products locally. Big new FRIENDSHIP CAMPAIGN of this 35 year old concern. This offer is simple and straight. **No more puzzles to solve.** No lists of words to make or write or any other puzzles. This is all. First prize winner gets Buick Sedan and the $480.00, but quickness is necessary. C. W. Francis, C. Vogtmann, J. M. Wandok, J. C. Long, Effie Swearingen won cars on our last ads. No cost or obligation now, later, or ever. Everyone rewarded if actively interested. If you can find one of the hidden letters in your name, send it right away by letter. That's all.

B. H. FRANCE, DEPT. 74 500 N. DEARBORN ST., CHICAGO



Must Men Suffer *after 40?*

A WELL-KNOWN scientist's new book about old age reveals facts which to many men will be amazing. Did you know that two-thirds of all men past middle age are said to have a certain seldom mentioned disorder? Do you know the frequent cause of this decline in vitality?

Common "Old-Age" Symptoms

Medical men know this condition as hypertrophy of the prostate gland. Science now reveals that this swollen gland—painless in itself—not only often cheats men of vitality, but also bears on the bladder and is often directly responsible for sciatica, backache, pains in the legs and feet, and dizziness. When allowed to run on it is frequently the cause of cystitis, severe bladder inflammation.

65% Are Said to Have This Gland Disorder

Prostate trouble is now reached immediately by a new kind of safe home hygiene that goes directly to the gland itself, without drugs, medicine, massage, or application of electricity. Absolutely safe. 40,000 men have used it to restore the prostate gland to normal functioning. The principle involved is recommended by many physicians. Amazing recoveries often made in six days. Another grateful effect is usually the immediate disappearance of chronic constipation. Usually the entire body is toned up. Either you feel ten years younger in six days or the treatment costs nothing.

Send for FREE Book

If you have gland trouble, or any of the symptoms mentioned, write today for scientist's free book, "Why Many Men Are Old at Forty." You can ask yourself certain frank questions that may reveal your true condition. Every man past 40 should make this test, as insidious prostate disorder often leads to surgery. This book is absolutely free, but mail coupon immediately, as the edition is limited. Address

THE ELECTRO THERMAL CO.
3713 Morris Ave. Steubenville, Ohio

If you live West of the Rockies, address The Electro Thermal Co., 303 Van Nuys Building, Dept. 37-N, Los Angeles, Calif. In Canada, address The Electro Thermal Co., Desk 37-N, 44 Yonge St., Toronto, Can.

The Electro Thermal Company,
3713 Morris Ave., Steubenville, Ohio

Please send me Free, and without obligation, a copy of your booklet, "Why Many Men Are Old at 40." Mail in plain wrapper.

Name .....

Address .....

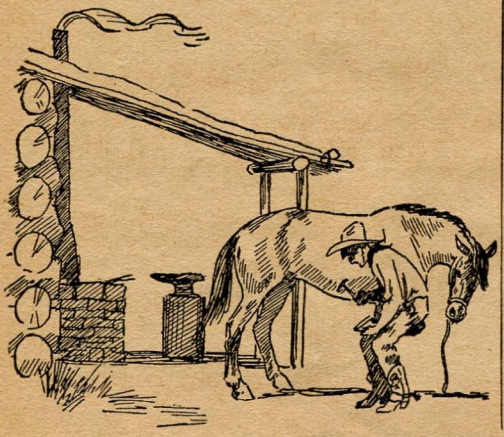
City ..... State .....

In Canada address THE ELECTRO THERMAL CO., Desk 37-N, 44 Yonge St., TORONTO, CANADA.

PUTTIN' ON THE SHOES

ON SOME cow ranges horses aren't shod except in winter when it is slippery, but on others where there is a great deal of rock and gravel, shoeing has to be done the year around. All horses that are ridden, packed or worked in any way must be shod or their hoofs will wear down, and they will get sore feet and can't travel. Almost any puncher or rancher can shoe a horse, top notch, whether he has to shape the shoes in a forge or not.

At the home ranch or at some permanent camps there is always a forge of some description and a good many blacksmith tools. The forge may be set in a log shop, under a big tree or in a shed; but its always there.



The first sketch shows a cowboy shoeing a gentle horse by an old stone forge set under a porch-like structure made of poles. This fellow's got it easy but all ponies the cowboy has to shoe aren't gentle.

In the second drawing the rider had to throw his horse and tie all his feet; and even then the horse may make it a hard job by jerking all the time.

If a horse is gentle at all, a rider usually takes a chance on shoeing him on his

(Continued on page 191)

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING

Wanted—Male Help

BIG PAY: South American Work. American firms pay fare, expenses. South American Service Bureau, 14,600 Alma, Detroit, Mich.

MEN, get Forest Ranger job; $125-$200 mo. and home furnished; hunt, fish, trap. For details, write Norton Inst., 1553 Temple Court, Denver, Colo.

Song Poem Writers

SONG POEM WRITERS—"Real" Proposition. Hibbeler, D 162X, 2104 N. Keystone, Chicago.

I WANT SONG POEMS. Casper Nathan, Q-3544 North Racine, Chicago.

Detectives

DETECTIVES EARN BIG MONEY. Excellent opportunity. Experience unnecessary. Particulars Free. Write, George Wagner, 2190-T Broadway, N. Y.

Art Novelties

BOOKS, MAGAZINES, Art Publications in English, French, Spanish. Photo Novelties, etc., samples, lists, 20 cents stamps. Villaverde Co., Dept. 200, Box 1329, Havana, Cuba.

Authors—Manuscripts

SHORT STORIES, ETC., Revised, Typewritten and Marketed. Hursh Service, Dept. 9, Box 1013, Harrisburg, Penna.

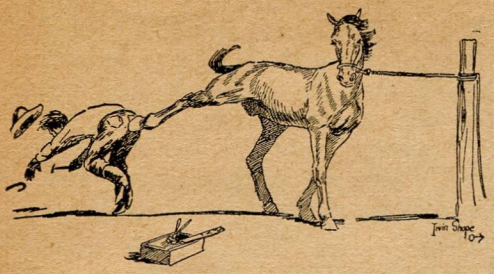
Personal

LET ME READ YOUR CHARACTER FROM YOUR HAND-WRITING. Sample reading 12c. Graphologist, 2309 Lawrence, Toledo, Ohio.

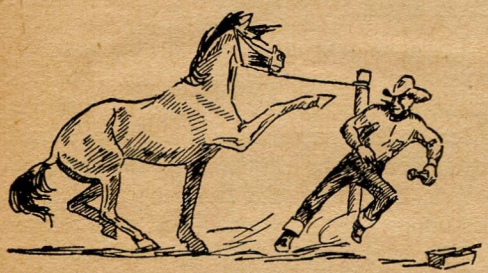
Miscellaneous

AMATEUR CARTOONISTS: SELL YOUR WORK NEW PLAN. Smith's Service, TX1194, Wenatchee, Wash.

(Continued from page 190)

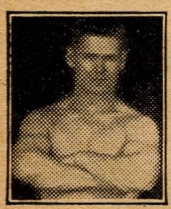


feet, but it's a ticklish business at times, especially with the hind feet as you can see by what happened in the third sketch.



Some broncs are handy with their front feet. The fellow in the fourth sketch just missed being patted on the head. Whether the horse is gentle or not the cowboy finds a way to shoe him and he puts the shoes on so they'll stay.

Many a time a cowboy's horse will shed a shoe far from home and then the puncher must use his ingenuity to replace it. Frequently the shoe is tacked back on with a rock, or any other hard object that may come to hand, as the haft of a knife.



I Positively Guarantee

to increase your arms one-half inch in size, chest one full inch, strength 25%, health, 100% in one week's time, by following my instructions and using my exerciser 10 minutes mornings and at night. Send $1 for complete course and exercisers. Satisfaction guaranteed or $1 refunded.

PROF. J. A. DRYER
Box 1850-H Chicago, Ill.

RHEUMATISM

FULL $1 BOX SENT ON TRIAL

All forms, even severest cases, relieved QUICK with Dr. Fox's Rheumatism Tablets. 20 years' record-of-relief to thousands. Full $1 box will be sent you ON TRIAL. Must give results—or **costs nothing!** No money now; pay AFTER benefited. Send name and address TODAY to

FOX MEDICINE CO., 1659 St. Clair Ave., CLEVELAND, O.

$75 to $125 Weekly

$5 down **Charging Batteries Starts You**

Let me show you how to make big money right from the start. I've prepared a FREE book explaining all details. First week's profit pays for all equipment. You can get all the battery charging business in your community with my Service Station Charger—it's years ahead of ordinary chargers—handles 50% to 70% more batteries. I explain everything—start you in a business of your own and put you on the way to big money. Write for FREE Book.

C. F. HOLMES, Chief Engineer, Dept. TX
Independent Electric Works, 5116 Ravenswood Ave., Chicago

FREE BOOK-Just Out

TRIPLE-X Advertisements Pay!

Most Amazing INVENTION in 25 years

"Cleans Up" for Agents

FREE MACHINE FOR AGENTS

$90 WEEKLY IN SPARE TIME!

Men, here is a wonder—the most sensational invention of the age! If you're looking for a rapid fire seller—an item that nets you 100% profit—an item that sells itself to 7 out of 10 men on demonstration—I've got it in Ve-Po-Ad, the amazing new vest pocket adding machine!

Sells for $2.95—You Make $1.65

This most remarkable invention does all the work of a $300 adding machine, yet fits the vest pocket and sells for only $2.95! It sells on sight to storekeepers, business men, and everyone who uses figures—and makes you over 100% profit on every sale! Ve-Po-Ad does any kind of figuring in a jiffy, yet weighs but 4 oz. Counts up to a billion. Shows total visible at all times. Perfectly accurate, lightning fast. Never makes a mistake or gets out of order. Over 100,000 in daily use!

Get Your Machine FREE

Live wire salesmen are dropping everything else and flocking to Ve-Po-Ad. Ve-Po-Ad brings them quick money and lots of it. Shapiro out in California made $475 in one week! You can "clean up" too! Only 10 sales a day in spare time will bring YOU over $95.00 a week! You need no previous sales experience—Ve-Po-Ad sells itself! If you are really interested in earning a steady, substantial income, write at once for full details of my **MONEY-MAKING PLAN** and **FREE VE-PO-AD** given to new Agents. Do it **NOW—TODAY!**

C. M. CLEARY, Dept. 801
173 W. MADISON ST. CHICAGO, ILL.

Stop!

Using Tobacco

Perhaps you've tried to stop using tobacco only to find that the habit has such a hold on you that you gave up trying.

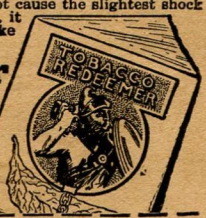
You know, better than anyone else, that you ought to stop because, sooner or later, it is bound to undermine your health. Heart trouble, indigestion dyspepsia, nervousness, insomnia, poor eyesight—these and many other disorders can often be traced directly to the use of tobacco. Besides it is an expensive, utterly useless habit.

Habit Banished

Let Us Help You

No matter how firm a grip tobacco has on you—no matter whether you've been smoking cigars, pipe or cigarettes or chewing plug or fine cut for a month or 50 years—Tobacco Redeemer will positively remove all craving for tobacco in any form in a very few days. It does its work so quickly that all tobacco "hunger" is gone almost before you know it. The desire for a smoke or a chew usually begins to decrease after the very first dose.

Tobacco Redeemer contains no habit-forming drugs of any kind—it is in no sense a tobacco substitute. It does not cause the slightest shock to the nervous system; on the contrary, it often helps to quiet the nerves and make you feel better in every way.



SEND Coupon for Proof

Get our free booklet. Tells you all about the deadly effects of tobacco and how easy it is now to quit. We will also send you copies of letters from confirmed users telling how this simple, home-treatment freed them absolutely from the habit. Just mail coupon—or a postal will do.

NEWELL PHARMACAL CO.

Dept. 744 Clayton Station St. Louis, Mo.

Send me without obligation to me in any way, proof that Tobacco Redeemer will positively free me from the Tobacco Habit or my money will be refunded.

Name .....

Street and No. .....

Town ..... State .....

DEATH FROM HUNGER

TRAGEDY and death stalk in the northland when a hunter fails to find the wild game on which he had depended. The caribou herds migrate along well-nigh regular paths, but sometimes for some reason or other, their well worn roads of travel are deserted.

One such case that spelled stark tragedy is that of Blackie Leonard, whose body has been found near Artillery Lake, in northern Canada. Word of the discovery came filtering down from the Barrenlands recently.

Leonard was an intrepid explorer and hunter of the northern wastes. Once before he was rescued by wandering Indians after he had eaten his dogs. But he outfitted again and returned to the land he loved. This time the Indians found only his bones. He apparently had run out of food and camped where the caribou were to swing northward.

But they did not come. He killed a dog and ate it. Still the caribou herds did not come.

He killed the rest of his dogs, one by one. Then, knowing that it was past the migration time for the herds, he pulled tight his belt and tried to find other game. It was useless. The Indians who discovered the remains declared they believed he took poison rather than await slow death by starvation.

Any PHOTO ENLARGED

Size 16x20 inches

Same price for full length or bust form, groups, landscapes, pet animals, etc., or enlargements of any part of group picture. Safe return of your own original photo guaranteed.

98c

SEND NO MONEY

Just mail photo or snapshot (any size) and within a week you will receive your beautiful life-like enlargement size 16x20 in. guaranteed fadeless. Pay postman 98c plus postage or send $1.00 with order and we pay postage.

Special Free Offer With each enlargement we will send FREE a hand-tinted miniature reproduction of photo sent. Take advantage *now* of this amazing offer—send your photo today.

UNITED PORTRAIT COMPANY

1652 Ogden Ave. Dept. 261 Chicago, Ill.

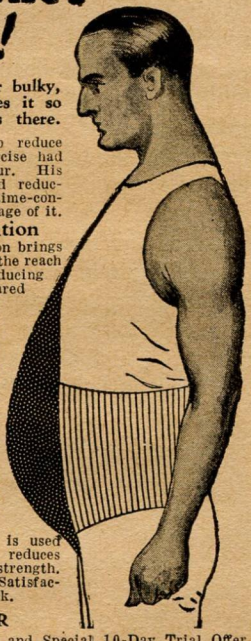
A Perfect Looking Nose

CAN EASILY BE YOURS

Trados Model No. 25 corrects now all ill-shaped noses quickly, painlessly, permanently and comfortably at home. It is the only noseshaping appliance of precise adjustment and a safe and guaranteed patent device that will actually give you a perfect looking nose. Over 90000 satisfied users. For years recommended by physicians. 16 years of experience in manufacturing Nose Shapers is at your service. *Model No. 25 Junior for children.* Awarded Prize Medal by big Wembley Exposition, London, England. Write for testimonials and free booklet, which tells you how to obtain a perfect looking nose.

M. TRILETY, PIONEER NOSE SHAPING SPECIALIST
DEPT. 3201 BINGHAMTON, N. Y.

New Self-Massaging Belt REDUCES WAIST -Easily!



Substitutes good solid tissue for bulky, useless, disfiguring fat, yet does it so gently you hardly know it is there.

Formerly those who wished to reduce without dieting or strenuous exercise had to go to a professional masseur. His method brought about the desired reduction. But it was expensive and time-consuming, and few could take advantage of it.

Remarkable New Invention

At last a wonderful new invention brings this same effective method within the reach of all. The Weil Scientific Reducing Belt, by means of specially prepared and scientifically fitted rubber, is so constructed that as you wear it every breath you take and every movement you make imparts a constant massage to every inch of the abdomen. Working for you every second, it reduces much more rapidly than ordinary massage, saving both time and money.

Actually Removes Fat

It does not merely draw in your waist and make you appear thinner. It actually takes off the fat. Within a few weeks many people find 4 to 6 inches gone from the waistline and look and feel 10 to 15 years younger.

The Weil Method of reduction is used by athletes and jockeys because it reduces quickly and preserves their strength. Highly endorsed by physicians. Satisfaction guaranteed or your money back.

SPECIAL TRIAL OFFER

Write today for full description and Special 10-Day Trial Offer. The Weil Company, 991 Hill Street, New Haven, Conn.

THE WEIL COMPANY
991 Hill Street, New Haven, Conn.

Gentlemen:—Please send me, without obligation, complete description of the Weil Scientific Reducing Belt and your Special 10-Day Trial Offer.

Name .....

Address .....

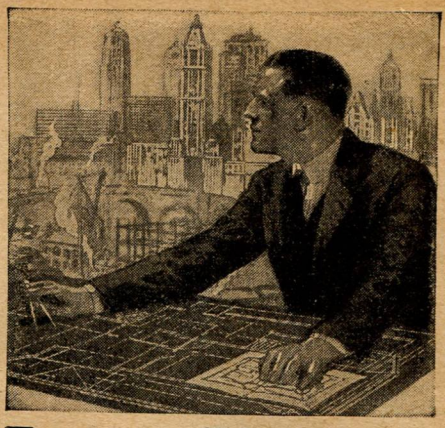
City ..... State .....

FOREST RANGERS

Men, get Forest Ranger job; $125-$200 month and home furnished; hunt, fish, trap, etc. For further details, write

NORTON INST. 1554 Temple Court DENVER, COLORADO

Triple-X Advertising Pays



Former Plasterer Now Earning $12,000 a Year

"When I enrolled with the International Correspondence Schools, I was a plasterer and I didn't know a thing about blueprints. Today I have my own contracting business and I am able to figure the most difficult jobs and execute them to the satisfaction of everyone concerned. My income is between $12,000 and $15,000 a year. It certainly was a lucky day for me when I sent in that I. C. S. coupon."

That's a true story of what just one student of the International Correspondence Schools has done. Every mail brings letters from other ambitious men and women telling of promotions and increases in salary due directly to spare-time study.

One hour a day spent with the I. C. S., in the quiet of your own home, will prepare you for success in the work you like best.

Mail Coupon for Free Booklet

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS
"The Universal University"
Box 2713-L, Scranton, Penna.

Without cost or obligation, please tell me how I can qualify for the position, or in the subject, *before* which I am marking X:

☐ Architect	☐ Navigation
☐ Architectural Draftsman	☐ Salesmanship
☐ Contractor and Builder	☐ Advertising
☐ Building Foreman	☐ Window Display
☐ Concrete Builder	☐ Show Card and Sign Lettering
☐ Structural Engineer	☐ Business Management
☐ Structural Draftsman	☐ Industrial Management
☐ Plumber and Steam Fitter	☐ Secretarial Work
☐ Heating and Ventilation	☐ Business Correspondence
☐ Plumbing Inspector	☐ Bookkeeper
☐ Foreman Plumber	☐ Stenographer and Typist
☐ Sheet Metal Worker	☐ Higher Accounting
☐ Civil Engineer	☐ Common School Subjects
☐ Surveying and Mapping	☐ Mathematics
☐ Reading Architects' Blueprints	☐ Illustrating ☐ Cartooning
☐ Electrical Engineer	☐ Railway Mail Clerk
☐ Electric Lighting	☐ Civil Service ☐ English
☐ Electric Wiring	☐ Mining Engineer
☐ Telegraph Engineer	☐ Gas Engine Operating
☐ Practical Telephony	☐ Textile Overseer or Supt.
☐ Mechanical Engineer	☐ Traffic Manager
☐ Mechanical Draftsman	☐ Automobiles
☐ Toolmaker	☐ Airplane Engines ☐ French
☐ Machine Shop Practice	☐ Agriculture ☐ Spanish
☐ Chemist ☐ Pharmacy	☐ Poultry Raising ☐ Radio

Name .....

Street Address .....

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

Occupation .....

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

Roping the Facts

(Continued from Page 22)

regulation target models. (2) And where can I get the real article in a belt and holster? (3) Where is the United States Revolver Association headquarters located, and who can I write to with a view to becoming a member of that organization?

C. J., Pittsburgh, Pa.

I recommend the latest model issued by the Colt Company—the Official Police, six inch barrel and calibered for the 38 Special shell. The Colt Company consider this to be their best all around gun.

(2) For belt and holster, you can't go wrong in getting the new pattern, Texas Ranger holster and a wide, soft leather belt, slotted to carry the holster. The Myres Saddle Co., of El Paso, Texas, supply the Rangers, Border officers, Mexican Army officers and the officers of the famous *rurales* with these belts and holsters. This firm is known as a specialist in this line, as its location brings it into daily contact with men whose lives depend on the speed and smoothness of their "draw."

(3) Write to Colonel Roy Jones, Secretary, United States Revolver Association, Springfield, Mass. Colonel Jones is an enthusiastic six-gun fan and he will be delighted to hear from you. Ask for an application form. The yearly dues are only two dollars and the official badge, in solid silver, is supplied to members for three dollars. I strongly advise you to join. I think there is a branch in Pittsburgh but am not sure.

* * *

HAIR ROPES

WILL you advise me if hair ropes were ever used in the West? I see them mentioned in some of the TRIPLE-X stories but my uncle, a Western old-timer, says he never saw one and does not believe they would be any good for use as a lariat. He says that hair ropes were only used to tie up horses with and to use in riding colts.

Miss B. A., Memphis, Tenn.

Hair ropes were made by Indians and Mexicans for various uses. As lariats they were just about a total failure. Twisted hair ropes are used today for a tie and hackamore rope. They are usually made out of black and white hair in two contrasting shades and they look very pretty on a horse. A good one, made out of mane hair, and twenty feet long, can be bought for $5. Hair bridles, decorated with colored tassels and silver conchas, and colored hair cinchas are still in use by Western horsemen in some sections of the Southwest.

Mayfield's Escape

(Continued from Page 16)

before the Sheriff and his posse should appear.

Mayfield had become so indifferent that he paid no attention to the warning until the officers arrived. Then Mrs. Huffaker hastily concealed him behind some dresses hanging against the wall. The hiding was merely of the ostrich kind, his feet and legs being plainly seen at a glance. But the officers searched the house from cellar to garret without success. Sheriff Gasherie tersely explained the dilemma to one of Mayfield's friends in this way:

"I couldn't find him, though I could see him all the time."

The vain search at last abandoned, the Sheriff and his party returned to Carson City and reported that the rumor of Mayfield's presence at Huffaker's was untrue and never had the slightest foundation.

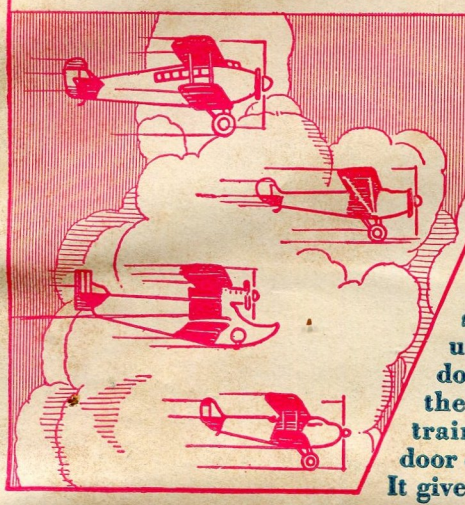
The folly and perversity of Mayfield began to weary his partisans, and they told him plainly that unless he left the Territory they would abandon him to his fate. This threat succeeded in awakening him to a sense of his danger, and at last he made his way through Humbolt County to the Salmon river region, in Idaho.

His reprieve, however, was scarcely worth the trouble and expense by which it had been secured. The following year at Placerville, Idaho, he got into a difficulty with a man named Evans over a card game. Mayfield drew his revolver, but Evans exclaimed: "I'm not heeled."

"Then go heel yourself," said Mayfield, "and be ready the next time we meet."

The next day Mayfield and two friends were walking along the street and came to a muddy place they had to cross in single file upon a plank. As Mayfield was in the center of the crossing, Evans who had obeyed the injunction to "heel" himself, and was lying concealed in a cabin nearby, poured two charges of buckshot into his adversary's body; and within an hour Bill Mayfield who came so near involving Nevada Territory in a bloody strife was beyond the reach of human justice or mercy.

There's Golden Opportunity in the Air!



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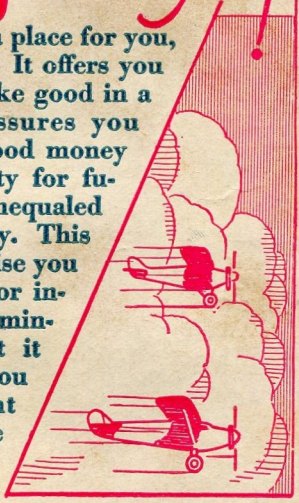

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$1.00 down brings it on 30 Days Trial

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